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# Pieces *of My* Heart

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Pieces of My Heart  
by  
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# I

I examined myself in the mirror. I hadn't worn this black dress in years, but it still fitted, which was a relief. I moved closer and peered at my face – daylight was harsh: all I could see were lines everywhere, mapping out my life so far.

I decided to focus on the positive – the dress fitted. Having children young definitely helped you to maintain some kind of waistline.

Sally came up the stairs and walked into the room. She looked stunning in a black trouser suit. Not having children at all helped you to maintain a sensational waistline.

'Nice suit,' I said.

'Prada. My present to myself for my forty-third birthday,' said my best friend. 'New boobs for my fortieth, Botox for my forty-first, Restylane for my forty-second and now designer clothes.'

'Well, you look brilliant. I think I'll have to ask Paul for a full face-lift for my birthday.'

'Hey, you're the hottest mother I know. My sisters all look like old women.'

'I don't feel remotely hot. Look at all these wrinkles.'

'That's why they invented Botox.'

'I know, I know. I just hate needles.'

'Muuuuum!' yelled Sarah, storming into the bedroom. 'There is no way I'm wearing this nun's outfit.'

'I want you to look respectable. Just put it on.'

'If I have to wear it, I'm not going.' She threw the navy dress onto my bed and folded her arms.

'Sarah, I haven't got time for this.'

'Come on, I'll help you find something,' Sally said, ushering my bolshy sixteen-year-old out.

As they left, Alison walked in, wearing a simple but elegant beige shift dress. ‘Is this OK?’ she asked.

‘It’s perfect, Ali.’ I smiled at my eldest daughter. ‘You look lovely. Come on, let’s go check on Charlie.’

My father was standing in the hall in his best suit, looking very pleased with himself.

‘Are you feeling all right, Charlie?’ Alison asked, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

‘Never better. I’ve been waiting for this day for twenty-three and a half years,’ he said, beaming.

‘Charlie!’ I scolded half-heartedly.

‘This is the best day of my life.’ He grinned. ‘I’ll celebrate the tenth of August every year.’

Sarah came strutting down the stairs in a black mini-skirt and a black top with *Babe* emblazoned across the front. I glanced at Sally, who threw her arms into the air. ‘This is mild – you should have seen what she wanted to wear.’

‘Sarah, you do know we’re going to a funeral, not a nightclub,’ I reminded her.

‘Legs like this deserve to be shown off,’ she said, flicking back her long dark hair.

‘Sarah –’

Charlie put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Leave her, Ava. She’ll liven things up.’

‘Where’s Dad?’ Alison asked.

I sighed. ‘Stuck in work. He said he’d meet us out there. Come on, everyone, into my car.’

Paul was waiting for us at the church. ‘Why is our sixteen-year-old daughter dressed like a hooker?’ he asked.

‘Talk to Sally. I left her in charge,’ I replied.

‘You should thank me.’ Sally laughed. ‘She wanted to wear hot pants, so we compromised.’

‘Ava left *you* in charge of Sarah’s wardrobe?’

‘Are you implying that I dress inappropriately, too?’ Sally said, playfully punching his arm.

‘Did you forget your shirt?’

‘Smartarse. Prada trouser suits don’t require shirts,’ she retorted. Then, turning to me, she asked, ‘I’m not showing too much cleavage, am I, Ava?’

Before I had the chance to reassure her that she wasn’t over-exposed, Charlie jumped in: ‘I’d like to see a lot more,’ he said. ‘I’ve always been a boob man.’

Sally, Paul and Sarah tried not to laugh, while Ali looked embarrassed.

‘Charlie!’ I hissed. ‘We’re at your wife’s funeral.’

‘I can’t help it. I haven’t had sex in six years!’

‘That is a serious famine,’ Paul agreed.

‘Ewww, Charlie, do old people still do it?’ Sarah asked.

‘Any chance they get,’ Charlie assured her. ‘And now that Catherine has finally died, I’m free.’

‘Was she really that bad?’ Ali asked.

‘She was out of her mind with drink for twenty years. I’ve been cleaning up vomit for decades.’

‘Were there no warning signs in the beginning, before you got married?’ Sally wondered.

‘I just thought she was good fun, lively. I didn’t realize she drank half a bottle of vodka before every date.’

I patted his back. ‘You’ve had a tough time, but it’s over now.’

