

Dear Reader,

Life is full of firsts. First breath; first steps; first words; first day at school. But it's the emotional firsts that hit you hardest. The first time you fall in love; hold your child in your arms; or say a final goodbye to a loved one. They're the ones you can't forget.

A Million Dreams is quite a special first for me too in other ways. It's not my first book – it's actually my sixth. But it will be the first of my books that will be published in hardback. And to bring it to you I've reunited with my first publishers and editor, which makes it feel as if fate has been playing a part in the proceedings.

This book is another first for me, because usually during the writing I will develop a fondness for one particular character. But that wasn't the case with *A Million Dreams*. I wanted them all to get exactly what they wanted. But, if you've read any of my books before, you probably know that good things don't always happen to my characters.

Please don't think that *A Million Dreams* is a book full of sadness, because to me it is actually quite the opposite; it's full of hope and love. But sad things do happen to two amazing women and the story of how they, and the people around them, deal with that had its hooks in me from the very beginning.

I hope you get to love Beth and Izzy every bit as much as I did. I hope they call out to you from the pages of the book in the same way they screamed to me from the computer screen. I hope they get into your head and make you wonder what you would do if (heaven forbid) you found yourself in their situation. But most of all I hope they become your friends and that when you reach the end of the book you find yourself missing them every bit as much as I did... and still do.

Love Dani xxx



DANI ATKINS is an award-winning novelist.

Her 2013 debut *Fractured* has been translated into sixteen languages and has sold more than half a million copies. Dani is the author of four other bestselling novels, including *This Love*, which won the Romantic Novel of the Year Award in 2018. Dani lives in a small village in Hertfordshire with her husband, one Siamese cat and a very sappy Border Collie.

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DANI ATKINS

*A Million
Dreams*



UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Prologue


10 Years Ago

Beth

‘The sooner we begin your treatment, the better the chances for a successful outcome.’



The words that reshaped our future – reshaped everything – were softly spoken. I looked across the desk, beyond the files and X-ray envelopes, at the doctor who was patiently waiting for our world to stop spinning as we absorbed the news.



I was gripping Tim’s hand so tightly I was probably crushing bone against cartilage, but my gaze was fixed on the oncologist, whose eyes revealed far more than I think he knew. Behind the rimless glasses, I saw the glimmer of a truth he was not prepared to share with us on that first black day. The chances of success were small. My ability to read faces, to pick up on tiny nuances others failed to see, had always been an asset in my work. On that day, it felt more like a curse.

‘I see from your file that you and your wife don’t have children, Mr Brandon.’

Tim shook his head, and I felt the tremors racking his



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body begin to spread to mine. I was shaking in both body and voice as I answered for him.

‘We’ve only been married for two years. We were planning on waiting a little longer before starting a family.’ I looked at the doctor, whose face was beginning to swim behind my tears.

‘I know this is a lot for you to take in, but without wishing to add to the decisions you are now facing, I have to urge you to think about safeguarding and preserving your fertility.’ Perhaps Tim understood instantly what the oncologist was talking about, but I was several pages behind him. ‘There is a strong possibility that your treatment will affect your ability to father a child in the future, so at this point we would recommend you to consider freezing your sperm.’

For one crazy moment I imagined he was talking about doing so at home, where it would sit on the shelf beside the packets of pork chops and Birds Eye peas. It took a few moments for the image to disappear.

‘There are several fertility clinics that we can refer you to. They will be able to explain the various options open to you. These can range from freezing sperm to even freezing embryos, if you should choose.’

‘Embryos?’ Tim asked, his voice ringing with confusion.

‘It’s one option to consider. There are excellent statistics for successful pregnancies resulting from cryogenically stored embryos. For couples your age and in your situation, it is definitely something worth thinking about.’

