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The Stepmothers' Support Group

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Extract

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ONE

'Look,' he said. 'Stop worrying. This is going to be fine.'

'Ian . . .'

'I mean it. I've told the kids to behave. We're going to Hamley's afterwards. All you guys have to do is say hello to one another.' A muffled noise came from the other end. 'OK?' Ian said, his tone changing. 'See you soon . . . It's Eve,' she heard him say to someone. 'We'll do that later. I've already told you.'

'Oh God, *Dad* . . .'

And then the line went dead.

The girl's voice was the last thing she heard. It was young, very English; much more confident than she had been at that age. Hannah? Eve wondered. It sounded too grown-up to be Sophie. She was still wondering when something else hit her.

I've told the kids to behave.

Why did they need telling? Ian was always saying how sweet and polite they were, all things considered. Maybe the devil was in that last detail.

This was like taking her driving test, plus getting her A-level results and having a root canal all rolled into one. Maybe throw in a job interview, for good

measure. Actually, it felt worse than all of that. Much worse.

Her stomach was empty, hollowed out and queasy. If she'd eaten anything worth throwing up, she would have done so, right there on Charing Cross Road. An anxiety headache pushed at the edge of her vision; and the first decent spring day of the year would have hurt her eyes, if only it could have found its way past her enormous sunglasses. When she'd tried them on they had given her an air of nonchalance, or so she'd supposed. But now she was horribly afraid they made her look like a bug-eyed, frizzy-haired insect. A *Dr Who* monster to send small children screaming behind the sofa.

Come on, Eve, she told herself. *You're thirty-two, a grown woman, with your own flat, a good job . . . And they're not even four feet tall.*

On the other hand, those knee-highs held her future in their tiny chocolate-smeared hands. It was an unnerving thought. One that had kept her awake most of the night.

Thirty minutes later, from where she stood on the pavement, gazing across Old Compton Street, three small heads could be seen in the first-floor window of Patisserie Valerie. Ian's three children were blonde; of course they were. She'd known that. It wasn't as if she hadn't seen enough pictures. Anyway, what else would they be? He was fair, his hair cropped close to his scalp. And Caroline had been blonde, famously so.

Not that Eve had ever met Caroline, but her cheekbones, knowing smile and flicked-back hair had been famous. They sat above her by-line in *The Times*, and even those who had never read her column knew her face from *The Culture Show* and *Arena*, not to mention that episode of Jonathan Ross's Friday night chat show that came up whenever Caroline Newsome's name was mentioned.

More gallingly, the same smile could still be found on

Ian's mobile, in various endearing family combos. Caro's hair could just as easily have come out of a bottle, Eve thought uncharitably, but with genes like theirs, what were the chances of Ian and Caroline Newsome producing anything but Pampers-ad worthy cherubs?

Get a grip, Eve told herself.

As she loitered, the sun cleared the skyline behind her and hit Patisserie Valerie's upstairs window, lighting the angelic host above. If she stood there much longer she was going to be late; which she had categorically, hand-on-heart, promised would not happen. And if Eve was late Ian's anxiety would only increase and, God knew, his stress levels were through the roof already.

('This is a big deal,' he'd told her on the phone the night before. As if she didn't know it. 'I've never . . .' he'd paused. 'They've never . . . met one of my *friends* before.'

Eve had never heard him so tense. His obvious worry only served to increase hers.

'And please don't be late,' he'd added. 'You know what it's like with children. You have to do *what* you say you'll do, *when* you say you'll do it.'

Eve didn't know *what it's like with children*. That was precisely the point. She didn't have any.)

If Ian was strung out, then the only one on Team Eve would be Eve. And with those odds she'd be lost. As if to rub it in, she caught sight of herself in a window below the awning. An average-looking brunette, with a mane of curly hair – a bit frizzy, a bit freckly – grimaced back at her.

Her trench was flung over a blue and white matelot top and jeans. Battered Converse completed the look. Kid-friendly, but not scruffy, was the look she'd been going for. Low-maintenance yummy mummy. Elle Macpherson, the high street version. Not afraid of a little dirt, more than able to handle the mothers' race. (*Do stepmums do*

sports day? She pushed the thought from her mind. One thing at a time.)

