

Fiona Gibson

**The Great Escape: The laugh-
out-loud romantic comedy
from the summer bestseller**

Аннотация

Can any woman ever grab back a piece of her younger self? For one weekend only, Hannah, Sadie and Lou are determined to give it their best shot. Hannah's getting married... and has serious pre-wedding jitters. She adores Ryan but can't figure out how to fit into his grown-up, family-sized life. There's that fridge, for starters. That, too, is family-sized, with a gadget on the front that spits ice in her face. More alarming still are Ryan's children, Daisy, 10 and Josh, 13, who clearly don't relish the prospect of Hannah, a free-spirited greetings card illustrator, becoming their step-mum. So she fires off invitations to a hen weekend – just the ticket to get her into the marrying mood. Trouble is... New mum Sadie is leaving her twin babies for the very first time with their terrified dad... Lou is unaware that her long-term man Spike is desperate to bundle her onto that Glasgow-bound train so he can hot-foot it round to see his secret fling Miranda... And, unbeknown to the girls, Johnny, their sexy upstairs neighbour from their art college days, is still frequenting those haunts, desperately in

need of a little magic to happen. Perfect for fans of Jane Costello, Kate Long and Tess Stimson.

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FIONA GIBSON

The Great Escape

A V O N



Copyright

Avon

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers Ltd*

1 London Bridge Street,

London, SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers*

2012

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Cover design © Debbie Clement

Cover illustration © Lucy Truman

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Ebook Edition © February 2012 ISBN: 9780007461714

Version: 2018-05-11

Dedication

For the fabulous Dolphinton writers

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ONE

Garnet Street, Glasgow, 1998

‘*Tadaaa!* All hail the party buffet ...’ With a flourish, despite the fact that she’s alone in the kitchen, Hannah sets out three bowls on the worktop. She’s wearing an oversized white T-shirt, sipping beer from a bottle and pretending to be hosting a TV cookery show. ‘Here on the left, we have sumptuous tortilla chips, chilli flavour, the ones with red dust on ... moving along, we have dry-roasted peanuts and this, the *pièce de résistance*, is my very own dip, which you can whip together in just a few minutes with some beans, garlic and, er ...’ She swigs her beer, and detecting a garlicky whiff on her fingers, tries to remember what the other stuff was.

‘Ugh, has someone been sick?’

Hannah’s flatmate, Lou, has appeared at her shoulder, her freshly washed hair dripping rivulets down her cheeks.

‘It’s our buffet,’ Hannah explains with exaggerated patience. ‘Come on, you’re supposed to be impressed. I’ve finally managed to cook something before I leave. You should be in *awe*.’

‘I don’t think that counts as cooking.’ Lou winces as if Hannah might have scraped the stuff in the bowl off the pavement.

‘Well, I was going to make hummus but we didn’t have chickpeas, so I mashed up those butter beans instead.’

‘It looks ill. Kind of ... beige.’

‘It’ll be fine once everyone’s had a few drinks,’ Hannah insists, mopping up a smear from the worktop.

Lou smirks. ‘Han, those butter beans have been in the cupboard since we moved in. Three years they’ve been sitting there. Your parents brought them in your emergency rations box, remember?’

‘Isn’t that the whole point of canning? They find tins at the bottom of the sea that have rolled out of shipwrecks, and when they open them they’re perfectly fine. These things just don’t go off.’

Now Sadie appears, swathed in a silky robe, dark hair pinned up with an assortment of clips. She peers at the dip from a safe distance. ‘Is that all we’ve got to eat?’

‘Well,’ Hannah says, ‘I was thinking of knocking up a banquet, wild boar on a spit, ice sculptures and all that, but ...’ She checks her watch. ‘I kind of ran out of time.’

‘How late is it?’ Sadie asks.

‘Just gone seven ...’

‘Hell ...’ In a flash of red silk, Sadie flies out of the kitchen to the bathroom where she turns on the juddering tap (the tank only holds a bath-and-a-half’s worth of hot water, so the three girls are accustomed to a water-sharing system that requires a frequently flaunted no-clipping-of-toenails rule). Hannah glances down at the dip. *Oh well*, she thinks as Lou drifts back to her room, *it’ll do for filling in that crack in the bathroom wall*. It can be her

parting gift to the flat.

Hannah doesn't want to think of tonight as an end-of-era party. It's a celebration, that's what it is: of four years at art school, three spent living with Sadie and Lou on the first floor of a red sandstone tenement block perched on a perilously steep hill around the corner from college. *Funny*, she reflects, *how a place so distinctly unlovely, with its mould-speckled bathroom and grumbling pipes, can feel like the most palatial abode when you're about to leave it. It's like getting a haircut. You can hate your hair, absolutely despise it to the point of wearing a hat at all times. Then, as you trot off to the salon, you glimpse your reflection in a shop window and think, actually, it looks great.*

She wanders into the living room. It's oppressively orange, thanks to the embossed patterned wallpaper which the girls' landlord had said they were welcome to remove – as if three art students would be likely to get around to stripping it off and redecorating. *Anyway, orange isn't ugly*, Hannah thinks now – *it's warm and cosy*. Her beanbag, too, looks strangely lovely, even though it has long lost its squishiness and now resembles a large cowpat in brown corduroy. There were two beanbags originally; the other burst mysteriously at a previous party, disgorging its beany contents all over the floor. Johnny from the upstairs flat had accompanied Hannah to buy them from a closing-down sale. He'd insisted on carrying both beanbags – unwrapped, clutched in front of his body – with the sole purpose of pretending they were unfeasibly large testicles.

Hannah looks around the room, taking in the dog-eared magazines on the shelves, the film and exhibition posters fraying at the edges on the walls. A rush of panic engulfs her as she tries to imagine no Sadie, no Lou, no Johnny; no orangey living room to hang out in late into the night, no kitchen table to congregate around over breakfast. *Don't be maudlin*, she tells herself firmly. *This was never supposed to be forever. You've got a new job, a new life and it'll be fantastic ...* At the sound of running water, Hannah makes for the bathroom and raps on the door. 'Sadie, you nearly finished in there?'

'Yeah, won't be a minute ...'

'Hurry up, it's nearly half seven ...'

'God, sorry, didn't realise ...' There's a squeak as Sadie's wet feet hit the glittery lino. She emerges from the bathroom, damp dark hair tumbling around the shoulders of her robe. Her toenails are painted fuchsia, her dark brows arched dramatically against her creamy skin. Sexy Sadie, the boys call her, although Sadie is blasé about her allure, a combination of Italian colouring and sensational curves. Catching Hannah's eye, she pauses in the hallway.

'You okay, Han? Feeling a bit wobbly about tonight?'

Hannah shakes her head firmly. 'I'm fine, honestly.'

'Just wondered,' Sadie adds gently, 'with this being our last party, end of an era and all that ...'

Hannah musters a wide smile. 'Yeah. Don't remind me.' Her eyes moisten, but she quickly blinks away the tears. 'Anyway,

better make myself look presentable. We've still got to sort out the music *and* I've got to get this garlicky stink off my hands ...'

'I'll do the music. You go and beautify yourself.'

'Okay. And look, I know you might find it hard to control yourself, but keep your fingers out of that butter bean dip, okay?'

With that, Hannah strides into the bathroom, dropping her T-shirt and underwear onto the floor where they lie next to Lou and Sadie's discarded clothing. Sadie's red fluffy mules have been kicked off by the washbasin; Lou's beaded Indian slippers are neatly paired up by the door. Hannah sinks into the lukewarm water, detecting a prickle of toenail at the base of her spine. Shifting up onto her knees, she fits the pink plastic hose over the taps and lets the water pour over her wavy fair hair. It's shudderingly cold at first, then come the gurgles as the last dregs of hot water splutter through.

She can hear Lou singing through the thin bathroom wall. Hannah knows she's probably trying on dress after dress in those weeny vintage sizes that only someone with her doll-sized proportions could ever hope to squeeze into. Hannah is more athletically built, with taut, defined calves from cycling furiously around Glasgow's hilly streets. Will London be like that? Will it be possible to cycle to work without getting flattened under a bus? She hasn't even figured out her work route yet. Archway to Islington isn't that far, apparently, but how will she get from one page of the A-Z to another whilst riding her bike? Hannah doesn't want to look like a tourist, peering at maps. She wants to

be a proper, breezy London girl who *belongs*.

Her stomach whirls as she turns off the hose. She's always anxious before a party and this one matters more than most. Drying herself with a towel that has all the softness of a road surface, she can hardly believe she's leaving. She'll miss those hungover breakfasts of bendy white toast and Philadelphia cheese. She'll miss all of them piling into Johnny's battered pillarbox-red Beetle and planning numerous jaunts to Loch Lomond, but never quite making it because there was always some party to go to instead. She'll miss whiling away entire afternoons in Puccini's, the best Italian café in Glasgow. The thought of those ordinary things no longer being part of her life triggers an ache in her gut. Hannah can't cry, though. Not now.

Glimpsing her wide blue eyes in the tarnished bathroom mirror, she wills herself not to lose it tonight. She's a grown-up now – no longer a student, but a real woman with a job waiting for her, *and* a flat, albeit with the dimensions of a Shreddies box. And she's not planning to ruin her last night here by being a blubbering wreck.

TWO

‘Lighten up, Lou-Lou. Hannah’s not dying, she’s only going to London.’ Spike, Lou’s boyfriend, rolls his eyes and looks up at the multicoloured plastic chandelier in mock exasperation.

‘You don’t understand,’ Lou retorts. ‘It’s a *huge* deal actually.’

Hannah moves away and grabs her glass from the top of a speaker. For the past five hours she’s been as bright and bouncy as it’s possible to be, and now she’s flagging a little. London, she keeps thinking. By this time tomorrow, I’ll be tucked up in bed in *London*. Hannah has only been there twice – the first time was on a mini-break with her parents when she was ten years old. All she can remember are monkeys hurling themselves around in their zoo enclosure, and her parents taking zillions of pictures of Big Ben while she tried to understand what was so thrilling about an enormous clock. You don’t get that in a tiny Fife fishing village, she’d concluded.

On her second London trip, six weeks ago now, Hannah had travelled down alone on an overnight coach to meet her new colleagues (the very word thrills her) at Catfish, the small design company that offered her a job as an in-house illustrator after her final degree show. Her new boss, Michael, put her in touch with a property-letting agency, where a Japanese girl who looked about fifteen took her to see a studio flat in Archway. ‘See, it’s all freshly decorated, perfect for someone like you who’s starting

out,' the girl enthused.

Starting out. That's it, Hannah decides. It's a new chapter, waiting for her to dive right in. Right now, though, of more immediate concern is the fact that there doesn't appear to be a drop of alcohol left in the flat. Someone hands Spike a drink, and he's appalled to discover it's plain lemonade.

'What's *this*?' he cries, in a voice that suggests they're trying to poison him.

'He's such an arse sometimes,' Lou mutters, sidling up to Hannah.

'You love him really,' Hannah teases.

'Do I? Sometimes I don't know. Sometimes, and I know this sounds awful and I really shouldn't say it, but ...'

'What?'

'I wish I was you. God, Han, I do love him, he's great, but it feels so scary now, having no lectures to go to, no structure, no nothing. It's just me. Me and Spike.'

'Hey, you.' Hannah pulls in Lou for a hug. 'You'll be fine. We all will. Anyway, as soon as I'm sorted, you and Sadie are coming down to visit and maybe you'll move too ...'

'*He* won't,' Lou says dryly.

'Well, maybe he will.' Hannah hesitates, then takes Lou by the hand and leads her to the beanbag where they both flop down. 'Anyway,' she adds, 'it's really about what *you* want, isn't it?'

Lou nods mutely. Sadie is dancing in front of them, her outrageous curves encased in a black Lycra dress. It's gone 3 am

and around twenty people are still here, mostly dancing, some kissing in corners. It's a warm June night, and Hannah hasn't kissed anyone – at least not properly – since their New Year party, which Lou and Sadie regard as a serious snog drought. It's better this way, Hannah decides now, spotting Johnny locked in conversation with his new girlfriend Rona. Being ensconced in a relationship, like Lou is with Spike, would just be too complicated.

'Dancing, Han?' Having managed to detach himself from Rona, Johnny has appeared in front of her, all gangly limbs and dark Irish eyes and clothes that always look a shade too big for him.

Hannah laughs and shakes her head. 'I'm knackered, Johnny. Completely done in. I'm having a little sabbatical here.'

'Oh c'mon, lightweight.' He bobs down and grabs her hand.

'I've been dancing for hours!' she protests.

He cocks his head to one side. 'Come on, Han. Last chance.'

Grinning, she allows him to pull her up to her feet. She dances, conscious of Rona watching her intently, as if she might be planning to kidnap Johnny, stuff him into one of her crates and whisk him off to her studio flat in Archway. 'I'm dying of thirst,' she announces as the song finishes.

'There's definitely nothing left to drink,' announces Sadie, glossy red lipstick somewhat smeared.

'We must have *something*,' Hannah declares, heading for the kitchen as Rona reclaims Johnny with a sharp tug of his arm.

‘Spike saves the day!’ Spike announces, brandishing a bottle of red wine like a trophy.

‘Where d’you find that?’ Hannah asks.

‘Ah, well ...’ He taps the side of his nose. ‘It was hiding at the back of your cupboard behind Lou’s bird food cereal.’

‘Spike, you can’t drink that!’ Lou shrieks from the doorway.

‘Why not?’ He grips the bottle to his chest as if someone might try to wrestle it from him.

‘My parents gave it to me the day I left home. It’s to stay unopened for fifteen years – that’s why it was hidden – and then it’ll be worth a *fortune*.’

‘Fifteen years?’ Spike looks bereft. ‘How can anyone be expected to wait that long for a drink?’

‘Mum and Dad’ll go crazy,’ Lou laments. ‘God, Spike, you’ll have to jam the cork back in. Quick, before air gets in and ruins it ...’

‘Jeez ...’ Spike rakes a hand through his hair. ‘Sorry, Lou-Lou. I just thought, seeing as it’s still early ...’

Lou pauses, then her small, dainty face erupts into a grin. ‘You honestly think my parents would trust me to keep a bottle of wine for fifteen years? It’s just ordinary stuff we must have forgotten about. Come on, get it open.’ Obediently, and clearly relieved, Spike pours a glass.

‘You’re not actually planning to drink that, are you?’ Rona has wandered into the kitchen, and is gripping Johnny’s hand firmly.

Spike raises his glass unsteadily. ‘Yeah. Why not?’

‘Because it’s disgusting. It’s got *bits* in it. Look.’ Rona steps forward – she’s all bones and sharp edges, Hannah decides – and prods his glass with a burgundy fingernail.

Spike peers at it. ‘Right. Well, they’re probably just bits of grape, and fruit’s good for you, isn’t it ...’

‘... says Glasgow’s top wine connoisseur,’ someone quips.

‘No one would drink that unless they had some kind of problem,’ Rona retorts, glaring at Johnny as if expecting him to agree.

‘The only problem Spike’s got,’ he chuckles, ‘is how to strain out the bits.’

Spike frowns as if faced with a tough mathematical equation. ‘Yeah, you’re right. What can we use?’

‘A colander?’ someone suggests.

‘I know.’ Spike brightens. ‘Get me some tights, Lou. Clean ones, not fishnet, and not grubby old things out of your linen basket either ...’

‘What for?’

‘Straining. Rona’s right – there are bits floating about in it. God knows, you girls keep a terrible wine cellar.’

