



Rowan Coleman

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ACCIDENTAL MOTHER*

lessons in laughing out loud

Have you ever
wondered what
might have
been...?

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Praise for Rowan Coleman:

‘Painfully real and utterly heartbreaking, every page will leave you an emotional wreck but, ultimately, this is a wonderfully uplifting novel about mothers and daughters’

Lisa Jewell

‘I can’t tell you how much I loved this book. It did make me cry but it also made me laugh. Like *Me Before You* by Jojo

Moyes, I couldn’t put it down. A tender testament to maternal love’ Katie Fforde

‘Written with great tenderness, *The Memory Book* manages to be heartbreakingly sad yet uplifting too. You’ll hold your loved ones that little bit closer after reading this novel. I

absolutely loved it!’ Lucy Diamond

‘*The Memory Book* is warm, sad, and life-affirming, with an unforgettable heroine who will make you laugh and cry. It’s a tender book about treasuring the past and living fully in the present; you’ll finish it and immediately go give your

loved ones a hug’ Julie Cohen

‘Warm, funny and totally heartbreaking, *The Memory Book* is a wonderful read’ Polly Williams

‘. . . just stunning . . . incredibly beautiful . . . the story took me on a journey that was at turns, devastating and then so uplifting. It made my heart soar at the strength of the human spirit and how capable human beings are of true, selfless love. An unforgettable and courageous story . . .

This story has the ingredients to capture the world’ Katy

Regan

'A heart-breaking story that will stay with you long after
you've finished the book' Carole Matthews

'... terrific ... incredibly moving but also witty and warm'
Kate Harrison

'... breath-takingly gut-wrenchingly heart-breakingly
wonderful. Exquisitely crafted and with huge emotional
depth ... extraordinary' Veronica Henry

'An absolutely beautiful, stunningly written story - you
HAVE to read *The Memory Book* by Rowan Coleman!'
Miranda Dickinson

'Heartbreakingly good stuff – just be sure to stock up on
tissues' *Fabulous Magazine, The Sun on Sunday*

'This is a heart-rending story, but it's also completely
absorbing, uplifting, tender, sad and wise' *Sunday Mirror*

About the Book

For any woman who has ever felt like she has lost herself ...

Willow and Holly are identical twins. They are everything to each other. Holly calls Willow her rock, her soul mate, her other half. And Willow feels the same about Holly. They are alike in every respect except one - Willow is afraid on the inside. And all because of a secret - one that binds the sisters closely together and yet has meant their adult lives have taken two very different paths.

Willow often feels there are large parts of her missing, qualities she only knows she's lacking because she sees them in her sister. For a very long time Willow has felt separated from Holly by one terrible moment in time - a moment that meant Willow's life was never the same again. And when the past catches up with her, Willow realises it's finally time for her to face her fears, and - with Holly's help - learn to laugh out loud once more ...

About the Author

Rowan Coleman lives with her husband, and five children in a very full house in Hertfordshire. She juggles writing novels with raising her family which includes a very lively set of toddler twins whose main hobby is going in the opposite directions. When she gets the chance, Rowan enjoys sleeping, sitting and loves watching films; she is also attempting to learn how to bake.

Rowan has written eleven novels, some of which include *The Memory Book*, *The Accidental Mother* and the award-winning *Dearest Rose*, which led her to become an active supporter of Refuge, the charity against domestic abuse.

She is donating 100% of royalties from the ebook publication of her novella *Woman Walks Into a Bar* to the charity.

Rowan does not have time for ironing.

[@rowancoleman](http://www.rowancoleman.co.uk)

Also by Rowan Coleman:

The Memory Book
Dearest Rose
Lessons in Laughing Out Loud
The Happy Home for Broken Hearts
The Baby Group
Woman Walks Into A Bar
River Deep
After Ever After
Growing Up Twice
The Accidental Mother
The Accidental Wife
The Accidental Family

Writing as Scarlett Bailey:

Just For Christmas
Married by Christmas
Santa Maybe (digital short)
The Night Before Christmas

Rowan Coleman
lessons in
laughing
out loud



EBURY
PRESS

For my children, Lily and Fred, who make
me laugh out loud every day

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Chapter One

THERE ARE MOMENTS in every person's life when something as simple as a wrong turn, an impulsive decision, or a door softly drawing to a close can change everything for ever. Moments that, Willow Briars knew better than anyone, were impossible to turn back from; moments that if you weren't very careful could shape the rest of your life.

