

Sing for my Baby



Jenn Matthews



Chapter 1

ROSIE TANNER PLACED A CLEAN piece of toilet paper over the white plastic stick and sat on the closed toilet lid. She started her phone's stopwatch. One whole minute. Time to wait. She bounced her knee. Balling a fist wasn't sensible; relaxation was the key. That and wiggling the tension out of her fingers.

She took slow, long breaths. She continued to bob her knee.

Her phone pinging nearly made her slip onto the lino. A text from Charlie, sending her love. Should she call her? Charlie would be able to see the pregnancy test through video chat, and Rosie could break the news to her then. After three weeks of visualising blattocysts and dividing cells, had it all been in vain once again?

Closing her eyes for a breath, Rosie then shook her head. There was no one there to see, but she did it anyway. Somehow, it gave her courage. It was something she could do herself. She needed to get used to it. That was the plan. Everything alone.

Fifteen seconds to go.

Her phone showed a fake second hand. Were those even seconds? They seemed more like hours or even days.

It was time. She wasn't ready.

Rosie pressed her fist into her thigh and set her jaw. *Get a grip, Miss Tanner.* That's what six-year-old Iris would say. Iris had just moved into Year Two and was already her own woman.

One last look at her phone. One last thought about calling her big sister.

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Rosie removed the tissue with a trembling hand. She blinked.

Surely that wasn't *two* blue lines?

She'd have to do another. It couldn't be right.

Rosie fumbled with the second test in the packet, then repeated the process.

There were definitely two blue lines on this one too. When she'd chosen the test, she had turned her nose up at the ones that said "pregnant" or "not pregnant." She didn't need the actual words. Surely she could use the handy key on the box? One line or two.

Should have bought one with the words. Something flipped inside Rosie's belly, a panic she'd read it wrong. She studied the box again, turning it over and over, wondering whether it said something else. No, two lines meant she was pregnant.

She blinked again. Her vision was clear. There were two lines on both tests. Numb, she took a photo of them, then placed her phone beside the sink. She rested her elbows on her knees and breathed.

I'm pregnant. I did it.

Joy built inside her and made her skin flush and her heart bulge. Her hand shook for a different reason—not nerves this time—and she grabbed her phone.

"Did you do it yet?" Charlie's voice was a few tones higher than usual, like a mistuned violin.

"Yeah." Rosie sat with her mouth open before realising she should give more information. "It was positive."

Silence. Then two squeals threatened to burst Rosie's eardrums.

She put the phone on speaker. "Ow. My ears, you guys!"

"Auntie Rosie, that's, *well*, excellent."

Rosie hadn't realised Chelsea had been listening. Charlie must be on speaker too. "Thanks, mate."

More giggling. Chelsea started an "I'm gonna be a cousin!" mantra.

Rosie rolled her eyes. "So, Chelsea's happy."

"I am too." Charlie's voice was warm. "I know you've been waiting for this. I know how much it means."

"Yeah."

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Rosie disposed of the urine. She considered keeping the tests but shrugged. The result wouldn't change if she binned them, and she had the photo on her phone.

"It's..." She took a deep breath and stopped tidying. "Fifth time lucky, huh?"

"Totally." Charlie made a kissing sound. "I love you even if you are a pleb."

"Tell that gorgeous niece of mine to think good thoughts." A tiny speck of sadness tugged at Rosie. The memory of an unmoving bundle in her arms hit her. She swallowed it away. "It's not confirmed yet. There're still bloods to take. And I'm not telling anyone until I get to twenty-eight weeks, okay? Not even Mum and Dad."

Charlie's whine turned into a happy hum. "They're going to find out. You'll be past showing by then, and you told Mum the donor was due three weeks ago."

Rosie laughed. "True."

"She'll be at home, waiting for the call. And if you don't ring her by Monday, she'll probably turn up unannounced at school."

"Oh, goodness." Rosie pressed her fingers to her eyes. "Yeah, okay. I'll tell them. But no one else."

"Damn good job Chelsea doesn't go to your school. She'll have it all round your colleagues in six seconds flat."

The squealing mantra continued in the background. Could the neighbours hear? "Anyway, I need to go sort out a few things. Text the donor. Let him know we created life."

"Madness." Charlie sighed. "I'm so pleased, Rosie."

"Got to go. Love you."

"Love you."

Chapter 2

THE COIN WAS WARM IN Amber Kingsley's palm. Its presence was powerful, a reminder of what she had achieved. The fluttering in her chest made her smile. *One whole year. I never thought I'd manage it.*

Various people gave her thumbs-up as they slipped out the door of the church hall. Friday night was always a good meeting—that was why she'd chosen it as her home group. A good variety of people: ages, genders, lengths of sobriety. Some meetings she had been to had been moan fests where nothing was really achieved or learned.

