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Breaking Point is her first novel.

EDEL
COFFEY

BREAKING POINT



SPHERE

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For David

Chapter 1

Susannah hated waking the girls so early. They were sleeping soundly in the dark nursery, their breathing long and shallow. She could smell the dry, oaty heat of their bodies when she walked in. Louise's hair – a sprig of light blonde fluff – had just started to grow and it stood on end, wafting like an underwater plant. Susannah brushed her nose over the downy tuft as she lifted her six-month-old baby out of the crib.

She crossed the room and gently woke her other daughter, Emma, who was four years old. She was half-awake already, and protesting. Susannah wanted to protest too. She was exhausted. Louise had kept her up half the night. It was only the first day of June but New York was already sweltering through a heatwave, and despite her best efforts with the air con, it was making everyone grumpy. The forecast for today was no different.

It had been 10 p.m. when she had gotten home from the hospital last night. John had been slumped on the corner couch, an iPad propped on his knee, 24-hour news playing silently on the TV. He had stood and stretched stiffly, his long body still slim and boyish, his thick silver-grey hair flattened where he had been lying on it. He always took Susannah's return from work as his cue to go to bed. And these days he was always asleep by the time she joined him.

Susannah changed Louise's diaper quietly and quickly in the soft glow of the morning light. She measured her weight as she carried her downstairs for breakfast. She knew Louise's weight by feel, to the ounce, gauged it in her arms every day. She inhaled Louise's hair deeply. So soft and silky, and that smell. *How did I get this lucky?* Then . . . *If I'm so lucky, why am I so frustrated all the time?* She tried to chase away the doubt, the *guilt*, shoo it like a fly from her mind. But it was persistent. An article she had read in the *New York Times* the previous week had said women were waiting until they were older to have children. One young woman quoted in the article asked, 'Why have children if you're not able to enjoy them yet?'

Were you really supposed to *enjoy* it?

Susannah loved Louise and Emma. She had never loved anyone or anything in this way before. It was a physical kind of love – sometimes it made her feel nauseated, weak, overwhelmed – but could she really say

she was *enjoying* being a mother? She wasn't enjoying anything at the moment. She and John never got to spend time together as a couple. They never relaxed, never hung out, never stayed in bed laughing like they used to do. And work at the hospital was busier than ever. The more successful she became, the more she had to do. Between her increasing TV commitments as a family expert, a publishing contract that demanded a new parenting book every year, and her *actual* job as Professor of Paediatrics at St John's Hospital in Manhattan, the days seemed to run on ahead of her, like a too-fast playmate. And then the nights slipped into one another, telescoping down into mere minutes, as Susannah tossed on a dreamless sea, burrowed deep in a dark exhaustion until Louise's cries punctured her oblivion.

A familiar wash of self-loathing plumed in her, like paint in water. Why could she not just be like other mothers, love her babies straightforwardly instead of second-guessing herself about every decision she made, interrogating her choices, questioning her own identity? Could she not just be patient, put aside her personal frustrations, her career goals, even for a few years, in exchange for the blessing of having children? And it was a blessing. She had undergone IVF to have Emma, and then had an unexpected natural conception with Louise. John had not been keen on having a second child. 'We're too old,' he had said. 'We're already so

busy, and Emma took so much out of you. We need to think of ourselves as well, *our* relationship. We should talk about this,' he had said. She knew exactly what he meant but she wouldn't hear of it. How could she not accept a second child so late in life as the blessing it was? In the sleepless world she now inhabited she sometimes imagined what their lives would be like if she hadn't become pregnant a second time.

She banished her thoughts with a shake of her head, fearful that bad thoughts were enough to make bad things happen. She didn't believe in prayer but she whispered one to herself anyway.

A high-pitched scream from Louise in her baby chair snapped Susannah back to the present.

'Sorry! You're hungry today, aren't you?' She scooped some more baby cereal onto the spoon. Louise was momentarily placated. Emma drew a picture whilst shovelling Cheerios into her mouth. She grinned at Susannah and Louise. 'This is Mommy, this is Daddy, this is Emma and this is Baba Loulou,' she said pointing at the crude simulations of her family members, who comprised her entire world.

After Susannah had finished putting the dirty breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, she brought the girls to their bathroom, where she washed their faces, their pink lips wobbling under the sponge (they liked that), their eyes squeezed tightly shut against the cool water (they didn't like that).

A door slammed downstairs. John, leaving for work. He knew Susannah's finely calibrated itinerary didn't have contingency for distractions like 'hellos' or 'goodbyes', kisses or hugs. Their routine was so tightly wound that there was no space for unscheduled items, spontaneity. Nobody could wake up late (Susannah always set two alarms), nobody could be sick (the rearranging it required was unthinkable), nobody could have a slow start (what even *was* that?). Still, sometimes, she wished John would say goodbye.

The door downstairs banged again.

'John? *John?* Is that you?'

Her husband's head popped around the door. She still marvelled at how immaculate John looked first thing in the morning – shower-fresh, clean-shaven, crisply dressed, his springy silver hair contained with some pomade.

'My car won't start,' he said in disbelief. 'Any chance you can give me a ride on your way to work?' He flinched a little as he said it. Susannah realised he was afraid of provoking an angry, impatient reaction. She pressed her lips together to hide her irritation and said as calmly as she could, 'Of course! Here, you take the girls and the diaper bags to the car … I'll just brush my teeth.' She mentally calculated the extra seconds and minutes it would take to drop him to work, and how much of a kink it would put in her day. Why would he not just call a cab? John was so brilliant at

his job and yet, somehow, so useless at *life*. He blithely ignored things like car servicing schedules and deadlines. Learned helplessness, she thought furiously, as she finished brushing her teeth.