Which was why she was trying rather hard not to murder Lucy Palmer. Many words and phrases had been used to describe thirty-nine-year-old Willow, but not until that very moment would anybody have ever called her murderous.

'Efficient' and 'capable' was how Willow was often described by her boss, Victoria Kincade, chief executive officer of Victoria Kincade Talent Ltd. Also 'invaluable', 'resourceful' and 'a genuine treasure'.

'Good old Will', was how many of her colleagues referred to her. Fun, funny, down-to-earth Willow Briars; always up for a good night out; says-it-how-it-is Will. And Willow knew perfectly well that if any of them were asked to describe her physically, they would dwell on her lovely skin, beautiful blue eyes, shiny hair, great smile, and fantastic taste in gorgeous shoes, which made up for her rather limited choice in fashion.

Her identical twin sister, Holly, who was exactly twenty-six minutes younger, called Willow her rock, her darling, her soul mate, her other half, and Willow could use all of those words to describe Holly too. Her four-year-old twin nieces, Jo-Jo and Jem, called her cuddly Aunty Pillow, sweet

Aunty Will and, nicest of all, best aunty in the world Aunty Will, which was a compliment with limited range as Willow was also their only aunt, but still, she loved it.

Depending on her mood her mother called her either the London twin or the disappointing one.

Willow's ex-husband had started off calling her darling, but after two years of marriage, had ended up describing her as a waste of space. And, for a very brief time, his daughter, Chloe, had not minded one little bit if people thought Willow was her mum.

Willow Briars was, and had been, many things to many people but so far never violent. Not until Lucy Palmer, graduate trainee and the daughter of a family friend of Victoria, had joined the agency six weeks ago and Victoria gave her the desk opposite Willow and instructed Willow to look after the barely twenty-one-year-old *ingénue*. From that moment on, to Willow's great surprise, she discovered she would most certainly be capable of bopping another human being over the head with a brick and then feeding them into a wood chipper.

'... Anyway, Will, *you* would have *died!*' Lucy informed Willow with some enthusiasm. 'I mean, you would not have been able to believe your eyes. It was fully out, under the table, right there in the middle of Nobu! *Lol!*'

And that was it; that was the thing about Lucy that brought out Willow's homicidal tendencies. She ended nearly every sentence with the nonsense word 'lol'.

A lesser woman than Willow would have hated Lucy for her smooth skin, glossy hair, long legs and insistence on sharing every mundane detail of her vacuous life with everyone in one hundred and forty characters or fewer ('Lucy Palmer is eating a sandwich, lol.' 'Lucy Palmer is thinking about lunch, lol.' 'Lucy Palmer has got her period, lol.' 'Lucy Palmer's boyfriend got his dick out in the middle of a restaurant, lol'), but what Willow discovered that she could not abide was that Lucy Palmer said 'lol' out loud as

if it were a word, as if it had any kind of meaning, as if it was actually a socially acceptable substitute for laughing out loud.

‘So I told him, I said to him, if you don’t put that away right now then there won’t be any dessert tonight, if you know what I mean, lol.’ For a second, Lucy stared at Willow who was doing her best to ignore her.

‘I mean blow job,’ she clarified. ‘Lol!’

Willow bit her lip and stared at the Excel spreadsheet on which she kept a record of Victoria’s expenses, wondering if the company accountant really would let Victoria claim for four nights on a yacht in Cannes with a young male actor-slash-model, who to date had not successfully auditioned even once, but who the normally ruthless Victoria kept on the books anyway, because he was terribly talented in areas that Lucy would have referred to as ‘dessert’.

‘Entertaining a client, darling,’ Victoria had responded to Willow’s raised eyebrow when she handed her the receipt.

‘Don’t you mean he was entertaining you?’ Will had asked her.

‘Well, somebody’s got to,’ Victoria had sighed. ‘There is not enough Viagra in the world to get my husband standing to attention.’

‘Poor Robert ... perhaps if you tried being nice to him?’ Willow had been living dangerously that day.

‘Darling, you know perfectly well I married Robert for his money and the Suffolk house. By the time one gets to one’s third husband being nice is definitely not on the agenda.’

Unable to question Victoria’s particular brand of logic, Willow had shrugged and keyed in the amount under the column headed ‘Entertaining’. Victoria liked her young men, and she didn’t mind at all paying for them, sometimes in kind and sometimes with cash, but especially on

expenses. Despite her own reservations on the matter, Willow couldn't help but admire Victoria's determination to get what she wanted from life, even if that meant ordering a young lover in exactly the same way she would order from a menu. She did sometimes wonder what Victoria's husband thought of it.

