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*The Stepmothers'
Support Group*

HARPER

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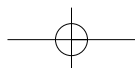
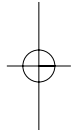
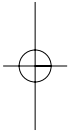


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*For my favourite boys, Jon and Jamie.
Thank you for letting me be part of your
little family.*



A stepmother is not a mother. She can help you with your homework and make dinner, but she should not be able to decide when you should go to bed.

Delia Ephron

ONE

'Look,' he said. 'Stop worrying. This is going to be fine.'
'Ian . . .'

'I mean it. I've told the kids to behave. We're going to Hamley's afterwards. All you guys have to do is say hello to one another.' A muffled noise came from the other end. 'OK?' Ian said, his tone changing. 'See you soon . . . It's Eve,' she heard him say to someone. 'We'll do that later. I've already told you.'

'Oh God, *Dad . . .'*

And then the line went dead.

The girl's voice was the last thing she heard. It was young, very English; much more confident than she had been at that age. Hannah? Eve wondered. It sounded too grown-up to be Sophie. She was still wondering when something else hit her.

I've told the kids to behave.

Why did they need telling? Ian was always saying how sweet and polite they were, all things considered. Maybe the devil was in that last detail.

This was like taking her driving test, plus getting her A-level results and having a root canal all rolled into one. Maybe throw in a job interview, for good

measure. Actually, it felt worse than all of that. Much worse.

Her stomach was empty, hollowed out and queasy. If she'd eaten anything worth throwing up, she would have done so, right there on Charing Cross Road. An anxiety headache pushed at the edge of her vision; and the first decent spring day of the year would have hurt her eyes, if only it could have found its way past her enormous sunglasses. When she'd tried them on they had given her an air of nonchalance, or so she'd supposed. But now she was horribly afraid they made her look like a bug-eyed, frizzy-haired insect. A *Dr Who* monster to send small children screaming behind the sofa.

Come on, Eve, she told herself. You're thirty-two, a grown woman, with your own flat, a good job . . . And they're not even four feet tall.

On the other hand, those knee-highs held her future in their tiny chocolate-smearred hands. It was an unnerving thought. One that had kept her awake most of the night.

Thirty minutes later, from where she stood on the pavement, gazing across Old Compton Street, three small heads could be seen in the first-floor window of Patisserie Valerie. Ian's three children were blonde; of course they were. She'd known that. It wasn't as if she hadn't seen enough pictures. Anyway, what else would they be? He was fair, his hair cropped close to his scalp. And Caroline had been blonde, famously so.

Not that Eve had ever met Caroline, but her cheekbones, knowing smile and flicked-back hair had been famous. They sat above her by-line in *The Times*, and even those who had never read her column knew her face from *The Culture Show* and *Arena*, not to mention that episode of Jonathan Ross's Friday night chat show that came up whenever Caroline Newsome's name was mentioned.

More gallingly, the same smile could still be found on

Ian's mobile, in various endearing family combos. Caro's hair could just as easily have come out of a bottle, Eve thought uncharitably, but with genes like theirs, what were the chances of Ian and Caroline Newsome producing anything but Pampers-ad worthy cherubs?

Get a grip, Eve told herself.

As she loitered, the sun cleared the skyline behind her and hit Patisserie Valerie's upstairs window, lighting the angelic host above. If she stood there much longer she was going to be late; which she had categorically, hand-on-heart, promised would not happen. And if Eve was late Ian's anxiety would only increase and, God knew, his stress levels were through the roof already.

'This is a big deal,' he'd told her on the phone the night before. As if she didn't know it. 'I've never . . .' he'd paused. 'They've never . . . met one of my *friends* before.'

Eve had never heard him so tense. His obvious worry only served to increase hers.

'And please don't be late,' he'd added. 'You know what it's like with children. You have to do *what* you say you'll do, *when* you say you'll do it.'

Eve didn't know *what it's like with children*. That was precisely the point. She didn't have any.

If Ian was strung out, then the only one on Team Eve would be Eve. And with those odds she'd be lost. As if to rub it in, she caught sight of herself in a window below the awning. An average-looking brunette, with a mane of curly hair – a bit frizzy, a bit freckly – grimaced back at her.

Her trench was flung over a blue and white matelot top and jeans. Battered Converse completed the look. Kid-friendly, but not scruffy, was the look she'd been going for. Low-maintenance yummy mummy. Elle Macpherson, the high street version. Not afraid of a little dirt, more than able to handle the mothers' race. (*Do stepmums do*

sports day? She pushed the thought from her mind. One thing at a time.)

Rummaging in her leather tote, Eve pulled out a blue carrier bag. Sliding the children's books out (bribes, peace offerings, late birthday presents, Easter egg surrogates that wouldn't rot tiny teeth . . .) She tucked them under her arm, scrunched the plastic under the other crap at the bottom of her bag and took a deep breath. Marching purposefully through the crowds clustered around the café's door, she pushed it open and headed for the stairs at the back.

Even in a café full of brunch-seeking tourists, there was no missing them. The round table by the window looked like an accident in a cake factory. Eve took in the mix of Power Rangers, Spider Man and My Little Ponies using an assortment of cream slices, éclairs and croissants as barricades, jumps and stable walls, and grinned.

'Eve!' Ian shouted the second he saw her. His voice was loud, too loud. His nerves radiated around the room like static, drawing the attention of a couple on the next table. One of them started whispering.

Pushing back his chair, he knocked a plastic figure from the table. Three pairs of long-lashed blue eyes swivelled in Eve's direction.

'You made it!'

'I'm not late, am I?' Eve said, although she knew she wasn't. She'd set two alarm clocks and left her flat in Kentish Town half an hour early to make sure she arrived on time.

Ian glanced at his watch, shook his head. 'Bang on time.'

'Hannah, Sophie, Alfie, this is Eve Owen, the friend I've told you about.'

Eve smiled.

'Eve, this is my eldest, Hannah, she's twelve, Sophie is eight. And Alfie, he's five.'

'And two months,' Alfie said firmly. The matter corrected, he returned to twisting Spiderman's leg to see how far it would turn before dislocating at the hip.

