MOTHER HENS

Also by Sophie McCartney

TIRED AND TESTED: The Wild Ride Into Parenthood

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Sophie McCartney

Harper North

HarperNorth
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For Nate – who I made, grew and birthed at the same time
as my book baby. And for my husband, Steve,
for always putting out… the bin.

Prologue

I often used to wonder… what makes seemingly good people do horrifically bad things? Hatred, greed, jealousy, a cup of tea made with the milk added first? Just how far can a person be pushed before finally snapping and shoving someone back… over a cliff?

Cascades of loose coppery stones flurry downwards past his flailing feet as they desperately try to find their footing on the crumbling edge of the never-ending scorched abyss. God, it's breathtaking up here, almost as beautiful as those bright blue eyes of his, which are now burning even more brightly with shock and betrayal under the searing heat of an Arizona sky. Dilated pupils foolishly attempt to penetrate the remaining fragments of my enraged soul and, as they do, I wonder… is it really too late for him? For us? For a margarita? If there was ever a time to be tanked, this is most definitely it. Although the events unfolding before me are happening in a matter of split seconds, in the vengeance-thirsty sandstorm of my mind time is as still as my stone-cold heart. Water slowly trickles from places I didn't even know were capable of perspiration and two wet boob-shaped orbs of sweat are now visible on my shirt. He was always a breast man, and I wonder whether God might see this last cheap thrill before the bitter end as a final act of kindness? A good deed that will perhaps result in a bit of time shaved off my eternal damnation? Unlikely, given the

number of deadly sins committed: lust, envy, pride, wrath. And now look at me, about to break one of his Ten Commandments too: thou shall not kill.

Without warning, his bloodied hand lurches towards mine – catching me off guard and causing me to stumble forwards to the edge of nothingness. Maybe we'll both go down together in a blaze of glory? Destined to spend eternity with one another, like he always promised. In this moment, however, as those magical fingers of his fleetingly graze against my own for the very last time, I remember everything. The way he made me feel – the fire, passion, lust – but also the lies, venom, manipulation, and his ability to destroy a life without hesitation or regret. I see him clearly for what he is… a beautiful monster, an apex predator, and king of chaos.

With the lightning-quick reactions of someone who's been burnt by a flame, my hand instinctively jerks away. As I watch that once heart-stopping, knicker-dropping handsome face of his slip into the sun-scorched void, my mouth curls into a slow and satisfied smile. Finally, he's out of our lives and into the afterlife, forever.

As it turns out, the catalyst for unspeakable callousness is actually very simple. A human being's greatest downfall always has been – and always will be – love.

But now… love is dead, and so is the king. So what next?

Long live the fucking queen.

1

Domestic Bliss

It never snows any more in December, does it? Of course that doesn't stop the annual festive tradition of every British tabloid rag madly speculating on the odds of a festive flurry, a bit like that psychic octopus who predicted the World Cup results. Apparently the chances of Cheshire getting a white Christmas this year are 2-1 but, on looking out of my kitchen windows at the clear sky and bright winter sunshine cracking the garden flags, I decide this must be a reference to the county's middle-class cocaine addiction. All down to global warming, I suppose: the weather I mean, not the drug-taking. I like to do my fair share though: of helping the planet, that is… not snorting coke. Once I had an awful reaction to Night Nurse and it very much put me off trying anything harder. Safe to say, the only line I'm happy to participate in is an orderly one at the Marks & Spencer checkout.

