



ALL

"A biting, twisty, utter
delight of a thriller."

—JESSICA KNOLL

THE

a novel
OTHER

MOTHERS

HATE ME

SARAH HARMAN

ALL
THE
OTHER
MOTHERS
HATE
ME

A NOVEL

SARAH HARMAN

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
New York

PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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For Jack, my best boy

PROLOGUE



THE MISSING BOY IS TEN-YEAR-OLD Alfie Risby, and to be perfectly honest with you, he's a little shit.

I realize that's a horrible thing to say about a child, particularly one who is missing. But—and I'm not proud of this—if I'd had to choose a boy in Dylan's class to vanish in broad daylight, Alfie would have been at the top of my list.

There are some kids you just kind of want to punch, and Alfie was one of them. Perhaps it was his hair—that pale red shade we used to call strawberry blonde. Or his dull, raisin-colored eyes. Or the way his sharp little teeth gave him a distinctly ferret-like appearance.

Their sharpness is a point of fact: Last year he bit his nanny, Cecilia, so hard she needed stitches. For weeks, she appeared at afternoon pickup like a sad ghost, clutching her bandaged forearm.

The one time I volunteered to chaperone a school trip, a class picnic to Hampstead Heath, Alfie leaned over a plate of sausage rolls and told me, very casually, as if we were two adults at a bar, that he “quite liked my slag fingernails.”

And then there's his family. They weren't just run-of-the-mill St. Angeles rich. They were in a whole other league.

“Like richer than God,” one of the other mothers had whispered to me during last year’s spring fundraiser, as we arranged sugar cookies on tiny plastic trays.

But if I’m being honest, my feelings about Alfie had nothing to do with his hair or his wealth or his ferret teeth. No. My dislike of Alfie stemmed entirely from the way he treated Dylan, my precocious, sensitive only son, like he was a bug to be crushed.

And nobody crushes my kid.

Shepherd's Bush, London

FRIDAY, 7:45 A.M.

I WAKE UP WITH A Girls' Night song stuck in my head. To be honest, "The Quake" never took off like the label had hoped. It didn't help that a devastating, 8.9-magnitude tremor had ripped through Southern California the same week our single was released, collapsing a multistory parking garage like a soufflé and trapping 346 people inside. The song itself is still a jam, though.

*You're like an earthquake,
Richter 10 heartbreak
Said you wanna "short break"
Then takin' up with that skan—*

I hum to myself under the covers, imagining that I'm performing to a sold-out Wembley Stadium instead of about to take a lukewarm shower on the ground floor of half a Victorian terraced house. Not even the whole damn house.

"Dylan!" I shriek. "Get up! You're gonna be late for school!"

My son appears in the doorway, fully dressed, right down to his St. Angeles cap and tie.

“Ha-ha, very funny, Mum.” He rolls his eyes and presses a cold can of Red Bull into my hands.

I take a sip. Our morning ritual complete, I pull the warm duvet back over my face.

“Seriously, though, can we not be late today?” my son pleads. “Ms. Schulz says the coach won’t wait this time.”

A dim memory of a permission slip surfaces, of scrawling my initials in eggplant-colored eyeliner and checking the “not available to chaperone” box.

“Because of the field trip?” I murmur, from beneath the duvet.

“Yes. The Wetland Centre. Bird-watching. Can you get up now, please?”

“Right. You excited?” I’m stalling, but he’s in an even bigger hurry than usual. Perhaps this means the bullying has finally stopped.

Dylan turns his pleading green eyes on me. “Can’t I just walk by myself?” he says, half question, half whine.

I remove the duvet from my face for a second time. Dull late-autumn light is filtering through the shutters now, piercing my retinas. I drag myself upright. Why does it have to be so *bright* in the mornings?

“Dylan. We’ve been over this. You’re ten. You’re not walking to school alone. You wanna end up in some hairy old pedophile’s basement? Hmm? You wanna spend the rest of your life—”

Dylan interrupts me. “It’s called a *cellar* here, Mum. Only Americans say *basement*.”

The way he wrinkles his nose when he says the word *American* is like a tiny hatchet to my heart.

I chug the rest of my Red Bull and toss the can toward the sprawling collection on my dresser. Dylan glares at my row of empties as if they’re discarded yellowcake uranium cartridges.

“You’re going to recycle those, right? Aluminium is one of the most energy-intensive materials on the planet? Mr. Foster showed me this documentary—”

“Not now, Greenpeace. We’ll be late.”

Dylan groans loudly as he stalks toward the kitchen. “Fine,” he sighs. “But, Mum—” His voice floats down the hallway. “Can you puh-leez just wear a *normal* shirt today? Like the other mums?”

I glance down at my *Girls’ Night 2008* tour shirt. Of all my band shirts, this one’s my favorite. It’s from the early days, before the whole Rose debacle. The front has a screen-printed photo of my own much younger face. On the back, my name, FLORENCE, is spelled out in block letters, like a football player’s jersey.

I slide the offending garment over my head, allowing a taurine-tinged burp to escape. A sparkly orange crop top catches my eye from the pile on the floor.

“You got it, kid.”

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 7:58 A.M.

THE AIR OUTSIDE IS COLD and clear, that dreadful slice of mid-November when the clocks have gone back but the Christmas parties haven't started yet.

Dylan races out the front door ahead of me, his backpack swinging loosely on one shoulder. Our neighbor Mr. Foster—the aforementioned aluminum documentary fanboy—is standing in front of his terraced house, sorting his glass cans into a bin. Dylan gives him an enthusiastic wave. I wince. I'm not thrilled that the seventy-six-year-old local recycling zealot is currently my son's best friend. I'm even less thrilled that he keeps giving Dylan live crickets to feed his pet box turtle. But that's a battle for another day.

"Oh, Florence," Mr. Foster says, looking up from a pile of cans. "Did you see that—"

"We're actually in a bit of a rush," I call over my shoulder without stopping. There will be hell to pay if Dylan misses that bus.

Mr. Foster grunts and turns back to his bins. "Course. Don't let me keep you."

As we get closer to Dylan's school, our neighborhood's familiar chicken joints and betting shops give way to organic butchers and natural wine stores. Before long, Dylan and I are passing the grand white mansions that house the Uzbek embassy and the Beckham family. Dylan's school is just a few blocks past all that, tucked away on a dead-end road.

St. Angeles is a 150-year-old, all-boys prep school, housed in a sprawling Victorian mansion straight out of a Dickens novel. The school's only concession to modernity is the incongruously cheerful blue front door, hastily painted after a private equity firm took over a few years ago and tried to drag it into the twenty-first century.

Morning drop-off at St. Angeles is choreographed with the precision of a North Korean military parade. It's a strictly no-cars-allowed situation, which means all the parents—no matter how busy or important—scramble for street parking several blocks away and then approach the imposing iron gates on foot, like religious pilgrims descending on Mecca.

By the time we arrive, the parade of supplicants snakes around the block. We're late, but we're not *late-late*. Dylan will still make the bus, and I will make my crucial next appointment. I just have to avoid Ms. Dobbins, the new head of "pastoral care." I've been dodging her calls for weeks now. Whatever she wants, it can't be good.

Dylan and I settle into line behind Allegra Armstrong-Johnson and her pallid son, Wolfie. I maintain a healthy distance, hoping she doesn't turn around. It wouldn't be fair to call Allegra my nemesis—that honor is reserved for Hope Grüber—and anyway, I don't know Allegra well enough to hate her. But she's the kind of St. Angeles mum I go out of my way to avoid. The kind with glossy brown hair, a Hurlingham Club membership, and a two-hundred-acre horse farm in Norfolk. Her husband, Rupert, writes Churchill biographies, which is apparently not only an actual job, but one that allows them to live in a swanky town house in South Kensington.

"Running late again, Florence?" Allegra clucks, all merry and faux-polite.

I look up at her. This morning Allegra is wearing buttery leather Hermès riding boots, a green wax Barbour jacket, and an expression of

complete self-satisfaction. Her anorexic whippet dog is off leash and dressed in a quilted vest.

When I don't answer, Allegra purses her lips and says quite loudly, "You're looking very glamorous this morning. Big plans after drop-off?"

Something about her tone makes me feel like a child who's been sent to the principal's office. It doesn't help that I'm a decade younger than most of the St. Angeles mums, none of whom got pregnant by accident at twenty.

I ignore Allegra's question and pat her hideous dog on the head. "Good boy, Wolfie."

She flinches. "Wolfie is our *son's name*," she says with a frown. "Not our dog's."

I begin to hum under my breath, the opening bars of "You're So Vain." When I get to the chorus, Dylan shoots me a death look.

"Mum!" he hisses. "Stop!"

"What?" I say innocently. "Carly Simon is a classic!"

I should be nice to Allegra. The fact is, she's an endangered species around here: an actual British person at St. Angeles. Most of her kind, the ones without aristocratic titles or hedge fund husbands, have retreated to Surrey now. This pocket of London is weird like that; an exotic blend of people with mysterious sources of income from all over the world. Frankly, you're more likely to rub shoulders with a Bahraini prince or a Greek shipping heiress than an actual person from, say, Yorkshire. There was a rumor a while back that St. Angeles was discounting the tuition for the few remaining British pupils, almost like a bursary for needy students. It's not that far-fetched. Foreign parents want to believe they're getting an "authentic" English experience when they send their kids to school dressed in knee socks and straw boater hats. No point in turning your child's education into an extended exercise in nostalgic British cosplay if *all* the other kids are also from Melbourne or Paris or Hong Kong or Helsinki.

Personally, I find the whole English obsession with schools ridiculous. Where I grew up, in a cramped two-bedroom apartment on a sun-drenched stretch of pavement outside Orlando, Florida, kids just went to whatever school was near their house. Grown men definitely did not spend entire

dinner parties trying to work out where their host learned his multiplication tables.

If it were up to me, Dylan would go to the local primary a block from our flat, and I would sleep in an extra twenty-five minutes each morning. When I mentioned this to my ex-husband, Will, he acted like I'd suggested that Dylan be removed from formal education to perform a decade of hard labor on a communal farm. Will was a St. Angeles boy, you see, and he'd insisted on the same for Dylan.

"Fine," I'd said with a shrug. "You're paying."

Anyway, the uniform *is* cute.

When we reach the front gates, the deputy head, an ancient brontosaurus called Ms. Schulz, offers us a tight-lipped smile.

"Morning, Dylan," she says primly, peering up at me from beneath a helmet of permed gray hair. She's dressed exactly like Mrs. Doubtfire and smells vaguely of mothballs.

"Have fun today, kiddo!" I call to Dylan as he disappears through the gate and into a sea of identical blazer-clad boys. "Knock 'em dead!"

Ms. Schulz winces. "Mrs. Palmer," she says, nodding in my direction.

"It's Grimes," I remind her. "Dylan is Palmer. Like his father."

Beneath her owl-eyed glasses, she blinks. "Of course," she says blankly. Like she hasn't seen me every weekday morning for the past five years. "My apologies. Enjoy your day."

I hurry away from the gates, willing Ms. Dobbins not to appear. A few feet away, Hope Grüber, the PTA president, is regaling Farzanah Khan and Cleo Risby with the riveting tale of her one of her triplets' perfect score on a mock St. Paul's entrance exam.

"We didn't even tutor!" Hope crows, batting her lash extensions.

Hope is a try-hard social climber from Brisbane. Before she met her husband, an Austrian property tycoon thirty years her senior, Hope was a struggling catalog model who lived above a chippy on Goldhawk Road. We ran in the same circles for a little while after I left Girls' Night. We were

never friends, but we lived parallel lives: shopping at Primark, partying at Fabric, always keeping one eye open for the next good thing. The difference, I suppose, is that Hope found it.

Today, Hope has three sons, drives a baby blue Bentley with custom BOYMUM plates, and refers to herself on Instagram as a #Model, #Philanthropist, and #GirlBoss. She still speaks with a naff accent and wears too much leopard print to fully pass as a member of the “quiet luxury” set, but she’s managed to ingratiate herself with the other St. Angeles mums by being keen with a capital K. Need a charity gala organized or a bake sale scheduled? Hope is your woman. It doesn’t hurt that she and Karl Theodor have a spare eight-bedroom chalet in Verbier she lets the other mums borrow, even in peak season. In exchange, her awful triplets—Trip and Teddy and, I dunno, Tryhard—are never excluded from a birthday party. Unlike Dylan.

“Ms. Dobbins says he’s naturally gifted!” Hope bleats. The mention of her name sends a little shiver up my spine. I need to get out of here.

Beside her, Farzanah lifts one perfectly arched eyebrow, not bothering to hide her skepticism. “Is that right?”

Unlike Hope, Farzanah has an actual job, as a “dermatologist to the stars,” with a skincare line at Harrods and her own offices on Harley Street. Farzanah is easily the most polished human being I’ve ever seen up close, with luminous skin, gleaming white teeth, and a curtain of dark hair so shiny you can practically see your reflection in it. Her father was the Pakistani ambassador to London in the late ’90s, and Farzanah attended an all-girls boarding school in Berkshire, where she developed the same crisp enunciation as the Dowager Countess of Grantham. To top it all off, her son, Zain, is an actual genius and has won the school’s LEGO Engineering Challenge three years in a row. Hope despises Farzanah, but in a completely different way than she hates me.

Beside them, Cleo Risby is only half listening, rummaging around for something in her oversize bag. Cleo is the coolest of all the St. Angeles mums. She’s nearly a foot taller than everyone else, with icy blond hair and a permanent distracted expression, like a model who just woke up from a

daydream. She's some kind of artist, though as far as I can tell, her work consists solely of chain-smoking outside various galleries and being photographed for *Vanity Fair*. Her husband is older and fabulously wealthy, the heir to a frozen food fortune.

Cleo rarely puts in appearances at drop-off (she has people for that), so this is a special occasion, particularly for Hope, who wants nothing more than to be Cleo's best friend. Unfortunately, Allegra Armstrong-Johnson beat her to it by several decades (they roomed together at school), and so Hope is forced to tolerate Farzanah and amuse herself by torturing me.

Hope grabs my arm as I scurry past, arranging her fish lips into a concerned expression. "Oh, Florence. There you are. Ms. Dobbins was just looking for you. Seemed quite urgent."

"Right, uh, thanks," I murmur.

Farzanah clucks her tongue ominously. "Oh dear. Everything all right with Dylan?"

She and Hope exchange knowing glances as I quicken my pace. Just a few more feet to the corner, a turn to the left, and I'll be safe—free from Ms. Dobbins and the other mothers' judgmental stares and whatever Dylan has done now.

At the end of the sidewalk, just as I begin to breathe a sigh of relief, a hard poke lands squarely between my shoulders.

Fuck.

When I turn around, it's not Ms. Dobbins at all, but a shiny-haired Asian woman, gripping a cell phone in one hand and speaking rapidly in a flat California accent. "So I told him, it's nonnegotiable that we have coverage from New York on this..."

I've lived in this country almost half my life now, and I sometimes forget how jarring an American accent can be at full strength. My own has diluted over the years, like instant coffee mixed with weak tea.

"Um, hello? Did you just poke me?"

The woman gestures to her ear, indicating that she's on a phone call. As if I had just jabbed *her* in the spine.

“Right. Yes. One hundred percent. Listen, let me call you back,” she says, extracting an earbud and extending her hand. “Jenny Choi,” she says, pumping my arm up and down, like the two of us have just negotiated a historic free trade agreement. “Sorry about that. Just trying to squeeze in another billable hour.”

She notices my puzzled expression and adds, “Attorney. Hazard of the job, I guess.”

“Right. Have we met?”

“No, no. We’re new here. But Ms. Schulz told me there was another American mom.” Jenny smiles and shifts her weight. She’s at least a decade older than me, maybe two. Her face is devoid of any makeup, and she’s dressed in androgynous corporate attire that looks incredibly expensive. The kind of woman who is very comfortable asking to speak to the manager.

“I’ve got the twins, Max and Charlie? They were supposed to start at the American School up in St. John’s Wood, but the interview...well, the boys were having a bad day.” Jenny stops, forcing a smile. “Anyway, never mind. We’re here now.”

I nod, trying to process the machine-gun volley of information she’s unloaded on me. In the distance, Ms. Dobbins emerges from the school gates and begins prowling the drop-off line.

“Well, um, welcome to St. Angeles,” I say, backing away before Ms. Dobbins can register my presence.

Jenny folds her arms across her chest. “Listen, let me get your number. For a playdate.”

“A playdate?” I study Jenny’s smooth face, her perfect teeth, her sleek, chin-length bob. We might have the same passport, but that’s almost certainly all we have in common. How long will it take for her to drop me once she clocks my status as persona non grata among the St. Angeles mums?

“For the boys,” Jenny clarifies. “I’d love for them to make some friends.”

Ms. Dobbins has spotted me now and is bearing down in my direction like a bloodhound.

Jenny hands me her phone. “Just put it in there. I’ll give you a missed call so you’ll have mine as well.”

Damn, she’s persistent. I pound out my number as quickly as possible. Ms. Dobbins is only a few feet away now and gaining rapidly.

“Well, um, nice to meet you,” I mumble, turning to leave. But it’s too late. Ms. Dobbins’s hand is on my shoulder now.

Busted.

“Ms. Grimes!” she says, slightly too loudly. “So sorry to interrupt! Might I steal you for a moment?”

Eliza Dobbins is younger than me, in her late twenties, with large round eyes and jet-black hair. She could be pretty if she tried, but she clearly doesn’t. Smears of mascara are dotted under her eyebrows, and her rayon monstrosity of a blouse is dusted with muffin crumbs. It doesn’t help that she’s roughly 150 months pregnant, heaving her belly around like a piece of overripe fruit.

“I should go,” Jenny says, backing away. “Great to meet you.”

I turn to Ms. Dobbins. “I’m actually in a bit of a rush.”

“No problem,” she chirps. “Which way are you heading? I’ll walk with you!” She pats her protruding stomach. “Good exercise! A walk-and-talk!”

As we cross the street, I can feel the other mothers watching us, their eyes boring into my back as they speculate about what Dylan has done this time. I tell myself not to turn around. But then, like Lot’s wife, I can’t resist: I glance back one last time at the school gates. Cleo is gone, I note with relief, but Hope and Farzanah and Allegra are still hovering near the gates, craning their necks in my direction.

Ms. Dobbins clears her throat. “I’ve been trying to reach you for several days. Is everything OK at home?” Her large brown eyes are pools of liquid empathy, which only makes me hate her more.

“What do you mean?” I deadpan.

“Dylan’s outburst. Last week,” she says, touching my arm gently. The microscopic stone in her engagement ring catches the dull light, glinting

like an old button.

“Oh. That.” I try not to smirk. “You have to admit, it was kind of funny. I mean—tell me *you’ve* never wanted to empty out a desk on Teddy Grüber’s lap?”

Ms. Dobbins purses her lips. “We’d like to have Dylan evaluated,” she says, in a slow, measured cadence that seems precisely calibrated not to upset me. “By an external professional. Dr. Lieber is extremely skilled at —”

A wave of heat sweeps over my body.

“Dylan is fine,” I snap. “I’m not sending him to some shrink just so you can medicate him to the gills.”

Ms. Dobbins frowns. “I assure you that is not my intention. It’s just that...” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “After the incident with the, erm, turtle, we’re obligated to take these matters very seriously.”

I gulp. Turtlegate. At the end of last term, a group of boys, Alfie and Dylan included, were gathered around the koi pond on the far corner of school campus, admiring a box turtle. In Dylan’s telling, Alfie had been poking the turtle with a cricket bat. Dylan told him to stop, that he was hurting the turtle. What happened next is the matter of some debate, but the undeniable result was that Alfie required four stitches to the oozing red gash above his right eyebrow. Dylan was suspended for three days and put on “behavioral probation.” It felt like an overly harsh punishment for something that was clearly self-defense. Or at least animal defense. So I’d agreed to let him adopt the turtle. Greta now lives happily in a terrarium in his room.

Across the street, Farzanah and Hope have stopped pretending to hold a conversation and are openly staring, straining to hear every word.

My whole body tenses. “Those other boys—Teddy and Alfie and Wolfie—they’re *bullying* him!” I whip off my sunglasses and jab my index finger toward the soft flesh of Ms. Dobbins’s sternum. “How about you go chase *their* mothers down the street to arrange psychiatric evaluations?”

Ms. Dobbins stares at me but doesn’t answer. Her mouth flaps open and shut like a guppy’s.

“That’s what I thought,” I huff, turning on my heels.

She calls after me, shouting something at my back as I stomp away. But whatever it is gets lost in the wind.

I hurry away from Holland Park as fast as I can. Every muscle in my body is on fire, like I’ve just done two Chloe Ting workout videos back-to-back. I shove my hands deeper into my pockets and push Ms. Dobbins’s worried face from my mind. *Dylan is fine!* That woman knows nothing about my son.

It’s true that Dylan has always been a bit *unusual*. Officially, I blame Will for abandoning us when he was a baby. But the signs were there from the beginning. He never babbled, not even a “mama.” Then one day we were walking through the supermarket, and he’d pointed a chubby finger at a carton on the shelf and said, “Please, Mummy, may I have some juice?” Just like that, with a crisp little British accent. I nearly collapsed in the aisle.

So yeah, Dylan wasn’t like other kids his age. And he didn’t much *like them* either. As a little kid, whenever I took him to the playground he’d shun the other boys and their ball games, preferring to strike up a conversation with a waiting grandparent or a bored teenage babysitter or a frazzled mother. Really, any adult would do. I didn’t blame him. Children are monsters.

And sure, my son has a bit of a temper. But you have to understand, it stems from his absolute sense of right and wrong. Everything is black and white for Dylan. *Good Guys vs. Bad; Greta vs. ExxonMobil*. I’ve tried to explain to him that no one is all good or all bad (except, perhaps, his father, ha-ha) and that people’s motivations are complex. It’s no use. If Dylan were a court of law, every case would end in either the death penalty or complete acquittal. There is no gray area for him.

As I approach the Holland Park roundabout, the pedestrian death trap that separates the fancy neighborhood of Dylan’s school from the salt-of-the-earth area where we live, I automatically begin to hold my breath, a

subconscious attempt to avoid the fumes from the four lanes of traffic idling beside me.

Today is a good day, I remind myself. It's Friday. The moon is in Jupiter, an auspicious time for new beginnings. And, most important, I recall with a fizzle of excitement, I'm seeing Elliott tonight.

Everything is about to change.

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 8:45 A.M.

TECHNICALLY, FRESH NAILS DOESN'T OPEN until ten, but I push the door open anyway, bracing for the familiar, electronic clang of the door chime.

"Time for a walk-in?" I call into the darkened salon.

Linh is perched cross-legged on a massage chair, wearing a bomber jacket that appears to be made of aluminum foil and watching Vietnamese TikTok videos without headphones.

"We're closed," she barks. "Come back at eleven."

"It's me, doofus," I say, flinging my bag into my usual chair.

Linh stands up and pretends to faint, a dramatic sinking movement that would have fooled me if she didn't do it every other week. "Girl, I thought you were dead. Get in here!"

The tension melts out of my shoulders. Everything in Fresh Nails is exactly as I left it: the acrid smell, the sticky plastic chairs, the dubious bottles of refilled hand lotion. My happy place.

I flop into a chair and display my neglected nails to Linh.

"Yikes!" Linh says with a grimace, and then, "At least I know you weren't cheating on me!"

“I’ve just been so busy.” This is a lie, but mercifully Linh doesn’t call me on it. Instead, she gets to work, spraying her tools with disinfectant.

“How’s school?” I ask. In addition to being a nail artist, Linh’s a second-year fashion design student at Central Saint Martins. Her mother, who owns Fresh Nails and fourteen other nail salons across West London, believes her only daughter is currently studying international finance at the London School of Economics and will one day take over her empire. It’s a whole thing.

“Shh!” Linh says, pointing toward the TV behind my head. “He got another one last night!”

I swivel my neck toward the television. A female reporter with crooked teeth and a hideous peach blazer is ambling down the road near Loftus Stadium, earnestly clutching a microphone.

“What? Who?”

Linh frowns. “The Shepherd’s Bush Strangler. Don’t you watch the news?”

Reader, I do not.

“So, um—what happened?”

“Woman walking home alone at night. Snuck up behind her.” Linh mimes strangling herself and shudders. “Second one this month, you know. Strangler’s getting bolder.”

“How is that even possible?” I lower my voice, even though the salon is completely empty. “Isn’t London, like, covered in CCTV?”

“I know! Crazy, right?”

I can’t tell if she’s disgusted or excited. Linh’s enthusiasm for true crime is rivaled only by her passion for high-concept fashion. I’m pretty sure the trousers she’s wearing used to be an actual parachute.

“No but seriously, how—”

Linh interrupts me, holding up my right hand to my face. “Why’d you do this?” she demands. The skin around my nails is bleeding, a botched attempt at trimming my own cuticles. “You know, some things you really can’t do alone. Sometimes you *need* help.”

I avoid her gaze and flip through the plastic polish samples with my free hand, settling on a shade of pink so intense it would make Barbie blush.

Linh frowns. “Really? *Faux Ho*? You got a date or something?”

When I don’t reply, her voice switches to a teasing singsong. “Ohhhh! Florence has a daaaaate! Who’s the lucky guy?”

“It’s not like that.”

Linh slaps me playfully on the arm. “Oh, so it’s a lady? Good for you!”

“No, no—it’s not—”

“Hands in the water!” Linh barks, gesturing toward the dish of tepid water where my mangled cuticles are meant to be soaking.

“It’s a meeting. With a music manager I used to know. Elliott.” Allowing myself to say it out loud feels like popping a zit. The relief is immediate, pure.

“Ohhh!” Linh says. “You’re going to be a singer again?”

I flinch and look back down at the polish samples.

Linh pauses, as if registering the gravity of the situation. “Right.” She clucks her tongue and ducks down, briefly disappearing behind the desk. When she reappears, she’s clutching a bottle of red nail polish like a prized ruby.

I gasp. “Is that what I think it is?”

Linh nods, her face solemn. “*Taco Party*. Impossible to find, even on eBay. My cousin brought it back from Dubai last year.”

Taco Party is widely acknowledged as the most perfect shade of red nail polish ever created, the color of Red Hots cinnamon candies mixed with a Ferrari. It was discontinued after it turned out the red dye came from endangered Amazonian glasswing butterflies.

Linh uncaps the polish with a ceremonial flourish and inhales deeply. “Like mother’s milk,” she says with a grin. “Now, tell me everything!”

The phone call had come three days ago, just after I’d dropped Dylan off at school. I was sprawled on the sofa, catching up on *Polygamy Island* reruns

and picking at my split ends.

“Big news!” the voice on the other end had twanged. “Huge!”

“Who is this?” I demanded.

“It’s Elliott, silly,” the voice preened. “Have you forgotten me?”

It had been a full decade since the last time I’d heard Elliott Rivera’s voice. Back then, I was a member of an up-and-coming girl band, and Elliott was second assistant to a label exec. He was a wide-eyed, slick-haired, shiny-shoed striver with his eyes on a corner office. Will and the other girls had made fun of him, calling him “Eager Elliott”—and worse. But Elliott and I had always had a connection, the bond of outsiders who could smell the desperation on each other.

“How the hell are you, Florence?” he said.

I knew from reading *Variety*—OK, looking at *Variety*’s tweets—that “Eager Elliott” was now a big-deal music manager in Los Angeles. I imagined him with his feet up on a mahogany desk, staring out the window onto Sunset Boulevard, watching people scurry below him like ants. At least the dream had come true for one of us.

“I’ll cut to the chase,” he said. “I’m in town, and I’ve got something I want to run by you. An opportunity.”

Finally, I thought. *Fucking finally*. It was the phone call I’d been fantasizing about for a decade, the one with the power to magically restart my career.

“How about next week?” I asked, already calculating how many salon visits I could squeeze in in the interim.

“Oh, darling, no. I’m flying back to LA on Saturday morning. Awards season prep. How’s Friday?”

“This Friday? As in three days from now?” It wasn’t ideal, from a timing perspective. Ten days is really the minimum required to pluck, buff, and lacquer myself back to some semblance of my former glory. But if Friday was the only option, I would make it work.

“Of course,” I said quickly. “Friday it is.”

“Great. One of my assistants will send over the details.”

When we hung up, I felt like my entire body had been filled with helium. There was no one to share the good news with, so I screenshotted my call history three times to prove to myself it had actually happened.

Forty minutes later, Elliott's assistant (asst1@elliotttrivera.com) emailed me, confirming our 7:00 p.m. reservation at Mr. Bang-Bang, a biodynamic dim sum restaurant in Hackney where diners are encouraged to bring their own chopsticks and help the staff wash dishes.

What followed was forty-eight hours of the most intense cosmetic preparation of my life. It began in a dank basement in Marylebone, where a tiny Russian woman used tweezers to apply extra individual black hairs to each of my own eyelashes. The intervention took two hours and left me woozy from the smell of the chemical glue. Next was a salon chair on Regent Street, where I maxed out my credit card to pay a "celebrity stylist" called Markk (with two ks) to weave thirty-eight half-inch wefts of Remy platinum extensions to my scalp, transforming my cotton-candy puff into a sleek blond curtain. The finishing touch came courtesy of the local Sun Express, where I'd declined the paper thong and rotated like a rotisserie chicken so that the "St. Tropez Glow" could penetrate all my crevices.

The sound of mechanical whooshing draws me back to the salon. Linh is grinning mischievously, holding an airbrush gun aloft.

"I've an idea," Linh says. "Nothing crazy. Just to show them what they've been missing."

I must look hesitant, because she quickly adds, "No extra charge."

Linh fills the airbrush gun with a few carefully decanted drops of polish and flicks the reservoir with her index finger. A feeling of Zen detachment washes over me. I lean back in the plastic chair. Something warm and wet trickles down my cheek. A tear.

Jesus, Florence, get it together.

Linh passes me a tissue before pulling down her safety goggles. "It's gonna be great. Just trust."

And for the first time in ages, I do.

The early 2000s were a difficult time for Mariah Carey. She'd recently left Sony Music after divorcing its CEO, and had just signed a historic \$80 million deal with Virgin when she suffered a highly publicized breakdown and was hospitalized for "extreme exhaustion." A few weeks later, her film *Glitter*—designed as a vehicle to showcase her star power—flopped spectacularly. A review in the *Guardian* noted that Mariah was "comfortably out-acted by the cherrywood kitchen counter-top in her spiffy Manhattan apartment." Her performance was singled out for a Razzie. The accompanying album did so poorly, Virgin bought out her contract.

Her next effort, *Charmbracelet*, released with Island Records, was savaged by critics. One wrote it had "all the raw emotional integrity of a Hallmark Get Well Soon card." The Queen of Christmas was done. Washed-up. Just another pop star past her prime.

And then she went away and released *The Emancipation of Mimi*, an album so perfect her fiercest critics were forced to publicly repent for dismissing her. It wasn't just the diva comeback of the century; it was an actual resurrection. *Mimi* redefined Mariah, as an artist and as a person.

Tonight's meeting with Elliott is going to be my *Emancipation of Mimi* moment. But first, I have one humiliating errand left to scratch off my list.

My actual job.

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 10:01 A.M.

I BALL MY HAND INTO a fist and pound against the metal door.

“Adam!” I shout. “I need you!”

Silence.

I take a step back into the tiny vestibule that separates our front doors. Our flats were originally a single terraced house, carved up like a Christmas turkey by a greedy property developer, a real visionary who didn't bother with boring stuff like properly rerouting the plumbing. Lately, whenever Adam showers upstairs, it creates a mini volcano in my kitchen sink, brown goo erupting like a fountain.

I press my ear against Adam's door.

Could he be with someone? I mull the possibility while admiring my nails, crisp red ovals with delicate white *F*s airbrushed on each ring finger. Perfection. Linh made me late, but the woman is an artist. She can't be rushed.

“Adam! Emergency!” I shout, hammering the door with my clenched fist.

Typical, really. Ever since Marta dumped him, Adam has been positively hovering, bursting with offers to “fix the sink” or “kick a ball

around with Dylan.” But now that I actually *need* him, he’s nowhere to be found. That’s men for you.

I’m still admiring my nails when Adam’s door swings open. The smell of sweat and Old Spice fills the tiny foyer. His forehead is damp with sweat, his dark curls standing in every direction, like his head has been rubbed by a balloon.

“Flo?” he says, his voice full of confusion.

I flinch. I hate being called Flo. It’s bad enough my mother named me after a ’70s sitcom star with a flip mullet. Must my nickname also be synonymous with menstruation?

“Sorry, Flo,” Adam mumbles. He has a distracted, vacant look in his eyes. “It’s, uh...not a great time, actually.”

I peer over his shoulder into his flat. “Why? Is someone with you?”

As far as I know, Adam hasn’t been on a single date since Marta moved out. He was utterly smitten with her, maybe even bordering on obsessive. The kind of boyfriend who bought her flowers every week, who drove out to Hampstead to pick her up at the hair salon whenever she had to work late. I was sure he would propose. No one was more surprised than I was when he announced she’d dumped him out of the blue and moved back to Poland.

Adam frowns and steps into the vestibule, pulling the door closed behind him. It shuts with a loud bang that makes me jump.

“What? No. Course not.”

“Never mind,” I say, as breezily as I can muster. “I’ll call Matt B.”

Matt B. (not to be confused with Matt T.) is Adam’s least favorite of my current flings—a Deutsche Bank currency trader whose entire personality is going for sashimi at dimly lit Mayfair restaurants and then booking a suite at the Peninsula. Matt B. thinks I don’t know he has a wife and three kids stashed away at his five-bed suburban home in Oxfordshire, but I do. I just really like good sushi.

“All good,” Adam says, interlacing his fingers and cracking his knuckles loudly. Each of his hands is the size of a small ham. “What’s up?”

“Why are you so sweaty?”

“Working on the sink,” he grunts. “Stopped up again—”

I catch a whiff of something caustic and chemical clinging to his skin.

“Gross. Well, I’ve got a little balloon delivery to make. Do you think you could drive me?”

“I thought you were meant to be getting your license?”

It’s a low blow. Adam knows I’ve failed the test twice. The last time, the soft-spoken Bangladeshi man who owns the driving school had suggested I not come back until I was “serious” about road safety.

“Look, if you don’t want to help me, just say so, OK? Jeez.”

“C’mon, Florence,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don’t be like that.”

I tilt my head and squint. Adam is not bad-looking. He’s thirty-six, five years older than me, and he still has a full head of thick, dark hair, which is, sadly, not a given for a man his age. His eyes are bright blue, framed by thick lashes. And he’s in amazing shape, which (almost) makes up for his one true flaw: Adam is short. Not Napoleonic or anything. But like, five six, max. And I know we aren’t supposed to discriminate against short kings anymore, but if I’m being completely honest: it’s the only reason we’ve never hooked up.

“So, can you drop me?” I say, pushing out my lower lip. “Please! It’ll take like, twenty minutes.”

Adam groans and shifts his weight. “Whereabouts to, then?”

“Notting Hill. Artesian Village.”

Adam glances at his watch, a flash Apple number that tracks your heart rate and who knows what else. He pauses for a moment, as if he is considering, but I already know he’s going to say yes. Adam always says yes, at least to me.

“’K,” he says. He lifts his chin toward the street, where his police cruiser is parked. “I can drop you, but you’ve got to make your own way back.”

“Great!” I squeal, wrapping my arms around him. His body feels warm and solid, like hugging a tree.

“I’ve just got a few more balloons to blow up. Ten minutes, OK?”

Adam opens his mouth to protest, but I'm already backing away toward my own flat, ignoring the pile of magazines and two-cent royalty checks piling up on my doormat.

"Just don't turn on the water yet, yeah?" Adam calls after me. "And five minutes, tops. I've got somewhere to be!"

There's a very specific kind of person who spends 600 pounds on balloons for her child's first birthday, and I can pretty much guarantee you her name is Charlotte. Or Caroline. Or possibly Caroline-Charlotte, CeCe for short.

In this case, it was just plain old Caroline.

Adam drops me off in front of a four-story mint green town house. I exit the car and grab the balloons from the backseat. Before I can say thanks or close the door properly, Adam is racing off down the street without so much as a glance in the rearview mirror.

I ring the doorbell, which sounds like wind chimes, and a yappy dog begins to bark.

A tall, slender woman in lavender leggings and a matching crop top opens the door. She has visible abs and a face that looks exactly like her Instagram photos, with golden skin, bee-stung lips, and a tiny, ski jump nose.

Caroline assesses me for half a second before turning and calling over her shoulder, "It's the balloon girl!"

A chorus of female voices, chattering and laughing, floats toward me from somewhere deep in the house.

"We were expecting the Pilates instructor," Caroline explains. "But come on in."

I turn sideways, careful not to pop the eight dozen raspberry-colored balloons I'm carrying.

The balloon thing had been my sister Brooke's idea—a precondition for some past loan, now (hopefully) forgotten. "You can't just sit at home

watching *Parliamentarians on Ice* all day, hoping for royalty checks!” she had insisted. Easy for her to say. Her own career, as a furniture buyer for John Lewis department stores, had not spectacularly imploded. She didn’t understand how offensive it was to suggest that hawking decadent balloon arrangements via Instagram might constitute a positive professional development.

After our mother died, Brooke had put herself through University College London by working at a bougie party-planning company. She kept going on and on about balloon arches. “You wouldn’t believe the markup! You don’t even need helium. Literally just balloons, air, and tape!” And unlike so many of her other half-baked schemes to fix my life, Brooke wouldn’t let this one go. Eventually, she’d made the Instagram account herself, using stock photos of children’s party arches and advertising free delivery anywhere in W2. She got fifteen requests in the first hour. That was seven years ago. I run the business myself now, cash only. With each passing day, the name—Pop! Star Balloons—feels less like a wry inside joke and more like salt in an already putrid wound. Not to mention the sheer logistical nightmare of delivering balloon arches around London without a car. But it beats getting a real job, not that I’m overwhelmed with offers or anything.

Inside, Caroline’s house is even bigger than it looks from the street. It’s a period home, but the interior has been completely gutted and replaced with clean lines and glass. Most of the ceiling is now a gigantic skylight; on a bright day, it must feel like walking directly into a dazzling sun. But today the sky is dull.

Caroline directs me toward an open kitchen/dining room that looks out onto a manicured garden. Half a dozen blond women in athleisure are lounging on a collection of pale, overstuffed sofas, like beached Lululemon mermaids. A housekeeper hovers in the background, chopping melon and periodically handing a chunk to a baby in a designer high chair. Each time the baby giggles manically, as if she’s just been told a hilarious joke. The whole scene is like an advertisement for Loaf furniture, or maybe female fertility in general.

For a brief moment, I am paralyzed by a gut punch of jealousy: What would it be like to spend all day hanging out with my girlfriends, doing gentle exercise and eating slices of fruit that someone else had cut?

That would require having friends. The thought lodges itself in my brain like a piece of barbed wire.

I clear my throat. “Where would you like me to install the arch?”

Caroline’s doe eyes dart around the room. She clearly hasn’t given much thought to the 600 quid’s worth of air and latex she ordered from me.

“How long will this take?” one of the friends calls from the sofa. “It’s just, the Pilates instructor will be here any minute—we’re doing postpartum Pilates? With Adriana? She does house calls, if you’re ever looking for someone.”

“I’ll be as fast as I can,” I say, without turning around. Installing a balloon arch isn’t hard, but it is tedious. Lots of repetitive movements. Pinch, tape, pinch, tape.

“Oh my god!” a voice from the sofa squeals. “Florence Grimes? Is that you?”

I feel as if a hairy spider has just crawled across the base of my neck. I turn mechanically toward the sofa. It’s definitely her. Her shiny brown hair is cropped to her shoulders now, and she’s had some work done, not all of it good, I note with relish. Her cheekbones are unnaturally high, her lips slightly ducky. But her voice is unmistakably the same.

“Lacey,” I say, struggling to smile. I fantasize about dissolving, right then and there, my body melting cleanly into the parquet floors like a Popsicle, leaving behind only a sticky purple stain.

“Oh my gosh, it is you!” Lacey squeals. She jumps up from the sofa and throws her arms around me like we’re long-lost friends. “I haven’t seen you since Jess’s wedding! That was, like, ten years ago!”

“Mmm.” My tongue feels like it has been coated in sand. I’ve imagined so many different versions of this reunion over the years: on the red carpet at the Grammys, when I’ve been nominated. Or courtside, while I’m catching a Lakers game with my best friend, Mariah. But I never imagined

coming face-to-face with Lacey while working as a glorified Taskrabbit in her friend's lavish home.

I feel sick.

"Alfonso still playing for Arsenal?" I manage.

Lacey fidgets with her engagement ring, a preposterous five-carat princess-cut diamond on a whisper-thin platinum band. She made all of us try it on the night Alfonso proposed, the four of us girls passing it around on the back of the tour bus like a magic talisman. I can still feel the weight of it. Today Lacey's fingers are positively cluttered with thick stacks of sparkling pavé bands. One for each time Alfonso cheated, probably.

"Nah, he retired last year," she says. "We're mostly out in Somerset now. Better for the children. We've got three!"

I try to nod, but my brain has turned into a bowl of limp noodles, all floppy and stupid.

"What are you up to these days?" she chirps.

I hesitate, just for a second. Lacey's eyes dart to the balloons and then back to me. She smiles, a little too wide.

"Ohhh, of course! Good for you!" she coos, the condescension oozing off her. "Good for you, Florence. Landing on your feet after all that."

One of the sofa mermaids wrinkles her button nose. "Wait, how do you two know each other?"

Lacey swallows. "Florence was in the band with us. She was the original, uh, before Rose, um, you know..." Her voice trails off.

"I left the band before Girls' Night made it big. Worst decision of my life." It's my stock response, one I've delivered many times, but saying it out loud never gets any easier.

Relief washes over Lacey's face as she realizes I'm not going to make this difficult for her.

"It was our loss," she says quickly.

"Ah, right," one of the other girls says, twirling a strand of creamy blond hair around her finger. "So why did you leave?"

I feel dizzy, like the whole room is under water. I reach my hand out and grab the wall to steady myself.

“It was a long time ago,” I mumble.

“Listen, Florence,” Lacey says, her Botoxed brow attempting a concerned expression. “I just want to say, it wasn’t right. What happened to you.”

A warm flush spreads across my face, the flames fanning out across my body like a five-alarm fire.

“It’s fine, Lace,” I sputter, backing away from her and tripping over my bag of balloons. Several of them pop loudly, like a volley of machine-gun fire. The baby begins to wail.

“I, um...forgot something in the car. Be right back,” I call over my shoulder as I race out the front door.

Outside it’s started to rain. Each fat droplet that plonks on my head feels like a personal insult. The moisture is a grave threat to my freshly blown-out hair, but I’m too humiliated to care. I wander past candy-colored houses in a fugue state, Lacey’s words repeating in my mind like a shame roller coaster I can’t disembark. *Good for you! Good for you! Good for you!*

At Notting Hill Gate, a grotty pub appears before me like a mirage in the desert. I feel myself being drawn inside, as if by magnetic energy. Like attracting like. Trash attracting trash.

The pub is dimly lit and the floor is sticky; my wet feet make little thwacking sounds as I approach the bar. The place is nearly empty. There’s only one other table, a group of construction workers watching Premier League highlights on a flat-screen TV.

An elderly man stands behind the bar, polishing a fork with a napkin.

“Vodka slimline tonic,” I say.

He looks up at me with an air of genuine surprise, as if I have just walked into his living room and demanded a foot massage.

“What’s that now, love?” he says.

“Vodka slimline tonic,” I say again, louder this time.

He turns around and begins clinking bottles, moving at a glacial pace. We’ll both be dead before I get this drink.

“Well now, vodka, I have,” the barman says, holding up a dusty liter of Smirnoff. “But slimline tonic, I’m afraid we’re out of that. How about Fanta?” he says brightly. “Nice vodka Fanta for you?”

“Sorry, is this not a bar?” I snap.

“It’s Wetherspoons, luv. And barely lunchtime. Most blokes, they just want a pint.” His voice is so kind I nearly crack in half. “Delivery van will be round this afternoon to restock us. Come back in three hours, I can make you whatever you like.”

I soften. “Fine. A vodka Fanta.”

I train my attention on the workmen, trying to work out which is the cutest. One of them looks up, and I smile at him. He blushes, his eyes quickly darting back to the safety of the TV screen.

The geriatric barman places my incandescent orange drink on the counter. I down it in three gulps.

“Another.”

“One of those days, eh?” he says with a sympathetic smile.

I ignore him and train my attention on the cute one, until his mates begin to elbow him in the ribs and whisper. Then he’s standing up, making his way toward me. He’s tall, I note with approval, and a lot younger than I thought. But never mind.

“Buy ya ’nother?” Hot Construction Worker says, gesturing toward my drink. He smells delicious: a woody, earthy scent, like pine needles mixed with wet grass. His green trousers have ventilation panels and reinforced knees. A gardener, I realize, not a construction worker.

Seriously, Florence? says a voice in my head. A voice that sounds suspiciously like my sister, Brooke.

I smile. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Notting Hill Gate

FRIDAY, 11:45 A.M.

WHEN WE FINISH, HE PULLS up his green trousers and saunters out of the ladies' room, his untucked polyblend shirttail trailing behind him like a superhero's cape.

I lean against the sink. I feel better now. Not great, not like Mariah descending the stairs in her gold dress in the "It's Like That" music video. But better.

I swish some water around my mouth and study my reflection in the mirror. Not bad, really, for the wrong side of thirty. It could be a lot worse. Frankly, it *has been* a lot worse. Like right after Will left us, when I immediately lost twenty pounds and most of my eyebrows. But never mind. Ancient history.

Once, back in the early days of Girls' Night, a makeup artist told me I had a face like a peeled potato, and as cruel as that sounds, I knew exactly what she meant. Left to nature, I'm practically invisible. My hair and skin and eyebrows are all variations on the same dirty sand color. I'll never be truly beautiful, not like my sister, but over the years I've learned all the tricks: lash extensions, brow lamination, teeth whitening, mindless hours of crunching and squatting and stair-climbing. Being hot is a lot like making balloon arches, really. Not hard, just a lot of tedious, repetitive work.

I take one last gargle of water and spit it in the sink. My phone chirps in my pocket.

1 new message from Brooke.

HERE! the text reads, followed by a smiley face.

Subtext: Where are you?

Fuck. Lunch. Brooke. I'm already late, which is terrible because the whole stupid thing was my idea.

I reply with the running emoji and race out of the pub, back toward the cruel light of day.

I arrive at the Princess Royal pub a full thirty-six minutes past the appointed time, huffing and puffing. Brooke is already parked in a booth, an untouched salad in front of her. She's wearing a vaguely nautical striped jumper with gold buttons on the shoulder and twisting a strand of cornsilk hair around her finger.

"Sorry sorry sorry," I mutter, depositing myself opposite her with a clatter.

Brooke looks up from her phone. "There you are. I went ahead and ordered."

The words glide out of her mouth in a confident Home Counties clip. To hear us speak, you'd never know we were sisters. Next to her, I sound like Woody from *Toy Story*.

Brooke has always been the golden child. She arrived on a sunny day in May like the factory-reset version of me. New and improved, with a button nose and better hair. Our father, a long-haul truck driver, wasn't home much, and three weeks after Brooke was born, he disappeared for good. The classic "went to buy cigarettes and never came back," except, as our mother would explain years later, he'd simply driven his rig back up I-95 to his "real family" in Scarsdale. I never blamed Brooke, of course not. But it was hard not to make the link between her noisy arrival and our father's hasty departure.

Our mother was a Denny's waitress, the kind of person who "saw the best" in people and as a result was constantly being taken advantage of. The other waitresses would sweet-talk her into taking their shitty Saturday brunch shifts with invented sob stories she never questioned. ("Show some compassion, girls," she would chide us, when we complained about being left home alone again.)

Our mother's kind nature made her a magnet for a certain type of shifty, down-on-his-luck grifter, men with names like Dean and Ace and Billy who are drawn to the state of Florida like moths to a streetlight. The sort who are forever asking to borrow a few hundred bucks for "a new business venture" that never, ever works out.

Brooke was fourteen and I was seventeen when our mother sat us down in a diner booth, ordered three chocolate lava cakes, and announced we were trading central Florida for England and our familiar unit of three for a new life with Barry, an "artist" she met on Match.com who lived "near Windsor."

I was livid. It was the summer before my senior year, and I was finally popular.

"What about cheerleading?" I'd screamed, chucking my cake at the wall.

Brooke, on the other hand, was a nerdy honor roll student with no social capital to lose. She had taken the news stoically, the wheels in her head already whirring. By the time our plane touched down at Gatwick Airport three weeks later, Brooke was swallowing her *rs*, holding her fork in the left hand, and strategizing about which fascinator to wear to Ascot.

Never mind that Barry's home "near Windsor" turned out to be a two-bed council flat in Slough he shared with his elderly mother. Or that his "art" consisted of painting storefronts on an industrial estate. Brooke had used the move to recast her place in the social order, like some kind of outlet-mall Brontë sister.

Our mother was always remarking on how much of herself she saw in Brooke. *Your sister and I are one soul in two bodies*, she would say. No one had to tell me who I reminded her of. Our father. The bad one, who left.

I pluck a walnut from Brooke's salad. "Sorry, B. Got stuck at a parent thing."

She frowns. "Really? Thought the other mums hated you?"

"It's a long story." I flag down the waiter and order a double cheeseburger with no bun.

Brooke studies my face like she's trying to solve a puzzle. "You're awfully dolled up," she says finally. My sister doesn't believe in makeup beyond ChapStick and the occasional swipe of mascara. Frankly, I wouldn't either if I looked like her.

"We can't all afford to dress like retired country gardeners, B."

Brooke leans in closer to me and sniffs the air. "Have you been drinking? And is that...potting soil on your sleeve?"

I change the subject. "How's the wedding stuff going?"

Brooke's getting married a week from Saturday at Holy Trinity Church on Sloane Square, the culmination of her decades-long scheme to launch herself into the upper-middle class. The wedding is her favorite topic of conversation.

"Ugh," she says with a sigh. "It's so stressful."

We both glance reflexively at the glob of antique diamonds on her finger. Her fiancé, Julian, is one of those stealth-posh Englishmen, with manners so polished they act as a cloak of invisibility for his actual personality. It took me two years to work out that I actually, genuinely, loathe the man.

"You can't even imagine," Brooke says, then catches herself. "Sorry. I just mean—well, it was different for you, back then."

I nod dumbly. I still need a favor.

"Anyway, that reminds me," Brooke says, opening her navy Smythson day planner. "One final fitting for the bridesmaids. Monday at two p.m. It's the only time Julian's sister can make it."

"Fine," I say, poaching another walnut from her plate.

She eyes me skeptically. "Really? You're OK with that?"

I rearrange my face into what I hope is a sympathetic expression. "Of course, B. You're under so much pressure right now. I wouldn't want to add

to it.”

“Right, OK,” she says, snapping the planner shut with a thwack. “What is it, Florence? Out with it. What do you need?”

I bite my lip. “Why are you so suspicious all the time?”

She stiffens. “I’m not *suspicious*. I’m *intuitive*. There is a difference.”

“The thing is, I’ve got a really important meeting this evening. And I was wondering if you could—”

Brooke makes a face. “Oh my gosh, just say it: You have a date.”

A wave of frustration washes over me. Brooke doesn’t have a creative bone in her body. She doesn’t understand how devastating it is for an artist to have their dreams snatched away, to crave a stage and be unable to conjure one. If it were up to her, I’d toil away in obscurity, making balloon arches forever, or—even better—retrain as an accountant.

“Who’s the lucky guy this week?” she continues. “A janitor? Online sports gambler? Oh, maybe the Shepherd’s Bush Strangler is single?”

“It’s not a date,” I snap. “It’s a job interview.”

Brooke snorts, flaring the nostrils on her perfectly upturned nose. “Right, a job interview on a Friday night? Come on, Florence. You can come up with a better lie than that.”

“Can’t you just help me? For once?”

Brooke’s eyes widen. “*For once*? Did you seriously just say *for once*? How dare you!” Her face is turning red now, a tomato flush that begins at the crown of her head and spreads down to her chin. “How about the ‘once’ I lent you four thousand pounds? Or the ‘once’ you slept on my sofa for a month and brought home”—she lowers her voice to a hushed whisper—“a veritable *parade* of randos!”

Brooke is on a roll now, tiny flecks of spit flying out of her mouth with each word. “Would it kill you to just act like a *normal* person for a minute? Just until the wedding is over?!”

The furnace feeling is back. I try to swallow, but the saliva in my mouth has turned to sawdust.

“Ha! The wedding. How could I forget? You haven’t brought it up in at least thirty seconds.”

At the table next to us, a group of middle-aged women begin to tut, swiveling in their seats to see what all the fuss is about. Brooke shoots them an apologetic look, her outrage tempered by her perennial desire not to make a scene.

“Why can’t Will watch Dylan?” she hisses. “I thought he was supposed to have him on weekends!”

My face burns. She’s right. According to our custody agreement, Will is meant to pick up Dylan every Friday at 6:00 p.m. and keep him until Sunday at noon. But Will flakes so often—usually late on Friday afternoon, long after Dylan’s bags are packed and his hopes are up—that I no longer count on it.

“Look, I’m sorry that helping your sister—your only living family—is such a *gigantic* inconvenience to you. I’m sure Mom would be really proud of how—”

Brooke’s face falls. “Don’t you dare bring Mum into this! If Mum were here—”

“Joke’s on you, B,” I hiss. “As far as Mom knows—as far as she’ll ever know—I’m the successful one.” I pluck the last walnut from her salad and pop it into my mouth. “That really kills you, doesn’t it?”

It’s a low blow, even for me. Brooke slumps against the wall of the booth and pulls her plate closer. “Stop putting your fingers in my food.”

Our waiter reappears, depositing my bunless burger on the table the way you would serve dinner to a dog who had just chewed your favorite slippers. I sink my teeth in, allowing the juice to run down my chin.

Brooke frowns. “You do know you’re supposed to be the big sister, right?”

I chew extra loudly, just to annoy her, and wait.

“Fine,” Brooke groans. “You win. I’ll be the grown-up, as usual. I’ll watch Dylan. But just so you know, I’m doing it for him. Not for you.”

“Great,” I say, reaching across the table to take a sip of her Diet Coke. “See you tonight.”

I stick Brooke with the bill and hurry out of the restaurant toward the Tube station. It's stopped raining, but the sky is heavy with dull clouds that threaten to reopen at any moment. I should have taken her umbrella, I realize, but it's too late now.

Fighting with Brooke always puts me in a bad mood, even when I win. Because my sister, with her unironic love of Boden jumpers and Sweaty Betty leggings and Jamie Oliver cookbooks, is a fundamentally *normal* person. A good person. A person incapable of descending to the dark, ugly place it takes to win an argument at any cost. Unlike me.

Sure, I can smile and bite my tongue for a couple of hours, maybe even a few days. But it never lasts. The darkness always burbles to the surface before long. A snide remark here, an unnecessarily cruel aside there. Brooke knows this. And so she lets me win, each little victory another splinter under my fingernail, a jagged reminder of the rottenness lurking at my core.

I glance down at my phone. One hour and forty-seven minutes left until I have to pick up Dylan.

I'll have to hurry now. Because there is still one final errand to cross off my to-do list.

Selfridges, Oxford Street

FRIDAY, 2:08 P.M.

I TAKE A STEP BACK and admire my reflection in the fitting-room mirror. The bodysuit is perfect: soft, black velvet, with long sleeves and a plunging V-neck that reaches almost to my belly button. Definitely not the kind of thing you can wear a bra with. I'm so glad I got implants when I could still afford that kind of thing.

I turn over the price tag. An audible gasp escapes my mouth.

£368!

I squint. Maybe that's the kronor price?

I look again.

£368.

I don't just want this bodysuit. I *need* it. It's imperative that the outfit I choose for tonight do the talking for me. Something that will wordlessly convey to Elliott that I am ready. That I am worth it. This is my fucking *Emancipation of Mimi* moment.

I glance at the tag one more time, just to be sure.

£368.

Who has that kind of money? The Venn diagram of people who can both afford and look good in this bodysuit has got to be like one single Russian oligarch's ex-wife.

I reach into my handbag, feeling around for the five-inch metal disk I ordered off eBay for just such an occasion. The metal is cool and smooth in my hands. Though I've watched a couple of YouTube videos, I've never actually used a security tag remover until now.

This isn't stealing, I remind myself. We're talking about a bodysuit made in a Cambodian sweatshop by children Dylan's age. If anything, it's an act of political dissent. A conscientious rejection of late-capitalist norms.

Still, I glance at the ceiling to check for security cameras. Surely they don't put CCTV inside the fitting rooms, right?

Using my left hand, I hold the remover against the security tag and wait for the click, just like in the tutorials. I am still sucking in my breath when three chipper little knocks on the dressing room startle me back to reality.

"How's everything working out for you?" a saccharine voice inquires through the door.

I drop the tag remover. It falls to the floor, an alien spaceship crash-landing on the plush carpet of the Selfridges fitting room. Thank goodness for full-length doors.

"I'm fine," I say, slightly too loudly.

"Just let me know if you need any other sizes," the voice trills. "If you're planning a big wardrobe refresh, we also offer a personal shopping service with one of our dedicated stylists."

