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PART 1

**LIFE
SUPPORT**

1. Wednesday, 27 August

The doors to the delivery suite bang open as Georgie's bed is rolled in.

The room is huge. There must be fifteen people in here, a small army of obstetricians, anaesthetists, neonatal doctors, nurses and midwives, and they are in a whirlwind of preparation, activity and order. My heart jumps to see so many people and I'm momentarily panicked by the sheer scale of the process that has been put in place for the arrival of our twins. But everywhere I turn I see calm, relaxed faces – faces which say this is normal for us – all in a day's work.

Georgie's frail frame is tilted forward as the epidural is administered and she shudders as the long needle slides into her spinal column. I perch anxiously alongside her on the bed as the anaesthetic starts to take effect.

The tall, young anaesthetist's face wears the same pained expression that we have seen on the faces of all of the doctors

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sent to talk to us over the previous five days of labour. I notice his bad teeth as he says, 'The lives of such premature babies are rarely uncomplicated . . . You do realise that you are both in for a very long and difficult journey, don't you?'

We nod the nods of people who want to look like they know what everyone's on about – nods we have perfected in the last few days. We frown in a way which is intended to indicate that we absolutely understand the seriousness of the task ahead of us.

We will laugh about this later. Laugh at our naivety and our stupidity for trying to look like we had the remotest idea what was about to happen to us.

*

The anaesthetic has taken effect, Georgie is ready and suddenly we are in business. Within seconds the sun roof is being peeled back, bringing light and life to our twins.

The surgeon is shrouded behind the curtain that crosses Georgie's chest, but the direction of his voice changes as he leans in to grasp the first of our babies and says, 'Feels a bit like someone rummaging around in your handbag . . . you know it's happening but it doesn't hurt.'

My face is close to Georgie's as she winces in discomfort, more at the thought of what's going on, rather than pain. I feel strangely elated about the thought of finally meeting our children and I smile.

I whisper, 'I love you,' and she weakly returns my smile. I squeeze her hand, pleased that this chapter is almost over and the trauma of her five days of labour can end.

I'm eager to catch a glimpse of our newborns for the first

WEDNESDAY, 27 AUGUST

time and I raise my head above the line of the sheet. The calm, peaceful sanctuary of our private moment together vanishes as I contemplate the battle scene in front of me.

I breathe in sharply.

Georgie's stomach, untimely ripped from side to side, is now a gaping hole. The yellow belly fat of her half-pregnancy glistens brightly in sharp contrast to the dark red blood that runs from her wound. And there, in the midst of it all, two blue-gloved hands tear my wriggling son from the safe harbour of the womb.

'A boy!' the doctor shouts, triumphantly.

My boy, I think.

He is momentarily held aloft and time stands still for a split second.

He is tiny and he squeaks like a mouse as he takes his first breath. I can't believe he's human. He looks like a tiny tangle of intestines. Did the doctor yank the wrong bit out?

One side of the room bursts into a flurry of activity. The baby is wrapped in swaddling and rushed over to a small trolley where a team of nurses descends on him, desperate to use these few, decisive moments to save his life.

My mouth hangs open as I turn back to Georgie. Clearly this is not the expression she was looking for from me.

'And a girl!' shouts the surgeon and she too is whisked off to another corner to be resuscitated.

'A boy and a girl!' I say to Georgie, who smiles back at me. Finally her part of the ordeal is over.

A nurse rushes across. 'Would you like to hold your baby girl?' she says to Georgie.

'Yes, please,' comes the eager reply. After days of battling to

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keep these babies on board, finally the moment has arrived when she gets her reward of meeting them. A nurse brings our baby daughter over and places her against Georgie's neck.

Georgie's face is a look of sheer panic.

'Oh my God, she's tiny!' she says, her eyes flaring with fright and her hands shaking as she cradles the baby in her neck. Our daughter is so tiny, it looks as though Georgie is cradling a telephone handset beneath her chin, rather than holding a newborn. She looks up to me, her face begging for the reassurance I'm just not qualified to give.

'They're going to be fine,' I say, stroking Georgie's hair, my smile betrayed by the panic she must surely see in my eyes.

And before we know it, the nurse has whisked our daughter away and the battle for our twins' lives begins.

2. April

It was a hot spring day, just three months earlier, when the obstetrician confirmed the joyous news that the blue cross on the pregnancy kit had suggested to us that night with the magpies.

I remember the sun warming my smiling face as Georgie and I hugged on the pavement after the appointment. It's an embrace we have perfected over the years – Georgie, nearly a foot shorter than me, her face buried in my chest, my long arms wrapped almost twice around her slim frame. And for the first time in almost three years it was a hug of celebration, rather than consolation.

It was the first time since Georgie and I set out on our journey to start a family that our expectations were exceeded, rather than undershot. We had years of trying and eventually succumbed to the need for IVF when they told us that we were 'completely incompatible as partners.' It seemed ironic to me

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that we were so entirely compatible in every sense, but not in this – the most critical area, baby making.

And even then, once we made that decision, each month our hopes were raised as Georgie passed the day her period normally arrived, only to be dashed when it started again. The plunge back to square one, the tears and reassurances as the cycle of rebuilding began: until next month, when hope would buoy us up again.

But now, with a bit of a shove and a fair following wind, we were going to become the proud parents of not one, but two children. As we hugged on the pavement, I squeezed Georgie tight and for the first time I got the new and peculiar sensation that two lives were now growing between us.

Even the surrounding buildings seemed to nod their knowing support for the news we had just been given – delivered by our obstetric doctor in an inappropriately deadpan manner.

‘Yes, definitely two heartbeats,’ she had said as if dispensing a prescription.

In that darkened room, lit only by the lamp aimed between Georgie’s legs, we heard the news we had waited years to hear and in an instant the clouds lifted and we were left wondering what all the fuss had been about.

For me the pain had been limited to mind games: three years of trying to conceive and the slowly increasing panic that this was never going to happen for us. Reassuring Georgie every month that everything would be OK in the end, whilst never having any kind of certainty myself.

All that worry was gone in a flash.

The almost indecipherable shapes on the screen were explained to us, ‘You see the head, the limb buds [yuk!] and the

APRIL

heartbeat?’ The heartbeat, a tiny constellation of dots flickering on and off – as difficult for us to comprehend as some distant galaxy viewed through a telescope. Our eyes strained to see and our minds strained to believe what we were witnessing.

In this dim-lit lab, perched on top of Georgie’s discarded trousers and pants, I grasped her hand and we gawped at each other like game-show winners who can’t believe their luck.

‘Hey, remember I told you about the magpies?’ I said. ‘One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy? Maybe we’re having one of each – a boy and a girl?’

‘Wonder what the first one means.’ Georgie asked.

‘I guess the sorrow is the pain we’ve gone through to get here,’ I replied.

That must be right. Nothing can possibly go wrong now. We’ve done it. We’ve finally bloody done it!

And the postscript of an email from my brother says everything about how we and our family feel about this moment . . .

‘PS TWINS!!!’