Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Between a Mother and Her Child

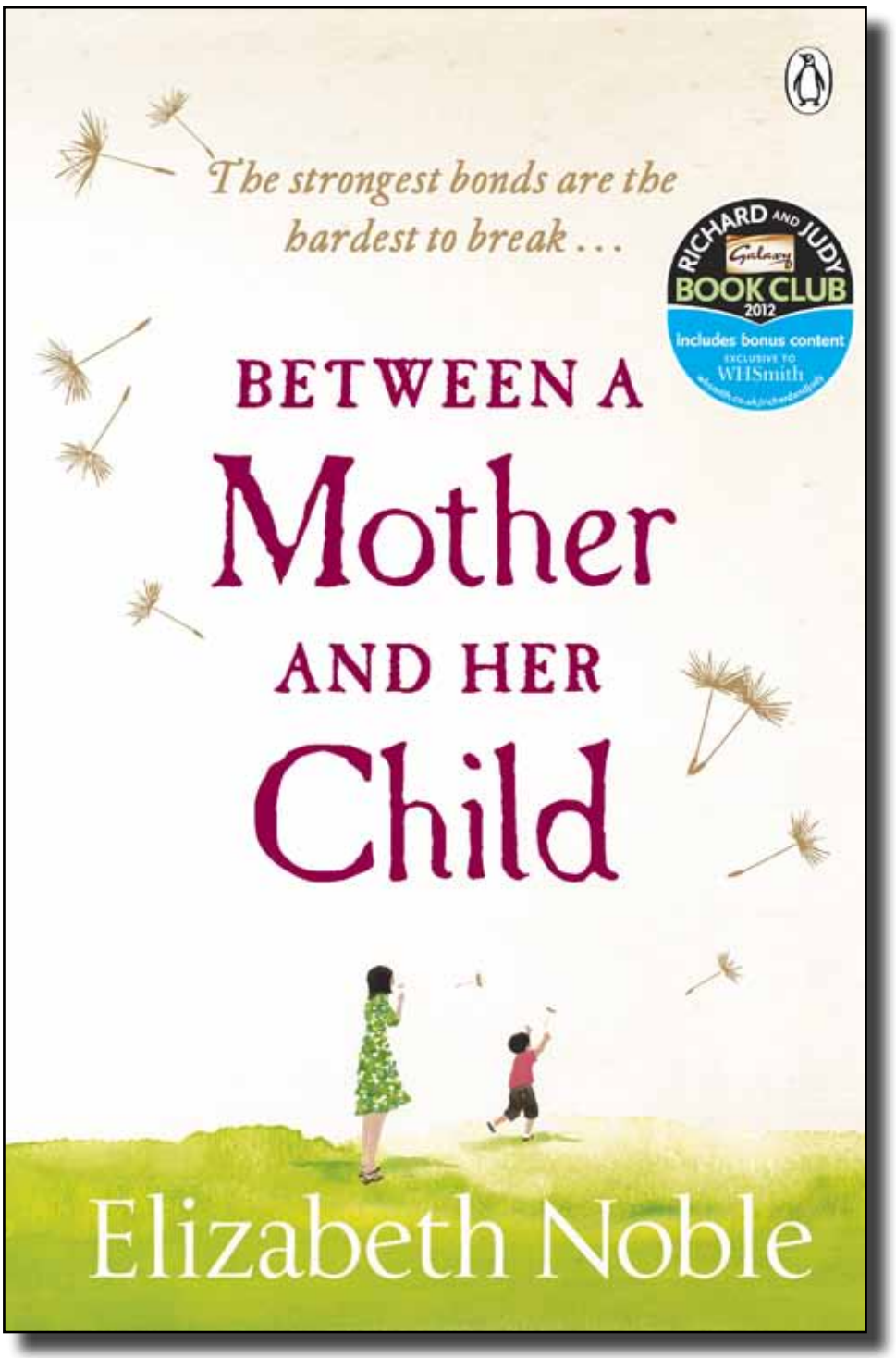
Written by Elizabeth Noble

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

PenguinTasters



Between a Mother and Her Child
by
Elizabeth Noble

Copyright Elizabeth Noble

All rights reserved

Penguin Books Ltd

Between a Mother and Her Child
is available to buy from Penguin
Paperback | eBook

and is also available in the
Kindle Store and the iBookstore

Prologue

Maggie

The dream, the one she had dreamt most nights for many, many months, always started out the same way. She sometimes thought she started dreaming it before she was even asleep. Willed herself into it, in some twisted, masochistic way. Sometimes it could even seem comforting, when it began, when it started. Familiar and warm, sound muffled, the world far away. She wondered if she thought, each time, that it might end differently. But it never did. Like an amnesiac, as though each night was the first, she forgot that the gentle, soothing start inevitably gave way to something much darker.

When she'd been a young girl, back in Australia, she and her brother and sister had often slept, on hot summer nights, on the family's ancient deck boat. It was their thing. Their mum had kept some old sleeping bags and pillows on board, the faint scent of mildew mingling with her fabric softener on worn cotton pillowcases, utterly comfortable and familiar. The gentle rocking, small waves lapping against the hull, had been her favourite way to fall asleep. Her childhood lullaby.

