

Extract from “With or Without You”

Chapter 1

‘This isn’t working, is it?’

or one mad moment I thought Jake was talking about the toaster. It had been on the blink for a while. But then so had we.

Two perfect golden-brown slices of wholemeal toast pop up with a cheerful ping! I glance up from my own bowl of ‘luxury’ muesli and try to look as if every dry, claggy spoonful isn’t choking me.

Jake grabs his toast, wincing as it burns his fingers. He tosses it onto a plate before he returns my gaze. ‘You know what I’m talking about, Lyssa.’

Yes. I do. Our fourth and most gruelling attempt at IVF has just ended in a red blob in the toilet bowl and misery. My misery. Our misery. I give up with my spoon. ‘Of course I do.’ I’m trying not to cry. I should go over to comfort him, but I haven’t got enough emotional energy for myself, let alone any to spare. I force a rigid smile. ‘But we can try again.’

Jake hasn’t made any attempt to butter his toast and it must be getting cold. In a pan on the cooker, two eggs are knocking around in our only Raymond Blanc pan, the bubbling water tossing them to and fro. My boyfriend, or whatever we’re supposed to call them these days, sounds irritable. ‘Not the IVF.’

I mentally trawl through a list of all our other domestic appliances that might be dodgy.

‘Us,’ he says starkly. ‘Us. We’re not working.’

I nearly laugh. I was just wondering if he meant the fridge – which frosts up far too quickly for my liking. I’m sure it never used to – but then you really never pay that much attention to your fridge, do you? Or your partner in life, it seems. And then I realise that Jake is deadly serious. The skin round his eyes is more drawn than I’ve ever seen it before and his mouth is pulled down at the corners.

‘It’s a difficult time for us,’ I say calmly when I really want to scream, ‘You’re not the one that’s bleeding here, Jake! I sigh inwardly. All couples have them. We’ll get through it.’

Jake comes and sits down. He takes my hand and turns it over, examining it as if he’s never seen it before. ‘And what if I don’t want to get through it? What if I’ve suddenly woken up to the fact that there’s more to life than getting through it?’

I open my mouth to answer with some platitude about how life can’t always be a bed of roses, but he rushes on before I can speak. ‘What if I don’t want a baby? What if I don’t want to spend any more time alone in cold cubicles with crumpled wank mags?’

My eyes widen. I thought that was the bit he liked best. Sometimes he specifically chose his own porny material to take with him.

‘What if I don’t want our sex-life littered with charts and thermometers and injections?’

‘I ...’

‘When did we last go wild and have a purely recreational shag?’

‘I ...’

‘When?’ he says with the triumphant note of the just in his voice.

‘What are you saying? I don’t mark notches on the headboard, like some old Lothario.’ I do, however, mark notches on my heart after every failed coupling. Failed in the sense that it didn’t produce a pink, bouncing baby at the end of it. ‘I thought you enjoyed our sex-life?’

‘Then you are truly delusional,’ Jake says.

I’m stunned. I had hoped that in the face of another disappointment, another thwarted dream, he’d take me in his arms, shush my tears – even though that isn’t politically correct these days – and tell me that it would all be fine, we would find another wad of our hard-earned cash to blow on hormones for Jake to inject into my bum, and that next time Sammy Sperm would get it together with Esme Egg and we would no longer be the complete failures we are with our inability to succeed in the most basic of human tasks.

How difficult can it be to make a baby? These days our teenagers are popping them out all the time. Britain has the highest rate of child mothers in Europe. Aren’t a mobile phone and a baby at the top of the ‘must have’ list for every schoolgirl? Go anywhere near New Look in any high street, on any Saturday and it’s like a teen mums’ convention. Okay, so I’m a little past the acne stage, but



at thirty-four it does seem a bit unfair that all my eggs, like the ones in Jake's unattended saucepan, appear to be turning hard-boiled.

'I need space,' Jake says into my self-pity.

'You're not an astronaut,' I say. 'You don't need space.' Only astronauts and Sigourney Weaver need space to function in. The rest of mankind have to operate in confined quarters – offices, homes, relationships – that's what it's all about. No man is an island. And no man whose sperm has been called 'sluggish' has a right to lay all this at my feet.

'I need time to myself,' he continues.

This is a man who every weekend plays some sort of sport – football and cricket in the appropriate seasons, golf and squash when he can fit them in. This is a man who I think has plenty of time to himself, and before we used to argue about our lack of babies, we used to argue about how much time he had to himself. I wonder why all this is going round in my head, but none of it is coming out of my mouth.

Jake takes a deep breath. He puts my hand down. Right into some milk I hadn't realised I'd spilled on the kitchen table. 'I think we should have a trial separation,' he says. 'For a few days. A few weeks.'

'Have you met someone else?'

'No.' He looks at me as if I'm insane to even entertain the thought. 'This isn't about anyone else. It's about me – and you. And your obsession.'

'Wanting a baby is not an obsession. It's a ...'

Jake waits.

'... a preoccupation.' Which sometimes borders on slightly obsessive. Very slightly. 'I just want a baby. Is that too much to ask?'

Jake stands up. Patently it is. 'I've packed a few things. I'm going to Pip's place for a couple of days. I need to get my head round this. I need to decide what I want.'

'And what I want doesn't come into it any more?'

Jake looks very tired of me. 'Suppose we can never have a baby, Lyssa? What then? How long would it be until you stopped hoping that one day modern science will no longer be baffled by our inability to conceive?'