We had visited a clinic just two days later. Scarcely enough time to consider what we were doing, or why. The





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possibility of Tim facing a life-threatening disease was still so overwhelming to us that everything else seemed like white noise. We'd left the fertility clinic with armloads of pamphlets and advice ringing in our ears. In the end, we had made the decision not because of the success rates, graphs, or testimonials we'd read until late into the night, as though cramming for an exam. We'd made the decision with our hearts.

'We'll be making a baby,' I said, snuggling up against the man I loved and trying not to notice how much thinner he seemed than only a month or so earlier.

'And then freezing it. We'd quite literally be putting our child – or children – on ice.'

'Actually, I think they store them in liquid nitrogen,' I corrected, a new expert in a field I'd known next to nothing about only a few days earlier.

'We'd also be putting you through all kinds of invasive procedures unnecessarily. Because there's nothing wrong with *you*,' Tim had said, and it was impossible not to hear the pain and regret in his voice. He was angry. No, more than that, he was *furious* with his body for failing him so cataclysmically for the first time in all of its thirty years.

'We don't know how long it's going to take you to beat this thing,' I reasoned, hoping the positivity in my voice was powerful enough to fool him. 'And it could be *years* before we're ready for children. This way we won't have to worry about whether my fertility has dropped off by the time we're ready. We'd already have a freeze-dried baby all ready to go.'

'Just add water,' he had joked, pulling me even closer against his bony ribcage.





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‘Exactly,’ I said, my mouth against his skin, where hopefully he couldn’t feel the trembling of my lips or the dampness on my cheeks from the tears that were falling silently in the darkness of our bedroom.

‘Let’s go for it then,’ he whispered into my hair. ‘Let’s make some babies.’

Beth

I have a good nose. I don't mean its shape, which is fairly ordinary and fits in perfectly well with my other features. (My husband, Tim, once claimed that I'm beautiful, which was charmingly biased and also inaccurate.) What I mean about my nose is that my sense of smell is uncommonly acute. Admittedly, I didn't fare quite so well with some of the other senses; for a start I'm completely tone deaf, which is kind of funny as I ended up falling in love with a musician. But a good sense of smell is a definite advantage if all you've ever wanted to do is work with flowers, or better still own your own florist shop. Happily, I did both.

'Is there anything else you'd like me to do before I leave for the day, Mrs Brandon – er, I mean Beth?'

I looked up from the bouquet of peonies I was tying and smiled at Natalie, my assistant, who even after six months of working for me occasionally forgot to call me by my first name. My fingers were working at speed, securing and knotting the rustic string around the stems with the dexterity of a practised fisherman.



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‘Have you any plans for this afternoon?’ Natalie asked as I followed her to the door and flipped the swinging sign from ‘Open’ to ‘Closed’.

‘Nothing particular,’ I replied with a smile as I ushered her onto the pavement and slid the bolt in place. She didn’t know me well enough to spot the lie. It was a smooth eviction, and hopefully she hadn’t noticed my haste.

Standing in the empty shop, I let the familiar odours and sounds settle around me, like a security blanket. The buzz of the overhead lights and the hum of the large refrigerators where the most delicate blooms were stored combined to drown out the sound of traffic from the high street. The shop was in a great position, and its reputation had grown steadily in the six years since we’d opened it. I ran my hand over the polished wooden counter, waiting for the usual grounding sensation to calm me. But today the shop failed to work its magic.

Early closing day was typically when I met with clients or caught up on paperwork, but there was something else on my agenda for this afternoon. I only managed to eat half of the meal-deal sandwich I’d bought that morning before throwing the rest into the bin beneath my desk. Perhaps I should have done the same with the strong Americano coffee, because the last thing I needed was an extra injection of caffeine, not when I was already so wired.

‘This is ridiculous,’ I muttered to myself as I went through the familiar ritual of locking up the shop and setting the alarm. ‘I’m only speaking to my husband. Why am I so uptight?’

Because you know he won’t be happy about this, an annoyingly accurate inner voice replied. I drowned it out





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by turning up the car radio to a volume usually favoured by teenage boys, and wove through the early afternoon traffic.

