

# The Swap

*Also by Fiona Mitchell*

The Maid's Room

FIONA MITCHELL

# The Swap

  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is  
available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 65966 7  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 65967 4  
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 65964 3

Typeset in Plantin by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

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*For my mum and dad, with love*

## Prologue

The woman is lying on the trolley, her legs stirrups, fingers laced together on top of her clinic gown.

‘Annie Perry, date of birth, 5.6.1984?’ Doctor Michael, beside her, asks.

As Mark tightens his grip on his clipboard – he heard that surname earlier – the door opens a notch.

‘Doctor Michael, could you come down to treatment room 3 please?’ a female voice calls.

A crease forms in Doctor Michael’s forehead, as though someone has nicked it with a knife. He turns towards the door.

‘We’re about to do a transfer here.’

‘It’s a matter of urgency.’

He climbs to his feet with a sigh. ‘Okay. Mark, would you prepare the embryos for Ms Perry’s transfer?’

It’s the third time today that Doctor Michael has asked him to get the embryos from an incubator alone, even though clinic guidelines state that doctors should do everything in tandem, one watching over the other as they manipulate sperm and eggs and move embryos from one part of the lab to another. Work has already begun to install videocams in each lab to watch out for mistakes, but this lab doesn’t have one yet.

Mark’s ears are ringing as he goes into the lab; his headache is getting worse. *Hamilton. Elliott. Perry* – here’s the incubator belonging to the woman in her forties who underwent a transfer earlier. He looks at his clipboard; she was Tess Perry. Doctor Michael had mumbled his way through her name and date of

birth, and the woman had tried so hard to hold herself still that she'd been shaking with tension.

Mark scrutinises the label on the incubator door. *A. Perry*. Scrawls and loops and squiggles; it's not easy to read, but it's definitely an A not a T, he can see that only now. He opens Annie Perry's incubator: it's empty.

He checks the front of all the incubators again. There on the bottom right, he finds an incubator labelled with the name, *T. Perry*. He opens the door. Two petri dishes sit on the middle shelf. Two petri dishes that shouldn't be there.

He'll have to go out there and tell Annie, the other Ms Perry, that her embryos have been transferred into another woman.

But back in the treatment room Annie's eyes widen at the sight of the petri dishes in his trembling hands, as if he is holding live twins.

He tries to ignore his pounding heart, the sour, dry taste on his tongue, but already the guilt is a stone in his chest and it's getting heavier.

# Part One

# Chapter 1

*Surrey, England*



*He's the kind of child you want to give back.* The thought floats uninvited to the surface of Tess' head. She clenches the steering wheel tighter, the burnt skin stretched pink over the knuckles of her hand.

Freddie, in the back seat behind her, slams his foot into the base of her spine. 'Are we there yet?'

'Almost.'

No one would be able to tell from the tone of her voice that she doesn't like her two-year-old son. The thought makes her feel ashamed. She can't see him in the rearview mirror, only Ruby beside him, cuddling her toy rabbit, her curls the colour of butter.

Freddie thrums his fingers against the glass, and Tess' breath follows suit. Any second now, there'll be a burp, a roar, another question. The diamond pendant tucked beneath her silk blouse bangs her chest like a nervous tic.

A snatch of Lady Gaga booms from the rolled-down window of a passing car. Tess switches on the heating and turns it up to full. The oranges on the passenger seat wobble, releasing their fresh scent. A large bottle of water sloshes in the footwell.

She stops at the traffic lights and snatches up her mobile phone, scrolling through the social media campaign she's running for one of her clients.

*Beep!* The lights have turned green. She eyes the driver behind,

his knotted mouth declaring a silent ‘for fuck’s sake.’ She raises her nail-varnished hand in a gesture of apology and pulls away.

‘Are we there yet?’ asks Freddie.

‘Soon.’

‘When?’

She doesn’t reply.

The driver overtakes her, his middle finger vertical behind the glass.

‘When?’

‘Ten minutes,’ she blurts, though she knows it’s more like twenty.

The roadside ferns flicker in the breeze and wizened trees whizz by. She passes a shop with mirrored windows and her personalised number plate stares back at her. TES5 DPE. Matteo bought it for her birthday five years back. Ridiculously middle-class. But this is just another badge that she wears, like driving a four-by-four and shopping at Waitrose. It’s not who she really is.

She spots a headless mannequin in a shop window, a poster stuck to the glass, proclaiming *Not Your Daughter’s Jeans*. She looks down at her trousers, navy blue like her blouse. Then a splash of yellow drops into her thoughts – Freddie’s scooter; she’s left it back at the park. It’s too close to lunch time to go back; Freddie’s behaviour gets worse when he’s hungry. She’ll just have to phone when she’s home, hope that someone’s handed it in.

She slows and tries to see Freddie in the mirror. He didn’t sleep well again last night. Perhaps that explains the way he squished those cyclamen flowers in his hands, the way he’d climbed that tree, felling a branch, bark exploding. ‘Down, boy!’ the park keeper had hissed as if her son were a dog. She rushed out an apology.