Giggling, Lou rushes off to her room, returning with a pair of black tights, which Spike carefully stretches over a stripey milk jug so a leg dangles down at each side. He pours out the contents of his glass, and then the rest of the wine from the bottle into the gusset. Filtration complete, he removes Lou’s wine-sodden hosiery from the jug and shares out the wine. A disgusted Rona

clip-clops back to the living room.

Someone has turned the music down, and a sense of quiet – or, perhaps, hushed respect for Spike’s ingenuity – settles over the group. ‘Where did you learn to do that, Spike?’ asks Sadie.

‘Boy scouts,’ he sniggers, ‘although there wasn’t a badge for it, sadly.’

With a smile, Hannah sips from her glass and lets her gaze skim over her favourite people in the whole world:

Lou, a talented jeweller, who, despite the odd flash of exasperation, is bonkers in love with the most flirtatious man in Glasgow (even now, with Lou in the room, Spike is sneaking quick glances at some friend of a friend with a long blonde plait coiled ingeniously on top of her head).

Sadie, the half-Italian beauty, who’s already had orders for her sensational hand-printed corsets, and on whom pretty much every boy in their year has nurtured an ill-disguised crush.

Johnny from upstairs, a catering student, virtually their fourth flatmate and provider of emergency rations ever since, one bleak winter’s night, he popped down to find the girls stony broke, trying to pretend that Weetabix and lime marmalade constituted a perfectly well-balanced meal. Johnny, whose new girlfriend is, although icily beautiful, a most *unsuitable* choice.

Hannah knows, too, that Johnny’s love life is none of her business, especially now, when she’s leaving. Feeling her stomach tighten, she glances again at Sadie and Lou who catch the look on her face, and who at once wrap their arms tightly around her.

‘Don’t forget us, will you?’ Sadie murmurs.

‘Are you mad? Of course I won’t ...’ Then, as Rona comes in search of her fake alligator bag which someone must have ‘stolen’ – she finds it wedged behind the kitchen door – Johnny grabs Hannah by the arm and says, ‘Great party, Han. The best.’

‘Thanks, Johnny.’ She blinks, not knowing what else to say.

He meets her gaze, and she’s surprised by the flicker of sadness she sees in his eyes. ‘A new start, isn’t it?’ he adds.

‘Guess so. It’s bloody terrifying, though ...’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean,’ he mutters.

Hannah frowns. ‘What, London?’

He glances around the girls’ devastated kitchen. ‘Um ... yeah. Sort of.’

‘Johnny?’ says Rona sharply. ‘You ready to go now? I’ve got a pounding headache.’

‘Yep, just coming.’ He smiles stoically. ‘So you’re off tomorrow?’

Hannah nods. ‘Mum and Dad are coming with the van at eleven. The way Dad drives, it should only take us about three weeks to get to London.’

Johnny laughs. ‘Bye, then, Han.’

‘Bye, Johnny.’ They pause, and he hugs her before Rona takes his hand and leads him to the door.

The final stragglers leave amidst drunken good-lucks, and Spike totters unsteadily towards Lou’s bedroom, a smear of pink, which doesn’t match Lou’s lipstick, on his cheek. ‘My God,’ Lou

breathes, taking in the nuts and tortilla chips crunched into the cork-tiled floor, the gigantic pub ashtray piled high with butts and the table crammed with smeared glasses and empty bottles. ‘We really should make a start on this.’

Hannah nods wearily. ‘Yeah, let’s do it now.’

‘No,’ Sadie declares, ‘not on your last night. Me and Lou will do it tomorrow after you’ve gone.’

‘But I can’t leave you with this!’

‘Course you can,’ Lou cuts in. ‘It’ll keep us busy – stop us pining for you, sobbing into your beanbag.’

‘Well, if you insist ...’ Suddenly, Hannah’s attention is caught by a tissue-wrapped bottle nestling between the bread bin and the microwave. ‘Look, someone’s left this.’ Frowning, she examines the gift tag attached to its neck and rips off the wrapping. ‘It’s from Johnny. Oh, that’s sweet of him. Look, there’s something else too.’ As Sadie wrestles out the cork, and Lou grabs three plastic cups, Hannah peels the lid from a faded Tupperware box. **GIRLS – FOR YOUR LAST BREAKFAST TOGETHER MAYBE?** J x is written neatly across it in felt-tip. It’s an apple tart, the segments fanning out in circles beneath a golden glaze. Hannah smiles, snaps off a fragment of pastry and lets it dissolve on her tongue.

There’s a card, too, propped up against the bread bin. She studies Johnny’s old-fashioned forward-sloping writing on the envelope and rips it open. The card depicts a wobbly line drawing of Glasgow, with the famous buildings all jammed in together,

jostling for space. *Dear Han, it reads, So you're off! We're all going to miss you like mad, you know. What's going to become of us? Who knows? And we'll definitely miss your cooking! Haha. But we'll be okay as long as you remember us and wear a bloody bike helmet in London. That's an absolute order, and I've alerted the police to keep an eye on you too. Love, J.*

'Oh, Johnny,' Hannah murmurs as Sadie fills the cups with tepid champagne. Raising hers to her lips, she wipes away the hot tears that have sprung to her eyes. 'I'd like to make a speech,' she says.

'Speech! Speech!' cry Sadie and Lou.

Hannah takes a deep breath. 'I just want to say ... I love both of you and we're never going to lose touch, okay?' She pauses as her friends murmur their agreement, then adds, 'And there's another thing.'

'What?' Sadie asks.

'Johnny's apple tart. I don't think I can wait till breakfast, can you?'

THREE

The morning after

As Hannah and her parents trundle down the M6 in a hired van, Lou heads back upstairs, breathless and grubby from lugging a third black sack to the wheelie bin outside. ‘Oh, hi,’ she exclaims. Johnny is sitting at the kitchen table, studying Hannah’s butter bean dip into which someone has extinguished a cigarette.

‘That’s horrible, that.’ He looks up and smiles. ‘It’s an absolute crime against humanity. It looked so tempting as well.’

‘Ha. Yeah, disgusting. God knows who did that. Spike, probably. How old is he again?’ Johnny looks at her blankly. ‘Thirty-five,’ Lou reminds him. ‘I’m going out with a thirty-five-year-old man who still can’t use an ashtray because so many other things will do instead.’

Johnny smirks. ‘Where is he anyway?’

‘Went back to bed for more beauty sleep.’ Lou pulls a wry smile. ‘So has Sadie, lazy sods.’ She laughs, suddenly conscious of her limp, hungover hair and shiny face flecked with the remnants of last night’s mascara. She’s still in her pyjamas too – embarrassing ancient fleecy ones, not like the posh silk ensemble Sadie wears. Thank God she’s flung a sweater over her top. ‘Thanks for the apple tart,’ she adds. ‘That was very sweet of you. I’d have saved you some but we scarfed it all down last night.’

‘No problem. It was my first attempt, thought you could give me your verdict. So, left you with all the clearing up, have they?’

Lou grins. ‘Oh, Spike managed to pick up a beer bottle and rinse out my wine-strainer tights.’ She perches on the opposite chair. ‘Are you okay? Feeling a bit fragile?’

‘Er, guess so.’ He looks it, Lou thinks; not mildly poisoned, as Spike currently is, flat on his back in her bed with a saucer-cum-ashtray perched beside it, fag ends piled up like a mini Mount Etna. Johnny’s is a different kind of malaise altogether.

He looks up at Lou, and it fazes her, the way he regards her so intently. She gets up and rinses out the Tupperware box. No one knows – not even Hannah or Sadie – how she really feels about Johnny. She hasn’t said anything because he’s a friend to *all* of them, a flatmate really, separated only by one floor. Admitting that she’s nurtured a crush on him this past year, since Spike’s less endearing qualities came to the fore, would upset the balance and change everything. Anyway, she has Spike and Johnny has Rona. Spike might be annoying but he’s lived a life that Lou still finds fascinating, *and* he adores her. Lou has never been so completely adored by a boy – well, a *man*, Spike is thirteen years older than her. She looks forward to the moment when her Johnny-crush suddenly clicks off, as if by a switch.

‘D’you want an Alka-Seltzer?’ she asks to break the awkward hush. ‘Or something to eat? I might be able to rustle up a bagel if you’re lucky ...’

He exhales. ‘No thanks. I’m not hung over, Lou. I hardly had

anything to drink last night.’ There’s another pause, broken by Spike launching into a coughing fit in Lou’s bedroom. ‘Listen,’ Johnny adds. ‘I’m ... I’m not supposed to tell anyone this. Rona’ll kill me if she finds out because she’s not ready to—’

‘What?’ Lou murmurs, frowning.

‘She ... Rona’s pregnant.’

‘Oh God, Johnny.’ No, that’s not right. He might be delighted – perhaps they even planned it – and he’s just a bit shell-shocked and hasn’t quite taken it in. Lou sits on the chair beside him and tries to settle her face into a neutral expression. Johnny doesn’t look delighted, though. He looks like someone whose life has spun out of control.

‘We found out a few days ago,’ he adds dully.

‘So it’s still early?’

Johnny nods.

‘Um ... what d’you think you’ll do?’ There are soft footsteps in the hall, then extravagant splashing as Spike pees into the loo, followed by a clanking flush as the flat’s prehistoric plumbing system kicks into action. Lou wills Spike to go back to bed.

‘I don’t know, Lou. Fuck ...’ He shakes his head. ‘It’s a mess ...’

Lou stares at her friend, a twenty-four-year-old student who loves staying up all night watching Steve McQueen films, and who’ll suddenly be propelled down that mysterious supermarket aisle that she’s only ever found herself in by mistake – the one with gigantic packs of disposable nappies and row upon row of

little jars of food, every product bearing a baby's face.

'Oh, Johnny. I'm sure it'll be okay ...'

'Will it, Lou? I just don't know.'

What he does next shocks her. Capable Johnny, creator of proper meals, incorporating vegetables – obscure vegetables sometimes, like yams and butternut squash – has his head in his hands. Then he turns to her and cries into her grubby old sweater as she holds him and says that whatever happens, he'll be okay, she'll help him, she'll do anything she can. Lou's eyes are wet too. He pulls away and looks at her, then he's kissing her on the lips, and her head spins and she knows she should pull away, but just can't. It's Johnny who stops, looks at her and pulls her into an embrace. They are holding each other now, not moving or speaking and not seeing Spike who's happened to glance into the kitchen, hoping to find a cigarette or even a decent-sized butt in the ashtray. Instead, he sees his beautiful girlfriend wrapped up with that tosser from upstairs, who has always had a thing for Lou, he bloody knew it.

Spike turns slowly and pads back to Lou's room where he'll rummage through her chest of drawers in case she has a stray packet of cigarettes lying around. Then, once his nicotine levels have returned to an acceptable level, he'll crawl back into her unmade bed and plot the slow, painful death of Johnny Lynch.

FOUR

Thirteen years later

Hannah steps into her wedding dress and studies herself in the mirror. She'd liked the simple cream shift when she'd tried it on at the department store, or at least she'd believed the persuasive salesgirl who'd said she looked 'elegant, sort of Grace Kelly-esque.' Heels were picked out too, plus a matching cream-coloured clutch. 'It's an elegant look,' the girl reassured her, 'but still lovely and young and fresh.' Now, though, at 7.35 am in the chilly upper reaches of Ryan's townhouse, Hannah doesn't feel young, fresh or remotely Grace Kelly-esque.

She looks like a fat nurse. As if the perfect accessory isn't the seed-pearl tiara Lou has already made for her, but one of those blood pressure devices that clamps around your arm. Instead of neatly skimming Hannah's body, as it had in the changing room, the dress now clings a little too tightly to her breasts and hips and bunches up like a carrier bag around her middle.

Either she, or the dress, must have changed shape in the two days since she bought it. Even its *shade* seems to have altered. The shop girl had called it oyster, but Hannah is now thinking over-boiled cauliflower. She is a fat nurse in a cauliflower dress. You hear of people bolting from the church or registry office in blind panic just before they're due to exchange vows. She

can just picture Ryan glimpsing her in that dress – it’s already become *that* dress, and not in a good way – and hurtling out of the building.

It’s not, Hannah decides as she tugs it off over her head and throws it onto the bed, the best start to a grey Monday morning.

‘He stole my iPod to look at my photos and now he won’t give it back!’ wails Daisy, Ryan’s ten-year-old daughter.

‘Who cares about your stupid sleepover photos?’ Josh, her big brother, shoots back. ‘I’ve got better stuff to do than look at your dumb friends.’

‘Why were you looking then?’

‘Cause I wanted to see what you had on it.’

‘Dad. DAAAD!’ There’s a screech, and as Hannah pulls on her black vest top and faded jeans, she detects the soothing tones of Ryan, her future husband, possessor of infinite patience and soon-to-be-witness of the cauliflower nurse dress.

‘Hey,’ he says, ‘come on, you two ... isn’t this a stupid thing to argue about? Yes, I hear what you’re saying, Daisy, I *know* they’re your private pictures, but Josh ...’ Hannah pulls her fair hair back into a ponytail and waits at the top of the stairs.

‘Little shit,’ Josh barks. ‘You’re *so* spoilt.’ Ah, Ryan’s firstborn, just turned fourteen, liberal sprayer of Lynx (preferred fragrance ‘Excite’ – ‘A rare gourmand-oriental mixture of fresh green accords and woody base notes,’ Hannah had read while perusing the can with interest in the bathroom). Although she’s been living here for six months, it still strikes her as completely bizarre that

Ryan is responsible for half the genetic make-up of the most life-sapping kids she's ever met. Occasionally, Hannah wonders if she's really doing the right thing by marrying him – but then, why should his offspring sabotage her future with the man she loves? This is the sweet, funny, sexy man with whom she exchanged life stories on the night they met. The man who turned up unannounced at her flat one sunny Sunday morning with a picnic for two. The man with whom she's travelled to Barcelona, lain kissing on a Cornish beach and joked that, if they spent any more time in bed together, they might have to arrange for a delivery man to slide a pizza under the door.

'Arsewipe,' Daisy shoots back.

'That's *enough*,' snaps Ryan as Hannah heads downstairs, gritting her teeth, a vein pulsating in her jaw as she tries to mentally transform herself into a vision of smiles and perkiness.

'But Dad, all I did was—' Josh starts.

'You should respect your sister's things,' Ryan barks as Hannah steps over a lone, grubby-soled football sock in the hallway. 'She doesn't fiddle about with your stuff.'

'She nicked my headphones,' Josh counters. 'She broke 'em and peeled the spongy bits off.'

'I did not,' Daisy snarls. 'They were broke anyway. They were crap.'

'Daisy,' says Ryan firmly, 'I don't want to listen to this and I'm sure Hannah doesn't either.'

'Huh,' Josh snorts, clearly meaning, *Who cares what your*

stupid girlfriend thinks?

Pausing before entering the conflict zone, Hannah sees flashes of Ryan through the half-open door as he darts back and forth across the kitchen. Busy Dad, rattling through the morning routine before hurrying off to work. Hannah can't help feeling irritated on his behalf and, rather than sauntering straight in, she takes a moment to consider what she should do next.

She could face the horrible truth that, despite her fantasies of being a friendly elder sister type to Daisy and Josh – watching movies together, perhaps even *advising* them occasionally in those rare moments when Ryan runs out of steam – it won't happen. In their eyes, she will never rise above the status of an apple core they've found rotting on the floor of the car. This means she should probably tiptoe to the front door and let herself out, leaving Ryan, his kids and that disgusting nurse dress, and never see any of them again.

Or she could stride into that kitchen, mature and confident like the grown-up woman she is, and seize control of the day.

FIVE

A muffled beeping noise is coming from somewhere in the depths of Sadie's bag. The bag is enormous and bulging and looks more like a vast quilted navy-blue pillow than anything you'd willingly lug around. It makes Sadie feel unbalanced, although she's started to feel that way when she's *not* carrying the bag, so perhaps it's her natural state now.

