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NO ONE SAW A THING

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Only one gets off...

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'Will have you chewing through your nails and unsure of which character to trust as past betrayals and loyalties collide. Gripping.'
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'Incredible thriller, amazing premise. Andrea Mara always delivers on twisty addictive pageturners. An adrenaline rush of a book.'
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Andrea Mara is a *Sunday Times* and *Irish Times* top ten bestselling author, and has been shortlisted for a number of awards, including Irish Crime Novel of the Year. She lives in Dublin, Ireland, with her husband and three young children, and also runs multi-award-winning parent and lifestyle blog, OfficeMum.ie. *No One Saw A Thing*, her most recent novel, sold more than 100,000 copies in thirteen weeks and became an instant No.1 Kindle and Irish bestseller.

Also by Andrea Mara

The Other Side of the Wall
One Click
The Sleeper Lies
All Her Fault
Hide and Seek

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NO ONE SAW A THING

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For warrior queen Alice Hayes, with love

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1

If only Sive hadn't told the girls to run ahead.

If only her editor hadn't picked that moment to phone.

If only she hadn't slowed to look at her screen.

If only she'd used the baby carrier instead of the expensive but cumbersome pram – fine for suburban Dublin but completely unsuitable for the London Underground on a humid August Monday morning.

If only.

As with most disasters, it isn't one single event or decision or misalignment of stars that causes it but a myriad of tiny twists and turns over the course of the morning.

If they hadn't picked that day to go for brunch.

If they hadn't picked that week to go to London.

If Aaron's friends hadn't needed a twenty-year reunion to see who was winning at life.

If, if, if.

But here she is, pushing the pram with one hand, manoeuvring it out of the lift and on to the hot, crowded rush-hour platform, trying to see who is phoning her at 8.30 a.m. when she's supposed to be off work.

'Keep going, Faye – jump on with Bea!' she calls after her six-year-old daughter as the two girls, hand in hand, approach the open Tube doors. 'I'm right behind you!'

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Her phone continues to buzz, and she squints at the screen. Her reading glasses – a new and unwelcome necessity – are back in the hotel room, but she can just about make out the caller's name. Caroline. Her editor. Her editor who knows she's away but has conveniently forgotten. Still pushing the pram with one hand, she swipes awkwardly to decline the call, but it has already ended of its own accord. Phone signal lost, perhaps, now that they're underground. She glances up to see where her daughters are. Two pink denim jackets, one small, one smaller, visible just ahead. The platform is heaving with rushing commuters, pushing forward to get on to the train. Sive tries to squeeze through the crowd, murmuring 'excuse me' and 'sorry' while at the same time aware that this tourist-level politeness is not what's called for here. And now, she's pulled forward in the surge towards the doors, a few feet behind her children. Through a narrow gap in the sea of passengers, Sive sees Faye climb on to the Tube, holding Bea's hand as the two-year-old clambers on too.

And then, just like that, the doors slide shut.

Her children inside looking out.

Sive outside looking in.

Heart in mouth, she rushes forward. The pram, so awkward just moments earlier, makes an efficient battering ram as she barges through commuters, shouting her children's names. But it's no good. The train begins to slide away from the platform and Faye's eyes widen, understanding now what's happening.

Sive roars, 'Get off at the next stop! Faye, next stop!' She points forwards and down, in some approximation of a signal for 'next stop', knowing there's no way Faye can hear her or understand, but hoping another passenger will read it correctly and get the children off the train.

And so, the Tube pulls away with six-year-old Faye and

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two-year-old Bea on board, leaving Sive on the platform, helpless and terrified.

Whatever adrenaline or presence of mind had pushed her to shout after Faye deserts her now. Her limbs are somehow loose and frozen all at once as she stares blindly at the rear lights of the departing Tube. *Jesus Christ.* Her children are on a train, in a city of eight million people, on a rush-hour Monday morning. Without her. Without any adult. What the hell is she supposed to do – try to get to the next station? Run there? With the pram? Hail a taxi? Call the police? Leaving the station feels counterintuitive. What if they come back here and she's gone? But how would they get back here? Would someone on the Tube have seen what happened and return them? Did people do that kind of thing? Someone is talking to her. A woman beside her on the platform. With huge effort, Sive makes herself tune in.

'. . . so you stay here, I'll find someone to help,' the woman says. 'OK?'

Sive nods dumbly.

'The man beside your little one on the Tube heard you. You saw that, yes?'

Sive hadn't.

'He gave a thumbs-up. He'll get your child off at the next stop. So we just need to get you there and find someone to radio ahead.'

Again, Sive nods, confused and grateful and terrified.

'The next train is due in four minutes. I'm going to get someone. You stay here.'

Sive does as she's told, rocking the pram on autopilot, staring down the track as though her children might magically reappear if she wishes hard enough. She glances up at the train information.

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Three minutes until the next one. She can do this. Where is the woman? She looks around. Where are the staff? All about, commuters swarm to the platform, jostling and rushing. The heat is stifling and, in the pram, the baby starts to whimper. Sive rubs his cheek and continues to rock. *Dear God, dear God, dear God.* Let them be OK. Let them not be lost in this huge city. Suddenly, staying here seems wrong. How can she stand on the platform when her children are whizzing down the track towards another place entirely? She turns the pram, just as a man in a bright orange jacket arrives beside her.