The car park was gratifyingly empty and I didn't pass a soul as my feet travelled on cruise control down the familiar twisting pathways. Even the scurrying squirrels who called this place home remained in their trees, as though respecting our need for privacy. My stomach was churning and gurgling with a mixture of eagerness and trepidation, forcing occasional splashes of acid to burn their way up my throat.

The thick cardigan I'd pulled on before leaving the shop was redundant, and I shrugged it off in the sunshine as I walked. Even so, beneath the weight of my shoulder-length hair, tiny pinpricks of perspiration erupted like measles spots on the back of my neck.

As I walked to meet him, it occurred to me that almost *every* important moment Tim and I had shared had taken place outdoors. We'd never engineered it, but looking back over the history of us, from our very first kiss (on a rain-drenched street corner) to the day two years later when we'd stood by the edge of a lake in front of our family and friends and promised to love each other for ever, we'd been outside. All our significant moments had been beneath a ceiling of clouds or stars. Even Tim's proposal had been *al fresco*, stunning me halfway through a countryside picnic. I could still remember how his dark brown eyes had softened as he reached across the plaid blanket for my hand, carelessly knocking aside the remains of our lunch. 'Marry me, Beth,' he'd whispered, looking almost as surprised as I'd been by his words. Then his mouth had covered mine, almost smothering the excited 'yes' I'd given in reply.





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It was only right, therefore, that this next life-changing conversation – the one I’d been rehearsing all morning – should be held beneath a blue, cloud-wisped sky, with only the chirruping birds as witnesses.

He was waiting for me beneath the shade of a tall oak tree, and I hurried to him as my stomach tied itself into an unimaginable tangle of knots. I felt like an actor who’d suddenly forgotten their lines moments before their cue. My carefully constructed argument covering the points I wanted to make – and the objections I knew he’d scatter like landmines in my path – had suddenly deserted me.

It was still a struggle not speaking to him every day. Perhaps that’s why my voice shook in a way it hadn’t done when I’d run this conversation past the buckets of gerberas and carnations in the sanctuary of the shop we’d set up together. I cleared my throat.

‘Timothy,’ I began, which must surely have put him on high alert, as I hardly ever used his full name. I swallowed down a lump of anxiety that was lodged in my throat like a boiled sweet and tried again.

‘Tim, I’ve got something I want to say, and I don’t want you to interrupt or chip in until I’ve finished, okay?’ I gave him no chance to interject and dived right in. ‘I’ve given this a lot of thought over the last few weeks – well, months actually – and I think we should try again. I think we owe it to ourselves to give it one last go.’

I hadn’t realised I was pacing as I spoke, until I saw I was no longer beside him. I retraced my steps. ‘I know what you’re going to say: that we tried before, *twice* before,’ I added ruefully, as if he might somehow have forgotten our previous failures. ‘But this time, I’ve got a feeling...’ My





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voice drifted away, and I instantly corrected myself. ‘No, it’s more than that. I’m *certain*. This time everything is going to work out just the way we wanted.’

I lifted my head and pushed back a thick lock of copper-shot hair that had fallen across my face. ‘Okay,’ I corrected, sounding suddenly sad, ‘maybe not *exactly* the way we wanted. But something good can still come out of all of this. Something wonderful.’

I dropped my gaze to my feet, but I could still imagine his eyes lasering through me. ‘The shop’s doing really well now; financially, we’re in a good place. And Natalie is ready to take on more responsibility.’ I could feel the acid prick of tears, but I didn’t want to stop, not now I’d finally found my stride. ‘I don’t want to wait any longer. I’ll be thirty-six next year,’ I reminded him, because he’d always been shockingly forgetful about birthdays and anniversaries. ‘I’m already what they’d call elderly – *geriatric*, probably.’

