

In a survey 50% of mothers questioned admitted feeling undervalued, over-criticised and constantly tired.

## CHAPTER 1

Not a sound is heard as it lands silently on the mat. No drums rolls, crashing thunder, shafts of light. The walls don't start crumbling, the ground doesn't vibrate with terrifying tremors and a yawning fissure fails to zigzag across the kitchen floor and separate my husband from his breakfast marmalade.

In short, I've no clue as to the impact it'll have on our lives. Mayhem, marital breakdown, murder. It should at least have been written in blood or come in the beak of a dark-winged raven.

*It is a postcard. "Love from London"* blazoned above a giant pair of pouting lips kissing a cherry-red heart.

At first sight it appears to be one of those "Please Come to Our Rave" flyers which get thrust through my door periodically. Now the chances of me, a world-weary, put-upon mother-of-two, going to a rave are slim to none, but heck it's nice to be invited.

I turn it over.

*Dearest, sweetest Declan* – it begins. My eyes widen as I take in the blue spidery handwriting and race to the signature. 'Love from La La.'

A tiny blip courses through me as I beetle down the hall, attempting to identify the exact emotion I'm feeling.

Jealousy?

No.

Anger?

Nah.

It's – I recognise it now – excitement. A blip of excitement's forcing its merry way around my clogged up veins.

'Postcard for you,' I say nonchalantly, opening the door and stepping back into the kitchen, 'from La La.'

I had a blip when I first spotted Declan at Bubbles, a dingy disco located east of the pier in downtown Bognor Regis. It was Sandra Mason's leaving work party and I was twenty-two years old. Sandra was tear-stained and puffy faced – partly from drink, partly emotion and partly because she always had a fairly puffy face. We'd given her a pretty good send off, bought her sexy underwear and filled an enormous padded card with witty farewells and humorous poems, all of them sounding a whole bunch better than my lowly "To Sandra, All best – Cath".

The fifth yawn of the evening had just wormed its way out of my mouth corner, when I spied Declan dancing under a glassy mirror ball, had the blip and knew immediately we were destined to become involved. I wasn't sure how. Perhaps he'd introduce me to a mate or better-looking brother. Not that he repelled me exactly, but spiky ginger hair had never been top of my "must haves" and the way he was swinging those hips in perfect rhythm with a blonde nymphet, well, they looked set for life. In and out they gyrated to *Unchained Melody*, his large hands caressing her tanned shoulder blades. I found out much later she was his long-term girlfriend, Lucy. Juicy Lucy, I labelled her. Not very original maybe but it inevitably served its purpose of getting right up Declan's nose.

They made quite a couple. Lucy laughing, licking her glossy lips, and my future spouse leering lovingly at her, beads of sweat running down his freckled brow. I was entranced for a good few seconds before being beckoned back to earth by Sandra, who wanted an all-embracing photo of the

girls from Credit Control. So, blocking out the blip, I pasted on a wide cheesy grin and darted across the room.

Declan?

He sits motionless, his knife suspended in the Flora margarine, blue eyes gazing into the far distance, as he listens to a heated political debate on Radio 4.

'Postcard, darling, from La La.' I raise my voice, aware it'll take a more urgent tone to break that level of concentration. Either that or blasting out the latest match score. Arsenal 0 – Manchester City 2. He reminds me at times of De Niro in *Awakenings*, forever trapped in a catatonic state. I often wonder if I throw a ball at him whether he'd whirl round in his chair and catch it in one swift movement.

'What?' He finally looks up, granary toast perilously close to his open mouth. 'Not more bills, surely?'

'La La,' I repeat, handing the postcard to him.

'Who the hell's La La?'

'Sounds like a telly tubby,' I return to my half-eaten boiled egg, disguising my curiosity. 'Not sure which colour though? Ask Josh and Sophie about it tonight.'

Our two children have been despatched to school by Henrietta, a fellow mum. A ruse we'd come up with so we could have "quality" time with our husbands on alternate mornings. Knowing Henrietta she'll be using her time to bonk Neil senseless. Me – I just aimed for a halfway decent conversation and constantly missed.

