

the
baby

LISA
DRAKEFORD

Chicken House

SCHOLASTIC INC. / NEW YORK

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 by Chicken House, 2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Drakeford, Lisa, author.

Title: The baby / Lisa Drakeford.

Description: First [American] edition. | New York : Chicken House/Scholastic Inc., 2016. | © 2016 | "First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 by Chicken House." | Summary: When Nicola gives birth at her best friend Olivia's seventeenth birthday party, the lives of five teenagers are changed forever—and in the months that follow Nicola, Olivia, Jonty, Ben, and Olivia's eleven-year-old sister, Alice, struggle with their changed relationships.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016005737 (print) | ISBN 9780545940276 (hardcover : alk. paper) |

Subjects: LCSH: Infants—Juvenile fiction. | Best friends—Juvenile fiction. | Sisters—Juvenile fiction. | Interpersonal relations—Juvenile fiction. | Teenage mothers—Juvenile fiction. | Teenage fathers—Juvenile fiction. | Gay teenagers—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Babies—Fiction. | Best friends—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | Sisters—Fiction. | Interpersonal relations—Fiction. | Teenage mothers—Fiction. | Teenage fathers—Fiction. | Gays—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.D75 Bab 2016 (print) | DDC 823.92—dc23
LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016005737>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, November 2016

Book design by Mary Claire Cruz

For Dan Tunstall. So sad that you'll never read this.

And for a real-life Olivia—nothing like my fictional one. She's had a rubbish year, and I've been so proud and impressed at the way she's handled it. I promised her mum I'd keep an eye out for her. This book is to make you smile, Olivia H.

Olivia

FEBRUARY

“Don’t disturb Mrs. Greasly next door. You know how cross she gets about noise late at night.” Her mum tugs with anxious fingers at her handbag.

“I know.” Olivia nods.

“And don’t excite Sandy.”

“She’ll be with Alice.”

Her dad jingles his car keys.

“Use the carpet spray under the sink if you spill anything.” Her mum loiters on the doorstep. Olivia’s dying to close the door.

“I will.”

“Oh, and remember Alice. Check on her, won’t you? You know how scared she gets with strangers.”

Olivia stares at the doormat, tracing patterns with her toe.

LISA DRAKEFORD

Just go, will you?

“And make sure she gets something to eat.” Her mum’s eyes narrow. “You won’t let anything horrible happen to her, will you?”

Olivia wants to scream. It fizzes in her stomach. “Course not.”

She throws a look at her dad, begging him to drag her mum away to the restaurant. Why is it always, *always* like this? Why, even at her seventeenth birthday party, are they still worrying about her sister? It makes her so mad. Why is it *still* about Alice?

But she takes a breath and sticks a smile on her face.

“She’ll be fine. I’ll keep an eye on her. She’s not been sick all day now.” It’s typical of her sister to be recovering from a bug at the worst possible moment.

She sees her mum look nervously over at her dad, who shrugs and points the key at the car. Olivia sighs and half closes the door. *Please go. Please just go.*

She closes her eyes with relief when her mum snaps shut her handbag and makes steps toward the car.

At last!

But it’s difficult to ignore the anxious look from her mum up toward Alice’s bedroom window.

The door crunches closed and she takes the stairs up to her room two at a time. It’s actually happened; after

THE BABY

moaning and grumbling for the best part of two weeks now, her parents have finally left her to it.

At the top of the stairs she lets her shoulders sag, feels a lift in her chest, starts to smile. *Let's get this party started!*



“God, I’m so fat.” Nicola grimaces in the mirror, spreads her fingers across her belly, and bends over toward the iPod for music.

She’s dressed in leggings and a long I ♥ NY tank top. There’s a half-finished bottle of hard cider on the floor beside her.

“Don’t be stupid. You look lovely.”

Nicola groans and jabs her stomach. “There’s nothing lovely about this.”

Olivia attends to her mascara, her mouth open with focus. “Shut up, Nic—it’s just Christmas weight. We’ve all got it. It takes three days to gain and three months to lose.”

Nicola shakes her head, unconvinced. “So where’s yours?”

Olivia sifts through her makeup bag. There’s a rattle of tubes and applicators between her fingers. “Well disguised, underneath this.” She tugs at her top, pulling it over her bum.

