



Two women. Two families.
One life-changing mistake.

when you were mine

emma-claire wilson

when you
were mine
emma-claire wilson

avon.

OceanofPDF.com

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Praise for Emma-Claire Wilson:

‘Beautiful, emotional and hopeful,
but have tissues to hand.’

Liz Fenwick

‘Tragic but ultimately uplifting.’

Katie Fforde

‘A heartfelt and suspenseful tale of an agonising life-and-death dilemma...
this is a family drama that doesn’t shy away from sadness and conflict but
powers towards an ultimately hopeful conclusion.’

Ali Mercer

‘An emotional story which broke my heart but was beautifully uplifting and
filled with hope.’

Emma Cowell

‘*This Child of Mine* is an emotionally charged,
beautiful and poignant story that will stay with me
for a very long time. Wilson had me sobbing from
the very first page, and I couldn’t put the book down. An absolute triumph
of a debut.’

Natali Simmonds

‘Right from the first pages, the reader is plunged into an emotional and
heartrending story...wondering what they might do in a similar situation.
This book cannot fail to move the reader.’

Janet Gover

‘A highly emotional read. Both harrowing and hopeful. Wilson offers a subtle, raw and tender exploration of what family means and how grief can ultimately open up new strength and unknown paths to happiness.’

Sarah Jost

‘I spent my Sunday devouring this heartfelt, emotional, charming and gorgeously written debut. With many unexpected moments, great characters, and a satisfying conclusion, I was lost in the story. Highly recommended.’

Louise Beech

‘Gripping, timely and important, *This Child of Mine* tackles something that is all too often swept into the shadows: the heartbreak that can come with starting a family.’

Katie Allen

‘Heartbreaking, unexpected and necessary. This book is just stunning.’

Emma Cooper

‘A beautifully written story of love and hope that will capture readers’ hearts and minds. Emma-Claire is the real deal – a writer to fall in love with.’

Ally Sinclair

‘A strong debut that takes the reader on a heartbreaking rollercoaster of emotions.

Thoroughly recommend.’

Jenni Keer

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*Real family does not come from your blood.
It is the people standing beside you when
no one else is. – Nishan Panwar*

*For my 'family' and friends – those bound by
blood and those I chose as my own – thank you
for standing by me, no matter what.*

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ONE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

I rummage around, my hand searching in the darkness for something I know is there, but I just can't find. It's a dance with the devil that I play every damn day – Lucifer in the form of white goods.

The washing machine. My nemesis. I refuse to let him win this time; I will not stick my head inside the hole of doom.

'Not today, Satan. You will not win!'

These are the only arguments I know I can win lately, because a machine can't argue back, roll its eyes at me or sigh in disgust. Small victories – that's how I fill my day.

'I know it's there; just give it up already!' I hiss into the cavernous metal drum.

Twenty-year-old me wouldn't recognise the husk of a woman crouching precariously on the balls of her feet in the corner of the kitchen, trying to avoid crunching the abandoned Coco Pops that litter the vinyl floor between her neglected and un-pedicured toes. I never imagined that at the age of forty-three, I would be playing hide-and-seek with a single toddler sock.

The remainder of the wet laundry is weighing down my other arm, my once toned biceps scream in tandem with my burning calves as I attempt to stay on my haunches. They say old age creeps up on you, but I feel like it hit me like a thunderbolt to the face one morning.

'Oh for fuck's sake!' I hout, the wobbling of my knees threatening to derail my determination.

'Here, Mummy. I help.'

Before I can protest, she is grabbing the sodden clothes from my arms and trailing them across the floor to the kitchen table, picking up the stray chocolate droppings along the way. It takes everything within me not to cry as I contemplate about having to rewash those now filthy T-shirts. I should've mopped the floor first.

My beautiful baby girl stands on her tiny tiptoes, as she tries in vain to

reach up and place the clothes on the table, only to have them fall heavily on her head, shrouding her like a mini-Joseph with a sodden technicolour-dreamcoat-style cloak.

As I close the door of the machine, the blinking error lights flash back at me.

