

## chapter one

I think I am having a breakdown, and nobody has any idea.

It is preposterous. I am lucky; incredibly lucky. There is no reason for me to have a breakdown. I have the perfect life; I have it all. A strong marriage, two beautiful children, freelance work I do because I want to, not because I have to. Security of every sort. I am, therefore, happy. I remind myself of this, all the time.

There are times, however, when something overwhelms me. It happens without warning, in the most ordinary of situations. Today, for example, I am sitting on a tiny table, an ungainly giant in a world made for little people, and having an innocuous conversation with my son's teacher, when my vision starts to cloud over, and the ringing sounds in my ears.

I hear his words as if through a tunnel. ' . . . not Beijing, though,' he is saying. 'I have a bit of a yen to spend some time in some of those places where you're days and days away from the nearest city, and it gets light at ten in the morning.'

It always starts this way. I don't say a word. I grip the edge of the table as hard as I can, with both hands. At home, I would slump down and close my eyes and surrender, but if I let that happen now, Mr Trelawney would call an ambulance.

So I screw my eyes tight shut, and listen to my heart pounding. It bounces around inside my chest like a dying fish. Then my throat constricts. I gasp for breath, as inconspicuously as I can. I open my eyes briefly, in an attempt to look normal. There are

childish paintings of pirates all over the walls, and when they start rushing towards me waving their cutlasses, and shouting obscenities in Devon accents, I shut my eyes.

Then I realise that it has never been this bad before, and that I am going to die. I need him to call the ambulance. I am leaving my body, slipping away. I am vaguely aware that I am falling down, and choking on nothing, and having a heart attack. I am taking myself out of my life.

And it is exciting. At least something is happening. The world turns to stars and I give up trying to breathe, and drift away, grimly grateful, knowing that this is for the best.

‘Tansy!’ He is shaking me. ‘Bloody hell! What happened?’

When I open my eyes, I expect, briefly, to find myself in hospital, being cared for. It seems, however, that I am on the floor of Toby’s classroom. The wild heartbeat and the hysterical breathing have stopped. As soon as I was absent from myself, my body easily reverted to its usual automatic plodding.

‘I’m OK,’ I realise. ‘Sorry. How long has it been?’ As I speak, my eyes focus again, and I look from his beautiful, baffled face up to the clock on the wall. It is still twenty to four. I feel stupid.

‘Don’t move,’ says Mr Trelawney, and he leans over me, his curly hair hanging down. I struggle to stand up, and he puts his hands on my shoulders and looks into my eyes. I look back. I am too weak even to make myself look away, as I normally do.

‘I guess you fainted,’ he says. ‘Look, you shouldn’t get up yet.’

I shake him off, more violently than is necessary. He pulls his hand back, as if I were on fire.

‘No, I’m really fine,’ I insist. ‘Sorry. Happens occasionally. It’s nothing. So, what were we talking about?’

He is full of wariness. ‘China,’ he says, looking furtively at me, waiting for more grand crazy behaviour. ‘Look, at the very least, grab a seat. You can’t go anywhere. Does this happen a lot? Have you seen a doctor?’

‘Yeah,’ I lie. ‘It’s nothing.’ I try to think of a plausible diagnosis. ‘Low blood pressure,’ I add. It sounds convincing to me. I bustle about, pick up Toby’s book bag, and push my hair behind my ears.

‘Tansy! Let yourself recover.’

## The Life You Want

I sit gingerly on the edge of the table, and wait for my legs to solidify.

Toby saunters back into the room, and stands there, wholesome but scruffy in his green uniform. I am still shaking, so I ram my hands into my coat pockets, purse my lips to stop them trembling, and march over to my poor little firstborn.

'Hey, there,' I say, applying a big smile and making an effort to let it reach my eyes. I lean down and kiss his hair, keeping my hands in my pockets. 'Let's go fetch your brother.' The ringing has almost stopped. This will be all right.

Toby is skinny, lanky, six. He is wearing grey shorts, even though it is a chilly autumn day, because I keep him in shorts until the pavements turn icy, to avoid him standing on the backs of his trousers and making them ragged. Such are my concerns, these days. One of his socks is baggy around his ankle, and his green school sweatshirt is stained with splashes of lunchtime yogurt.

'Just a minute, Mum,' he says, full of enthusiasm. He pulls my sleeve, and drags me to the wall of pirates, all of whom are now behaving themselves, though I think I catch one winking in my peripheral vision. 'This is my pirate. Look, I put shiny foil on his sword!'

