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Opening extract from

The Kissing Club

Written by

Julia Clarke

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Chapter One

Today I told my parents I am pregnant. I told them it was a virgin birth. I didn't know what else to say. I could hardly tell them the truth, could I? After I'd said it I realized what a completely crazy thing it was to have uttered. I would have liked to laugh to take away the puzzled, strained look on their faces. But instead—just like when I was a naughty child telling fibs—I elaborated:

'It was my birthday. There was a big thunderstorm. Do you remember? And when the lightning came down from the sky an angel came down too and told me I would have a baby. I think it will be a boy. I'm almost certain that is what she said . . . ' I paused for a moment, as if going through the conversation again in my head: which was an extremely phoney thing to do because, of course, I was making it all up on the spur of the moment.

For a split second I faltered—I nearly said, 'I'm sorry, that was a load of pooh. Forget I said that.' But I couldn't. I was too caught up in the story. I'd managed, since joining the Kissing Club, not to tell proper lies. And being truthful had made me feel good about

myself, because my parents have always been really strict about things like truth and honesty, and I always wanted to please them (even when I wasn't able to do so).

This sudden eruption of lying was the first time for years that I had told a great big, obvious, deliberate untruth straight out like that. (Although, of course, I'd carried on telling the usual little white lies to avoid hurting people's feelings.)

But suddenly, terrifyingly, telling a proper lie was back again like a seriously addictive vice. As if making up fantasy was a snort of some unbelievable drug that hooks you immediately, and never ever lets you get away. So that even after years of being clean, you get the taste, just one tiny taste, and you're back—a junky once again.

I took a deep breath and rejoiced in the comfort of it. It just felt so much better than the truth. It was like having a warm bath instead of a cold shower. It was like ice cream on a hot day. It was like freedom from pain.

Despite all that, part of me (my conscience, I guess), was shocked at how easily all those lies had gushed out from me—and spoken with such sincerity too! I suppose it's because I would have liked it to be true. I would have given anything for it to be true. It would be wonderful if an angel really had come and told me about the baby . . . If conceiving really had been a magical, wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime-I'll-never-forget-it-because-it-was-so-special-type-moment.

What was scary was that once I'd started with the stupid story of the virgin birth I found I couldn't stop. It was just so easy and it felt so disturbingly good. For the first time in ages I felt as if I was in control of something.

With the precision of a con-artist I smiled at my parents and added: 'Although I shouldn't say "she" should I? I should just say "angel"—because strictly speaking angels don't have a sex, do they? I mean they are neutral.' There was a long pause. 'Or I should say they are hermaphrodites, that's the correct term, isn't it?' I added that very precisely—as if getting everything right was really important to me.

After I'd said that there was complete and utter silence from them. The ticking of the clock on the wall sounded like a giant heart. And outside I could hear the crows cawing and calling to each other from the chestnut trees at the bottom of the garden.

I was silent too. I just stared at the food on the table, desperation growing inside me like a tidal surge. We always eat in the kitchen on Saturday lunchtime and for breakfast. My parents are quite robotic and habitual and so our lives follow very set patterns. They are totally well organized. So Saturday lunchtimes we have a barbeque out on the patio if the weather is kind or a barbeque-type meal cooked in the kitchen if it isn't.

Today, as it is a cold and blustery October day with a hint of winter in the wind, we sat in the kitchen. My mother had cooked really scrummy lamb chops,

roasted to a crisp in a hot oven, with vegetables that had been rolled around in the lamb fat and browned. Also, as a side dish, we had a wonderful vegetable rice with little baby prawns and sweetcorn mixed in.

Two minutes after conception I'd felt hungry and I haven't been able to stop eating ever since. I have doubled in size over the last four months—and all of me is now so fat that no one has ever thought to ask about the bulge above my waistband. It could be caused by greed or pregnancy or even some kind of awful terminal disease which makes you overeat until you explode.

I don't know why I chose that moment to tell them. I could have kept quiet for a bit longer. I could have thought about what to do—asked someone for advice—or sat my parents down and talked to them sensibly and seriously. Instead, saying that about the angel made it seem as if I was mucking about. They looked down at the food on their plates. They didn't believe me. They thought it was some kind of sick joke.