He's silently reading.

'What does it say?' I add a pinch of salt to the last millimetre of yolk. Declan hates that I add salt to food, wants it banned from the house, which makes it all the more decadent and delicious.

He fishes in the drawer for his wire-framed reading glasses, perches them on the end of his nose, in a way that hides his boyish face and makes him look nearer fifty than his "recently passed forty-two".

He clears his throat. "*Dearest, sweetest Declan, I long to have you in my arms again. Ever yours.*" A tinge of colour slowly works its way up his cheeks. 'And there's a "Love from La La" at the bottom. Well, how about that?' He starts pacing the floor, a puzzled frown etched on his forehead.

'So who do you think sent it?' I ask eagerly.

'No idea.' The postcard's placed on the worktop. 'Practical joke, I guess.'

Forlornly I tackle the stack of plates lying accusingly in the sink.

'I seriously need a dishwasher,' I mutter, squeezing a generous helping of Fairy liquid onto a brown, greasy stain. 'Everyone's got one, even Patience Preston.'

Patience, mate of my closest friend, Raz, lives on her own in an immaculate flat.

'Hmm.'

'All she uses her fridge for is to chill vodka. Not a scrap of food's ever marred its spotlessness.'

'Hmmm.'

Sometimes my conversations went totally one way.

'She skips breakfast, buys herself wraps lunchtime and eats out each evening. And yet she owns a dishwasher. All I've got is an empty space waiting to be filled.'

'Patience can probably afford a dishwasher,' he says slowly. 'Because *she* has a job.'

My hackles raise a notch. 'Ah, but she doesn't have children to chase after all day, does she?'

'And nor do you. Now they're both at school till four.'

Another few notches of hackles are raised. 'Half three actually. And I have to leave ages before that to pick them up.' Rather than tromp through a well-planted minefield I decide to divert. 'Did you know Patience's mum owns a microphone once licked by Tom Jones?' Occasionally a little falsehood helped deflect the shrapnel.

It works, momentarily. 'Why on earth does Tom Jones go around licking microphones?'

'Dunno, maybe someone threw their knickers at it and knocked it into his mouth.'

He raises his eyebrow a fraction. 'Anyhow a dishwasher's not exactly a priority, is it? What with the roof space that needs lagging, windows replacing, boiler about to blow. Where the money's coming from, I don't know. My pockets aren't...'

His diatribe's thankfully interrupted by his ringing mobile. It's in his hand faster than Wyatt Earp with a smoking gun.

‘Hi. Mm. Sure, sure. Sounds good. When? Ha, ha, ha. Have you asked Jessica-Ellen? Uh huh. Uh huh. Cathy? Nah she’s cool. ’Course. Eight p.m. it is.’

‘Eight p.m. it is,’ I echo under my breath as I scrub furiously at last night’s saucepan.

‘So,’ his voice is casual as he slips his phone into his pocket. ‘Wonder who sent it then?’

‘Maybe someone at work fancies you.’ My chortle halts abruptly when I turn and catch his expression. He’s not been in the mood for jokes lately, his sense of humour apparently absconding the morning of his fortieth birthday.

Besides he knows he’s attractive. I made the mistake of telling him he was voted “Body of the Year” by the Tuesday Twice-Monthlies – the Restaurant Research Group I attend each fortnight. Henrietta likens him to a ginger Nicholas Cage with his high cheekbones and well-defined eyebrows. Raz adores his muscley arms, “sex on elbows” she calls them. And everyone everywhere tells me how lucky I was in nabbing him. As if I was a total pleb who lured him with some secret charm they could never quite see in me. I want to rage at them all, ‘I was the one “nabbed” sisters. I was the one “bloody nabbed”.’ Of course being a coward, I never do.

He turns the card over. ‘If that were true, you’d think they’d pop it in my pigeonhole rather than send it to my home, wouldn’t you?’ He drops his cup into my washing up bowl. ‘Right I’m off.’