Smiling inanely, Eve felt like a children's TV presenter. 'Hello,' she said.

Three faces stared at her.

'I'm Eve,' she added unnecessarily, putting out a hand to the girl sitting nearest. Hannah might be twelve, but she looked older. Already teenage inside her head. And way taller than four feet. She exuded confidence. 'Hannah, really nice to meet you.'

'Hi.' Hannah raised one hand, in token greeting, then used it to flick long, shiny golden hair over her shoulder, before reaching pointedly for her cappuccino.

'And you must be Sophie.'

The child in the middle was a smaller, slightly prettier and much girlier version of her sister. Except for Levi jeans, there was nothing she wore, from Converse boots to Barbie hair slides that wasn't pink.

'How do you do?' Sophie said carefully. She shook Eve's hand, before glancing at her father for approval. He nodded.

'I'm Alfie,' the boy said.

'Hello Alfie.'

'Do you like Spiderman or Power Rangers? I like Power Rangers, but Spiderman is all right. You can be Venom.' Recovering a plastic figure from the floor, he shoved it into Eve's outstretched hand.

'That's kind,' she said, feeling stupidly grateful.

'Don't be so sure,' said Ian, tousling the boy's hair until the tufts stuck up even more. 'All that means is your figure gets bashed.'

'Venom's the baddie,' said Alfie, as if it was the most

obvious thing in the world. 'He has to lose, it's the law. Can we eat our cakes now, Dad?'

Without waiting for permission, he grabbed the nearest éclair, one twice as big as his hand, and thrust it mouthwards, decorating his face, Joker-style, with chocolate and cream.

'Sit, sit, sit,' Ian said, pulling out the empty chair between his own and Hannah's. 'I'll get you a coffee. Black, isn't it?'

You know it's black, she wanted to say. When has it ever been anything else?

She didn't say it, though. And she resisted the urge to touch his hand to tell him everything would be all right. Hand squeezing was out of bounds. As was reassuring arm touching and even the most formal of pecks on the cheek. They'd been lovers for nine months, but this was something new and Eve was still learning the rules.

This was more than girl meets boy, girl fancies boy, girl goes out with boy, falls in love, etc . . . This was girl meets boy, girl fancies boy, girl goes out with boy, girl discovers boy has already gone out with another girl, girl meets boy's children.

In other words, this was serious.

Eve never expected to fall for a married man. Well, widowed, to be more accurate. But married, widowed, divorced . . . It just hadn't occurred to her this was something she'd do. In fact, like boob jobs, Botox and babies, it was one of those things she'd always have said, *No way*.

But then she'd stepped off an escalator, into Starbucks, on the second floor of Borders on Oxford Street over a year earlier. It had been Ian's choice, not her idea of a good venue for an interview; too noisy, too public, too easy to be overheard. She'd stepped off the escalator, seen him at a table reading *Atonement*, her favourite book at

the time, and felt a lurch in her stomach that said she was about to commit a cardinal sin.

He was tall and slim, with a largish nose, made more obvious by his recently cropped hair. But it was the brooding intensity with which he read his book that attracted her. Before he'd even looked up, she'd fallen for her interview subject.

She never expected to fall for a married man.

Eve ran that back. Actually, she'd worked hard not to fall for anyone. She could count on one hand the number of lovers she'd had in the last ten years. And she didn't need any hands at all to count the number whose leaving had given her so much as a sleepless night.

She had her job, features director on a major magazine at thirty-two, and, apart from one serious relationship in her first year at university, she'd never let anyone get in the way of what she wanted to do. And, if she was honest, she hadn't let that get in the way, had she?

So, falling for Ian Newsome was more than a surprise. It was a shock.

Life didn't get messy immediately.

Caroline had been dead for nine months when Eve interviewed Ian; and it was another six months before they ended up in bed. All right, five months, two weeks and three days. But from the minute he stood up, in his jeans and suit jacket, to pull back her chair, Eve was hooked. And during that first meeting he wasn't even the most accommodating of interview subjects.

He hadn't wanted to do the interview at all. He was there, surrounded by tourists, two floors above Oxford Street, under duress. Caroline's publishers had insisted. *Precious Moments*, a collection of her columns documenting a three-year battle with breast cancer was due for publication on the first anniversary of her death. And Ian was morally, not to mention contractually, obliged to promote it.

Since a large percentage of the money was going to the Macmillan Trust, which had provided the cancer nurses who had seen Caroline through her last days, how could he refuse?

It was a given that *The Times*, Caroline's old paper, would extract it; so he agreed to an interview with their Saturday magazine to launch the extract, plus one further interview. Of all the countless requests, he had chosen *Beau*, the women's glossy where Eve was features director.

The first thing he'd said was, 'Can I get you a coffee?' (Eve recognized it for the power play it was, but let him anyway.) The second was, 'I won't allow the kids to be photographed.' He fixed Eve with a chilly blue gaze as she took a tentative sip of her scalding Americano and felt the roof of her mouth blister.

Great start.

'I'm sorry,' Eve said, hearing her voice slide into 'case study' mode. 'But we'll need something.' She tried not to run her tongue over the blister. 'I did make that clear to your publicist right from the start.'

Ian's mouth set into a tight line. So tight, his lips almost disappeared. 'And I made it clear,' he said. 'No photography would be allowed. That was my condition. After all they've been through, losing their mother and . . . And everything. Well, protecting them, giving them some . . . normality. That's the most important thing. I'm sure you understand.'

'Of course, I do.'

Eve forced a smile, racking her brains for a way to salvage the interview. She did understand, but she also understood that Miriam, her editor, would kill her if she came back empty-handed. There were pictures of Caroline they could buy from *The Times*, obviously enough. Also pap shots, taken when she was leaving hospital. Only Miriam would want something new. Something personal.

Something that would strike a chord with *Beau's* readers, many of whom were in their thirties. The point at which Caroline had discovered, while feeding Alfie, that she had a lump in her breast. A lump that turned out to be what everyone thought was a not-especially life-threatening form of cancer.