'I *love* him,' I say. I put all the excitement I can muster into my words. 'Well done, Tobes.' I turn to the teacher, who is now being ostentatiously busy. 'Why do you get them to do pirate pictures, Mr Trelawney?' I ask, though I meant to say *goodbye*. 'When everyone knows that pirates are bloodthirsty criminals?'

'Does everyone know that, though?' Mr Trelawney asks, looking up with the smile that makes me quiver. I wonder whether he knows what effect he has on me. 'I mean, they've been fetishised out of all recognition over the years, haven't they? It probably started with Stevenson. Arrrr, Jim lad and all that.'

'Arr,' says Toby. 'Toby lad.' He laughs to himself.

'Captain Pugwash,' I say. 'Not to mention the horrors of those Johnny Depp films. Pirates have amazing PR.'

'What's amazing PR?' Toby demands, and I look at him, at his big dark eyes that remind me so much of his father's. Right now, I see Max watching me through Toby. He is guarded, wary, judging

me. I often wonder whether Max has set up some kind of portal, whether he observes my failings through Toby's eyes, whether right now he is wondering what I am doing, hanging out after school with Mr Trelawney, flinging myself on to the classroom floor.

'Come on,' I say, and take my boy by the hand. My grip is almost firm.

Mr Trelawney smiles at us both. He has springy curly hair that reaches the nape of his neck, and a golden tan, and, unlike most of the teachers, he dresses like a surfer. I tear my eyes away from him.

'Bye, Toby and Toby's Mum,' he says.

'See you tomorrow,' Toby says seriously.

As I step out into the corridor, which smells of polish, and crayons, and eternal youth, it starts to happen again. I steady myself with a hand on Toby's head. There is a strange taste in my mouth. Black splodges appear before my eyes. Toby is saying something, but I can't hear him because of the blood swirling around in my ears. I can hear my heart pumping the blood around my body. It is not a 'boom-boom' heartbeat, not the sort of tidy beat you hear in the credits of medical programmes, but a great roaring swoosh.

I make the most enormous effort, stand still for a second, and nip it in the bud.

I try to talk about it, at the boys' bedtime.

'I thought I was going to die today,' I say to Max, from the table, as he gently closes their door.

He laughs, but in a whisper. 'Die of what?' he asks.

'Well, that's just the thing. Of nothing. Nothing at all.'

Max, the smooth, clean-shaven City man, looks quizzical. He walks across the room and puts his arms on my waist. I lean into him immediately, and we fit together the way we always do. He has sideburns, and an expensive haircut. I love it that he walks in from work and instantly, automatically, puts the boys to bed. I love it that he loves them so much.

'Right,' he says. 'But you didn't.'

I bury my face in his chest and try to find the words.

'That's right,' is all I manage to say. 'I didn't.'

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## The Life You Want

At half past three in the morning, my eyes spring open. This has happened for the past four nights. Five days ago, I was living my life in a reasonably competent manner. The things that bothered me were mainly packed away into strong boxes, with lids nailed firmly down. One email has changed it all. A single, upbeat email, written with no intention of bringing my house of cards crashing down. I cannot believe it is happening: soon, I am certain, I will be sane again.

I look at the orangey light on the ceiling, from the street lamp outside. I can see the outline of the furniture, of my blameless husband.

When I met Max, when I realised that I loved him and that we would be together for ever, I was smugly amused by the fact that, in spite of my background, in spite of everything, I had ended up conforming to society's norms. I knew we would marry, that we would live in a monogamous nuclear unit, that I would accidentally be conventional. I should have known that my conventionality would be fragile.

I listen to the dull hum of traffic outside. My mother is right outside the window, taunting me for my failure.

'You're dead,' I say quietly, and she melts away. Max rolls over and mutters, but doesn't wake. The contours of his sleeping face are lit up in eery yellow. I sit up and look at him for a while. I hear his untroubled breathing, gaze at the bulk of his comatose body under the duvet. Part of me longs to pack a bag and tiptoe out of my life, to follow up Elly's idea. I will never do it. Instead, I lie down, roll up close to him. We are naked together, against each other, a picture of intimacy.

'Mm?' he says. 'What is it?'

I stare at him, at his smooth cheeks, the contours of his cheekbones, the place where his hairline meets his face. I touch his cheek. Everything has been enchanted for us. That's what everybody thinks. It's what he thinks. I cannot bear to disappoint him.

'Nothing,' I mutter.

'Go back to sleep.'

I close my eyes, and try to think of nothing.