Rummaging in her leather tote, Eve pulled out a blue carrier bag. Sliding the children's books out (bribes, peace offerings, late birthday presents, Easter egg surrogates that wouldn't rot tiny teeth . . .) She tucked them under her arm, scrunched the plastic under the other crap at the bottom of her bag and took a deep breath. Marching purposefully through the crowds clustered around the café's door, she pushed it open and headed for the stairs at the back.

Even in a café full of brunch-seeking tourists, there was no missing them. The round table by the window looked like an accident in a cake factory. Eve took in the mix of Power Rangers, Spider Man and My Little Ponies using an assortment of cream slices, éclairs and croissants as barricades, jumps and stable walls, and grinned.

'Eve!' Ian shouted the second he saw her. His voice was loud, too loud. His nerves radiated around the room like static, drawing the attention of a couple on the next table. One of them started whispering.

Pushing back his chair, he knocked a plastic figure from the table. Three pairs of long-lashed blue eyes swivelled in Eve's direction.

'You made it!'

'I'm not late, am I?' Eve said, although she knew she wasn't. She'd set two alarm clocks and left her flat in Kentish Town half an hour early to make sure she arrived on time.

Ian glanced at his watch, shook his head. 'Bang on time.'

'Hannah, Sophie, Alfie, this is Eve Owen, the friend I've told you about.'

Eve smiled.

'Eve, this is my eldest, Hannah, she's twelve, Sophie is eight. And Alfie, he's five.'

'And two months,' Alfie said firmly. The matter corrected, he returned to twisting Spiderman's leg to see how far it would turn before dislocating at the hip.

Smiling inanely, Eve felt like a children's TV presenter.

'Hello,' she said.

Three faces stared at her.

'I'm Eve,' she added unnecessarily, putting out a hand to the girl sitting nearest. Hannah might be twelve, but she looked older. Already teenage inside her head. And way taller than four feet. She exuded confidence. 'Hannah, really nice to meet you.'

'Hi.' Hannah raised one hand, in token greeting, then used it to flick long, shiny golden hair over her shoulder, before reaching pointedly for her cappuccino.

'And you must be Sophie.'

The child in the middle was a smaller, slightly prettier and much girlier version of her sister. Except for Levi jeans, there was nothing she wore, from Converse boots to Barbie hair slides that wasn't pink.

'How do you do?' Sophie said carefully. She shook Eve's hand, before glancing at her father for approval. He nodded.

'I'm Alfie,' the boy said.

'Hello Alfie.'

'Do you like Spiderman or Power Rangers? I like Power Rangers, but Spiderman is all right. You can be Venom.' Recovering a plastic figure from the floor, he shoved it into Eve's outstretched hand.

'That's kind,' she said, feeling stupidly grateful.

'Don't be so sure,' said Ian, tousling the boy's hair until the tufts stuck up even more. 'All that means is your figure gets bashed.'

'Venom's the baddie,' said Alfie, as if it was the most

obvious thing in the world. 'He has to lose, it's the law. Can we eat our cakes now, Dad?'

Without waiting for permission, he grabbed the nearest éclair, one twice as big as his hand, and thrust it mouthwards, decorating his face, Joker-style, with chocolate and cream.

'Sit, sit, sit,' Ian said, pulling out the empty chair between his own and Hannah's. 'I'll get you a coffee. Black, isn't it?'

You know it's black, she wanted to say. When has it ever been anything else?

She didn't say it, though. And she resisted the urge to touch his hand to tell him everything would be all right. Hand squeezing was out of bounds. As was reassuring arm touching and even the most formal of pecks on the cheek. They'd been lovers for nine months, but this was something new and Eve was still learning the rules.

This was more than girl meets boy, girl fancies boy, girl goes out with boy, falls in love, etc . . . This was girl meets boy, girl fancies boy, girl goes out with boy, girl discovers boy has already gone out with another girl, girl meets boy's children.

In other words, this was serious.

Eve never expected to fall for a married man. Well, widowed, to be more accurate. But married, widowed, divorced . . . It just hadn't occurred to her this was something she'd do. In fact, like boob jobs, Botox and babies, it was one of those things she'd always have said, *No way*.

