

## I

‘Pregnant?!’ Beth put down the jug of water and stared at her eighteen-year-old daughter, hoping she had misheard. From habit, her hand flew to the thin gold chain around her neck, twisting it round her forefinger.

Ella was opposite her, glaring at her glass, turning it slowly on the table, waiting for her parents’ reaction. Her fair hair was scraped back into a ponytail, so Beth could see the vulnerability and uncertainty chasing across her face. She turned to Jon, who sat speechless, his mouth slightly open, eyes wide. In front of them, the steaming salmon and vegetables were forgotten.

She had not misheard.

She took a deep breath, and glanced around the kitchen as if looking for help. The door of one of the duck-egg-blue cupboards was ajar, the span of oak worktop reassuringly empty, but for the coffee-maker and kettle. The huge framed photograph of Vietnamese paddy fields, taken by Jon on their first holiday without the girls, took up most of the empty wall. Nothing was out of place.

The three of them had just sat down together for an early supper. The judge presiding over the hearing in which Beth was representing the aggrieved wife had drawn proceedings to a close early in order to write up his judgment, so Beth had been home in good time. For once, she had had time to change out of her black work suit into jeans and a jumper. She had been planning to ask the others where they wanted to go that summer once the exams were over. As usual, they had proved impossible to pin

down so far. Croatia? Turkey? Greece? All hot, relaxed places that would have something to offer each of them. Now that Ella was about to leave home for university, this might be the last family holiday they'd ever take together. The thought had struck Beth with sadness.

Then Amy had rung to say that after the school hockey match she was going round to her best friend Hannah's house to revise – whatever that really meant. Beth was under no illusions when it came to Amy's less than enthusiastic academic leanings. Ella had come down from her bedroom and helped lay the table as usual, then waited till they were all sitting down before blindsiding them with her announcement. There had been no preamble, just a straightforward 'I've got something to tell you.' And then she did.

'Are you sure?' Beth asked. Her instinct was to play for time, uncertain how she should react. She straightened the blue place mat in front of her, aligned her knives and fork. Order.

Ella gave a little nod, still turning her glass. 'Yes,' she whispered, looking up, her face drawn but set, her eyes shiny. 'I've done a test.'

Beth sprang up and went around the table to sit by her, hugging her tight, feeling Ella's tension as she leaned into her for support. Pregnant! For a moment, Beth's shock stopped any thought, only allowing her to feel Ella's anxiety and her dread of their reaction as if they were her own. She held her closer. 'Those tests have never been one hundred per cent reliable. It could be wrong.' But she knew she was really only clinging to a fragment of wreckage as they were washed out into choppy waters.

Ella shook her head wordlessly, scrabbled for a tissue in her pocket and blew her nose. Beneath the sloppy jumper, Beth could feel her daughter's slim frame trembling. She reached out with her spare hand to stroke the stray wisps of hair back from Ella's face.

'I've done more than one test,' Ella choked out, as she regained

some control of herself. ‘They were all positive, so they must be right.’

‘Oh, Ella.’ Beth kissed her cheek. ‘How many weeks, do you think?’ She blinked back the tears that stung her eyes, and swallowed hard. This couldn’t be happening. Not to Ella. A dart of fear shot through her: fear of the unknown, of what would happen to their daughter. Until now, Ella’s path through life had been virtually obstacle-free. She’d done everything expected of her, all the boxes ticked. But this! They’d never expected anything like this to rock their world.

Ella looked at her. ‘Seven or eight, I suppose. I’m not sure.’

Beth concentrated on maintaining an outward appearance of calm, while inside her thoughts were whirling, one unanswered question tripping over another. How could this be happening? How could Ella not be sure? What had she been doing two months ago? Around Christmas? As far as Beth knew, she didn’t have a boyfriend. So who ...?

‘I don’t know what to do,’ Ella said.

‘You must do what you think is right,’ said Jon, speaking slowly at first, as if he was making up his mind. ‘We’ll support you whatever you decide.’

*Whatever you decide.* The words ricocheted around Beth’s head as their dual significance sank in. Her hand rose to her gold chain again, twisting it once, twice around her finger.

‘Who’s the father?’ Jon asked quietly. ‘Does he know?’