‘I don’t have time for this,’ I hiss through gritted teeth, the frustration building behind my grimace, but the sight of my beautiful bubbly daughter covered in Daddy’s sodden boxer shorts evaporates my anger.

Satan can’t win when she’s around. She’s his kryptonite. My saviour, my Grace.

I crawl across the floor to meet the toes of my tiny toddler and run my fingers like spiders up her legs, tickling her stomach as I pluck the garments from her shoulders and kiss her damp cotton-fresh-scented cheeks.

‘Thank you for your help, baby girl, but I don’t think I need you to wear the wet clothes!’

Her face explodes with a broad grin, eyes wide and sparkling as she throws her head back in delight, carelessly smacking her palm against her face.

‘Doh, Mummy, you are so silly.’ Her perfectly high-pitched voice sounds like a song, and my heart sings back with joy.

I always thought it sounded trite, but these years really are the best. As first-time mums, we don’t appreciate it as much as we should, often too busy looking out for the milestones and eager to get to the next step, that we never truly take in the wonder of those first few years. Now with a son old enough to grunt responses and shoot me dead with just one glare, I appreciate the small moments of innocence. Grace wraps her arms around my neck and plants a raspberry on my cheek.

‘Love you, Mummy’.

‘Love you more, precious.’

As she runs off into the living room, I check the clock and breathe a sigh of relief. It’s almost bedtime. I’ve been dreaming about the half bottle of rosé sat in the fridge since my second coffee of the day.

I don’t remember being this exhausted the first time around. Ben was an easy baby. I had no issues at all with him, and as soon as he was old enough, he trotted off into nursery and never looked back. He was such a

happy-go-lucky kid who socialised easily, and I was back to work in the salon by the time he was eighteen months old.

But then, Ben didn't have to spend the first few years of his life in and out of lockdowns, cooped up in a house with a family scared to breathe outdoors for fear of catching the dreaded 'Rona, and terrified to breathe indoors in case another argument erupted.

Grace was a shock, a welcome surprise, in the end, but a surprise nonetheless. At the age of forty I never expected to go back to baby changing bags and sleepless nights. Most days I'm not sure if the exhaustion I feel is a result of chasing after a toddler, or just my bones feeling their age. The last few years have kicked my ass. I feel like whoever was given the job of 'game-maker' for my particular life story really did go to town during this last season.

I bend down to collect the wet clothes now breadcrumb around my kitchen and pause as I hold one of the many home-made masks I bought from Etsy, washed so many times the pattern has faded and the ear-loops now fraying. With the world slowly getting back to normal, I had hoped it wouldn't be long before we could get rid of these for good. A deep sigh builds within me, fear catching on my ribs as my chest expands. Some days it feels like we may have come out of the other side of this relatively unscathed; other days, I tiptoe around on eggshells waiting for the other shoe to drop. As if I can feel something waiting in the wings, waiting to knock us off course again.

Everyone found something to help them through the endless days and nights of the last few years: some baked banana bread and picked up knitting needles; others found genius ways to exercise in tiny rooms with no real equipment. My daily joy was found in the Zoom chats with a new friend a million miles away. Victoria was a welcome distraction from the daily drudgery and we formed an unexpected friendship that kept me smiling in the darkest of moments.

The irony that a pandemic that kept everyone away from each other was the thing that brought two complete strangers, oceans apart, so close together is not lost on me.

I know everyone struggled, some so much more than others, but raising a new-born in those circumstances felt like fighting fire with a faulty extinguisher. Victoria was the fire blanket that kept the flames at bay.

I place the worn fabric in the basket near the front door where we keep all the 'clean' masks and wonder if that box will stay part of normal life; like dropping the keys in the bowl when we walk in the door or placing our shoes in the 'shoe library'. It's so strange how our lives can be so irrevocably altered in one small moment. One tiny mistake, one cough, one sneeze, and everything changes.

My thoughts are interrupted by a cacophony of giggles coming from the living room, and I'm grateful that the house is once more filled with laughter and love. She might not have been expected, but she was needed. Maybe even more than I realised at the time. I watch as she chases Pip, our chocolate Labrador, around the room, trying to mount his back. He isn't giving in easily today, but I can see the cheeky smile on his lips, his tongue hanging from the side of his mouth as he pretends to buck her off, before lying at her feet and inviting her to climb back on again.