"Thanks," I squeak. My heart is doing a drum solo in my chest cavity. Maybe this is a bad idea. Scratch that—it's *absolutely* a bad idea. But what choice do I have? I *need* this outfit.

I sit down on the upholstered bench and wait for the sound of the fitting room attendant's footsteps to retreat. I can already picture myself sitting across from Elliott in a cozy corner booth, trading industry goss about who's gone overboard with Ozempic or is getting their fourth divorce. At some point, he'll push his glass of wine to the side and look into my eyes.

"Seriously, though, Florence," he'll say. "You were always the star of Girls' Night. Is there *any* way we could tempt you back into the studio for a solo album?"

The thought sends a little shiver of pleasure through my body. In reality, I don't actually know what Elliott wants to discuss—he'd been cagey on the phone. But if he's asking me to dinner, on his last night in London no less, it's got to be something good.

Right. No time to waste. I suck in my breath and lift the metal disk over the security tag for a second time.

On the other side of the room, my phone begins to chirp with a flurry of notifications. *Ping. Ping. Ping.*

I pick it up. Twenty-seven new messages, all of them from the St. Angeles mums' group chat. Those bitches are deranged, especially Hope, but twenty-seven messages? That feels...unusual.

I open the chat. The messages are popping up faster than I can read them.

EMERGENCY AT SCHOOL!!!

GET HERE QUICK!

My eyes dart across the screen, trying to make sense of what's happening.

POLICE ARE ON THEIR WAY!

A warm, woozy feeling washes over me.

WHAT'S GOING ON? I type.

No one replies. There's a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I try again.

WHAT IS GOING ON?

But the other mums just ignore me. The group chat goes silent. I throw my sweatshirt on top of the bodysuit and barge out of the dressing room, racing toward the escalator. My heart hammers in my chest as I pound out a text to Dylan on my phone.

ARE YOU OK? TEXT ME BACK, I command. RIGHT AWAY!

I wipe the sweat from my forehead and stare at my phone, willing my son to reply.

Last seen 4 hours ago, his profile taunts me.

I lost Dylan in a shopping mall once. He was four or five, and I had dragged him, against his will, to Westfield to return a dress I had already

worn once on a date. I was arguing with the snooty cashier about whether it had deodorant marks on it, and I took my eyes off him for one second. Literally one second. I looked down, and Dylan was gone. “Dylan!” I’d screamed. No answer. That cashier just gave me a look like “What else do you expect from a trashy mum who tries to return a clearly worn dress?” I abandoned the dress and raced around the store, asking strangers, “Have you seen a little boy, about this tall, in a blue shirt?” I had asked maybe four people, my heart pounding in my chest, before Dylan jumped out of a rack of clothes and shouted, “Boo!” I nearly threw up in my hands. My relief gave way immediately to fury. “What’s wrong with you?” I shouted. “I thought I lost you!” He burst into tears. We both sobbed on the bus ride home.

The bottom of the Selfridges escalator comes as a complete surprise, issuing me with a searing jolt that jars me back to the present. I weave my way past the ground-floor perfume counters, dodging the spritzes, until I reach the overhead sign marked “Oxford Street Exit.”

I explode onto the sidewalk, sucking in deep breaths of cool air. Herds of clueless tourists are clogging the sidewalk like lowing cattle, snapping idiotic photos of the Christmas decorations, the shop windows, and their own dumb faces.

“Move!” I screech, pushing through the mass of bodies to flag down a passing black cab.

“Holland Park!” I bark to the driver. “Fast as you can.”

I look down at my phone. No new messages. I say a silent prayer. *Please, God, let this be like that day at the mall. Let him be OK.*

My body is taut as a drum now, banging with a single beat.

Not Dylan. Not Dylan. Not Dylan.

Holland Park

FRIDAY, 3:01 P.M.

I AM STILL TWO BLOCKS from the school gates when the first scream hits my ears.

The shrieking is coming from everywhere, all at once. A small cluster of nannies is huddled off to one side, crying and whispering. Ahead of them, closer to the gate, is another group, vibrating with righteous indignation. Mothers.

A dull roar begins to build behind my ears, like a jet taking off inside my skull.

Dylan.

I break into a sprint.

The normally orderly pickup procession has imploded. The school head, Nicola Ivy, is standing at the front gate, clutching a clipboard like a life raft, a haunted expression etched on her face. She's in her midforties, with box-dyed brown hair and a smoker's mouth. Her presence at the gate is an ominous sign: Ms. Ivy generally leaves the day-to-day running of the school to Ms. Schulz, saving her appearances for the big fundraising galas. Whatever's happened, it's serious.

“If I can just ask parents and carers to...” Ms. Ivy begins, gesturing limply at the growing crowd.

In front of her, an outraged mob of Year 5 mothers is lobbing questions like hand grenades.

“WHERE ARE OUR SONS?” roars Allegra Armstrong-Johnson, struggling to control her dog as he strains against the leash.

Hope Grüber is brandishing a biscuit-colored Bottega Veneta bag like a weapon. “JUST TELL US WHAT HAPPENED!”

“The school is on lockdown,” Ms. Ivy offers feebly. She throws a desperate glance at her deputy, Helen Schulz, who has dropped any pretense of helpfulness and is openly bawling into a handkerchief.

Cleo Risby lurches forward. “Someone needs to tell us what’s going on. Now!”

Ms. Ivy’s eyes flit nervously around the crowd of mothers. Her hands are trembling. Whatever she has to say, it isn’t good.

She clears her throat. “A student in Year Five has gone—er, rather, that is—seems to be—” She stops, her eyes lingering on Cleo. “The police will be here momentarily. Perhaps it’s best we wait for them.”

The mothers howl in protest. Eventually, Ms. Ivy’s mouth continues moving, but it’s too late. I am deaf with panic, my entire body pulsing with a single, desperate prayer: *Not Dylan. Not Dylan. Not Dylan.*

I shove my way through the crowd, charging toward Ms. Ivy. She gives a weak protest as my shoulder brushes hers, but I push past her, forcing my way inside the gate. At the top of the stairs, Ms. Schulz is slumped in front of the blue door like the world’s least effective bouncer. One of her beige knee-high stockings has crumpled around her ankle, revealing a map of spidery varicose veins.

“Move,” I say, but she can’t hear me over the sound of her own sobbing. In the distance, sirens wail.

“Move!” I say, louder this time, and she scoots out of the way. To my surprise, the blue front door gives way easily, with a soft click. Ms. Ivy’s voice grows smaller behind me: “...missing persons investigation...highly unusual...cooperating with the authorities...”

I enter a dim corridor that smells of old gym socks and fresh chalk.

“Dylan?” I shout blindly, unable to see a foot in front of me.

As my eyes adjust, the darkness recedes to reveal a sea of irrelevant boys, none of them Dylan. They’re all leaning against the walls of the corridor, fidgeting and whispering to one another.

The biology teacher, Mr. Dempsey, barrels toward me, waving his arms in the air.

“How did you—we’re in lockdown!” he shouts, pushing his thick black glasses up his nose. “You can’t be in here.”

But I’m already past him, bolting up the stairs toward the classrooms.

“Dylan!” I shout into the void.

I’ve lost my peripheral vision and can no longer hear Mr. Dempsey, though I’m vaguely aware he is still behind me. I feel as if my soul has completely left my body. If something—if anything—has happened to Dylan, there is no reason for me to continue occupying this earth. I will launch myself directly from the roof.

I stick my head into the students’ bathroom. “Dylan!” I shout. “Are you in here?”

I’m not one for hocus-pocus, but I swear I actually feel Dylan, sense the weight of his soul far before my optic nerve has a chance to register his presence and relay it to my brain as a coherent thought. I am suddenly aware, on a molecular level, of his pale skin, his piercing green eyes, the scattering of freckles across his nose.

My only son is safe, perfect, whole, leaning against the radiator and twirling a piece of hair in his hand.

“Hiya, Mum,” he says, his voice downright casual.

My shoulders relax for the first time since the Selfridges fitting room. I wrap my arms around him, smothering him with my entire body. I am overwhelmed with the urge to fold him up like an origami swan and stuff him back inside my belly, where he will be safe forever.

Dylan looks up at me, his pale face smudged with dirt, a fresh red scratch above his right eyebrow. “Did they find him?”

“Who?” I blurt. My sense of relief is so complete it renders me briefly amnesiac. But of course someone else’s child is still missing, and some other mother’s frantic trip through that blue door will have a different, devastating ending.

“Alfie,” my son says, without lifting his gaze.

Alarm bells begin to ring in my head. *Alfie Risby? The turtle kid?*

“Shit.”

In the distance, I hear footsteps pounding up the stairs, followed by Mr. Dempsey’s voice shouting about “a parent intruder.” I extend my hand to Dylan and pull him to his feet.

“Let’s go,” I say, as a red-faced Mr. Dempsey throws open the door.

“Aha!” he shouts. He’s the color of a pomegranate, with thin rivulets of sweat trickling down his broad, meaty face. He plants his body in the doorway, barricading us in the bathroom.

I drop Dylan’s hand and move toward Mr. Dempsey, until I’m close enough to smell his Boots aftershave.

“Move,” I say, my voice calm and cold.

“Have you gone mad? The police need to interview everyone who—”

“Move. Now.” I lean closer and whisper in his ear, “Or I will scream bloody murder.”

Mr. Dempsey jerks his head back in confusion. “What? Are you threatening me? You...you do not have permission to remove your son,” he stutters, but he’s already retreating from the doorway.

I turn to Dylan and gesture for his backpack, slinging it over my shoulder.

“Let’s go,” I bark. I’m still holding Dylan’s hand as we race down the stairs, weaving our way through his classmates’ outstretched legs, all clad in identical gray wool trousers.

“I’ll be filing a police report,” Mr. Dempsey calls after us.

At the end of the hallway, I push open a heavy door labeled “Staff Only.” We enter a commercial kitchen, full of shiny stainless steel counters and stacks of plastic lunch trays.

“There must be some kind of service entrance back here, right? For deliveries?” My heart is still slamming around my chest, and I wonder if Dylan can tell how terrified I am.

“How should I know?” Dylan shrugs. “I’ve never been back here before.”

I scan the room, my eyes darting over the industrial dishwashers, gallon-size buckets of detergent, huge bottles of ketchup and mustard, and napkin holders. Then I see it. Off to one side. A glowing green EXIT sign. *Thank fuck.*

I grab Dylan by the hand again.

“Here we go.”

Outside, the sky is just beginning to go inky-dark. We’ve ended up in a delivery bay adjacent to the staff parking lot. For a moment, neither of us says anything. I’m still wearing Dylan’s backpack and clutching his sweaty hand in mine. The thought of letting go is unbearable, and he doesn’t resist. From the other side of the building, I can hear sirens and shouting. Someone is speaking through a megaphone.

We circle the building slowly, my heart slamming in my chest as we draw closer to the front of the school. I’m bracing for something—a loud voice, a firm hand, someone who will notice and stop us, but no one does. Out front, a crowd has gathered; hordes of reporters are mobilizing in front of the school, like ants poised to collect crumbs from a picnic. Two police officers have joined Ms. Ivy on the school steps. A bearded officer with a northern accent is addressing the crowd, speaking in a monotone designed to drain some of the urgency from the situation.

“Ladies and gentleman, this is an active investigation—”

I try to hurry Dylan along, but he stops and turns around. “Where are they taking Alfie’s mum?” he asks, tugging on my sleeve. I follow his gaze to a lump on the sidewalk in front of the school; a crumpled pile of clothes and blond hair and slender, flailing limbs. A high-pitched wail is coming from the heap. It takes me a second to understand that it’s a person. *Cleo.*

Two uniformed police officers, a man and a woman, are trying to pull her off the sidewalk, but she isn't budging. My stomach plunges into my knees, and I fight the urge to vomit.

"Let's go," I say, tugging on Dylan's hand as I hurry him down the street. "We need to get out of here."

The people who live in the elegant homes that surround the school have begun switching on their lamps, sending warm pools of light spilling across the pavement and transforming their curtainless front windows into miniature theaters: a mother helping with homework; a man chopping vegetables; a boy practicing piano. All of them oblivious to the nightmare unfolding just blocks away.

I pause for a moment and study Dylan's face. His expression is blank, impassive. He doesn't look particularly upset. *Should he?* Dylan notices me staring at him.

"Mum, I—"

I put a finger to my lips. "Not a word until we get home," I say. "And then I want to know everything."

I keep my face calm: I walk casually, not too quickly. But my all-consuming relief is beginning to give way to something else: a gnawing sensation in the pit of my stomach, like the feeling right after you jump off a diving board. A boy is missing, and I have just whisked my son away from the scene, under the noses of teachers and reporters and police officers. What the hell was I thinking?

I clutch his hand tighter, enveloping his clammy palm with my fingers.
Safe. Perfect. Whole.

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 4:23 P.M.

BY THE TIME WE REACH our front door, my hands are shaking so badly that I fumble the key in the lock. Dylan gets frustrated (“Ugh, Mum, I’ll do it!”) and takes over.

I know what I should do. What a good mother would do: put the kettle on, sit Dylan down on the sofa, make him tell me everything. I try to propel myself toward the kitchen, but my entire body feels like it’s made of lead, like weights have been attached to my limbs, pulling me deeper and deeper toward the floor of the ocean. Instead of the tea-and-biscuits routine, I find myself lying face down on the sofa. The urge to close my eyes feels deep, primal. It’s not even a choice.

Dylan walks to the kitchen and pours himself a glass of water.

“Can I go across the street and see if Mr. Foster is home?”

I stare at him blankly. “Mr. Foster?”

Dylan sets his glass on the kitchen counter. “Yeah. He’s got crickets for Greta. She’s about to hibernate.”

I feel a surge of rage toward Dylan’s pet turtle and force myself to sit up. It feels like raising the *Titanic*.

“Are you joking?”

Dylan stares at me blankly. “No.”

Of course he's not joking. My son is the most literal person on earth.

"Sit," I command, patting the spot next to me. "Tell me what happened today."

At first I think he's going to join me on the sofa. But then he scowls and slams his water glass down on the stone countertop, shattering it into a thousand tiny pieces.

"You ruin everything!" he shouts, racing to his room and slamming the door.

I don't go after him. Instead, I gather the broom and dustpan and begin sweeping up the glass. It's been a hell of a day; who could blame him for being edgy?

My phone buzzes just as I am putting the broom back in the cupboard. A text from Will.

JUST SAW THE NEWS. WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?!

ALL FINE, DYLAN OK, I reply.

Three dots appear. He's typing.

BE THERE AT 6. HAVE HIM READY.

When I finish sweeping, I tiptoe down the hall and knock on Dylan's bedroom door. Dylan is sitting on his unmade bed, staring into the middle distance.

"Vegan mac and cheese for dinner?"

He shakes his head.

I study his face, searching for hidden clues. In the softness of his cheeks, I can see traces of the baby he was about five minutes ago. My eyes wander around his room, over the Nobody Owens graphic novels, the piles of hastily folded and now-forgotten laundry, the far-too-fancy telescope (a birthday gift from Will, doubtlessly intended to highlight the lack of stargazing opportunities in our flat).

"Listen Dyl—you know I'm on your side, right?"

He nods but doesn't make eye contact. I lower myself onto his unmade bed, smoothing the rumpled astronaut sheets with my hand. Greta stares at

me from inside her dim terrarium, unblinking.

“I need to know what happened today.”

I wait. The story begins to dribble out, in short, staccato bursts.

“We were on a field trip,” Dylan says in a flat monotone. “To the Wetland Centre.”

I imagine the boys in their wellies, traipsing through knee-high marsh and swampy overgrowth, past bird hides and disused Victorian-era reservoirs.

“Right. OK.”

“Mr. MacGregor split us up in pairs, gave us each a set of binoculars. To look for rare bitterns.” Dylan’s voice is trembling slightly now. He lowers his gaze to the floor, his eyes tracing the star-shaped pattern on his rug. “Alfie and I were partners.”

My pulse quickens. “You were partners? Just you and him?”

“Uh-huh,” Dylan says.

The hairs on my neck stand to attention.

“Right, um, OK. Go on.”

“We were on the far side of the marsh. And I...I saw some rubbish on the ground. A Coke can and a Mars wrapper.”

He clenches his hands into little fists as he relives the injustice. “Someone just threw them on the ground. A bird could have choked!”

I force myself to imagine a cool, calm lake. *I am neutral. I am Switzerland.*

“Right. OK. Go on.”

“So I told Alfie, ‘I’m going to find a bin.’ And when I came back, he was gone.” He hangs his head. “I thought he was hiding or playing some kind of trick on me.”

“I don’t understand. Didn’t they count you when you got back on the bus? How could they drive all the way back to school without Alfie?”

His face goes ashen. The sinking sensation returns to the pit of my stomach. The pieces of the puzzle are coming together now, but I don’t like the picture they are creating.

“So...you knew Alfie wasn’t on the bus?” I say softly, willing it not to be true. “And you...didn’t say anything?”

Dylan stares at the floor.

“I don’t understand. How did the chaperones not see he was missing?”

My son can barely look at me.

“I don’t know,” he mumbles.

“Dylan.”

He exhales, a long, slow breath that seems to last for hours. “We were all on the coach. Mr. MacGregor was talking to the driver; one of the parent chaperones was calling our names, ticking them off a list. When she called Alfie’s name...”

“What?”

Dylan’s voice is so small it’s like it’s coming from the very bottom of the ocean floor.

“I said, ‘*Here!*’ ”

I stare at him in disbelief. “You did what?”

“It was a joke!” A fat tear slips out the corner of his eye.

I freeze. Seeing Dylan cry is the only thing in the world guaranteed to make me cry, and my own tears will only upset him more, trapping us both in a vicious cycle of snot and sobbing. I wrap my arms around him, drawing him close so he can’t see my face.

“It’s my fault,” he heaves.

“No,” I say reflexively, automatically. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that.”

Dylan and I sit together on his bed, neither of us moving. Beneath my sweatshirt, I’m still wearing the black bodysuit from Selfridges. The fabric feels like chain mail now, constricting me, trapping me.

Dylan takes a strand of sandy hair between his fingers and begins to twirl it. A nervous tic. There is something else, something he isn’t telling me.

“I forgot my backpack,” he mumbles.

I sit up straighter. “You mean at school?”

“No,” he says softly, continuing to twirl his hair. Dylan lifts his eyes from the carpet and meets my gaze. “At the Wetland Centre.”

I frown. I could have *sworn* I carried his backpack home. But never mind.

“It’s OK. I imagine school will be canceled for the next few days. I’ll call and see if anyone turned it in.”

“Mum?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think Alfie is dead?”

A crystalline image flashes before my eyes: a Dylan-size body sinking to the bottom of a reservoir. I push the image away. “No. No, hun. Of course not.”

For the second time that evening, I wrap both my arms around my son so he won’t see my tears.

I give the macaroni a half-hearted stir and dump the fluorescent orange powder into the pot. You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find the vegan Kraft Mac & Cheese in London, not that Dylan appreciates it. The plant-based butter substitute has barely begun to melt when my phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Max says it happened on the field trip? I heard no one even noticed until they were back at school!”

The voice is unfamiliar. I rack my brain. “Sorry, who is this—”

The voice pauses for a microsecond, and I hear the sucking sound of a vape pen. “It’s Jenny. Jenny Choi. We met this morning.”

My heart begins to pound. Why is this woman I barely know calling me?

She continues. “See, what I don’t understand is—*where* were the chaperones?” Her voice rises a full octave, like an opera singer doing scales. “I’ll tell you what it sounds like, Florence. It sounds like a lawsuit.”

“Well, maybe—” I start to say, but Jenny barrels over me.

“Like, how is this even possible?” she barks. “Don’t they count the kids? Isn’t that, like, Field Trip 101?”

For a brief moment, I allow myself to imagine that I am one of Jenny’s clients and that this torrent of righteous indignation is being unleashed on my own behalf. I close my eyes and envision the full force of her intellect raining down on everyone who has ever wronged me: Will. Rose. *Especially Rose*. It gives me a delicious, dizzy feeling, like drinking a mug of glühwein on an empty stomach.

Jenny is still talking, a rapid, machine-gun spray. “Could this be related to that whole”—she lowers her voice—“*groping incident* a few years ago?”

“How do you know about—” I start to say, but Jenny carries right on speaking.

“My nanny said there was practically a riot today at pickup—were you there?”

“Briefly. Actually, Jenny—”

“Ohh, check your e-mail!” she interrupts. “Message from Ms. Ivy.”

“Um. I’m sort of in the middle of something. Read it to me?”

Jenny begins reading, in the polished voice of someone who was definitely captain of her high school debate team.

Dear Year 5 Parents,

Please join us for an emergency parents’ meeting tomorrow at 2:00 p.m.

Frieth Road, Marlow, Buckinghamshire, SL7

Parents only, please. No children, nannies, lawyers, etc.

In the meantime, please do not speak to ANY media.

*Yours,
Nicola Ivy*

Jenny lets out a long, low whistle. Or maybe her vape pen is running dry. “Want me to pick you up tomorrow? I heard you don’t drive.”

“Um,” I stutter, unable to fathom an excuse.

“Text me your address,” she commands, just as the line begins to beep with another call.

“Sorry, Jenny—there’s someone’s on the other line—”

“Go go go. Let me know what you find out.”

The second call is from Hope Grüber.

“Floooooorence,” she coos, her voice smooth as butterscotch.

I flinch. Hope would never call me for no reason.

“So terrible about Alfie! Poor Cleo,” she says, but she doesn’t sound sorry at all. Her voice has the strained, giddy tenor of the village busybody who has finally gotten hold of something really juicy. I imagine her draped across a chaise longue in a palatial penthouse overlooking Hyde Park, working her way through the class phone list while a terrified assistant spoon-feeds Karl Theodor oatmeal.

“How can I help?” I ask tersely.

Hope clucks her tongue. “Just wanted to see how you were holding up.”

“Oh, uh—”

“Because Teddy told me that Dylan and Alfie were partners today. On the trip?”

My stomach plummets into my feet. *Fuck*. I should have known this was a trap. Abort. Abort. Abort.

Hope continues. “And I know there’s...history there. Between the boys.”

I fumble for an excuse. “Sorry, I’m actually kind of in the middle of something here.”

“Have you thought about reaching out to the police? It might be good to have Dylan speak to them now, while it’s still fresh.”

“Of course,” I say, though helping investigators is the furthest thing from my mind.

“I’m sure he has nothing to hide,” she purrs. “Though I have to tell you, it did come up on the group chat. You know, Turtlegate—”

A wave of shame washes over me, followed immediately by confusion. “What do you mean? There haven’t been any messages on the group chat —”

Unless—oh. Of course. There must be another chat. Without me. The brief silence that follows confirms my suspicions. I let it go; there’s no point now. I might as well find out what she knows.

“So, um, what have you heard?”

Hope clears her throat. “Well, I’ve hardly had time to *gossip*, Florence. And of course, it’s a police investigation, so it’s all very hush-hush.”

I study my nails and wait. Hope couldn’t keep a secret if her life depended on it. The attention is too intoxicating.

“But I do know the Risbys are in the middle of a divorce,” she whispers. “Affair, supposedly. The father—well, I’m sure you’re aware—the Risbys are basically the Rockefellers of the freezer aisle. The family fortune is at stake.”

She stops for a second and clears her throat. “From what I hear, it’s an especially *nasty* divorce. But I suppose you know what that’s like. How is Will? Those little girls of his are just precious.”

I bite my tongue, willing myself not to take the bait. I won’t give her the satisfaction.

Instead I change tack. “Poor Cleo.”

“Poor Cleo,” Hope echoes automatically. “Oh, that reminds me—the floral arrangement for the Risbys. Now, most of the parents are doing a hundred pounds, but whatever you can manage is fine,” she says, faux-gracious.

One hundred fucking pounds for flowers! There are sixteen boys in Dylan’s class, minus Alfie, obviously, which means Hope is collecting roughly the equivalent of a used Opel for a bunch of soggy carnations. I despise her with the power of a thousand suns.

“Hope, I’m sorry, the line is breaking up...”

I let my voice trail off and then simply hang up.

That cunt.

Holland Park

TWO YEARS AGO

THERE IS, OF COURSE, A reason all the other mothers hate me.

Two years ago, I made a rather large mistake, followed immediately by another, even larger one, the very same night. It was the first week of December. St. Angeles was poised to release its pupils for an entire month of winter break, creating a sense of frenzied expectation in the children and heightened dread in the parents. The gasket to release this pressure was the Holiday Fundraiser Gala, also known as HFG. Ostensibly held to raise money for “a child in need of a bursary,” the alleged recipient never seemed to materialize, and the evening served primarily to polish whatever remaining patina of glamour still clung to the school.

The event’s bland title belied its decadence: a four-course dinner catered by Yotam himself and a performance from an up-and-coming musical act followed by an open bar and the sort of debauchery that made the final day of Glastonbury look like tea with the Queen.

Because it was held on the Thursday evening before the boys’ holiday pageant, being terribly hungover at Friday’s 11:00 a.m. curtain-raiser was a bit of a humblebrag, a winking sign that of course you had been in on the fun, dah-ling. One year, a St. Angeles father had been discovered the next morning by a groundskeeper, pants-less and snoring in a coat closet.

Though Dylan had been a St. Angeles student since the age of four, I had never actually attended HFG. Not only were the tickets obscenely expensive, they could only be booked as a table of eight, i.e., four couples. The seating arrangements were the subject of intense social jockeying. Either you ponied up for a whole table and scrambled to invite the “right” couples to join you (Hope) or you waited and prayed you’d be asked to join a good table. Needless to say, no one ever asked me. But two days before the event that year, I’d received a panicked phone call from Hope. A particularly virulent strain of stomach flu was doing the rounds; the band was badly stricken. “I know you’ve got a bit of a ‘performance’ background,” she began. Would I be willing to perform a “festive, nonreligious holiday song” for HFG?

There was no offer of payment, of course—no mention of the stricken band’s fat fee. But then, that wasn’t really the point.

I said yes. I chose Mariah Carey’s “Oh Santa!” and went to great pains and some expense to re-create the figure-hugging red and white jumpsuit from her “All I Want for Christmas Is You” video. As I took the stage that night, a familiar jolt of adrenaline coursing through my veins, I felt, for a brief moment, like my old self again. And frankly, I killed it.

Afterward, there had been the obligatory polite applause, a respectable number of leering stares from the fathers, and a smattering of backhanded compliments from the mothers. I walked off the stage, powdered my nose, and returned to the dining room in search of my name card. After several minutes of looking, it became clear: the committee hadn’t set a place for me.

Hope was terribly apologetic. *Of course* they didn’t expect me to eat in the back with the catering staff. It was a *misunderstanding*. She was *so terribly sorry*.

I could feel the shame burning in my cheeks as I brushed it off, assured her it was fine. I wasn’t hungry anyway. Not knowing what to do with myself, I slunk outside for a cigarette. I don’t actually smoke—I’m too vain; cigarettes destroy your facial collagen—but I always keep an emergency pack of Gauloises Blondes in my handbag, just in case.

So there I was, pretend-smoking—puffing, really—when one of the dads, a Draco Malfoy type named Rollo Risby, approached me with a cocked eyebrow and said, “Got a spare?”

Cigarettes in London, in case you don’t know, cost approximately £27 apiece. Only an entitled asshole would ask a near-stranger for one.

I held out the pack and he helped himself, his little gold signet ring glinting in the moonlight, like a B-list Bond villain. Hot, in an evil sort of way.

“That was quite the little performance,” he said, tucking his monogrammed “RR” lighter back into his pocket. His accent was so plummy I could have smeared it on toast. “Takes a lotta guts for a girl your size.”

I swept my gaze across his body: the flax-colored hair receding from his temples like a retreating army, the slight middle-aged paunch tucked into an ivory dinner jacket. I could practically hear Cleo lying through her teeth about how it made him look just like Daniel Craig.

“My size?” I said, allowing the smoke from my cigarette to drift directly into his pale face. “Wow. Well I happen to like my body. But um, great neg. Boys at the club will love that.”

Rollo let out a surprised laugh and held his palms up in surrender. “OK, OK,” he said, grinning like a peace offering. “Please don’t cancel me.”

I stared at him, stone-faced. “Give me a hundred quid.”

Rollo laughed again, but he seemed less sure of himself this time.

“I have a better idea,” he said, a mischievous grin spreading across his face.

Something in the air shifted, and I could feel what was coming next: the magic question, the one with the potential to turn a mediocre night at your child’s school fundraiser into an amazing one.

“You party?” he asked, raising one pale eyebrow.

My partying days were mostly behind me by that point. But Rollo’s attention felt like ice on a fresh burn. I was desperate to belong somewhere, to not be standing around, awkward and unwanted. So I nodded.

We stubbed out our cigarettes in unison and walked wordlessly inside to the school toilets. The cubicles were impossibly narrow, designed for children, but we squeezed in together, giggling, delighted by our own audacity. Rollo cut two neat little piles and gestured for me to go first. So chivalrous.

The metallic taste hit my tongue first. Then came the manic, fast-forwarding sensation of all my neurons beginning to fire faster than nature had ever intended.

That was when I made my first mistake: I smiled—a real, dumb, happy smile.

Rollo took it as an invitation and lunged. The cubicle was tiny; there was nowhere to turn. I tried to push him away, but his soft veal-hands were everywhere, his tongue stuffed so far down my throat I could taste the gravy from his main course.

Time slowed down, then ground to a halt. I remembered a documentary I watched with Dylan once, about surfers who had survived shark attacks on the Great Barrier Reef. Aim for the nose and gills, they said.

My fist connected with the soft tissue of Rollo's nasal cartilage before I even realized what I was doing. His blood, dull and red, began puddling on the floor like paint dripping from a canvas.

"Fucking bitch," he howled, grabbing his mangled nose. "This is a custom tux!"

I unlatched the stall door while he moaned in pain.

"And you wear it so well, for a man your size," I called over my shoulder.

That wasn't my second mistake, though.

The second mistake was going back into the ballroom and approaching his wife, who was several glasses of Chablis deep into a heated discussion with Farzanah Khan about the Chelsea Flower Show. I tapped her lightly on her pointy shoulder and painted a concerned expression on my face.

"So sorry to interrupt, Cleo," I said, perhaps a little louder than strictly necessary. "I'm afraid Rollo may have had a little...accident."

Cleo jumped up, spilling her glass of wine. "Where is he?"

“In the student bathroom.”

I paused, making eye contact with everyone else at the table. It was the head's table, Nicola Ivy's preferred platform for hobnobbing with the wealthiest St. Angeles parents. She and Allegra Armstrong-Johnson were engrossed in a conversation about the benefits of equine therapy for children, while Allegra's husband, Rupert, gave a rambling monologue to Mr. Ivy about the true scale of British casualties at Normandy. Hope and Karl Theodor Grüber were there too, having recently made a sizable donation for a koi pond no one asked for (the same koi pond that would later become the scene of Turtlegate, not that I'm bitter).

All of them stopped talking and looked up at me.

“Addiction's a real bitch,” I said.

There were a few polite murmurs of agreement, and then the entire table began studying their cloth napkins intently. Cleo was already halfway across the ballroom, her bony scapulae poking out of her mauve Marchesa gown like a bird's wings.

I should have left right then, should have ordered a cab and gone straight home, but the drugs had kicked in, and I didn't feel like calling it a night. So I went back outside on the school steps, pretend puffed another cigarette, and watched, from a distance, as Cleo and a uniformed driver struggled to load a jittery, bleeding Rollo into the backseat of a black BMW 7 Series.

Out of nowhere, Hope Grüber appeared next to me on the stairs. Her dull little fish eyes zeroed in on the trail of blood on my jumpsuit.

“Oh my,” she murmured. “Quite a lot of blood, isn't it?”

“Yeah, well. He threw himself at me. What was I supposed to do?”

“Hmmm.”

Hope arranged her trout pout into a thoughtful expression. And then, without taking her eyes off Cleo, said, “So what were you two doing in the bathroom, anyway?”

The words hit me like a cold shower. I knew right then what would await me at the school gates after Christmas: Silence. Stares. Prim little

mouths set in neat little lines. Whispered rumors, *I heard she broke his nose.*

Whatever. I didn't care. I never wanted to be part of their matching-leggings mums' club anyway. Gag me.

But the worst part was—apparently old Rollo really got off on the whole thing. The very next morning, while I was at Dylan's Christmas pageant, a courier delivered a bouquet of fifty long-stemmed white roses to my front door, along with a handwritten note:

Smashing good time! Do it again next year?

xxx

R

I'll never understand Englishmen.

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 5:56 P.M.

I MAKE DYLAN COME SIT at the kitchen table for dinner. We don't usually eat together, but it feels like the right thing to do under the circumstances. We sit in strained silence, stabbing forkfuls of macaroni and cheese. Beneath the table, I scroll through the *Daily Post* headlines on my phone. Alfie's disappearance is the top story, the headlines equal parts shouty and prurient.

CLASS TRIP TURNS TO NIGHTMARE AS BOY
VANISHES IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

MISSING SCHOOLBOY IS HEIR TO FROZEN
DINNER FORTUNE

INSIDE MISSING BOY'S £36,000 PRIVATE
SCHOOL WHERE KIDS ENJOY FENCING
AND FLUTE LESSONS

A red countdown clock at the top of the page shows exactly how much time has elapsed since Alfie was reported missing:

3 HOURS AND 56 MINUTES!

I look up from my phone at Dylan. He's changed out of his school uniform and is wearing the *Beets Not Meats* T-shirt Brooke got him for Christmas last year. Which reminds me: I'm still wearing the velvet bodysuit under my sweatshirt. I glance at my watch. Only one hour and four minutes until my meeting with Elliott. Might as well leave it on now.

I turn to Dylan, who is shoveling macaroni into his mouth at an alarming clip.

"Did you see anything suspicious today? Like, anything at all?"

"Nope," Dylan says, pausing to swallow. "I already told you."

"Was Alfie acting strangely?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, shoving another heaping forkful into his mouth.

"Like, did Alfie seem upset about anything? Worried?"

Dylan gulps. "You mean, like, did he off himself? Doubt it, Mum. Alfie's pretty fond of himself, after all."

"Dylan!" I smack the wooden table with my hand. "The kid is missing. You can't talk like that!"

My son shrugs and gives a self-satisfied little smirk. The way he curls the right side of his lip reminds me so much of his father that I have to look away.

My relationship with Will began on a cold February night, after a particularly disastrous show in Leeds. Back then, Will was our tour manager, a world-weary thirty-one-year-old man with the thankless job of accompanying Girls' Night to places like Newcastle and Nottingham, where we would open for other, only marginally less shitty acts.

Even then, I knew Girls' Night wasn't a great band. The whole thing was a transparent cash grab, a cynical attempt by a second-tier label to recapture the magic of the Spice Girls, ten years too late. The four of us

girls had been cast in a single afternoon in a Westfield shopping mall competition. Rose was the pretty one. Imani was the dancer. Lacey was the all-rounder. And I was the singer. I'd always had a good voice. Not an amazing voice, not Mariah or Whitney or Amy, but a good voice. Solid. Clear. Strong. Enough to get me out of Slough, away from Barry and my mother and perfect Brooke.

But touring with Girls' Night was like being inside an estrogen pressure cooker. We played six shows a week, crisscrossing England, Scotland, and Wales in a bus that felt like a little island, cut off from the outside world. Our entire fan base was girls between the ages of eight and sixteen years old. Girls on the bus, girls in the crowds, girls on the stage. Will was the only man in our orbit, aside from two grizzled fifty-something roadies both called Rob. Of course we were all a little in love with Will. He was the only viable option. He flirted with all of us, but Rose was his favorite. She was the prettiest.

One night after a particularly disappointing turnout in Leeds, Will had knocked on the door of my hotel room. The label had started putting us two to a room to save money. Me and Rose in one; Imani and Lacey in the other.

I was in the middle of painting my toenails, a shimmering teal shade I'd borrowed from Lacey. The other girls had gone out in search of weed.

"You good, Flo?" Will had said, glancing around the room. I could smell the IPA on his breath.

I wasn't expecting Will to kiss me, and when he did, it tasted salty and bitter, like cigarettes mixed with Doritos. I was surprised how much I liked it. Not just the kiss, but the attention. *Rose is gonna be so jealous*, I thought, closing my eyes and leaning in. Up close, I could see tiny gray hairs sprouting along his temples.

Even as it happened, I was already framing the story of our hookup to tell the other girls (*You'll never guess what happened last night!*). It wasn't that I didn't enjoy the kiss. Or what came after. It was fine. But mostly I was excited to have my own morsel of excitement to unpack during the long days on the bus.

Five weeks later, I started barfing up my guts, just as rumors started flying that the label was planning to pull the plug on our tour. By this point it was clear that Girls' Night's days were numbered. Then my mother's green Opel Corsa hit a truck on the M25. It was her own fault; she'd been drinking. Brooke and Barry and I buried her in a small plot in Slough, next to Barry's mother. I was twenty. A pregnant orphan on the verge of unemployment. It never even occurred to me not to keep the baby. He was all I had.

Will had accepted the news of my pregnancy stoically and, after what I now suspect was a stern lecture from his father, proposed in a Marks & Spencer parking lot. The ring was a castoff from his mother, a real '90s doozy with yellow gold swirls and sapphires. Two weeks after he proposed, the label canceled the rest of our tour. Marrying Will at the end of the summer felt like winning a consolation prize. We had a big shotgun wedding at his family home in Hertfordshire. I was the star again, in a flower crown and a lace dress that strained over my baby bump. The pictures were in *HELLO!* magazine. Not the cover, but still. *Pop Princess Weds Aspiring Music Mogul*. I wore Rose's jealousy like a badge of honor, a sign that I had won something worth having.

The joke was on me, though, because Will was hiding his own secret all along.

When I return to the table, Dylan has cleaned his plate.

"Can I get pudding now?" he asks, already racing to the freezer for a Popsicle.

He's fashioning the stick into a samurai sword when the doorbell rings.

"It's Dad!" he squeals, jumping out of his seat.

I glance at my watch. Ten past six. Finally. I'd love to make Will wait, but I've got to be in Hackney in fifty minutes, and it's at least an hour away.

Dylan scurries toward his room to say one last good-bye to Greta, and I step into the vestibule and throw open the front door.

Will is wearing his typical uniform: white button-down shirt, pressed khaki shorts, and mahogany-colored loafers with no socks. The scent of Acqua di Gio hits me like a brick wall. How is it possible for one person to emit so much...aroma?

Will frowns and gestures toward his entry-level Porsche at the curb. "Where's Dylan? I asked you to have him ready. You know I can't park here."

"You're late," I snap, shoving Dylan's overnight bag at him. "I've got a meeting tonight I can't miss."

"That right?" Will leans against the doorframe. Suddenly he has all the time in the world. "About the missing boy?"

His tone is lightly accusatory, as if Alfie Risby's disappearance is some pesky annoyance I've personally orchestrated to inconvenience him.

I crane my neck into the flat. "Dylan! Come on. Your dad's in a hurry!"

Will sighs, running a hand through his gel-slick hair. "So what happened? Kid just vanished in broad daylight?"

I sigh. "I'm not the police. I've got no clue."

Will frowns, like he's the one counting down the minutes to a life-changing meeting and I'm the one preventing him from an adequate beauty routine.

"Well, surely the school said *something*. Was he kidnapped?"

"I've told you everything I know. You're welcome to call the school yourself. Or there's a meeting tomorrow—"

Will interrupts me. "Did you talk to Dylan? What did he say?"

"Of course I did! But you know how Dylan is—"

Will pounces. "What's that supposed to mean?"

My ex-husband is in complete denial about Dylan's occasionally eccentric behavior. Any mention of our son's issues at school is treated as evidence of my own shoddy parenting.

I sigh. "I just mean that he's fragile. Things got off to a rough start this year, with the whole Turtlegate thing. I don't want to upset him—"

Before I can finish, the front door flies open.

“Dad!” Dylan cries, beaming and wrapping Will in the kind of two-armed hug that I would kill for. Of all the sadnesses of my life, the fact that Dylan positively worships his useless father is top of my list.

“Hey, buddy,” Will says, thumping him on the back. Will kneels down to Dylan’s eye level, like he’s speaking to a toddler. “How’d you like to spend a whole week out in the countryside, with me and Rose and the girls?”

“Really?” Dylan squeals, punching the air in jubilation.

I stare at Will in disbelief. “What? Aren’t you even going to ask me first? We have a custody agreement.”

Will shoots Dylan a conspiratorial glance. “Uh-oh, buddy, looks like we have trouble.”

He turns, fixing me with a patronizing stare. “Calm down. It’s just an offer. They said on the radio just now that school would be canceled all of next week.”

Dylan looks up at me, pleading. “Pleeeeeeease, Mum! I never get to see Dad—”

I start to say, “And whose fault is that—” but Will interrupts me, giving Dylan a conciliatory clap on the back.

“Sorry, bud,” Will says. “Your mum says no.”

I bite my lip. It’s a trap. Will is counting on me to say no. To make me the bad guy, while he collects maximal credit for minimal effort. *Not today, Satan.* I grit my teeth and paste a smile on my face. “Actually, it sounds like a great idea.”

Will’s eyes crinkle. “Really? You’re sure? The whole week?”

“Of course,” I trill. “The country air will do him good. And like you say, school is canceled. Just as long as he’s back in time for Brooke’s wedding next Saturday.”

I won’t lie. A small part of me is thinking about my meeting with Elliott. It’s not like I’m trying to get rid of Dylan, but what if Elliott asks me to jump straight back into the recording studio? If school is really canceled, Dylan will be sitting at home all week with nothing to do.

I turn to my son. “Run inside and grab some extra underpants and socks.”

As soon as he disappears, Will crosses his arms and fixes me with a stern expression. “Look, I don’t know what you’ve been doing all afternoon, but you need to take this more seriously. A boy is missing. The school needs be held accountable. Ever since those Omega Plus private equity twats took over, standards have been slipping. Frankly, after an incident like this...well, I just wonder...should we really be paying full fees next term? Feels like a discount might be in order.”

“Will, I hardly think this is the time—”

He raises his eyebrows. “Of course. You’re busy. With your ‘meeting.’” He puts the word in air quotes.

A wave of shame washes over me. Even after all these years, Will still has the power to make me feel small and wrong and bad.

He turns to leave. “Tell Dylan I’ll wait for him in the car. Oh, and, Florence?”

I look up at him expectantly.

“Next time have him ready.”

Will’s secret had come tumbling out one night when Dylan was two months old. At the urging of some well-meaning midwife, I was nursing—or trying to. I’d been wearing the same fleece bathrobe for what felt like days. My hair was greasy and matted; none of us were sleeping.

Will and I were shouting at each other in the kitchen—who knows about what. I’d thrown a mug (*Leeds: Live it, Love it!*) against the wall, the force of the gesture popping my bathrobe open, revealing a wobbly slice of my jellified postpartum body.

Will gazed at me for a moment, a faraway look in his eyes. Then he said quietly, “You know I was looking for Rose that night, right?”

I stood there, dumbstruck, my mouth gaping like a fat fish.

“I was drunk, shagged you instead,” he said, more to himself than to me, as if he were just waking up from a coma and struggling to piece

together the cause of the accident.

“But this—” He gestured to me, the kitchen, and, most unforgivably, Dylan, asleep in his Moses basket. “I never wanted this.”

He looked directly into my eyes. “It’s always been Rose.”

Will moved out before Dylan had his first tooth, piling his pretentious vinyl collection into the back of a rented van and hightailing it back to his family home in Hertfordshire.

By Dylan’s first birthday, Will and Rose had their own baby on the way and sole custody of our entire friend group. The next year, Will’s dad died, and Will inherited money. A lot of money. Enough to start his own record label. Like a complete idiot, I hadn’t even realized his parents were rich. Having money in England looked so different than having money in Florida.

Will and Rose relaunched Girls’ Night without me. They didn’t bother replacing me. With three girls, Rose could always be in the middle. Lacey and Imani both went along with it. They needed the paycheck; I could hardly blame them. Will’s timing was impeccable. The reunion tour started just in time for the first wave of millennial girl band nostalgia. One of their songs was in a Jetta commercial.

It’s always been Rose—

Even now, a decade on, I can barely recall those words without conjuring a flood of snotty tears.

Still, I’m not sorry it happened. Dylan is the best thing in my life, without exception.

As soon as Dylan has been successfully dispatched to Will’s car, I race inside to the bathroom to salvage my appearance. It’s already twenty past six. I’ll have to take a taxi now, and I’ll still be a little late, but forgivably late. Fashionably late. The air smells of blackcurrant and burnt hair, the messy marriage of a smoldering flat iron and a Diptyque Baies candle I neglected to blow out. I rip off the sweatshirt, smooth the rumpled bodysuit, take a swig of mouthwash. My hair could use another pass with the

straightener, but there isn't time. The front is fine; it's the back of my head that's the problem. I'll just be careful not to turn around in front of Elliott.

I pick up a lip liner and attempt to trace the outline of my mouth, but my hands are shaking so bad I have to stop. Deep breath. Just a few more hours. I can compartmentalize for a few more hours. Nail this meeting. Then come home and deal with all the Alfie stuff.

I order an Uber on my phone and apply a final spritz of perfume. The doorbell rings.

Dylan must have forgotten something. I scan the bathroom counter and immediately spot it: his forgotten toothbrush. I stuff it in my bag and race to the door. Quick handover and straight into the car.

When I open the front door, two unfamiliar faces gaze back at me: a young man in a dark turban and a heavyset woman with close-cropped gray curls.

Both are wearing Met police uniforms and identical grim expressions.

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 6:21 P.M.

"DETECTIVE GLOVER," THE WOMAN SAYS, handing me a card. She's in her early fifties, with dust-colored hair and a single wiry whisker protruding from her chin. "May we come in?"

My mind is reeling, unable to process what's in front of me. Across the street, the curtain in Mr. Foster's front window twitches open.

"Sorry," I say, stepping onto the porch. "But this isn't a great time. I'm just on my way to a meeting—"

The younger cop, the one in the turban, interrupts me. "Ms. Grimes, I'm Detective Singh. Is Dylan home? It's very important that we speak with him."

"Dylan's with his father," I say, swallowing hard. "In Hertfordshire."

Detective Glover raises an eyebrow. "That right?" she says, scribbling something on her notepad.

I glance at my phone. Two missed calls from the Uber driver. If I lose this ride, I'm going to be late-late.

"I'm sorry, but I was just leaving—"

Singh interrupts me again, placing his hand on the doorframe. "Ms. Grimes, I understand you removed your son from school this afternoon, before the police had cleared the building?"

I glance down at my phone. *Driver departing soon. You will be charged a cancelation fee.*

Panic rises in my throat. I cannot be late. I will not be late.

“Sorry, am I under arrest?” I say, eyeing Detective Glover’s black bowler hat.

Singh frowns, as if confused by the question. “Are you under arrest?” he repeats, his voice incredulous.

“Yeah. Am I under arrest?”

I can feel his gaze boring into the side of my head. It’s very hot on the porch all of a sudden.

He glances at Glover before answering. “Uh, no. This is a voluntary interview.”

“Then I think we’re done here,” I say. I press “find another ride” on the app and tap my foot as it loads.

Glover casts a wary eye over my black velvet bodysuit and then snaps her notebook shut. “Fine. That’s your choice. This time.”

The strain in her voice sends a little chill up my spine. I look up from my phone.

“I’m sorry, it’s just, as I said, I have an important meeting starting in —”

“Don’t let us keep you,” Glover says. She makes a big show of tucking her notepad into her jacket pocket. “You’ll be hearing from us.”

“Why? I mean, I haven’t done anything.”

Singh snorts, as if the answer should be obvious. “Ms. Grimes, a boy is missing. And your son was the last person to see him. He’s going to be called in for formal questioning.”

The words hit my ears like rocks on a glass window.

“Formal questioning?” Panic rises in my throat. I don’t really know how the British legal system works, but that sounds serious. “Do I need a lawyer?”

Glover clucks her tongue. “Afraid we can’t offer legal advice,” she says, motioning toward Singh that it’s time to go. “Contact Legal Aid if you have questions.”

At the bottom of the porch stairs, Glover turns around. “Good luck on your date,” she says, not bothering to hide her smirk.

By the time they leave, the Uber app has quit responding. *All our drivers are currently busy, please try again soon.* I troop out to Goldhawk Road and try to hail a cab, but none of them stop. It’s Friday night; they’re all booked. I check Citymapper. The Circle line is currently experiencing “severe delays.” *Fuck.*

I need to call Elliott, let him know I’m going to be late, but I don’t actually have his direct number. I pound out an e-mail to his assistant—*RUNNING LATE, ON THE WAY*—as I shuffle to the bus stop. I immediately get an auto-responder: *I AM OUT OF OFFICE UNTIL MONDAY AND WILL GET BACK TO YOU ON MY RETURN.* *Fuck.*

I look at my phone: 6:35. Even if I got in a taxi right now, I’m still a good hour away from the restaurant.

Just as I begin to panic, the 94 bus appears, as if driven by fate’s invisible hand. Hope surges through my veins. This might still work. I can still make it.

I scurry to the top of the bus and look up the restaurant’s phone number on my phone. They can give a message to Elliott, let him know I’m running late. He’ll be annoyed, sure, but he’ll wait.

The phone rings three times before someone picks up. “Thank you for calling Mr. Bang-Bang, we’re—”

“Hi. Can you give a message to my friend? I’m running late. It wasn’t my fault, but I’m on the way now. If you could just give him a message—”

There’s a clicking sound, and I pause.

“Hello? Can you hear me? His name is Elliott Rivera. We have a reservation for seven p.m., and he’s waiting for me, but I don’t have his phone number—”

The clicking sound again. I realize I’ve been talking to Mr. Bang-Bang’s answering machine.

I hang up and stare out the window, allowing my head to slump against the glass. Around me the bus is filling with revelers headed into town for a big night: girls in sparkly dresses and heels, boys doused in cheap cologne.

I tap my fingers against the window and imagine Elliott sitting alone at the table. Wondering where I am. Growing impatient, then angry. Surely Elliott has my number, right? His assistant can't possibly make *all* his calls for him? At some point, he will call me, and then I can explain everything.

At Shepherd's Bush Green, the loudspeaker crackles to life. A prerecorded voice says, "Dear passengers, this bus will terminate at the next stop."

A collective groan ripples through the upper deck. The driver comes on the loudspeaker, informing us that another bus will be along in "about fifteen minutes" to continue the journey.

The doors shudder open. I trudge off the bus and into the darkness to wait.

At 6:47 p.m., the replacement bus still has not arrived. I'm still at Shepherd's Bush Green, a solid hour away from the restaurant by taxi or, as Google helpfully informs me, "a three-and-a-half-hour walk." My disappointment is a physical sensation, like having my limbs crushed by a steamroller.

My phone rings, and I nearly jump out of my skin. But it's not Elliott. It's Brooke. I don't answer. The last thing I want is to hear her "helpful" advice—that I can always call Elliott's assistant on Monday and explain, or send apology flowers to his office in LA, or try to take the meeting over Zoom. She won't understand. I've been waiting a decade for a second chance. How many more years will I have to wait for a third one?

I give up and decide to walk home. On the way, I stop at an off-license and purchase two silvery cans of diet G&T. I drink them alone in the darkness, hating everyone: the police and their smug smiles; Will and his condescending stare; Elliott's unreachable assistant. But mostly I hate myself. For everything.

I return to a silent house and an angry voicemail from Brooke, who had turned up to babysit and found the house empty and dark. *Oops*. There's nothing from Elliott. Maybe he really doesn't have my number after all. I tiptoe down the hall to Dylan's room, cracking the door open a millimeter at a time, like I did when he was a baby, sneaking in to hold my index finger under his nose, waiting for that warm puff of breath to confirm he was still alive.

I crawl into his empty bed, wrapping myself in his astronaut comforter. The sheets smell of boyish sweat and musty socks. A hot tear escapes, inching its way down my cheek. I pull the comforter over my head before I allow myself to sob into his pillow.

I want to rewind. I want to go back. I don't understand how this happened, how the last eight hours have unraveled so spectacularly. This was supposed to be my moment. I'm not supposed to be dodging the police and wondering if my son was involved in something shady. I should be sitting with Elliott right now, drinking champagne and toasting my shiny new future.

Elliott. The thought of him sitting alone at the restaurant, wondering where the hell I am—it's too much.

My tears mingle with my mascara to form a mucky puddle on the pillowcase, a sludgy goo that stings my eyes. I roll out of Dylan's bed and onto the floor, taking the tangled duvet with me. Through Dylan's open curtains, a full moon is rising against the black sky, round as a melon. I should get up and wash my face, but wallowing on the floor feels so much better. I lay there for a long time. Long enough to notice all the dust on the floor, the crumbled socks. And then something else. Something sticking out from beneath Dylan's bed. A belt, maybe, or some kind of strap. Without thinking, I give it a tug. It's heavy. I give it another tug.

A backpack.

A rush of adrenaline sweeps through my body. *Dylan's backpack*. It's here. He didn't forget it at the Wetland Centre. It's all a big misunderstanding. I knew I'd carried it home from school, and I was right. Maybe everything else was a big misunderstanding too.

I switch on the lamp and examine the backpack. It smells earthy and slightly damp, like it's been left outside in a garden. I yank the zipper open and dump the contents onto the bed. There are several notebooks I've never seen before. A *Bonjour France 2* workbook. An unfamiliar blue water bottle. A strange pencil case. A *Feelings Journal*, full of childish, chicken-scratch handwriting I don't recognize.

A dull ringing begins in my ears as I survey the unfamiliar items strewn across my son's bed. It dawns on me slowly, far more slowly than it should:

This is not Dylan's backpack.

I turn the *Feelings Journal* over in my hands. It feels warm to the touch, like it's radiating its own heat.

Property of Alfie Risby.

Shepherd's Bush

FRIDAY, 11:49 P.M.

A BURNING SENSATION BEGINS IN the back of my throat, an invisible noose tightening around my neck. Why does my son have the missing boy's backpack underneath his bed?

I flip through the pages. Alfie's penmanship is shaky, rendered alternately in dull pencil and leaky fountain pen. Most of the entries are complaints: about a "bullying" tennis coach who made him run laps, an "incompetent" housekeeper who burnt his morning toast, and the sheer injustice of having to attend exam tutoring on Saturday mornings.

17 Sept.

Maths homework sucks!!!

22 Oct.

The blobby blobster known as Mr. Dempsey took away two of my house points for laughing during chapel.

Ha. Mr. Dempsey *is* a blobster. Kid's not wrong. But the next entry stops me cold.

9 Nov.

Dylan Palmer said he's going to kill me...

My eyes dart to the date line—*four days ago*. An awful, nauseating wave crashes over me. I drag myself, on my hands and knees, to the bathroom. The vomit comes quickly, the color of a fluorescent orange highlighter, and lasts for what feels like hours. When I have emptied my entire stomach, I lie back on the cold tile floor and gaze up at the ceiling.

Could he...?

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to hide from my own wandering thoughts.

Could he...?

Dylan's dinner table smirk haunts me, but I push the thought away. There's got to be some explanation. He's only ten. He doesn't even kill spiders. There's no way he would hurt another kid. Right?

I crawl toward the tub and turn on the tap, allowing scorching-hot water to gush into the ancient claw-footed bathtub. I'd purchased this flat with my Girls' Night signing bonus, in perhaps the only smart financial decision I've ever made. Run-down and damp, in an untrendy corner of Shepherd's Bush, it was still slightly more than I could comfortably afford. But it was mine. I'd fully intended to renovate, to replace the old tub with a walk-in rainfall shower once I made it big. But then everything imploded, and the years passed, and my comeback never materialized. Now I'm glad I kept the tub. The bath is the only place where I can actually think.

I drop a lavender bath bomb into the water and submerge myself. My fake tan instantly turns the foam a sludgy brown. I sit in the silence, wandering around the edges of the question that I can't bring myself to actually ask.

What did you do, Dylan?

Ten years ago, when I was pregnant, I'd passed those dull final days of gestation wondering what Dylan would look like. Would he have a head full of hair? Will's brown eyes or my gray ones? Button nose or honker?

What I was really wondering, at my core, was *Will he be cute?* Or one of those horribly wrinkly, old-man babies? Or worse—a blotchy, puckered, shrieking one? Everyone assured me that mothers always find their own babies beautiful. Even if he's ugly, they said, you won't know.

Motherlove will blind you.

Except it didn't.

Dylan got stuck in the birth canal; they had to vacuum him out. He emerged limp and gray, and the suction cup from the vacuum left him with a pulsing red plum on the crown of his head, like a second, external brain.

The lump went away completely after a few hours, just like the kind NHS doctor promised, and left no scar.

But when I looked down at the wailing blob in my arms, I knew. I can't speak for all the other mothers out there. But as for me?

I knew my baby wasn't cute.

Eventually, the hot water does its job, scorching away my thoughts until I can think of nothing else but my flesh melting, singeing away muscle and fat and sinew until only my skeleton remains.

I fantasize about hailing a taxi, driving out to Will's house, grabbing my son by the shoulders. *What did you do, Dylan?* But I can barely form these words in my own mind, much less say them out loud to my only child. He's too fragile.

I grab a bar of soap and begin scrubbing the dark skin around my ankles where the streaks of fake tan have pooled.