She hung around for a few minutes, waving to those who were leaving. The coin sat happily in her jacket pocket.

Jilly, her landlady and replacement aunt, was one of the last to leave. She gave Amber the biggest hug and rubbed her shoulder as she pulled away. "See you back at home?" Her clear alto made Amber smile.

"Of course. I'll walk Nico when I get back, if you like."

"Did it this morning. He's good until tomorrow." Jilly glanced at the sky. "Should be okay to walk home?"

"I'm just going to say goodbye to Harry. Want to arrange a stables meet-up." Amber patted the camera hung on its strap around her neck. "Take some more shots of that gorgeous horse of his."

Jilly chuckled. "I think you're in love."

"Might be." Amber shrugged. "Might walk along the seafront tonight and get some sunset shots too."

After kissing her cheek, Jilly strode away, her long blonde hair sweeping behind her. Jilly had her car, and she wasn't one to walk around much

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outside of her working hours. But Amber liked the walk home—it wasn't far, and September evenings meant it wasn't too dark.

When Harry stepped out, a grin lit up his entire face. "I'm so proud of you."

Amber pushed up her shoulders. "Thank you."

"Fancy doing step one together next week? Admit we're powerless to our affliction? Look at how unmanageable our lives used to be?" He made it sound like a fun activity.

"Course. In exchange, I expect access to the woman in your life for some photos."

Harry frowned. "My mother?"

"Your beautiful horse, Florence, you daft thing." She poked his arm. "Reckon she's free next Saturday?"

"Reckon she is. Need to take her for a proper ride. Can't this week though." His eyebrows furrowed. "Matthew's taking me to the cinema."

"So nice you guys can still be romantic." Amber sent him an affectionate look at the mention of his boyfriend. "Florence will get jealous."

"She forgives me if I take her an apple or two."

Amber indicated her camera. "You go on. I'm going to catch the sunset."

"Should be a nice one tonight. Clear." A last hug and he left.

She leant against the wall next to the front door, checking for missed calls and messages on her mobile. A bit of social media, just for the few minutes she wanted to wait, to take note before the walk home.

Someone knocked into her, folders and papers flying all over the place.

Amber braced a hand against her camera, making sure it didn't swing around, as she stooped to help. "Gosh, you okay?"

"I'm so sorry!" A woman with brown hair, wearing a black leather jacket, crouched next to her. She swept up the folders she'd spilled onto the concrete.

Amber grabbed a few, then stood, neatening them into a pile. "You're in a hurry." Had she intended on coming to the meeting? She was over an hour late.

"Yeah. Choir starts in like three minutes." She stood but wobbled. Her eyes glazed over for a second.

Amber put a hand out. "You okay?"

The woman closed her eyes and took in a few deep breaths before giving Amber a dazzling smile. “Course.” She wiped a hand over her face. Her make-up was immaculate: dark smoky eyes with a touch of silver sparkle. Her hair was messy, but Amber reckoned she’d spent a while on it. “Tell me you’re coming to join us? We’re desperate for more sopranos this year. You sing soprano, right?”

Amber blinked. She almost put her right. But telling a complete stranger that she was an alcoholic gave her a dry mouth and a lump in her throat. She wanted to say she’d been socialising with friends, but what if this woman knew the AA meeting had just finished?

Words wouldn’t come; she tried swallowing a few times. She was right there, hanging around at the beginning of, apparently, a choir rehearsal. She had no interest in singing, let alone any talent. She should have left as soon as she’d said goodbye to Harry.

Finally, her mouth came to life. “Sure. Of course.” Amber had a vague knowledge of the different voices. Sopranos sang the high notes.

“We’ve had, like, half the buggers leave.”

Amber gulped but yanked a smile onto her face. “Yeah. Was hoping to join, if that’s okay?” Her gut twisted with guilt at the lie, but she figured it was worth it for the good of her home group.

It was also worth it to see the beam on the woman’s face. “You’re officially my hero. I’m tired of sitting with the warblers.”

As the woman led her back into the hall, Amber made a pact with whatever deity or force was in charge. She’d make it right in some other way. She’d clean Jilly’s bathroom as well as her own for a month. She’d donate to three different charities for a year. There was no way she would slip back into old habits—perpetual lying—if she could help it.

Instead of focusing on her still-twisting belly, she traipsed past the room they used for AA meetings into a larger room at the back. A piano sat in the corner and there was a small stage at the end. Everything was dark, varnished wood, and there was a smell like wax, old and musty.

The woman placed her folders onto the edge of the stage and beckoned Amber over. “Sorry, I’m Rosie.”

“Amber.” They shook hands and Amber nearly dropped her folders.

