CHAPTER ONE

Lisa Wheeldon yawned but kept her eyes shut. It was so cosy under the doona. So relaxing, and the semi-erotic dream she'd been having had left her with a warm, fuzzy feeling between her thighs.

Under the doona, she reached for her husband's leg and squeezed it. 'This is nice, isn't it?'

'Mmmm,' he murmured and placed his hand over hers.

Usually they woke to a prod in the back from Ava or Jemima, or both. Their two daughters had rendered all alarm clocks utterly useless. Mostly, they were up well before the sun, except for today.

Lisa stroked her husband's thigh. 'I was just having the hottest dream—'

'Yes?'

'About Max from Max's Garage. He came to me with his receipts—'

'Go on.'

'And they weren't in the bag.' At sixty-five, Max Ingall was her oldest client. Wizened as a sultana, his idea of bookkeeping involved chucking receipts into a plastic bag, and handing them over. It drove the order-loving Lisa insane.

'No bag?' Scott knew how much she hated the bag.

'He came to me with folders.' She paused. 'Colour coded.'

'Oh, god.' Scott moaned appreciatively.

'I know, right.'

Lisa rolled onto her side and took a second to appreciate her adorable husband, with his smile lines and greying hair around the temples. Men were lucky in the way they slid so easily into middle age.

Yep. My Scottie has still got it.

With a speed she hadn't mustered in years, Lisa launched herself onto her husband's chest and kissed him full on the mouth. Encouraged by the equally rapid response of Scott's groin, Lisa started kissing him down his chest.

'Nice to see you so relaxed about the party,' he murmured.

The party.

Oh goodness, the party.

Lisa blinked madly and looked at the alarm clock.

8.36 am.

'Why didn't you tell me?' She leapt off Scott and out of the bed, sending her pillow flying. Quickly, she grabbed it off the floor and threw it back onto the bed, accidentally hitting her husband in the head.

'Ow.'

Lisa wrenched open the doors of her cupboard. 'Why didn't you wake me?'

'Because I was asleep.' Scott rubbed his eyes while Lisa clutched at the first article of clothing she could find—an ancient white (now over-washed grey) T-shirt, and a tatty pair of light (intentionally) grey yoga pants, complete with faded bolognaise stains and a big hole in the knee from too much crawling on the floor with the girls.

'Of all the days, of course today would be the one where they slept in,' she muttered, roughly pushing her feet into ugg boots.

'Get up,' she hissed at her still-groggy husband, before skittering out the door and down the stairs. In less than ninety minutes—one hour, twenty-three minutes now, to be precise—there would be thirty-two children between the ages of four and six arriving on her doorstep for Ava's fifth birthday party.

Thirty. Two. Children.

‘You’ve managed accounts for hundred-million-dollar companies, you’ve got this,’ she whispered to herself, while trying to visualise the spreadsheet she’d drawn up yesterday on her laptop—with things already done in the green column, and those outstanding in the red. Spreadsheets made her feel so much better about life; Microsoft Excel was her yoga. But there was no time to fire-up the computer. From memory, she had to:

-Make fairy bread (no crusts, gluten-free bread)
-Cut fruit (star shapes, as per Ava’s request)
-Collect sushi from shop
-Blow up balloons (find balloon pump so as not to collapse from dizziness)
-Put up streamers
-Sweep the back deck for possum poo
-Get the girls dressed
-Clean the toilet (the girls treated the flush button like a bomb detonator—something to be feared and avoided at all costs, regardless of smell emanating from the bowl)
-Decorate the cake (a princess castle, completely beyond Lisa’s abilities)
-Set up tea cups and saucers for the adults
-Heat up the frozen sausage rolls (homemade was now out of the question)

At the bottom of the steps, Lisa stopped. On the couch in the lounge room, the girls were curled up shoulder-to-shoulder under a rug and watching Sunday morning cartoons. A familiar twinge went off in Lisa’s ovaries and despite the gargantuan nature of the to-do list in her head she couldn’t help gazing on the yawning space next to Ava and Jemima that seemed to cry out for an extra body.

Two children was sensible, she and Scott had agreed. A third child would leave them outnumbered.

Can you imagine? Three mini-Mussolinis screaming for cuddles and only two sets of hands to provide them?

Still, Lisa couldn’t quite quell the feeling that her family wasn’t complete.

‘Mummy! It’s the party!’ Ava and Jemima squealed as Lisa startled from her momentary reverie and scooted past them towards the kitchen.