She has brought the joy back into the house, but it hasn't always been this way.

Grace did nothing but scream for three months straight, day and night. It didn't matter how much the health visitor told me it was normal baby behaviour, it felt like she was angry with the world, with me maybe, as if someone wasn't listening to her, so she shouted louder. Maybe I was looking out for signs, maybe it was my paranoia, maybe, just maybe, she was screaming because she knew my secret, my fears, my doubts. The more she screamed the more I worried; the more I worried the more strained things became. The vicious cycle repeating day in day out.

Three months felt like eternity, and then, just as quick as she had arrived in the world, the anger was gone. The clouds parted and left behind the most beautiful, serene little angel. Just in time for the next war to begin, only this time, the war wasn't within our four walls, it was across all four corners of the globe. Just as I found time to catch my breath and feel my feet on solid ground, the entire world shifted on its axis, and we all held our breath once more. If ever life felt like a rollercoaster, it was then.

I'm not sure there was a marriage that didn't struggle during the last few years, but the cracks in our marriage were already the size of the Grand Canyon; we didn't need a pandemic to shine a light on our failings. They were glowing in all their glory before the world tried to break us.

The constant existential dread fuelled by daily press briefings on a loop

coupled with disjointed days that seemed endless was enough to send us mad; but add to that a husband who had been forced to leave the only career he had known to try and 'save' his marriage, only to get locked inside four walls and face every single fracture; we were on the path to disaster.

Our family portrait suddenly consisted of an exhausted mum, a sick seven-year-old, a new-born, and a husband who thought sleeping on a cot bed in the middle of the North Sea would've been preferable to spending the night next to his wife. I felt like I was sitting on a landmine with fire ants nibbling away at my resolve. As the world battled their own respective fires, restrictions across the globe caused anger and upset; meanwhile, we had been thrown all the elements you need to start the perfect bonfire inside our own home, one that burns so hot it will incinerate any marriage.

Worse yet, we had no idea how long it might last.

For those of us who were caught in that strange time in history, our babies will forever be a 'once in a generation' type of child, and us mothers learned a very different style of parenting. Everything about bringing up this surprise bundle of joy just felt more extreme than the first time around.

As I potter around collecting the discarded toys from the floor, I try to remind myself that these moments in life are sent to try us. That's what they say, right? What doesn't kill us makes us stronger?

Andy would be home late tonight if he came home at all. He got a lift into the office with a work colleague this morning so he could enjoy a few pints after work. It wouldn't surprise me if he kipped on one of the lads' couches overnight.

The hour and a half trip from Aberdeen to Broughty Ferry is an expensive taxi ride, so it makes more sense to make a night of it, but I suspect he also relishes the opportunity to escape from the thick atmosphere in the house. We can go weeks and sometimes months with no issues at all, and then suddenly something will shift, and I lose him again. As if a dark cloud descends across him, concealing him from our family. He has been quiet this last week, not angry, just distant. I try not to get frustrated, but I wonder how long he will continue to silently punish me.

I don't begrudge Andy the opportunity to drink with his mates; after all, I plan on sinking at least half the bottle of wine myself with Vic later. That's the great thing about 'virtual drink dates', no one can judge how much you are drinking if they can't see you pouring the glass off screen, and tonight I

feel the need for more than just a cup of tea. Tonight will be a ‘wine and whinge’ session.

The sad truth is, speaking to Vic often feels easier than speaking to anyone else. She’s just distant enough from my everyday life that I can pick and choose which parts of it I share with her. With friends and family still judging every move I make, she feels like the only person I can relax around.

I’ve made such a mess of my life, and as much as I love my brothers, our close bond can sometimes creep across the very thin line into suffocation. Each of them believes they have the right to judge my life, or play the part of parent and chastise me for my mistakes. It often feels like a petty competition to see who will be strong enough to take over from Dad as the patriarch of the family now. He’d be livid if he could see how they act, all high and mighty on their moral molehills.