What do the police know? The school will turn over Dylan's disciplinary record. They'll find out about Turtlegate. That won't look good.

I could lawyer up, try to fight. But Dylan's not the kind of kid who would do well on the witness stand. And I can barely pay for my nail appointment, much less a hotshot defense attorney. Will has money, but not enough to out-lawyer the Risbys.

We could leave the country. I could grab Dylan, hop on the next flight out of Heathrow. Head to South America or maybe France. Start over in a sleepy little village in Provence. There's the custody agreement, though. I need written permission from Will to take him out of the country. Plus Alfie's parents are rich. Money has long arms. They could easily hire a gang of burly mafia-types to track us down. I suppose if it came down to it, I'd rather Dylan stay here and face the softball UK court system, with its suspended sentences and reduced penalties, than be forever looking over his shoulder for a goon with a baseball bat.

My mind wanders to Alfie's backpack. Why is it in Dylan's room? And where is Dylan's backpack? None of it makes any sense. Dylan would never hurt another kid on purpose, even a brat like Alfie. Unless, of course, he had a really good reason. Or there was some kind of misunderstanding. Like Turtlegate. Oh God. What if Alfie was, like, bothering a nesting goose or something, and Dylan got upset and pushed him, and Alfie tripped and fell in the reservoir? I can't 100 percent rule it out.

I'm desperate to call someone and talk through the options, but who? It's after midnight. Adam is asleep. Brooke will just tell me to get a lawyer. Jenny barely knows me. And all the other mothers hate me. I am completely, utterly alone.

My head is pounding now, the beginning of what promises to be an excruciating migraine. I sink lower in the tub, allowing my skull to slide beneath the surface of the water, hair extensions be damned.

Underwater, everything goes silent and dark. I close my eyes and am greeted by a vision of a uniformed boy waving eerily as he plummets to the bottom of a reservoir, weighed down by a St. Angeles backpack. The water is black and icy, and as the boy turns around, I realize, with horror, that it's not Alfie, but Dylan. My son's terrified mouth forms a perfect O shape as he screams for help. But I am paralyzed, watching in panic as my son takes

in mouthfuls of water, each gulp sending him deeper beneath the surface, until he disappears from view. A few lonely bubbles are all that remain.

I wrench my head out of the bathwater, sputtering for air. I clamber out of the tub, not bothering with a towel, and run naked and dripping wet toward Dylan's room.

Back in the bathroom, I arrange Alfie's *Feelings Journal* in the basin of the sink like a sacrifice on the altar. In the mirror, I catch a glimpse of my black bodysuit crumpled on the floor, a relic from another life.

I strike a match. The notebook burns quickly, the ash crumbling into the sink. I burn all 102 pages that night, but not before committing the most damning ones to memory.

Shepherd's Bush

SATURDAY, 7:38 A.M.

I WAKE UP IN MY own bed. The moon is gone, replaced by a dull, flat sun fighting its way across the horizon. Yesterday's disasters come flooding back one by one. My thwarted comeback. The police. Alfie's backpack. The *Feelings Journal*.

Fuck.

I prop myself up against a pillow and survey my room. Discarded lipsticks, eyeshadow compacts, and makeup brushes are scattered over every available surface. The air is thick and stale, and the floor is littered with high heels and shapewear. It looks like a crime scene sponsored by Estée Lauder.

This won't do. Appearances matter now. Especially if the police come back. I take a deep breath, roll up my sleeves, and get to work stuffing laundry into the hamper, shaking out the duvet, opening the windows.

I sweep my collection of empty Red Bull cans into a plastic laundry basket and carry it outside to the recycling bin. Across the street at Mr. Foster's, a curtain twitches. Better hurry or he'll trap me with one of his tedious monologues about the evils of cobalt mining or fossil fuel production. I dump the cans as quickly as I can, but I'm too slow. Mr.

Foster is bounding up to me, the fabric of his gray anorak swooshing ominously.

“Florence,” he says, his face riddled with concern. “Couldn’t help but notice the police car last night. Everything all right?”

The intensity of his stare is unsettling. I bristle. What fucking business is it of his?

“Yes. Just a misunderstanding.”

“Is Dylan home?” Mr. Foster says. He’s holding a yellow can with pictures of insects on it. “I’ve got something for him. I was expecting him to drop by yesterday after school.”

“Dylan’s at his dad’s house.”

Mr. Foster’s bushy white eyebrows shoot up. “Ahh, right. Must be some fellow. Dylan speaks highly of him.”

“So listen.” I clear my throat. “I’m sure you’ve heard the news. One of Dylan’s classmates went missing yesterday. On a field trip.”

Mr. Foster shifts his weight. If he’s surprised, he doesn’t look it.

“That right? Terrible, that.”

“Yes, well, anyway, the police—it was a procedural thing. They were in the same class.”

“Right,” says Mr. Foster. “So you said.”

It feels like he’s waiting for something. An invitation, maybe. I don’t have time for this. I have work to do.

Finally Mr. Foster thrusts the container at me. “Right. I’ll leave these with you, then.”

Zoo Med, the label declares. *Can O’ Crickets*. Gross. I stare at him stupidly, not following.

“Greta,” he says slowly. “Dylan’s turtle. You’ll need to feed her. She’s about to hibernate.” Mr. Foster stares at me, an unreadable expression on his gray face. “She’ll need a few each day—but not too many or she’ll get sluggish.”

“Yup. Got it.” I reach out my hand reluctantly. The tin is surprisingly heavy.

Back inside, I pull out my laptop and order the largest bouquet of yellow roses I can find to Elliott's office in Santa Monica. In the messages section, I type out an apology. SO SORRY I MISSED OUR DINNER; FAMILY EMERGENCY. LET'S GET ON ZOOM & TALK. XXX FLORENCE. The price makes me flinch—I could have a full face of Botox for that money—but they'll be waiting on his desk on Monday morning. It might not undo everything, but it's a start. A chance.

I chuck the crickets tin into Dylan's room and shut the door. I'll feed Greta later. Or Dylan can do it when he comes back from his dad's.

Right now, I've got something more important to deal with: getting rid of Alfie's backpack.

Fifteen minutes later I am in the back of a taxi, snaking my way south through a clog of Saturday-morning traffic. Alfie's backpack is resting safely at my feet, double-bagged in a green plastic M&S shopper.

The entrance to the Wetland Centre is in Barnes, a sleepy, affluent pocket of South London full of the sort of twats who want to pretend they live in a village while still enjoying £8 pour-over coffee and same-day dry cleaning. I've been to the Wetland Centre once before, on a Raya date with a guy who claimed to be "really into birding" but was actually just really into having sex outside. The place itself was fine, if a bit dull—dozens and dozens of acres of wild marshland and waist-high grass tucked into a bend on the River Thames, punctuated by the occasional binocular-clutching retiree.

The taxi driver is listening to talk radio. The topic is Alfie, and a caller is speculating that the Shepherd's Bush Strangler may be involved somehow, though, as the host points out, the Strangler has never targeted a child before.

As we reach Church Road, traffic slows to a crawl. A few minutes later, the reason for the congestion becomes clear: Half a block from the entrance, on what looks like a rugby pitch, are six gigantic white media tents.

Frazzled-looking reporters and camera crews are scrambling back and forth between the tents and the satellite news trucks that line the street.

The taxi driver gives a long, low whistle. “Quite the circus,” he says, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

My hands go cold, like they’ve been plunged into a bucket of ice. When I’d imagined myself returning Alfie’s backpack to the Wetland Centre, I figured I’d just chuck it over the fence. My plan seems woefully naive now. Stupid, even.

“Whereabouts you headed, exactly?” the driver says.

“This is fine,” I say. “I’ll just get out here.”

“Seriously? Here?”

I open the door before I can change my mind, clutching the carrier bag beneath my arm. It’s drizzling now, a fine English mist. I pull my jacket tighter as I approach the first police cordon.

Confidence, I remind myself. *Mariah Carey. Chin up, shoulders down, neck long.*

Two police officers are standing in front of a row of crowd-control barriers, speaking to a TV reporter with blond hair and a bright red raincoat. As I approach, one of the officers, a tall, sandy-haired guy in a high-vis jacket, raises his hand in a “Stop” motion.

“Morning,” the officer says. “Print or broadcast?”

“Huh?”

He repeats the question more slowly, as if I might be clinically stupid. “Broadcast news or print?”

“Oh. Neither, actually. I’m a mom. A St. Angeles mom. My son—”

A look of disgust crosses his face, and he cuts me off with a flick of his hand. “This is the press pen. Accredited media only.”

“I just wanted to see if there was—”

He puts his hand on his hip, and I catch the silvery glint of handcuffs.

“You heard me. No lookie-loos.”

My face flushes with embarrassment. I turn around and begin the soggy walk back to the street, the shopping bag banging against my shins.

There's a pub at the end of the road. The Red Lion. One drink won't hurt.

Inside it's warm and cozy, with a roaring fire and a chalkboard menu listing the lunch specials. It's still early, empty except for a middle-aged man in a West Ham jersey parked at the bar.

I sit down, and he lifts his chin in my direction. "Reporter, are ya? For the missing boy?"

"Do I look like a reporter?" I snap.

"Y'look like a good time," he leers.

"Fuck off."

I order a vodka soda and drink it slowly. Shame is still radiating off my body, the police officer's words ringing in my ears. *No lookie-loos*. Why am I such a fuckup? If I were a different, better kind of person, a *Serious* Person, with a college degree and a pension plan and a valid driver's license, I would have made it past that police line and Alfie's backpack would not be resting underneath my barstool.

"Tell you what I hear," the man says, slurring slightly. "Inside job, that one. Family's loaded."

I can smell the lager on his breath, even from across the room. I slide my foot along the floor until I feel the reassuring weight of the shopping bag. Still there. Good.

"That right?" I say.

The man nods. "Some kinda insurance thing. Reckon the kid got straight on a private jet to the Virgin Islands. Like Epstein, eh?"

My eyes are glazing over. I stare at the bar, admiring the neat rows of liquor bottles with pour spouts, the buckets of sliced lemon and crushed ice. Maybe I could just leave Alfie's backpack in the bathroom of the pub? That might raise other questions, though, once it's found. The pub is probably covered in cameras. No, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right. This stupid backpack is going back to the Wetland Centre, where it belongs.

"That's what I hear, anyway," the man continues, letting out a loud belch. "But what do I know? You're the reporter."

“I’m not a—”

My eyes land on a stack of waiter’s notepads piled next to the register.
A reporter. That’s it.

I lean over the counter and swipe a notepad and two pencils. With the palm of my hand, I wipe off my lipstick, pull my hair into a low bun, and tuck one of the pencils behind my ear.

I turn to the drunk man. “You got me. And I just remembered my deadline.”

Outside, the wet grass squishes loudly beneath my feet. The two officers from earlier are gone, replaced by a single, bored-looking woman in a Met police bowler hat. As I approach the barrier, I pull out my phone and begin doing my best impression of Jenny, using all the reporter words I know.

“So I told them, it’s imperative that we make this deadline—”

The officer holds up her hand. “Press pass?”

“Shit,” I say, patting down my pockets, feigning frustration. “I must have left it...”

I cover the mouthpiece with my hand and give the officer a helpless smile. “I was here earlier. You remember, right? Sorry, my editor is just...” I roll my eyes, in a *can-you-believe-this-guy* kind of way.

The officer sighs, like she can’t believe how dumb reporters are, and motions me through the metal barrier.

The only thing separating me from the entrance to the Wetland Centre now is fifty feet of open field. Not a single tree or building to hide between. I’m going to have to hoof it.

Mariah Carey, I remind myself. Head high, shoulders down.

I duck under the barrier. I can do this. Forty feet to the edge of the trees. I just need to make it far enough inside to chuck Alfie’s backpack somewhere. Then this whole stupid thing will go away. And I can call Elliott and try to salvage my comeback, before it’s too late.

Twenty feet. Ten. I can’t believe no one has spotted me. I race across the field, the shopping bag thwacking against my shins. If I can just make it

a few more feet—

A hand clamps down on my shoulder, harder than strictly necessary.
The sandy-haired officer from before.

“I thought I told you not to come back here.”

Barnes Police Station

SATURDAY, 12:18 P.M.

THE POLICE STATION LOOKS LIKE an American DMV, with peeling linoleum and plastic chairs screwed to the floor so no one can pick them up and throw them. Behind the duty desk, a bored-looking rookie officer with a too-tight ponytail is scrolling listlessly on her desktop computer and pointedly ignoring me, the only other person in the room.

I clear my throat nervously, hoping against hope that Officer Baby hasn't peeked inside the plastic bag I was holding when they put me in the back of the squad car. The bag with Alfie's backpack in it. Which they still haven't returned to me.

"So, um, can I get my one phone call?" I venture.

She flicks her gaze toward me and gives a cynical snort. "One phone call? That's not how it works. Anyway, like I told you—you're not being detained. Use your own phone."

I glance down at the cell phone in my hand. Do I call Brooke? I can already hear the condescending lecture she'll give me. Adam's probably at work, and he won't love the whole "breaking the law" situation. I scroll through my contacts list twice before settling on Jenny. She doesn't know me well enough to say no. Plus she's an actual lawyer.

My call goes straight to voicemail. *"You've reached the mailbox of Jenny Choi, managing partner at Colson and Casey. At the tone, please leave your message."*

"So, uh, I've been arrested. Trespassing. Could you possibly come down to the Barnes police station? Oh—it's Florence. Grimes. Dylan's mom. From school. Thanks!"

My hands are sweating as I hang up the phone and turn to face the duty officer again. Her eyes remain fixed on the computer screen. I crane my neck to see what she's looking at. The Zara website. Holiday dresses.

I lean against the desk.

"My lawyer's on her way," I say, trying to sound professional. "So if you could just return my belongings?"

"Uh-huh," the cop says without lifting her gaze from the screen. "Like I said, you're not being charged." Her cursor hovers over a gold sequin jumpsuit. "Chief thinks it'd be bad PR to charge one of the school mums. You're free to go."

My shoulders relax. "Really? That's great."

She doesn't look up. "Yeah, you can just wait outside for your ride or whatever."

I scan the space behind her desk in search of the green shopping bag, hoping it hasn't been logged into evidence. "So, um, can I just grab my—"

The officer finally tears her eyes from the screen and looks up at me. "What's that now?"

And then I see it. Shoved under her feet.

"I, uh, just need my shopping bag," I say, pointing to the M&S bag.

She looks down, noticing it for the first time. "Oh. Hmm. Think I was supposed to send that for processing."

My heart skips a beat.

"Hang on a sec." She picks up the landline phone, and I nearly throw myself over the desk.

"Great jumpsuit, by the way," I chirp, pointing to the screen. "You gotta be careful with Zara, though. The stuff in your cart, it's not reserved. Lost

an amazing minidress that way, just last week. Someone swooped in and bought the last one out from under me.”

Beneath her thick glasses, her eyes go wide as golf balls. “That right?”

I nod vigorously. “Go ahead and lock it in. Seriously. I don’t mind waiting.”

She shoots me a nervous smile, then quickly clicks back to the Zara homepage to complete her purchase.

“There,” she says with a happy sigh as the confirmation screen appears. “Thanks.”

She reaches for the desktop phone again, then seems to change her mind. She leans down, disappearing for a moment, then hoists the green plastic bag onto the counter.

“This the one?”

I nod, my heart pounding so loudly I’m certain she can hear it.

The officer slides an ancient brown clipboard toward me. A cheap pen is tied to the top with a piece of string.

“Go ahead and sign here confirming we’ve returned your belongings.”

I try not to grin as I scribble my name as fast as I can.

“Right then,” she says, her eyes already darting back to her computer screen. “Try not to jump any more police cordons.”

Thirty minutes later, Jenny pulls up in front of the Barnes police station in a shiny new Tesla that looks like it has just been unwrapped from cellophane.

I wrench open the passenger’s-side door, and Jenny looks up at me in confusion. “Wait—I thought you were being detained? Did they just let you go?”

“Misunderstanding.” I wave my hands dismissively. “Let’s get out of here.”

Jenny frowns. Considering she has twins, her car is conspicuously absent of any trace of children. Not a crumb or toy or greasy fingerprint in sight. I sink into the spongy mushroom-leather seat and feel myself begin to relax.

“So what happened?” she says.

I stare out the window at the police station parking lot. The morning’s drizzly gray backdrop has been replaced by bright winter sun. I wish I had my sunglasses.

“Nothing, really. Just a misunderstanding.”

Jenny’s eyes bug out of her head a little bit. “Look, I’m not a taxi service. I thought you needed *legal* help. Don’t you have any friends you can call for rides?”

I look down at my nails and pretend to study Linh’s monogram manicure. “I mean—not really.”

Jenny lets out a surprised guffaw. “Yikes. OK, well, since we’re being honest here, me either. Kind of freeing to just admit it.”

She starts the car, and we glide out of the parking lot and toward Mortlake High Street.

“So, Florence, what do you do for work?”

I freeze. It’s a test. She’s probably googled me, pulled up my old Girls’ Night videos and laughed at my pink fishnet tights and our goofy dance moves.

“I was, uh, in a girl band for a while, actually. Doing my own thing now.”

Jenny’s eyes widen. “That’s so cool!”

Her enthusiasm seems...genuine? Maybe she hasn’t googled me.

“Yeah, um, it was fun. I left before they got famous. What about you?”

Jenny begins rattling off her biography: Korean immigrant parents, Bay Area childhood, undergrad at Stanford, law at Harvard, white-shoe firm, now some kind of specialist for corporate insurance risk blah blah blah. Her tone is breezy, like she’s recounting the plot of a familiar film.

“Wow,” I say, when she finishes. “That sounds so...serious.”

She shrugs. “Yeah. Insurance law isn’t necessarily what I dreamed of doing with my life. But it turns out I’m good at it.”

Through the window, the dull, gray Thames appears on my right. I squint, trying to peer beneath its murky surface. I think of Alfie, and then of Alfie’s bloated body, bobbing somewhere beneath the glassy pane.

Jenny glances at the river and clucks her tongue, as if reading my thoughts. “I hear police haven’t even run dogs over the area. Because it’s some kind of nature preserve? Can you *imagine*?”

I swallow hard. “Yeah. Terrible.”

Jenny rummages in the glove box and pulls out a vape pen.

“What?” she demands.

“Nothing. I just took you for more of the green juice type.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been a hell of a week—”

“No judgment here.”

She takes a deep inhale. “So what’s Dylan told you?”

My jaw clenches. “Not much. He was very upset, obviously,” I add quickly.

“Obviously,” she says, rolling down the window to blow out the smoke or vapor or whatever it is vapes emit.

“What about, um...”

“Max and Charlie? Yeah, nothing. They’ve only been at that school, what, three weeks? I’m not even sure they even knew the kid.” Jenny pauses. “His poor mother. Can you imagine?”

An image of Cleo crumpled outside the school gates flashes in front of my eyes, and I try to push it away. We sit in silence for a moment, mulling the unspeakable.

Jenny clears her throat. “What’s he like? Alfie, I mean?”

I rack my brain for an appropriate response. It’s barely been a day, but Alfie already seems to have acquired a sort of blurry halo.

“Well, he was...a ginger,” I say, trying to be diplomatic.

Jenny frowns slightly and takes another puff from her vape pen. “Oh, c’mon. You know what I mean. Is he, like, troubled?”

I hesitate for a moment. “Well, to be honest with you...he was kind of a dick.”

A hoot of laughter escapes her lips, but she quickly composes herself. “Jeez, OK. Tell me how you really feel.”

“I mean, the kid hit a turtle with a cricket bat. Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t have wished any of this on him. But he’s not exactly the Boy

Scout everyone is making him out to be.” I glance down at my nails. “Anyway, I’m sure the police will find him soon.”

“Yeeeah,” Jenny says, drawing out the word, “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, please. Don’t you watch the news? The Met police? A bunch of them are *actual* rapists! They aren’t gonna solve this.”

Before I can conjure an appropriate reply, Jenny begins rummaging around in the glove box again. She pulls out a pack of gum, offering me a stick before taking one for herself.

“Wait—Big Red? This used to be my favorite. You know you can’t even buy this over here?”

Jenny gives me a playful wink. “Stick with me, lady. Brought a whole case.”

She switches on the radio to some plinky jazz station, and we settle into a comfortable silence. The seat heating is on full blast, and my body feels like a marshmallow being held over an open flame, toasted and gooey.

At Chiswick Bridge, we cross the Thames towpath. I look down at the tidy riverfront homes and pubs with names like the Ship and the Barge. It all looks so peaceful and quaint. The thought of having to get out of Jenny’s warm car and trudge back to my cold, empty flat is viscerally painful.

“You know, I actually went down there this morning. To the Wetland Centre.”

Her eyes widen. “You *what*? Is that how you got arrested?”

I nod. “It was stupid, really.” My eyes dart involuntarily to the carrier bag with Alfie’s backpack stuffed inside. “I guess I just...wanted to see for myself?”

Jenny’s face lights up. “Oh my gosh, you shoulda told me! I would have come with you.” Her earnestness knits a deep divot between her eyebrows. *I know someone who could fix that for you*, I think, but decide not to mention it. We’re not friends yet.

Her face turns wistful. “I always wanted to be a detective. I actually interned with a private investigator back in San Francisco. Summer before

law school.”

I choke back my surprise. “You what?”

“Yeah, it was great. Stakeouts, binoculars, the whole nine yards. Cheating husbands, mostly.” She smiles and taps her fingers on the steering wheel. “Anyway—long time ago.”

“Wait, so why didn’t you? Become a detective, I mean.”

She waves her hand, batting the idea away. “Money, mostly. Not exactly a lucrative career, being a PI.”

There is a fluttering sensation in my chest—a feeling I will later come to recognize as *opportunity*—a magical portal conjured at exactly the moment I need it most. Because Jenny, with her smooth hair, her unwrinkled clothes, and her immaculate car is exactly the kind of Serious Person who could talk her way past a police line. The kind of person who could help me figure out what really happened to Alfie. If I could just get her to help me, I could protect my son and maybe, just maybe, find a way to salvage the situation with Elliott.

“Listen,” I say, struggling to contain my excitement, “maybe you and I should look into this whole Alfie thing. You know, together?”

Jenny frowns. “What, like, play detective?”

My heart begins to pound. I think of Dylan’s smirk, Officer Glover’s condescending stare, Will’s exasperated *what-have-you-done-now-Florence* face. I bite my lip, desperate for her not to see how desperate I am.

“You know, my upstairs neighbor, Adam, he’s actually a cop. I bet he could help us get some info—”

“I have a job,” Jenny interjects. “And twins.” She shakes her head. “It’s a nice idea, but I can’t take on a freelance missing persons investigation.”

I feel myself deflating. *Of course she doesn’t want to play detective with you, Florence. You idiot.*

Outside the window, Shepherd’s Bush Green is coming into view. The twinkly lights are gone, replaced by police sirens and honking and the smell of kebab mingled with bus exhaust.

“Never mind,” I say quickly, as if the whole thing was a joke. “Silly idea.”

Jenny visibly relaxes. “Yeah. In another life, maybe.”

She glances at the silvery Patek Philippe watch on her wrist and jerks the steering wheel to the left. “Besides, we’re already late for the parents’ meeting.”

Marlow, Buckinghamshire

SATURDAY, 1:58 P.M.

"IN TWO ME-TERS, TURN RIGHT," the satnav voice chirps.

Jenny gasps and turns the steering wheel sharply, forcing the car off the main road and my forehead into brief, painful contact with the windshield. A canopy of heavy tree branches appears overhead, creating an artificial sense of dusk. I lift my gaze just in time to see a massive house appear on the horizon. It looks like an illustration from a fairy tale, or the *Sunday Times* Homes supplement: a sprawling redbrick mansion with twin turrets, set alone against rolling green hills. Ms. Ivy's house.

Jenny lets out a low whistle. "Wow. Guess teachers are better paid over here?"

I gulp. My palms are sweating again. My whole body is, if we're being honest. I hadn't planned on attending the parents' meeting. And now I'm about to walk in the door carrying the missing boy's backpack in a plastic shopping bag. Probably best to leave it in the car.

We park on a circular driveway lined with so many luxury SUVs it looks like a dealership. A parking attendant in a blue windbreaker appears and gestures for Jenny's keys, handing her a green slip of paper in return. The gravel crunches menacingly beneath our feet as we make our way to

the front door. I say a silent prayer that Hope doesn't bring up the whole "Dylan and Alfie have a history" stuff in front of the other moms.

On the porch, I turn to Jenny, trying not to let the anxiety creep into my voice. "By the way, did the, uh, police contact you?"

Jenny frowns. "No. Why would they?"

"You know, to speak to Max and Charlie, see if they saw anything?"

She shakes her head, just as the imposing front door groans open. A stout woman with a face like a battle-ax peers down at us.

"Names?"

She pauses to cross-reference our answers with her list before ushering us into a dim foyer. The house smells of freshly cut chrysanthemums and old wood. A smattering of oddly sized Persian carpets litters the floor; the walls are lined with oil paintings of fruit and dead-eyed children. Jenny catches my eye and mouths the word *Hideous*.

I grin, despite my nerves. It's true. Over here, the older the money, the fustier the wallpaper, the more moth-eaten the cushions, and the more pervasive the damp. A truly posh English person has no need for *House & Garden*; the scruffiness is its own quiet boast.

A plump man in a threadbare suit appears and gestures for us to follow him. Jenny arches an eyebrow as we follow him down a long corridor.

"Is that a *butler*?" she whispers.

At the end of the hall, the man deposits us with an awkward little bend. "The drawing room," he murmurs before scurrying away.

The room is painted the color of dried blood, and the air is at least ten degrees colder than the rest of the house. Rows of folding chairs have been assembled for the parents. At the front is a plexiglass podium, behind which Nicola Ivy is pacing nervously. Next to her is a police officer. Ms. Schulz is conspicuously absent.

"One part school board meeting, one part public execution," Jenny whispers as we shuffle past the parents to the last row of folding chairs, like two tardy students arriving after the bell.

The other parents have arranged themselves roughly according to social rank. With the Risbys absent, Allegra and Rupert have moved into pole

position and are now occupying the front-row seats closest to Ms. Ivy's podium. Next to them are Farzanah and her husband, Kyle, a boisterous Canadian tech bro. Hope and Karl Theodor are at the end of the row. Hope is wearing large Jackie O. sunglasses, a black cocktail dress, and knee-high boots, like she's attending a funeral for one of the Real Housewives. I'd bet money she arrived early just to snag a seat in the front. Still, I give her an overly friendly smile as we pass. I may despise her, but I'm not stupid enough to provoke her.

Ms. Ivy clears her throat. "Shall we get started, then?"

The aura of frenzy she exuded yesterday is gone, replaced by a coached, calm professionalism. Her normally bushy hair has been tamed in a sleek blowout, and she's wearing a sober navy pantsuit that looks fresh off the rack.

I poke Jenny. "Is it just me, or did she have a glow-up?"

Jenny nods. "School probably hired an image consultant. Imagine she'll be doing a lot of press the next few days."

At the front of the room, Ms. Ivy lifts her chin toward a card table piled with untouched egg sandwiches and clipboards. A thin man with an unfortunate goatee and a woman with a satin scrunchie are hovering nearby. Their clothes contain too much polyester to be St. Angeles parents.

"That's crisis PR," Jenny whispers, "and probably legal."

As if on cue, Ms. Ivy says, "Elise and Alan work for Banyon, a firm engaged by the school to help us respond to this incident."

Elise and Alan offer somber little waves and then begin to pass out clipboards and pens.

"Nondisclosure agreements," Jenny whispers without even looking at the words on the pages.

My eyes widen. Paperwork terrifies me. "Should we sign?"

"Might as well," Jenny says, uncapping a pen with a shrug. "Hardly enforceable."

"I appreciate this is a difficult day," Ms. Ivy begins, speaking in a canned monotone that suggests she has memorized this part of her speech. "I know you have a lot of questions. To that end, I've asked Police

Constable Thompson to be here with us. He's promised to share as much information as possible."

The police officer nods and strides to the podium. He looks like the store-brand version of Idris Elba, if Idris stopped going to the gym and started buying reading glasses from Poundland.

"Thanks, Nicola," PC Thompson says. He scans the audience, appraising the parents. "I've been a Met community liaison officer for fifteen years, and I'll tell you, days like these, they never get easier."

A murmur of acknowledgment ripples through the parents.

"I know there's a lot of concern right now. Frustration, even. That's understandable. But I'm going to make you a promise: You, the St. Angeles community, are my number one priority. My colleague PC Davis here is going to give you my personal number."

In the back of the room, a second officer, a younger woman I hadn't noticed before, stands up and begins handing out slips of paper. The parents visibly relax. Special treatment always plays well with this crowd.

"Now, in return, I do need to ask you all for one thing," PC Thompson says, pausing for effect. "No media. You have a question, a tip, a worry in the middle of the night? You call me, PC Thompson. Not the *Daily Post*, OK? Do we have a deal?"

A chorus of agreement flits through the parents.

"Oh, he's good," Jenny whispers to me. "Like watching one of those *Hurt Locker* guys defuse a bomb."

"Right," Thompson says. "Now that we got that out of the way, let me walk you through what we're looking at. Afterward I'll take your questions."

Thompson pauses, takes a sip of water, and then launches into the facts of the case.

"As you are no doubt aware, a student disappeared on Friday during a school trip to the London Wetland Centre. Now, unfortunately, the fact of his disappearance was not ascertained until the coach had returned to school, at approximately fourteen hundred hours."

I squirm in my seat, hoping no one brings up the roll call on the bus or the fact that Dylan and Alfie were partners. I cast a sideways glance at Hope, willing her to keep her big mouth shut.

Thompson continues. "Surveillance footage from the car park shows the coach arrived at approximately eleven a.m. The period under investigation is between eleven forty-five a.m., when the boys were dispersed to begin the bird-watching assignment, and approximately two forty p.m., when the entrance to the Wetland Centre was sealed off by police."

Thompson lifts his gaze to the back of the room. "PC Davis, the map, please?"

The younger cop begins lugging an easel with aerial photographs of the Wetland Centre to the front, dragging it awkwardly across the carpeted floor. Thompson pulls a laser pointer from his pocket, highlighting a large area of the map.

"The search radius is nearly a hundred acres. Most of it is water. You've got four main reservoirs, plus the River Thames, which makes up the eastern boundary of the property. We already have several teams of divers on-site. If the missing individual is in the water, we will find him."

There's a subdued silence as the implication of this sentence washes over the parents.

Thompson tucks the laser pointer back in his pocket. "Now you'll appreciate that I can't reveal details of an ongoing investigation. But part of my job is to try to reassure you, the community. So if you have questions, I'll do my best to answer them now."

Twenty hands shoot in the air, including Jenny's. Thompson looks taken aback, like he wasn't fully expecting this level of parental participation.

"Right," he says. "Great to see the enthusiasm. Let's see here..."

Jenny nudges me. "Put your hand up."

"Me?" I'd rather be boiled alive than ask a question and give the other mothers more ammunition against me. "Nah, you go ahead. I'm no good at public speaking."

Jenny rolls her eyes. “You can give your turn to me. Just put your hand up—”

Thompson scans the crowd. “Right, OK. Let’s start in front. Uh, yes, sir in the tweed jacket.”

Allegra’s husband, Rupert, stands up, shifting awkwardly in his brown loafers. He has the posture of an academic and retains a slightly hunched aura even when standing.

“Rupert Armstrong-Johnson. I’ve got, uh, Wolfie. Anyway, I’m just wondering, about the CCTV? Whether the cameras have given off any, erm, interesting leads, as it were?”

Thompson nods. “Thanks for your question. Unfortunately, very little CCTV coverage inside the park. Next to nothing, really, aside from the egret cam. But we are pulling footage from the parking lot, as well as the on-site cafeteria.”

Jenny pokes me in the ribs with her finger. “CCTV? What kind of question is that?” she hisses. “What I wanna know is how the school *lost* a kid in the first place!”

Farzanah’s husband, Kyle, jumps in next without raising his hand. Kyle was a mid-level software salesman who became a multimillionaire overnight when the online sports betting company where he worked IPO’d. Now he spends his free time giving unpaid TEDx talks and trying to get booked on Bloomberg TV. This afternoon he’s wearing tennis whites, an outfit so wildly inappropriate it feels like a flex.

“How about drones?” Kyle barks.

“Sorry, I don’t follow,” Thompson says.

Kyle is only too happy to explain. “One of my start-ups—I’m what we call an angel investor—they’re doing these infrared drones. Blows the Chinese junk out of the water. Now, they’re not officially on the market yet, due to some regulatory issues, but I might be able to pull some strings.”

Thompson frowns. “Uh, interesting. Thank you, sir. Perhaps we can discuss afterward.”

Kyle gives him a confident, chin-up nod. “Whatever we can do to help, my man.”

Beside me, Jenny is seething. “Is this for real? The school *lost* a child! Why are they all being so...helpful?”

I clear my throat. “Eleven-plus, probably?”

“What?”

I cover my mouth with my hand and lower my voice “I mean, the exam is important, but Ms. Ivy’s recommendation still counts for a lot. Nobody wants to risk their kid’s first-choice school.”

Jenny rolls her eyes in disgust and flings her hand higher in the air, but she’s too late. Hope’s husband, Karl Theodor, is creaking to his feet. Karl Theodor is one of the Old Dads, a group of melted-looking men on their second or third wives who rarely show up at school events and when they do look vaguely confused and start handing out butterscotch candies. You can practically hear his arthritis as he hoists himself into a standing position.

“What about that caretaker?” Karl Theodor blurts out. “Romanian fellow. Mr. Papa-sozy, is it? Fellow’s always given me a, well—you know it’s a different culture over there. They have different values.”

Hope turns the color of my favorite Mac lipstick and whacks her husband on the arm with her Fendi baguette.

“Sit down,” she hisses, “right now!”

Karl Theodor gives a helpless shrug. “What? Am I not supposed to say it?”

At the front of the room, Thompson is already slickly moving things along. “Thank you, sir,” he says, clapping his hands together. “I can assure you the entire staff will be interviewed in due course. How about we hear from some of the mums now?”

From the front row, Farzanah lifts two fingers into the air, like she’s motioning the waiter for her check. She stands up and introduces herself as “Dr. Khan.” Hope audibly groans.

“Just one question,” Farzanah says. Her skin is so dewy it’s like she’s carrying around her own ring light. “Is it true you found his wellies?”

Thompson’s posture changes. If he thought the mothers were going to be easier to handle, he sorely miscalculated.

“Sorry, where did you hear that?” he says, shifting his weight.

Farzanah tucks a strand of her impossibly glossy hair behind one ear, revealing a diamond solitaire the size of a gumball.

“An old school friend of mine is deputy editor at the *Times*. Is it true?”

Thompson looks rattled. “Well, I uh...” He pauses, pushing his glasses up his nose. “I can confirm we’ve recovered several items we believe *may* have belonged to the boy. However, I can’t say anything definitive at this time.”

A grim silence settles over the parents. Farzanah sits down, somehow managing to look elegant while perched on a folding chair, and immediately begins hammering out a message on her phone.

Jenny resumes flinging her hand in the air, just as Hope jumps to her feet in the front row, clearly eager to atone for Karl Theodor’s comments.

“G’day,” she says, in the flat Australian accent she never fully lost. “Hope Grüber, from the PTA. I’ve got three boys at St. Angeles, so I guess you could say this school feels like family.” She casts a sideways glance at Ms. Ivy. “And I’m just wondering, at such a difficult time, what can we do to *help*?”

A look of relief spreads across PC Thompson’s face. *This* is more like it.

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Grüber. I appreciate that. Due to the nature of the search area, I’m afraid we can’t allow volunteers on the grounds. However, we are holding a sunset vigil at the school gates tonight. It would be great to show your support there.”

Hope beams, and Thompson glances down at his watch, mumbling something about running out of time. I breathe a sigh of relief. The meeting is nearly over, and Dylan’s name hasn’t come up once.

Jenny, however, isn’t finished. She thrust her hand toward the ceiling, waving it wildly. When Thompson doesn’t acknowledge her, she stands up anyway.

“Jenny Choi,” she says, her voice crackling with electricity. Everyone turns around, craning their necks to see where it’s coming from. “My

question is for Ms. Ivy. I'm just wondering how the coach made it back to school without Alfie? Logistically speaking. Did you not count the kids?"

A sour look crosses Ms. Ivy's face, and a murmur goes through the group, like a shark's fin slicing through the ocean's surface.

Thompson frowns. "I'll take this one, Nicola. What did you say your name was?"

"Jenny. Jenny Choi."

"Right. Ms. Choi. You do understand that the point of this exercise is not to cast blame, correct?"

Jenny clears her throat, undeterred. "I'll redirect. Is there an ongoing threat to our children's safety?"

Thompson casts a nervous glance at Ms. Ivy before responding.

"Well, Ms. Choi, we do believe this was an isolated, um, incident. That's about all I can say."

Jenny isn't satisfied. "Well, I'd like to know what steps you're taking ____"

Thompson clears his throat. "Right. I'm afraid that's all the time we have. I hope to see as many of you as possible at tonight's vigil. Be safe. Be alert. And remember, no media."

Jenny shakes her head, anger flashing in her eyes. She pokes me in the shoulder with her finger.

"Let's get out of here," she says, jerking her head to the door. "What a pointless charade."

Outside, Jenny snatches her key from the valet, banging the car door loudly.

She buckles her seat belt and turns to me, her face glowing with anger. "They're hiding something. I mean, it's obvious, right? That crisis PR firm? *A dedicated community liaison?* Something isn't right."

I bite my lip and stare out the window. It's raining now. The other parents are pouring into the driveway, racing to their cars to avoid the droplets.

“Why drag us all up here and then not tell us anything? And why does a school principal have a butler!” She pulls her vape from the glove box. “I’m telling you, if there’s one thing I absolutely cannot stand, it’s being lied to.”

This is it. My chance. I train my gaze on Jenny’s earnest face and make one last attempt to save my son.

“You know, maybe we should look into this whole Alfie thing,” I say, careful not to show how invested I am. “Because you’re right. There’s something fishy going on. And like you said, Met Police are hopeless. Doesn’t Alfie deserve a real search?”

When she doesn’t respond, I add, “It could have been one of our sons.”

Jenny stares out the windshield, deep in thought.

“You should know,” she says, without meeting my gaze, “that when I do something, I go all in. I commit. And I win.”

I nod vigorously. “Oh, totally, same. Love to win.”

She doesn’t seem convinced. “Are you sure you’re up for this? A missing persons investigation is a lot of work. We’d be starting at square one.”

My heart begins to pound. “Is that a yes? Are you saying yes?”

Jenny turns to face me, her dark eyes boring into me. “What about your job? Can you get the time off?”

“My job? Oh, I don’t actually—” I start to say, but stop myself. “Yeah. For sure. I get time off.”

“One week,” Jenny says finally. “And no one better get arrested.”

Marlow, Buckinghamshire

SATURDAY, 3:28 P.M.

WE GLIDE DOWN THE MOTORWAY back toward London. The rain has stopped now. Half a dull rainbow has lodged itself between two clouds. I desperately want it to be a sign, but I can't bear to get my hopes up after the crushing disappointment of the last twenty-four hours.

"We'll start with interviews," Jenny says with a glance in the rearview mirror. "Speak to the people closest to him. Friends. Teachers. Do you have a class list? I never got one."

I gulp. The shopping bag with Alfie's backpack is leaning against my leg, and it feels like it's alive with disapproval.

"I'll, uh, have to check."

Jenny nods. "Oh, and we need to talk to Ms. Schulz. Weird how she wasn't at the parents' meeting, right?"

"Yeah. I wonder why?"

Jenny changes lanes, keeps talking. "The rain boots thing is interesting, though, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not likely he took his own shoes off. Runaways don't tend to do that. And didn't you say the kid's family was rich?"

“Oh yeah. Risby’s Roasts? They’re like the Kennedy family of flash-frozen dinners.”

Jenny raises her eyebrows and nods, like I’ve just confirmed her worst fears. “Ever hear of a tiger kidnapping?”

“A what?”

She lowers her voice, even though we are alone in the car. “Basically, an insurance company’s worst nightmare. First, they kidnap someone you love, take them hostage. Then they force you to commit another crime, using your loved one as collateral.”

“I don’t get it. Why not just do the crime yourself in the first place?”

“Certain things are hard to do from the outside.”

“Like what?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. Stealing nuclear codes?”

“You think Alfie was tiger-kidnapped for nuclear codes?”

Jenny frowns. “No. Of course not. I’m just brainstorming. But after that little performance, I’m one hundred percent convinced that the school, that Ms. Ivy, is hiding something. I just don’t—”

Her phone begins to chirp. She glances down, taking her eyes off the road. We drift slightly to the left.

“Argh!” Jenny reads the message and bangs her hands against the steering wheel. “Belinda needs to leave. I’m going to have to swing by the house and get the boys.”

“Belinda? Is that your, um, partner?”

“Belinda’s the nanny,” Jenny says with a sigh. “Can’t exactly leave the boys home alone, can I?”

I force a laugh. “Of course not. I just thought you might...have someone.”

Jenny shakes her head. “Nope. Flying solo. Boys were a thirty-sixth birthday present to myself. Right after I made partner.”

“Oh, wow, so you’re a lot older than—” I stop myself. “I mean, so you’re, like, also a single mom.”

Jenny flips on her indicator and nods. “Yeah. It’s a lot, isn’t it? Some days I wonder if...” Her thought is interrupted by the sound of her phone

chirping again. She glances down, distracted.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to speed a little.”

The house, Jenny explains, is a corporate-subsidized rental. She’s just moved in, hence all the “mess.” We pull up outside a towering four-story Georgian terrace around the corner from St. Angeles. She mashes a button on the steering wheel, and the gate to the driveway swings open automatically.

“Damn, girl. What kind of lawyer *are* you?”

Jenny frowns. “I told, you, I’m in corporate—”

“Shut up and take a compliment!”

“Oh,” she says, flustered. “Right. Thanks.”

She takes a final hit from her vape, then tosses it into the glove box and shoots me a stern look. “The boys don’t know, OK? It’s my one vice. I never do it in front of them.”

I pantomime zipping my lips shut. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Along the street, dozens of news vans with satellite dishes are lined up around the perimeter to the school in anticipation of the vigil.

“Want to just wait in the car?” Jenny says. “I’ll be quick!”

Not a chance, I think. Jenny’s only been in this country a few weeks; she probably still has all kinds of good American prescriptions in her cabinets. I would kill for a Xanax right now.

“Actually, I’m desperate for the bathroom,” I say, uncrossing my legs. “Mind if I come in?”

Inside, the house is even more immaculate than I expected. There are visible vacuum lines on the pale carpet and not a moving box in sight.

“Excuse all the beige,” Jenny says with a grimace. “Corporate furnishing, you know. Guest bathroom is just down the hall. I won’t be a minute.”

I can’t believe my luck: I’m alone in Jenny’s house.

The first door I open turns out to be some sort of dressing room. I inhale deeply, taking in the smell of cedar and wool. All around me are

racks and racks of Celine garment bags, crisply tailored Joseph trousers, wool coats from the Row. Androgynous, corporate chic, and the very best of everything.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the three-way panel mirror: my orange puffer coat, glittery crop top, and bra-length, honey-blond hair extensions. When I put this outfit on this morning, it had felt fun, playful—but suddenly I feel like a slutty troll doll.

A gnawing sadness sweeps over me, for reasons I can't fully explain. It's less jealousy and more a reminder that there is a whole other playing field, and I am not on it.

I close the dressing room door and make a beeline toward the bathroom, but Jenny's medicine cabinet is disappointingly empty. Just an orange vial of Lexapro, a tube of medical-grade sunscreen, and a Waterpik. Bummer.

I wash my hands twice with her fancy Aesop soap and then sit on the edge of the bathtub, refreshing the *Daily Post* on my phone.

BOOTS FOUND IN WETLAND CENTRE BELIEVED TO BELONG TO MISSING BOY

25 HOURS GONE! the flashing red ticker at the bottom screams. In the pit of my stomach, the sinking feeling returns.

When I return to the living room, Jenny is tapping her foot impatiently. Beside her are two dark-haired boys in matching navy duffle coats.

"Max, Charlie, what do you say?" Jenny prompts.

"Nice to meet you," the boys chant in singsong voices.

I'll be honest: I really don't care for twins, especially the identical kind. They freak me out.

"Um, hey guys," I fumble. "Ready for the vigil?"

"*Ready for the vigil*"? *Did I seriously just say that?*

Jenny frowns and slings her handbag over her shoulder. "Shall we?"

We arrive at the school gates just as the winter sun is preparing to dip behind the horizon. The twins trudge behind us, pouting because Jenny refused to let them bring their iPads (“*No, you cannot play Minecraft during the vigil for your missing classmate!*”)

It feels strange to be attending without Dylan, and I wonder, for a brief moment, if going without him seems suspicious, like we’re hiding something. But it’s for the best. After all, I’m still carrying the green shopping bag with Alfie’s backpack around with me. Not exactly ideal. Plus, what if Hope tried to interrogate Dylan in front of everyone? What if he made an awkward, mistimed joke and the other mothers pounced? No, he’s safer at Will’s. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

In front of the school gates, dozens of people are milling about, clutching homemade posters with Alfie’s face on them. Ms. Dobbins is there, bundled up in a sleeping-bag-size maternity coat and perched in a camping chair.

“Quite a turnout,” Jenny says, whistling. Behind her, the twins are playing a game that involves whacking each other really hard on the back and then cackling with glee.

“Boys!” she says sharply.

The media has been roped off to one side—separated from the vigil-goers by a wispy metal cordon that looks like it could blow away at any moment. The news cameras are aimed expectantly at a wooden lectern, framed by large posters bearing Alfie’s most recent school photo. The ominous word *MISSING* is stamped in red above his head. Looking at it makes the hairs on my arms stand up.

I scan the crowd. It’s nearly dark now, and properly cold. I wish I’d worn warmer clothes.

Jenny nudges me. “Look,” she says, pointing toward the school gate.

I follow her gaze. Inside the gate, two female figures are huddled by the bike racks, engaged in what looks like a tense conversation. One of them is unmistakably Ms. Schulz. I’d know those sensible brown shoes

anywhere. The other has her back turned to us and is waving her hands furiously.

My eyes widen. “C’mon, let’s try to get closer.”

“Boys!” Jenny barks, gesturing for them to follow her.

The four of us push through the sea of bodies until we are huddled against the wall of the school, in the spot where the brickwork meets the iron gate.

The figure turns. It’s Nicola Ivy. Her face is livid, and she’s pointing a long, leather-gloved finger in Ms. Schulz’s face.

“I still can’t hear anything,” I whisper, straining to make out any snippet of their conversation. Before we can move closer, something brushes my shoulder. I spin around to see Hope Grüber, grinning.

“There you are!” she crows, as if she’s just won a protracted game of hide-and-seek. “But where’s Dylan?” she adds with faux concern.

I gulp, trying to look relaxed. “With his father. In Hertfordshire.”

“Well, in that case.” Hope turns to Jenny. “I would never dream of asking a fellow mum of multiples—I know you have your hands full this evening—but I was hoping that Florence here might be able to help us out over at the candle table. Do you mind?”

Jenny frowns. “Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

Hope barrels on, still speaking to Jenny, “You see, unfortunately, we’re down a mum tonight. Farzanah, or ‘Dr. Khan,’ I should say, was called into work. Some sort of dermatological emergency, if you can imagine.”

Hope crosses her arms, finally addressing me. “It’s just that the other mothers really need to be with their children tonight. You understand, right?”

Before I can say anything, she clamps a French-manicured hand on my shoulder and begins frog-marching me toward a wooden folding table, my plastic shopping bag banging against my calves. Allegra Armstrong-Johnson is perched behind the table, arranging plastic LED candles in tidy little rows. Her brown hair is pulled back in a neat bun, and her brow is furrowed in concentration as she counts softly under her breath.

“Oh, hello, Florence,” she says, her voice full of surprise. “I do believe I’ve just managed to put all the batteries in.” She leans back in her chair. “No Dylan tonight?”

“With his father.”

I stash the bag under the table and slump into the folding chair next to her. Fucking Hope. She ruins everything. “Shouldn’t you be up at your horse farm?”

Allegra frowns. “Horse farm? Oh, you mean the Norfolk stables.” She shakes her head. “I couldn’t! Not when Cleo...You know, she and I have been friends since we were eleven? One never imagines...” Her voice trails off as her eyes well up with tears. “This whole situation, it’s just dreadful.”

I grunt in agreement while scanning the crowd for Ms. Ivy, or Jenny and the twins, but everyone has converged into a mass of indistinguishable bodies, all bundled up in thick coats and hats and scarves.

Allegra clears her throat. “I was saying earlier to Ms. Ivy, perhaps some of the boys would like to come up to Norfolk for a bit of equine therapy? It’s miraculous what a few hours with a horse can do. Might Dylan be interested?”

I flinch. It’s a trap, surely. “I, uh—”

Before I can think of an excuse, Hope reappears. “It’s time! Are the candles ready?” she barks. “We’re about to start.”

A queue of parents forms at the table, and Allegra busies herself handing out the goods. I lean back in my chair, flicking the on/off switch on a plastic candle until the battery gives out.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the vigil begins. Hope approaches the microphone, and an expectant hush falls over the crowd.

“Good evening,” Hope says, her voice quaking slightly. “I’m here tonight not only as your PTA president but also as a close personal friend of Cleo Risby.”

“She wishes,” I mutter, and from the corner of my eye, I catch Allegra stifle a smile. Hmm. Maybe I’ve misread her. Perhaps she has a sense of humor after all.

Up front, Hope continues speaking. “Alfie Risby is a beloved member of the St. Angeles community. Everyone who knows him will tell you: There is something special about Alfie.” She pauses to allow us to applaud her profundity. “Blue is Alfie’s favorite color. Please join the St. Angeles family in wearing blue until Alfie is home safe.”

The sun has fully disappeared now. In the darkness, my mind wanders to Dylan. What is he doing right now with Will and Rose? Does he miss me? Is he scared?

Up front, Hope has finally finished. A choir from St. Angeles’s sister school, Lady Margaret’s, shuffles forward and begins an a cappella rendition of “Amazing Grace,” their small soprano voices ringing out into the cold night air.

“I once was lost but now am found.”

I’ll admit, the lyrics hit different with a kid missing. The effect is eerie and strangely moving. I bite my lip, determined not to cry in public.

The second verse is interrupted by the sound of squealing tires. A blacked-out luxury sedan roars up the road, flagrantly violating the street’s no-through-traffic rule. The car door swings open, and the crowd parts like the Red Sea. Four people bundle out: first a bodyguard, then a lawyerly looking middle-aged man, and, finally, Alfie’s parents.

As Rollo and Cleo make their way to the podium, the crowd begins to applaud. Softly at first, and then louder, a thunderous shower of support. On the other side of the press barrier, hundreds of camera lenses whir to life, zooming in for the money shot: the missing boy’s devastated parents, pleading their case to the public.

The lawyer guy taps the microphone. “The family would like to say a few words.”

Rollo Risby approaches the podium first. My stomach flip-flops. He looks nothing like the man I punched at the Christmas party: his face is drawn and lifeless, sucked dry by grief.

Cleo looks even worse. Her hair has gone from blond to white overnight, forming a fluffy, ethereal halo around her haunted face. Rollo

claps a hand on the lawyer's shoulder to thank him. Then he turns to the crowd, gripping the podium with both hands.

"What happened yesterday is every parent's worst nightmare. My only son, gone." He pauses and pulls a page of notes from his coat pocket. "If you have any information, no matter how small, please come forward. We've established a dedicated tip line, staffed around the clock by volunteers. Rest assured, your call can be kept completely anonymous." Rollo pauses, choking back emotion. "Alfie, mate. We won't stop until we find you."

The crowd breaks into thunderous applause. The news cameras click. Rollo wipes a tear from his eye.

Then Cleo shuffles toward the microphone. She's always been thin, but tonight she looks positively skeletal, her coat dripping off her bony shoulders, as if every ounce of spare flesh had up and vanished along with her son.

"Good evening," she squeaks. She looks out into the sea of faces with a searching expression, like her son might be hidden among the crowd.

"Alfie," she begins, and her voice breaks. The lawyer steps forward, placing a hand on her arm.

"It's OK," he says. "This is hard."

"No," Cleo gasps, wriggling free. "I need to say it."

She clears her throat. "If you have him," she says, her face distorted in anguish, "just bring him back. I'll do anything. Anything." She turns to the cameras. "Did you get that? *Anything*. If this is about money, name your price."

Rollo takes a quick step toward her, attempts to interject, but she shrugs him off as well.

"Just bring him back." The sound that follows is the worst sound I have ever heard in my life: a low, mournful howl, like a dying animal. Cleo crumbles into the podium, and it gives way beneath her, crashing to the ground. Rollo rushes to help her, and the cameras click away, inhaling her raw grief.

I'm no great Cleo Risby sympathizer, but it's too much. Too real. Hot tears sting my eyes. I shove my chair away from the table and jump to my feet, nearly forgetting the shopping bag.

"Where are you going?" Allegra trills. "We need to collect the candles when it's over."

I grab the shopping bag and push past her without answering, hurrying away from the school and the hum of the satellite news trucks. Cleo's desperate pleas rattle in my ears: *I'll do anything, anything*. I know exactly how she feels.

I turn right, then left, then right again. Dead leaves crunch underfoot as I turn the corner. The streets are unusually empty. Every house I pass has the shutters drawn. Linh's voice echoes in my ear. *Strangler's getting bolder!* In the distance, a car backfires, and I jump.

When I finally look up, I'm in some sort of garden square, illuminated by the dull glow of streetlamps. The sound of Cleo's sobbing is still echoing in my ears. And it's getting louder. *Am I hallucinating?* The crying is all around me now. What the hell?

I whirl around, trying to identify the source. My eyes settle on figure slumped on a park bench. Her face is hidden by a large white handkerchief, but the crown of gray frizz looks strangely familiar.

"Ms. Schulz?"

She startles at the sound of my voice.

I take a step closer to her. "It's me, Florence. Dylan's mum."

Ms. Schulz squints in my direction and frowns. "Ah, right. Yes. The turtle bo—" She stops herself. "Yes, I know who you are."

"Are you OK?" I say gently.

"I should be getting back," she says, but doesn't move. A siren wails in the distance, briefly drowning out the sound of a helicopter overhead.

I sit down next to her. The bench is hard and slightly damp. It's a weird place to have a sob.

"Why are you crying?"

Ms. Schulz looks up at me. "I've known the Risby family for fifty years. Half a century. Can you imagine?"

She peers over her owl-eyed glasses at me, as if noticing me for the first time. “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you back at the vigil, with the other mums?”

I pause. Might as well be honest. “Cleo’s speech. It was just...too much.”

Ms. Schulz’s eyes widen. I can see the wheels in her head turning. “Wait a minute. Aren’t you the one who tried it on with Rollo at HFG a few years ago?” Her eyes flit over me appraisingly. “You’re certainly his type, aren’t you? Yes, I imagine that makes this whole thing rather uncomfortable.”

My face flushes. “It wasn’t like that at all. Who told you that?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised how much an old biddy like me overhears.”

She glances over her shoulder. “I should be getting back now. Nicola will want me around.” She stands up, smoothing her coat with her hand. “Might need someone to carry her handbag.”

The sarcasm takes me by surprise. Who knew she had it in her?

“I saw her shouting at you.”

“Yes, well. It’s a difficult time. Particularly for an ambitious new head who’s just misplaced the school’s most high-profile pupil.”

“You know, Jenny and I—we’re actually trying to figure out what happened. To Alfie.”

Ms. Schulz wrinkles her nose. “What, like *detectives*? Oh, you Americans. Always thinking you can fix everything.”

“Maybe you could help us. You know more than anyone else about this school,” I add hastily. “I’m not even sure Ms. Ivy knows all the kids’ names.”

Ms. Schulz stuffs her handkerchief into the pocket of her coat and sighs. “Well, you’re not wrong about that.”

“How about I walk you back to the vigil? You could tell me what you know about the Risbys?”

Ms. Schulz tuts. “I think not, dear.”

My shoulder slump. Of course it’s not going to be that easy. I rack my brain for something that might entice her. What do elderly British people

like?

“How about tea?” It shoots out of my mouth before I can even think it through.

Ms. Schulz pauses. I can practically hear the wheels in her head turning. “Tea?”

“Yeah. Like afternoon tea. High tea. Whatever you call it. Anywhere you like.”

“Well now,” she says, pursing her lips like she can already taste the scones. “I do love a good cream tea. And the Ritz does a lovely spread.”

“Done,” I say quickly, before she can change her mind. “One p.m. tomorrow?”

“One p.m.? For afternoon tea?” She laughs, a sharp, scratchy sound like chalk sliding out of the box. “Oh dear, no. A proper afternoon tea is served at four p.m.”

“Fine. Four p.m. We’ll meet you there,” I say quickly, before she can change her mind.

“Do book ahead, dear,” she calls over her shoulder. “The Ritz always fills up at the weekend.”

I return home to a silent flat. Adam must have gone out; his beat-up white VW Polo isn’t parked on our street. He’s left a note on my door: *Pipes should be clear but don’t put anything down the sink besides water.*

I shove the plastic bag with Alfie’s backpack under the sink. It’s not ideal, but I can think of a better plan in the morning, once I’ve slept. I flop on the sofa and text Jenny the good news about Ms. Schulz. I’m expecting her to praise me, or at least be excited, but instead she seems suspicious.

