

Chapter One

Sweet Nothings

Lulu Baker leaned on the banisters, listening. Another shriek of laughter from Varaminta; when was she ever going to go to bed? Not any time soon, by the sound of it. Lulu had had no time alone with Dad all evening, and any prospect of it was fast disappearing.

Lulu sighed heavily and headed back to her room. She opened the drawer of her dresser and took out the tin. It was an old round tin meant for storing cake, but Lulu used it for her Wodge of Stuff. The Wodge of Stuff was what she always turned to in times of crisis. And if ever there had been a crisis, this was it. As opened the tin, the Wodge un-wodged itself all over the floor. Lulu bent down to pick up the pictures, notes and cards. Here was the Glitter Monster, that Mum had made for her when she was little, to scare off the other monster that lived under the bed. It had worked, too. Here were Lulu's favourite photographs, the one of Mum and Dad holding baby Lulu between them and Lulu's most treasured of all, The lovely, laughing Mum-in-Muddy-Wellies photo. And here was the photo of Lulu, on her fifth birthday, almost completely hidden by a gigantic cake shaped like a fairytale castle. Mum had used loo roll holders for the turrets. Long after every trace of pink icing was gone, Lulu had insisted on hanging on to the crumply cardboard tubes.

As Lulu stared at the picture, a tear rolled down her cheek. *Will I ever be that happy again?* she wondered.

They'd made the cake together. Well, Mum had made it really, but she had managed to make Lulu feel as essential to the process as flour and eggs. After putting it in the oven, Mum had crouched beside the cooker. 'Come and have a look.' Lulu had stepped forward and peered through the glass oven door to watched as the cake puffed itself up.

'It's biggering!' Lulu had said.

Mum had laughed and put her arm around her. 'That's it!' she'd replied. 'That's *exactly* what it's doing; it's biggering!' Lulu had stood and breathed in the delicious buttery aroma as the cake swelled some more. And Lulu remembered how the light from the oven had made Mum's face look as if it glowed from within as she had turned and whispered excitedly, 'It's like *magic*, isn't it?'

There was no fairytale cake for Lulu's sixth birthday.

Crossing the street with her shopping on a rain-soaked day in March, Mum had been hit by a speeding motorbike. The biker had just started work that week with Eatza Pizza, and was in a hurry to deliver the food while it was still hot. Lulu had not been able to eat pizza ever since.

Like all five-year-olds, little Lulu couldn't understand how someone could just not be there any more. And as there was no Mum to talk to, she settled for the next best thing; Mum's picture. It was a habit she still clung to, seven years later, especially when Dad was away. And Dad was away or busy a lot nowadays, especially since he had won the Sweet Nothings advertising account several months ago...and since he had started dating Varaminta le Bone, around the same time.

Dad wasn't away right now, but he might just as well be. Whenever Varaminta was around, Lulu felt unwelcome. She had sensed the frostiness the first time she'd met the tall, glamorous, pencil-thin ex-supermodel; her bubbly friendliness always turned to icy silence as soon as Dad's back was turned.

Lulu didn't like silences - not the empty kind, anyway. There were full silences, like the walking-in-the-woods-with-Dad-on-a-Sunday-afternoon silence; all peaceful and contented. But these empty silences were like big, black holes, threatening to suck Lulu in.

There was also the annoying presence of Varaminta's spoilt son, Torquil, who was the same age as Lulu. She had hoped things would improve when the two of them moved in. Aileen had done her best to reassure her of this. It was Aileen who cooked and cleaned for Lulu and her Dad, and Lulu often sought her advice. 'Perhaps you all just need to get to know each other better,' she'd said. But now, three weeks after they had moved in, it was still the same pattern; all gushing girlfriend and warm brotherliness whenever Dad was around, black hole when he wasn't.

Until today. Today had been the worst day yet. Lulu curled up with The Mum-in-Wellies, and told her all about it...

A large chocolate cake nestled on the crystal stand, in the middle of the table. The silk tablecloth draped over it was strewn with rose petals and silver sugar almonds. A slim blonde woman took a slice of cake and looked up, her ice-blue eyes and glossy red lips glinting in the strong lights. Then...