‘Alleluia! I’m back on the market, so watch out, ladies.’

‘You can come out with me and my single friends,’ Sally offered.

I pinched her. Why was she encouraging him? He was like someone escaped from prison – he needed to calm down. I was worried he’d go out and shack up with the first woman he happened to bump into. After my mother died, Catherine was the first he’d met and look what a disaster that had turned out

to be. Charlie had never been on his own. He liked being in relationships. I'd need to keep a close eye on him.

We headed inside and sat up at the front of the church. Sally was in the pew directly behind us. There were barely twenty people in all, including us. Catherine had clearly alienated almost everyone. The priest cleared his throat and began . . .

He talked about Catherine's 'fun-loving nature and her unfortunate decline in health'. He said she had been 'a loving wife to Charlie for over twenty years'.

'There was no loving,' Charlie grumbled, under his breath.

The priest noted what a wonderful carer Charlie had been, looking after Catherine through some very hard times. He then asked us to take a few moments to reflect on our own personal memories of Catherine.

After we had reflected, the altar boy carried the water and wine to the priest. As he approached the altar, he tripped on his vestment. The water and wine went flying, most of it spilling at the priest's feet. There was a deathly silence. Then Charlie began to laugh. Soon half of the mourners had joined in while the other half looked appalled.

The priest peeled the boy off the floor, muttered, 'I'm terribly sorry. If you'll excuse us a minute while we regroup. This is most unusual, never happened before,' and led him, red-faced, to the sacristy. Once they were out of earshot Charlie said loudly, 'I can tell you now it was Catherine who tripped that poor boy up. She doesn't want us having any wine without her.'

'Heaven must be a drink-free zone.' Sally grinned.

'Or else she's drunk it dry already.' Charlie and Sally erupted into a fresh fit of laughter.

'For God's sake, you two,' I hissed at them. 'We're supposed to be the chief mourners here. Everyone's staring.' They struggled to compose themselves.

Paul leaned across me and whispered to Charlie, 'You're a saint for staying with her all those years. Were you not tempted to do a runner?'

‘I was, I was, but I’m an old-fashioned fellow,’ Charlie admitted. ‘Till death us do part and all that. That’s why I’ll never marry again. From now on I’m going to look after myself. No more lost causes.’

‘Maybe you should breathalyse them on the first date,’ Sally said, her shoulders shaking again.

I shot her a warning look. ‘*Stop* encouraging him.’

‘Is it over yet?’ Sarah yawned, thoroughly bored by the whole thing.

‘Nearly,’ Paul said. ‘And don’t even think about putting that iPod on. I can see it in your pocket.’

‘But Ali’s been texting David the whole time and you’re not giving her grief.’ Sarah pouted.

‘Ali, put your phone away,’ Paul told her. She finished a message quickly and stuck the phone in her pocket.

The priest returned, the altar boy following with replenished containers. ‘I’m terribly sorry for that interruption,’ the priest said. ‘Fred here would like me to apologize to you all on his behalf, especially the grieving family.’ I suppressed a smile. We couldn’t have looked less like a grieving family.

After the final blessing, the undertakers moved in quietly to bring the coffin outside to the hearse. The congregation followed. People came up to Charlie and said they were sorry for his loss . . . She was better off now . . . At peace . . .

The rest of us stood apart, basking in the hot sun.

‘Oh, my God,’ Sarah squealed suddenly, ‘he just pinched that woman’s arse!’

We spun around to see Charlie groping someone’s bum.

‘That is truly the definition of mutton dressed as lamb,’ Paul marvelled. We watched the woman kissing Charlie’s cheek, leaving a bright red lipstick mark, then tottering away in six-inch heels and a very tight short dress, with a slit up the side.

‘I can’t believe he made a pass at someone at a funeral. At his *wife’s* funeral,’ Sally gasped. She grinned. ‘Charlie’s going to be

so much fun now he's been set loose. I'm raging I'm going away. Ava, text me the juicy stuff.'

'I can't believe he's my new house-mate,' Paul said.

'Charlie's moving in?' Sally looked at me.

'It's only for a few months. He sold his house and bought an apartment, which isn't quite ready yet.'

Charlie bounded over, rubbing his hands together. 'Well, well, well, it looks as if I'm already in demand. Lily said she'd like to meet up for a drink some time to see if I'm doing OK.'