MS. SCHULZ? THE DEPUTY HEAD? WHY WOULD SHE TALK TO US?

Her reaction annoys me. I feel instantly defensive. *Why is nothing I do ever good enough for anyone?*

I DUNNO. MAYBE SHE FEELS BAD ABOUT THE WHOLE THING? ANYWAY, IT’S A START.

I turn on the TV, eager for some distraction. The house feels empty without Dylan. I wonder if it's too late to call. Rose is strict about bedtime. But what the hell. I'm his mother.

Dylan answers after two rings.

"Hiya, Mum."

My heart softens at the sound of his voice. Whatever I have been imagining, whatever I have built up in my head, this is not it.

"Hi, hun. How's it going?"

"Yeah, OK."

Not the biggest talker, my son. I picture him in my mind's eye: twisting his sandy hair around his index finger and gazing into the middle distance.

"How's it going? You getting along with Dee and Andi?"

"Uh-huh."

"I went to a vigil for Alfie tonight."

He grunts.

"Honey, about Alfie, I—"

Dylan exhales loudly. "I already told you, I don't know what happened to him."

"I know, hun. I just thought—"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Dylan! Of course I believe you. And I will do anything to help you. Anything. I just need you to tell me—"

"Did you feed Greta?"

Fuck. My mind flashes to the can of crickets, still untouched in Dylan's room.

"Yes," I lie. "Of course. She's doing great. Misses you. Just like I do."

I can hear him breathing, weighing up whether to believe me.

"'K. Just don't forget to feed her. She's about to hibernate."

"So I hear."

"Huh?"

"Mr. Foster told me."

"You saw Mr. Foster?"

"Yeah, he gave me—"

Will's voice interrupts. "Bedtime, buddy."

This is it. It's now or never. I have been mentally rehearsing the words for the last twenty-four hours. "*What was Alfie's backpack doing under your bed?*" But now that I have the chance, I'm too afraid of the answer. Confronting Dylan will make everything so definitive. So final. If I don't ask him, there's still hope. There can still be a perfectly reasonable, innocent explanation.

So I don't ask. Instead I say, "I miss you, hun."

"Miss you too, Mum. Gotta get ready for bed now. And seriously, don't forget to feed Greta."

"I'm on it."

Dylan hangs up first.

Shepherd's Bush

SUNDAY, 9:00 A.M.

THE RINGING BEGINS AT 9 a.m. on the dot. I'm still face down in my silk pillow, the one that's supposed to prevent wrinkles and sleep dents. For a brief, blissful moment, I am conscious but not yet fully cognizant, blissfully unaware of the horror-scape of the last forty-eight hours. But as my phone continues to ring, it all comes crashing back. Dylan. Alfie. The Backpack.

I press the cold glass screen to my face. "I'm asleep," I lie. But Jenny is not deterred.

"Get dressed," she barks. There's some muffled shouting in the background. The sound of a rapidly devolving family breakfast. "No, Max! We don't hit."

I pull down my green satin eye mask and rub my eyes. There is so much leftover mascara caked on my eyelashes it's like massaging a furry tarantula. I slept horribly. Every time I'd started to drift off, I'd been jolted awake by a vision of Dylan in a little orange jumpsuit.

I clear my throat. "I'm actually not feeling that—"

"Get up. I'm already on the way over," Jenny says, shutting down my protests.

Jenny shows up twenty minutes later dressed for exercise, in a high ponytail and orange running shorts bright enough to deter both oncoming traffic and would-be catcallers. Stripped of her professional armor, she looks smaller, more vulnerable. I can clearly picture her twenty years ago, a law school gunner with her hand in the air, presiding over the group project with a neon highlighter.

“You go for a run or something?”

“Just a quickie. Fifteen-point-seven miles.”

“Eww.” I’ve never understood running; it seems so mind-numbingly dull. “You having a midlife crisis? Should I be worried?”

Jenny grins. “You should try it. Endorphins are good for you.”

“Maybe you should try getting laid.”

“*Getting laid?* What are you, a frat boy?” She takes a seat at my kitchen table and looks up at me expectantly.

“Oh, sorry, um, do you want some water?” It’s been years since I had guests besides Brooke and Adam; I’ve forgotten all the little niceties. I hurry toward the sink, hoping the tap is working again.

“So,” Jenny says, leaning forward in her chair like a kid with a secret, “I’ve got good news and better news. Which do you want first?”

“The good news, I guess.”

She stands up and thrusts a heavy canvas bag from Daunt Books in my direction. “The good news is, I got you something.”

I peer inside the bag. *Surveillance Techniques for Dummies*. *MI6 Spycraft for Civilians*. *A Field Agent’s Guide to Undercover Work*.

“Are you giving me homework?”

“What? No. It’s not like I’m expecting you to read every word. I’ve highlighted the most important bits. It’s color coded; so green is ‘vital’—”

A warm flush of embarrassment begins to spread over my face. I’m not a person who reads for fun—not when there’s YouTube and Hayu and 180 channels of aspirational home improvement content.

“Wow. Do you turn *everything* you do into a research report?”

Jenny folds her arms across her chest. “I happen to *like* doing things properly.”

“We don’t have time for this...bookworm nonsense.” I thrust the bag back at her. “This is the real world, OK? We don’t need a bunch of theories and case studies. Intuition, people skills—that’s what matters.”

Jenny frowns. “A little bit of knowledge never hurt anyone.” She tucks the bag into an empty chair and turns to me. “I’ll leave it here, in case you change your mind. Now, do you wanna know what the better news is?”

I sigh. “You got me a library card?”

“Nope. An address. For Mr. Papasizi.”

“Who?”

“The maintenance man. Remember? The one Hope’s racist old husband was trying to blame at the meeting yesterday. It’s probably nothing, but we have to start somewhere. He lives in Camden, so we can swing by before we meet Ms. Schulz at the Ritz this afternoon.”

“Swing by and do what?”

“Interview him, silly. Get his version of events.” She stops and squints at my satin pajamas. “Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

Camden on a Sunday morning looks like a hedonist war zone. The pavement is littered with broken glass bottles, piles of vomit, and dribbles of piss.

Mr. Papasizi lives on the second floor of a shabby gray housing estate, in a slice of the borough where aging punks and paint-spattered Eastern European workers have forged an uneasy peace with Zillennial Whole Foods shoppers.

Jenny has changed out of her running clothes and into a loose black dress and a crisp navy blazer, like she’s about to chair a surprise board meeting.

She rattles off Mariu Papasizi’s CV as we drive. He’s in his late forties. Emigrated from Romania. No arrest record. Worked in construction, hurt his back, drove a lorry, and then became a school caretaker. It’s great info,

but it creeps me out, the ease with which she tracked down every detail of this man's life.

"Wait, can lawyers just *do* that? Is there some kind of central database?"

Jenny shrugs. "There's a research department. But the assistants handle that stuff. I'm not sure how it works these days. Obviously if anyone asks, we found it on Google, OK?"

I nod. It all sounds like a faraway world. Assistants. Research departments. People whose whole job is to make your life easier.

Jenny lifts her eyes, pointing through the windshield at a squalid concrete building. "Anyway, here we are. Looks like the place where hope goes to die."

I shrug. It doesn't look that bad to me. The architecture reminds me of a cheap Florida motel, with external walkways connecting each unit and all the doors facing onto a large, central parking lot. In fact, it's not that different from the apartment complex where I grew up.

Jenny clears her throat. She seems positively giddy about the task ahead. "So remember the plan, yeah? We need to find out if he saw anything suspicious or out of the ordinary on Friday. But first we should try to build some kind of rapport with him. Then, once he feels comfortable, we ask about Alfie."

I unclick my seat belt. "Give me some credit. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's talking to old guys."

Jenny frowns. "Just keep it professional, OK?"

I throw open the passenger's-side door. "C'mon. Let's go find Alfie Risby."

Mr. Papasizi opens his front door wearing head-to-toe Tottenham kit. He has straight dark hair that hangs in his eyes and a face that has never been exfoliated.

"Yeah?" he says warily. The TV is on in the background, blaring something sports-related.

Jenny smiles. “Hi there. I’m Jenny. This is Florence.”

He gives us a weary look. “Yes?”

“We’d like to speak with you. About Alfie Risby.” Jenny shifts her weight. This clearly isn’t the welcome she expected.

His ruddy face blanches. “I already spoke to the police—”

“We’re not cops,” I interject, batting my eyelashes and giving him my best stage smile. “We’re mothers. St. Angeles mothers.”

He peers at us for a minute, like he’s trying to decide whether it’s more dangerous to let us in or to tell us no.

Finally he gives a small nod. “OK. Come in.”

The flat is small but tidy. We sit down in the living room, Mr. Papasizi in a brown recliner, me and Jenny on a small leather sofa. The TV is on. Men in shorts are throwing each other around a wrestling ring.

“It’s nearly over,” he says, almost apologetically. He speaks with a faint accent and the short, clipped diction of someone who is at pains not to make a mistake.

“Of course,” I chirp. “Leave it on. We’ll wait.”

“Fizzy drink?”

“We’re fine,” Jenny replies, just as I say, “Coke would be great. Or a Red Bull if you’ve got one.”

Jenny and I sit in awkward silence while the fight continues. As soon as the match breaks for commercials, Mr. Papasizi mutes the TV and disappears into the kitchen. He returns with a can of generic energy drink. I pop the top and take a sip. It’s not bad.

“So,” he says, looking at us expectantly.

I clear my throat. “We were just wondering if you saw anything... suspicious on Friday? Anything out of the ordinary?”

Mr. Papasizi bristles. “Always the foreigner, hmm?”

My face flushes. “What? Oh no, that’s not what I—no. We’re foreigners too, actually. Americans. Anyway, we just want to find out the truth. For Alfie’s sake.”

“I already talked to the police. For four hours. No drinks, no break.” He shrugs his shoulders. “I have nothing to hide.”

I glance at Jenny, hoping she'll jump in and fix this.

"Sir," Jenny says, her voice firm and controlled. "You're not in trouble, OK? We're not accusing you of anything. We're just trying to get more information about what happened."

He snorts. "Not in trouble? How can you say this? Are you the police? Are you my lawyer?"

Jenny clears her throat. "I'm actually an attorney myself."

I shoot Jenny a look. *Not helping!*

Mr. Papasizi's eyes grow wide. "You said you were mums!"

Jenny begins to backtrack. "Sir, I'm not here in any official capacity. Please. We're just trying to get some information."

Mr. Papasizi ignores her and turns his gaze to me. "What about you? Also a lawyer?"

I wrinkle my nose. "No way. I barely finished high school. Don't trust lawyers. Except Jenny here. She's all right."

He leans back in his chair and appears to consider this.

Jenny stands up, begins pacing the room. "Please. You must have seen something?"

Mr. Papasizi removes his gaze from the TV and shakes his head. "What I've seen? I've seen how they treat teachers at that school. And me? I'm just the maintenance man. Seven more years to retirement. My pension. You understand?"

Jenny pounces. "What do you mean, 'how they treat teachers'?" Her tone is sharp, like she's cross-examining an uncooperative witness. I shoot her a pleading look, but she doesn't seem to notice.

I flash Mr. Papasizi a sympathetic smile. "Maybe you could help us understand what you mean?" I say, as gently as possible.

But Mr. Papasizi clams up. The match comes back on, and he unmutes the TV.

At the next break, he stands up and takes a framed picture off the bookshelf, thrusting it toward us. It's a young girl with dark hair, early twenties, wearing a mortarboard graduation cap.

“My daughter,” he says proudly. “Elena. Just graduated from university. In Sheffield.”

“Congratulations,” I say.

He beams. “She won’t have to mop up after spoiled brats—” He stops himself, realizing that the spoiled brats are, in fact, our children. “Err, sorry.”

“I get it,” I say breezily. “My mother was a waitress. People can be awful.”

Jenny shoots me a surprised look, but I keep my gaze locked on Mr. Papasizi. “We all want better for our kids,” I add.

Mr. Papasizi gives a little nod and unmutes the TV. The three of us watch as men in tiny shorts body-slam each other until one of them taps the floor three times. At the next break, I turn to Jenny. “You know, I think I left my phone in the car? You mind grabbing it?”

“Why can’t you—”

I raise my eyebrows. “I think it might be better if you get it,” I mumble, eyeing the door.

“Fine. But don’t talk about anything important while I’m gone.”

As soon as the door closes, I turn to Mr. Papasizi. “Listen, we’re gonna get out of your hair, let you enjoy the rest of the fight. But just one thing, before we go. What do you make of Helen Schulz?”

“Helen?”

“Yeah. Deputy head. Gray hair, hunched shoulders, been there a thousand years. What’s her deal?”

He’s so quiet for a minute I think he hasn’t understood the question. Then, finally, he looks up at me.

“You hear about Mr. Sexton?”

I sit up. “Yeah. The one who got fired for groping a kid, couple years back. Everyone heard about that.”

“Ask Helen,” he says without lifting his gaze from the TV. “She knows.”

“Knows what?”

He lifts the remote and mutes the TV, turning to face me. On the screen, a bloodied man is dancing around the ring, pumping his fist in celebration. His opponent lies crumpled on the mat. The crowd is going nuts.

“What do you mean, ‘she knows’? Knows what?”

Just as he opens his mouth to speak, the front door bangs open. Jenny walks in, waving my phone in the air triumphantly.

“Found it!” she crows, her body blocking the TV.

Mr. Papasizi frowns and unmutes the TV. The match roars back to life.

He lifts his chin toward Jenny. “Let the lawyer figure it out.”

Back in the car, Jenny turns to me expectantly. “So? What did you find out?”

“Oh, uh...” I had expected her to be annoyed that I cut her out of the conversation, but she seems completely unbothered. “He said to talk to Helen. Something about that teacher who got fired for groping a kid, few years back?”

Jenny nods. “OK. Well, that’s handy, seeing as we’re meeting Ms. Schulz in a few hours.” She reaches into the glove box and pulls out a pack of Big Red, offers me a stick. “Nice work in there, by the way. He was clearly never gonna warm to me.”

“Oh. Um, thanks.”

Jenny glances at her watch. “We’ve still got a few hours to kill. Wanna get brunch?”

“Brunch?” I can’t remember the last time I went to brunch. Brunch is for other people. People who throw each other baby showers and take shared villa holidays and have group text chains with twenty of their best girlfriends.

“Sure,” I say, swallowing my doubts. “Brunch sounds great.”

Jenny smiles. “Great. I already booked us a table, just in case. There’s a Lebanese place I’ve been wanting to try. The boys hate that kind of thing, and it’s impossible to get a reservation for one, you know?”

Three hours later, after Jenny has ordered us far too many plates of shakshuka and herbed labneh and smashed fried eggs with baba ghanoush, we make our way to the Ritz for tea with Ms. Schulz.

A fleet of top-hatted doormen line the perimeter of the building, greeting chauffeured vehicles and shuttling their geriatric passengers inside.

Fancy hotels have always intimidated me. Once, after Girls' Night signed our second record deal, Rose, Lacey, Imani, and I had tried to go to Mandarin Bar for a celebratory drink. We never made it past the lobby. The concierge had taken one look at us—in our finest fishnet stockings and vinyl miniskirts—and informed us the bar was “closed for a private event.”

Not today, though. Today, a top-hatted porter scurries to throw open the ornate wooden door for me and Jenny. The scents of neroli and jasmine hit me in the face like a frying pan.

“Welcome to the Ritz,” he says with a little bow.

The Ritz tearoom is a gilded symphony of brocade wallpaper and Wedgwood china. In the corner, someone is playing an actual harp.

Jenny rolls her eyes. “God, this place is cheesy. Like it was designed by Liberace to impress midwestern tourists and old people.”

A maître d' in a white dinner jacket takes our names and makes a big show of looking up our reservation in a leather-bound book.

“This way,” he says. “I believe one of your party has already arrived.”

The room is full of purple-haired old ladies wearing golf-ball-size diamond rings and clutching fancy shopping bags, but I spot Ms. Schulz immediately. She's dressed up for the occasion, in a peachy skirt suit and coral lipstick that has bled into the wrinkles around her mouth.

“Hi, Ms. Schulz,” I call out, and she startles, gasping and pushing back her chair, sending a gaggle of Liberty's shopping bags from the neighboring table scattering across the plush carpet.

To her credit, she recovers quickly. “You must be Jenny,” she says, extending her hand. “Helen Schulz. Lovely to meet you. I told Florence, I think it's just wonderful that you girls are asking questions. Such initiative.”

It's hard to tell if this is a genuine compliment or one of those little digs disguised as a compliment British people are always giving, but either way, Jenny isn't fazed.

"Thank you," Jenny says with a tight smile. "We appreciate you talking to us."

We tuck ourselves into high-backed, meringue-colored chairs. Like magic, a waiter appears with two more large, leather-bound menus.

Jenny clears her throat. "Perhaps we could start with Friday—"

Ms. Schulz interrupts her. "Shall we order first, dear?"

Our obsequious waiter appears and proceeds to explain all eighteen different Darjeeling varietals on the menu, with full tasting notes. Ms. Schulz takes her time, asking questions, hemming and hawing. Jenny begins digging her fingernails into her palm, clenching and unclenching her fist like a beating heart. She may be the smartest person I know, but she's also the most impatient.

"I'll have the orange pekoe," Ms. Schulz says. "No, the formosa assam. No, mint bergamot. No, actually, I'll stick with the orange pekoe." She closes the menu at last.

The waiter nods. "Excellent selection, madam."

"House blend," Jenny says, snapping the menu shut.

He turns to me expectantly. I hate tea, like truly hate it. I don't know why anyone would intentionally drink brown leaf water.

"Can I have a hot chocolate?" I ask.

The waiter frowns. "A hot chocolate?"

"Or honestly, just like, anything that isn't tea."

"I'd have to check with the kitchen," he says. "I believe we have some juice on the children's menu."

"Grand," Jenny snaps. "She'll have a juice."

When the waiter disappears, Jenny leans forward, propping her elbows on the table.

"So," she says eagerly. "What can you tell us about Alfie Risby?"

Ms. Schulz picks up her napkin and smooths it into her lap. "Did you know I grew up in Scotland?"

“Oh,” Jenny says, clearly taken aback. “That’s, um...interesting. Sorry, but what does that have to do with Alfie?”

Ms. Schulz frowns, just as the waiter returns with a large silver tray bearing two pots of tea and a small glass of orange juice. He makes a big show of arranging it all on the table and telling us how long each varietal needs to seep.

“Sorry,” Jenny says quickly. “Please continue.”

Ms. Schulz takes her time adding three, four, then five spoonfuls of sugar and stirring it slowly. “It was rather idyllic. My father was employed by a Scottish boarding school. Our family lived in a little cottage on the grounds. My younger sister, Mary, and I had the loveliest childhood you can imagine. Running through streams, playing in the woods. Nothing like children today, with their iPads and fidget spinners and anxiety tablets.”

“Sounds lovely,” I say, eager for her to get to the point.

Ms. Schulz stops stirring and places her spoon on the saucer. “Wouldn’t you know, Rollo Risby was a pupil at the school. He was quite the looker back then. Mary and I, we both fancied him.”

I nearly spit out my juice. “Wait, you and Rollo are the same age?”

Jenny shoots me a death look, but before Ms. Schulz can answer, the waiter returns again, bearing a tower of crustless sandwiches and a long-winded explanation of each of them: ham with grain mustard on brioche; smoked salmon with lemon butter on sourdough; and scones with strawberry preserves and clotted cream from a Cornish dairy.

Jenny clears her throat. “Do continue,” she says.

Ms. Schulz takes another sip of her tea, which must have the consistency of syrup now. “Well, I turned eighteen, went away to teachers college, and when I came back—wouldn’t you know...”

“What?” I practically shriek, unable to bear the suspense.

“Rolly,” Ms. Schulz says, pausing again to dab her lips with a cloth napkin, “had got the stablemaster’s daughter pregnant. Can you imagine? It was quite the scandal. He was seventeen. She was only sixteen. Anyway, she kept the baby. Women had fewer choices in those days. It was a boy.”

Jenny leans forward in her chair. “You’re saying Rollo Risby has a love child? Alfie has a brother?”

Ms. Schulz purses her lips. “Half brother. Yes. He’d be pushing forty now.”

I clear my throat. “Why were you crying last night. At the vigil?”

Ms. Schulz looks down at her napkin. “Listening to Rolly up there, touting all of this ‘my only son’ nonsense...well, I found it rather upsetting. Nicola wouldn’t like me saying it, but—”

“What?” Jenny demands.

Ms. Schulz glances over her shoulder and then leans in toward us, her voice barely a whisper. “I think I saw him.”

“Who? Alfie?”

Ms. Schulz frowns. “No. Certainly not. The other one. The secret son. He was at the vigil.”

I bite my lip. “That doesn’t make any sense. How do you even know what he looks like?”

Ms. Schulz begins fidgeting with her teaspoon. “I wasn’t sure at first. He was wearing those giant headphones all the young people wear now. But his face. It was just like Rolly’s. And that same pale hair. It was unnerving.”

Jenny stares at Ms. Schulz. “I don’t get it. Why are you telling us all this? Why not go to the police?”

“And say what, dear? ‘Here’s a morsel of ancient gossip’? No law against having a secret love child! Besides, they wouldn’t give an old biddy like me the time of day.”

Jenny glances at me and then back at Ms. Schulz. “Do you think he was involved?”

Ms. Schulz shrugs. “I doubt it. But he might know something useful.” She turns her palms up. “Anyway, I’ve told you what I know.” She turns to the spread in front of us. “Do you know, I quite fancy a scone.”

I pass her the basket, and she takes one in her spidery hands.

“Oh, actually—there is one more thing.” Ms. Schulz pauses, allowing the suspense to build as she cuts her scone in half, applying a thick layer of clotted cream, followed by an equally thick layer of jam.

“The Risbys are not just any family. They *know* people. Do you understand?”

Jenny sits bolt upright, like a marionette who has just had her strings tightened. “What do you mean?”

Ms. Schulz sets the scone down on her plate, her eyes darting between us. “I *mean* that you two can’t just parade around announcing to God and the world that you’re *investigating*.” She shakes her head. “That’s just asking for trouble, now, isn’t it, girls?”

My heart is racing as Jenny and I trundle out of the hotel toward Green Park Tube station. The bracing November air feels like a slap in the face after the warm incandescence of the Ritz. My fingers are tingling with excitement.

“Holy shit,” I squeal, turning to Jenny. “Our first clue!”

I rub my hands together and clap her on the shoulders. “Did you hear me? We have our first clue!”

Jenny wriggles out of my grip and throws a nervous glance over her shoulder. “Not here, OK?”

“Oh, c’mon. Like Ms. Schulz is tailing us? The old bag could barely get out of her chair.”

We duck inside Green Park, which is deserted except for a flock of pigeons and a few joggers. In the distance, the gilded wrought iron panels of Canada Gate peek through the barren trees.

“Empty enough for you?”

“We need to be careful!” Jenny hisses. “You heard what she said. About the Risbys.”

I’m not listening. A feeling of delicious giddiness has descended over me. Rollo Risby has a secret love child. A *highly suspicious* secret love child. And Dylan has an out.

Jenny cracks her knuckles, a nervous tic that makes me wince.

“If Rollo had another child,” Jenny begins, “did Cleo know about it? Maybe she found out? Maybe that’s the reason they’re getting divorced?”

“Lot of reasons to divorce Rollo Risby,” I quip, but Jenny just furrows her brow, lost in thought.

On the nearby grass, a pigeon has managed to extract a hamburger bun from a cardboard box. He flies off victorious, and other pigeons begin to chase him, trying to steal his bounty.

“What happens now?” Jenny says. “Do we go to the police?”

“What?” I snap. None of this is going to work if Jenny insists on running off to the police every time we get a lead.

I soften my voice. “You said yourself, the police are useless. Besides, like Ms. Schulz said, having a secret love child is hardly a crime.”

Jenny doesn’t reply. She stuffs her hands in her pockets. I can see her turning the conversation over and over in her mind, like a shiny pebble, examining it from all angles.

“Is it weird that Ms. Schulz told us all this?” she muses. “She barely knows us.”

“She’s an old lady who wants to feel important! We have a clue. This is great! Now we just have to find him!”

Jenny jerks her head back. “*Great?* We’re talking about a missing kid, Florence. Nothing about this is great.”

“Of course,” I say quickly. “Of course.” I take a deep breath and try to arrange my face into a solemn expression. “I just mean, you can do this, right? Your firm’s investigators or whatever—they can track down this secret love child?”

Jenny chews her lip and stares at the pigeons. They’ve moved on from the hamburger now and are fighting over a half-eaten Greggs sausage roll. “I need to think about this, Florence. This is...a lot.”

Shepherd's Bush

SUNDAY, 7:20 P.M.

ALL THE LIGHTS ARE ON in my flat. Which is weird, because I definitely turned them off when I left this morning. I stand on the sidewalk, attempting to peer through my own window, but the shutters are drawn. My heart begins to pound in my chest. The police. Could they have come back to search my flat?

I shove my key into the lock and heave the door open. I can hear voices and something that sounds like music.

"Hello?" I call.

A woman's voice is talking, murmuring something I can't quite make out. Is Detective Glover in my flat?

"Hello?" I call again. I take two more tentative steps, until I'm standing in the middle of my living room.

Brooke is perched on my sofa, holding her phone to her ear. Relief floods my body.

"Brooke! What are you doing here?"

"I'll call you back, yeah?" Brooke hangs up and gives me an indignant look. "I told you I needed to stay over tonight. Julian's off at his stag do and I've got the builders in, remember? Redoing the kitchen tiles? The dust is atrocious."

I nod. I have no memory of this, but I'm so relieved I don't care.

Brooke's eyes bore into me. "Are you OK? You're acting kinda weird."

"I'm fine. Absolutely fine."

She lifts the remote to mute the TV. "Any news?"

"About what?"

She frowns. "About the missing boy? Florence, I really think you ought to call Julian's dad. He's a barrister. He could help."

Fuck. I never should have told her about the police showing up. It was a moment of weakness, but now that she has the information, she's going to use it to punish me.

"It's fine," I say, flopping onto the sofa next to her. "That visit on Friday was routine. Procedural. Anyway, Jenny and I are looking into it."

"Jenny?"

"My new friend—she's actually a lawyer. Really smart. You'd like her. Anyway, we're looking into the whole thing."

Brooke frowns. "You have a friend?"

"Don't be such a bi—"

Brooke grabs my arm before I can finish. "Florence," she whisper-shouts through clenched teeth. "You need a real lawyer. And you shouldn't be 'looking into' anything. It sounds like Dylan is a suspect."

I wriggle free from her clammy hand. "He is not! How dare you!"

She stands up. "You're in denial, Florence. Just like last time, when Dylan dumped out the desk on that kid's lap. Or hit that boy with the cricket bat! How many stitches did he need?"

My face gets hot. "That's not what happened! He was defending a helpless animal."

"You need to speak to a lawyer. A real lawyer, not some mummy friend of yours. Call Julian's dad. It's what a responsible person—a responsible parent—would do."

" 'It's what a responsible parent would do,' " I parrot, mimicking her high-pitched voice.

Brooke gives me a piercing stare. "Fine. Do whatever you want. As usual. But tell me this: Why is Dylan still at Will's house?"

My mouth fills with the dry taste of dust and ash. “Will is his father. It’s good for him.”

Brooke shakes her head. “You’re in denial. Again.”

Her whole “responsible big sister” schtick is really starting to grate. I’m the big sister, dammit.

“I don’t need your help, OK? This is not like before—” I start to say, but Brooke cuts me off.

“Believe it or not, I was hoping we could talk about *wedding stuff* tonight. But I can see that my plans are going to have to take a backseat to yours, as usual.”

Brooke flounces toward my bedroom.

“Where are you going?” I call after her.

“I’m taking the bed,” she huffs, “because unlike you, I have to be up early tomorrow. For work!”

I sigh, slump on the couch, and stare at my phone. If only Dylan would call me and volunteer some reasonable explanation for everything. Make it all go away. At the very least, he could explain the backpack underneath his bed.

I fantasize about hailing a taxi, driving out to Will’s house, grabbing my son by the shoulder, and getting some answers.

Instead, I sit on the sofa and stress-pluck my eyebrows in a 10× magnifying mirror, forcing myself to do ridiculous mental challenges like, *if I look down at my tweezers and see an even number of hairs, Dylan didn’t do it.*

When I fail, repeatedly, I tell myself I must have counted wrong. Anyway, it’s a stupid game.

I wake up to the sound of glass shattering and a piercing, high-pitched scream.

Brooke, clad in my pink waffle weave bathrobe, is shrieking and brandishing a curling iron like a weapon.

I open the door to my flat and walk into the vestibule. The stained-glass panels that frame mine and Adam's shared front door are lying in glittering shards on the porch. The object that shattered them is resting innocently on the floor. It looks like a giant baseball. (*A cricket ball!* Adam will later explain with exasperation.)

"It's OK, everything is fine," I say reflexively, to no one in particular, though I have no idea if that's true. Somewhere in the last two days the entire world has stopped making sense.

Brooke inches toward the door, clutching the curling iron above her head like the world's least menacing Ghostbuster.

I pick up the ball. There's something wrapped around it. A single sheet of printer paper held in place by a red rubber band. Gingerly, I slip the paper out from the rubber band.

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS OR ELSE!!!

Just like that, with three exclamation points.

Brooke's eyes grow round. "Do you see?" she snaps. "Lawyer. Now!"

Before she can pick up her phone, the dull thud of footsteps announces Adam's arrival. He's wearing navy sweatpants and holding a heavy-duty flashlight.

"Florence?" he calls out, entering the shared vestibule. "You all right?"

"Watch your feet," I say. The space is too small for the three of us. I can smell Adam's cologne, the faint whiff of whisky on his breath.

Adam surveys the damage and lets out a long, low whistle. "Window's going to cost us."

"Look at this," I say, unfolding the paper. Adam grabs the note, and my shoulders begin to inch toward my ears, my muscles tensing in shame.

" 'Mind your own business,' " he reads, looking up at me. "What does that even mean?"

"No clue." This is a lie. I know exactly what it means, and it suddenly feels like every fiber of my body has been lit on fire. There's a tightness in the back of my neck, spreading further down my back with every passing second.

Brooke appeals to Adam. “You’re the police, right? Can’t you do something?”

Adam sighs and surveys the broken glass. “Hate to say it, but I doubt they’ll send boots out for a broken window.”

“A broken window *and* a threat!” Brooke huffs. “It could be connected to”—she lowers her voice to a whisper—“the missing boy!”

“Happy to put in a call, if you like,” Adam says, stuffing his meaty hands into the pockets of his joggers. “But for property damage? They’re just gonna tell you to fill in the form online and call your insurance company.”

Brooke frowns and pushes open the door to my flat.

“Well, I’m going to put the kettle on,” she says, shaking off her fear and shifting into organizing mode. “Come on. It’s freezing out here.”

Adam and I follow her. My hands are still trembling. I am overwhelmed with a desire to call Jenny, to have her calm, detached voice to make sense of this mess. But it’s 2:00 a.m. Jenny is tucked between her ironed sheets, deep asleep. And I can’t risk spooking her.

“You gonna be OK? Want me to sleep on the sofa?” Adam’s voice draws me back to the living room.

“Huh? Oh no, it’s fine. Brooke’s here.”

Adam looks at me for a long time, like he’s trying to decide what to think. “Florence, is there...anything you want to tell me?”

“Like what?” I snap. “I did it? I killed Alfie?”

“Right. It’s late. We’re all tired.” He reaches for the cricket ball. “I can take this into the station with me tomorrow.”

“OK, OK,” I say, too tired to object.

Adam stuffs the ball in his pocket and turns to leave.

“Be sure to lock up behind me.”

Shepherd's Bush

MONDAY, 8:55 A.M.

JENNY STANDS ON MY PORCH, surveying the broken glass. Brooke had used the July issue of *Vogue* to paper over the spot where the cricket ball made contact with the window. An editorial feature on sustainable island getaways is flapping in the breeze where stained glass had once been.

“Yikes!” Jenny says, surveying the shards. “What happened here?”

Shit. “Don’t mind that.” I usher her over the threshold. As much as I would love to unload all my worries on her, it’s too risky. If Jenny finds out I’m getting menacing notes through the window, it might put her off the investigation. “Just the neighborhood kids, you know,” I add, with what I hope is a casual shrug. “The bigger question is, what’s with your outfit?”

Jenny has traded her usual sleek attire for a floral-print midi dress and a pair of those white trainers Kate Middleton wears whenever she’s being made to do sports in public. It feels wrong, jarring even, to see her wearing pastel. In her left hand, she’s clutching two large paper shopping bags, like a suburban mom who just returned from the mall.

Jenny arches her eyebrows. “Oh, you’ll see,” she says with a grin. “But first, take a look at this.”

She sits down at the kitchen table and shoves a piece of paper toward me. It's some kind of official government paperwork. I squint at the dates, trying to remember whether the British put the month or the date first, but the numbers are cha-cha-ing around on the page, rearranging themselves, mocking me.

"I'm not really sure what I'm looking at," I concede.

"It's a birth certificate," she says. "For Ian Risby. Rollo's son."

Jenny's grin widens, and she leans back in the chair, crossing her arms across her chest. A dazzled sort of feeling washes over me.

"He's real?" I'd half expected the whole "secret love child" thing to be some kind of misunderstanding, a dementia-addled Ms. Schulz mistakenly recounting the plot of a soap opera.

"It gets better," Jenny says. "I think I know where he lives. Now, it's just a postcode, not an exact address. But we could go check it out, knock on some doors."

I squirm. My eyes dart involuntarily toward the window, the broken glass.

"Does that seem, I dunno, a bit risky? And shouldn't you be at work?"

Jenny's eyes narrow. "I took the week off. And what do you mean 'a bit risky'? Yesterday you were practically begging me—"

Her reply is interrupted by three sharp, confident knocks on the front door.

"It's open," I shout, sitting up a little straighter. "My neighbor."

Adam walks through the door, his face damp with sweat. He's wearing a faded *CrossFit Hammersmith* T-shirt and clutching a plastic shopping bag from Argos. A look of surprise spreads across his face.

"Don't look so shocked," I snap. "I have friends, you know."

"Of course," says Adam, setting the shopping bag on the floor and extending his hand to Jenny.

"Adam," he says, giving her hand a vigorous shake. "Upstairs neighbor."

"Pleasure," Jenny chirps, her voice climbing an octave. "Jenny. One of the school moms."

Adam turns to me. "I got you something."

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a box that reads "Doorbell Security System."

"You didn't need to do that," I say, and I mean it. It's no secret that Adam is broke. He drives a VW Polo, for goodness' sake. He shouldn't be wasting his money on me, because I am never going to sleep with him.

"It's no trouble!" he says. "Can't be too careful, what with everything going on."

I hurry to fill the silence before Adam can mention the broken window or the note. "Thanks, Adam. Seriously. Really kind of you."

He grins like a golden retriever who has finally got a pat on the head.

I continue. "But could we install it tomorrow, maybe? It's just—we're kinda busy at the moment."

"Oh right." Adam begins gathering up the bag. "Of course. I didn't mean to interrupt—"

Jenny shoots me a look that says *don't be ridiculous*, then jumps to her feet. "No, stay! We were just doing a bit of brainstorming. Maybe you can help us. Florence said you're a cop?"

"Yeah," Adam grunts, setting the bag back down. "Not working this one, though."

I bite my lip. That's the understatement of the century. Adam is a glorified traffic cop. There was some kind of incident, years ago. He'd never gone into details. But my impression was he was only kept on the force as a favor to his father, a policing legend.

Jenny leans forward in her chair. "OK, so you know how when a woman goes missing—"

"It's always the husband. Or boyfriend, what have you," Adam says, finishing her sentence as he begins unboxing the doorbell system.

"Exactly!" Jenny is slapping the table. "So what's the missing-kid equivalent of that?"

Adam exhales loudly. "Well, depends on the age. Older kids, teenagers, it's often a runaway situation. Rowing with their parents, that sort of thing." He looks down at the floor. "But a ten-year-old..." His voice trails off.

“Maybe a noncustodial-parent kidnapping. Some kind of accident. Or, you know—”

He doesn’t have to finish the sentence. We all know what comes after the *or*.

Adam continues to fiddle with the doorbell components. Jenny watches him intently, twirling a piece of shiny black hair around her finger. I am not interested in Adam like that, really I’m not, but I feel a familiar twinge of competitiveness burble to the surface. Jenny is way too old for him. She’s embarrassing herself.

“Anyway, I imagine they’ll make quick work of this one,” Adam says. “Lotta pressure. Zillionaire’s kid and all. Probably make an arrest by the end of the week.”

My stomach leaps, as if my body had jumped off the high dive without it. I think of Alfie’s backpack, still buried in the bottom of an M&S shopping bag deep in my closet.

“That fast?” I squeak.

“I reckon,” Adam says, getting to his feet and wiping his hands on his joggers. “Anyway, doorbell’s done now. You just need to download the app and we can monitor the front of the house from anywhere.”

He looks down at his Apple Watch and frowns. “Getting late. I better get going.”

Jenny jumps to her feet and gives him a big hug, like they’re old friends. “So nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Adam says, a dull blush spreading across his face.

After Adam leaves, Jenny clears her throat.

“Right,” she says. “Back to business. You ready?”

Without waiting for my answer, she dumps out one of the shopping bags on the kitchen table. A pile of lumpy cardigans and plastic hair clips tumbles out. I pinch a cream-and-navy Breton-striped sweater between my fingers.

“What is this?”

Jenny leans back in her chair. “OK, so remember how, when the boys were little, if you were pushing a kid in a stroller, it was sort of like you were invisible?”

I nod. I had definitely used Dylan’s Bugaboo to shoplift fancy cheese from Waitrose, tossing it in the bottom basket between sandy shovels and muddy wellies.

“Yeah, so?”

Jenny grins. “So we’re going undercover. Mom drag.” She reaches into a second bag and pushes a plasticky Winnie-the-Pooh diaper bag toward me. “Your new handbag.”

I stare at her open-mouthed. “Whoa. This is, like, next-level.”

“C’mon,” she says, already halfway to the front door. “You haven’t even seen the best part.”

Outside, Jenny mashes a button on her key ring. Instead of her Tesla, a red Kia Picanto beeps twice. Up close, I see there’s a large pink magnet on the side of the car. It reads:

J&S Toddler Snacks
Easy. Organic. Healthy.
www.mum-snacks.co.uk

I frown. “I don’t follow.”

“For our business,” she trills, smoothing her dress. “Don’t you see? We’re not just moms. We’re *mom-prenuers*. If we’re going to be knocking on doors, what could be less threatening than two women trapped in a pyramid scheme?”

I have to admit, her commitment is impressive. Jenny has put more thought and effort into these disguises than I put into my actual job.

“Where did you even get all this?”

“The sign? Oh, I had it printed online. Only £39.99, including overnight delivery!”

I peer inside the car. In the backseat, a surprisingly lifelike plastic baby doll is strapped in an infant car seat.

A slow smile spreads across my face. “You,” I say, clapping her on the shoulder, “are a complete genius. Do you know that?”

She blushes. “It’s just a bit of Primark and a rental car. Anyway, I warned you: When I do something, I go all in. Besides,” she says, her smile vanishing, “it’s for a worthy cause.”

The sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach returns. She’s right. I shouldn’t be enjoying this. Alfie is still missing. And Dylan is—

“Of course. A worthy cause.”

Jenny applies a prim layer of spit to the suction cup of a yellow “Baby on Board” sign and slaps it on the back window.

“*Et voilà*,” she says. “Our cloak of invisibility.”

Barbican

MONDAY, 12:18 P.M.

AN HOUR LATER, AFTER REPACKAGING two dozen fruit snack packages into tiny wax paper bags (“We need merchandise or it’s not plausible!”), Jenny and I are standing in front of the ugliest building I’ve ever seen. It’s less like an apartment complex and more like an entire brutalist village, an interconnected maze of concrete and elevated walkways uprooted from Soviet Siberistan and plonked down in the heart of central London.

“So Rollo’s secret son lives...in a council flat?”

Jenny snorts. “This is the *Barbican*. It’s an architecturally significant building.”

I gaze into the artificial lake at the heart of the complex, which has been dyed an unnatural shade of green. “Kinda feels like where George Jetson would live if his futuristic sky-city were also a gulag.”

“It’s actually fascinating,” Jenny says, going into full-on nerd mode. “That lake is part of the building’s cooling system. They have to dye the water so that...”

I tune her out, scanning the concrete tower blocks for evidence of Rollo’s secret love child. A ray of sunshine appears behind the clouds, and a little surge of hope ripples through my chest. We have a suspect. A suspect

who is not Dylan. And we're here. Together. *Detectiving*. Aside from the weird note and the cricket ball through the window last night, things are looking up.

"Here, you take her," Jenny says, passing me the stroller. Our plastic baby doll is sleeping soundly beneath a pink muslin blanket. "I'm going to find the directory."

I follow her, jiggling the stroller gently. "What if we find him? Alfie, I mean? Like, what if he's just sitting in one of these flats right now, watching cartoons," I continue. "Do we reverse-kidnap him?"

Jenny turns around, her face a mask of disbelief. "Are you being serious right now? Tell you what. If we find him this afternoon, you can keep the whole outfit—including the diaper bag."

She turns her gaze back to the directory, and I stick my tongue out at the back of her head. I'm not going to let her cynicism ruin my good mood.

I look up at the three soaring brutalist towers tickling the sky.

"Which one is Ian's?"

Jenny's eyes dart between her phone and the map on the wall, her eyebrows knitted in concentration.

"I don't know," she says finally.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I have a postcode for him, not a full address. And apparently all the mail goes through a central processing center."

I stare at her, still not fully comprehending. "So...we have no idea which part of this maze he lives in?"

She nods.

I feel like I've been kicked in the kidney. I imagine Dylan hunched over a bowl of prison gruel, which is probably not vegan, being forced to trade his commissary money for protection.

"But there are, like, a thousand flats here! We can't knock on every door."

"A thousand flats?" she says breezily. "Nah, more like two thousand." She snatches the stroller back and begins walking past me, toward the ramp that links the courtyard with the first block of flats. When she reaches the

ramp, she turns around and calls over her shoulder, “Which is why we better get started.”

We begin at the top of the eastern block. The first door is brown metal, the exact color of the poo emoji. The doorbell is louder than I expected, an ominous, hollow reverberation that echoes down the corridor.

No one answers.

“Well, it was hardly going to be the first one, was it?” Jenny says, already moving on to the next door.

But no one answers that one either. Or the next. We knock on forty-seven doors and not a single person answers. Either they’re all at work or they all have doorbell cameras. I’m getting antsy, worried this whole thing is a gigantic waste of time but unsure what else to do.

“This is worse than trying to get Dylan to do his reading homework,” I sigh.

Jenny nods. “Tell me about it. I don’t think Max has finished a math worksheet all year.” She lowers her voice. “I’ve never told anyone this, but sometimes I just do it for him, after he goes to sleep.”

“Wait, you *what*?”

She shrugs and lifts her hand to knock on door #48. “There’s only so much battle left in me after a long day at work. I just make sure to get a few wrong on purpose.”

I picture Jenny in her power suit, hunched over a ten-year-old’s math homework, and try not to laugh. “Wait, does Max know you’re the one doing it? Or does he think there’s like a magical homework fairy who comes and—?”

Before I can finish, the door swings open, revealing an elderly woman with a puff of lilac hair.

“It’s about time!” the old woman huffs, leaning against the doorframe. “I’ve been waiting for you all morning!”

I struggle to remember what we were meant to be selling.

“Come in,” she says, growing impatient. “This TV’s not going to fix itself!”

“Sorry?”

“You’re from Currys, right? To fix the TV?” the old woman says.

I glance at Jenny, who gestures to the paper bags beneath the stroller. “Actually, ma’am, we’re selling toddler snacks.”

“Toddler snacks?” The old woman harrumphs. “Are they made out of children?” She squints at me. “Wait a minute. You look familiar. Where do I know you from?”

I bite my lip. “Oh, I was in a girl band. A long time ago.”

“A band, eh? You friends with that DJ?” She scowls. “Ian What’s-his-face?”

“No,” Jenny says quickly. “We don’t live here.”

I freeze. “Ian? Did you say Ian?”

She nods sourly. “That’s his name, isn’t it? Blond lad two floors up? The one who blasts that infernal music all day long? You tell him if he doesn’t knock it off, I’ll be calling the police.”

“Which flat did you say—” I start to ask, but the sound of brisk, heavy footsteps interrupts me.

“Afternoon, ladies!” A baritone voice echoes down the walkway. A security guard in a high-vis jacket is striding toward us.

“Let me handle this,” I whisper to Jenny.

I turn on my biggest pop-star smile and bat my eyelash extensions. “Hello, Officer. Can I interest you in a toddler snack?”

He shifts his weight, taking us in. “No soliciting on the premises. I’m going to need you to take your, uh, snacks and vacate the property.”

I dangle a paper packet in front of his face and widen my smile. “How about a free sample?”

“G’on now,” he says, his voice weary. “Don’t make this difficult.”

“Are you sure? They’re orgaaaanic.”

Jenny is already packing up the samples, a tense, determined look on her face.

“Enough, Florence,” she says quietly. “Let’s go.”

Back at the mom-mobile, I throw open the door and fling the doll onto the backseat. Of course it didn't work. Nothing ever works for me.

"It's not over yet, OK?" Jenny says, as if reading my mind. "We know where he lives now. We'll come back."

I don't know what to say. My disappointment is so visceral it feels like a third person sitting in the car with us.

She tries again. "Hey. Today was good, OK? We got some new information."

I sigh and slump deeper in my seat. Learning that someone *might be a DJ* is not the kind of development that's going to keep my son out of trouble. Not that I can explain that to Jenny.

I can feel her staring intently at the side of my head. "Can I ask you something?" she says.

"Hmmpf?" I say, not meeting her gaze.

"Do you always give up this easily?"

I squirm in my seat.

"No, really. Do you?"

I twist away from her so I can stare out the window. It's lunchtime; city workers are scurrying down the sidewalks, clutching their little white Pret lunch bags, hurrying back to their desks. A family of tourists walks by with a boy roughly Dylan's age.

Jenny continues. "Did you really think the first door we knocked on was going to have Alfie behind it?" She puts on a little boy voice: "'Oh here I am, right behind door number one. Thanks for finding me, Florence!'"

"No," I snap. "That's not what I thought."

She lets out a rueful laugh. "Oh my gosh. You did! You actually thought that we were going to waltz in there on our first try and be *heroes*!"

I stare at my cuticles and say nothing. We snake our way slowly through the streets of Clerkenwell, past sleek converted warehouses, designer furniture stores, and gastropubs swelling with lunchtime crowds.

“Let me tell you something,” Jenny says, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. “I had to take the California bar exam twice. My driver’s test—three times. It took me”—she swallows hard—“*six* rounds of IVF to have the twins.

“I don’t know what your life has been like. But I never got to bat my eyelashes and *oh-thank-you-Officer* my way through anything. Every single thing I have, I’ve had to crawl across broken glass for.”

I sit there motionless, letting her words wash over me. No one’s ever spoken to me like this before.

Jenny tosses her hair over her shoulders. “I’m a lot of things, Florence—but I’m not a quitter.”

The way she says the word—*quitter*—makes it sound like the worst thing in the world. *Child abuser. Puppy kicker. Quitter.*

We don’t speak for the rest of the drive home.

I know intellectually that it’s not Jenny’s fault. But every day that we don’t find Alfie Risby makes it a little more likely that the things in Dylan’s room mean something. A little more likely that the police will show up again, asking questions I don’t want to answer.

When we pull up in front of my flat, Jenny mashes the child safety button and my door unlocks with an anemic bleat.

“Have your little pity party,” Jenny says, nodding toward my front door. “But then shake it off and put on your big-girl pants. We still have a lot of work to do.”

I’m still shutting the door when she starts to drive away.

King's Road

MONDAY, 2:20 P.M.

JENNY'S LECTURE IS STILL RINGING in my ears as I hurry into the bridal shop. The theme of the store is white: floorboards, dresses, clientele. Rustic enough to make a would-be bride forget they are spending someone's yearly salary on a dress; fancy enough to ensure they don't encounter anyone who would judge them for it.

Brooke had graciously offered to postpone the final fittings in light of "recent events," but I told her not to bother. She's still getting married on Saturday; I still have to wear a dress. But now that I'm about to walk into the viper pit with Pandora and Tilly, I'm desperate to be anywhere else.

I steel myself and push open the door. The smell of freesia fills my nose. A lone employee, who looks like a nineteen-year-old runway model, is fussing over a silver tray of ribbons.

"You must be Florence," she purrs. "Your sister said you'd be late."

She hands me a silk robe and a disposable makeup shield. "The other girls are already in the bridal salon. I'll bring your gown right over."

The only reason Brooke asked me to be a bridesmaid is because she knows it would seem weird to Julian's parents if she didn't. She'd issued the "request" along with strict instructions to go along with whatever

Pandora and Tilly wanted. I was not, under any circumstances, to make things “difficult” or “about me.”

Inside the bridal salon, Brooke is standing on the illuminated nine-foot runway, twirling in her reception dress. She looks positively incandescent. Pandora and Tilly are perched like toads in stuffed armchairs, admiring her.

“There you are, Florence,” Pandora squeals. “I was beginning to worry.”

Pandora is Julian’s sister. The same features that make her brother blandly handsome—the strong jaw, the dark hair, the haunted-owl eyes—render Pandora’s face disconcerting, like a cubist painting, or one of the lesser royal cousins. More offensive than her appearance, though, is her complete lack of self-loathing. Pandora has the blithe, blind confidence you only get from being born rich.

Brooke gives me a strained smile. “Kind of you to join us!” And then, “Is that my jumper?”

“Hello, love,” coos Tilly. Tilly is my sister’s best friend, a theater kid with flame red hair who married an Argentinian dancer named Ramon when she was in her early twenties. Their union was widely rumored to be a visa scam, but against the odds, Tilly and Ramon have stayed married: Tilly with a brood of redheaded children in their big house in Harpenden, Ramon spending most nights in the West End loft he keeps “for work.”

“You get stuck in traffic?” Tilly asks.

“Interview, actually.”

“Oh, for a job? Good for you!” Tilly says, nodding earnestly. “I’ve thought about getting one as well.”

Fuck you, Tilly, I think. Brooke shoots me a warning look. She’s worked too hard to ingratiate herself with this crowd to allow me to ruin things. Brooke met Pandora and Tilly nine years ago, while waiting in line for the loos at a grotty student nightclub next to the Primark on Tottenham Court Road. Pandora was crying, Tilly was comforting her, and Brooke, always prepared, had offered Pandora a disposable makeup-remover wipe to fix her smeared mascara. Later the trio discovered they were all doing marketing degrees at UCL. That spring, Pandora had invited Brooke to

spend a bank holiday weekend at her parents' "farmhouse" in the Cotswolds, which turned out to be a stately, Grade II listed home. That's where she met Pandora's brother, Julian, who had recently finished a geography degree at Durham and was now working on "some start-up ideas" while living in a flat his parents owned in Islington.

Brooke spent the next eight and a half years patiently waiting for Julian to propose. I told her it would never happen; Julian's family were the kind with their name on a plinth outside the National Theatre, and Brooke was Florida trash, albeit trash with a carefully constructed accent. But it turns out Brooke was a lot better at marketing than I gave her credit for. At her engagement party, I'd overheard her telling one of Julian's great-aunts that our father had worked "in transportation" and our mother had been "a champion of Southern cuisine." I nearly choked on my canape. I suppose it's easy to whitewash the dead; they don't come back to haunt you with inconvenient truths. I, on the other hand, was a grenade waiting to explode all over her carefully sanitized version of our past.

I turn my gaze back to Tilly, who is staring at me expectantly. "Oh no, not a job interview. It was about the missing boy. I'm sort of, well, looking into it."

Tilly raises one pale ginger eyebrow. "The police asked you for help?"

"No, it's more of an independent thing."

Pandora frowns. "So you're just...interfering?"

Brooke huffs loudly. "Guys! This is supposed to be a fun day, OK? No more missing-child talk, please!"

As if on cue, the shop assistant reappears, balancing flutes of champagne on a silver tray. "Here we are," she says with a wink. "For those pre-wedding jitters."

I take a glass and drain it. "Another, please?"

Brooke glares at me. Pandora, to her credit, tries to lighten the mood.

"Six days, B!" she says in a singsong voice. "Remind me where you and Julian are spending the honeymoon again?"

"One week in Madagascar and then a week in Mauritius," Brooke says.

“Oh, did you get one of those little water bungalows on stilts?” Tilly squeals. “You know, Ramon and I...”

I tune out their chatter and wander toward the little curtained cabins that line the edge of the room. My dress has magically appeared on a padded silk hanger, and I slip into the fitting room and pull the curtain closed.

Jenny’s words are still ringing in my ears. *Quitter. Quitter. Quitter.* She’s not wrong. After the band fell apart and Will left, I just kind of...gave up on my entire life. There would have been plenty of ways to spin off a halfway successful girl band career. I could have tried to get cast on a reality show, or dated a footballer, or launched a line of sunless tanner. But Dylan was so small, so needy, and being a single mom was all-consuming. There were endless, repetitive cycles of feed, change, sleep. And then one day I looked up and Dylan was ten, and I was still hawking balloons to the rich mums of Instagram.

Outside the curtain, the chatter has turned to the relative merits of Tuscany versus Provence.

I pick up my phone. There are several new messages on the St. Angeles mums’ WhatsApp group.

Allegra has posted the phone number for the “Alfie Risby Tip Line.” TOTALLY ANONYMOUS, OF COURSE! SHARING IN CASE ANYONE KNOWS ANYTHING.

DON’T FORGET ABOUT THE REWARD MONEY! Hope chimes in, not about to be outdone by Allegra.

I freeze. Are they implying that I—that Dylan—might have information? No. Of course not. It’s a group chat, not a pointed secret memo to me. They’re just trying to be helpful. I’m being paranoid.

I slump deeper on the cushy fitting room chair and open Instagram. There are several frenzied messages requesting “EMERGENCY” last-minute balloon arches, which I promptly delete, even though if I don’t take a couple of jobs soon I won’t be able to make the minimum payment on my Amex at the end of the month. But that’s a problem for future Florence.

I still have a few friends in the music industry. Well, maybe not friends, exactly. But people I know. Or used to know. I fire off a quick message to a

handful of acquaintances: KNOW ANY DJs NAMED IAN RISBY? BASED IN LONDON?

Brooke pokes her head through the curtain. “Are you going to put it on or what?”

Ugh. The dress. I paint a smile on my face. “Of course, be right out.”

It’s our third fitting appointment. The wedding is on Saturday. At this point, the shop is just looking for things to fix so they can charge her.

I slip the cool, slinky fabric over my head. The dress was Tilly’s doing, and it’s genuinely hideous. A modern Edwardian number with a ruched bodice designed to hide your “flaws.” The color is a muted sage green; a shade that makes anyone who doesn’t have red hair look recently poisoned.

I exit my protective cabin and give a performative twirl.

“No fair!” says Pandora, jutting out her chin. “Everything looks great on you!”

Because I exercise and get plastic surgery like a normal person, I think. With your money I could look like Giselle.

Brooke frowns. “But you’re going to wear a bra, right?”

I nod. Inside the changing room, my phone is pinging softly.

My pulse quickens.

“Sure. A bra.” *Whatever.*

Ping. “I better take it off now. Don’t wanna mess it up.”

Before I can retreat, a seamstress appears and begins frowning and pinching fabric between her fingers.

I start to protest. “It’s fine, really—”

Brooke shoots me a warning look. And so I freeze like a statue, allowing the woman with pins in her mouth to tut and poke and prod until she smiles and says, “Much better.”

“Take it off carefully, dear, so you don’t scratch yourself.”

I nod and race back toward the fitting room. My phone is lying on a chair.

One new message. It’s from Hope. HELLO DARLING, JUST CHECKING IF YOU WERE PLANNING TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE FLORAL ARRANGEMENT FOR THE RISBYS? NOTICED I HADN’T RECEIVED YOUR CONTRIBUTION YET.

Dammit. I chuck my phone against the dressing room curtain. It falls to the floor with a soft thud.

I make my own way home from the dress shop and install myself on the sofa with a pint of ice cream and the TV remote. I'm not having a pity party. I'm just relaxing for a second. *You might consider it, Jenny.*

I've seen this episode of *Property Shark* before. A middle-aged couple from Shropshire is converting a barn into a three-story palace for their rescue beagles.

My mind wanders to Elliott. It's Monday. Have those flowers I ordered been delivered yet? What time is it in California? I check my phone in case I missed a call. Nothing.

I sink deeper into the sofa and pry another icy clump of mint chocolate chip loose with my fork. I try to keep my gaze on the screen, but the show isn't having the same liquid-Ambien effect it usually does.

I'm nervous, jittery, and have the distinct sensation of being watched. I stand up and walk to the kitchen window, the one that looks out over the back garden. I peer into the darkness. Two round yellow eyes stare back at me. I scream, and the eyes vanish instantly, a fluffy tail receding in the darkness. A fox. It was just a fox. One of the thousands of foxes roaming around London at any given moment. It's not a sign.