There is something off with Freddie, and not just today, but she can’t face going back to the GP, not after that last time. Freddie had been running a temperature; he’d been lethargic and manageable, so she’d let her guard down. He’d broken away from her,

charged down the corridor and burst through an unlocked door. Tess had raced after him. The face of the woman lying on the trolley was mangled with shock, the cave of the plastic speculum between her legs yawning. ‘Fanny, fanny, fanny!’ Freddie kept shouting as Tess dragged him out of the room by his wrist and back into the waiting area where people tried to hide their sniggers, faces behind hands. He’d picked the word up from Jenna who’d been talking about waxing. Why do people give the female genitalia girls’ names anyway? *Fanny. Lily. Minnie*, when Vagina is a perfectly good name. She pictures it in *The Baby Name Wizard* book. That would shut up those playground mothers with their Phoebes and Palomas. *Oh, look, here comes my little Vagina.*

Freddie’s foot dents the back of her seat and presses. He sniffs, the sound of his snot bubbling through her. She grips the wheel tighter still.

‘Mine!’ snaps Ruby.

In the rearview mirror, Tess sees Freddie dragging Ruby’s toy rabbit towards him. Ruby snatches it back with a rip.

‘I want!’ shouts Freddie, his hand clamped on the rabbit’s ear.

‘No!’ says Ruby.

‘Let go of it, please,’ says Tess, attempting a patient tone.

The boy grasps harder, the toy ripping more.

‘Stop!’ says Ruby.

Tess passes a lane with a sign that says *Private*.

‘Mine!’ shouts Freddie.

Ruby starts to scream.

‘Freddie, let go of Ruby’s toy!’ The authority in her voice is strident, but Freddie’s hand stays locked on the rabbit.

She can hear the drag of the seatbelt, a *clickety-click*. The electronic seatbelt alarm starts to ping through the din.

‘For goodness’ sake, Freddie, I’m not going to put up with this kind of behaviour anymore.’

Yet another hot flush is heating Tess up from the inside. There’s the rustle of clothes.

‘No!’ shouts Ruby, Freddie now on top of her.

Tess watches the back of his head, the raggedy tufts of his shoulder-length strawberry blond hair, and Ruby’s legs pumping; her sobs come loud and fast.

‘Get back into your seat immediately!’ says Tess, as near as she ever gets to shouting.

The road is four lanes wide and there’s nowhere to stop. She glances in her rearview mirror again. There’s a thick queue of cars behind her and a red line seams the tarmac. Ruby continues to sob. Sweat is pumping out of Tess’ torso now, her shirt sticking to her skin like cling film. So much for black cohosh.

*Ping-ping-ping.* A sign flashes past. *40mph.*

‘Freddie, stop being a nuisance and get back into your seat!’

Freddie plants his face on Ruby’s. Ruby screams.

Tess takes a bend too quickly, catapulting Freddie into the footwell. She looks away from the road, turning round to make sure Ruby is alright. The little girl’s eyelashes are beaded with tears, and there, above her right eyebrow, the skin is gaping like a button hole – Freddie has bitten her open.

The pressure starts to build in Tess’ head; her hands crush the wheel. Ruby struggles against the seatbelt, but where can Tess pull in?

‘I want my mummy!’ Ruby screams.

‘I’ll be able to stop in a minute, darling,’ says Tess.

She pushes her foot harder on the accelerator and the car in front draws speedily closer, too close, large and looming and silver. She slams on the brake, but her car continues to hurtle forwards. Her handbag topples onto the floor, tossing out the little wooden memory box. The oranges bullet downwards.

There’s an almighty crash of metal, which rodeos Tess, her head jerking forwards and back, her shoulders and torso following suit. Tyres screech; silver paint fountains out like sparks.

The airbag is a sudden rubbery swell around Tess’ head. And still the car is screeching sideways, the stench of burn filling her

nose, her throat. A car alarm is shrilling. Tess bites her tongue and tastes blood. The car careers onto the pavement, felling a lamppost, then grinding to a stop.

The cap fizzes off the sparkling water bottle in the footwell. A child is mewling gently.

‘Ruby?’ says Tess. She tries to turn her neck, but the airbag is boxing her in.

‘Freddie?’

The child continues to moan and someone burps.

‘Freddie?’

Tess runs through a checklist of her own body. There’s pain in her neck, down her spine, but it barely registers.

‘Ruby?’ Still nothing. ‘Freddie, are you okay?’

‘My leg hurts, really huuuuuurts!’ Freddie wails.

‘Can you move it?’

‘No.’

*Oh, God.* ‘Can you wiggle your toes?’

‘Yes.’ His voice quavers.

The reek of burning is getting stronger, muffled voices outside the car. Someone shouts, ‘Now!’ Someone else says, ‘Holy fuck, there’s two kids in the back.’

Tess can smell petrol.