'Seriously, Charlie, Catherine hasn't even been buried yet.' I pointed to the coffin lying in the open hearse.

He put his hand in and patted it. 'Well, Catherine, I hope they've restocked the bar for you up there.'

'Hey, Charlie, you know what would have been hysterical? If you'd played "Another One Bites The Dust" in the church.' Sarah giggled.

'Or the Jam's "Going Underground"?' Paul grinned.

'No, no, Elton John's "I'm Still Standing",' said Sally.

'"Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life"?' Ali piped up.

'I think Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" is more apt.' I laughed.

'No,' said Charlie. 'There's only one song that sums up how I feel. It's Bachman-Turner Overdrive's "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet".'

As the mourners began to take their leave, Charlie turned to us. 'I'd like to invite you all for lunch and some drinks. Let's give Catherine a good send-off.'

'Sounds good to me,' Sally said.

'I'm in.' Sarah tucked her iPod into her pocket.

'Ali?' he asked, as Ali sent her twentieth text of the day.

She smiled. 'Sorry, Charlie, yes, I'd love to come. I'm not meeting David until later.'

'Looks like you have a full house,' I said to Charlie.

'Uhm, I'm afraid I'll have to pass,' Paul said. 'I need to get back to work. Sorry, but lunch hour on a Saturday is manic. I'll see you all later.'

I bit my tongue and fixed a smile on my face as Paul strode towards his car.

'Right then, follow me,' Charlie said. 'It's a little Italian place just around the corner here.'

Sally linked my arm. 'You OK?'

'Yeah, fine. I really wasn't close to Catherine – I hardly knew her, to be honest.'

'I mean about Paul not coming with us,' she said gently.

I shrugged. 'His priority is work. We always come second.'

'Come on, Ava, you know he loves his family.'

'He's got a funny way of showing it,' I muttered.

Sally squeezed my arm. 'He'll come around.'

'Come on, you two,' Sarah called back to us. 'Get a move on – I'm starving.'

The little bistro proved to be very nice. We were seated at a cosy round table and Charlie ordered a bottle of Prosecco.

'Bubbles, fantastic!' Sally said, holding out her glass.

‘Can I have some?’ Sarah asked.

‘Of course you can,’ Charlie said, pouring her a large glass before I could object.

When we all had our glasses filled, Charlie raised his. ‘I’d like to propose a toast. To new beginnings. After years of misery, Charlie Hayes is getting back in the saddle.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Sally said. ‘Here’s to you meeting a sober sex-bomb and me meeting a gorgeous Spanish billionaire next week when I’m sunning myself in Marbella.’

‘That Lily woman at the funeral looked like a sure thing, Charlie.’ Sarah took a large gulp of her Prosecco. ‘And I’d say you’ll definitely get lucky in Spain, Sally. You’re pretty hot for an oldie.’

‘Oldie!’ Sally exclaimed. ‘I’m not old, thank you very much. Your mum and I are still young. We discovered leggings, micro-miniskirts, Madonna and Demi Moore long before you did.’

‘Did you really wear micro-minis?’ Sarah looked at me doubtfully.

‘Your mother had the best legs in college. How do you think she attracted your dad?’ Sally laughed.

‘You should show them off, Mum,’ Ali said. ‘They still look good.’

‘No way!’ Sarah chimed in. ‘I do not want my mother walking around in minis up to her arse.’

‘You don’t need to worry,’ I assured her. ‘My legs only look good from the knee down now. Cellulite has taken over my thighs.’

‘They’re still bloody good.’ Sally winked at me.

‘I think you’re both great for your age,’ Ali said.

‘Thanks, Ali,’ I smiled at her, ‘but everyone thinks Sally’s younger than me.’

‘But I’ve had a lot of work done.’

‘You should have Botox, too, Mum. Your wrinkles are getting bad.’ Sarah pointed to my forehead.

I put my hand up and felt the deep lines. Maybe she was right.

‘Spanish ladies are very sexy. I might have to take a little holiday there myself,’ Charlie mused.

‘You should,’ Sally enthused. ‘I use a great company that does good packages for single people. They always recommend nice places that aren’t full of families or loved-up couples. It makes going away on your own a lot easier.’

‘I hear those 18–30 clubs are good.’ He grinned.

