

Since I Don't
Have You

Prologue

London, 1988

I don't remember exactly the day we made our pact, but it was Jenny, of course, who came up with the idea. Of the three of us, she was the one most likely to make a stand – or get carried away, depending on how you looked at it. Oliver called her our 'hothead'.

We were in our local café, the babies asleep in their pushchairs, when she suddenly looked about her at the neighbouring tables as though suspecting eavesdroppers and spoke with hushed urgency:

'We should make a promise that we'll look after each other's girls. You know . . . *if disaster strikes.*'

I looked up from my coffee, a little shocked. 'Disaster' struck only other people, didn't it? People you read about in the papers. Nothing was going to happen to *us*. Next to me, Mariel raised an eyebrow. I'd wait to see what she said, I decided, before replying myself. If Jenny was our demonstrator then Mariel was the cool one, the realist.

'The chances of both parents getting terminal cancer at the same time are very slim,' she said, reasonably. 'Or dying together

in a plane crash without their child in the seat between them. Believe me, Jen, no one's going to be an orphan.'

Jenny pulled a face and began grabbing at a handful of her thick red-gold hair, a habit of hers. She'd plait it really tightly and then leave it to unravel again over her shoulders. 'Even if it's just one parent who dies, then.' She met Mariel's eye with a determined look. 'Toby flies all over the place for work, doesn't he? Isn't he in the Far East right now?'

'Jen!' Now I was properly shocked, but Mariel just laughed. 'Well, thanks for that cheery thought. I'll let my husband know he needs to update his life insurance.'

'I'm serious, Mariel. These things happen!'

There was a pause as we all looked at each other. 'Well, I'm in,' I said, and they both looked at me, as surprised as I was by my sudden earnestness. Whichever 'one' of the three of us I was, a chord had been struck and I wasn't prepared to close my ears to it. With Oliver continuing to work silly hours – and drink frightening quantities – I didn't like the idea of something happening to me, and Emma having to be left in the care of a relay team of nannies co-ordinated by his mother or, worse, his PA.

'Mariel?' Jen asked.

Mariel nodded, the wings of her dark bob swinging forward over her cheeks. 'Of course I'm in. You know I'd do anything for the girls.'

'It's a deal, then,' Jen said, pleased. 'We'll wave them off to university together if it's the last thing we do. Oxford, I think. No, Harvard!'

Mariel chuckled at the thought, but I wasn't sure I was ready to lighten my own mood yet. 'And they'll always have each other too.'

'If it turns out they get on,' Mariel said, delicately.

'What are you talking about? They *will* be friends,' Jenny pronounced sternly, and now I *did* smile. I knew what they were both thinking, the same as I was: that if our daughters grew to be

a fraction as close as we were then they would be lucky girls. They'd be three times as equipped for life, three times as protected.

Three times everything.

PART ONE

*‘ . . . now I am six I am clever as clever
So I think I’ll be six forever and ever.’*

A. A. MILNE

Chapter 1

London, June 1994

As they came to collect their children from Emma's sixth birthday party, the mothers asked me where Oliver was. It was a Friday afternoon after all, the weekend, and everyone knew that fathers made their own children's birthday parties, in both senses of the word.

There was a certain amount of speaking in disbelieving italics to contend with:

'He's not here? Well, what a *shame*.'

Yes.

'He *must* be away for *work*, then? Some trip he couldn't get out of?'

No, just in his office in town.

'And he couldn't get away? Not even for a *couple of hours*?'

Apparently not.

'Well,' said Ruby Sherwood's mother Lesley, 'That's grounds for *divorce* if you ask me!' I noticed with relief that little Ruby was the last to leave.

'Rach, come and have a drink,' Mariel called from the living-room doorway. She'd been standing there for a while, I guessed,

waiting for the right moment to step in and rescue me. ‘The girls have flopped, look!’

‘The girls’ – we even used the term when Cat’s baby brother Jake was present – were lounged across the sofa, party dresses puddled beneath them, legs stretched out, pale tights grubby at the soles. Little debutantes calmed at last by the breaking of day. Around them were scattered trails of ribbons and streamers, plates of cake crumbs and crumpled napkins. All eyes were on the TV screen, however, identically rapt. Disney. *Sleeping Beauty*, if I wasn’t mistaken.