'What's that light doing up there?' she screeched, throwing the cake down. 'Are you trying to make me look like a witch? *Urghhh!*'

'Cut!' called the director.

The woman stormed off the set, past the director, the camera operators, and the red-faced lighting man, into the gloom of the auditorium where Dad and Lulu sat.

Dad stood up. 'Minty...'

Dad hadn't been seeing Varaminta very long before he had hit on the idea of using the ex-model and author of *How To Be As Thin As Me* in the new TV commercials for his newly-acquired *Sweet Nothings No-Fat Desserts* account. Naturally, he wanted to make sure things were going smoothly. They weren't.

'Darling, thank goodness you're here!' pouted Varaminta, flinging her long, elegant arms dramatically around Dad. 'Sort out this mess for me will you, Mikey-Wikey?'

'Yes, don't worry, I'll, er, have a word,' said Dad. 'Lulu's here!' he added.

Varaminta grimaced, then quickly remembered she was supposed to be delighted. 'Oh, so she is,' she gushed. How super!' Varaminta was the only person in the world who actually used the word 'super'. 'Has anyone seen Torquil?' she asked.

Torquil was also at a loose end, it being half term. Varaminta had brought him along to the studio, intent on getting him an appearance in the commercial somehow. She'd had him hanging around the set all day.

Lulu had long since given up trying to be friends with Torquil. In fact she and Frenchy, her best friend, had begun to refer to him as The Torment; a merciless teaser, he was also full of money-making scams,

as Lulu and Frenchy had learned to their cost. They had bought cinema tickets from him which had, it turned out, been made by him on his computer and were completely worthless. But Lulu offered to go and look for him anyway.

'Okay Noodle,' said Dad vaguely, before setting off to sort out some fuzzy-focus lighting for Varaminta.

Dad nearly always called her Noodle. Torquil was quick to change this to 'Poodle', probably because of Lulu's unruly mass of curly blonde hair. Although from the way he pronounced it - *POO*-dle - it was clear that it wasn't just her hair he meant to insult.

By the time Lulu returned with Torquil, a rotund man in a suit had joined Varaminta and Dad. 'But I'm the Face of *Sweet Nothings!*' Varaminta was protesting. 'It's only natural my son should be in the commercial too. Tell him, Mikey.'

'Ah, and here he is,' said Dad. He introduced Lulu and Torquil to the man. It was Mr Dextrose himself, the managing director of Sweet Nothings.

'So how much am I getting paid?' asked Torquil.

'Um... ' Mr Dextrose looked at Torquil. Then he looked...at Lulu. Varaminta shifted sideways slightly, hiding Lulu almost completely from Mr Dextrose's view.

Mr Dextrose shifted sideways slightly too, and peered around Varaminta. 'Hello,' he said.

Lulu smiled back.

Without taking his eyes off Lulu, Mr Dextrose took hold of Dad's arm. 'Mike, could we have quiet word...?'

An hour later, it was Lulu, not Torquil, who was on the set. Lulu didn't have much choice in the matter; apparently Mr Dextrose had been 'simply inspired by her natural charm and vitality' and he was sure that 'this extra spark of hers' was just what his adverts needed. Lulu was far from thrilled.

'Cake needs another touch-up!' called the director. A girl duly appeared, and the cake, wilting under the hot lights, got a fresh application of icing. 'I, like, put extra icing sugar in, OK?' said the girl. 'So it doesn't, like, melt so quickly?'

'Good thinking,' commended the director. 'Alright, ready? And, action!'

Lulu smiled at the camera. 'Now Mum can have her cake...'

Varaminta held up a slice, '...and eat it!'

'Perfect!' said the director. 'It's a wrap. OK guys, let's tuck in!'

Everyone assembled around the table, except for Varaminta. She shot a private, withering look at Lulu and flounced off in the direction of the Ladies' room.

Then Dad appeared at Lulu's side. 'Well done, Noodle,' he whispered.

Mr Dextrose stepped forward. 'Thank you all for a splendid job,' he said. 'I look forward to seeing the end result.' There was a ripple of applause. He raised his plate. 'Perk of the job: free cake! So enjoy!'