‘Groooooossssss!’ Sarah squealed.

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Charlie, but you might be a year or two too old for that.’ Ali giggled.

‘I’ll keep an eye out for some suitable *señoras* for you.’ Sally patted his hand.

‘*Señoritas*, please, Sally!’ Charlie chuckled.

Ali’s phone beeped. She started texting back immediately.

‘Seriously, Ali, do you and David *ever* stop?’ Sarah rolled her eyes. ‘You must text each other, like, fifty times a day.’

‘We like to keep in touch.’

‘Ah, first love . . . I remember that. Enjoy every minute, Ali,’ Sally said, while Sarah made vomiting noises.

‘How long are you going to Spain for?’ Charlie asked Sally.

‘Two weeks. Fourteen glorious days of sun, sand and . . . who knows what else?’

‘You’re so lucky. I wish I was going away to the sun.’ Sarah groaned. ‘I can’t bear the thought of going back to school.’

‘You’ve still got two weeks’ summer holidays left. Try to enjoy them instead of moaning all the time,’ I said.

‘I’ll think of you getting your books and uniforms ready while I’m sipping *piña coladas* on the beach,’ Sally goaded her.

‘Catherine was fond of *piña coladas*. When we went on our first holiday together, she used to knock back four at breakfast,’ Charlie said.

‘Why was Catherine such an alco, Charlie?’ Sarah asked.

‘She was just an unhappy person,’ I said quickly, trying to be kind to the memory of my recently deceased stepmother.

‘That’s Ava, always looking for the good,’ Charlie said. ‘The

truth is that Catherine was one of those people who think life owes them something. Her father walked out when she was a child and she felt hard done by because of that. But I couldn't see it as an excuse. I grew up in an orphanage and got the holy shit beaten out of me regularly by the older boys, but you don't see me crying into a bottle of vodka to drown my sorrows.'

I always felt so sorry for Charlie when he talked about his childhood, which he didn't often. It was heartbreaking to think of a little five-year-old boy losing both parents and then sent off to be raised in an orphanage. My mother always used to say that the experience had made him incredibly open-minded and generous to people from all walks of life. He knew what it was to be an outcast, to be at the bottom of the pile. He had faced loss and heartache at a very young age, but instead of making him bitter or hard it had left him with his love for life and people.

'If I'd known what Catherine was really like,' Charlie continued, 'I'd never have married her. She was nasty and bitter when she drank, which was all day.'

'You certainly rushed into it,' I said, remembering how he'd announced his engagement three months after my mother had died. I had been devastated to lose her so suddenly and when Charlie had got married so soon after, it had caused a rift between us. Luckily it hadn't lasted long, but I had been really upset for a while.

'With you off in college, I was lonely and desperate, Ava. I didn't know what I was doing. I was heartbroken when Moira died.' To the girls, Charlie added, 'Let me tell you something. Never make big decisions when you're unhappy. By God was it a mistake. I ended up being Catherine's nursemaid for years. I should never have married anyone. I should have gone to Hollywood when I was seventeen and pursued Ava Gardner or Marilyn Monroe instead.'

'But if you hadn't stayed here and married Granny Moira, you wouldn't have had Mum,' said Ali.

Charlie looked at his granddaughter, his face softening. 'You're absolutely right, Ali, as always.'

'Charlie!' a man called from across the restaurant.

'Bollox,' Charlie cursed. 'It's Billy Norman, Catherine's cousin. I'll have to go over and say hello. He's an almighty bore.'

While Charlie made polite – or, in his case, not so polite – conversation, Sally asked me how long he would be living with us.

'I don't know. Until he feels ready to leave, I suppose,' I said, trying to sound breezy.

I had asked him to move in two weeks ago, after Catherine was placed in a hospice. I wanted him to have his family around when she died. We had the space and I was worried about him getting depressed on his own. But he was like a man escaped from captivity. On the one hand I was delighted to see him so carefree after having been weighed down by her drinking for so many years, but on the other, he was becoming increasingly inappropriate and erratic and I was worried he'd get himself into trouble.

Still, it was a temporary arrangement. Charlie was only due to stay until the new apartment he had bought was ready. It was due for completion in a couple of months. The funny thing was, I liked having him around. Paul owned a gastro-pub, which meant that he worked irregular hours and was often out at night. I liked having Charlie's company – as an only child I'd always been close to him, and the girls adored him.