'Your child is on the Central Line train that just left for Oxford Circus, madam? Can you give me the child's name and age?' Matter-of-fact. No-nonsense. Exactly what's needed.

'Two children.' Breathless. 'Faye is six and Bea is two.'

He lifts his radio. 'Can you describe them – what they're wearing?'

Christ, what are they wearing? Her mind is blank. *Breathe. Focus.* This is not the time to fall apart. She slows her mind and pictures her children as she saw them, just minutes earlier. 'They're both wearing pink denim jackets. Matching.' The man nods for her to keep going. 'Faye has bright blonde hair. Bea has light brown hair like mine.' She stops. How else can she describe them? Fun and funny and cute and irritating and adorable and infuriating. And gone. 'They're both wearing dresses. Faye's is light grey. Bea's is purple. And they're wearing tan sandals. Faye has a *Frozen II* backpack. Bea has a *PAW Patrol* backpack.'

The man isn't listening any more. He has a radio to his mouth and he's telling someone else everything Sive just said. Two children, six and two. All alone in Oxford Circus. Or not. *Fuck.*

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One minute to go until the next Tube arrives. Sive is rocking the pram harder now.

'Would you like me to do that?' the woman asks. Sive takes her in for the first time. She's a little older than Sive, in her mid-forties, maybe, with curly brown hair and kind brown eyes.

'Oh, I don't want to keep you – you're probably on your way to work?' Sive says, taking in the lanyard hanging around the woman's neck.

'I'm early – it's fine. And your train will be here any second now. Would you like me to come with you?'

'Oh God, I can't ask you to do that,' Sive says emphatically, desperately wishing the woman would do exactly that.

The man with the radio has his back to them but turns now. A train is pulling into the platform and the woman begins pushing the pram towards the opening door, queuing behind a scramble of passengers. The man smiles at Sive and gives her a thumbs-up. 'They got them,' he says. 'Go straight to the next stop. Oxford Circus. My colleagues there will help you, madam.'

Sive's legs almost give way, but the woman is calling her, urging her on to the train.

And the doors are closing and the woman is waving and the man is smiling. Everything is going to be OK.

The journey is the longest of her life, though it can't be more than a minute. It's OK. They're fine. They got them. They'll stay with them. They're not going to leave two little girls alone on the platform to wait for their mother. Their *imbecile* of a mother. Jesus Christ, how is she going to explain this to Aaron? It doesn't matter. All that matters is getting there and seeing them again. It's hot and sticky and hard to breathe, and Sive feels dizzy. Sick. More and more nauseous with every shallow breath. All around her, commuters hold on to bars and read phones, oblivious to

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her plight. Oblivious to her desperate need for the train to hurry the fuck up and get her to Oxford Circus. And then, suddenly, she's there. The doors slide open. She pushes the pram on to the platform, into throngs of commuters. Where are they? Shit, she should have asked the man where to go once she got here. Maybe the staff will find her? Is there some kind of meeting point for missing children? And then she sees it. Down towards the end of the platform. A flash of pale pink denim and light brown curls. She starts to run.

'Bea!' She grabs her two-year-old and whisks her into her arms, burying her head in toddler curls. 'I'm so sorry, lovey. Did you get a terrible fright? Did Faye mind you?'

A woman in an orange jacket smiles at the reunion.

'Hi, love. I'm Rita,' she says, clearly delighted to be part of the happy ending. Gently, she pats Bea's shoulder, and Sive smiles back.

Will Rita or the other security people need proof that Sive is the girls' mother? Bea's hug is visible proof. And at six, Faye is old enough to confirm who Sive is.

Faye.

Sive looks around.

'Where's Faye?'

Rita looks confused. 'Who?'

'My other child?'

'There was no other child.'

Sive hears the words but doesn't take them in. The woman can't have said what she just said. Through the roar of descending panic, she tries again.

'My six-year-old. Faye. She was with Bea?'

Now Rita looks alarmed. 'I was told to look out for a little girl in a pink denim jacket.'

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'*Two* little girls in pink denim jackets. *Two*.' Sive can feel her voice getting louder. Panicky. 'They were together. Faye. Faye is six. She was with Bea.' She turns to Bea, who's still in her arms. 'Where is your sister, lovey? Bea, where is Faye?'

'Gone,' Bea says. 'Faye gone.'

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2

All hell breaks loose. In Sive's head, at least, all hell breaks loose. Rita does not have her daughter. None of the staff at the station have her daughter. And while Sive's been travelling here on the Tube, her daughter has been disappearing somewhere else entirely. Still on the train? Somewhere on the platform? Right out of the station? She wouldn't, though. Surely she wouldn't leave the station. Unless she thought that was the best way to find her mother?

'What about the man on the train?' she asks, panic making her breathless.

Rita looks confused. 'The man?'

'The other woman said there was a man on the train who saw me on the platform and gave a thumbs-up.' It sounds garbled.

'The other woman?'

Sive shuts her eyes briefly and forces herself to slow down. *Stay calm.*

'A woman in Bond Street saw a man on the train. He gestured to show he understood, when I shouted at Faye to get off at the next stop. I thought he must have got them off, and that's why we got the message they were here and that that's how Bea is here. Oh, Jesus.'