Assessing the midwinter mudbath of what, pre-kids, used to be the rather picturesque and pristine girly-garden of my cosy semi-detached home, a nice fluffy layer of snow would certainly help to mask the unkempt slew of deflated footballs, pink plastic tat, and slalom of dog poos I'm yet to psyche myself into clearing

up. No, it would seem, in more ways than one, I'm no longer any good at maintaining my lady garden. I can't quite put my finger on the reason why, but I don't feel especially Christmassy this year. Possibly it's down to the unseasonably warm temperatures or, more worryingly, is it because of the strange and unshakeable niggling sensation that's been brewing in my stomach all morning? That said, maybe, just maybe, my festive fretfulness is actually down to the fact that today, along with Jesus, I'm celebrating my birthday. Yep, Cara Stringer, you are now thirty-seven years young. Fuck. Where did the time go? There's a part of me that knows I should be eternally grateful for the happy and healthy existence I've already had on this earthly plain, when so many others haven't had the same luxury. But there's a bigger, more self-centred part that's already obsessively googling 'Botox near me' and 'dry vag… menopause?' At just three short and terrifying years away from the big 4-0, a complete nervous breakdown, along with a bottle of lube, is pending.

After a morning of letting the kids open all two of my cards (which they made themselves), I've come to the realisation that birthdays past thirty, and as a parent, are generally pretty shit. In your twenties, you think age, much like the PTA, will never catch you. Shuddering at my almost unfamiliar reflection in the patio window – first signs of silvery greys nestled amongst my recently 'lobbed' mousy brown hair, tired eyes, with bags large enough to fit the weekly big shop in, staring back – I consider myself well and truly caught. Just another year, I try to reason with myself. It's time to be grateful for being alive and to enjoy the added benefit of today, it being socially acceptable to get hammered at 7am. Amen to that, JC. As I drain the dregs of my fourth mimosa, my perimenopausal pity party is interrupted by a completely different type of festive w(h)ine.

'Why do we *always* have to go to Nannie's for Christmas?!' Benjamin, my seven-year-old, and most vocal about anything

and everything these days, especially at the prospect of our impending family outing to my parents' house.

To be fair, on this occasion, his protests are 100% valid. No one enjoys the annual pilgrimage to watch my mother soak up the Christmas spirit (anything 40% proof) or witness my stepdad becoming increasingly less tolerant of her dancing round the kitchen to Mariah Carey in her underwear. Let me tell you, every year without fail, you can cut the air with a knife – sadly, the same can never be said about the cremated turkey.

Regardless of this, off we go on our annual trip to watch this pair of geriatric caged tigers taking chunks out of one another: mainly due to a case of my eldest-child guilt, and because it's cheaper than a family pass to Chester Zoo. With a love–hate relationship to rival Marmite, I live in constant fear of receiving a phone call to say he's caved her head in with the £3 bottle of Chardonnay she carries round like a third child, and has buried her body under the patio. It would be horribly upsetting for all concerned, but I'd get it and probably still provide him with an alibi, and then sign him up to a dating app. As stepdads go, I did quite well.

Taking both my mum, Camilla, and me on when I was a grumpy eight-year-old, he was sturdy, dependable, and emotionally available – a stark contrast to Camilla's inattentive, selfish, and flaky approach to parenting. My 'real' dad or, as Mum liked to call him, 'sperm donor', disappeared without a trace when I was seven – no goodbye, no note, no nothing. Like he dropped off the face of the planet. I'd thought the world of him. Camilla, however, had not. As a child, I'd lose count of the number of arguments they'd have ending in her losing her temper and throwing something at him. I don't blame him for going, but he's never tried to contact me since. That's the bit that hurts the most. Don't get me wrong: I love Camilla, of course I do, she's my mum. The woman selflessly grew me in her womb as though she were a

walking petri dish, only to torpedo all 10lb 3oz of me out of her body, ripping her V to her A in the process (something she reminds me of regularly). But two peas in a pod, we are not. Like it or not, we're bonded for life, our fractious relationship held together by an invisible thread of history, emotional blackmail and an inescapable IOU for bringing me into this world. One thing's for sure though: I'll never be like her – apart from 7am drinking – but today is *totally* an exception to the rule. Isn't it?

'Here's the thing, Ben,' I foolishly attempt to reason with the mini face of fury flailing about on the floor before me, 'I don't particularly want to go either but, you know as well as I do, we don't have a choice. Nannie claimed this day as hers thirty-seven years ago. It matters not that God gave his only son to save the world. She gave her only vagina to deliver me, and no one's been allowed to forget it since. So we'll go, open some weird presents she's last-minute-panic-bought on the internet, feed rock-hard poultry to the dog, and smile politely while counting down the time until we can make our escape. Ok?'