Nicola shrugs and averts her eyes. Olivia shakes her head. Her friend’s always been the same. She’s the original

LISA DRAKEFORD

yo-yo dieter. Ever since Olivia's known her, from the age of seven, she's been unhappy with how she looks. She's seen Nic gain and lose weight at the drop of a hat and Nic's never satisfied with the result. And tonight, just like every other night, Olivia thinks Nic looks lovely. She's curvy in the right places, unlike Olivia, who's more straight up and down. Nicola's hair is glossy and long, winding around her shoulders. Her mum describes it as her "crowning glory." She has a pretty face with a heart-shaped mouth, which is enough to have boys falling over themselves for her attention. Only she has no idea. So frustrating. She has no confidence in her looks.

There's nothing more Olivia can say; she's said it all before. But even so, she slips her hands on Nicola's shoulders, breathes in her musky smell, and smiles at the image in the mirror. "Nic—you look great. Gorgeous." She catches Nic's brown eyes. "You're my best friend, my oldest friend, and I wouldn't have you any other way. And when you're working for Versace you've got to remember me." Nicola has massive aims to work for a top designer when she's older and Olivia's sure that she can do it. Her taste in fashion is brilliant.

Nicola frowns, lowering her eyes. Embarrassed. Her voice catches so it comes out as a husk. "You know I'll always remember you. And you look amazing too. You do all the time. I love that top."

THE BABY

Olivia pulls at it. “Do you think?” Pouts. “I’m not so sure. Jonty hates it. Says it’s too low cut.”

Nicola sighs. “Don’t listen to him. If it was up to him he’d have you in a nun’s outfit.” She turns toward Olivia and checks her friend’s face.

Olivia feels like she’s being weighed up by an elite fashion stylist. It’s nice. She respects Nicola’s opinion. She waits while Nicola wipes at Olivia’s eyelid with a brush. “You spend too long worrying about what he’s going to say.”

Olivia feels a disappointed lump develop in her throat. Turns toward the cider bottle, suddenly wanting more. “Habit, I guess,” she mumbles.

Nicola grabs her arm—Olivia can feel her fingers dig deep into her skin. “Bad habits need to be broken.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

But Nicola lets it go. Instead she reaches over to the iPod, flicks through for a change of track, and turns up the volume.



With just a few last-minute touches to their clothing, some squirts of body spray, and more of their favorite makeup; with some laughs over Nicola’s outrageous new shoes and a bit of posing, they’re almost ready to make their grand entrance down the stairs. Jonty and his mate Adam are already downstairs, having arrived just before her parents left. She can hear

LISA DRAKEFORD

them setting up the speakers, jeering at each other, blasting out X-rated songs now that her parents have finally gone.

Olivia checks the time on her phone and half hopes, half dreads the first ring of the doorbell. One thing's for sure: She could really do with their mate Ben being one of the first visitors. He can be relied on to get a party going. His cheery banter always eases even the most awkward of situations. Apart from the ones between her and Jonty. In fact, Ben is sometimes the reason for awkwardness there.

Two sharp raps on the bedroom door and Jonty walks in. He's wearing black jeans and a denim shirt. His skin is shiny and fresh and he's washed his hair. It makes him even more good-looking. He seems excited and edgy.

They smile at each other. She feels tense goose bumps rise on her neck.

"Ready?" She notices his glance linger on her tank top, but thankfully he doesn't say anything.

There's a brief wash of his eyes over Nicola.

Olivia sees Nicola put weight on her back foot like she's nervous or worried about something.

But now there's the clatter of voices down in the hallway. They're here! Olivia takes a deep breath, walks across the landing to Alice's room, and pops her head round the door, where she sees her sister sitting on her bed, sorting through her gemstones. "You okay there, Alice? I'll bring you up some pizza later."

THE BABY

Alice nods happily. "I'm fine."

Olivia closes the door and grins over her shoulder at the waiting Nicola. "Then let the party commence."

She likes the sound of the words as they echo around her landing.



Two hours in and the party is full on.

Music blasts against walls, jars against pictures, rattles among glassware littered on surfaces. The quiet little semi-detached house has never known such force. It literally quivers.

People are strewn around the two reception rooms. Their skin, their hair, their clothes are bathed in the glow of a good time. Boys grabbing each other in the front room, slam dancing and moshing. Girls bent double in the lounge, laughing over phones, cracking up with drinks balanced in wavering hands. Couples with their fingers all over each other: in hair, in clothes, in mouths moist with drunken laughter. The kitchen teems with conversation and raised voices. Hard to be heard over the music.

Tiles tacky underfoot. Walls with giant shadows. Ugly, looming figures throwing exaggerated profiles against low lights and candles. Scents of perfume, sweat, beer, cider, and wine. And one of a strongly fragranced candle that burns by the side of the computer. Despite the warmth of tightly

LISA DRAKEFORD

packed bodies, there are blasts of icy February air that cut at ankles as they dance around the kitchen. The back door bangs open and shut as people stumble into the dark chill of the garden to smoke.

