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Opening extract from

Little Celeste

Written by

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For my own two beautiful baby girls, now all grown up – Poppy and Lola xxx

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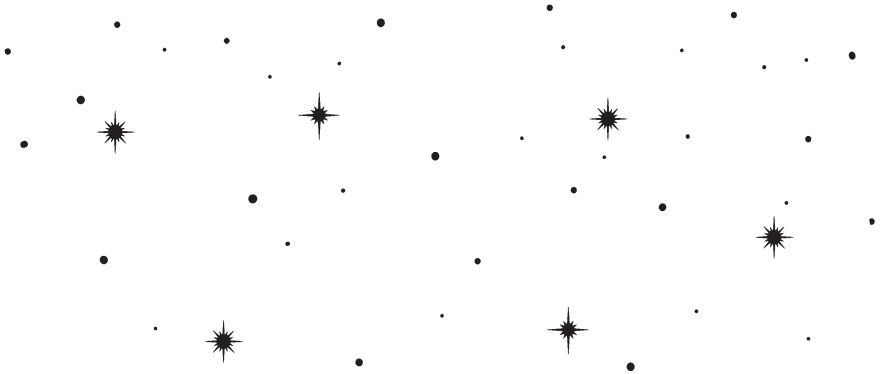
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Chapter One

I was only out of my room for two minutes, I swear it. But when I got back, there she was.

A baby.

Lying there on my duvet, crying her head off.

A real, true-life baby. Come from nowhere.

I stood there, staring at her, with my brain jammed. Shaking my head. Opening and closing my eyes.

Oh my GOD! Where had she popped up from?

Was she a *ghost*?

But she didn't look like one – she was proper

pink and gurgly like a normal baby. And she wasn't wearing a flowy, ghosty cloak – she had on a real baby suit with a big red raspberry on the front.

I reached out towards her. I was thinking: *will my hand go straight through her?* I poked her quickly in the tummy. She felt solid, squidgy and warm. Definitely not made of cold cloud like ghosts.

I got even closer. Bent right over her.

She smelt sort of nice, like vanilla ice cream. She looked right back at me, with ginormous eyes full of tears. She stopped wailing the moment she saw me, and made a *cooee* baby noise. That did it – I ran backwards out of my room, tripping over the stuff on my floor.

'MUM-M-M-M!' I yelled.

Then I remembered that Mum'd gone out. Out looking for Scott AGAIN. Even though he didn't want to be her dumb boyfriend any more.

No good me calling for her.

Not now she's basically forgotten she has a daughter . . .

I was on my own in the house. At least I'd thought I was . . . UNTIL A BABY SUDDENLY APPEARED ON MY BED!

But babies don't just turn up on their own, do they? Or go wriggling off on their nappy bums into strange people's houses? Had someone brought her in?

I ran to the front door.

It was locked.

I ran back to the kitchen. The back door was locked and bolted. And all the windows were shut. No one could have got in.

Still, I checked in every room. I tiptoed up and down the stairs, peeking round all the doors, behind chairs and cupboards, hardly breathing, my skin all goosebumpy. It's a small house so there weren't many hiding places.

There was definitely nobody there.

It was just me and the weirdo baby.

I was kind of scared and not scared at the same time. Because she wasn't really a scary thing, being that titchy and babyish. So I went back to my bedroom door and peered round.

She was sucking her tiny thumb, happy as anything now.

I went in and crept a bit nearer.

'How'd you get in here, little frog?' I whispered. I stroked her face with the tip of my finger, and her skin felt as soft as marshmallows. 'Who's your mummy, eh?'

Oh God, it isn't Mum's, is it?

My tummy turned.

No!

Of course I knew I was being daft. There was no way Mum could've had a secret baby without me knowing. She had a dead flat tummy because she only ate get-skinny food – so obviously I would've noticed if she'd had a baby-belly sticking out under her skimpy tops.

But where on earth *had* the baby come from? It was like she'd just dropped out of the sky onto my duvet from nowhere.

Like magic.

Magic!

I got freaked out again then. It was all too loopy. I leapt off the bed away from her. I had

no blinking idea what to do. All I could think of was showing her to Mum when she came back from stalking Scott.

Scott the Toadstool. That's what I called him behind his hairy back, because he smelt of disgusting, gone-off mushrooms. And he was always dead narky with me – but only on the sly when Mum couldn't hear.