Emma's Montessori school was the only one in the area that opened at 7 a.m.; it also opened on Saturdays, which Susannah didn't like to admit had played a part in her decision to enrol her there. She tried not to use it too often. She never mentioned it to anyone when she did. Why not? The truth was something close to shame, or perhaps failure, particularly as she spent so much of her time giving advice on how to be a perfect parent. What would people think if they knew Dr Sue's kids were farmed out to daycare and a nanny so she could go to work, write research papers, write and publish books and appear on TV advising parents on how to manage this very juggle? People didn't seem to realise that being the perfect mother involved a lot of outsourcing and a lot of money. And sometimes she didn't even get to kiss Louise and Emma goodnight. She was sure the people who bought her books would think she was a fraud if they knew. Louise's daycare was closer to the hospital. It wasn't ideal doing two drops every morning but on the upside, Susannah could visit Louise if she had a quiet hour at work. Or that had been the plan.

But work was never quiet.

Susannah would have preferred it if a family member could have helped out but her mom was never the most nurturing type, and it would be a huge stretch to ask her to mind the girls. She was pushing eighty and Susannah, at forty-six, knew how exhausting looking after the girls could be. And besides, they just didn't have that kind of relationship. Some of Susannah's friends had those mothers, who had moved in with them after they had had babies, cleaned the house, made dinner, sent them off with their husbands for romantic weekends. It would never occur to Susannah's mother that she might need help (and it would never occur to Susannah to admit she *needed* help).

When Susannah and John arrived at the Montessori, she dropped Emma off quickly, leaving the car running as she did so. It was blindingly hot already, and she had started to sweat by the time she got back into the car. John hung up his call and ran his hands over his hair.

'Part of the roof on the new house has collapsed.'

John seemed to be the only engineer in New York who could make glass houses stay up using nothing but a few pieces of slender steel. He engineered improbable houses for star architects with starrier clients.

'Oh, Christ – can this day get any worse? Is anyone hurt?'

'No, it looks like it happened overnight but the place

is a mess. Can you drop me straight to the site instead of the office?' He winced, again, waiting for her reaction. 'I'm really sorry, Susannah, I know it's out of your way.'

Shit. She moved the seconds and minutes around in her head. If she hit the highway now, dropped John, then looped back, she could still be at the hospital before 8 a.m. Her secretary, Roberta, had texted the night before to say she was down a doctor in clinic this morning. She could really do with getting to the hospital early but it would just have to wait.

'It's fine,' she said, shaking off her irritation. 'It's not your fault. There's nothing we can do about it now.'

She turned the car around in a large, smooth semi-circle, elegantly done, just like everything she did, and headed back in the direction they had come. Louise snuggled into her car seat, drifting deeper into sleep after her wakeful night.

John called the architect and the builder, and spent the rest of the car journey on the phone. He put his hand on Susannah's leg and gave it a little squeeze. He mouthed the word *sorry* at her.

She gave him a tight, brief smile to tell him not to worry about it.

They pulled up to the site and the builder emerged to greet them. As John got out of the car, he tilted his head to look at her and asked, 'Everything okay?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I'm just thinking about clinic. I'm

down a doctor this morning and we're overbooked so I'm just trying to organise it all in my head before I get there.'

'Always thinking about the job,' he said. It felt pointed.

'Someone has to,' she retorted, then she hated herself for sounding so snippy, so martyred.

Her phone rang. 7.50 a.m. 'I'm sorry, John, I have to take this. Will you be okay?'

He rolled his eyes and smiled. He leaned back into the car to kiss her, just managing to skim the corner of her mouth as she put her phone in the hands-free cradle and hit the button on her steering wheel to answer. She waited for him to walk away before she reversed the car and floored the accelerator in the direction of the hospital. She merged onto the highway, not seeing what was in front of her, driving on autopilot as she listened to her panicked resident doctor on the end of the phone. A driver changing lanes from the other side nearly wiped her out. She swerved to avoid him, muttering 'asshole.'

'Look,' she said to her resident. 'I'm two minutes away, it's easier if I just come see the patient. Meet me at reception in two.'

The phone continued to buzz and beep, ping and vibrate in its cradle while she drove. Her mind was everywhere, on the road, on her phone, on her marriage, but mostly on the child that awaited her at the

hospital. She had built a career on insightful diagnosis and she took enormous pride and care in her work, in helping children, in improving, and often saving, their lives. She took the responsibility seriously. She had seen too many times how quickly a child could flip from fine to critical.

She pulled into the employees' car park, at the back of the A&E department. She grabbed her handbag and stethoscope from the footwell of the passenger seat. She pointed her key fob over her shoulder without a backward glance and heard the double beep of the horn telling her the car was locked. It still gave her a little thrill of satisfaction. She had bought the car new a few months ago and was still enjoying its little quirks, even the souped-up spoiler John had been so against.

'You're having a midlife crisis,' he'd mumbled when she'd ordered it but she didn't care.

'At least I'm not having an affair,' she had told him. She had had suspicions about John on and off over the years but he never flinched. Either she was paranoid or he had an excellent poker face.

She strode around the block towards the hospital reception. She was the picture of composed professionalism. The sun beat down on her back and sweat beaded her upper lip as the automatic doors of the hospital parted smoothly and she crossed the threshold into the air-conditioned comfort of the A&E department. She spotted her harried-looking resident by the reception

desk. She felt the sweat cool on the back of her white silk blouse and a calm descended as she switched into work mode and forgot about everything else.

Back in the car, baby Louise woke up and began to cry.