‘How long have you two been up?’ she shouted and started flinging open a variety of cupboard doors, not exactly sure what she was looking for but certain that if she opened enough doors it would come to her.

‘We’ve been up for ages, Mummy,’ said Ava, bouncing on the couch.

‘Since before the sun,’ added Jemima.

‘We were too excited.’ Ava clapped. ‘I’m having a party. I’m having a party,’ she chanted.

‘You’ve been up since dawn? Why didn’t you come and get me up?’ said Lisa, still wrestling with cupboard doors.

‘We did, but you just rolled over and said something about folders.’

‘But normally you poke me until I open my eyes.’

Ava stuck her head up over the couch. ‘You’ve told us not to do that.’

‘Yes, but you never listen to me!’ Lisa banged some oven trays down on the bench and started lobbing sausage rolls onto them before quickly realising it would be faster if she upended the entire container onto the tray, which she did, and sent pastry crumbs flying everywhere. Now, in addition to all the food she had to prepare, the floor would also have to be vacuumed.

‘Aren’t you proud of us, Mummy? For not poking you?’ This time, it was Jemima’s worried face that peered up over the couch, like a soldier inching their head over the parapet.

Lisa thought for a second. It was one of those trick parenting questions that always seemed to stump her. On the one hand, they had done exactly what they were *told* to do. On the other hand, they had done exactly what she did not *want* them to do. In her experience, young children did not understand nuances or semantics or double entendres and the frustration she felt in that moment would be better served by being hidden by a cloak of maternal pride.

‘Yes, my darlings. Of course I’m proud of you for letting me sleep. It’s just that Mummy has rather a lot to do today for Ava’s party, which begins in,’ she checked her watch, ‘approximately seventy-nine minutes.’ Dread made Lisa’s stomach drop. There was no way she could possibly get everything done.

‘Mummy, do I have to have breakfast, even though it’s my party?’ Ava turned back to the TV.

Lisa poked her head out of the freezer from where she'd retrieved the bread. 'Yes, you do.'

'Then I want it now,' demanded Ava.

'Me too,' added Jemima.

Lisa dropped the loaf on the counter and slammed the sausage rolls in the oven, whizzing the temperature dial up to maximum. 'Manners, girls.'

'Pleeeeease,' they said in unison.

Where was Scott? There was some clumping going on upstairs, but it wasn't what one would call *speedy clumping*. It was clumping of the regulation kind. Slow and plodding, as if it was just another ordinary Sunday morning.

'Scott,' Lisa shouted up the stairs. 'Scott, the girls need their breakfast. Are you coming down?' *Like, today?* she added mentally.

'Coming, coming,' said Scott, sauntering down the stairs and casually pulling a T-shirt over his bed-ruffled hair.

'You make the girls' breakfast. I'll do the fairy bread.'

Scott picked up the loaf of bread on the counter. 'Gluten-free?'

'Don't touch that, it's for the fairy bread.'

'But this stuff tastes like cardboard, doesn't it?'

'Well, it'll have to do. One of the children has irritable bowel and can't eat wheat.'

'I thought only fifty-year-old women got that?'

'No, Scott.' She turned to him, wielding a large knife. 'It can be a very serious and debilitating condition for a five-year-old, not to mention embarrassing.' Lisa started slathering butter. 'Hermione's mother says it's as serious as a nut allergy.'

'Poor Hermione,' Scott murmured, moving methodically about the kitchen to set up bowls and cereal for the girls.

'Hey, don't move that.' She tapped Scott's hand as he reached to move an empty plate on the bench. 'That's part of my assembly line.'

'Are you making kids' party food or a car?'

'Very funny. But this is no time for jokes, Scott. This is an emergency.'

The next seventy minutes were a whirlwind of fairy bread, balloons and vacuuming up crumbs. The food was ready. The house was ready. Everything was ready, except for the cake. The girls were outside helping Scott with the last of the decorations. At least *he'd* had time to shower and shave. Lisa was still dressed in her grey trackies.

She wiped her hands with a tea towel, then mopped her brow with it and checked her watch: 9.55 am and already she was sweating in what she knew was an unattractive fashion. Long pants and ugg boots had been completely the wrong choice for a sticky, late-February day. But there was no time to change. She had five freaking minutes to build a castle that would make Walt Disney proud. She took a deep breath.

You've got this.

Everyone would be at least ten minutes late which gave her fifteen minutes to make Disney magic out of two rather pale, flabby and possibly crunchy (thanks, eggshell!) hunks of vanilla cake that she and the girls had made yesterday.