“Let me take those.” Rosie grabbed them with a lopsided smile.

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“So, um, yeah. The choir?” Amber bit her lip and searched for a backstory. “I’ve been thinking about doing something new for a while... and this seemed perfect. I’ll get to meet people.” She shrugged. That would have to do. She didn’t want to oversell it.

“New term started last week, but that’s okay. Presume you read music?”

Amber nodded but immediately regretted it. *Another lie? Stop it now.* A few people started to arrive. Amber inwardly cursed herself. *What am I doing?* “Are the songs hard?”

“You’ll be fine.” Rosie went to grab a chair. She seemed to hesitate before picking one up and walking slowly to the front, the right-hand side. She patted the back. “Stick with me. You’ll be awesome.”

Whilst Rosie got a chair for herself, Amber sat and got out her phone. The sunset would have to wait until a different evening. She didn’t need to walk Jilly’s dog. She’d had dinner before the meeting. Just a quick text to say she would be back a little later. She hoped Jilly wouldn’t worry.

Rosie plonked herself onto a chair after she’d set it down next to Amber. “Nice camera.”

Amber flushed. *Who turns up to a choir rehearsal with a camera?* “Thanks.”

“Into photography?”

“Kind of a hobby, maybe an obsession.” Coyness made her fidget. “Bought this thing a month ago. Saved up for ages.”

“What d’you like to shoot?” Confidence radiated from Rosie, and the glint that had been in her eye since she’d bumped into Amber appeared to be a permanent fixture.

“Landscapes. Animals. My mate has a horse; she’s the perfect model.”

“Cool.” Rosie took out a pen and wrote *Amber* above her own name, already in situ on the folder in her lap.

It felt final. The tension in Amber’s belly coiled more tightly. She let out a breath, trying to settle the feeling, and smiled at Rosie. “I was going to shoot some sunsets later but reckon I might be too late.”

“Rehearsal’s for an hour and a half. You might just catch the last minute or so.”

Amber stared at the floor. Her dejection must have been obvious because the next minute a comforting hand appeared on her arm.

“Hey, there’ll be other sunsets, Amber.” Rosie tilted her head, her gaze steady on Amber’s own. “Oh, wow! You really have beautiful eyes.” It might have sounded like a pickup line on anyone else’s lips, but Rosie seemed sincere. With a wince, she looked away. “Sorry. Ignore me. Sometimes I say stuff without thinking it through.”

“Oh, hey, it’s fine.” Amber chuckled. “I actually get that a lot.” She gestured towards her face. “I get them from my mother.” She gritted her teeth against a negative comment about her mum. She hadn’t spoken to her in years. *No need to delve too deep after only five minutes of knowing her.* She considered Rosie. “You have very cool hair.”

Rosie barked a laugh. “Needs a cut, but thanks.” She softened, lowered her gaze, and opened the folder.

Amber got the feeling she was distracting them both toward a change of topic. Fair enough. “What are we singing, then?”

“A few of the usual. Songs from *Les Mis*. Some John Rutter. Nothing too complicated.”

“Oh, good.”

“And you need to pay Enid, so have two quid ready for when she—”

An older woman with thick-rimmed glasses and grey, wavy hair ascended the stairs to the stage and placed her briefcase on the floor. She opened it and took out a bulging folder fit to burst. When she lifted her head, she smiled at Rosie.

Rosie grinned and gave her a little wave. “That’s Enid. She’s the musical director.”

“She looks stern.”

“She is. In a good way though. Used to teach at the school I teach at now, back in the day. Head of music.”

Enid put a large sandwich tub on the stage and a clipboard next to it. People started to go up and add money to the tub.

Amber fumbled with her purse, took out a couple of pound coins, and shuffled to the tub to pay.

Rosie did the same.

“You’re a teacher?”

Rosie stuffed her wallet in her back pocket and crossed her legs. “Yup. Year Two. Top-year infants.”

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“Which school?” There were several infant schools which took children from four to six years old in the area.

“Worle Infants.”

Amber folded her hands in her lap. “I admire teachers. I loved mine when I was little. I remember having the biggest crush on Mrs Sunderford when I was five.”

The tiniest of eyebrow raises. “I started with the gay thing young too.” Rosie’s tone was low, but she didn’t seem embarrassed by the fact.

A sort of understanding settled over them as more people filed in. *At least I might make a friend. Been a while since I met anyone. I’m pretty out of practise.*

Much chatter and scraping of chairs echoed around them as an orange glow filtered in through the high-up windows. Amber didn’t mind—she was sitting next to someone she had something in common with and was guaranteed at least ninety minutes of their company. And all for two quid. Not a bad exchange, really.