From where Olivia's standing, against the sink, next to two friends who are definitely worse for wear, she thinks it's going well. She presses her fingers against the cool of the ceramic behind her. This is a good party. She can just feel it.

She watches Jonty over in the corner, talking with his mates Adam and Durant, their profiles throwing laughter shapes against the wall. Jonty looks happy.

That's a relief. Don't want him angry, not tonight.

Ben's dancing with a circle of friends—mainly girls. He's the center; their faces all turned toward him, laughing. Olivia smiles with pride. He's her best boy friend. Came into her life only last year but a fierce friend all the same. Back at the start of the last school year he wandered into her science class, a cloud of shaggy hair, shining eyes, and outrageous shoes. He sat beside Olivia as it was the only free stool. Within minutes he was rethreading her friendship bands and telling her that if she liked the Horrors' music, and judging by the graffiti on her science folder she did, then she should really revisit some original stuff from the eighties.

THE BABY

By the end of the lesson they were mates. He even managed to finish her question on photosynthesis.

He's now a regular visitor to her house. A day rarely passes when they don't see or meet each other. Olivia's mum thinks the world of him, and even Nicola seems happy to share the friendship; they get closer every day. He's easy company, makes few demands, and has both girls laughing at things that didn't seem funny before. He even makes an effort with Alice, who's unusual—to say the least—and awkward with people. But somehow Ben sees through this. He is kind and gentle with her.

It's only Jonty who doesn't get Ben. But it's sort of understandable—before Ben came along Jonty was the only boy she spoke to. It must have been a shock for him to suddenly have to share her. Besides, they are poles apart. Ben's obsessed with music and fashion; Jonty couldn't care less. He hangs around in track pants and T-shirts and hates shopping with Olivia. Anyhow, Jonty doesn't have any money. He lives with his nan and uses any money he *does* have on his gym membership and protein shakes. Ben, on the other hand, works in a café on Saturdays and spends all his wages on clothes and music by Sunday.

Watching Ben now, in among all the dancers, she feels a rush of love for him; gratitude for his friendship. She grins to herself. Maybe it's the cider.

LISA DRAKEFORD

She can't see Nicola. Now she thinks about it, she hasn't seen her for a while. Not since the first half hour when they'd started off the dancing. She hopes she's stopped worrying about her appearance. She's normally laughing and joking with Ben or Olivia. It's weird that she's not around.

Pouring herself some more cider, Olivia thinks briefly about Alice too. Sighs. She'll go and check on her in a bit. In a while. When she's had this drink. Maybe take her some pizza later.

Ben grabs her by the wrist, his eyes creased with laughter. Pulls her from the sink and her two drunken friends. "C'mon, dance to this. It's so good."

She allows herself to be dragged into the circle of bodies, weaving and swaying and pounding in time to the music. The drink; the music; the voices around her; the shadows; the smells. She gets sucked in. Swirls around. A giant, laughter-filled, cider-infused twist.

"Where's Jonty?" Ben's sweating. It glistens on his cheeks.

"Not sure." She points at a boy in the corner, Ben's current love interest. "I see Mark made it, then?"

Ben shakes his head. "I've gone off him. His toenails are a disgrace." He pulls his mouth down. "A disgusting old-man yellow."

She rolls her eyes. "You're so picky. And a bloody perfectionist." She has to shout in his ear, it's so loud.

THE BABY

He slides his warm hands over hers. “There’s nothing wrong with high standards.” Lifts his chin like he does when he’s trying to make a point. “Something you could learn from.”

She frowns, turns her head, and thinks about changing the subject. She’s been down this road with Ben too often. Ben’s voice is careful, close to her ear. “Don’t really get why you still see Jonty.”

Olivia sighs. She looks around her at the swaying dancers. She stands on the edge, half dancing, half not. “Everyone says that. It’s just . . . I’ve been with him for so long that I can’t imagine what it’d be like without him.”

The music morphs into another song. Someone’s slick mixing.

“No offense, Livvy, but isn’t he kind of . . . possessive?” His voice gets louder in her ear, more insistent. “He definitely bullies younger kids. I’ve seen that myself.” He pulls away to check her eyes. “And doesn’t his body obsession bore you to tears?”

“You don’t know him like I do.” Even to Olivia this sounds weak. But it’s true. They’ve been seeing each other for six years now. Since year seven. Thank God Ben decides to let it go—like Nicola did earlier. A party isn’t the place. Ben always seems to know when she’s had enough. He steps back and gets in some serious shuffling. It makes her laugh. He pulls her in with him again.