I wipe my hands on my dressing gown as I follow him down the hall.

‘You couldn’t just take my watch to be repaired? On the bedside cabinet.’ He retrieves his umbrella from the pot by the door.

‘Sure, honey babe.’ I stand on tiptoes to tweak his tie.

‘Oh and my black boots need soles.’

‘Consider it done.’

‘And do get the kids to clear up those toys in the back garden.’ His face takes on a pained expression, strange love cards already dismissed. ‘Neighbours must wonder who they’re living next to.’

‘I’m on to it.’ I resist the urge to snap into a salute.

Pathetic, isn’t it? This seems to be our new roles in life. Declan barking orders, me acting the subservient housewife. Usually I’m not so wimpish but since Josh started school six months back, I realise I’m on extremely shaky ground even if it looks like the same old floor tiles. Casual mentions of spiralling debts, sharing the load or even carrying it for a change have been accumulating faster than Victoria Beckham’s Hermes handbag collection.

Too bad that as the bickering increases so does my morbid fear of rejoining the workforce. Once lodged comfortably at the back of my mind, like a suspicion of woodworm you’ll get around to dealing with later, it’s morphed to become a monstrous bugbear between us.

Rattle of keys. He’s already mentally in his office as he pecks me on the cheek. Smack of suit pocket to check for his wallet, quick comb of the hair to confirm it’s up to Wilson Inc. standards, and he departs for work. I wave serenely on the doorstep before dashing back inside to put on Coral Duster’s Greatest Hits.

As Coral’s dulcet tones wash over me, I head for the phone.

‘Urgent sturgent! Urgent sturgent!’ I can’t disguise the thrill in my voice. Me with news? Something unexpected from the Cathy O’Farrell home front. I move aside Declan’s raincoat and Sophie’s puffa jacket, rub a hole in the dusty oval mirror and glance at my reflection. My eyes are so alive they’re practically dancing. The whites, whiter than I’ve seen for ages, the iris a more attractive shade of green and my pupils have almost doubled. Even my hair, though badly in need of brushing, seems to have a few extra auburn glints.

‘What’s up?’ Raz says excitedly.

I knew she’d be all ears. I don’t call her “Nose-ache Nora” for no reason. Her name’s really Rosa. Rosa Alison Zimmerman, but Raz was a pet name one of her ex’s gave her and it had kind of stuck.

We met in the toilet of Johnson & Phillips Surveyors. Both escaping for a clandestine ciggy and to get away from the oppressive atmosphere of the miserable men with their clacking rulers. During our regular smoke-outs we found we had much in common, i.e. sneaking off for two-hour lunches and rating the hotness factor of every guy we ran into. That was fifteen long years ago. We’d lived together, loved and lost together. We know each other better than we know ourselves.

She listens quietly, as I spurt it out in a waterfall of words. ‘You think this postcard could be serious?’ she says finally.

‘Nah,’ I giggle. Even my lips have a bee-stung feel about them. ‘It’s just somebody winding him up.’

‘Sure about that?’ Her imagination virtually scales the same heights as mine, except she’s got minor sanity in her life – an office, desk, own direct line and, best of all, colleagues.

Colleagues. Thing I miss most about working. Especially male colleagues that I can banter with, groan at their silly jokes and amaze with clever solutions to their insurmountable problems. ‘By gad you’ve got it, Cath!’ They’d exclaim in awe. ‘We’ve been struggling with that one ages’ and I’d reply, ‘No worries, lads,’ and feel their admiring eyes on my bottom as they watched me leave.

Only that was before my bottom sagged to resemble Dumbo’s and my pre-children brain cells were sparkling crystals, free from today’s pea souper fog. Nowadays the only thing I could bring to the conference table would be the tea trolley.

Raz and I are both silent. I’m thinking about Declan and his endless meetings and oh-so-vital budget reports. Could he really sweep them all aside for unbridled, illicit sex? Raz, from the sound of things, is drawing on her first fag of the morning. I can almost smell the sweet aroma.