‘Freddie, can you see Ruby?’ She tries to twist her head, but agony stabs into her shoulder blades and up her neck. Her heart is speeding, but she needs to stay calm. She breathes deeply, but still the panic burgeons.

Someone taps on the driver’s window. ‘Emergency services are on their way, love.’ It’s a man’s voice. ‘They’ll get you out of there, just hang tight.’

She lifts the palm of her burnt hand and presses it to the glass. His thick fingers meet hers, the window warm between them.

‘Freddie, I need you to tell me, is Ruby moving?’ asks Tess, her hand still on the glass. ‘Is she breathing?’

‘No.’ Freddie starts to cry.

The hard ball of tension in her throat makes it difficult to swallow and when she does, her ears crackle.

A siren rises in the distance. Tess closes her eyes and in the amber-grey darkness of her head, she sees a teenage girl, her long brown hair flowing down her back, the red of her dress. She is walking and getting further away.

‘Wait,’ says Tess, though her mouth stays closed.

‘Can you tell me your name, love?’ The man calls from outside the car, but Tess is drifting.

She follows the girl deeper into the shadows behind her eyelids, then everything goes black.

## Chapter 2



Tess stares up at the strip lighting, her fingers crinkling the cold cotton sheet. People in scrubs are blurry around her. She tries to sit up, but pain spears the back of her shoulders and forces her down again.

A nurse moves in front of her then, mousy hair so sparse her scalp shows through. ‘You blacked out after the collision. Nothing broken though.’

‘What about the children?’ Tess’ chest is buzzing with panic.

‘Your son has severe lacerations to his leg. He’s lost a lot of blood. We’ve had to give him a transfusion.’

Tess searches her own arms for a puncture wound, but can’t see one. ‘You didn’t give him my blood?’

‘We always take blood from stock.’

‘Where is he?’

‘In paediatrics. Your daughter’s there too.’

*Daughter?*

Tess grasps for clarity, the past spooling through her head. The orange lick of the flames; the word *Why* dredged up from somewhere deep inside of her, phlegmy and desolate.

She closes her eyes and tries to find the girl in the darkness again, but this time there’s nobody there.



A voice wakes Tess. Matteo’s voice.

‘I only know because I gave blood a couple of months ago.’ His Italian inflection carries through the curtain pulled around her bed.

‘Perhaps they gave you the wrong information,’ says a woman, the nurse from earlier possibly, though Tess can’t remember the cadence of her voice.

‘Well, it’s very worrying if they did,’ says Matteo.

‘Your wife is definitely an O, and Freddie a B, so you being blood group A, well, it’s just . . .’

‘What?’

‘Genetically impossible.’

Tess hears nails scratching skin.

‘If you don’t mind me asking, did you have assisted fertility, a sperm donor or a donated—’

‘He’s my son.’ The word ‘son’ comes out on a spit. Tess pictures the muscles flexing in Matteo’s cheek the way they do when he’s angry, his set jaw.

‘I didn’t mean to . . . It’s just that, well, IVF can sometimes drift to the back of people’s minds.’

Matteo continues speaking, his voice too low to hear. Why are they talking about blood types? Has something gone wrong with the transfusion? A strand of her black hair comes loose from her head and settles like a pen mark on the white sheet.

A face peeps through the curtain then, topped with a Brillo-pad fringe. Luca’s smile reveals his overlapping incisors. ‘Hello.’ He bounds in, folds himself across her, a plump cheek cushioning her face, her ten-year-old son.

‘Have you seen Freddie and Ruby?’ she asks.

‘No, but Daddy has. Freddie’s had loads of stitches in his leg.’

‘Is Phoenix with Freddie?’

‘Dunno,’ Luca shrugs.

She should go to Freddie right now; he’s there alone, her here, and Matteo out there still deep in a conversation she can’t make out. She tries to sit up, but the pain flattens her again.

‘Poor Mummy.’

Phoenix comes in then, keeping space between him and Tess,

and towering over her, his hair gelled into a quiff, which makes him taller still.

‘You smell funny,’ he says.

‘Thank you!’ she says. It’s too late, he’s heard the clip in her voice. She doesn’t understand why she can’t gauge the moods of her twelve-year-old and edit herself accordingly. It’s become a reflex to snap at him.

‘Silly, Mum,’ he says and flops into the easy chair, draping one of his gangly legs over the arm.

‘Why did you crash?’ asks Luca.

‘Because she’s a rubbish driver,’ says Phoenix.

‘Freddie was . . .’ Her head aches and swims.

‘Being naughty,’ says Luca.

‘You don’t like Fred, do you?’ says Phoenix, glaring at Tess.

‘Of course I do,’ she snaps. She can’t seem to regulate her voice, her mind is so hazy.

Phoenix looks away. Luca sits on the bed and squeezes her toes through the blanket, the fluorescent lighting picking out the leftover shimmery shadow on his eyelids.