The beeping noise is Sadie's mobile, gasping for breath beneath the nappies, bottles, hats, wipes, bibs, extra sweaters (lovingly knitted in pale lemon yarn by Barney's mum), bendy rubbery spoons and jars of baby food. It might as well be in Tasmania for all she can reach it. She stops with the buggy on the damp path in the park and frantically searches for it. Typical. Just as she manages to locate the phone, it stops ringing.

Missed call from Hannah. It's 8.07 am. Why is she calling so early? Is something wrong? More to the point, what's Sadie doing, marching around Hissingham Park on a blustery morning when normal people are having breakfast, drinking coffee in their cosy homes and browsing the newspapers? Yet she *had* to get out. Barney leaves at seven am every weekday, catching the train for his London-bound commute. Dylan and Milo took exception to Daddy leaving today, swiftly working themselves up to inconsolable on the baby mood-scale. Sadie tried feeding them, then carrying them both, one plonked on each hip,

through every room in the house. She tried singing and even dancing in their small, cave-like kitchen, then gathered them onto her lap and read *Peepo!* twice. Nothing worked. She sees her imaginary parenting test paper covered in angry red scrawlings with FAIL written across it in huge capitals. *Must try harder, Sadie Vella. Eight months into this course and we're still seeing little improvement.* Now, as a cool wind stirs the branches of a sycamore above her, scattering rain droplets onto Sadie's pillow-flattened hair, Dylan starts to cry again. This means that returning Hannah's call will have to wait.

Sadie strides on, hoping that the buggy's steady motion will soothe her son, and also that Hannah is okay. Of course she is. Her life seems to be going spectacularly well at the moment. She has a great job, having risen through the ranks at Catfish to become head of the entire creative department. She has a gorgeous, caring and enviably grown-up man who loves her to pieces and writes adverts for – actually, Sadie can't remember who Ryan writes ads for. Hannah has told her several times but it whooshed in through one ear and out the other, as most things do these days. Sadie wonders what's now occupying the space in her head where her brain used to be. Teddy bear stuffing, or stale air, like the inside of a neglected fridge? Only this morning it took her fifteen minutes to locate her keys before she could leave the house. She couldn't find the boys' soft leather baby shoes either, so they're each wearing two pairs of thick baby socks. Supposedly simple tasks have become virtually insurmountable.

Sadie can't fathom how women manage to hold down paid jobs as well as look after their children, bake cakes *and* fashion 'amusing' toddler meals where the cannelloni look like little people sleeping under a blanket.

'It's okay, sweetie,' she murmurs, parking the buggy next to the café that hasn't even opened yet, and bobbing down to try and soothe Dylan. A young girl is in the café – Sadie thinks she's Polish – placing small vases of flowers on each table. Milo, apparently unconcerned by his brother's anguish, is studying the spindly weathervane on the café's roof. Sadie unclips Dylan's buggy restraints, picks him up and cradles him close to her chest.

Rocking him gently, she absent-mindedly jiggles the buggy with her free hand. A ruddy-faced woman, her round cheeks accentuated by a short, choppy hairstyle, is striding along the path towards her. Hannah knows without doubt that this woman will stop and talk to her; it's what people in Little Hissingham do. As well as motherhood, Sadie is also trying to get to grips with village life where everyone seems to know her as 'the one with the twins', even though she hasn't the foggiest idea who most of these people are.

'Oooh, you're the one with the twins,' the woman exclaims unnecessarily, cocking her head to one side as she fixes her gaze on Dylan's tear-blotched face.

'That's right,' Sadie says, pulling her lips into a smile.

'What've you got again? Boy and a girl?'

'No. Two boys.'

‘Aw, shame! Were you awfully disappointed?’

No, of course I bloody wasn't, Sadie thinks angrily. ‘No, not at all,’ she says firmly. That’s better. She’s managed to wrestle her thoughts under control instead of having to restrain herself from slapping the woman.

‘Well, you got more than you bargained for there,’ the woman chuckles.

Sadie places Dylan, who’s calmed down a little now, back into the buggy. ‘Well, yes, it is pretty busy. Keeps me out of trouble, you know.’

‘IVF?’

‘Sorry?’ Sadie laughs involuntarily.

‘I mean, are they IVF babies?’

‘Er ... no ... why d’you say that?’ Sadie feels her heart quickening as, for a split second, she wishes Barney were here to tell the woman to mind her own damn business. Even if they had had fertility treatment – which they hadn’t – why would she wish to discuss it with a stranger in the park?

‘Cause my sister,’ the woman continues, scratching her chin, ‘she and her fella tried for years, the old ovulation kit with the menstrual cycle and all that. Nothing happened. Took all the romance out of it, you know? Became, like ... *mechanical*. Not romantic at all.’ Sadie is jamming her molars together so hard, she fears they might start to crumble. When did she start needing Barney to protect her in situations like this?

‘So it was twins they had,’ the woman rants on, ‘and God,

they're hard work, aren't they? Not a second to yourself. You'll know all about that, haha!' She peers down at the buggy. 'Don't they have any shoes?'

'Er, yes, but I couldn't find ...'

'It's a cold day,' the woman scolds her. 'Their little tootsies'll be freezing ...'

Phone bloody social services then, Sadie wants to scream. Or make a sodding citizen's arrest. 'Sorry, I'm in a hurry,' she blurts out, charging off with the buggy, and wondering where she can go that's not the inside of her soul-crushing house – sorry, *cottage* – but also where that woman won't find her and start interrogating her on her sex life.

Both the children are crying now, signalling that feeding time is upon them. Sadie is still breastfeeding the babies, although they do, mercifully, also have bottles of formula, jars of food and her home-made concoctions. Determined to up her parenting grade – she's awarded herself a D-minus so far – she bought a vast array of vegetables yesterday which she chopped at midnight and simmered until 1 am when Barney (and probably the entire Western hemisphere) was sleeping soundly, only to realise that the damn stuff couldn't be frozen in ice cube trays until it had cooled properly. She found herself blowing on the vatful of steamy mush, then worried that she was breathing stinky adult germs on it and would infect her children with gastro-enteritis. It was too smooth as well – she'd overdone the mushing. By eight months her children should be managing lumps, finger food,

great saddles of lamb, probably. Sadie finally staggered to bed at 2.30 am, cursing Barney for the sole reason that he had the audacity to be asleep, precisely ninety minutes before the babies woke up, eyes pinging open to full alertness, ready for their first feed of the day.

Is Sadie feeding them too much, too little or too often? She has no idea. She's read so many baby manuals that they've all merged into one fat, hectoring tome. When she presented her hastily defrosted home-made baby food this morning – realising she needn't have frozen it after all – Milo and Dylan spat it all out onto their white towelling Monday bibs.

Who could blame them? she thinks now, pushing the double buggy at a determined speed. *What's wrong with shop-bought baby food anyway? It's made by experts – people whose lives are dedicated to formulating stuff packed with nutrients that babies will actually enjoy and not spit out.* Sadie can't compete with that.

Catching her breath, she heads for the rose garden where she knows there are benches, and which is shielded from the rest of the park by dense, square-cut hedges. For someone who was once body-confident, pouring her luscious curves into corseted lingerie which she constructed herself, Sadie is incredibly self-conscious about breast-feeding in public. She and Barney pored over soft pencil illustrations of possible feeding positions in *Twins: Your Essential Survival Guide*. *It's okay for the women in those drawings, she thinks now. They don't have to sit on damp park benches with a baby clamped to each bosom*

and spot a teenage boy glancing through a gap in the hedge, looking completely appalled. Plus, the women's breasts in those illustrations don't overproduce milk until it seeps through their breast pads, making their gargantuan nursing bras wet and smelly (no boned, hand-stitched underwear for Sadie these days). She has never felt more aware of being a mammal in her entire life.

She's just sat down, and is lifting an agitated Milo from his buggy, when her mobile trills into life again. Claspng him tightly to her lap, she fishes the phone from her bag, quickly enough to take the call this time.

'Sadie?' comes Hannah's voice. 'Are you okay to talk for a minute?'

'Yes, sort of,' she says, phone in one hand, and wrapping her other arm around her writhing son. 'Just about to feed, though. Boys are a bit unsettled. Oh, hang on a sec ...' Milo squirms in her lap. 'Are *you* okay?' she asks quickly.

'Er, yeah, I'm fine ...'

'Where are you?' Sadie asks.

'Outside. Just outside the house.'

'What, *your* house?'

'Um, yes ... just had to get out for a minute. I know this sounds mad ...' Sadie hears Hannah blow out a big gust of air.

'What's wrong? Is everything okay with you and Ryan?'

'Yeah, it's fine! I mean it's fine with *us*. It's just, um ... the kids, Sadie. They're just ...'

'Has something happened?'

‘Oh, not really ... Look, I’m sorry to load this on you at this time in the morning but they’re all in the kitchen right now, bickering, and I just ... I don’t know why, but maybe it’s because I’ve just tried on my wedding dress and it’s horrible. Really ugly and plain. What was I thinking? I should’ve asked you to come into town and we could have had a lovely day and picked something together. *And* I bought a clutch bag. A clutch bag! I’ve never owned one in my life. Will I have to go around clutching it all day?’

‘Well, I’m sure you are allowed to put it down, or someone will look after—’

‘It’s horrible,’ Hannah cuts in. ‘Like something Princess Anne would carry. Can you imagine me with a clutch bag? And I got this *fear*, you know? This horrible feeling about ...’ Her voice falters.

‘What, about getting married?’ Sadie exclaims, unable to work out whether her friend’s distress has to do with Ryan’s kids, the dress or the Princess Anne bag.

‘I don’t know,’ Hannah says. ‘I ... I just had to talk to you.’

‘Maybe it’s just the wedding,’ Sadie murmurs. ‘All the organising and preparations ... you know what? You should have a hen party. Let your hair down and have a bit of fun.’

Hannah laughs weakly. ‘I’d love one, and the girls at work have been on at me to sort something out ...’

‘Well, why don’t you?’ Somewhere in her distant past, Sadie remembers clubs with music playing, drinks flowing and women

moving freely without lugging gigantic quilted bags. She pictures a glass of white wine, and her entire body tingles with longing.

‘Oh, I don’t know ...’ Hannah tails off. ‘What’s that noise anyway?’

‘It’s the boys, they’re hungry. Sorry, Han, I’d better go ...’ Sadie clamps her mobile between her shoulder and ear while gently bouncing Milo up and down and rocking the buggy. She eyes the hedge and wonders if anyone would mind if she crawled under it and fell asleep.

‘God, they sound upset. I won’t keep you a minute. Yes, I’ve thought about a hen party but you know what? I’d only want you – you and Lou, I mean – and that would be impossible, wouldn’t it?’

‘Maybe not. I’m only an hour away and York’s not *that* far ... maybe you’d better speak to Lou. I haven’t talked to her in ages. Look, Han, I’d really better ...’ Sadie’s attention is diverted by a large black dog bounding towards her, pink tongue lolling from its mouth.

‘D’you think Lou’s okay?’ Hannah asks. ‘I worry about her and Spike sometimes. He never seems to appreciate ...’

‘Uh-huh,’ Sadie mutters, holding Milo tightly as she jumps up and tries to form a human barrier between the buggy and hound.

‘I mean, she’s working all hours at that horrible soft play place *and* keeping the jewellery thing going ...’ Perhaps it’s chronic sleep deprivation, or the fact that becoming a mother has turned Sadie into a lumbering beast incapable of rapid movement.

Whatever the reason, the dog shoots past her and proceeds to lash Dylan's terrified face with its tongue.

'No!' Sadie screams with her mobile still clamped to her ear. Dylan squeals loudly.

'I mean, what does Spike do all day?' Hannah wants to know. 'Sits on his arse, strumming a guitar, waiting for a recording contract to drop into his lap ...'

'Stop that!' Sadie shrieks, shoving herself between the dog and Dylan, whose cries have morphed into hearty wails.

'What's happening?' Hannah asks.

'There's a dog here! It's trying to attack Dylan and there's no bloody owner and—' She drops her phone onto the path and its back pings off. 'Shit,' she mutters, deciding that her baby's immediate wellbeing is more important than a three-year-old Nokia. A tall, scrawny man whistles for the dog at the rose garden's entrance. No apology, no acknowledgement that his slavering beast has nearly devoured her child, or at the very least infected him with some terrible dog-tongue disease, *and* caused Sadie to wreck her phone. As the dog bounds away, Sadie blinks away tears of stress, unleashes Dylan from the buggy and sinks back onto the bench, clutching both of her boys and panting.

She doesn't feed them straight away. She can't, not with her heart banging madly and her children so distressed. Sadie just sits there, conscious of faint drizzle now falling on her hot cheeks, and an empty Bacardi Breezer bottle lying on the ground.

She glances down at her babies, taken aback as she always is

by the fierce rush of love that engulfs her. Her sons, all round brown eyes and tufts of dark, fluffy hair, gaze up adoringly at her. The fact that they emerged from her own body still strikes her as nothing short of miraculous. All those years of debauchery as an art student, a lifestyle which continued steadily through her twenties, and she was still capable of incubating these utterly perfect human beings. Dylan is smiling now, and Milo is gazing up at her as if she were the most wondrous creature on earth.

This is what it's all about, Sadie reminds herself. It doesn't matter that I'm stained and knackered and every little thing Barney does irritates the hell out of me. It doesn't matter because it's all about this – being Milo and Dylan's mum. Sadie bunches up her T-shirt, frees her breasts from her huge, shiny scaffolding-bra and clamps a child to each nipple. Both babies fall upon her as if they hadn't been fed for weeks. Sadie inhales deeply, kicks the Bacardi Breezer bottle under the bench, then focuses hard on the cracked screen of her mobile which is lying at her feet.

SIX

‘Why aren’t you and Dad getting married in church?’ Daisy fixes Hannah with a cool stare as she enters the kitchen.

Hannah pauses, taken aback by the fact that Daisy’s query isn’t about why she crept outside to make a call on her mobile. Ryan is muttering about gym kits in the utility room and Josh is chewing slowly and rhythmically, like a bull, whilst staring blankly ahead. ‘Well,’ Hannah says brightly, ‘we’re only having a small wedding with the people we’re closest to, and it’s ...’ She falters, deciding not to utter the unmentionable words: *and it’s your dad’s second wedding, after all*. ‘It just seemed right for us,’ she adds. ‘We don’t want anything too fancy or formal, you know?’

Clearly, Daisy doesn’t know. She gnaws on a toast crust and blinks down at Hannah’s bare feet. Josh continues to eat in silence, the Lynx Effect engulfing the kitchen as if being pumped in through a pipe. ‘Why not?’ Daisy asks.

‘Well, er,’ Hannah starts, deciding yet again that it’s ridiculous to feel intimidated by a ten-year-old, ‘I’m not really religious so it wouldn’t feel right for me to get married in church when I don’t go any other time.’

Hannah hears Ryan slamming the washing machine shut and switching it on. Daisy is now gawping at Hannah as if she’s just confessed to a liking for torturing kittens. ‘You mean you don’t believe in *God*?’ she gasps.

‘Well, not really,’ Hannah blusters, her cheeks flaring up. ‘I mean, I believe in *something*, I suppose, like we should treat people well and respect each other but, er ... I’m not really a churchy type.’

Daisy purses her pink lips. ‘I believe in God.’

‘Well, that’s good, Daisy. It’s completely personal and up to you what you believe in.’

‘Don’t you believe in Heaven either?’

No, because I’m the Antichrist ... ‘Er, not really, I mean ...’