I was glad glad glad he had gone, hopefully forever this time. Because now maybe me and Mum could be just the two of us – like we were when Toadstool went on a boys' night out, and she curled up in my bed with me to watch a funny film. Or even better, like we were when I was little, before she'd even met Scott. When it was just me and her all the LOVELY time . . .

Except Mum wasn't glad he'd gone.

She's turned to mush without him.

The baby was wriggling and kicking her legs about. I put pillows along the edge of the bed, just in case she roly-polied off and bumped her head. I knew normal babies did stuff like that, so maybe a magic one might too.

Then I squeezed my bum onto my windowsill. I could keep an eye on Babyface from there, and watch out for Mum.

I stared down at the traffic below, scoffing jelly babies. It was getting dark out, so I could see my blurry reflection in the window. I frowned. Mum was so pretty, but not me. I reckoned I took after our cat, Fuzz-wuzz – kind of squish-faced and wiggy.

Please come home and help me . . .

I kept looking over at the tiny thing. She'd fallen asleep – I could hear her soft, whispery breaths. Sometimes I tried tricking her – glancing away, and then back really fast to see if she disappeared. But she kept on being there.

I half wished Lexi was in too, because she always knew what to do about everything– she was a bit bossy like that. But of course she was in Ibiza, lucky her. And anyway, she'd kind of gone off with Sophie Briggs at the end of term, and started leaving me out . . .

I didn't really care.

Well, only a bit . . .

Sigh.

Still no Mum.

Before Scott went, she'd have fussed me into bed by this time – in between cooking his stupid tea, of course. She'd have nagged me to clean my teeth . . . kissed me goodnight . . . *Not just ignored me* . . .

The window was getting all steamed up, so I rubbed away a peephole with my sleeve. I could see some faint twinkles in the sky above the sea. I drew a picture of the baby on the steamy glass and made two of the little stars into her eyes.

Angel baby.

Mia and Chanel walked past in the street below, wearing identical pink hoodies. I quickly hid behind my curtain.

Ugh . . .

Bad luck for me they were starting Wirthing Secondary soon too. Brainbox Lexi had got in to the girls' High School. And Sophie Briggs had. But not me.

New horrid GROSS school in three weeks, two days . . .

By myself.

Ugh again.

I didn't mean to, but I said 'UGH' out loud. It startled the baby, and she did a lying-down starfish jump in her sleep. I clamped my hand over my mouth. I didn't want her to wake up, no way.

Oh, come on, Mum!

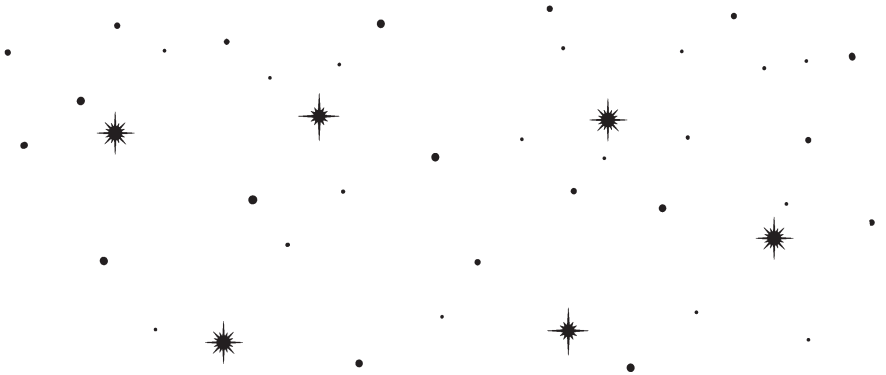
Maybe she isn't coming back . . .

I shook that thought out of my head. Of course she was . . .

Not that I knew what I was going to say when she did come home.

Like: 'Hello. By the way, you know you've lost the total plot since Scott left you on Saturday. Well, now I've gone mad too, because I think I've got a magic baby on my bed.'

It was all double, triple, raspberry-ripple loony.



Chapter Two

The phone went.

It wasn't Mum.

It was her boss at the hotel asking why she hadn't been to her receptionist job. She hadn't even rung in.

'She's a bit poorly,' I lied. 'Bad tummy – you know, a sicky thing.'

Sick in the head more like. Gone off her rocker over pointless Scott.

