Before We Were Thirty

Katie Agnew

Chapter 1

In the beginning

It started as a joke. A drunken, giggly, late afternoon joke during a loved-up weekend in Bath. It was the kind of spur-of-the-moment thing they did back then - before they were thirty - and neither of them thought for a moment about the consequences of such a silly little conversation, about how it would change the course of their lives for ever and how it might even drive them apart. Without the luxury of hindsight or the caution that comes with age, they jumped together off the highest cliff and waited to see where they would fall.

The way Rachel remembered it, it was all Simon's idea.

"I know, sweetheart," he'd said, in the animated, enthusiastic way he'd had back then, when they were newlyweds. "Let's look in that estate agent's over there. I bet we could get a great pad round here for the price of our flat."

He was right. Simon was always right when it came to money. Wasn't he the one who'd bought an airy two-bedroomed mansion flat in Belsize Park just six months before the London housing market went berserk? And wasn't he the one responsible for the huge amount of equity they now had on paper, if not in the bank? And hadn't the clever boy gone and bought himself a little shoe box of an investment in Hoxton just before it became the most hip and happening address in London? He now rented it out to a trendy young photographer for over a grand a month. Yes, Simon was very clever when it came to all things financial. And Rachel? Well, according to Simon, Rachel was just very good at spending it. Predominantly on shoes.

A quick glance in the window of the estate agent's had showed that while they couldn't quite run to a Georgian townhouse, a four-bedroomed Victorian terrace with a 100-ft garden and views over the city could be theirs with some change left over.

"Wow!" Rachel had said, trying to focus through a fog of red wine. "I could handle living there."

"Or," salivated Simon, pointing at a picture-perfect country cottage with roses round the door, "we could do the whole rural idyll thing."

"Oh, now that's gorgeous," Rachel had said with gusto. "Imagine living there."

She'd read from the details in the window: "Grade II-listed, 200 years old, three double bedrooms, two reception rooms, study, kitchen/breakfast room, many original features, including wooden beams and inglenook fireplaces - inglenook

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fireplaces! - Located in the heart of an exclusive village in Wiltshire, six miles from Bath. Six miles, that's nothing."

'ten minutes in the Land Rover, darling," laughed Simon.

"Oh yes, we'd need a long wheel base," agreed Rachel. "And a black labrador, a couple of Barbours and some Hunter wellies."

Simon had laughed at the thought of his chic and oh-so-fashionable little wife wearing countryside green rather than fashionista black. He shivered. It was October, and although Bath was basking in autumnal sunshine Simon was getting cold in his shirtsleeves.

'shall we go and see the Roman baths now or do you fancy finding another pub?" he'd asked.

Rachel wrinkled her button nose. "Pub?"

"Pub," nodded Simon.

They had spent the rest of the afternoon snuggled up in a comfy booth, drinking whiskey and joking about their imaginary life as country bumpkins before staggering down to Bath Spa station and falling onto the last train to Paddington. It had been a lovely weekend.

The winter that followed was long, cold and dreary and had lasted well into April. As the rain drizzled constantly on their North London flat and Hampstead Heath turned into a mud bath, Simon and Rachel would often talk about the cottage in Wiltshire with the inglenook fireplaces and the roses round the door. It would be OK to be rained-in there, romantic even. How cosy to be curled up on the sofa, listening to the raindrops on the sash windows, watching the countryside turn green as spring arrived. But it was only a joke.

Sometimes on the Tube, on the way to her job as a fashion PR in Soho, Rachel would imagine cruising through the countryside in her 4x4, dog in the passenger seat and wellies in the back. She'd get so engrossed in her day dream that she'd forget about the elbows crushing her ribs and the smell of stale commuter on the Northern Line. Once she even missed her stop. But it was only a dream.

Work for Rachel was dull, dull, dull. Seven years earlier, after returning from her post-university year out (Thailand, India, Vietnam) she had accidentally fallen into a junior position in a small PR company through a friend of a friend of a friend. It had just been something to do in the short term to pay off her student loans while she decided what she really wanted to do with her life. Over the years, there had been promotions and pay rises, increased responsibility and even her own office, and then somehow, one day, it had become a career. But it wasn't her vocation. It was just something she did - rather brilliantly by all accounts - to help pay the bills.

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In the meantime she'd met a dashing young advertising executive called Simon. He was the friend of a friend of a work colleague and he'd just come back to London after making his name in New York. They met at a party in Clapham and, although she'd been a bit merry by the time they actually exchanged numbers, Rachel thought he was the best-looking, most wonderful man she had ever met. Even Zoe, her cynical best friend, admitted somewhat grudgingly that he was "handsome in a well-bred, well-fed, Home Counties kind of way" and nice and kind because "nothing bad had ever happened to him in his comfortable, middle-class existence". Which was a vote of confidence of sorts. Rachel was certain that there were no chips on his broad shoulders or excess baggage on his muscular back. What you saw was what you got. And she liked what she saw a lot. Rachel had never felt as contented and relaxed as when she was with him.

"When I'm with Simon I feel as if I've found my ""home""," she had gushed to Zoe.