Rita speaks into her radio. More orange-jacketed staff arrive. An announcement comes out over the PA system, but Sive can't

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concentrate on any of it. She's flailing. Sick. Panicked. Bea on her hip. Pram by her side. Scanning crowds of commuters. The rush on. The rush off. Another train. Another crowd. Another surge. No sign. No clue. No Faye.

Someone calls the police. Rita, maybe, or one of her colleagues. More announcements. More orange jackets. More worried frowns. But still no Faye. A police officer. A request for a photo, one from today if possible. Questions asked. Descriptions given. Notes taken. Photos sent. Blurred faces through terrified tears. *Is there anyone you can call?* someone asks her. Aaron. She needs to call Aaron.

In the end, she hands her phone to Rita, and it's Rita who makes the terrible call to her husband. *We're doing our best. I'm sure we'll find her in no time. Everyone on the lookout. Any minute now. Pink jacket. Grey dress. Tan sandals. Blonde hair. Do you know where she might go if she's lost? Of course you can speak to your wife.*

Aaron is shouting. Sive needs to stay calm. She tries to explain. She says all the things she doesn't believe herself right now – Faye will turn up, any minute. Any. Minute. Now.

Except she doesn't.

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3

Tim is his name, the man who got Bea off the train. He's standing in front of Sive now, explaining something, but it's not going in. Rita is speaking into her radio again, and a police officer who introduced herself as PC Denham of the British Transport Police is asking Tim questions. Sive pulls Bea closer and forces herself to tune in to what Tim is saying.

'My girlfriend got off at Bond Street and I was waving goodbye to her when I saw the lady shouting,' he says to the police officer. 'Then I realized there was a little girl, right in front of me.' He points at Bea. 'I guessed what had happened and that she was telling her to get off at the next stop.'

'And what about the other child?' PC Denham asks.

Tim shakes his head. 'I'm sorry. I didn't see any other child.'

Sive is going to throw up.

'But she was right there, too,' she manages to say. 'She got on just ahead of Bea. How did you not see her?'

Tim shrugs and then catches himself. 'Sorry . . . It did take a few seconds to work out what you were shouting, and the carriage was packed.' He lifts his hands apologetically. 'Then I noticed your little girl all on her own, and I asked around if anyone was with her and no one was. And I guessed then what had happened. So I took her off at the next stop.'

'And you were on your way to work, sir?' PC Denham asks.

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Sive shuts her eyes briefly. How is this relevant? How will this help find Faye?

'That's right.'

'And where is that, sir?'

'Six years as Head of Fund Accounting at Anderson Pruitt,' Tim says, even though PC Denham hasn't asked what his position is or how long he's been there. Beneath the fog of panic, it strikes Sive as odd.

'And where is that located, sir – somewhere near here?' Denham asks.

Sive sucks in a breath. Seriously, how is this going to help?

'No, Liverpool Street.'

'But you got off here?'

Tim's face flushes red. 'To make sure the little girl was safe. I wasn't going to leave her on the platform on her own.'

'So, you handed her to who, sir?'

'One of the security staff. He knew about it. He'd had a message from Bond Street.'

'And then?'

'I was walking towards the exit for the stairs and spotted this lady with the little girl, so came back to . . . you know . . .' He shrugs.

To be part of the happy reunion, Sive thinks. To enjoy some Good Samaritan energy.

'Thank you,' she says now. 'For what you did. But are you sure you didn't see another child? She's six' – she indicates with her hand to show him how tall Faye is – 'and wearing a jacket just like Bea's. Bright blonde hair. Didn't you see her?'

'I'm sorry,' Tim says helplessly. 'I only saw the little one.'

'All right, sir, I'll just need your contact details in case we need to speak to you again,' PC Denham says, and Tim calls out a phone number.

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Sive pulls Bea away from her shoulder so she can look at her.

'Where is your sister? Where is Faye?'

'Chase,' Bea says solemnly, looking at Tim and then back to Sive. 'Chase on train.'

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4

Aaron is rushing towards her, pushing through crowds, ignoring disgruntled expressions as he barges past. All six foot three of him, here to help, and Sive instantly feels a lift. Between them, they'll fix this.

'Faye?' he says helplessly.

She shakes her head. 'Not yet.' It comes out in a whisper.

'My God.' He looks around the bustling platform, and she feels every inch of it. The crowds. The sheer volume of numbers. The size of the city. The endless entrances and exits. The dark tunnels. The oncoming trains.

'What happened?'

In short, breathless, staccato bursts, she explains.

'But how were you not right there with them, getting on the train?' he asks.

'I was just behind them, pushing the pram out of the lift. Telling them to hurry. And then—'

She closes her eyes.

'And then what?'

'My phone rang. I was trying to see who it was. Trying to decline the call.'

Aaron shakes his head.

'It didn't take more than a second, but . . .'

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'Long enough for the doors to close. I know.' He rubs her arm, and the kindness brings tears to her eyes.

PC Denham clears her throat and addresses Sive. 'Your younger daughter said Faye was chasing someone or something? Does that make any sense to you – can you think of anything that she might run after?'