In the dream, she was swimming. It had always been her favourite thing to do. It had always been what she did best. Her dad had called her Goldie. It made no sense to people – Maggie's hair was espresso dark – unless you knew that it was short for Goldfish. Because she swam like one, he said.

She loved to swim. In the dream, right at the start, she clearly felt the surge of joy she was familiar with in water. Strong, confident, able. Her arms moving forward, the backs of her hands together, fingers stretching, arms straight. Then pushing her arms apart, feeling herself moving forward. Her lungs were relaxed. She could feel all her muscles, in her shoulders and her back, in her thighs, moving the way she wanted them to, at her command, the way they had been taught, and how she had practised, over the days and weeks and months of her adolescence, in the perfect rhythm. The water around her was the mythical turquoise-aqua clear of her childhood, cool and refreshing, with rays of the bright sunshine on the surface shining through the shallows and dappling on the wet sand below her. She was perfectly happy here. She was perfect, here.

But then, without warning, the sunshine receded, not gradually, but at once, as though a light switch had been suddenly flicked off. The water became darker, and became agitated, not moving with its age-old ebb and flow. Now it was no longer clear, and she couldn't see her hands in front of her face. She wanted to come to the surface – she knew she had to, but she couldn't. She wasn't even sure, after a few moments, which way the surface was – above her or below – only that she couldn't get there. It was the feeling you got when a wave dumped you, body surfing on Manly or on Bondi: total disorientation. Her lungs were tense and rigid, and panic was rising in her chest. Her limbs, the same arms and legs that had been moving in their perfect dance, were flailing now, ungainly and ugly. She was in pain, and she was afraid. So, so afraid. And she couldn't break the surface . . .

Kate

Kate Miller felt, every day, like she was fading out and away. Echoing around, getting fainter and fainter. The world, with all its sights, sounds and people, was getting further and further away. And what scared her the most about it – this process of becoming invisible – was how strangely comfortable it felt; how familiar and unthreatening. It was like life was being lived on the surface of a pond, and she was sinking towards the dark, silty bottom. People said, didn't they, that drowning was soothing, almost peaceful: how ridiculous that was, when surely you should be fighting for breath, terrified, panicking. Apparently not – you read about some sort of surrender, some sense of peace, and almost hallucinatory happiness. And this was the same. Kate knew she should fight this feeling, this sapping apathy. But something about it, she realized sadly, suited her.

There were days when she didn't leave the house. Her home, this place – it was safe and it didn't challenge her. She knew every inch – everything in it. She slept poorly at night, but often drifted off as dawn broke and slept until ten. Waking so late, it felt as though the day had started without her and the energy to catch up sometimes – often – deserted her. She'd lost weight, though she had been slim enough before. The loss didn't suit her, but cooking for one held no appeal, whatever Delia Smith might have to say on the subject, and anyway, she didn't look at her shape much – she dressed without mirrors, and without variety. Most days the phone didn't ring, and she didn't dial.

It seemed to Kate, when she thought about it, and she thought about almost nothing else these days, that in her sixty-plus years of life, she'd been two distinct and very

different people. There was the woman she had been, had allowed herself to be, for most of her adult life, and that woman lived her life in quiet black and white; and there was woman she had been for the last ten or fifteen years, before she lost him, who had basked in glorious Technicolor for all of that time. How quickly she had gone back to black and white. How weak she must be. And how she hated herself for it.

Chapter One

November 2006

When she couldn't sleep, which was often, Maggie had learnt that lying damply, tossing in the hot, crumpled sheets of her too big bed, was the worst thing she could do. She didn't want to take pills, though she had them, hidden in the back of the medicine cabinet, a slender amber pot of blue lozenge-shaped pills, not one missing, all pushed down with a cotton wool ball, the label facing the back of the cupboard, like she was ashamed she had even been prescribed them. She couldn't read then, or watch television. Her daughter Aly, who knew how it was, though they seldom talked about it, had joined LoveFilm with her mother's name and credit card details, and optimistically lined up epic boxed series of DVDs – *The West Wing*, *Rome*, *24*, *Grey's Anatomy*, alongside the older, black and white film collection that Maggie had treasured for years – the Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart and Katharine Hepburn films she knew by heart but that Aly didn't consider constituted entertainment. But Maggie couldn't always concentrate, couldn't follow even the simplest stories she knew best. She needed to move, and not to think. If she'd lived alone, she might have run, hard and fast, the way she hadn't done for years, concentrating only on putting one leg in front of the other and on controlling the screaming pain in her lungs, though she knew it wasn't a sensible thing to do in west London in the middle of the night. But she didn't live alone, and she couldn't do that.