Diving into the kitchen drawer she ripped open the new piping set, bought especially to create piped rosettes as per the pictures in the book. Inside the pack was a device with ten different nozzles and a plastic barrel that looked like a comedy syringe.

Lisa's heart sank. Who was she kidding? This was the culinary equivalent of a Rubik's Cube. This was no time for puzzles. She needed results! Impact! Bulk icing! Stat!

She hauled the mixmaster out from under the bench, hurled icing sugar and butter into the bowl and set it to 'high'. Had the girls been present for the resulting explosion of white powder into the atmosphere, they would no doubt have cheered at the impressive creation of fog, almost like snow! But in that moment, Lisa found it impossible to feel anything but devastation. Icing required icing sugar. Preferably in the bowl, not misted across the kitchen. She leant over the still-whirring beaters to inspect the fallout. Was there enough icing sugar in there? She peered more closely. Closer and closer …

Suddenly her head was being pulled towards the beaters. Oh god! Her hair was caught and with each passing second more and more was becoming entangled. She felt around for the 'off'

switch and pressed it. The beaters whirred to a standstill with her hair still firmly tangled in the beaters, and her face a matter of centimetres from the bowl.

'Scott,' she yelled. 'Scott! Help me. I'm stuck.'

Lisa could hear running footsteps but couldn't yank her head far enough to turn it to see who they belonged to.

'What the hell!'

Scott. Thank goodness.

'Mummy, why is your head in the bowl?' Ava stood at the door, hopping from one foot to the other, while Jemima just stared, her three-year-old brain trying to process why Mummy had stuck her head in a mixer.

'What happened?' Scott leant over and started untangling Lisa's hair.

'I was just looking at the icing, and suddenly my hair caught. And now the icing is ruined!'

With a final tug, Scott freed Lisa from her mixmaster-imposed imprisonment. 'There. All done.'

Lisa stood and surveyed the icing, which was now littered with her fine, brown, curly hairs. 'Oh god, it's ruined.' She clutched the bowl as Scott peered into it.

'Hey, it's okay. We've still got time. Let's start a new batch. I'll help.' He looked around the kitchen. 'What do we need? Flour?'

Oh god. He doesn't even know the ingredients!

The doorbell rang.

Lisa felt her legs giving way, her lips trembling. 'Oh no. They're here.'

Scott took her by the shoulders. 'Hey, c'mon, Lise. It's just a party. It's not like anyone's died.'

She raised her eyebrows. Scott knew that at some point today, probably when the girls were asleep, she would let herself have a good cry. She did it every birthday, since Ava was born, for as joyous as the celebration was, it was always tinged by the absence of her parents. They would have adored their granddaughters, of that she was sure, and the girls would have adored them. They had all missed out.

'Sorry,' said Scott. 'Poor choice of words. I know these days are hard for you.' He kissed her on the forehead. 'I'll take all the kids down the side passage and out to the backyard. You keep working on the cake.' He squeezed. 'You can do this.'

'I can't.' Her voice quavered.

'You can,' he called over his shoulder and strode towards the front door with Ava and Jemima in tow. 'You have to.'

CHAPTER TWO

In two minutes, Lisa had the mixer going again with a fresh batch of icing, free of brown hairs thank goodness.

Scott was right. She had no choice but to make this birthday cake work. This was what parenting was. One foot in front of the other. Just keep going. Children rendered choices impossible. There was only moving forward. No standing still. No going back to the life they had before children. Being a mum was showing up, every day, even in a crisis.

Lisa stopped the mixer and started spooning huge, white pillows of icing onto the slabs of cake. As she spread it, a drip of sweat fell into the cake. Lisa stopped. *Oh bugger bum.*

She didn't have any infectious diseases, but still …

Lisa looked around. No one watching. She started smoothing down the icing again and within a second, the extra liquid had dissolved.

Salt is flavour after all.

After five minutes, the cake resembled something akin to a castle, albeit a very cheap, very pre-fabbed one with lopsided turrets and a general Pisa-like lean. Lisa stood back and wiped sticky hands on her pants.

Dreadful! Why is cooking such a dark art?

This was why Lisa loved accounting. The order. The predictability. Sure, running her own bookkeeping business wasn't quite as exciting as accounting for Lawson and Georges. But that was the choice she'd made when Ava was born.

From outside, she heard Scott yelling at one of the kids. 'Not in the face! Not the face! Legs. Legs. Noooooooo! Not like that.'