Eve thought fast. She only had an hour with the guy. The last thing she needed was to spend half of it squabbling over pictures. Then it dawned on her. 'You're a photographer? I bet your family album is stunning. How about a snap of Caroline with the kids, when they were much younger, before she was ill? The children would scarcely be recognizable. Your youngest, Alfie, would still be a baby. Surely that wouldn't infringe their privacy?'

'I'll consider it,' Ian said grudgingly. His scowl said the subject was now closed.

The feature was a success. After that early hiccup, Ian had talked candidly about Caro's life and very public death, even giving Eve some lovely quotes on the children he clearly adored. The following day, he'd e-mailed her three 'collects' – snapshots from his family album of Caro and the children when they were small. The pictures had never been seen before or since. It was only later, after the interview was published, that Eve looked at the spread and realized there was only one of Ian, standing in the background, behind Caroline and her triumvirate of beatific angels.

'Well, he *is* a photographer,' the editorial assistant said. 'He was behind the camera.'

All the same, something about the shot troubled her.

Eve couldn't have been more surprised when, a week after the issue containing Ian's story went off-sale, her mobile rang and it was him.

'I hope you don't mind me calling.'

'No, not at all.' Eve tensed. She'd been expecting him to ball her out the week it was published; to say he hadn't said this or didn't mean that, but his tone wasn't what she'd come to expect from enraged or regretful case studies. And it wasn't as if they could have lost his pictures because they were digital. So what did he want?

'It's just . . . I was wondering if you'd like a coffee sometime?'

Even then Eve hadn't been entirely sure he was asking her out on a date. And to begin with it wasn't a date; it was a coffee. And then another. And another. Between then and now, Ian Newsome had bought her an awful lot of caffeine.

'I bought you all something,' Eve said now, as she took off her trench and slung it over the back of her chair. She tried not to notice Hannah eye her stripy T-shirt. Whether the girl's expression was disapproval or amusement was hard to tell, but it certainly wasn't covetousness. Maybe she'd tried too hard, Eve thought. Maybe the girl could smell that, like dogs smell fear and cats make a beeline for the one person in the room who's allergic.

'Here,' she said, offering a copy of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* to Hannah. 'I loved this. I hope you haven't read it.'

Hannah smiled politely but didn't put out her hand. 'I have, actually. When I was younger . . .'

'But thank you,' she added, when Sophie nudged her. 'I loved it.'

The book hung in midair, hovering above mugs of cooling hot chocolate. Eve felt her face flame, as she willed Hannah to take the book anyway. The girl studiously ignored it.

Eve could have kicked herself.

This was tough enough as it was. Why had she taken

a risk like that? It would have been so much easier just to ask Ian what books they had. Only she'd wanted to do it on her own. She'd wanted to prove she could get it right.

'Oh well,' Eve said, admitting defeat. 'I'm sorry. I'll exchange it for something else.'

'Thanks. But there's no need.' Hannah held up a dog-eared magazine, open at a spread about *Gossip Girl*. 'I prefer magazines anyway.'

'What about me?' demanded Alfie. 'What did you buy me?'

'It's not your turn,' Sophie said, punching Alfie's arm. 'It's mine.'

'Ow-uh!' Alfie's face fell. But when he saw Eve watching, he grinned. His heart wasn't in being upset.

Regaining her confidence, she gave Sophie a brightly-coloured hardback. 'It's the new Jacqueline Wilson; I hope *you* haven't read it too.'

Sophie's squeal reached Ian as he returned, holding a large cup and saucer that he'd been waiting at the counter to collect. 'What's the matter?' he said. He shot Eve an, I've-only-been-gone-two-minutes-is-everything-OK? Glance.

'Look,' Sophie said, waving the book. 'Look what Eve got me!'

'Aren't you lucky?' Ian looked pleased.

'What's Eve got me?' Alfie asked again.

'For God's sake Alfie,' Hannah said. 'Don't be so rude.' She was grown up enough to sound like her mother. Well, what Eve remembered Caro sounding like from hearing her on television.

'That's enough,' Ian said, rolling his eyes. 'Chill, both of you. And Hannah, you know I don't like you saying for God's sake.'

Hannah scowled.

Nervously, Eve offered Alfie a copy of *Charlie and the*

Chocolate Factory. With Roald Dahl's words and Quentin Blake's illustrations, it was a book she loved. She still had a copy somewhere, probably in her parents' attic.

'Hey Dad, look,' Alfie said, snatching it. Immediately whatever chocolate wasn't smeared on his face was transferred to the book's cover. 'Spiderman's got a new hovercraft.' He sat one of his plastic figures on the book, before turning to Eve.

'You be Venom.'

'Later,' Ian said. 'Let Eve eat her cake first.' He smiled at her, then glanced at the table, a frown creasing his face. 'Alfie,' he said. 'Where *is* Eve's éclair?'

TWO

'They're . . . Well, cute, I guess.'

'Cute?' Clare Adams said.

'Yes, cute. Small, blonde, cute.'

The woman leaning on the work surface turned to look at her. 'They're children and there are three of them. There has to be more to say about them than, *they're cute.*'

Eve was in the kitchen of her friend's flat in East Finchley. It was a small flat, with an even smaller kitchen. As it was, there was barely room for the two of them. When Clare's daughter, Louisa, got home it would be full to capacity.

Rubbing her hands over her face, Eve felt the skin drag. The magazine's beauty director was always telling her not to do that. But Eve did it anyway, pushing her face into her hands hard enough to see stars. How could one hour with three children be so draining?

'OK, let's be honest about this. Cute, well brought-up . . . And lethal. Like a miniature firing squad. Only some of them wanted to shoot me more than others.'

'Now we're getting somewhere,' said Clare, flicking off the kettle just as it was coming to the boil. 'You know, I don't think a cup of tea is going to cut it.'

Heading for the fridge, she peered inside at the chaos of Louisa's half-eaten sandwiches and jars that had long since lost contact with their lids. Emerging with half-empty bottles in either hand, Clare said, 'Already opened bottle of Tesco's cheapest plonk or own brand vodka and flat tonic?'

