Divided Loyalties

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Extract

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WINTER

1

'Let's try for another baby?' Shauna Cassidy fingered the flat, full pack of her contraceptive pill and scowled resentfully. Her husband, Greg, groaned from his side of the bed.

'Aw, Shauna, I don't know. Chloe's been such a handful since she was born, and besides, she's only two.'

'Don't say that,' Shauna flared indignantly, her heart sinking at his negativity. This wasn't the first time that she'd broached the subject of trying for another baby. For the last couple of months she'd become increasingly broody. She wanted Chloe to have a brother or sister close in age to her but, so far, Greg wasn't having any of it.

'Come on, Shauna.' He yawned and nearly gave himself lockjaw. 'She had colic for the first year. And that bloody reflux. Not to talk about the temperatures every time she's getting a tooth. She

rarely sleeps a full night, we've only just started to have a social life again and we're moving to the Emirates in January. Your timing is lousy.'

As if on cue, a fretful squawk from the room across the landing turned into a heart-rending howl. 'And you want another one?' Greg muttered, turning on his side and pulling the duvet up over his ears. Shauna glared down at him.

'Come on, Greg! I don't want to start another month on the Pill; we need to talk about this sooner rather than later.'

'Not tonight. I'm knackered. For God's sake go in to her or we'll never get to sleep,' he growled.

'Ah you're always knackered,' she said exasperatedly as she threw back the duvet and hurried into the next room to comfort their little daughter.

Greg felt the tension begin to seep out of his body as he stretched his limbs and heard Chloe's sobs peter out as his wife's soft crooning soothed her. Was the woman mad? he wondered drowsily. Imagine two babies in the house, screeching and yelling. He loved his daughter but she'd completely disrupted their lives. Even Shauna couldn't deny that. They rarely had a night out together. Everything had to be arranged around

feeding times and nap times. It was a pain in the butt. There were times he even felt that Shauna was so completely focused on Chloe and her needs that she'd hardly notice if he wasn't around any more. He remembered how she'd always made a fuss of him and danced attendance on him before she'd got pregnant. Those days were a distant memory.

Perhaps it would all change when they went back out to the Gulf. He was really looking forward to going to work in the Emirates, despite the instability in the region. He'd kept in contact with people he'd known and they all assured him that life went on very much as normal in spite of the volatile political situation. Shauna felt a little jittery sometimes, especially when the bombs had gone off in the residential compounds, but Greg had pointed out that Abu Dhabi was much more stable than Saudi and far more cosmopolitan. The war in Iraq wasn't having such an impact there. Look at all the people going out on holidays and buying property in Dubai, which was only a couple of hours' drive down the highway, he'd pointed out reassuringly. If they didn't go now they'd never go, he urged. His wife had reluctantly agreed, knowing that he was right, at least about the timing.

They'd met at a party in Riyadh ten years ago. He was an architect in a big construction company. Shauna had worked in the personnel department. They were both in their early twenties, making lots of money and having a ball. They'd clicked and started dating. Greg sighed, remembering those carefree days. They'd had a great, relatively stress-free couple of years and then come home to get married.

The money they'd made in Saudi had bought them a four-bedroom house in Malahide; they hadn't even needed a mortgage. They'd bought it in Shauna's name so they wouldn't have to pay stamp duty as they were still paying off the mortgage on the place that Greg had bought when he was single. The apartment was now let, and the rent more than covered the mortgage repayments.

Greg wanted to increase his property portfolio and get into the property business in a big way. He'd bought and renovated two small redbrick houses in Cabra and made a relatively good profit on them. It had given him the taste for property speculation. Another stint in the Gulf would boost the bank balance enough to get him on the next rung of the property ladder.

It had all been going swimmingly until Shauna

had got broody. He'd managed to put her off for a few years but she'd said that she didn't want to be too old having her first child and that thirty was considered quite old for a first-time mother. Reluctantly, he'd agreed to try for a baby. Chloe had been conceived a couple of months after they'd stopped using contraception and Shauna had been over the moon.

Greg scowled under the duvet. It seemed she was getting broody again. As he'd told her, her timing was lousy. Well, she could forget it. When they moved back to the Gulf they'd have an au pair to help out with Chloe and they were going to start having fun and socializing again. Life in Abu Dhabi would be far less restricted than their life had been in Saudi. It was just what they needed. Once they were out there, she'd forget all this baby stuff. His eyelids drooped and within minutes he was asleep.

Shauna could hear her husband's snores rumbling across the landing. Selfish lump, she thought sourly. Greg rarely got up to attend to Chloe. *You wanted her, you deal with her* was the unspoken reproach that had permeated their marriage since she'd had the baby.

