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Sunday evening

Dearest Tess,

I'd do anything to be with you, right now, right this moment, so I could hold your hand, look at your face, listen to your voice. How can touching and seeing and hearing – all those sensory receptors and optic nerves and vibrating eardrums – be substituted by a letter? But we've managed to use words as go-betweens before, haven't we? When I went off to boarding school and we had to replace games and laughter and low-voiced confidences for letters to each other. I can't remember what I said in my first letter, just that I used a jigsaw, broken up, to avoid the prying eyes of my house-mistress. (I guessed correctly that her jigsaw-making inner child had left years ago.) But I remember word for word your seven-year-old reply to my fragmented homesickness and that your writing was invisible until I shone a torch onto the paper. Ever since kindness has smelled of lemons.

The journalists would like that little story, marking me out as a kind of lemon-juice detective even as a child and showing how close we have always been as sisters. They're outside your flat now, actually, with their camera crews and sound technicians (faces sweaty, jackets grimy, cables trailing down the steps and getting tangled up in the railings). Yes, that was a little throwaway, but how else to tell you? I'm not sure what you'll make of becoming a celebrity, of sorts, but suspect you'll find it a little funny. Ha-ha funny and weird funny. I can only find it weird funny, but then I've never shared your sense of humour, have I?

'But you've been gated, it's serious,' I said. 'Next time you'll be expelled for definite and Mum's got enough on her plate.'

You'd been caught smuggling your rabbit into school. I was so very much the older sister.

'But it's a little funny too, isn't it, Bee?' you asked, your lips pursed trying not to let the laughter out, reminding me of a bottle of Lucozade with giggle bubbles rising, bound to escape with fizzing and popping on the surface.

Just thinking of your laughter gives me courage and I go to the window.

Outside, I recognise a reporter from a satellite news channel. I am used to seeing his face flattened into 2D on a plasma screen in the privacy of my New York apartment, but here he is large as life and in 3D flesh standing in Chepstow Road and looking straight back at me through your basement window. My finger itches for the off button on the remote; instead I pull the curtains.

But it's worse now than when I could see them. Their lights glare through the curtains, their sounds pound against the windows and walls. Their presence feels like a weight that

could bulldoze its way into your sitting room. No wonder the press are called the press, if this goes on much longer I could suffocate. Yes, OK, that was a little dramatic, you'd probably be out there offering them coffee. But as you know, I am easily annoyed and too precious about my personal space. I shall go into the kitchen and try to get on top of the situation.

It's more peaceful in here, giving me the quiet to think. It's funny what surprises me now; often it's the smallest things. For instance, yesterday a paper had a story on how close we have always been as sisters and didn't even mention the difference in our age. Maybe it doesn't matter any more now that we're grown up but as children it seemed so glaring. 'Five years is a big gap . . .?' people would say who didn't know, a slight rise at the end of their sentence to frame it as a question. And we'd both think of Leo and the gap he left, though maybe gaping void would be more accurate, but we didn't ever say, did we?

The other side of the back door I can just hear a journalist on her mobile. She must be dictating to someone down the phone, my own name jumps out at me, 'Arabella Beatrice Hemming'. Mum said no one has ever called me by my first name so I've always assumed that even as a baby they could tell I wasn't an Arabella, a name with loops and flourishes in black-inked calligraphy; a name that contains within it girls called Bella or Bells or Belle – so many beautiful possibilities. No, from the start I was clearly a Beatrice, sensible and unembellished in Times New Roman, with no one hiding inside. Dad chose the name Arabella before I was born. The reality must have been a disappointment.

The journalist comes within earshot again, on a new call I think, apologising for working late. It takes me a moment before I realise that I, Arabella Beatrice Hemming, am the reason for it. My impulse is to go out and say sorry, but then you know

me, always the first to hurry to the kitchen the moment Mum started her tom-tom anger signal by clattering pans. The journalist moves away. I can't hear her words but I listen to her tone, appeasing, a little defensive, treading delicately. Her voice suddenly changes. She must be talking to her child. Her tone seeps through the door and windows, warming your flat.

