

# The Sisterhood

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## chapter one

Elizabeth Greene

*London, 31 October*

It was Halloween, and a few people were dressed in stupid costumes. Everyone ignored them. I stood on the Northern Line, gripping a red pole and swaying in the familiar rush-hour crush, and I decided that I was going to start to make an effort. When Steve and I got together, we were starry-eyed 27-year-olds. Now we were close to forty, with nothing but a mortgaged flat to show for it.

It was natural, I decided, that we had fallen into a rut. I pictured a huge tractor ploughing a muddy field. There we were, Steve and me, tiny little figures struggling in an enormous earthen rut. He tried to give me a leg up, but I toppled back into the mud. He climbed on to my shoulders, but we overbalanced. My hair was covered in damp earth. We were stuck. This was what I thought, at least, on Halloween. My whole life was a rut. I was doing the job I had trained for, as a stopgap, sixteen years earlier, when people with English degrees who didn't want to go into the media did

a PGCE as something to fall back on. I was bored with teaching, but I didn't know what else to do.

Someone lurched into me. 'Sorry,' I told him, without thinking.

A lot of other people I knew had babies. Maybe that was good, I thought. Perhaps it gave a relationship a new focus. Perhaps a baby gave a couple something to look at, other than each other. It certainly gave them something to talk about, endlessly. I didn't want a baby, though, and neither did Steve. What I wanted was a holiday. I was trying to work out whether I could arrange something as a surprise for Steve, whether he could take several weeks off work, and how far away we could get without flying. I was thinking of Italy, or Russia, or a great train trip like the Trans-Siberian. In the year since we'd both decided to stop air travel, we had been no further afield than Brighton. Although we'd often talked about taking off on the Eurostar and having romantic holidays centring on European stations with big clocks and well-dressed people, Steve seemed to be in the process of downgrading this summer's excursion to a weekend at Glastonbury.

I sighed as the doors opened and twenty-two more people forced themselves into the scrum. My shoulders were up against everyone else's, as usual. I blew the hair off my face and tried not to feel claustrophobic. I hated feeling that I had failed myself. The dreams I'd had, when I was young, had never included being jammed on to the Northern and Victoria Lines twice a day. They hadn't involved trying to ram D.H. Lawrence down the throats of unresponsive fifteen-year-olds, when everyone in the room – myself included – would rather be drinking, smoking and shagging. I was fed up with my life, and I was worried about

my relationship, too. Last week, I'd put a lot of time and effort into seducing Steve. To my horror, it had been difficult. I'd had to force him into it, and before that we hadn't had sex for months. Tonight, I was going to try again.

Steve was the great love of my life. From the moment we met, we belonged together. He was a part of me. Over the years, we had been best friends, lovers, soulmates. We had always been equals. Now, suddenly, things felt wrong. We were distant, slightly wary of each other. I wondered whether we would split up. It was unthinkable. I wished we were married, because that would have made it harder for us to part. Neither of us had ever wanted marriage. We had been to so many of our friends' weddings that there had long ago ceased to be any attraction in having our own: we would have been forced either to re-enact a ceremony we had already been to many times over, or to be self-consciously different just for the hell of it. On top of that, I had been married before, for two sad years in my early twenties. I married my university boyfriend, feeling enormously grown up. My father paid for a registry office and a party in the upstairs room of a pub in the Lanes in Brighton. Within six months I could hardly bear to look at my husband. I had never fancied being a double divorcee. That was another reason why I had not married Steve.

The train pulled into my station and as I came out of the Tube, I decided, with a sudden fierce conviction, that I had to do everything I could to bring us close again. I would start that night, by putting on an ironic Halloween party for the two of us. We would get drunk, laugh, be silly, and remember why we were together. When I was drunk enough, I would steer the conversation to my insecurity, and to holidays and the fact that life was no longer as much

fun as it ought to be. Actually, I was rubbish at playing games. I would have a drink and tell Steve exactly how I felt. Then it would be up to him.

It was a clean, crisp day, even in London. The air I breathed was impregnated with exhaust fumes, but I was used to that. Whenever I left the city, my lungs protested, scalded by fresh air. The sun had disappeared behind a tower block, low in the sky, but above me everything was blue and cloudless. My breath fogged in front of me, and the nip of incipient night was making my nose red and my fingertips numb. I threw fifty pence at the homeless boy on the pavement, aware of the pathetic nature of my token gesture, and wondering how he was going to get through the winter with a skimpy sleeping bag and a 50p coin. Then I forgot about him, and went to Waitrose.

There was always something soothing about Waitrose. That was a sad state of affairs, but it was true. It was its own world, where everything was clean and orderly. Instantly, I felt I could make things right.