I looked around, making sure we were quite alone and not overheard before continuing. ‘I’ve contacted the clinic.’ I imagined, rather than heard, his gasp of disapproval. ‘They said it could be different this time. I could try it without the drugs, so there’d be less chance of me feeling so sick.’ I gave a small laugh, which almost – but not quite – managed to hide the fledgling sob beneath it. ‘Unless of course I get *morning* sick,’ I joked. No one laughed. But then I hadn’t really expected that either of us would.

I looked back towards him, feeling the first escapee tears beginning to course down my cheeks. I grappled in my pockets for a tissue packet, furious with myself for not having had the foresight to bring one. There’d always been zero possibility of me getting through this without crying.





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‘We’ve got one last chance, my love. There’s just one embryo left, and I want to try for it.’ My words rode the sob like a surfer on a wave. ‘I want to have your baby.’

My words hung on the air, like the strains of an instrument long after the song has ended. I scabbled in my handbag on another fruitless tissue hunt. Who comes to a place like this without one? I sniffed inelegantly as I crossed the space between us. ‘Aren’t you ready after all this time to be a daddy?’ My fingertips reached out to him. The stone felt cold as I traced the outline of his name in the white-flecked marble. *Timothy Brandon*. And beneath his name was the date, which was etched in my heart even more deeply than it was into the stone marker. September 10th 2014. The day I lost my husband.

Mascara was probably running down my cheeks, and I was sniffing like a runny-nosed toddler in the absence of a handkerchief. ‘For Christ’s sake, where’s a bloody tissue when you need one?’

‘Here,’ said a voice from somewhere behind me.

I don’t think either me or the stranger who was holding out the unopened packet of tissues expected me to shriek quite as loudly as I did.

‘Sorry,’ said the man, taking a quick step backwards, his much-needed packet of Kleenex going with him. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘Well, you did,’ I retorted, embarrassment making me sound angrier than I should have been. ‘I thought I was alone here.’

I looked around at the rows of orderly headstones. It was my preferred time of day to visit Tim’s grave. Midweek,





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mid-afternoon; you were practically guaranteed to have the place to yourself.

‘Me too,’ said the man smoothly. His eyes held a challenge and I quickly reached out and took the packet from his still-outstretched hand before he changed his mind. He politely pretended not to hear while I made good and noisy use of the tissues. It was a sound I’m sure Tim’s immediate neighbours were all too familiar with. I plucked a second square from the packet – just in case – and passed them back to him.

‘Please, keep them,’ he said, his eyes kind and knowing. ‘It sounds like your need for them might be greater than mine.’

His words made me uncomfortable, but that didn’t excuse my knee-jerk reaction: ‘Were you *eavesdropping* on my private conversation?’

The man’s eyes, which were an unusual shade of grey, like slate after the rain, widened a little at my confrontational tone. ‘Quite unintentionally, I assure you.’ His voice was measured, but I caught the smallest flare of his nostrils, like a dragon waiting to exhale flames. ‘Although I’m not sure it can legitimately be called “private” when you’re broadcasting it loudly to anyone in the vicinity.’

He had me there, but embarrassment made it impossible to hear the sensible voice of reason in my head, the one that was telling me to thank him politely and walk away. ‘There *was* no one around. I checked. And it was a very personal conversation.’

The man sighed, and I wondered how many times he was going to end up regretting his good deed for the day. From





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the expression on his face, quite a few, I imagined. ‘I’ve been here for the last forty minutes.’

I rammed the tissues he’d given me into my pocket, and heard a teenage-worthy petulance in my voice, which I should have outgrown several decades ago. ‘Well, you must have been hiding, or something.’

There was something in his eyes that told me I’d crossed a line, and all at once I remembered where we were.

‘I was kneeling down,’ he said quietly. ‘Tidying my wife’s grave.’

My eyes dropped and I saw two damp circles darkening the denim of his jeans, verifying his words. ‘I... I’m so sorry,’ I said awkwardly, trying to squeeze the apology past my foot, which was firmly lodged in my mouth.

