

Chapter 1

Beca took a drag on her cigarette and looked at her watch. It was three o'clock near enough. Discounting the time she would spend asleep that night, there were just another 16 hours of this self-imposed child immersion therapy to survive. From her hiding place she could see the glass of wine she'd left behind. It was turning syrupy warm and undrinkable in the summer sun.

These were strange times indeed. They had to be, for why else was she spending the weekend in the countryside with a passel of kids? Her plan had called for nothing less than total exposure to the wiles and vagaries of her friends' children. This was the last challenge, the final test which would, if she survived, shape the rest of her life. This weekend was the shit-or-get-off-the-pot finale to what had become an all-consuming obsession: to have a baby, or not.

Abi, Sally and Claire, her closest friends, were on the terrace knotted together at one end of the long table which was now a post-lunch bombsite. Sally was the centre of the group, or more specifically her new baby was and Beca couldn't keep her eyes off the bald, mewling child.

The pro-baby camp that had pitched its colours somewhere near her heart wanted to be there with them lapping up every word, but she had been dismissed with a request from Claire 'to

be a poppet' and entertain the children. After all, what possible interest could she have in a new born baby? None. Evidently the other two had agreed because neither had jumped up to stop her, which was why she found herself hiding behind a bush playing hide and bloody seek with their off-spring. Boring, but nonetheless a crucial part of the therapy. Much more time spent with this whiny, unfathomable bunch and she'd be cured; she could send her hormones packing and get on with her very child-free life.

Beca's eyes kept wandering back to the tiny bundle in Sally's arms as time and again the now familiar visceral urges kept overruling her well-educated brain. Looking at the baby was as compulsive, and annoying, as reading and re-reading adverts on the Tube. She didn't want to do it, but she couldn't stop herself. Why not though? She wasn't interested in babies any more than she was in cheap international phone rates. She couldn't be, it was so out of character, and it was important to keep reminding herself of that fact. If she could get her hands on her drink, she'd be fine. A whole bottle would be better still, maybe then the frightening mumsy feelings would go away.

'Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.' Harriet, Claire's eldest, rolled each syllable around in her mouth like a multi-layered gobstopper before spitting it out and trying another. The other children began to wander off before she had even reached twenty. Dulcie skipped away wafting the petal-shaped skirt on her fairy dress while the boys beat the long grass with sticks sending clouds of seed and chaff into the air.

While this baby obsession had been wreaking havoc with her ordered life, Beca had not remained idle. Ever the pro-active completer, she'd drawn up a business plan, along with mission

statement, conception strategy and long-term schedule and budget. It was all worked out, in the ghastly event that she decided to go ahead. Or was that joyful? It rather depended on which part of her rapidly emerging split-personality had the floor. God, she needed that wine.

‘Fiffffty.’ Peals of laughter and screams erupted as the children charged off towards the orchard, in exactly the wrong direction. Beca darted out from the bush, stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

‘Hey! That’s cheating,’ Abi shouted. ‘Get back.’ The children hadn’t noticed anyway.

Beca was close enough to see the smile on Abi’s face. She also noticed the full glass of wine in her hand, so at least she wasn’t going to die of thirst any time soon. Beca watched as Abi rejoined the other two still cooing over the baby. What were they talking about now? Why did she care so much? Something had gone dreadfully wrong. A year ago she would have had no interest in the mind-numbing details of swaddling a baby. The dummy, good or bad debate would have left her yawning. And as for the taxing issue of weaning, she hadn’t cared, at all.

‘Here darling,’ she heard Claire say as Sally breastfed her baby in an old rattan chair. ‘You’ve got to keep your milk supply up. It’s *sans gas* of course. Have to be careful of those bubbles. You do know that bubbles give babies the most frightful wind, don’t you?’ Sally’s trance had been broken. She looked up and pushing a straw-coloured lock from her face she smiled.

Bloody Claire. Thick-set bossy Claire. From school friend to mother, she had always had an unerring ability to transform her loudly delivered opinion into bona fide fact. Still, it was worth remembering about those bubbles.