Calm the fuck down, Florence.

I return to the sofa and begin to scroll through random DJ profiles on Instagram. They're all the same photos: fixie bikes, East London street art, turmeric lattes with cryptic captions about new beginnings.

On the TV, the couple are doing their big reveal. The beagle palace has nonslip wood flooring and an organic water spring.

My phone pings, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

LOOKING FOR GUEST LIST 2NITE?

It's from Rory, an event promoter I messed around with once at Glastonbury half a million years ago. Rory is an operator; the kind of guy who summers in Ibiza, has dozens of celebrity Instagram followers, and is

on a first-name basis with the owners of every hot club and trendy restaurant between Los Angeles and Tel Aviv. He's always trying to do people favors, so they'll "owe him one."

Three dots appear. Rory is typing.

SAW YOUR INSTA MESSAGE. IANSQUARED'S AT WAREHOUSE TONIGHT. CAN GET YOU GUEST LIST.

I pull up IanSquared's profile. He's got all the standard DJ shots: him from behind, hunched over turntables in front of an ecstatic crowd at Amnesia. A Coachella wristband, worn next to a magnetic energy bangle and single red-string bracelet. A latte with a perfect leaf shape etched in the foam.

I pull my fingers apart on the screen to enlarge the photos. It's impossible to tell if the man in these pictures is Rollo Risby's secret love child. His face is hidden in every shot, like he's the second coming of Avicii and needs to keep a low profile, lest the masses recognize him.

My phone pings again.

COULD MEET YOU THERE? Rory says, adding a little purple devil emoji.

Ugh. Why are men so disappointing? I give a final half-hearted scroll through IanSquared's photos. And then I see it. In one of the turntable photos. There, on his right pinky finger, is a gold signet ring. Just like Rollo's.

My stomach tightens.

I text Jenny: WE'RE GOING CLUBBING TONIGHT.

Somewhere Beyond Hackney

TUESDAY, 12:22 A.M.

THE BASS IS POUNDING AGAINST the walls of the warehouse. Kids in body glitter and tie-dye shirts and denim overalls jostle us from every side. The building we're standing in used to be some kind of industrial meatpacking plant. Now it's filled with hundreds of Gen Zers vibrating to awful, wordless electronic music.

Jenny tugs at the tube top I lent her.

"I don't understand," she says, leaning against the unfinished concrete wall. "Where is he?"

I don't understand either. Last time I went to a club, they were playing Rihanna and there was bottle service and a VIP section. I feel as ancient as the sea. When did body glitter become a thing again?

The music is aggressively loud. We resort to standing on the edge of the dance floor, shouting in each other's ears.

"This is ridiculous," Jenny shouts. "Can't we just—" Her words are interrupted by someone with a lampshade on their head, who bumps into her, then bows apologetically and dances on.

Jenny looks at me, wide-eyed. "Can't we just go to his dressing room?"

"His *dressing room*? Look around you. It's not the Royal Albert Hall!"

Jenny's eyes dart around the dark room, her exasperation mounting. "Where are the adults? Who's organizing this?"

"It's a warehouse party. No one is *organizing* it."

Jenny snorts. "Yeah, right. You think these kids just *stumbled* into an abandoned building that magically conforms to statutory fire code for public events? With clearly marked escapes and exit signs? Not a chance."

I glance around the room. A green exit sign glows through the dry ice. *Dammit*. She's right.

"Fine," I say, taking her hand. "Let's ask a bouncer. They know everything."

We push our way across the main dance floor, back through the warm crowd of bodies. On the threshold between the dance floor and coat check, a group of four guys in sweatshirts and neck chains brush past us, jostling my energy drink and spilling it all over me.

"Hey," I shout into a cloud of Tom Ford cologne. "Excuse you!"

The leader whirls around. He's tall and fair, with Buddy Holly glasses and gigantic headphones around his neck.

"Sorry about that," he says with a hint of a Scottish accent. When I look up, I notice something else too: Rollo Risby's signet ring on his right pinky finger.

I gasp and poke Jenny.

"We know who you are!" she shouts over the din of the music.

"What?" he shouts back.

"I said, we know who you are!" Jenny yells toward his face.

He gives us a wink. "Cool. See you ladies on the dance floor, then." He gestures to his entourage, and they turn to leave.

Jenny stands on her tiptoes and clamps her hand on his shoulder. "We're not your fans!" she screeches, leaning in until her face is just inches from his. "We're here about your brother. Alfie. Where can we talk?"

Under the strobe lights, Ian's pale face turns paler. He turns to his friends, dismissing them with a swift round of fist bumps and *catch you later*s. He gestures for us to follow him and leads us away from the dance floor, through an unmarked door and down a long, concrete corridor. Ian's

legs are long; Jenny and I have to jog to keep up. He's limping slightly, favoring his left leg. I elbow Jenny, but she's already noticed.

At the end of the corridor, Ian nods at a beefy security guard. The guard grunts, and Ian pushes open a final metal door marked "Talent Only."

Jenny shoots me a look that says, *I told you so*.

Ian's dressing room is not much bigger than my bedroom. There's a grotty leather sofa, two metal folding chairs, and a wooden coffee table strewn with rolling papers and two bags of prawn cocktail crisps. A single fluorescent light fixture hangs by a thin black cord, like an interrogation room.

In the bright light, Ian looks less like his father than Ms. Schulz had made out. He has the same pale hair, but his eyes are different. Kinder. If it wasn't for the ring, I probably wouldn't have even guessed they were related.

"So," Ian says, folding his long limbs onto the leather sofa and gesturing for us to sit down, "who are you, exactly?"

"We're moms. St. Angeles moms," Jenny says.

Ian frowns. "Did Cleo send you? Look, if this is about the letter, that was sent on the advice of my solicitor. A solicitor I no longer employ."

"What lett—?" Jenny begins, but I interrupt her.

"This is about your brother. Half brother. Alfie."

"I see." Ian stands up and opens a dorm-size fridge, offering us each a glass bottle of caffeinated yerba maté tea. "No such thing as a secret love child, I suppose. Not in the age of good old 23andMe."

He fishes a lighter from his pocket and uses it to pry the top off each of our drinks. "All right, well, what do you want to know?"

Jenny leans forward. "Someone saw you at the vigil on Saturday. Why were you there?"

Ian takes a slow sip. "Why was I at the vigil for my missing half brother? Um, OK. I suppose I went to show my respect. Solidarity. Not that the old man appreciated it or anything. But at this point, I don't expect much, y'know?"

He looks so genuinely sad I have to fight the urge to reach out and hug him.

“Oh no, it’s fine,” he says, noticing my face. “I’m thirty-eight years old. I’ve had a shit ton of therapy. And yeah, a few ayahuasca retreats. I’m telling you—it doesn’t eat at me anymore. I’ve made my peace with it.”

“So you didn’t kidnap your secret half brother?” Saying it out loud suddenly feels ridiculous. Insane.

Jenny clucks her tongue. “Florence, please—”

Ian lets out a low, rumble laugh. “Is that what you think? Yeah, negative.” He gestures around the room, “Don’t exactly have the lifestyle for a child hostage.”

A young blond woman with a clipboard appears in the doorway. “Ten minutes, Ian.”

He winks at her. “Thanks, Chels.”

“So, uh, where were you last Friday?” I say.

Ian looks up, as if he’s noticing me for the first time. “Wait a second—do I know you from somewhere?”

My face flushes. “I, um, I doubt it.”

He jumps up, unwilling to let it go. “I swear you look so familiar. And your voice! This is gonna sound crazy, but it’s giving early Mariah—”

“It’s probably just the American accent,” Jenny interrupts. “Can we try to stay on track? Where were you on Friday?”

I look down at my shoes. “I love Mariah! And I, uh, also have a musical background,” I stammer.

Ian nods, ignoring Jenny completely. “See? I could sense that.”

He pats the spot next to him on the sofa. “C’mere. I’ll show you where I was on Friday.”

I join him on the leather sofa, our knees just inches apart. He passes me his phone, and when his fingers graze mine, I feel a little jolt of electricity pass between us.

“See that?” he says, gesturing toward the screen. It’s a video of some kind of rave—black lights, sweaty people, more awful electronic music.

Ian leans in closer. “Fire Factory in Brixton,” he says softly.

I'm suddenly conscious of the heat of his body, the warmth of his breath. All the hairs on my arm stand up. Ian's not my type, not at all. I tend to go for emotionally stunted Credit Suisse bankers. But I find myself longing to scoot even closer to him.

"That's where you were on Friday? All day?" Jenny's voice cuts through my thoughts like an executioner's sword.

Ian nods, but Jenny isn't done yet. "So what's with the limp?"

A bemused smile plays on his lips. He slides his phone back in his pocket and turns to Jenny. "That noticeable, huh? Snowboarding accident. Caught some early powder in Zermatt last week, wiped out."

Jenny leans forward in her folding chair. "Listen, can you think of anyone who might want to hurt your father? Or your brother?"

"Wouldn't really know, would I? Old man and I don't see much of each other, apart from the occasional Boxing Day lunch. I'm supposed to be a secret, remember?" He winks.

Jenny frowns. "He gave you his ring, though?"

Ian looks down at the gold signet ring on his pinky finger. "What? No. My mother gave me this ring." He frowns. "Two weeks before she died."

Jenny is struggling to hide her disappointment. "So you can't think of *anyone* who would want to hurt your father? Or Alfie?"

Ian's expression turns thoughtful. "Well, maybe..." His voice trails off.

"What?" Jenny demands.

"You're from St. Angeles, right? What about that maths teacher a few years ago—the one who got fired for trying it on with a student?"

I sit up straight, remembering my conversation with Mr. Papasizi. "Mr. Sexton?"

"Yeah, I think that was his name. Messed-up situation, that."

Jenny bolts out of her chair. "Was Alfie involved in that? I mean, was he the student?"

Ian chews on his lip. "I shouldn't really be talking about this. Not my journey, you know."

"You kind of already did, though," I point out.

"Well, why do you think the guy got fired so quickly?"

Jenny interjects. “How do you even know about any of this? I thought you said your dad didn’t pay much attention to you?”

Ian looks like he’s been slapped. I shoot her a look. “C’mon, Jenny, be nice.”

“What? It’s a fair question.”

Ian eyes her warily. “Helen probably told me.”

Jenny pounces. “Helen Schulz, the deputy head?” she demands, her eyes growing round.

The door squeaks open. The blond woman reappears.

“They’re ready for you, Ian.”

He unfurls his long legs and stands up. “I better go,” he says, looking not at all sad to escape.

“Sorry, can you just—” Jenny jumps out of her chair and moves to block the door, but Ian’s already halfway across the room.

He stops at the threshold, fixing his eyes on me, as if Jenny wasn’t there at all.

“Good to meet you, ladies,” he says with a wink. “Stick around for the set if you like.”

Three Ubers cancel on me before I finally find us a ride. By the time our silver Prius pulls up outside the warehouse, strung-out kids are beginning to trickle out of the club, dawdling in groups before pairing off for the night.

Jenny hurls open the backseat door and slides across the bench.

“Are you...mad at me?” I ask tentatively.

“What gave you that idea, *Detective*?” she spits, jamming her seat belt buckle into the clicker.

The driver eyes us in the rearview mirror, weighing up if we’re going to be trouble.

“Why? Because he liked me?”

Jenny turns to face me. “Didn’t you hear what he said? He called her ‘Helen.’ Which means Ms. Schulz *lied* to us. She acted like she didn’t even

know Ian. And we could have found out even more if you weren't so busy *throwing* yourself at him."

My face flushes. "I wasn't throwing myself at him! I was making a *human connection*. Why do you think he let us into his dressing room in the first place? We're not the police, you know! He has to *want* to talk to us."

Jenny ignores me, rummaging in her handbag for her vape. In the front seat, the driver frowns.

"You can't smoke in the car," he says.

Jenny takes a slow puff of her vape. Anger is evaporating off her in humid waves.

"You know, it's not a crime to be charming," I say. "You might consider it sometime. Anyway, Ian has an alibi. Two thousand people were watching his set on Friday. You can't seriously believe that a guy like that—"

"A guy *like that*?" Jenny snaps. "What does that even mean? You think attractive people don't commit crimes? Florence, he had a limp! And a motive. Think about it: If Cleo and Rollo get divorced and Alfie's out of the picture, Ian is Rollo's only heir. He stands to inherit millions."

"Seriously, lady, you can't smoke in here," the driver interjects.

"I'm not smoking. It's a vape!" Jenny takes one last hit before shoving it back in her handbag.

The driver shakes his head and rolls down the windows. Cool night air washes over my face. The lights of Canary Wharf zip by in the distance; soon the shiny towers will be full of busy little worker bees.

Jenny tugs at her tube top. "You know, Colson and Casey bill my time at £1,250 an hour. In seven-minute increments." She looks down at her watch. "This little chat would have cost you...£450."

Panic rises in my throat. Whatever happens, I cannot afford to lose Jenny. Without her, there is no investigation.

"Did you even read any of those books I gave you?" she asks.

I look down at my nails, the remnants of Linh's manicure. "No. Not yet, I mean."

Jenny stares out the window, expressionless. Whatever I say next has the power to break the entire thing.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly. “About earlier. I genuinely thought I was helping.”

I am pleading with her now, begging her with my eyes. *Don’t give up on me.*

Jenny stares out the window for a long time. Canary Wharf is behind us now. Ahead, on the horizon, the Tower of London is coming into view, the ancient stones lit up by bright spotlights.

She rolls up the window and turns to face me. “Can I ask you something? What are you going to do when you’re not pretty anymore? Do you have a backup plan? Because this whole schtick has a shelf life.”

Her words burn in my ears. I bite my lip, willing myself not to cry.

London Bridge appears on my left. Tourists are always confusing London Bridge with Tower Bridge. Tower Bridge is the fancy one on all the postcards and in the James Bond films. London Bridge is a squat little overpass made of concrete and steel, built in the ’70s for commuters. They don’t bother lighting it up at night.

I take a deep breath. “Look. I’m doing the best I can, OK?”

“We have to speak to Ms. Schulz again,” Jenny says finally. “She lied about knowing Ian. It’s suspicious.”

My heart soars. “Yes. And track down Mr. Sexton. First thing tomorrow.”

Jenny glances at her watch and sighs. “Just get your shit together, Florence. I took a week off work for this. It’s not a joke to me.”

Shepherd's Bush

TUESDAY, 3:18 A.M.

I RETURN HOME TO A silent flat. Adam must have gone out; his beat-up VW isn't parked on our street. My key sticks in the lock. I jiggle it, thinking of the Strangler, and make a mental note to ask Linh if they ever caught him.

Inside, I flop on the sofa. A pile of Jenny's detective books catches my eye. She's right. I should have read her dumb books. Or at least skimmed them.

I lean down and select the smallest one in the pile: *Surveillance Techniques for Dummies*. On the cover, a middle-aged dork in khaki cargo shorts is using a long-range lens, presumably to spy on his soon-to-be ex-wife. I flip through the chapters on stationary surveillance and surreptitious recording. It all feels so utterly pointless. These are not the skills that are going to get my son off the hook.

I abandon the book in favor of the *Daily Post*. Alfie's disappearance is still the top story. The paper has gotten ahold of CCTV footage from the Wetland Centre parking lot. A grainy, black-and-white still from a video is splashed across the front page, showing a dozen boys moments after exiting the coach that morning. The *Daily Post* has helpfully drawn a red circle

around a lone figure who appears to be shoving another boy. The headline screams:

MYSTERY BOY SEEN PUSHING VANISHED ALFIE HOURS BEFORE HIS DISAPPEARANCE

The dull ache in the pit of my stomach returns, the one that's been plaguing me since I picked Dylan up on Friday. I zoom in, enlarging the photo until it takes up my entire screen. *Is that Dylan?* It looks like him, but it's hard to say for sure. The boys are all in uniform, and they've blurred the kids' faces.

Up until this exact moment, I have managed to avoid contemplating what actually happened to Alfie in the Wetland Centre on Friday. Yes, the backpack under Dylan's bed is suspicious. Yes, the stuff Alfie wrote in his *Feelings Journal* looks bad. But it's like when you accidentally cut yourself and your hand really hurts but you avoid looking because *seeing* the actual wound is only going to make the pain worse. If I confront Dylan with what I've found, his response will be final, irrevocable, fixed in my mind for all eternity. I just haven't been able to face it.

But sitting there on my sofa, staring at what is almost certainly my son's blurred photo on the homepage of the nation's biggest tabloid newspaper, I realize how stupid I've been. How naive. How can I protect Dylan if I am playing blind? The only way to keep him safe is to find out the truth, the full truth, and stare it in the face.

I march down the hall and fling open the door to Dylan's room, savoring the familiar contours of the space: the LEGO spaceship, the comic books, the slight smell of sneakers.

When I reach for the light switch, there is a popping noise, followed by a high-voltage fizzling sound, like an electric chair being switched on. It takes me a moment to realize it's just the lightbulb burning out. *Just the lightbulb*, I say out loud, trying to soothe my rattled nerves.

I wait for my heart to stop pounding and then pull out my phone and begin snapping photos of the room. There is no way I'll remember where everything is; I need documentation if I'm going to have any hope of putting it back together. When I'm confident I've chronicled the location of every stray toy and sock, I roll up my sleeves and begin to take Dylan's room apart, piece by piece. I flip the mattress, rifle through the wastebasket, dump out all the LEGO boxes. I don't know what I'm looking for, so I have to look at everything.

From Dylan's desk I pull out half-broken pens, folders of old math worksheets, photocopies of articles about animal testing. "Fighting Back Against Rabbit Cruelty in the Laboratory." The photos are horrifying. Fucking Mr. Foster. I never should have let the two of them hang out. The old weirdo is making Dylan even stranger. When Dylan comes back from Will's house, I'll break the news: no more Mr. Foster.

I move onto Dylan's dresser. Jerking open the top drawer, I dump out socks and pajamas. I run my fingers along the inside edge to see if he's hiding anything. My fingers brush something soft and wet. Slimy. I recoil and jerk the drawer out of the chest. Inside is an open red plastic container roughly the size and shape of an egg. I recognize it from Dylan's "Junior Scientist" kit. The Great Slime Experiment. The one that left a trail of green goo all over my countertops. Slime. I've been at this for over an hour, and a cup of "Science Slime" is the most incriminating thing in my son's room.

A wave of shame breaks over me. What am I doing? Of course Dylan doesn't have anything suspicious in his room. He's a child. I hate myself for daring to imagine otherwise.

I put Dylan's room back together and spend the rest of the night in a fugue state. I contemplate calling Matt B. for a round of omakase and hotel elevator sex, but it's too late. He's asleep now. Brooke will just ask if I've called the lawyer yet. The only person I really want to talk to is Jenny, but that's out of the question. If she knew the real reason I was doing all of this, she'd never speak to me again.

Instead I open her stupid book on surveillance and read the entire thing, cover to cover, stopping only when the sun's rays begin to crawl through

the window.

I wake up closer to noon than I intended. My head is pounding. Caffeine headache, probably. There's a text from Brooke. DID YOU CALL A LAWYER YET?!, followed by two bright red exclamation points. I wonder if she's seen the *Daily Post* website too.

I crack open a Red Bull and check the homepage. The headline about the boys fighting is gone. In its place is one that reads:

PSYCHIC CLAIMS TO COMMUNICATE WITH MISSING SCHOOLBOY

94 HOURS GONE! the countdown clock shouts.

I click on the article, but before I can read it, my phone pings.

1 new message from Dylan.

Hope surges in my chest. This could be it. The moment I've been waiting for. My son is going to explain everything. I race to open the message, but there are no words. Just a solitary turtle emoji.

Greta.

Fuck. I still haven't fed that damn turtle.

I walk to the kitchen to survey the contents of the fridge: a bottle of vodka, three limes, a container of leftover Indian takeout. I spoon some aloo gobi on a plate, Dylan's objections ringing in my ears: *You can't feed a turtle takeout!*

And you can't hide your missing classmate's backpack under your bed and not tell me about it, I retort in my head.

Greta is perched on the big rock in the back of her tank, sunning herself near her UV lamp. I spoon the curry into her tank. She stares at me with an expression of utter disdain.

The yellow tin can on Dylan's desk catches my eye. The one from Mr. Foster, with the crickets. Ugh. Fine. I'll give her what she really wants.

The can is surprisingly heavy in my hand. I lean over Greta's tank and brace for a flurry of insects. But when I remove the lid, nothing happens. I tip the can slightly and give it a small tap. A shower of nails rains into Greta's tank, missing her by a couple of inches. Greta gives me an apathetic stare, like *You're even more useless than I thought*.

"It's not my fault that the old idiot gave me the wrong container," I huff. *Fucking Mr. Foster*. Doddering old man. As soon as I sort this Alfie stuff, I'm going to have a word with him. Dylan needs normal friends his own age.

I clean up the mess as quickly as I can, pinching the nails between my fingers and depositing them back in the tin. When I finish, I dump the rest of the Indian food into the corner of Greta's tank and hurry out of Dylan's room.

She doesn't even blink a thank-you.

Jenny picks up on the third ring.

"Are you still mad at me?" I blurt out, before she can say anything. "Because I miss you."

It's true. The last few hours have been strangely lonely. I hadn't realized how much I'd come to rely on Jenny—for rides, company, and, of course, the investigation.

"I'm not mad," Jenny says quietly. She sounds a million miles away; her voice has a vague, distracted quality.

"Oh, great. Should we get brunch and talk next steps? We could go back to that Lebanese—"

"Florence, I can't. Something came up. I had to go into work and put out a fire."

"What? I thought you were using vacation days?"

Jenny sighs loudly. "Welcome to the working world."

I ignore the dig. This is still a penance mission.

"Listen, I read the books you gave me. Well, one of them, anyway. On surveillance."

“Really?” She sounds surprised.

There are some muffled voices in the background, colleagues maybe. I realize I don’t even know where Jenny’s office is. Soho? The City? I wonder if she has one of those glassy corner skyscraper offices like in the movies, with orchids on the desk and assistants running around fetching coffees that are never hot enough. I should ask.

“I have to go,” Jenny says. “Just, I don’t know...do your best. Maybe you can find an address or some contact details for Mr. Sexton.” She hangs up before I can say good-bye.

When I knock on Adam’s door, he answers immediately, shower-fresh and smelling of minty shampoo. He’s wearing dark sweatpants, his white V-neck straining pleasingly across his muscular chest.

“Flo!” he says with a smile. Inside his flat, the TV is on; the unctuous smell of sausage and fried eggs drifts through the open door.

“Perfect timing. Just making some food. Come on in.”

I haven’t been up here in ages, since before Marta moved out. We usually hang out in my flat, which has the benefit of the back garden and furniture you’d actually want to sit on. Adam’s half of the house was purchased by his police chief father in the late ’90s—I suspect as a place to conduct affairs—and never renovated. The kitchen is all dated oak cabinets and faded magnolia walls. My eyes dart around the kitchen. Most of the counter space is taken up by gallon-size jugs of creatine powder. One of Marta’s inspirational Instagram quotes is still framed on the wall: “Life is a canvas. Paint it with your dreams.”

It’s immaculate, though; I give him that. Every surface is scrubbed and sparkling.

“Damn, dude. You get a cleaner?”

“Nah. Marta was the messy one. One good thing about her leaving, I guess. Can finally live in a clean flat.”

“Hmm.” Marta never seemed that messy to me. But then, she and I weren’t close. Our relationship consisted entirely of exchanging

pleasantries about the weather whenever we ran into each other on the front path. One Christmas she'd knocked on my door and handed me a gift-wrapped parcel containing a "personal journal inspired by the best-selling book *The Secret*." I hadn't bought her anything and had handed her an unwrapped bottle of prosecco straight out of the fridge, even though I was pretty sure she didn't drink.

"She leave you the pot too?" I ask, pointing to a pastel pink Le Creuset knockoff burbling with baked beans.

Adam shrugs. "Yeah. Too heavy to schlepp back to Poland, I guess." I sit down at the kitchen table while Adam plates the food. The TV is on. A Sky News reporter in a belted wax jacket is standing in front of a marsh, explaining the "controversy" over the plan to drain the reservoir to look for Alfie, after concerns from an environmental group that it might disrupt migratory bird patterns.

Adam plonks a heaving plate of food in front of me and gestures toward the TV. "Can you believe it? All this fuss for one rich kid," he says, shaking his head.

I nod. I'm not really in the mood for one of his "everyone is equal" speeches.

"You off work today?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"Yup." His voice drifts toward me from the kitchen. "Headed to the gym later. Leg day."

"You still doing that thing..."

Adam reappears, clutching a bottle of HP Sauce. "CrossFit? Oh yeah. Got a bunch of competitions coming up. Probably be gone for a few days."

He puts the sauce on the table and motions for me to eat. I stare at the plate, pushing the eggs around with my fork.

"How's your, uh, investigation going?" he asks, stuffing a huge spoonful of beans in his mouth.

I clench my jaw. "Not great, actually. None of our leads have panned out. Now Jenny's annoyed with me."

He shovels another bite into his mouth and frowns. "How could anyone be annoyed with you?"

I bite my lip. Surely he knows the only reason anyone is ever *not* annoyed at me is because they are hoping I'll sleep with them.

"She feel like you're not pulling your weight, or what?"

"What? Have you spoken to her or—"

"No—er, well, I bumped into her yesterday. At Nando's."

I feel something snap inside me, an extra synapse or something.
"What?"

"It's really good! Lotta protein options, if you're bulking."

"No. I mean, why were you hanging out with Jenny?"

Adam frowns. "Awww, c'mon. It was just some chicken." He holds out a plate to me. "Tomato?"

I shake my head.

"It's really not a big deal, Flo."

But it is a big deal. Adam may not be my boyfriend, but he is my backup plan. His attention, his favors, his loyalties—those belong to me. I rely on them. But I manage to push my jealousy aside, because I came here on a mission.

"I need your help."

Adam's round blue eyes narrow into little slits. "What kind of help?"

"I need to show Jenny that I'm contributing. To the investigation. That it's not just all her. Can you help me find an address?"

"What kind of address?"

"His name is Robin Sexton. He was a teacher. At St. Angeles. Got fired a couple years ago."

Adam exhales slowly, considering. "And what do I get in return?"

I frown. "We're talking about a *child*, Adam. A ten-year-old boy. Someone's kid."

Adam pouts and stabs a sausage with his fork. "It was a joke, OK?"

"So you'll help me?"

He groans, and I know I have won.

"I'll see what I can do," he says. "No promises." He pushes a plate of fried meat toward me. "Now, Flo...?"

"Yeah?"

“You really need to try these sausages.”

The address for Robin Sexton comes through the mail slot that night, scrawled in Adam’s handwriting on a scrap of notebook paper. I text Jenny the good news without mentioning where I got it.

If she’s impressed by my sleuthing, she doesn’t show it; her only reaction is a thumbs-up emoji.

I try again. WANNA CHECK IT OUT? WHEELS UP TOMORROW AT 9AM?

K, she replies, a few minutes later. I wonder if she’s still mad or just really busy.

BELINDA’S SICK. MAY HAVE TO BRING THE BOYS, Jenny adds.

I gulp. It’s a test.

NO WORRIES, I reply, adding a smiley face for good measure. THE MORE THE MERRIER!

Shepherd's Bush

WEDNESDAY, 9:45 A.M.

WHEN I WALK OUT OF the house the next morning, Jenny is alone in the rented red mom-mobile. Belinda the nanny has managed a miraculous eleventh-hour recovery, granting me a reprieve from the Max & Charlie show. But Jenny is even tenser than usual, alternating between cracking her knuckles and taking large gulps of an iced Americano.

"Ever been to Guildford?" I ask, hoping to break the ice.

"I think it's pronounced Gil-ferd," Jenny replies. "The 'd' is silent. Ready?"

She starts the car without waiting for my reply. As we glide out of London, sturdy redbrick homes become new-build flats, then construction cranes and strip malls with signs in Polish. Finally, the E-Z-Storages and money transfer shops give way to gentle, sloping green hills.

I was expecting some shabby, soulless commuter hive on the outskirts of London, but Guildford turns out to be a perfectly charming little market town, complete with a medieval castle.

We have plenty of time to admire the castle because we get lost. Jenny argues loudly with the satnav as we circle in infinite loops around the Guildford roundabout. ("It's technically a gyratory," she chides me.) It feels

almost like old times, but there's a new undercurrent to our relationship, an edge that wasn't there before.

By the time we pull into Chestnut Road, the sun is high and flat in the sky. The street is quiet. Most of the residents have left for work. It's trash day; bits of debris and empty bins litter the sidewalk.

Robin Sexton's house is number 16, a tidy Victorian worker's cottage. The brick exterior is painted white, with a crisp green front door and a potted olive tree. It's downright cute. You'd never know someone accused of a monstrous crime was living there.

We park a few doors away, beneath a tree whose leaves have fallen onto the street in a big pile.

I turn to Jenny. "Now what?"

"What do you mean? You read the book. Now we wait." She drums her fingers on the steering wheel. "Hand me the picture again?"

I show her the photo of Mr. Sexton that I'd snapped from Dylan's old yearbook.

"He's not bad-looking," Jenny muses, and I have to agree. You sort of expect someone accused of groping a child to radiate a general creepiness, with wire-rimmed glasses and a shiny domed head. But Robin Sexton—at least the Robin Sexton of four years ago—looks fresh-faced and wholesome, with a square jaw and broad shoulders and wavy brown hair. He looks like he played lacrosse. You might swipe right on him, if you weren't feeling particularly ambitious.

Jenny hands me back the photo. "I mean, he's no Adam," she says with a wink, "but he's not bad."

I feel like I've been slapped. "What?"

Jenny unbuckles her seat belt and turns to face me. "Oh, c'mon. Are you telling me you two have never—you know?" She wriggles her eyebrows suggestively.

I feel my face flush. "Ewww. No!"

Jenny shrugs. "I dunno. He's pretty cute."

"What? He's not even your type," I sputter.

Jenny wrinkles her nose. "What do you know about my 'type'?"

“I dunno. I just see you with someone who, like, wears a suit. A businessman. Or -woman,” I add hastily.

Jenny snorts. “A *businessman*? What does that even mean?”

She seems genuinely offended, but before I can smooth things over, a sharp knock on the passenger’s-side window interrupts us. A woman with a broad face and a small dog gestures for us to roll down the window.

“Morning!” she says. “Can I ask why you’re parked here?”

I stare at her, stone-faced. “You the traffic warden?”

The woman gives us a fake smile. “It’s just that, on this street, there’s sort of an unofficial parking order. For residents.” She shifts her weight, waiting to see if we take the hint. “You see, usually, I park here,” the woman continues. “And I suppose I could take another spot”—she gestures to the empty street—“but it would cause a lot of confusion for everyone. Perhaps you could just scoot backward a few feet? That’s the spot we tend to leave open for visitors.”

The woman’s small dog gives a yap, as if agreeing with her assessment.

“Sure thing, weirdo—” I start to say, but Jenny cuts me off.

“No problem,” she says, rolling up the passenger’s-side window and easing the car into reverse. She turns to me. “Picking petty fights with strangers is not really great undercover practice. The whole point is not to be memorable.”

She turns off the engine and begins to chew the nail on her right index finger with a ferocious intensity. For some reason, this annoys me. “Since when do you bite your nails?”

“Maybe since I stopped vaping?”

“What? Why?”

“What do you mean *why*? Vaping is terrible for you. I should have quit a long time ago.”

“I just don’t see why—” I start to argue, but I stop mid-sentence, because a man in joggers and a hunter green jacket walks out of number 16, with a large black duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

“That’s him,” I shout. “That’s Robin!”

Jenny’s eyes widen. “Is that a duffel bag? Oh my god, record this—”

I pull out my phone and scramble to open the camera app. I start to film as Robin makes his way to a white van.

“A white van? Like an *actual* white van! Does it get any sketchier than that?” I squeal.

Jenny and I watch as Robin glances over his shoulder, then opens the rear door of the van and places the duffel bag in the back with a heavy thud. But instead of getting into the van and driving away, he gently closes the door and walks back into his house.

“Did you see that?” I say, my eyes wide. “The bag?”

Jenny nods. “Whatever was in there was heavy.”

Before either of us can say anything else, Robin reappears, lugging a second, identical black duffel bag. He deposits it next to the first one and walks back to the house.

“Holy shit. Holy shit. Are you seeing this?” I say in disbelief.

Jenny gestures to my phone. “You’re getting this, right?”

Robin reappears a third time, toting a huge white plastic sack on his shoulder. I squint, trying to make out what’s written on the side of the bag.

Jenny puts on her glasses. “Or-ga-nic Fer-til-iz-er,” she says, her voice cracking.

Robin tosses the bag in the back of the van, closes the door, then gets in the driver’s seat and starts the engine. I stop recording and shove the phone in my purse.

“He’s leaving,” I squeal. “We have to follow him.”

A flicker of hesitation flashes across Jenny’s face. “Follow him?”

“C’mon, we have to see where he’s going!”

Jenny turns the key in the ignition, and our mom-snacks tank rumbles to life. My heart is pounding as we pull out onto the main road. Jenny is careful to maintain a two-car distance, just like the surveillance book advises. It’s not a chase, exactly. More like a very lawful, careful following. But it feels exciting nonetheless.

We trail him for a mile, then two. Then three. Finally, Robin puts his turn signal on.

“He’s turning left,” I say. “Don’t lose him!”

Robin pulls into a shopping center and parks the van in front of a B&Q hardware store.

Jenny turns to me, her voice shaky. “I’ll get the shopping cart, you grab the doll. Dumb moms, remember? Act casual.”

Jenny hops out of the car before I can answer. I grab the diaper bag and fumble with the seat belt on the baby carrier, but it won’t budge.

“C’mon,” Jenny calls, already halfway across the parking lot.

I give the seat belt another tug, and it finally releases. I extract the carrier, toss a floral-printed muslin on top of our plastic baby doll, and scurry to catch up with Jenny, the diaper bag banging against my hip.

The air inside the hardware store smells rubbery and plastic, with a hint of chemicals. It’s the middle of the day; the other shoppers are mostly tradesmen in coveralls. We walk past cans of paint and house plants and lighting fixtures, engaging in performative, make-pretend conversation about baby-led weaning as we frantically scan the aisles for Robin. Periodically, I reach my hand under the blanket and soothe our lifelike baby doll.

“There, there,” I say to absolutely no one.

When we reach the tool section without any sign of him, Jenny suggests we split up.

“I’ll stand up by the exit in case he leaves. You scan the aisles. Don’t forget about the garden center,” she says, jerking her chin toward the greenhouse doors.

I position myself at the top of the drill aisle and pretend to examine some impact drivers. No sign of Robin. I keep moving, pausing at the paint display to admire some high-gloss chips. From the corner of my eye, I see a flash of hunter green. Robin. He’s at the very end of the aisle, less than ten feet away, by the sponge rollers. I pause for a moment and study his face. Is that the face of someone who would hurt a child?

My eyes dart to his cart, just as a man in paint-spattered overalls brushes past me and plants his broad body directly in front of me, blocking my view.

“Excuse me,” I say, trying to maneuver past him, but he doesn’t budge. I give him a gentle tap with the cart, just a nudge, but I overshoot it. The diaper bag I’ve slung over my shoulder makes contact with a hip-height shelf of Farrow & Ball paint. The builder whirls around, just in time to see a gallon can of Elephant’s Breath slide off the shelf and land directly on top of my muslin-covered baby carrier with a dull thud.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, yer baby!” the builder shouts, pointing in horror to the can, perfectly cradled in the infant seat.

There’s a round of audible gasps. The store had seemed practically empty before, but suddenly dozens of people are gawking, staring open-mouthed at the irresponsible mother who dropped a can of paint on her baby.

“It’s fine.” I try to pivot the cart so I can turn around, but the aisle is filling with shoppers eager to see what all the fuss is about.

“She’s fine,” I say again. Behind the paint counter, an employee in an orange polo shirt picks up a walkie-talkie. “Code 300 in paint.”

“Pick up the can!” a woman with gray hair screeches. She moves closer to me, gesturing toward the Elephant’s Breath. “Your poor baby!”

Tentatively, I hoist the can of paint off the carrier and lift the corner of the muslin cloth to peer at the plastic baby doll.

“Yup, all good,” I say, feigning relief. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Let me see,” the woman says, elbowing me out of the way with her meaty arms. “I used to be a nurse.”

I lunge for the doll, but the woman is quicker, ripping the blanket off and scooping up the contents of the carrier.

“What the—? It’s plastic!” she shrieks, holding the doll up like a bomb that needs detonating. “It’s a fake baby!”

The builder recoils, disgust spreading over his face. “A fake baby? Who brings a fake baby to B-and-Q?”

People tut audibly, shaking their heads, hurrying away from me like they’re worried my insanity might be contagious. At the end of the aisle, Robin notices the commotion and squints in my direction. I freeze. It’s been a couple of years since he was a teacher at St. Angeles. I doubt he’d

recognize me, but I can't risk it. I abandon the cart and the baby and begin to race out of the paint aisle.

"Madam, you can't just leave your—" the orange-shirted employee calls after me, as I race through the aisle toward the exit.

Jenny is leaning against the wall behind the checkouts, her eyes scanning the registers.

"Let's go," I bark. "We have to go."

She frowns. "Why? What happened?"

"I hit a display. With the cart. A can of paint fell on the baby. Bit of a scene."

A cackle escapes her lips, and she rushes to cover her mouth. "Right," she says, wiping the smile from her face and grabbing my hand. "Let's get out of here."

We hurry out of the store, through the automatic doors and into the parking lot. When we reach our rented mom-mobile, my knees begin to wobble. I bend down, trying to catch my breath.

"Oh my gosh, that was insane!"

Jenny rolls her eyes, her expression halfway between annoyance and amusement. "You're such a chaos muppet."

"I know. But I saw him."

"And? What was he buying?"

"Couldn't see. Too far away."

She shakes her head and unlocks the car. I start to open the passenger's-side door.

"Actually," she says, pointing to the backseat. "I have an idea. Scrunch down in the footwell."

"What?"

"C'mon. We've come this far. Let's finish the job."

I want to protest, but I don't dare. I've already made enough of a mess. I climb in the backseat. The floor smells like feet and dirt and carpet cleaner. Jenny passes me a pair of binoculars.

"Get ready," she says.

I peer above the rim of the car window and try to adjust the binoculars. It's no use. Everything is blurry, doubled. It's making me dizzy.

"He's coming out. Eleven o'clock!" Jenny calls from the driver's seat.

"I can't get these dumb things to work!"

Jenny reaches into the backseat, snatches the binoculars, and makes a series of quick adjustments.

"OK," she says, craning her neck for a better view. "Got him."

"And?"

Her face turns white, and she draws a short, sharp breath. The binoculars fall out of her hands and land on her lap with a thud.

"What?"

She turns back to look at me. The blood has drained from her face, and her hands are shaking lightly.

"A saw," she says, her voice light and breathless. "Robin Sexton just bought a saw."

Guildford, Surrey

WEDNESDAY, 1:18 P.M.

JENNY PASSES ME THE BINOCULARS. “See for yourself.”

I peer through the glass, just in time to see Robin’s dirty white van peel out of the B&Q parking lot, tires squealing.

“He’s leaving! Follow him.”

Jenny turns the key. I brace for our car to zoom after him, but nothing happens. I put the binoculars down.

“C’mon,” I snap. “We need to see where he’s going!”

Jenny turns the key again. Nothing. She frowns. “The car won’t start.”

I feel my face grow warm, the temperature in the car rising “What? How does that happen?” My voice is louder now, more desperate. “Seriously, what the fuck?”

“I dunno,” Jenny says, taking a deep breath. “I’m not a mechanic. I’ll call the rental company. And we should contact the police, tell them what we saw. Honestly, it’s for the best. If that man really did— Well, he could be dangerous.”

I slam my head back against the headrest, too furious to speak. Against all my wildest hopes, we have somehow found an actual, living suspect. A person who is not only not Dylan, but is also a confirmed child molester. And we are letting him get away.

“What the fuck? So we’re just giving up now?”

Jenny looks at me in surprise. “Why are you freaking out? It’s not like we can confront him ourselves. I can’t get *arrested*, Florence. I could lose my job. And I have the boys to think about. That was never the plan. The police—”

“Jesus! I cannot believe this!” I snap, banging my head against the seat. My seat belt is way too tight; it’s starting to feel like a straitjacket. I can’t breathe. “Did you *not* just watch a child groper load fertilizer and a saw into his creepy white van?”

Jenny looks down at her hands on the steering wheel and furrows her brow, like she’s trying to work out a tricky math problem in her head. I can feel her coming off the adrenaline high of the chase. The rational, skeptical part of her brain is taking control, kicking the tires, doubting everything we just saw.

“Listen, all of that—it’s circumstantial. The man has no criminal record. No history of violence. Not even a traffic violation.”

“He groped a student! Everyone knows that.”

Jenny shakes her head. “Robin Sexton was never charged. I checked. There’s no record of an arrest.”

My face is burning now. I blink back hot tears. “Why are you even here? Why did you come?”

She stares straight ahead, not meeting my eyes. “I think the real question is, why do you want it to be him so badly? What’s going on, Florence?”

The question makes me feel like I am being peeled alive. *Dylan*, I want to shout. But I can’t.

Instead, I study my nails, refusing to meet her gaze. “I—I care about Alfie. I thought you did too.”

Jenny puts a hand on my arm. “I care about the truth,” she says softly.

I jerk away from her. “No. Uh-uh. You seriously expect me to believe you did all of this—the mom-mobile, the disguises, this chase—because you care about ‘the truth’? The truth is over there driving away, and we’re just sitting here.”

Jenny sighs. “What do you want me to say? I was lonely? I liked hanging out with you? It was, I dunno—fun?—to have something that wasn’t my soul-crushing job and my ungrateful children and the unbearable, oppressive weight of responsibility that bears down on me from every direction? Is it a crime to want to talk to another adult for ten minutes?”

Silence settles over the car. We sit together in the B&Q parking lot, neither of us speaking.

Finally Jenny clears her throat. “I’ll call the towing service. And then I’ll call that detective, the one from the parents’ meeting, PC Thompson. We should tell him what we just—”

Her words are interrupted by the sound of a phone ringing. My phone. It feels like a glass of ice water being poured down my back.

NO CALLER ID, the display reads.

I take a deep breath. “Hello?”

“Ms. Grimes?” says a man’s voice. Deep. Unfamiliar.

“Speaking.”

“This is Detective Singh. We spoke on Friday, about your son.”

My entire body clenches. A tinny, metallic taste fills my mouth. I throw open the door and jump out of the car, out of Jenny’s earshot.

“Sure,” I squeak. “I remember.”

“We’ve got some, uh, new information. Need you to come down to the police station.”

I swallow hard. Through the window, Jenny shoots me a concerned look.

“Now?”

“Yes,” he says. “How soon can you be here?”

“Is it—”

“I’m afraid it’s not good news.”

“Who was that?” Jenny says when I hang up.

For an instant, I almost crack. I'm dying to tell her about Dylan, the backpack, the *Feelings Journal*. All of it. But I can't.

"It was Will," I lie. "Dylan's out of socks."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm so glad I don't have to deal with that ex-husband bullshit."

I stare out the window. Outside, dark clouds are assembling on the horizon.

"Looks like it's gonna rain," Jenny says.

I will myself not to cry.

"Sure does."

Shepherd's Bush

WEDNESDAY, 4:12 P.M.

THE SHEPHERD'S BUSH POLICE STATION is all garish light and squeaky plastic seats. There's a filthy little watercooler with no paper cups in the dispenser. The whole thing feels like a dire Labour Party advert designed to shame Tory politicians for underfunding public services.

Detective Singh meets me in the lobby. He seems older today, more relaxed on his home turf.

"Afternoon," he says, whisking me back to his desk, which is covered in a mound of papers and manila file folders and half-empty mugs of coffee.

"Have a seat," he says, taking a sip from one of the many mugs. "Sorry, forgot to offer. You want one?"

I shake my head, and he sighs, leaning back in his chair. "How's Dylan?"

"Fine. Concerned, obviously," I add quickly.

Detective Singh studies my face, frowning slightly. "Still at his dad's house?"

"Yup."

Singh makes a note on a tiny piece of paper, then looks up at me. "No easy way to say this. We're bringing Dylan in for a formal interview. Under caution." He pauses. "Do you understand what that means?"

A whooshing sound begins in my ears, like a helicopter taking off.

“No,” I say, struggling to keep my face neutral, my voice calm.

Singh takes a slow sip of his coffee before explaining. “It means his answers will be recorded and can be used in future criminal proceedings.”

“He’s ten!”

“Yes. Obviously, an adult will be present. Yourself—or a representative. Now it’s important for me to tell you—Dylan is not under arrest at this time. But ten is the age of criminal responsibility in this country. And this interview is not voluntary, Ms. Grimes.” Singh leans forward, his chair creaking beneath him. “If Dylan refuses to cooperate, we can arrest and charge him to secure his cooperation.”

I stare at him, dumbstruck. “Lawyer,” I spit. “I want a lawyer.”

“You’re welcome to hire a solicitor,” he says calmly. “In fact, I recommend it.”

He shuffles some folders around on his desk and continues. “If, after interviewing Dylan, we feel there is sufficient evidence to charge him, we will approach the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision. This could happen immediately after the interview or within a few days.”

He slides a card toward me. “Now, I appreciate that Dylan is with his father in”—he glances down at his notes—“Hertfordshire, was it? So I’ll allow an additional day for you to make the necessary travel arrangements. If there are any issues with your ex, let me know and we can have a word. Otherwise, I’ll see you and Dylan here on Friday morning. Let’s say ten a.m.?”

I try to say something. Anything. But my mouth feels like cotton wool. I’ve failed. It was all for nothing.

“Right,” Singh says, standing up and nodding toward the door. “See you then.”

When I break the news to Will, he is characteristically apoplectic. It’s my fault, of course.

Jesus Christ, Florence. How could you let this happen?

The usual accusations follow: if I had spoken up, paid more attention, hired a lawyer, etc., all of this could have been avoided.

I don't react, allowing Will's accusations to wash over me. When he doesn't get a response, he grows even angrier, until he is actually shouting, bellowing down the phone line at me. Then he abruptly changes tactics and tries to argue his way out of it.

"But there's no body!" he says. "They haven't found a body!"

He says it over and over, like a self-soothing mantra. *No body. No body. No body. No body.*

I clear my throat. "Listen, Will. This is happening. Pull yourself together. Dylan needs a lawyer. I'm going to call Julian's dad, get a recommendation."

There's a pause, a brief break in the tsunami of accusations. For the teeniest, tiniest moment, I contemplate telling Will about my plan. I'm desperate to confide in someone. And surely, if anyone could understand what I am about to do, it's Dylan's father. The person who ostensibly loves him as much as I do.

But the sound of my ex-husband's voice snaps me back to reality.

"I can't believe this," Will says. And then, "You tell him. You're the one who got him into this mess."

Without warning, he hands the phone to Dylan. My mind is reeling. I struggle to collect my thoughts.

"Hiya, Mum."

"Hi, buddy." I swallow hard. "I need to tell you something that might be upsetting."

"Is it about Alfie?" His voice sounds small and scared.

"No, hun. It's about you."

After I hang up, I get straight to work.

I look up the train departure times on the railway website, noting the ticket price so I can pay cash at the station. I order what I'll need from Amazon and Argos, selecting "click and collect" for Argos and paying extra

for same-day Prime delivery. Then I open Dylan's online Seesaw account, the one where the teachers post photos of field trips and science fair exhibits. I scroll back in time, watching the boys age in reverse. I download the photos I need, then transfer the images to a USB stick.

Around 8:00 p.m., the phone rings, shaking me out of my meditative state. I glance at the caller ID. Overseas number. Probably spam. I take a closer look: 213 area code.

Elliott.

A thrill of anticipation courses through my veins as I lunge for the phone, but it's quickly subsumed by another thought: Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than what I'm about to do. Allowing myself to get distracted, even briefly, could lead to a mistake that will jeopardize my son's entire life. This is my last chance. Dylan's last chance.

I take one final, longing glance at the still-ringing phone in my hand and let the call go to voicemail. I'll call Elliott back tomorrow, once I've fixed everything.

An eerie, inexplicable calm settles over me. For once in my life, I know exactly what I have to do.

Shepherd's Bush

THURSDAY, 7:18 A.M.

WHEN THE SUN COMES UP on Thursday morning, I am waiting for it. Everything is heightened: colors, sounds, smells. I am no longer a person. I feel ancient, primal; a slimy, prehistoric creature lurking on the dark seabed floor. I sit at my kitchen table and dial Jenny's number.

"Whoa," she says. "You're up early." In the background, I can hear the sounds of a chaotic family breakfast unfolding: milk pouring, spoons clanking against bowls, Max and Charlie arguing over whose Weetabix is bigger.

The ordinariness of it all feels like a personal affront. This time tomorrow, my son will be on his way to a police interrogation. By next week, he could be sitting in a cell. Eating a jailhouse breakfast with other juvenile detainees. But I can't tell her any of that.

Instead I say: "I know how we can get inside his house."

"What? What are you talking about?"

There's a pause. Jenny shouts, "Stop it, Max," and one of the kids starts to shriek.

"Robin Sexton. We have to go back there. Please, Jenny—I have a feeling about this."

“Yeah, no,” she snorts, banging her hand on the table. “Max! Kind hands! Sorry. I’m gonna need a bit more than ‘a feeling’ to go off.”

“Think about Dyl—” Oops. Freudian slip. “Alfie, I mean. Think about Alfie!” I try to appeal to her natural curiosity. “Don’t you want to know what’s in those duffel bags?”

Jenny sighs. “Of course I do. But nothing has changed since yesterday. We absolutely cannot go into that man’s house.” She pauses. “If anything, we should probably have gone back to Ms. Schulz. See why she lied about knowing Ian.”

My heart sinks. I knew, on some level, that she would never agree, but I realize now how much I had allowed myself to hope.

“Did you call PC Thompson?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Yup. He’s going to flag it up the chain of command.”

I stare out the kitchen window in the gray backyard. Football-size holes dot the grass, next to little mounds of freshly turned earth. The fox is back.

“I thought we were friends?” My voice is small and pleading.

Jenny snorts. “Florence, this has nothing to do with being friends.” In the background, a plate slams onto a stone countertop. “What you’re asking me to do is crazy.” Her voice is rising now, climbing the scales from miffed to indignant. “Frankly, I can’t believe you would even put me in this position. I would never—”

“Fine. Never mind. Seriously, forget I even asked.”

I hang up and stare out the window into the back garden, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fox. It would be a good omen. A sign that I’m doing the right thing. A breeze rustles through the bushes. A pigeon lands on the neighbor’s tree. But that’s it. No fox. No sign.

I look down at my phone, willing Jenny to relent. To call me back and change her mind. But I already know she won’t.

I’m on my own now.

Robin Sexton opens his front door wearing khaki chinos, a crisp button-down shirt, and the tensest expression I have ever seen. Up close, he is less

attractive than his photos, with an upturned nose and the smug, fastidious manner of someone who irons his underwear. I'm wearing a fluorescent yellow safety vest and a plastic hard hat, a green "hidden disability" sunflower lanyard dangling from my neck. His eyes linger for a moment on the lanyard.

"Can I help you?" Robin says in a tone that implies he has no intention of helping. He rests his hand on the doorframe, and I can't help but admire his nails: immaculate, like he's just had them buffed.

"Are you the resident of this house?" I say in my best impression of a British accent.

"Who's asking?"

"Emily, uh, Smith. Thames Water. We're investigating reports about poor water quality in this area."

He frowns. "Don't you usually send a letter?"

There's a tightness in my chest, like someone is pulling my muscles apart. I wasn't expecting him to be this skeptical. If he doesn't let me in, I—or rather, Dylan—will be screwed. Better not to think about that.

I suck in air through my teeth and shake my head. "Can't afford to wait, I'm afraid. You heard of Legionella? Nasty stuff."

He glances over his shoulder. "I'm actually in the middle of something." I peer through the open door. There's no sign of Alfie.

"One in ten cases is fatal," I say. "Notice anything different lately? Any new aches or pains?"

Robin grunts and rubs his left shoulder, grimacing slightly. "How long will this take?" he says, without budging from the doorway.

"Oh, I'll be quick. You won't even know I'm here."

He gives a final exasperated little sigh and opens the door for me.

"Shoes off!" he barks as I cross the threshold.

Inside, the flat is warm and cozy. There's a woodburning stove, a thick stack of logs, and a well-worn sofa. Classical music is playing softly. It does not, I have to admit, look like the home of a child snatcher, but maybe that was his goal.

I begin setting up my tools at the kitchen sink. I snap on a pair of latex gloves and unpack the Legionella testing kit I ordered off Amazon with a hundred and fifteen five-star reviews. On the way to Guildford, I'd watched a YouTube tutorial on water sampling. Well, most of it anyway, until the Wi-Fi in the train gave out.

Robin shoots me an aggrieved look. He gestures to the wooden cutting board full of minced onions and bell peppers. "I'm actually trying to cook here, if you don't mind."

"No problem. I can start upstairs." Upstairs is where I'm trying to get to anyway.

I take the stairs two at a time. The USB stick is the size of my pinky. I'd spent half the night collecting photos of Alfie and had amassed quite a collection.

Robin follows me up the stairs and stands in the hallway, tapping his foot as I pretend to collect a sample from his bathroom sink. God forbid he leave me alone for two seconds so I can do my job. Jeez.

I fill the glass test tube under his watchful glare, my hand shaking lightly. I twist the cap as slowly as I can, hoping he will get bored and leave. He's positively hovering. Like he's afraid I might steal one of his fancy soaps or frilly little hand towels. I find his unwillingness to hide his suspicion of me offensive.

I fill another test tube with water and take my time sealing it off, wondering how the hell I'm going to get him to go back downstairs.

"So, um, you live here alone, sir?" I ask.

He frowns, his neat eyebrows transforming into a mean unibrow. "How is that relevant?"

I gulp. "Just making conversation."

"Hmmm," he says. Just like that. *Hmmm*.

A timer goes off in the kitchen, and he jumps a foot in the air.

"The sourdough!" he says, hurrying downstairs with a scowl. "I'll be right back. Don't touch anything!"

I count his footsteps as he walks down the stairs. *Eight, nine, ten*. When I'm sure I'm alone, I race out of the bathroom and push open what I hope is

his bedroom door. Bingo.

It looks like a prisoner's room. A white metal bed frame with a single quilt, a small wooden dresser. The only personal effect is a framed diploma from Cambridge that hangs neatly above the bed.

I open his top dresser drawer. Rows and rows of identical black socks. Freak. I place the USB stick into a sock toward the back and shut the drawer as quietly as I can. Then I kneel down and remove Alfie's backpack from the plain canvas tote I'm carrying. I push the backpack under the bed and give it a shove. The bed frame is low to the ground; the backpack gets stuck, half in, half out. Panic rises in my throat. I give it a kick, then another. It doesn't budge.

I can hear footsteps now, Robin bounding up the stairs two at a time. I give the backpack a final karate-chop kick and it disappears beneath the bed, just as the door swings open.

"What are you doing in here?" he demands.

I glance around the room, searching for an answer. I can taste my heart in my mouth.

"I was...I was checking if you had a washbasin in the bedroom. Like an en suite. Lots of homes do nowadays." I scan the room. "Nope, no en suite here," I say cheerfully, just as something dark catches my eye. Fuck. The strap of Alfie's backpack is poking out from beneath the bed like a navy blue tentacle. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Robin frowns. "What part of Ireland are you from?" he says suddenly.

"Sorry?" So much for my British accent. I rack my brain for the name of an Irish-sounding place. "Blarney?"

"I'd have guessed the West Coast," he says, smiling at my confusion. "Got a bit of an ear for languages, you could say."

"Oh, um, very cool," I murmur, maintaining careful eye contact while using my toe to shove the strap beneath the bed. "Right. All done here."

I make a beeline for the stairs before he can ask me anything else.

He frowns. "What about the downstairs tap, in the kitchen?"

"Oh, it's fine. It's all the same supply."

"Really," he says. "Because I thought you said—"

“I’ll be on my way, then.” I push past him and scurry down the stairs. My heart is beating so hard it feels like it might explode. I am desperate to be out of this house and far, far away.

Robin follows me down the steps, unrelenting. “I’m just confused, because you said—”

“Be sure to stick to bottled water until we have the results back,” I say, edging toward the front door. “You’ll get a letter in six to ten days with the findings.”

“How will you—” he begins, but I’m already out the front door, scurrying down the sidewalk.

At Guildford railway station, I slip into the Costa bathroom and splash cold water on my face. Under the fluorescent light, I look like a ghoul. I lean in closer. Am I imagining it, or are my eyebrows getting sparser? No. No. I’m being paranoid. This is not like last time. My eyebrows are fine.

Still, I am extra careful not to brush anything against my face as I remove my sunflower lanyard and the yellow safety vest, stuffing them into separate bins in different stalls.

It’s early afternoon when my train pulls into Waterloo Station, but it already feels like rush hour. Around me, busy people bustle and scurry and shove. I take out the water testing kit, separating the bag and its contents and depositing them into bins on opposite ends of the crowded platform.