The man shook his head, and as he did I noticed the small scattering of grey threads at his temples. He was older than I had first thought, perhaps in his early forties. Although his lean frame and casual clothing gave the impression of someone younger.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said, but I got the impression he was still annoyed with me. That made two of us, because *I* was annoyed with me. ‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘I was about to go, so I’ll leave you in peace to finish your... conversation.’

‘No, please, don’t go because of me. I feel like I’ve chased you away.’

‘Not at all.’ His mouth betrayed the polite lie. ‘I can always come back later.’

He turned to go and I felt a rush of shame. In my job, I was used to dealing with the bereaved. And never, in all my





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years as a florist, had I spoken to a grieving relative in such an unthinking way.

‘I really *am* sorry,’ I said to his fast-retreating back. For a moment, I thought he was going to carry on walking, but he slowed and then turned around.

‘Forget it,’ he said, and then his face softened as he added, ‘It sounded as if you and your... partner—’

‘Husband,’ I corrected softly.

There was empathy in his eyes as he nodded gently. ‘It sounds as if you have a lot to discuss.’

He strode away, surprisingly silently for such a big man. No wonder I hadn’t heard his approach. I dug my hands into my pockets, my fingers curling around the stranger’s gift, as I crossed back to Tim’s headstone. The grass was slightly damp, but I dropped down onto it, sitting crossed-legged as I leant forward with my forehead resting against the cool marble. ‘Don’t say a word,’ I warned my ever-silent husband. ‘Not one single word.’

The random encounter with the stranger in the cemetery kept popping into my head over the next few days, and I cringed *every single time* I remembered how I’d behaved. Of course I would apologise if our paths ever crossed again, but I really hoped they didn’t. It felt weird knowing that a total stranger was the sole keeper of a secret I hadn’t yet shared with either my family or friends.

My hands stilled their work sorting out the early morning delivery of blooms from the nursery. The baby Tim and I had hoped for felt so close, all I had to do was reach out and pull it towards me. We had one last chance to make





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our dream a reality. Deciding to go ahead with the IVF by myself was both terrifying and exhilarating. A baby. A tiny human who would be half Tim, and half me. It was a tangible way for him to live on in my life, in more than just my heart and memories. I pulled up the tall stool at my workbench and sank shakily onto it. It was a huge decision, a life-changing decision, and making it alone had never been my intention.

I closed my eyes, knowing when I did the cool storeroom of the florist shop would disappear and I would once again be transported back to the oncologist's office, hearing the news that would devastate our life and shatter the future we'd dreamt of. The ringing of the shop's doorbell was a welcome intrusion as it jerked me out of the old memory I visited far too frequently.

'Crazy Daisy' had always been so much more than a business to me. It was something Tim and I had dreamt up and created together; at times from his hospital bed, or during the long days between treatments, when he'd not been well or strong enough to return to his teaching job. The shop felt like our child, our firstborn, and I was fiercely protective of it.

When Tim lost his fight to stay with me, when all I'd wanted to do was curl up in a ball of misery and join him, it was the shop that dragged me from my bed each morning. To abandon it felt like I'd be abandoning him. And that was something I would never do. Without Crazy Daisy, I doubt I'd have got through those first dark months of grief and despair. But now, five years on, I was ready to create one last piece of magic with the man I loved. It wouldn't be easy. I knew that. I was going to worry that I was doing





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it all wrong every single minute of the day. Without Tim's calming influence around to dial me down, I was probably going to be an absolute nightmare of a parent. And I could hardly wait to find out.



Beth

After Tim died, I'd visited the cemetery every day. It hadn't been healthy – I could see that now – although at the time I'd refused to listen to my worried parents or my sister, who'd voiced her concern all the way from Australia, where she now lived. Eventually my visits had decreased to just once or twice a week. Anything less than that still felt wrong.

There were always more people in the cemetery at the end of the day, and I recognised the faces of several 'regulars' as I passed them. Some looked up from tending their loved ones' graves, and nodded like commuters who travel the same route for years but never say a word to each other.