‘You’re obviously really really worried about it,’ she adds. ‘So...’

‘I’m not *really* really worried about it,’ I say, starting immediately to *really really* worry.

‘I’m on my way.’

The sound of creaking and clapping, platform shoes on wooden stairs, reverberates throughout the house.

## CHAPTER 2

It had been my great good fortune, that two months ago Raz found out Jerry, her live-in lover, was a secret druggie. She kept discovering rolled up balls of silver foil near the base of the toilet and could never understand where they came from. She rang me one night about it.

‘Silver foil...toilet base...hang on a sec. Look, now don’t take this badly but,’ I drew in a deep breath. ‘Do you remember when you were shackled up with Pete and I was stuck on my own in that grotty Kilburn bedsit?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And do you remember what I found...in the back of the oven?’

‘Yes. Oh God. *God.*’

‘Now listen, Raz, I want you to stay calm. Just think,’ I said the words slowly to emphasise the seriousness of the situation. ‘Have...you...checked...the tea-towels?’

‘I can’t!’ she shrieked. ‘I can’t have a bloody rat living in my oven!’

‘You bet you can.’ I mean why not her? Happened to me after all.

The tartan tea-towels had been the first thing I noticed. Ragged at the best of times, they were becoming holier by the day. Eventually one night I followed a scratching sound and there in the dark of the kitchen a small brown head popped up from under a hot plate. I looked again and he was gone but pulling back the oven moments later, there I found him – a ruddy great rat sitting wide-eyed and somewhat guilty in a tartan nest.

‘But surely silver foil isn’t that comfortable?’ Raz said bemused.

‘Might be for insulation. Rats are extremely intelligent. Now deep breaths. I’ll stay at the end of the phone. You go look.’

‘Right.’

She came back moments later.

‘It’s OK,’ she said relieved. ‘Tea-towels are all there, there’s no droppings and besides, we’ve one of those halogen hobs.’

Days later Raz discovered Jerry was heavily into the old Charlie – and I’m not talking Sheen – (but could be). It was enough for her to retreat back to her parents’ home. ‘Thank Christ I found out before we moved into the new flat,’ she’d confided as I joined her in a spot of retail therapy. ‘He’d have stayed forever, burning a hole in his nose and my pocket at the same time.’

‘True.’ I’d replied, peeling off yet another pair of Calvin Klein jeans I could barely manoeuvre into, yet alone afford.

‘But on the other hand I don’t think I can stand staying with mum and dad until the renovation’s done,’ she continued, buttoning up an immaculately-fitting black Jaeger jacket. ‘I’m already getting jaw-ache from grinding my teeth at night. I’ll have to rent. Only all the landlords want a year’s bloody contract.’

‘Too bad,’ I’d sympathised, whilst inwardly formulating a cunning plan.

That evening I whisked her off to Café Rouge, got her tanked up and persuaded her to move into our loft extension. ‘Just until your builders finish.’

‘But you’re married now,’ she slurred, over her fourth glass of Frascati. ‘I don’t want to be a big fat gooseberry.’

I glanced at her across the table, chasing her crab cakes around her plate with a fish fork. Willowy and beautiful with her delicate bone structure and slim but shapely figure. No big fatty thing about her anywhere. Not like me. Two sizes too wide, two inches too short, orange peel thighs and a large layer of belly blubber.

No, Raz’s different. Everyone loves her with her famous zigzag parting, her shoulder-length stylishly-streaked blonde hair dropping down just a hint over her right eye. She has a certain sexiness in her gravelly voice, a confidence in her manner and a way with people that both intrigues and attracts them.

‘You won’t be. What’s more,’ I added encouragingly. ‘It’ll dilute Declan, help with the mortgage and,’ my eyes sparkled with anticipation. ‘We might have fun. Thirty quid per week.’ I quickly chinked my glass against hers to cement the deal.

After another carafe of wine, she agreed, with the proviso that she pay us eighty, wouldn't be expected to baby-sit and I'd have to knock if I wanted to enter her private quarters. You always knew where you stood with Raz. 'Oh and,' she added. 'We'll need space for our own friends.'