"When I find a man with a luxury penthouse apartment overlooking the Thames then I'll know I've found my home," Zoe had retorted.

If relationships were made or broken on public approval alone, then these two were in it for the long haul. His friends fancied hers and her friends flirted with his. Soon their two groups were permanently intertwined with various sub-relationships. Before long, Zoe started seeing Simon's best mate Anton, and the cosy twosome became an impenetrable foursome. Hell, even their parents approved. There were no silly games or infidelities in the early, uncertain stages of the relationship, and it made sense to everybody when Rachel moved into Simon's Belsize Park flat within six months of meeting him. Zoe might have complained more about losing her flatmate if Anton hadn't been moving in. When Simon proposed a year later, Rachel didn't even consider saying no. They married on a sunny Sunday in June in Hampstead. The bride was raven-haired, tanned and petite, a vision in an ivory couture strapless dress (thanks to her enviable contacts in the fashion world). The men in the congregation secretly wished that they'd rodgered Rachel Rodgers before she'd become Rachel Travis. The single girls felt a pang of unrequited longing as Simon said "I do" and his new mother-in-law said a little too loudly, 'doesn't he look just like Cary Grant?"

Rachel was so delighted with her lot that she cried on and off all day without smudging her waterproof mascara. Simon thought he would explode with pride and couldn't wait to get his new wife into their hotel room that night so that he could rip her designer dress off and get his hands on her sexy little body. They honeymooned in the Maldives and returned to a flat full of state-of-the-art gadgets and tasteful soft furnishings, thanks to their Conran Shop wedding list. Life was good. For a while at least.

But about a year after the wedding Rachel became aware of a slight niggle of discontentment gnawing away at her perfect existence. She wasn't unhappy with her relationship. That was great. It was their London lifestyle that got her down. Life felt just a little bit boring and mundane.

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"It's all too samey," she'd explained to Zoe. 'same office every day, same bars every night, same people, same tube journey, same flat . . ."

"Are you bored of us, babes?" Zoe had asked with a frown.

"No, no, no." Rachel had backtracked, not wanting to hurt her friend's feelings. "But maybe I'm a bit bored of London."

Zoe had scoffed at that. "What do they say? If you're bored of London, you're bored of life." But then she'd never lived anywhere else and was fiercely loyal to her home city.

Rachel had spent her early childhood in leafy Surrey, making daisy chains in her parents" rambling garden and climbing trees in the surrounding fields. And although she'd left the relative peace and quiet of suburbia at a young age, she remembered those days with rose-tinted nostalgia. That's what she wanted for her kids, when she had them, not the noise and pollution of London. More and more, the city began to make her feel claustrophobic, and she craved wide open spaces. Being short didn't help. Sometimes, as she fought her way through the crowds on her way to Tottenham Court Road Tube station after work, Rachel was convinced she would be crushed to death by the seething masses. She wished she could see above their heads, beyond Centre Point, which loomed above her, and out to the world beyond. She felt as if the microcosm of her London existence was false and that while she fought for her personal space with a zillion other miserable commuters, real life was somehow going on beyond the M25.

Simon, being Simon, understood. He agreed that their long-term plan should be to leave London, have children and settle down somewhere less manic. In the meantime he provided his wife with short-term relief by whisking her out of London for little weekend breaks away from big-city living. And that's how they found themselves in Bath that autumn, full of whiskey and plans for the future.

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As winter turned into spring, Rachel felt a stirring somewhere deep inside. It was a kind of squirmy, nauseous niggle.

"I feel weird," she told Simon as she frantically de-iced the fridge with a bread knife. "Kind of restless."

'shall we go away for the weekend then?" suggested Simon. They hadn't left London since they'd had a mini break in Prague in January. "Where do you fancy?"

Rachel shrugged.

"How about Bath again. We could do some house hunting."

Rachel put down the knife and looked up in excitement. 'seriously?" she asked.

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‘seriously," nodded Simon. "I’ve done my sums and, with both our salaries, the income from the Hoxton flat and last year’s Christmas bonus, we can definitely stretch to a cottage in the country."

"Just a lovely little something for the weekend," mused Rachel happily.

"A house for the future," Simon corrected her. ‘somewhere big enough for me, you and the rugby team of boys you’re going to produce for me."

"Oh, that sounds perfect," said Rachel. "Except we’re having a chorus line of girlie girls, remember."

She reached up to Simon, who was just over a foot taller, and snogged the face off him in sheer, unadulterated gratitude for the perfect life he’d given her. They celebrated with three bottles of red wine and a quick romp on the kitchen table. Then Rachel spent the night on the bathroom floor, sporadically throwing up into the toilet.

"You’ve turned into a lightweight," said Simon the next morning as he kissed her clammy forehead goodbye. "I’ll call your office when I get to work and tell them you’ve got flu."

‘thanks, darling," croaked Rachel before crawling back to bed with the mother of all hangovers.

Rachel was still feeling sick three days later as they sat in a smart estate agency in central Bath. But she put the nausea down to the excitement of this, the ultimate shopping spree: buying a house.