There’s a big gap between Freddie and her older boys – perhaps that’s why she doesn’t have much patience with him; perhaps she’s grown out of looking after tots. At 45, perhaps she’s too old. Not that she planned it this way.

Her navy leather handbag is there on the bedside cabinet and she thinks of the memory box falling out of it, onto the floor of the car. Will she get the box back? Her hand jerks towards the bag, shooting pain into the side of her neck.

Luca places the bag beside her, and she searches inside it. The curtain whips back, rings scraping the pole, and there is Matteo, a fug of aftershave preceding him. He bends and kisses her hard on the lips.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asks.

‘Freddie’s on his own,’ she says.

‘He’s sleeping. They want to keep him in for a couple of days.’

‘And what about Ruby?’

‘Jenna’s with her now,’ he says. ‘She’s got the all clear to take her home.’

Guilt burrows into Tess. Perhaps Jenna will come to say goodbye, then again, maybe she won’t; maybe she’ll keep her distance from now on and who can blame her? Tess might have killed her daughter, and that bite is bound to leave a scar.

Matteo taps Phoenix’s hand and flicks his head sideways.

‘But *I’m* sitting here,’ says Phoenix.

‘Come on,’ says Matteo, exasperation in the edges of his voice.

Tess reaches for Phoenix’s hand as he stands; it slips away. ‘Darling, I’d love something to drink. Will you take Luca and go and get me a glass of water, please?’

Phoenix rolls his eyes. Luca walks out of the cubicle, but Phoenix stays put. Tess lays her hand on the small of his back. ‘Please, I want to talk to Daddy.’

Matteo shuts the curtain behind Phoenix and sits. ‘How did this happen?’

‘Freddie bit Ruby’s face. She started screaming; he launched himself at her. I lost control of the car.’

He digs his thumb into a dent in the arm of the chair. ‘At least it’ll fade,’ he says.

‘What will?’

‘Ruby’s cut.’

‘It’s a bite mark, not a cut.’

Matteo looks away, shakes his head, the muscle in his cheek rippling. ‘We need to take a firmer hand with him.’

‘I treat him the same as the others.’

His chest fills with air. ‘Maybe we need to try something different.’

‘There’s something not right with him, Matt.’

‘Lots of children bite. Lots of children play up.’

‘I don’t just mean the biting; it’s the tantrums; he hardly sleeps. I heard someone – was it one of the nurses? – saying something about blood groups. What was that about?’

‘She was talking about the transfusion.’

She balls her hand in the hammock of the sheet covering her thighs. ‘I don’t know what to do with him anymore,’ she says.

‘He knows how to push your buttons, that’s all; he doesn’t act like that when I’m around.’

The veiled criticism bores through her skull. ‘Well, I’m all out of ideas. I’ve tried reward charts, the naughty step – I’ve even begged him to behave, but he won’t listen.’

‘We just have to keep going. He’ll get the message eventually; he’ll calm down.’

‘I don’t have time for it.’

‘You need to make time.’

‘I’m already tearing myself in two, balancing my business and Freddie’s needs.’

‘So wind things down a bit.’

‘Why can’t *you*?’ she asks.

He slams his mouth shut like he’s trapping a retort, and looks about the cubicle. ‘Maybe we need some outside help.’

‘We’ve got Jenna.’ She gives a pretend laugh. ‘Mind you, I’d be astonished if she wants to let Ruby anywhere near Freddie after this.’

‘I don’t mean childcare, I mean a doctor, a child psychologist, some kind of professional.’

Noisy air shoots from her mouth.

‘Come on, Tess, you don’t eat meat, but you aren’t imposing that on the kids. The same should go for counselling.’

She bites the side of her gum. An image of a beige lady in a winged chair drops into her head. ‘And how did it make you feel, reading those condolence cards?’ the woman had asked. It hadn’t worked for Tess, so why would it work for Freddie? And besides, delving deeper into Freddie’s behaviour might involve examining her own. Don’t counsellors always blame the mother? She doesn’t want to confront that possibility.

‘No one wants to play with him,’ she says. ‘And now, what

he's done to Ruby . . .' She shuts her eyes for a moment. 'What did Jenna say anyway?'

'She's relieved everyone's alright. Don't worry about Jenna. She knows Freddie can be challenging, but she's always been understanding about it.'

'I crashed the car though. I could have killed Ruby for God's sake.'

'But you didn't, Tess, Ruby's okay.'

'It's one thing hurting your own child, quite another hurting somebody else's.'

She realises what she's just said and can't bring herself to look at him. What happened all those years ago gnaws at her, and the cubicle bloats with silence.

Using the flap of the bag as a shield, she digs in, and feels for the memory box. She removes the lid carved with the outline of a castle, and there inside it is a small bag of ash. Relieved, she closes the lid. She's boxed the whole thing up into this small, tidy package, and still she clings to it like a crutch.



Wearing the pyjamas that Matteo brought in for her, Tess walks along the corridor in her pumps.

