

# The Fallout

Rebecca Thornton



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*Silent lies are more venomous than cruel truths*

– BEN OLIVEIRA

SEPTEMBER 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014

*WhatsApp Group: NCT West London Ladies*

*Group Admin: Victoria Stuart-Brown*

*Members: Victoria, Liza, Sarah, Miranda, Ella, Camilla*

*Victoria: Hi guys. We are absolutely delighted to announce that Otto Arthur Stuart-Brown was born yesterday to a very proud Mummy and Daddy. Hit the September baby mark. Phew! Weighed 6 pounds and 5 oz. We are totally in love. Oxytocin, ladies! It's the stuff of dreams.*

*Camilla: Lovely news, Victoria. Elodie was born too, yesterday. Whopper at 9.9oz.*

*Miranda: Ah congrats everyone. I'm still waiting for my little bundle to arrive.*

*Sarah: Me too*

*Liza: Me three*

*Victoria: Oh you ladies will be absolutely fine. Just remember. Breathe, let nature work its magic. Nothing to be worried about. And remember – they're sensations. NOT contractions.*

*Liza: How was it? We're all dying to hear.*

*Victoria: Good thanks! Bit tricky trying to type with one hand whilst I feed. Just enrolling him into schools!*

*Miranda: Oh god. Schools? Really? Do you think I've missed my chance already? Where did you put him down?*

*Victoria: @Miranda – I'll ping you separately. Yes. I'd get on it. Got to do it now ladies, or you'll miss the boat!*

*Ella: Typing...*

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*New WhatsApp group: Renegades*

*Group Admin: Liza*

*Members: Liza, Sarah*

*Liza: @Miranda, I'll ping you separately – in our newly-named WhatsApp group. SMUG MUMS.*

*Sarah: Hahaha I know!*

*Liza: Shit I thought I sent that to the wrong group.*

*Sarah: I'm so tired I think I might die.*

*Liza: You're tired now? Wait till you get this fucker out. THEN YOU'LL KNOW THE MEANING OF TIREDNESS. Joking.*

*Sarah: Oh God. Wtf is with that school thing btw? Is she for real?*

*Liza: Yup. She's been banging on about it since the first step she took into our NCT class. Thank god you were there. And normal.*

*Sarah: I'd have to sell a kidney first. Not that they'd be worth much at the mo.*

*Liza: Me too.*

*Sarah: £6k a term or something for the one she's been talking about. Ps Ella keeps typing then dropping off.*

*Liza: Sure she's fine. We would have heard by now if not. Think she's just...not into socialising too much.*

*Sarah: \*with us\**

*Liza: Yup.*

*Sarah: haha.*

*Liza: Coffee later?*

*Sarah: Mella's? Half an hour?*

*Liza: See you there. I'm bringing plastic bags to sit on.*

*Sarah: Ping me if you hear anything from Ella before then?  
So weird she hasn't been in touch. I've WhatsApped her  
separately but nothing – she's read it though.*

*Liza: Yeah will let you know. Although she'd have pinged you  
before me anyway. She's a bit of a mystery that one.*

*Sarah: She is indeed. Do you think we did anything to offend  
her? She's posting on Facebook. Just seen pics of her and  
Christian from this morning!*

*Liza: Weird. Must be us then. Something someone said, or did.  
Like I said, Ella Bradby is a total mystery.*

*Sarah: Hmmm. She sure is. Ok see you in thirty, yeah? X*

*Liza: Yeah X*

## FIVE YEARS LATER

“How many mistakes does it take before you’re bad? Does it start with a little white lie, and slowly progress to fraud . . . and worse? Does it matter if you do the wrong thing for the right reason?”

– CHRISTINA LAUREN, MY FAVORITE HALF-NIGHT STAND

**PRESENT DAY: July 21<sup>st</sup> 2019**

**West London Gazette Online**

**Author: J Roper**

*A nine-million pound refurbished health club, The Parkside Club, has just opened to the well-heeled residents of West London. Based on the Acton/Chiswick fringes, the club boasts an Olympic-sized pool, a crèche, soft-play, six tennis courts and an outdoor playground.*

*Kirsty Macdonald, Director of Sales says two thousand members have already joined, with staggered waiting lists already full.*

*“Our clients are mainly families and working professionals and we hope to provide a fantastic service to everyone in the area to keep them healthy and fit, whilst also being a great place for socialising.”*

*The residents are also thrilled to have this new West London club on their doorsteps.*

*Cordelia Banks, a lawyer and 39-year old mother of three, says that the club will be a “much needed central hub – a place for both children and adults to keep fit and entertained in a safe environment.” And Finlay Brown, a 27-year old marketing executive says that The Parkside Club will “keep the residents*

*of West London active,” and he is looking forward to meeting  
“like-minded healthy people there.”*

*For further information, or to book a private tour, please visit  
The Parkside Club website.*

## CHAPTER ONE

# SARAH

“Sarah,” Liza hisses. “Quick. Oh my god. Look who it is. My three o’clock.” She throws her head towards the soft-play, kids hurling themselves off the plastic inflatables like they’re on some kind of kamikaze mission.

“Georgina Bard?” replies Sarah. “Yes, she’s here all the time. With that perfect, peachy bottom of hers.”

“No. Not her. No, look again. Behind the blondes. Hurry, she’s going. Bloody hell.”

It’s rare, but Sarah’s not in the mood for a gossip. It’s just one of those days where everything feels wrong, like a too-tight pair of trousers, except she doesn’t have the relief of opening the top button.