Enid held up a hand once the doors were closed, and everyone went still. The men sat behind the women, on the left and right, separated by a gap. There were a few people in their thirties, but most people, as far as Amber could see, were past retirement. A slim, middle-aged man with round spectacles sat at the piano.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Hope you’ve all had a lovely week.” Enid pushed her glasses up and regarded the room with a pinched smile. “I have an announcement. In addition to our usual Christmas concert on the third of December, we will be singing at the Colston Hall in Bristol next summer.”

A few hushed murmurs. Excitement buzzed through the room.

“Something a little different, I know. That’s why I need 100-percent attendance and 150-percent commitment. Once the Christmas season is over, I expect every single one of you to be at every single rehearsal. Not that you would ever want to miss one, hm?”

A titter from some of the women. One of the men snorted.

“We don’t have anything good enough to perform at the Colston Hall,” one of the women over on the other side piped up.

“Aha. Well, I’ve found us something new. A beautiful collection named *Lullaby of the Ocean*. I’ll hand this out in the New Year. It’s simply joyous.”

Rosie's eyes narrowed. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. "I don't know of that." She leaned towards Amber so she could whisper to her. "But Enid has good taste. If she says it's good, it'll be excellent."

Panic rose inside Amber. It wouldn't be a few fun tunes she recognised. She'd have to learn an entire concert of new music with absolutely no expertise in the area. *I'll just have to leave after this week and never come back.* As pretty as Rosie was, Amber couldn't justify continuing with the choir, not all the way until next summer. She'd go home tonight, find the number on the website, if the choir had one, and phone to say she wouldn't attend any more. It'd save her two pounds a week if nothing else.

They began with some vocal warm-ups, which Enid led. She had an old-fashioned voice but pleasant. Amber wondered whether she had sung professionally in her youth. She could imagine Enid up on a stage in the sixties, a big band behind her and smoky tables with happy customers.

Rosie's voice carried over the rest of the choir—or maybe it was just because Amber sat so close to her. Surprise made Amber's jaw drop. Rosie sounded so—and there truly wasn't a better word for it—girly. Clear, like a young boy in a cathedral. Amber rectified her open-mouthed situation and echoed the scales quietly, hoping to fade into the background.

She didn't seem the sort to have that kind of voice. Amber's first impression had labelled Rosie as a butch with her black jeans, boots, and leather jacket. And her speaking voice was low—not as low as Jilly's but low enough for her not to sound like a prepubescent boy.

Amber shook the thought away. Who was she to have preconceptions of someone she'd known for only a few minutes?

"Good." A single nod from Enid. "Remember to keep those diaphragms strong. Drop your jaw as you go up to those top notes."

It all sounded terribly technical. Amber fingered her camera strap and tried not to worry too much.

The first song Rosie pulled from the folder reminded Amber of the *Blue Peter* theme song. It was lively and bouncy, and she could barely keep up with the lyrics. It was a bit jumbled, as if everyone was out of practise. Someone behind them seemed to think she should be in an opera. Her voice wobbled all over the place and grated on Amber's nerves.

Enid started with the sopranos—this was the part Amber should be singing. The pianist played the tune on the piano and they repeated it back.

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The errors began to fade. Then the altos, the lower female voices. Then tenors and the basses, the two groups of men.

By the time they'd gone over each individual part, Amber was none the wiser.

Rosie caught her eye halfway through the fourth time they sung all the parts together. She gave her an encouraging smile and held the musical score towards her, one fingertip tracing the words.

The little blobs and sticks were an alien language to Amber. She mouthed the words but no sound came out. The desire to look away was strong, but Rosie was being so kind, giving her such supportive looks. She listened to Rosie and copied what she did.

By the end, everyone else seemed to have sorted out what notes they were supposed to sing. The harmonies made Amber's blood dance along. It was a joyous, comfortable song.

Rosie beamed, her face alight with pleasure when the song ended. This alone made some of Amber's worry fade. She really was pretty, and more so when she smiled like that.

Next came a slower song, one with less complication. It rang a bell for Amber—she'd heard it before somewhere. When she read the information on the first page, Amber realised it was one of the *Les Mis* songs Rosie had mentioned before. Confidence swelled in Amber, but she kept her voice quiet, still. It was nice to just listen to Rosie sing anyway rather than sully the experience with her own incompetence.

"A quick break now. Please utilise the water cooler at the back. Soothe those throats." And Enid stepped from her stage.

Chairs scraped again. Rosie stood and covered her mouth. She swallowed. "I'm just going to the..." She twisted her lips and pointed towards the door.

Amber assumed she meant the bathroom, so she nodded and took the folder from her. Whilst Rosie was gone, she studied the music. Balls and sticks with no apparent meaning but with words underneath. At least she could read those.