He had asked the question burning on the tip of Beth’s tongue. She watched his expression, which showed nothing but love and concern. He was keeping anything else well hidden. He had always been so protective of Ella and Amy. When they were tiny, he’d joke about how, in the future, he’d insist on right of veto over any potential boyfriends. Even if he had been serious, there hadn’t been any for him to approve or disapprove of. Too late now. The thought flitted through Beth’s head.

Ella had always been a model daughter. Everyone said so.

Unlike her wayward younger sister, she had never done anything to make them worry. She was polite, kind and a hard worker at school, always focused, determined to get the outcome she wanted from whatever she was doing. Yes, she could dig her heels in, but where was the harm in that?

A baby. Nobody had said the word yet. But they were all thinking it.

If Ella really was pregnant, what would happen to her plans for the future? The predicted star-graded A levels, the place to study medicine at Cambridge. These were what she had worked for, what she had wanted and, therefore, what they had wanted for her. But if she had a baby ... Beth tried to leave the thought unfinished, but she couldn't stop herself racing through the possible repercussions. She felt tears stinging her eyes again, but she wouldn't let them fall. Crying wouldn't help. Her first instinct was to protect, her second to guide and advise. After all, sorting out other people's problems was what she did for a living.

'You've never mentioned a boyfriend.' The words were out before Beth could stop them. They hung in the air, more accusatory than she had intended. 'Or have I forgotten?' she finished, gentle again, not wanting to reprimand Ella. Guilt that she hadn't talked to her more, didn't know what was going on in her life, niggled at her.

Ella shook her head, blowing her nose again. 'He's not exactly.' Her words were so quiet that her parents barely heard them.

Oh, God! Had she been sleeping around? Having unprotected sex? A new set of circumstances and their consequences entered the equation. Beth pulled back so she could see Ella clearly. Her daughter straightened up, her face blotchy but more determined now. Beth recognised that look. She drew in a shuddery breath. 'What is he, then?' she asked.

'I don't want to talk about him until I've told him. Until we've decided what to do.' Ella sniffed, back in control of herself again

as she folded her arms across her chest and shifted out of her mother's embrace.

'What do you mean?' Beth hadn't meant to sound so anxious. Dealing with problems was one thing when they were someone else's, but this was different. 'Are you really not going to tell us who he is?'

'Being angry isn't going to help,' Jon intervened, ever the family peacemaker.

'I'm not. Really I'm not.' He was right, of course. Beth squeezed Ella's shoulder, reassuring her, before returning to her place at the other side of the table. Was this really happening to them? If she pinched her wrist, perhaps she would wake up. She didn't.

'I just want to talk to him first.' The damp tissue twisted between Ella's fingers and tore. 'I should have done it before telling you, but I couldn't keep it to myself...'

Jon ran a hand through his curly hair, his expression both puzzled and concerned. 'Of course, Lulu.' He used her childhood nickname, the one she always responded to.

Beth glared at him, then looked away. She didn't want to argue with him in front of Ella, especially not now, but surely they should insist that she told them. Whoever the boy was, he shared the responsibility. He would have his own views about what should happen.

'Tell us when you're ready, and then we can work out what to do together.' Jon reached across the table and clasped both of Ella's hands. She looked up at him, grateful.

As she witnessed their exchange, Beth was beginning to appreciate the strong young woman her daughter had become. When had that happened? It was no time since they had been collecting her from school, taking her to piano lessons, helping her with homework, applauding her at prizegivings and school plays, driving her to and from parties. So many snapshots from her past flicked by. Now tall and leggy in her black skinny jeans and baggy jumper, with a purposeful expression, she had grown

up almost without Beth realising. She suffered a familiar pang of guilt for all those hours spent at work that might have been spent at home; all those opportunities to discover what really made her daughter tick that she would never get back. The truth was, of course, that Beth had no idea who her daughter spent her time with when she wasn't at home. She had made assumptions about her being with her girlfriends, hanging out, sleeping over. She should have involved herself more.

