

Tiny Acts of Love

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Is real love just a fairytale?

A funny romantic novel

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For my girls, Emily and Charlotte

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1

I'd been awake for eighty-six hours when I realised what my husband had done. We'd just got home from the hospital and he was upstairs holding Sophie so that I could make myself a cup of tea and possibly have a nap.

But by the time I'd inched my way to the kitchen, tea-making seemed too daunting a task – something I'd been used to doing in a previous life, but not now. From the fridge magnets and the Isle of Skye tea towel to the strand of spaghetti dried onto the hob, everything seemed familiar but distant, as though I'd returned to a house I'd lived in a long time ago.

My eye caught the laptop, open on the kitchen table. People were bound to have heard about the birth by now – maybe I should check my emails. Perhaps some words of congratulation would flick a switch, jump-start me, and shake me out of this jittery, twilight world.

To my surprise, I had a hundred and four unread emails, all with identical subject descriptions. I opened up my sent box, a terrible suspicion forming in my mind. The offending communication was right there at the top.

Subject: 48 Stitches Later!

Attachment: sophiebreastfeeding.jpg

She has arrived! Sophie Louise Carlisle, a bouncing baby girl 7lb 5oz. Cassie's waters broke on Monday afternoon (at work!) and we rushed up to the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in a taxi (taxi driver NOT happy). However, she wasn't dilated enough, so we were

sent home. Contractions started overnight, and when we went back the next morning, we were rushed up to the delivery suite where the midwife decided . . .

Unable to read any more, I opened the attachment. It was a photograph of my top half, naked and white against hospital sheets. I was frowning in concentration as I tried to coax my nipple into Sophie's mouth.

It had been sent to every name in my contacts list, including the following recipients:

1. David Galbraith, Senior Partner, Everfield Chase, London office. He'd been the lawyer acting on the other side of a multi-million pound joint venture called Project Vertigo. I'd been advising on transfer of employment issues and for some reason got involved in some late-night emailing from my home computer.
2. Everyone else from Everfield Chase who had ever worked on Project Vertigo. This ran to dozens of people, including: Nadeem Madaan (employment law), Bill Harkness (banking), Julie MacDonald (tax), Benjamin Trent (property), and Ashley Green (night typing secretary).
3. Doreen King of HM Revenue & Customs – provider of guidance in relation to a tax issue that had arisen in another corporate transaction.
4. Elliot McCabe, Manager of Braid Hills Funeral Home – correspondence concerning Great Auntie Judith's funeral.
5. Renato Di Rollo, Reservations desk, Hotel San Romano. Holiday booking.
6. Malkie Hamilton. Ex-boyfriend. Oh my God.

‘Jonathan!’

He eventually appeared, carrying Sophie snug against him on one forearm, supporting her head in his palm.

‘Is it time for your paracetamol?’ he asked with a bright smile.

‘What . . . *is* this?’ I whispered, my hand pointing somewhere in the direction of the screen. The effort of twisting my head to look up at him had dissolved my vision into a field of black swirls.

‘What? Let me see.’ He peered in closer. ‘It’s the email I wrote in the hospital – remember, the one I showed you?’

‘What? I’ve never seen this before in my life!’

He paused for a moment, frowning while he considered his response. ‘Well, maybe you were a bit . . . out of it . . . at the time . . .’

Scenes from the birth, fragmented and disconnected, surfaced in my mind: Jonathan fiddling with his BlackBerry during the pushing stage, at around the point where I’d reached a calm acceptance that I would never get out of that room alive; Jonathan taking pictures as the midwife hauled a purple, blood-stained Sophie onto my chest for skin-to-skin contact; Jonathan waving the BlackBerry in my face just as the haemorrhaging started . . .

‘You needn’t look like that, Cassie. You said it was okay.’

‘I might very well have done. But I was not of sound mind at the time.’