Catherine, Daisy and Emma: inseparable, just as we’d hoped. Cat was in the middle, resting her head on Daisy’s shoulder. I thought, as I often had, how her face was a design of both her parents’ in alternate horizontal bands, exactly like one of those children’s drawing games in which one body part is sketched and the paper folded down and passed on to the next player, until the final figure is revealed in all its incongruity. The brush-thick brown hair was Toby’s – fold – the wide-set hazel eyes and delicate nose Mariel’s – fold – the strong mouth and jaw Toby’s – fold – the slender neck and delicate collarbone Mariel’s.

Daisy was a different kind of hybrid, with Jen’s heart-shaped face and clear, trusting gaze and Bob’s sharper profile. Only Emma appeared to be a perfect miniature of one parent, but I knew from photographs of myself at the same age that I had not been even half this winning: large blue eyes, the irises like blurred flower heads; cheekbones already defined enough to be remarked upon by strangers; her hair a buttery blonde no salon could replicate for adult heads. She’s going to be a beauty, everyone said. Impossible to tell, I’d say, careful to hide my pride. In any case, they were all beauties, already; these three and every single one of the dancing imps who’d played here today.

I turned to follow Mariel into the kitchen where Jen was pouring the dregs of flat champagne into smeared flutes. ‘Leave that, I’ll get us something nice to drink.’

Past the pool of purple balloons and the leaning tower of unopened gifts, trailing a string of silver from my right ankle, I let myself into Oliver's wine cellar in the basement, the temperature and humidity of which was controlled by some incomprehensible device by the door, and picked pot-luck. Back upstairs I found some plain crystal glasses in a cupboard high above infant reach.

'Mmm, this wine is *really* nice,' Mariel said, settling on a kitchen stool.

Jen grinned. 'Hey, it's not something Oliver's *laid down* for Emma's twenty-first, is it?' She'd adopted a comically pompous baritone and Mariel and I giggled. Only my mother, busy at the dishwasher, remained silent and I gave her a look that I hoped communicated that this sort of talk was fun, just a little joke, certainly nothing to do with disloyalty.

'Are you sure you don't want to join us, Alysa?' Jen asked her. She hated anyone to be left out. Earlier, I'd heard her asking Mum how children's birthday parties were celebrated in Greece and I'd had to remind myself that at Emma's age Mum would still have been living in her native Santorini. No doubt Jen had hoped for details of feasting and plate-breaking and dancing in large circles. But Mum didn't like to talk about her homeland – unless to give warning of its being 'cursed' – and kind, caring Jen had been forced to give up trying.

'Mum, we're thirsty, we need some juice . . .'

'Ah, the birthday girl herself!' Emma came for a hug, her head nuzzling my ribs until I squatted to wrap my arms around her and bury my nose in that lovely hair, with its scent somewhere between lemons and toffee. I wondered, as I often did, when the hugs would peter out and be replaced by sulks and demands for a TV in her bedroom and an ever-larger allowance for clothes.

Six. Was she still my little girl? Or was she now a big girl? It was she who had made a landmark of today. Ever since she could speak she'd been saying, 'When I'm six,' or 'I want to be six,' or

‘Six is the best number.’ It wasn’t that she thought life began at six, as older girls might regard sixteen; she didn’t yet think in that way. It was more that she thought six was all there was to reach. That A. A. Milne verse the girls loved to recite said it perfectly.

Now she squeezed away from me and moved towards my mother. ‘Come and watch the film with us, Grandma.’

Mum took Emma’s outstretched hand. ‘All right, love.’

I felt pleasure, as I always did, at demonstrations of their closeness, and gratitude too that my own relationship with my mother had benefited from it. Extraordinary, now, to remember our near-silence of years ago when my father had died and we had almost allowed ourselves to give up on one another. (At least, I had almost allowed myself to give up on her. Now I had Emma I realised that Mum would never have thought to have given up on me.) A stalemate, that was all it had been, and if anyone was going to break a stalemate between two adults it was a child.

I went to sit for a few minutes too, because I knew Mum liked to have us both together, one on either side of her, just as once she’d been flanked by husband and child. She’d had her own parents to herself for much of her childhood so she was happy in a three.

You two are all I have . . . She didn’t say it aloud, but I knew it was what she was thinking.

Yes, happy in a three, but alert, too, to its risks.

In the kitchen, Mariel asked me, ‘Where *is* Oliver? Seriously?’