'It's not fair! I want to stay here!'

Assessing my unimpressed frowning face (people who claim their wrinkles are laughter lines evidently don't have children) he stops thrashing about on the floor like a trodden-on grasshopper, opting instead to go for a textbook move straight out of the parent manipulation manual given to all children at birth: sad puppy dog eyes.

'Pleeease!'

Unfortunately for him, I'm a tough crowd. 'Sorry sweetheart,' I faux-sympathise, completely disregarding the pleading baby blues inherited from his father, 'but life's not fair.'

There's a semi-accepting grunt in my general direction, but still no movement.

'Anyway,' I cheerfully remind him, hamstrings straining with the weight of having to deadlift 30kg of limp child off the kitchen

floor, 'it won't be *all* bad this year because Auntie Connie's coming too, and you know how much she likes to buy you horribly age-inappropriate presents that'll no doubt either impale or traumatise you!'

Yes, fun old Aunt Connie. I say old… but, annoyingly, my half-sister is only twenty-seven, and has as much of a grasp on responsibility, and impractical gifts likely to result in the loss of an eye, as I do on viral trends that don't require Imodium. On hearing the name of his second-favourite human EVER (his first being some god-awful YouTube star with a voice more irritating than intestinal worms), Ben's face instantly brightens. 'Do you think she's bought me Fortnite?!'

Ah, the eternal optimist. You see, to my son, I am a complete fun-sucking she-devil who has cruelly prohibited his impressionable young mind from being exposed to the violence and horrors of any video game that's not Mario Kart – although don't get me started on the Italian bloke's blatant disregard of the Highway Code. Not a fan of violence, the only head shots I want him taking are selfies with me, so I can cry over them when he's a teenager and hates me. Plus, gaming is all online now, isn't it? You don't know who the hell they're talking to, which is a terrifying prospect to any parent who grew up in the nineties where the dodgiest bloke you came across in a video game was Doctor Robotnik and the aim was collecting gold rings, not dodging paedophile ones.

In a bid to manage his already wildly out of control expectations, I attempt to talk him down. 'Oh, I doubt it, sweetheart. Auntie Connie won't even know what it is. The closest she's got to Fortnite was her two-week stint on *Love Island*, which I'm sure she'll happily tell you all about once she's stopped crying about being dumped for Ariana Grande's personal assistant's UK dog walker. Do Mummy a favour, will you? Go and make sure your little sister hasn't got the Sharpies out again while I find Daddy, and sort my face out.'

Ever hopeful that later in the day he'll be able to fire a virtual crossbow directly through the forehead of one of his school friends, he happily bounds off with a spring in his step and murder in his heart. Boys, young ones and fully grown ones – until my dying day, I will never truly understand them. Speaking of which…

'Dom!' I bellow, from the kitchen. Where *is* he? These days he's harder to track down than the latest PlayStation a week before Christmas Eve. It's pretty hard to lose a guy in a house this size – yet off he sloped to the bathroom, phone in hand, over an hour and a half ago and has been AWOL ever since. Pouring a fresh mimosa, I'm fairly suspicious I know exactly what he's doing on his own upstairs. Nothing, not even the great Lord himself, so it would seem, stops grown men playing with their balls for ninety minutes.

'Dom?!' I call again, plodding up the stairs and making my way across our bedroom towards the Jack-and-Jill bathroom. 'Are you still in here? I need a wee!'

My husband's job as a professional football manager, and the endless hushed calls that go along with it, always grate on me so much more over the holidays. I've never understood the allure of Boxing Day matches and why people choose, of their own free will, to freeze their nips off watching twenty-two blokes running up and down a pitch' over the joy of wearing elasticated trousers and inhaling After Eights.