So she did housework, and laundry, and ironing. In the middle of the night. Her home was cleaner than it had ever been. Not that it mattered to her, particularly. Maggie had always been quite laid back about that. More laid back than her husband, Bill, ever had been, certainly. She had accused him, more than once, and not entirely jokingly, of being borderline OCD. Bill would square off a pile of magazines and newspapers on the coffee table (if he wasn't, in fact, consigning them to the recycling) and dry dishes left to drain on the counter. He couldn't really relax if jobs like this weren't done. These were not things that had ever worried Maggie. She'd grown up in comfortable chaos – her mum had kept newspapers until she'd read every word, and since she worked hard, that often took weeks, and they teetered in piles on every available surface. It was clean, her childhood home, but it was almost never tidy. Mess was her natural habitat, she supposed. It was one of the differences between them that had once been endearing, but, across the years of their marriage, had become less a cute contrast and more a wearisome irritation. Sand in the pearl shell.

But the cleaning was almost therapeutic now. She could go into a room and make it different. Achieve something. Fix something. Focus on something real, however mundane. And it was hard work physically. She usually gave up on sleep around 2 or 3 a.m. Then cleaned for two or three hours. Then went back to bed, falling exhausted on to the same crumpled sheets, not noticing them this time. It meant that getting up at 7.30 a.m. to see Stan and Aly off to school nearly killed her every morning, the alarm she had to keep on the dresser across from her bed rousing her from the deepest, furthest away sleep she ever got these days. She would swing her legs out of bed the second she heard it, sitting with her

head bowed like a disorientated drunk, willing herself to come around.

She never let herself go back to bed after she'd waved them off, though sometimes – usually – she ached to. Somehow that felt like a slippery slope to her, and the idea of it frightened her. She wouldn't be *that* woman. She showered and dressed, dried her hair and put on make-up, something she'd learnt to do without ever really looking herself in the eye, and got on with things. She often napped in the afternoons, in front of *Midsomer Murders*, on the deep denim sofa in the sitting room, but she was dressed when she did it, damn it.

It was a new routine, and she hated it, but it was a routine, at least, and there was some strange comfort in that. For a long time, there'd been no routine at all, because they'd all been so very lost, disorientated, like in the dream.

On the top landing, Aly's door was firmly shut, but Maggie turned the handle silently, braver in the dark night than she sometimes felt in the day, and opened it enough for the pendant on the landing to bathe her daughter's face in a shaft of soft light. Aly's face had hardly changed at all since she was a baby. Her rounded nose, her full lips, the slightly chubby cheeks she so hated – they were all the features of her baby face. The eyes, closed now in deep sleep, were her father's clear bright celadon green. Aly wore her hair long, like every other teenage girl Maggie could think of, and it lay in heavy, wavy layers across her pillow, a dirty dark blonde. Aly would be pleased with how she looked lying there, if she could see. A sleeping beauty. Maggie marvelled, as she had all Aly's life, that this child had come from her. Her own coarse curls were so brown they were almost black. Her skin was olive. Her eyes were a deep, dark hazel brown, like a Labrador, Bill used to say.

From a distance they looked chocolate brown, but up close you could see slivers of amber and emerald and tawny yellow in them. Aly frowned and shifted a little in her sleep, and Maggie closed the door gently. She did this most nights. She and Aly were so out of sync in their waking lives that she needed this contact. Asleep, Aly couldn't argue with her, couldn't make that particular face she seemed to reserve exclusively for her mother, didn't make Maggie feel like she was getting everything wrong.

Along the hall, Stan's door, proudly marked as such with a US car licence plate from the state of New York that bore the name Stanley, was wide open. Stan lay spread-eagled diagonally across his bed, the duvet kicked back and half on to the floor. Stan's left hand was down his pyjama bottoms in the position of comfort he had been assuming all his life, and his pyjama top had ridden up so that ten inches of belly were exposed. Maggie smiled and went in, stubbing her toe on a rogue piece of Lego and swearing under her breath. She pulled him around carefully, smoothing his top down and covering his soft skin. She kissed his cheek and lingered for a moment, loving the smell of him, and almost envying the regular, peaceful sound of his breathing. She touched his hair. If it grew, then those would be her dark curls, but by mutual agreement, she and Stan kept it close-cropped, and it was like stroking an animal's pelt. A sudden tear rolled down her cheek, her sternum contracting in a momentary dull pain. That happened, these days, all the time. Maggie barely noticed.

Her babies were asleep. They were safe, and they were here, and they were sleeping. It brought her a kind of peace, for a while at least.

Maggie tucked him in again, and got on with her labours. She kept a small cleaning kit in each of the bathrooms. It

saved making too much noise going up and down the stairs. She cleaned the bathrooms the most. She kept old T-shirts of Bill's, yellowed at the armpits and stretched at the neck, as cloths and rubbed at the tiles until they gleamed. She scrubbed at the grout and polished the taps. Replaced damp towels from the floor with fresh, clean ones from the airing cupboard on the landing outside her bedroom. Neither of the kids appeared to understand the concept of a towel rail, however often she explained it to them.