'I'm sorry, I didn't think to bring wine,' Eve said. 'I just . . . fled, I s'pose.'

After leaving Patisserie Valerie, Eve had made the journey on the Northern Line from Soho to East Finchley on autopilot, not even calling ahead to make sure Clare was at home. Although Clare was almost always home at weekends. A single mum, with a teenage daughter on a secondary school teacher's salary, she rarely had the spare cash for a bit of light Saturday afternoon shopping.

And when she did, it was Louisa who got the goodies.

'You want me to pop to Tesco Express on the High Road?' Eve asked, reaching for her bag.

'No need.' Using her arm, Clare swept aside exercise books to make space on the table for a bottle of Sicilian white and two large wineglasses. 'All I'm saying is, it's not Chablis!'

When Ian first announced he'd like her to meet his children, Eve had thought they'd make a day of it: shops, a pizza, perhaps the zoo. An idea Ian rapidly squashed.

At the time she'd been hurt, maybe even a bit offended.

But now . . .

Now she was grateful he'd insisted they keep their first meeting brief. 'So as not to wear them out,' he'd explained. Eve couldn't help thinking that she was the one in need of recuperation.

After Patisserie Valerie came Hamley's for Alfie and Sophie, and Topshop for Hannah. Ian had grimaced when he told Eve. And Eve had wanted to hug him. Ian hated

shopping. For him, Topshop on a Saturday afternoon was like visiting the nine gates of hell, all at once.

'You are good,' she whispered, when the children were packing their possessions into rucksacks, carrier bags and pockets. Or, in Alfie's case, all three at once.

'It's in the job description.' Ian kept his voice light, but his meaning was clear. He was their dad, and not just any old dad, not an every-other-weekend one, or a Saturday one. He was full-time, 24/7, widowed.

He was the there-is-no-one-to-do-it-if-I-don't model.

As Eve recounted her meeting with Ian's kids, badly chosen books and all, Clare sipped at her wine. It was more acidic than when she'd opened it the night before, allowing herself just the one, after Louisa went to bed. Well, Lou claimed she'd gone to bed. Clare knew better. Her daughter had probably spent a good hour on YouTube; only turning off her light when she heard footsteps on the stairs.

Clare had learnt the hard way to choose her battles, because, as a single mum, there was no one to back her up. If Louisa and she argued, it seemed much more serious. Besides, if they weren't there for each other, who was?

Clare had saved hard to buy a laptop for Lou's thirteenth birthday; taken in extra exam marking to pay the monthly broadband bill. *It will help with your homework*, she told Louisa at the time. If Clare was honest, it was about more than that. She wanted Lou to fit in and have the stuff that her friends had, not always to be the one who went without. Not that the reconditioned Toshiba from a computer repair shop on Finchley Road was the latest thing, but it could pass for new, and it worked, and Louisa had been ecstatic. The expression on Lou's elfin face when she first turned it on made all the long nights at the kitchen table marking exam papers worthwhile.

Occasionally, Clare felt her life was one long night at

a kitchen table. After Louisa was first born, it had been a pine table in Clare's mother's kitchen in Hendon; revising for the A-levels she'd missed, what with being eight months pregnant. At Manchester University, it had been an Ikea flat-pack in a grotty student house she'd shared with three others. One of whom was Eve. It was Eve who lasted. The others came and went, endlessly replaced by yet more students who freaked out at the idea of having a toddler around to cramp their style.

Now it was a pine table again. And, even now, Clare couldn't work until Lou was asleep, the flat was still, her light came from an Anglepoise lamp that lived in the corner during the day, and the low mutter of the BBC's *World Service* kept her company.

Not normal, she knew.

Clare had been sixteen when she met Will. She'd been smitten the first time he walked into her AS level English lit class, his dark floppy hair falling over his eyes. By the end of the second week they'd been an item, a fixture.

He was her first boyfriend, her first true love and, so far as she knew, she was his. At least, he'd told her she was. They'd done everything together. First kiss, first love, first fumble, first sex. Life had been a voyage of mutual discovery. And then, halfway through the next year, she'd become pregnant and everything – *everything* – had come crashing down.

Her mum and dad only got married because her mum was pregnant, with Clare. Her nan had married at seventeen; giving up her factory job to have five children and a husband who spent most of his life in the pub. It was the one thing Clare had promised herself would never happen to her.

A mistake like that, it could ruin your life.

Will had laughed when she'd said that. Said people didn't think like that any more. He'd been trying to get

her into bed at the time. Well, he'd been trying to get his hand inside her knickers on his parents' settee while they were next door having drinks. Like a fool, she'd believed him.

Clare wasn't sure what happened exactly. They'd always been careful. Originally, she only went on the pill because she didn't think condoms were enough. After Will stopped using condoms, Clare never, ever missed a pill. But a vomiting bug went around college, and that was enough, apparently.

Everyone, from her mum to Will and Will's parents told her to do the sensible thing, and 'get rid of it'. Even her dad would have had an opinion, Clare was sure of it; if he'd ever bothered to show an interest in what she did, or even sent a birthday card in the five years since he'd left.

'What do you mean? You want to have it?' Will said, sitting in the recreation ground not far from her home. Clare watched the ducks try to navigate a Tesco shopping trolley masquerading as an island in the middle of their lake.

'I want *us* to have it,' she said. 'Us. It's *our* baby.'

Out of the corner of one eye she was aware of Will staring at his knees. Once, his curtain of hair would have hidden his eyes, but he'd had it cut shorter and removed his earring for a round of medical school interviews.

'*Our* baby,' she said, turning to stare at him. 'We would have had one eventually, wouldn't we?'

Will refused to catch her eye.

'Wouldn't we?'

It was only later she realized he'd never answered the question.

'If it's *our* baby, then it's our decision,' he said, trying to harden his voice. But Clare could hear it tremble as he spoke. 'And I don't want a baby. I'm too young, Clare.'

We're too young. What about university? What about those novels you're going to write? And me? Seven years of medical studies. How can I do that with a baby?'