A nurse peers at her through a pair of smudged glasses. 'Are you okay there?'

'I'm looking for my son, Freddie Rossi,' says Tess.

'Little poppet,' says the nurse. 'You'll find him in the first room on the right. He's been ever so good. Hasn't complained once.'

Tess watches Freddie through a window scarred with old Sellotape marks. He's asleep in the nearest bed, his cheeks with colour in them for once. She goes in and sits on the edge of the bed, the line attached to the drip curling into the back of his hand. She looks at the sachet of blood, *Type B* printed on a sticker, the name Freddie Rossi scribbled on in black marker pen. That nurse was right about his blood type. The crumpled sachet

makes her think of the night he was born. That doctor with his suede shoe wedged against the end of the bed for leverage. The pulling, the tearing.

A child fidgets in one of the beds and coughs.

'Freddie,' she whispers.

He opens his small blue eyes, the skin clinging too close to his skull. When he sees her, he turns his head away then tucks a hand beneath the sheet.

'I want Daddy.'

'Daddy's gone home now. It's late. He'll be back tomorrow.'

Freddie's swallow makes a clicking sound. Tess bends over and kisses his cheek. His nostrils are red-rimmed, his breath putrid as if he's been sleeping with his mouth open. He wipes her kiss away.

'Where's Phoenix?' he asks.

'He's at home too. You'll be going home soon, but you have to rest for now. Are you sore?'

He doesn't answer, just stares at the curtain pulled halfway around his bed. She rises, and stands two foot away from him.

Nothing about Freddie makes any sense. His short, skinny frame, the hair that everyone calls red even though it's the colour of copper. A thought starts to beat through her. She tries to push it down, but it plays on repeat anyway. *He's not mine. He's not mine. He's not mine.*

## Chapter 3

*Florida, USA*



Annie gets up off the floor, the screwdriver hanging from her hand. She hasn't been able to fish out her wedding ring from between the stripped wooden floorboards where she dropped it. Her padded knees are sugared with dust like a couple of Dunkin' Donuts. She puts the screwdriver on the lip of the sink then pulls her paint palette earrings out of her earlobes and throws them into the mess of her jewellery box. Undoing the top button of her flamingo print pyjama top, she douses her cleavage with perfume.

The bathroom door scrapes across the floor as she opens it and bounds into their cluttered bedroom. Carl is marooned on the futon, with a photograph album on his lap, his feet pointing ten to two.

The thick tube of the free-standing air-conditioning unit has been shoved through the open window, and the room thunders with noise.

'I've lost my ring,' she says. He doesn't hear her through the clanking. 'Carl?'

She stands there watching him, the skin above his eyebrows crimping into a frown as he scans the photographs, the dim light casting shadows over his face. Spiky reddish beard, red cheeks and nose, an old T-shirt too loose around the neck. He spends most of the day outside fixing swimming pools, but never bothers with an SPF (he should be spreading it double with his colouring). He drinks in air then blows out abruptly.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asks, but still he doesn’t hear. He tips his head back and looks at the ceiling.

She moves towards him then, and he turns and flinches when he sees her. She tilts her head coquettishly and gives him a little smile then lowers herself to the bed, her chubby foot upending a glass of water she hadn’t noticed was there on the coir-carpeted floor.

She rubs the puddle in with her foot – at least it’ll give a patch of the carpet a wash. Taking the photograph album, she flings it to one side, pushing him backwards.

‘Whoah!’ He puts his hands into the air as she smacks her lips over his. His mouth goes on lockdown; his rigid shoulders rise to his ears, the pillow of his loose belly beneath hers.

‘Wer yer doing?’ his muffled voice fights its way through.

She pulls away. ‘What does it look like I’m doing?’

The whites of his eyes expand like he’s afraid of the answer.

‘Just relax,’ she says.

‘But, I don’t really feel like—’

‘What’s going on, Carl?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You’ve got something on your mind.’

‘I haven’t.’

He pulls her towards him, presses her head into his man boobs and sighs. She stays there, defeated.

A sex life in three acts. Act one: The can’t-keep-your-hands-off-each-other. Act two: The having-sex-to-try-to-get-pregnant. (Even after she’d found out that they wouldn’t be able to have a baby naturally, she’d continued poking her hopeful legs into the air after they’d done it). Act three: Once every two months.

*Pat-pat-pat* goes his meaty hand on the back of her head as if he’s petting a pug. But then maybe it’s her who’s brought this on. The way she’d railed at him all those years ago, saying things that couldn’t be unsaid. The way her body had filled out – not fat exactly, but not slim either, a bag stuffed a bit too full. She and Carl are a matching pair.

'I love you, you know,' he says in a languorous voice, still patting. She pushes herself away and stares at him. 'What's happening to us then?'

'Nothing's happening.'

'Exactly!' She chews the inside of her cheek. 'You're so distant all the time, faraway.'

'I'm right here, aren't I?' he says.

'I mean, we don't talk, we just . . .' She blows air into her flustered face.