It was a beautiful house, and she loved it clean as she had loved it messy. She had lived in it for almost fifteen years. Aly had been a toddler when they'd moved in, and Stan was born five years later, just as she and Bill had finally finished renovating. A grand and imposing Victorian end-of-terrace villa, it sprawled over four floors. She remembered standing at the bottom of the flight of steps that led up to the big dark-blue front door, the day the estate agent had taken her and Bill to see it for the first time, struggling to imagine that a place this lovely, this big, could actually be her home. Their home. Bill was a risk taker then. He'd squeezed her shoulder and said he'd done the sums and they could afford it, and even though she knew he'd done the sums he wanted to do, not the sums he probably should have done, she didn't press him because she suddenly, desperately wanted to be the woman who lived here. She wanted to sit in an armchair with the children playing on the rug around her in the vast bay window on the upper-ground floor and wait for him to come home at night.

It had been in a state, of course, with peeling William Morris wallpaper and sticky carpets. Even Bill couldn't have made the numbers work on a property already renovated, not in those days, even in a postcode that was more up and

coming than already established. But the rooms had been big, with unbelievably high ceilings, and, thank God, all the period details intact – big marble fireplaces and deep, gracious coving, ceiling roses and picture rails. The agent had banged the doors authoritatively and declared them 'heavy, solid, almost certainly original'.

There were two huge reception rooms on the ground floor, and four smaller rooms in the basement, which was dark, and had a single, solid door that led out into the surprising, overgrown sixty-foot garden. On the first floor there were three bedrooms and a bathroom, and on the top floor, three more bedrooms. As she had slowly climbed each staircase, with Aly wriggling and chattering on her hip, wandering from floor to floor, Maggie had fallen more and more in love with the house. Finally, years after she'd left her home in Australia, Maggie had the strange and marvellous feeling that she was home again. Bill and the agent were brainstorming the possible renovation and tapping walls in a manly way. Maggie had been uncharacteristically quiet. When Bill had whispered in her ear, anxious and unable to read her, 'What do you think?', she had smiled broadly, then buried her face in Aly's delicious scented neck, and giggled. 'I think you better buy it right now, 'cos I'm not leaving . . .'

And she hadn't.

It had been hard work. They'd laboured in the house while the neighbourhood around them also became more respectable and smart, and while Bill's property-development business thrived and made sense at first of the sum, and then light work of the mortgage, and while their children grew and played in the garden. They'd stripped all the gruesome wallpaper and pulled up the carpets. At first, that and fresh paint was all they could

manage. Then they'd gone room by room, adding curtains, and furniture. A family bathroom with the clawfoot bath that was everywhere that year. And at last the kitchen. They'd taken the back off the basement and installed a vast and fashionable family kitchen/diner down there, with stainless-steel appliances and a seamless white Corian work surface, although Maggie had insisted on a huge old pine kitchen table and mismatched chairs that she'd found at a reclamation yard to stop the place feeling what she would describe to Bill, her nose wrinkled in distaste, as 'too cataloguey'. There were floor-to-ceiling glass doors that opened all the way back on clever hinges and slides on warm sunny days. Bill always told people he had to get as much fresh air and sunlight as he could in for his Aussie wife, but it was as much for him as for her. They'd put in a master en suite and a small new top-floor bathroom, and decorated everywhere in a warm palette of greens and neutrals, Maggie sneaking a splash of orange and pink in where she thought she could get away with it.

They'd been crazy stupid happy doing that house. Exhausted a lot of the time. There were a million memories in the fabric of the building. Aly riding a trike around a big empty room, a tiny hard hat rakish on her head. Bill, his five o'clock shadow scratching the side of her neck, sliding his hands down the insides of her painting dungarees, desperate to distract her from finishing just one more wall. They'd all laid a handprint in poured concrete and she'd scratched their names under each palm imprint. Heights were scratched into the kitchen doorframe. Bill had filled the foyer with blue balloons the day they'd brought Stan home from the hospital. There was a raised bed in the back garden, made with reclaimed railway sleepers Bill had found, where she'd taught the children to plant seeds and

they'd grown tomatoes and lettuces and carrots. She'd loved doing it – every minute of every day of it, she'd loved how it all looked when she was finished – cool and comfortable and lived in, lived in by her happy family, and she'd loved her life. Then.

She loved it still. Several redecorations later, and however many times she climbed that flight of steps and put her key in the lock. In the late nineties, Bill had tried hard to persuade her to move. They could have something much grander now, he told her. The mortgage that had once been terrifying had long been paid off – Bill had been lucky, and he was good at what he did – astute investments and imaginative projects in great areas had made him wealthy far quicker than Maggie would have imagined possible, though Bill had always had a professional confidence that some might think bordered on arrogance. Bill's father, before he died, had crowed that he'd been right all along – Bill hadn't needed university with his head for business and property, it would have been a waste of time, he said. He'd been Maggie's ally – Bill's mother had never entirely forgiven Maggie for 'holding Bill back', though until recently Maggie had never understood what she was supposed to have been holding him back from. Bill wanted to move; he felt he'd earnt it. He had a shopping list of things he wanted – garaging for his car, a garden big enough for a pool . . . he brought home details of behemoths in Primrose Hill and Hampstead. Tried to enlist the children in his master plan with promises of en suite bathrooms and tennis courts – but all in vain. Maggie was rooted here, and she refused to budge. This was their home. It had driven a small wedge – not injurious, necessarily, but irritating, like a splinter – between them. Bill accused her of not enjoying his money, and thereby tarnishing his own enjoyment of his success. Maggie had tried to