Maybe I should be considerate and tell her to go home. Your case is subjudice so I'm not allowed to tell them anything till after the trial. But she, like the others, already knows this. They're not trying to get facts about you but emotions. They want me to clench my hands together, giving them a close-up of white knuckles. They want to see a few tears escaping and gliding snail-like down my cheek leaving black mascara trails. So I stay inside.

The reporters and their entourage of technicians have all finally left, leaving a high tide mark of cigarette ash on the steps down to your flat, the butts stubbed out in your pots of daffodils. Tomorrow I'll put out ashtrays. Actually, I misjudged some of them. Three apologised for intruding and a cameraman even gave me some chrysanthemums from the corner shop. I know you've never liked them.

'But they're school-uniform maroon or autumnal browns, even in spring,' you said, smiling, teasing me for valuing a flower for its neatness and longevity.

'Often they're really bright colours,' I said, not smiling.

'Garish. Bred to be spotted over acres of concrete in garage forecourts.'

But these wilting examples are stems of unexpected thoughtfulness, a bunch of compassion as surprising as cowslips on the verge of a motorway.

The chrysanthemum cameraman told me that this evening the *News at 10* is running a 'special' on your story. I just phoned Mum to tell her. I think in a strange mum-like way she's actually proud of how much attention you're getting. And there's going to be more. According to one of the sound technicians there'll be foreign media here tomorrow. It's funny, though – weird funny – that when I tried to tell people a few months ago, no one wanted to listen.

Monday afternoon

It seems that everyone wants to listen now – the press; the police; solicitors – pens scribble, heads crane forwards, tape recorders whirr. This afternoon I am giving my witness statement to a lawyer at the Crown Prosecution Service in preparation for the trial in four months' time. I've been told that my statement is *vitaly important* to the prosecution case, as I am the only person to *know the whole story*.

Mr Wright, the CPS lawyer who is taking my statement, sits opposite me. I think he's in his late thirties but maybe he is younger and his face has just been exposed to too many stories like mine. His expression is alert and he leans a fraction towards me, encouraging confidences. A good listener, I think, but what type of man?

'If it's OK with you,' he says, 'I'd like you to tell me everything, from the beginning, and let me sort out later what is relevant.'

I nod. 'I'm not absolutely sure what the beginning is.'

'Maybe when you first realised something was wrong?'

I notice he's wearing a nice Italian linen shirt and an ugly printed polyester tie – the same person couldn't have chosen both. One of them must have been a present. If the tie was a present he must be a nice man to wear it. I'm not sure if

I've told you this, but my mind has a new habit of doodling when it doesn't want to think about the matter in hand.

I look up at him and meet his eye.

'It was the phone call from my mother saying she'd gone missing.'



When Mum phoned we were hosting a Sunday lunch party. The food, catered by our local deli, was very New York – stylish and impersonal; same said for our apartment, our furniture and our relationship – nothing home-made. The Big Apple with no core. You are startled by volte-face I know, but our conversation about my life in New York can wait.

We'd got back that morning from a 'snowy romantic break' in a Maine cabin, where we'd been celebrating my promotion to Account Director. Todd was enjoying regaling the lunch party with our big mistake:

'It's not as though we expected a Jacuzzi, but a hot shower wouldn't hurt, and a landline would be helpful. It wasn't even as if we could use our mobiles, our provider doesn't have a mast out there.'

'And this trip was spontaneous?' asked Sarah incredulously.

As you know, Todd and I were never noted for our spontaneity. Sarah's husband Mark glared across the table at her. 'Darling.'

She met his gaze. 'I hate "darling". It's code for "shut the fuck up", isn't it?'

You'd like Sarah. Maybe that's why we're friends, from the start she reminded me of you. She turned to Todd. 'When was the last time you and Beatrice had a row?' she asked.

'Neither of us is into histrionics,' Todd replied, self-righteously trying to puncture her conversation.

But Sarah's not easily deflated. 'So you can't be bothered either.'

There followed an awkward silence, which I politely broke, 'Coffee or herbal tea anyone?'

In the kitchen I put coffee beans into the grinder, the only cooking I was doing for the meal. Sarah followed me in, contrite. 'Sorry, Beatrice.'

'No problem.' I was the perfect hostess, smiling, smoothing, grinding. 'Does Mark take it black or white?'