When the shit hit the fan, I ran underground. I ignored the Zoom calls, left messages unread, and instead picked up the phone to Victoria. Watching the breeze tickle the palm trees behind her feels like pure escapism. She knew it all; well, everything I was willing to tell her. It’s easier to be judged by a stranger than those who love you the most.

I’ve been moving around the house on autopilot, cleaning up the messes left behind by the children and readying my home for a relaxing night. It’s not until I notice the credits rolling on the movie I’d put on for Grace that I realise the time. She’s fallen fast asleep, her head resting on the belly of her best friend, his fur tickling her nose, their bodies rising and falling in unison with each other, her eyes flicking with dreams while his paws twitch. If she’s not asleep on my heartbeat, she’s asleep on his.

I lie on the floor next to my two snoozing snuggle bugs and stroke her back lightly, careful not to scare her awake. Pip wags his tail, letting me know he’s awake, but dares not move until she does.

As Grace begins to stir, I hear Ben jumping around in the room up above me. His thunderous pounding shakes my ceiling as I hear him pad out the familiar rhythmic steps to his latest *Just Dance* obsession.

Bang Bang Bang.

Grace, clearly not amused at being rudely awoken, covers her ears as she sits up, Pip mirroring her movements and both now staring at the ceiling, a comically similar look of frustration across both their faces.

‘Too loud, Mummy,’ says Grace. The sleep creases on her skin, making her angelic face look even less impressed.

Bang Bang . . . cough cough cough . . . cough cough . . .

‘Wait here, baby. I’m gonna check on BenBen, then we’ll have hot chocolate, OK?’

I wipe away a lock of her almost jet-black curls from her face, her eyes pulling me in as I place a kiss on her sweaty forehead.

I stand and wait a beat, to see if it stops. Hoping I’m worrying over nothing. Then it comes again.

Cough cough cough. Cough cough cough . . . ‘Muuuuuum . . .’ cough cough.

Shit.

I make my way up the stairs in the hallway, two at a time, gripping onto the banister to steady myself.

When I get to his room, I see him on the floor, his face purpling as I approach him. He reaches out for the bag and I snatch it from the chest of drawers. We’ve done this too many times now.

Ben was the first of us to catch Covid. None of us know how. None of us had left the house. Andy’s convinced it came in through many of our Amazon packages. We were so diligent at first, but after a few months, we got lackadaisical about wiping things down. When Ben’s temperature spiked at forty, my heart all but stopped beating.

For Grace’s sake, we decided to separate the house completely in two. We had no idea what effect it would have on her ‘preemie baby’ weakened immune system and seeing how hard it hit Ben terrified us. His pallor was grey, and his breathing constantly laboured. He’d lost a considerable amount of weight and his eyes were almost jaundiced.

Even after he’d recovered, something still lingered. His breathing never got back to normal, and no matter how careful we were, he seemed to pick up every bug and virus that floated in on the breeze. A normal winter cold quickly developed into bronchitis more than once. It didn’t matter what vitamins and supplements I fed him, his immune system simply wasn’t the same anymore.

As he puffs into the bag, slowing down his own breathing, I reach for a

blanket and place it around his shoulders and pray this isn't the start of yet another chest infection. He's missed enough school already this year.

As I tuck the blanket around his body, I notice the bruise on the side of his cheek.

'Oh, buddy, where did this come from?'

He shrugs his shoulders and continues to pant.

I brush his hair back from his temples and trace the browning edge of the purple bruise from his temple, down the inner ridge of his ear almost to the crook of his neck. It must be at least a few days old now and I'm shocked I hadn't noticed it before.

I take the bag from his shaking hands and pull him into my lap, rocking him as I hold him close.

'Did you hit it with something? Were you messing around with that lightsaber again?'

'No, but my ear did feel a bit sore when I woke up this morning.'

He shrugged again then slipped off my lap to grab the controller.

'Look, I got the highest score on "Levitating"! Look, I'll show you.' He scrolls to the play button, and I watch as the graphics fill the screen and music starts to thump through the speakers of his TV.