She’d googled her symptoms this morning in bed. Mood swings, tiredness, heavy periods. Her diagnosis had said: *Perimenopause*. She shivers remembering what she had read next. *Perimenopause can last for ten years during which time fertility declines*. Ten years! It seems so unfair. She’s only thirty-nine after all.

She can’t really see who Liza could possibly be talking about anyway. Everyone looks the same here. Block-printed

athleisure-wear leggings with Olivia Cunningham's brand new *Motherhood Mania* clothing-line tops. Brightly-coloured slogan tees – *Mother's Little Helper!* – complete with lozenge-shaped pills underneath. She jolts when she realises she cannot see Casper, his blonde, bowl-hair cut flying up and down as he leaps from level to level, before she remembers he's safely ensconced in his Champions Forever tennis lesson.

"See her now?" says Liza. "It's a good'un."

"Nope." Sarah wonders why Liza is staring at her so intently, waiting for her reaction. A Z-list celebrity, she wonders? Unbearable if it is. But, all she can really think is: why is everyone still smiling? Three days into the autumn half-term and she's done in. Yet here they are, all the other women (and where are all the bloody men today?) bouncing around. Long, lean legs, in their pristine trainers, chatting so animatedly. Why aren't they exhausted? She knows she's probably just jealous – but what's wrong with them? She'd never stopped to think that maybe they were all normal and it was actually her with the problem. She rubs a mark off her own leggings. Weetabix, she's guessing, from Casper's breakfast.

She inspects all the other women as she tries to find the target of Liza's attention. She's distracted by Thomasina Hulme, who'd been extremely frosty with her in Zumba the day before last.

"Come on Allegra." Thomasina sounds increasingly shrill. "Come on. You can jump by yourself, without Mummy's help. Go on." She wishes Thomasina would shut up and stop thinking that she was instilling *confidence* into her little one. Allegra jumps onto a red, squishy mat. Thomasina lets out a triumphant "Oh!" and looks around, hoping for some semblance of shared

joy at her daughter's leap into the unknown. To Sarah's utter satisfaction, no one else seems to be watching.

"I can't see anyone new, Liza. Just tell me who it is." She tries to disguise the impatience in her voice. Both she and Liza had had a field day when the club had recently opened. After all, *The Parkside Club* was the spanking new place to be for the parents of West London to bring their little monkeys and so far, she and Liza had pretty much spotted and done a recce on all of the members already (their best one yet being some of the cast of *Strictly Come Dancing* on rehearsal) and apparently they'd since shut the waiting list.

She can see why the place is in such high demand. There's a soft-play, a gym. There's even a crèche and kids' classes, boxing, tai-chi and all, so the children can pump their little fists on punch bags instead of Mummy and Daddy.

Just as she's about to swivel her gaze back to Liza and tell her she can't see anyone, she spots her. She's in the corner, behind the soft-play, picking up a large bag with two tennis rackets sticking out. In her right hand is a bottle of half-finished water and in the other, an iPhone. She can see it has been personalised with a photograph on the back. She gasps. Liza's right. Bloody hell indeed.

*Ella Bradby.*

Of all people. Here. She doesn't know why she hadn't thought of it before. She must have just joined.

It was just like Ella to waft in after everyone else. To check things at the club were tickety-boo. Ella wasn't a leader of the pack in that sense. More that she would always wait. Keep everyone on their toes. Wanting to see if it *was* actually good enough for her. Sarah's mind is pulled back to their antenatal

class, five years earlier. The way Ella had waited for a text message from ‘*someone*’, before she deigned to ‘follow on’ to the restaurant that had been chosen for their final NCT lunch. *Just let me know what the food looks like, will you? Before I come all that way.* And of course that part of the discussion had taken up most of lunch, as everyone had been too scared to put their heads above the parapet – just in case it *wasn’t* good enough for Ella Bradby.

“Oh my god, it’s *her!*” says Sarah, “I thought there was a massive waiting list.”

“See? I told you it was a good spot. The mysterious Ella. Back again in our lives.”

Sarah doesn’t want to give Liza the satisfaction of reacting in exactly the awe-struck way that had been anticipated.

“Well, she hasn’t changed much, in all these years, has she? We still don’t know where she went.”

“Nope. You’ll catch flies in a minute,” Liza laughs. “She’s one of us now. No helping it. Ha. You going to ditch me now?”

“No, course not,” she replies, distractedly. “Shall we talk to her?”

“You can. Happy to observe. But I don’t want to go back in time. It’s all history now.

Sarah doesn’t really know what ‘history’ Liza is referring to but she glosses over it, in favour of thinking about Ella Bradby. She had been fascinated by her for the few weeks they’d been in NCT class together, and afterwards too. She thinks about the second she’d first laid eyes on Ella. How every single man and woman in the room – including her own husband – had been looking at those never-ending legs, that self-contained smile of hers. Sarah had felt that curious pull of wanting to both

look and be like her, yet feeling simultaneously threatened. The fact that Ella, too, had forgotten Sarah's name – not once, but twice – only served to make her allure even stronger.

And after that, she'd googled her obsessively and discovered with absolute glee that back in the day, Ella had spent two dazzling years with West London-based actor, and St Paul's Alumni, Rufus North. She had told Liza she had known with an absolute certainty she'd recognised Ella from somewhere. And there it was! Her relentless poring over the Mail Online's Sidebar of Shame had paid off. All along, she'd been right on the money.

Afterwards, Sarah had remained intrigued for the eight weeks that Ella had been on the *NCT West London Mums* WhatsApp group, before she'd quietly and deftly removed herself.

None of the other members of the NCT had said a word to each other about it. Too proud. Nursing their indignation by swiftly moving on to other matters. Nappy-rash. Tongue-ties, the colour of their newborn's faeces (often accompanied by a photograph. *Sorry in advance. TMI, but I'm having a massive freak out! Why is it the colour of mustard?*).