George, the estate agent (or property executive as he liked to be known) had found three suitable properties in Bath’s outlying villages. They jumped into his Mercedes and went on a magical mystery tour of the West Country. The former toll-house with rustic charm near Freshford was as delightful as George had promised, but there were only three bedrooms (one the size of an airing cupboard) and the ceilings were so low that Simon, at six foot two, had to stoop. It was almost big enough for a weekend bolthole, but it was never going to be a family home. What’s more, the rain the night before had turned the driveway into a bog.

"Oh no, I’ve got mud all over my Jimmy Choos," squealed Rachel.

It was a definite no no.

The second property, a charming double-fronted village house on the outskirts of Bradford-on-Avon, was much roomier, with four double bedrooms, a large kitchen with an Aga and a conveniently tarmacked drive. What’s more it had been "extensively upgraded by the current owners to provide a stylish family home". But whatever way you looked at it, the house was on the main road to Trowbridge and shook every time a lorry drove by. It wasn’t quite rural enough.

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"I'd worry about the dog with that road," said Rachel pensively.

"We haven't got a dog," Simon reminded her.

"Yet," said Rachel firmly. "We haven't got a dog yet."

On the way to the village of Combe (pronounced "Coom", as George informed them), it started to rain again. But to Rachel the wet weather only added to the area's charm. In London, rain made her want to hibernate, but here it somehow brought the countryside to life. The fields and trees were so green that they dazzled her eyes and she had to put her Chanel shades on.

"Rachel," Simon whispered loudly. "It's pissing down. Take your sunglasses off. You're not on Bond Street now."

"Oops," giggled Rachel. "I'm breaking the countryside code already."

As George's Mercedes pulled into Chillyhill Lane, Rachel knew immediately that it was 'the one". Just as she'd known Simon would be her future husband within five seconds of seeing his chiselled face, so she sensed that Ivy Cottage - "a larger than average, characterful village home dating back to the 17th century in need of some updating" - would be hers.

"Wow! It's gorgeous," she gushed, taking in the ivy-clad Cotswold-stone walls, leaded windows and roses round the door. Suddenly, Rachel had a vision of herself in a long, flowery skirt, carrying a gardening trug filled with roses. A dog trotted obediently at her ankles and an angelic toddler, who had walked straight out of a Baby Gap advert, played contentedly on the lawn. This, she was sure, was her future.

"Looks a bit dilapidated," said Simon doubtfully, taking in the peeling paint work and cracked window panes. "And God knows what damage that ivy's done to the brickwork."

'the property is in need of some TLC," George jumped in. "But it's Grade II-listed and it has heaps of potential. Honestly, properties of this type very rarely come on the market. We only got the instruction yesterday and you're the third couple to have a look. Believe me, if you're interested you'll have to act quickly with this one."

Rachel gave Simon a pleading look. She longed for this house.

"Let's have a look inside before you make an offer, sweetheart," he said sensibly to his wife.

George had promised that the cottage was 'deceptively spacious" and for once the estate agent was telling the truth. The beamed ceilings were high enough for Simon to walk without stooping and all four bedrooms were of a reasonable size - even the attic room in the eaves was large enough to swing a good-sized cat. But Simon still had reservations.

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"I can smell damp," he explained to his starry-eyed wife, who was already perusing Farrow & Ball paint charts, mentally at least. "And the bathroom's downstairs. There's no central heating and I really think we need somewhere with a second loo and a utility room."

'the cottage offers flexible living accommodation," insisted George. "You could knock a few walls down to create a more open living space, move the bathroom upstairs perhaps, and if you look out here" - he kicked open the rotting French doors in the kitchen to reveal a deliciously overgrown cottage garden - "you'll see that there are two outhouses attached to the main building which could be converted into a utility room and a second loo. All subject to planning permission, of course," he mumbled quickly.

"Oh, he's so right," enthused Rachel. "It really is very versatile."

"Now you're beginning to sound like an estate agent," whispered Simon, out of George's earshot.

"Whatever," said Rachel. "Anyway, it's not going to be our full-time home yet, so it doesn't need to be perfect straight away. We'll be in London while the work's being done, so it won't get in our way, will it? Plus, it's twenty-five grand less than our budget."

Rachel was already spending the extra money on Cath Kidston fabrics and Philippe Starck bathroom fittings.

"Our maximum budget, darling," Simon reminded her. "Just because we can spend it, doesn't mean we must spend it. I know that's a concept you find hard to grasp butÑ"

"But it means we can get a new kitchen, a new bathroom and have the garden done," she continued enthusiastically. Rachel was a level-headed woman, but she did have a stubborn streak and her heels were already beginning to dig into the kitchen's flagstone floor.

'this garden is south facing, right?" called out Simon, stepping over brambles towards George, who was trying to locate the well promised on the property's particulars. 'so it gets good sunlight when it's not raining."

"Oh yes," promised George.

"But doesn't this hedge cast a shadow?"

George, Simon and Rachel looked up at the 20 foot beech hedge at the back of the garden.

"Oh no," lied George.

"What's behind there?" asked Rachel, curiously. She could just make out the tip of a turret above the hedge.

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‘the Beeches," said George with grave pomposity. "Lord and Lady Lilywhite Smythe live there, so there’s no need to worry about the neighbours. Fnar, fnar. Actually, this cottage and the one across the lane, Daisy Cottage, used to belong to the manor house - for the staff."