Sive shakes her head. 'I have no idea.'

Tim is still standing nearby, watching, and Denham turns to him now. 'Did you see anything like that – a child running?'

'No, but the Tube was packed. I don't think anyone could have run anywhere.'

Aaron looks confused. 'And you are?' he says to Tim.

'This gentleman took care of your younger daughter, took her off the train and handed her to security staff,' PC Denham explains.

Aaron frowns. 'And you claim you didn't see Faye?'

Claim. Sive bites her lip.

Tim stands a little taller, cheeks flushed. 'I didn't see your other daughter, no.'

PC Denham interrupts. 'We've covered this, and we have contact details, should we need further information.' Her tone says, *I'll ask the questions here*. 'If we could get back to what your younger daughter said. Sometimes kids chase after things without thinking and lose their way. Like running after a ball or a butterfly?'

'A butterfly on a Tube?' Aaron sounds incredulous, and Sive wants to tell him to rein it in – they need all the help they can get, to keep everyone on side.

'Can you think of anything your daughter might chase?' Denham says evenly.

Sive looks at Bea, thinking back on her words. *What if that's not it? What if Faye didn't chase a ball or a butterfly? What if someone chased her?*

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'Bea, sweetheart. Did someone run after Faye?'

Bea looks blankly at her. A man dashing for a Tube pushes between them, separating Sive from PC Denham momentarily. Sive tries again. 'Darling, can you point – where is your sister?'

Bea's lower lip wobbles. 'Baw-baw.'

'What was that?' Denham asks, cupping her ear against the clamour of rush hour.

Sive shakes her head. 'She just wants her milk.'

'Do you think she might tell us more eventually?' the police officer asks. 'Maybe she's tired or hungry?'

'She's just turned two,' Aaron says tersely. 'She can't tell us anything.'

Aaron. Sive pleads with him silently. Playing the big man isn't going to help here; this police officer isn't one of his witnesses on the stand.

'She doesn't have many words yet,' Sive clarifies for PC Denham. 'I don't know how much she'll be able to tell us beyond what she's already said. But what if it means someone chased Faye – someone frightened her and made her run off? Maybe she's still on the train, or hiding in a station?'

'We have officers on the train now, and they're checking each stop – London Underground staff are checking too. We'll find her. There's a finite number of stations on this line and we'll get to all of them.'

'What if she's left one of the stations,' Sive whispers.

An announcement booms over the tannoy, and Aaron waits before asking his next question.

'Would there have been time?'

'There was maybe six or seven minutes—' Sive's voice disappears, swallowed by panic. She clears her throat. 'Between waiting for the next Tube and getting here. The security people

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were already looking for her, but they couldn't have . . . they couldn't have covered every station immediately.'

'Oh my God.' Aaron runs his hand through his hair, turning in a slow circle. He looks back at Sive. 'We're in a city of eight million people, and Faye could be anywhere.'

She nods, unable to speak. Her child has disappeared on a moving train, and no one saw a thing.

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5

Three days earlier | Friday
The Meridian Hotel

'Are we ready to go? It's five to three.' Aaron tapped his watch. The newly purchased, eye-wateringly expensive Tag Heuer he'd treated himself to, coincidentally, just in time for the reunion. He'd been pacing up and down the hotel bedroom for five minutes now, waiting for Sive to finish feeding the baby. She could almost see the indentations in the blue-and-gold carpet. In the sitting room next door, Faye and Bea were watching cartoons. Sive wasn't quite sure why Aaron had booked a suite – why they needed a sitting room, when their bedroom already had its very own sitting room: a pale blue sofa with matching armchairs surrounding an elegant mahogany coffee table in front of a huge, yet somehow discreet TV – all in keeping with the not at all understated luxury of the Meridian Hotel. Then again, it was nice to be able to shut the door on the sounds of *PAW Patrol* and *Peppa* sometimes, too.

'I think he's almost done feeding,' she said to Aaron. 'Will you get the girls to put on their shoes?'

That might be a better use of his time than wearing out the hotel carpet. Aaron was a pacer. When she first met him, she thought it was a sign of nerves. Over time, watching him prepare for court cases, she realized it indicated something more

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like pumped-up energy. A raring-to-go-ness. Right now, he looked like he was about to bounce off the carpet out into the hotel corridor. Only this was no court case – this was a twenty-year reunion with his old London housemates. Meaning for Aaron, she thought, hiding a smile, the stakes were *far* higher.

'It's supposed to be fun!' she'd said as she packed Bea and Faye's shared suitcase at home in Dublin. 'You're acting like it's some kind of contest. And why are you stalking your friends' work updates – why don't you just wait till we get to London and let them tell you in person?'

Aaron was on LinkedIn, reading his old housemates' profiles, and updating his own.

'You don't think for a second they're not going to look me up, too? You don't think, right now, Burner and Trigger aren't scrolling through my profile, looking for holes?'

Burner was Scott Burns, Aaron's long-time BFF, frenemy and rival. Trigger was Dave Taylor, someone whose career didn't threaten Aaron in the slightest. Once upon a time, Dave had been called Trigger to his face – an affectionate nickname inspired by a sit-com character not famed for his intellect. Nowadays, Aaron still occasionally called him Trigger, but only behind his back.