'I hope he stays for ever,' said Sarah. 'He's a riot. Was he always this much of a live-wire, Mum?'

'Not as bad as he is now. He always had a slightly mad streak in him, though. I think it comes from growing up in the orphanage where he really had to fight for attention. When I was young, he'd sometimes collect me from school dressed as Superman. He'd put on a pair of red Y-fronts over his suit trousers and a red towel on his shoulders. The other kids thought he was great, but I was mortified. Now that he doesn't

have to look after Catherine, he's just letting go and enjoying his new-found freedom.'

'Did you have a hard time with her, too? I mean, I know we didn't see her much, but you must have had to deal with her?' Ali asked.

'It wasn't so bad. I was already in college and living on campus when he married her, and Charlie always made sure she was either sober or out of the way when I called in. Then I met your dad, got married at twenty-two and my own life took over.'

'There's no way I'd get married that young,' Sarah said. 'Didn't you want to travel and go wild in your twenties?'

'Not really. After my mum died and Charlie married Catherine, I felt a bit lost. I was angry with Charlie, and because I didn't have any brothers or sisters to talk to about it, I felt really lonely. I was desperate to create my own family unit and your dad was so solid and sane. I felt very safe with him. I couldn't wait to get married and have a family of my own. It was all I wanted.'

'I'm not going to have kids till I'm at least thirty,' Sarah said, reapplying lip gloss for the zillionth time that morning.

'Actually, that's a good idea. Sometimes I think I had you guys too young. I was clueless.'

'But, then, if you don't get married young and focus instead on your career, like me, you might never get married,' Sally mused.

'Did you ever come close?' Ali asked.

'Twice,' Sally admitted. 'But neither worked out for different reasons. It just wasn't meant to be.'

'Do you mind being on your own?' Sarah wanted to know.

'Most of the time it doesn't bother me.'

'I think I'd like to get married young,' Ali said. 'I'd like the security of it.'

'You're just nauseatingly in love,' Sarah said. Then, to me, she added, 'Although I'm glad you had us when you did. It's cool to

have a young mum. Some of my friends' mothers are so old and frumpy.'

I was thrilled with this rare compliment from Sarah. 'Really? Do you?'

'Yeah, but it's time for Botox. It's all beginning to sag, Mum.'

'You look gorgeous, Ava.' Sally laughed, poking Sarah in the ribs. 'Don't mind this cheeky cow.'

As Ali's phone beeped yet again, Charlie arrived back at the table. 'What a boring old fart that fella is. I need a drink.' He grabbed a passing waiter and ordered another bottle of Prosecco.

I stirred the porridge and breathed a sigh of relief that school was starting again. It had been nice having the girls around all summer, but it had been difficult trying to juggle work with keeping them occupied and out of trouble.

I heard the kitchen door open and turned to see Ali, immaculately dressed in her uniform. Her blonde hair was perfectly blow-dried and I could see she had put on a little makeup. Her face was glowing with happiness. She looked beautiful.

‘Big day!’ I smiled. ‘Everyone’s going to see you and David together.’

She blushed. ‘I’m a bit nervous. I think a lot of people’ll be surprised that he’s going out with me.’

‘Ali, for the zillionth time, you’re stunning and he’s the lucky one.’

‘I know, but everyone fancies him, so it’s a really big deal.’

‘I’m sure lots of the boys in your class fancy you, too.’ I couldn’t understand why Ali was unable to see how gorgeous she was. If I had been that good-looking at seventeen, I would have strutted around town like a peacock.

‘They don’t, Mum, but thanks anyway. Can I help with that?’

‘No, thanks, it’s nearly ready. Sit down and have some juice.’

Paul came in, reading the newspaper. ‘Well, Ali, big day today, your final year in school. You’ll be out in the big bad world soon.’

She groaned. ‘Don’t remind me, Dad. I’m not going to have a life this year. It’s going to be non-stop studying.’

‘Well, don’t work too hard. Enjoy yourself as well, have fun with David,’ I said, worried that Ali would wear herself out.

Most mums had to beg their kids to study, but I had to drag Ali away from her desk.

‘No problem to a straight-A student like our Ali,’ said Paul, patting his daughter’s arm. ‘I know she’ll do brilliantly.’