‘don’t they have staff any more?" asked Rachel.

"Oh yes, they still have a number of staff," explained George, proud to be so knowledgeable about the local landed gentry. "But they don’t live in the village these days. They can’t afford it."

"Friends of yours, are they, the Lilywhite Smythes?" asked Simon mischievously, knowing full well that there was no way a jumped-up estate agent would hang out at The Beeches, even in his wildest dreams.

George shuffled his shiny loafers amongst the brambles sheepishly. "No, I don’t know them as such," he admitted. "But one does read about them in society magazines from time to time. Not that I read those magazines, you understand, it’s my wife; she leaves them in the bathroom. Anyway, have I told you about the well. It’s here somewhere."

Over dinner that evening, Rachel and Simon discussed Ivy Cottage.

"Please can we buy it, Si?" pleaded Rachel. "I really love it and I don’t think I’ll ever find a house like that again, and what if someone else puts in an offer first. Oh my God, I’d be gutted, but we could guzump them, couldn’t we, and…"

‘sweetheart," said Simon patiently. "You’ve only spent half an hour of your life in the place, you can’t be that emotionally attached to it."

"Oh, please," she continued. "It spoke to me."

"What, like those Gucci boots I bought you for Christmas? They spoke to you too and you’ve only worn them once," Simon was teasing her, but affectionately. He didn’t mind pandering to her shoe fetish. But he wasn’t about to part with over a quarter of a million pounds on one of Rachel’s whims.

"I do like it," continued Simon. "And the village itself is picture perfect - great pub, village shop, cricket pitch. Maybe I could start playing again in the summer," he pondered. "I played in the firsts at school, have I told you?"

"You might have mentioned it once or twice," teased Rachel.

"OK, you win," said Simon. "I’ll get Gavin over here to have a look and, provided he thinks it’s a sound investment, we’ll put in an offer. Happy?"

"Ecstatic." Rachel lifted her glass of Chianti in celebration.

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Simon's younger brother was a newly qualified architect with skipfulls of enthusiasm and a million bright ideas. One phone call from his brother and he abandoned Notting Hill, jumped in his lime-green Beetle and zipped along the M4 to Bath.

"It's not exactly my cup of tea, Bro," said Gavin as he took in the crumbling cottage. "It's very pretty and all that, but I'm more of a loft-living kind of guy, you know what I mean?"

Rachel and Simon knew what he meant. Gavin was all baggy jeans hanging off his bum and trainers imported from Japan. He had his eyebrow pierced and several tattoos. Gav was only four years younger than Si, and the brothers were very alike physically, but their outlook on life, not to mention their dress sense, belonged to different generations entirely. Rachel secretly quite fancied her brother-in-law. He had a slightly dangerous edge that nice-guy Simon lacked. She guessed that Gavin probably did quite a lot of drugs and had very dirty sex with edgy young girls in the grubby toilets of east London nightclubs at four o"clock in the morning. Simon, on the other hand, drank quite a lot of champagne and made multi-million-pound advertising deals with Chanel-suited American women in expensive restaurants in Belgravia in the middle of the afternoon.

There was an inch of naked flesh visible directly above Gavin's low-slung jeans where his misshapen T-shirt didn't quite meet his boxer shorts. Rachel suddenly realized she'd been staring at this taut, slightly hairy bit of skin for quite some time. Thankfully both brothers were too busy surveying the property to notice her letching. As Gavin ran his fingers through his Hoxton fin, Rachel sighed to herself gently with a shiver of never-to-be-requited longing.

"I'm more into modern industrial-style design than all this period business, man," Gav spoke very slowly, as if permanently stoned. "But you know what, Bro? I think I could do something with this."

"Gavin," said Simon bluntly. "I don't want you to do anything with it. I just want your opinion on the building. Is it about to fall down? Will I get planning permission to move the bathroom? Should I knock down this wall? That sort of thing."

"Oh." Gavin looked disappointed. "I could really have fused ancient with modern here. You know what I mean, man?"

Rachel and Simon didn't have a clue what he meant.

Their offer was accepted on Tuesday morning. Simon was in New York on business, so Rachel celebrated with Zoe and several Caipirinhas in Soho House.

"You'll have to become a member at Babington House," advised Zoe.

"Babington House?" asked Rachel blankly.

Zoe looked at her friend as if she just got off the boat from deepest, darkest Peru.

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'duh. Soho House in the country. Haven't you heard of it? I went to a wedding there last summer, remember. Hilary and Jeremy? The designers."

"Vaguely," said Rachel.

"I wore that red, D&G dress," prompted Zoe. "Anton got trolleyed and tried to snog one of the bridesmaids. Oh, you must remember, I was traumatized for weeks."

Rachel nodded. "I remember now. Anton swears he wasn't trying to snog her he just got his bow tie caught in her tiara."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway," continued Zoe. "Babington was way cool. And it's near Bath somewhere, so you'll have to join. I mean, you won't want to go to the village pub, will you? It'll be full of old people in flat caps who smell of manure."