This lawyerly pronouncement didn’t seem to make much of an impression on him. He merely bent his head and kissed Sophie’s nose six times. Her arms flew out in a startle reflex. It occurred to me that we’d have to take off the hospital bracelet that still encircled her thin, translucent wrist; she was ours now. I could scarcely believe they’d let us take her home.

‘And anyway.’ I glared at Jonathan again. ‘Then you decided to email it to half the lawyers in the UK?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ve managed to send it to all my contacts, which seems to include everybody I’ve ever sent an email to since I got this account.’

He was quiet for a moment, taking this in. ‘Hmmm. You’ll need to change your default settings.’

‘So it’s my fault now?’ Rage was bubbling up in the pit of my stomach, but somehow it wasn’t reaching as far as my voice, or the part of my brain that formed words. I sat back with a big shuddering sigh.

‘Don’t you think you might be overreacting? And besides,’ he said, narrowing his eyes, ‘you’re not supposed to do work emails from a personal email account. You know that, Cassie.’

‘There were other people on that list too.’ I scanned through it again. ‘The damp proofing guy, the fish deliverer . . . people who are now going to think I’m mad.’

‘So? I hardly think that matters. If you like, I’ll send out another email saying it was my fault, and that it wasn’t intended to reach them.’

Before I could reply, the doorbell rang, and Jonathan rushed off to answer it. He came back beaming, an enormous bouquet of flowers in his non-Sophie arm.

The cellophane screeched as I tore off the card, making Sophie startle again.

‘Congratulations! With best wishes from the Joint Ventures Team at Everfield Chase.’

With a squeal, I tossed the bouquet onto the table. ‘For God’s sake! It’s from bloody Everfield Chase!’

Jonathan seemed delighted. ‘You see, Cassie, everyone is going to be happy for you. I hope there were some clients on the list too. It’s quite an original marketing tool – you’ll certainly stand out in their memories, look at it that way.’

‘Yes, I should think the mental image of their employment lawyer naked and breastfeeding in the delivery room will be quite hard to erase.’

‘I’m sorry, Cassie-Lassie.’ He came over and folded me into a hug with his spare arm. I detached myself and took Sophie from him – a process that took several moments as I eased my hands around her back, working my fingers upwards to support the back of her head. She felt more like a kitten than a baby; a pliant bag of bones. She curled into an upright position against me, nose nodding into my shoulder as she tried to move her head, sensing milk nearby. I stroked the nape of her neck with one finger, lost in the utter softness of her skin.

‘Our very own joint venture, Cassie,’ said Jonathan, curling his palm around the back of Sophie’s head, his eyes looking moist.

And although it was a terrible line, it did make me smile. Because it was his way of saying that Sophie had been born out of our love, because of our love, and would grow up in our love like a little bud unfurling its petals towards the sun.

2

‘Cassie.’ Jonathan’s voice woke me, pulling me up through fathoms of deep dark sleep. I opened my eyes, disorientated.

‘Where’s Sophie?’ I jerked upright.

But there she was, asleep in her Moses basket beside the sofa.

‘Oh, she’s fine,’ I breathed. She stirred at the sound of my voice, twisting her upper body towards me, pulling the plain white babygrow taut over her middle. One of her hands, resting by her cheek, opened and closed. But she didn’t wake up.

‘Yes, thank the Lord,’ said Jonathan. ‘You dozed off for ten minutes – and she’s still alive!’

‘Ten minutes?’ Tears of rage sprang to my eyes. ‘Why did you wake me?’

‘Your phone’s been ringing,’ said Jonathan. He thrust it towards me. ‘You’ve got five missed calls. I thought it might be important. You were trying to get Helen earlier, weren’t you?’

‘It’s hardly going to be her, is it?’ I snapped. ‘It’ll be the middle of the night in New Zealand.’ I still hadn’t entirely forgiven my best friend for moving to the other side of the world as soon as I’d got pregnant.

