

BABY LOVE

CHAPTER 1

“Girl Talk”

Baby Hunger

Lust for a fellow is one thing. But lust for babies is a whole different story. And a lot harder to satisfy. The old cliché about biological clocks is just a polite way to describe waking up one morning, realizing you've wasted your youth, and now you can practically feel your eggs shriveling. The viable ones, that is. The duds are probably swimming merrily round your ovaries, snickering at their rapidly dissolving sisters.

If you've baby lust but no daddy material on the horizon, you're probably thinking, how can I joke about this? I see your point. Your average baby fanatic has the same problem as any other addict, because the temptations of babies, like drink, drugs, or gambling, are everywhere. (Which only increases your lust.) Another painful truth is that baby-lusters often gravitate toward careers that provide maximum contact with babies...like pediatricians, or playschool teachers. Unfortunately, jobs like that give BL's minimum contact with what they can't do without: unattached sperm-providers.

You might be one of the lucky ones, though, with several paternal prospects to choose from. But what if you're keener on having a baby than having a fella? People will generally think you're quite heartless, if not altogether mad (or a hopeless lesbian), which bothers true baby-lusters not a whit. Your road to motherhood couldn't be simpler: You pick a fellow you know will drop his drawers for you, no questions asked. Unfortunately, any guy who'll sleep with you at the snap of your fingers is a guy who's had it off with

every available female who's crossed his path—not the sort you'd want condom-less.

All you want, really, is a nice guy with a presentable gene pool, who won't make a scene when you cool the relationship. After the deed is done, that is. Trouble is, nice fellas want to do the decent thing...

—Gai Lannigan

CHAPTER ONE

“I'm glad I'm not worrying about *that*.” Justine Egan tapped her *Dublin Echo*, then drained her pint.

“About what?” Staring enviously at my flatmate's glass, I crunched a shortbread finger. A pity I'd no head for drink. Today of all days, I'd have liked something to take the edge off. “Give us a look, will you?”

“But Grainne, it's ‘Girl Talk’...” Justine clutched her newspaper protectively. “Can't you get your own?”

“In a pub?”

“Well...” With a reluctant look, Justine passed it across the scratched wood table. “Just don't get crumbs all over it.”

“Sure,” I said, as she went up to the bar for a refill. Scanning the article, I took another bite of shortbread. Crumbly bits showered the paper.

“Is that Gai you're reading?” Eamonn winked at us from behind the taps. “What's she on about today?”

“Getting pregnant,” Justine told him. “With the right guy.”

“And before your ovaries wither like raisins,” I added, and laughed. Or tried to.

“Aw, Grainne.” Eamonn shuddered as Justine returned with another pint. “Who wants to hear that female stuff?”

“Well, you asked.” I helped myself to a third biscuit, as if a self-induced sugar coma might help me forget why I was mainlining the stuff in the first place.

You know how it is—the day an old boyfriend gets married, it’s like a huge insect squished on the windscreen of your life. It’s not like you *care* or anything, it’s just that the ‘oul bugger is blocking your vision. “Although,” I muttered, “there’s something to be said for ‘ignorance is bliss.’”

“Amen to that,” said Eamonn. Really, the man had ears like underwater sonar. He resumed his glass polishing and pint-pulling and lovelorn-counseling and whatever else a barman does at O’Fagan’s, Temple Bar’s least trendy and most morgue-like pub, on a weekday afternoon.

Looking round the dim, mud-brown interior, Guinness flag-banners hanging listlessly from the ceiling, I polished off my biscuit and started on a fourth. “Why are we here anyway?” I asked. Really, there’s nothing like a wedding to get you pondering the Big Picture. Even one you’d no interest in attending, even if they’d prostrated themselves at your feet and begged you.

“You mean, on Planet Earth?” With a pint in her, Justine was apt to wax philosophical too.

“No, here. O’Fagan’s.”

“Besides Eamonn keeping sweets around for you?”

I ignored that. “I’m not here for the fellas, that’s for sure.” I avoided the inebriated

stare from a pub regular, whose hair looked like it had never heard of shampoo, and whose outfit screamed eighties' leisure suit.

“Me neither,” said Justine, though I wish she was. Sadly, she'd a here-and-there thing going with that tosser Frank Sheridan (currently in the “there” status, as he hadn't rung for a week), while simultaneously being hung up on a fella who didn't know she was alive, except as a friend. If that wouldn't doom a girl to misery, I don't know what would.