ignore the feeling that Bill's wanting to move was somehow a betrayal of how happy they'd been here. Somehow an indication that none of it was as precious, as memorable, to him as it was to her. The kind of thought that seeps into a marriage and is never really expressed, because it seems so small, at first. But maybe it's the start of a slight fraying around the edges. A few threads, coming loose. So small a fault at the start that you shake your head and dismiss your own pessimism. But it's a start.

It almost amused her, the cleanliness of the house now. It was ironic that Bill didn't live here any more to see it.

Downstairs now, Maggie boiled the kettle in the gleaming kitchen, and put a teabag in a mug. For a while, after everything, she'd abandoned the strong 'builder's tea' she'd drunk ever since she came to England and switched to what Bill called 'weirdy beardy' tea – chamomile and nettle and fennel and such. Teas she might have smirked at, if she hadn't been so desperate for tranquillity and for sleep that she'd try anything. She'd almost been relieved, though, when they hadn't worked – hadn't kept her asleep or slowed her racing pulse – and she'd been able to switch back. They tasted so awful. She drank too much tea, she knew. Drank tea like an Englishwoman – all day long, as refreshment, as therapy, because boiling the kettle was something to do to break up the hours. But frankly she didn't care about her tannin levels, or her caffeine intake. There were worse addictions to have, and she'd avoided those – painkillers, antidepressants, too much Pinot noir in front of the TV, even. She checked her watch, though she didn't really need to. She didn't have to figure out the time difference – after all these years, she still ran two clocks in her brain. It was 4 a.m. here, so it was three o'clock in the afternoon there, eleven hours ahead. She took the phone from its cradle, picked up her mug of tea and curled

up on the sofa, pulling an embroidered Union Jack pillow into the small of her back.

Her younger sister, more than 10,000 miles away, was on speed dial and it only took twenty seconds to get to her. She was #2, after Bill's office at #1. Not for the first time, as she pushed the button, Maggie thought maybe she needed to change that now. Olivia picked up on the fourth ring.

'Slacking off on the housework, sis?' They'd always done that – segued straight into conversation, as though they were in the next room from each other and had broken off only for a moment.

'Tea break. Time for one yourself?'

'Good idea. Hold on.' Maggie could hear the sound of a door closing – Liv's office door – and a technical beep, like she'd closed a computer screen. This was Liv's ritual. She was making time for Maggie. She always did.

'Tell me all about it?'

It was what Maggie always said. Olivia knew that what it meant was 'talk to me, talk at me, let me lose myself for a moment in your life so far away . . .' She knew to talk.

'Work, weather or Scott?'

'You have to ask?'

'Well, I had a long, dull meeting with the partners this morning, and now I've got this report to finish . . .'

'Scott. I meant Scott, you dufus.' Maggie almost laughed.

'Ah . . . Scott . . .'

Scott was her younger sister's boyfriend. The first one, so far as Maggie knew, and Maggie knew everything, who was getting really serious . . .

Maggie was thirty-eight years old. Olivia was eight years younger. She was their parents' bonus baby, born on their own mother's forty-fifth birthday. Maggie had loved Olivia passionately and unconditionally since the first moment

she'd seen her, lying in a Perspex cot beside their mother's hospital bed in Sydney. Olivia had been born with a full head of glossy hair that curled at the ends just like her big sister's had, before the curl travelled resolutely up to the roots, and a reflux issue that meant she threw up almost everything she had ingested for the first nine months of her life. Maggie didn't care. She had never tired of washing and dressing Olivia. She was almost proprietary about her, rushing home from school to take over from her mother, who, more tired than she had thought she would be this time around, was happy to hand her over. Their father worked long and often unsocial hours, and wasn't entirely baby friendly when he was around, preferring his children once they could walk, talk and swim; their big brother, Tom, was totally uninterested, so Maggie had often had Olivia completely to herself.

She'd taught her to walk, and she'd taught her to swim. Olivia's first word was a slurred approximation of Maggie's name. The two of them had always shared a bedroom, and often, in those early years, a narrow single bed, Olivia climbing in to snuggle into Maggie's warmth whenever she woke in the night and sometimes before she'd even slept.