'White. We don't laugh any more, either,' she said, levering herself up onto the counter, swinging her legs. 'And as for sex ...'

I turned on the grinder, hoping the noise would silence her. She shouted above it, 'What about you and Todd?'

'We're fine thanks,' I replied, putting the ground beans into our seven-hundred-dollar espresso maker.

'Still laughing and shagging?' she asked.

I opened a case of 1930s coffee spoons, each one a differently coloured enamel, like melted sweets. 'We bought these at an antiques fair last Sunday morning.'

'You're changing the subject, Beatrice.'

But you've picked up that I wasn't; that on a Sunday morning, when other couples stay in bed and make love, Todd and I were out and about antique shopping. We were always better shopping partners than lovers. I thought that filling our apartment with things we'd chosen was creating a future together. I can hear you tease me that even a Clarice Cliff teapot isn't a substitute for sex, but for me it felt a good deal more secure.

The phone rang. Sarah ignored it. 'Sex and laughter. The heart and lungs of a relationship.'

'I'd better get the phone.'

‘When do you think it’s time to turn off the life-support machine?’

‘I’d really better answer that.’

‘When should you disconnect the shared mortgage and bank account and mutual friends?’

I picked up the phone, glad of an excuse to interrupt this conversation. ‘Hello?’

‘Beatrice, it’s Mummy.’

You’d been missing for four days.

I don’t remember packing, but I remember Todd coming in as I closed the case. I turned to him. ‘What flight am I on?’

‘There’s nothing available till tomorrow.’

‘But I have to go now.’

You hadn’t shown up to work since the previous Sunday. The manageress had tried to ring you but only got your answerphone. She’d been round to your flat but you weren’t there. No one knew where you were. The police were now looking for you.

‘Can you drive me to the airport? I’ll take whatever they’ve got.’

‘I’ll phone a cab,’ he replied. He’d had two glasses of wine. I used to value his carefulness.



Of course I don’t tell Mr Wright any of this. I just tell him Mum phoned me on the 26th of January at 3.30 p.m. New York time and told me you’d gone missing. Like you, he’s interested in the big picture, not tiny details. Even as a child

your paintings were large, spilling off the edge of the page, while I did my careful drawings using pencil and ruler and eraser. Later, you painted abstract canvasses, expressing large truths in bold splashes of vivid colour, while I was perfectly suited to my job in corporate design, matching every colour in the world to a pantone number. Lacking your ability with broad brushstrokes, I will tell you this story in accurate dots of detail. I'm hoping that like a pointillist painting the dots will form a picture and when it is completed we will understand what happened and why.

'So until your mother phoned, you had no inkling of any problem?' asks Mr Wright.

I feel the familiar, nauseating, wave of guilt. 'No. Nothing I took any notice of.'



I went first class, it was the only seat they had left. As we flew through cloud limbo land I imagined telling you off for putting me through this. I made you promise not to pull a stunt like this again. I reminded you that you were going to be a mother soon and it was about time you started behaving like an adult.

"Older sister" doesn't need to be a job title, Bee.'

What had I been lecturing you about at the time? It could have been one of so many things; the point is that I've always viewed being an older sister as a job, one that I am ideally suited for. And as I flew to find you, because I would find you (looking after you is an essential part of my job description), I was comforted by the familiar scenario of being the superior, mature, older sister telling off the flighty, irresponsible young girl who should know better by now.

The plane started to descend towards Heathrow. West

London sprawled beneath us, thinly disguised with snow. The seat-belt light came on and I made deals with God: I'd do anything if you were found safe. I'd have made a deal with the devil if he'd been offering.

As the plane bumped clumsily onto the tarmac, my fantasy annoyance crumbled into sickening anxiety. God became the hero in a children's fairy story. My powers as an older sister dwindled to still impotency. I remembered viscerally Leo's death. Grief like swallowed offal made me wretch. I couldn't lose you too.



The window is surprisingly huge for an office and spring sunshine floods through it.

'So you made a connection between Tess's disappearance and Leo's death?' Mr Wright asks.

'No.'

'You said you thought about Leo?'