He needed her, quickly. One adult versus thirty-two children was a disastrous equation. She needed to reach him quickly, or a child would get hurt, maybe worse. A child who wasn't theirs, no less. She swivelled towards the backyard, and in so doing her hip caught the edge of the cake board.

Splat.

The cake landed at her feet like a pile of sludgy, cakey, crumby, melting snow and Lisa's insides dropped to the floor alongside it.

There was no saving the castle now. It was gone. A splattered, irretrievable mess. There would be no cake today.

No cake? *It's a fifth birthday party. Cake is compulsory.*

Lisa couldn't move. The destruction was mesmerising in its comprehensiveness. Frankie trotted to her side.

'Oh, puppy, what have I done?'

Frankie's tail thumped the ground appreciatively. 'No, Frankie. No eating!' She held a finger up and started to scoop the worst of the mess straight into the sink.

The doorbell rang.

'Scott! Scott! Can you get the door?' But there was only shrieking from outside. He was needed out there.

'Frankie, no eating!' As Lisa waggled a finger at her tail-wagging dog, the doorbell rang again. Three angry jabs.

'I'm coming. I'm coming.' Lisa ran her hands under the tap, dried them on her trackies and scurried towards the front door, briefly checking her reflection in the hall mirror. The grey pants had been smeared by white streaks of icing and her hair was a sticky, matted monstrosity.

I'm a homeless zebra.

At the door, she smoothed her icing-crusted hair and pasted a smile on her face.

She swung it open. 'Hello and welcome to Ava's party.' Lisa knew she sounded like she'd been snorting icing sugar, and the woman before her confirmed it by stiffening and recoiling.

'Hello,' said the woman formally.

Lisa knew her only as Mrs Glamazon—the mother who always looked immaculate at the school gate, and this morning was no exception. From the razor cut of her skinny jeans, to the fur-trimmed vest that hinted at perfect breasts, the woman was stunning and so was the little girl beside her, presumably her daughter, dressed in the biggest, frothiest tutu Lisa had ever seen.

'Hi. It's Savannah-Rose, isn't it?'

'I'm Savannah-Rose Bingley-Peters.' The little girl put out her hand and Lisa shook it.

'That's a big name for a little girl.'

'And I can write it all myself.' The little girl retracted her hand and primly held onto a handbag emblazoned with the words *Baby Dior*.

Lisa had never been within touching distance of a Dior handbag, let alone one made for a child. 'Savannah, all the kids are out the back, do you want to join them?' She pointed down the hallway.

'Yes thank you,' and she took off at lightning speed, reminding Lisa of a bounding poodle as she tore down the hallway and called over her shoulder, 'It's Savannah-Rose. Not Savannah. Bye, Mum.'

'Bye-bye, darling.' Mrs Glamazon held up a perfectly manicured hand before turning her attention to Lisa. 'Well, I'll be off then.'

'Wait. Won't you come in for a cuppa?'

'No, thanks. See you at twelve!' called the exotic woman over her shoulder as she strode away down Lisa's front path with her pert little bottom not daring to bounce behind her.

'Wait, wait!' Lisa scurried behind, slowed down by her ugg boots. 'What about Savannah-Rose? Don't you want to stay in case she, you know, needs you?'

The glamazon pirouetted on wedge sneakers and removed her oversized tortoise-shell sunglasses. 'Hon, Savannah-Rose is nearly six. She can more than handle herself.'

I'll bet she can.

'But I've got sausage rolls,' Lisa pleaded.

The woman made a face. 'I'm fully paleo, babe.' She patted her thighs. 'No carbs. No grains.'

No fun.

'All right then.' Lisa stuck out her hand. 'Well, I'm Lisa, by the way.'

'I'm Heather.' She quickly pulled her hand away from Lisa's and wiped it against her slim thighs. 'Hon, why don't you just go inside, pour yourself a champers, sit back and let the entertainer do all the work.'

'Oh, I haven't got an entertainer,' said Lisa airily. 'I was just going to do it myself.'

'You're going to entertain thirty-two children, dressed like that?' Heather looked Lisa up and down, sliding her eyes over the icing-smeared tracksuit pants. 'Is there some hobo-clown craze I didn't know about?'

Lisa's eyes were suddenly hot and itchy. She sniffed and rubbed at them. Everything had gone wrong. The cake was ruined, the kids were running riot and she looked like a total mess. This was Ava's first party at St John's! Her first chance to make a good impression. Lisa had to make it work or the kids would go home and tell their parents how hopeless it was and the Wheeldons would become the social pariahs of the school. Forever!