Zoe was born and bred in Wandsworth. She didn't really do the country. Except for weddings, of course. Rachel and Zoe had been best friends since for ever. Or at least since 1984, when Rachel's parents bought the townhouse next to Zoe's parents on Wandsworth Common. Rachel had moved from a commuter town in Surrey, so was pretty "out of things" in Zoe's opinion. Zoe made it her duty to transform her new neighbour into a cool, happening London chick and had been meddling in Rachel's affairs ever since. The only reason that Rachel had done her degree in Brighton was because Zoe had convinced her that "Brighton really rocks - great clubs, gorgeous men, cool people". She'd been right but, unfortunately, all the gorgeous men had been gay. Not that Rachel minded Zoe's meddling. Zoe was her best friend. She had a right to interfere. And anyway, Rachel's flair for fashion would never have blossomed had it not been for the gay men she'd met as a student.

Some people, Simon in particular, were baffled by Rachel and Zoe's friendship. It appeared to work like this - Rachel was a supportive, nurturing, ego-boosting friend to Zoe, while Zoe spent much of her time insulting Rachel with catty comments and hurtful digs. It had always been that way. But Rachel knew that, deep down, Zoe loved her. She was just prickly and defensive and scared of being hurt. Her dad had left when she was a baby and her mum had been too busy trying to scrape by to give any of her three children much attention. Over the years, Zoe had developed a hard shell and a permanent sneer to ward off the world. She was determined not to let anyone get too close. But Rachel was well aware that Zoe depended on their friendship. It had been the most stable, permanent relationship in her life.

"You're not going to move away properly, though, are you?" Zoe asked with a worried expression. "I mean, I think you might get a bit bored."

"God no," lied Rachel. She hadn't plucked up the courage to tell Zoe her long-term plans. "We'll just use it for weekends and holidays and stuff. There are four bedrooms, so we can all go down - you and Anton, me and Si, and anyone else who wants to tag along. The whole crew. Can you imagine? We can drink Pimms in the garden in summer and Baileys in front of a real fire at Christmas."

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‘thank God for that," said Zoe. "I had a horrible vision of you in one of those hideous Driza-Bone coats for a moment there. It was quite scary. Drink?"

Rachel said yes please, even though she was beginning to feel sick again.

Rachel rummaged in her handbag for the cigarettes she'd bought the night before. She awkwardly lit a cigarette on the gas hob, singeing her hair as she did so, and returned to the bathroom in a cloud of smoke. She paced the tiled floor impatiently, sneaking furtive glances at the offending white tube that mocked her from its perch on the side of the bath. Rachel willed the second line not to appear. She screwed her eyes up really tightly and prayed to any God that would listen.

"Please don’t let me be pregnant. Please, please, please," she pleaded.

The cigarette made her feel sick but she persevered. She needed something to do with her hands while she waited for the seconds to tick away on her watch face. Eventually, it was time. Rachel threw the fag into the sink and picked up the pregnancy test. It shook in her hand. Slowly, very slowly, she had a peek. There, as bold as the first, was a second blue line. She shut her eyes to make it disappear. Then she opened them and checked the box. She read the instructions very slowly and out loud, so as to be sure she'd got it right.

"If a second blue line appears then the test result is positive. Bollocks!"

Rachel tore open the second test from the box and tried to squeeze out another pee. She managed to produce a dribble. Then she redid the entire process: light cigarette, pace nervously, pray, quick peek, definite blue line, re-read the box, bollocks!

She burst into tears.

"I don’t want to be pregnant," she wailed to the empty bathroom. "I'm too young." Rachel was almost 29. Yes, she'd always wanted children, sometime in the vague and distant future, but not now. Now was way too soon. Way too scary.

Rachel walked on shaky legs to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of red wine. It was an automatic response to any shock. She had gulped down half the glass before she realized she shouldn’t be drinking in her condition, or smoking, or having any sort of irresponsible fun at all.

She poured the wine down the kitchen sink, slithered into a heap on the kitchen floor and stared numbly at the wall. It was at this exact moment that Simon chose to arrive home from New York.

"Rachel!" he bellowed from the front door. "I'm home . . . What’s that smell?"

Nobody ever smoked in their pristine flat - at Rachel’s insistence - so no one could blame Simon for being a little taken aback by the cloud of smoke that hit him as he

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walked in. He found his wife, slouched on the kitchen floor with a shell-shocked expression on her face.

"Rachel, what's going on? You've been smoking? You don't smoke," said Simon, scratching his head.

"I do," pouted Rachel. 'sometimes."

"Yeah, but only when you're out with Zoe, totally legless and completely beyond rational thinking. You don't smoke in the middle of the day in our flat."

Rachel shrugged. "It was an emergency."

"Rach, you thought Gavin should pay for the curtains to be dry-cleaned last time he smoked in this flat. You're being really weird. What's going on?"

"I'm pregnant," she blurted out.

Simon's legs buckled slightly and, for a split second, he looked as though he'd been slapped around the face with a large fish.

"Pregnant," he repeated as if the word were completely alien to him. "What do you mean, pregnant?"

"It means," replied Rachel solemnly, 'that in approximately eight months" time we're going to have a baby. What's more, in the months leading up to that monumental event, I'm going to get enormously fat, develop varicose veins and stretch marks."