'I think about Leo all the time. He was my brother.' I'm tired of going through this. 'Leo died of cystic fibrosis when he was eight. Tess and I didn't inherit it, we were born perfectly healthy.'

Mr Wright tries to turn off the glaring overhead light, but for some reason it won't switch off. He shrugs at me apologetically and sits down again.

'And then what happened?' he asks.

'Mum met me and I went to the police station.'

'Can you tell me about that?'



Mum was waiting at the arrivals gate wearing her Jaeger camel coat. As I got closer, I saw that she hadn't brushed

her hair and her make-up was clumsily applied. I know; I hadn't seen her that way since Leo's funeral.

'I got a taxi all the way from Little Hadston. Your plane was late.'

'Only ten minutes, Mum.'

All around us lovers and relatives and friends were hugging each other, reunited. We were physically awkward with each other. I don't think we even kissed.

'She might have been trying to phone while I've been gone,' Mum said.

'She'll try again.'

But I'd checked my mobile countless times since the plane had landed.

'Ridiculous of me,' continued Mum. 'I don't know why I should expect her to phone. She's virtually given up calling me. Too much bother, I suppose.' I recognised the crust of annoyance. 'And when was the last time she made the effort to visit?'

I wondered when she'd move on to pacts with God.

I rented a car. It was only six in the morning but the traffic was already heavy on the M4 into London; the frustrated, angry crawl of the absurdly named rush hour, made even slower because of the snow. We were going straight to the police station. I couldn't make the heater work and our words were spoken puffs hanging briefly in the cold air between us. 'Have you already talked to the police?' I asked.

Mum's words seemed to pucker in the air with annoyance. 'Yes, for all the good it did. What would I know about her life?'

'Do you know who told them she was missing?'

'Her landlord. Amias something or other,' Mum replied.

Neither of us could remember his surname. It struck me as strange that it was your elderly landlord who reported you missing to the police.

‘He told them that she’d been getting nuisance calls,’ said Mum.

Despite the freezing car, I felt clammy with sweat. ‘What kind of nuisance calls?’

‘They didn’t say,’ said Mum. I looked at her. Her pale anxious face showed around the edge of her foundation, a middle-aged geisha in Clinique bisque.

It was seven thirty but still winter-dark when we arrived at the Notting Hill police station. The roads were jammed but the newly gritted pavements were almost empty. The only time I’d been in a police station before was to report the loss of my mobile phone; it hadn’t even been stolen. I never went past the reception area. This time I was escorted behind reception into an alien world of interview rooms and cells and police wearing belts loaded with truncheons and handcuffs. It had no connection to you.



‘And you met Detective Sergeant Finborough?’ Mr Wright asks.

‘Yes.’

‘What did you think of him?’

I choose my words carefully. ‘Thoughtful. Thorough. Decent.’

Mr Wright is surprised, but quickly hides it. ‘Can you remember any of that initial interview?’

‘Yes.’



To start with I was dazed by your disappearance, but then my senses became overly acute; I saw too many details and

too many colours, as if the world was animated by Pixar. Other senses were also on heightened alert; I heard the clank of the clock's hand, a chair leg scraping on linoleum. I could smell a cigarette clinging to a jacket on the door. It was white noise turned up full volume, as if my brain could no longer tune out what didn't matter. Everything mattered.

Mum had been taken off by a WPC for a cup of tea and I was alone with DS Finborough. His manner was courteous, old-fashioned even. He seemed more Oxbridge don than policeman. Outside the window I could see it was sleeting.

'Is there any reason you can think of why your sister may have gone away?' he asked.

'No. None.'

'Would she have told you?'

'Yes.'

'You live in America?'

'We phone and email each other all the time.'

'So you're close.'

'Very.'

Of course we are close. Different yes, but close. The age gap has never meant distance between us.

'When did you last speak to her?' he asked.

'Last Monday, I think. On Wednesday we went away to the mountains, just for a few days. I did try phoning her from a restaurant a few times but her landline was always engaged; she can chat to her friends for hours.' I tried to feel irritated – after all, it's me that pays your phone bill; trying to feel an old familiar emotion.

'What about her mobile?'

'She lost it about two months ago, or it was stolen. She's very scatty like that.' Again trying to feel irritated.