'We can manage,' Clare promised. 'Both of us, together.'

She was fighting a losing battle. She knew it, and Will knew she knew it. 'No,' he said finally. 'We can't manage. And *I* won't do it.'

Hurtling into the kitchen, Louisa threw her skinny arms around Eve. 'Hello Auntie Eve,' she said. 'Mum didn't say you'd be here.'

'That's because *Mum* didn't know,' Clare said.

Louisa raised her eyebrows.

Eve had known Lou since she was a baby, and been an honorary aunt – the kind whose job it was to provide presents, play-dates and an impartial ear – almost as long. But it always amazed her how unlike her mother Lou looked. Where Clare was stocky, Louisa was wraith-like. Taller, lankier, olive skinned, with eyes so dark they were almost black, and a curtain of shiny black hair that kept falling into her eyes. A black T-shirt carrying the logo of a band Eve didn't recognize, black jacket, skinny jeans and a pair of sneakers that were almost Converse. The girl had emo written all over her.

'Mum,' said Louisa, heading to the fridge. 'What's for lunch?'

'Lunch was two hours ago and if you think I'm cooking again you've got another think coming. If you're hungry, you can have what's left of last night's risotto or make a sandwich.'

Her daughter's nose wrinkled in disgust. 'A sandwich?' she said, sounding like Edith Evans playing Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, her last school play. 'I'm going to look like a sandwich if I eat any more. Anyway, there's nothing to put in one.'

'I'll do a shop tomorrow. For now, there's cheese, peanut butter, marmite, jam . . .' Clare recited a list of jars in the fridge and hoped the cheese hadn't yet developed a crust.

'They're all empty. And you know I don't eat cheese,' Louisa said, spotting the bottle. 'Can I have a glass of wine?'

'You know you can't,' Clare sighed. 'Have orange juice.'

Louisa opened her mouth to object.

'Don't even start. Auntie Eve and I are trying to have a conversation. A *private* conversation,' Clare added pointedly.

It was no use.

As the mother-daughter combat bounced back and forth, Eve listened as Clare negotiated her daughter down to marmite on toast now, plus a glass of orange juice, with the promise of a takeout pizza later as a Saturday night treat. Apparently, Louisa didn't regard mozzarella as cheese. Eve couldn't imagine ever having a conversation like this with Hannah.

'Kids,' Clare said, as Louisa bounced out, orange juice sloshing as she went. 'That's all they are you know. A mess of emotion done up to look scary.'

It was Clare the schoolteacher speaking.

'I know . . . I know.' Draining her glass, Eve reached for the bottle and topped herself up to the halfway mark, before emptying the rest into Clare's. 'And I can't begin to imagine what Ian's have been through. But the eldest, Hannah, I don't think she has any intention of giving me the slightest chance. It's like she's already decided to hate me.'

'How old is she again?'

'Twelve, going on twenty.'

Clare shot her a warning glance. 'A year younger than Louisa,' she pointed out. 'Can you imagine how Lou would react to a new man in my life? Not that that's going to happen any time soon. She'd hate it.'

'You think?'

'I *know*,' Clare said firmly. 'Hannah doesn't hate you. She hates the *idea* of you. She'd hate any woman who threatened to come between her and her dad.'

Looked at objectively, Eve could see Clare was right.

'But right now,' Eve protested. 'I'm just a friend of her dad's.'

'Yeah, right.' Clare rolled her eyes. 'Of course she knows. How many of their dad's *friends* have those children met since their mum died? I mean, think about it. How many times have they traipsed into London to meet someone and then been taken to Hamley's or Topshop as a reward for good behaviour?' She looked at Eve questioningly.

'Zero, nada, zilch. Am I right?'

'Oh bollocks,' Eve said. 'D'you think so?'

'I know so. They might be children, but they're not stupid. Certainly not Hannah. The little ones might take you at face value, for now, but Hannah? Twelve going on twenty, as you put it? No way.'

Eve took a gulp of her wine. How could she have been so naive?

'To be honest,' Clare said. 'I'm surprised Ian was dumb enough to think she'd fall for it. Lou wouldn't, and nor would any of her friends.'

Eve could have kicked herself. It had seemed such a good plan, but with the benefit of hindsight, its flaws were glaring.

'Still, at least he tried. I've told you about Lily's boyfriend, Liam?'

Lily was Clare's sister. Nine years younger and a lot closer to Louisa in looks than she was to Clare. Eve hadn't seen her for years.

'The divorced one? Sports reporter?'

'Not-quite divorced. But yes, that one. He just threw Lily in at the deep end. Her and the kid, *and* his ex. I don't

know who was more traumatized. If that wasn't bad enough, a couple of months later, she has to field his kid for an entire afternoon by herself.'

'God,' said Eve. 'Why?'

'His shift changed and he *had* to cover the FA Cup.' Clare mimed inverted commas around the 'had'. 'He didn't even ring his ex to explain. She only found out he wasn't going to be there when she delivered Rosie, and Lily opened the door. I had Lily on the phone almost hysterical. Didn't have the first clue what to do. Didn't know what to feed her, anything . . . I mean,' Clare asked, 'would you?' Her voice rose.

Clare had never been much of a drinker, but when she got drunk, she got drunk. Eve was familiar with the signs.

'I should probably go,' she said.

'Not yet.'

Eve waited.

'I've had a brainwave! You could meet up with Lily. Compare notes.'

'Clare . . .'

'I'm serious.' Standing up from the table Clare found the cups and put the kettle back on. 'Have to be instant,' she said. 'And I think I'm out of digestives.'

'I know. You haven't done a shop.'

Eve hated Nescafé, but wouldn't dream of saying so. Fresh coffee was a luxury Clare only allowed herself once a month, on payday. And when the packet was empty, it was back to instant again. Occasionally, Eve would bring coffee herself, only she'd been too strung out by meeting Ian's kids to bring anything, apart from her problems.

If she was honest, that was something of a pattern. Eve arrived with something for Louisa, a bottle of wine for Clare, and her problems. In return, Clare listened, although rarely without comment. That was the price of access to Clare's shoulder.