'Anyway he got dessert, all right. In the back of the cab on the way home! Lol!'

Willow looked at Lucy for a long moment, hoping that a mere glance would be enough to imprint her seniority and authority on the younger woman and shut her up. It did not.

'So what did you get up to last evening?' Lucy asked her. 'Anything?'

'Oh, you know,' Will said mildly. 'The usual.'

'Takeaway?' Lucy fluttered her lashes innocently.

'Orgy.' Willow did not glance up from her screen and she continued to key in figures.

'Wow,' Lucy said, wide-eyed, probably at that moment trying to imagine Willow with her ample thighs wrapped around some man or men. 'Lol.'

The last time Willow had been out was, in fact, Saturday, on a blind date with Dave Turner, a friend of a friend of her brother-in-law, who had recently moved to London and didn't know anyone. Privately Willow objected to the assumption, often made by married people, that all single people over a certain age were so desperate about their mutual failure to find a life partner so close to imminent death that they became instantly compatible, but still she had agreed, because frankly she had nothing else on, and besides, Holly was only trying to be nice. And whatever else she might get wrong, Willow tried her best not to let her sister down because Holly cared about people. She worried about them, even people she didn't know, and it made Willow feel like a better person to do things to please her, partly because she'd do anything for Holly, but also

because it sometimes felt like Holly was her living breathing conscience. Holly was the good twin, their mother said so often enough.

Dave Turner turned out to be far too good-looking to be a serious prospect, the sort of man who, in a year or two, would end up with a woman ten or fifteen years younger than Willow, who would giggle at his jokes, rather than raise a sardonic eyebrow. Now he was a confident bachelor, a man about town, who was not in need of a friend at all. Willow realised rather belatedly that Holly was actually trying to expand her own social horizons. It was soon obvious that Dave Turner was not hoping for anything serious. He had the look of a man who would soon get tired of all the effort of small talk, find a wife, put on five inches round his middle and spend the rest of his life trying to get them off. He'd been polite enough to flirt with Willow, though, and he'd seemed interested in her stories.

As the evening wore on, and after several glasses of wine, his gaze had begun to stray to her cleavage and his sentences were punctuated with much arm and hand touching. Willow sensed he expected some sort of pay-off for the four gin and tonics he had bought her. So they had parted company after several minutes of fevered grappling behind the wheelie bins in the pub car park. Dave offered to walk Willow home, but she had declined because, even drunk as she was, she found the prospect of an awkward and embarrassing Sunday morning, polite lies and empty number exchanges unbearable.

Willow liked to be wanted, she liked to feel a man's desire for her, but she knew – had known for a long time, even before her ill-fated marriage – that she could never be in a relationship. She just didn't have what it took to make another person happy.

'Oh, *lol!*' Lucy said to herself, reading something on Twitter, no doubt, prompting Willow to get up and pretend

to go to the loo, just in case the urge to staple Lucy to the desk and hole-punch her carotid artery came to anything.

'Will, darling?' Victoria hung out of her office door, like a glamorous Nosferatu rising from her coffin, as Will passed. '*Uno momento, s'il vous plaît.*' She was never one to shy away from both misusing and mixing the languages of Europe.

'Marvellous,' Victoria said, as she gestured for Will to take a seat.

Victoria's Dickensian gothic office – the giant antique dark oak desk, scarlet velvet curtains, brass desk lamp, and, hanging on the wall, an oil painting of Victoria with both a cleavage and a blue silk gown, both of which came straight from the artist's imagination – seemed a little incongruous in the modern office building. Victoria liked it, however; she said it gave her authenticity. Willow had never really been sure what her boss meant by that, but neither was she really sure exactly how old Victoria was. Her face was held in permanent suspended animation somewhere in her late forties. Perhaps she'd had that desk since new.

'Super, darling. Love those.' Victoria nodded at Willow's heeled mules, which peeped out from below her wide-legged trousers. Once Willow had joked that she always wore high heels so that she was the right height for her weight, and everyone had laughed and rolled their eyes, and said things like, 'Oh, Willow, you *are* funny.'

But Willow had only been half joking. Shoes were the one fashion item that always fitted her no matter what her waistline was doing. Her feet were long and slender. She could walk into any shoe store in any city, and although the staff might look at her askance, they would not discreetly or politely tell her that they did not sell plus-size clothing. She would splash out on the kind of shoes that set off a sensible skirt; that would say to any observer, 'I am not frumpy, I am not past my peak, I am not just fat. Look, I

have fantastic shoes that make me interesting, fashionable and show you that there is another side to me.'