Stupidly, in my younger days, I always thought my exciting new wife life would be akin to the TV programme *Footballer's Wives,* but with slightly less crushed velvet furniture and fewer fake-tanned babies. That, however, was before I truly understood what the National League was. Think Premier League, but then keep heading down through all the levels until you hit the basement. Once there, open the trapdoor and you'll find Trafford Rovers, the jewel in Manchester's crown… or at least the really small cubic zirconia next to Manchester City and Manchester

United. Sure, those clubs have money, world-class players, and stadiums that don't resemble cow sheds – but they don't have the strategic mastermind, genius tactician, and hot-stuff-to-my-muff Dom Stringer running the show.

Glamorous, it is not. Long hours, shit pay and, without fail, every Christmas Day is dominated by pre-match training and tactics. The rest of the year isn't much better. The kids and I seldom see him, especially lately, and I've spent more time solo-refereeing in soft-play centres, children's birthday parties, petting zoos, and shopping centres than I care to recall. Of course there are some perks: the endless swanky events… that I'm never invited to; match-day catering… if you like cold chips and a warm pint; and, last but not least, inauguration into a special society governed by a sacred rule that football comes above all else in life… including the arrival of it. Yes, while Dom was two goals down, knee deep in a match, I was two midwives up, elbow-deep in my snatch, birthing Ben.

Admittedly, there's a lot I wish I'd known before signing a lifetime contract but, in all truthfulness, there's nothing I'd ever change. Everyone has a calling in life and, while mine was to give up my career to stay at home raising our two beautiful children (and googling reasons for my saw-dusty faff), his is the beautiful game. No, I could never begrudge him his passion, his brilliance, his everything. Naturally, I was unsure when he asked me to effectively become a 1950s housewife. I'd spent so much of my life striving to be independent it felt alien to be giving it all up because I was growing something inside me that felt, well, like an actual alien. But one look at newborn Ben and I knew Dom was right to talk me round. Childcare was so expensive, and he had such big dreams that mine felt mediocre by comparison, so who was I to stand in his way? You see, football is what makes him shine, what fuels that gloriously effervescent charisma of his. After all, it's what attracted me to him in first place – well

that, and his bloody gorgeous face. Personality is, of course, of the upmost importance in any relationship, but so is a face you never get tired of sitting on. Tall, brooding, with impeccably carved cheekbones perfectly offset by an ever so slightly crooked nose (a lingering reminder of his own playing days), he possesses just the right balance of playboy pretty and captivatingly craggy.

Speaking of the dapper devil, the bathroom door swings open and out he nonchalantly swaggers, cheeks flushed and spraying himself in a cloud of Hugo Boss cologne. Even after twelve years of marriage, I still like to take a minute and appreciate what a magnificent specimen of a man he truly is. Water from his freshly washed sandy blonde hair trickles freely down his neck, and my eyes can't help but follow as it dances downwards past his clavicle, flirtatiously flowing over the undulating, rock-hard ridges of his annoyingly well-defined-for-forty-one abdominal wall, before being absorbed by a strategically placed *Beauty and the Beast* bath towel – the bulge of what lies beneath perfectly aligned with poor Lumière the Candledick. Out of all the women in the world, to this day I still can't believe he chose me. His imposing six-foot frame combined with intensely serious face would make him an absolute shoe-in for a Viking era shampoo advert. However, born and raised in south London, the most Scandinavian thing about Dom is his ability to construct IKEA flatpack furniture. Which to be fair, is still sexy as hell. Why is it that men age so much better than women? The greys in his stubble are undeniably sexy. The greys in mine, however, make me look like a donkey from the school nativity.

'All ok? You've been ages,' I ask, scuttling past him, hoicking up my dressing gown, and plonking myself on the loo. I often think back to our early dating days and laugh at how refined I tried to be in his presence: once actually leaving his swanky London pad in the dead of night for a number two in the twenty-four-hour McDonalds on Clapham High Street, happy for him

to think I was off out for a quarter-pounder rather than expelling something from my body of the same weight and colour. Nowadays, thanks to many years of marriage, and the nearest twenty-four-hour fast-food joint being ten miles away, our boundaries are next to non-existent.