'What do you want to talk about?'

She folds her arms. 'You keep drifting off like you're thinking about things, things you won't talk to me about.'

'I don't.' He stretches out the words.

'I mean, you're not ill or anything? You would tell me, right?'

He tries to smother his smile, but his eyes light up with laughter.

'Stop it,' she shoves his arm.

'What ails you today, Mrs Amstel?'

'Shit, don't call me that. I feel like your mother.'

'Oh, pardon me, Mzzzzzz Perry.'

She laughs, leans across and picks up the photograph album – Willow showing her chocolatey fingers to the camera in one picture.

'Look at her, such a beauty,' she says.

'Not like us at all,' he says, and rubs at his beard.

'Goddamn cheek!'

Carl's not smiling though. 'I just mean that hair, that skin,' he says.

The fact that Willow doesn't look like either of them has given Annie a licence to be immodest, to agree with people when they say, 'Your daughter's so pretty,' but Carl's words have made her heart plummet.

The air-conditioning starts quaking even more. It strikes her then that she won't be able to hear Willow if she shouts out. She gets up and switches it off.

'I dropped my ring between the floorboards in the bathroom.'

'Not again.' He drags himself off the bed, his pyjamas bottoms riding down, revealing his butt crack.

He lumbers out, and she swoops towards Willow's bedroom.

The fairy that Annie made with tissue-paper wings and concertinaed gold legs billows on the partially open door. The bed is empty, a depression in the pillow. Blood starts to burble through Annie's ears.

'Willow!' she calls.

She drops to her knees, but there is nothing but clods of dust under the bed, a screwed-up tissue and a facedown book against the wall. She hears Carl say something in the bathroom, the plod of his feet.

'Willow, honey!' she calls, pins and needles of fear in her chest.

The doors to the wardrobe are partially closed and when Annie opens them, Willow is there, curled at the bottom, her fingers plunged into her rosebud mouth. Relief pours through Annie.

'What's going on?' asks Carl, the screwdriver vertical in his hand.

He comes to Annie's side, gazes at his daughter in her floral pink nightie, her teddy bear locked in her arms.

'Oh, kiddo,' he whispers, and shakes his head, a smile on his face.

'Full of surprises, isn't she?' says Annie as Carl lifts Willow, the girl's eyes flickering open then closed, her body floppy.

The teddy bear falls to the floor. Carl puts Willow back into bed and Annie tucks in the teddy bear beside her.

'She gave me such a scare,' she says.

He pulls her ring off the screwdriver and tries to push it onto her pudgy finger. It gets jammed, but he perseveres, ramming it into place. He loops his arm around her shoulder, and they stand there watching Willow, her long, conker-brown hair strewn across her olive-skinned face, two moles under her eye like a semi-colon.

They head back to bed. Carl snaps on his eye mask patterned

with slices of cucumber, and she switches off the side light. She holds his hand under the sheet, lying in the congested heat, ears alert to every creak and settle of the dilapidated apartment.

As the time passes, still she feels wired. She can tell by the pace of Carl's breathing that he isn't asleep either.

'You would tell me if there's something wrong?' she asks.

'Go to sleep, honey,' he says and swallows.

She turns onto her side, and her foot strikes something, the photograph album still on the bed. She prods it and it falls to the floor with a clonk.

## Chapter 4

*Surrey, England*



Tess is at home, lying in bed beside Luca as he reads his book. The house is quiet, just the mimosa swishing beyond the window, Freddie asleep in the next room along.

Since the accident four weeks ago, he's been less fraught, content to dig at the garden mud with a spade while she pulls weeds beside him. He even laid his head in her lap while she sat on the sofa one day, updating her clients' social media accounts. She cupped her fingers around his face and typed one-handed. He hasn't been needling her for attention. He's been easier to like, to love, because it must be a kind of love that she feels for him, not the same as what she feels for Phoenix or Luca, but love nonetheless. The knowledge of his blood type is an undertow though. She knows she should let it go, enjoy his new equilibrium, but she can't.

'It's time to turn off,' says Tess. Luca flings his book to the side and pulls the duvet up to his chin. She closes her own novel.

'Try and kiss me,' he says, his bare foot in the air poised to defend himself, a game they play every night.

She laughs, puckers exaggerated lips and leans into him, his arms crisscrossed over his face. He bats her back with a hand and she upends the glittery L on the bedside cabinet along with a photograph frame dotted with footballs, a hopeful Christmas present from Matteo.

'This is so easy,' he says.

She holds up surrendered hands. 'Oh, Lulu, I give up.'

'I win.'

She cuddles into him, his arms tight around her.

'Danny's lucky.'

'Why?' She tries to pull away, but he holds her there, speaking warmth into her ear.

'Because he doesn't have brothers.'

'You love your brothers.'

'Do I?'