As I walk toward the Tube, a man hands me a free copy of the *Evening Express*. I glance down at the cover and see Alfie’s sad brown eyes staring back at me. *FRIDAY MARKS ONE WEEK WITH NO ANSWERS*, the headline cries. Which reminds me: I’m not quite done yet.

Shepherd's Bush

THURSDAY, 3:18 P.M.

"HIYA, FLO," ADAM SAYS, LEANING on his doorframe. "You good?"

He looks exhausted, a pale purple half-moon beneath each eye. I try not to stare.

"Wanna go for a walk?" I ask.

He frowns. "Now? It's nearly dark."

"I need to ask you something."

Adam's expression changes. He takes his hands out of his pockets, cracks his knuckles. "Sure thing. Lemme just, uh, grab my coat. Meet you out front."

I wait for him on the street, kicking pebbles with my shoes. The adrenaline from earlier has drained from my body; my legs feel like they've been filled with lead.

Adam appears a few moments later in a dark green puffer coat. "Which way d'you fancy?" he asks.

"Fountains?"

The White City Fountains occupy an unloved stretch of concrete by the Wood Lane Tube station, an uninspiring water feature dreamt up by a developer trying to win approval for more hideous new-build flats. Dylan

had adored them as a toddler. The two of us spent hours between the high-rise and the highway, watching those eight little streams of water.

Adam and I sit together on a cold stone bench. A handmade sign informs us the water has been turned off as a “temporary cost-saving measure.” A gaggle of preteen boys are performing unimpressive skateboarding tricks on the smooth concrete.

Adam looks at me expectantly. “So,” he says. “What’s up?”

I pause. For a second, I have an urge not to say anything. To keep it all to myself. But I’ve already dragged him out here and made everything “maximally dramatic,” as Brooke would say. I need to say something. Once I do, though, it’s going to change everything. There is no going back.

I fix my eyes on the skateboarders. There are five of them, but one is much better than the others. He’s showing off, doing solo tricks that involve grabbing the board with his hands in the air.

I clear my throat. “I think I know, um. Who took Alfie.”

“Go on,” he says, his eyes cold.

“There was this math teacher. He got fired, couple years ago. For groping a kid?”

I look up at Adam. His face is blank, unreadable.

“I found Alfie’s backpack. In his house.”

Adam stares at me for what feels like an eternity. The sun is setting, the cold creeping in beneath my jacket. Adam leans back, tilting his body away from me.

“Wow.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “How did you—wow. Can’t believe Jenny went along with that.”

I stiffen at the sound of her name. “No, no. She didn’t. It was just me. Jenny actually—”

Adam’s eyes bore into mine. “She doesn’t know, does she?”

“No,” I admit. “She doesn’t.”

In the distance, one of the skaters wipes out. His friends gather around him in a little half circle, laughing and slapping him on the back.

“What should I do?” I say. “Who do I tell?”

Adam exhales slowly, his nostrils flaring.

“Well,” he says finally. “I can’t be getting involved. Wouldn’t look right. But there’s a public tip line. You could call that.”

He shifts on the bench, twisting until his face is just inches from mine. There is nowhere to look but into his eyes. “But seriously, Flo. Are you sure? Like, *really* sure? Before you go and ruin some guy’s life forever?”

I squirm and kick the concrete with my sneakers. At this point I’d set myself on fire to keep Dylan out of trouble. It’s the only thing in the entire world I’m sure about.

“Yes,” I say. “I’m positive.”

He cracks his knuckles. “Righto. Well, we should get back.”

On the porch, he leans in to hug me. He wraps his arms around me, enveloping me in a cloud of Old Spice and laundry detergent, burying his face in my hair.

“Please don’t do anything stupid,” he murmurs into the top of my head.

There’s a bit of elevator music and then a clicking sound, like the start of a recording.

A woman’s voice says, “Thank you for calling the Alfie Risby Tip Line. May I take a few details?” Her voice is chipper, like she’s taking lunch orders at a drive-through.

“Hi. Um, just checking—will this be—is it anonymous?”

“It certainly can be,” the woman says, like she’s reciting the day’s lunch specials. “However, if you’re interested in potentially claiming the reward, then I would need to take a few details.”

Upgrade to a combo for just ninety-nine cents more!

“I, umm...”

My mind is spinning. I haven’t thought this through.

“Can you speak up for me, luv? My ears aren’t what they used to be.”

I picture an elderly woman in a pastel cardigan, a lonely volunteer in some church basement.

“Anonymous,” I say, recalibrating my attempt at an Eastern European accent. “Sorry, my English, not so goodly.”

“Oh, bless you, luv, you’re doing great,” she says, and I nearly burst into tears.

I don’t have to pretend to be upset. My voice is genuinely shaking as I tell her my story: How I make eleven pounds an hour cleaning houses. How I send most of that money home. And how I found Alfie Risby’s backpack underneath my client’s bed. As I give her Robin’s address, I start to cry.

The old woman tries to console me. “It’s all right, luv,” she says. “You’re doing the right thing.”

The right thing.

The words ring in my ear long after I’ve hung up the phone.

The police raid Robin Sexton’s house overnight. When I wake up Friday morning, the photos are all over the papers. *FORMER TEACHER ARRESTED IN HUNT FOR MISSING SCHOOLBOY*, the headline screams.

The *Daily Post* must have gotten an advance tip-off about the raid. Their homepage is full of dozens of high-resolution photos: police officers in bulletproof vests; white-suited forensics team dutifully removing bags of evidence; a bewildered Robin Sexton being led out of his house in handcuffs.

I lie in bed and watch the footage of the raid on YouTube while drinking my morning Red Bull. Sunlight is pouring through the shutters now, and I hold the phone to my face, replaying the clip over and over again so I can study Robin Sexton’s expression as he’s led out of his house in handcuffs. He looks surprised and scared, like a kid who’s been called to the principal’s office and doesn’t know why. A ripple of guilt cuts through my gut, like the beginning of a stomach flu. I push the feeling away. He’s a child molester, I remind myself. His arrest is a net gain for humanity. It was the *right thing* to do. I’m tempted to call Jenny, but I can’t risk tipping off her Spidey sense that I’m involved. Better to let her break the news to me.

When Singh calls to tell me Dylan’s interview is being postponed “in light of recent developments,” I pretend to act surprised.

“Canceled for good?”

“Until further notice,” he says gruffly. I text Will the good news.

An hour later, Jenny calls. I’m in the shower, attempting to coax a sufficient spray from the reluctant showerhead.

“Did you see?” she demands, completely breathless. “They made an arrest. You were right!”

I give up on the shower and grab a towel. “Oh, yeah. I saw that.”

Jenny pauses. “Good thing we didn’t follow him. Can you imagine?”

“Umm, yeah,” I mumble, like a car running out of gas. My adrenaline is exhausted; my plan did not extend to managing Jenny’s reaction.

Jenny lowers her voice. “Still no body, though. Kinda weird, right?”

The call is starting to feel dangerous, like an exam I might not pass. I’m desperate to talk to her, to let the whole story pour out of my mouth in one breathless deluge. And if I stay on the phone any longer, I might just tell her everything.

“Listen, Dylan’s coming home today. I gotta run to the store. Get some groceries.”

Jenny sounds surprised. “Oh. Of course,” she says. “Don’t let me keep you. I should probably show my face in the office anyway.”

“OK,” I say. “See you soon.”

When I hang up, a strange ache comes over me, like homesickness or sea sickness or something. I turn the water back on, adjusting the temperature until it’s scalding hot and I can’t feel anything at all.

That afternoon, Will drops Dylan off with a bag of dirty laundry and an expression of pure contempt. Dylan gives me the briefest of hugs on the porch and races inside to his room. *Is he checking to see if Alfie’s*— I wonder, then stop myself. It doesn’t matter anymore. It’s over. Done.

Will hands me the laundry bag.

“Crazy news,” he says, folding his arms across his chest.

I nod. “Yeah. Crazy.”

“So Dylan’s—”

“Safe,” I say swiftly.

“Good,” Will says, his shoulders relaxing. “Good.”

I study Will for a moment: the slight double chin, the chino shorts in winter, the ludicrously expensive watch masking the fading sense of his own importance. Standing there on my porch, he looks like every other paunchy, middle-aged dad in West London. I feel baffled, and a touch embarrassed, that this utterly unremarkable person ever held so much power over me.

He begins to shuffle off the porch.

“Hey, Will?” I call, pointing to his shirt.

“Yeah?”

“You missed a button.”

Brooke’s wedding is tomorrow, so Dylan and I decide to spend Friday evening on the sofa, watching reruns of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* He’s on his best behavior and doesn’t even complain when I heckle the contestant, a forty-one-year-old accountant from Dorset who refuses to give up after winning the £32,000 question.

“It’s thirty grand!” I squawk at the TV. “You’re rich. Count your blessings and go home.”

Dylan rolls his eyes and takes another slice of vegan pizza from the box on the table.

“When will I go back to school?” he asks.

I take a bite of my own slice. Hot fake-cheese scorches the roof of my mouth.

“Monday, I guess? I mean, they caught the guy. It’s safe now.”

Dylan looks up at me, threads of cheese hanging from his mouth like a spider’s web. “They didn’t find Alfie, though.”

I freeze. *Tread lightly*, I think. “Yeah. Not sure what to think about that, really.”

White-hot guilt burbles in my gut. I feel like my intestines are on fire. How long will it take for this feeling to go away?

I stuff another slice of pizza in my mouth and pray Dylan doesn't ask me anything else.

That night, after Dylan's asleep, I tiptoe into his room. He's snoring lightly. I stand in the doorway and watch his chest rise and fall, his eyelashes fluttering like tiny butterflies.

My baby. I take a step closer to him, brushing his damp hair off his forehead. Warm tears prick my eyes, and for a moment, my guilt is overwhelmed by something else. Relief? But relief is such an unsatisfactory word for what I'm feeling. Relief is when you breeze through a red light without setting off the traffic cameras or smuggle a particularly lovely tube of hand cream past the register in the duty-free shop.

But this—Dylan—it's everything. Or the difference between everything and nothing. I stand in the doorway for a long time, watching my son's eyelids flutter softly.

I'm just about to leave the room when his eyes fly open. Dylan looks straight at me, with no trace of dreamy sleep or confusion.

"Thanks, Mum," he says. His voice is soft and muffled, like it's coming from a thousand miles away.

I freeze. My heart begins to pound in my chest. *Is he thanking me for getting rid of Alfie's backp*— I push the thought from my head. It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is right in front of me.

"You're, uh, you're welcome," I stammer, gathering my composure.

And I mean it. I feel terrible about what I did, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat if it means my favorite person on earth is safe here with me.

Belgravia

SATURDAY, 9:48 A.M.

THE BRIDAL SUITE AT THE Goring Hotel smells of gardenias and Aquanet. Brooke stands in front of me and does a performative little twirl. She's wearing a hammered silk slip dress, held atop her delicate shoulders with spiderweb-thin straps. Her face is bare, her lips bloodred. Her veil, a single sheet of tulle, floats behind her like a shimmering valance, held in place with a vintage brass hairpin. The effect is 1992 Kate Moss meets Carolyn Bessette. The kind of styling you'd only choose if you were already so gorgeous that no amount of adornment could possibly improve things.

I fidget in my chive-colored bridesmaid's dress. Soon the high-strung wedding coordinator will knock on the door and we'll all pile into a fleet of vintage Rolls-Royces and make our way to the church. But for now it's just the two of us: Pandora and Tilly have popped out for ice. Dylan is at the groomsmen's brunch in the restaurant downstairs.

I'm aware I should say something, give Brooke some kind of big-sister moment, but I can't find the words.

"You look beautiful," I manage, which is an understatement. She's the most stunning bride I've ever seen.

Brooke squeezes my hand and then drops it to do another twirl in front of the full-length mirror.

"I do, don't I?" she says with a little laugh. "Thanks for being here," she adds. "I'm just so glad everything is, you know...over." She laughs nervously, her tinkly sleigh bell laugh. "It is over, right?"

I nod. "Totally."

Early-winter sunlight pours through the window. It catches her pearl earrings, and for a moment, everything feels so sun-kissed and perfect, it's almost unbearable.

"How's he doing?" Brooke says softly.

"Fine," I say automatically. "Dylan's great. But this is *your* day, Brookster. Just for today, we're only going to talk about you."

Brooke sniffs twice in quick succession, like she's trying not to cry.

I arch my eyebrow. "Don't. You'll ruin your makeup. Anyway, I have to ask you a question. Something serious."

"Anything," she says, wide-eyed.

"Are you absolutely, positively *sure* that you want to change your last name to Chuntley?"

The ceremony is the classic "love, honor, obey" led by a jowly priest in an old church. When Brooke had asked me to sing, I'd suggested Etta James's "At Last," as a joking reference to the eight and a half years it took Julian to propose. But standing at the church's crypt-cold altar, belting out the lyrics, the song feels absolutely perfect.

The reception is in a grand hotel ballroom. Adam, Dylan, and I are at the bride and groom's table. Adam hadn't wanted to come ("Weddings aren't really my bag, Flo," he'd insisted), but I couldn't bear the thought of Pandora's and Tilly's pitying looks if I showed up alone. He'd relented in the end, pouring himself into a rented tux and making me promise he could leave at midnight, no matter what.

Dylan is a groomsman, and though he had insisted on pairing his suit with Converse sneakers, he still looks so handsome and grown-up that I

can't help but imagine his own wedding one day, to some crunchy granola girl or guy. Outdoors, probably, in a public park, with biodegradable wooden forks. A few weeks ago, this vision would have struck me as small and sad. But tonight, it seems ludicrously, unbelievably charmed; a shiny bauble glistening with light and luck.

I lean back in my seat, quaffing champagne as I survey the happy scene: Adam bravely making small talk with Julian's father about whether Hammersmith Bridge will ever reopen to cars. Dylan playing *Roblox* on my phone. Julian swaying across the dance floor to Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World," with all the sloshy elegance of a drunken Englishman. Brooke, bless her, doesn't seem to notice. She's draped her arms around him and is grinning from ear to ear, as if being a sloppy drunk is one of his most endearing personal qualities.

I take another biscuity sip of champagne. Everything is fine. *Finally*.

The DJ transitions seamlessly into Mariah Carey's "It's Like That," and I shoot out of my seat.

"This is my jam!" I squeal.

Brooke winks at me from the dance floor and mouths, "You're welcome."

Adam grins, extending a hand. "May I?"

"It's not really that kinda song—" I protest, but he takes my hand and proceeds to twirl me around the floor with an easy confidence.

"I didn't know you could dance!"

He smiles. "Yeah. Marta made us take lessons."

"Wow. You don't seem the type."

"I'm full of surprises," he says with a wry grin. When the chorus comes, I belt out the lyrics.

Adam pulls me in closer. "You know, you've really got a great voice."

I blush. "Yeah, well, look how far it's got me."

"Aww, don't be so hard on yourself." Adam's face changes. "Actually—I wanted to talk to you about something. Something serious."

"Oh yeah? What?" I am giddy, almost drunk with relief that the whole thing is finally over, that Dylan is safe.

Adam stops dancing. “Could we go outside for a minute?”

“Oh. Uh...” I don’t want to go outside. Or have a serious conversation. I’m desperate for this magical feeling to last, to stay in this gilded ballroom drinking and twirling and having my own private little celebration that this whole mess is behind me. And if Adam is about to confess his feelings for me, I’m definitely not up for it.

Before Adam can say anything else, the DJ changes tracks. The opening bars of Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)” fill the ballroom, and I feel a tap on my shoulder.

“Wanna?” Dylan says, extending a scrawny arm in my direction. My heart surges. Dylan hates dancing, along with most kinds of touching. This is A Big Gesture.

I glance at Adam, who gives a funny little bow. “Of course. We can talk another time,” he says graciously.

I take both of Dylan’s hands, and we begin to sway, awkwardly at first, then spinning around the ballroom, faster and faster. I start to feel dizzy, but I don’t dare ask him to stop. I smile so wide my cheeks ache.

“It’s OK,” I whisper to my son. “Everything is going to be fine now.”

The blissful feeling carries through until the next morning. Adam had bowed out as soon as the cake was cut, mumbling an excuse about training and an early start. But I’d stayed for the after-party in the groom’s suite, putting Dylan to bed in a neighboring room and then swigging champagne from the bottle and arguing with one of Julian’s groomsmen about the merits of Prince versus David Bowie, until his wife found us and hissed in his ear that it was time for them to leave.

By the time the doorman packs me and Dylan into the back of a black cab the next morning, the sun is already rising. Dylan is in a good mood, swiping through photos of the night before.

“What should we do when we get home?” I ask, desperate for the feeling to last just a little longer.

“Order donuts?” Dylan says.

I high-five him. “Perfect.”

He’s scrolling the Deliveroo app as the cab pulls onto our street. I spot a small figure in a gray anorak hurrying down our front steps.

“Who’s that?” I snap. “On our porch?”

Dylan squints through the glass. “Probably just Mr. Foster. He was going to leave me an article to read and some crickets for Greta.”

I feel my good mood begin to curdle. “Why?”

Dylan looks up at me, a strained annoyance etched in his face. “What do you mean? He’s just being nice. He’s my friend.”

I shake my head. “No, Dyl. Your only friend cannot be our retired weirdo neighbor. You need friends your own age.”

Dylan frowns. “But I don’t like kids my own age.”

“Here OK?” the driver says.

The taxi comes to a stop, and I fling open the door. “Don’t you see? This is how the whole mess—” I stop myself. “You know what? Just go inside.”

“But, Mum!”

“Go. I’ll be right in. And leave the crickets on the porch.”

Dylan unlocks the door, and I turn to follow the anorak-clad figure down the sidewalk.

“Hey!” I shout, but he doesn’t stop. “Hey! Mr. Foster!”

“Oh, Florence!” A sheepish look crosses his face as he turns around. “My, you’re all dressed up! Been somewhere nice?”

“My sister’s wedding,” I reply through clenched teeth. “What were you doing on my porch?”

“Oh, just leaving some things for Dylan. Bit of reading material, some crickets for Greta. You know she’s—”

Rage rises in my throat, sweeping across my body. This is all his fault. This weird old hippie, with his cans of crickets and his recycling documentaries and his turtle hibernation tips. He is the reason my son has no friends. The reason my son ended up in this whole mess to begin with. The reason I almost lost him. And it ends today.

“Listen, I want you to stay away from Dylan,” I say, my voice shaking slightly. “From now on. He needs to make friends his own age.”

Mr. Foster’s face blanches. “But our—”

“I’m his mother. Do you hear me? It’s not appropriate. And no more crickets.”

Mr. Foster is still for a moment and then nods. He turns and shuffles across the street, back to his own house. I stomp up the porch stairs and slam the yellow cricket tin into the recycling bin. It hits the bottom of the plastic bin with a heavy, metallic thud.

When I look up, Dylan is standing at the front window, watching me. A dark shadow crosses his face. He releases the fabric of the curtain and then disappears deeper inside the house.

Shepherd's Bush

MONDAY, 7:20 A.M.

BY THE TIME DYLAN GOES back to school on Monday, Alfie is no longer the top story on the *Daily Post*—displaced by an earthquake in Asia, climate protests outside BP headquarters, and MacKenzie Matthews, a twenty-eight-year-old TikTok influencer nearly strangled to death by a masked stranger while walking home from a hen-do. She's been giving interviews all morning about her "near-death" experience with the Shepherd's Bush Strangler.

It's strangely comforting, the speed with which everyone has moved on. If they can forget the whole Alfie thing this quickly, so can I.

So will we.

I make waffles to celebrate Dylan's first day back at school. It's so unlike me that it seems to alarm him. He gives me a worried glance as he sits down at the kitchen table.

"You OK, Mum?"

"I'm great," I say. "Never been better."

It's true. I'd woken up without an alarm, like a fully charged battery, with maximum energy. Didn't even need a Red Bull. Perhaps this will be my new thing. *Homemade breakfasts. Apron mama. Hands-on parent.*

“You excited to get back to school?” I ask, slopping waffle batter onto the sizzling iron.

Dylan shrugs.

Good enough, I think. I watch my son as he hunches over his plate, forking waffles into his mouth at a rapid clip. He’s wearing his St. Angeles uniform again. He looks good. Healthy. Everything is going to go back to normal now.

Dylan looks up from his waffle at me and frowns. “Did you do something to your eyebrows?”

A wave of icy panic washes over me. My hand flies to my brows.

“What? No!”

“Oh,” he says calmly, continuing to munch his waffles. “They look different.”

I force a smile, ignoring the tightening feeling in my chest. “Nope. Everything is exactly the same as it always was.” I push the plate of waffles toward him. “Have another.”



Dylan and I arrive at school early for once. Allegra, Farzanah, and Hope are standing in a little huddle, whispering. Hope catches my eye and makes a sympathetic clucking noise. “Good to start easing them back in, don’t you think?”

I nearly choke in surprise. “Are you talking to me?”

Hope lifts her chin slightly. “I was just saying to Allegra, it’s for the best. Children thrive on routine.”

“Oh, um, yeah. For sure.”

Allegra nods, and I feel as if I’ve passed a little pop quiz. The tragedy seems to have made me more palatable to the other mothers, now that someone has been arrested. Or perhaps Hope just feels guilty for suspecting my son in the first place.

“Anyone heard from Cleo?” Hope says tentatively.

In the days since Mr. Sexton’s arrest, Cleo had not been her usual impeccably mannered self. First, she’d posted in the mums’ WhatsApp

group, asking about the sign-up deadline for the February half-term ski trip. She'd followed it up with a link to a clickbait article entitled "Top Five Missing Children Who Were Later Found Alive." Several people had given it a heart emoji, but no one really knew what to say.

Then Hope had the temerity to suggest that this year's HFG be turned into a fundraiser to create an "Alfie Risby Memorial Scholarship," and Cleo had completely lost her shit.

CAN EVERYONE PLEASE STOP ACTING LIKE MY SON IS DEAD!!! she wrote. It was so out of character no one knew how to respond. Instead, the group chat had simply gone silent.

"Bless her," Allegra says, as her misshapen dog strains against his leash. "I cannot even imagine."

Farzanah nods. "Can't be easy, losing your son and your husband all at once."

Hope clears her throat. "It's just so awkward now, with HFG, now that Cleo is not...in favor of the new plan."

I dare to ask the question no one else will: "Why not just cancel it?"

Farzanah purses her lips. "It's ten days away. Everything is already paid for—"

Hope cuts in, interrupting her. "I think the bigger issue is, what message would canceling send? Traditions are important. For the community. And the children." She scans the drop-off line, then lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I mean, bless her, but is Cleo even a part of the PTA anymore? Technically, if she's not a parent..."

I look at Allegra, expecting her to protest or, even better, defend her old friend Cleo—but she just smiles weakly and changes the subject. "Did I mention I'm on the committee for Goffs London Sale this year? Anyone in the market for a thoroughbred?"

The conversation shifts, and we shuffle toward the school gates. Once upon a time, I would have judged these women—*a child went missing and they don't want to cancel their party!* But I find myself identifying with their transparent wish to have everything remain exactly as it was. And after

what I've done, I'm hardly in a position to judge. Anyway, it's just a party. Canceling it is not going to bring Alfie back.

As we draw closer to the gate, I scan the horizon for Ms. Schulz's familiar form. But the old battle-ax is nowhere to be seen. In her place is a stern-looking bald man in a navy suit and brown leather loafers.

I turn to Hope. "Who's that—" I start to ask, but then the man is reaching out to shake my hand.

"Bert Sanders," he says, his voice slick and confident. "On behalf of the entire Omega Plus community, I want to thank you for your continued trust."

"Where's Ms. Schulz?"

He seems surprised by my question. "Oh, apologies. I thought school leadership would have communicated that. Helen has opted for early retirement. Effective immediately."

"What?"

He shifts his weight. "The, uh, upset from the situation. Bit much for her, I'm afraid. But we're terribly grateful for her many years of service."

Bert gives me a strained smile. He wants me to move on, but I'm not ready yet.

"Why wasn't there some sort of announcement? A ceremony? She worked at this school for, like, thirty years."

Bert purses his lips and frowns. He's not used to being challenged. "I'm sure there will be, at a less...sensitive time." He clears his throat, fixing his eyes on the mothers behind me. "Today is really about the boys. Getting them back on course, don't you agree? Eleven-plus exams are right around the corner."

I open my mouth to protest, but Dylan is bounding through the gates, and Bert has started a new conversation with Hope about a charity golf tournament.

"Have a good day," I call to Dylan, but he's already disappeared.

The rest of the day unfolds before me like a vast expanse of blank paper. Did I really used to spend the entire day going to the salon and watching reality TV?

I knock on Adam's door a few times, but he's not home. Probably at the gym. Or work.

I text Brooke, *How's THE HONEYMOON GOING?* She responds with a half-dozen sun-drenched photos: a white-sand beach, a lemur, a baobab tree at sunset. Julian is conspicuously absent. I picture him parked at the resort tiki bar, downing margaritas and watching cricket on his phone. I wonder if Brooke is secretly as bored as I am. There aren't even any balloon orders to fill. The sort of women who order custom balloon arches aren't sloppy enough to give birth in the run-up to Christmas and doom little Caspian to a lifetime of overshadowed birthdays.

It's embarrassing to admit, but I miss Jenny. She's back at work now and has texted me exactly once since Mr. Sexton was arrested, a breezy check-in with a vague mention of "drinks soon." But without Alfie's disappearance to investigate, what do we even have to say to each other? Are we still friends? Were we ever?

Around noon, I decide I might as well get a manicure. Kill some time. But when I arrive at Fresh Nails, the door is locked. I jiggle the handle, but it doesn't budge. I peer through the darkened glass, searching for the familiar outline of Linh curled up in a massage chair, but it's empty. Not like her to just close the salon. Has she gone on vacation? I contemplate calling her, but I'm not even sure I have her phone number.

I trudge home, feeling desperate and pathetic, until I remember: Elliott. I can call him back now, get things moving again. I perch on the edge of my bed, my heart fluttering in my chest as I dial his number. But my call goes straight to voicemail. Never mind. Still early in L.A. He's probably hiking or something. He'll call back.

I slump on the sofa and flick through the channels. It reminds me of right after Will left, how the days had felt infinite and shapeless. At least back then I had a baby to take care of. Say what you will about infants, but keeping them alive certainly fills the hours.

I spend the remainder of “the first day of the rest of my life” on the sofa, trying to remember what on earth I used to do all day, before Jenny and Alfie and the whole stupid thing started.

Shepherd's Bush

TUESDAY, 8:43 P.M.

BY TUESDAY, I AM CLIMBING the walls. There's a peculiar feeling settling over me, a certainty, deep in the pit of my stomach, that something VERY BAD is about to happen. I take to checking the locks on the door several times, double- and triple-confirming that the gas stove is off. I spend hours studying my face in the bathroom mirror, examining my eyebrows for signs of thinning.

Jenny still hasn't texted, Fresh Nails is still inexplicably closed, and Dylan is moping around, making sad eyes because I forbade him from seeing Mr. Foster. So when Matt B. texts me about a new sushi spot opening in the basement of a boutique hotel in Mayfair, I allow myself to be lured by the siren song of eel rolls and 1200-thread-count sheets. I wasn't actually planning on going out tonight: Brooke is still on her honeymoon, so I don't have a babysitter. Ten years old is borderline to stay home alone, I know. But I deserve a break. A victory lap. Anyway, I stayed home alone at ten, and I had to watch Brooke too, while our mother worked the late shift at Denny's.

I tuck Dylan into bed before heading out and text Adam to keep an ear out. *Back to your old ways*, a little voice in my head chimes, but I push it away.

The restaurant is in a windowless basement, dark and plush and louche. The kind of place that is practically begging you to have an affair. Matt B. is seated in a booth, hidden by a privacy curtain, but I recognize his shoes. When I lift the little curtain, he looks me up and down and pretends to faint.

“My god, look at you.”

I grin. One of my favorite things about Matt B. is how much he appreciates my appearance. A lot of guys will try to play it cool, never give compliments, but Matt B. is slobberingly open with his admiration. Still, he won’t touch me until we go upstairs, not even a hug or hand on the shoulder. Plausible deniability, I suppose, in case we bump into someone from his office.

I lower myself into the booth across from him. The upholstery is soft and deep. A waitress appears, and Matt B. orders two bottles of sake and the chef’s tasting menu for both of us, plus “whatever else she thinks is good,” then leans back in the booth and gives me an appraising look.

“So, what sort of mischief have you been up to lately?”

I rack my brain for something that will amuse him. Matt B. is the kind of guy who carries two phones, who has to “check in” with work throughout the weekend. As far as he is concerned, I might as well be an alien species: a full-grown adult without a real job.

I sip the first sake, allowing the icy sweetness to coat my tongue.

“Well, let’s see—I framed a man for a hideous crime. But don’t worry, he was a pedophile, so he deserved it.”

Matt B. throws his head back and gives a deep belly laugh. “That right, eh? How many years he looking at?”

“I dunno. All of them, probably.” I down the rest of the sake in a single gulp. “You?”

“Oh, you know, just making the rich richer.”

I found Matt B.’s wife on Instagram once. Most of her photos were of their three kids. The youngest, a boy, is severely disabled: wheelchair, professional nurse, the whole nine yards. Matt B.’s never told me any of this. With me, he always acts like a freewheeling bachelor, just another finance bro living it up in the city. Going along with it feels like a kindness.

I smile, slide my shoe off my foot, and begin to glide it carefully up Matt B.'s leg.

He tuts, gesturing to my plate. "You haven't touched your yellowtail." Matt B. takes food very seriously. His entire nonwork personality is knowing a lot about restaurants.

I stab a cold piece of fish with the end of my chopstick and pop it into my mouth. It melts on my tongue like cool, salty butter.

I hum appreciatively.

"Here," Matt B. says, pushing the second sake toward me. "Pair it with this one. Better match for the flavor profile." He launches into a mini dissertation about the five basic types of sake and their various fermentation processes, and I allow my mind to wander to Ian. I wonder what he would be like on a date. Not like this, I bet.

By the time Matt B. finally pushes away his chopsticks and dangles the hotel room key in front of me, he's slightly drunk. A thin film of sweat glistens on his forehead.

"Shall we?" he says with a crooked smile.

My stomach flip-flops. I'm tipsy, but not tipsy enough, somehow. Still, I follow him up to the room. When he unbuttons his shirt, I take one look at his eager face and feel a wave of revulsion. It's not the alcohol, I realize. It's that fucking someone else's shitty husband no longer feels thrilling and salacious. It feels pathetic. I can't believe I left Dylan at home for this. What the hell am I doing?

I mumble an excuse, grab my shoes, and slip out the door, racing down the hallway toward the elevator.

I try to order a taxi on my phone, but the app rejects me. *We're experiencing high demand*, it reads. *Please try again in a few minutes*. High demand. Must be nice.

Fuck it, I'll take the night bus. I climb to the upper level and grab a seat in the middle, just behind the stairs. The bus is full of the usual suspects: shift workers in stained corporate-logo polos, weary revelers navigating the

precipitous territory between intoxication and hangover, and a few desperate souls seeking shelter from the cold night air. I put my headphones in and zone out as we glide past the darkness of Hyde Park.

I smell her before I see her. A woman, tiny, shrunken, no bigger than a child, wearing an enormous cashmere coat. When she gets closer, I realize the coat is hiding a pair of rumpled Frette pajamas. I take off my headphones, unsure if I can trust my eyes.

“Cleo? What are you doing on the bus?”

I’ve heard grief does strange things to people, but Cleo’s transformation is breathtaking. Her glossy blond bob is gone, replaced by a fluffy halo of white hair. She’s clutching a bottle of Chablis and a glossy Harrods bag filled with loose sheets of paper.

Before I can say anything, she plops herself into the empty seat next to me, enveloping me in a cloud of wine sweat. It’s unclear if she recognizes me, but she seems to have decided I’m a friendly presence for the time being.

“Does Rollo know where you are?” I ask gently.

Cleo slumps further in her seat. “That cheating bastard?” She takes a sip directly from the bottle of wine on her lap. “She’s twenty-five. Twenty-five!”

“I’m really sorry,” I say. “About Alfie. I know we’ve had our differences, but I—I can’t even imagine what you’re going through.”

“I know about you,” she says, swiveling in the seat to look straight into my eyes.

I freeze. “What do you mean?”

“You and Jenny. You were trying to find him. Ms. Schulz told me. Why?”

“Why? We just...felt bad, I guess. It’s a terrible thing.”

Cleo plunges her hand into the shopping bag, then leans forward, as if she’s about to let me in on a secret.

“Look,” she says, shoving a piece of paper in my face.

It’s a child’s drawing, done in blue pen. A house, a garden, a dog. Beneath are the words *Love you mum*.

“I, uh—I don’t understand.”

Cleo wipes her face on her sleeve of her coat. “Someone mailed it to the house. Anonymously. Two days before they arrested”—she gulps—“that man.”

I flinch. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see?” she hisses. “This is his handwriting. Alfie is alive.”

The hope shining in her eyes is brutal. I feel a little piece of me die. “Cleo, I—”

Her eyes narrow. “You don’t believe me?”

I change tactics. “Have you spoken to the police?”

“The police?” she spits. “The police?” Her voice is growing louder now. She stands up again. “The police don’t want to hear about it. They said it’s a hoax, some sicko taking advantage of the situation. Said I’m hysterical. A grieving mother.”

“Aren’t you, though?” I say, my voice barely a whisper.

“You have to help me,” she says.

Everyone on the bus is staring at us now, wondering what’s going on, if a fight is about to break out.

“Cleo, please. I—I’m not a detective, OK? All of that, it was a mistake.”

She looks up at me, pain etched in her face. “Please,” she says. “Please. I’m begging you. Help me.”

“The police have their guy,” I insist.

Cleo waves the drawing at me one last time, then stands up and begins to march down the stairs, just as the bus brakes. The wine bottle flies out of her hand as she lurches forward. She tumbles down the last four steps, collapsing in a heap at the bottom. The other passengers gasp. I hurry toward her, extend my hand, but she bats it away.

The doors shudder open, and Cleo staggers to her feet.

“I’m going to find my son,” she says. “Even if no one helps me.”

She stumbles through the open door and into the darkness. A small part of me wonders if I should follow her. But the other, bigger part of me is

relieved. She's crazy, I remind myself. Insane with grief. Nothing she says can be taken seriously.

But even I have to admit the handwriting on that piece of paper looked an awful lot like the handwriting in Alfie's *Feelings Journal*.

You know, the one I burned in my sink.

Shepherd's Bush

WEDNESDAY, 10:02 A.M.

THE NEXT MORNING, DYLAN AND I both oversleep. Typical for me. But Dylan is usually up with the sun, like a human alarm clock.

He groans when I yank back the covers.

"Five more minutes," he pleads.

I acquiesce, but we're late for school. Late-late. The gate is locked; I have to ring the buzzer and then go into the registrar's office and sign a slip of paper declaring the reason for our tardiness, my pores still oozing sake. Hope and Farzanah are standing in the hallway, chatting with Verity Parker, one of the front office administrators. Hope is wearing the same creamy cashmere coat I'd seen on Cleo the night before, except Hope's is clean and makes her look like a caterpillar that got stuck in her cocoon.

I avoid making eye contact, but Verity pounces on me, not realizing I'm not part of the mums' club. I suppose to her, we all look the same.

"Great news," Verity calls breathlessly. "It's a go!"

I lean against an artwork-covered wall and try to work out what she's talking about.

"HFG is on!" Verity beams, as if this is all her doing. "The school has Rollo's support to proceed with the event as a memorial fundraiser."

A vision of Cleo riding the bus in her pajamas flashes in front of me. “What about Cleo? I thought she—”

Farzanah interrupts me without looking up from her phone. “You know they’re in the middle of a divorce? Bless her. Terrible situation.”

Hope chimes in, not to be outdone. “Right? Heard his new one is only twenty-five! Can you imagine?”

A wave of indignation sweeps over me. “Well, maybe someone should go check on Cleo? You know, since we’re all so *concerned*.”

Hope’s eyes dart sideways to Verity. “Oh, Florence,” she twangs in her Australian accent, “I’m just not sure that would be appropriate? Apparently, she’s threatened legal action against the school.”

Her words settle over the front office like a dark cloud. I mumble an excuse and back away from them, out of the building and down the block.

I try my best not to think of Cleo for the rest of the day. My focus should be on Dylan. Helping him get a fresh start. Maybe I’ll talk to Will about moving him to a new school. St. Angeles has had a groping incident and lost a child. If that’s not reason to break with tradition, I don’t know what is. Moving Dylan midyear might look suspicious, though. Probably best to keep everything as it is.

The rest of the day passes in a haze of *Property Shark* and naps. At some point I fall asleep on the couch and dream that Cleo has drowned in my bathtub, that I am trying to wake her up, slapping her in the face, over and over, even though I know she is dead.

That night, I make Dylan’s favorite dinner: vegan fish fingers and peas.

He sits down at the table and gives his plate an approving little nod.

“How was your day?” I ask nervously, an ice-skater venturing out onto a freshly frozen lake.

“S’OK,” Dylan grunts. He reaches for the ketchup, knocking over his glass of oat milk. The liquid pools on the table and begins to drip down

onto the floor.

I gesture to the growing puddle. "Could you wipe that up?"

He doesn't move.

"Dylan?"

He stares at me, unblinking, as if he's taking a forensic portrait for later reference.

"You do it," he says finally.

"Dylan!" I snap, jumping up to grab the sponge from the sink. "What's going on with you?"

He doesn't reply.

"Is something bothering you? You know you can talk to me."

He pushes his peas around the plate with his fork. "Can I be excused?" he says. I nod, and he races off to his room without clearing his plate. I glance down and rub my eyes: Am I imagining it, or has he carefully arranged his remaining peas into the shape of a giant green A?

I grit my teeth as I scrape the peas into the compost bin. I shouldn't be so hard on him. It's been a hell of a week. It's gotta be tough, being back at school, sitting next to an empty desk, thinking about your missing classmate. I'm sure this is a normal stress response.

Nothing to worry about.

After Dylan goes to bed later that night, I flop on the sofa and turn on the TV. I force myself to stare at the screen, but I can't get Cleo out of my mind. Where is she now? Still wandering the streets in her pajamas? The dull ache in my gut grows stronger as I recall how she looked last night. *Helpless*. What if she gets run over by a car? Why do I even care? Cleo Risby is not my friend. And Mr. Sexton definitely did it. If anything, framing him just sped things up a bit. So why do I feel so awfully, unspeakably guilty?

I pull out my phone and scroll through Insta, past Brooke's honeymoon pics, nail art from a salon I've never been to, and a close-up of a cocktail with Ian's hand around it.

I pause. What the hell. I give his photo a like.

A private message pops up immediately. HEY. U UP?

YEAH. WATCHING TV. BORED TO TEARS.

WHITE CITY HOUSE. 9TH FLOOR. MEET U BY THE BAR?

It's tempting. More than tempting. A drink and some distraction is exactly what I need. And Adam's at home. He can keep an ear out for Dylan.

K, I reply. WHY NOT?

I creep into Dylan's room to check on him one last time. He's snoring softly beneath his astronaut duvet, not a care in the world. I run a quick slick of lipstick over my mouth, then change my mind and wipe it off. No need to look like I've gone to a bunch of effort.

When I arrive, Ian is leaning over the marble bar, deep in conversation with the bartender. It's a position that would look awkward on most people, but he manages to make it look cool, like the most natural thing in the world.

"Flor-ence," Ian says, drawing out the syllables of my name. "Come to apologize, I imagine?"

I inhale, taking in a deep whiff of his cologne. The man smells really, really good. Ian pulls out a barstool for me.

"Why would I apologize?" I ask, sinking into the soft velvet upholstery.

"Saw they arrested the bastard. Thought you might be feeling guilty. You know, for suspecting me?"

Behind the bar, a bearded man with an eyebrow ring is mixing drinks. He has a pair of dice tattooed across two knuckles of his right hand, and when he shakes the cocktail mixer, it looks almost like he's rolling them.

Ian gives the bartender a little chin-up nod. "What are we drinking, Ricky?"

Ricky pauses, appraising me with his eyes. "Looks like a Negroni girl."

"Oh, good shout," Ian says with a smile. "*Refreshing, yet bitter.* Yup. I can totally see it."

I frown. "What?"

“Ricky here has a gift. He can match your drink to your essential essence. Negroni’s a classic, by the way. Last girl I brought here”—he winces and lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper—“*mojito*. Tragic, really.”

“So it’s like a horoscope?”

“More like a personality test.”

I shrug. “Fine. A Negroni, then.”

Ricky flashes me a smile and gets to working, placing two cut crystal tumblers in front of us.

Ian swivels toward me, placing a casual hand on my thigh. “It’s great to see you.” Every blood vessel in my body dilates.

“Yeah, um, you too.”

Ricky fills our tumblers with blood-colored liquid and garnishes each one with a slice of orange.

Ian raises his glass in my direction. “What are we drinking to?”

“To Alfie?” I say automatically, without even thinking about it.

Ian’s face falls. He jerks his hand back from my leg. The spell is broken.

“To Alfie,” he says solemnly, and we clink our glasses together.

I clear my throat. “I saw Cleo. Last night. On the night bus.”

Ian’s eyes narrow. “Cleo, my father’s soon-to-be ex-wife? On a bus?” He smirks. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t doing great. She seemed...disturbed. It was kinda sad.”

“Look at you. Sympathy for the devil.” He clucks his tongue and begins folding a paper cocktail napkin. “Why do you care anyway?”

“I don’t. I mean, it’s just—the woman lost her son. And her husband.” I can hear my voice rising, taking on a shrill, desperate quality, but I can’t stop. “She’s all alone, wandering around in pajamas, showing people her missing kid’s drawings. Don’t you think *someone* needs to help her?”

Ian sets his drink on the table. “Listen. It’s cute that you want to help. But I’m just the ‘illegitimate’ son. Cleo would be the first to tell you, I’m not family. Certainly not an heir to the Risby family fortune. She wouldn’t

want me getting involved. Besides, that divorce has been in the works a long time. Way before Alfie...you know. The cards were being reshuffled, if you will."

The will. It dawns on me slowly, and when it does, I can't believe how long it's taken me.

"Wait. Is that what the letter was about? The one you mentioned that night at the club? Sent on the advice of your solicitor? You asked your father to put you in his will? Since he was having it redone anyway. Because of the divorce."

Ian frowns, wrinkling his nose. "Did I say that?" He fidgets in his seat. "I don't remember mentioning that."

The cocktail napkin he was folding is now a full paper airplane.

"But yeah, it's true. Aunt Helen's solicitor said we might as well ask nicely first. Cleo blocked it, of course. Apparently, her precious Alfie really needs to inherit all forty-eight million."

Aunt Helen. The name sticks in my ear like a claw. Fuck. Jenny was right. Ms. Schulz was hiding something. And we should have followed up on it days ago.

"Helen, as in Helen Schulz? She's your aunt?"

Ricky plops a bowl of green olives down between us. Each one is fat as a fig. Ian pops one in his mouth.

"Yeah. More than an aunt, really. The woman practically raised me after my mum died."

My heart begins to pound. I can feel the room start to spin. "Wait, so if Rollo divorces Cleo, and Alfie is gone, that just leaves...you. You'd be the only plausible heir."

Ian stares at me for a long time, then shakes his head. "Wow. Really? You think I—"

Shit. "No, I didn't mean—"

"You do know that there's a guy in custody, right?" Ian stands up and shoves hands in his pockets. "You know, I thought this—you—I thought this was something else. My bad." He shakes his head sadly and gestures to Ricky. "Put it on my tab, yeah?"

My face burns with shame. “Ian—I—wait—”

I want to shout, tell him to come back, but I can’t form the words. Watching him walk away feels like a knife twisting in my chest. *Why am I such a fuckwit?* I was only trying to help Cleo. Who, for some deranged reason, I can’t stop thinking about. But instead I’ve just casually accused Ian of a heinous crime.

One of Brooke’s many lectures rings in my ears. *You don’t have to broadcast every thought that flits through your head.*

Ricky the bartender appears with a fresh drink I didn’t order and sets it down on a coaster in front of me.

“He ran off quick,” he murmurs, glancing in the direction of the elevators.

I sigh. “Yeah. I tend to have that effect on people.”

Ricky raises his eyebrow like an invitation. “You know, my shift finishes in half an hour. If you want company.”

I consider it. It might make me feel better, at least for a minute.

Ricky looks at me expectantly. And then my phone starts to ring. The 213 number. My heart surges. Elliott.

“You can’t take phone calls up here,” Ricky says apologetically. “House policy. There’s a phone booth downstairs.”

“That’s OK,” I say, standing up to leave. I’ll call Elliott back when I get home. It’s better, actually. Makes me look busy. Don’t want to seem too eager.

The ringing stops. *1 new voicemail message.*

I take one last look at Ricky. “Thanks,” I say. “But I should go. I’ve got work in the morning.”

Shepherd's Bush

WEDNESDAY, 11:13 P.M.

AT HOME I CHECK ON Dylan, then pour myself a glass of water and carry my phone to the sofa. I need to listen to Elliott's voicemail and call him back, but my head is pounding from the Negroni, from Ian's disappointment in me, and from the stress of keeping everything together. I lower myself onto a cushion and force myself to think about albums and charts and comebacks. My comeback.

Elliott's message is long. Two and a half minutes. His voice is so bright and chipper that at first, I think I must have misunderstood the words. As soon as it ends, I replay it, just to be sure. But I haven't misunderstood anything. White-hot shame floods my body. *Of course he's not offering you a musical comeback, you complete idiot!* I chuck my phone across the room and crawl toward my bedroom, too tired to cry. I just want to be asleep and not think about anything anymore.

I haven't been asleep long when the sound of footsteps jolts me awake. Small and soft. Like someone trying to be quiet. I sit bolt upright in bed, my heart slamming in my chest.

Someone is breaking into the house.

I push the sleep mask off my face and run down the dark hall to Dylan's room. His bed is empty.

I feel sick, dizzy.

“Dylan,” I shriek. “Dylan?”

There’s no answer.

I race to the kitchen. It’s empty. The door to the refrigerator is open. Instinctively, automatically, I reach my arm out to close it. When I turn around, Dylan is standing behind me, fully dressed in his coat and trainers.

“Dylan! Jeez, you scared me. I thought someone was—”

“Relax, Mum. Just getting a glass of water.”

I glance at the clock. “It’s two a.m.”

He shrugs. “I was thirsty.”

I walk to the front door. The bolt is still firmly in place. I inhale sharply through my nose, waiting for my adrenaline to dissipate, for my heart to stop pounding.

“Relax, Mum,” Dylan says. “Seriously.”

I study his face. He’s just getting some water. I’m being paranoid. I should calm down.

It’s only once I’m back in my bed that it occurs to me to wonder: *Why was he wearing his shoes in the middle of the night?*

Shepherd's Bush

THURSDAY, 7:20 A.M.

I WAKE UP THURSDAY MORNING more determined than ever to move on. Make a fresh start. Fuck Elliott. And Ian. And that shifty liar Ms. Schulz. I may be unlovable and professionally unredeemable, but at least my son is safe. It's time to put all of this behind me and focus on Dylan. His behavior these last few days—it's clearly a cry for help. And I'm going to give it to him. It doesn't matter that Ian hates me or that I'll never be a singer again or that Ms. Schulz clearly lied to us. Dylan is the priority.

I find him in the kitchen eating muesli with oat milk and playing *Minecraft* on his phone.

"You sleep OK?" I ask.

He nods. "Yup."

"What are you gonna do at Dad's house this weekend?"

He shrugs. "Video games."

My entire body tenses. "What about friends? Anyone you like out there?"

"No," he says glumly. He fixes me with a pleading look. "Mum, can I please stop by Mr. Foster's house after school? Just really quick. Greta needs crickets—"

“Dylan, c’mon,” I interrupt him. “I’ll buy you crickets, OK? You gotta stop hanging out with that guy. You need friends your own age.”

“But no one likes me.”

I shake my head. “That’s not true. They would like you, if they got to know you. You just need to put some effort into it.”

Dylan rolls his eyes, and I hope he doesn’t call me out for my blatant hypocrisy; a person with approximately zero friends doling out relationship advice.

Fucking Mr. Foster.

I drop Dylan at the school gates and head straight for the 328 bus. He’s still the priority, of course, but he’s at school for seven and a half hours a day. I have to do something with that stretch of time.

Ms. Schulz lives in a stretch of no-man’s-land between Earl’s Court and West Brompton, on the fifth floor of an old Victorian mansion block. Verity Parker from the front office had given me her address, after I explained the PTA wanted to send flowers to celebrate her retirement.

Her building must have been beautiful once, with its redbrick facade and ornate stucco plasterwork. But now it’s crumbling and dirty, the exterior covered in a fine layer of black soot from the two lanes of traffic zooming past.

I contemplate ringing her buzzer but decide to favor the element of surprise. She won’t be happy to see me. I position myself outside the front door and begin to scroll through my phone, until an older man with a labradoodle walks out of the building.

“Hold the door?” I call, in my most damsel-in-distress voice, and he does. British people are so polite.

In the marble lobby, I step into the old-fashioned cage elevator and push the button for the fifth floor. The door clanks shut, and my heart begins to pound.

The building is eerily silent. Most people are at work. The only sound is the metallic screech and clank of the elevator.

I pause for a moment outside her flat, listening. The TV news is on, blaring about MacKenzie Matthews. I knock twice, sharply, and wait for the dull thud of her orthopedic shoes shuffling toward the door. She opens it cautiously, without undoing the chain.

“Ms. Grimes,” she says, her lip curling.

I wedge my body in the crack between the doorframe and the door. “Can I come in?”

A grimace crosses her face. “On my way out, I’m afraid. Perhaps another time.”

“Please? It’s important.” I clear my throat. “And I’d uh, hate to make a scene.”

She sighs and unlatches the chain. “Suppose you’re already halfway in already, aren’t you?”

I settle into an armchair that is the hardest piece of furniture I’ve ever encountered and scan the room. It’s oddly formal, with Queen Anne-style furniture, an antique grandfather clock, and heavy upholstered drapes. An indifferent white cat peers up at me from beneath the coffee table. No sign of Alfie. Not that I was expecting him.

I train my gaze on Ms. Schulz, who is sitting opposite me on a cream-colored settee.

“I spoke to Ian.”

She frowns. “And?”

“Why didn’t you tell me he was your nephew? You acted like you didn’t even know him!”

In the corner, the grandfather clock ticks loudly. Her eyes follow the second hand as it winds in a tight circle.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says. “And I’m afraid I need to go. I’ve tickets to a talk at the Royal Horticultural Society.” She stands up and gestures toward the door. “If you don’t mind...”

My spine stiffens. “No. Not until you tell me what you’re hiding. Why you sent me and Jenny on a wild-goose chase for Rollo’s alleged ‘secret

son' when you knew perfectly well who he was the whole time. He's your nephew!"

She takes a step closer toward me. Her eyes go watery. "You know," she says softly, "you look so much like her."

"Who?"

"My sister. Mary."

I swallow. "What's she got to do with any of this?"

She sits down again. "My sister was an angel. A complete innocent. Slept with Rollo Risby once, when she was sixteen years old. And it ruined her life. He left her penniless, with a child to support, and then had the nerve to go off and live his life like nothing ever happened."

I gulp, suddenly relating to this Mary person more than I care to admit. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Ms. Schulz shifts in her chair. The white cat jumps into her lap. "Things were different in those days, you know. Women didn't just go around flaunting their midriffs and their illegitimate children. The shame drove her to a deep depression. She took her own life. Even then, Rollo refused to acknowledge his son. Rollo Risby," she says slowly, spitting his name like a curse, "is a horrible person."

I clear my throat. "Did you and Ian do something to Alfie? To try to get Ian into Rollo's will?"

She laughs, a dry, dusty cackle. "What utter nonsense." She pauses, stroking the cat's ears. "Ian is like a son to me. My only living family. All I want is for him to be able to claim what is rightfully his. So yes, when you accosted me on the park bench that day at the vigil, rambling on about your little investigation, I saw an opportunity. I thought perhaps, if you were one of Rollo's flings, you might be able to exert some pressure, some influence. At the very least, make him see that acknowledging his other son—putting him in his will—was the decent thing to do. Clearly, I overestimated your abilities. Had to spoon-feed you the clues like a baby nurse."

"I'm not one of Rollo's flings."

"Yes," Ms. Schulz says, stroking the cat's ears. "How very disappointing for all of us."

The grandfather clock begins to chime, startling the cat and sending her scurrying back under the coffee table.

Ms. Schulz leans forward in her chair. “However, there is still one thing I’d like to know.”

“What’s that?”

“How on earth did Robin Sexton end up with Alfie’s backpack?”

Around me the room begins to spin. The floral drapes, the beige carpet, the cherrywood coffee table, all swirl before my eyes.

Ms. Schulz smiles, an icy-cold grin that suddenly feels like a threat. “Clearly Robin Sexton was framed.”

I grab the arms of the chair to steady myself. “How do you—”

She clears her throat. “Two years ago, I mean. That whole groping business. It was nonsense. Rollo and Cleo’s doing.”

“Rollo and Cleo framed him? For groping? I don’t follow.”

Ms. Schulz sighs. “Alfie cheated on a maths test, you see. Robin gave him a failing mark, refused to let him retake the test. Robin was very principled like that. The very next day, the Risbys were in Nicola’s office with their ‘groping’ allegation.”

I feel all the blood drain from my body. “You’re saying that Mr. Sexton didn’t touch anyone?”

“Course not. The accusation was nonsense. Revenge.”

“Why would Ms. Ivy go along with that? Just fire an innocent teacher?”

Ms. Schulz looks at me like I’m dense. “To protect the sale, of course.”

“What sale?”

Ms. Schulz lifts a little pastel mint from a porcelain dish on the table and pops it into her mouth. “For goodness’ sake, Florence, do try to keep up. Everyone knew the school’s finances were in a dreadful state. That’s why the board voted to sell the school to Omega Plus in the first place. A lawsuit—especially one from the Risbys—well, it would have tanked the sale.”

I try to connect the dots. “So Robin Sexton resigned, the Risbys agreed not to press charges, and the sale to Omega Plus—”

“Proceeded as planned,” Ms. Schulz interrupts. “Now you’re getting it. Privately, I suspect there must have been a little something in it for Nicola, given that she’s living like the bloody Count of Monte Cristo out there in Buckinghamshire. But I’ve no proof.”

“I don’t understand. What does all of this have to do with Alfie?”

Ms. Schulz looks at me blankly. “Nothing, dear. I haven’t the faintest where he’s gone. But I’d be very surprised if Robin Sexton did either.”

I can’t catch my breath. Ms. Schulz purses her lips. “Terrible thing, that groping allegation. Ruined that man’s life. Robin Sexton had a first from Cambridge. Last I heard, he was working on a Christmas tree farm out in Surrey.”

The words catch in my ear. “Sorry—did you say a Christmas tree farm?”

She nods. “I imagine it was the only job he could get. Such a shame. And now, well...” Her eyes dance around the carpet, not daring to meet mine. “I just can’t imagine someone like him will last long in prison.”

Shepherd's Bush

THURSDAY, 10:20 A.M.

I HAVE NO MEMORY OF walking home. My mind is reeling, like a merry-go-round that has been sped up far faster than it should ever go. Robin Sexton isn't a child molester. The saw, the van, the fertilizer—it was all for a Christmas tree farm. Fuck. Jenny was right. Circumstantial evidence.

Contrary to popular belief, I'm not a bad person. I don't just go around framing people for serious crimes. I thought the guy was a pedophile. As far as I'm concerned, groping a kid should be punished by immediate chemical castration. Show me a mother who thinks differently, in her heart of hearts. But Mr. Sexton wasn't a groper. He was just a stickler for rules who got on the wrong side of the Risbys. And now I've gone and completely ruined his life.

To cover for...what, exactly?

Alfie's haunted face dances before my eyes. What if he's still alive and I've botched the investigation by framing an innocent man?

Fuck fuck fuck.

The moment I get home I make a beeline for the bathroom and strip off all my clothes. An armchair psychologist would tell you I'm trying to wash away my guilt, and she wouldn't be wrong. I stand motionless in the shower, allowing the warm water to cascade over me. Just as I start to relax, the spray turns icy cold, like razor blades on my skin.

I bang the showerhead with the palm of my hand. Can one stupid thing in my life please just *work*? There's a gurgling sound, and the water stops entirely. I whack the showerhead again. Nothing. Then an explosion of mud-colored sludge. The spray hits me right in the face—a coating of wet, brown-gray slime. I shriek, louder than I mean to. "*Fuck!*"

I grab a towel and wipe my face. It's an oozy, lumpy goo with an earthy smell, like clay mixed with something sharp and chemical. I hope it's not from the sewer line. Whatever it is, it's gonna ruin my towels. Fucking Adam. He was supposed to be fixing the pipes. *Don't call a plumber*, he'd said. *I can handle it*. And now I'm covered in sludge.

I wrap myself in a towel, fly out of my flat, and bang on Adam's door. I'm barefoot, and the rough carpet between our units scratches my bare feet. Why isn't he answering? His car is parked outside; he must be home.

I ball my hand into a fist and bang again. "Emergency! Adam, open up!"