For a moment I wondered if I really had told them such a complete load of crap. My brain seems to have turned to mush these days so maybe it was all a hallucination. I have become bovine—all I think about these days is sleeping and eating. And being back at school and talking sensibly to people has been impossibly hard.

But, unfortunately, I could tell from the length of the silence, and their crestfallen faces, that I really had

spoken. I had told them the truth (well, part of the truth anyway) and I suppose I'd done it because I wanted them to know. That must have been the reason. If I really analyse my feelings then a bit of me is hurt that they haven't worked it out for themselves like weeks ago. I mean we are a family—we are meant to be close. And here I am, so changed that I don't recognize myself, and my parents didn't seem to have spotted a thing.

I suppose I have been waiting, almost holding my breath, for my mother to work out what is happening, has happened, to me. I couldn't quite believe that she hadn't registered that I don't drink coffee any more but crave hot chocolate, that I can't eat anything but fruit for breakfast, but pig out after ten in the morning on as much carb as I can get my hands on. Why has she not noticed that for elevenses I can eat half a loaf of bread, toasted and layered with jam and cream cheese, and still be ready for lunch? Why hasn't she put two and two together and come up with a big fat FOUR—to match her big fat pregnant daughter?

How ironic that it should be food—the big obsession in my life at the moment—that finally brought it out into the open and made me tell! Because today, as I heaped my plate with peppers, courgettes, mushrooms, and as much of the lovely rice as I could balance onto the serving spoon, my mother said gently, 'I should go a little easy on the rice if I were you, Emily. It's full of calories. Why don't you fill up on some salad?'

Silently my father handed me the salad bowl. I reached over and took hold of it. My mouth was actually quite wet with saliva because the smell of the meal was making my taste buds melt and my stomach was screaming out that it needed food and fast. I reached into the salad bowl and picked up a baby tomato. It was greenish and firm, just the way I like them. I popped it into my mouth, crushing it greedily with my teeth.

'Tongs,' my mother said, her tone reproving, as she held the implement out to me. 'Don't use your fingers, please.'

'Sorry,' I mumbled. 'I'm hungry.'

'We can see that,' my father said with a grin; he was trying to be lighthearted. He shot my mother a glance (which they didn't think I saw); it was as if he was asking her not to be hard on me.

And it was then that I said it: 'Actually—I'm hungry because I'm pregnant. I'm eating for two.'

And that bit at least was true. I should have left it there, let the idea bed in—waited for the questions—instead of telling that story about the angel. As it was, as soon as I had finished with my virgin birth saga I began to eat (I was so desperate for food I would have killed anyone who tried to take that plate away from me). And all the while my parents sat in stunned silence, looking down at their plates, making a pretence of eating, while I—with a degree of heartlessness which shocked me—gnawed at my chop bones like a ravenous dog. Not even the shock and anxiety radiating from my parents like earth tremors could affect my appetite.

Eventually I finished. I suppressed a burp as I wiped my mouth. 'Thank you that was lovely,' I said gratefully. I looked at my mother's plate with concern. Her chops were untouched.

'Can I have your chops—It's such a shame to waste them, isn't it?' Before she had a chance to reply I reached over and speared them with my fork.

My mother looked as if she might cry. 'I think we'll have coffee in the conservatory,' she said, her voice very faint, not much more than a whisper.

'Nothing for me, thanks. I might have some ice cream when I've finished up here,' I said, without looking up from my plate of food.

They didn't answer and I carried on eating. Out of the corner of my eye I watched them: my mother pouring hot water onto the filters, my father fetching cream and laying out a tray with mugs and sugar. When it was all ready my father carried the tray, with hands that were not quite steady, and they left the room without a word. I heard the doors between the kitchen and the conservatory close and the low hum of their voices.

I paused before I ate the last of the vegetable rice straight out of the bowl, and wondered in a moment of sharp pity what would the be worst problem for them: a daughter who has an eating disorder, a daughter who has a personality defect resulting in hallucinations and religious mania, or a daughter who is pregnant.

Unfortunately, at the present time, I expect they are seriously worried that they have a daughter with all three.