'If there's anything you'd like to know. Anything you're not sure about, you will ask won't you,' Claire continued.

'I've got to admit it's all a bit of a shock,' Beca heard Sally say.

'Don't worry, that's just your hormones. Are you still bleeding?' Claire asked.

Sally nodded and reddened slightly.

'Course you are,' Claire continued. 'It's only, what, three weeks? I always bleed for ages after labour.'

Yes, being a bloody drama queen you would. Beca was still cross at being cold-shouldered by her friends. It was all very well sweeping Sally and her baby into their collective embrace, but hadn't it occurred to Claire or Abi that she might want to join in? No, of course not. She'd done a very good life-time's job of being entirely uninterested in breeding. Sally held her baby up on her chest and began to pat her back. As Beca watched, the gooey, light-headed feeling swept over her again.

'Here we go,' she said and waited for the cloying, candy-floss pink moment to pass.

'Who are you talking to?'

Abi's appearance made Beca jump. 'No one, nothing. I'm just driving myself insane. Where did you come from?'

'Thought I'd keep you company. Claire's doing her perfect mother routine. Here,' she added proffering a glass of wine.

'Thank God.' Beca guzzled. 'I heard her.'

'Are you alright?' Abi asked folding her arms across her chest.

'Never better.' Aside from the full-on war raging within.

'You look anxious.' Her best friend had a better-in-than-out look on her face, but then she always had been alarmingly in

touch with her feelings. It was tempting to blurt it all out; to share the news that hard-nosed, career girl Beca had finally seen the light. Then again, perhaps it would be better to wait awhile; she might have gone off the whole idea by tomorrow. Who was she kidding?

‘What’s wrong?’ Abi asked when she got no answer.

‘Nothing.’

‘Trouble at work?’

‘Exactly.’ Beca drank her wine. ‘Sally’s baby is lovely, isn’t she?’ she said testing the water.

The look of surprise on Abi’s face was as predictable as it was easy to read.

‘I can’t imagine why they named her after a cat,’ Beca continued. ‘Tabitha? How daft is that?’

‘Don’t be so heartless. It’s sweet.’

‘If she had a tail.’

Off in the distance Beca could hear Harriet and the others shouting out for her. She leant against the springy branches of the rhododendron and looked at Abi. ‘Tell me something, why am I never included?’

‘In what?’

‘In the conversations you three have all the time about children and baby stuff.’ Beca was aware she sounded peevish, but she was never going to attain Abi’s level of maturity so what was the point of trying?

‘You always look so bored.’

‘People change,’ Beca muttered into her glass. ‘It would be nice to join in, sometimes.’

Abi smiled and put an arm around her waist. 'Come on. I think Claire's working up to a theory on vaginal tears.'

Beca halted in her tracks. 'Perhaps I could show the kids how to blow up frogs.'

'No, no. I insist. It will be educational.' Abi's arm tightened around her and together they strolled back towards the old Norfolk manor house.

As they reached the terrace, Beca saw Eddie coming out through the French windows, pretending to swing a cricket bat. Tom and Dan followed him into the sunshine. The men were looking rather downcast.

Abi laughed at them. 'That'll be England all out then.'

'Narrow escape,' Beca said, playfully pulling away from Abi's grasp.

'What? You think the presence of men will stop Claire?'

'Is it my imagination or as soon as you have a baby, your body and every nasty thing that happens to it becomes the subject of open debate?'

'Absolutely. You must be pleased to have sworn off breeding.'

'That was the plan,' Beca mumbled to herself.

'Where were you?' demanded Harriet as Beca and Abi returned to the table. 'We looked for you everywhere.'

'I evaporated in a puff of smoke. Now, off. Leave me alone.' Beca pulled her sunglasses down from her forehead and sitting back in a chair closed her eyes.

'But –'

'Go and play with Claire. I heard your mother say she was going to let you cut her hair.'