‘Ah, but all work and no play make for a very dull life,’ said Charlie, shuffling through the door in his slippers and dressing-gown.

‘Morning, Charlie,’ said Ali.

‘Hello, my angel,’ he said, kissing his granddaughter on the forehead.

‘Good morning, Charlie,’ said Paul.

‘What’s good about it? It’s lashing rain, I didn’t sleep a wink last night and I haven’t had sex in years.’

‘Charlie! It’s eight o’clock in the morning,’ I said, glaring at him.

‘Hey, Charlie, are you moaning about your love life, or lack of it, again?’ asked Sarah, plonking herself down on the chair beside him.

‘Yes, I bloody well am. It’ll shrivel up and drop off if I don’t get some action soon.’

‘If you’re really desperate, you could always pay someone?’ Sarah suggested.

‘Well, I must say this is lovely breakfast conversation,’ said Paul.

‘That’s enough, thank you, Sarah,’ I said curtly, ‘and you need to take your makeup off. You look ridiculous.’

‘Muuuum, *everyone* wears makeup in school now. It’s no big deal. Only total nerds don’t. Do you want me to be a social outcast?’

‘If it helps you focus more on your studies, then that would be fine,’ said Paul. ‘You should take a leaf out of your sister’s book.’

‘Newsflash! I’m going to be an actress, not a doctor, so I really don’t need to get ten zillion points in my finals like brain-box Ali. Besides, in case you forgot, I’m on my transition year,

which is all about exploring your creative side, so I don't need to study.'

'After your poor results last summer, you'll be studying extra hard this year,' I said. 'We've discussed this already, Sarah. There'll be less drama and more work from now on.'

'Ava Gardner – now, there was a dramatic actress. She had the best face in Hollywood,' said Charlie.

'Is that why you named Mum after her? Because she was your favourite actress?' Ali asked.

He shook his head. 'Not really. Your grandmother Moira wanted to call your mother Noreen. I said no way was a daughter of mine going around with a rotten name like Noreen. I wanted her to have a good strong name. Something different. Something people would remember.'

'Oh, they remembered all right. I was the only Ava in Ireland,' I said, laughing. 'But I am glad you saved me from being called Noreen – it would have been much worse.'

'So I did something right,' he grumbled.

'Yes, Charlie, you did,' I said, kissing his head.

'OK, come on, eat up, you lot – you don't want to be late on your first day,' said Paul.

'I'm knackered,' Sarah muttered, as she stood up to reach for the cereal. 'Getting up at half seven is obscene.'

'Pull your skirt down, for God's sake. It's school you're going to, not a disco,' said Paul, frowning at Sarah's hoisted-up uniform.

'Hellooo! How else am I going to show off my tan?'

'I'll tan your hide in a minute, missy,' said Paul.

'Dad, you know I don't understand when you talk like a bog-man,' said Sarah.

'Don't be so cheeky,' Paul replied, trying to stifle a smile.

'I'm not being cheeky, I'm being honest. I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Well, that makes two of us, because half the time I've no idea what you're saying either,' said Paul, gulping down the last

of his coffee and making for the door. 'I'm gone. See you all later.' The door slammed shut behind him. I tried to remember the last time I'd got a goodbye kiss.

'Get out there and sow your wild oats,' shouted Charlie, as the girls went to get their coats and bags. 'You're only young once.'

'Seriously, Charlie, can you please tone it down? Don't encourage Sarah – she's a handful as it is.'

'She's spirited.'

'High spirits can get you into trouble.'

'She's a grand girl. She's just different from Alison. It doesn't mean she's wild.'

'I know I shouldn't compare them, but Ali's been such a dream daughter. I've never had to worry about her.'

'She's a gem, all right, but sometimes I think she takes life too seriously,' said Charlie.

The kitchen door opened. 'Mum, we're going to be late,' said Ali, looking worried.

'Coming,' I said, grabbing my keys from the counter and heading for the door.

As we pulled up outside the school, Sarah snapped off her seat-belt. '*Oh*, my God, there's Bobby Masterson-Brown – how fit is he?'

Alison and I peered at a tall, broad boy with badly highlighted hair and saggy trousers, strutting across the grass.

'He looks ridiculous,' I said.

'Mum, you have no idea what's cool these days. Bobby's hot.'