'What can I do for you?' Willow asked Victoria, who was tapping her finger thoughtfully on her desk.

'Will, darling, I need you to get me something really marvellous. You know, special, exotic ... really rare and expensive, OK?'

Will enjoyed working for Victoria – every day presented a different challenge – but she did sometimes have the knack of talking entirely in adjectives without ever actually saying anything.

'Can we narrow that down a bit?' Willow asked. 'When you say marvellous, exotic, expensive and rare, are you asking me to ring up that escort service again?'

'No ... no darling, although ... No, no time for sex today.' What might have been disappointment passed fleetingly across Victoria's mostly frozen face. 'What I *mean* is, you know, something delightful, sumptuous – an explosion of delight in your mouth ...'

Briefly Willow thought of Lucy and her dessert.

'Chocolates, darling, *chocolates*! We need some really top-notch wonderful *chocolat* for this afternoon. India Torrance is coming in, and the poor little lamb needs a lot of cheering up. Apparently she's ever so fond of chocolate, although you wouldn't know it to look at her, thank God; I can't make money from a porker.' Victoria eyed Willow, whose affection for confection was burgeoning all too apparently behind her straining buttons. 'Normally I'd say something complimentary to make up for the fact that you're fat, but I haven't got time for social empathy today. We have only a brief period of calm before all kinds of shit starts to hit the fan. It's *most* inconvenient.'

'What sort of shit?' Willow asked as she closed the office door behind her and sat down, pulling her shirt over her waistband, and folding her hands over her stomach. 'Isn't

India supposed to be in Cornwall in a wig and some stays, pining after a man she can never marry?’

India Torrance, twenty-something, had been a relative unknown until she’d won an Olivier Award for best newcomer at the tender age of eighteen, having taken first Stratford and then the West End by storm. In the following four years she had made a film a year that was both critically and commercially acclaimed and had become Victoria’s favourite cash cow. Ethereal, beautiful, upper class but down to earth, India was in demand all over the world, and Victoria was on the verge of agreeing a string of endorsements for her, including perfume, a make-up range, a boho clothing line that India would take credit for designing, and all this while she was in the process of making her fifth feature film, a British costume drama that had, according to Victoria, Oscar written all over it.

‘Yes, she fucking is,’ Victoria said mildly. ‘That’s what she’s supposed to be doing, but she has ... transgressed, darling ... been a teensy bit of a hiccup with my plans for her, and a little bit of “housekeeping” will be required.’

‘Housekeeping?’ Willow’s eyes widened. That was Victoria’s code word for covering up a really massive scandal and turning it to her client’s advantage against all the odds. It was what Victoria was famous for, and most of the reason she was so successful.

‘What’s she done?’

‘It’s more like what she hasn’t done.’ Victoria paused, stabbing the nib of the fountain pen she liked to use into the blotting pad, which Willow was pretty sure was at that moment a substitute for India’s lovely face. ‘Anyway, she’s coming in and I’m committed to treating her with kid gloves, et cetera, so I think we’ll start with some lovely choccies, something that shows we really care about her, blah, blah, blah – OK?’

‘Chocolate, OK, if you say so.’ Willow started to get up, but Victoria stilled her with the flat of her hand.

‘Willow, there is something else ... something a little bit above the call of duty that I need to ask you, and when I say ask, I mean tell.’ Victoria’s brows furrowed about as much as the Botox would allow, always an ominous sign.

Willow waited, patiently confident, after five years with Victoria, that her boss would come to the point eventually.

‘If this had happened next year it wouldn’t have mattered, but she’s just starting to get in her stride. Now is the crucial time, the time when she’s really valuable. I’m this close to making me – *her* – some serious money, and this business ...’ Victoria thumped her desk with her fist, making Willow start back in her chair. ‘Honestly, I don’t mean to sound harsh, but the silly thick-headed little bitch, you’d have thought that the amount of money her parents spent on educating her would have meant she had a bit more sense than the average fuckwit on the street.’

‘You don’t sound harsh at all,’ Willow told her mildly.

‘She’s fucked up, Willow. She’s been having an affair with Hugh Cramner. They’ve been screwing and, now it’s all come out, he’s dropped her like a lead balloon and run back to his wife claiming he was seduced by a whore.’