Eddie finished playing air cricket with a great flourish and flung himself down into the chair next to her. Beca had always found it alarming that he and Claire looked so alike. In-breeding amongst the minor aristocracy, most likely. A theory which did much to explain why, although lovely people, they were incredibly dim. It was one of those gender iniquities that while both were broad-in-the-beam, Eddie was cuddly like great uncle Percy's teddy bear, while Claire looked like she'd been let out of her harness after dragging a plough all day.

'So how's work?' he asked.

Beca sighed. 'Great. Just marvellous. Nothing more pleasurable than a chat about work at the weekend.'

Eddie guffawed. 'Any tips? Pointers? You know, what's going up and down?'

'Strictly speaking telling you could land me in jail. But seeing as it's you.' She gave him a cheesy thumbs-up and watched as he went off to play aeroplanes with his two sons.

Tom sniffed extravagantly as a means, she supposed, of catching her attention. She obliged him with an arched eyebrow. 'Hay fever?' she asked.

He looked away, sneering perceptibly. Odious man. What did Abi see in him? It was such a waste. Beca studied his haughty profile until Tabitha's screaming broke in on her uncharitable musings.

'Here, let me.' Claire swooped in and scooped the baby up in her arms. As an unfamiliar hand started pounding her on the back she howled even more. Sally flushed but didn't protest. Her delicate thoroughbred sensibilities didn't stand a chance up against Claire's draught horse.

Abi muttered darkly.

‘What?’ Beca needed enlightenment.

‘She’s got to let Sally do it herself. They can’t bond if every time Tabitha squawks Claire steals her away.’

Beca was impressed at the importance Abi attached to a bit of winding. ‘Claire, why don’t you give Sally her baby back? You’re interfering.’

‘What would you know?’ Claire asked.

‘Absolutely nothing,’ Beca replied with mock contrition. ‘But any idiot, even a childless one, can see you’re not helping.’

‘Give Tabitha back,’ Eddie said. ‘You’ve got three of your own.’

‘I’m only trying to help.’ Claire’s mouth shaped up like a cat’s arse. The child was duly restored to her mother and immediately fell silent.

Sally beamed with delight. ‘I’d best go and change her nappy. Perhaps that’s what’s bothering her.’ She bent down to retrieve the elephant print nappy bag.

‘Can I come?’ Damn, how had that slipped out? Beca tried to brave the astonished looks with a toothy laugh. None of her friends were decent enough to play along so she snatched up the change bag, swung it over her shoulder and strutted nonchalantly into the house with Sally and Tabitha following in her wake.

The astonishing news that the children needed feeding again so soon after lunch was further ammunition for the no-baby camp. Beca found herself in Claire’s kitchen blunting a bread knife on a breeze-block sized loaf. She was using the table rather than the worktop because it was lower and she hoped the extra weight she could apply would help in the task. The knife was as

ancient as the kitchen and Beca's game of pretending to be Ruby from *Upstairs, Downstairs* had worn off half a loaf ago.

'Sally looks amazing,' she said to Dan through gritted teeth. He was busy jockeying fish fingers around a vast cast-iron frying pan.

'Doesn't she. Look,' he said taking the knife away from her. 'If you hack at it like that it's bound to end up in pieces.'

'Bloody home-made bread.'

'I heard that.' Claire was laying the table with an assortment of brightly coloured plates and cups emblazoned with the latest must-have children's characters.

'There. Done,' Dan said with satisfaction. 'Now, if you butter them first before you cut the crusts off it's easier.'

'How do you know all this stuff? You've only been a father for three weeks.'

He shrugged. 'Spend any time in the kitchen and you'll learn. Claire's kids aren't slow in letting you know what they want. Oscar told me this morning he and Charlie like theirs cut into soldiers while Harriet insists on triangles.'

'You couldn't have a word with Tom, could you?' Abi blew a wisp of hair out of her eyes as she sorted out spoons and forks. 'He seems to think parental responsibility ends after the moment of conception.'

'Let's face it. If you'd wanted Modern Man you shouldn't have got hitched to that entirely unreconstructed chauvinist,' Beca said. 'He's a 1950s throwback. Does Dulcie have any specific bread pattern preferences?'