My own #1 Relationship Rule: a bloke can put me first or not at all. *But if you'd been more understanding*, a little voice answered, *Maybe you'd still be with—* Promptly squashing the thought, I stared at the biscuit in my hand, then set it down. “Who needs guys anyway? We need entertaining—”

“Wait a minute.” Justine snatched her *Echo* back, and blew the sugar bits off it. “Do you think Gai Lannigan *really* wants a baby?” She wrinkled her extremely freckled nose.

“How should I know?”

“She doesn't seem the sort.” Justine stared at the newspaper hard, as if her answer would somehow waft off the pages. “Maybe she's just nattering on about babies 'cause a lot of girls...you know, her demo...em, whatchacallit?”

“Demographic?” Eamonn put in. He was a great one for shameless eavesdropping.

“That's it—*those* girls are thinking about kids.” She looked happier. “Not Gai.”

“Whatever.” I plucked the paper from her hand, and set it on the table. “Like I said, time for some craic.”

“Oh...not that...” she protested feebly.

Maybe she'd forgotten why I needed a bit of fun, but I couldn't. “Yes, *that*.”

Heaving a long-suffering sigh, Justine picked up her glass and dragged her feet to the dartboard. Which naturally, was free—like I said, O’Fagan’s was a right mortuary. “I don’t know why I give in, when you’ve a definite advantage over me.”

“Never say a bit of Guinness has got you too pissed to play,” I said, collecting darts. “You know we never keep score. Besides, rules are for wimps.”

“I was talking about your height,” Justine grumbled. “And that I’ve a year on you. But if Gai’s right about girls going downhill, with any luck I’ll be too decrepit to play much longer.”

Gripping the barrel of my dart, I aimed, and threw my warm-up. Lovely—narrow end of an outside pie. “Speaking of decrepit,” I said casually, “now that I think of it, that Gai may have a point for a change.”

“How’s that?”

“Well,” I said, choosing my next dart, “Every time you turn round, you hear some thirty-something girl is having trouble getting pregnant.”

“Like who?” Still holding her pint, Justine absently picked up a dart.

“Your sister-in-law, for one.”

“Aine?” Justine waved dismissively with her dart hand, then threw—and barely hit the board. “It took six months—hardly ‘having trouble.’”

“That’s half a fecking *year*.” I threw again. Oooh, sweet. Middle of an inside pie.

“Trouble with you is, you want what you want, like *yesterday*.” Another dart in hand, Justine frowned at the board. “Tell me again, why do we play this bloody game?”

“For the aerobic benefit,” I replied. “In your case, hand-mixing strength. Now throw.”

Justine obeyed grudgingly, paying no attention to where her dart hit. (Good job she didn't, it was that bad.)

"The thing is," I said, examining my next dart, "it's been scientifically proven that after thirty, our—women's, that is—fertility takes a bit of a nosedive. Before long, we're all but barren."

Justine pulled a face. "Like I said, I've no worries about *that*."

"*Yet*," I said.

"What's the rush? 'When God made time, he made plenty of it.' My mam loves that one."

"Tripe," I scoffed, and threw. Yesss! Another inside pie! "That's from the old days, when you married at the age of sixteen, and had three glorious decades of pregnancy until childbirth finished you off. Now, you need a strategy—"

"Grainne!" called Eamonn, polishing his way toward our end of the bar. "I've a note for you. From..." Nodding at Mr. Leisure Suit, he handed me a scrap of paper.

With our man eagerly watching me, I felt obliged to read it. *Grania, can I stand your next round?*

Grania! Clearly, the man didn't know his arse from his Irish spelling. And for all his ogling, didn't he notice I was into biscuits, not pints? I sent a sickly smile in his direction, and pocketed the paper. (For a ritual burning once I got home. Like voodoo.)

His duty done, Eamonn pointed his towel at Justine. "Are you going to throw, so?"

She only took another drink, then licked the froth off her lip.

I ignored the bystanders. "A *real* baby strategy," I emphasized to Justine. "You can't leave too much to chance, even if getting preggers is hardly rocket science."

Justine grabbed a dart. “Tab A—” Giggling, she tossed it. The dart bounced off the board without penetrating, then clattered onto the nearest table. Luckily an empty one, though Eamonn let out a gasp. “—Into Slot B?”