'Of course you do.' She thinks of her own sister, Angela – her report card decorated with As; the photograph of her in her mortar board on top of their parents' mantel. The only picture of Tess that graces that carved wooden shelf is one of her and Matteo on their wedding day, Tess caught mid-blink, so that her eyes are permanently shut.

'Freddie's weird,' he says.

'What do you mean?'

'Bites like a dog.'

'Not since he came home from hospital.'

She sits up, combs Luca's thick hair away from his face; it springs back, covering the top part of his eyes. She's hoping that the accident was such a shock to Freddie's system that he won't bite anyone again, that he won't misbehave, that he'll be more like Ruby – content to sit on his own and play, using a spoon to eat instead of his hands. Since the accident, she's had nothing more than a text from Jenna. Tess had left a garbled message gushing apologies, and asking how Ruby's face was healing. She'd held her hand to her throat as she spoke in a bid to stop her voice breaking, but still Jenna hasn't called her back.

'Freddie's okay when he's sleeping, I suppose,' says Luca.

'And what about Phoenix?'

'Ugh,' says Luca. She tweaks his nose, takes his toy monkey off the floor and presses it under the duvet.

'Sleep tight,' she says, and kisses him.

She goes downstairs into her office, the darkness a black sheet over the VELUX windows, the air scented with rosemary, the lit candle flickering in a draught.

Something moves across the parquet flooring, a spider with a body as big as a marble. She empties a jar full of pens, clambers to her knees and presses the glass over the spider. It scuttles away so fast that she shears off two of its legs. It stutters forward. She pushes on a shoe, rams her foot down then grabs a tissue and wipes up the black jam of it, dropping it into the bin.

She opens a blank page on her iMac and makes a start on a blog post for her interior designer client. An hour goes past, then she allows herself a look at her own Facebook page. She uploads a picture of Phoenix standing in front of the Chinese characters on the white board at his after-school Mandarin lesson, Luca beside him crossing his eyes. *Friday fun*, she types and adds a smiley face emoji.

She pushes her shoulders back, scans the neat rows of books on the shelves above the desk, arranged according to the colour of their spines – Man Booker Prize nominees and Penguin Classics, a bumper thesaurus and a Chambers Dictionary. All those words she knows the meaning of, yet so many she doesn't know how to pronounce. How long was it before she knew that 'banal' did not in fact rhyme with 'anal'? And how many times had she said it the wrong way? She feels the inner heat of shame.

Five likes on that photograph of Phoenix and Luca already, though that's nothing unusual for a collector of online friends like her. Her eyes brush over some of the names, people she knew at university and colleagues from the marketing team she worked in before she had Phoenix. The front door slams, the Victorian stained glass window in it rattling.

'Daddy!' Freddie's voice crackles through the baby monitor – he's not asleep after all. She keeps it switched on, so she can hear him when he wakes. Feet pad up the stairs; Matteo's been working late again at the hotel.

His voice echoes through the monitor. ‘How’s your leg, my boy?’

There’s the suck and pucker of Matteo’s affection, Freddie’s laughter lighting up the monitor’s arch of red beads. The cuts on Freddie’s thigh are angry hashtags, even though the stitches have come out.

She looks at her emails. There’s one from a mother of a boy in Freddie’s Montessori class. Another refusal to the invitation to Freddie’s birthday party – that’s five refusals so far.

She switches off the iMac, takes a padded envelope from the desk drawer and slides the contents out – three plastic bags with cotton buds and folded instruction leaflets inside.

*She didn’t want him.* The jagged thought scythes her head. She wanted a girl, needed a girl, to try to erase what had happened to her first born, Ava. She’d be fifteen now.

Pregnancy didn’t agree with Tess. She’d battled through diabetes with Phoenix, osteoporosis with Luca, then there’d been the three miscarriages, but still they went on trying for a third child. Matteo hadn’t wanted to do IVF at first, but she’d worked on him. ‘What if it’s twins?’ he’d asked. But she didn’t care if it was twins, triplets even, just so long as one of them was a girl, a girl to fill up the gaping space inside of her.

It was Tess who’d found the clinic in America that offered gender selection IVF. If she was going to pump herself full of drugs, she wanted to make sure she’d have the girl she so desperately wanted. ‘We can only work with what we have, and you have a low number of follicles in line with being 41,’ the doctor had said. ‘But there’s still a chance,’ Tess had replied, and he’d tilted his head and given her an unconvincing, stretched-out ‘yes.’

So they’d stayed in a hotel, the boys in an adjoining room. And she’d had her eggs harvested, four of them – only two of them had fertilised. The doctor phoned, said he had carried out a test that showed that one of the embryos was female.

‘I don’t want the boy,’ she’d said to Matteo after the appointment.

But over the next two days, her heart had filled with trepidation. The odds of giving birth to a live baby at her age were low, and this would be her last pregnancy. Then another thought took hold and wouldn’t let go. If she didn’t transfer the male embryo, it would get thrown into the bin because she certainly couldn’t contemplate donating it to another woman, wondering whether it had turned into a child she’d never get to see. She thought about how she rarely put food in the freezer, and the times that she had, she’d taken out a lasagne and a container of soup and watched them thaw, coagulated. It was a waste, but she usually threw that food away.