'Yeah, sorry babe,' he says, somewhat flustered, his boy-about-town cockney accent making every term of endearment sound as though he's about to blow the bloody doors off something. 'Fucking Harry's injured again, fucking groin strain! Can you believe it? Physio reckons he's going to be out for six weeks.'

Funnily enough, I can believe it. Harry Jones is twenty-one, handsome, and has more money in his back pocket than the average part-time plumber. My money's on that very prominent groin of his being strained by scoring with an aspiring Instagram model behind the Slug and Lettuce bins. Flushing the chain, I eye Dom suspiciously as he takes one final look at his phone, a broad grin spreading across his face.

'What are you smiling at?' I ask, heading to my dressing table to begin speed-applying mascara. 'Something vulgar on the dads' WhatsApp group again? Honestly, you lot are worse than a bunch of teenage boys!'

He laughs guiltily. 'You got me.' He throws his phone onto the bed and pads across the carpet to wrap his long, strong arms around me. 'How's my birthday girl doing?' he growls seductively into my ear, before nuzzling his stubbly face into my neck. 'I've just realised, I haven't given you your present yet…' The earthy smell of his aftershave washes over me as his Disney towel conveniently drops to the floor, Lumière now replaced by the rampaging Beast.

Giggling at his unrealistic hopefulness, but also wondering what's brought on the sudden friskiness, I'm quick to shoot down his advance. 'Probably for the best that you re-wrap it for now.' I nod my head towards the landing. 'Little eyes and ears are

close by. Unless you fancy forking out for the years of childhood therapy required after seeing Daddy playing leap frog with Mummy over the John Lewis ottoman?'

'But I'll do that thing you like,' he smoothly counters, taking a lesson out of Ben's book and attempting those all-too-familiar puppy dog eyes.

'What, put the bin out?' I mock. 'You're on!' Smiling, I turn my back on him – it's lovely to feel wanted, but whose birthday does he think it is? The only sausage I'm planning on eating this morning is one that's grilled and in a bap.

It's at this point, with timing impeccable as ever, and proving my point perfectly, Ben barges into the bedroom, accompanied by his three-year-old hell-raiser of a sister who, to be fair, he has in an impressively firm headlock. While Dom desperately scrambles for his towel, I make a mental note to limit the amount of unsupervised time my eldest has watching *WWE* videos on YouTube. I dash across the room to separate the two of them before Nancy's oxygen levels diminish.

'MUUUM, look! *She's* done a bad thing!' Ben complains, throwing his little sister under the proverbial bus as only a big brother can.

'Benjamin, firstly, you know the drill with Nancy. Snitches get stitches. She'll seek her revenge when you're least expecting it, and then you'll be sorry. Secondly, please can we refrain from physical violence? Today is going to be difficult enough without you getting arrested for GBH. That's grievous brotherly harm in case you're interested.'

Swearing under my breath, I make my way back to my dressing table wondering how it's possible to love your kids implicitly while also fantasising about being a childless free spirit living her best life on a hedonistic party island where her only responsibility is having to try every incredibly potent cocktail on the

poolside menu. Slapping on foundation as though I'm plastering a wall, I realise we're most definitely going to be late.

'Oh fucking hell!' Dom swears loudly, and with the enthusiastic gusto of a drunken sailor.

'Language!' I chastise, whipping my head round once more to eyeball the incredibly distracting trio hampering my efforts to leave the house any time this century. Having only just got over the horror of Nancy cheerfully calling a kid at nursery a shitnugget, we most certainly don't need the 'F' bomb added to her repertoire of pre-school profanity. Now free of Hulk Hogan's vice-like grip, curtains of messy blonde hair have parted to reveal her tiny and beautiful little face along with what appears to be a very large and very unfortunately phallic-shaped horn, complete with ejaculating sparkles, scrawled on her forehead.

'FUCK!' I scream, in absolute horror. 'Is that permanent marker?'

'Language, Mummy!' mocks my unhelpful husband.

'I'm a unicorn!' shrieks Nancy, in delighted glee.

'No, you're not!' yells Ben, in condescending disdain, before pointing towards his father's crotch and concluding, 'You're Daddy's extra leg!'