DS Finborough paused a moment, thinking of the right

way to phrase it. His manner was considerate. 'So you think her disappearance is not voluntary?' he asked.

'Not voluntary.' Gentle words for something violent. In that first meeting no one said the word 'abduction', or 'murder'. A silent understanding had been reached between DS Finborough and me. I appreciated his tact; it was too soon to name it. I forced out my question. 'My mother told me she'd been getting nuisance calls?'

'According to her landlord, yes, she has. Unfortunately she hadn't given him any details. Has Tess told you anything about them?'

'No.'

'And she didn't say anything to you about feeling frightened or threatened?' he asked.

'No. Nothing like that. She was normal; happy.' I had my own question. 'Have you checked all the hospitals?' As I asked it, I heard the rudeness and implicit criticism. 'I just thought she might have gone into labour early.'

DS Finborough put his coffee down, the sound made me jump.

'We didn't know she was pregnant.'

Suddenly there was a lifebuoy and I swam for it. 'If she'd gone into labour early, she could be in hospital. You wouldn't have checked the maternity wards, would you?'

'We ask hospitals to check all their in-patients, which would include maternity,' he replied and the lifebuoy slipped away.

'When's the baby due?' he asked.

'In just under three weeks.'

'Do you know who the father is?'

'Yes. Emilio Codi. He's a tutor at her art college.'

I didn't pause, not for a heartbeat. The time for discretion was over. DS Finborough didn't show any surprise, but then maybe that's part of police training.

‘I went to the art college—’ he began, but I interrupted. The smell of coffee in his Styrofoam cup had become nauseatingly strong.

‘You must be very worried about her.’

‘I like to be thorough.’

‘Yes, of course.’

I didn’t want DS Finborough to think me hysterical, but reasonable and intelligent. I remember thinking it shouldn’t matter what he thought of me. Later I would discover that it mattered a great deal.

‘I met Mr Codi,’ said DS Finborough. ‘He didn’t say anything about his relationship with Tess, other than as a former student.’

Emilio still disowned you, even when you were missing. I’m sorry. But that’s what his ‘discretion’ always was – disownership hiding behind a more acceptable noun.

‘Do you know why Mr Codi wouldn’t want us to know about their relationship?’ he asked.

I knew it all too well. ‘The college doesn’t allow tutors to have sex with their students. He’s also married. He made Tess take a “sabbatical” when the bump started to show.’

DS Finborough stood up; his manner had shifted up a gear, more policeman now than Oxbridge don. ‘There’s a local news programme we sometimes use for missing people. I want to do a televised reconstruction of her last known movements.’

Outside the metal-framed window a bird sang. I remembered your voice, so vividly that it was like you were in the room with me:

‘In some cities birds can’t hear each other any more above the noise. After a while they forget the complexity and beauty of each other’s song.’

*'What on earth's that got to do with me and Todd?' I asked.
'Some have given up birdsong altogether, and faultlessly imitate
car alarms.'*

*My voice was annoyed and impatient. 'Tess.'
'Can Todd hear your song?'*

At the time I dismissed your student intensity of emotion as something I'd grown out of years before. But in that police room I remembered our conversation again, because thoughts about birdsong, about Todd, about anything, was an escape from the implications of what was happening. DS Finborough sensed my distress. 'I think it's better to err on the side of caution. Especially now I know she's pregnant.'

He issued instructions to junior policemen. There was a discussion about the camera crew and of who would play you. I didn't want a stranger imitating you so I offered to do it. As we left the room, DS Finborough turned to me. 'Mr Codi is a great deal older than your sister?'

Fifteen years older and your tutor. He should have been a father figure, not a lover. Yes, I know I've told you that before, many times, building to a critical mass which forced you to tell me in so many words to butt out, only you would have used the English equivalent and told me to stop putting my nose in. DS Finborough was still waiting for my reply.

'You asked me if I am close to her, not if I understand her.'

Now, I think I do, but not then.

DS Finborough told me more about the reconstruction.

'A lady working at the post office on Exhibition Road remembers Tess buying a card and also air-mail stamps, some time before two p.m. She didn't say Tess was pregnant, but

I suppose there was a counter between them so she wouldn't have seen.'