Graveyards have their own etiquette. It's okay to nod. Even a watery smile of recognition is permissible. But what you're *not* meant to do is intrude on any conversation being held with a lost loved one. The man who'd offered me his tissues the other day had clearly never learnt that. I wondered if he was recently bereaved.



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‘Hey. It’s me again,’ I said to the white plinth that had withstood so many of my tears in those early days, I’m surprised the stone hadn’t eroded away. I’d been a mess; totally unprepared for life without the man I loved beside me. You’d have thought my early premonition at that first oncology appointment would have prepared me better, but when Tim finally slipped away, after the bravest and hardest-fought battle, I was left reeling.

I lifted the bunch of flowers in my hand. ‘Don’t get excited,’ I told his headstone, ‘these aren’t for you. They’re an apology for a man whose wife lives over there somewhere,’ I explained, nodding my head in the direction the man had come from the other day. ‘Give me a minute to find her, then we can carry on with our chat. We still have a lot to discuss.’

In any other location, I’d probably be certified as crazy for talking to Tim in the way I did here. But in this place it was so normal, it was practically obligatory. Beneath our feet were our loved ones. The people we’d shared our lives, our hearts and our souls with. To *not* speak to them in exactly the same way as we’d always done, well, *that* would be the madness.

An uncanny instinct led me to the right plot. In a row of lichen-covered, weed-strewn markers, her memorial was scrubbed clean, and the surrounding ground was neatly tended and planted with small flowering shrubs. The epitaph carved into the light grey marble was simple rather than flowery, but no less poignant. It said that the woman at my feet was Anna Thomas, wife of Liam, and a quick sad sum confirmed she’d been young – exactly the same age as I was now – when her life had been cut short eight years earlier. What a waste.





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I crouched beside the headstone and carefully set down the small bunch of yellow roses. Not many people understand the language of flowers anymore, but as a florist I was fluent. These said ‘sorry’, and drew a concluding line beneath my unfortunate meeting with Anna Thomas’s husband. Tucked among the tightly furled blooms were two things: a small card, on which I’d written *Thank you*, and an unopened packet of tissues. I figured he’d be able to work out who they were from.

‘So what’s new? What have you been up to recently?’

‘Nothing much,’ I replied. *Except preparing to get pregnant.* For a horrified moment I thought I’d said the words out loud, but my sister’s face on my laptop screen looked neither stunned nor shocked, so I don’t suppose I could have.

It was morning in Australia and Karen was sitting in her preferred spot for our Skype chats, on the deck of her Sydney home against a backdrop of tropical blooms. I’d long since seen through her not-so-subtle attempt to lure me subliminally to the other side of the world with exotic foliage.

Our calls were the highlight of my week. She was half a world away, but she was still my best friend, and the ache of missing her had never gone away, not even after all these years. I still longed for the smell of her shampoo when she hugged me, the graze of her lips against my cheek when she said hello, or her hand squeezing mine for those moments when words just weren’t enough. We’d always been close, even as children, and although I’m sure we must have





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squabbled the way siblings do, the memory of it was buried so deeply beneath missing her, I truly couldn't recall it.

We knew each other's secrets: first crush; first kiss; first sneaked cigarette; first time with a boy: '*Honestly Bethie, I don't know what all the fuss is about; it was all over in seconds.*' That one still made me smile, although one devoted husband and two small children later, I doubt she still felt the same way. But now I was keeping the biggest, boldest secret in my entire life from her, and every time I opened my mouth I was scared it was going to come tumbling out.

'How are Mum and Dad?' Karen asked, momentarily disappearing from my screen as she reached for her glass of orange juice.

'The usual,' I replied in sister shorthand. I knew she'd be able to translate that one: Mum was busy with her book club, volunteering and amateur dramatics, while Dad was trying to pretend that retirement wasn't boring him to death, or that his arthritis hadn't deteriorated from slightly troublesome to seriously debilitating.