But, she justified to herself, she and Jon had always agreed that she could never have been a stay-at-home mother. When they'd met, she was already well on the way to becoming a successful lawyer. She adored her family, but her job was what made her get up in the morning. She relished the challenge, the difference she could make to people's lives, the intellectual rigour. No, she had wanted to have it all – career and family – and had tried her best to make it work. She couldn't have done more than that.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Of course that's what you must do. It's just such a shock. Shall we start again?'

Jon shifted in his seat, crossing his legs, clearly relieved that she wasn't going to make a scene. She started to serve the supper, not that she would be able to stomach a mouthful.

Ella pushed her plate away. 'Sorry, Mum, I'm just not hungry. I've been dreading telling you. I knew how hard it would be. Dad's right, though. This is my decision.'

'We only want what's best for you,' said Jon, toying with a bit of salmon.

Beth stared at her plate. 'Have you thought about—'

'Mum, don't.' Ella stopped her from saying any more. 'I know what you're thinking.' She scraped back her chair and stood up, taking her plate over to the dishwasher, her huge monkey-faced slippers shushing over the limestone tiles.

'I'm not thinking anything,' Beth lied. 'But I don't want to see

everything you've worked for thrown away. You shouldn't make any decision lightly. You must look at all the possibilities.'

Ella's resigned expression was reflected in the glass splashback in the second before she squatted down to pet Jock, their grey schnauzer, who had come in to investigate the possibility of food. Then she straightened up and walked towards the door, shoulders hunched. Jock followed her, tail wagging, hoping this was the preamble to a walk.

Oh, God, thought Beth. This is so like what happened to me. The one thing I hoped the girls would never have to go through. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to go over and hug her daughter again, but something in Ella's bearing prevented her. And then the moment had passed.

'Where are you going?' she asked instead, desperate to prolong the conversation, to reach some kind of resolution. 'We can't leave it at that.'

Ella looked back at them, biting her bottom lip hard before letting it slide away from under her teeth. 'I'm going upstairs. I've got to finish last year's physics paper for tomorrow. Not that I can concentrate, but I've got to try. Of course I'm not going to decide anything lightly or on my own, but there's no point in talking about it any more. Not at the moment. I just wanted you to know, that's all.'

'But ...' Beth felt the weight of Jon's foot on hers, warning her that she was in danger of saying too much.

'Not now,' he whispered.

Ella shut the door behind her.

'But if not now, when?' Beth hissed back.

He shook his head.

They sat together listening to the thump of Ella's footsteps on the stairs. The kitchen was silent except for the sound of the rain beating on the glass roof of the extension. After a moment, Jon let out a deep sigh.

'How could this have happened?'

‘We know *how*.’ Trying to get on top of her own confusion, Beth spoke sharply. She took a mouthful of her salmon, but almost gagged on the taste. Swallowing, she put down her fork. ‘What we don’t know is *who*.’

‘I can’t eat a thing either.’ He stacked the plates, sweeping her leftover food on to his. ‘If she’s kept him secret till now, she’s not going to tell us until she’s ready. Even with this. You know what she’s like.’ He stood to pick up the plates and heap some of the leftovers into Jock’s bowl. ‘I can’t believe we haven’t noticed.’

Beth hesitated. ‘But she can’t have a baby.’ Her voice broke. Jon passed her a bit of kitchen roll as she began to cry. ‘What about all her plans?’

‘Sometimes plans have to change.’ He sounded stern, as if he had to make her understand. ‘You of all people should know that.’

She ignored the dig. ‘She doesn’t have to have it, you know. There is another way.’ She hesitated to say more, because she knew how strongly he felt about the issue. He’d made that crystal clear when she had told him about the abortion she’d had long before they met. He’d been sympathetic, but he hadn’t hidden his feelings. ‘If only I’d known you then,’ he’d said, looking into her eyes. ‘I would never have let you go through with it.’ She’d been so touched; she had never forgotten his reaction. ‘I’d have looked after you and made sure everything worked out for the best. You can’t get rid of a life just because it’s inconvenient.’ Put like that, how could she argue?

At the same time, she had never regretted her decision. She couldn’t help thinking that now. Having a baby at sixteen – only two years younger than Ella – in the household in which she had been brought up had been unthinkable. She would never have got away from there. Or if she had, she would never have survived. Usually she and Jon agreed about everything. But not about this, and maybe not when it came to their own daughter,

whose career was mapped out, beckoning. All her teachers said the same thing.