I saw Mum coming along the corridor towards us as DS Finborough continued.

'Tess posted the card from the same post office some time before two fifteen.'

Mum's voice snapped with exhausted patience. 'The card was my birthday card. She hasn't been to see me for months. Hardly ever phones. But sends me a card as if that makes it all right.'

A couple of weeks before, I'd reminded you that it was her birthday coming up, hadn't I?

Before we go on, as I want to be honest in the telling of this story, I have to admit that you were right about Todd. He didn't hear my song. Because I'd never once sung to him. Or to anyone else for that matter. Perhaps I am like one of those birds that can only imitate car alarms.



Mr Wright gets up to close a Venetian blind against the bright spring sunshine.

'And later that day you did the reconstruction?' he asks.

'Yes.'

Mr Wright has the reconstruction on tape and doesn't need additional details of my extraordinary game of dress-up, but I know you do. You'd love to know what kind of you I made. I didn't do badly, actually. I'll tell you about it without hindsight's glaring clarity.



A middle-aged woman police officer, WPC Vernon, took me to a room to change. She was pink-cheeked and healthy, as

if she'd just come in from milking cows rather than policing London streets. I felt conscious of my pallor, the red-eye flight taking its toll.

'Do you think it'll do any good?' I asked.

She smiled at me and gave me a quick hug, which I was taken aback by but liked. 'Yes, I do. Reconstructions are too much of a palaver if there isn't a good chance of jogging someone's memory. And now we know that Tess is pregnant it's more likely that someone will have noticed her. Right then, let's get your clothes sorted out, shall we?'

I found out later that although forty, WPC Vernon had only been a policewoman for a few months. Her policing style reflected the warm and capable mother in her.

'We've fetched some clothes from her flat,' she continued. 'Do you know what kind of thing she might have been wearing?'

'A dress. She'd got to the point where nothing else would fit over the bump and she couldn't afford maternity clothes. Luckily most of her clothes are baggy and shapeless.'

'Comfortable Bee.'

WPC Vernon unzipped a suitcase. She had neatly folded each tatty old garment and wrapped them in tissue paper. I was touched by the care that she had shown. I still am.

I chose the least scruffy dress; your purple voluminous Whistles one with the embroidery on the hem.

'She got this in a sale five years ago,' I said.

'A good make lasts, doesn't it?'

We could have been in a Selfridges' changing room.

'Yes, it does.'

'Always worth it if you can.'

I was grateful to WPC Vernon for her ability to make small talk, a verbal bridge between two people in the most unlikely of situations.

‘Let’s go with that one then,’ she said and tactfully turned away while I took off my uncomfortable tailored suit.

‘So do you look like Tess?’ she asked.

‘No, not any more.’

‘You used to?’

Again I appreciated her small talk, but suspected it would get bigger.

‘Superficially I did.’

‘Oh?’

‘My mother always tried to dress us the same.’

Despite the difference in age, we’d be in kilts and Fair Isle sweaters, or striped cotton dresses depending on the season. Nothing fussy or frilly remember? Nothing nylon.

‘And we had our hair the same, too.’

‘A *decent trim*,’ Mum would command and our hair would fall to the floor.

‘People said Tess would look just like me when she was older. But they were being kind.’

I was startled that I had said that out loud. It wasn’t a path I had gone down with anyone else before, but it’s well worn with my footsteps. I’ve always known that you would grow up to be far more beautiful than me. I’ve never told you that, have I?

‘That must have been hard on her,’ said WPC Vernon. I hesitated before correcting her, and by then she had moved on, ‘Is her hair the same colour as yours?’

‘No.’

‘Not fair the way some people get to stay blonde.’

‘Actually, this isn’t natural.’

‘You’d never guess.’

This time there was a point bedded down in the small talk that spiked through. ‘Probably best if you wear a wig then.’

I flinched, but tried to hide it. ‘Yes.’

As she got out a box of wigs, I put your dress over my head and felt the much-washed, soft cotton slip down over my body. Then suddenly you were hugging me. A fraction of a moment later I realised it was just the smell of you; a smell I hadn't noticed before: a mix of your shampoo and your soap and something else that has no label. I must have only smelt you like that when we hugged. I drew in my breath, unprepared for the emotional vertigo of you being close and not there.