'Fine! Fine! Anything you say,' I squealed with delight and just managed to refrain from running around the restaurant clicking my heels.

I got to admit living with Raz and my family's a whole lot different to when it was just the two of us sharing years before in various short-term lets. Back then not only was I young, energetic and could party 'til dawn, but I could nip to the pub at the crook of a finger, vomit down the loo all night long and nobody'd blink an eye. My commitments added up to a big round zero. But now, having gone down the baby route, I've turned into this safety-conscious, back-of-the-queue sort of a gal while Raz has remained in the live wild, live dangerously phase.

Not forgetting that the "job" thing also stands between us. While my career ranging from secretary to admin assistant to PA with own secretary, slithered into oblivion at the birth of my offspring, Raz became a big cheese in the advertising world. She blossomed whereas I withered away, happily sacrificing my not-yet-glorious working life to nurture our children.

Anyway, she keeps assuring me that her "room at the top" suits her perfectly for now, although recently I've noticed that her phone calls to the team of builders called Trev and Kev and such are sounding increasingly hysterical, overshadowing the screeches of squabbling children and day-to-day quarrelling between Declan and myself. Builders being what they are and the finish date past weeks ago. I suppose for an ad executive she's slumming it, although she does have her own bathroom, toilet and bed under the eaves. A little nest where she gathers together countless people. I should know because I've tried counting them, watching enviously as they troop up, bottles in hand. Unusual hairdos, curious fashions. I've even managed to join them a few times, to supper or the occasional brunch, where we'll read the Sunday rags, drink bucks fizz and gobble up grapefruit sprinkled with Demerara sugar. And I'll borrow some of Raz's clothes, lie back on a beanbag and feel for a tiny while young and Bohemian, forgetting about Declan downstairs with the kids.

She arrives in the kitchen, notebook in one hand, half-finished cigarette in the other. I show her the postcard then perch expectantly on a stool.

'I see,' she studies it carefully before pinning it to the fridge with a magnetic Marge Simpson. 'Well, I'm not going in 'til later,' she flicks the ash into the sink. 'So,' she ejects my Coral Duster CD, plugs her iPod into Declan's docking station, and turns it on, 'let's get down to facts.'

Pumping music fills the air and I grin. We're on a mission. Just like the old days in our shared studio when we'd jump on the other's bed and shout, 'Let's hit Camden' or 'Let's do the Thames' or 'Let's phone that bloke that never rang you and blow raspberries at him.' Happy times before I became a domestic prisoner.

'We'll make a suspects list.' She looks thoughtful as she taps into her blackberry. 'A. La La's someone Declan works with having a giggle. Someone with a lousy sense of humour?'

'Definitely. They're all rather geeky.'

'B.' She closes her eyes a moment. 'La La's a man!'

The hairs on my neck suddenly stand erect. 'Gay lover?'

'Hardly! Business rival maybe. Someone with a grudge.'

'Grudge? Well probably loads of people hate him. He's got funny habits, like the way he looks in the opposite direction when you're attempting a conversation.' I drum my fingers on the table.

'C. Declan's had or is having an affair. She begged him to leave you, but he told her no. Miffed, she sent the card hoping you'll kick him out.' She taps away while adding. 'Totally off the wall, but we have to consider every possibility.'

'Unlikely,' I say dismissively. 'If he started an affair I'd suss him out right away. He'd be all strange and psychologically different. Mooning at the moon, sighing heavily, listening to Leonard Cohen.'

'You mean like you did when you had that secret tryst behind pervy Paul's back.'

'Yeah, well, he deserved it with that foot fetish. Can you imagine how cringey it is having your toenails idolised?'

'So Declan's not been acting differently in any way?'

'We-ell,' I pause to think. 'He has been coming home later from work...and he's just recently bought piles of starry pants and expensive aftershave.'

‘Anything else?’