'It's a good idea,' Clare insisted. 'You know it is. If you're going to do this . . .' She looked at her friend. 'And I assume you haven't fallen at the first hurdle?'

Eve shook her head. Of course she hadn't. How pathetic did Clare think she was?

'Then you're going to need all the moral support you can get. And who's going to understand better than Lily, who's in the same predicament?'

THREE

If Clare hadn't been coming along *to say hello* . . .

Check they both showed up more like, Eve thought wryly. She'd already had a text and a call on her mobile to make sure there was no last-minute work crisis. If not for Clare coming, Eve would have cancelled.

But even the most mundane night out was a big deal for Clare. She didn't do it often – couldn't afford the time, energy or money that four hours away from Louisa invariably cost, both in bribery and babysitters – and every occasion was a military operation of childminders, Tube trains and precision timing.

In the two weeks since Clare suggested a three-way get together, Eve had seen Ian only a couple of times. Both snatched drinks on his way home from work. They'd spoken on the phone another half a dozen times, and texted and e-mailed often, but she hadn't once mentioned Clare's plan.

What was the big deal anyway?

And mentioning it would involve being honest about how hard she'd found meeting his kids, how upset she'd been about Hannah's rejection of her present. Easier by far to continue with their mutual pretence that it had gone well.

Closing the feature she'd been editing for what felt like days, Eve shut down her computer. The piece was a profile of Kate Winslet by an award-winning interviewer. Eve pulled her make-up bag from a desk drawer and began retouching her face. Award-winning interviewer maybe, but she was a famously bad writer, well-known for delivering what were, basically, six-thousand-word transcripts for a two-thousand-word interview.

But features editors continued to commission her because her name opened doors. Hollywood publicists loved her and always approved her, so she always got used. Eve wondered if the old soak ever read the interviews printed under her name; and whether she really believed the award-winning writing was hers.

A stiff drink was deserved, for cutting the feature by half and turning what remained into half-decent prose, but she wasn't going to get one. Clare had suggested Starbucks on Carnaby Street and Eve had agreed. Central enough to be convenient for none of them, it was busy enough for them to have a coffee each and call it quits if the whole thing was as big a disaster as Eve expected.

An hour, she decided. An hour and a half, max.

Then she was out of there.

'I'll be an hour, tops,' Lily Adams told the stage manager at the Comedy Club, as she grabbed her purse and kicked her backpack under the desk of the ticket office. 'I've got to do this to humour my sister. I'll relieve you at eight, promise. Eight-thirty, absolute latest.'

'Eight it is,' he said, waving her away.

There was no irritation in Brendan's voice.

Stand-up had always been Lily's great love. Right up to the point she got hammered at Soho House with a couple of the comics who'd just done a one-off charity special, got talking to, and laughing with, some journalist

they knew called Liam Donnelly, and woke up in his bed. Somehow one night had turned into weeks, and then weeks had turned into months; now Liam was Lily's great love. Or so she was telling everyone.

Helping out in the ticket office, and being general dogsbody at the Comedy Club in Piccadilly was as close as Lily got to the career she'd temporarily put on ice. For now, it was close enough. She had other things on her mind. Although what Clare thought 'discussing her problems' with some old friend that Lily hadn't seen for years would achieve, Lily didn't have the faintest idea. Not that she could avoid it.

'I've booked a babysitter,' Clare said. Pulling her old, 'don't let me down after I've gone to so much trouble' guilt trip again. It worked, of course. It always did.

Privately, Lily thought that if her sister's life was tough, Clare had only herself to blame. She hadn't had to have the baby after all. Although Lily would never dream of saying such a thing, and felt bad for even thinking it. She adored Louisa and couldn't imagine life without her pint-sized partner in crime. But honestly, nobody *forced* Clare to become a single mum at eighteen. More importantly, nobody forced her to still be a single mum nearly fourteen years later.

That particular call was down to Clare.

Lily had been nine when Clare announced she was pregnant, and was having it no matter what anyone else said. She could still remember the rows that rocked their Hendon terrace. As days dragged into weeks, Lily began to feel ever more invisible. She went to school and came home again. Went to Brownies and netball practice. Went next door to play with Bernice. Inside the house the argument raged. Lily might as well not have been there.

Lily had lost count of the nights she lay awake, plotting her escape. She wanted to run away and find Dad,

then they'd be sorry; if they even noticed. But she never did run away. And Dad had been gone five years, anyway. Six, almost.

When the baby was born, Lily went from see-through to utterly invisible. The day Clare took baby Lou away to university in her pushchair, Mum had shut herself in her bedroom and sobbed and sobbed.

At the time Lily didn't care. She had her mum back.

At the bottom of Carnaby Street, Lily stopped to check her reflection in a shop window. Not exactly smart – jeans, T-shirt, Paul Smith jacket lifted from Liam's wardrobe – but these were her theatre clothes and she was on her break. What else could Clare expect? Her fine dark hair was newly washed and tied back in a knot, her make-up minimal, but there if you looked close enough. That would do. It would have to.

Clare was already sitting at a low-level table pretending to reread *Jane Eyre* in sympathy with her GCSE students when Eve arrived. Of course she was, Eve thought fondly. The one with the most on her plate and the furthest to travel still managed to get there early and keep a bunch of German students out of the three most comfortable leather armchairs in the whole place. She'd even got the coffees in.

'Let me,' said Eve, reaching for her purse. She knew the evening would have cost her friend at least twenty quid before she even stepped out of her front door.

'No need,' Clare said. 'Anyway, it's easier saving the chairs if there's a cup in front of each. You can get the next round.'

Eve didn't say she was hoping there wouldn't be a next round.

'There's Lily!' Clare exclaimed.

As Eve turned, Clare began waving at a tom-boyish

figure peering through the window. The girl raised her hand so briefly it was more twitch than acknowledgement, and began weaving between tables to reach the door.

'That's Lily?' Eve asked.

'Uh-huh. Hasn't changed a bit, has she?'