Leaving Olivia in Australia had been, at the time, the hardest thing Maggie had ever done. She had been eighteen – Olivia barely eleven, angry and hurt that her sister was deserting her to go so very far away. Over the years, Bill had joked that the phone bills and the airline tickets he'd had to pay for were a very high price for his foreign, exotic flower of a wife. As she got a little older, Olivia flew unaccompanied minor as often as she could: Christmas and New Year, the long Australian school summer holiday. Maggie's parents hated the flight – they'd come at first, once a year or so, but that had dwindled eventually. They preferred Maggie to

visit them, anxious for her children to spend time in Australia. Tom made no secret of his dislike of England, with its grey skies and long winters, and his vague disdain for Bill had been another barrier to a close ongoing relationship. When he'd married a woman neither Liv nor Maggie could stick for more than an hour or so at a time, they'd grown further apart – their virtual estrangement a stark contrast to the bond between the sisters. Olivia was the most steadfast member of Maggie's family. Maggie had hoped Olivia might follow her and make a permanent home in England, but she'd had to acknowledge that Olivia, as much as they loved each other, was somehow just more Australian. England didn't suit her as much. And Olivia had known it too, although one summer in her late teens she had fallen in love with a burly hockey player from the club where Bill played, and tried to convince herself she could stay. They broke up and she went home. And there she had stayed.

Always 'the brainy one', although truly she was the one who had had the most opportunity, or at least hadn't blown it like Maggie had, Olivia had read business studies at the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, gaining a first-class degree 'without really breaking a sweat', Maggie would declare proudly. She was working on an MBA now, sponsored by the large insurance company she'd worked for since graduation. The sullen eleven-year-old with wild hair had grown into a groomed, sleek and smart young woman. Maggie was beyond proud of her sister, and still as protective as she had been all those years ago, despite the miles between them and the creeping knowledge that Liv scarcely needed looking after as much as she herself did now. Distance notwithstanding, they were as close as they had ever been. Closer now, if that were possible, in the last cou-

ple of years. Olivia had been entirely constant since Maggie's life had started to go so spectacularly wrong – perpetually available to her sister whatever was going on in her own life. And constancy was a great thing. There had been weeks, maybe months, when Maggie had refused to answer the phone or been monosyllabic and uncommunicative when she did, but Liv had never wavered. She called every day, for ages, and when Maggie didn't talk to her, she just carried on detailing the minutiae of her own life, her tone light and bright, knowing that Maggie was listening, even if she wasn't responding.

Maggie had never met Scott, though. She'd last been in Sydney the previous Easter, stopping there for ten days or so, staying with their dad – widowed eight years earlier when their mum, a lifelong non-smoker, had died quickly and violently of lung cancer – before she took the kids north to Hamilton Island. He and Olivia had been seeing each other then, but he'd been in Tokyo on a business trip. Maggie had pretended to be offended, called him Olivia's imaginary boyfriend, and Olivia had made light of it, but Maggie knew from her sister's face that it was serious and that she was a little sad they hadn't met. She knew Olivia wanted to look at this man she might love through the gently refracting lens of her sister's eye.

She'd seen pictures of a tall, good-looking guy with an easy smile, and spoken to him on the phone, though that had been strangely frustrating, as awkward as talking to Liv was easy. It was only when she was talking to her sister that she forgot that slightly stilting time delay and occasional echo on the line. She liked to see people's faces when she was talking to them. Without that, no conversation felt easy. With Scott, their mutual keenness – hers to like him, him to have her like him – made it odd and unnatural.

'He wants us to move in together.' Olivia laughed, a high, excited, happy sound.

'You're kidding me? Really?'

'No. He asked me last night.'

'Wow. Move in, not get married?'

'Well . . . ?'

'Well . . . what?'

'Oh Mags . . .'

'Oh Liv.' Maggie was teasing her, but only gently.

Liv apparently hadn't noticed anyway. 'He made this lovely, lovely speech. Honestly, he was so sweet my knees were buckling, and I was sitting down. He said . . . oh, he said the greatest, sexiest, most romantic, wonderful things anyone ever said to me . . .'

Maggie waited, holding her breath. Olivia's excitement was contagious, but, for her, always with a twist. Her sternum ached again, and unconsciously she tapped herself lightly on the part that hurt.

'He said he wanted to marry me. He said that was absolutely what he saw in our future. That he already couldn't imagine his life without me. Didn't want to. He said when he proposed, he wanted it to be perfect. He wants to meet you first, sis. He knows about us, he really gets it. He'll ask Dad, I'm sure; he's that kind of guy. But he knows it's really you he has to impress . . .'

'And shacking up with my baby sister is the way to do that, right?'

Olivia laughed again. 'You're awful, Mags! You really are. Shacking up! He said he couldn't bear not to wake up with me every morning, and he was getting fed up with carrying his jockeys around town in his briefcase.'

'That old chestnut. Which episode of *Sex and the City* did he get that line from?'

'Yes, that old chestnut. He doesn't watch *Sex and the City*.'

'And you fell for it, did you?'

'Hook, line and bloody sinker.' Olivia laughed. 'Oh shit, Maggie, I'm so happy I might explode.'

Maggie loved so many things about Olivia it was hard to say what she loved best, but it might just be that Olivia didn't try and shield her sister from her own joy, like other people might. She understood that the two things – her joy and Maggie's misery – weren't related, and that Maggie didn't want to be protected from it. She already felt everything, so let her feel this too.

'I'm glad, Livvy.'