"But how?" Simon dropped his holdall on the kitchen floor and slithered down onto the floor next to his wife. "How did you get pregnant?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "How do you think, Si? I haven't been abducted by aliens in the night, and no angels have visited me, proclaiming the arrival of the second messiah, so I assume it happened when you and I had sex at some point."

"But we're always so careful," he insisted. 'since you stopped taking the pill we've always, always used condoms."

They stared at each other blankly, both at a loss to recall the moment of conception, and then, simultaneously, the penny dropped.

"Zoe's birthday," they announced in unison.

Five weeks earlier, Zoe had turned thirty and Anton had arranged a suitably glamorous celebration for his girlfriend's "coming of old age" (as she put it). Anton worked for a City bank who owned, amongst many other status symbols, a rather ostentatious boat which was moored on the Thames in Chelsea. If an employee made

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the company enough money, he or she would be awarded with one night's free use of the vessel. Anton had recently made the deal of the decade, and so Zoe's party took place on the water. The boat had been decorated with balloons, streamers and banners, supplied with enough delicious canapŽs to feed a battalion of marines and laden with enough bottles of champagne to sink a battleship. The boat had been fully staffed and the dress code was "glitzy and glam".

Zoe did not disappoint her guests. She wore a silver satin dress, four-inch heels and a white feathered headdress in her peroxide blonde crop. Only Rachel had upstaged her - by accident, as always - in a scarlet floor-length gown, large gold hoop earrings and a rose in her jet-black hair. She'd looked like a gypsy queen, and when she'd stepped onto the boat behind Zoe, all eyes had been on the best friend rather than the birthday girl. This fact was not lost on Zoe. It never was. Zoe would spend hours carefully choosing her outfit, applying her mask of make-up and blow-drying her hair, while Rachel would just throw something on at the last minute, add a dollop of mascara and a smudge of lippie, run her hand through her hair and there she was, the belle of every ball. Zoe was attractive in a well-groomed way. She was not really a natural beauty but years of careful shopping, highlighting and working out had made the most of what nature had provided. Rachel, on the other hand, had been blessed with the kind of good looks that don't require make-up or good lighting. Rachel could stumble into bed at 2 a.m. and wake up five hours later with mascara smeared over her face and still look beautiful. It made Zoe want to spit.

The girls had drunk and shimmied, gossiped and giggled in the comfortable, if unconventional, manner they'd developed over almost two decades.

"You look gorgeous," Rachel had said to Zoe. 'that dress is fabulous on you."

'thanks, babes," Zoe had replied. "Yours is nice too, but I think you should have got it in a bigger size. Have you put on weight?"

Rachel had glanced down at her almost flat stomach and shrugged.

"Maybe a little bit," she'd replied cheerfully. "But it's winter, and we all need a bit of extra padding in the cold weather." Unlike Zoe, Rachel was not particularly vain.

Simon and Anton had propped up the bar and watched their women boogie. Simon had smiled happily at the scene, proud to be Rachel's husband, knowing full well that every man on the boat would have swapped his Christmas bonus to be in his Gucci loafers. Anton knew it too. And he knew how hard it was for Zoe to always be second best. He'd watched the girls over the years and he'd listened to Zoe's drunken rantings about how Rachel was so perfect and how she'd never come close. Zoe would never have said those things to Rachel, but she said them back home, in their flat, at the end of the night when she was drunk and tired and emotional.

He always told her she was wrong, but in a way he knew she was right. Facts were facts - Rachel was prettier in a conventional way, kinder, definitely, and probably easier to love. Zoe had always been more of a challenge but over time Anton had started to love her, jagged edges and all. Mind you, Rachel was very easy on the eye.

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He watched his girlfriend's best friend jiggle her curvy little body and sighed to himself. He'd never been tempted to touch, but he did like to look.

Rachel had beamed at Simon and Anton and shaken her butt to the music.

'she's quite a mover, Rachel," Anton had mused. "Puts Beyoncy to shame."

"Zoe's not bad, either," Simon had added chari- tably, without taking his eyes off his wife. Rachel was always the best dancer on any dance floor.

Zoe meanwhile, desperately tried to copy Rachel's moves, and was doing a moderately good job, but while Rachel laughed and tossed her long hair, enjoying the music, Zoe wore a studied frown of concentration. She'd glanced up just in time to catch Anton eyeing up Rachel and her cheeks burned with indignation. She knew he had a crush on her; it was embarrassingly obvious.

Every now and then Zoe would trip over her stilettos, blush and look over to the boys, to make sure they hadn't seen her mistake. But it was Simon, not Anton, she was trying to impress. Despite the fact that she constantly put him down to Rachel, Zoe adored Simon. Not in a platonic, best-mate's-husband kind of way, but in the Biblical sense. The fact was, she had seen him first. She'd been the one who'd had the nerve to approach him and start chatting. Rachel had just sat there, fluttering her obscenely long eyelashes and flicking her glossy hair. Zoe had done all the leg work, but it was Rachel's number he'd asked for at the end of the night. In time, Zoe had come to terms with the fact that Rachel had won the man, but Zoe was still determined to win the war. Eventually she'd settled for Anton, but the truth was that Zoe still loved Simon.