‘And anyway,’ Jonathan added. ‘You don’t want to sleep too long or you won’t get to sleep tonight.’

I stared at him in incomprehension. ‘I won’t be *getting* any sleep tonight. She’ll want fed every forty-five minutes as usual.’

‘Not now we’re back home, surely. That was just the hospital unsettling her.’

My phone rang again in my hand and I answered it.

‘Cassie?’ It was Murray Radcliffe, the managing partner at McKeith’s solicitors, the firm where I worked. His barking voice jarred heavily against the peacefulness of the lamplit room. The sound of the phone ringing had woken Sophie and her face crumpled and turned a deeper pink. Jonathan tutted softly and swooped her up into his arms. Why was it that he seemed to know instinctively how to handle her, didn’t seem intimidated by her fragility?

‘What the *hell* are you playing at?’

Black swirls again; I must have sat up too quickly. I rubbed my eyes with the back of a hand that suddenly seemed to be trembling.

‘I’ve seen your email. The one with the unsavoury pictures. I’m just going into a meeting with marketing to see what we can do by way of damage limitation. Joan’s making a list of the clients and firm contacts involved and it doesn’t make for comfortable reading, believe me.’

Oh God. ‘Yes, I’m sorry about that. There was a bit of a mix-up, I’m afraid, because my husband—’

‘It’s not just the pictures, Cassie. There’s also this: “If our Babycraft teacher can be believed, Sophie will be more demanding and unreasonable than even the most fearsome clients Cassie advises through McKeith’s – so don’t expect to hear from us for a while!” I mean, you’ve sent it to the head of RBS, for Christ’s sake.’

I stood up, forgetting that this wasn’t as straightforward as it used to be, and grimaced as I felt a hot trickle of blood down the inside of my leg. Clutching the crotch of my tracksuit bottoms, I hobbled towards the bathroom.

‘But the thing is, you see, that was only a light-hearted comment. Hopefully any clients will realise that. Some people

have even emailed back with good wishes and congratulations.’ *Not like you, you sociopath.* ‘Listen, Murray, I’m going to have to . . .’ I’d reached the bathroom and was rifling in the cabinet for the heavy-duty maternity pads.

‘Who has? Who has emailed you with congratulations?’

‘Well, no actual clients, admittedly. But definitely people within the business community. Such as . . . oops . . .’ – two spare cans of deodorant toppled out of the cabinet and rolled across the tiles – ‘such as a very nice funeral director called Elliot McCabe . . .’

There was a pause. ‘Not THE Elliot McCabe?’

‘Umm . . .’

‘Elliot McCabe, who owns a chain of funeral homes across Britain and is thinking of expanding into Europe? Elliot McCabe, the husband of Lorna McCabe, Chief Exec of Turley Sturrock Holdings? How do you know him?’

‘Well, *I* was a client of *his*, last year . . . or rather, my great-aunt was. I mean, I wasn’t, you know . . .’

‘And he was *nice* to you, you say? Right, well maybe we can salvage something from this. We’ve been trying to approach him for months but he won’t give us the time of day. He’s a bit of an oddball, by all accounts.’

Murray’s tone was edging into the conversational now. Maybe if I could keep him on this train of thought he’d calm down and I could get off the phone without being fired.

‘Really? Why’s that?’

‘He came up in discussion at the Signet Library do last week. Apparently there have been all kinds of goings-on at this Braid Hills funeral home of his. Peculiar stuff. Rich pickings for us, by the sounds of it. I want you to telephone him, apologising for the email and introducing yourself on behalf of the firm. Try and set up a meeting.’

I looked up and saw myself in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door – a bare-legged creature perched, Gollum-like, on the loo, tracksuit bottoms abandoned on the blood-streaked tiles. My hair was stringy and wild, and my face was grey with heavy smudges under the eyes. I looked like the victim of a mining accident, just winched to the surface after being trapped underground for months.