But now Ella's child, Felix, was in the same year at school as Sarah's son. Though of course in a different class and despite Sarah looking high and low, she'd never once spotted Ella at the school gates.

She remembers eagerly skimming through the Reception enrolment list for The West London Primary Academy School before the start of autumn term. The way her heart had skipped when she had seen the name: **Bradby, Felix**. And she *knew*, right away. She'd texted Liza straight off and had felt a swell

of validation that they'd also managed to get Casper into the local primary – even though they were precisely zero point eight five and three quarters of a kilometre away from the school. It had still been touch and go for a minute. She had been so relieved that she and Tom hadn't had to delve into their life savings, just to be able to afford one term's fees of the private school The Little Falcons. Tom had been relieved when she'd imparted the news and because Ella Bradby's child had also been sent to the local primary, Sarah had never again felt that she had to justify her choice to her mother – who constantly asked if Tom's job was 'going well'. A lecture would then follow, on how she and Sarah's father had *worked themselves into the ground* to send Sarah to her private school. She had clutched at this newly-acquired information about Ella and Felix like it was a toasty hot-water bottle.

And now Ella was here too, at the club. Only a few metres away. She felt the lift of her earlier malaise.

It wasn't that Sarah necessarily still wanted to *be* Ella Bradby like she had when she'd first laid eyes on her at NCT. Not in the same way that, aged sixteen, *little-miss-average Sarah Biddlecombe*, at her West London private school, had wanted to step into the glittery, platform trainers of *little-miss-popular* Cassie Fox.

No. Not in that way. Or at least so she told herself. She had had enough life experience now to know women like Ella had enough trouble in life, what with the judgement that came with their ice-cool looks and trendy jobs. The pressure of it all. No, it was something else entirely. She just wanted to be *near* her, and breathe in the cool, calm essence of her. Her energy that said: *I don't really give a damn if you like me or not*, which of course, made Sarah want Ella to like her even more.

*Fuck*, she thinks, smoothing her t-shirt over her belly. *Fuckety, fuck fuck*. Was this how utterly sad her life had become that she was getting off at the prospect of talking to one of the other school mothers?

“Oh, well, she’s already gone,” says Liza. “Ghosted us. Again. Remind me why we sat here?” Liza throws her head towards the soft-play.

“So we have prime seats so that when the kids are back with us, they can watch even more telly and we can be inside and warm.” She turns to the blaring TV screen and watches Mr Tiny Tots in his weird, spotted bowtie, grinning and gurning like he’s just necked a load of class A drugs. “Hey. Want a coffee?”

“If you go, can you check on Jack? Outside? In the playground?”

“I sure will,” Sarah tells her. “Don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” Liza lifts Thea out her pram. “He’s just there.” She points at the window, towards the sandpit. “This little monster just needs a quick feed.”

“No probs. Cake?” Sarah nearly trips over the aggressively large bundle of bags, toys and coats that they’d used to lay claim to the seats.

“Nope.” Liza lifts her T-shirt and unclips her nursing bra “But sorry – you asked me about coffee. Yes please. I *shouldn’t* of course.” She gives a small smile at the ubiquitous joke they shared right back from NCT. “But – well. You know. I’m tired.”

“Listen, Liza, Gav will come back to you. I promise. He’s just...”

“An idiot?”

“You said it not me.”

“Do you see him at all? I mean I know you’re still under the same roof but...”

“Yeah. He’s always breathing down my neck about something or other. It’s weird. He wanted the separation. Wanted to move into another part of the house. But still, he thinks he can get involved in parts of my life that I don’t want him to.”

“Well, you know my thoughts on the matter. Thea’s barely two months old. I mean when I think back to when Casper was that age, how hard it was – and now you’ve got two.”

Something about Liza’s expression looks a little bit guilty. Sarah wants to shake her friend. *It’s not your fault he wanted a break*, she wants to shout. But instead she controls her voice. “Black, one sugar, yes?” She doesn’t wait for Liza to reply. “Let me go and get us drinks and I’ll check on Jack too,” she says. In truth, she wants to get away from the bright lights and the screaming. It’s all making her head buzz. She’d drunk too much Shiraz last night and she feels sick. Not so sick she could fully indulge her hangover and eat her bodyweight in carbs, but sick enough.

She watches Liza’s green eyes narrow, scanning the neighbouring cricket pitch outside – a peaceful large, quiet green space in this area of West London. Her friend looks even more tired today than she did last week, the wing of her brown eyeliner smudged underneath her right eye. The bright halogen lights are unfairly harsh on her skin. She can see some new wrinkles. Or perhaps they’d always been there and she’d just grown so accustomed to Liza’s face, she hadn’t noticed.

She thinks of her own appearance. Mousy hair. Freckles. She still looks quite young, she supposes. Except for the lines under her eyes. “Smile maps,” Tom had said to her once. “Don’t be a dick,” she had replied. Perhaps she’d have that Botox after all. The other mums she spoke to were all at it. Botox parties.

She was both miffed and elated she hadn't been invited to one. Liza still looks pretty though, Sarah thinks, despite her dog-tiredness. She watches her friend's expression as she tuts at Thea's head. "Just stay on, will you," she mutters down at her two-month old daughter. *Pretty, but unmemorable*, Tom had once said. *And that's why you like her*, he had laughed. *No threat. You're so predictable, Sarah Biddlecombe.*

"No!" She had been cross. "That's not true. I like her because she never judges me." And she'd quickly added that she was also "funny and kind."