Lisa rubbed her nose and sighed. 'It's been a bad morning,' she said quietly. 'The kids didn't wake me, then my hair got stuck in the mixer and now there's cake all over the floor and the kids will be scarred for life if I perform balloon tricks looking like this.'

Heather peered at her. 'You need to pull yourself together, hon.'

'I don't know if I can. I'm usually so organised,' Lisa whispered, bewildered. 'I just wanted everything to be perfect.'

'It still can be,' said Heather in an unconvincing tone. 'Possibly.' From a snakeskin tote, she whipped out an impossibly sleek mobile phone and tapped out a number, her black polished nails skimming lightly over the screen. 'Arabella? Are you free, sweetie? I have a … a … an acquaintance who has a party emergency. We need you now … The Wonder Woman act … You can? Wonderful. I'll text the address. Bye, sweetie.'

Using her T-shirt, Lisa wiped her eyes. 'Who was that?'

Heather tapped out a text message as she spoke. 'My nanny moonlights as a party entertainer. She'll be here in fifteen minutes, dressed as Wonder Woman and armed with a bag of tricks.' Heather put the beautiful phone back in her beautiful bag and strode through the door and down the hallway. 'Now, let's see this cake problem.' As she marched into the kitchen, her nose wrinkled. 'Something's burning.'

'Oh no! The sausage rolls!' Lisa raced ahead to find smoke billowing from the oven. Fanning furiously she wrenched open the door to find her golden orbs of pastry transformed to nuggets of charcoal.

Heather sniffed. 'No loss there. Full of trans fats. Now, cake. What exactly is the issue?'

Having dumped the sausage rolls in the bin, Lisa scanned about the floor for the remains of the cake. But all she could see was a staggering Frankie, barely able to lift his head.

'How old is that thing?' Heather recoiled as Frankie sniffed forlornly about her denim-clad legs.

'He's only two.'

'Are you sure? Looks to me like he's about to drop dead.'

Lisa scanned the kitchen floor again. When she left, there'd been a huge pile of dropped cake right next to the bench.

'Oh god, I think the dog ate it all,' she whispered. 'He's in a sugar coma.'

Heather sniffed, went to the sink and slowly leant her head over it. 'I think a child's been sick in here.'

Lisa joined her. 'No. That's the rest of the cake.'

'Ugh. Well, just as well it got destroyed I suppose.' As the dog moaned and whimpered, Heather whipped out her phone again. 'Pierre? It's Heather, darling. *Mwah. Mwah.* I need one of your iced, flourless, dairy-free chocolate cakes immediately. As in, yesterday.' She covered the receiver. 'Dairy gives Savannah-Rose the runs,' she whispered to Lisa before returning to Pierre. 'You've got a spare? Fabulous … All right, darling. There in a jiffy. Ciao, my strudel superhero,' she tinkled before hanging up.

Before Lisa could say thank you, Heather was sailing back down the hallway while talking over her shoulder. 'Arabella will be here in a minute and I'll be back in half an hour with the cake.' At

the front door, she smoothly slid the sunglasses back over her eyes. Whenever Lisa did that, she always got a hair snagged.

'Thank you for helping me.' She clutched the doorknob for support.

'Anything for the children.' Heather pursed her lips. 'I think Savannah-Rose quite likes your daughter.' Her voice was baffled, like she couldn't work out why Savannah-Rose would deign to spend *any* time in the company of a child with such incompetent parents. She gave Lisa a final look up and down and sniffed. 'I'll be back soon.'

'Please! I mean … uh … thank you!'

With the smell of Heather's perfume still wafting through the hall, Lisa wandered back into the kitchen in a daze and pondered just how close she'd come to disaster. A memory pinged in her brain. What was it that Jamie had said in her email—the one where she checked off Lisa's party spreadsheet.

The only problems you'll face are the ones you never see coming, so just try to relax. It's a five-year-old's party. How bad could it be? Ha! Maybe Jamie understood corporate cocktail schmooze-fests, but she had zero clue about the complexities of kids' shindigs. Speaking of which, where was her sister? She was supposed to come early to help. It was there in the spreadsheet that she'd ticked off. *Jamie—arrive 8.30 am to help with set-up.*

It wasn't like her to be late. Where could she be? Was she okay? Why hadn't she called? It wasn't like her not to call. Not a day passed without them talking at least twice a day, once in the morning and again at night, and it had been that way ever since the accident. After all, they were the only family each other had.