‘At work, of course. He has some Japanese clients in town. There was never any chance he would make it.’

‘God, he really knows how to push it, doesn’t he?’

I shrugged. ‘It’s not the end of the world.’

‘Well, I think you’re very understanding,’ Jen said. She paused to glance at the open door before adding in a whisper, ‘Especially after that business with Charlotte.’

That *business*. It was funny, in a way, to describe infidelity as business, especially in the case of Oliver for whom it must have been a rare incident of *non* business. Charlotte had been a graduate trainee, an evidently irresistible transfusion of new blood, and I remembered how I'd wept to Mariel and Jen about her, my body needing every morsel of the consolation they offered. But even as I cried I was already making my mind up to forgive him.

Jen's eyes glowed angrily. 'God, if I caught Bob with someone else I'd be like that woman in America, what was her name, something Rabbit?'

'Bobbitt? The one who cut off her husband's penis?' Mariel giggled. 'Well, you do have the scalpels to hand, I suppose, being a pedicurist. Or does Bob make you keep your tools in the car? I think that might be wise from now on. I don't want to be called as a character witness, thank you very much.'

I laughed, enjoying myself, but Jenny wasn't finished. 'I think infidelity is just, I don't know, *unforgivable*. If you don't want each other any more, why not just split up?'

There was a silence. I caught Mariel's eye and she bit her lip, a sure sign that she was thinking something of a restricted nature. I had an idea what that might be and knew I could count on her to change the subject on my behalf. We'd known each other for several years before we'd met Jenny and there were some things – well, one thing, specifically – that I'd told only her. Charlotte might have been for the three of us to discuss, that had felt right, but not what had come next.

'Do you think you and Bob will ever get married?' she asked Jen in that reasonable tone of hers, honed by years of working with NHS patients. What she half-meant, of course, was did Jen think they'd ever split up, and Jen understood this and after another cautious look towards the door answered accordingly.

'He annoys me sometimes, but he is Daisy's father.'

Mariel nodded. 'Yes, and if being annoying was a cause for break-up there'd be no couples left.' That was a typical Mariel

remark. A by-product of her sureness in her own marriage to Toby was her tolerant line on other, less exemplary unions: infidelity, conflict, ‘mini-rebellions’, as she called them, none was insurmountable. Imperfections were not only to be forgiven, but also forgotten. Personally, I was a little too inclined to remember.

‘Jen! Hey, darling, what is it?’ All of a sudden Mariel had her arm around Jenny who, to my great surprise, had started to cry. I leaned across and closed the kitchen door before moving to her other side. She was plucking furiously at her hair and blinking big swollen tears on to her cheeks.

‘It’s just, oh God, this is silly, but it’s just the way he looks at me sometimes. The look on his face, it’s *contempt*. He seems to find me so much more irritating than he used to. But I’m not doing anything different, I *know* I’m not.’

‘It’s all right,’ I said, ‘of course you’re—’

‘I’m just so sick of it all,’ she cut in with a sniff. ‘Sick of it!’ She looked beyond me to the polished cabinets and high windows of my kitchen. ‘I don’t know, we just seem to work so bloody hard all the time and never get anything out of it.’

Gently, Mariel steadied the glass in her hand. ‘You’re exhausted, darling. Why don’t Rachel and I take Daisy this weekend and you guys have a night away together?’

Jen shook her head. ‘We’re so broke at the moment, we couldn’t afford it. Anyway, I’m honestly not sure I’d want to spend a whole weekend on my own with him.’

‘Dinner then,’ I said. ‘Tomorrow night. Or just a drink. Some time on your own, away from the flat. That’s all you need.’

‘Thank you, that would be good.’ Jen grabbed a pink party napkin from the worktop to wipe her eyes and nose. ‘God, what am I doing? I don’t want Daisy to see me like this.’

I glanced at the closed door. ‘Don’t worry, they can’t hear a thing. Anyway, they’re too busy being hypnotised by the handsome prince.’

Mariel looked from Jen to me and smiled. ‘I wonder how long *that* will last.’