'Where's David?' I asked. Ali blushed. She had now been going out with David for six weeks. He had called into the house the week before and seemed nice in that gawky teenage, monosyllabic way. He was very good-looking, like a young Johnny Depp. I could see why so many girls fancied him. Ali seemed almost in awe of him. I had to keep reminding her how lucky he was.

'I'm meeting him outside the gym in five minutes,' she said, beaming.

'There's Elaine,' squeaked Sarah. 'Oh, my God, she's, like, black. The bitch! I've got to find out what fake tan she's using. Later, Mum.'

'OK, 'bye,' I said, as the door slammed and I watched my younger child hiking up her skirt and screeching as she met her friends.

'I'd better go, too. I'll see you later,' said Ali, kissing me on the cheek. She walked over to greet her best friend, Donna, and they headed inside together, arms linked.

It never ceased to amaze me how two daughters born of the same parents could be so completely different. Ali was blonde, green-eyed, studious, shy, gentle, thoughtful and sensitive. Sarah was less conventionally pretty. She had long dark hair and nice blue eyes, but she had inherited her father's strong jaw, which looked good on a man but out of place on a girl. She had also been born with incredible self-confidence. She had a really bubbly, outgoing personality, a wide group of friends and a constant stream of admirers.

While Ali focused on studying, Sarah focused on her social life. Ali had one true best friend, Donna, while Sarah seemed to have a new best friend every week. They were like chalk and cheese, but they got on very well. As an only child I envied their closeness. I would have loved to have a sister to talk to growing up. I hoped that, despite their different personalities, they would always be close.

I turned the car around and headed to work. Sally was back from her holidays today and I was dying to catch up with her. Our children's party business, Happy Dayz – which we'd set up ten years ago as kind of a hobby on the side – was now really successful, which was fantastic, but I'd missed Sally when she was away. We had expanded from kids' events to sweet sixteens and even, sometimes, eighteenth and twenty-first birthdays. I had been swamped over the last few weeks and had been com-

ing home late every night. I wanted to be around more for the girls now that they were back in school, so I'd be happy to share the workload again – and the gossip.

While I focused on the creative side, working with the parents on party themes, food, decoration, gifts and entertainment, Sally did the books, the website, organized suppliers and hired and fired all the part-time staff. In the ten years we had been up and running, we had seen parties go from fairly simple princess and pirate themes to wedding-like extravaganzas. It was never dull and I loved it.

I pulled into the office space Sally and I rented, which held our stock of basic party essentials – bouncy castles, little tables and chairs, boxes of balloons, banners, costumes, music, face paint, *piñatas*, gift bags, candles and industrial-size jars of sweets. We had found a wonderful chef, Helen, who made birthday cakes and did all of the food that was more complicated than sandwiches and sausages, which I managed. As I was getting out of my car, my mobile rang.

'Hello?'

'I not working in you house any more,' said Magda, our Polish cleaning lady.

'What's wrong? What happened?'

'You daddy is bad man. Very bad.'

'Oh, no, what did he do?'

'He is hiding and jumping out, like tiger. I very scared. My heart stop. I tell him he very bad man. He laugh and then he try to do kissy-kissy.'

'I'm so sorry, Magda. I promise I'll talk to him and he won't do it again. Please don't leave.' Magda had been with us for years. She was a life-saver – I'd die if she left.

'I have husband in Poland. I no kissy-kissy other man. You daddy old and ugly. I tell him. He say, "I pay you for the sex." I not prostitute. I good Catholic girl.'

Jesus, when had my father turned into a sexual predator?

'OK, Magda, the next time he tries to kiss you, just hit him

over the head with the brush. You have my full permission to use violence.'

There was silence.

'Magda?'

'I am already using little bit of violence today.'

'Is he all right?' I asked, suddenly worried. Magda was built like a shot-putter. My father was five foot seven and wiry. My money was on Magda in a fight.

'Ya, he OK. He not jumping any more.'

'Put him on to me.'

'Hnnnlo?'

'Charlie? What the hell are you doing, sexually assaulting my cleaning lady?'

'Stupid cow doke my nobe.'

'What?'

'Stupid cow doke my nobe!'

I heard a scuffle and then Magda's voice came back on the phone: 'I think you come now. I give you daddy slap on nose. He not happy.'

'I'm on my way,' I said, sighing as I turned the car around.