"Bloody hope Jack is still there." Liza cranes her neck to get a better look outside. "Can't see him anywhere else. He's probably digging in the sand under the pirate ship. He's a good boy, at least I have that much. Thanks for checking on him, Sa."

"He'll be fine. Be back in a sec." Sarah walks away from the harsh sounds and noises of the soft-play area to the quieter café. What a relief. Only three more days of half-term. She can do this. But then she thinks about afterwards. She's moaning now, but what about when it's over? How empty the days will seem. How boring with the new account Liza had got her. She was incredibly grateful. But she wasn't really interested in marketing old peoples' homes. Or post-retirement flats as they'd decided to call them. She walks through to the café serving area and consoles herself with the thought of forty minutes of blissful peace and quiet before she has to pick up Casper from tennis. Just before a load of other customers join the line she arrives at the food counter, where her gaze settles on a passion fruit and walnut cake. She falters for a second. Should she check on Jack first? No, she thinks. Get everything sorted and then she'll go. She'll be waiting for ages if she leaves now. He's nearly

five. He's a well-behaved boy. And after all, he can't get out of the health club. At least she has made a definitive decision about one thing today. She looks back down at her phone and sends Liza a quick message while stepping one foot closer to the front of the queue.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LIZA

My phone beeps. I'm sure it's Sarah. She does this when she's forgotten our table number when ordering coffee. Normally I would have pre-empted it. Not today, though, what with both kids awake all night. And of course Gav had been there, at every single turn. I'd hear his footsteps first as he ran up the stairs from the spare room, breath ragged from broken sleep.

"Everything alright?" he queried, watching me open my pyjama top.

"Everything's fine. Why?"

"Just checking. That you're doing your job." He'd emphasised the word job in such a way that made me think I'd been doing anything but. Last night, he'd stood over me, making sure I was feeding her right, until I'd asked him to leave. "I'll go when you've finished." He'd sat down on the very end of the bed, the furthest distance he could manage before he would fall off. As though being any nearer would poison him. He'd made exaggerating stretching sounds all through the feed, yawning and sighing.

I try to forget about Gav. I rest my handset on Thea's side

whilst she's feeding. Sarah would have told me to take it off immediately. *Radiation, cancer.* She's right, of course, but I leave it there whilst I shuffle Thea into a more comfortable position. I'm having to learn independence now after all. I look down at my screen.

*"Just in bit of a queue. Haven't checked on J yet."*

I type back one-handed.

*"No worries. I've just seen his head poke out from the sandpit but please check on him after. Just to make sure I got the right kid."*

I think about Sarah – how strangely she's been behaving lately. Not with it. Distant. It's as though her eyes are totally blank. That look she gets when she and I have been on the wine – the dead-eyed tipping point when I know she's totally gone. I should find out if she's ok, especially given what she went through last year. I know it can't be easy, her seeing me with a new-born, but for the moment, I'm just too tired.

She's a bit snippy with me today too. I want to talk to her about an email I'd got from the work contact I'd put her in touch with, but I decide to wait. I know these moods of hers. Nothing can snap her out of it, really. Except today, the reappearance of Ella Bradby had. I wonder how long *this* one will last. I think about Aria Delamere whose daughter, Emmeline, had been at nursery with Casper. Sarah had constantly meerkatted for Aria at the school gates, whilst I had been her 'steady' friend in the background. The feeling towards Aria had been quick to dissipate, though, when Casper hadn't been invited to Emmeline's fourth birthday party.

I look back out of the window, thinking about when *I'd* last seen Ella, just before she'd done a runner on us, all

those years ago. The way she'd stood right by me, her fingers squeezing my arms in the pitch black freezing winter night. Of course Sarah knows nothing about that – no-one does. I pull my thoughts away from it all. Time to move on. I look outside at the sky to distract myself. It's a greying day. It feels all at odds to the bright colours and noise inside – the swell of parents dropping their kids into the crèche, so they can race to their fitness classes. Thea starts to squirm. I move her onto the other side of me, rather optimistically latching her high up to my breast. It's only when I look down that I realise that she's nowhere near my nipple. *Christ*, I mutter. If Gav wants out of the marriage, I dread to think how I'm going to find anyone else who I won't mind seeing my boobs. I look around. Everyone just looks so on it. So – perky. And then I give myself a good talking to. *Come on, Liza*, I tell myself. *You're better than this. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Get on with it. The kids need you.* But despite my pep talk, there's still something about today that has turned sour. Just a feeling, if you will. Restlessness. An edginess in the pit of my stomach. And it's not just the way Gav's been behaving towards me either.

I look out the window again but my vision is pulled towards the other side of the room. And then I see a flash of her amongst the multi-colours. She stands out, in her monochrome outfit. So sleek and perfect. She pushes a tennis racket back into her bag and swings herself up, effortlessly. As though her limbs are weightless. Bet she has no issues with her boobs. I pull up my bra and try and hoik up my own at the same time.

When I look back on this moment, I will realise that, this is when it hits me. This is when my mindset spiralled even further.

When I started to really question myself. Not that Gav didn't help me do a good job of that anyway.

It was in this moment, little more than ten minutes ago, when things changed and cracked. This moment Ella Bradby walked back into our lives.

