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Opening Extract from...

Our Precious Lulu

Written by Anne Fine

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Our Precious Lulu

Anne Fine



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HE HEARD THE DOOR BANG IN THAT OLD FAMILIAR WAY, and even before Geraldine had struggled out of her coat she'd appeared in the doorway. 'Guess what she's done now. Guess! Just guess! The bitch! The bloody bitch!'

The match was well into the second half, but still he forced himself out of his chair. 'Want me to fetch you a drink? Then you can spit tintacks into it.'

But Geraldine was in an even more distracted state than usual on these occasions. 'No, no. Well, actually . . . Yes. Maybe I will.'

'Red? White? A gin and tonic?'

'Oh, God! Red, please. No! White.'

'Don't follow me out,' he warned. 'You know I have to take in the details of these dust-ups quite slowly, or I don't get them. You just sit there and blow your stack quietly to yourself till I get back.'

By the time he brought in her drink, she had switched off the television. Bad luck on him. But he might catch the

last few minutes of the game if she calmed down as fast as usual. (Poor lamb. She'd had enough practice.) 'So,' he said, putting the glass into Geraldine's hand and wrapping her fingers round it. 'What has our precious Lulu done now?'

That set her off again. 'The bitch! The bloody bitch!'

'I thought tonight was yoga. What can your sister possibly—'

'*Step*sister, thank you!'

'Well, what can she possibly do to upset you so much at a yoga class?' He ripped a bag of peanuts open with his teeth, then added, 'Apart from sign up, of course,' remembering how irritated Geraldine had been to find her sleek, bendy stepsister turning up at the very same sessions in which she herself had struggled for eight months.

'It wasn't *in* the class,' said Geraldine. 'It was right after. We all went off next door as usual, and got the big table. I reckoned that I needed to use the loo, so I went off. And when I came back, all of the rest of them were crowded round Lulu, crowing and patting her on the back and congratulating her, and all that crap.'

'Oh, yes. All that crap.'

'Don't you laugh! Wait till you hear. And everyone turned to me and said, "Isn't it absolutely *wonderful*? Isn't it *brilliant*? You must be *thrilled* for Lulu!" And I suppose I must have looked completely baffled because suddenly they were all glancing at one another curiously and backing off, really embarrassed. I think they realized that I didn't know.'

He wasn't sure that he was following. 'Didn't know what?'

'What she'd just told them.'

'Which was?'

'That she is pregnant.'

'No!'

'Bloody bitch! Can't even pee on a stick and have the thing turn blue without somehow making it an opportunity to be vile to her own sister.'

'*Step*sister,' he reminded her.

She wasn't in the mood for being teased. 'Cow! Bitch!'

'Well, well.'

They sat in silence for a while. Then Robert said, 'Actually, you know, we've had a heap of crap from Lulu over the years. But I do truly think this takes the biscuit.'

'Doesn't it?' said Geraldine. 'Doesn't it *just*?'

And she burst into tears.

Crying is easier in the bath, so that's where she went. With her hair dripping down her face, she felt less leaky. Lulu had always been a venomous little baggage. Way back in primary school, before their parents had even met, let alone married, she had been brilliant at making others suffer. Geraldine would never forget the look on poor little William Webberley's face when he opened up what must have been the very first present he had ever been given in school, only to find a bit of dried-up dog turd in the box and hear Lulu's petty jeer, 'Neh, neh! Fooled you!'

And when her stepsister wasn't playing horrid tricks, she was nasty in other ways. She was a positive expert in leaving people out. Geraldine herself had spent enough time trailing

round the edge of the playground to know exactly what had happened to those poor creatures perpetually pretending to root for something in their schoolbags, and trying to look so indifferent when everyone knew that they were on the verge of tears and counting the minutes to the bell.

Thank God that Lulu had always been in a class one year group down. That eight-month gap in age had been a blessing, making things easier during weekends and holidays because they both had different friends. But still the two of them had spent enough time together to know one another backwards. So when the phone rang, Geraldine didn't reach over the edge of the bath to pick it up. She didn't want to hear her stepsister's smarmy pretence at innocence. 'God, Geraldine! I am so sorry! I really, *really* didn't mean to—'

Bitch! How many years had Geraldine and Robert been trying to have a baby? Five, at the very least. Two on their own, two with the help of experts, and it was only six months or so since that tear-filled weekend when she'd decided that she couldn't stand it any more, and would he mind? And Robert had admitted he was relieved. He'd hated all that clinic crap. He'd loathed the fact that Geraldine was loading her system with chemicals. He kept on worrying she might get cancer and die on him. If she really wanted to adopt, then they could think about that. But, in the meantime . . .