What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he

enjoy their child? Why couldn't he see that it would be good for them to have another baby, sooner rather than later, so that the children would be companions for each other? It made sense. They'd be around the same stage getting through all the childhood and teenage stuff. They'd be close to each other, there for each other in times of trouble, just like her siblings were there for her.

She looked down at Chloe's blond head nestled into her shoulder and her heart contracted with love. Her daughter's curls were the colour of spun gold and framed her head like an angelic halo. Her two little cheeks were fire-engine red and her chin was damp from dribbles. Shauna wiped her mouth tenderly with a soft bib. Chloe whimpered.

'It's all right, darling. Let's give you a drop of Calpol and you'll be as right as rain,' she murmured, stifling a yawn. It looked as if it could be a bumpy night. If she was up with one child she might as well be up with two, she thought resentfully. If she didn't get pregnant soon Chloe would be too old for her sibling. She'd love to have another little girl. It would be wonderful for her daughter to have a sister. Shauna smiled, thinking of her own sister, Carrie. She was really

going to miss her when she went back out to the Gulf. Not only was Carrie her sister, she was her best friend. She'd understand Shauna's desire for another baby better than anyone would.

2

Carrie Morgan hated maths, always had and always would. She'd thought she'd finished with the damn thing for good when she'd left school. She hadn't reckoned she'd be battling with it again in her thirties. And losing badly, at that.

If she was having problems with subtraction how on earth was she going to manage when her children were doing isosceles triangles and all that gobbledegook? She tried again, as patiently as she could.

'Eight from seven you cannot take. Borrow one and cross off the—'

'No, Mom! That's not the way Teacher does it,' Olivia wailed. Carrie stared at her daughter in exasperation.

'Well that's the way we did it at school. I don't understand the way your teacher does it.' This new way of doing maths was doing her head in.

'That's 'cos you're stupid, Mom,' Olivia yelled as she stomped out of the kitchen in high dudgeon.

'Olivia Morgan!' Carrie roared. 'Come back here and don't be so cheeky. How *dare* you?' At precisely that moment the pot of homemade vegetable soup bubbled over, the creamy froth foaming across the top of the cooker.

'Lord Almighty give me patience,' she muttered, lifting the pot off the heat. She could hear Olivia sobbing her way upstairs.

'Mom, it's just not your day.' Her son, Davey, chewed his pen at the other end of the kitchen table as he struggled with his English spellings.

'I guess not.' She managed a smile as she wiped away the mess. Davey, thank God, was placid and easy-going compared to his younger sister, who was definitely going to end up on the stage, she thought ruefully. High drama and Olivia went hand in hand.

'Do you know how to do the subtraction the way Miss Kenny does it?' she asked him hopefully.

'I think so, Mom. Will I try and explain it to Olivia?' he offered.

'We'll let her calm down for a minute. You finish your spellings and we'll have another go.'

The shrill jangle of the phone made her sigh. 'Hello.' She tried to hide her irritation.

'Carrie, I'm not feeling very well. Could you drop my dinner over instead of me having to come over to you?' her father, Noel, said in his martyr voice. He usually ate dinner with them in the evening.

'What's the matter with you?' She tried to inject a note of concern into her voice. This was all she needed.

'I've a pain in my arm. I'm sure it's nothing,' he said mournfully.

Carrie's heart sank. As sure as eggs were eggs she'd end up bringing him to the doctor who'd arrange blood tests and ECGs, all of which he'd had done before.

'Right. I'll be over later. I'll have to bring the kids with me; Dan's working late.'

'Thanks, love,' her father said gratefully. 'See you later.'

As if I haven't enough to be doing, she thought grumpily as she added a slab of butter and a sprinkling of salt to the potatoes and wielded her masher with a vengeance.

Noel lived in a bungalow at the other end of the large seaside village of Whiteshells Bay, in North County Dublin, where she had grown up. It was

convenient that he lived so close, but tonight was not a good night for one of his hypochondriac episodes.

Tonight was Boy Scouts night. She'd been hoping Dan would be home to bring Davey to the club, but the sprinkler system in one of his glasshouses had gone on the blink and it had to be sorted. He'd sounded pissed off when he'd phoned her, so she'd bitten back her grumbling reproach and told him she'd keep his dinner for him. Dan worked hard for his family. He'd built up a sizeable market gardening business on the farm his father had left him but he had to spend long hours at work sometimes, to Carrie's intense frustration.

'You'll be dead before you're fifty!' she had exploded in exasperation one wet, windy Sunday morning a few weeks ago, when he'd got out of bed while it was still dark to get dressed to go and inspect his glasshouses.