'Sweetheart,' I say, taking the controller and hitting pause, 'I think you need to stop for now and let your chest recover, OK? Let's get you dressed for bed, eh. Go brush your teeth.'

'Aww. Mam, can I no' have a hot chocolate first and then brush ma teef?'

'My. Teeth,' I enunciate. It's so obvious when he's been around his cousins. He's at that age where he thinks dropping his t's and rounding off his words is 'cool'.

'Mummy dearest, may I please have a hot bev-er-age before you make me brush my *teeeeetttth*,' he responds, bowing to me as he reaches the end of his carefully constructed manipulation tactic. I can't help but smile, even when he's being cheeky he steals my heart.

Ben follows me downstairs, and when we reach the kitchen, I find my darling daughter stood on my stool up at the kitchen counter, chocolate powder in hand, a mischievous grin on her face.

'You're no daft, are ya?' I chuckle at her expectant expression. 'Go sit in the living room; I'll bring it through.' As I watch them toddle off together, it warms my heart to see just how close they are. Like two peas in a pod,

separated by years, but you'd never know it. I place two mugs on the tray next to the plate of biscuits and glance once more at the clock on the wall before deciding 'fuck it'.

I reach into the fridge and grab the ice-cold bottle of rosé, breathing a sigh of relief as the viscous liquid coats the inside of the crystal glass, beads of condensation immediately forming at its base. I rarely drink around the kids, but today I need it.

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TWO

Victoria

Spain – October 2022

‘I’m not going to ask you again, Mark. I’ve asked four times and I’m about to lose my freakin’ mind.’

‘I don’t have time, Vic. I’m meeting Nige.’ He shrugs, grabs his coat from the back of the sofa and heads out, his feet barely inside his flip-flops before the door shuts behind him.

‘For FUCK’S SAKE!’ I shout. Was it too much to ask for him to put his kids first? Just once?

I’d waited inside this goddamn house all day for him to come home and ‘talk’. I’d even warned him before he went off to work, but his avoidance tactics are well rehearsed and perfectly polished.

Ships in the night would be an understatement right now. He’s careful to compartmentalise his time, just enough left over in his busy schedule to drop kisses on our foreheads before taking off again to enjoy the better parts of his life. The uncomplicated bits. The non-emotional bits. Why stay at home and face the realities of building a life when he can hide in the snow globe of an existence he has created for himself?

Life isn’t perfect though, is it? I wonder sometimes if he remembers what we look like in daylight hours, or without Snapchat filters hiding our flaws.

I’d already messaged Nicole to warn her I’d be late; I need to shift my mood before I talk to her.

Mark knew I had a call with her tonight; I put it in our shared colour-coordinated calendar, the one he consistently and conveniently ‘*forgets*’ to check when a client invites him out for a drink.

This was not the way I expected to raise children. It’s certainly not what I imagined motherhood would be like.

I look down at the buttons I have just popped – wrongly – on my son Leo’s romper suit and let out a deep guttural and painful sigh as I un-pop them and start again. My body is so beyond exhausted that I just can’t function.

‘Where do you get the *energy*?!’ I hiss through gritted teeth, at them, at no one. At the wall. I had heard all the horror stories of the ‘terrible-twos’. I just assumed it would be over by now; they are almost three and after an entire year of this, I’m at breaking point already.

His sister Sophia looks back over her shoulder at me and laughs, as if she can hear my internal screams. Leo pulls his arm back through the sleeve and stuffs it down the front of his playsuit.

‘Like trying to stuff an octopus into a string bag,’ I mumble at them, at no one, at the wall. For the first time in my life, I understand my foster mum Maggie’s favourite movie. She would nod along with Shirley Valentine and laugh in recognition when she said, ‘Hello, wall’. Only now do I understand her pain.

I flick at the hairband tied around my wrist, a technique I’ve used far too often in these last few weeks when I felt the darkness slipping in again. Like a migraine threatening at the corner of my eye, a small niggle in my peripheral vision that I can’t quite reach. Always there. Always waiting.

Snap snap snap. The sting of the band reddens the skin beneath and I watch as the invisible becomes visible. A red angry mark to remind me that I *am* in control of my own emotions.