Lisa collected her phone, and started dialling. By the third ring, her nerves had re-doubled. Jamie always answered by the second. The phone was like an extension of her arm, thanks to her job. At the sixth, Lisa's stomach somersaulted into her throat. Something must be seriously wrong.

'Yeah, hello.'

Her sister's voice was slurry, almost drugged sounding.

'Jamie! Where are you? Are you okay? You're supposed to be here for the party.'

There was scrabbling in the background. 'Shit, sorry, Lise. No, I'm fine.' More scrabbling. 'The stupid alarm didn't go off. I'll be there quick as I can.'

'You only just woke up?'

'Yeah, look, I don't know what happened. I'm so sorry.'

'As long as you're okay …'

'No, I'm good. Are you, though? You sound a bit strange.'

Lisa sighed. Where to begin. Her own sleep-in? The ruined cake? The total disorganisation? 'No, I'm good. Just wanted to check where you were. I'd better get back to the party.'

'I'll be there soon.' Jamie paused. 'I'm sorry if I made you worry. I'm really fine.'

Lisa took a breath. Jamie was thirty-five years old. Well and truly an adult, and usually a highly responsible one.

You're her sister, not her mother. No guilt-trips.

'Seriously, it's good. Just come when you can.'

'Will do.'

Lisa dismissed the niggling sense of irritation that urged her to tell Jamie to hurry. Her sister was okay, that was the main thing. The party, on the other hand, sounded like it was getting wilder by the minute. Lisa returned the phone to her pocket and headed towards the shrieking.

She stopped at the doors, the scene of utter chaos before her rendering her muscles immobile. In one corner of the garden, two little boys had armed themselves with plastic bats (meant for the piñata) and were smashing the heads off Lisa's beloved roses. In another corner, a group of five was industriously constructing a completely precarious tower of little plastic chairs atop one another near the fence, as if staging a great escape. In the middle of the garden, Ava was locked in a tug-of-war style battle with two other children over the skipping rope. 'It's mine,' she hollered. 'And I'm the birthday girl!' Near the BBQ, a small crowd had formed as one boy pushed desperately at the gas hob. 'I can make fire!' he boasted. 'Just watch.'

Where were the parents? Where was Scott?

Finally, she spotted him, emerging from underneath a pile of children. He tried to stand, but it was virtually impossible, with no less than eight children trying to drag him back down to the ground, two attached to each limb. 'No more jam sandwiches!' he protested weakly. 'Jam sandwich' was a game he sometimes played with Ava and Jemima where they piled on top of each

other, usually with Scott at the bottom, which was all well and good with two rather petite little girls, but almost deadly with the wild and oversized mob currently attacking him.

Putting two fingers into her mouth, Lisa summoned the biggest whistle her lungs would allow.

The effect was immediate. The kids were like statues. Thirty-two pairs of eyes turned to her.

What now? *Think, Lisa. Quick, or they'll start killing each other again.*

'Pass-the-parcel,' she called. 'Everyone sitting here in a circle.' She gestured to the grass beneath her and nearly got knocked off her feet by the immediate flood of children.

'Get the music going, quick,' she hissed to Scott as he passed her, still trying to re-tuck his shirt and smooth down his crazed hair.

'Okay, everyone. Let's start with you.' She pointed randomly at a little boy with jet black hair and wide blue eyes. 'What's your name?'

'Mummy says I shouldn't talk to strangers.'

'I'm not a stranger. I'm Ava's mummy, Lisa.' *And if your mum is so worried about strangers, why has she dropped you and run?* 'But sweetie, you don't have to tell me your name if you don't want to. Just take the parcel and pass it on.'

Scott started the music. For the first minute, it was fine. Calm even. It was like a tennis match, with the kids' eyes glued to the parcel as if it were a ball. The music stopped. A little girl looked at Lisa with her head cocked to the side.

'Yes, darling. It's you. Open the first layer.'

The little girl started tearing. The kids inhaled and leant in as one. The wrapping was off. The girl turned the parcel over, and over again. 'Where's the treat?'

'Oh, there's a few more layers to go until we get to the big prize,' said Lisa gaily. 'Let's keep going.' She made eye contact with Scott and nodded. 'Ready please, Mr Music.'

The little girl held tightly to the parcel. 'But there's supposed to be a prize,' she said plaintively.

'At the end, sweetheart. I promise.'

Reluctantly, she passed it along. This time, the music stopped on a boy in a checked shirt, navy pants and what appeared to be some type of gel in his hair, given its unnatural spikiness. With gusto, he ripped, and kept ripping.