When Rosie returned, she had a cup of water in each hand. "Here. Drink up. She'll be starting again in a minute."

"Oh yeah. Better do as we're told."

“Good for your voice.” Rosie sat next to her and wedged the cup between her knees before stretching both arms above her head. A small groan escaped her. “What do you do, then?”

“Hmm?”

“Work, job. I teach. What do you do?”

“Oh.”

A sideways grin. “Mind if I try to guess?”

Amber folded her arms and gave her a curious look. “Go for it.”

One of Rosie’s eyes shuttered. “I reckon...you’re a professional juggler.”

Amber laughed. “Wrong.”

“Really? Shame.” Rosie took a sip of her water. “Consultant surgeon?”

“No.”

“Lumberjack?”

“Clearly not.” Amber indicated her skater skirt and ballet shoes.

“Right. Okay.” She made a flippant gesture. “I give up.”

“Remind me never to play I-Spy with you.” Amber nudged their shoulders together.

Rosie nudged her back, her hair falling over one eye. “Spill.”

“I work as a receptionist in a dental surgery.”

Staring at her, Rosie lifted both eyebrows. “Oh. That’s a—”

“Boring job? Yup.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“Right, everyone. Time to continue.” Enid was back up on her stage.

“You so were,” Amber hissed.

“I was not.”

Amber chuckled but sat up straight and turned her attention back to the front.

The next song was another Amber had never heard before. Something about cats and rats and a very strange number of eyes for three animals to have collectively. It was another quick one. Amber copied Rosie again, finding if she sung under her breath she wasn’t at risk of making a loud mistake.

A few more songs followed, each as obscure as the last. Amber tried not to think about Enid on the stage scrutinising the choir with such seriousness. She tried not to think about the other members of the choir

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either but did feel glad that, as they sat at the front, no one could hear her ineptitude. The pianist was focused on his own nimble fingers.

Mostly, she enjoyed the miniconcert Rosie was giving her, her voice angelic, sharp as a crystal. She'd never known anyone who could sing, certainly hadn't ever sat right next to someone who could give Aled Jones a run for his money.

Inside her pocket was something cold and round. The coin—her one-year medallion. A true follower of the twelve steps without fail for exactly 365 days. She relished the accomplishment but acknowledged she was lacking tonight. *I promised myself I would stop lying, and here I am, doing just that.* Would ringing Enid when she got home be cowardly? Yes. She'd have to come clean once the rehearsal was over—apologise to Rosie, and to Enid.

Enid clasped her knobbly fingers in front of her. “Good work. Same time next week. If you can, work on ‘Five Eyes’; those parts are tricky. And remember to enunciate.”

Rosie nodded once, stood, and carried her chair to the side to stack it with the rest.

Amber pulled her cardigan on, ready for the conversation she needed to have. She gathered her courage. Owning up to things as soon as she could was important—it was Step Ten. Her continued recovery relied on it.

Leather jacket back on, Rosie stood with her hands in her pockets, a curious smile on her face.

Holding her coin with sweaty fingers, Amber shot Rosie an apologetic look. “Rosie, listen...” She took a deep breath, her nerves wavering.

“I'm not stupid, you know.” Rosie flicked her eyebrows. “I'm well aware you can't read music and have never sung before.”

“Oh my gosh.” Amber covered her eyes. “I thought I'd got away with it.”

“I've been teaching for nearly fifteen years. I've been playing music since I was five. I can tell someone isn't a maestro after an hour of sharing a score.”

“I'm sorry I lied.”

“Oh, please.” Rosie chuckled, and they walked out of the hall into the night. “I'll live. Anyway, I think you're cool enough to help you, if you'd like me to.”

Amber blinked. “You...you want to help me?”

“Definitely.”

What happened to coming clean? Amber gripped the coin until it cut into her palm. She released it and wiped her hand on her skirt. “That’s really kind, but—”

“No ‘but’s,’ dude. Like I said, I think you’re cool, so I want to help you.”

What were her options? She really didn’t want Rosie knowing she had issues with alcohol. And she’d been honest about the whole not being musical issue. Her shoulders felt a tad lighter. And even if she hadn’t meant to join the choir, she supposed there was no reason why she couldn’t commit to it. It *had* been fun, and not just because Rosie had been there.

“Look,” Rosie flipped her hand around, “I have a piano at home and far too much time on my hands in the evening. When I’m not marking spelling tests and simple maths, I’m just watching Netflix and eating digestive biscuits.”

“So, I’d be doing you a service?” Amber looked Rosie up and down. She didn’t need persuading away from any form of baked goods. But there was a hopeful look in her eyes. Amber wondered whether she was lonely too. “Fine.”

“Excellent.” Rosie beamed at her. “I live in Yatton. Do you drive?”