'She eats it as it comes, but if someone else gets the Barbie plate there'll be hysterics,' Abi replied.

A pack of pit ponies thundered down the stairs. All conversation stopped until they were seated around the kitchen table and the business of getting food into hungry mouths brought the decibel levels down.

‘So, got a new man in your sights?’ Dan grinned over his shoulder as he started on the washing up.

Beca grabbed a tea towel off the front of the Aga and twisting it into a tight cord she flicked the back of his legs. ‘It’s unusual for you to be so interested in my s-e-x life.’

‘She said “sex”,’ Harriet pounced. ‘S-e-x spells sex. That’s a naughty word isn’t it, mummy?’

‘Where did you learn that?’ Claire was aghast.

‘Sex, sex, sex.’ Oscar jumped down from his chair and ran around the room. ‘Sex, sex, sex.’

‘He’s stupid. He doesn’t even know what sex is,’ Harriet stated with big sister superiority.

Claire for once was speechless.

‘What’s sex, mummy?’ Dulcie asked through a mouthful of fish fingers.

‘It’s nothing to worry about,’ Abi replied.

‘Why’s it nothing, mummy?’

‘I’d better see how Sally’s doing,’ Dan said drying his hands on his chinos.

‘And I’ve got a nicotine habit to feed.’

Beca breezed out into the hall, past the line of wellington boots and old dog baskets and out into the beckoning sunshine of late afternoon. She could smell cigar smoke coming from the terrace and giving Tom and Eddie a wide berth she crossed the

lawn, went through the door in the old garden wall and escaped into the orchard. The sun was beginning to go down, but it was still warm and the air felt balmy and comforting. Beca found a secluded spot under a peach tree and sat down, squashing the long grass around her into a springy blanket. She pulled a flattened cigarette packet out of the waistband of her Capri pants. Tabitha's pink polka-dot socks were wedged on top. She spread them out on her thigh, then pulled them over her fingers like puppets. She sniffed them and instantly that gooey, squidgy feeling smothered her again. Oh dear God, it was ludicrous, insane. She didn't want a baby. Didn't, didn't, didn't. Having one would destroy her body, not to mention her career. She did not want a baby. Beca pulled hard on her cigarette as if the habit of smoking somehow proved her point.

What was the use of pretending? Fags or not, she wanted a child of her own. She wanted one so much that her throat tightened just at the thought that she might not. This had to stop. She shook her head, furious at the unseemly urges that kept attacking her from within. So much for her clever idea of spending the weekend immersed in the triviality of babydom. By Sunday night she was supposed to run screaming towards the nearest sterilisation clinic. Not even Tabitha's shitty arse had put her off. It looked so sweet when pooey. She was envious of Sally's engorged breasts. For Christ's sake, she even wanted to sit on a valley cushion and complain about her stitches, although she wasn't entirely sure what the cushion or the stitches involved. She had it bad; really very bad indeed.

For months she had done everything she could think of to talk herself out of this ridiculous predicament, but her hormones were raising the victory flag over her beleaguered body. Assisted

by every television commercial and fly-on-the-wall baby documentary, they had won. It was Cave Mothers 1, Beca Morley 0. With a bitter laugh Beca finally admitted defeat and surrendered. The pro-baby camp had done it. She would have a baby. And why not? She'd spent enough time and money researching the subject, and surely it had to be less effort than this continuous tussle with her feelings. But if she could barely explain why she felt so strongly about it to herself, how the hell was she going to tell the others?

She took a last drag on her cigarette and waited for retaliation from her brain; a stroke perhaps. Nothing happened. Feeling peculiarly at ease with herself she adeptly flicked her cigarette butt away with a thumb nail and watched it smoulder on the dry ground. Knowing Claire and Eddie would take a dim view of her burning the place down she jumped up and ground it carefully out, and then spat on it to be sure.

A sense of calm after the storm had settled on the sitting room. With the children bedded down, their parents had at last collapsed into the dog hair-covered sofas. A full supper sat heavily in their stomachs and there was little thought of doing anything more than stretching out and waiting for the digestive juices to start working.