It was gone nine by the time I heard the door. Babyface was still kipping, and I was nearly

dropping off myself, just sitting there waiting.

I didn't go downstairs straight off. I stayed on the windowsill and drew fast swirls in the steam until the glass squeaked.

Then I reached for the baby, holding my breath, and picked her up, dead awkward-like. She felt like a dough dolly, warm and damp and floppy. Her head lolled forward and I caught it, but she stayed asleep.

I carried her down the stairs – like a plate of dinner, all out the front.

Mum was sat on the sofa, ogling her phone. She'd kicked off her high heels into a heap – not put them back all super-tidy in the cupboard like she usually did.

She was prettied up in her best black dress. Even though it was a Tuesday night.

She glanced up. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her face looked blotchy.

Has she been crying?

My belly flipped.

Mum, like, never cries . . .

She was gibbering at me.

‘Sorry I was so long, babe, but I couldn’t find him again.’ Her voice wobbled. ‘Looked in both pubs, and sent him loads of texts, but he didn’t show. No one’s seen him – or his van.’ She sighed and shook her head. ‘He’s dodging me.’

She was looking at me. Looking straight at me. And at the baby.

‘Mum.’ I walked over to her. ‘Mum, lookie what I’ve got.’

It sounded dim, that: ‘lookie’. I said it in a bright, fun voice like I was showing her an interesting beetle or a cake I’d made. God, even my voice was going strange now, as well.

‘Mum?’

‘What, darlin’?’ she said. She was prodding her phone with a long nail. Probably texting Toadstool again.

‘No, Mum . . . LOOK!’ I practically stuffed the baby in her face. ‘Baby!’

She looked. ‘What? What you on about, Shelley?’

The baby was almost in her lap. She was staring right, right, right at her, but Mum flipping well

couldn't see her. She really truly couldn't see her.

I was really scared then. I got pins and needles and my head started spinning. I swayed and staggered forward a step and somehow managed to knock Mum's phone out of her hands. It crashed flat on its face onto the wooden floor.

'Oh, for pity's sake, Shell!' Mum squeaked in a panic. 'If you've broken my screen . . .' She snatched up her phone like she'd die without it. She sighed. 'No, it's OK . . . phew . . .'

I opened my mouth to try once more.

Please Mum . . . switch on your eyes.

But she just half glanced up and tutted.

'Bed now please, Shell. Be my good girl and go straight up. I'll come and say night-night in a bit.'

I went. Like her good girl.

Carried the baby back upstairs, my legs wobbling.

I put her down on my bed and sat right on the other end away from her, breathing hard. She woke up and started whimpering.

Come on, Shells, pull yourself together.

My head whizzed.

Oh my God! Mum couldn't see the baby. She actually couldn't.

I turned on my big light, so I wasn't so scared. I stared at her again. Looked at her really properly this time.

She was so tiny – almost as small as a baby doll. Was it me, or was she way smaller than normal babies? And she had these strange eyes. They were pale purple like lavender flowers. Beautiful. I'd never seen eyes like that before in my whole, entire life. Lavender eyes.

I caught my breath.

Blimey, maybe she's a fairy baby!

Then I almost laughed my head off at myself. A fairy baby! I was losing it now. But secretly, I kind of hoped it might be true.

I shuffled up the bed nearer her. Gently I unpoppered her suit. I slid my hand in, feeling her back for wings. Totally loony tunes, I know.

No wings.

Shame . . .

Just a dinky baby back. All soft and weeny.

Her ears were normal too – small, pink and

round. Not pointy. If she was a baby fairy or a pixie, they would be a bit pointy, wouldn't they? Maybe . . .

She started squeaking right then. Her face went all red. One second later, I had to hide my nose in my sleeve. What a right old pong and a half! She'd gone and done a poop in her nappy, and she smelt real, all right. I didn't think ghosts and fairies usually went around pooping at people. Or did they? Well, I didn't know.

She arched her back and bleated louder.

Now what am I supposed to do with a magic baby who's mucked her nappy?

Then suddenly I knew.

Brainwave.

I opened my cupboard and grabbed a stuffed-full carrier bag. Mum had tidied my room the other week and bagged up all my too-babyish tat for the charity shop. I rummaged through the bag. I knew what I was looking for. My old baby doll, Kylie.