“As long as Tab A’s got a willing male attached to it.” I picked her dart off the floor. “And please God his aim’s better than yours.”

“You can’t go wrong,” and Justine sniggered again, “if his willy’s at the ready.”

“Girls!” Eamonn looked scandalized. In a former life, he’d attended seminary, even if he hadn’t lasted long. “In my pub?”

“Ah, you’ve heard worse,” I told him, and turned back to Justine. “The question is, where to find the man for the job.”

“I’ll bet a girl could find plenty of sperm donors.” She leered, cutting her eyes toward Mr. Leisure Suit. “If she lowered her standards at bit.”

Yuk. “Don’t even joke about it,” I said. The man was gawking at us so hard, you’d think he had X-ray vision. “The male DNA round here is probably pickled in drink.”

“And possibly STDs,” Justine added. “Eeuw,” we said at the same time.

“This is more complicated than I thought.” Justine sounded like she’d really got the spirit of the thing. “So far, a top-notch donor fella can take booze or leave it, and is all but certified virus-free. What else?”

“Intelligent without lording it all over you,” I said, and threw. Wow—an inside pie, near the point this time! “But witty enough so your eyes don’t glaze over every time he opens his mouth.”

“Does a fella *really* need conversational skills for what you’ve in mind?”

“Seems only polite,” I countered, “to chat up the bloke before the knickers come

off.”

Justine sighed. No doubt thinking of the dialogue-challenged Frank Sheridan.

“And he should be in decent shape,” I continued. “A lean, mean, babymaking machine.”

“You’re fussing over the guy’s body too? Rather superficial, I’d say.” Justine threw again.

At least her dart stuck to the board this time. “Not at all,” I said. “The latest research says men with beer bellies come up short in quality sperm production.”

Justine digested this. “How about his face?”

“Well,” I said slowly. “You’ll want to think of the baby’s genes, so you’d eliminate the out-and-out Quasimodos first off. And probably take a pass on a weak chin or squinty eyes.”

“Minimum standards, then, like nice skin, decent teeth?” Justine glanced at Mr. Leisure Suit again, and grinned. “And good personal hygiene?”

“You’re reading my mind,” I said, weighing the dart in my hand. “But you’d not want an Adonis either, that you’d have to drag away from the mirror to get him in bed.”

Taking a deep breath to get centered, I aimed carefully, and threw. Ah ha! Almost touching the bull—sure, my first double bull was within my grasp!

“You should enter one of them championships,” called Mr. L.S. “I’ll come and watch you.”

You’ve watched enough, thank you. I picked up another dart. “One last go?” I asked Justine, but she shook her head. “Well, then, for the final criteria...” I rolled the dart between my thumb and index finger, to prime my throw, “...he’s got to be from out-of-

town—or better yet, out of the country altogether. So once you’ve hit your bull’s-eye—your positive test—you’ll go your separate ways. With no embarrassing chance encounters.”

Justine laughed. “Oooh, have I the man for you.”

“Who?” I clutched my dart. Then I set it down before I stabbed myself. “You mean,” I said casually, “like hypothetically. A fantasy guy any girl would want.”

“No, a real guy. For *you*. If you actually wanted a baby, that is.”

I felt a tiny leap in my chest. “And he is?”

“Smart, great smile, and not too keen on the drink,” Justine ticked off, without answering me. “No STD’s either—no germ would dare come within five miles of him.”

Really, this one sounded like a great candidate. “Where’d you meet this paragon?”

“Oh...around,” she said, smiling mysteriously. He’s even the right age and height for you.”

The excitement made my heart squeeze. “Well, who bloody is it?”

“And he hasn’t a big ego, despite having looks and talent and pots of money *and* every other reason to think he’s God’s gift to womankind,” Justine said, still teasing me. “In fact, he’s quite nice.”

Disappointed, I picked up my dart. This guy was *too* perfect. He couldn’t be real.

“And he lives *really* far away. As in...” she paused for dramatic effect, “Seattle.” I forgot to breathe as she grinned at me. “We know just the fella...don’t we?”

I gulped for air. “You are *so* mad.” Feeling my wrist go floppy, I turned and threw.

“The ideal man,” Justine pronounced as my dart missed the board entirely and skidded under a table. “My cousin Rafe.”

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