“Kind of.” Amber had insurance on Jilly’s car. “I can borrow my landlady’s. She doesn’t use it in the evenings.”

“You rent?”

“Lodge, officially.”

“I miss living with people. Being alone can get tiresome.” Something undecipherable flickered across Rosie’s eyes.

“Jilly’s pretty cool. Bakes fresh bread at the weekend...and lets me share it.”

“Kind of something between a friend and a cool auntie?”

Amber giggled. “Yeah.”

“Give me your phone; I’ll put my details in. We can arrange something then.”

“Okay.” Amber handed it over and peered as Rosie tapped away.

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“No worries.” Rosie gave her a lopsided smile and gave back the phone. She made a pistol motion with her forefinger and thumb. “Catch you later, okay?”

All Amber could do was nod. What had she agreed to? On the one hand, she’d get to spend some quality time with a very attractive woman at her house. She’d get to sit next to Rosie every week and hear her sing.

On the other hand, the knowledge that it had all started with a fib twisted inside her. Hope swelled though. *The fib can't escalate, can it? And Rosie barely minded I had lied. I'll just work really hard and prove I'm committed. It isn't like before; I came clean.*

Amber spent the entire walk home convincing herself of the fact.

Chapter 3

SOMETHING WAS MAKING A NOISE.

Rosie rolled from her prone position and nearly fell off the sofa. She blinked and stared around. *What time is it?* One glance at the clock told her it was almost seven. Had she eaten yet? She didn't feel hungry, so she assumed she had. Where had the time gone?

Grumbling, she slid from the sofa and pulled her fingers through her hair. She'd been asleep. Week six of her pregnancy seemed to be sapping all her energy. She'd expected it—knew the baby would grow and therefore use her calories. But she couldn't remember the last time she'd fallen asleep before actually climbing into bed.

She rubbed the grit from her eyes and passed her palm over her belly. Nothing showed yet. Kind of as if it weren't real. There was the half expectation she would wake up one morning and find nothing there, like the weeks after little Ali had been stillborn. Her boobs hurt though, and they were getting bigger. *Good job they're not big in the first place.*

The noise was still going—a gentle knocking. Then it hit her: Amber was due at seven. And she'd been mulling over the size of her own boobs instead of answering the door. She shot into the hallway and jerked the door open. “Hi. Sorry.”

Amber wore a red cardigan, a blue top, and a black skirt. She had thick black tights on underneath shiny black shoes, the type a schoolchild would wear. Rosie was hesitant to call them ‘little-girly’; she always tried to stay gender-neutral even in her own mind.

“Hi.” Amber narrowed her eyes. “Did you...um...just wake up?”

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“Kind of.” Rosie smothered a yawn with the back of her hand. “Sorry. Don’t usually nap on a school night.” She frowned. “Or any night.”

“I can go, if you like.” Amber looked at the blue Smart Car parked on the road.

“No, you’re okay.” Rosie stepped back, allowing Amber into her house. “Been a long day at school.”

“Oh, ’course. Teaching, huh?”

“Yeah. New Year Twos: cute little monkeys.” Rosie grinned. “Let me get those for you.”

Amber handed over her scarf and handbag. “Want me to take my shoes off?”

“If you like. Got thick carpets, so...” Leaving Amber for a minute, Rosie went into the living room to check her make-up and hair in the mirror. *Not too scruffy, that’s good.* Amber had made an effort with her outfit. She didn’t look like she’d been curled on the sofa since dinner.

Soft footsteps told her Amber had padded in behind her in her tights. Rosie turned to find her with her eyes lowered and her hands clasped in front of her. “You have a beautiful home.”

“Thanks. Would you like a drink?”

“Maybe just water.”

I don’t think I have any alcohol in the house anyway. Seems pointless when I can’t drink it myself. “One water coming right up.”

When Rosie brought two glasses back with her, Amber was sitting primly on the sofa. There was an expression akin to wonder on her face. “The grey really works in here.”

“Thanks.” Rosie handed her the drink. “My mum hates it.”

“Well, she doesn’t live here, does she?”

Rosie shook her head. “They don’t live far though. Walkable distance.”

“That’s nice.” Amber took a sip before considering her knees. “I’m really sorry I lied to you last week.”

She tilted her head. “You really feel bad about it?”

“Yeah. I don’t like to be dishonest.”

Rosie sat at the other end of her three-seater sofa. “If it helps, I forgive you.”

“Thank you.” Amber laughed.

“I think being honest is a good personality trait. So many people talk rubbish.”

“Me too.”

“Right. Tell me about your history with music.” Rosie leaned against the sofa back. “Did you have any lessons at school or...?”