I might be through the worst of the postnatal depression but waiting so long to get help meant the big black dog found shelter in my soul, and he isn’t easy to get rid of once he makes a happy home. I’ve learned to live with him now, and the grey warning clouds that precede him.

The cackles and laughter grow rather than fade, like the setting sun outside, and I resign myself to the fact that I know neither of them will sleep tonight, so *Disney+* will have to babysit them while I chat to Nicole.

It’s funny what you promise yourself before you face the reality of parenthood. No TV before bedtime was to be one of my strict rules. Then I had twins, and all those little rules were long forgotten.

As I reach for the remote and start scrolling through the litany of movies on offer, Sophia jumps down from the sofa and runs at me, full tilt and naked once more, to show me a close-up picture of her own eye.

‘Mummy, Mummy, looooooook,’ she says, almost scratching my own cornea as she launches the device at my face.

‘My eeeeeeeeyeeee. It’s beautiful like yours,’ she says, reaching up, cupping my face and staring deep into my eyes.

‘Beautiful girl, yes, your eyes are gorgeous, but Mummy’s are brown; Sophia’s are green. See?’ I say showing her the image again.

She looks quizzically between me and the image, then shrugs.

I’ve accepted it now. It took a while, but the therapy helped. I think because I was adopted, I was excited to have a little girl who would look like me. I was hopeful that having someone in my life who felt connected to me, in such a clearly biological way, would fill a hole somewhere, and surely having a girl would mean I would see myself reflected back at me?

Only, I couldn’t see myself in her at all. The therapist explained that all babies look like their father when first born. It’s an important part of human biology. Something to do with nature making sure a father recognises their kin, their DNA programmed to protect their own. When her green eyes and pale skin remained part of her beauty, I struggled. Therapy helped me stop searching for the physical similarities and instead focus on her personality. Quiet and thoughtful, like me, not loud like her father. Independent and driven, like me. I stopped searching for the mannerisms and accepted our differences.

‘Sweetie, where are your clothes?’

She chuckles at me, a Muttley-style laugh, her delicate fingers covering her lips and her shoulders shaking along with glee.

‘Silly Mummy. I don’t want clothes.’

‘*Por fi, mi amor, ven aquí,*’ I say, through gritted teeth and a plastered-on smile.

She knows when I speak to her in Spanish that I’m being serious. She slides her body reluctantly across the marble floor towards me.

I slip the matching romper over her head and pop the buttons.

‘There. *Preciosa*, my precious little *mariposa*.’

Mark gets angry when I call her my little butterfly, but I don’t care. She is quiet, fragile, delicate and mesmerising, but shy and reserved. Not everyone can be as outgoing as Mark.

Round two goes easier, thankfully. Sophia is too busy taking pictures of her chipmunk cheeks to notice I’ve wrestled her back into restrictive clothing.

I’m on edge today. With the world opening up again, it’s getting harder to

hide from the reality that my life isn't panning out how I'd hoped. A simple trip to the park left me feeling more alone than ever. With restrictions finally lifted, it's nice to see people gathering, but the lockdowns here had been so much stricter than in the UK, and Spaniards are still wary. Instead of birthday parties being held in the play zones in town, most families gather in big open spaces. Today, I watched as families congregated, balloons tied to the trees and kids running around, some still in masks, as they played tag. Generations of the same family all huddled round, passing the *Casera* to one another as they topped up their *Tinto de Verano*, chuckling and giggling together.

I found myself missing that today. Found myself wanting it. A big happy family.

'Don't forget, my dear, emotions are like clouds. They can be blown away as quickly as they appear. You just have to make sure the wind is going in the right direction.' Patricia's voice is loud in my mind.

I lift myself from the living room floor, searching for a glimmer of hope to replace the trigger for melancholy, and the sight of my kids steals my attention as they settle on the sofa behind me.