‘You’re not seriously suggesting ...?’ He stopped, his head cocked to one side.

She didn’t reply immediately. She needed to think the situation through, tread with care. ‘I just think we should consider all the options, that’s all. She’s only just eighteen. What about her A levels, Cambridge, her life?’ Did he not see how much those things mattered, how much a baby would disrupt everything?

‘Why couldn’t a baby be factored in? It wouldn’t be the first time someone’s done it.’ He looked directly at her, challenging her, his dark eyes glittering. The silvering in the hair over his ears, the lines that deepened when he smiled and the slight pouches under his eyes gave him a lived-in look that she loved. If anything, age had improved him.

She was shocked to realise that he was quite serious. She recalled her own anguish when she had realised she was pregnant as if it was yesterday. However necessary it might have been, the decision to have an abortion had not been easy.

‘Seriously, how could she possibly study medicine and look after a baby?’ She heard the ghost of her young self talking. This was the girl who had wept with fear but hung, white-knuckled, on to the idea of a future, one she could never have had with a baby in tow. Surely the question was a reasonable one, something they should debate. When she had been studying law, there had certainly been no room for anything other than her career. Her family had come much later.

‘Beth, listen to yourself. This is your grandchild you’re talking about.’ Jon straightened up from the dishwasher, shut the door and leaned against the run of units. The set of his face said he was not going to be easily budged. ‘I know it’s difficult, but we can’t get rid of it just like that.’

She tried to sound reasonable. ‘I’m playing devil’s advocate here. We’re not really talking about a baby at this stage, are we?’

It's just a few cells that are frantically dividing. That's all. They don't amount to anything yet. Plenty of young girls take the other route without coming to any harm. I did.' The more she spoke, the more she began to see this alternative as a possible answer.

He shook his head. 'I can't agree with you. Think of it this way. If we'd done what you're suggesting, we wouldn't have had Ella, and think how empty our lives would be without her. The *only* way I would ever go along with her having an abortion is if that's what she decides she wants. Then I'll support her, not because I approve, but because she's my daughter and I'd do anything for her. But I won't encourage her.' He twisted his wedding ring around his finger, but didn't take his eyes off Beth. 'I'm sorry.'

How could he be so infuriatingly calm? So closed? So wrong? Beth didn't want to be the bad guy, but didn't someone have to consider every option? She wouldn't let herself think of it as a baby. If she did, she wouldn't have the strength to argue. She would think only of Ella, the life ahead of her, and what was best for that.

Before she could say anything else, the front door slammed. Footsteps sounded in the hallway, followed by the thud of a bag being dumped on the floor, before the kitchen door was thrown wide. Amy stood there, her pleated grey school skirt disappearing under a huge green hoodie with the school logo emblazoned on the back. Her eyes, peering out from under her side-swept fringe, were rimmed with black liner and thick mascara, presumably lashed on the moment the school bell rang at the end of the day. She certainly hadn't left the house looking like that in the morning.

'Hey, peeps. Why the serious faces? Looks like someone's died.' She headed for the fridge, opened the door and grabbed a carton of apple juice. Once the straw was in, the other end in her mouth, she looked up at them.

'Do you want some supper?' Beth asked.

'Good game?' Jon spoke at the same time.

Beth knew instinctively that he felt, as she did, that there was no need to involve Amy in Ella's situation. They would have to continue their discussion later.

'Rubbish.' Her daughter slouched across the room and flung herself at a chair. 'We lost thanks to that effing bitch Suzy Featherstone. Like she missed two goals. Can you believe it?'

'Amy, please. Language.' Beth observed Amy's sunny mood cloud over in an instant. Beneath the too-long fringe that never quite fell enough to one side, a sullen expression took shape.

'Well, she is. She's an utter cow. You don't know.'

'Salmon?' Jon pointed to the congealing remains of roast fish and wilted vegetables.

Amy shook her head, at the same time pulling at her skirt, which certainly did not meet the not-more-than-eight-inches-from-the-knee-when-kneeling rule that Beth remembered from her own school days. 'Nah! We had pizza at Hannah's.'