“Well, yes. Sort of.” Amber drank some more water and winced. “I had a few recorder lessons. Went to the recorder group everyone was required to attend.”

Rosie chuckled, remembering the one she’d also been to when she was at school. *I had Grade One by the time I was in Year Four. I got so bored.*

“I never really got the hang of it. Always sat at the back and mimed mostly.”

“Not unlike last week.”

Pink tinged Amber cheeks. “Gosh, I really hoped I’d got away with that.”

“Aw.” Rosie touched her shoulder.

Amber didn’t pull away.

“Like I said, I’m probably more aware than most. Teacher, from a musical family.”

“You are?”

“Yup.” She pulled her socked feet under her backside. “Mum teaches privately at home—singing and piano. Dad is a vicar.”

“A vicar?” Amber’s eyebrows lifted.

“Not the scary type. He’s pretty liberal. He plays the guitar and sings Led Zeppelin.”

“Legend.” Amber grimaced. “I’m a bit jealous of people with nice families.” Something darkened in her eyes. “I’m not in touch with my parents. Like, at all.”

“That’s more surprising than me having a rock-obsessed vicar as a dad.” Rosie wanted to touch her again but resisted the urge. “Any reason? Or...”

Fidgeting with her glass, Amber pushed her shoulders up to her ears. “Lots of reasons.” Apparently that was all she wanted to say.

That was fine with Rosie. “Anyway, so your entire experience with music was a school recorder group?”

“Yeah.” Relief swept through Amber’s features. “I’m basically a novice. No, less than a novice.”

Sing for My Baby

“Well, the choir isn’t a professional group. It’s a community choir. We’re not expected to be Grade Eight standard.” She wiggled her head and sat up proudly. “Even if some of us are.”

“I’m guessing Grade Eight is good?”

“Highest you can get.”

“Nice.” Amber smiled over at Rosie’s piano. “Your voice is lovely. You’re clearly talented.”

Modesty swirled in Rosie’s belly. “Well. It was sort of expected.” She stood, left her glass on the coffee table, and sat on the piano stool. “You got any siblings?”

“No. You?”

“One sister, Charlie. She’s married with a kid. Plays cello, but not so much now. At school and the music centre when we were kids.”

“Music centre?”

“Yeah, it used to be run by the local authority, but now it’s kind of independent. Run by a load of music teachers in North Somerset. Usually happens Saturday mornings. They have a tuck shop.” Memories of being allowed a quid for chocolate flowed through Rosie. Her mouth even watered a bit.

“Do you go?”

“I did when I first started teaching, but these days I have a lot more on, like after-school things. I like my weekends off though.”

“Me too.” Amber stood and came over to the piano. “So, um, you play?”

“Piano? Since I was five.” She played a happy major chord with a bass note, ending it with a flourish.

“Such a cool skill.”

Rosie wondered how many times Amber could compliment her. It was so alien to know someone that didn’t have a musical upbringing. Not that she was naïve—Rosie was of course aware that people grew up differently to how she and Charlie had. It was just a shame. But Amber wouldn’t have come along to the choir if she hadn’t been interested.

“Let’s go through the first one we did on Friday, okay?” Rosie glanced at Amber, who stood with her arms folded. “Okay, first of all: stand up nice and straight. Arms by your sides. Chin up.”

Amber complied, a small smile tugging her lips.

“Weight on both your feet. And sing from your belly, rather than your ribs.”

“Diaphragm, right?” Amber pressed a palm to the area below her ribcage.

“You got it.” Rosie took the sheet music for the first song from the top of the piano and played the introduction. She sang the soprano part—the tune—clearly but not too loudly.

After a few bars, Amber sang along too, getting some notes wrong and some of the words muddled. She put a hand over her face and turned away.

Grabbing Amber’s other hand, Rosie pulled her back round. “Hey. Come on. You’re not going to get it perfect first time.”

“Second time.” Amber looked down at Rosie with large brown eyes. Her pale skin made her eyelashes look strikingly black.

She’s very pretty. Rosie pushed that thought away, as amusing as it was. She was well aware that part of the reason why she’d offered her expertise to Amber was because she’d found her attractive. *Nothing wrong with looking and enjoying. I don’t intend to do anything about it; relationships are not in my plan at the moment. My baby is my plan, and after failing miserably at finding someone who wants a baby with me, it has to be something I do alone.*

They went through the song several times. Each time, Amber got more and more of the tune and words correct. Her voice was soft, breathy. *Definitely a soprano. Probably a first soprano if we work on her upper range.* Rosie decided to give her some time before they tackled that.

“The song is about three cats, right?” Rosie pointed to the lyrics. “There’s this guy and he owns this mill. And his cats are in charge of keeping the mice from eating the flour.”

“So it’s a story?”

“Sure.”