Sophia's big beautiful green eyes seem filled with worry and wonder as she lifts the corner of the blanket to beckon me to her side. I'm grateful to have this relationship with her now. For so long I felt such a disconnect with her. She seemed so uninterested in me in the first few months and her determination to be independent merged with my postnatal depression. I spent months convinced she hated me. To be able to snuggle next to her with such ease now fills me with a contentment I wasn't sure I would ever feel.

As I fold the blanket over my knee and scooch my daughter under my arm, my watch alerts me to a new message from Mark. This has become a habit. He'll leave the house, me generally in tears begging him to stay and choose to spend time with us, him choosing time away instead; he will then wait fifteen minutes, just enough time for him to get to the pub, and then 'check in with the wifey'. It makes him look like he cares, as if he is the perfect doting dad and ever-loving husband.

I know better.

The first few words tell me all I need to know. *'Sorry. Hope Nic is well.'*

He wasn't sorry. He never is. I don't bother reading the rest.

He uses his job as a relocation expert as an excuse to spend his nights getting drunk and showing new clients how fabulous life in Spain is, while his wife sits at home alone battling with the reality of life as an expat.

When did paradise turn so toxic?

I snap again at the band on my wrist and try to remind myself of the words Patricia said in our final session: *'This strange and unstable time will rock us all, but let the dust settle before you blow up a marriage.'* But it's not Covid that is killing our marriage, it's him. With every night that he chooses the pub over us, I wonder if by the time the dust has settled, we might find it has suffocated what was left of our relationship.

I open my eyes to see Leo rubbing my wrist, a boy of few words, but the pain in his doe-like eyes says it all.

I take in the sight of my wee boy, amazingly still dressed in his cute short, striped romper. I snap a picture, blurring out the background.

He's almost three now and every day he looks more and more like his father, but still not at all like his sister. I've often described them as being two totally different flowers living in the same space. Leo is much more affectionate, and Sophia much quieter, considered even. He wants to be active all the time, desperate to play with anyone he meets, and he hates being alone. He's high-maintenance, like an orchid. Sophia is the absolute opposite; she just wants to be left alone and seems more content in her own company. She can come across prickly and uninterested, more like a cactus.

I've come to realise it's not personal; it's just her personality. It took a while to understand it myself, but the therapy helped. Mark, however, can't wrap his head around it, confused as to why two such 'loud' parents could end up with a quiet child.

Only I'm not loud. Opinionated maybe, once upon a time. Not so much anymore. My voice is now dulled to a low whisper. Easy to ignore, even easier to dismiss.

The genetics of babies fascinates me. It's something Nicole and I chat about a lot, the nature-versus-nurture argument, especially after Mark has been on one of his rants about 'changing' our quiet little girl. We talk for hours about how each of our kids are growing and evolving with the environment around them. How each of them seems to look like a different parent depending on the day.

Leo with his shock of dark curly hair and green eyes – just like his

father's – looks as far from Sophia's twin as you would think possible with her neat little dark blonde curls tightly nestled around the crook of her neck, spiralled so perfectly you would swear I had spent hours curling each strand myself. I often study my own face in the mirror and wonder if my mother might have been blonde, or my father even. My hair is straight, so the curl must be a dominant feature from Mark's side. Each morning when I stare at my children over the rim of my coffee cup, I wonder just how much of my forgotten family line runs through their veins.

I wrestle Sophia's hair into cute little bunches at the sides of her head and marvel at how much she looks like a young version of Drew Barrymore in *E.T.*

'*Mi niños,*' I coo, but they are both more interested in the TV than the silent admirations of their mother.

Eager to remember the 'glimmer', I rise from the sofa and pass them both their bears, the ones Maggie knitted them when I was pregnant, and hope they will comply as I try to capture the moment for posterity, but emotions catch me off guard again and I feel grief rising in my chest. I don't have time for that particular beast right now, so I smile and let the cloud pass by for another day. '*One storm at a time,*' I chant to myself.

As if on cue, my babies raise their bears to partially obscure their faces, posing happily for the camera. I snap a couple of pictures and examine the results. Exactly the kind of image Mark will want for our socials.

As I edit the snap, I momentarily forget the first rule of motherhood: never let your guard down . . .