'I know. I know you are.'

'Are you going to do it straight away? Before you come here?'

'I can't see why not. *Carpe* the *diem*, right?'

'That's my philosophy.' Hadn't it always been? Liv hesitated for just a second.

'He wants to come with me, at Christmas.'

'Oh.' Of course. He had to come, didn't he? How else could they meet? She hadn't thought it through fast enough . . .

Olivia carried on, quickly, sensing what Maggie was thinking. 'But not for the whole time. I mean, I'm taking a long break, right?' Olivia was arriving on the 15th, and staying for almost four weeks. Officially, she was on a study break from work. Unofficially, Maggie knew she was coming to look after her. And she couldn't wait. The nearer the time got, the more desperate she felt. She would drive to Heathrow to pick Olivia up, and she'd heave a huge sigh of relief that her sister was finally here. Then she'd let her sleep for fourteen hours, and just knowing that Olivia was in the house, was here at last, would be like a salve. She hated the sudden stab of jealousy she felt because it made

her feel mean – but Scott had her all the time, didn't he? Scott had her on the other side of the world. She wanted her to herself.

'And he is meant to be with his parents, of course. The whole lot.' Scott came, Maggie knew, from an improbably large farming family in Queensland, outside of Brisbane.

'But he thought he'd maybe come between Christmas and New Year, and stay for a week. The day after Boxing Day until New Year's Day, maybe. Would that be okay?' Olivia spoke slowly and clearly. She knew exactly what she was saying – she must have rehearsed saying this, Maggie realized. And she needed Maggie to know that she knew.

Maggie took a deep breath. 'Of course. It would be great. Stan and Aly will be thrilled.'

'And you?'

Maggie made herself sound light and warm. 'Of course. I can share you – for a while. I've got to meet this man, right, if he's going to be my new brother-in-law?'

'So when does Bill have the kids? Did you sort it all out yet?'

'Before Christmas. He's bringing them back Christmas morning.' God, she dreaded that. The handover was the absolute worst part. There was no way of finessing it, or making it appear as anything other than what it was – two parents splitting their children and their children's hearts in half on a weekly or fortnightly basis. However hard they worked at it, however committed they were to making it as easy for the kids as it possibly could be, and however civilized, that moment was still the hardest.

'Then odd days, between then and New Year's. He'll have Stan on his own a bit – Aly has all kinds of plans with her mates, as usual. Stan's trying to talk Bill into taking him skiing, but I don't know if he's sorted anything out . . .'

'How do you feel about that?'

'I hope he does. Stan loves the snow.'

'And you hate it, right?'

'Bingo.'

'So that works?'

'That works. You and me. Then you, me and the kids. Then you, me, the kids and Scott.'

'He says he wants to be in Trafalgar Square for the New Year's Eve hoopla.'

'Why?' Maggie's tone was incredulous. She couldn't think of anything worse than a drunken scrum on a freezing damp night.

'God knows. I suppose he's seen it on the telly or something . . .' Olivia giggled. 'Let's talk him out of it.'

'You're on. That could only be a huge disappointment, after a lifetime of celebrating it in Sydney Harbour . . .'

'He spent most of his first years celebrating it on a farm in the middle of nowhere. They probably sheared a sheep or two to ring in the New Year.'

'You might have to lose the disdain for rural life if you're going to hitch your wagon to this guy's horse, Liv.'

'No way. He's getting a city girl. He knows that.'

'You sure he's not planning to drag you back to the homestead, get you pregnant once a year for the next decade?'

She heard her sister shiver, then laugh.

'I can't wait for you to be here, Livvy.'

'Me too. Three weeks and I'll be there . . .' After a pause, Liv's voice grew suddenly serious. 'How are you doing?'

Maggie shrugged, though she knew the gesture did not translate on the phone.

'You know. I'm okay. I'm fine.'

'That's the banned word.'

Olivia had banned 'fine' ages ago. But 'fine' was a bad

habit, hard to shake. 'Fine', she could have pointed out, was also exactly what almost everyone else who asked wanted to hear, after the initial interest and support.

'Sorry.'

''S okay. You hanging in?'

'By my fingernails.' Maggie tried to keep her tone light, and Liv responded in kind, though neither of them believed each other.

'What you got going on, apart from the bloody spring cleaning?' No one but Liv knew about Maggie's nocturnal habit. For the sister who'd grown up in Maggie's messy tip of a bedroom, it still seemed bizarre. For all the kids knew, or noticed, a team of pixies slipped in each night and did it all.

Maggie took a quick stock. 'Aly's got the wretched exams, of course. I'm actually having lunch with Bill this week to talk it over.'

'Is that okay?'

'You know it is, Livvy.' She and Bill could still talk about the kids, almost like they always had, with the crucial difference that one of them no longer lived with Aly and Stan and didn't see them every day. She was determined that would not change. She did not withhold information. She did not do PR for their father, negative or positive. But she had never shut him out. She never would.