'Are you OK?'

'It smells of her.'

WPC Vernon's maternal face showed her compassion. 'Smell is a really powerful sense. Doctors use it to try to wake up people in a coma. Apparently newly cut grass is a favourite evocative smell.'

She wanted me to know that I wasn't overreacting. She was sympathetic and intuitive and I was grateful that she was there with me.

The wig box had every type of hair, and I presumed they were used not only for reconstructions of missing people but also for the victims of violent crimes. They made me think of a collection of scalps and I felt nauseous as I rummaged through them. WPC Vernon noticed.

'Here, let me try. What's Tess's hair like?'

'Long, she hardly ever cuts it, so it's ragged round the edges. And it's very shiny.'

'And the colour?'

Pantone number PMS 167, I thought immediately, but other people don't know the colours of the world by their pantone numbers, so instead I replied, 'Caramel.' And actually your hair has always made me think of caramel. The inside of a Rolo, to be precise, liquidly gleaming. WPC Vernon found a wig that was reasonably similar and nylon-shiny. I forced myself to put it on over my own neatly cut hair, my

fingers recoiling. I thought we were finished. But WPC Vernon was a perfectionist. 'Does she wear make-up?' she asked.

'No.'

'Would you mind taking yours off?'

Did I hesitate? 'Of course not,' I replied. But I did mind. Even when I woke up, I would have pink lip and cheek stain applied from the previous night. At the small institutional sink, with dirty coffee cups balanced on the rim, I washed off my make-up. I turned and caught sight of you. I was stabbed by love. Moments later I saw that it was just my own reflection caught in a full-length mirror. I went closer and saw myself, scruffy and exhausted. I needed make-up, properly cut clothes and a decent haircut. You don't need any of those to look beautiful.

'I'm afraid we'll have to improvise the bump,' said WPC Vernon. As she handed me a cushion I voiced a question that had been itching at the back of my mind, 'Do you know why Tess's landlord didn't tell you she was pregnant when he reported her missing?'

'No, I'm afraid I don't. You could ask Detective Sergeant Finborough.'

I stuffed a second cushion under the dress and tried to plump them into a convincing-looking bump. For a moment the whole thing turned into an absurd farce and I laughed. WPC Vernon laughed too, spontaneously, and I saw that a smile was her natural expression. It must be a facial effort for her to be genuinely serious and sympathetic so much of the time.

Mum came in. 'I've got you some food, darling,' she said. 'You need to eat properly.' I turned to see her holding a bag full of food and her mothering touched me. But as she looked at me, her face turned rigid. Poor Mum. The farce I found blackly comic had turned cruel.

'But you have to tell her. It'll just get worse the longer you leave it.'

'I saw a tea towel the other day with that printed on it. Underneath was "never put off till tomorrow what you can do today".'

'Tess . . .' (Or did I just give an eloquent older-sister sigh?)

You laughed, warmly teasing me. 'Do you still have knickers with days of the week embroidered on them?'

'You're changing the subject. And I was given those when I was nine.'

'Did you really wear them on the right day?'

'She's going to be so hurt if you don't tell her.'

I looked back at Mum acknowledging and answering her question without a word being spoken. Yes, you were pregnant; yes, you hadn't told her and yes, now the whole world, at least the TV-watching world, would know about it.

'Who's the father?'

I didn't reply; one shock at a time.

'That's why she hasn't been to see me for months, isn't it? Too ashamed.'

It was a statement rather than a question. I tried to appease her but she brushed my words aside, using her hands in a rare physical gesture. *'I see he's going to marry her at least.'*

She was looking at my engagement ring, which I hadn't thought to take off. *'It's mine, Mum.'* I was absurdly hurt that she hadn't noticed it before. I took the large solitaire diamond off my finger and gave it to her. She zipped it into her handbag without even looking at it.

'Does he have any intention of marrying her, Beatrice?'

Maybe I should have been kind and told her that Emilio Codi was already married. It would have fuelled her anger with you and kept icy terror away a while longer.

'Let's find her first, Mum, before worrying about her future.'