Karen pulled a face that I recognised only too well. The guilt that was never far away scored a sneaky bullseye. It was no secret that my parents had always intended to spend their retirement years in Australia. The pull was perfectly understandable: the weather was better for a man with Dad's condition; plus, fifty percent of their offspring lived there, with one hundred percent of their grandchildren. It was really all about the maths.

I'd always suspected that Karen had a secret master plan to move our entire family 'down under'. It had been a clever long game. She'd fed our parents titbits of information about





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beachside retirement properties beside golf courses, and had even sent links to Tim about teaching jobs with funny notes attached: *Didgeridoo skills not needed for this one!*

Although we'd never pursued it, I could see Tim's curiosity had been piqued. Karen knew I wanted to live by the coast again – and there was plenty of that in Australia. So mission (semi) accomplished. Or at least it might have been, until there was a persistent stomach spasm that wouldn't go away, and a perpetual sickness that caused the weight to drop from Tim almost overnight...and suddenly all talk of living elsewhere disappeared. We were much more focused on just living *at all*.

I hadn't expected that Tim's illness and battle to survive would alter my parents' plans. It had never been said – in fact, it had been actively denied many times – but everyone knew the real reason my parents had never emigrated. *I* was the reason. And the guilt of that weighed down heavily on me. Karen had two adorable children whose growing-up was being watched at a distance by their grandparents, and nothing anyone could do or say was ever going to make me feel better about robbing them of that. Except, perhaps, by giving them a third grandchild – one that no one was expecting.

A chorus of kookaburras chirruped noisily from a tree behind Karen as seven-year-old Aaron edged his face before the camera.

'Are you coming to see us soon, Auntie Beth?' Aaron asked, his question a serpent's lisp owing to the absence of his front teeth.

'Nice one,' I said to his mother over the top of my nephew's tousled blond curls. 'Clever change of tactic.' She





knew better than anyone how much I loved her two little boys.

Karen answered with a grin that even I could see was identical to my own. 'I figured he'd be harder to disappoint,' she said, dropping a reward kiss onto her son's head.

'We've been through this a thousand times before. You know I can't just shut up the shop and take off.'

'I thought that's why you hired your wonder woman assistant.'

My smile felt suddenly strained. For a moment, I came perilously close to letting Karen in on my secret. Very little shocked my big sister, but I bet if I said: *Actually, I hired Natalie so she'd be able to look after the shop while I have a baby*, I could wipe that knowing look clean off her face. But I wasn't about to say that. Not yet. Call it superstitious, but it felt too much like counting your chickens before they've hatched, or the IVF equivalent: counting your embryos before they've thawed.

Luckily, a noise somewhere off-screen distracted Karen, and she glanced towards it with a small frown. 'Uh-oh. Sounds like Josh has just woken up. I thought we'd be safe for another twenty minutes. Sorry, hon. I'm gonna have to cut this one short.'

'Give him a big kiss from me,' I said, wagging my fingers at the screen. 'We'll chat again next week.'

Karen's eyebrows drew together to form a single blonde line. She was much fairer than me, and seven years in the New South Wales sunshine made her look like a native Aussie.

'You sure everything's okay, Bethie? You sound kind of... preoccupied.'



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How did she do that, even from the other side of the world? How did she see through the distortion of pixels and look straight into my heart? Out of sight of my laptop screen I crossed my fingers like a child, to cancel out the lie.

‘I’m absolutely fine. Stop worrying.’

Sleep took a long time coming that night. I hated lying to my family, but after the pain of the first two failed IVF attempts in Tim’s final year, I didn’t want anyone to know what I intended to do, until I knew it had been successful. *Or so they can’t talk you out of it?* asked a voice in the darkness, which I recognised as mine. I turned over and thumped my pillow with an angry fist, as if the words had emerged from its memory foam filling. ‘No,’ I replied, reaching for the pillow on what I still referred to as Tim’s side of the bed. I curled my arms around it, but it was a poor substitute for the man who should be lying there. ‘I just don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up, that’s all.’