‘A meeting? But Murray, there’s no way I can—’

‘Cassie, I don’t need to remind you how important it is to build up your practice area, get some clients of your own? It’s one of the factors we’ll be looking at in the redundancy exercise. You did get the email about that, I suppose?’

‘I would love to be able to take this on, really, but the problem is—’

‘Just do it, Cassie, if you would. I need to get to that meeting now. Okay? Great. Bye.’

He hung up. I sank my head into my hands and growled, furious with Murray, and even more so with myself for my lack of assertiveness. He knew he wasn’t allowed to do this when I was on maternity leave, and he sure as hell knew that I knew.

‘Trouble at work?’ asked Jonathan, when I’d sorted myself out and returned to the living room. ‘Oh look, Sophie! Mummy’s brushed her hair.’

‘Murray just wants me to speak to a possible new client,’ I mumbled. ‘One of the people you emailed. I’ll sort it out.’

Jonathan didn’t yet know about the redundancy exercise. I hadn’t been able to face thinking or talking about it, on top of everything else. I couldn’t lose my job. It wasn’t just that we needed the money, it was the fact that I’d managed to negotiate a two and a half day week, to start on my return from maternity leave. The chances of finding a new job on the

same terms were close to zero. I didn't want full-time nursery for Sophie. The thought made me hollow inside.

I was about to put down the phone when I noticed that there was another missed call listed. I pressed a key to view the number.

'What's the matter?' asked Jonathan.

'Nothing.'

'Why have you gone all red?'

'I haven't,' I said lightly, placing the phone on the seat beside me.

It was strange how something so embedded in the past could reassert itself in the present with no warning, boldly backlit on an LCD display. And even stranger, perhaps, how a set of digits could trigger such a profound, dizzying response from my circulatory system.

It was the number of Malkie Hamilton; my first head-over-heels love; the one who (as it had seemed at the time) got away; and unintended recipient of the email '48 Stitches Later'.



Mirroring my own feelings at that moment, Sophie threw up and started crying.

'I'll go and get her changed,' I said, holding out my arms. Apart from anything else, I wanted to evade any further questions.

Walking up the stairs, step by slow, painful step, I felt it again. I'd been trying to ignore it since getting back from hospital, but the house felt odd, off-balance, somehow.

To look at, it was an idyllic house. Painted cream, with Georgian-style windows and a roof of weathered red tiles, set in a mature garden of long lawns and whispering trees. And it

was perfectly situated on Ravelston Dykes, a wide avenue on the spine of a hill on the north-west side of the city. Walking along that street was always a pleasure. In September, the sycamore seeds would spin down around you like tiny helicopters. By October, you would be ankle-deep in smoky leaves. Come May, you would be trailing through a pink slush of blossom.

And it was the perfect house for bringing a new baby home. We'd spent months making preparations, first decorating the nursery, a white sunny room facing the garden. We'd put up a border and matching curtains featuring small pink mice. Jonathan had built the cot, the changing table, and a chest of drawers for all her things. I had washed the tiny baby clothes and hung them on the line to dry in the fresh air before ironing them, folding them, and placing them in the drawers. We'd grown fondly used to the sight of our hospital bags standing packed and waiting at the front door. There were three – one for me (Evian spray, lavender oil, three sets of new pyjamas – white, with broderie anglaise detailing), one for the baby (nappies, clothes, tiny organic baby toiletries) and one for Jonathan (swimming trunks, for the birthing pool that was never to be, and a spare t-shirt).

During all these preparations, I'd thought that I'd known her intimately, this creature who'd poked her heels and elbows into me, who'd squirmed and hiccuped her way through the last few months. Jonathan and I had talked to her each night as we'd snuggled up to go to sleep, telling her about our days or what new item we'd bought for the nursery.

But that imaginary baby had gone now, replaced by this little stranger who made rest impossible, and pulled at my insides whenever she was out of my arms.