'Forty-five, even,' he teased as he towelled his chestnut hair dry after his shower.

'I'm serious,' she retorted, thinking how fit he looked as he stood, all six foot one of him, bare-chested, lean and rangy, in front of her, with a towel tied at his waist.

'Ah don't be grumpy,' he chided, bending down

to kiss her. She'd kissed him back, unable to stay mad at him.

'Come back to bed,' she urged, wanting him, running her fingers through his damp hair.

'I've a date with a hot tomato,' he murmured, nibbling her ear. 'When I get back.'

She'd watched him leave, half exasperated, half amused. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, auburn layers sticking up wildly, a dusting of freckles across her nose, green eyes, fringed with dark lashes, a tad puffy. No wonder he preferred his tomatoes, she thought ruefully as she burrowed back down in the bed and fell asleep almost instantly.

Imagine having to compete with a tomato for your husband's affections, she'd complained to Shauna, who'd called over to visit later that day.

'Tell me about it,' her sister said dryly. 'I've to compete with drawing boards and T-squares.'

'And you're the good-looking one in our family,' Carrie remarked, wondering how her younger sister always managed to look so groomed and elegant. Her naturally blond hair fell over her shoulders in a silky curtain. Her eyes, as blue as cornflowers, sparkled over high cheekbones and she had a gorgeous snub nose that Carrie had

always envied. Shauna was slender and petite. Carrie always felt like an Amazon beside her.

'You have curves where women are meant to have curves,' Dan constantly assured her, with an appreciative glint in his blue eyes that always made her feel good about herself.

'I was dying for a shag last night and Greg fell asleep on me. I went to brush my teeth and go to the loo and when I came back into the bedroom he was snoring,' Shauna moaned.

'So much for our sex appeal.' Carrie grinned. Shauna had giggled in spite of herself and they'd comforted themselves with a slice of coffee cake.

Carrie spooned carrot and parsnip mash onto the heated plates, and gave a wry smile as she remembered that particular Sunday. Shauna had taken Chloe, Davey and Olivia to the zoo and she and Dan had spent the afternoon in bed making the most of a child-free Sunday afternoon.

'I ended it with the Tomato,' Dan had whispered mischievously as he slid his fingers up under her T-shirt, making her shiver with anticipation.

It had been a loving, lusty afternoon and she had reason to remember it now, she thought ruefully, as her breasts ached with soreness. Her period was late and she didn't need a test to know

that she was pregnant. Maybe that was why she was so crotchety lately. Poor Olivia. If she thought life was tough now, wait until her nose was put out of joint by the new arrival.

'Olivia, come down and have your dinner, pet, and we'll have another go at the sums,' she called placatingly.

'Don't want any dinner,' Olivia shouted huffily.

'OK, I'll give an extra portion to Dad and Davey,' Carrie challenged.

Silence.

Then, sulkily, 'I'm coming.'

Carrie smiled as she plated up Dan's and her father's dinner. Was that child psychology, emotional blackmail or what? At least it had worked for today. Now if she could only get a handle on those bloody sums she'd be doing OK.

She was glad to flop onto the sofa once the children were in bed. She'd seemed to spend the evening getting in and out of the car. She'd dropped off Davey at his Scouts. Then she'd bought a pregnancy test kit, delivered her father's dinner, brought in his washing off the line, and gone shopping for cat food for him.

Her father had eaten all his dinner, and told her that he felt a little better. He'd looked fine to her. He didn't look pale or flushed, but he had

confided that he'd been talking to a neighbour who'd told him that one of the neighbours down the road had suffered a heart attack. Carrie could see his medical encyclopedia beside his armchair and guessed that he'd been reading up on the symptoms. One day she was going to burn that damn book, she thought irritably. Next to the Bible, it was the most well-thumbed volume in her father's house.

Afterwards she brought Olivia into Seashells Café for hot chocolate, as a treat to make up for their earlier tiff. Seashells Café was one of their favourite haunts. It was right in the middle of the village, beside Fisherman's Lane, and its big bay windows had panoramic views of the coast and sea. In summer it was always packed with day-trippers to the beach, but at this time of year it wasn't so busy and she and Olivia had settled at one of the round pine tables in the bay window. It was a bright, airy place, decorated in nautical blues and creams, and the walls were hung with a selection of framed sepia photos of the village in the 'olden days', as her daughter called them. They'd sipped their hot chocolate companionably and made their peace with each other, before collecting Davey, who proudly showed them his collection of nautical knots.

Dan had arrived home around nine, yawning his head off, and wolfed his dinner.

'You look whacked,' he observed as he handed her a mug of tea and a chocolate Kimberly a little later.