She reached her decision on the morning of the transfer. ‘I want both the embryos put back inside me,’ she’d said.

‘Are you sure?’ Matteo had asked. There’d already been one little death in the family, she couldn’t bring herself to be the cause of another.

‘I am,’ she said.

When she took the pregnancy test, she stared at it in astonishment. A girl, she convinced herself, or twins. For those first few weeks, she carried herself around like glass, then her sense of smell heightened. She’d felt sicker than she had done with her other pregnancies, a pervading nausea that lasted all day and sent her throwing up into the toilets at work. An early scan showed a single baby and hope swept through her, her little girl had made it; the delusion was persuasive. At least she’d given the boy a chance, she had no reason to feel guilt on that account. At the next scan she was buried by the realisation it was a boy she was having. A fluttering kind of sob leapt out of her mouth, which the nurse must have mistaken for laughter.

‘Look, he’s waving at you there,’ she’d said, gesturing towards the scanner.

Matteo had smoothed his thumb over the burn mark on Tess’

hand. She let him examine it, the patch she so often sat on, or covered up with long-sleeves, the rivulets of waxy skin, the drip marks through it.

After Freddie was born, it was as if her head was stuffed with lard, and it was siphoning into her arms, her legs, her heart. She'd only been able to shake the feeling off when she'd launched her business two months later, her vagina still smarting, her breasts aching with the milk he wouldn't take.

She and Jenna had shared the childcare between them, and having Ruby around diluted what Tess felt about her son: something lukewarm and not enough.

She hears footsteps on the stairs and pokes everything back into the envelope. The office door slides open, and there is Matteo, a patch of stubble the size of an eye on his jaw, his collar with a grey smudge on it. There's something haggard about his face, his cheeks caved in shadow, one of them dissected by pink scratches.

'I thought you were in bed,' he says.

He sits in the Balzac chair, the tartan blanket slithering off the back to the floor.

'Why are you so late?' she asks.

'We're going to have to cancel the bathroom refurb.'

'But why?'

'Why do you think, Tess? It's going to cost a fortune.'

'But the hotel's doing well.'

His Adam's apple dips as he swallows. 'Bookings are down on this time last year.'

'Oh. Should we be worried?'

Matteo shrugs. Something falls upstairs and the chandelier, which resembles a ring of icicles, chinks and shakes. Tess stares at the ceiling and presses her bare foot over the webbed toes of the other one. She's considered surgery to separate them, but she avoids hospitals if she can.

'I can't believe he's still awake at this time,' says Matteo.

She slides her tongue over her suddenly dry gums and forces herself to speak. ‘I’ve been thinking more about what that nurse said to you.’

‘Which was . . .?’

‘About Freddie having a completely different blood type to us.’ She cradles her hands under each of her elbows.

He regards her with disgust. ‘He’s our son, Tess.’

‘She said that it was genetically impossible.’

He shakes his head, looks away from her.

‘I know what I heard,’ she says.

‘I’m not doing this.’

She bites her teeth together; she’ll stick that cotton bud into Matteo’s mouth when he’s sleeping if she has to.

‘Just because you find him difficult, just because you can’t cope. Christ, Tess, he’s our son – I don’t give a damn about what that nurse said.’

‘If there’s a chance Freddie might not be ours, I want to know.’

‘This is about Ava, but Ava’s gone. You should concentrate on what you do have; you should concentrate on Freddie.’

His words crawl in through her ears and hook inside her chest. She lifts the envelope, slapping it onto the table. ‘I want us to do a DNA test.’

She tries to hold herself still, her rigid neck aching with tension.

‘Oh, come on!’

‘What if they mixed up the embryos at the IVF clinic?’

‘Don’t.’

‘If he isn’t ours, who does he belong to?’

Matteo puts both his hands to his head like a crash helmet. She leans further forward in the chair, planting her feet flat on the floor.

‘And if he isn’t ours, what happened to our embryos?’ she asks.

‘Oh, Tess, this is fantasy.’

‘You heard what that nurse said.’

She takes his dry hand; the eczema on his fingers sandpapers her skin.

‘I always thought the worst thing that could happen to anyone was if their child went missing,’ she says. ‘Having to live not knowing what had happened to them, but that could be what’s happening to us.’

‘If we do this, they could try to take Freddie away from us,’ he says.

She squeezes his fingers. ‘I need to know if my children are out there somewhere.’

‘If this turns out to be true, it’ll be harrowing. We can’t even begin to imagine how hard it’ll be.’

‘I need to know.’

‘We can’t do this, think of the consequences,’ he says.

But there’s something surrendered about his voice, and he owes her this. He owes her this because of what he did to her all those years ago. The livid burn stares up at her as she opens the instruction leaflet and starts to read it for the fifth time this evening.