‘Hugh Cramner!’ Willow gasped. Hugh Cramner, acting legend, his twenty-six-year marriage to his adorable wife often lauded as an example of how to be married. An adoring father of four, he was routinely referred to as ‘a national treasure’ and, it was widely rumoured, only a few short months away from being awarded a knighthood in the New Year Honours List. Willow felt queasy. ‘But he’s old enough to be her father, he practically is ... Oh my God, doesn’t he play her father in this film?’

‘Yes, darling.’ Victoria’s face was immobile, which was the nearest she ever got to despair. ‘Quite. India is absolutely distraught, as you can imagine, heartbroken, devastated, all the misery words. But the worst of it is that the press are about to blow the story wide open. They’ve got photos with more than a touch of nudity and some

phone recordings – sex talk, that sort of thing. They want her side and they’ve given us forty-eight hours to agree to an interview before it goes nuclear. Of course, I’ve taken her off set, popped her into Blakes Hotel for a few days – they are very discreet there; that whole thing with me and that boy band went completely unnoticed – but she won’t even be able to stay there to hide once the story is out.’

‘But if she gives an interview, tells her side of the story ...?’

‘Oh, Will, have you learned nothing, *mon petite amore*? Of course I’m not going to let her give away her story for free to the blasted red-top whore-mongering scum. No, I’m going to *let them* think that’s what we’ll do, to buy her some time, and then I’m going to tell them to fuck off and make her disappear until, A, the shit’s died down and, B, I can make some real money selling her story to the kind of magazine that pays big bucks.’

‘Won’t that make things a bit harder on India?’ Willow shifted in her seat; sometimes Victoria’s ruthlessness unsettled even her.

‘Darling, I’m not here to make her life easy, I’m here to make her famous and rich.’ Victoria shrugged. ‘So when the story breaks on Sunday she’ll be somewhere completely safe, where the press won’t find her.’

‘Right, and you want me to find somewhere, a cottage, maybe, in the country? Ireland?’ Willow asked her, already mentally making a list.

‘No, darling.’ Victoria didn’t miss a beat. ‘I want you to keep her in your flat.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Willow wanted to believe that she had misheard but she knew Victoria well enough to know she had not.

‘You have it,’ Victoria said. ‘Look, darling, I thought and thought about it for ... well, a long enough time to make a serious decision. You know what the paps are like: when it becomes clear she’s not going to play ball they’ll hunt her

down. They won't stop until they've got the woman who seduced Hugh Cramner.' Victoria squared up her padded shoulders, lifting her chin a little. 'I know I'm a monster, but I do care about the people who make me a lot of money, and India is one of them. And the thing is, she can be a bit fragile. You know how creative people are, all manic depressive and melodramatic. India went into months of decline over a bad review, so imagine how she will deal with heartbreak and infamy. Anyway, with her parents in Devon, I'm really *in loco parentis*, and I need to find a person – perhaps the only person who I can truly trust – to care for her.' Victoria pointed at Willow. 'By which I mean you. So if you could just pop her in your spare room for a week or two and make sure she doesn't top herself that would be marvellous.'

Victoria's smile was something to behold, something rather similar to the grimace of one of the mummified Egyptians in the British Museum, deathly and utterly lacking in warmth. Willow would not have been surprised if her face had actually creaked when she snapped the smile off again as quickly as she'd conjured it up.

'Victoria,' Willow said quietly and calmly, standing up to make her point, 'I am not moving India Torrance into my flat. This is worse than when you made me buy drugs for Simeon Burton. Have you any idea what it's like for a middle-aged woman in a trouser suit to turn up at an illegal drugs den at three a.m.?''

'Yes,' Victoria said with some conviction. 'And you are not middle-aged until you're fifty these days, darling. Everyone knows that. It was in the *Daily Mail*: fifty is the new forty, which makes me about thirty.'

'In donkey's years, maybe,' Willow muttered under her breath. 'You're putting me on suicide watch with a world-famous woman in my Wood Green flat? What about that makes any sense? Why don't you just rent a flat, or something? Get her a carer?'

‘Willow, you know the sort of person I am.’ Victoria gestured regally. ‘I’m kind. I’m a kind person, which is why I’m asking *you* to keep an eye on India. You don’t want to be responsible for the poor girl slitting her wrists, do you? I wouldn’t want you to have that on your conscience.’

‘Me!’ Willow fumed impotently.

‘Darling, just do this for me. As your boss – I mean, friend. OK – boss. Look at everything I’ve done for you. I’ve ... well, I pay you quite well, considering. You’ll have the weekend to prepare for her, tidy up, fumigate. And in a shake of a lambkin’s tail I will have turned the whole situation around to our advantage, washed up that bastard Hugh Cramner for good and made us all a lot of money. Well, not you, to be fair, but you never know, perhaps I’ll pop a bit extra in your Christmas bonus. Yes?’