LISA DRAKEFORD

“By the way, I checked on Alice earlier,” he shouts in her ear again. His words are hot on her cheek.

“Was she okay?”

He nods. “Yeah, she’s so cute! Told me all about her imaginary farm.”

Olivia winces. She presses her thumbs together. Her sister’s had an imaginary farm for the past two years now. She has horses, pigs, and dogs. All named after precious stones like malachite and amethyst. Nobody knows why. Nobody dares ask. She has massive tantrums if someone suggests they’re not real. And she insists on telling people about it. Olivia shouts back. “It’s a bit weird, isn’t it?”

Ben smiles, shrugs, and shuffles some more. “You should have known me as an eleven-year-old. I was an emotional nightmare. I burst into tears if anyone so much as looked at my *Star Wars* LEGO set. I was sure they wanted to sabotage it, or at least nick Yoda.”

Olivia cracks up at the thought, shoves him in the ribs. “I bet.”



Twenty minutes later. Face glowing, beads of sweat on her top lip, she thinks there was something she had to do. Only her mind’s not working anymore. She’s been drinking too quickly. Jonty won’t be impressed if he realizes how drunk

THE BABY

she is. All that's in her brain are images and ideas, flitting and skittering behind her eyes.

She's standing with Jonty surveying the kitchen. He has his arm around her shoulders, but he's talking to Adam. It's okay though. He's in a good mood. There's a smell of burning pizza. She doesn't remember putting one in the oven, but someone must've done: Sarah Harrison's taking bites of a limp, wet-looking triangle. The tomato makes orange stains at the corners of her mouth.

Jonty points to a large chocolate cake by the kettle. "Who's that for?"

Olivia rolls her eyes. "That's mine. Mum seems to think that even though my birthday isn't till Thursday, just the fact that we're having this party means we should have a cake."

Jonty shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "Nice."

"Look, I'm just lucky she's not putting out Jell-O and ice cream as well."

"What time are they staying out till?"

"It took all my negotiating skills to get them to stay out until midnight. But I wouldn't put it past them to be early. It's way past their bedtime."

"And Alice?" Jonty narrows his eyes. He's not a big fan. Doesn't know how to deal with her.

"She's promised to stay in her room. I couldn't persuade Mum to take her with them because she's been ill."

LISA DRAKEFORD

Sarah wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and comes over. "Someone's locked in your bathroom upstairs. Reckon you might have to call the fire brigade." She raises her eyebrows and takes one last mouthful of pizza. "I'll take photos. Firefighters are so hot!"

They laugh, just as the speakers fizz and die.

Jonty swears, leaps over to the corner, and starts to fiddle with wires.

No one else seems that bothered. The low ceiling bounces voices around the room.

This is a good party. The noise reminds her of a school cafeteria. Only more glasses.

There's something she should be doing. She's certain.

There's a blast and another fizz and suddenly the music returns. Jonty stands proud, waiting for someone to be grateful. There's a dutiful cheer, and he grins. Olivia finds herself dancing into the front room to celebrate. She's not sure how she got there although she can still feel the circle of Ben's fingers around her wrist, so she guesses he must have dragged her to dance again.

Her drink's on the mantelpiece above the fire.

Glancing at the hallway, through the door, she sees smears of birthday cake on the laminate. The swirls remind her of her grandma's curtains.

There's something she has to do.

THE BABY

Jake Moon bangs on the downstairs bathroom door, his hand covering his mouth. His body is folded in a retch.

Lorna Cole holds a pack of cigarettes in the air, glints at Olivia, jerks her eyes to the back door. Olivia smiles, thinks about going to join her. Only Jonty hates the smell . . . Maybe just one . . .

A while later, back in the kitchen, she spots Lorna through the window, smoking and laughing in the garden with a cluster of friends. Their movement switches on next door's outside sensor light. The Greaslys will be going crazy. But right now she's too happy to care.

This is a good party!

Another drink, some pizza. And now she's remembered what she was meant to do: check on Alice. She'll be nice and take her a slice of pizza. And where the hell is Nicola?

Jake Moon seems to have stopped vomiting now. And his hand is in Alice's goldfish bowl. Water splashes over the pine dresser. Oversized thumbs chasing goldfish.

Someone—she's not sure of his name—is playing guitar with her mum's leopard-skin-patterned broom. Random.

She chinks glasses with Will Child. "Brilliant party, Olivia." She sees his tonsils when he laughs.

She smiles and smells burning pizza again.

It reminds her that she's getting pizza to take up to Alice.

She wishes she could find Nicola.