'You're genuinely asking me if Scott and Dave are on LinkedIn stalking you right now – do you want my honest answer?' She smiled at him, shook her head and began inspecting the contents of Faye's carry-on backpack. A teddy bear with a toy passport, a hairbrush, a packet of crayons, a tiny notebook. All the essentials, and no rogue liquids or sharp objects. She moved on to packing her own bag. 'Anyway, you always say Scott doesn't care what anyone thinks of him.'

'He doesn't, but he loves needling me, competing for the sake of annoying me.'

'Then perhaps become less easy to annoy?' she said lightly.

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'And look, you saw Dave last summer, and you met up with Scott in June – it's not like you haven't seen them every other year since you all lived together.'

'Yeah, but this is the first time we'll all get together in one place since . . . well, since the funeral.'

'Ah.'

A pause. 'It's not just twenty years since we met, it's also fifteen years since Yasmin died. Her anniversary is on Monday.'

Sive stopped what she was doing. 'You might have told me.'

'Sorry. I don't like talking about it, you know that.'

Sive did indeed know that, and she'd learned not to ask about Aaron's deceased fiancée. Her husband was a non-stop talker and yet somehow, too, a closed book.

'Will it be weird? Maybe I shouldn't be there – I didn't know Yasmin.'

He kissed her cheek. 'Don't worry. We'll raise a glass to her but, other than that, nobody will talk about what happened. Nita doesn't like it, and we all tend to follow her lead.'

Sive nodded. Nita, Yasmin's sister, liked mostly talking about herself, so that seemed a reasonable prediction.

'Right, that's Faye and Bea done, and I'll put the baby's clothes in with mine.' She paused. 'Unless, of course, you've already packed his stuff with yours?'

Aaron shook his head absently, still staring at his phone. Sarcasm was wasted on him.

And now, a day later in this London hotel suite, despite knowing everything there was to know about his former housemates; despite his quiet certainty that he'd measure up, that he'd outdo them, he was like a cat on a hot tin roof. And their daughters were still shoeless and watching cartoons.

'Aaron. Please. Just get the girls organized and I'll be done feeding by the time you're all ready.'

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He nodded, went next door to Faye and Bea, and Sive let out a quiet breath.

On the bed beside her, on the tightly tucked pristine-white cover, her phone pinged with an email. She angled her head to see who it was from, without dislodging the baby. The newspaper's picture editor, looking for a more recent photograph of an actor she'd interviewed. Damn. She glanced at the door to the adjoining room. She'd promised Aaron she wouldn't have to work during the trip to London, but this wouldn't take a second. One-handed, she typed a reply. She would ask the publicist for another photo and revert asap.

Aaron came back into the room, shaking his head in exasperation.

'Are they ready?' she asked.

'Faye's insisting on changing out of her shorts and into a dress, but I've told her she can't.'

This was also very Aaron – he'd missed the choose-your-battles chapter of the parenting manual.

'It's fine, let her change.'

'Ah, Sive, I can't backtrack now! If you undermine me, they're *never* going to listen. I'm just going to be "silly daddy" for ever.' He rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. He loved being 'silly daddy', and she knew it.

'It's not undermining you if there's a valid reason. She wants to wear a dress so the stitches in her leg won't be as visible, I'll bet. That's all.'

He looked confused for a moment, as though he'd already forgotten the stitches. Then again, he hadn't been the one to pick her up when she fell off the fence. He hadn't had to hide a shudder on seeing the gash the nail had made in her leg. He hadn't had to drive her to the Swiftcare clinic for stitches and a tetanus shot, while looking after Bea and Toby too. He'd arrived

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home from work yesterday evening to hear all about it after the fact. And that was just the way it was. He worked full-time, she worked part-time, and it wasn't his fault he couldn't be there to help. He could, however, help now.

'Here – take Toby,' she said, standing up. 'I'll get the girls.'

Aaron took Toby and immediately nuzzled the baby's cheek. Sive stopped to watch for a moment. Aaron drove her mad sometimes, but he was a giant lump of putty when it came to the kids.

She continued through to the girls' bedroom, on the far side of the sitting room. 'Right, let's go,' she said, clapping her hands Mary Poppins style. 'Time for Daddy's big reunion.'

The Library Bar of the Meridian Hotel was humming buzzily. Its high-backed wing chairs were almost all occupied, though it was three o'clock on a Friday afternoon and most people in Sive's world were still at work. Heavy curtains in olive green and contrasting fawn draped and looped halfway across the floor-to-ceiling windows, letting in light but giving a sense of warmth and privacy too. Built into the walls were shelves of leather-bound books, creating the eponymous library, while gilt-edged mirrors and tall standing lamps completed the effect. The bar was the epitome of tasteful luxury, and not quite where Sive would normally bring her children.

Now, Faye and Bea skipped ahead, skirting between the green-and-brown velvet chairs, almost knocking a vase of pink chrysanthemums from a high polished table in the centre of the room. Sive hid a sigh. It was going to be a long afternoon, and they hadn't even sat down yet.