'No, no, darling. Just one layer.' Lisa moved closer. But what could she do? She couldn't just wrench the parcel out of his hands. 'Please. Just one.' She got close enough to gently tug it away.

'You mean there's no prize till the very end.' The boy stood and kicked at the ground. 'This is boring.'

'Yeah, this is boring,' murmured some of the others.

Ava caught her gaze. Her face was as sad and confused as Frankie's in the sugar coma.

'All right, then. Let's do the piñata!' Lisa clapped her hands together. 'Everyone line up behind me.'

A scrum quickly packed down behind her of jostling, pushing five-year-olds.

'I wanna go first.'

'No, me!'

'You got the parcel first.'

'Kids!' Lisa raised her hand, the way she'd seen the day care teachers do when they wanted attention. One by one, Ava's buddies followed suit until there were thirty-two raised hands, and absolute quiet. It was like magic.

In front of them, Scott took a step away from the rainbow unicorn he'd just finished tying to the clothes line. 'All ready to go.' He nodded at Lisa.

'You get one bash, then you hand it on.' She handed a plastic bat to the first kid in the line, a little boy wearing a ninja T-shirt.

He stepped up, eyes drilled into the unicorn, his mouth set in a determined line.

'Go, Cooper! Get 'im,' called another little boy from the line.

Cooper nodded grimly, raised his bat, and what proceeded to unfold was the most frenzied and violent attack on an inanimate object that Lisa had ever seen.

On and on he went. Thwacking and hacking. Beating and slicing.

Lisa felt a little body throw itself around her legs.

'Mummy, Mummy, why is Cooper hitting the unicorn? Make him stop. Make him stop,' wailed Ava. 'I don't like this. He's hurting the unicorn.'

‘It’s okay, honey. It’s just a cardboard unicorn. It’s not actually feeling anything.’ Lisa knelt down to comfort her daughter while signalling frantically for Scott to *do something*! Halt the attack. Or no other kid would get a go at demolishing the mythical beast.

But removing the bat from Cooper’s vice-like grip was easier said than done. Scott just couldn’t get close, not unless he wanted to risk losing an eyeball, or a hit to the genitals.

Ava buried her head into Lisa’s thigh and sobbed harder, while Lisa admonished herself for not having thought to explain the concept of a piñata to her. But who would have thought it necessary? Hadn’t her daughter seen one before? Sometimes, it was the smallest, most unexpected things that most tripped her up as a mother.

‘Cooper, stop, mate,’ Scott called lamely, swatting at the bat as it swished past him. ‘Time to give someone else a go.’

But Cooper had no intention of stopping, that much was clear, not until he’d dismembered the unicorn, which was now hanging at a very odd angle from the clothes line.

HURRAY!

The roar went up as the horned-horse fell to the ground and the kids descended on it like a pack of hungry wolves, intent on feasting off the carcass. All Lisa could do was stand back and shield Ava from the ensuing violence as shards of cardboard and bits of streamers emerged, flung out of the scrabbling mob in their desperate hunt for the inner treasure.

Cooper stood up and looked at Lisa accusingly. ‘Where’s the lollies?’ He held up his hands, a rubber ball in one and an eraser in the other. ‘It’s just this stuff. My mum calls it junk.’ He made a face and dropped the offending prizes, as if they contained a deadly virus.

‘There’ll be lollies later. Plenty of them,’ said Lisa brightly. ‘But only prizes in the piñata. Too much sugar is bad for us, remember?’

Cooper shot her a look that Lisa could only describe as pure disgust. ‘I don’t like this party.’ Jamming his hands in his pockets, the boy sloped off to the back of the garden.

She felt her hand being tugged. ‘Mummy, I don’t like this party either.’ Ava looked up at her, eyes brimming and Lisa felt her heart shrivel a little. She wanted this to be perfect! Or at least, moderately enjoyable.

‘Oh, darling. Don’t say that. It’s going to get better, I promise. This is just the beginning.’

She checked her watch. Only 10.17? Her heart shrivelled a little more. How had she forgotten that minutes passed like dog years at a child’s party.

Where was Heather? Where was the Wonder Woman she’d promised?

Only a superhero could save this party now.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Mummy, are you coming in with me?’

Ellie was wide-eyed and wriggly as Missy removed her keys from the ignition and folded her daughter’s wormy fingers into her own. ‘No, El. I won’t come in but I’m going to walk you right to the gate.’