The door swings open. On the other side is a woman. Her hair is tousled, like she's just rolled out of bed, a trench coat hastily flung over her shoulders. Beneath it, I can see the straps of a slinky black dress. A pair of strappy red Jimmy Choos have been discarded casually by the door. *Where did Adam meet a fancy bitch like this?* I wonder.

I look up at her face. The woman is flustered. She starts to back away from the door. My brain goes into overdrive, trying to connect what I'm seeing to reality.

"Jenny?" I say, my mouth gaping open, dumbstruck.

Her face turns the color of a ripe raspberry.

"I...ah...I can explain."

Oh my god. Oh my god. How did I not realize?

"You and Adam?" I manage.

Jenny shakes her head. “I— It’s not—” She stops, folding her arms across her chest. “It’s not a big deal. We’re not, like, *dating*.”

We. Oof. The word lands like a punch in the stomach. My mind flashes back to that day in my kitchen, a decade ago. The day that Will told me he’d been in love with Rose all along. I feel like my skin is on fire, like everyone in the entire world is staring at me and pointing and laughing.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I suddenly recall the moment at Brooke’s wedding, when Adam had wanted to talk about something ‘serious’ and I’d demurred, thinking he was going to confess his feelings for me. Is *this* what that was about?

Jenny’s eyes flit over my body, taking in the sludge and the towel and my wet hair. “Oh gosh, what happened? Are you OK?”

I ignore her. “How long—”

“Just a one-time thing,” she says quickly. “Or, well, a two-time thing, I guess.” Am I imagining it, or does her face have a dreamy, lovestruck quality?

“So this is why you’ve been ignoring me—to fuck *Adam*? Where is he?”

“In the shower.” Jenny glances over her shoulder, lowering her voice. “Jeez, Florence. I was just scratching an itch. Besides, you said there was nothing going on between you guys. Why are you so upset?”

I want to explain to her that Adam is mine; my backup plan, my security blanket, my permanent plan B. But I can’t. I’m too angry to speak. Instead, I stare at her, willing her to spontaneously combust and trying to remember if that is even a real thing.

Jenny reaches out and places a hand on my arm. “Can’t you just be happy for me? You’re the one who said I needed to get laid.”

My face burns. I *had* said that. But I didn’t mean by Adam.

Jenny sticks out her lower lip, attempting a pout. It doesn’t suit her. “Why do you always get to be the fun one? I’m fun too, you know.”

I whirl around and stalk back toward my own front door.

“Slag,” I mutter under my breath, hoping she hears it.

Shepherd's Bush

THURSDAY, 12:20 P.M.

MY EYES LAND ON THE pile of detective books Jenny gave me. That'll do. The scissors are sharp, but the books are tougher than they look. I sink the blades deeper into the pages. Swish swish swish. It feels petty, juvenile, amazing. The whisk-whisk sound of the kitchen scissors is like aloe on a sunburn. I feel out of control, like a monster. I begin to cry, snot running down my face as I cut Jenny's stupid books into smaller and smaller pieces.

When I finish, I survey the shreds. *Ha. Take that, Jenny.*

I imagine her and Adam loved up on his crappy little sofa, pretending to be concerned about me.

"I feel so bad," Jenny will whisper.

"But you didn't do anything wrong," Adam will respond, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

The image makes me want to gag. Jenny fucking Adam is a betrayal of the highest order. She could have at least told me herself. I might have understood. But finding out like this—it's the ultimate slap in the face. At least Rose had some prior claim to Will. He was hers first. And there was never any pretense of me and Rose being friends, not really.

But this...Jenny. I will never, ever forgive her.

What happened after Will left me for Rose was this:

I briefly lost my mind.

People say this flippantly—“She lost her mind”—without really meaning it. But when I say I lost my mind, I mean that my consciousness ceased to inhabit my body and took up permanent residence in some dark, urine-soaked alley full of broken bottles and fast-food wrappers. In this parallel snatch of universe, after Will had moved out and I’d learned he was relaunching Girls’ Night without me, I had donned an unfortunate black-and-white Topshop dress and showed up at his shiny new offices in Soho, blagged my way past security, and—toting a sleeping Dylan in one arm and an overstuffed diaper bag in the other—stood in the glass-walled conference room and begged Will, actually begged him, to keep me in the band. When he refused, I laid Dylan gently on the floor, climbed atop the conference room table, and dumped out four bottles of pumped breast milk before security intervened.

It was the early days of camera phones. Someone snapped a grainy picture. It wound up in all the tabloids. “Please Don’t Stop the Moo-Sic.” Get it? Because I looked like a cow. That fucking Topshop dress. Anyway, after that, everyone knew I was *crazy*. I was never going to work again.

Legally speaking, it was a bit murky whether Will was actually entitled to relaunch the band without me. But when he threatened to pursue full custody of Dylan, using the conference room meltdown as evidence of my unfitness, I signed all the papers immediately. I never regretted my choice for a second. Still, the day I officially gave up Girls’ Night was the worst day of my life. I stopped eating, stopped showering, stopped caring. Brooke had to move in with me. It was a disruption of the natural order, the younger sister taking care of the older. Brooke was only eighteen. Slept on my sofa for five months, kept milk in the fridge and Dylan in clean diapers. Our relationship has never been the same. To her, I’ll always be a ticking time bomb that could go off at any second.

Elliott's pitch to me, a decade later, was to reframe my conference room outburst as a principled feminist outcry. He'd laid it all out in the voicemail. *Times have changed*, he'd said. People felt badly about how they treated female stars back then. Look at Britney, he said. The icon of public meltdowns, now widely viewed as a survivor of a broken system. The public was eager to atone for its sins.

It was, Elliott had insisted, the perfect cultural moment for a tell-all memoir.

So that was his big idea. Not a comeback tour. Not a new album. A cruddy old book. Destined for the bargain bin.

I knew in my heart it would never work. Because I was never a feminist icon. That day in the conference room, I was just angry. Show me a woman who isn't, though. Show me a woman who, beneath all the eyelash extensions and hair dye and loose beach waves isn't fucking *boiling* with rage at the sheer injustice of it all, and I'll show you someone who's not paying close enough attention.

I cast one final look at the mangled pile of detective manuals, scoop up the shreds in my arms, and carry them to the kitchen trash. Then I turn on the tap, grab a washcloth, and begin to gently sponge the slime from my face and hair. When most of the goo has been removed, I crawl into bed, pulling the duvet over my head and tucking the sides in around me, like a little coffin.

I lie there motionless for a very long time, listening to the sound of my own breath.

Shepherd's Bush

SATURDAY, 9:00 A.M.

WHEN I WAKE UP, IT'S light outside. The clock on the dresser reads 9:00 a.m. Hooray. I've made it to Saturday. I'd managed to get out of bed yesterday just long enough to ferry Dylan to and from school and then bundle him off to Will's house. My plan is to spend the next thirty-six hours in bed. A mini-break. When Dylan comes home on Sunday afternoon, I will rise, Lazarus-like, and summon the strength to keep going. But not yet.

At some point, though, my body begins to ache. I stand up and splash water on my face, check my phone. Two missed calls and a text from Jenny (AWAY FOR THE WEEKEND, CAN WE PLEASE TALK WHEN I'M BACK?) and a message from Adam (HEADED UP TO BRISTOL FOR A CROSSFIT COMPETITION. CHAT SOON?).

Those fuckers, trying to pretend like they haven't gone away together on some romantic little weekend jaunt. How dare they! And Adam still hasn't fixed my shower.

I glance at the clock. Not even 10:00 a.m. yet. Still so much more daylight to pass. Might as well eat something.

I head to the kitchen and begin to pile food onto a tray: Dylan's Planet Organic tortilla chips, some vegan cheese, a can of jalapeños. I put it all on a plate and microwave it for thirty seconds. My phone pings, and I startle.

Maybe it's Jenny, sending a long, apologetic text about how wrong she was and how sorry she is. But it's not. It's Allegra, on the mums' group chat, inviting anyone who fancies a bit of "equine therapy" to join her and Wolfie up in Norfolk next weekend. "I know it's a tough time," she adds. "Hope everyone is holding up OK."

The microwave dings, and I carry my nacho feast back to bed and eat it with my bare hands, jalapeño juice stinging the corners of my mouth.

The doorbell rings just as soon as I finish. I nearly jump out of my skin. I check the camera on my phone, but all I can see is a mop of dark hair. Maybe it's Jenny, come to apologize in person. Beg my forgiveness.

I press the button on my phone. "Yes," I say icily, a real grade A bitch.

The woman looks up, her eyes searching. She's young, early twenties, with waxy skin and dark hair. In her right hand, she's clutching half a dozen red helium balloons. Probably some kind of scam. Like those people who ring your doorbell claiming to be from Battersea Animal Rescue but are actually casing your house for a robbery.

"Happy birthday!" the woman squeals, followed by something else in a language I don't understand. Russian, maybe. Polish?

"Wrong house," I snap. *You fucking weirdo.*

"Happy birthday!" she says again. "Surprise!"

"It's not my birthday. You. Have. The. Wrong. House," I say, slowly, my finger still on the microphone button.

Her insistence feels personally offensive. I'm grieving here. Leave me alone.

The woman frowns, confused, but she doesn't move. Instead, she rings the doorbell again. *Diiiiing-donnnng.*

Ughhh.

"WRONG HOUSE!" I shout into the doorbell camera, but she just looks confused. I sigh and drag myself out of bed.

Up close, the woman looks even younger. She's wearing a silver puffer coat with fake fur trim and clutching a cheap wheelee suitcase. She seems

surprised to see me.

“Who are you?” she says. Her English is perfect, but there’s a hint of an accent.

“Who am I? You rang *my* doorbell? Who the hell are you?”

“Zofia. But you can call me Zo,” she says slowly. “I’m here to see my sister.”

“You’ve got the wrong address.”

Zo pulls a creased red envelope from the pocket of her jacket. It looks like a Christmas card. “Is this 184—?”

I snatch the envelope from her hand. “Let me see that.”

Across the street, the curtains twitch in Mr. Foster’s window, the old toad popping out of his hole to get a closer look.

I turn the envelope over in my hand. “Who sent you this?”

“Marta,” she says. “My sister. It’s her birthday. I came to surprise her.”

I notice the Wizz Air baggage tag dangling from the handle of her suitcase. “What, like, straight from the airport?”

She nods. “Luton. Took three buses to get here.”

I shudder. “Listen. Marta used to live in the flat upstairs. With Adam. We share a front door, it’s confusing. But she moved out. Like, ages ago.”

The woman frowns. “I’m sorry?”

“Marta doesn’t live here anymore,” I say, speaking more slowly. “She moved out.”

The color drains from Zo’s face. “What? No.”

Across the street, Mr. Foster’s door begins to open. I cannot bear another conversation with that weirdo. I grab the strange woman by the hand.

“Look, just come inside, OK? We can talk in there.”

Zo takes a seat at the kitchen table, clutching the handle of her suitcase like it’s a support animal. She fidgets awkwardly, her eyes dancing around the room.

“Listen,” I say as calmly as I can, “Marta probably just forgot to give you her new address. We can go upstairs and ask Adam—” I start to say,

temporarily forgetting his betrayal, and Jenny, and the fact that he's gone away for the weekend.

Zo stands up and begins pacing the kitchen. Her cheap sneakers squeak against the hardwood floor. When she looks up at me, her eyes are filled with tears. "When was the last time *you* saw Marta?"

I try to remember. Marta had lived in the flat above me for years. But she wasn't really the kind of person you paid attention to. She was pretty but painfully shy. The kind of woman who didn't walk so much as *scurry* from place to place. After she and Adam broke up, I hadn't thought much about her one way or another.

"Summertime, maybe?"

Zo flinches. "What month? Please. Try to remember."

I close my eyes. Marta was a hairdresser. She used to cut Dylan's hair in the backyard sometimes. After she left, I had to start taking him to Supercuts, which made him look like a Mormon minister and cost 30 quid. When was the last time she'd cut his hair? It had been warm, right before Dylan went back to school.

"End of August?"

Zo's face floods with panic. "Three months ago?"

She begins casting her eyes around my flat, as if Marta might be hiding behind a corner. Her red helium balloons have broken free, floating through the apartment like ghosts. I think of the Shepherd's Bush Strangler. When had that whole thing started? I've been so distracted lately, I haven't been paying attention.

I clear my throat. "Listen, are you *sure* she didn't go back to Poland? Maybe she just didn't call you? I know how sisters can be."

Zofia shakes her head. "No. No way. We were texting yesterday. She was going on and on about how much she loves London, her job, the salon. So happy. She's been here so long she only wants to speak English now," Zo adds with a nervous laugh.

"Wait, she's been texting you?" Relief floods my body. "Well then, she must be OK."

Sheesh. What a drama queen. And here I was starting to worry the Strangler got Adam's ex-girlfriend.

"Listen, it's the middle of the day. I'm sure she's just at work. Why don't you swing by the salon and surprise her? It's in Hampstead. Pretty swank. Apparently, Cumberbatch gets his hair cut there. You can take the Overground—"

Zo looks up at me, her eyes round as saucers. "Come with me? Please?"

"What? No, I—" I rack my brain for an excuse. What can I say? "I need to stay home and wallow because I framed an innocent man for a heinous crime and *maybe* impeded a murder investigation and my only friend stabbed me in the back, so I'm planning to stay in bed until tomorrow afternoon"? Besides, maybe this is my chance. To redeem myself.

I look at Zo's teary face, her lost, disoriented expression, and feel something like...empathy?

"Fine," I say with a sigh. "I'll get dressed."

Marta's old salon is in Hampstead Village, a North London neighborhood full of independent cafés, cobblestone streets, and bountiful hanging flower baskets. Notting Hill is a dumpster fire in comparison. If the Hollywood location scouts had done their jobs properly, Hugh Grant would have had his bookshop here.

It's terrible to admit, but it feels great to have a mission again. And this time, I get to be Jenny. The adult, the expert, the calm voice of reason. It's invigorating.

When we reach the salon, I turn to Zo. "Just follow my lead," I say, pushing open the door. The sound of Tina Turner fills my ears.

"Good morning, ladies!" a singsong voice calls from behind the front desk. It belongs to a man wearing loose black trousers, a billowy white silk top, and a single gold hoop earring. *Cillian*, his name tag announces. An Irish pirate washed ashore in North London.

“Afraid we only do men’s cuts here,” Cillian trills, giving us an exaggerated sad face. “But I’d be happy to book you into our sister salon in Soho. What are we thinking—cut? Color?”

I clear my throat. “We’re actually here to see Marta.”

Cillian’s face darkens. He runs a nervous hand through his brown ponytail, then glances over his shoulder. Behind him, in the salon, a female stylist with a bleach-blond pixie cut is trimming a man’s neck with a straight razor. An electric tension begins to fill the space where we stand.

Cillian plants his elbows on the reception desk. “Listen,” he says, lowering his voice, “if she thinks she’s getting her final paycheck—” He stops, shakes his head. “What Marta did—it was not OK.”

“What do you mean?” I say, shooting Zo a look that says, *Easy now*.

“I pour my heart and soul into this place, eleven months a year. But August is my time. I go to Mykonos for three weeks. Marta and Natalia—they were meant to run the salon. And Marta, she didn’t give a single day of notice. Didn’t even cancel her appointments. I got a text from her. A freaking text!”

Zo’s face goes pale. “Are you saying Marta isn’t here?”

Cillian flips open a paper calendar on the desk and runs his fingers over the empty spaces. “Her last day was...August twenty-seventh?”

Zo looks as if she might faint. “Three months ago? You haven’t seen her in three months?”

“That’s right,” Cillian says. “Sorry, who are you?”

Zofia takes a step toward the reception desk. “I’m her sister. Why didn’t you report her missing?”

“Because she’s not missing. She quit. Like I said.” Cillian sighs. “There I was, lying on a sun lounger at JackieO’ and I get a text: ‘Sorry, have to go back to Poland ASAP. My mother’s been diagnosed with cancer.’ ”

His face softens as he turns to Zo. “I am sorry about your mam, by the way. I lost my own far too young. But the way that Marta just—”

Zo isn’t listening anymore. She looks as if she’s been lit on fire. In a voice so quiet it’s barely a whisper, she says: “Our mother hasn’t been diagnosed with cancer. She’s been dead for twelve years.”

I manage to get Zo out on the pavement before she starts to hyperventilate, the tears streaming down her cheeks like water from a faucet. In the face of her complete meltdown, I have no choice but to remain calm. It's a new role for me. I ease her down onto a not-too-filthy patch of sidewalk, ignoring the concerned looks from passersby going about their Saturday errands.

Then I wait. Zo cries for a long time. I don't rush her.

When her sobs begin to slow to dull whimpers, I clear my throat. "Listen. I know this seems bad. But Marta still has her phone, right? She's still texting you. So she lied to her boss. Maybe she just needed a little break?"

Zo wipes her face on her sleeve. "The last time she came home, to Poland, we had a fight."

"I get it. I have a sister."

Zo reaches into her pocket. "I'll call her again. Tell her I'm here—"

"You know what, maybe don't?" I ease myself down on the pavement next to her. The ground is cold and hard. I try hard not to think about all the dogs and drunks who have urinated on this exact patch of concrete.

I clear my throat. "Wherever she is, Marta clearly doesn't want to be found. Why don't we try to get some more information first?"

Zo wipes her tearstained face on her sleeve. "How do we do that?"

"I've actually got some experience with missing people. There was this boy—"

"Huh?"

"Never mind," I say quickly. Not the right time. "What I'm trying to say is, I can help you."

Zo brightens, just a smidge. "Really?"

"Yeah."

And for once, I actually mean it.

Hampstead

SATURDAY, 12:35 P.M.

THE DECOR IN THE HOLLY Bush hasn't changed a lick since the eighteenth century, with the exception of adding credit card machines. It's all heavy velvet drapes and threadbare rugs on well-worn floors. Zo is still in shock as we slide onto one of the cracked leather banquettes to wait for Natalia.

It had been easy enough to get her phone number from Cillian, who would have done anything to get rid of us by the time I went back inside and asked for it. "Natalia and Marta were friends," he assured me. "She'll know what happened." He was eager to wash his hands of me and Zo, and I didn't blame him. Having a sobbing, grief-stricken woman parked on the front pavement isn't great for business.

Beside us is a crackling open fire with no safety screen, which Jenny would be quick to point out is a health and safety violation. ("Open flames and the general public do not mix. Trust me, I see the paperwork when things go wrong," she'd remarked to me once.) Thinking of her gives me a little pang. I push it away and fire off a message to Brooke instead, who's now in Mauritius, probably lying in a hammock and being fanned by uniformed attendants.

HEY. JUST THINKING OF YOU. HOPE THE RESORT IS OK. She doesn't answer.

At 1:00 p.m. on the dot, a thin, dark-haired woman shuffles through the door. Her hair is in neat braids, and she's wearing a long red parka that swallows her tiny frame. Behind her, a fluffy white dog trails on a red leash. Natalia glances around nervously, as if she's been summoned to a surprise performance review.

"Two of you? Is Marta in some kind of trouble?" Her voice has a wonderful husky quality to it, like one of those old-timey movie stars from the '40s. I wasn't expecting such a great voice to come out of such a wiry, nervous body. It throws me off, just for a second.

My eyes dart toward Zo. "She, uh, might be missing. It's not clear."

Natalia looks like she wants to ask something else, but Zo charges ahead stoically. "When was the last time you heard from Marta?"

Natalia pauses, thinking. "End of summer, I guess. She, uh, she moved back to Poland. I think."

"You think?"

"Yeah. She texted me."

Zo shoots me a panicked look, but I keep going.

"Was there anything about Marta, that, uh, concerned you? She didn't seem..." I lower my voice. "Depressed?"

Natalia cocks her head back in surprise. "Depressed? Marta? No. She was in love." She begins to fidget with the dog's leash. "Sorry, who did you say you were?"

I suddenly wish I had brought a notebook, anything to make me seem more official. "Me? Uh, I'm her neighbor. Well, I was. Zo is her sister. So there was nothing that made you worry?"

Natalia jiggles her legs, her eyes darting around the pub. "There was one night. I can't remember when exactly. She'd called me super late, asking if she could come over. Had a fight with her boyfriend."

I nod encouragingly. "Go on."

"Figured she must have been desperate to ask. We weren't that close, you know, and I live up in Barnet with three flatmates. Anyway, Marta showed up, it was after midnight, looked like she had been crying."

"What happened?"

Natalia shrugs and shifts in her seat. “She didn’t want to talk. I didn’t push her. I gave her a phone charger, a glass of water, let her sleep on the sofa.”

“And then?”

“That was it. When I woke up the next morning, she was gone. Almost as though I’d dreamt the whole thing.”

“Do you know what the fight was about?”

Now that I think about it, I *had* heard Marta and Adam having a massive blowout one night, right before she left him. Banging, shouting, doors slamming. Could it have been the same night?

I pick up my phone and fire off a frantic message to Adam. CALL ME. IT’S NOT WHAT YOU THINK, I add.

Natalia begins to fidget with a thin golden ring on her finger. “I don’t know. Lovers’ spat, I guess. I didn’t push.”

“Please. Don’t you remember anything?” Zo is begging now. It’s painful to watch.

Natalia blanches, looks away. “Look, I don’t really know what the deal was. The guy, you know, I think he was married. He wore a wedding ring.”

The words catch in my ear like a hangnail on a cashmere sweater. I freeze. “A wedding ring? How do you know?”

Natalia shrugs. “He was a client. At the salon. Came in every Thursday. She wasn’t—” She looks up at me. “She wasn’t a bad person, Marta. She really loved him.”

Alarm bells are going off in my head. I’ve never seen Adam wear a wedding ring, or any jewelry at all, for that matter.

“What was his name?”

Natalia looks down at her hands. “You know, I don’t remember. He would pick her up at the salon sometimes. In his flash little car.”

My ears prick up, like someone is singing. “What kind of car?”

“I don’t really know. Cars aren’t my thing. Sports car, maybe? I think it was dark green.”

My heart begins to pound. Adam’s white VW Polo has never, ever been described by anyone with eyeballs as a “sports car.” I stand up, knocking a

fork to the floor.

“I’ll be right back,” I say to Zo. “I need to make a phone call.”

She gives me a bewildered look. “Right now?”

“It will just take two seconds.”

“I’ll come with you,” she offers, already standing up.

“No,” I say, perhaps too quickly. “I mean, it’s OK. Back in two clicks. You guys keep talking.”

Outside the pub, I lean against the brick wall and dial the salon. Cillian answers on the second ring. Cher is playing on the stereo. I picture Cillian fussing over the display of dry shampoo behind the counter.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he says, sounding anything but pleased.

“Did Marta have a boyfriend?”

He pauses, sucking in air through his teeth. “Why do you ask?”

“Let me rephrase: Did Marta have *two* boyfriends?”

There’s a long pause.

“Look, it’s none of my business. She was a nice girl.”

I imagine him leaning against the reception desk, inhaling the scent of wet hair and Barbicide.

“Describe them for me.”

Cillian hesitates. “I think one was a copper. Super fit. Biceps like the God of Thunder.”

“Right. And the other?”

“More of a Prince Charming type. Older. Used to send her gigantic floral arrangements. Like, seriously, huge. We let her keep them on the desk at reception. It was all *très romantique*.”

“What did he look like, this Prince Charming?”

Cillian pauses. “Girl, *rich*.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Old. Pale. Fancy wristwatch. Standing Thursday appointment.”

My heart begins to pound in my chest. There's a tinnitus-like ringing in my ears, like an alarm going off in my brain.

"Do you know his name? Or wait—if he was a client, you must have a phone number for him."

Cillian's tone shifts from gossipy to nervous. "I don't remember his name. He stopped coming around after Marta left. Anyway, a client phone number—that's not the kind of thing I can just hand out."

"Please?" I say, in my nicest voice. "Because I think he may know where Marta is."

I don't mention the "two boyfriend" situation to Zo. Not yet. No sense in upsetting her further before I have all the facts, and anyway, at this point, managing her emotions has become more work than the actual investigation. We say our good-byes to Natalia, and I bundle Zo off toward a distant Premier Inn, with a promise to text her as soon as I learn anything more.

Back at home, I ease myself onto the sofa. In my right hand is a slip of paper with the number of Marta's second boyfriend. In my left is a can of Smirnoff and Diet Cola, just to take the edge off.

It's Saturday night. Tomorrow is Sunday. Tomorrow Will will bring Dylan back home, and my investigation will come to an end, whether I want it to or not. This is my shot.

I take a deep breath, swig the rest of the Smirnoff, and plug the number into my phone. *Here we go.*

It rings three times, then four. When I realize that no one is going to pick up, a wave of relief washes over me. My shoulders relax a smidge. I hadn't thought about what to say if someone answered. Then, on the fifth ring, there's a clicking sound, and a computerized voice picks up.

"You've reached the voicemail box of...Rollo Risby. At the sound of the tone, please leave your message."

Shepherd's Bush

SATURDAY, 9:35 P.M.

ROLLO RISBY. *WHAT THE FUCK?* I dial the number again, just to be sure. I get the same message.

I sink deeper into the sofa. Around me the room starts to spin. So Marta was having an affair with Rollo Risby? That can't be a coincidence, can it? I mean, what are the chances?

Fuck. I've spent so much energy trying to get my own son off the hook that I haven't been paying attention to anything else. *Think, Florence, think.*

If Marta was having an affair with Rollo...did Rollo do something to Marta? It doesn't make any sense. Rich people don't have to kill people. They can just buy them off. Maybe Marta threatened to tell Cleo and is now sitting on a tropical beach somewhere, fanning herself with hundred-dollar bills. Good riddance to the hair salon and the cramped little flat and to London entirely.

I'm desperate to call Jenny and tell her what I've just learned, have her walk me through it, piece everything together in her cool, logical way. But Jenny and I aren't friends anymore. Because she's fucking Adam.

Adam.

Did he know that Marta was cheating on him? Is that why they broke up? Did he—?

Without thinking, I jump up from the sofa, smashing my shin against the coffee table. I ignore the smarting pain and race out of my flat and into the vestibule. I press my ear to Adam's door. Silence. I lift my hand to knock. Then I stop. It's almost 10:00 p.m. on a Saturday night. What am I going to say? *Did you know your ex-girlfriend was cheating on you?* He'll just think I'm jealous, trying to sabotage him and Jenny. Anyway, Adam and Jenny aren't home. They're off on a mini-break, probably tucked into a thatched-roof cottage in the Cotswolds, cuddled up under a wool blanket, feeding each other strawberries and giggling.

Marta. Alfie. Marta. Alfie. None of it makes any sense. Fuck. *Think, Florence, think.*

I drag myself back to my own flat, the sofa. I can't make sense of it. I'm too stupid, my shin hurts, and nothing makes sense. I turn on *Property Shark* and fall into a fitful sleep.

When I wake up on Sunday morning, the TV is still on. A news anchor is blathering away about an environmental activist group who have superglued themselves to the motorway, blocking traffic in both directions. Then the screen flickers and Robin Sexton's mug shot appears. His arraignment is tomorrow, at Westminster Magistrates' Court. A fresh ripple of shame washes over me. I turn off the TV and pick up my phone. There's a series of text messages from Zo. THANKS FOR TRYING TO HELP, BUT I'VE DECIDED TO GO TO THE POLICE.

The police. I can hardly blame her for wanting to get some adults involved. *I* want to get some adults involved. Still, it stings. Like she doesn't trust me to find her sister.

GOOD LUCK WITH THAT, I reply glibly. SURE A "MAYBE-MISSING" FOREIGNER WILL BE TOP OF THEIR LIST. Then I feel guilty and hastily add, HOPE IT GOES WELL. KEEP ME UPDATED. X.

I lie on the sofa, studying the bruise on my shin. It's turned a deep eggplant color. I poke it with my index finger. A sharp shot of pain courses through my body.

Where are you, Marta?

At noon, I am still sprawled on the sofa, staring dumbly at the ceiling, when I hear the sound of keys in the door. Dylan. I scramble to my feet and smooth out the deep divot on the sofa.

“You’re home early!”

“Wanted to see Greta,” he says, brushing past me toward his room. I glance out the window at Will’s car, already speeding away. Fucking Greta. Why didn’t I get the kid a normal pet, like a dog?

Dylan reappears, clutching Greta in one palm and a scrap of red foil in the other. “What’s with all the helium balloons?”

“Huh?”

“There’s a bunch of half-deflated red balloons all over the place.” Dylan narrows his eyes. “You know helium is a nonrenewable resource, right? Eventually, we’re gonna run out of it.”

Zo. Shit. Her birthday balloons. “Sorry, hun. It’s a long story.”

He starts to say something else, and I zone out, slumping back on the sofa.

“Please, Mum, one last time?” And I realize Dylan is still talking to me, has been talking to me this whole time, about going to Mr. Foster’s house for crickets.

I sigh. What difference does it make? Everything is fucked anyway. I can’t take any more conflict or rejection or failure.

“Fine. But quickly. In and out. And after this—”

Dylan isn’t listening; he’s already hurrying down the porch steps toward Mr. Foster’s door. I follow him, standing watch as he rings the doorbell. Mr. Foster appears in the doorway, looks briefly confused, his eyes darting nervously toward the porch, to me.

I give him a friendly wave. “It’s fine,” I call. “Just for today.”

Mr. Foster nods. He looks relieved. The two of them begin conversing in hushed voices.

I text Zo. AND? ANY UPDATES?

She doesn’t reply. On a whim, I dial Marta’s number. Can’t hurt, right? The line begins to ring, and I lean against the porch and hold my breath. In

the distance, something catches my ear. An echo. I redial the number, pulling the phone away from my ear. I'm not imagining it. It's faint, barely louder than my beating heart. But I can definitely hear something ringing.

I walk into the vestibule and dial Marta's number again. There it is, louder now. I'm not imagining it.

Marta's phone is in Adam's flat.

Shepherd's Bush

SUNDAY, 2:30 P.M.

I DIAL JENNY'S NUMBER WITHOUT even thinking. My hands are trembling, dread filling my body as my imagination runs wild with worst-case scenarios. Jenny answers on the second ring.

"Oh my God, you're OK," I heave.

"It's not a good time," Jenny says. Her voice is strained, distracted.

"Where are you? Are you with Adam?"

"What? No. I just got home from an exhausting work 'retreat' and I have a bunch of *actual* work to catch up on, I haven't seen the boys all weekend and honestly—"

"I'm coming over. It's urgent."

Her voice changes. "Is everything— Is Dylan OK?"

"He's fine. But everything is not OK. We need to talk in person."

"It's really not a good time."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes. And whatever you do, don't call Adam."

I hang up the phone just as Dylan comes bounding back across the street, clutching a bunch of small yellow cans, humming happily to himself. He nearly drops them on the porch when he sees my face.

"Mum? What is it?"

I freeze. This isn't something Dylan should have to worry about. I try to make my voice sound casual. "Remember Marta? Who lived above us?"

Dylan flinches. "Yeah. What's happened to her?"

The hairs on my arms stand up. "What do you mean, 'What's happened to her?'?"

He shrugs. "Why are you asking if I remember her, unless something bad happened to her?"

I can't think. It's all too much. Marta. Adam. Rollo. "Can you, uh, please just put a coat on? We have to go."

Dylan balks. "But I just got home. I'm about to feed these crickets to Greta!"

"C'mon, Dylan."

He digs his heels in. "But you leave me home alone all the time."

A wave of guilt washes over me. My heart continues to pound in my chest like a high school drumline. I need to think. I can't think.

"Look—I can't argue with you right now. Just, um, go inside, lock the door. I don't know how long this is going to take."

He nods, victorious. I try to hug him, but he's already scurrying inside, clutching his stack of cricket cans like a trophy.

By the time the taxi pulls up in front of Jenny's house, my hands are shaking, violent little tremors that seize me every few minutes, like aftershocks from an earthquake. Jenny opens the door barefoot, in running shorts and a tattered gray Stanford sweatshirt. There's a basket of unfolded laundry on the sofa, a half-eaten takeaway salad on the coffee table, and her laptop is open to an Excel spreadsheet. I can hear Max and Charlie roughhousing upstairs, whooping and hollering with equal parts glee and aggression.

A flood of nerves sweeps over me. Why are my palms so sweaty? I hadn't thought through how to say this next part. When I called her, I'd been acting on instinct. But now that I'm here, it feels awkward. I stare at her silver carry-on suitcase, splayed open on the floor, half unpacked.

“Should we sit?” I say, gesturing to the sofa.

“Go ahead,” she says. There’s a guardedness in her voice.

“You might want to sit too.”

“I’m fine,” she says. “Just say what you came to say.”

I address my concerns to the carpet, not daring to meet her gaze. “I think Adam might have...might be...*involved* in his ex-girlfriend’s disappearance.”

Jenny’s eyes narrow. “Is this your idea of a joke?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I’m serious. I’m worried about you. I’m trying to tell you—”

“I don’t understand,” she barks, her face flushing. “What ex-girlfriend? What are you even talking about?”

My palms begin to sweat even more now. Would it be weirder to wipe them on the sofa or my jeans?

“Marta. Adam told me she dumped him over the summer and moved back to Poland. But her, uh, sister, Zo, came looking for her yesterday. We went to the salon where she works. Or used to work. They haven’t seen her in months.”

I’m talking way too fast, the words pouring out of my mouth with their own deranged velocity.

“Anyway, it turns out Marta was having an affair with Alfie’s father, with Rollo Risby. What are the fucking chances? So I called Marta’s phone. And it was ringing. Um. Upstairs. In Adam’s flat.” I can hear myself, how insane it sounds, but I can’t stop. I look up at Jenny. “I’m wondering if maybe—”

Jenny stands up. Her face is stone. She points to the door. “I want you to leave.”

I remain glued to the sofa. “Listen. I know. It sounds crazy. But you might be in danger, OK? Just hear me out. I think the whole Alfie thing—”

Jenny looks at me like I’m the stupidest person alive. “Can you actually hear yourself? *Adam did something to his ex-girlfriend?* And Alfie?” She laughs, a dry, sarcastic laugh I’ve never heard before. “Maybe Adam’s the Zodiac Killer. Or the Shepherd’s Bush Strangler.” Jenny shakes her head,

her sleek hair swooshing angrily. “I knew you were jealous, but I cannot believe you would stoop this low.”

I reach for her hand, lunge for it, wrapping my fingers around her palm. “Jenny. Please. I’m begging you. Something is really wrong. I’m worried for you.”

She jerks her hand back. “You aren’t, though. You can’t be, because you never think about anyone but yourself. You’re just jealous that I’m happy.”

Hot tears spring to my eyes. I push them away. For a second, neither of us speaks.

“Where is he?” I say. “Where’s Adam?”

Jenny shrugs. “How should I know? I haven’t seen him since Friday morning. I’ve been on a partners’ retreat. With the firm.”

“So you guys weren’t together? Having a romantic weekend?”

She rolls her eyes. “You do know how insane you sound, right? How utterly unhinged? I mean, they arrested the guy who took Alfie. You do remember that whole thing, right?”

The ache in the pit of my stomach returns. I close my eyes, ignoring the searing pain as I allow the truth to tumble out.

“Yeah, um. That guy. Mr. Sexton. He didn’t do it.”

Jenny’s face is turning red now. “I don’t understand. They found Alfie’s backpack. In his house.”

I study my hands, which are crumpled in my lap like used tissues. “The evidence, the stuff that police found in Mr. Sexton’s house. It was put there.”

Jenny frowns. “I don’t follow.”

Shame floods my body. I feel so small and wrong and bad I worry I might actually implode, like a star collapsing under the weight of its own gravity.

“It was put there. By. Um. Me.”

Jenny’s expression remains impassive, calm. She sinks onto the sofa and studies my face.

“In my defense, I thought he was a pedophile.”

“Oh my god!” she shrieks, jumping to her feet again. “There’s always an excuse! You have so many excuses!” She begins pacing the room. “Why would you do this? Where did you even get Alfie’s backpack?” Her eyes bore into me like lasers.

I study my hands. No point in lying now. “I, uh, I found it. In Dylan’s room. But he didn’t—”

Her eyes narrow. “Oh my god. You—”

I stand up, take a step toward her. “No. No! Dylan didn’t do anything. It’s a misunderstanding. I know he—”

Fury floods Jenny’s face. “Oh my god, I was *helping* you. I was helping you! Do you realize—I could lose my law license for this!” She grabs my shoulders and pushes me toward the door with a force I hadn’t expected. “Get out. Get out of my house. Get out of my life!”

I stumble back. “I thought we were—”

“Adam was right about you. You and this”—she waves her hand in a circular motion around my face—“this...this *chaos* that you create everywhere you go.”

She flips her hand over and, in a cruel impression of me, says, “ ‘Oh, I’m Florence, my clothes don’t match and I don’t know how to use a clock and I’m such a freeeeeeeeee spirit!’ ”

“That’s not—”

Jenny isn’t done. “ ‘I’m just so fun and exciting and I don’t care that I’m a bad—’ ”

“Just say it,” I snap. “You think I’m a bad mom.”

“No,” Jenny says quickly. “That’s not what I was going to say. *Friend*. You’re a bad *friend*.” She looks me up and down. “But now that you mention it, where is Dylan?”

I feel my heart rate slow down, my blood turn to ice water in my veins.

“My turn now,” I say slowly. I mimic her vaping, taking a deep inhale. “ ‘Hi. I’m Jenny. I’m a four-hundred-year-old type A cunt. No one will ever love me, because I’m the most uptight, controlling person on earth. Even my kids prefer their nanny.’ ”

She is shaking now, vibrating with rage. “GET. OUT!” she roars.
“You’re poison!”

I stalk to the door. “Fine. Have fun fucking Adam.” And then, because I can’t resist, I add: “Just know he’ll be picturing me the whole time.”

Jenny emits a shriek, like a seagull being torn in two.

I slam her front door so hard it shakes in the frame.

Shepherd's Bush

SUNDAY, 5:50 P.M.

AT HOME, I SCAN THE street for any sign of Adam's car. I put my ear to his door. Nothing. Wherever he is, he's not here. I contemplate calling Zo, trying to explain everything to her, but what's the point? If Jenny doesn't believe me, Zo won't either. No one believes me. I'm a fuckup, a liar.

I order Dylan a vegan pizza for dinner and go straight to the kitchen, where I fill a coffee mug with vodka, adding tap water to cut the taste. The mug hasn't been washed properly, but I don't care. I just need something to dull the edges, to briefly puncture the immense balloon of shame I live in.

When the pizza arrives, Dylan emerges from his cricket kingdom to eat it. I join him at the table.

"Y'OK?" Dylan says, elbows on the table, inhaling a gooey slice.

"I will be soon," I say, taking another gulp from the mug.

"You and Jenny have a fight?"

I nod, tears filling my eyes. "Yeah."

I take another sip. *Fuck that cunt*, I think. *She's* the bad friend. I was trying to help her. To save her. I hope Adam cuts *her* up into a million pieces. My heart stops. No, I don't mean that. Of course I don't.

Dylan looks up at me, strands of fake cheese dripping from his mouth. “What was the fight about?”

I put on a brave face. “Adult stuff. Nothing for you to worry about, hun.”

He looks up at me, his eyes round as saucers. “Alfie?”

“No. Well, sort of—” I slump in my chair, allowing the shame to envelop me like a hug. “To be honest with you, I’m not really sure what anything is about anymore.”

“Do you think you should call the police?”

I consider this for a moment. I could call Detective Singh, tell him what I’ve found out. Let the professionals deal with it. Zo’s already spoken with the police about Marta. Maybe if I tell them about her phone, they can connect the missing pieces. The pieces I can’t seem to make sense of. Fuck it, it’s worth a try.

I turn to Dylan. “You know what, buddy, that’s not a bad idea.”

Detective Singh isn’t on duty, the smug-faced precinct receptionist tells me, but there’s an online form I can use to make a report.

“I came down here because I really need to talk to a human. It’s kind of urgent,” I say, with a nervous glance at Dylan.

The receptionist purses her lips. “Fine. If you want to wait for the duty officer, go right ahead.”

“Do you know how long—it’s just, it’s already almost eight p.m., and I’ve got my son, he needs to get to bed soon—”

The receptionist eyes me warily. “Well, like I said, you’re welcome to use the online form.”

“Fine,” I say with a tight-lipped smile. “I’ll wait.”

I steer Dylan to a peaceful corner, past the weary, strung-out faces haunting the waiting room. I run a hand over my navy pinstripe dress. When I’d chosen this outfit, it felt serious, lawyerly, but now that the backs of my thighs are sticking to the plastic chair, I regret it.

Forty-five minutes pass before the duty officer appears. “Miss, uh, Grimes?” he says, reading off a clipboard. “Right this way. I’m PC Wilson.”

I abandon Dylan in the grimy waiting room with strict instructions not to leave his chair or speak to anyone. I hate leaving him, but I can’t bear for him to hear what I’m about to say.

Wilson is a portly forty-something man with little hair and no chin. When we reach his office, he makes a big deal of pulling out the chair for me.

“What can I do for you, miss?” he says, his eyes lingering on my legs.

I clear my throat, attempt my most calm, professional voice. “I’m concerned that my friend, well, my neighbor...I think he, uh, might have done something. To his ex-girlfriend.”

Wilson frowns. “That right, eh? What makes you say that?”

“Well, she’s missing. And her phone—”

Wilson’s own phone beeps, and he looks down. “Sorry. The wife.” He rolls his eyes. “We’re out of milk.” He taps out a quick message, then looks back up at me. “Right. You were saying. Your, uh, neighbor, was it?”

“Yeah. Um. He’s actually a cop.”

Wilson’s expression changes, like a door slamming shut. He leans back in his chair. “That right? Well, see, that’s a different jurisdiction. You need the Independent Office for Police Conduct. Over in Fulham.” He clucks his tongue. “Not open now. But first thing tomorrow.” He leans back in his chair, waiting for me to thank him.

“It’s just, it’s kind of urgent.”

Wilson frowns. “He hit you?”

I shake my head.

“Threaten you?”

I swallow hard. “No.”

Wilson smiles. “Good. So you’re not in any immediate danger.” He smiles indulgently. “Wouldn’t want anyone hurting that pretty face.”

He clears his throat, shuffles some papers on his desk. “Fulham, yeah, luv? That’s where you need to make your report.”

I nod, unable to get out my chair.

Wilson winks, sliding a business card toward me. “And if this bloke gives you any trouble, PC Wilson is going to have words with him, yeah?”

My face burns with shame. I stand up and thank him for his help, hating myself the whole time.

Back home, I wait until Dylan has gone to bed to pour another slug of vodka into the coffee cup. I can’t do anything right. I can’t even report a missing person correctly. I am desperate for something, anything, to change the channel in my brain, but every time I close my eyes I see Jenny’s disgusted face, her words ringing in my ears. *You’re poison!*

I text Matt B. YOU UP? He doesn’t answer. Oh God, even Matt B. is sick of my shit. Fine. I pivot to the apps. Leo, 23, wants to party tonight. Fine, Leo. You’ll do.

As if in a trance, I stalk to my closet, digging until I find my smallest, shiniest dress. I wriggle into it, do a little twirl in front of the mirror. Still fits. I march down the hall to the bathroom and dig out my foundation-spattered makeup case, setting up my battle station at the edge of the sink. There is so little left I can control—not Dylan, not Adam, not Officer Wilson. Certainly not Jenny. But this—my face, the depth of my eyeshadow shading, the wave of my hair—this I can still make perfect.

I peer into the mirror. A hideous ghoul glares back at me. There’s no denying it. My eyebrows are vanishing. The hairs that remain are just wisps. Never mind. I can fix it with makeup. I can fix everything with makeup.

Toner. Moisturizer. Primer. Let it set.

I pour another splash of vodka water into the coffee mug. The taste is revolting, but it’s doing the job. I take another sip.

I pump a few drops of NARS Vienna onto a beauty blender and begin to dab it into my skin, until my face resembles a smooth, pore-less doll.

Every few minutes I glance down at my phone, to see if Jenny has come to her senses, if she has texted me to apologize. Nothing.

Time for the real art now. I select a glittery black eyeliner pencil and begin to trace the shape of my eye. I use a tight synthetic brush to blend the color out toward my eye socket in slow, gentle circles. Then bronzer, blush, highlighter, setting spray.

By 9:30 p.m., I have painted a completely different face on myself. A darker, sharper, prettier one. With eyebrows.

I run hot tongs through my frazzled hair and cement the whole thing in place with a cloud of good old-fashioned Elnett.

I imagine sitting on Jenny's beige sofa again, but this time I express everything perfectly. This time, I make my case confidently, clearly, and with ease. Jenny nods; she understands. She *gets* it.

Thank you for telling me, she says earnestly. *I can see how hard that was for you. I believe you. Let's come up with a plan.*

Outside, my Uber driver honks.

I tiptoe down the hallway to Dylan's room. He's fast asleep in his bed. Ten is plenty old enough to stay home alone. When I was Dylan's age, our mother was at work, and I was making dinner for Brooke and myself. Microwaved hotdogs and chocolate milk with Hershey's syrup. The Florence frankfurter special, we called it. We were fine, and Dylan will be too. Fucking Jenny and her guilt trips.

Anyway, leaving isn't optional. There's a ringing in my ears now, like a car alarm that won't stop going off. I have to get out of this house, or I am actually going to lose my mind.

I take a final sip from my coffee mug and walk outside, double-locking the door behind me.

Shoreditch

SUNDAY, 10:17 P.M.

LEO TAKES ME TO AN awful, sticky-floored basement “speakeasy” just off the Old Street roundabout. It’s full of soft-bodied graphic designers and professional baristas in ironic hats. He orders me a mojito. “You’ll love it,” he says earnestly, like it’s some new thing he’s discovered. I feel a painful urge to relay this to Ian, who I know would find it funny. Then I remember that Ian hates me too and down the whole drink in one gulp. I try to focus on what Leo is saying, but all I can think about is Jenny. Replaying our conversation in my head. Why won’t she believe me? Can’t she see I’m trying to protect her? Leo is going on and on about something. An archaeology degree?

Oh God, he’s still a student.

Finally he holds up a little plastic baggie. “Yeah?”

The rest of the night passes in a blur. Leo begins nuzzling my neck and asking if I “wanna get out of here?” Even in my condition, I can picture his grim little flatshare in Peckham a little too clearly: a mattress with no bedframe, a *Big Lebowski* poster on the wall, an old milk crate for a nightstand.

“I’m gonna use the restroom,” I slur.

Outside, I hail a taxi. I remember asking the driver to stop at a shop. I remember buying two bottles of orange Fanta and chugging them right there on the pavement. But that's the last thing I remember.

When Dylan was four or five, I'd sleep-trained him using a digital alarm clock with a small blue moon that transformed, at a preprogrammed hour, into a bright yellow sun. That little plastic clock had more authority than I ever did. On mornings when he woke up before the sun had appeared, he would lie bravely in bed, a little soldier waiting for permission to rise. The moment it popped up, he would call out to me: "Mummy, my sun is here!" *My sun*, he called it. It rose just for him, programmed by my unseen hand.

When I wake up the next morning, I am in my own bed. The winter sun is blazing violently through open curtains. I'm still wearing my party dress, which has a giant rip up the side. The bruise on my shin from the coffee table has faded to cornflower blue, so ugly it's almost pretty.

I stagger to the kitchen. The house is quiet. There is no TV blasting, no environmental guilt-trip podcast blaring, no fried tofu scramble burning on the stove.

"Dyl?" I call. "Are you up for school?"

I glance at the clock. Eight thirty. School starts at 8:30. There's no way he slept this late.

I knock on his door. "Dyl, come on. You're gonna be late."

No answer.

I try the knob. It's locked. A rush of indignation sweeps through my veins. I'm no snoop, for goodness' sake. The kid has no reason to lock his door.

I bang loudly. "Dylan! Morning! Time to get up!"

When he doesn't answer, I grab the key from the top of the refrigerator. The moment I open his door, the blood drains from my face. I open my mouth to scream, but nothing comes out.

Greta is lying on her back, her little turtle legs sticking straight up. And Dylan is not in his room.

I begin to scream, a bloodless cry that comes from deep in my gut. I call his phone, but it goes straight to voicemail, the automated message taunting me with the sound of his voice.

I stand in my son's bedroom dazed, willing Dylan to walk through the front door. *What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.*

I feel as if my heart has been wrenched from my chest, like that terrible sacrifice scene in the Indiana Jones movie. I will myself to run to the front door, to look for Dylan, to shout his name, but I am frozen, paralyzed, a fossil suspended in amber. Why won't my legs move? My mind races to piece together the situation. Greta the turtle is dead. And my son is gone.

All at once, the spell is broken, and I find myself at the front door, with no memory of having walked there. Maybe Dylan is on the porch. Or at Mr. Foster's house. That's it. Maybe he woke up and saw Greta was in trouble, went straight to Mr. Foster's.

I lurch toward the porch, and then I see it. A white scrap of paper shoved through the mail slot, resting on the carpet between mine and Adam's front door.

*458 Land's End Road,
Porthcurno, Cornwall*

If you call the cops, he dies!!!

Shepherd's Bush

MONDAY, 8:47 A.M.

JENNY ANSWERS THE PHONE ON the third ring, her voice dripping with contempt. "I'm recording this," she says warily, "in case you were planning to confess to further crimes."

At the sound of her voice, a guttural sob escapes from somewhere deep in my soul. "It's Dylan," I manage. "He's gone."

Her tone changes. "What do you mean?"

"He's gone. Missing." The words stick in my mouth like sandpaper. "I just woke up and he's not—he's not in his room."

"Is this some kind of sick joke, Florence?" Jenny snaps, uncertainty already creeping into her voice.

"Am I dead?" I cry. "What's happening?"

I have fully left my body now and, from my position on the ceiling, have a perfect aerial view of my own shoulders hunched over the kitchen counter, sobbing into the phone. I never should have left last night. What had I been thinking? What kind of mother goes out drinking and leaves a ten-year-old at home? I am the worst person in the world, and I deserve this. I crumble into a pile on the floor, then hate myself even more. A good mother would get up. Go look for him. But I can't move.

The doorbell rings. Jenny is standing on the porch. “You call the police yet?”

I shake my head.

She pushes her way inside, eyes flying across the kitchen, taking stock. “How long has he been gone?”

I glance at the clock. “I...I don’t know. I woke up at 8:30 and he wasn’t in his room.”

Her eyes flit over my gold dress. “Did you go out last night?”

The memory makes me feel woozy. I grab the cool stone of the kitchen counter to steady myself.

“I’m not judging you,” Jenny says quickly. “I’m just trying to figure out how long he’s been missing. Did you see him when you came in?”

I rack my brain. Had I stumbled drunkenly to his room to give him a final good-night kiss? I think so. But I can’t be sure. Might have just crawled into bed in my clothes.

“I’m not sure,” I say softly, shame filling my body.

Jenny bites her lip. “Speaking as an attorney, it’s my professional advice that you notify law enforcement.”

“I can’t.” I hold up the note. “There’s something else.”

Jenny lunges for it, her eyes flying over the paper. A pained expression crosses her face, like she’s been slapped.

“Oh,” she says, her voice cracking. For a moment I think she might cry.

“What?”

A couple of seconds pass. Jenny swallows hard, rearranging her face into a neutral expression. She turns to me and, in a firm, matter-of-fact voice, says, “Adam has a house in Porthcurno. His mother moved there after the divorce.”

I can barely follow what she’s saying. It’s like I’ve lost the ability to speak English.

“Listen to me,” Jenny says, placing her hand on my shoulder. “I’m going to call Belinda to watch the boys. I want you to pack a bag. Clothes. Toothbrush. A few things for Dylan.”

“Dylan?” I say, not understanding. I feel like a gutted fish, hollowed out and waiting to be eaten for dinner.

Jenny stares at me imploringly. “Yes. We’re going to get him now.”

My ears begin to ring.

“How?” I ask dumbly.

“We can talk in the car. But, Florence?”

“Yes?”

“We have to hurry.”

I am throwing clothes into a bag when the doorbell rings. Every hair on my body stands at attention. Jenny looks at me.

“Don’t be mad,” Jenny says. “But I called Allegra.”

I almost say, “Who’s Allegra?” because every single thing that is not Dylan and his whereabouts now feels like another, parallel life. Did I really used to spend energy hating the other women at the school gates? How petty, how privileged, to have had the energy for something so inconsequential. All I can think about now is Dylan. Dylan. Dylan.

“Horse Girl Allegra?”

Jenny frowns. “Have you ever even talked to her? She’s actually really nice. Anyway, she has something we’re going to need.”

They say poison is a woman’s weapon. A clean, bloodless murder. Poison lets you keep your distance.

I saw a documentary once on the Crime Channel about a rash of arsenic poisonings in mid-nineteenth-century England. It was mostly wives offing their husbands. A little sprinkle into his morning coffee, a pinch atop sir’s mushy peas. You can hardly blame them, these nineteenth-century women, stuck in the kitchen all day, raped in their beds at night, handed squealing baby after squealing baby without epidurals or formula or disposable diapers. You can picture them graveside, eyeing their newly widowed friends with envy and silently crafting their plans.

And then Jenny and I are back in the car. Her real car, the Tesla, not the rented Kia. Speeding down the motorway toward Cornwall.

My body is completely numb, my movements controlled by some unseen force, like a windup toy mindlessly carrying out a preprogrammed dance.

I stare out the window, recalling in vivid detail every single way I have failed Dylan, starting from when he was four months old and accidentally rolled off the sofa and onto the wooden floor. I didn't realize he could roll yet. He'd cried for an hour.

I think about the small, dark part of me that has always wished Dylan was popular and sporty instead of gangly and earnest. The part that's embarrassed of his quirks, that wishes he could be more like other kids, if only because it would make his own life so much easier.

How many times has my son tried to show me something—some unimpressive jump off a low wall, some cloud that looked vaguely like an elephant, some flagrant recycling violation? And what had I said? *That's nice, hun*. Had I ever truly listened? I don't deserve him.

My body begins to curl in on itself, forming a roly-poly bug of self-loathing. The seat belt is digging into my shoulder blade, but I don't move it. I deserve to be in pain. All of this is my fault. For doubting him, for thinking he might, just maybe, have been capable of something horrible. And now he's gone. It's unbearable. I sink deeper into my seat.

Jenny glances over at me, then flicks her eyes back on the road. "Stop blaming yourself," she says, looking straight ahead.

"What do you mean?"

"You've got that thousand-yard mom-guilt look in your eyes."

"Well, shouldn't I? This whole thing *is* my fault. If I hadn't—"

"Look, Florence. What you did, it was terrible. Framing an innocent man?" She shakes her head. "Awful. Unconscionable. And as soon as we get back to London, you have to put it right." Her voice softens. "But I do get why you did it."

“You do?”

Jenny fixes her gaze on the road. “Of course. I’m a mother too, you know.”

The late-afternoon sun is moving from orange to red when we stop at a service station somewhere in Devon to charge the Tesla. Jenny goes inside to use the bathroom and I slump in my seat, surveying the parking lot, which is empty except for a beat-up silver Skoda. A young mom in stained leggings is wrestling with an angry toddler who is refusing to sit in his car seat.

“Oliver, I swear—” she begins, then notices me watching and sweetens her tone. “Please, baby, get in your seat.”

Don’t yell at him, I want to shout. One day you’ll regret it so much you’ll want to die. But before I can find the words, Jenny comes barreling out of the service station.

“Ready?” She tosses me a raspberry-flavored protein bar, jolting me back to reality. Awful, nightmarish reality.

“I’m not hungry,” I say, chucking the snack on the backseat like a petulant child. I look down at my phone, willing it to ring, but it’s lost reception entirely.

Jenny reaches into the backseat and retrieves the protein bar.

“Eat,” she commands. “We’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

Miles of highway pass in silence. The landscape turns hilly. Jenny stares straight ahead, alternating between vaping and chewing the inside of her cheek.

I stare out the window, trying to work out the answer to a question that has been plaguing me since the moment we got in the car.

“I just don’t understand why Adam took him in the first place. It doesn’t—it doesn’t make any sense.”

Jenny says nothing and tightens her grip on the steering wheel. I feel like I've been headbutted in the stomach. Suddenly it all makes sense.

"Oh my God." My cheeks turn warm. "Of course. You told him. Last night. You told Adam what I said about Marta."

The color drains from Jenny's face. She doesn't deny it.

"You told Adam that I think he's involved in Marta's disappearance. And so he kidnapped my son, to keep me from saying anything."

Jenny turns to me. "I'm so sorry," she whispers. "I—I thought you were just mad that we hooked up. I never, ever, in a million years, thought he was capable of something like this."

"Do you think Dylan is—" My voice cracks, unable to finish the sentence. "I mean, we're going to find him, right?"

Jenny's face is an inscrutable mask. "I can't promise you it's going to be OK," she says slowly. "You know that. But I swear, I will do absolutely everything in my power to bring Dylan home. Besides, if he were going to..."

"You mean if he were going to kill Dylan, he already would have?"

Jenny holds up a single finger. "No. Don't. We have to stay positive."

But even as she says it, she taps the accelerator. The Tesla surges forward, toward whatever awaits us in Cornwall.

Cornwall

MONDAY, 5:12 P.M.

PORTHCURNO IS A TINY VILLAGE on the southernmost tip of Cornwall, full of tidy cottages and sweeping coastline and dramatic rock cliff vistas. As we pull into the center of town I can hear the waves in the distance; the smell of sea salt and ocean fills the car. The sky is darker than I've ever seen in London.