Willow dropped her chin and looked at the pointed toes of her shoes. It was fair to say that there had been plenty of ups and downs in her life, to put it mildly. But, on the whole, working for Victoria Kincade had been one of the ups. Yes, Victoria seemed to think that she owned Willow body and soul, which Willow thought she might have signed over along with her weekends and evenings, when she agreed her contract in suspiciously red ink. But still, Victoria had been good to her and she didn’t mind Willow’s foibles; she actively seemed to like them. Besides, it was pointless fighting Victoria once she’d made her mind up. She was like the Black Death personified: there was no cure for her.

‘Fine,’ Willow relented. ‘Fine. Whatever you say. I’ll go out and get chocolate.’

‘Thank you, darling.’ Victoria didn’t sound nearly as grateful as Willow thought she should. ‘We’ll discuss the details along with India when she gets here.’ Victoria tossed Willow a credit card. ‘Get yourself some while you’re at it. You know you want to.’

Chapter Two

MANY PEOPLE WOULD be a good deal more alarmed and overwhelmed by the prospect of unexpectedly putting up a dumped, internationally renowned actress than Willow Briars was, but for Willow it was almost as expected as it was unexpected. Or to put it another way, if someone had told her on her way to work that morning that she was about to be forced to cohabit with a celebrity then she wouldn't have been in the least bit surprised. Over the last few years, Willow had come to realise, and mostly enjoy, the fact that working for Victoria was a bit like following a white rabbit into Wonderland on a daily basis, where it was sensible to always expect the unexpected, and beware the Red Queen. In fact, as she swung her bag onto her shoulder and headed out of the offices of Victoria Kincade Talent Ltd and onto Golden Square to take the short walk to Liberty, the imminent arrival of India Torrance came pretty low on her list of worries.

Willow was irritated that Victoria hadn't given her time to think, but then that was Victoria. She didn't like to give her people time to think in case they took it upon themselves to think that they didn't like her plan for them at all and wanted to change their minds. Victoria wasn't a fan of people who changed their minds. It was a trait in her boss that Willow had learned to adapt to early on in her career by ceasing to think unless Victoria expressly asked her to, which was absolutely fine by her. Thinking, dwelling, wondering were all activities that Willow thought were exceptionally overrated.

No, it was not the prospect of having a celebrity to stay that rattled Willow. After all, she worked in one of the world's foremost talent agencies; part of her job was regularly babysitting people who either by accident, luck and, very occasionally, talent found themselves removed from the rest of the population by extreme fame. Having India Torrance slumming it in her flat would be no different from the time that Victoria made her go on a book-signing tour with a WAG who, at the age of twenty-four, had just finished the first instalment of her autobiography. It had been one of Willow's jobs to clear the toilets of any members of the public, and to make sure there were no offending smells lingering by the time her client arrived. And once Victoria had woken Willow up at four in the morning and sent her to Chelsea in a black cab to what could only be described as a brothel to pick out a suitable escort for a very shy married male film actor over from Hollywood for a few days. As Willow relayed the chosen girl (she had to be brunette, curvy and willing) back across London, she had been obliged to make her sign a series of watertight confidentiality agreements and, as Victoria had put it, mildly threaten her as to what would happen to her if she even thought about kissing and telling. Willow had felt sick to the pit of her stomach as she ushered the young woman past the hotel concierge and took her up to the actor's room, fighting her disgust at what Victoria had asked her to do.

'Why do you do this?' she'd felt compelled to ask the girl, who couldn't have been much more than twenty, shivering in a sequinned shift dress that skimmed the tops of her thighs, as they stood in the lift. The girl had shrugged as if she didn't really know.

'The money's good,' she'd told Willow with an absent smile.

'But doesn't it make your flesh crawl?' Willow had asked her, fascinated.

‘It’s only sex,’ the girl had told her. ‘It’s no big deal. And sometimes something cool happens, like you get to fuck a film star.’

‘That’s nice,’ Willow had said. She sort of understood, and there was a little part of her that was jealous of the bravado the girl displayed. Perhaps she meant it.

But still, Willow had felt no better as she stood on the other side of the locked door, making some final arrangements with the star’s bodyguard before she finally went and found breakfast. It was the thought, just the thought, that that young girl might not want to be there, that she might be frightened, or feel helpless or sick that had made Willow, for the briefest of moments, think of going back through that door and rescuing her. But then she heard a peal of girlish laughter, like the tinkle of glass breaking, and she had removed her hand from the door and left. Not everyone wanted to be rescued.