But then she'd stepped off an escalator, into Starbucks, on the second floor of Borders on Oxford Street over a year earlier. It had been Ian's choice, not her idea of a good venue for an interview; too noisy, too public, too easy to be overheard. She'd stepped off the escalator, seen him at a table reading *Atonement*, her favourite book at

the time, and felt a lurch in her stomach that said she was about to commit a cardinal sin.

He was tall and slim, with a largish nose, made more obvious by his recently cropped hair. But it was the brooding intensity with which he read his book that attracted her. Before he'd even looked up, she'd fallen for her interview subject.

She never expected to fall for a married man.

Eve ran that back. Actually, she'd worked hard not to fall for anyone. She could count on one hand the number of lovers she'd had in the last ten years. And she didn't need any hands at all to count the number whose leaving had given her so much as a sleepless night.

She had her job, features director on a major magazine at thirty-two, and, apart from one serious relationship in her first year at university, she'd never let anyone get in the way of what she wanted to do. And, if she was honest, she hadn't let that get in the way, had she?

So, falling for Ian Newsome was more than a surprise. It was a shock.

Life didn't get messy immediately.

Caroline had been dead for nine months when Eve interviewed Ian; and it was another six months before they ended up in bed. All right, five months, two weeks and three days. But from the minute he stood up, in his jeans and suit jacket, to pull back her chair, Eve was hooked. And during that first meeting he wasn't even the most accommodating of interview subjects.

He hadn't wanted to do the interview at all. He was there, surrounded by tourists, two floors above Oxford Street, under duress. Caroline's publishers had insisted. *Precious Moments*, a collection of her columns documenting a three-year battle with breast cancer was due for publication on the first anniversary of her death. And Ian was morally, not to mention contractually, obliged to promote it.

Since a large percentage of the money was going to the Macmillan Trust, which had provided the cancer nurses who had seen Caroline through her last days, how could he refuse?

It was a given that *The Times*, Caroline's old paper, would extract it; so he agreed to an interview with their Saturday magazine to launch the extract, plus one further interview. Of all the countless requests, he had chosen *Beau*, the women's glossy where Eve was features director.

The first thing he'd said was, 'Can I get you a coffee?' (Eve recognized it for the power play it was, but let him anyway.) The second was, 'I won't allow the kids to be photographed.' He fixed Eve with a chilly blue gaze as she took a tentative sip of her scalding Americano and felt the roof of her mouth blister.

Great start.

'I'm sorry,' Eve said, hearing her voice slide into 'case study' mode. 'But we'll need something.' She tried not to run her tongue over the blister. 'I did make that clear to your publicist right from the start.'

Ian's mouth set into a tight line. So tight, his lips almost disappeared. 'And *I* made it clear,' he said. 'No photography would be allowed. That was my condition. After all they've been through, losing their mother and . . . And everything. Well, protecting them, giving them some . . . normality. That's the most important thing. I'm sure you understand.'

'Of course, I do.'

Eve forced a smile, racking her brains for a way to salvage the interview. She did understand, but she also understood that Miriam, her editor, would kill her if she came back empty-handed. There were pictures of Caroline they could buy from *The Times,* obviously enough. Also pap shots, taken when she was leaving hospital. Only Miriam would want something new. Something personal.

Something that would strike a chord with *Beau*'s readers, many of whom were in their thirties. The point at which Caroline had discovered, while feeding Alfie, that she had a lump in her breast. A lump that turned out to be what everyone thought was a not-especially life-threatening form of cancer.

Eve thought fast. She only had an hour with the guy. The last thing she needed was to spend half of it squabbling over pictures. Then it dawned on her. 'You're a photographer? I bet your family album is stunning. How about a snap of Caroline with the kids, when they were much younger, before she was ill? The children would scarcely be recognizable. Your youngest, Alfie, would still be a baby. Surely that wouldn't infringe their privacy?'

'I'll consider it,' Ian said grudgingly. His scowl said the subject was now closed.

The feature was a success. After that early hiccup, Ian had talked candidly about Caro's life and very public death, even giving Eve some lovely quotes on the children he clearly adored. The following day, he'd e-mailed her three 'collects' – snapshots from his family album of Caro and the children when they were small. The pictures had never been seen before or since. It was only later, after the interview was published, that Eve looked at the spread and realized there was only one of Ian, standing in the background, behind Caroline and her triumvirate of beatific angels.