Pulling on his trousers with tears of laughter rolling down his face, Dom leans down to me. 'Merry birthday, babe. At least the unicorn got his happy ending… you got this, yeah?'

'No!' I object. The only thing I've 'got' is a small child with a dodgy dick tattoo on her head, but I'm swiftly interrupted by him swooping in to kiss my half-open and protesting mouth. As the softness of his lips presses into my own, prickles of white hot electricity course through my nervous system – but, instead of experiencing desire, I'm once more struck by the same stomach-lurching pangs of anxiety I've been batting off all morning. As his tongue gently flickers against mine, a discon-

certing coolness creeps over my skin, causing the hairs on my neck to stand on end like the hackles of a rabid street dog.

Abruptly pulling away from his embrace, my muddy green eyes lock firmly with the cool and familiar azure of his and, reaching out to touch his cheek, I take a few seconds to examine the contours of his face, scanning for the smallest indication of a problem.

'Why are you being weird?' he asks, avoiding my stare and turning his back as he fishes a tracksuit top from the wardrobe.

'Oh, it's nothing…' I blag, noting the rapid change in his tone and sudden frostiness. 'Just wondering what other joys today has in store for me.'

'Listen Cara Stringer, supermum of the highest order, and protector of public order,' he life-coaches me while once more picking up his phone and absent-mindedly flicking through its contents. 'You're head of the PTA. If anyone can deal with a room full of irritating knobheads, it's you.'

Ain't that the truth, I think as he fondly pats me on the head as though I'm an ageing family pet, and heads off to say a hurried farewell to the kids.

'Love you!' I call behind him as he leaves the room, but, with eyes already glued to the glow of his screen, he's down the stairs and out of the front door without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

Turning back to face my mirror, I take a long hard stare at the woman before me. Her reflection is so very different from how it used to be: ballsy, confident, a woman who was going somewhere other than to the playground and back. Now all I see is an out-of-touch thirty-something mother of two who's treading water, and fighting her constant fear of not being good enough by going out of her way to do anything for anyone. You're overthinking this, Cara, I tell myself, swallowing down a mouth-

ful of uneasiness. You know you are. It's not like last time. We're just super-busy, I try to rationalise. Dom has matches to plan, training sessions to attend, players to buy and sell – I have parent rep meetings, school traffic patrols, and fancy-dress days to organize, in between a mountain of housework and after-school clubs taxi runs. We just need to make more time for one another; keep the romance alive and all that jazz.

Feeling bad for shooting him down just now, I realise all my oversensitive gut is picking up on is marriage guilt – like mum guilt but you substitute enduring soft play with foreplay. The problem is, I conclude, while attempting to wrangle both my eyebrows into position, once you've lived through one marital blow-up, if you continue to look hard enough, traces of explosive will always remain. You see, there's always a taint that lingers in your mind, and paranoia. What was once shiny and fresh, no matter how hard you scrub, will never be the same as it was when it was brand new. A red wine stain on a woollen carpet, an oil mark on a dry-clean-only silk blouse: sure, with enough effort, they'll fade over time to some degree – other people probably will never even notice – but you'll always know it's there. You just have to learn to live with it.

'Stop it!' I shout, serving a warning to both myself and the kids who are trampolining on my bed.

'Right, you lot, down NOW!' I command. 'We do not need the addition of a green stick fracture to make Christmas any more painful than it already is. Ben, downstairs and get your shoes on. Nancy, go get Mummy's nail varnish remover. You are not leaving the house like that, do you understand me?'

Nodding in resigned defeat, she scurries off into the bathroom while I head downstairs to refill my mimosa glass and grab a scouring pad. Stopping once more at the patio windows of our perfect little family home, I look up at what was, only an hour

earlier, a calm, blue sky. A chill runs down my spine as ominous as the dark plumes of clouds that now loom on the horizon. Necking my drink as giant droplets of rain begin to lash against the glass, my heart sinks. I was wrong: it looks as though a storm's brewing after all.