*West London Gazette Editorial notes, September 2019*  
*J Roper Interview Transcript*  
*Aaron Daniels, Crèche Manager, The Parkside Club.*

*I know, I know. This is meant to be a puff piece for the club, isn't it? You want me to tell you how fantastic the new crèche is. My boss gave me the heads up. How happy the mums and dads of West London are that there's a new place for them to drop off their children so they can get to their Pilates and what not. How much it's changed the area. Blah blah blah. But it's ok—off the record—I'm not staying for much longer. Sick of it, I am. Especially since I moved here.*

*For some it's been good, of course. Not just the crèche. This whole 'health club' thing. We've already had people claim that property nearby has rocketed. Like we need that. It was bad enough when they built that school—West London Primary Academy, driving up the house prices like crazy for the rest of us. A school for the under-privileged my arse. You should see the families that go there now, braying at the gates with their 4x4 cars running outside. So for those people, you see, of course this has all been a bonus.*

*Anyway, I'm not ungrateful for the job. I've learnt how to handle myself much better. Especially when there's a complaint from the mums or dads that we haven't been doing our jobs*

*properly (I didn't know our role was to be private tutor, chef and the rest all in one.) The behaviour then is crazy. They're all rigid and polite until something is not to their liking. Then they come up, their faces all in mine. "You mean you don't have drinks and snacks for the children? This is disgusting. I don't pay all this money for nothing you know." You get the picture.*

*Anyway, they're not all bad, obviously. Some are. Your ears would bleed if I told you some of the stuff I've seen. Put it like this, I'm not quite sure how some of them have hearts that don't explode on the running machines after a weekend of 'excess'. And by excess, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. (At this point, interviewee mimics sniffing something off the table – ed).*

*I hear them all the time in the queue. "How did you feel on Sunday, Minnie?" And the casual tap on their noses, their smiles, all conspiratorial, like. "Oh god," they'll reply, "The children were up at six in the morning. I was still absolutely awake from the night before." Then they'll do this comedy wide-eyed expression, chewing their tongues. In front of their kids! Anyway, I'm not going into that now, when I've still got to hand in my notice.*

*Besides as I was saying, some of them are nice. Polite but distant. But they're all very, I'd say . . . "eager" to drop their kids. I understand, they want a break. We all do and I've got two of my own, so I know. But the way they go about it is quite mad, really. Jostling and pushing to get to the front of the queue. It's like they're teenagers all over again, waiting to see their favourite band live in concert. We've had to install*

*a proper system with barriers and stuff, just so we can keep them in line.*

*And when I say the parents run—they've barely finished scribbling their names on the signing-in sheet before they've disappeared to get to their fitness classes. Then, when they come back it's all like, "Oh little Freya" or "Little Isabella, how I've missed you, have you missed Mummy and Daddy?"*

*Look, as I said I've got my own kids so I know what it's like. And better they run to their fitness class than well, to the pub. Although it appears to me they do that too.*

*But I think what upsets me the most is not that the members here have a place to enjoy. It's brilliant that they've built somewhere that focuses on fitness and health for both adults and children. I know most of those parents work hard. And if I'd grown up somewhere like this I would have loved to have been a part of it all.*

*But I suppose what I'm saying, really, is that some of the parents who drop their kids at the crèche, it's that they see it as their right to be here, rather than a privilege.*

*And you know how I know this?*

*Well, it's been a few weeks now, since the club opened its doors, and some of the first members started coming here right from the beginning. Every day they've dropped their little ones here. Same time, same place. And it occurred to me yesterday that only about half of them have even bothered to learn my name. I don't expect them to know all the staff members here. Of course not. But the ones looking after their kids? Yes. I do expect that.*

*I do get a vague smile, though, from most of them. I mean, we can't be totally invisible. Can we?*

*After all, we're looking after their little angels. It's us that keeps them safe from harm. For that window of time they are with us, we have to make sure that nothing bad comes their way. Because, of course, where their children are concerned, there's danger everywhere – isn't there?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### SARAH

“Table number?” the barista asks when Sarah finally reaches the front of the queue. As well as WhatsApping Camilla, her mind’s been off elsewhere, she can’t seem to focus on one thing, thinking about whether it was true that sugar had an effect on fertility; and her perimenopause and whether that might just be the root of all her problems in trying to conceive. Then she drifted onto remembering to get a dodgy-looking mole checked (she’d have to remember to bring the iPad with her to the GP to entertain Casper). Then she was thinking about whether she’d actually remembered to sign Casper into his tennis class. Whether she should put a second wash on before she watched *Killing Eve* tonight, or if she’d be too tired to stay up until it finished.

“Oh, crap. Sorry. I was...” She waves a hand over her head. “Sorry. I’ve forgotten. We’re just by the soft play. You know, the table by the window that overlooks the good one. The one that everyone wants.” She laughs but the waiter gives her a pitying look. “It’s like ze Germans with the sun-loungers.” She stutters on her own bad joke. “Oh don’t worry. Forget about it.”

“Overlooking the cricket pitch?” he asks, speaking slowly,

as though she's hard of hearing. "That's table eighty-seven." He jabs his finger on the buttons until the till pings. *Shit*. Her mind starts reeling again.

What if her bank card doesn't work? Had she been paid for her last project? She can't remember and she hasn't checked her account for weeks. She feels hot and clammy and now look – a queue forming behind her. After all, membership here was expensive enough. *But it's a life saver*, she'd pleaded with Tom when it had first opened. *A health and fitness club. Think of the benefits*. She'd even pushed her stomach out extra hard so that he'd see it and think it was unquestionable that they join.

"Here's your receipt madam." *Phew*.

"Thanks." She snatches the bit of paper from the waiter's hand and slinks off towards the sliding window. She supposes it's her birthday soon. Tom had suggested a weekend away in a cottage in Norfolk. Something to look forward to. But she can't quite bring herself to do that either.