The phone rang on. Let Robert pick it up downstairs if he chose. Geraldine didn't care how sharp he was with Lulu; she deserved it. But clearly Robert, too, thought better of tangling with his sister-in-law tonight. Eight rings, and then the phone cut off with that half-chirrup that meant the

answering machine was clicking in. And that was for the best. Robert had always known exactly when to say something and when to give things time. What was it Geraldine's mother had said about him so often over the years? 'Dear Robert! Not much cop for looks, but so, *so* good with pets and toddlers.'

And so, *so* good with wives. For he had always known how best to comfort her. After the last sequence at the hospital, he had been firm. 'Out goes the whole damn lot!' Sure enough, all of that grisly and expensive paraphernalia had vanished overnight: the pamphlets, instruction details, timing devices and every last medication and syringe. 'That's it!' he had declared. 'We're free!' And suddenly the two of them were living in a whirlwind: weekend trips; New Year in Vienna; walking in Sicily; a fortnight in Goa. All of the things they wouldn't have dared to do with either a pregnancy or a small child. From time to time, held in his arms on dark nights, Geraldine did admit that there was still a painful yearning inside her somewhere. But it was getting better. At least they'd had the sense to be discreet all the way through, so there was no one in their circle of colleagues and friends who even knew about their disappointment.

Except for Lulu.

Oh, why had Geraldine been so stupid as to use that appointment card as a bookmark? Lulu had pounced. 'What's this? Are you having treatment at this place? I didn't know!'

'No, no. I lent that book to Tania at work. She must have left that card in it.'

'It's got your name on it.'

So that was that, of course. Geraldine did try to play the whole business down, but she'd still had to tell at least a part of it. And Lulu had appeared all sympathy, and full of understanding. God knows what must have been in all those drugs that Geraldine had taken, to make her so soft-brained she thought that she might get away with it. No, not with dear Lulu's compulsion to seek out other people's soft places and stamp so casually and cruelly where it hurt most.

The bath water was stone cold now. Out she stepped, reaching for Robert's dressing gown because it was more comforting than her own. She came downstairs. 'So. Have you listened?'

He didn't bother looking up. 'Oh, yes. I listened. Don't even try because I deleted it.'

'What was it, then? Don't tell me that she dared to say that she *forgot*?'

'No, no. It was some drivel about assuming that you'd take longer in the loo than you did. She was quite sure that by the time you came out the fuss would be over.'

'Over? After a piece of news like *that*?'

'She claimed that when the rest of them had gone, she planned to take you somewhere quiet and tell you privately.'

Geraldine pushed at the giant lump of purring fur that had been nesting on the sofa, then gave up and slumped down beside it. 'She is extraordinary, isn't she? You really wouldn't think that someone who's so good at being spiteful could think up such half-baked excuses.'

'But that's deliberate, surely.'

'You think so?' The notion took Geraldine by surprise. 'Put down that paper and say that again.'

He dropped the paper on the arm of his chair and reached for his beer can. 'It's perfectly simple. I think that Lulu is forever trying to push you over the edge. She gets her jollies out of sticking pins in everyone, and I think it really irritates her that you never lose your temper. You always forgive her.'

'I *never* forgive her.'

'Well, *I* know that. But she doesn't, does she? Because you make an absolute fetish of never offering her the satisfaction of seeing how upset you are. You've always responded that way.' He took a swig of his beer. 'This evening, for example, in the café. What did you do?'

She blushed. 'Pretended I'd noticed a traffic warden prowling round my car. Then I fled, hurling apologies behind me.'

'See? And Lulu thinks she simply hasn't prodded hard enough. So she gets worse and worse, and turns each half-arsed explanation or apology into even more of an insult. I reckon all she wants is for you, just for once, to crack.'

'Crack?'

'You know. Act like a normal person. Burst into tears. Yell at her. Slap her face. Anything.'

'Then she might knock it off? You really think that?'

'Yes, I do. Why else would she waste her time dumping this sort of vileness on to you time and again? She's jealous. Jealous because you have a decent husband and she only has

that daft Harvey – when he's not back with his wife. Jealous because you have a sensible career, and she just flits from one silly job to another. Jealous because you're nice and she is nasty. Jesus! Here, hide the last of these peanuts before I end up as fat as that damn cat.'

She tucked what he'd left of the packet safely behind a cushion, then pulled it out again. Soothed by the ebb and flow of Puffer's purr, she munched away for a while. Jealous – of course. That didn't come as news. Didn't they all remember the time that Lulu started on about the posture badge? All Robert had said when he came round to their house after school prize-giving was, 'Geraldine did well, then!' And Lulu had been out of her cage. 'I got the Posture Badge!'