'But—'

'It was home-made,' Amy protested before Beth could object to pizza as a school-night meal.

A sudden blast of unidentifiable tinny music interrupted them. Amy reached into her hoodie pocket for her phone and held it to her ear, glaring at them all the while. Her face lit up. 'Yeah. You're joking. He's dope. No, I'll text her now. Yeah, thanks. Later.' As soon as she cut the call off, she was texting, thumbs going at a million miles a minute, head bowed as she concentrated, a small smile on her lips.

Jon raised his eyebrows at Beth. They knew perfectly well the impossibility of imposing their opinions or lifestyle on their younger daughter, although they hadn't given up trying. She was a law unto herself. They had to choose their moments carefully, and perhaps they'd had enough upset for one evening.

'I'm going up,' Amy announced, scraping her chair across the floor. She swept her fringe towards her left ear, where it stayed for a nanosecond before flopping back over her face.

‘Homework?’ ventured Beth tentatively.

‘Maybe. I’ve got stuff to do, though.’

Beth could imagine. In the jumble that passed for Amy’s bedroom, the still small centre was the area of desk reserved for her laptop and the chair in front of it. Hers was the one room in the house where disorder prevailed, as her clothes were pulled out or taken off and dumped unceremoniously on the floor or the bed. Occasionally Beth ventured in there. Since her own disordered childhood, chaos of any kind was anathema to her. But if she said anything, or tried to impose some sort of order herself, she was shouted at. Apart from that, she had lost count of the number of family rows that had stemmed from their daughter’s unyielding preference for social media over her schoolwork. She couldn’t face another one right now.

As Amy left the room, Jon went over and pulled a bottle of red wine from the wine rack. ‘A drink, I think,’ he said, as he opened a drawer to find the corkscrew.

Beth fetched two wine glasses from a cupboard. The more she thought about it, the more she leaned towards the arguments for Ella not keeping the baby. She felt an urgent need to talk to Megan. But this wasn’t the moment to call her – not when she and Jon were recovering together from the shock. Her closest friend would understand where Beth was coming from. Megan would understand how torn she was feeling. Megan loved Ella and Amy as if they were her own daughters, having known them and often looked after them since they were babies. And Beth loved Jake and Hannah likewise, although her work had stopped her from getting to know them in quite the same way. She and Megan had spent hours discussing their children; their hopes and fears for them. They had been equally proud of Ella’s achievements, particularly given the lack of academic prowess shown so far by the other three.

Ever since Ella was born, Megan had been there for Beth as a constant source of advice and friendship. Beth liked order. She’d

been reassured by a schedule, feeding every four hours, knowing when Ella was due to go down or get up. Except of course Ella didn't always oblige. And that provoked flurries of panic, of diving into the manuals, reading and rereading them as if an answer to a sleepless or food-refusing baby would come rearing out of the pages. When it didn't, Beth would consult Megan, who had endured all this and survived to tell the tale. With three years of motherhood, albeit of a rather undisciplined nature, under her belt, Megan was considered by Beth as the fount of wisdom. Unlike Beth, she had binned the baby books after those initial weeks of barely suppressed panic and adopted a more laissez-faire approach. She ignored scheduled feeding, scheduled naps and scheduled bath- and bedtimes. Jake ate when he was hungry. Megan was completely relaxed about when he spoke, crawled or walked. She wasn't looking for any signals that he was more or less advanced than other babies the same age. He was who he was. Beth envied her approach and tried to emulate it – without much success, but without any harm done to Ella, who became as obliging a toddler as Jake had been before her.

From those early days, they had debated motherhood, marriage, life, the universe and everything over countless cups of coffee and bottles of wine. They made each other laugh. They calmed each other's worries. They had become part of each other's story. Mothers-in-arms. That was what they were. Bonded by motherhood. Friends for ever.

They were due to meet for supper the following evening. Less than twenty-four hours away. Together they would work through the situation, through Beth's and Jon's reactions, and what the best course of action might be. Without having to contend with Jon's emotions as well as her own, Beth would be able to consider the situation more objectively. Megan would be that valuable sounding board they so often were for one another.