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opening extract from

My Sister Jodie

written by

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published by

Doubleday,

an imprint of Random House Children's Books

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Jodie. It was the first word I ever said. Most babies lisp *Mumma* or *Dadda* or *Drinkie* or *Teddy*. Maybe everyone names the thing they love best. I said *Jodie*, my sister. OK, I said *Dodie* because I couldn't say my Js properly, but I knew what I meant.

I said her name first every morning.

'Jodie? Jodie! Wake up. *Please* wake up!'

She was hopeless in the mornings. I always woke up early – six o'clock, sometimes even earlier. When I was little, I'd delve around my bed to find my three night-time teddies, and then take them for a dawn trek up and down my duvet. I put my knees up and they'd clamber up the mountain and then slide down. Then they'd burrow back to base camp and tuck into their pretend porridge for breakfast.

I wasn't allowed to eat anything so early. I wasn't even allowed to get up. I was fine once I could read. Sometimes I got through a whole book before the alarm went off. Then I'd lie staring at the ceiling, making up my own stories. I'd wait as long as I could, and then I'd climb into Jodie's bed and whisper her name, give her a little shake and start telling her the new story. They were always about two sisters. They went through an old wardrobe into a magic land, or they went to stage school and became famous actresses, or they went to a ball in beautiful long dresses and danced in glass slippers.

It was always hard to get Jodie to wake up properly. It was as if she'd fallen down a long dark tunnel in the night. It took her ages to crawl back to the surface. But eventually she'd open one eye and her arm went round me automatically. I'd cuddle up and carry on telling her the story. I had to keep nudging her and saying, 'You *are* still awake, aren't you, Jodie?'

'I'm wide awake,' she mumbled, but I had to give her little prods to make sure.

When she *was* awake, she'd sometimes take over the story. She'd tell me how the two sisters ruled over the magic land as twin queens, and they acted in their own daily television soap, and they danced with each other all evening at the ball until way past midnight.

Jodie's stories were always much better than mine. I begged her to write them down but she couldn't be bothered.

'*You* write them down for me,' she said. 'You're the one that wants to be the writer.'

I wanted to write my own stories and illustrate them too.

'I can help you with the ideas,' said Jodie. 'You can do all the drawings and I'll do the colouring in.'

'So long as you do it carefully in the right colours,' I said, because Jodie nearly always went over the lines, and sometimes she coloured faces green and hair blue just for the fun of it.

'OK, Miss Picky,' said Jodie. 'I'll help you out but that won't be my *real* job. I'm going to be an actress. That's what I really want to do. Imagine, standing there, all lit up, with everyone listening, hanging on your every word!'

'Maybe one of my stories could be turned into a play and then you could have the star part.'

'Yeah, I'll be an overnight success and be offered mega millions to make movies and we'll live together in a huge great mansion,' said Jodie.

'What does a mansion look like?' I said. 'Can it have towers? Can our room be right at the top of a tower?'

'*All* the rooms are our rooms, but we'll share a very special room right at the top of a tower, only I'm not going to let you grow your hair any longer.' She pulled one of my plaits. 'I don't want you tossing it out of the window and letting any wicked old witches climb up it.' Jodie nudged me. She had started to have a lot of arguments with our mother. She often called her a witch – or worse – but only under her breath.

'Don't worry, I'll keep my plaits safely tied up. No access for wicked witches,' I said, giggling, though I felt a bit mean to Mum.

'What about handsome princes?'

'*Definitely* not,' I said. 'It'll be just you and me in Mansion Towers, living happily ever after.'

It was just our silly early-morning game, though I took it more seriously than Jodie. I drew our imaginary mansion, often slicing it open like a doll's house so I could illustrate every room. I gave us a huge black velvet sofa with two big black toy pumas lolling at either end. We had two real black cats for luck lapping from little bowls in the kitchen, two poodles curled up together in their dog basket, while twin black ponies grazed in a paddock beside our rose garden. I coloured each rose carefully and separately, deep red, salmon, peach, very pale pink, apricot and yellow. I even tried to do every blade of grass individually but had to see sense after dabbing delicately for half an hour, my hand aching.

I gave us a four-poster bed with red velvet curtains and a ruby chandelier, and one wall was a vast television screen. We had a turquoise swimming pool in the basement (with our twin pet dolphins) and a roof garden between the towers where skylarks and bluebirds skimmed the blossom trees.

I printed the title of each of our books in the library in weeny writing and drew every item of food on our kitchen shelves. I gave us a playroom with a trampoline and a trapeze and a jukebox, and one of those machines you get at the seaside where you have to manoeuvre a crane to pick up little furry teddies. I drew tiny teddies every colour of the rainbow, and I had a shelf of big teddies in our bedroom, and a shelf of old-fashioned dolls with real hair and glass eyes, and a splendid rocking horse big enough for both of us to ride on.

I talked about it to Jodie as if we'd really live there one day. Sometimes I imagined it so vividly it seemed like a real place. I just had to work out which road to take out of town and then I'd round a corner and spot the towers. I'd run fast, through the elaborate wrought-iron gates, up to the front door with the big lion's-head knocker. I'd know how to press the lion's snout with my finger and the door would spring open and I'd step inside and Jodie would be there waiting for me.

I wasn't stupid, I knew it wasn't really real, but it felt as if it might be all the same.

Then one morning at breakfast everything changed.