"Let's dance on the tables," Rachel had proclaimed, pert buttocks jiggling.

The boat had lurched down the Thames and Zoe had tripped over Rachel's long dress.

"OK," she'd said, uncertainly.

Rachel had hopped gracefully onto a table and started doing a faux pole dance. Zoe had clambered up after her and tried to join in, but her shoes were too high and the boat swayed too much and

she'd had too much champagne to balance. As Rachel had danced, Zoe had fallen flat on her face on the grimy dance floor, and when she'd stood up her beautiful dress had been covered in beer stains and cigarette ash.

"Are you OK, darling?" Rachel had asked, jumping off the table to help her best friend. 'shall I help you wash your dress in the loos?"

"No, I'm fine," Zoe had snapped. "Just leave me alone." Before storming off towards the deck.

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Anton had scurried after her, leaving Rachel and Simon alone.

"What have I done now?" Rachel had asked with a confused frown.

"You don't have to do anything, darling," Simon had answered, shaking his head at Zoe's retreating back. 'she's just jealous of you."

'don't be silly," Rachel had scoffed. 'that's nonsense."

Simon watched as a drop of perspiration meandered its way down Rachel's neck, over her collar bone and then disappeared into her cleavage. His wife was so sexy that it was no wonder Zoe was jealous.

"You look extra hot tonight, Rach," Simon had panted into her ear. "I think I might need some fresh air to cool me off."

Rachel had laughed and grabbed her husband's hand, leading him out into the cold winter night. It had been a clear, starry evening, and as the couple arrived on deck, the boat was just passing the London Eye.

"Isn't it beautiful," Rachel had exclaimed. "London looks best from the river."

Simon and Rachel found a quiet spot at the back of the boat and leaned against a life boat. Simon's hand had found flesh under Rachel's dress and he sighed as he felt the velvety softness of her skin. Rachel giggled under his touch. She was drunk and giddy and excited.

"I haven't got a condom," Simon had whispered.

Rachel had been taken off the pill a couple of months earlier after suffering from migraines.

"Never mind," Rachel had shrugged. "We can still be careful."

But, of course, they hadn't been careful. Not nearly careful enough.

Rachel and Simon sat on the kitchen floor in shocked silence.

"A baby," said Simon after a while. "We're going to have a baby."

"A real live, crying, breathing, pooing, puking baby," Rachel added.

"It's what we wanted," Simon reminded himself and Rachel, but he didn't sound convinced. "It's just sooner than we'd planned."

Rachel turned round and looked at her husband with huge, scared eyes. "I'm not sure I'm ready," she whispered.

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Simon pulled her towards him and kissed the top of her head. "We'll be OK," he promised, uncertainly. "It's just a bit of a shock, that's all. We'll be brilliant parents."

'do you think?" Rachel bit her wobbly bottom lip.

"I know it," he replied, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure at all.

"Pregnant?" said Anton, incredulously, when Simon told him the news. 'shit! That's a bit of a bombshell."

"It is," agreed Simon, sipping his beer and lounging comfortably on Anton and Zoe's leather couch. "But we've kind of got our heads around it now and it'll be cool."

"Aren't you scared, mate?" asked Anton. He peered at Simon over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. "I mean, getting hitched was a brave move, but babies, that's serious stuff. It's like, really grown-up."

"I know." Simon grinned. "But it's about time we all started acting like adults."

Anton shrugged. "If you say so, Si," he pondered. "Fancy a game on the PlayStation?"

"Good idea," enthused Simon like an overgrown ten-year-old. "But I want to be James Bond."

Zoe was struggling to take in the news of Rachel's pregnancy. The wedding had been difficult enough, with all the shopping for gorgeous dresses, planning dream honeymoons, organizing hen weekends in exclusive health spas and having to do the whole chief bridesmaid thing. Not to mention the fact that she was secretly in love with the groom. The "Big Day" had been painful for Zoe. She'd walked up the aisle behind Rachel, taking in Simon's beaming face as he'd spotted his radiant bride-to-be. When he'd said, "I do", she could tell he meant it right down to the tips of his toes and she'd stood there, next to the happy couple, trying to let go of the feelings she had for him, knowing they were wrong, but still wishing that she could be Mrs Travis. Meanwhile Anton, the best man, had been closely watching his girlfriend for signs of unrequited love. He'd long since suspected that Zoe had the hots for Simon and when he watched her face fall as the vows were said, he knew he was right.

When the wedding photos were printed, Rachel had noticed that both Zoe and Anton were wearing rather strained smiles. "I think they must have fallen out and not wanted to tell us in case they ruined the day," she'd said to Simon. "Nah," Simon had mocked. "Zoe was probably just heartbroken that I was off the market and Anton, well, Anton always looks like that." Rachel had laughed at her new husband.

And now Rachel and Simon were having a baby. It was the end of an era for them all. Zoe knew that the minute that little embryo had implanted itself in Rachel's

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womb, their friendship had changed for ever. Rachel would be far too busy with her own life from now on to continue pandering to Zoe's.