"We have to celebrate, just for your nearest and dearest," he'd said as he spooned over-priced, sugar-free muesli into his mouth, before he'd left for work this morning. She knew it was ridiculous, but truthfully the idea of it had filled her with utter dread. The rigmarole of packing up, organising childcare, catering. False jollity when everyone just wanted to slob around in bed all day. And then the invites, to boot. She couldn't cut her list down to *just her nearest and dearest!* What if Saskia got wind of it? Or Matilda or Miranda? They'd be so hurt and she didn't particularly want to keep it all a big secret. And then her mother too, on at her about celebrating this big milestone of turning forty.

A tonne of guilt washes over her. Look at what Liza was

going through with Gav. Let alone the other awful things that were happening across the globe. Those Syrian children she'd seen on the news earlier. It didn't bear thinking about. And she had Tom and Casper. A nice three-bed house in a desired location to boot, and it even had a self-contained one-bed lower ground floor flat too, that she and Tom had plans to develop.

"Something to get your teeth into," Tom had said.

"Don't be so patronising," she'd replied. It still made her cross to think about. And inevitably then she'd ruminate on all the other misguided comments that Tom had made since they'd had Casper. About work, money and all the rest. As if she didn't have enough on her plate. They were close to Chiswick. Close to Westfield shopping centre. So privileged in so many ways. And yet it's tough, she thinks. These years are tough. Her mother was getting older. Too old to be in that ramshackle house of hers in Gloucestershire, all alone since her dad had died. Casper needing her and here she was, slap bang in the middle of the sandwich years. But should life really be such a chore? Aren't these years meant to be breezy, loving your kids, a laugh a minute? She should feel lucky she had a child at all after everything that had happened last year. Her eyes fill with tears despite vowing never to think of it again in public. By the time she reaches the balcony, she feels like she's been through ten rounds in the boxing ring.

She resolves to stop thinking like this. She needs to hurry up and check on Jack. Her thoughts have reached fever pitch. Five minutes alone and she's already lost it. She doesn't know what is wrong with her. She peers over. At first she can't see Jack but then she spots his curly hair, bandy legs wrapped around a wooden post at the back of the playground. He's half-way up, but looks like he's edging back down to safety.

She softens for a second. He's so sweet. Gifted the best of Liza's personality. Always hugging her, telling her he loved her. Then she thinks of Gav. Wonders what characteristics he'd inherited from him. How he'd changed lately from being fun, *up for it* Gav, to someone she wanted to shout and tear her hair out over. Of course, Tom hadn't noticed a thing.

"He's one of my best mates, Sarah," he'd said when she'd brought it up. "Don't you think I'd *notice* if he was controlling Liza?" Part of her had thought this was true. She'd watched carefully, for any signs. But it was difficult when Gav lived in one part of the house, and Liza another. How weird, she thinks. Can't he just move out? Wouldn't that make things so much easier for them? It's not like they can't afford it. Something is keeping him at the house, she just doesn't know what.

She really should shout over at Jack. Motion for him to get down from the post. But before the thought segues into action, she feels a presence behind her. She turns.

It's her. She's standing on the balcony right behind her, like some sort of apparition.

*Ella Bradby.*

"Ella, hello." She grabs her opportunity whilst she's alone, without Liza's sly gaze making her feel self-conscious. "It's Sarah. Biddlecombe. Remember? We were in..." she trails off, waiting to see if Ella does indeed remember. Silence. "We were in NCT class together?" she prompts. "Years ago. You..." *deserted us all*, she thinks. "I think you must have been busy."

"Sarah. Yes." She smiles, a flat sort of smile, showing a perfect set of bone-white teeth.

"How are you then? You..." She was about to ask about Felix. But she shuts her mouth. How on earth would she know

about Felix unless she'd been keeping tabs on her? And she can't very well admit that now, can she?

"Did everything go well in the end? After your NCT? Boy? Girl?"

"Boy, Felix. He's in karate now."

Sarah waits, ready to fill Ella in on her own news, the information on the tip of her tongue, but before she can drop in that her own little boy is at The West London Primary Academy School, (surely she couldn't be dismissive of her after that nugget of information?) Ella's icy-grey gaze is transported downwards.

Sarah follows her eyeline to see a small, cherubic blonde figure on the floor beneath them. The little boy (she assumes it's a boy but she'd made that mistake before) is about six-months old. She thinks about her earlier cyber-chondria. Her self-diagnosed perimenopause. This month's PMT – she had felt the familiar darkness settling on her all of last week, the downward tug of her uterus. She tries to be generous about other people's good fortune but alas, the hand of sadness squeezes her tight around the neck.

"Oh, lovely" she says. "What's...the baby's name?"

"This one? He's Wolf."

"Wolf?" She wants to laugh, desperately – she feels it bubbling up in her stomach. Just wait until she gets back to Liza, she thinks – but then she realises with some frustration, that Ella pulls it off majestically. A snip of delight swiftly follows that Ella has had two boys –instead of the 'one of each sex' that she remembers Ella pining for at NCT. She hates herself for thinking it. Really, really hates herself. But she just can't help it. Not everything was perfect for the enigmatic Ella Bradby.

She watches as Ella bends down and scoops up Wolf, breathing into his soft hair, her phone in her other hand: a rose-gold encased iPhone, with an image on the back of herself and her husband. She remembers Christian well from their NCT days. Who wouldn't? His beachy-blonde hair, and huge, shiny white teeth. And as for his spectacular body – well, she remembers everyone at their NCT class sliding glances towards him, not daring to stare too long. The way he'd rubbed Ella's back as they'd all acted out different labour positions. She and Liza had been laughing convulsively, but somehow, Ella and Christian hadn't made it so funny. She had watched them out the corner of her eye. The way they'd glided around making it all seem to easy and beautiful – Ella's eyes closed so serenely, as she transported herself to the birth of their baby. She wondered how it would feel if anyone should stare at her and Tom like that.