As Eve watched the girl working her boyfriend's clothes in a way that was only possible with the confidence and body of someone under twenty-five, she wondered if Clare realized how long it was since they'd last seen each other. Lily had been at school. And now she was here. Cool, effortlessly stylish, with that no-age aura that made her appear both older and younger than her twenty-three years. Eve felt strangely intimidated.

'Hey,' said Lily to no one in particular. She swung skinny denim-clad legs over one arm of the chair and lounged against the other. 'Very long time no see.' She turned to her sister. 'So, where's the fire?'

'Good to see you too,' Clare said.

Rolling her eyes, Lily slouched even further, causing two of the German boys to look over. And keep looking.

Eve, whose newly-hip Jaeger dress and skyscraper heels had seemed so right at the office, felt instantly overdressed.

'So,' Clare said, calling her meeting to order. 'The reason we're all here . . .'

Lily sighed. 'There's three of us,' she said faux patiently. 'Perhaps you'd like me to take minutes?' Some things hadn't changed, she still had her annoying little-sister routine down pat.

'The reason we're here,' Clare repeated, 'is because we're stepmums. Well, you two are, sort of . . . And since I have to suffer you both moaning, I thought it might be better if you moaned at each other.'

Eve couldn't help laughing. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't realize I was that bad!'

'Oh, Lily's worse. Liam this, Liam that . . . The problem is, I'm not sure I'm on either of your sides.'

'You're not?'

'No,' said Clare. 'I'm not.'

'Then whose side are you on?' Eve demanded.

'The children's.'

Eve was shocked. She'd only come because she didn't want to let her friend down. Now Clare was stitching her up. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lily had frozen, her latte halfway to her lips.

'Don't look so surprised.' Clare seemed almost pleased by their reaction. 'When you've had one like ours, you're hardly going to side instinctively with the stepmonsters.'

'Oh for crying out loud,' Lily said, banging her cup down hard enough to slop coffee over the edge. 'If you're going to start whingeing on about Annabel again, I'm leaving.'

'I'm not. I'm just saying, remember what it's like from the kids' perspective. They don't ask for a stepmother.'

'But we barely even saw her,' Lily said crossly.

'Yes, we did.'

'No, we didn't.'

Eve started to rummage in her bag, looking for her mobile, a lipstick, anything to remove her mentally, if not physically, from this conversation.

'We did. What about that trip to the cinema and . . .'

'Yes. I know!' Lily almost shouted. 'The pizza from hell.'

'Maybe I should go?' Eve started to get up.

'No!' Both sisters rounded on her so swiftly the students crowded around the next table turned and stared.

'Dad left us for the stepmonster,' Clare resumed her story as soon as Eve had returned to her seat.

Eve knew what was coming; she'd heard it all before.

Drunken midnight rants at their student house, with one ear on a baby monitor, segueing into hissed updates every time a birthday or Christmas was missed. When

her father began missing Louisa's birthdays too, Clare was livid. The fact he didn't even know his granddaughter existed was deemed irrelevant.

Clare's hatred was impressive in its consistency. Annabel was a blonde-bobbed, designer-clad bitch who stole her father from under his children's very noses. Her father wasn't exactly an innocent party in this particular fairy tale, but Clare never seemed to mention that.

Stealing him, however, wasn't Annabel's number one crime.

Her number one crime, the sin that led to rows, re-criminations, and ultimately an estrangement lasting nineteen years and counting, was that Annabel had tried to usurp their mother. When, as Clare never failed to point out, they had a perfectly good one, already.

The scene of Annabel's crime was an Italian restaurant in north-west London. And the way Clare told it, it began with Annabel sending Clare and Lily to the toilets to wash their hands before eating, and went downhill from there. Couldn't they sit up straight? Why weren't they using napkins? Hadn't their mother told them how to hold a knife properly?

The list grew longer with each telling.

Finish their mouthfuls before starting another. Surely their mother didn't allow them to leave their crusts at home? (The answer was no. But what self-respecting thirteen-year-old would admit that?)

When the woman asked Clare if she'd ever heard of the words *please* and *thank you*, lunch turned ugly. Who could blame her, Clare said, if she accidentally knocked an almost-full glass of Coca-Cola over her father's girlfriend's smart cream trousers? (She was thirteen, for crying out loud. Thirteen and trapped. Who wouldn't do the same?)

Lily sighed loudly.

But as Eve pictured a teenage Clare nudging her elbow

towards that glass, it wasn't her friend she saw. The skinny face that stared defiantly as sticky brown liquid splashed across the table was Hannah's. And suddenly the story didn't seem as clear-cut.

'Liam's got a little girl, hasn't he?' Eve asked Lily. Her attempt to move the subject on could hardly be less subtle. 'How old is she?'

'Rosie,' Lily said. She'd obviously planned to say as little as possible, and leave as quickly as she could, but even she looked grateful that Eve had stopped Clare in her tracks. 'She's three. Adorable, in a girly way. Yours?'

'Not really mine.'

'They never are,' Lily said, sounding far older than her years. 'That's the whole point, isn't it? So, how old are they?'

'Hannah's twelve, going on fifteen. Sophie's nine and Alfie's five and two months. And don't you dare forget the two months!' Eve smiled. 'I've only met them once. And that was terrifying enough.'

'Three of them! I can barely cope with Rosie.'

'I know the feeling,' Eve said. 'I had no idea it would be so hard. They're just kids, after all.'

'*Just kids?*' Clare said. 'You're kidding, right?'

'Of course,' Eve smiled weakly. 'I wanted them to like me so much. That's why I bought them the books,' she explained to Lily. 'That was my big mistake, right there. I shouldn't have bothered. Especially without running it by Ian first. I opened myself right up and now I'm afraid I've blown it.'

'What does Ian say?' Lily asked.

Eve stared at her hands. 'I haven't told him,' she admitted. 'We haven't really seen each other properly since. And I don't want to worry him.'

Don't want him to think there might be a problem, more like, she thought.

'Is that usual?' Lily asked.

'What?'

'Going a fortnight without seeing him properly?'