Beca sat on her own, her legs flung over the arm of a chair whose only sign of former glory was the square of bright chrysanthemum print that had for generations been protected by an antimacassar. One of Eddie's cocker spaniels rested his head on Beca's thigh, his soft brown eyes pleading to be stroked. She gave his ear a scratch and before she knew it the dog had leaped up and settled awkwardly on her lap. She was grateful for the

company. It was only in the evenings when the couples reconnected with some simple gesture of affection that Beca felt self-consciously single. The rest of the time she delighted in her single status. She knew her friends loved her as much as she loved them, with the obvious exception of Tom, but naturally they loved their partners more. It was a different kind of love, one Beca had little experience of. It placed the recipient way up there beyond the others. She watched as Eddie topped up Claire's glass before filling anyone else's. Tom rubbed Abi's feet as she stretched out her legs across his lap, and Dan and Sally gazed at each other and their daughter, silently congratulating themselves on their brilliance. Beca was resolutely commitment-free, but even she could appreciate that on occasions a smelly dog made a poor substitute.

'I say, Beca. There's something different about you. Can't put my finger on it. It's been bothering me all day. Have you done something to your hair?'

'Very observant of you, Eddie. I've had it cut.'

'Knew it was something like that. You look like that actress, Aubrey someone.'

'Audrey Hepburn?' Abi offered.

'She looks like a boy,' Tom said.

Eddie chuckled. 'Not with those tits she doesn't.'

'I don't think it's appropriate to talk about another woman's breasts,' Claire said in a huff. 'Even Beca's.'

'You don't mind do you? You're one of the lads. God you haven't gone all lesbo on us, have you? That would be a turn up.'

'Oh do shut up, Eddie,' Abi said.

Beca's mind was elsewhere. 'Can I hold her?' she asked, cutting the conversation dead.

It took a moment for Sally to realise Beca was talking to her. She looked up and smiled. 'Of course.'

Ignoring the silence she had created, Beca squeezed onto the sofa and took Tabitha in her arms. The sleeping baby fretted in her inexperienced grasp, but settled once she was nestled against Beca's chest. The warmth of her tiny body passed through the layers of clothes between them. Beca cradled her head in her hand, kissed her soft downy hair and breathed in her sweet babyish smell.

'She's perfect,' Beca choked.

Sally beamed with pride.

Oh Christ. Beca coughed to clear the lump in her throat. 'I'd so much like to have my own.'

'Own what?'

'Baby. I've decided to have one,' she confided in a whisper.

'Have?' Sally asked.

For God's sake. 'A baby. I'm going to have a baby.' How obtuse could the woman be?

'You're not pregnant are you?' Abi asked with alarm.

'No. Not yet.'

'Aren't what?' Claire demanded.

'Beca's going to have a baby.' Sally leant over to fill her in.

'Good show.' Eddie toasted her with his glass. 'All women should have babies. Keeps them happy.'

'You don't do us blokes any favours,' Dan said.

Eddie shrugged. 'It's what Claire says.'

'I hadn't meant to tell you yet, but there we go,' Beca said. 'I've been thinking about it for months.'

'I suppose even cats make good mothers.' Tom was such a bastard.

Claire howled with laughter. Sally joined in and Abi made no attempt to hold back. Tabitha woke up and began to cry as Beca's body tensed up. The child was swiftly reclaimed by her mother. Beca returned to her own chair and sent her awaiting companion scurrying away to his basket with just one glare. She was furious at her friends' reaction. Had she said something absurdly funny? She hadn't reckoned the idea of becoming a mother would provoke such uncontrolled mirth.

'Precisely what is so bloody hilarious about me having a child?'

'It's just not one of your core competencies.' How nice that Tom found it all so amusing.

'What?' Sally asked.

'It's not something she's very good at,' Dan translated.

'Really, it's not that funny,' Abi said. 'But you've always disliked them.'

'So did you once.' Beca turned a packet of cigarettes over in her hands.

'I know, but we were much younger then.'

'Well? It's just taken me a bit longer to come around to the idea.' She was desperate for a fag.