“We're just hanging out, Wolf and I.” Ella interrupts Sarah's thoughts, her voice low and controlled. “Whilst Felix has got karate. Aren't we Wolfe-Bear?”

God, thinks Sarah, the poor bugger is going to develop an identity crisis.

“God he's just so... *delicious*. Aren't you Wolfe?” Ella continues.

“He's absolutely divine,” Sarah says. *Divine?* What the hell? She'd never used that word before in her life. But she carries on and on, the words spewing out her mouth. “Just look at that beautiful blonde hair.” *Just like yours*, she nearly adds, but manages to stop herself just in time.

She stands there, rooting around for more things to say but suddenly her workout top feels too tight, squeezing out all of

her breath. She notices the squidge of flesh spilling out of the top of her leggings, which begin to feel scratchy and hot. She's also got a nagging feeling – her stomach feels hollowed out. It's the sense that she's forgotten to *do* something. But then she hears Ella clearing her throat and her mind is transported right back to the present moment. She thinks about making a joke about it all. Telling Ella how annoying she finds this whole 'soft-play' thing. She lets out a brief laugh and then wonders how she's managed, in the space of three minutes flat, to come across as a complete twat.

“So Felix is enjoying karate? I was thinking about putting my son Casper in for a trial.” If Ella knows that Casper and Felix are in the same year, she's not letting on. The feeling her son is being dismissed, as well as her, only makes Sarah more determined to get Ella's attention.

“Yes. He enjoys it.” She's still rubbing her thumb on the screen of her phone, glancing down at it as though she's expecting it to ring at any given moment.

*Keep going with this*, Sarah thinks. Her heart's going crazy. Don't fuck this up. But Ella's attention is elsewhere. She's cooing in Wolf's ear, totally unaware of Sarah, and the emotional energy she's putting into the conversation.

“We're inside,” she carries on. “Me and Liza. Do you remember Liza? She was in NCT too. We're still mates. Really good mates.” She sees something flicker in Ella's expression. A vague recognition but it quickly disappears. She feels slightly irritated. Was Liza really more memorable than her? “We're in the soft-play area. If you want to, you know, join us?” Liza would scold her later on for that, Sarah was sure of it. *What do you want to ask her for?*

“Thanks.” Ella doesn’t say anything to indicate that she’s even acknowledged what Sarah had said. She feels stung at Ella’s lack of interest in her, a seed of rage pushing its way up from her stomach. Is she not good enough for her? She tells herself just to stop being so bitter. That none of this is to do with her. Ella is the way she is and that’s all there is to it. Maybe something bad had happened to her when she was young. Her mind fills with images of Ella as a child. A sad and lonely orphan.. Maybe, Sarah thinks, just maybe, she should try being a little bit kinder in her thoughts. Except she can’t. She’s furious at the distance that Ella has put between them.

Just as she’s thinking all of this, Wolf’s right leg kicks out and something clatters to the ground.

“Oh,” Ella gasps, bending down. But before she can get there, with Wolf now wriggling and whining, Sarah reaches it first. The phone. Ella’s hand stretches out at the same time. Sarah watches as their fingers nearly touch.

“No!” Ella lets out a protest. But Sarah’s already grabbed it.

“Nice.” Sarah says, turning the phone around in her hands. She feels a giddy sense of power.

“Can I have it back now, please?” Ella says, her vowels stretched high over the piercing sound of Wolf’s cries. It’s the first time Sarah has seen Ella experience something close to discomfort – she watches her bounce Wolf up and down on her hip. She smooths her thumb over the plastic case and before she returns it, she turns it over, screen-side up. She doesn’t know why she does it. It’s an instinctive action, but she can’t stop herself. She’s almost unaware that she’s doing it. She makes a big show of looking at it, her chin pulling right in to her neck. There it is. The green background of a new WhatsApp notification.

“Look,” she says. “You’ve got a message.” Ella snatches the phone but it’s too late. Sarah has managed to read and digest the entire contents, well before Ella swiped it back. Her stomach flips over. Oh my god! Her first thought is that she can’t wait to get back to Liza to tell her what she’s just found out. But then she realises that perhaps it’s not such a good idea after all – what with everything going on with her and Gav at the moment Her second thought is that it actually can’t be true. She wouldn’t. She just *wouldn’t*. Oooh, but she has.

*Ella*, with her perfect, handsome husband. Her two blonde, angelic children.

“Oh my god,” Sarah mutters, a half smile curling up her lips. *This is more like it*. The earlier power she’d felt over handling her phone has morphed into something else entirely.

“Wolf. Shhhh. Shhhh.” Ella is going red now. Sarah watches as she squeezes her little boy’s arm, leaving small imprints in his pudgy flesh. “Sarah, I...” And then she stops, breathes in deeply and stands up straight. “Actually, Sarah, you know what? I *have* got twenty minutes before I pick up Felix. I will have that coffee with you.”

Bingo! Now, perfect Ella is going to want to be *her friend*. At this point, Sarah doesn’t give Liza a second thought. She can feel Ella’s fingertips through her grey top. She allows herself to be led back into the soft play. When they arrive, Liza’s slumped on the chair, gazing into the distance. Sarah knows that she’ll be too tired to have been thinking of anything much. That the last thing she’ll want to do is socialise.

“Thea’s asleep,” Liza mouths, giving a thumbs up. But then she clocks Ella and a slight frown crosses her face.

“Liza,” says Ella. “Look who I just bumped into.” Aha,

Sarah thinks. So you *do* remember. “How *are* you?” Ella sounds almost sympathetic. Now why would that be, Sarah wonders. Ella and Liza were never close, were they?