'I am.' She snuggled in beside him on the sofa in the den. A fire blazed up the chimney and she felt pleasantly relaxed. 'And it's going to get worse.'

'Why?' He eyed her quizzically.

'Remember the Sunday afternoon that you shagged me senseless?'

'Yessss . . .' he said slowly, his blue eyes widening as comprehension began to dawn.

'I think I'm pregnant.' Carrie studied him warily. They hadn't actually discussed having a third child.

'You *think* . . .'

'Well, I'm more or less sure. I just have to do a test to confirm it and I wanted us to do it together.'

'Do you want to do it now?' Dan asked. Stoically.

'Will we?'

'Come on, so.' He pulled her to her feet and dropped an arm round her shoulder.

'Do you mind if I am?' she asked hesitantly. If

Dan wasn't happy about her being pregnant she'd be gutted.

'Of course I don't if you're OK with it.' He smiled down at her and she felt inexplicably happy. Dan Morgan was the best thing that had ever happened to her. She was still as crazy about him as she'd been when they'd first married.

'So it looks like we're pregnant,' he said ten minutes later as they studied the wand she held, which showed two unmistakable blue lines. His arms tightened around her and they kissed until she drew away breathless.

'By the way,' he murmured as his hands slid down to her waist and over the curve of her hips. 'I just want to clarify one thing. It was *you* that shagged *me* senseless that Sunday afternoon.'

'Whatever you say, darling. Let's do it again. Just be gentle with the boobs, they're ready to explode!' Carrie whispered, tiredness forgotten as her hormones ran rampant at the touch of his fingers.

Later as she lay drowsily in the crook of his arm she thought of Shauna. This new baby would be a playmate for Chloe in years to come. As it was, Olivia and Davey were very protective of their little cousin. Carrie was looking forward to telling her sister her news. She'd ring Shauna first thing

in the morning and arrange for them to have lunch or coffee. She was glad Shauna was still at home to share her good news. It would be much nicer to tell her face to face than to say it down a phone line when she was thousands of miles away. She was going to miss Shauna like hell. Why she wanted to up sticks and head out to live in a war zone was unfathomable. But that didn't seem to bother her or Greg unduly. As needles of rain began to hurl themselves against the bedroom window and the east wind blew in from the sea, Carrie mused that if it were her, she wouldn't bring her kids to live in a place as unstable as the Gulf.

She was dreading her sister's departure to the Emirates. Their father was getting more demanding and they'd always shared the responsibility of him since their mother had died three years ago. Now, with another baby on the way, and Shauna leaving for God knows how long, Carrie couldn't help feeling more than a little daunted.

Shauna led such a charmed life, she always had. Sometimes Carrie couldn't help feeling the tiniest bit envious. Wouldn't it be lovely to go to an exotic country and have maids and nannies to help you manage? It would be fabulous to spend your time partying and socializing. Even though Whiteshells Bay was a picturesque little seaside

village, and Carrie liked living in it, exotic was hardly the adjective to describe it.

She sighed, and then smiled as Dan gave a low rumbling snore. She might live in a sleepy seaside village, and she might be pregnant and have an ageing, demanding father to take care of, but she had a kind, witty, supportive, sexy husband and two good little children. She wasn't doing too badly at all.

The phone rang, jerking her into wakefulness tinged with dread. Phone calls at this hour of the night weren't good news.

'Hello, Carrie, it's Dad. I think I need a doctor. The pain's gone into my chest. I think I'm having a heart attack.' She could hear the panic in her father's voice.

'You're not having a heart attack. Stop getting yourself into a tizzy. I'll be there in a minute,' she assured him.

'I didn't like to bother Shauna. I know the baby's teething,' her father said feebly. 'And besides, you're nearer.'

'That's OK. I'll be over as soon as I get dressed.' Carrie tried not to feel resentful. It wouldn't have mattered if Shauna lived next door to him; their father would always call Carrie in an emergency. He and his younger daughter didn't

get on too well. Their personalities had always clashed, but since his wife's death the hostility between them had deepened. And as for Bobby, the youngest in their family, he had washed his hands of his father just as Noel had washed his hands of him. Carrie would be wasting her time expecting any help from him. Not that he could help anyway right this minute, seeing as he lived in London, she thought glumly. She yawned as she pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. She couldn't honestly blame Bobby after the way their father had treated him. Her only brother was gay and that was anathema to their father, an affront to his religious beliefs. Once their mother had died, Bobby had gone to London, unable to deal with his father's hostility. Understandable, but it didn't change the fact that she was the one getting up in the middle of the night to go and look after Noel. She was the eldest; she was the responsible one. And she was getting fed up of it.