When they did, the mismatch was immediately clear. Sitting around a low mahogany table by the window were Scott, Nita, Maggie and Dave. On silver coasters in front of them sat a bottle

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of beer, a tonic water, a glass of rosé and a pint of Guinness. Sive's three children were about to immeasurably cramp everyone's style. She groaned inwardly as Faye began running towards the bar shouting about fizzy orange, followed by Bea, who tripped and fell en route.

'Ah, here they are! In your honour, mate!' Dave said, holding up his pint of Guinness and standing to clap Aaron on the back. '*Benvenuti! Salute!*'

Sive had no earthly idea why Dave – normally the least pretentious of the gang – was speaking Italian, but she kept her smile firmly in place as the others stood too and greetings and hugs and air kisses ensued. Sive had met each of them at various times over the years, but they were very much her spouse's friends. And none of them had spouses. Or children. At least none currently in their care, here in this opulent Central London hotel. Sive bit her lip.

'Sorry we're late getting down,' she said as they all took their seats again. 'The only ones staying here in the hotel, yet last to arrive.' She rolled her eyes apologetically.

'Don't worry,' Maggie reassured her in her soft Edinburgh burr. 'We're all absolutely delighted with an excuse to take an afternoon off work. I've been enjoying sitting here with my rosé, watching the world go by.'

'That's because you were forty minutes early,' Nita said, then turned to Sive. 'Maggie is the most extraordinarily punctual woman in Britain. She only has one setting, and that's "early"'.

'Which of course makes us normal humans feel desperately late, even when we're not,' Scott agreed. 'And she'll be even worse now, with her fancy new watch.' He nodded towards an open gift box at the centre of the table and Sive felt a sudden unease that there would be presents exchanged; that she'd missed the memo. Why would there be gifts at a reunion, though?

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Scott turned towards Maggie. 'Come on then, let's see it.'

Maggie stretched out her arm to show Scott a dove-grey smartwatch with a copper-coloured strap. 'Isn't it gorgeous?' Then to Nita: 'Are you sure you don't want it yourself?'

Nita smiled benevolently. 'Gosh, no. Brands keep sending me stuff. I have, like, eight or nine watches now. So you're more than welcome to it. You know it has GPS?'

'Amazing! Not that I know how to use it, but it sounds *very* cool.'

Dave tilted his head, scrutinizing the watch. 'Hmm, that model only works if you have your phone with you too. What you need is one that functions even without your phone. You know they can be used to help find missing people? I was reading about it at work the other day—'

'*No!* Dave's going to tell us one of his work sagas!' Scott said in mock horror. 'This is even worse than Maggie's hyper-punctuality.'

Maggie reached across to swipe at Scott, but she was smiling. 'Hey, I saw you outside, puffing away on your e-cigarette thing. You were in no rush.'

He grinned back. 'Oh, come on, leave me to my few remaining pleasures. I've given up the real things, that's something.'

'About time,' Maggie said. 'Only fifteen years too late for those poor neighbours whose shed—'

'Yeah, yeah, don't get into that. We can't all be as perfect as you, Maggie,' Scott said, cutting her off. He was still smiling, but there was an edge to his tone now. 'Anyway, we're here, it's Friday, nobody's working, and we have drinks.' He raised his glass, and the others followed suit.

Nita clapped her hands. 'Let's grab a pic, now everyone's here!' She stood, holding her phone, to take a group selfie. Sive hovered near the edge of the frame, not sure if she should be in or out.

'Here, why don't I take one?' she said, pulling out her own

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phone and getting up from her seat. She stepped back from the table to take it, nudging her chair out of the way.

There they were, Dave, Scott, Nita, Maggie and Aaron, smiling at Sive's camera. Dave with his balding head and customary sheepish expression. Scott, his blond hair faded and his pallor blotchy, a pair of aviator sunglasses high on his head. Nita, the princess, whitened teeth gleaming. Maggie – sensible, understated Maggie – tucking a long red curl behind her ear. And Aaron. Just as handsome, in Sive's admittedly biased opinion, as when she first set eyes on him.

She took three photos and sat back down, promising to send them to the WhatsApp group, though she wasn't actually in the WhatsApp group.

Scott turned towards Aaron. 'So, how's everything in the criminal world? Some big cases on the go?'

Straight in, then, Sive thought, no 'How was the journey?' small talk. But this was what Aaron loved. Holding court. Talking shop. Centre of attention.

'Good. Busy. You know yourself, it's non-stop.'

'I read about this Brosnan guy you're defending. That's something else.' Scott shook his head with what looked like envy disguised as admiration. 'Sure you haven't bitten off more than you can chew?' He laughed to show he was joking, his ruddy cheeks glowing.

'I can handle it.'

'From what I've read,' Scott said carefully, 'this Callan crime gang you've got over there in Dublin are pinning everything on Pete Brosnan getting convicted so their guy isn't in the frame.'

'You are well informed, my friend.' Aaron raised the pint that had just been placed in front of him.

Scott shook his head, faux ruefully. 'They're a nasty bunch. A

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penchant for bagging people up and throwing them in the river, if I remember correctly.'

'How do you know so much about them?' Aaron asked over the top of his pint.

'We had a case that involved one of the Callans back in my old firm. Intimidating lot.' He exhaled audibly through pursed lips. 'You must be a little worried about what they'll do if you get your guy off?'