"I can see why you would bring a hostage here," Jenny mutters. "No phone reception. Completely isolated."

I try to grunt my agreement, but I can barely speak. I stare out the window, transported back to one of the few vacations Dylan and I ever took, when he was about six, to a dreary little British seaside town. It was a day trip; we'd taken the train down in the morning, and the moment we'd stepped out of the station, it had started to rain. I was furious, but we'd persevered, huddling under a single umbrella, defiantly eating ice cream on the rocky beach and hurling stones into the sea by the handful. On the train ride home that afternoon, Dylan had leaned his head against my shoulder and looked up at me with his freckled little-boy face and said, "That was my best day ever, Mum." The memory is so painful I start to cry.

I stare out the window, at the utter darkness, willing time to rewind so I can go back and make a different choice. *Why did I leave him alone in the*

house? What was I thinking? How could I have been so stupid?

The sound of tires on gravel pulls me back to the present. We're leaving the village now, heading back inland on a dark country road. A car zooms past us in the blackness, nearly clipping us.

"So much for small-town kindness," Jenny snips, and I wonder, for the first time, if she is nervous.

A few miles later, the satnav beeps. Jenny slows down and gestures through the darkness at a small blue cottage surrounded by a large empty field. "I think that's it."

I squint. It's the only property for miles. I scan the house, the yard, the street, for signs of Dylan. But the shutters are drawn, and all the lights are off.

And then, suddenly the house is behind us.

"Stop," I yell, but Jenny keeps driving. A deep animal instinct overtakes me. "Turn around," I growl. "Now. My son is in there."

Jenny bites her lip, looks uncomfortable. She flicks on the turn signal, pulls onto a soft shoulder, and turns off the engine.

"Listen," she says, pulling up the emergency brake and turning on the flashers. "I know how upset you are. But surely you realize—" She stops, fidgeting with the chain around her neck. "You're only going to get one shot at this. Adam knows you're coming. He'll be expecting you. We need to be smart about this. For Dylan's sake."

I stare out the window. She's right, of course. He doesn't just know I'm coming. He's lured me here, with the strongest possible bait. Still.

She stares at me, her face drawn and serious. "Are you *sure* you don't want to go to the police? It's not too late. I'm pretty sure we passed a police station."

I shake my head. "Adam *is* the police. Besides, I want Dylan to know I tried to save him. That I didn't just leave him there." My mind is clear. I feel almost giddy. After hours of incessant, indolent waiting, I'm finally going to *do* something. Even if it might very well be the last thing I do. "That's the only thing that matters now. He has to know I tried. That I did everything to get him out of there. Now turn around."

Jenny doesn't move. She looks down, studying her nails. "You know I can't—I can't go with you. It's just, if something happens, my boys...they don't have anyone else."

I nod. "I get it."

Jenny starts the car, and we begin a slow crawl back toward the cottage. She parks on a shoulder fifty feet from the house, behind a clump of trees. We exit the car and she fidgets with the string of my hoodie as she fires off last-minute advice and instructions. But she already feels incredibly far away, like a vacation I can barely remember. In my mind, I am already in the house. The only thing that matters is inside the house.

"Speed is key," Jenny is saying. "Every minute you spend inside makes it less likely you'll come out. You go in, grab Dylan, run out. I'll be waiting here to drive you both home."

She clears her throat. I can tell she wants to say something meaningful, something to mark the moment.

"Listen, Florence—whatever happens, I want you to—"

"This isn't *Braveheart*, OK? Don't make it weird."

She wraps her arms around me, so tight I can barely breathe. "Good luck, you chaos muppet," she whispers into my hair. "Remember the plan. I'll see you back out here in a few minutes, yeah?"

Porthcurno

MONDAY, 5:58 P.M.

EVEN IN THE DARK, THE house where my son is being held hostage looks unremarkable, banal even. A pale blue 1950s cottage with untrimmed hedges, an unloved lawn. You always imagine the dramatic moments of your life taking place somewhere special. *Poor me, my child is being held hostage inside an unremarkable house!* a voice in my head taunts me, and I clench my fists, driving my fingernails into my palms, hating myself.

It feels weird, suddenly, to be without Jenny, after such an intense period of togetherness. Like having a limb severed.

I walk up a little stone path toward the door. Above me, an angry seagull shrieks. Are seagulls nocturnal? On the stoop, I pause for a moment, searching for signs of Dylan. But the house is silent, withholding. I pick up the cheap door knocker, rapping it three times against the door.

Klopf klopf klopf.

I exhale. I hadn't planned on no one answering. How awkward. I take a step backward and ponder what to do. Do I knock again? Shout?

Then my phone begins to go off. *Ping ping ping.* Dozens of delayed messages and notifications. Apparently this godforsaken cottage is the only

place in Cornwall with cell phone coverage. I look down at the screen. *18 new messages from Dylan; 10 missed calls from Dylan.*

I scramble to call him back. My breath catches in my throat as the phone rings once, twice. *Pick up pick up pick up.* There is a click, but before I can say, “Where are you?” there’s a loud cracking sound. The front door swings open. A hand reaches out and grabs me by the neck, dragging me across the threshold and into the darkness.

Porthcurno

MONDAY NIGHT

WHEN I COME TO, I'M lying on a faded floral sofa with a cool washcloth on my forehead.

"Dylan!" I scream, but no sound comes out. "I'm here!"

Silence.

My head is throbbing, and every beat of my heart sends the pain surging deeper into my skull. I pry my eyes open, but I can barely see anything. It feels like someone has smeared Vaseline on my retinas. In front of me are two faces, two sets of pale blue eyes. Twins? Am I seeing double? Then the two figures collide into one.

Adam.

He's sitting in a chair opposite me, wearing the navy blue sweater I gave him for Christmas, staring at his phone and squinting.

I scan the room. This must have been Adam's mother's house. It has an older woman's touch—wicker baskets, wooden geese, watercolor paintings. It smells damp and musty at the same time, like the windows haven't been opened in a decade. I half expect to turn the corner and bump into Miss Havisham.

"Dylan," I shout again, through the haze of pain.

This time, Adam jumps up from his chair. “Oh, you’re awake.” He leans over me, his familiar scent flooding my nose. “How you feeling? You hit your head pretty hard.”

“Where’s Dylan?”

“Dylan?” Adam sounds genuinely confused. “How should I know?” He peers down at me. “You sure you’re all right? Quite a fall you took there.” He sounds so concerned that for a brief moment I wonder if it’s all some kind of misunderstanding. Then I notice that my hands have been bound together in front of my body with silver duct tape.

“First things first,” Adam says, walking toward the kitchen and rummaging in a dingy overhead cabinet. “You’re my guest. Tea?”

“If he’s dead, just kill me now. I don’t give a fuck.”

Adam places a PG Tips bag into a chipped white mug. “Kill you?” He gives a hollow laugh. “You’ve got the wrong idea, Flo. I just want to talk.”

“Talk? I have a gushing head wound and tape around my wrists.”

He grimaces. “Sorry about that. Just a precaution. Speaking of which —” He picks up a knife off the counter. The one I’d stuffed into the pocket of my hoodie before leaving home. “Thanks for this. You really didn’t need to bring a housewarming gift.” He taps the tip of it softly with his finger.

My heart begins to race. “Dylan!” I shriek. “Dylan! Can you hear me?” Silence.

“You’re not listening to me,” Adam says, his nostrils flaring. “Pay attention, Flo. This is important.”

A sense of panic is beginning to cut through my pain, like a scuba diver slowly surfacing for air. I turn my face toward Adam, the kitchen. In the harsh fluorescent light, he looks at once familiar and completely foreign. There’s something else too. A hardness I’d never noticed before. Had this version been lurking all along?

“What do you want, Adam? Why are you doing this?”

Adam looks up from the tea, his blue eyes round like marbles. He looks almost wistful. “I just want you to listen to me. That’s all I’ve ever wanted, Flo.”

Adam joins me on the sofa and hands me the mug of tea. I grip it awkwardly in my still-taped hands. It's lukewarm, I note with disappointment. Not hot enough to scald him if I threw it.

He takes a deep breath. "Where shall I begin?"

"Dylan," I say, but he ignores me.

"Clearly, you know about Marta."

"I know she was cheating on you. With—"

"Rollo Risby," Adam says, spitting the name out like a curse. "Caught her, red-handed. On our anniversary."

I nod as my eyes dart around the room searching for traces of Dylan—a shoe, anything child-size. Where is he? If I could just get to my phone, see what those text messages said...

"I was planning to surprise her at the salon, with flowers. She told me she was working late that night. When I showed up, her manager said she had left hours ago. *With her boyfriend!*"

Adam's face is flushed, his breathing labored. "Did you hear me, Flo? *With her boyfriend! I was her boyfriend!*" Adam roars. "Which means they all knew. All of them. Everyone knew she was cheating on me." He looks up at me, a wounded animal. "Did you know?"

"Not until yesterday." Would the mug be enough to knock him out if I hit him over the head hard enough?

Adam nods, satisfied. "When I confronted her, she denied it. Said I was 'imagining things.' I told her to get out. She said *I* should get out. Of my own house. Can you imagine, Flo?"

The way he keeps repeating my name is unnerving. Is this some kind of police tactic, to gain my trust?

"I told her to fuck off. And then she shoved me." He studies my face for a reaction. "Marta was strong. Stronger than she looked. Eastern European women, you know, they're tough. She shoved me against the wall."

He pauses for a moment. “So I pushed her back. But it was self-defense. Unlucky she hit her head on a cabinet.”

“She hit her head? Did you call an ambulance?”

Adam fixes me with a cold stare. “Did I call an ambulance?” He laughs, a hollow, empty sound. *Daily Post* woulda had a field day with that one. ‘Ex-Police Chief’s Son Sacked for Wife-Beating’? Anyway, an ambulance wouldn’t have done any good by that point.”

My stomach flip-flops, then plummets like an elevator in an empty shaft. “Wait—so Marta is—?”

Adam looks down at his feet, clad in the gray New Balance 550s I’m so used to seeing outside his door. He cracks his knuckles.

“’Fraid so.”

The words hit me like a punch in the gut. I think of Zo, her teary face, and want to throw up.

“You killed her.”

“No. I told you, it was an accident.”

“Wait a minute. So Marta’s been dead since...August? And this whole time, you’ve been sending text messages from her phone. Pretending she’s still OK?”

Adam sucks in air through his teeth. “I had to buy myself some time. Figure out what to do next. I didn’t plan this, Flo. It just...happened.”

“I don’t—I don’t understand. If Marta is dead, what did you do with her...her body?”

Adam hesitates. “You don’t want to know. Trust me.”

He’s right. I don’t want to know. I just want to find Dylan and get the fuck out of this house. But I owe it to Zo.

“Please. Just tell me.”

Adam looks at the floor. “You ever seen *Breaking Bad*? The bathtub thing?” He shakes his head, lets out a nervous laugh “Not gonna lie, it was gross. Blocked up all the pipes. Sorry about that, by the way.”

My mind flashes to my broken shower, and a wave of nausea rises in my throat. I swallow hard and lean back on the sofa, my throat burning like fire. My head is still pounding, and I’m desperate to know where Dylan is.

“It was an accident!” Adam wails. “I had no other choice. Who woulda believed me?”

I put the mug back on the table, an awkward maneuver with my hands taped together. “Let me get this straight: You killed Marta, and then you kidnapped my son so I would come out here and listen to your confession?”

He frowns. “No. Confession? Is that what you think this is?” His voice rises sharply. “I’m not confessing to shit! C’mon, Flo. You *know* me. How many times have I been there for you? I’m not a bad person. I’m telling you. It. Was. An. Accident.”

I shift uncomfortably on the sofa. The wound on my head is throbbing. The blood has trickled down to my mouth now, leaving a salty, metallic trail on my lips. All I can think about is Dylan.

Adam places a hand on my thigh. “Please, Flo. Tell me you understand.”

I grit my teeth, summoning all the softness I can manage. “OK. Sure. It was accident. I get it.”

He exhales, relief flooding his face. For a moment, I think he’s going to hug me.

I clear my throat. “Now tell me where Dylan is.”

Adam frowns, jerks his head back. “Dylan? How should I know where he is?”

White-hot fury races through my veins. “How should you know? Goddammit, Adam, I know you have him! I found the note. What the fuck do you think I’m doing here?”

Adam stares at me, then lets out a long, low laugh. “Oh wow. The note.” He continues to laugh, a bitter, rueful howl that shakes his chest.

“Dylan. Ha.” Adam shakes his head again, like he can’t quite believe what he’s hearing. “I’ve no clue where Dylan is.” He sets his tea mug on the pine coffee table and turns to me, his face dark.

“That note was about Alfie Risby, you dumb bitch.”

Porthcurno

MONDAY NIGHT

NOTHING MAKES SENSE. I'M STILL on the floral sofa, but my head feels like someone is kicking it with a steel-toed boot, a dull, incessant pounding that grows worse with each passing minute.

"Alfie?" I hear myself say. "What?"

"Haven't you been listening to anything I said?" Adam's face grows red, angry. "His father fucked my girlfriend. He ruined my life! And it's only a matter of time before someone finds out about the...accident." His eyes are filled with desperation. "I need money, Flo. To get out of town. Start over, someplace warm and cheap. You know I'm a good guy. Don't I deserve another chance?"

A lightbulb turns on in my dim head. "Oh my God. Did you— Is Alfie —" I glance around wildly, a new panic growing in my lungs. "Is he—is Alfie Risby—*here*?" My eyes fly around the room, across the knotty pine furniture, the ancient box-top TV, the dusty mauve curtains. "Where is he?"

"Relax," Adam says, standing up. "He's fine, I promise. Better than fine, really. I'm, like, the nicest hostage-taker ever. Kid's got a brand-new PlayStation and *Star Wars* LEGOs. I'm talking full *Millennium Falcon*. Even gave him the en suite—"

My heart pounds in my chest. “You kidnapped Alfie Risby? But then—where is Dylan?”

Adam groans. “Always with the Dylan stuff! Would it kill you to think about someone else for one minute?” He gestures down a dark hallway. “I just told you that Alfie Risby—the billion-dollar baby—is on the other side of the wall, and all you care about is Dylan. Besides”—Adam opens his phone, dangling the screen in front of me—“according to our doorbell camera, Dylan went out this morning at...five seventeen a.m. Just after you came home from your little adventure.” He leers at me. “Bit late for a school night, don’t you think? Who were you off with, anyway?”

I feel strangely hollow, as if the blood and bones and guts have all been drained from my body. I lunge for the phone, gripping it awkwardly between my still-bound hands, staring at the screen. The person in the doorbell camera footage is wearing a dark hoodie and carrying what appears to be a heavy backpack. It does look a lot like Dylan.

“What the fuck—”

Adam winks at me. “Not to worry. The doorbell camera also shows he returned home an hour later, then left again in his school uniform at seven forty-five a.m. Didn’t realize you were letting him walk to school by himself now? But I guess you were tired from your date.”

My head is spinning. *Has Dylan really been at school all day? And what was he doing, going for a predawn walk?*

I’m desperate to get to my phone, to read the messages Dylan sent me. To figure out what the hell is going on. Before I can do anything, Adam tosses me a cheap red polyester ski mask. It lands in my lap. “Better make sure he doesn’t see your face.”

“What?”

“I’m guessing you want talk to Alfie, right? Make sure he’s OK?”

Alfie. Right. I had forgotten about him entirely. All I really want is to get the fuck out of here, back to London, to Dylan. *What am I doing here, hundreds of miles from my son?*

“I, uh—”

Adam jerks me roughly from the sofa, and I follow him reluctantly down a dark hallway, toward a door with a chain pulled across the outside. Light pours out from under the edges. Adam fiddles with the chain, then gestures for me to go in.

My breath catches in my chest. “Wait, you’re not coming in with me? How do I know you won’t just lock me in there?”

Adam gives me a wounded look. “C’mon, Florence. It’s me. I just want you to see for yourself that I’m not some horrible monster. That I’m taking good care of him.” Adam shifts his weight. “Just ask him, yeah? He’ll tell you.”

Adam helps me pull the ski mask over my face, and I make my way into the room. Alfie is sitting on an unmade bed with his back to me, playing a first-person shooter game. He’s smaller than I remembered, his red hair matted and greasy. He’s wearing rocket ship pajamas and slippers with a striped bathrobe on top, like a kid home from school on a sick day. It’s jarring to be so close to him in real life, after his school photo was plastered on every newspaper in the country. Like seeing a celebrity up close.

Alfie looks up from the game and scowls. “You’re not him. Who are you?”

“I’m a friend, um—of your mum’s. Sort of. I just wanted to check on you. Make sure you’re OK.”

Alfie grunts. “Yeah.”

The room is bigger than I imagined. There’s a built-in wardrobe and an en suite bathroom, plus a double bed and a flat-screen TV hooked up to a PlayStation.

I lower my voice to a whisper. “You’re good, right? No one is—like, messing with you?”

He doesn’t look up from his game. “Ew. Gross.”

A wave of relief washes over me. Of course not. “Good. That’s good.”

“So you here to save me?”

“What?”

“You know, like, rescue me?”

Beneath the acrylic ski mask, the first beads of sweat prick my forehead. I swallow. “What? Uh, no. I was actually looking for my own son.”

Alfie’s face falls. He turns back to his game, and I feel something like guilt. *Should I* be rescuing him? How would that even work?

“Sorry. I just—I don’t know how to help you. Besides, I’m stuck here too.” I hold up my still-bound hands as proof.

Alfie lets out a derisive laugh without taking his eyes off the screen. “Yeah, but you’re an adult. Can’t you figure something out?”

There’s an explosion on the screen, and Alfie lets out a frustrated sigh and chucks his controller at the TV.

“Slag,” he mumbles. “Look what you made me do.”

Two weeks of hostagedom clearly haven’t changed him. For a moment, I’m not sorry at all that he’s locked in Adam’s guest room. Maybe another week or two in here will teach him a lesson.

I make my way to the door. “Right. Well, um, take care.” I use my elbow to pound against the wooden door. “I’m ready to come out now!”

Alfie looks over his shoulder at me, and I notice for the first time that his eyes are ringed with red. In a voice barely louder than a whisper, he utters a word I’m not sure he’s ever used before.

“Please?”

He looks smaller suddenly, more helpless.

“Please,” he says again. “I miss my mum.”

I start to say something, but then the door swings open and Adam’s burly arm reaches in, grabbing me by the shoulder and steering me back to the living room sofa. I peel off the itchy acrylic mask and sink into the cushions, trying to process what I’ve just witnessed.

“See?” Adam crows triumphantly, planting himself next to me on the sofa. “What did I tell you? Kid’s got pizza, *Fortnite*, all the Monster Energy he can drink. Betcha he doesn’t even want to leave!”

I bite my lip. Alfie’s sullen little *please* is rattling around my brain like a curse.

Adam grabs my still-bound hands, and his face goes earnest.

“All I want,” he says, his voice straining, “is a fresh start. You have to believe me, Flo—I never meant to hurt Marta. It was an accident. A terrible, terrible accident. Surely, if anyone can understand wanting a second chance, it’s you.”

I nod, unsure if I actually agree but eager to buy myself some time. “I—I don’t understand. How did you even find him?”

“Oh, it was pure luck Dylan mentioned the class trip that day. Did you know the Wetland Centre is one of the only places in all of London without CCTV? Made it pretty easy.”

“So you kidnapped him and drove him what, five, six hours down to Cornwall? I don’t understand. Has someone been helping you? How did you keep him here?”

Adam shrugs. “Well, it’s not like he was super keen to get back to school. Like I said, pretty sweet setup he’s got here. I just locked the door, left him plenty of food. Told him I’ve got cameras everywhere, and if he tries anything I’ll track him down and kill him.”

He winks at me. “Besides, kids this age don’t really require constant supervision, do they?”

My face burns in shame, but I push on. “But what about Dylan? Why did he have Alfie’s backpack?”

“Oh, that. I’m afraid Dylan interrupted things a bit in the Wetland Centre that day. I was wearing a mask, of course, so he didn’t recognize me. But just in case, I had the boys switch backpacks.” Adam grins at the memory of his own cleverness. “Told Dylan if he said anything to anyone, I’d make sure he went to jail.”

White-hot rage floods my body. “You framed my son?”

Dylan’s odd behavior lately suddenly makes a whole lot more sense. No wonder. Poor kid watched a masked man abduct his classmate. He must have been completely traumatized.

Adam shakes his head vigorously. “No. It was just a bit of insurance. How was I to know you’d go snooping around his room and jump to conclusions? Anyway, you got to hand it to the kid—he sure can keep a secret. Guess the threat of jail scared him into keeping his mouth shut.”

I think of Dylan. My perfect little weirdo, who only wants to make the world better. How many sun-drenched, ice-cream-cone Saturdays does one little kid actually get, before his spirit is crushed by bullies and bad bosses and menacing letters from the taxman? How many sock-footed Christmas mornings, tiptoeing downstairs to a pile of gifts beneath the tree? It's not a rhetorical question. I can count my own happy childhood memories on one hand. Adam has stolen what was left of Dylan's innocence, carried him prematurely across the bridge that separates *Blissful Childhood Ignorance* from *Shabby Wasteland of Adulthood* and burned down the bridge behind him. What's worse, he's taught my child to lie to me. For that alone, I would cheerfully murder him: a few swift swings of the hatchet, a freezer bag, a tarp. It wouldn't be hard for me at all.

My whole body is shaking now, vibrating with fury. I turn to face him. "Why did you bring me here, Adam? What am I doing here?"

He looks at the floor. "I need your help."

"What?"

"You heard Cleo Risby at the press conference: 'Name your price.' I was thinking five million. Three for me, two for you. Enough for both of us to start over, but not so much that they'd actually miss it and come after us."

"Us?" My palms begin to sweat. "What's any of this got to do with me?"

Adam snorts. "Oh no, you're right. I'll just send these billionaires a little ransom note made of cut-up magazine letters, post it through their letter box. " 'Got your son, please drop a couple bags of cash in the bushes'?"

He shakes his head. "Give me some credit, Florence. I'm not a complete moron. I already tried reaching out to Cleo on my own. Sent her a couple of Alfie's drawings, as proof of life. But it just muddied the waters."

My stomach drops as I recall the pictures Cleo showed me on the bus that night. Fuck. She was right.

Adam lowers his voice, as if someone might overhear. "Fact is, hostage negotiation is a delicate art. The approach needs to be made gently, by

someone they know. Otherwise they'll go straight to the cops or whatever ex-Mossad goonies they've hired on the side, and it'll all be for nothing."

"Wait, so...you want me to ask the Risbys for ransom money?"

"Now you're catching on."

"Why not Jenny? Since you guys are so close now?"

Adam throws his head back and laughs. "Jenny? Are you kidding? She'd call the police so fast it would make your head spin. But you—" He pauses, running his eyes up and down my body appraisingly. "You're different. *Morally flexible.*"

I bristle. In spite of everything, I find this offensive. "I'm not actually like that. Not anymore."

"That right? That what Robin Sexton thinks?"

A feeling like a bucket of ice water washes over me. Adam cocks his eyebrow. "Oh c'mon. We both know what you did. Honestly, I'm impressed. Framing an innocent man to save your son? That's some biblical shit." He pauses. "Just think about it: two million quid. You could get a bigger place, record an album. I'm offering you a way out, Flo. A new life. I just need you to help me do this one little thing."

I feel faint. The room is starting to spin. Next to me, Adam is growing increasingly agitated, speaking in a rapid-fire clip. "You know, a different kind of person would just blackmail you. But not me. I'm a good guy. I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to."

Before I can say anything, Adam jumps up from the sofa. He retrieves a box cutter from his back pocket and grabs me by the arm, slashing at the tape on my wrists and dissolving it with two quick slices.

"There you go," he says, extending a hand and helping me to my feet. "OK? You're free. Walk right out the door if you want. Seriously."

I rub my wrists. My head is still pounding. Marta is dead. Alfie is in the next room. And Dylan, apparently, is safe at home in Shepherd's Bush, after taking a mysterious predawn walk.

Think, Florence, think.

How long have I been in this house? It could have been an hour, or ten. I've completely lost track of time. I wonder if Jenny is still waiting around

the corner. I could slip out now, run through the darkness toward the car, drive the six hours back to London and Dylan. But what will happen to Alfie Risby if I leave now? There's a twinge in my stomach. I need more time. I need to think.

"Actually, Adam—" I pause, still negotiating my awkward status somewhere between guest, co-conspirator, and hostage. "Do you think I could use the bathroom? Freshen up a little?"

Adam's eyes linger on me for a moment, taking in the dried blood on my forehead, my smeared makeup, my matted hair.

"Gotta admit, you do look pretty gross," he says finally. "Down the hall on your left. But no funny business, yeah?"

Porthcurno

MONDAY NIGHT

THE BATHROOM LOOKS LIKE AN old woman's too. Peeling pastel wallpaper. A decaying pile of shell-shaped hand soaps. A basket of ancient potpourri.

I unbutton my shirt, careful not to jab myself with the capped syringe I'd tucked in my bra. The one with Allegra's horse tranquilizer in it. It's easy enough to imagine plunging it into Adam's shoulder, then grabbing Alfie, running out of the house. But could I really do it?

At the sink, I splash cold water on my face and try to reconcile the Adam I've known all these years—my earnest, lovesick upstairs neighbor—with the person he actually is: a murderer, a kidnapper. I wish I had asked more questions about the incident he'd alluded to once, earlier in his police career, the one that got him demoted. Maybe if I'd been paying more attention, I could have spared everyone. But it's too late now.

Dylan. I picture my son at home, wondering where I am and why I'm not answering my phone. What the hell was he doing, sneaking out of the house in the dark?

I grab a dubious-looking bar of soap and begin to scrub my face, removing every trace of makeup until the suds burn my eyes. Maybe it's

best to just go along with Adam's plan. After all, Dylan is safe. What's the point of trying to rescue Alfie? I don't even like him.

I stare at the chipped tile and think about Adam's offer. A fresh start. A chance to close the door on this whole sorry chapter of my life. To stop being Florence the Fuckup and begin my *Emancipation of Mimi* era. Two million pounds is a lot of money, but it's still not enough for a pastel Notting Hill town house. Maybe the basement of one. I could put a recording studio in the back garden. Transfer Dylan to one of those "nurturing" private schools with no uniforms or grades. He could finally make friends, stop spending all his time with creepy old Mr. Foster.

In the filthy mirror, I examine my reflection. My makeup is gone now, and my eyes are puffy and swollen, still stinging from the soap. Wet hair clings to my skull like limp spaghetti. The gash on my head is bleeding again. I look like a monster. I feel like a monster. Small and wrong and bad. Adam saw it. *Dark recognizing dark*. That's why he's asked me and not Jenny to help him.

I dry my face on a stiff towel and tuck the cool plastic syringe back into the band at the center of my bra. My eyes linger on the grimy mirror. For a moment, I see someone else. Not a monster. But someone who doesn't care how she looks anymore. Who doesn't have to care. The goddess Medusa, dangerous, powerful in her hideousness.

Fuck it. I've spent the last ten years taking the easy way out. Look where it's gotten me. Alone in an old woman's bathroom, trapped between a girlfriend killer and a kidnapped rich kid. I've got no career, no romantic prospects, and all the other mothers hate me. No one is coming to save me. No one was ever coming to save me. Tonight, for once in my life, I'm going to do the right thing. The hard thing.

It's time to save Alfie Risby. For real this time.

Porthcurno

MONDAY NIGHT

I MEET ADAM IN THE kitchen. He's standing in front of the oven, sliding a frozen pizza off a metal baking sheet. "Hard work having such a posh hostage," he says with a little laugh. "Kid only eats the gourmet stuff from M-and-S."

His eyes linger on the ligature marks on my wrists, angry purple burns that look like bracelets.

"Sorry about that, by the way," he says, catching my gaze. "Precautionary measure. You understand."

"It's fine," I say as lightly as I can muster. I have to act casual now. Everything depends on it.

I lean against the counter and steel myself for one final performance. "I understand, Adam. Really. About everything."

Relief floods his face. He slides the pizza onto a plate and wraps his arms around me, engulfing me in a familiar cloud of Old Spice and laundry detergent and pressing the plastic syringe tighter against my chest. Every molecule in my body recoils against his touch, but I force myself to remain perfectly still.

"Thank you," he says, nuzzling his face in my hair. "Seriously, Flo. You won't regret it."

Relax, I remind myself. Be cool.

“It’s going to be fine,” I lie.

Adam releases me and turns back to the tray, adding a glass bottle of Perrier.

“Teatime for His Highness. Be right back—we’ll get straight into the details.” He winks at me before he pulls the red ski mask over his head.

I take a seat at the kitchen table and wait. The tranquilizer won’t work immediately. Which means as soon as I jab him, I need to be ready to run. Alfie too.

I peer through the kitchen window, into the darkness. The glass is smudged; all I can see is the dim glow of hazy moonlight. I wonder if Jenny is still out there, waiting. I hope so. I don’t fancy my chances alone in the dark.

In the distance, I hear the sound of the bedroom door closing again, the jangle of the chain, followed by Adam’s flat, heavy footsteps returning to the kitchen. I sit up straight. Ideally I’d jab him while we are in the living room, so it’d only be a few steps to Alfie’s room and then the front door. The closer the better. Every second is going to count.

Adam reappears, pulls off the red ski mask, and sits down next to me at the table.

“Right. So. The approach. You’ll wanna make contact with Cleo Risby on her own. Maybe invite her for coffee. You mums love Gail’s Bakery, right? Be sure to meet her in public, somewhere crowded. Frame it as a social thing.

“I’ll send you some photos of Alfie with today’s newspapers, but—and this is important—only show her *on your phone*. Don’t AirDrop them or e-mail them to her or anything. We have to mind our digital trail.”

I nod. “Got it. But actually, Adam”—I giggle nervously—“I need the bathroom again.”

He rolls his eyes. “You know where it is.”

As soon as I’m out of the kitchen I reach into my bra, uncap the syringe, and clutch it in my fist, careful not to stab myself with it.

I shuffle along the corridor, past the bathroom, toward Alfie's room. I slide the chain from the door as quietly as possible. My heart is slamming around my chest so hard I imagine Adam can hear it in the kitchen. *Gotta be quick quick quick.*

When I ease the door open, Alfie is sitting inches from the TV, clutching a video game controller in his hand. He looks up at my maskless face in surprise. "Hey, I know you! You're one of the mums—"

I put a finger to my lips and nod. "I'm Dylan's mum. And I'm going to get us out of here. Put your shoes on."

Alfie frowns, his nose scrunching in annoyance. "What, like right now? But I'm on level 17, and I just—"

In the distance, I can hear Adam banging around the kitchen. My heartbeat quickens. "Alfie, this is serious. Put your shoes on and get ready to run. We're in dang—"

I'm interrupted by the sound of quick, heavy footsteps. The bedroom door flies open, cracking against the wall with a dull thud. Adam is wearing the red ski mask and carrying a silvery gun in his right hand. The sight of it makes me jump.

I clear my throat. "Sorry, I was just checking if he needed—"

"You idiot!" Adam shouts, lunging toward me. For someone so muscle-bound, he's incredibly fast. His face is inches from mine; I can feel his hot breath on my cheek. "You idiot! He can't see your face. Don't you get it? Now he knows—"

I'm not ready. But this is it. It's now or never. I bring the syringe up over my head and slam it down, plunging it into the firm muscle of Adam's trapezius. It takes him completely by surprise. He staggers backward, the syringe sticking out of his navy jumper like a dart on a bull's-eye.

I turn to Alfie. He's still sitting in front of the TV, frozen in fear.

"*Run, Alfie!*" I shriek, the words burning in my throat. "*Run!*"

Alfie finally, belatedly, seems to comprehend the urgency of our situation. He stands up, chucks the video game controller to the ground, and darts past Adam, through the open bedroom door and into the living room.

Adam reaches down and plucks the syringe out of his shoulder. “What the fuck?” he scoffs, chucking the syringe to the floor. “Did you just try to stab me?”

I strain for the sound of the front door opening, desperate to know if Alfie has made it out of the house. Is Jenny still idling in the car nearby? Will she find him?

The half-empty syringe is now lying on the carpet, just beyond my reach. I lunge for it, but it’s too late. Adam is on top of me now.

“You dumb bitch!” he shouts. “You ruined everything.” There is an explosion of pain as the wind is knocked out of me. I am on the floor now, belly down, face mashed into the carpet.

“Why?” Adam is shouting. He’s dropped the gun and is pummeling me with his bare hands, as if he can’t bear the distance the gun would put between us, as if he wants the satisfaction of feeling his flesh connect with mine in the most painful way possible. “Why, Flo? You ruined everything.”

My entire body contracts in fear as the blows continue. A hand. A foot. Something heavy, perhaps the PlayStation. At first, I feel strangely numb and detached. Then the pain comes all at once, like a wave cresting on the beach. It is everywhere. Agony. Adam is still shouting, but I can’t make out the words anymore. I let my body go slack. The blows continue. I wonder, abstractly, how I am still conscious. Shouldn’t my body shut down, protect me from this? I think of Marta and hope that her end was less painful. In the distance, I can hear a thwacking sound, like wood on metal, coming from the front of the house. I try to open my eyes, but all I see is blood. I feel myself drifting out of consciousness, being dragged woozily down to the bottom of a warm pool.

An image of Dylan appears, hunched over our kitchen table, wondering when I am coming home.

Who’s going to tell Dylan? It’s the last coherent thought I have before I plummet down a dark well, landing with a plop at the bottom. My mother is there, wearing her Denny’s uniform. “Look at you,” she says, beaming. “Showing compassion for that kid. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

Marta is there as well. Or Ghost Marta, I guess. She hands me a tissue and a sympathetic look.

“Sucks being dead, doesn’t it?” she says.

I shake my head. “Not me. Not yet.” I force my eyes open again. Adam has stopped wailing on me now and is sitting on the bed. He’s facing me, his back to the door, sobbing into his hands. The veterinary tranquilizer has had no discernible effect. My eyes dart to the gun on the floor, just to the right of the bed. If I could just crawl a few feet...maybe. I try to move my arm, but nothing happens. *Oh God, am I paralyzed?*

Just behind Adam, in the doorway, a figure appears. Dark hair, dark clothes. My breath catches in my throat. Jenny? Am I hallucinating? Her eyes grow round as she takes in the situation. She puts a finger to her lips and lunges for the gun.

At that precise second, Adam turns around and sees her.

“Shit,” Adam’s voice says. He jumps up from the bed and delivers a final kick to my head. “See what you did?”

The sound of a gunshot fills the room. The piercing bang is far louder than I expected, and everything goes dark.

Silence.

I WAKE UP WITH A Girls' Night song stuck in my head, but I can't work out which one. The lyrics are floating somewhere just beyond my grasp, like the ribbon on a helium balloon drifting up, up, and away.

The air smells of lilies and antiseptic. I blink. Bright light scorches my retinas. A hospital. I'm in a hospital. Last time I was in the hospital was when Dylan was born—a squalid NHS maternity ward with nine other women and their hulking, hairy husbands. But this is different. This is the Tiffany's of hospital rooms. A few more Diptyque candles and it could pass for a day spa.

Dylan is perched next to me, his head bowed, his eyes trained on a Game Boy. I call his name, but it comes out all lumpy, like "*Gm-pgn*."

"Mum!" he says, jumping to his feet. "I'll get the nurse." He pauses for a microsecond, draping an awkward arm over my chest. "I missed you," he murmurs. I breathe in the soapy scent of his hair. The urge to hug him is all-consuming, but when I try to move my arms, nothing happens. I look down and find them encased in matching plaster casts, like immobile caterpillars in little white cocoons.

A cheerful-looking nurse in pristine green scrubs appears in the doorway. "Well, hello there," she says brightly, as if she's speaking to a

baby who has just been born. “How are we feeling?”

I open my mouth to answer, but the words come out like mush.

“That’s OK,” the nurse says, scribbling a note on her clipboard. “A week in a coma will do that to you!” She turns to Dylan. “Dylan, my love, the nurses just put out some cookies in the staff room, if you want to grab one while they’re warm.”

She presses an icy stethoscope to my chest. “Just relax for me. Good. Doctor’s on her way now. I’ll just get some vitals from you.”

She flutters around me like a hummingbird, poking here, lifting there, scribbling again. Her movements are brisk, efficient, competent. She reminds me of Jenny.

“*Mmpf. Mpfh.*”

The nurse gives me a sympathetic look. “You may find you have some difficulty speaking over the next few days. Not to worry. Just try to rest.”

I nod. My eyelids feel so heavy, as if they’ve been lined with cement.

“Oh, and I’ve already called your sister,” she says with a conspiratorial wink. “Not the one in Mauritius. The other one.”

I stare at her, not comprehending. She continues, “Normally, we have a family-only policy for critical patients, but she and the twins have been visiting nearly every day since you arrived.”

I lean back, allowing my head to sink deeper into the pillow. I try to remember how I got here, but my memory feels like it’s been smeared in peanut butter. The soft bleating of the monitors lulls me into a meditative state. Dylan reappears in the periphery of my vision, thin and pale, his dark hoodie half obscuring his face.

“What happened?” I try to say, but it comes out like, “*Whaf affpad.*”

Dylan glances at the floor but doesn’t answer. He knows exactly what I want to know.

“Adam?” (*Atham?*) I croak.

Dylan grimaces, draws an index finger across his throat.

I gulp.

“Alfie?” (*Mathie?*)

“He’s fine.” Dylan shrugs. “Free to torture reptiles another day, thanks to you.” He gestures to a floral arrangement the size of a small SUV on the opposite table. “From the Risbys,” he says. “You know, for saving their son and all that.”

I nod, trying to wrap my head around it all. Adam is dead. Alfie is alive. Rollo and Cleo like me now.

“Where were you?” I say finally. (*Bher merf ew?*) “That morning?” (*Mat foring?*)

Dylan looks down at the white tiles on the floor, not meeting my gaze. “I just went for a walk, Mum. That’s all.”

I study his face, trying to decide if I believe him. There are still so many more questions, but I can feel my body beginning to sink like a heavy stone through the mattress. I am so tired. Are they giving me morphine? The floor of the hospital opens up, and I begin to plummet down toward the basement, where I stay for a very long time.

The next time I wake up, Jenny is sitting next to me, in the chair where Dylan had been. It’s morning. Sunshine streams through the window, forming a halo around Jenny’s head. A folder of papers is spread out in front of her. Yellow legal pads full of handwritten notes in Jenny’s prim script. *Ask about dental implant specialist. Pull the latest research on acute sub-cranial hematoma interventions.*

Jenny turns toward me and pulls off her reading glasses. A smile spreads across her face. “You’re awake.”

“*Mmfhg*,” I manage.

“Now don’t worry about your teeth. We’ll find you a great dentist.” She smiles indulgently. “You’ll be chomping Big Red again in no time, I’m sure.”

My teeth? Is that why I can’t talk? I run my tongue around my mouth, but my gums are thick and wooly, like they’ve been lined with cotton balls.

“Try not worry,” she says. “Everyone has veneers now. The Risbys will make sure you have the very best.” She gestures around the room. “They’re

the ones who put you up in this swank place.”

“*Mmfhg*,” I manage.

She hands me a little dry-erase board. “I thought it might be easier for you to write.”

I grasp the dry-erase marker awkwardly. My arms are still in casts, but I manage to scrawl, *What happened?*

Jenny sucks in air through her teeth. “OK. Sure. Right. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Before I can answer, Dylan reappears and thrusts a cardboard box in my face. “Mum, look,” he says, speaking rapidly. “It’s Greta! I thought she was dead, but she was just hibernating. Mr. Foster said—”

“Hey, Dyl,” Jenny says. “Wanna grab some snacks from the vending machine?” She pulls out a twenty-pound note. “The twins are in the waiting room, take them with you.”

When he’s gone, Jenny turns to me. Her face is drawn and earnest. “I waited outside, like we agreed.” She looks down at her feet, choosing her words carefully. “But I also called the police. I wasn’t going to let my best friend walk into a death trap, was I?”

My heart swells. *You saved me?* I scribble.

“Not exactly. See, it was a small town—the officer, he didn’t really understand the gravity of the situation. Maybe it was the American accent, I dunno. It was like he thought it was prank. Anyway, no one came. I ended up getting out of the car, crouching in some bushes in the front yard, trying to see what was going on in the house. Then the front door flew open, and Alfie came shooting out, shrieking like a banshee. Ran right past me. I could hear screaming inside. The door was still open, so...I went into the house. And then...”

“What?” I say. (*Whaf?*)

She stares at me intently. “You really don’t remember?”

I shake my head.

A strange look crosses her face, something between suspicion and relief. “Well, never mind. The important thing is, you’re OK.”

Her eyes bore into me like lasers, willing me to understand something she can't bring herself to say out loud. "Though I imagine the police will want a statement from you. About Adam's, um...suicide."

I change the subject.

Dylan? I scrawl tentatively.

She hesitates. "That part I'm less clear on. What has he told you?"

I shake my head. Nothing.

"Well, according to him, he couldn't sleep and went for a walk," Jenny says, choosing her words carefully. "He claims he came home and found you deep asleep, so he got dressed and took himself to school."

School? I suppose that would explain why no one from the front office called about his absence. But what on earth was he doing going for a walk in the early hours of the morning?

The sound of gleeful whooping in the hall interrupts my thoughts. The boys are coming back now, their arms laden with soda and candy. Jenny stands up, and, as if reading my mind, says, "You'll need to ask Dylan about the walk." She crouches down by my hospital bed, lowering her voice to a whisper. "But listen. He's fine. You're alive. Maybe just leave it alone for now. What good can possibly come of it?"

She squeezes my hand gently. "Rest now, Florence."

The days pass in a blur. There is physical therapy. Walking gingerly on crutches, performing gentle stretches. Eating small bowls of applesauce the nurses bring me. Someone comes to my hospital room and takes a mold of my mouth. "For your new teeth." The old me would have been hysterical at the thought of losing six teeth. And maybe it's just the pain meds, but I find myself unable to muster much outrage. I'm alive. My son is safe. What's a few pieces of enamel, really? Like Jenny said, I can buy new ones.

A few days later, the police show up. A male officer with a gaping overbite stands at the foot of my hospital bed and asks a bunch of perfunctory, leading questions before declaring Adam's death a suicide.

He murdered his girlfriend! I scribble on my dry-erase board. The officer gives a curt nod. “We’ll inform her next of kin,” he says. “And the Polish embassy.”

Even now, no one seems especially interested in Marta’s murder. Marta, who didn’t get a single headline.

A freshly suntanned Brooke comes to visit, dragging a sulking Julian and a wilted bouquet. She’s quick to mention that she sacrificed her first-class seat to fly back to London earlier. (“But it was no trouble,” she assures me.)

“Bad luck about your teeth,” a sunburnt Julian mumbles, and I try to nod graciously. “And sorry about the whole cricket ball thing.” He lifts his chin toward Brooke. “She made me do it.”

Brooke glares at him. “Really? You think now is the time?”

“Whaf?” I manage.

Brooke takes a seat on the edge of my bed. “Look, I’m sorry. Really. I was just so worried about you and Dylan. And I thought perhaps the note would frighten you out of your little investigation, convince you to get a lawyer. I had your best interests at heart.” Her voice shifts from apologetic to chipper. “But never mind! Water under the bridge now, isn’t it?”

Before I can protest, my sister reaches into a woven straw carrier bag and fans several newspapers across the bed. “Have you seen the good news? Look! You’re famous again!”

I study the headlines.

HERO MUM FINDS MISSING BOY!

**FORMER POP STAR BEHIND DRAMATIC
RESCUE OF FROZEN FOODS HEIR**

**MET POLICE CHIEF CALLS FOR INQUIRY
INTO KIDNAPPING COP**

Some enterprising photo editor has dug up photos from my Girls' Night days. Old promo shots, from when I was a decade younger and several shades blonder. I can't help but smile, though it sends a jolt of pain through my jaw.

Brooke beams at me.

You still owe me a window, I scrawl on the dry-erase board.

Later that evening, I flip through the newspapers. I suppose almost dying has made me curious about the world I'd nearly left behind. The news is predictably bleak: Forest fires destroyed a billionaire's house in California. Rebels attacked a container ship in the Red Sea. And buried on the very bottom of page 5, a short article reveals that Robin Sexton has been released from jail, all charges dropped. A wave of guilt washes over me. I may never stop feeling bad for what I did to that man. But at least now I have the rest of my life to try to fix it.

The next morning the deliveries begin: floral arrangements and fruit baskets and teddy bears sent by morning show bookers in New York and ambitious junior producers in London, all hoping to score the first sit-down interview with the "hero mum detective" who found Alfie Risby.

Elliott sends a case of Taittinger and a note that reads, "WOW! Who knew you were such a multi-hyphenate. What's next? New album? Beauty line? A guest spot on *Torture Jungle*? Call me, let's seize your 15 minutes!"

A cardboard record mailer arrives with a limited-edition pressing of *The Emancipation of Mimi* on clear vinyl. There's no card, just a handwritten yellow Post-it note that reads, "Get well soon, Negroni-Girl ☺".

I show all the flowers and newspaper clippings to Jenny, feeling slightly guilty. *You're the one who should be getting credit*, I scribble on my dry-erase board. *If it weren't for you, I'd be buried in the backyard of that cottage*.

"Oh please," she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "Like I want my picture on TV. The guys at the office would never let me hear the end of

it.” Her face grows serious. “I’m just happy you’re OK.” She squeezes my hand. “And I’m sorry this happened, Florence. You didn’t deserve it. Any of it.”

Hot tears prick my eyes. But the truth is—though I feel terrible about what Adam did to Marta, and what I did to Robin Sexton—if the whole Alfie thing hadn’t happened, Jenny and I never would have become friends. I’d still be watching reality TV by myself all day, delivering balloon arches and dreaming of a musical comeback. I’d still be pining for my old life, living under a cloud of regret for my past mistakes, sabotaging myself at every turn.

Sure, it sucks what happened to Alfie, but hear me out: Is it possible that getting *gently* kidnapped wasn’t the absolute worst thing that could happen to a spoiled rich kid? At the very least, now he has some “hardship” to write about on his college admissions essay. I guess if I’m being completely honest, I’m not sorry it happened. I don’t say this to Jenny, though. Don’t want her thinking I’m a psychopath.

Instead, I squeeze her hand. “I owe you,” I mumble.

The next day, the Risbys show up: Cleo and Rollo and Alfie, united in euphoric relief and trailed by a gaggle of frazzled assistants and a bodyguard. I wonder if the divorce is off, but it seems imprudent to ask.

Cleo is halting and shy. Her hair is blond again, like the whole thing never happened. She hovers close to Alfie, unwilling to let him out of her sight. She squeezes my hand and sobs into an oversize cashmere roll-neck sweater. “I’ll never be able to repay you,” she says softly. “To have your child returned. It’s...it’s everything.”

I nod, understanding more than she will probably ever know. Alfie looks down at his shoes, as if his mother is embarrassing him.

“Go on, darling,” Cleo says, and Alfie shuffles toward me, thrusting a gigantic bouquet of white lilies into my lap.

“For you,” he says. “You know, for saving me.” Am I imagining it, or is there the faintest hint of a smirk on his freckled face?

“Quite right,” Rollo interjects, oozing brandy and gratitude, the force of his personality filling the room like helium gas. He grabs my hand and pumps my arm up and down like he’s running for mayor, ignoring my winces.

“All the best to you,” he bellows, as his assistant snaps a photograph.

“We won’t keep you,” Cleo says, wrapping a protective arm around Alfie. “Come now. Let’s let Ms. Grimes get her rest.”

Rollo clears his throat. “Family office will be in touch. About the financial side of things,” he says with a wink.

My heart soars. Does this mean— Am I getting reward money? I’d somehow forgotten all about it. But just as quickly, I remember: Mr. Sexton. And before the door even closes on the Risbys, I already know that I’m not going to keep it. Money will never undo what I did, but it’s a start.

The next day the casts come off. I manage to reach down to pick up a pencil off the floor, leading my physical therapist to break out in applause. A team of fresh-faced doctors agrees I’m healthy enough to be discharged. I’ll have to continue outpatient physical therapy, but there’s no reason I can’t be home for Christmas.

On my last night in the hospital, the chipper nurse from the first day comes in for rounds, trailed by a small figure in a large purple hoodie. “She says she’s a friend,” the nurse says.

I squint. Linh lowers the hood with a conspiratorial smile. She doesn’t tell me I look good or try to hug me. Instead, she holds up a travel cosmetics case.

“Figured your nails probably looked like shit,” she says with a grin, and begins setting up at my bedside.

Where were you? I scrawl on my dry-erase board. *I came by Fresh Nails and couldn’t find you. I thought the Strangler got you!*

Linh’s eyes widen. “Oh, didn’t you hear? They caught him.” She sighs. “Yeah. Some neckbeard in Wandsworth. Apparently, he stole one of his victims’ mobile phones and tried to gift it to another woman he met online.

Forgot to erase her iCloud. Can you imagine? Almost like he wanted to get caught!”

I nod patiently. I’ve never shared Linh’s obsession with true crime.

But where were you? I scribble.

Linh looks away shyly. “Oh. I had an interview. Alexander McQueen. Just an internship. But, girl, they make you work for it. Three rounds of interviews, full studio trial day.” She begins lining up her tools on my meal tray and shrugs. “Anyway, I got it.”

I break into a wide grin that makes my face ache.

CONGRATULATIONS! I scrawl.

Linh smiles and takes my hands in her own, studying my nail beds intently, the way you might read tea leaves for hints of your future.

“Let’s go with green,” she says after a moment. “For new beginnings.”

Linh gets to work, taking care not to jostle the IV line delivering my pain medication.

“Anyway, I’ve got a new obsession,” she says, applying nail polish remover to a cotton ball. “You heard about this new militant environmental collective? It’s like Just Stop Oil meets the Red Army Faction.”

I shake my head.

Linh pitches the damp cotton ball toward the trash can on the opposite side of the room. It sails neatly through the air and lands in the bin on her first try.

“Eco-terrorism, basically. They’re targeting bigwigs from the top ten polluters. Oil company executives, that kind of thing. Started with little pranks—sugar in the petrol tank of some CEO’s Bentley. But lately”—her eyes dance with excitement—“they’ve started blowing stuff up.”

She uncaps a clear bottle of Seche Vite and applies the topcoat with smooth, even strokes. “Anyway, it’s for a good cause.”

She recaps the bottle and does a little bow. “*Et voilà!*”

I look down at my nails. Nine perfect mint-colored ovals.

“I had to skip the one with the pulse oximeter,” Linh says apologetically. “But what do you think?”

“*Neez glur-glur,*” I say.

Linh's eyes widen at the sound of my voice. "What's that?"

I try again. "*Gli-guh*."

A smile of recognition spreads across her lips. "Oh. *Glitter*." She glances down at my nails. "Couldn't agree more."

I'm alive after all. Reason enough to celebrate.

Shepherd's Bush

DECEMBER 25

I'M BACK HOME IN TIME for Christmas. In a rush of joie de vivre, I agree to let Dylan get a real Christmas tree. He selects a six-foot-tall Nordmann fir that comes in its own replantable pot. It costs 250 quid and looks like a bush, but whatever. He installs it in pride of place in the living room and decorates it with "sustainable" garlands made of popcorn and dried oranges that I worry will attract rats. After watching a viral video on how an unwatered Christmas tree can set your living room ablaze in under five seconds, I take to watering it obsessively.

You'd think it would be strange, being back in our old flat, walking through the shared front door every day, but to be honest, it feels like it always did. Like home, for better or worse.

On Christmas morning, Dylan wakes up early and bounds into my room, dangling a Red Bull wrapped in a crimson velvet ribbon in front of my face.

"Ha-ha, very funny," I say, rolling my eyes, but I'm secretly pleased he got me anything. Dylan doesn't believe in Santa, he never has, but the two of us troop out to the living room anyway to pretend. I make us mugs of oat milk hot chocolate to slurp while Dylan plunges into the pile of presents.

Brooke and Julian are spending the holiday in St. Lucia (“to make up for our interrupted honeymoon!”) but have sent gifts: a Selfridges Christmas hamper and a pair of fuzzy slippers for me, and a set of walkie-talkies and a solar-powered charger for Dylan. I’d been careful to buy from his list: a drone and an instant camera and, against my better judgment, a slingshot. There’s only one gift I’d dared to pick out myself: a new terrarium for Greta. Dylan unwraps it with a skeptical look on his face before delightedly declaring it his favorite present of all. “A real turtle palace!”

We spend the morning moving Greta into her new home, and in the afternoon, Jenny and the boys come over. We order dim sum from Tian Fu, open Brooke’s Christmas hamper, and pop the bottle of champagne Jenny brought. The twins run around the backyard, whacking each other with sticks while Dylan hides in his bedroom, arranging rocks in Greta’s new terrarium.

“What are they gonna do with his flat?” Jenny says, biting into a slice of panettone.

My eyes dart up to the ceiling. “I actually thought I might—well, you know originally it was one house. Thought I might have a go at putting it back together.”

This is not the complete truth. In fact, I’d already called Adam’s father and, after offering my condolences, offered to buy Adam’s flat. I didn’t hold it against him, raising a murderer. We don’t choose our children, after all.

Jenny’s eyebrows shoot up. “Whoa. Seriously? Can you afford that?”

“Sure, I still have some of the—” I stop myself.

Jenny sets her glass on the table. “Wait, I thought you gave the reward money to Robin Sexton?”

“Yeah, sure. But did he really need all five million? He was in jail for like a week! Four million seems like plenty.”

Jenny rolls her eyes, but there’s a hint of a smile on her lips. I scramble to change the subject. “What about you? What’s new at work?”

Jenny looks down. “Oh. I’ve been offered a promotion, actually. To lead the Frankfurt office.”

My heart sinks into my feet. “Really? But you just got here!” I stop myself. “I mean, that’s great. Congratulations.”

“Yeah.” She pours herself another glass of champagne. We stare out the window at Max and Charlie, who have stopped hitting each other with sticks and are now flinging them over the garden fence like boomerangs.

“I don’t think I’m gonna take it.”

“What?”

She wrinkles her nose. “You ever been to Frankfurt? Anyway, the boys like it here. They’re settled. I was thinking I might treat myself to a sabbatical. Try something new. Who knows?” She shrugs and takes another swig of her champagne. “Maybe I’ll start my own thing.”

After they leave, Dylan and I install ourselves on the sofa. We play two rounds of Uno, eat leftover dim sum with our hands, and watch *Die Hard* on TV. He’s probably a little young to enjoy Bruce Willis battling terrorists at Nakatomi Plaza, but whatever. Will’s coming to get him tomorrow for Boxing Day, and I’m determined to make sure *this* is the holiday he remembers.

We must have both fallen asleep on the sofa, because when I wake up, the house is dark and quiet. Dylan is sprawled on the sofa. The movie is over, and the eleven-o’clock news is on. A baby-faced reporter is standing in a parking lot in front of a burning building. Shell Oil headquarters in South London, he tells the somber studio anchor.

“No fatalities have been reported, but at least one board member was badly injured,” the reporter continues, gesturing to the flaming inferno behind him. “Authorities are calling it arson. The explosive device is believed to be a nail bomb.”

A fuzzy photo flashes on the screen. A hunched figure in a gray anorak.

“Police are asking the public for help in identifying this man,” he adds.

A trickle of fear begins to ooze its way into my consciousness. Why does that picture feel so...familiar? I stare at the screen, willing my brain to

switch on and connect the dots. I know that jacket from somewhere. But where? One of the school dads? Someone from Raya?

A wave of nausea washes over me.

Mr. Foster.

The moment it dawns on me, something clicks in my mind. The crickets. The can full of nails. Dylan's mysterious early-morning walk. Linh's words ring in my ears: *This new militant environmental collective.*

I glance over at my son, deep asleep on the sofa, and every hair on my body stands to attention.

Did he—could he—?

I turn back at the TV and the blazing Shell building. The network is really milking that fire footage. In the reflection of the TV screen, I watch Dylan snoring lightly, his green "Give Peas a Chance" hoodie lifting with each breath. He looks so perfect, so angelic, when he's sleeping.

One thing you don't realize until you have kids of your own is how often your own mom has pictured your death. It's one of the dark secrets of motherhood: from the moment your child is born, and sometimes even before, you are haunted by visions of horrible things happening to them. Your two-year-old toddling into a pool unnoticed. Your six-year-old on a shiny red bicycle, darting out in front of a bus. Your rebellious teenager accepting a ride from a stranger with the darkest of intentions. And it never, ever ends. Dylan will be a paunchy, balding middle-aged man one day, and I'll lie awake at night in my old folks' home, fretting about whether he took his cholesterol medication. That's why mothers love to watch their children sleep. Because it's the closest we ever get to feeling like they're actually safe.

I study Dylan's peaceful face. How many more nights like this do I have, before he is grown and gone, out in the world on his own? Before the Bad Thing, the one I can't stop or foresee or fix, finally catches up with him, the way it will for all of us one day?

I sit in the dark for a very long time, watching Dylan slumber, savoring each of his inhales and exhales, the way only a mother can.

Eventually, I stand up, turn off the TV, pour some more water in the Christmas tree pot, and cover Dylan with a blanket.

My baby.

Safe. Perfect. Whole.

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