She'd pulled the house off its axis, too; that was what had

happened. Its centre of gravity had shifted from the rooms at the front – the hall and living room – to the nursery at the back. That was the heavy point, the point where I was standing if I tried to picture the house in my mind. The rest of the house had twisted, realigned itself, and now seemed to stand silent, waiting.

Waiting for what? Some kind of disaster, it felt like. Even climbing up these stairs was an activity fraught with peril. One slip, causing Sophie to lurch out of my arms, and it would all be over; the exhaustion, the confusion, those extravagant eyes and their dark blue gaze that plumbed unimagined depths of me. My throat went tight.

I found I could go no further. I sat down, three steps from the top, and folded my body around her.

‘Jonathan!’

I sat calling him, over and over again, for five minutes or ten or maybe an eternity.

He didn’t come.



‘I was on the phone to Stephen!’ he protested later that evening, for the hundredth time.

He was washing the dishes while I sat on a kitchen chair piled with cushions. Sophie had fallen asleep on me, and I was reluctant to move.

‘He wanted to hear all about his beautiful niece. I spoke to Moira briefly too, but you’ve got to phone her tomorrow – she wants a blow-by-blow account of the birth.’

I shuddered. ‘You mean they didn’t get your email? They must be about the only people in the world who didn’t. Was it blocked by the US government, or something?’

‘You still haven’t forgiven me, have you?’

I shrugged.

‘Oh Cassie, I’m sorry. I’m an arse, I know. I was just on such a high during the whole birth thing. I wasn’t thinking straight.’ He shook his head and winced. ‘It’s not a very good email, is it?’

‘There’s no way you can . . . recall it, or stop people from opening it, somehow, is there? We have no idea where that picture could end up.’

I looked down at Sophie. So far, the only place she’d fall asleep was in my arms; she seemed to think I was the person most likely to take care of her. ‘I don’t like the idea of her spinning around cyberspace where anyone can look at her.’

‘It’s only a picture, Cass. I haven’t sold her soul on eBay or anything.’

‘It just doesn’t seem safe . . . out there.’

‘Out where?’

I waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the window.

‘She’s not out there, sweetheart. She’s in here with us – in our house.’

‘Yeah, well. There’s something not right about this house.’

‘What, Cassie?’

How could I explain it? ‘There’s a sort of gravitational pull, coming from the nursery.’

Jonathan made a faint squeaking noise, in his manful effort not to laugh. ‘I think we’ll need to cut down on some of that medication you’re taking.’

‘Yes, the mind-altering paracetamol.’

‘Hmm. Or those tricky iron tablets. But seriously, Cassie, you’re tired. I think you should get off to bed. I’ll look after Sophie.’

‘I don’t want to go to bed. I want us to sit down together

and watch television.’ Maybe we could pretend, for just half an hour, that things were normal again.

‘But there’s no point in us both staying up.’

‘I can’t believe what we’ve done,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘I can’t believe we thought we could just have a baby. We don’t know anything about how to look after a baby.’

‘Cassie, she’s three days old. All she needs is milk, cuddles and sleep.’

‘But this doesn’t feel like home any more.’

Jonathan sighed. ‘Of course this is our home, darling – you, me and Sophie. Everything will be fine.’

Would it be fine? She lay with her cheek against my forearm, her head resting in the crook of my elbow. What if I dropped her onto the tiles below? Would the back of that rounded head, with its soft whorls of hair, cave in like the shell of an egg?

‘Jonathan. Help me.’

He tutted softly. ‘Give her to me. Go to bed and get some rest. You’ll feel better tomorrow.’

I transferred Sophie into his arms and went upstairs. I wanted to cry, but they were heavy tears, trapped somewhere inside, unable to fall. I hadn’t been at all prepared for what would happen, giving birth to Sophie. I had walked through a door and found myself in a parallel world. And Jonathan hadn’t come with me.