Everyone raised their slice and sank their teeth into it.

'*BLECH!!!*' And everyone simultaneously spat it out.

'Eurgh, that's disgusting!'

'Eew, *salt!*'

Soggy splodges of chocolate cake flew this way and that. They splurged into hair and onto shoes; they plopped all over the creamy white tablecloth and fizzled on the studio lights. And one splodge splatted onto Lulu's top. 'Oh no!' cried the cake assistant. 'I could've like, *sworn* it was sugar?'

On her way to the Ladies' room, Lulu passed Torquil. He jeered gloatingly at her chocolatey front.

'Yes well, you're lucky you missed the cake,' she told him.

'You kidding?' he smirked. 'Luck had nothing to do with it! You should have seen your faces - excellent!' And he doubled over with laughter.

So *he* switched the salt with the icing sugar, Lulu realised. Ha ha, very funny. Her face still puckering from the awful taste, Lulu stepped into the Ladies' room.

Varaminta paused in applying her lipstick and glanced up in the mirror; she was not smiling.

'Bit of a disaster with the cake,' ventured Lulu. Varaminta didn't answer. Lulu cleared her throat, and began to rub at her top with damp paper towels. Varaminta sprayed several puffs of perfume into the air around herself, as if she were a rose needing protection from this annoying greenfly, this unwelcome child. The scent cloud clenched at Lulu's throat. Coughing, she quickly dried her hands and headed for the door, but Varaminta stepped in her way. 'Congratulations, Louisa,' she purred sarcastically. 'Nice little piece of up-staging there.'

Varaminta always used Lulu's full name, which no-one else did. Lulu just wasn't, nor ever had been, a Louisa, and she was definitely not a 'Loo-Wheezer', which was how Varaminta pronounced it.

'Look, I didn't even want to- ' Lulu tried.

'Rubbish!' snapped Varaminta, baring her expensively whitened teeth. 'You may be the apple of Daddy's eye, but I know a rotten core when I see one. Don't come the innocent with me!'

Lulu could hardly believe what she was hearing. 'Huh? I *am* innocent. And what about Torquil? He put salt in the icing sugar packet! It's made the cake taste disgusting!'

Varaminta was unmoved. 'Well, if he did, who can blame him after the way he was treated? Really! But *you*... Let's get one thing straight here and now,' she continued in a low, menacing tone, taking Lulu's chin between two sharp, blood-red nails. 'You can't fool me with your butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth act. Daddy's girl might have always got her way in the past, but things are going to be very different from now on. Oh yes. *I'm* running the household now, and what I say goes. So don't you ever humiliate me like that again! Understand?'

'So now it's official,' Lulu told the Mum-in-Muddy-Wellies picture. 'She's got it in for

me. 'Another distant shriek of laughter bubbled up from downstairs. Lulu felt that twisting inside again; something deep in the pit of her stomach had been growing bigger and harder as the weeks passed. She pictured it as a ball of elastic bands; a tight tangled knot of worry and hurt, anger and...well, guilt. Even today, Varaminta had managed to make her feel that if only she, Lulu, had done things differently, everything would be all right between them. That the problems were all her fault. And because she was ashamed of how silly and pathetic that might sound, Lulu couldn't explain it to Frenchy or Aileen or anyone.

'Oh Mum, I'm not a rotten core, am I?' said Lulu to the Mum-in-Muddy-Wellies photo. It was Lulu's favourite because it was the most typical of Mum. Another picture showed her at a wedding in a green dress. Lulu had thought it quite impossibly glamorous at the time, but now she could see that even that didn't quite fit around the shoulders, the skirt was creased, and Mum's hairdo was unravelling itself. Still she looked more lovely, Lulu realised, than Varaminta ever could. 'You were happier in wellies,' she said out loud, before putting the pictures back in the tin with the Wodge of Stuff. As she leaned down, she heard a floorboard creak. Someone was right outside her door, which was slightly ajar. Lulu crept over and yanked the door open fully, just in time to see Torquil's bedroom door close.