'And then Stan is determined that we decorate for Christmas on December 1st, so the tree can drop all its damn needles by Christmas Eve, and this year he is also determined we must hike around in the mud at a Christmas-tree farm and cut the wretched thing down ourselves.'

Stan was too young and too oblivious to realize that selecting the tree, wielding the axe and tying the tree to the top of the car was definitely what Maggie would have con-

sidered Bill's domain. So she would do it, though she would dread it.

'Sounds ghastly.' Liv hated the cold.

'It'll be . . .'

'Don't.' Olivia's voice, mock strict, was strident down the phone. She knew Maggie had been about to use the banned word.

Maggie laughed, stifling a yawn. 'It'll be . . . an adventure.'

'You yawning?'

'Yep. Think the second rest shift might be on.'

'Charming. You've rung me, on the other side of the world, so I can talk you to sleep. I'm human Mogadon. I'm a lullaby made flesh . . .'

'Pretty much.'

'I love you, Mags.' She hadn't always been so sentimental. Hadn't always said out loud the things she felt that she knew were understood. That was new.

'I love you too. Livvy? I'm really, really pleased for you. Honest. I can't wait to meet him.'

'I'll be there soon.'

Not soon enough. The moment Liv had hung up, Maggie's heart sank. She put her mug in the shiny sink and climbed the two flights of stairs to her bedroom. She stood in the doorway, staring at the bed. It was a little more than seven foot wide – the biggest bed she had ever seen. Sheets for it had to be specially made. Bill had had it made for them, the year Stan was born. He said he wanted a bed they could all sleep in without being uncomfortable. All watch a black and white film on the vast wall-mounted television, or read books and newspapers on a Sunday morning. You could get lost in a bed that big, and Maggie felt lost in it every night now. She needed to get rid of it. She said that at least once a day, usually while she was making it, but she hadn't done

anything about it. She nodded her head decisively. She would. She must. She would talk to Bill about it when they had lunch this week. Then she walked to the foot, put her arms out to the sides, and fell forward, like a bungee jumper, her breath forced out of her lungs as she fell on the mattress, eyes already closed.

It was hot a couple of hours later, when Olivia stepped out of her office on to the street. Bright and sunny and still very hot. She pulled the sunglasses she'd had on the top of her head down, feeling her eyes start to water as they squinted at the yellow light. Maggie would be asleep now. She hoped. Like those clocks hotels kept in their foyers, showing the time in New York, Tokyo, London, she automatically thought in two time zones. Whatever she was doing, at any time of the day, she knew what time it was in London – what Maggie might most likely be doing. Now, now she should be sleeping. There was something like relief in knowing that. Maggie was unlikely to call for the next few hours. And she no longer called so much during Liv's night. She had done, fairly regularly, at first. But she didn't any more. Liv had said she could, and she didn't mind, she truly didn't, but it had been exhausting. Even on the nights when Maggie hadn't called, her voice breaking and quiet, her Australian accent more pronounced in grief than it had been for years, Liv slept lightly, fitfully, waiting for the ring. Liv wasn't sure whether it was because she no longer needed to, or because she knew how much those calls frightened and worried Liv, or maybe even because of Scott – because these days more often than not Liv was in bed with him.

That made little difference to Liv. If anything, she worried more. Once it was the phone ringing that woke her. Now it was quite often the silence. The not ringing. Either way, she

was often sitting propped on pillows thinking about her sister in the middle of the night.

Scott had helped. God, how he had helped. Sometimes he slept through her wakefulness, and she lay on her side, watching him. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. The odd twitch of his eye or his lips as he dreamt. It made her calm, watching him. Sometimes he woke too, sensing her beside him. They didn't speak. He knew and so there was no need. Then he would pull her in towards him, holding her tightly. Quite often he would make love to her then, silent and gentle and slow, as though in a dream, sometimes not even quite fully awake. They had a lot – really, a lot – of lights-on, eyes-wide-open, aerobic-work-out, *Kama Sutra*-style sex the rest of the time, but those times, in the middle of the night, in the silent darkness, those meant the most to her, because what it so eloquently told her was how well he understood her, and how willing he was to give her what he knew she needed. It was a huge part of how and why she loved him.

She remembered telling him about Maggie and Bill, and their story. Horribly early in their relationship. Too soon, probably. No, definitely. It was their fourth date. She'd been out with a lot of men, but Scott had made a huge impact. It wasn't just that he was gorgeous, though he definitely was. They'd kissed, open-mouthed and hot under the collar, against the wall outside her apartment, at the end of the third date, but that was as far as things had gone. And then she was crying into her tapas. And she wasn't a pretty crier – this she knew to be true. That he hadn't run screaming for the hills was to his eternal credit.

And here he was, leaning against a bike rack, his tie already loosened and his jacket over his shoulder. She smiled at him, and he walked towards her. He often met her outside the

office these days; he worked a few streets away. He slid his arms around her waist possessively and kissed her deeply, wonderfully oblivious to the commuters milling around them. She let him kiss her and she kissed him back, the sun strong on her upturned face, and gratefully let Maggie slip gently to the back of her mind.