If I could put on a good enough Halloween spread, then everything was going to work out the way I wanted it to. I dashed around, feeling harassed and trying to order my mind. In my anxiety, I filled a small trolley with a big pumpkin, several bags of crisps, two Pizza Express pizzas, two bottles of expensive champagne and a box of Belgian chocolates. Then, almost hysterical, I added an orange plastic tablecloth with witches on it, two novelty black pointed hats, and a pair of plastic champagne glasses with spiders on them. Not long ago, Steve would have loved something this kitsch. Drunken, ironic evenings were the sort of thing we used to do together, winding each other up to fever pitch, laughing and staying up all night. I

contemplated face paints, but decided that I should stop short of making myself look mad. I would redo my make-up instead. I would put on some sexy underwear.

Years ago, on my thirtieth birthday, we had a party, just Steve and me. We had just bought our flat. He cooked dinner, and we drank and laughed and ate, and sat on our sofa with the curtains open and the lights off, and talked until it got light. I adored Steve. I had loved him passionately from the day I met him, and I was not letting him go.

I was excited when I got back to the flat. We lived on the top two floors of a large terraced house in Kentish Town. We had been there for years and years, since we were twenty-nine, and had watched our friends gradually having families and moving out to the suburbs and beyond, generally just before the second baby arrived. These days the only people I knew locally were shopkeepers, the barman at the local café, and a few neighbours.

The big black front door slammed shut behind me. I checked the post on the sideboard, though there was nothing for us. I unlocked our front door, which was a cheap plywood effort in the hall, and took the stairs two at a time.

‘Hiya!’ I shouted, always hating the sound of my voice in a potentially empty space. ‘I’m back,’ I added, my voice tailing off. I listened. There were footsteps upstairs.

‘Lizzy!’ he called. A herd of elephants gallumphed down to meet me. Steve leapt down the last five steps, landing with a crash in front of me. He smiled a broad smile, but he looked unsettled.

Steve had changed after work, and was wearing a baggy shirt, unbuttoned almost to the waist. He had lost weight recently, which made me conscious of the fact that I hadn’t.

He was trying, at the moment, to compensate for his receding hairline by growing what remained, so it touched the back of his collar. To my surprise, he looked distinguished like that. It suited his face.

He ran a hand through his hair.

‘You’re back!’ he exclaimed, frowning and smiling at the same time. ‘Are you early?’

I shook my head. ‘Maybe a bit,’ I said. ‘Left school at four for once.’ I held up my hands, a laden carrier bag in each. ‘Went to Waitrose. Got stuff for tonight.’ I listened to myself. I could tell that I was nervous, because I was missing off personal pronouns. The atmosphere was odder than usual.

Steve nodded. ‘OK. Cool. I’m just sorting some stuff upstairs. Be down in a minute.’

‘Sure.’

Steve was often home before me, even though he supposedly worked until half past five. I had never quite worked out how he did it, though when I thought about it, I knew that I usually stayed later than four, and he often bunked off early. I worked further from home than he did. My school was in Pimlico. I travelled eight stops on two Tube lines, while he rode a bike for ten minutes. It did add up, in a way.

I looked around the kitchen. There were two cups, washed up, on the draining board. Otherwise it was spotless. Our kitchen was filled with cheap wooden units that we painted blue and yellow after we visited Monet’s house on holiday, years ago. I remembered feeling proud and grown up, standing up a ladder with a paintbrush in my hand. These days it was tatty, but it was home, and I would not have swapped it because our history, in our happy days, was in this kitchen.

I put the radio on, determined to work myself up into a party mood. Radio Four was eager to tell me about a reporter for one of the British papers who had been kidnapped in Iraq. I felt fairly sure that the details weren't going to crank up my adrenaline levels and make me irresistible, and so I twiddled the dial. Eventually, I found an easy listening station that allowed me to attempt to harmonise with Sinatra in 'Something Stupid'. I chilled the champagne in the freezer, and poured myself a gin and tonic. I hollowed out the pumpkin as best I could, and put the pathetic scrapings I took from its middle into the fridge, where I supposed they would sit in a bowl for a week or so before we threw them away.

By the time Steve reappeared, the oven was pre-heated, ready for the pizzas, and the table was set with the tasteless tablecloth and five candles. I was pleased with the overall effect. I had even remembered to close the sitting-room door at the front of the house, with lights off and curtains drawn, to discourage trick or treaters.

I was singing along, enjoying myself, when Steve came back downstairs, and I stopped with the words 'I love you' in my throat, suddenly shy.

He looked around.

'Heeeeyyyy,' he said. He was trying hard to be appreciative.

'Do you like it?' I pretended his reaction was incidental, as if the whole point of the evening was not to get him back.

He smiled warmly, and put an arm around my shoulders. 'Of course I like it. What can I do?'

I cuddled into him, appreciating the rare physical contact.

'Did you switch everything off upstairs? So we look like we're out?'



‘Scared of your students coming to terrorise you?’

‘They live too far away. Thank Christ. Scared of the local five-year-olds, though.’

‘Scared of drunk teenagers armed with flour and eggs.’

‘Fireworks and handguns, more like.’

‘Well, it’s all switched off upstairs, yes.’

We put the pizzas in the oven, and I opened the first bottle of champagne. The plastic flutes made a dull clunk against each other.