'You're the most baby-phobic woman I've ever come across.' Tom made no attempt to cover his amusement.

Beca looked at him with loathing. 'Piss off, Tom.'

'I'm sorry, I don't want to sound rude, but you're just not the sort.' Claire's tone reminded her of a snippy French teacher they'd had at school.

Beca pressed back in her chair. 'What sort?' she asked. 'I'm a woman, I've got all the right bits. Assuming they're working I could easily have a child.' Anger made her voice quaver.

'Yes, but you're not the sort to be a mother, not a good one anyway.' Claire's words trailed off and hung heavily in the silence.

Beca was crushed. Her eyes prickled with tears. She hadn't cried for years. Not even the most outrageously rude bastard at the bank could make her cry. She gritted her teeth.

'At last, something Beca's not good at.' Tom raised a glass to her.

'Shut up,' Abi snapped. 'That's a terrible thing to say,' she said turning on Claire. Eddie exchanged an anxious glance with Dan and in unison they got up and left. Tom held out until a collective glare drove him from the room.

'I didn't mean it like that exactly,' Claire said. 'It's just she's so focussed on her career.'

'And that's a crime?' Beca wished she'd kept her stupid mouth shut about wanting a baby.

'You've said so yourself,' Claire said ignoring her.

'I absolutely have not,' Abi replied.

'So I'm selfish?'

'No, of course not. But it would involve a lot of changes. I'm sure you'd be a very good mother, it's just,' Abi tried to find the right words.

‘You don’t have the nurturing instinct.’ Claire triumphantly folded her arms across her ample chest as if to emphasise her point.

Sally gasped and held Tabitha closer.

‘Bullshit. Outrageous bullshit,’ Abi said. ‘She’s brilliant with Dulcie and Billy. You didn’t mind her running around after your lot today.’

‘But that’s completely different. She only sees them occasionally. I’m not trying to be horrid, but I don’t think she has the first idea about motherhood.’

‘I think it’s a lovely idea,’ Sally chipped in.

‘Well you would. Your hormones are still all over the place.’ Claire’s firm put down had Sally in retreat.

Beca sat and watched them arguing, their faces red and shiny with too much wine and heated debate. It hardly seemed to matter if she was there in the room with them or not. Abi and Claire battled it out as they always had, with Sally quivering on the sidelines unsure which way the argument would turn. It was like being back at school again, except now they weren’t shouting about boyfriends and copies of *Blue Jeans*, but her life. She was in serious danger of crying.

‘I had no idea you had such a low opinion of me.’

‘We don’t.’ Abi squeezed herself into Beca’s chair and put an arm around her.

‘Then why is it open season? My feelings are no less important than yours. I’m always there for you lot. I do my damndest to be a good friend, which isn’t always easy considering what massive pains in the arse you are. You’re right, I never have wanted babies, but I’ve changed my mind. People do.’

It happens from time to time. I thought you might be pleased for me.'

The others looked at her sheepishly.

'I'm not as robust as you all seem to think. Just because I don't work in some clappy-happy, touchy-feely, care-in-the-community, hugs-before-bedtime job, doesn't mean I'm an insensitive, heartless bitch.'

Claire looked contrite. 'I'm sure if you want a baby you'll make a good mother, after your own fashion. But forgive me for pointing out the obvious. Don't you need a husband first?'

'Me and Dan aren't married,' Sally said.

'Yes, but that's different.' Claire rolled her eyes with exasperation. 'Beca doesn't even have a boyfriend.'

It was so galling when the screaming bloody obvious was presented as brilliant insight.

'I'm not a complete idiot,' Beca replied with scorn. 'This isn't some flash-in-the-pan idea, I've been planning for months. Believe me, the lack of a boyfriend is a minor detail.' Strictly speaking that wasn't entirely true but she was in no mood to share such news with her friends. Instead, she got up and left the room without bothering to say goodnight. Of course there was a plan. She had a rolling schedule based on six potential conception dates worked out. What remained to be decided was precisely who was going to do the honours. A tricky one to resolve considering her track record with men.