Their big mistake was thinking she had made a joke. And since Lulu didn't have much of a sense of humour, perhaps they'd laughed a little too enthusiastically, because she'd flared up. 'What is so funny about that?'

Geraldine's mother had wiped the smile off her face in a flash. 'Nothing, dear. Nothing.'

'So why are you all laughing?'

No one could think of any good reason – except, of course, that it was funny to compare scooping up all three of the sixth-form science prizes with getting 'Posture'. Robert had pitched in as usual to try to deflect the flack. 'So what is posture anyway? What does it *mean*?' He'd made a great performance out of saying the word in a pretentious manner. 'Poss-chure! Poss-chure! Is it just standing up straight?'

'Of course not!' Lulu snapped. 'It's about the whole way you hold yourself and how you behave, and your attitude and everything.'

Even mild Mrs Carter had found herself baulking a little at this. 'No, I don't think so, dear.'

And Lulu lost her temper. They'd had the works. The flashing eyes and stamping feet. 'It is! It is! Don't try to tell *me* what it is. I won it! And it means a whole lot more than just stupid sitting up straight. It's *just* as important as physics, biology and stupid, stupid *maths*!'

Embarrassed to their very bones, no one had pointed out that Geraldine's third prize had been for chemistry. And that was the problem, of course. Nobody tangled with Lulu. Some held back out of fear, and some from pity. And others were simply too unsure of what might happen, because it truly did seem as if within her boiled some outlandish force that might at any moment set her off down a track everyone would regret.

So no one tackled her, and ugly scenes came thick and fast. It was as if, over the years, Lulu had managed to train them all to put up with anything – anything – rather than risk another barrage of her desperate hysteria. The only dignity that Geraldine had been able to snatch from these unsavoury occasions had been the satisfaction of flattening all expression, pretending to be deaf to every insult, and, best of all, popping her head around a door only a few minutes later with a casual, 'Lu, seen my pencil sharpener?', or, 'I can't remember whether you said you were coming into town this afternoon with us or not?' Anything simply

to rob her stepsister of the satisfaction of knowing how hard she had struck.

Posture badge, though! It was ridiculous. Crumpling the empty peanut bag, Geraldine tossed it across the room at the waste-paper basket. It missed, and rolled along the carpet, spilling salt.

'Crap shot,' jeered Robert.

'I wasn't trying,' she defended herself. 'And I already *know* that Lulu's jealous. That's how I keep from letting fly and scratching her eyes out. The trouble is, I'm not sure I can carry on. I think I'm finally ready to give up and take your advice.'

'Everyone's advice, not just mine. Your friends. Your colleagues. That weirdo therapist woman. *Everyone*.'

'Except for Mum.'

'Well, yes. But your mother has a vested interest in keeping you at it, doesn't she? I mean, if you decide that it's not worth the candle trying to placate that vindictive little minx any longer, and make a go of cutting loose, then Jane will have to start to ask herself why she's let Lulu chew up so much of her own life.'

Geraldine sighed. 'Oh, well. That's her problem now. Because I think I'm ready to write a letter to Lulu telling her I never, *ever* want to see or hear from her again.'

There was a long, long silence while both of them considered the fact that toughness of this sort had never been Geraldine's strong suit. If she'd been halfway capable of keeping any resolution of this sort, she would have written the letter years before.

'But, on the *other* hand . . .' said Robert suddenly.

She turned her head to see a smile she didn't recognize. 'On the other hand, what?'

Now he was grinning, as if he'd suddenly snapped back into himself. 'Just that it almost seems a shame to quit now, while you are so far ahead, and she has been so nasty. If you were *ever* going to crack and let fly back at her, it would have been tonight. So don't you feel a tiny, tiny bit like making the most of your laurels?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, paying her out, I suppose. Making a hobby of it.'

'A *hobby*?'

'Why not? That's what she seems to do to you, after all. She just gets on quite happily with her own life and then, whenever she gets bored or you provoke her—'

'I don't provoke her!'

'Yes, you do. You know. By getting promotions and awards and things.'

'Oh, *that* sort of provoke.'

'Yes. That sort. That always seems to be when she sets up these little stabbings in the back. She gets at you by being foul. You parry by appearing not to notice, or not to mind.' He shook his head in wonder. 'It's like a psychic sword fight. You two are in a little personal Shakespeare play all of your own. So take her on. Stay unperturbed – *whatever*.'

'To what particular purpose?'

It was as if he hadn't quite thought this bit through. But in the end he came up trumps with something heartening.

'Revenge, of course. What else? I told you, it's like a play. In the last act, she will go mad and die. We'll say a few improving words over her body, and have the bloody little bitch out of our lives for ever.'