What really gave Willow pause, as she pushed open the beautiful oak doors and made her way into Liberty, stopping briefly to inhale the delicious scent of polished wood, perfume and chocolate, was to have someone else, another person, staying in her home. Willow did not like people. No, that wasn’t exactly true: she loved some people, approximately four, if she were honest, although she’d only openly admit to three of those. She felt obliged to stay in touch with her mother, with whom she had not got on in years, and had a deep respect and affection for the largely terrible human being that was her boss. She enjoyed a friendly relationship with most of her colleagues, was always extremely personable with clients, no matter what their foibles or tics, and got on perfectly well with the friends of the one friend she had outside of work. But on the whole Willow did not like people, and she especially didn’t like them too close to her, in her house, using her bathroom, quite possibly for crying and perhaps even slitting their wrists. The only person she’d ever been able

to live with successfully was Holly, and she'd always known she would lose Holly one day. Since her divorce Willow liked to be herself in her own home. It was one of the few places where she could really relax, buy a KFC bargain bucket for dinner without anyone judging her, eat an entire box of Maltesers in an evening, sit about with her buttons undone, her bra slung over the back of the sofa and, most crucially of all, breathe out. And then in again, and out again.

Even breathing wouldn't be possible any more once India Torrance was *in situ*. Willow would have to be on high alert all the time, keeping India hidden and sane, the latter a task for which Willow was most definitely underqualified. And if something terrible did happen, if the press discovered India, or the girl did harm herself in any way, then the person who would get the blame would be Willow.

From what little Willow knew about her personally, India seemed to be a nice enough person, well brought up, well spoken. She was certainly very beautiful, in a fresh-faced way. She never seemed to need even a speck of make-up to gild those sparkling eyes and long light brown hair that framed her delicate features, although the stylists liked to glam her up for the red carpet and she took it well, an actress playing the vamp. India was still in that bloom of youth, that reign of beauty, that when you are in your twenties seems like your right, one that you never expect to lose.

Pausing in front of a mirrored wall punctuated with handbags of all shapes and colours, floating on glass shelves, Willow observed her own face.

For the last twenty years, perhaps more, Willow had been allowing herself to grow steadily fatter, adding a few pounds more every year and never quite finding the time or the will to make the necessary changes that could either halt or reverse the gradual increase in her waistline, hips and bottom. Willow met her own eyes, and regarded them

for a moment, deep blue, almost violet, with a random fleck of black in one iris. They could be quite arresting, intense, intoxicating, someone had once whispered in her ear.

Everyone always said she had lovely eyes.

And Willow had great hair, she was a genuine blonde; no need for highlights or glosses or half a squeezed lemon for Willow. Her thick, golden, waist-length hair fell in soft curls. Always silky and soft to the touch, it was her crowning glory. Willow had it styled every six weeks by a celebrity hairdresser who owned a high-end salon in Covent Garden and gave her a massive discount for sending stars his way. He'd trim the ends whilst telling her that she had hair any star would envy.

Her skin was radiant, soft and smooth without a single blemish. Even at the age of thirty-nine, even after a horrible divorce, even after everything, she still looked a good ten years younger than she was. Willow would routinely get asked how she did it and she would reply, it was in the genes, although once, at some tortuous family occasion, one of her mother's friends had told her that big girls always have great skin.

'It's the fat, you see. Stops your face falling in,' she'd told her as if she were delivering excellent news.

'Fuck it, I'm having another piece of cake then,' Willow had said, enjoying the shock her casually dropped profanity had had on one of Mother's WI set.

'The fat' - as if it wasn't part of her, as if it were a separate entity all of its own that she could somehow absent-mindedly lose, or shed like a butterfly shrugging off a cocoon. But that wasn't going to happen. The fat was more than part of her. Sometimes Willow felt like it *was* her, all of her, marbling throughout her whole being, not just her body, but her mind, her heart and perhaps even her soul. Perhaps she had a fat soul.

Even so, Willow could never blame her weight on her genes or her metabolism or big bones or any other excuse.

Her weight was all her own doing. A fact she was certain of because she had another reflection, one much crueller than any mirror she stood in front of could ever return. She had her own identical twin to look at, her very own genetic clone, to show in glorious Technicolor exactly what could have been if only she had been better at saying no.