'Well, he *is* a photographer,' the editorial assistant said. 'He was behind the camera.'

All the same, something about the shot troubled her.

Eve couldn't have been more surprised when, a week after the issue containing Ian's story went off-sale, her mobile rang and it was him.

'I hope you don't mind me calling.'

'No, not at all.' Eve tensed. She'd been expecting him to ball her out the week it was published; to say he hadn't said this or didn't mean that, but his tone wasn't what she'd come to expect from enraged or regretful case studies. And it wasn't as if they could have lost his pictures because they were digital. So what did he want?

'It's just . . . I was wondering if you'd like a coffee sometime?'

Even then Eve hadn't been entirely sure he was asking her out on a date. And to begin with it wasn't a date; it was a coffee. And then another. And another. Between then and now, Ian Newsome had bought her an awful lot of caffeine.

'I bought you all something,' Eve said now, as she took off her trench and slung it over the back of her chair. She tried not to notice Hannah eye her stripy T-shirt. Whether the girl's expression was disapproval or amusement was hard to tell, but it certainly wasn't covetousness. Maybe she'd tried too hard, Eve thought. Maybe the girl could smell that, like dogs smell fear and cats make a beeline for the one person in the room who's allergic.

'Here,' she said, offering a copy of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* to Hannah. 'I loved this. I hope you haven't read it.'

Hannah smiled politely but didn't put out her hand. 'I have, actually. When I was younger . . .'

'But thank you,' she added, when Sophie nudged her. 'I loved it.'

The book hung in midair, hovering above mugs of cooling hot chocolate. Eve felt her face flame, as she willed Hannah to take the book anyway. The girl studiously ignored it.

Eve could have kicked herself.

This was tough enough as it was. Why had she taken

a risk like that? It would have been so much easier just to ask Ian what books they had. Only she'd wanted to do it on her own. She'd wanted to prove she could get it right.

'Oh well,' Eve said, admitting defeat. 'I'm sorry. I'll exchange it for something else.'

'Thanks. But there's no need.' Hannah held up a dog-eared magazine, open at a spread about *Gossip Girl*. 'I prefer magazines anyway.'

'What about me?' demanded Alfie. 'What did you buy me?'

'It's not your turn,' Sophie said, punching Alfie's arm. 'It's mine.'

'Ow-uh!' Alfie's face fell. But when he saw Eve watching, he grinned. His heart wasn't in being upset.

Regaining her confidence, she gave Sophie a brightly-coloured hardback. 'It's the new Jacqueline Wilson; I hope *you* haven't read it too.'

Sophie's squeal reached Ian as he returned, holding a large cup and saucer that he'd been waiting at the counter to collect. 'What's the matter?' he said. He shot Eve an, I've-only-been-gone-two-minutes-is-everything-OK? Glance.

'Look,' Sophie said, waving the book. 'Look what Eve got me!'

'Aren't you lucky?' Ian looked pleased.

'What's Eve got me?' Alfie asked again.

'For God's sake Alfie,' Hannah said. 'Don't be so rude.' She was grown up enough to sound like her mother. Well, what Eve remembered Caro sounding like from hearing her on television.

'That's enough,' Ian said, rolling his eyes. 'Chill, both of you. And Hannah, you know I don't like you saying for God's sake.'

Hannah scowled.

Nervously, Eve offered Alfie a copy of *Charlie and the*

Chocolate Factory. With Roald Dahl's words and Quentin Blake's illustrations, it was a book she loved. She still had a copy somewhere, probably in her parents' attic.

'Hey Dad, look,' Alfie said, snatching it. Immediately whatever chocolate wasn't smeared on his face was transferred to the book's cover. 'Spiderman's got a new hovercraft.' He sat one of his plastic figures on the book, before turning to Eve.

'You be Venom.'

'Later,' Ian said. 'Let Eve eat her cake first.' He smiled at her, then glanced at the table, a frown creasing his face. 'Alfie,' he said. 'Where *is* Eve's éclair?'