Oliver came home at ten, when Emma was asleep and I at least halfway there. Though his mouth spoke of traffic delays, the flickering figures of the computer monitor were still in his eyes. His once-fine bone structure was already blurred by a quilting of flesh. This, and the fact that his fair colouring seemed recently to have faded to grey, made him look older than he was; he could easily have passed for a man ten years older, one of those ageing City boys broken by their bank. As I finished unloading the dishwasher I listened to him pad up the stairs – he always did ‘quiet’ in so staged a fashion, like a burglar in his own home. Inexperience, you’d call it if you were feeling mean, for any parent involved in the bedtime process knew that their kid would sleep through Concorde taking off after a birthday party like today’s.

On the counter the wine bottle was empty. Maybe it *had* been laid down for some other occasion. Poor Oliver. I didn’t know precisely at what point I had begun to participate in – encourage, even – my friends’ mockery of my husband, this idea that he could not be offended or, worse, had no right to be. I told myself that Jen and Mariel were practically sisters to me, as discreet as they were loyal, and that our remarks were no different from those we made about Toby or Bob. But they were. Bob was far too complicated to dismiss so easily, with his impatient bursts of temper and passions that drew everyone into their heat: flying kites, drinking real ale, reviving classical learning (the last ignited a need so urgent he one day turned up at the children’s school and tried to persuade the teacher to let him take them to see the Elgin Marbles, every last one of them, that very moment!). Yes, we despaired of Bob, but we never thought to mock him.

Toby, on the other hand, had been my friend first, before he or I had met Mariel, and so was exempt from the rule of

secondary status by which he might otherwise have been judged. He was never going to be the kind of husband who remained two-dimensional in the minds of those who knew the wife better. Oliver, however, was. It wasn't so unfair a call for that matter, for what he chose to present to the other two couples, and these days to me too, *was* thin enough to be a stereotype, a wine-swilling, double-breasted banker stereotype. I knew what the others thought without them having to spell it out: he was one of those people who are likeable enough, you can't fault them as far as that goes, it's just that you can't imagine them ever engaged in anything real, like sex or excretion or putting the rubbish out, or, evidently, supervising a game of pass the parcel. I knew better, of course. Or at least I once had. And there it was, just as he reappeared at the kitchen door: that dangerous, instinctive shift in tense, the very thing I had been working so hard to deny.

'How is she?' I made an effort to smile properly.

'Out for the count.'

I suppressed irritation at the sports metaphor, his favourite form of communication. Stop it, I told myself, this is your husband, he has his own quirks and you have yours. Remember that! Did he conceal irritation at me too? Did he wish it didn't all have to be fairies and princesses and love hearts and glitter? Did he wonder if I'd created this pink and purple dominion specifically to exclude him? Then I thought, does he ever think like this, putting himself in my place as I do his, and, since he probably doesn't, should *I* continue to bother?

I found an open bottle of white in the fridge and poured him a glass. 'Well, she's had a great day. She loves being six.'

'Who wouldn't? She's not exactly worrying about her next tax bill, is she?' He dispatched half the wine in silent, open-throated gulps. 'Your mother's gone home, has she?'

'Yes, she was an amazing help, did almost everything in the end. All the clearing up. I must send some flowers tomorrow to say thanks.'

He was looking at me quizzically and I wondered what was wrong with the idea. Mum *had* been pretty wonderful. Then I realised he was puzzled by my friendliness; he'd been expecting hell and I should, by rights, now be giving it to him. I felt a bolt of pure guilt, followed by injustice at being associated with hell when all I'd been doing was trying to be a reasonable wife.

'Well, I've had a fucking appalling day,' he said and gave exactly the type of sigh I was expecting – long and heroic. I called it his Odysseus sigh, the one he used when he was the warrior returned, the provider in need of good food and a bed, not a night of 'where the hell d'you think you've been?'s from the wife. 'Look, I'm sorry I couldn't get back, it's—'

'It's OK,' I said, noticing that his *it's* and mine had synchronised precisely. Did he break off or did I interrupt? It was a form of conversational dovetailing so practised by now that it was impossible to know. Marital communication on autopilot: real, sentient people hardly need take part. I thought about Jen, weeping in this very room just hours earlier. Well, whatever her troubles with Bob, I couldn't imagine them speaking to each other like this. I put down the tea towel I was holding. 'I'm going to have a bath, I'm shattered.'

I had to remind myself to make contact with him as I passed, lightly placing my hand on his stomach and brushing my shoulder against his. And he had to remind himself to acknowledge the gesture, which he did by nodding, moving his lips in my direction in a ghost of a blown kiss. That done, we were free to go our separate ways.