‘Dad doesn’t go to church either,’ Josh intercepts, pushing back a dark, shaggy fringe from equally dark, foreboding eyes. ‘But him and Mum got married in a church and *that* was all right.’ He juts out his bottom lip.

‘Well, I suppose what I mean, what I should’ve said,’ Hannah explains, feeling her jaw tighten and any semblance of hunger rapidly ebbing away, ‘is that I don’t really follow a religion.’

‘Do you *follow* a religion then?’ Josh meets her gaze over the gingham tablecloth.

Hannah frowns. ‘What d’you mean, Josh?’

He flares his nostrils at her, like a horse. ‘You said you don’t *follow* a religion. Like you’d say you *follow* Chelsea but you don’t *follow* Spurs. Like religion’s a football team.’ He sniggers and clamps his mouth shut like a trap.

‘Oh, right!’ She laughs a little too heartily. ‘Well, what I mean is that I don’t support – I mean *practise* – any particular religion.’ As Josh blinks slowly, waiting for her to dig herself into an

even deeper hole, Hannah wonders if this is how it'll be when she's Ryan's wife, and their stepmother. Like being sandwiched between a Gestapo interrogator and a belligerent English teacher who ticks her off for using an ill-chosen verb. Christ-on-a-sodding-bike. She has a sudden urge to shriek, *Okay! We're not getting married in church because your dad was married before, as you both know, a fact I've avoided mentioning because I'm trying to be nice. And actually, while we're on the subject of marriage, why don't we just forget the whole business and carry on living together? It was your dad's idea in the first place, you know. Getting married, I mean. Because he loves me. Yes, I know you might find the idea completely repulsive, and God knows, his feelings might waver a bit when he sets eyes on my cauliflower nurse dress. But still ...*

'What were you saying, Daisy?' Ryan asks, emerging from the utility room with a bundle of sports kits.

'We were just talking about the wedding, Dad,' Daisy says pleasantly.

'Oh, right.' Ryan smiles at Hannah, his eyes meeting hers, making her stomach flip as it always does when he looks at her like that. 'Well,' he adds, turning to Josh, 'speaking of the wedding, we should all go shopping next weekend and pick you both something to wear.'

'But it's ages away,' Josh replies. 'It's *weeks*.'

'Yes, I know there's still six weeks to go. But you'll be at Mum's the next three, and then we'll be cutting it fine, really, to

get things organised ...’

‘Eddie’s birthday’s on Saturday,’ Josh mumbles. ‘We’re going bowling.’

‘Oh,’ Ryan says. ‘Right. Well, that’s nice. Maybe we could do it on Sunday instead.’

‘And we’re staying over till Sunday,’ Josh adds, ‘like *all* day.’

‘Are you? Oh ...’ Hannah can detect the stress creeping across Ryan’s forehead, and longs to ask Josh why he’s being so bloody difficult when all his dad wants to do is festoon him with new clothes. However, she suspects that that would be even more outrageous than admitting she doesn’t *follow* Christianity. Anyway, perhaps Ryan doesn’t mind this rudeness, or has become immune to it over the years. Maybe he thinks Josh and Daisy’s behaviour is perfectly fine and it’s the wedding that’s stressing him out. They’ve planned it together, with the intention of keeping it low-key and simple. But the guest list has grown, and Ryan’s new suit came back from being altered with the trousers so short they flapped pathetically around his ankles. He’s been worrying about the food when Hannah would be perfectly content with a pile of sausage rolls dumped on the table if that’d put a smile on his kids’ faces. Now, what started as Ryan blurting out, ‘I want to marry you, Han, and spend my whole life with you’ has morphed into something stressful and dark, like a storm cloud billowing towards them.

‘And I’ve got stuff to wear anyway,’ Josh mumbles, looking down at his crumb-strewn plate.

‘I know, but I thought you might like something new.’ Regaining his composure, Ryan rolls his eyes good-naturedly at Hannah. How he manages to scrabble together these reserves of patience, she has no idea. Perhaps it just happens when you have children. You suddenly develop this bottomless well of kindness and goodwill.

‘You’re not going to turn down your dad’s offer of new clothes, are you, Josh?’ Hannah asks lightly.

‘Well, I’ve got plenty of T-shirts and jeans.’

‘Right, so which T-shirt were you thinking of?’ Ryan asks with a snort.

‘Dunno. My dark green one maybe.’

‘The one with the rip in the shoulder?’ Ryan laughs. ‘Sure, that’ll look great in the photos, Josh.’

Josh stares at him uncomprehendingly. ‘Photos?’

‘Yes, *wedding photos*, like people usually have when they get married,’ Ryan says with exaggerated patience.

‘What’s wrong with my T-shirt?’

‘Well, apart from the rip, it does tend to whiff a bit even when it’s been washed,’ his father explains, ‘like something’s actually embedded in its fibres and will never come out, even if I boil-wash it which I’ve done on several occasions ...’

Daisy starts giggling. ‘You smell, Josh. That horrible T-shirt stinks of BO and even washing powder can’t get it out.’

‘*And* it’s age nine-to-ten,’ Ryan reminds him, ‘and you’re fourteen, Josh, if I remember rightly. Now, I know you’re fond

of that T-shirt but we could be radical and buy you something in the right size.'

'Oh, Josh can wear whatever he likes,' Hannah cuts in. 'It's not going to be formal, is it, Ryan?' She smiles at his son. 'It's probably best to wear what you feel happy and comfortable in.'

'He's *not* wearing that T-shirt,' Ryan mutters.

'I just don't think it's worth falling out over ...' Hannah glances at Josh. Instead of responding, and being grateful to her for not trying to cram him into a suit, he takes a big gulp of orange juice, wipes his lips on his cuff and allows his mouth to hang open, as if airing its interior. Trying to decipher these kids is a bit like learning to drive, Hannah decides as Ryan shoos them upstairs to fetch their schoolbags. In fact it's *harder* than driving because at least she was able to pay for a teacher. As far as Hannah is aware, there's no British School of How to Handle Daisy and Josh.

'I'd better be going,' Hannah tells Ryan, trying to quash the trace of relief from her voice.

'Okay. Have a good day, darling.' He steps forward and pulls her close, smelling freshly showered and delicious.

'What are *you* wearing to the wedding?' Daisy has reappeared in the kitchen doorway.

'Me?' Ryan springs away from Hannah. 'Erm, a suit, Daisy. A new one that's being altered for me.'

'I meant Hannah, Daddy.' Daisy gives them a fake smile.

'Oh, just a simple dress,' says Hannah quickly.

'Aren't you wearing a veil?'

Hannah pauses. ‘No, but Lou, one of my best friends from—’
‘Why not?’

Because I don't like them! ‘Well, veils are lovely but my friend Lou from college is an amazing jeweller and she's made me this beautiful silver tiara with—’

‘Mum's wedding dress was pretty, wasn't it, Dad?’ Daisy beams at her father.

‘Er, yes. It was very nice ...’ Ryan turns away and swills out the washing-up bowl noisily.

‘Mum's dress,’ Daisy continues, eyes fixed determinedly on Hannah, ‘was white and low at the front like this.’ She draws an invisible V-shape to indicate a plunging neckline.

‘Well, that sounds gorgeous.’ Hannah smiles tightly.

‘And it was long with millions of sparkly beads sewn on, and the veil was so massive two people had to walk behind and carry it through the church, didn't they, Dad? So it didn't drag on the floor and get dirty. Didn't they, Dad?’

‘Er, yes,’ Ryan croaks, now scraping the remains of the kids' breakfasts into the bin.

‘Wow,’ Hannah says hollowly. Why don't we get out the album, she thinks darkly, then we can all gather round and ooh and ahh over Petra's incredible dress before I go to work, and I can show you how crappy and plain I'm going to look in my dumpy little shift that I must have chosen in a fit of madness ...

‘Mummy looked beautiful,’ Daisy breathes.

‘I'm sure she did.’

Sorry, Ryan mouths from the sink. Taking a deep breath, Hannah pauses for a moment, focusing on the area behind Daisy, where the family-sized super-deluxe fridge stands proudly, with its ice maker gadget which once spurted frozen crystals in her face, causing Daisy and Josh to keel over with helpless laughter. It had never done that before, Daisy had informed her when she and her brother had finally managed to compose themselves. Well, of course it hadn't. Petra had chosen it – she'd picked virtually every appliance and piece of furniture – and at times like that, Hannah couldn't help feeling that the whole house was against her. 'D'you want to see a picture of Mummy's dress?' Daisy enquires.

'Daisy!' Ryan barks. 'Could you hurry up and get your shoes on?'

'But, Dad ...'

'Sometime, maybe,' Hannah says briskly, 'but I'd better get off to work now. I'm running late as it is.'

SEVEN

As Lou pulls on her uniform – a brown nylon tabard bearing the soft play centre’s ‘Let’s Bounce’ logo across the chest – it occurs to her that the person who designed it might possibly be a pervert. Lou turns this thought over in her mind almost daily, and as she’s been working at Let’s Bounce for nearly a year, that makes it – well, at 8.30 am she’s incapable of working out the exact figure off the top of her head. But it’s something in the region of 230 times, which she fears is verging on obsessional. It can’t be normal to allow dark thoughts about play centre uniforms to occupy such a large part of her brain.

Yet that vile piece of clothing really ticks all the boxes, Lou thinks, teasing her curly auburn hair with a long-toothed comb and sweeping on powder and lip gloss at the dressing table mirror. No one, apart from people who go in for medieval jousting contests, wear tabards. Even worse, Dave, her boss, insists that said garment is worn on arrival at work and has even ticked off Lou’s friend Steph for not modelling hers on the bus on the way in. ‘You’re all walking advertisements,’ he’s fond of reminding the staff during his ‘motivational talks’.

In their bed behind her, Spike emits a long *mmmmmm* sound, and Lou turns to see a faint smile flicker across his lips. His eyes are closed, his dark lashes dusting his lightly-tanned skin like tiny brushes, his strong, defined jaw bearing its customary blur of

dark stubble. Looks as if he's having a pleasurable dream, lucky sod. Lou's friends often tease her about living with a man with a super-charged libido, and she knows she should feel flattered that he's so up for it, especially as they've been together for sixteen years. In fact, if anything, Spike's sexual appetite has intensified as he's grown older. Maybe it's the tabard, Lou thinks wryly. 'You up, babe?' Spike has awoken from his reverie.

'Yep. Running a bit late actually.' Lou pads over to the bed and dispenses a speedy kiss on his slightly clammy forehead. 'Gotta go,' she adds, grabbing her bag from the floor, pulling on her tabard-concealing black trenchcoat and hurrying out of the flat, down one flight of dusty wooden stairs and into the hazy April morning.

It feels good to be outside. The flat seems even dingier when Spike isn't working, which happens to be most of the time. It's been six months since he last had a job, and the more time Spike spends in bed, or comatose on the sofa, the staler their surroundings become. Some mornings, like today, Lou is almost *grateful* to be escaping to Let's Bounce. Although she loves Spike, and he's still handsome and ridiculously youthful-looking at forty-eight, Lou can't help worrying that his lethargy might engulf her completely until it's too late to fight her way out.

Is sitting on your arse all day actually contagious? she wonders as she walks briskly to work. *Does it become progressively worse, until the sufferer is unable to separate himself from the sofa apart from occasionally staggering to the loo?* Spike can't even be

bothered to drop used teabags into the kitchen bin. He just lobs them into the sink, and every time she removes them – unwilling to start an argument over something as petty as teabags – Lou is seized by an urge to pelt them in his face.

She marches on, now feeling more annoyed with herself than Spike for allowing yesterday to slip away in a fug of TV and housework instead of making the most of her one day off. She always imagines Sadie and Barney taking their babies to some beautiful spot in the Cambridgeshire countryside for a picnic on Sundays. And Hannah and Ryan probably take his kids on a family walk in some particularly photogenic part of London – Primrose Hill or Hampstead Heath – like characters in a Richard Curtis movie. Lou sees expensive white wine being lifted from a coolbox and Ryan’s kids chatting nicely with Hannah, laughing at her jokes and feeling lucky that their dad has found himself such a cool girlfriend. And here’s Lou in York – not that she’s blaming York for the situation she’s found herself in – wearing a synthetic tabard on her way to extract stray nappies heavily laden with pee from the ballpool.

Still, she thinks, approaching the redbrick former factory which houses Let’s Bounce, at least there’s Hannah and Ryan’s wedding to look forward to. Six weeks to go now. A trip to London will shake her up. She’s made a pact with herself to get out of this crappy job by then, after which ... well, she isn’t quite sure *what* will come after that. Something to do with Spike, she suspects. Something to change her life and lift her out of the

humdrum existence which has somehow sucked her in. Yes, after the wedding she'll do it. She'll be refreshed and energised then. But it's far too big and scary to think about right now.

EIGHT

Hannah cycles like a maniac, legs pumping and heart banging against her ribs. It feels good being out; in fact after the interrogation over breakfast, about weddings and veils and *God*, for Christ's sake, having a toenail ripped off would feel pretty damn fantastic. Even though she's lived in London for thirteen years, Hannah can still taste the traffic fumes on her tongue. It tastes of excitement and life going on all around her. Her childhood in a tiny fishing village made her yearn for a fast-paced city life: first Glasgow, where she'd studied illustration, followed by a succession of insalubrious rented studio flats and shared houses scattered all over north London. Now, as she zips between vehicles, heading for Islington, she feels the stress of her interrogation blowing away in the light breeze.

The trouble is, Hannah has never imagined herself becoming a stepmother. She'd have been no less amazed if someone had announced that she must fly a helicopter or raise a family of baboons. Yet, when you meet a man in his mid-thirties, you can hardly fall over in a dead faint when it transpires that he has children. Ryan became a father relatively young, at twenty-three. Parenthood has occupied a huge portion of his life, making his two years with Hannah a mere dot on the map in comparison. Checking her watch as she turns into Essex Road – she's early for work, as is often the case these days – she replays the Saturday

night when Ryan Lennox dropped into her life.

It was a bitterly cold evening and Hannah had recently ended her year-long relationship with Marc-with-a-'c'. Actually, 'relationship' was too grand a term for what had consisted mainly of him showing up infuriatingly late for dates, or not at all – then drunkenly buzzing the bell to her flat at 3.30 am, crying and blurting out declarations of love loud enough to wake everyone in her post code. When he'd mistaken her T-shirt drawer for the loo and peed into it, that had been the final straw. Hannah hadn't been looking to meet anyone that night as she'd waited for her friend Mia. She was enjoying her single, Marc-free life, cycling to Catfish, working hard, knowing that nothing untoward was going to happen to her T-shirts.

She and Mia had arranged to meet in Nell's, a cavernous bar in Frith Street. Ryan was standing at the bar, and although the place was already bustling, Hannah sensed an aura of calm around this tall, slim man in jeans, a pale shirt and fine, wire-rimmed glasses. Squeezing her way through a bunch of loud girls on a hen night, she ordered a beer and looked around for Mia. Hannah was five minutes early and, as she paid for her drink, she had an overwhelming urge to talk to this man standing a couple of metres to her right.

Sipping from her glass, Hannah conjured up possible scenarios. He was a Saturday dad having a restorative pint after showing his children armadillos or Egyptian artefacts in museums before heading home to his new wife. The wife would

be astonishingly pretty, obviously (Hannah had already assessed his striking dark eyes, the nicely full mouth, his cute dimple). Or maybe he was single and putting off the miserable business of going home to a chilly flat and a meal for one. Yet neither scenario seemed right. There was no wedding ring, nor did he seem like someone who'd limp off home to peel the foil lid off a shrunken frozen lasagne. *He's probably just waiting for his girlfriend*, she decided, feeling foolish for letting her thoughts run away with her.