“I hadn’t even thought about what the words meant. I was just so worried about singing it right. Sounds kind of scary.”

“Weird how the pace and key of the song can have that effect. The lyrics aren’t actually that scary.”

Amber stepped back, her mouth to one side. “I like it when songs do that. It doesn’t matter what words are in them, but the tune and the rest... that really makes it.”

Sing for My Baby

“I expect “Stairway to Heaven” wouldn’t have the same appeal if the tune was boring.”

“And that guitar riff?”

“Not so cool when you’ve heard your dad play it repeatedly on an acoustic guitar.”

They smothered giggles.

“Okay, focus.” Rosie shot her a joke-stern look. “I do need to go to bed at some point.” She barely held in a yawn.

“I’m sorry. Shouldn’t be keeping you up, not when you’ve got to teach a load of screaming kiddies all day tomorrow.”

A stone dropped in Rosie’s belly. “You...you don’t like kids?”

Amber shrugged. “I don’t dislike them. I just...I suppose I’m impressed by those that work with them. Teaching must be stressful.”

“It’s rewarding though.” *Does she not like kids? That’ll be an issue in eight months’ time.* “I do love it.”

“I think it takes a special type of person to teach.” Amber played with the bottom button of her cardigan.

Suppose I can hardly complain when she says something like that. Rosie smiled back. “It’s lucky I enjoy things like times tables and reading out loud.”

Amber gestured towards the music. “You’re clearly good at the teaching thing. I’m almost getting this song.”

“Let’s finish on a high note, then, so to speak.”

Amber nodded and went back to the sofa to drain her glass. “Thanks for this. I think I’ll be okay now.”

Rosie’s chest ached. As weird and unintentional as it had been, she’d enjoyed teaching Amber. She didn’t want it to be the last time they met up privately. Going to choir together was all very well, but sharing a snippet or two about their lives in a more private setting had been nice. *What am I doing? What happened to no dating for the foreseeable future?* “Don’t think you’re getting away with it so quickly.” She spun on her stool to face Amber. “I fancy giving you a hand every week, so long as you keep coming to rehearsals.”

“Really?”

“Let’s call Mondays our day. Maybe next week we can have cake?”

“So long as you let me bring the cake.” Amber’s eyes were bright.

“Deal.” Rosie made a clicking noise and gave her a wink.

To her joy, Amber blushed but maintained eye contact. “I like you.”

“I like you too.” She’d said the words before she’d even thought about doing so. Her jaw hung slack for a beat, but she finally closed her mouth and shrugged. “No reason why we can’t be friends. Especially when there’s cake involved.” *That should save any misunderstanding.*

“So long as you don’t only want me for the cake I bring.” Amber’s spirits seemed to have fallen a touch, but her smile renewed the longer they looked at one another.

“I’ll try not to let that be the only factor.” *Friends would be okay. Sensible move.*

Amber set her glass back on the coffee table and moved into the hall, then stooped to pull on her shoes. “Thanks for the help.” She lifted her head again once her shoes were buckled. “And, in advance, for all your future help.” She tugged her scarf around her neck.

“Pleasure.”

With her bag on her shoulder, car keys in her hand, Amber opened the door and went outside. “I guess I’ll see you on Friday.”

“Don’t be late. I can’t guarantee some other pretty girl won’t take your seat.” She gave her a suave look. “I’m quite a catch, you know.”

Lowering her head, Amber smiled. “I’ll be there.” As she walked down Rosie’s path, she gave her a little wave.

Rosie waved back. *Should I stand at the door and watch her leave? I don’t want to seem too keen, or keen at all, in fact. And what was all that about another girl stealing her seat if she wasn’t on time? I really need to rein in my flirtatious streak.* She closed the door before Amber got into her car.

She sat at the piano for a while, playing some slow and calming arpeggios. Then she lowered the piano lid with a soft thump before tidying away their glasses. Nothing else needed doing—she’d made her lunch and packed the things she needed for tomorrow. She headed upstairs, brushed her teeth, and climbed into her pyjamas.

The full-length mirror called her. She stood sideways and pushed up her pyjama shirt. How long would it be before she had to tell people that weren’t her family? Work would need to know at twelve weeks. But the choir?

Sing for My Baby

Baby Ali appeared in her mind again. She'd been so excited with her last pregnancy, had strived to share her news with all and sundry. The women that sat behind her in choir, "The Warblers", as she called them inside her head, had scoffed and tutted. And she'd lost him, her baby boy. Her excitement had jinxed the whole affair.

When would she tell Amber? *Maybe when I properly start to show. She didn't seem too keen on kids during our conversation tonight. I don't want to put her off from being friends with me.*

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

SING FOR MY BABY

BY JENN MATTHEWS

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