Sive winced. This was starting to sound as though Scott had spent the last three days reading up on Aaron's cases, ready to pounce with some carefully planned passive-aggressive digs. Scott had worked very long hours for almost twenty years, until redundancy two years ago had left him extremely wealthy but thoroughly bored.

'I couldn't do my job if I was afraid of everyone with a vested interest. You know that, Burner,' Aaron said evenly. 'Or you used to.'

'Ha. There's vested interests and there's bloody murderous crime gangs.' Scott laughed. 'What about you, Sive, aren't you worried they'll come gunning for your husband?'

Nita and Maggie shook their heads in despair. 'Scott, stop! And not in front of the kids,' Maggie admonished.

Sive smiled. 'Aaron's dealt with some unsavoury types before. He can handle it.' She clinked her gin against her husband's pint. In truth, she hated these kinds of cases. Hated thinking about them. Usually kept her head in the sand and avoided reading about them. But for every crime-gang case, there was another involving some perfectly normal person who'd slipped up and found themselves in court. The kinds of people who deserved a second chance, or at least the best defence they could get. This thought was quickly accompanied, just as it always was, with one word. *Hypocrite.*

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'Anyway, enough about me,' Aaron said. 'How's piloting going, Burner? Any regrets?'

Scott used to be a criminal lawyer too. He and Aaron had worked together when they were starting out and had further bonded over their membership of the same rowing club. They'd lived together in a house in Stratford in East London, with Maggie, Dave and Nita, and both had gone on to marry and have three children each. Scott, however, on being made redundant, had left the law completely to retrain as a pilot, around the same time as Caron, his wife, left him for a millionaire music producer. Go figure, as Aaron said when he heard.

'No regrets,' Scott said, leaning back on his chair and clasping his hands behind his head. 'Seeing the world, seeing the sky . . . seeing the air hostesses,' he added with a wink.

Beside him, Nita groaned, putting one beautifully manicured hand to her forehead. Sive was caught, as always, by how like her sister Nita was. Or at least how Yasmin might have looked had she lived another fifteen years. Yasmin, the ghost hovering over every get-together. And sometimes over Sive's marriage.

'You just do take-off and landing, right?' Aaron was saying now. 'The autopilot does the rest?'

Oh, Aaron. Sive took a sip of her gin.

Scott sat forward again. 'It's not quite as simple as that. But let's just say the pros far outweigh any cons. Actually, there *are* no cons.'

'Unlike in the legal profession,' Maggie quipped, lightening the mood.

Sive smiled across at her. Maggie was forty-two, the same age as the rest of the housemates, but always seemed older. It had nothing to do with her appearance – her unlined skin and beautiful long red curls made it hard to guess her age – she just had that quiet maturity that some people have. The sensible one,

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back in the day, according to Aaron. The one who remembered to pay the electricity bill and put out the bins. The boring one, he said, a bit of a prig at times, a bit judgemental. Sive's impression was that Aaron felt inherently criticized because Maggie didn't drink as much as the rest of them, though as far as Sive knew Maggie had never said a word to suggest she was judging anyone at all. She'd been working in law back then too, in a fortieth-floor office on Canary Wharf. Like Scott, she'd had a career change. Unlike Scott, she'd opted for a somewhat less glamorous career managing a suburban GP clinic.

'I don't get it,' Dave said now, popping a mint in his mouth.

Maggie let out a tiny sigh.

'*Cons*. As in, *convicts*?' Scott explained. 'Dave, you are literally a pretend-policeman. How did you not get that?'

The others laughed, and Dave grinned.

'Do *not* start with the pretend-police stuff, Burner,' he said, offering around the packet of Polo mints. 'Surely there's a statute of limitations on that joke?'

'Never!' Aaron said, raising his glass, and they all clinked, even Dave, who was blushing.

Sive felt for him. While the others were flying high in their skyscraper careers, Dave had been starting a job as a civilian investigator or, as he and his colleagues called it, a 'civvie' for the Metropolitan Police. And twenty years on, that's still pretty much what he was doing. He'd changed roles now and then but, as far as the others were concerned, while they were saving the world one court case at a time, Dave's job mostly involved data searches and data entry.

To the best of Sive's knowledge, it was critical work in any police force, but the others, with their seven-figure salaries, tended to quietly look down on Dave. The running joke was that he really wanted to be, as they put it, a 'proper' police officer, and

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over the years his former housemates had gifted him magnifying glasses, handcuffs and an endless supply of little black notebooks whenever they all met up. His current job was in vetting applicants for police roles, and about as far from the *Line of Duty* version of police work as you could get, but, from what Sive could see, Dave was happy and well able to brush off the teasing.

'Speaking of which,' Scott said now, reaching for a gift bag at his feet, 'we have, as always, a present for you, Dave.'

Aaron drum-rolled the table. Dave groaned, but he was grinning. Nita shook her head, but she too was smiling. Maggie's face was impassive. Scott pulled out a navy baseball cap with a cartoon police badge on the front and stretched across the table to put it on Dave's head. Everyone cheered, Dave took a small bow and said it was perfect for covering his expanding baldness. How quickly they all fell back into their old roles, Sive thought, looking around the table. All except Nita, perhaps, who had just recently undergone the biggest change of all.