The man glanced at Hannah as her mobile rang. 'Han?' Mia croaked. 'I'm really sorry. I set off to meet you but I feel so crap, really sick, that I just had to come home ...'

'Oh, poor you,' she said. 'Don't worry. Just get well ...'

'But I've ruined your night,' Mia wailed.

'It doesn't matter, honestly.' Hannah caught the man's eye as she finished the call.

How could she start talking to him? All her life, Hannah had stumbled into relationships with no chatting up required, and now the only thing she could think to mention was how much she hated 'Eye of the Tiger', which was playing rather loudly right now. But what if he liked it? She glanced at him again. He seemed thoughtful, bookish and unpretentious – the kind of man who'd prefer to eat in a casual Italian place than a poncey establishment.

Hannah chewed her lip and tried out possible conversation openers. *Hi. Rotten night out there.* To which he'd reply, 'Yes.'

And then there'd be a horrible silence. *I hate this record, don't you?* she'd add with a strained laugh. And he'd say, 'Do you?' Because by this time, 'Eye of the Tiger' would have stopped, and it'd be something like Marvin Gaye singing 'What's Going On?', and she'd have to bluster that it was the *last* one she hated. 'What was the last one?' he'd ask, backing away from her and looking for the quickest exit route.

What on earth was wrong with her? She was single. She was thirty-three years old. Why couldn't she act like a normal woman? It wasn't that she lacked confidence. At work, she'd been recently promoted and was often expected to present to terrifying panels of suits. Whiteboards, PowerPoint, coming up with concepts for new ranges: she was fine with all of that. Yet she couldn't figure out how to talk to a handsome man in a bar, even though he'd glanced at her on several occasions and, crucially, wasn't giving the impression that he thought she was completely hideous.

Then he turned to her and said, 'Hi.'

God, his smile was nice – sweet, warm and genuine.

'Hi,' Hannah said.

'Horrible night out there.'

'Yes, it is.'

Small pause. Hannah took a gulp of her drink.

'Waiting for someone?' the man asked.

'Um, I was, but she's just called to say she can't make it.'

Hannah smiled broadly. 'So I guess I'll just finish this drink and

go home.'

'Well,' he said, 'it doesn't look like the person I'm meeting is going to show up either.'

'Really? Who's that?'

He grinned and paused, as if wondering how much information to divulge. 'Er ... I don't really know,' he said, blushing slightly. 'I mean, I've never met her. We've just emailed a couple of times.'

'Blind date?'

The man nodded, raising his eyebrows ominously. '*Guardian* Soulmates. I know it sounds a bit ...'

'No, not at all, it sounds *fine*...' It really did. It meant he was single, read the *Guardian*, and was looking to meet someone. Which immediately made him a more attractive prospect than someone who showed up at 3 am, awash with tears and snot, and peed on her favourite T-shirt.

'I'm not even sure it's the best way to go about things,' he added. 'In fact, *Guardian* Soul-destroyers would be more apt.' He laughed and pushed back his light brown hair self-consciously.

'Had a few bad experiences then?' Hannah asked with a smile.

He shrugged. 'Let's just say it's been a bit of a non-event so far. Anyway, I'm Ryan ...'

'Hannah ...' And that was that. They talked, not about whatever godawful song was on the jukebox, but about their lives. By 10.30, in a cosy Italian restaurant, Hannah found herself telling Ryan about the T-shirt drawer incident while he

confessed to hiding his eight-year-old daughter's favourite story book after he calculated that he must have read it 150 times. Hannah learnt that, while Ryan's job as an advertising copywriter sounded glamorous, his latest campaigns had been for mould-repelling tile grout and a toilet deodorising brick that came in six different scents inspired by the wild herbs of the Corsican Maquis. 'Seriously?' She exploded with laughter.

'Unfortunately, yes – we're talking thyme, lavender, sage ... the range is called "The Scented Isle".'

'So you can have your own Scented Isle in your toilet? I never knew that.'

'Er, yes, if you really want one. They're only a couple of quid ...'

'Cheaper than a package holiday,' she suggested, noticing how Ryan's eyes crinkled when he laughed.

'You know,' he added, 'we might use that line.'

Thank God your date didn't turn up, Hannah thought a little while later as they stepped out into the wet night and hailed a cab together. She didn't know Ryan – not really. But she knew about his ex-wife and children and more about toilet brick fragrances than she'd ever thought possible. As he dropped her off at her flat, after they'd swapped numbers and he'd kissed her briefly but incredibly sweetly on the lips, she'd decided that she wouldn't bother to pretend she was too busy to see him for at least a week. She'd be calling him the very next day, to hell with it.

What Hannah hadn't realised then was how swiftly and deeply

she'd fall in love, and that eighteen months after meeting, Ryan would ask her to move into the house he shared with his children at London Fields, and marry him, and that she'd want to very much.

And now, as she chains up her bike in the small courtyard at Catfish, Hannah feels a sharp twinge of guilt. All the stuff about church weddings and veils and their beautiful mother – of course, none of it is their fault. They're just kids, she reminds herself. Even Josh still needs constant reminders from Ryan to clean his teeth and not wear the same boxers three days running.

No, it's up to *her* to make things work. And she will, Hannah decides, greeting Adele at reception and entering the light, airy space of the design studio. She'll start with Daisy, because surely it's easier to befriend a ten-year-old girl than a boy of fourteen. She'll suggest something simple, like a shopping trip. As Hannah says hi to her colleagues, and pours herself a strong black coffee, she feels a surge of optimism. She and Daisy will have a whole day together – a girlie day – to try on clothes and stop off at cafés where they'll giggle and chat. It's a great idea, she realises now. Why didn't she think of it before?

NINE

At Let's Bounce, 'York's Premier Soft Play Experience', Lou plucks a small object from the ballpool and holds it gingerly between her forefinger and thumb. It's dark brown and sticky and it occurs to her that, just a few months ago, she'd have retched if she'd had to pick up such a thing with her bare hands. Now, though, it seems like a normal part of her day.

Lou works six shifts a week at Let's Bounce. Although she was grateful for the job when three shops which stocked her jewellery closed down, she vows that, if she ever has children – and with Spike, it seems increasingly unlikely – she'll insist that they play on grass and in rivers and never in putrid places like this. Lou knows that parents need somewhere to take their children, especially on rainy days, but she never thinks the adults look happy or even faintly relieved to be here. They slump over plastic plates of chips and baked potatoes and horrible yellowy stuff called coronation chicken, whatever the heck that is, looking as if their lives are teetering on the brink of collapse.

Wrapping the brown squidgy thing in a paper napkin, Lou carries it to the ladies' loo. While the main play zone is dimly lit – to conceal the decaying food lurking amongst the equipment, Lou suspects – the fluorescent strip in the ladies' is so unforgiving, she'll be able to get a proper look at the thing. If it's poo, or something equally gross, she plans to present it to Dave,

her boss, which will hopefully make him do something about the state of the place.

Lou places the paper parcel on the Formica top beside the washbasins and peels it open.

‘Ew, what’s that?’ Steph, Lou’s friend and fellow staff member, has emerged from a cubicle and is eyeing the parcel from a safe distance.

‘Don’t know,’ Lou replies, ‘but I think it might be a squashed muffin. It smells kind of sweet ...’

Realising what she’s doing – ie, trying to *analyse* the lump – Lou quickly re-wraps it and flings it into the plastic bin.

‘I bloody hate this place, Lou,’ Steph mutters, washing her hands and picking a clump of mascara from an eyelash.

‘Me too.’ Lou checks her watch. ‘C’mon, if you Hoover and I clear the tables, maybe we’ll get out on time for once.’

‘Yes, boss.’ Steph grins.

Lou smiles back. Thank God for Steph and the rest of the staff here, united in nugget-frying hell. ‘Fancy a quick drink when we’re done?’ she asks.

‘Could murder one,’ Steph replies. She stands back from the mirror, smoothes her hands over her rounded hips and inhales deeply as if summoning the strength to face the mayhem outside.

And it *is* mayhem. By midday, the blue sky had turned a moody grey, and the onset of rain always brings in the hordes. In her first week here, Lou discovered that things don’t gently wind down towards the end of the day as they do in normal

workplaces. No, they wind *up*. By 5.30 pm the kids are usually so overwrought and exhausted that at least two-thirds are crying, lashing out at their parents and refusing to leave. Plus by that time, their stomachs are swishing with cheap blackcurrant squash and churning with horrible deep-fried nuggets. So they feel sick as well. Some children actually *are* sick. Compared to mopping up puke, Lou thinks wryly, retrieving a squashed muffin from the ballpool is almost a perk of the job.

‘I don’t wanna go home!’ a little girl wails in the play zone. ‘Wanna climb on the big rope again!’ The mother throws Lou an apologetic look. Lou smiles back. Although the woman looks young – late-twenties perhaps – her shoulder-length bob bears a thick swathe of wiry grey at the front. Perhaps motherhood has done that to her, or she’s just had to endure one too many bleak afternoons at Let’s Bounce. Will that happen to Lou if she works here much longer? She noticed a solitary grey hair nestling among her auburn curls this morning – at *thirty-five* – a defiant, silvery wire which she yanked out in disgust.

The girl is now darting between the scuffed, primary-coloured tables. ‘Come *on*, Bethany,’ the woman cajoles, holding out her hand ineffectually.

‘No! I hate you!’

‘They’re closing in a minute,’ the mother adds. ‘Look – all the other boys and girls have gone home. This lady’ – she indicates Lou, who wonders at what point she became a lady – ‘wants to go home and if you don’t come right now, you’ll be locked in all

night.’

‘Good!’ the girl thunders. ‘It’d be fun.’

‘Your mum’s right,’ Lou says lightly, dragging the vacuum cleaner with its ‘amusing’ cartoon eyes towards them. ‘But if you don’t mind, I’ve got to Hoover up first.’

‘Right. Sorry,’ the woman says, stepping away from a scattering of nuggets on the carpet. Lou switches on the Hoover while Steph loads a tray with dirty plates.

The child is now refusing to put on her shoes. ‘Want to help me Hoover?’ Lou asks.

The girl eyes her warily. ‘Okay.’ Lou hands the tube to her, quickly glancing around to check that Dave isn’t lurking around. He’d snap that she was contravening health and safety regulations (although discarded food and nappies in the ballpool area don’t seem to bother him one bit).

The girl is Hoovering with reasonable efficiency and her mother looks relieved. ‘You’ve done a great job there,’ Lou praises the child.

‘Thanks.’ She grins proudly.

‘You know what?’ the mother adds, clearly grateful for Lou’s intervention, ‘you’re a natural to work somewhere like this.’

Lou smiles and thanks her, but by the time the mother and daughter have left the building, she’s thinking that being a natural at scraping up chips off the carpet was never supposed to be part of the plan.

‘Still fancy that drink?’ Steph asks as they leave, tearing off

their tabards and stuffing them into their bags.

Lou thinks about Spike lying around at home, perhaps strumming a guitar but more likely depositing yet more used teabags into the sink. ‘God, yes,’ she declares. ‘Let’s go.’

TEN

‘Result,’ Spike says, placing his mobile back on the bedside table.

‘What’s that?’ Astrid asks.

‘Lou’s in the pub, having a drink with her friend from work. Reckon she’ll be a couple of hours at least ...’

Astrid laughs and shakes her head in mock despair. ‘You’re terrible, giving her all that crap about rehearsing at Charlie’s. I don’t know how you can live with yourself, Spike.’

‘Well, I *could* be rehearsing,’ Spike murmurs. ‘In fact, we could practise a few things right now.’ With a broad smile, he swivels back into Astrid’s rumpled bed, pulling her towards him. She’s so beautiful, he thinks, like one of those gamine actresses from the sixties. All smooth, golden skin and perky breasts and that curtain of long, straight hair with a fringe hanging over her clear blue eyes.

Astrid, who is entirely naked, coils around Spike like a cat and plants a kiss on his fevered brow. He’s not ill, yet that’s how he feels when he’s with her: hot and feverish, as if the inner workings of his body which control mood and temperature go haywire the minute he arrives at her small terraced house.

‘You okay, baby?’ she asks in that vaguely posh voice with husky undertones, which always sends tiny sparks zapping up his spinal cord.

‘Better than okay,’ he replies with a smile. ‘Absolutely fantastic.’

She chuckles throatily, swinging her legs out of bed and stretching up to her full six feet before sashaying towards the open bedroom door. Spike stares at her bum, deciding it’s so perfectly formed, it looks airbrushed. ‘Want a cup of tea?’ She glances back with a teasing smile.

Tea? How can he think about tea when he’s just copped a long, languorous look at her backside? Yet that’s what Spike loves about Astrid Stone. Her casual air, the way nothing seems to ruffle her. The way she can enjoy a full four hours in the sack, then swing out of bed and suggest a hot milky drink, as if prolonged afternoon sex is a completely normal and expected part of a drizzly Monday afternoon.

‘Tea would be great,’ Spike replies, although it’s the last thing he fancies right now. He wants Astrid back in bed with him instead of wasting valuable time waiting for the kettle to boil and, if any beverages are to be consumed, he’d prefer a nice cold beer.

He can hear her now, padding lightly downstairs and pottering about in the kitchen. As she hums a lilting, unrecognisable tune, he sinks back into her plump white pillows and congratulates himself on his stupendous luck.

He really is a fortunate bastard. Astrid made all the moves, from the moment they met at the Red Lion, six months ago now, one wet October night. She’d come along with Charlie, a friend of Spike’s with whom he has vague intentions of starting a band.

It had felt like an ordinary night until Astrid strode in – a blonde, blue-eyed goddess.

‘Spike,’ Charlie said grandly, ‘meet my dear friend Astrid.’

Astrid beamed at him. ‘Uh, hello,’ Spike croaked, taking in the cute peasant top and slender hips and legs that went on for about seventy miles in dark skinny jeans. Her ankle boots were scuffed, and she wasn’t wearing make-up which, to Spike, suggested a self-assuredness he found incredibly loin-stirring. ‘Hi, Spike,’ Astrid said breezily, kissing his cheek and nearly sending him staggering back into a table laden with drinks.

When Spike tries to replay that night, he can’t remember all of it. If someone were to ask, ‘What did you and Astrid talk about? What did she drink?’ he wouldn’t be able to answer. All he remembers is Charlie melting into the crowd, and some godawful Dire Straits tribute band playing on a tiny stage, and he and Astrid escaping to flirt in a dark corner until last drinks were called and they ventured out into the night.

Somehow, they found themselves falling into a damp alley where they kissed against a wet wheelie bin. Spike found his hands accidentally falling into Astrid’s top, getting pulled up there by some kind of strange magnetic force, at which point he realised she wasn’t wearing a bra. She laughed and disentangled herself, and they swapped numbers before going their separate ways. Spike watched her swish off down the street (she wasn’t wearing a jacket – Astrid seemed impervious to the cold) and realised that something incredible had just happened to him.

Spike had just met a woman who knew how to *live*.

‘Here you go, baby.’ Astrid has reappeared at her bedroom doorway with two mugs of tea.

‘Thanks, honey.’ She’s no longer naked, disappointingly, but at least she’s only wearing a short, silky slip thing. It’s nothing like the floor-length pink dressing gown that Lou bundles herself up in, constructed from two-inch-thick fabric with all the sexual allure of a gigantic marshmallow. No, the thing Astrid is wearing definitely isn’t a dressing gown. It’s, um ... Spike sips his tea and tries to think of the word. ‘What’s that called?’ he asks.

She glances down and frowns quizzically. ‘What’s *what* called?’

‘That ... that thing you’re wearing.’

‘What, my chemise?’