For the past fifteen minutes they’d sat in the car and watched a procession of shiny-shoed and glossy-haired children stream through the front gate to the Wheeldons’ house. While the children were beautifully primped and preened and trotted happily down the side path to the backyard, their parents looked harried. Un-brushed hair. Un-ironed shirts. It was the weekend, after all. None of them stayed inside the Wheeldons’ for long. Just a drop-and-go, and out they hurried with a little glint in their eyes that said, *Yes! Two hours to read the newspaper and have a coffee in peace.*

Missy sighed and her stomach did its thousandth revolution for the morning. The thought of what she was about to do made her feel sick. Sicker than even the drive over to the party. It was strange, to be behind the wheel again and she spent the entire journey checking the rear-view

mirror. *Please, no police*, she'd prayed. Getting caught driving without a licence could ruin everything.

Missy played with Ellie's braid. The end of it was like a soft-bristled paintbrush and she stroked it gently across her cheek.

'Ellie, we talked about this.'

The child nodded miserably. 'But I won't know anyone at the party!'

Missy reached over the gearstick to pat her daughter's leg. 'I have a plane to catch, remember? So, I have to drop you now.'

She hated lying to her daughter and what shocked her was how readily Ellie accepted the untruths. She had full faith in her mother, and Missy hated herself for exploiting it.

'Honey, the Wheeldons are a lovely family. They'll take care of you, I promise.' Missy took her daughter's finger and crossed it over her chest. 'Cross my heart. You're going to love staying with them and this is going to be the best party you've ever been to.'

Missy could say that with full confidence, for it was also the only party Ellie had ever been to. There had been no choice. It was the only way of keeping her safe. Stay detached. Never get close to anyone. Never let them know who you really are.

'Will there be a cake?' Ellie asked, wiggling her finger out of Missy's grip.

'For sure! The most delicious cake you've ever eaten, and there'll be games and …' As Missy described every child's fantasy party, she visualised Lisa Wheeldon, floating serenely about her home, a beacon of calm and organisation. Having watched her closely over the past few weeks (undetected, obviously) Missy had come to realise that the perfect mother did, indeed, exist. Her name was Lisa Wheeldon and Missy knew that any party organised by this woman would be perfect as well.

'Can I go in now?' Ellie tugged at Missy's sleeve and pulled at the door handle. 'I don't want to miss anything.'

Missy's speech had done the trick. The fear in her daughter's eyes had been replaced with excitement.

She looked at her watch: 10.20. All the party guests would have arrived by now. Missy double-checked out the window. The street was quiet. Perfect. 'For sure. Let's go.'

She let Ellie out of the car and walked her across the road, gripping her hand a little more tightly than usual and feeling for her daughter's knuckles. Only eighteen months ago, it would have been impossible to feel the bones. At the age of five, Ellie's knuckles had been nothing but starbursts of chubby flesh. All squish, and no hardness. But her daughter was six going on seven now. Lengthening out, developing angles, and losing the softness that Missy had never imagined her losing.

They stopped at the gate.

'This is a nice place, isn't it, Mummy?' Ellie looked around at the giant fig trees that overhung the street, providing a cool canopy on a day that was shaping up as another hot one.

'It is a nice street, El.'

'Nicer than ours.'

'I agree.' She leant down. 'But I think you'd better go inside before you miss too much of the party.'

'Okay, Mummy. I'll see you soon,' said Ellie happily, her arms not quite reaching all the way around her mother.

'Bye-bye, my Elle-belle.' Missy squeezed hard and swallowed back the tears forming in her throat. 'I hope you have the best time ever.'

'I will,' she said confidently, one hand swinging the bag that held the gift and the other clutching her little overnight bag which contained a toothbrush, some clothes, and her favourite books.

'I love you so much.' Missy hugged her daughter again.

'I love you too. More than you love me.'

Missy laughed. 'That's not possible.'

'Yes, it is,' said Ellie over her shoulder as Missy opened the gate to let her through. Down the side passage she could hear high-pitched squeals of delight. Ellie paused once more and looked to her mother for reassurance.

'Off you go, hon.'

The little girl raced away. 'Enjoy your trip, Mummy,' she yelled.

Missy watched as Ellie ran towards the Wheeldons' backyard, heels and plaits flying. Then, she was gone and Missy slumped against the gate.

She allowed herself a thirty-second cry and pulled herself together. The plan would never work if she allowed herself to fall apart.

Ellie was safe. For now. That was all that mattered.