'I don't know.' I shrug lightly. 'Three weeks? Four?'

 This fails to add levity to our desperate situation.

'I'll phone you tonight,' Jake says. 'To make sure you're all right.'

I won't be all right, I want to say. I'm not all right now. I may never be all right again. 'You can't just go.'

'I'll phone you.'

'Jake. Don't go. Not like this.' I can feel panic rising in me. Begging words are rushing up to my throat, but I won't let them out. I can't let them out. Why is he doing this? He can't be thinking straight. I'm the one who's supposed to have raging hormones and mood swings. He never behaves like this. We've been together for years – four, in fact. That's twice my usual quota for long-term relationships. He is The One. My heart's desire. I thought I was his.

Jake and I are joint owners of this rather nice terraced house in St Albans, a pleasantly leafy city on the outskirts of London. Although we haven't actually tied the knot, we've discussed marriage on several occasions. Usually after a couple of bottles of vino blanco, admittedly. We're trying to have a baby together. You don't just leave someone at eight o'clock on a Friday morning before you go to work, do you? You wait until Friday night or the weekend or Christmas or their birthday – a catastrophic date they'll always remember. Friday morning is such an insignificant time to do something so momentous. He's nearly at the door. Anxiously, I cast a look at the bubbling pan.

'Your eggs. They're drying up.'

He looks as if he's about to say something and then changes his mind. 'They'll be too tough now.'

Like mine. 'What will I do?'

'You'll be fine,' he says, and it seems he's already managed to convince himself that I will. But I'm not sure how I'll cope at all.

My lover, my life, the father of my as-yet-unfertilised-foetus is walking, strolling, out of my life. He picks up his holdall at the front door, the one I thought contained his squash gear. He gives me a distant little smile that doesn't even begin to reflect what he's doing to me. And with that he closes the door behind him.

Chapter 2

I can't go into work. I have to go into work. I am blessed with great colleagues who will be hugely sympathetic and will call Jake all manner of obscene names including 'fuckwit'. That will make me feel heaps better. They won't mind that I'll be horribly late and will spend the entire day crying into cups of manky machine coffee.

Boiled eggs and toast soldiers are supposed to be comfort food, but somehow it's just not happening. I bash in the top of Jake's abandoned eggs with the back of my spoon, using rather more force than is necessary and stare at their rubbery white skins and dried-up yolks. My stomach has decided that eating isn't on the agenda. The toast has gone all floppy and wouldn't even make a dent on them anyway – you can draw your own metaphorical conclusions on that one.

Jake is in advertising. I don't really know what he does other than wear sharp suits and make up slogans. His latest project is to convince a sceptical general public that eggs are good for you. Now Edwina Currie may have skewed judgment on some things, but she was damn well right about the eggs all along. But now they're no longer stuffed full of salmonella and they're a safe and wholesome foodstuff once again – so Jake says. One of the very few benefits of this ad campaign is that we've been getting free eggs. But it's not the type of egg donation that's any use to me.

Work for me is as an Assistant Editor at Global Magazine Publishing – a bit of a misnomer because none of our magazines ever venture out of the British Isles. This sounds very glamorous to people until I say that our main magazines are called My Baby and My Divorce. I can never decide whether these are extremely dull titles or marketing masterpieces. Certainly the circulation is steadily climbing – well, of My Divorce anyway.

After my own, uneventful schooldays, I thought very seriously about becoming a teacher with a view to watching my eager charges blossom under my tender tutelage in the manner of Miss Jean Brodie. But after one terrifying work experience stint at a North London comprehensive, I decided that it was far too hideous and desperately underpaid. And that even the formidable Ms Brodie would have cracked under the strain of trying to control a room full of shaven-headed, pierced twelve year olds. So, instead, I joined the world of publishing which, several years later, I still now inhabit. It's marginally less hideous, but still desperately underpaid. Plus all the shaven-headed and pierced people are over thirty.

My day mainly consists of compiling the letters page for My Baby – which means I'm constantly knee-deep in tearful epistles from cooing mothers or tirades from childless harpies, not unlike myself, who feel that the world has dealt them a duff hand. I also commission and edit articles that are given whizzy titles by Monica, my editor, such as – Make Your Fallopian Tubes Your Friends, The Greatest-Ever Guide to Baby Poo, Feeling the Strain – All You Ever Need to Know about Constipation and Pregnancy. There are also far too many entitled Great Expectations! Occasionally, when there's no one else available and my desk isn't swamped under a deluge of urgent copy, I'm allowed out with my trusty Dictaphone to interview 'C' list celebrities about their joyful, and often alternative, birth experience or their long and painful struggle with polycystic ovaries or similar.

Jake has, on one or two occasions, voiced the opinion that my current employment is doing little to quell my 'obsession' with babies. I just feel that when the time comes I'll be fully equipped – mainly with baby and toddler-type freebies – and confident in my knowledge of the wonderful adventure that is pregnancy.

I do admit that every now and again I tear up or bin a letter from some whining, sleep-deprived mother who is writing in saying that she's permanently tired from disturbed nights. Some women don't know how lucky they are. I'm permanently tired from disturbed nights trying to bloody conceive!

I give the eggs another whack for good luck and toss the spoon onto the table. With my loved one gone, it looks like that particular problem is going to be a thing of the past.