Ah, *chemise*. He might have known it’d have a sexy French name, like something you could happily drown in. ‘Yeah,’ he says, pushing dishevelled dark hair out of his eyes. ‘I knew it was something like that.’

‘You’re funny,’ she says, ‘but listen, much as I’d like to discuss my chemise at great length, I need to get moving so you’ll have to get out of here I’m afraid.’

‘What?’ Spike groans. ‘Already?’

Disappointment wells in his stomach. He’d envisaged another couple of hours here at least; it’s only half-six, and he’s already constructed the Charlie alibi. He’d even planned to call Lou a little later to say the rehearsal was going so well, they’d be

carrying on late and she needn't wait up for him.

'I'm booked to do a voiceover at half-seven,' Astrid adds briskly, 'and I still need to get showered and sorted.'

'What, in the evening? Who works at that time?' Spike tries to erase the hint of possessiveness in his voice.

'Loads of people do,' she laughs, 'especially at radio stations. It's for some programme trailers and I need to do it with the guy who does the evening show.'

Despite his irritation, Astrid's job as a voiceover artist actually increases her attractiveness. Spike can imagine happily buying incontinence pads if it were her voice purring away in the ad.

She marches over, grabs the duvet and pulls it away with a laugh, exposing Spike's naked form. 'Hey!' he cries in protest.

'Oh, don't be shy, baby.' Then, just as things are looking hopeful again, she fixes him with a steady gaze. 'So, does Lou have any idea about us, d'you reckon?'

'Um, no, I don't think so ...'

She tuts loudly. 'Ah, so you keep telling me it's all over between you two, that you're just flatmates really, blah-di-blah, yet you still act as if you're terrified about her finding out.'

'I'd just rather pick the right time,' he says, feeling hurt.

'Oh, I'm not saying you *should* tell her,' Astrid adds brusquely. 'That's up to you. It's your life, Spike, but I hope you're not kidding me, yourself or Lou by pretending your relationship's dead in the water when your girlfriend obviously doesn't think it is.'

‘Actually,’ Spike mumbles, ‘I probably will say something soon. Maybe it’s for the best ...’

‘She might be pleased,’ Astrid says with a shrug. ‘Maybe she’s been trying to pluck up the courage to tell *you*.’

‘To tell me what?’ he asks, aghast.

‘That she wants to break up. Face it, Spike – the only reason why you’re round here four times a week is because you’re both in such a rut, which is hardly surprising, is it, after how many years together?’

‘Um, about thirteen,’ Spike says dully.

‘Hey.’ Astrid’s face softens. ‘I’m just being realistic, honey. I mean, you were both so young – well, *she* was young when you first got together ...’

Spike nods, marvelling at how Astrid manages to drop in casual references to his age. She, like Lou, is younger than him; in fact at twenty-nine, she’s even younger than Lou. Is it *his* fault, though, if he attracts younger girls? What’s he supposed to do – go out hunting for forty-eight-year-old women?

Spike clambers out of Astrid’s bed, gathers up the clothes he threw off in haste and reluctantly puts them on.

‘You make me sound like a real shit,’ he huffs.

‘I didn’t mean that, babe. You’re not shitty to me. You’re quite lovely, in fact. Apart from that time when you didn’t tell me Lou was going to show up at that gig ...’

‘What, the Christmas one? I had no idea! She said she was going to her work party.’

‘Yeah,’ Astrid says sternly, ‘and she snuck off early so she could see you play, devoted girlfriend that she is.’

Spike’s face droops. ‘Yeah. Well, I’m sorry. That must’ve been uncomfortable for you.’

Astrid smiles, takes hold of his shoulders and kisses him firmly on the mouth. ‘I’ve had better nights, but never mind. Now move it, you. I need to get ready.’

‘Okay, *okay*...’ He follows her downstairs to the front door which she opens with a flourish, mouthing bye-bye, apparently not caring that anyone could walk by and see her clad only in a chemise.

‘Bye,’ he says, stepping out onto her path. He knows he’s sulking, and he turns to give her a big smile, but Astrid has already shut her front door.

Spike doesn’t feel guilty, he decides as he leaves her street of tidy redbrick terraces. It’s not thirteen years he and Lou have been together, he realises now, but *sixteen*. God, that makes him feel old. Spike is two years off fifty, a fact he rarely dwells on, but which now causes a flutter of panic in his chest.

He met Lou at the end of her foundation year at art school: a beautiful, fresh-faced doll of a girl who’d gone on to study jewellery, scooping prizes galore, while he’d scraped a living with the odd short-lived job – van driver, kitchen porter, postman – whilst trying to revive his music career. At twenty-one, Spike had had a hit with a plaintive, acoustic love song based on the *Black Beauty* TV theme tune, imaginatively entitled ‘My Beauty’

which had, for one summer, been the slow-dance song of choice. He'd moved from Glasgow to London, hoping to follow it up with another release to showcase his talents, but his second single had flopped, as had his third, and then his record label had dropped him and the horse telly thing had become a bit of a joke. There'd been a brief frisson of hope three years later, when his manager had called him, suggesting continuing the horse theme with 'an ironic, tongue-in-cheek version of Follyfoot or maybe even White Horses, you remember that one ...'

'I don't want to be seventies-horse-telly-man,' Spike had snapped. Broke and desolate, he'd drifted back to Glasgow and into the arms of a cute art student called Lou. Is he passionate about her, after all this time? Not really, he reflects, striding past Sound Shack, his favourite music shop in York and giving Rick, the owner, a nod through the window before marching purposely home. Oh, she's pretty all right. She's barely aged at all, with that cheeky little face and smattering of freckles that he finds so sweet and endearing. Yet spending sixteen years with the same woman, no matter how lovely, is hardly sexy and dynamic, is it?

Spike doesn't know any couple, apart from his own mum and dad (who are old and therefore don't count) who've been together that long. Surely it's not natural to meet one person and stick with them forever, all through your young years when you're meant to be wild and crazy and shagging like mad. And *he's* not old. Forties are the new thirties these days, and he still *feels* young, which is what matters. Spike can proudly say he's never set foot

in a Homebase. So here he is, a youngish virile man, and if Lou can't appreciate him and insists on wearing that marshmallow dressing gown instead of a chemise, then who can blame him for having a little dalliance now and again?

It's not as if he's ever brought Astrid home while Lou's been at work. *That* would be out of order, Spike decides as he strides down their shabbier street and climbs the stairs to their first-floor flat. As he lets himself in and grabs a beer from the fridge, Spike contents himself with the fact that no one can say he doesn't have morals.

ELEVEN

Daisy is cleaning her teeth before bed. Normally, Hannah avoids going into the bathroom if she hears one of the kids in there, even if the door is wide open as it is now. Occasionally, she's made a mistake, and leapt out at the sight of Josh clad in his boxers, dabbing at a chin-spot with a little piece of loo roll. But now, hearing the sound of bristles vigorously scrubbing enamel, she figures that teeth cleaning isn't too personal and that it might be okay to tiptoe in.

'Hi,' she says casually. Daisy turns to her from the washbasin with a mouth oozing pink froth. 'Er, I was thinking,' she starts, 'that maybe me and you could go shopping in the West End on Saturday, just the two of us?' Daisy blinks slowly as if anticipating a cruel punchline: *Because I'd like to buy you an embarrassing coat.* 'I know your dad suggested all of us going,' Hannah ploughs on, 'but Josh is going to Eddie's and I thought, well ... wouldn't it be nice, just me and you? Would you like that?'

Daisy wipes some toothpaste from her chin, then turns back to the washbasin where she spits noisily. 'I dunno,' she says.

Hannah wonders if this means she's unsure of her availability, or whether or not it would in fact be 'nice'. 'Well, I thought maybe we could choose you a dress,' Hannah offers, starting to sweat a little now. 'I mean, you are our bridesmaid, Daisy.'

She spits again – more for effect than out of necessity, Hannah suspects – then fills her cupped palms with water from the cold tap and slurps it noisily.

‘Or, if that’s too girlie for you,’ Hannah soldiers on, ‘maybe you’d like a skirt and a nice top, and a little cardie in case it’s cold. It doesn’t matter really. We don’t even have to look at clothes. We could, er ...’ She tails off, stuck for words, as if faced with a particularly hostile interviewer. Why is she doing this anyway? Hannah doesn’t care what anyone wears to the wedding. Yet it’s not about shopping, not really. Hannah and Daisy have never done anything on their own together, because Hannah has always assumed Daisy would either come up with an excuse, like she was planning to stay home and count the woolly tufts on her bedroom rug, or reply with a curt ‘No, thank you.’ But now, with the wedding thundering towards them, she’s decided to stop assuming anything.

Daisy sucks on a tendril of hair and looks at Hannah as if she’s just suggested a trip to the chiropodist.

‘Just me and you, d’you mean?’ she asks cautiously.

‘Yes. Wouldn’t that be fun?’

Daisy pulls her lips into a thin line and nods.

‘Great, then,’ Hannah says, turning to leave the bathroom.

‘Hannah?’ Daisy has followed her out to the landing.

‘Yes?’ Hannah says eagerly.

‘Wanna see something in my room?’

‘Er, sure.’

She follows Daisy into her pale turquoise bedroom, carefully treading between the books, clothes and sweet wrappers that litter the floor. Hovering uncertainly, Hannah watches as Daisy crouches down to rummage at the bottom of her wardrobe. Finally, she pulls out a small, black, leather-bound book.

‘What’s that?’ Hannah asks.

‘Mum and Dad’s wedding album.’ She clutches it in front of her, as if about to present it to Hannah as a prize.

‘Oh! That’s nice. Did they, um ... give it to you?’

Daisy perches on the edge of her bed. Hell, Hannah thinks, she’s going to make me look through it. She’s going to make me examine her mother in that billion-sparkles dress. Hannah feels vaguely queasy, and can feel beads of sweat on her upper lip.

‘She made me and Josh one each,’ Daisy explains, tossing back her long dark hair. ‘I don’t think he looks at his though.’

‘Oh. Well, I guess boys aren’t really into that kind of thing.’

‘What, weddings?’

‘No, um ... looking at wedding *photos*. You know.’ Hannah’s entire body is now prickling with unease as she tries to conjure up a fictitious emergency downstairs – the smell of burning or gas – that will give her an excuse to charge out of Daisy’s room. She doesn’t want to scare the child by making her think her home is about to explode, but nor does she wish to peruse the album, which Daisy has now opened on her lap to reveal a full-page close-up of Petra’s radiant smiling face.

Petra doesn’t look like a fat nurse. There’s nothing medical

about her whatsoever. She's so lovely and elegant with her jet-black hair piled up that Hannah's breath catches in her throat. For an instant, she thinks Daisy must have found a copy of *Brides* magazine, snipped out a picture and stuck it in the album to trick her. But no, it's her mother all right – those are Petra's steely grey eyes, sharp cheekbones and perfectly painted red lips. 'This is Mummy arriving at church,' Daisy murmurs, stroking the side of Petra's face.

'That's nice.' Hannah swallows hard.

'And that's Grandma Esther standing next to Mum,' Daisy adds, turning the page.

Hannah feels ridiculous, perching gingerly on Daisy's bed, and sneakily checks out roughly how many pages the album might have. A dozen or so and she'll probably be able to hold it together, but this is a chunky album that could conceivably go on forever. 'Maybe you'd better get your PJs on now,' she says gently. 'It's gone half-eight ...'

'Yeah, in a minute. Anyway, look – that's Daddy in his wedding suit. Is he gonna wear the same one at *your* wedding?'

'No, he's having a new one altered, remember?' Hannah says, willing Ryan to come upstairs, witness the cosy tableau and chivvy Daisy into bed.

'Oh yeah. Look! That's the dress I was telling you about.'

Hannah tries to focus on the stunning woman before her. But her head is swimming and she can no longer make proper words come out of her mouth. How can Ryan not still be in love with

this woman? Hannah has met Petra numerous times, when she's picked up or dropped off the children, and has always thought, yes, she's striking, but somehow her chilliness cancels out her beauty. But she's never seen Petra look like this – like a woman in love, who'd go on to bear Ryan two children whom they'd raise together until her shock announcement three years ago that she must 'put myself first'. Heartbroken and stunned, Ryan simply hadn't seen it coming. As far as he was concerned, Petra's career as a concert cellist *had* come before everything else.

Maybe that's it, Hannah thinks, a sense of dread washing over her. Ryan asked her to marry him simply in an attempt to get over Petra. He is trying to *force* himself not to love her anymore.

Daisy is still going on about her mother's billowing veil. Hannah tries to show appreciation, but her tongue feels like a dry thing flapping around in her mouth. *They're only wedding photos*, she tells herself sternly. *She's just showing them off because she likes to look at them. It's nothing more sinister than that.*

'Don't you like it?' Daisy swivels round to face her.

'Oh, yes,' Hannah croaks. 'It's beautiful. A really amazing veil.' *Turn the page*, she thinks desperately, *so we can look at pictures of the bridesmaids or cake*. Daisy turns the page. There's a group picture with everyone neatly arranged in two rows in front of the church, squinting in the sunshine. So many people. Hannah wonders who they all are. There's also a close-up of Ryan standing next to his new bride, two beautiful people setting out on a life together. 'So you're up for this shopping trip at the

weekend?’ she says faintly as Daisy flicks through the final pages.

‘Yeah, okay,’ Daisy mutters.

They sit side by side for a moment, with Daisy now resting the closed album on her knees as if reluctant to put it away. Hannah isn’t sure if she’s imagined it, but Daisy might possibly have shuffled a millimetre closer to her on the bed. ‘Thanks for showing me the album,’ Hannah says gently. ‘It obviously means a lot to you.’

Daisy nods mutely and bites her lip.

‘I’m looking forward to our day out, are you?’

She nods again.

‘I, er ... I hope you’re looking forward to our wedding too,’ Hannah ventures, wondering if it would be okay to put an arm around Daisy’s shoulders, or if she’d flinch, or leap up and run out of the room. No, better not.

‘Yeah,’ Daisy replies, her gaze fixed firmly on the album. ‘But I still can’t understand why it’s not in a church.’

‘I can’t believe she did that,’ Ryan whispers in bed that night. After half a year of living here, Hannah still finds the nocturnal whispering bizarre. It’s not even as if they’re up to anything. Ryan is wearing pyjamas, for God’s sake. With Josh’s bedroom next door, and Daisy’s the one after that, the only time it feels remotely okay to have sex is if the kids aren’t home, or if she or Ryan happen to wake up at some ungodly hour, like 4.30 am, when they’ll grab the opportunity. It gives their sex life during the week an urgent quality, and makes the three out of four weekends when

Daisy and Josh are at their mother's feel like a bit of a treat.

Lately, Hannah has started to hanker for a baby of her own; yet, as she's never had the faintest yearning before, she worries that this might be some desperate attempt to redress the balance. 'It doesn't matter,' she tells Ryan, snuggling closer. 'Daisy wasn't doing it to be mean or anything. And I bet every girl's entranced by her mum on her wedding day.'

There's a beat's silence and she breathes in the scent of Ryan's skin. There's something almost *edibly* warm about him: sweet and moreish, like a croissant. Hannah's paranoia about Petra has ebbed away, and she plants a soft kiss on his chest.

'I know they don't make it easy for you,' he says.

'Well ...' She hesitates. 'It's not easy but, you know, I'm an adult. We'll get there. It'll just take some time.'