‘Em, silly really,’ I hesitate. ‘But there’s been a surge of brightly-coloured ties these last few weeks, not the sort he usually wears. Snake-like patterns.’

‘Aha.’

‘And he,’ I lower my voice. ‘God I’m embarrassed to say, but he’s been wanting me to get up to all sorts of bedroom tricks. Almost as if he’s got this teacher, showing him the ropes. But hey, I don’t think they’re signs, do you?’

‘Cath,’ she rolls her eyes, ‘will you be serious for once? I mean it’s clearly a nonsense prank, but whoever sent it is playing a totally stupid and possibly dangerous game. What if you were the morbidly possessive type? Remember that idiot in the news a few months back who stabbed his girlfriend because he believed the rumours she was a prostitute.’

‘I know, I know.’ But for some mad reason I’m loving the drama. Maybe I should be getting all neurotic and jealous at the possibility of my husband of ten years finding a lover – alarm bells ringing, cue eerie music as Camera One closes in on my wedding ring – but, hey, this is fun. Perhaps it’s only that I’m stuck in a rut and clueless how to change things, but for one wild moment I want to fling everything routine from the highest rooftop. And then peer down, see how they’ve landed and go from there. Is that so very wrong?

‘Apart from working longer hours than ever before, there’s zilch to report.’

‘I mean, an affair. Ridiculous. He’s crazy about you.’ Raz smiles sympathetically, but continues tapping, an intense look plastered on her face.

I give a weary sigh. Perhaps I’m looking at this the wrong way. Perhaps the opportunity of swapping my plain cotton-rich M&S midi knickers for a scanty pair of Agent Provocateur briefs *has* finally become too much for Declan. I can’t help feeling a tinge of sympathy. After all, he’d no idea when he married his coquettish flirtatious young girlfriend what sort of dreary wife she’d turn into. Although, to be fair to myself, neither did I.

‘And D,’ she stubs out her ciggy. ‘Could be like fatal attraction. Insane woman, gunning for you.’

‘Gee, now that makes me feel *heaps* better,’ I gulp.

‘Well, like I said, they’re all just possibilities,’ she presses a few more buttons and the screen goes blank. ‘Probably turn out to be A. Cox’s?’ She throws me over an apple and takes one herself.

‘You know, Raz,’ I bite into mine. ‘This reminds me of the last mission we undertook – the frozen shoulder conspiracy.’

‘The one where you discovered people suffering from spasmodic shoulders had been infected with a strange Spanish virus?’ She bites into hers.

‘Yup, but the UK doctors were keeping mum because they were getting backhanders from pharmaceutical companies.’

‘Cathy,’ she smiles at me indulgently. ‘That was a dream, remember?’

‘Yeah, I know,’ I admit grudgingly. ‘But it was a really realistic one.’

She stands up and checks her watch. ‘Whoops. Better go. Can you just sort my jacket?’

I retrieve the lint roller from the kitchen drawer and carefully remove Custard’s dog hairs from her back. She looks exceptionally smart, with a crisp cream blouse underneath her cotton flared trouser suit that matches to the precise shade, her violet-blue eyes. All ready for a hard day’s work with Younger and Wilding, top London Advertising Agency. And there’s me standing behind her, unshowered, clad in grubby dressing gown with one pocket and three buttons missing, shoulder-length hair secured with one of Sophie’s discarded Barbie baubles.

At thirty-two, she’s only six years younger than me, but at this nano-second in time, I feel like her old granny – the one you *can* shove off a bus.

‘You home tonight?’ I call after her as she heads off down the front path.

‘Not until late,’ she shouts back. ‘Seeing Patience up town. But I’ll google La La as soon as I get to work, see if she’s got a track record. And Cathy, if you think of anything, anything at all, call me right away. We’re going to get to the bottom of this if it kills us.’

I smile as I close the door and step back inside the house. I might not get paid a salary, my children might be speeding towards adulthood so fast we’ll be paying for Sophie’s wedding before I’ve even got her baby photos sorted, but now I have a purpose, a quest. I’m looking for La La.