“Oh hi, both of you.” Liza looks at Sarah – something accusatory in her expression and then the strangest thing, she spills a bit of her coffee, and then drops her phone.

“Oh god, silly me,” Liza flusters. “So cack-handed today.” Most unlike Liza, Sarah thinks. It’s almost as if she’s been thrown off balance. Usually, in circumstances like these, Sarah would have cast Liza a glance. One that said a multitude of things: *I know. I’m sorry, but come on, we can get the gossip. We can find out what the hell she’s been doing all these years. I’ll steer the convo so you don’t have to make any effort. I’ll make it up to you.*

“I’m well. Thank you. Very well. Nice to see you,” says Liza. “And another little... boy?”

“Wolf,” Sarah interjects. “Isn’t he gorgeous?” Liza raises her eyebrows but manages to nod.

Sarah inwardly begs for Liza not to be in one of her narky, don’t-carish moods. She doesn’t have the energy to over-compensate when she’s already trying to be as welcoming as she possibly can.

But then Liza jumps. “Shit,” she says. “Sarah, did you see Jack by the way? Is he ok?”

*Fuck. Jack. Fuck, shit. Shit.* Sarah glances outside, but he’s not to be seen. The wooden post he was climbing earlier was set back behind a tree, out of view from here. If she angled herself correctly she might be able to glimpse him, but it’s too late for that.

She absolutely cannot admit to Liza that she *had* seen him.

That he was higher than he should have been on that bloody post, and that she'd been distracted before she could call out to him. Distracted by Ella Bradby, of all people. She can't admit that in that moment, in that very moment that she'd seen *her*, both Liza and her beautiful, well-behaved little son had become totally dispensable.

"Yes." Ella sounds almost bored. She sticks a leg out. "Yes she saw him." She pulls out a menu from the wooden holder, her grey eyes scanning the protein shakes section. "He's fine, isn't he?" she says, without looking up. Liza looks at Sarah, pointedly. Sarah knows that look. *Why the fuck are you letting her answer?* But before Sarah can say anything else, she finds her head moving up and down, mouth open, like she's one of those freaky Mama dolls.

She tries to work out why Ella would have said that. But it was too late now to do anything else and it saved her the bother of having to admit that she had *sort* of done her job. But not quite.

Sarah looks at Ella and thinks she catches a tiny wink. Almost imperceptible. A warm glow spreads across her chest. Something to tie them together. She forgets about her shitty work. She forgets about the tug of her womb. She forgets about the way she'd been feeling lately. Restless and edgy. Who gave a damn about marketing an old peoples' home after all? She sits up straight, buoyed by these thoughts and the connection with the woman sitting next to her. But then she thinks about those moments outside on the balcony.

The moment when she'd seen Ella Bradby. The moment that she forgot about the promise to her best friend.

She looks over to the window again, desperately trying to

quash the memories of everything that Liza had done for her last year when Tom had been on business in Sydney.

She'd been twenty-eight-weeks pregnant when she'd rung Liza and told her she had a 'bad feeling' and some pains. Tom had scoffed down the phone when she'd insisted on paying for someone to take Casper whilst she went into the hospital. "Fine," he'd said. "But we can't keep doing this every time you have a 'bad feeling.'" But then, the silence as the ultra-sound technician glided the doppler over and over the same area on her stomach. "Just one more second," she'd said, pressing harder. Moving it around a bit more. Nothing. Liza had been her go-to then. Liza had been the one who had gripped her hand during the long, drawn out labour, as she had given birth to the little girl they'd named Rosie. No. She will not think of that now.

She shifts her focus onto the other parents outside watching their kids. She notices a lady craning her neck over the fence at the back of the playground – undoubtedly looking at the new tennis courts. If Jack was in any danger, she thinks, someone would have spotted it. And he'd probably have clambered down from that post now anyway. He would be under the pirate ship and they had forty clear minutes with Ella Bradby. To make up for all that lost time. She clears her throat and turns to Liza.

"Yes," she says. "Yes. He was at the back of the sandpit." That much is true at least, she thinks. "I waved at him. He's absolutely fine."

*WhatsApp group: STUFF*  
*Members: Sarah, Camilla*

**Sarah:** *Guess who I've just spotted at The Parkside Club?!*

**Camilla:** *Holy shit! Don't tell me the hottie from SCD? I read that he was there in the Mail yesterday! Couldn't come up today. Taking Elodie to dentist.*

**Sarah:** *Ella Bradby!*

**Camilla:** *Oh – yes! Gosh. How was she? Never heard from her again did we? Did we ever find out why?*

**Sarah:** *Didn't speak to her yet. Still looks the same. Just trying to resist cake. Will try and speak to her later and get the goss.*

**Camilla:** *You ok? You looked upset this morning at school drop off. Tried to catch you but didn't want to get stuck talking to Carmen.*

**Sarah:** *Yes. 2WW. I think I'm about to get it though. PMT Off the charts.*

**Camilla:** *You peed on a stick yet?*

**Sarah:** *No. Can't bring myself to see a neg.*

**Camilla:** *Oh I'm sorry, love. I know I've offered before but if you want my IVF doc name, just LMK. She's in Chiswick. Easy.*

**Sarah:** *Will you come with me? Just for the registration then I'll tell Tom. Don't want to put too much pressure on him*

*just yet. We can go for lunch after? That new restaurant on Turnham Green Terrace?*

**Camilla:** *Course. I'll book the appt. Next Thurs morning ok? When the kids are back at school? I know there won't be anything wrong by the way but she'll do all the investigations anyway.*

**Sarah:** *Sounds great. Thank you. Thank you so much. X*

**Camilla:** *No worries. I'm there for you anytime. X*