Holly was almost her exact double, with the very same violet eyes, including the dark fleck, honey-golden hair and wonderful skin. The twins were the same in every respect except one. Holly was a healthy size eight and Willow was a large size eighteen. Whenever Willow looked at her beautiful sister, whom she loved more than anyone alive, and whom she knew loved her back equally, she had to confront on each and every occasion what she might have looked like, what she might live like, if only she could find whatever magic ingredient it was that would make her stop eating much more than she needed to every single day.

Willow stared at the woman who was staring back at her from behind a tangerine Mulberry bag, her rounded face, the gentle pouch of a double chin that billowed softly beneath her jaw, the buttons of her shirt that strained against the pressure of flesh building behind them, and the surge of fat that blossomed over the waistband of her wide-legged trousers. She could remember exactly the last day that she and Holly had looked identical.

It had been on the day of her stepfather's funeral in Christchurch. He'd been diagnosed with prostate cancer ten months before, and succumbed to his short illness, as the notice in the paper said, at home and at peace with his loving wife and doting stepdaughters. The twins had never known their real father and Willow's recollection of life before Ian shone in her memory like polished silver, despite the hardships they'd faced. Back then it always seemed to be summer, and she remembered being taken out for picnics on a school night, because the cupboard was bare and the bakers on the corner sold sandwiches at half price

at the end of the day. They'd climb the side of the steep hill on a windy day, paper napkins sailing away on the breeze, and Willow and Holly, hands linked, would roll down the slope, laughing and laughing as the world spun out of control all around them, secure in the knowledge they would always have each other.

Then their mother met Ian, Mr Sinclair, the local bank manger. Imogene Briars had made her girls wait for her while she went in for her interview, careful to point out her needy charges, drumming their worn-down heels on the metal chair legs in unison, as she disappeared into his office. She'd gone in to extend her overdraft and came out with an invitation to dinner. After a whirlwind romance, during which Willow remembered her mother constantly smiling, they were married. Inside a year Ian had brought everything into their lives that had been missing before: stability, order, security. There weren't picnics on a school night any more, or evenings spent rolling down hills until after it got dark. But neither were there winters when the tips of their fingers went blue because the power had been cut off, or they had beans on toast for tea the third night in a row. From the age of eight Willow and Holly gained the closest they had ever had to a father, but it never occurred to Willow until they buried him, how much she loved him. And when she realised that was true, the only thing she could think of to do was eat.

On the day of Ian's funeral Willow's mother had been inconsolable, retiring to bed with a large gin and Valium, before the guests had left the wake. Holly, turned out so neatly in a black dress with a white collar, had done her best to step into their mother's shoes, and Willow, bereft and feeling a sudden empty crater open inside her, had sat quite alone at the kitchen table and eaten sixty ready-cooked cocktail sausages straight out of the packet, one after the other without stopping. Later, after everyone had gone and Holly had been upstairs to check their mum was

still breathing, she had come down and found Willow still sitting in the kitchen.

‘She’s never going to get over this,’ Holly had said, taking out of the fridge a chocolate cake that a neighbour had baked and putting it on the table. ‘We’re going to have to look after her now.’

‘I know,’ Willow replied. ‘Well, we’re almost fifteen now, anyway.’

‘Just the three of us again,’ Holly had said, her eyes meeting Willow’s, full of apprehension.

‘Just the three of us, yes.’ Willow remembered feeling like the gulf inside her must reach through her toes and into the guts of the earth, the prospect of life without Ian had so terrified her.

From that day on she had drifted ever further from the life her identical twin lived. When Holly, size eight, went to university, Willow, size ten, moved into a bedsit over a chip shop and started at a temping agency, moving from job to job, quite happy never to settle anywhere. When Holly, size eight, started as a graduate trainee for a fashion house in the West End, Willow, size twelve, automatically went along as requisite flatmate and started working as a dentist’s receptionist. For four years the two of them lived together; a perfect, happy period in Willow’s life that always seemed to be full of fun. Holly and her boyfriend, Graham, were the sensible ones and Willow, curvier than her sister, flirty and sexy, was much in demand, dating an endless stream of men, never really able to settle on one. That all ended when Holly, twenty-five and size eight, married Gray, with Willow, size fourteen, standing at the altar in a bridesmaid’s dress that had been dyed to match her eyes.

The following years were almost featureless in Willow’s memory. Holly, size eight, had worked her way up in the fashion industry, travelled with Gray whenever she could, gradually spending more and more time visiting their mother and spending less time with Willow, who seemed to