'I'm sure you're right,' he says, kissing her. *I am*, she reflects. *I just need to keep believing that.* Anyway, what kind of person of Ryan's age doesn't come with a little baggage? In fact, she likes the fact that he knows what days gym kits are needed and never forgets to pay the deposit for a school trip. So much information to store, and he manages it so admirably. She doesn't even think of Ryan's children as baggage; after all, they *belong* here, while she feels like an awkward guest at a fancy boutique hotel, under the watchful eye of two stern concierges. 'Anyway,' she adds, 'I've got some good news. I've been thinking me and Daisy should spend some time together, so I asked her if she'd like to come shopping and she said yes.'

‘But you hate shopping,’ he exclaims. ‘You can’t stand it. You don’t see the point ...’

‘I know, but I thought she’d enjoy it.’ *Because I don’t know her, you see. I don’t really know anything about your daughter.*

‘Well, I think it’s a great idea.’

‘And hopefully,’ Hannah adds, ‘it’ll get her in the wedding mood.’

Ryan pauses, then asks, ‘Are you in the wedding mood, Han?’

Hannah frowns in the darkness. ‘What d’you mean?’

He hesitates, and the hand which has been stroking her back and shoulders comes to a halt. ‘I ... just think you seem a bit tense, that’s all.’

‘Um, just wedding nerves, I guess.’

‘Not getting cold feet, are you?’ he asks.

‘No, of course not. It’s just ... I don’t know. Right now, it doesn’t seem quite real. I’d never imagined getting married, being a *wife*.’

‘But you’re glad I put the idea in your head?’

‘Yes, of course I am. Actually, no one’s ever asked me before.’

‘But they all wanted to, I bet,’ he says affectionately.

‘Hey, less of the *all*...’

They lie in silence for a few moments, and Hannah hears Josh padding to the bathroom.

‘Maybe you should plan a hen night,’ Ryan adds.

‘It’s funny, but Sadie was saying the same thing.’

‘Well, I’m having one.’

‘What, a hen night? I didn’t think you were the type, darling, for the L-plates and the bunny ears.’

‘No, a stag party. Not a *stag* stag party,’ Ryan adds quickly. ‘Not your gigantic piss-up and being stripped naked and tied to a lamppost ...’

‘Come on, I know you’d *love* that ...’

‘No,’ he insists, ‘I just mean something to mark the occasion. You should do something too.’

‘Ryan,’ she says firmly, ‘if I was having a hen night, I’d want Sadie and Lou to be there.’

‘But that’s not impossible, is it?’

‘Well, there’s the little matter of Sadie having the twins and Lou being in York, plus they’re coming to the wedding so I can’t really expect them to schlep down to London twice in six weeks ...’

‘How about rounding up some of your other friends?’

Hannah shakes her head. ‘I’d only keep wishing those two were there. Anyway,’ she adds, realising they’re forgetting to whisper, ‘I’m really pleased about Saturday. I thought me and Daisy could choose her bridesmaid’s outfit, if you don’t mind not being there ...’

‘No,’ he chuckles. ‘You go ahead. I’m happy to leave that to you two.’

You two, thinks Hannah as sleep starts to close in on her, as if they might possibly become a little gang. And somewhere down the line, perhaps there’ll be another person in the gang. A baby

– a little brother or sister for Daisy and Josh.

Hannah wants to mention it – to say, ‘I think I’m ready, Ryan. I can now almost imagine myself being a mother.’ But as she turns to him, Josh makes a rather noisy exit from the bathroom, shutting the door unnecessarily firmly behind him.

It’s as if he’s reminding them that he’s there, awake and prowling around on the landing, ensuring that no future babies are made. And by the time she hears Josh’s bedroom light click off, Ryan has already fallen asleep.

TWELVE

Sadie isn't used to attending birthday parties at 11 am on a Saturday. In fact she isn't used to attending babies' birthday parties at any time of day, and hopes that her present, tucked into the little wire compartment beneath the buggy, will be deemed acceptable. The whole business of toys seems terribly complex these days. Sadie grew up in Liverpool, playing with the ordinary things little girls played with back then – Barbie, Sindy, a severed doll's head on which you could practise make-up techniques. None of the children she's encountered on the Little Hissingham coffee-morning circuit seem to own such things. The babies have scrunchy bead-filled bags to encourage fine-motor skills, while their older siblings play with tasteful wooden construction kits and Brio train sets. It's good to be invited, though, Sadie reminds herself, as this suggests that she's starting to belong.

'So glad you could come,' says Monica, the hostess, beckoning her in beneath a voluptuous swathe of lilac hanging over the cottage door. 'Isn't Barney with you?'

Although Monica has never met Barney, all the women around here seem adept at remembering not only everyone's children's names, but the names of their partners too. Sadie can't understand how they can store so much information. 'He'd loved to have come but he's working today,' Sadie fibs.

'He works on Saturdays?'

‘Sometimes, at home,’ Sadie says, which *is* the truth. ‘Just to catch up, you know.’

‘That’s a shame,’ Monica says, looking genuinely crestfallen. ‘Anyway, come on in. Party’s in full swing already.’

It sounds like it, too, with a blend of chattering toddlers, the odd crying baby and a dozen or so women all talking at once in Monica’s overwhelmingly floral living room. Actually, Sadie didn’t even ask Barney to come. He’d accompanied her to one parent-and-baby get-together in Hissingham church hall a couple of months ago, but it was impossible to even try to mingle when, whichever way Sadie turned, she could still see her husband, pressed to the flaking pale pink wall with terror flashing in his eyes. ‘How long does this go on for?’ he asked, grabbing her arm while she politely took a biscuit from an offered plate.

‘Only about sixteen hours,’ she joked, hoping he’d crack a smile and at least try to relax. But his jaw clenched even harder and she detected a faint lick of sweat on his upper lip.

‘Oh, your babies are so cute!’ a small, neat woman exclaims as Sadie manoeuvres the buggy containing her snoozing children to a far corner of Monica’s living room.

‘Thanks,’ she says with a swell of pride.

‘They’re just like you, aren’t they? Same colouring, face shape and that lovely dark hair ...’ Dylan and Milo wake up simultaneously and Sadie smiles, relieved that she’s managed to kit them out to a reasonable standard – not too matchy-matchy, but in a vaguely coordinated selection of blues and greens which,

she hopes, gives the impression she's some kind of alpha-mother. She's even managed to find all four soft leather shoes.

'Oh,' Sadie says, as Monica swoops past with the birthday baby in her arms, 'this is a present for Eva.' She snatches the present from beneath the buggy, which Monica accepts with thanks, placing it on an enormous pile on the oak dresser.

Freeing her babies, and lifting them down onto a circular rug littered with various multicoloured wire-and-bead contraptions, Sadie scans the room for somewhere to station herself. She glimpses her reflection in a large gilt-framed mirror. Although her hair is bleating for a cut, at least she's wearing lipstick. It's slightly askew, but it's *on*, and that's the main thing.

'So you're the one with the twins,' says a blonde-bobbed woman, beckoning Sadie to squish onto the rose-patterned sofa beside her.

'Yes, that's right.' She smiles brightly, keeping a close eye to ensure that Milo and Dylan aren't attacked by the other babies on the rug.

'I've seen you around. You moved here a few months ago, didn't you?'

'Yes, that's right, it's been six months now.'

'I'm Polly, and this is Justine,' she says, introducing the redhead next to her, who offers Sadie a dazed smile over the baby clamped to her breast.

'I'm Sadie ...'

'So you moved with new babies?' Polly says. 'That was brave

of you.’

‘Well, we didn’t plan it that way,’ Sadie explains. ‘We’d been trying to sell our London flat for ages but it didn’t shift, then it finally did, and after having the babies I probably wasn’t thinking straight, so ...’

‘You mean you don’t like it here?’ Justine asks with a small frown.

‘No! No, I love it,’ Sadie declares. ‘It’s so, er ... peaceful and pleasant and everything. And it’s safe, much safer than where we lived – in fact we were burgled when I was pregnant and that set us thinking that we should move somewhere small and quiet and er ...’ Hell, she’s broken her rule already, babbling on when all these women want is a bit of light chit-chat. Sadie glances at the table laden with chocolate brownies and cupcakes and her stomach rumbles ominously.

‘It’s much better for children out here,’ Justine remarks. ‘There’s such a strong sense of community.’

‘Oh, yes, I can see that ...’

‘Especially if you’re planning a big family,’ chips in Polly, whom Sadie has realised is mother to three of the children in the room, which seems almost unimaginable. ‘It’s wonderful how everyone helps each other out.’

‘Well, I’m not sure we’ll have any more,’ Sadie says with a grin.

‘Oh!’ Polly frowns at her, then a flicker of understanding crosses her face and she adds, ‘Of course, if it was difficult for you the first time ...’

‘No, it’s lovely, and I’m really happy and everything,’ Sadie explains, ‘but, you know, managing the two of them is probably enough to be going ...’

‘I mean conceiving,’ Polly murmurs. ‘If you’ve been through all that, you probably won’t want to again with all the drugs and expense and the stress of it.’

Sadie blinks at her. What is it about having twins that makes everyone assume they were conceived by IVF? Sadie is tempted to have a T-shirt printed saying WE DIDN’T HAVE ANY BOTHER CONCEIVING. IT WAS RIDICULOUSLY SIMPLE – IN FACT IT HAPPENED THE FIRST TIME WE TRIED!

‘No, that part was easy,’ Sadie says lightly. ‘We didn’t have IVF.’

‘Oh, didn’t you? I’m sorry, I just assumed ...’

‘It’s okay,’ Sadie says, feeling bad now for making Polly uncomfortable. ‘What I mean is, we’re not in any hurry for another.’

‘Don’t rely on breastfeeding as contraception then,’ Justine remarks. ‘That’s how we got Benjamin ...’

‘Oh, I’m not,’ Sadie says quickly.

‘I got a coil after that,’ she adds.

‘Me too,’ Polly says eagerly. ‘It’s fantastic.’

Sadie falls silent, not sure she has anything to add to this new, startling line of conversation that doesn’t feel quite right at a child’s first birthday party. Anyway, contraception is hardly

an issue at the moment. Since Sadie was around six months pregnant, the very prospect of sex has been as appealing as having a foot amputated – which makes it nearly a year since she and Barney last did it. *God*, she realises, *we're heading for our first no-sex anniversary.*

As Milo starts to cry, Sadie rescues him from the rug and holds him on her lap. 'He thinks it's an ice lolly,' Polly chuckles, indicating her toddler who's sitting nearby, gnawing at a yellow disc.

'What is it?' Sadie asks.

'Frozen banana. It's great for teething, soothes the gums ...'

'And he really thinks it's a proper lolly from a shop?' Sadie marvels. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Monica starting to unwrap the presents, showing each one to baby Eva in turn.

'I wouldn't give Alfie an ice lolly from a *shop*,' Polly exclaims, as if Sadie has just suggested feeding him frozen Red Bull. 'I make them at home with fresh juice.'

'Of course, that's what I meant ...' she says feebly. Monica is opening Sadie's present now, and says a brief 'Ahhh' to the garish giraffe before dumping it on a teetering pile of already opened gifts.

'Have *you* ever frozen a banana?' Polly asks.

'Er, no, but I'll definitely try it,' Sadie says, seized by an urge to leave the overheated room and almost grateful when Dylan emits a howl from the rug.

'Oh dear. Your boys are a bit unsettled, aren't they?'

‘Yes, I think they’re a bit hot ...’ She gathers him up, holding both babies who are now wailing heartily.

‘They make quite a racket, the two of them!’

Sadie nods. ‘They certainly do. In fact I think we’d better go.’

‘Maybe you could just give them a little push back and forth around the garden?’

‘No, I really think we should head home.’ Trying not to seem too eager, Sadie tries, unsuccessfully, to soothe the boys. Strapping them into the buggy, she says a collective goodbye and makes for the front door, trying to stroll rather than charge towards it, and filling her lungs with crisp spring air once she steps outside. She needs to talk to Hannah or Lou, someone who really knows her and won’t start going on about their ‘fantastic’ coil or imply that she and Barney should get on with the business of baby production.

Sadie tries Hannah first, who thankfully picks up. ‘Sadie? How’s it going?’

‘Good, fine ... whereabouts are you?’

‘Just out shopping in the West End with Daisy,’ Hannah replies, and the hubbub of voices and traffic, then a siren wailing, almost makes Sadie faint with desire.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘We’re just trying to find something for Daisy to wear to the wedding ...’

How cosy, Sadie thinks – reassuring, too, to be reminded that babies grow up, and that at some point it’s feasible to take them

to the shops. To the West End, even.

‘What about you?’ Hannah asks.

‘I’ve just been to a party.’

‘Really? Like, a lunch party or something?’

‘Er, yeah, sort of.’

‘That sounds nice ...’

And you sound distant, Sadie thinks, as if your mind’s on something else – which it is, of course, because you and Daisy are browsing in some chi-chi little shops in ... actually, Sadie can’t think what part of London has chi-chi shops anymore, and she only left six months ago.

‘I’ll ring you some other time,’ she murmurs.

‘Yeah, okay. Sorry, Sadie, it’s just ... *tricky* right now ...’

‘Are you okay? You sound a bit hassled ...’

‘No, look, I’ll have to go now, sorry, sorry ...’ And she’s gone.

Sadie tries Lou, but both her landline and mobile go to voicemail. She’s probably at work. Sadie hasn’t got her head around Lou’s shift pattern yet, but she seems to virtually live at that soft play centre these days.

Of course, both of her friends are busy right now, as most people are on Saturdays. They’re working, shopping, living their lives, and although she can’t quite identify what it is she’s missing, Sadie suspects that freezing bananas to make pretend ice-lollies probably won’t fill the gap. She’s been kidding herself that she can pull this off – fit in with these women who bake brownies all day, and be a proper mother to Milo and Dylan. Even Barney

is slipping away from her, and who can really blame him when her sense of humour and sex drive seem to have completely disappeared? A lump forms in Sadie's throat as she marches home, knowing she can never tell anyone about the horrible, claustrophobic mess she's found herself in.

THIRTEEN

The day isn't turning out quite the way Hannah had imagined. All the way into the West End, Daisy was stonily quiet, as if mentally preparing herself for extensive dental drilling work. And now, as they hoof along a packed Oxford Street, surrounded by eye-popping stores crammed with everything a ten-year-old girl could possibly desire, she still hasn't perked up. 'See anything you like?' Hannah asks, instantly overwhelmed by a sea of pastel lace and excitable teenagers in New Look.

Daisy shakes her head. 'Nah.' Hannah casts a glance around the vast floor. Perhaps there's just an overabundance of ... *stuff*. If she's finding it all too much, maybe Daisy is too. It can't be easy picking, say, a top, when there's something like eight thousand to choose from.

Daisy wanders away from Hannah to flick through a rail of sludge-coloured trousers. Like Hannah, Daisy isn't really a dress sort of girl; she prefers a complicated layering system that involves long tops, short tops, leggings, shorts and opaque tights, often with a drapery cardi flung nonchalantly over the top. With her tall, willowy frame, it usually works pretty well. Whenever her mother takes her shopping, Daisy always returns with bagfuls of uninspiring-looking items that look fantastic when she puts them on. Maybe, Hannah wonders, it's *her* that's putting Daisy off. As Ryan reminded her the other night, Hannah doesn't enjoy

shopping. She practically exists in jeans and vest tops; practical clothes for cycling or painting, although she hasn't painted much lately. Anyway, she thinks now, picking up trousers Daisy's knocked off the rail, isn't shopping a classic mother-daughter activity? Daisy is probably missing her mum, especially since Hannah doesn't seem to know what to do. While mums and daughters all around her are bonding over sequined tops and asymmetrical dresses, Hannah is loitering awkwardly like an alien whose first, baffling experience of earth involves being dropped into the chaos of New Look on a Saturday afternoon.

'How about this?' she asks, holding up a stripey top with an ostentatious bow on the front.