'Not really, but it's not *unusual*. It depends on both our work, his childcare arrangements – he has an au pair, but he tries to be home as much as possible to cover homework – that kind of thing.

'We talk about it all the time,' Eve continued. 'How to spend more time together, I mean. But Ian wants to take it slowly – for the sake of the kids. It's a difficult balancing act. I'm trying to understand, but it's not easy.

'So much of our relationship has been like this,' she continued. 'Cups of coffee, quick drinks on his way home, dinner and the odd evening at my place. We've managed a night away a couple of times, but overnights are rare . . . Understandably enough,' she added, for fear of sounding bitter. 'They're going to their grandparents' in a couple of weeks, so he'll stay with me then.'

She felt like a teenager, aware her face lit up at the mere thought of a whole twenty-four hours together.

Said out loud it sounded paltry, embarrassing. A grown woman excited by a Saturday night sleepover. 'It's the kids,' she repeated. 'He wants to ease them in gently.'

It was a well-worn line. One she trotted out every time anyone asked after her love life.

'You can hardly blame him,' Clare put in, plonking three full mugs on the table in front of them. 'They've lost their mum, after all. The last thing they need is to feel they've lost their dad too.'

Eve and Lily had been so engrossed they hadn't noticed Clare was gone until she'd returned with the second round of coffees.

Lily nodded thoughtfully. 'So, he's a proper dad,' she said. 'Unlike Liam.' She smiled indulgently. 'He's an every third weekender. And then only when he remembers.'

'Liam forgets?'

'Oh yeah,' Clare said. 'He'd forget his head if it wasn't screwed on.'

'My turn,' Eve said, reaching for her purse.

'OK,' said Lily. 'But I'll get the next round.'

Clare raised her eyebrows.

'If there is one, obviously,' Lily added hastily.

'It wasn't that much,' Clare said, looking at the ten pound note Eve was holding out to her. When Eve rolled her eyes, Clare took it anyway. It would pay her Tube fare home.

'Back to Liam,' she said. 'And his convenient bouts of amnesia.'

'Don't start,' said Lily, but her tone was light and the smile reached her eyes as she pulled a picture from her wallet. It showed a slightly thickset man, with dark curly hair and crinkly brown eyes. He was good-looking, if you liked the type, and he knew it.

'Looks like Jimmy Nesbitt with longer hair,' Eve said.

'God, don't tell him that,' said Lily. 'He's vain enough as he is.'

'I'm not sure Eve meant that as a compliment.'

Lily caught Eve's eye and both women grinned. 'Thing is,' she said, 'I know Clare doesn't appreciate his finer qualities . . .'

She ignored her sister choking pointedly on her coffee.

'But I love him. I've never met anyone like him. He's funny and clever and . . .'

'The sex is great,' said Clare.

'Clare!'

'You're telling me it isn't?'

'OK, the sex is great,' Lily grinned. 'You're just jealous.'

'Seriously, though,' she returned her attention to Eve.

'If you'd told me a year ago I'd be taking on a guy twelve years older than me with a three-year-old kid I'd have told you to dream on, so I guess that makes it a bit more than great sex.'

Lily smiled again. 'But, yes, he forgets, a lot . . .'

'And you can't do that with a kid,' Clare completed for her.

'Never make a promise you can't keep.' Eve put in. She had heard it from Ian, about a zillion times. Never fight a battle you can't win. Let the small stuff go. Concentrate on the things that matter.

'Well,' Lily said. 'Let's just say, reliability isn't Liam's strongest point. Not even where Rosie's concerned.'

'Understatement,' Clare snorted. 'Tell her about the FA Cup quarter-final.'

'Not his finest moment. Rosie comes every third weekend. Liam picks her up Saturday, takes her back Sunday. He fixes his shifts around it. We both do, if we can.'

'Which paper's he on?'

Lily named a tabloid.

'Anyway, that's how our free Saturdays are spent, babysitting.' She glanced at her sister, and Eve was impressed to see Clare remain silent.

All of Clare's were spent babysitting.

'So, he got a call late Friday night saying they needed him to cover the quarter-final. To be fair, he did try to get out of it. I heard him. But his editor wasn't having it. And, ultimately, work's work. The paper comes first, everything else is second. That's what he's like. What he's always been like.'

Now *that* Eve understood.

Taking a gulp of coffee, Lily said, 'He couldn't face calling Siobhan – his ex – at midnight. I didn't blame him. It's not exactly amicable at the best of times and this was going to cause a huge row.'

Clare nodded. She'd obviously heard it before.

'When he left next morning, I just assumed he'd call her on his way to work. I was on the verge of phoning the Comedy Club to see if they needed any shifts covering,

when his doorbell rings. So I picked up the videophone assuming it's the post or something. There's Siobhan, with Rosie, Angelina Ballerina rucksack and all.'

'God!' said Eve, horrified. 'What did you do?'

'What could I do?' Lily shrugged. 'I let her in. Siobhan was furious. Man, did she give me a piece of her mind. It's funny how she's changed the goalposts to suit her. She refused to let me anywhere near Rosie in the beginning. But then Liam told her that if she wanted every third weekend off, Rosie would be spending it with us or she'd be making other arrangements. So she backed off.'

'New boyfriend,' Clare said. 'Wants some time for herself.'

For a split-second Eve's eyes met Lily's.

'So there I was – and there Liam wasn't,' Lily continued. 'I was at least as furious with Liam as Siobhan was. Being lumbered with his kid without anyone even having the decency to ask, but there was no way I was going to let Siobhan see that.'

'What about Rosie?' Eve asked. 'Did her mum take her away again?'

'Fat chance!' Lily was emphatic. 'She dumped her on the settee, turned on CBeebies and shut the flat door so she could spit venom in the privacy of a communal stairwell. She said I could tell Liam she expected him to deliver Rosie back at the usual time and she'd be having words with him. Then she bugged off. Can't say I blame her. But talk about kicking the cat.'

Eve was blown away by the young woman's calmness. She wasn't sure she would know how to cope with this now, let alone when she'd been Lily's age.

Maybe she could learn something after all . . .