‘Cheers,’ said Steve, and he sat down at the table. The atmosphere between us was suddenly stranger than it should have been. I looked at him, the beautiful man who had adored me for years, who had made me laugh and cry with happiness. My first husband had never been anything. Steve was everything to me. I made myself speak. I couldn’t try to manipulate the conversation like a ‘Venus’ woman. I had to come straight out with it.

‘OK,’ I said, levelly. ‘Steve. Honey. I think we need to talk about a few things.’

Steve stared at the table.

‘Talk about a few things?’ He snorted gently. ‘Yes. I’ve been wondering if you’d picked up on anything.’

I looked at him, surprised. ‘Picked up on what?’

‘You tell me.’

‘No. You tell me.’

‘You started it.’

‘I don’t think I’ve “picked up on anything”.’ I tried to fit my concerns into a framework of picking up. It didn’t work.

‘So what did you want to say?’ he asked, fiddling with his plastic champagne glass, a glass which suddenly looked stupid.

‘I’m going to the loo,’ I announced suddenly, scared. ‘Then we both have to talk.’

‘Deal.’

I looked at him. He smiled and winked. It was a shadow of the way we used to be, a trace of the old days. I felt a mounting fear, because I sensed that the foundations of my life were shifting.

I lurched upstairs, already slightly drunk. More than that, though, I was starting to panic. I knew Steve inside out, and I knew that he had something big to tell me. It was going to be something disastrous. I wondered whether he was ill. He had lost a lot of weight. We hadn’t talked about it.

I stared into the bathroom mirror, which had a little mosaic around it. I was hiding from what might be coming. I saw that the fear, and the alcohol, had made my cheeks pink, my eyes wide. I drew my fingers through my curly hair and tried to be positive.

I looked good. I was slightly heavier than I would have liked, but my features were strong and even. I looked a bit stupid in my work clothes, so I thought I would go and change. This was something I should face in what Steve called my ‘glad rags’.

Then I stopped myself. I wasn’t going to hide upstairs, in the bathroom. I wasn’t going to put on a dress. This was not a job interview. This was Steve and me. I told him everything. We were partners. He was probably in financial trouble. We would work through it together.

Someone moved in our bedroom. I wondered how Steve had got up there without my hearing him. I didn’t even need to go to the loo. As I opened the bathroom door, I heard footsteps jumping down the stairs, taking all of them in three or four jumps. Steve was standing at the bottom, but there was someone else there too.

Within seconds, I was in the kitchen. Steve grabbed me around the waist, and held me back. Our visitor was going down the other stairs, now, in a panicky blur. The plywood door downstairs slammed shut. I kneed Steve in the balls and jumped down, taking the stairs in fours and fives.

I had only seen Steve's face for a second, but it was all there. I knew.

He chased me down the stairs, trying to catch me as I tumbled over and grabbed the banister. I had to find her, had to know who she was. As I opened our flimsy front door, I saw a slight figure silhouetted in the frame of the main door. That door slammed with a noise that shook the building. I ran to it, yanked it open, and stared at the person on the steps.

I was expecting a young woman. In the few seconds since I'd realised what was happening – since I had started to 'pick up on it' – I had formed a picture of a twenty-two-year-old girl with peachy skin. Many things had instantly fallen into place. Steve wasn't interested in sex with me. He came home from work early, presumably not alone. He often changed the sheets on our bed, which he never used to do. He was too polite to me, like a stranger, and he had wanted to talk. When I was about to tell him how much I loved him, how much I wanted to be with him for ever, he was working up to telling me that he'd met someone else, and that the woman in question was hiding in our bedroom.

But this was not a peachy young woman. It was just a boy. He was a teenager, handsome in a young, callow way. He was wearing a pair of jeans and Steve's grey jumper. As he turned and looked at me, I saw that I had missed everything. I was a stupid woman who had no idea about things that went on under her nose. I knew nothing, nothing at

all. Steve and I had been leading separate lives, and I had thought it was all about commitment.

I grabbed the boy's arm. He looked at my hand, and then at my face. His face was young, younger than I would have thought possible. He looked like the more knowing children in my GCSE classes. His skin was slightly pitted and his eyes were wild, as if he were high.

As I stared, he looked back at me. He began to smile. Then he chuckled, and within a few seconds, he was laughing loudly, in my face.

Steve's face was flushed, his expression unreadable. As I watched, he covered his mouth with his hand. I had no idea whether he was laughing too, or whether he was mortified.

'Um,' he said. 'I imagine this clarifies things.' I could not make a reply. 'I guess I'd better go,' he added. 'I'm sorry that it's been . . . I'm sorry, Liz. It's just . . .'

I didn't want him to leave. All the same, I stood on the pavement, outside our house, in the cold of an autumn evening that was turning to night, and watched my boyfriend of ten years leaving me with a boy who was probably illegal.

The boy looked back over his shoulder, and smiled contemptuously. He put a hand possessively on Steve's bum, and Steve didn't stop him. Not even for my sake.

Across the road, three children dressed as vampires were going from house to house.