'So when are you due?' Sive asked her now.

'Not until February,' Nita said. 'Plenty of time still.' She took a sip of her drink. 'It's just tonic water, no gin, by the way.'

Sive smiled. 'First-time pregnancy is an eye-opener.'

'Only if you're not prepared,' Nita countered. 'I did a lot of research beforehand. I can't understand people who plunge in without reading up on it first.'

Sive nodded politely. She'd known precisely nothing about pregnancy when the line appeared on the test that first time. And had remained in a state of bewilderment, feeling her way as she went, through most of her pregnancy. Then again, the circumstances were hardly the same. Nita had planned the pregnancy meticulously, opting to go it alone with IUI instead of, as she put it, 'settling for some loser from Tinder'. Sive, on the other hand, had most definitely not planned her first pregnancy.

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She glanced over to where Faye was sitting on the soft green carpet, taking off her shoes. She had taken Sive's phone and moved a little bit away from Bea, keen, no doubt, for a brief breather from her greatest fan and constant provocateur.

Nita followed her gaze. 'Two little girls – so sweet. They're probably best friends.'

Sive shook her head. 'Ha, no, they *kill* each other.'

Nita looked surprised. 'Really? How awful.'

'Oh, I just mean normal sibling stuff. Bea wants to do everything Faye does. Faye gets tired of having her follow everywhere and tries to escape. Bea, in turn, does whatever she can to keep Faye's attention. It might be a hug or it might be a kick.'

On cue, Bea sidled over to Faye and sat so close she was almost on top of her. Personal space was not Bea's thing.

'Goodness. That's dreadful that they don't get on.'

'Ah no, Faye is driven mad by Bea at times, but she's very patient with her. And woe betide anyone who dares to cross her little sister. She'll fly to Bea's defence. She overheard me telling Aaron about a kid in crèche who was pinching Bea and—'

'Pinching! That's horrendous. Was disciplinary action taken?'

Oh, good God. Nita was going to get a rude awakening when her child started nursery.

Sive smiled. 'That's just something that happens with small kids. It's no big deal. But Faye overheard us talking about it and at pick-up the following evening she stalked over to the other kid and told him if he ever pinched her sister again she'd come back and pinch him twice as hard. So yeah, Faye might be irritated by her little shadow, but she'd go to the ends of the earth for Bea if someone else hurt her.'

Nita picked up her phone and typed something. She glanced at Sive. 'Making a note to find some books on nurseries and violence. I do a lot of research,' she explained. 'Obviously, since I'm

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doing it on my own, I can't just hope for the best. I need to be organized.'

Sive had never met anyone more organized than Nita and didn't doubt her for a second. Where Maggie was the house mother – the one they relied on to quietly get things done – Nita was the house manager, a not always welcome or necessary role. According to Aaron, she'd had spreadsheets for the cleaning rota, Excel formulae for weighted calculations of split bills, and a strict set of house rules pinned to the fridge. Her unselfconscious thoroughness served her well at work – like Aaron, she worked in law, and thrived on the attention to detail required for her current role as Head of Legal in a multinational bank. This same skillset had not won her any popularity contests back when they all shared a house, but Nita had never cared for popularity contests.

'Of course. And you'll be a brilliant mother,' Sive said, glancing at her daughters as they bickered over her phone.

Nita looked over too.

'The littler one, Bea, she's so pretty. She looks nothing like you, Sive – her daddy's girl!'

'Um, thanks, I think . . .'

Nita carried on, unfazed. 'And Faye's quite pretty too, with that lovely blonde hair. You and Aaron are both much darker – where did she get the gorgeous hair?' A tinkly laugh. 'I bet people ask if she's adopted. I considered adoption, but thought IUI might suit me better. More twenty-first century.'

Sive nodded, unsure what to say to that, and peeked, instead, into the pram at her sleeping baby.

'How old is' – Nita paused, unsure, it seemed, of the name – 'the little one, now?'

'Toby's four months old,' Sive said, 'so he still sleeps a lot in

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the afternoon, thank goodness. The other two are enough of a handful.'

They both looked over again to where Faye and Bea were sitting together, glued to something on Sive's phone. As they watched, Bea's foot knocked against Faye's glass, sending the last dregs of her orange cordial splashing on to the strap of Faye's beloved *Frozen* backpack. Sive held her breath. It was only a small splash. If Faye didn't notice, she wasn't going to say anything. The Meridian Library Bar didn't seem like a great place for a she-ruined-my-bag meltdown. But Faye was still transfixed by Sive's phone (thank you, YouTube) and Sive dodged a bullet.

'I won't be going down the technology route with mine,' Nita mused. 'Storybooks and nursery rhymes are so important for the developing brain.'

'Well, if you'd like to practise, I could dig out a storybook and you can read it to my girls?' Sive said with a bright smile. 'I could do with taking my phone back, though I suppose it *will* mean they'll be clambering all over us . . . Then again, it'll get you used to what's ahead . . .'

A worried frown crossed Nita's pretty features. 'Oh, they seem perfectly happy there. Best to leave them while little . . .' She looked at the pram.

'Toby,' Sive supplied.

'While little Toby is sleeping.'

'Indeed,' Sive said, picking up her gin. It was going to be a long four days in London.

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