Oh, she'd put on a brave face, as Rachel had excitedly told her the news in the pub after work. Christ, she'd known something was up when Rach had ordered an orange juice. That was a revelation in itself. She'd tried really hard to bite her tongue and stop anything nasty escaping from her mouth. But it was difficult to just sit there and watch Rachel glow with excitement.

"Ugh!" she'd said. "You'll get stretch marks and your boobs will sag. And I've heard that almost everybody does a poo when they give birth."

Rachel had sat there for a moment with a horrified look on her face, and then she'd giggled and replied, "Oh well, it's Simon who'll be at the end where all the action takes place. I won't be able to see a thing. And I plan on having so much pain relief that I won't be able to feel anything from the neck down."

Rachel always took Zoe's insults so well. Never once had she said, "Actually, Zoe, that was really out of line. Shut up." It was all it would have taken to make Zoe stop, and the truth was that Zoe had been expecting a backlash for years. But Rachel understood the game. Zoe was insecure. She said nasty things to test Rachel's loyalty to her. If Rachel took it, as she always did, it meant that she really loved her. If she ever stood up for herself, it would mean game over and Zoe would be left alone, just as she always suspected she would be.

Zoe played the same game with Anton, but with less success. She had quickly learned that Anton wouldn't take any shit. If she put him down

he would just say, "Well go, if I'm not good enough for you. I'll survive." And Zoe was sure he would. He was very smart and sociable and fun to have around. Plus he was a good-looking guy in a slightly nerdy way. He was a little too tall at six foot four, and a little too thin. But he had floppy black hair which he was always tossing out of his dark eyes in the cutest possible way, and underneath his crisp City-boy shirts was a torso so toned it made Zoe want to weep. Oh, he wasn't in Simon's league - Simon was Batman and Anton was Robin - but she was sure, deep down, that he was too good for her. She would lose him too. Eventually. In the meantime she continued pushing him away, testing him, waiting to see how much he'd take before he proved her right and walked away.

Zoe let herself into the flat and found Anton and Simon playing on the PlayStation. They had met up straight from work and both wore expensive suits and shiny Italian shoes. Anton's glasses made him look older and more responsible than he actually was. But the men were lying on their stomachs in front of the TV, kicking their legs excitedly behind them and punching each other playfully on the arm as they shot at each other on screen. Zoe could see quite clearly the little boys in thirty-something bodies on her living-room floor.

"Hello, love," said Anton cheerfully. "Good day?"

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"It was OK," replied Zoe flatly.

"Hi, Zoe," called Simon without turning round.

She felt the usual pang of disappointment when Simon failed to notice her.

"Oh bollocks! You shot me in the nads," exclaimed Anton.

"Game over," said Simon cheerfully. "I am victorious."

The men sat up and faced Zoe.

"Has Rachel told you our news?" asked Simon excitedly. "It's amazing, isn't it? I'm going to be a daddy."

Zoe nodded. "Congratulations," she said coldly before disappearing into the bedroom and closing the door.

"What's up with her?" asked Simon.

Anton shrugged. "Ignore her," he said. 'she's being a right moody cow at the moment."

"You must have done something wrong," said Simon. 'she's huffing and you've got to guess why."

"Probably." Anton sighed. "But I can't be bothered with all these games."

"Maybe she wants you to propose," suggested Simon.

Anton frowned. "God, I hope not. I'm not getting married. Not now. Not to Zoe."

"No?"

"No way. I've told you, I'm saving myself for Kylie."

"Of course," Simon remembered grinning. "Zoe's just a filler until Ms Minogue is ready for you."

"Exactly."

Simon turned to Anton and looked serious for a moment. "You shouldn't mess her around, though, if you're not serious. I know she's a bit . . ." he searched for the word.

"Of a nightmare?" suggested Anton.

"No, I was going to say touchy," replied Simon. "But, you know, I hear stuff from Rachel, and Zoe's not had an easy time of it. You mustn't string her along."

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"I'm not," insisted Anton. "Zoe and me, we're fine. I know I take the piss out of her moodiness sometimes, but I do like her - a lot. Christ, I probably even love the mardy mare. She's a great girl, she's got a lot going for her - she's sexy and funny and she gives the best blow job in the whole damn world, but I'm not sure she's Òthe one"". I'm not her dream man either. That I am sure of."

Simon scratched his head. He loved Rachel so much that he couldn't understand his best friend's so-so relationship. What was the point in hanging around if she wasn't 'the one".

"Why do you stay with her?" he asked. "If there's no future?"

"Because," said Anton, flicking his hair out of his spectacles. 'she's an animal in bed."

'really?" asked Simon.

'really," confirmed Anton. "Why do you think I'm always so knackered? She's a three-times-a-night girl, and the imagination she uses. Jesus! She's taught me positions the Karma Sutra didn't think of. Must be all that yoga. Right, you ready to have your ass whipped, boy?"

The men turned back onto their stomachs and began a new game, but Simon couldn't concentrate. He kept thinking about Anton and Zoe's sex life. Why wasn't Rachel an animal in bed, he wondered. He thought best girlfriends shared everything, particularly sex tips.

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