I tugged her out. She was still a bit sticky from where I'd fed her dunked Jammy Dodgers a few

summers ago. But she had these cool nappies, which were exactly like real ones but smaller. Perfect size for Little Miss Fairy. I could use one to change her tiny bum.

Then for the stinky bit.

I went to the bathroom and got some wet bog roll. Slowly, I took off her suit – it was tricky because her fingers stuck out all spiky and got in the way. She got in a right paddy. Her rubbery little legs kicked about, her face went red like a squashed raspberry, and she screamed her head off. I waited, ready for Mum to come up and see what all the racket was about, but she never did.

And she hasn't even come to say goodnight, like she promised.

'Oh well, little frog,' I said to her, 'seems like Mum can't see you *or* hear you.' It was proper weird.

Maybe she's just too busy crying herself to turn her ears on.

God, I didn't even know why she cared so much about Toadstool! She was so pretty and young, and he was hairy-bum-faced and ancient. She reckoned

he was sweet to her sometimes – like sending her the odd suck-up, cheesy card. But really he just treated her like his little maidy-servant. Honestly, he walked about like he was the king or something. Getting us to bring him his tea and beer. Expecting Mum to do all his whiffy washing and cook him fry-ups that she didn't even like.

Ugh, I don't even want to think about stupid him.

I got busy with the baby again. I cleaned up her bott, and put on the clean nappy and her raspberry suit. It took ages to get all the poppers done up right. Then I put some of my doll's little booties on her too – just for cuteness.

I jiggled her in my arms and soon she stopped bleating.

'Well done, baby woo,' I said to her, kissing her little nose. 'Nice clean bott now.'

I didn't know what to do with the whiffy nappy, so in the end I stuck it in a plackie bag and hung it out of my window on the latch.

I was well proud of myself. I'd done my first nappy. *Look at me, Mini-Mum.* I was kind of

getting used to her by then. Kind of. When I didn't think about her being a mad, magic baby.

I lay down and cuddled her. It was so lovely and cosy. She was gulping softly, and still had teardrops on her long, baby lashes. Then suddenly she gave me a little, wet smile.

Like I'm her own mummy.

I kissed her and began humming to her gently.

What IS that tune?

Of course! It was 'Silent Night'. Mum used to sing it to me as a lullaby – even though she didn't know the words, and it was supposed to be just for Chrimbo.

That was years ago when I was a titch.

In the good old days when it was just me and Mum. Before I had to share her.

'Silent Night, hole in your tights. All is calm, all is bright . . .'

I sang and hummed it over and over. It was a funny old church song, but soothing somehow.

Soon the baby dropped off, tucked up against my tummy like a small, fat teddy bear.

'Where did you come from, Fairycake?' I

whispered. ‘I just don’t get it, but I’m so glad you came.’

We stayed all curled up together for hours. We heard Mum come up. She stopped outside my door like she was listening. But she didn’t come in and just scuffed off to bed, sniffing.

I sighed and quickly hugged the baby closer. We listened to faraway seagulls and the rain plinking at the windows. It was so snuggly, just the two of us. She sucked her thumb and dozed on and off, but of course there was no way I could sleep. I was too wowed by her.

Then suddenly I knew her name. It just pinged into my head.

‘Celeste,’ I whispered to her. ‘That’s what I’m calling you. It’s a magic name – for proper girl angels.’ She peeped up at me then, and I swear her lavender eyes glittered like fairy lights in the greyness. Like she had real stars for eyes.

So maybe she was a real baby fairy then. Maybe she COULD do magic and grant wishes.

I know what I’d wish for . . .

I wondered if it was mean to make a wish.

She was only a baby so she might not know any magic yet.

I decided to start with an easy wish that would only need a little spell.

'I wish for . . . um . . . um . . .' My brain was concrete.

'I wish for . . . um . . . some bubblegum. Cherry cola flavour, please!'

I looked at her and waited. Celeste sucked her thumb and looked back at me blankly.

'But it doesn't matter if you can't though!' I said, quickly.

I was hoping my room would suddenly be piled high with bubblegum packets, like a tipper truck had just emptied itself through the window.

But nothing happened.

I felt dumb then.

'Never mind,' I said. I kissed her soft head. 'Magic is very hard.'

But I still made a bigger wish, quietly in my head.

Please make Mum turn back into Mum, and remember about me again.