Daisy cringes. 'No thanks.'

'Or this?' Hannah indicates a denim mini-skirt. Daisy shakes her head and moves swiftly on, as if Hannah's offered her a peach twinset.

In hot pursuit, but trying to appear calm, Hannah begins to feel redundant and foolish. She thinks about Sadie, in the country, nipping off to lunch parties with her babies in tow. *She'd* know how to handle Daisy. She'd have chosen her something – Sadie knows instinctively what goes with what – and by now they'd be giggling away in a café, a cluster of carrier bags at their feet. Someone biffs Hannah in the ribs with a rucksack, sending her staggering sideways into a rack of handbags adorned with gleaming buckles and chains and, in one case, a plastic lizard. She loses sight of Daisy, her heart racing until she pops into view

again. Daisy's sour expression suggests that she's being dragged down the poultry aisle of a supermarket, not being given the run of a fashion emporium.

They make for Zara, where Daisy grudgingly tries on a couple of outfits that don't fit, then they head to the kids' section at Primark, which is even more crowded than New Look. 'I'm gonna try these on,' she announces, having amassed an armful of clothes.

'Great. I'll wait by the changing room, okay? In case you want to come out and show me anything.'

Daisy frowns at her. 'I'll be all right.'

'Yes, I *know* you'll be fine, I just meant if you wanted, um, a second opinion ...' But Daisy has whipped into the changing room, and all Hannah can do is plonk herself on a small plastic stool and resist the temptation to text Ryan: **HAVING TOTALLY CRAP TIME. COMING HOME NOW.** She desperately wants to phone Sadie back, but what would she say? Admitting how bleak things really are would mean facing up to the fact that she doesn't have the faintest idea about how she intends to carry off this stepmother lark.

Hannah waits patiently on the stool for what feels like a week. She can actually feel herself ageing, her skin shrivelling and her bones beginning to creak. Nearby, a leggy woman in tight jeans is having an altercation with her teenage daughter. 'You've got trousers just like those at home,' the woman snaps. She's gripping the handles of a buggy containing a screaming toddler.

‘Wanna go,’ he keeps yelling. ‘Wanna go home NOW.’ It’s a sentiment Hannah can sympathise with entirely.

‘They’re *different*, Mum,’ the girl declares. ‘These are a much brighter blue.’

‘Yes,’ her mum replies, ‘because the ones at home have been washed.’

‘So they’re all faded and *that’s* why I need new ones ...’

‘Go on then, try them on ...’

‘Want Daddy!’ the toddler wails. With a sigh, the woman parks the buggy beside Hannah and sinks down onto the stool next to her.

‘How come we mums end up spending so much of our lives sitting outside changing rooms?’ she says with a wry smile.

‘I know,’ Hannah says. ‘I think she must be trying on everything at least twice.’ Daisy reappears briefly, grabs a few more items from a nearby rail and struts back into the changing room.

‘Pretty, isn’t she?’ the woman observes. ‘Lovely sense of style she’s got.’

‘Yes, she has.’ Hannah manages a smile.

‘Takes after you,’ the woman says kindly.

‘Thanks.’ Hannah falls silent, feeling deeply uncomfortable about taking credit for Daisy’s fashion sense. ‘Actually,’ she adds, ‘I’m not her mum.’

‘Oh?’

‘No, I’m her ...’ Hannah tails off, wondering how to put it.

Stepmum still doesn't feel accurate; she fears she'll never be remotely qualified to assume such a terrifyingly grown-up job title. 'I'm sort of ... seeing her dad,' Hannah adds, realising that's completely wrong too. They're getting *married*, for God's sake. They've chosen rings, booked the registry office and bar-cum-restaurant for a small party afterwards, *and* she's bought that fat nurse abomination. They're even planning a honeymoon somewhere down the line, although they have yet to book anything as Petra hasn't come back to Ryan about when it might be 'convenient' to look after her own children. The cello comes first, naturally, taking Petra all over the world to give performances. Hannah imagines it strapped in the aeroplane seat beside her, being asked by a flight attendant whether it wants chicken or fish.

'Oh, hell,' the woman cries as her toddler breaks free from his buggy restraints and her daughter glides out of the changing room. 'Right – we're getting out of here.'

'Can't I have these trousers?' the girl bleats.

'I said you've got some at home. What d'you think I am, made of money?' Manhandling her toddler back into his buggy, and starting to march away, the woman flings a quick glance back towards Hannah. 'Enjoy your day with your, er ...'

'Thanks. You too.' Hannah checks her watch as Daisy finally ambles towards her. 'Wasn't there anything you liked?' she asks, now feeling horribly hot in the stuffy store.

Daisy shakes her head. 'Nah. But there *is* something ...'

‘Oh, what’s that?’

Daisy pushes back her hair and meets Hannah’s gaze. ‘You know for the wedding, right?’

‘Yes?’ Hannah says eagerly.

‘Well,’ Daisy fixes her with a defiant stare, ‘I’d like my ears pierced.’

‘Really? Well, I guess you’ll have to talk that over with your mum and dad.’

‘Oh,’ Daisy mutters as they make their way down the escalator.

‘Anyway, are you hungry yet? I’m starving ...’

‘Yeah. A bit.’ They step off the escalator and squeeze their way through the buffeting crowds towards the exit.

‘The thing is,’ Daisy says, ‘I really need to get it done today.’

‘Well, I’m sorry,’ Hannah replies, ‘I can’t let you do that without your mum or dad saying it’s okay.’

‘But it’s *my* ears,’ Daisy shoots back, ‘and the thing is, if I get it done today, it’ll be all healed for the wedding and I’ll be able to take out the boring plain earrings and put in ones I like. ’Cause you’ve got to leave them in for six weeks. How long is it till the wedding?’

‘Er, six weeks.’ Hannah pushes the main door open, steps out of Primark and takes a big gulp of cool air.

‘See! I’ll *have* to get it done today.’

‘I ... I’m just not sure, Daisy. It’s quite a big, significant thing. You might feel sick and queasy and one of your parents should ...’

‘No, I won’t. I’m never sick. I have *never actually been sick.*’

‘Really?’

Daisy shakes her head. They’ve stopped on the pavement next to a man who’s shouting that he can save everyone from all the greed and nastiness in the world. Hannah is tempted to ask if he can help out with the earring issue.

‘And it’s not a big thing,’ Daisy adds firmly. ‘It’s just two teeny holes and they use a gun.’

‘A gun?’ Hannah is trying to maintain a pleasant expression, which is becoming trickier as she recalls her own ears being pierced at sixteen, courtesy of a darning needle and a lump of cold potato held at the back of her lobe.

‘Yeah,’ Daisy says. ‘It’s really easy. Why don’t you phone Dad and ask him?’

‘I, er ...’ Hannah pulls out her mobile. It doesn’t feel right, calling Ryan to confirm what she already knows; that he won’t allow it and, worse, it’ll imply that she’s incapable of handling the situation herself. She feels ridiculous now, having pictured the two of them trotting happily along Oxford Street, stopping off for cakes and Daisy realising that Hannah’s sole purpose isn’t to steal her father and ruin her young life after all.

‘Well, are you gonna phone Dad?’ she demands.

‘Okay. I’ll do that.’ Bristling with irritation now, Hannah calls Ryan’s mobile, which goes to voicemail. He’s not at home either, and she doesn’t bother leaving a message, because how pathetic would her voice sound, drifting out of the answerphone, wittering

about earrings?

‘Claire’s Accessories,’ Daisy announces. ‘That’s where everybody has it done.’ Hannah smiles tensely. Then a brainwave hits her. Of course: Sadie will know what to do. Capable Sadie, who’s managing to live in that teeny village in the middle of nowhere without going mad, while raising not one but two babies *and* going to lunch parties. Hannah feels guilty now, being so distracted when her friend had called earlier. And if Sadie can’t offer a snippet of sage advice, then who can?

Damn, she’s not picking up either. Probably at another lunch party by now. ‘Phone Mum,’ Daisy barks. ‘Mum’ll say it’s okay.’

‘Fine, but I *have* to get something to eat first, okay?’ Boldly, without any debate, she takes Daisy by the hand and whisks her into Prêt à Manger.

Here, none of the sandwiches is deemed acceptable. A plain bread roll is chosen, even though it’s really offered to accompany soup (Daisy wrinkles her nose at Hannah’s suggestion of soup, as if she’s trying to trick her into consuming vomit).

‘Dad said I could have my ears done for the wedding,’ Daisy mumbles, picking a crumb off her lip.

Hannah has an overwhelming urge to tip a large glass of chardonnay down her throat. ‘Well, we’ll see,’ she murmurs.

‘You’ve got *your* ears done,’ Daisy ventures as they leave.

‘Yes, Daisy, but I’m thirty-five! And I was sixteen when I had it done and you’re only ten. There’s a big difference.’

‘If you don’t let me have it done,’ Daisy growls as they head

outside, 'I'm not coming to your wedding.'

Hannah stares at her. 'You really mean that? You wouldn't come to your own dad's wedding because of *ears*?'

Daisy shrugs. 'No.'

'But he'd be so upset! Can you imagine how he'd feel if you weren't there?'

Daisy juts out her chin. 'I want to wear earrings at the wedding.'

'What about clip-ons?' Hannah suggests desperately. 'There were loads of nice clip-ons in New Look. Come on, we'll go back and choose you a pair ...' The thought of braving that store twice in one day is beyond horrific. But Hannah is prepared to spend the whole damn *night* in New Look if it'll settle the earring issue.

'I don't *want* clip-ons.'

Don't wear bloody clip-ons then! Hannah wants to yell. 'Okay,' she snaps, yanking her phone from her pocket, 'I'll call your mum and you can talk it over with her.' A vein pulses urgently in her neck as she scrolls through her contacts.

'Hello? Hannah?' Petra's voice is needle-sharp.

'Hi, Petra, are you busy right now?'

'Yes, just a bit, haha,' Petra says, meaning, *when am I not rushed off my feet?* Hannah wonders if she's interrupted a performance, whether Petra's gripping her bow in one hand, mobile in the other, bony knees thrust apart with her cello between them. This image makes her feel a tiny bit better.

'It's just—'

‘Is this urgent, Hannah, or can we talk later?’

Hannah glances down at Daisy who’s picking out a bit of bread from between her teeth. ‘It is urgent actually. I’m out shopping with Daisy and she’s decided she wants to get her ears pierced.’

Silence. No, not quite silence. Hannah can detect the faint whirring of Petra’s *incredibly* overworked brain. ‘Petra? Are you still there?’

‘Yes, Hannah. I’m just ... digesting it.’ Hannah pictures a conductor drumming his fingers impatiently on a little podium thing.

‘Oh.’ Hannah bites her lip. She assumed Petra would deliver a brisk yes or no, not that she’d need time to mull it over. The silence seems to stretch for an eternity. Daisy squashes a smouldering cigarette butt with the toe of her patent boot. ‘Shall I call you back later?’ Hannah suggests.

‘No, there’s no need for that. We can talk now, even though I’m trying to do *fifty* things at once ...’

‘Petra, look, if it’s not a good time ...’

‘That’s not the issue,’ Petra barks. ‘It’s us, having this conversation about my daughter who you seem to think is perfectly old enough to have her body *disfigured*, her lobes punctured by some teenager wielding a needle ...’

‘Well, I wouldn’t call it disfig—’

‘She’s ten!’ Petra exclaims. ‘Do you think it’s okay for a ten-year-old girl to have something *irreversible* done to her body, with needles?’

‘Er, they use a gun these days,’ Hannah says dully.

‘A gun? Good God!’ Petra really is bloody unhinged, Hannah decides. She knows Ryan was devastated when she left – he made no secret of that. If she’d been him, though, she’d have been popping champagne corks and dancing wildly on the scuffed bit of floor in the attic where her cello used to stand. Petra is now babbling on about infections and pus. Daisy has extinguished the cigarette and is kicking it towards a smear of pigeon droppings. ‘It’s fine, Petra,’ Hannah cuts in firmly. ‘Actually, I thought you wouldn’t be keen. I just called because Daisy asked me to, and as you’re not happy, we definitely won’t do it.’

‘Well, I hope not.’ Her voice softens slightly.

‘Of course we won’t. I’d never do anything like that without asking you or Ryan first. Anyway, as you’re obviously in the middle of something ...’

‘Bye then,’ Petra says curtly.

What a monstrous mother, Hannah thinks, not even asking how Daisy is, or saying a quick hello to her. Despite the disastrous nature of their day, Hannah has a sudden urge to envelop her in a hug.

‘What did Mum say?’ Daisy asks quietly.

‘Um, she’s not keen, sweetheart. But that doesn’t mean never. Maybe, when you’re a little bit older, you could ask her again.’

Daisy’s mouth sets in a scowl as, agreeing that they’ve run out of shopping steam, they march purposefully towards Oxford Circus tube station. Jesus, Hannah reflects, anyone would think

the poor kid had asked for a facial tattoo.

Hannah can't sleep. It's unusually hot and stuffy for late April, and she tosses and turns, replaying her day in town. Unable to convey its true awfulness, she made light of it to Ryan and even threw in a few jokes about being trampled underfoot by herds of antelopes in New Look.

Ryan is sleeping soundly, but Hannah just can't get comfortable. She's replaying Daisy announcing, 'Hannah bought me a plain bread roll for lunch!' as they all sat around the dinner table, and Ryan throwing her a quizzical look, as if he imagined for a second that Hannah hadn't given Daisy any choice. Slipping out of bed, she considers going downstairs to make a cup of tea, but is wary of being discovered by one of the kids as she sits bleakly in the kitchen in the middle of the night. She might look as if she's losing it, which would cheer them up no end.

Instead, she heads up to the converted loft – formerly Petra's music room – and now Hannah's very own studio. Sitting down at her desk, she flicks on the wonky Anglepoise lamp she's had since art college, then turns on her ageing computer and waits for it to whir into life. All around the room, canvases are stacked against the plain white walls. Cityscapes, mostly, exploding with colour. Although Hannah studied illustration at college, she still loves to paint. She runs her gaze along the row of canvases leaning against the wall. These were painted before she moved in with Ryan; he seemed entranced as she unpacked them and helped to peel off their protective bubble wrap layers. But there's

no evidence of recent painting activity. No tubes out of their wooden boxes, no brushes in jars or hardened worms of paint stuck to her palette. In fact, she's only started one painting – a portrait of Daisy which she had to abandon because it felt wrong, the two of them up here with Daisy reminding her, in that prim little voice, 'This used to be Mummy's music room, you know. She kept her cello over there. That's what made the scratches on the floor.'

Focusing on the screen now, Hannah begins to type:

Girls, hope all's well. Been missing you loads lately and I've had an idea. I'm planning a hen weekend, just the three of us. How d'you fancy going to Glasgow for old time's sake? Her attention is momentarily diverted by a painting of the Clyde, silvery-green beneath a searing blue sky. Sadie, she continues, I know the babies are still little, but d'you think Barney would be okay with you coming away? And Lou – I know York's hardly on the doorstep but d'you think you could make it, get some time off work? We could go to all our old haunts, try to track down some of the old crowd, maybe even find Johnny, although God knows where he disappeared to. Or maybe it'd be better just the three of us.

So what d'you think? Shall we talk about dates? I know you'll be at the wedding in just a few weeks, but I honestly think I'll burst if I don't see you before that. No pressure though!!

Lots of love, Han xxx

As she clicks 'send' and turns off her computer, Hannah feels

her spirits rise as she pictures the three of them – the Garnet Street Girls – back together again. *Please come*, she murmurs as she pads back down to her and Ryan’s bedroom. *Please, please say yes*

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