I'd taken my eyes off them for the shortest of moments, but the screech tells me I should have separated them before turning my focus to work. Leo had smacked Sophia square in the face with his bear. Sophia in turn, simply pushed him over. Hard. Before taking her teddy and heaving herself back onto the sofa with her blanket.

She might be quiet, and she will never start a fight, but she knows – at least with her brother – how to end one. She might only be a few short minutes older, but she wore the trousers for sure.

I check the time. 'Shit,' I say under my breath. I've got twenty minutes until I am due to call Nic. I quickly tap out a caption and post it to Instagram.

I never planned on becoming a 'mumfluencer' – in fact, I try not to be.

My degree in marketing was supposed to set me on a path to working for one of the big advertising companies, but living on the Costa del Sol means you must be ready to turn your hand to pretty much whatever is offered. My dreams of working in a corner office for a massive agency soon warped into working long hours from a home office for highly strung expats, creating campaigns that would get a few more clients through the door. It wasn't the high-flying career I expected, but at least helping Mark gave me a little bit of variety. That's where the Instagram pics come in. There are so many relocation 'specialists' on the coast and Mark believes that parading his Insta-worthy family gives him the chance to paint a picture of the perfect family life in Spain. His idyllic family life keeps money flowing through the door, and so, as Mark reminds me daily, I shouldn't complain.

My family has become a commodity, my life a show for everyone else to watch and admire, or judge and scrutinise.

Most of the time I feel like I have no choice but to go along with his plans, but I put my foot down when it came to having my children's faces on the internet. The first time Nic and I FaceTimed, she laughed as I held the kids up to the camera and explained in mock horror: *'Oh my God, they actually have, like, FULL FACES.'*

I swear she thinks we live a timelessly rich 'Posh and Becks' lifestyle. Our kids and home dripping in the perks of gold and silver. Influencers who fill their homes with gifts and gadgets; to her, we are minor celebrities. She even joked once that we could film our own reality show — 'A New Life in the Sun meets TOWIE does Marbella'. It doesn't feel glamorous to me. I feel more like a caged tiger, trying desperately to keep the public away from my precious cubs.

Life can look distorted depending on what side of the glass you view it from. The grass may be greener on the other side, but nine times out of ten, it's because it's been fertilised with bullshit – it's just that no one sees the filth behind the veil of social media.

In Mark's mind, we should lead by example. So, we documented our integration into our small Spanish community, blogged about our move into an almost entirely Spanish-speaking village nestled in the mountains, and when I fell pregnant, it became just another 'episode' in our journey for everyone to follow along with. In Mark's mind, this was perfect, and just what the business needed. Real-life issues documented in an 'authentic'

manner. I saw it differently; it never quite sat right with me. All I wanted was to live the authentic Spanish life. I wanted my kids to grow up with the love I saw on the streets of the small villages; I wanted to find a community, a place where I felt at home.

I wanted a life but it can often feel like all he wants is the lifestyle.

When the twins were babies, I tried to put my frustration aside. Surely if we were creating our own family, it amounted to the same thing. Now, I'm not so sure.

Living in Spain is like living on the edge of an active volcano – you know that at any moment it can blow, with no warning. You could be staring at the most beautiful vistas, quite literally on top of the world one moment, and then find yourself burning in a sea of lava the next. The unpredictable nature of living an expat life changes you. Slowly, over time. You become more risk-averse, but you also take more unpredictable risks. It makes no sense, but no one tries to understand it more than that. You cling to any sense of normality you can find, as if it might slip through your fingers at any moment. Before you realise it, you've been living on edge for years. Not breathing, scared to rock the boat, and forever looking for the next small danger that might light the touch paper that can take your whole life away from you.

It's stressful, and that's before you add children into the mix. It makes no sense until you live the life, but it's never steady. Never easy. Never peaceful.

It's beautiful, but when they say, 'Paradise comes at a cost', they truly mean it. It's worth every penny – some days anyway.

When we first moved here, we lived a life packed with parties, drinking and dancing, but once kids came along, things changed.

We swapped our small beachside apartment, close to the bars, for a gorgeous villa, sat at the tip of an almost-purpose-built crest on the top of the mountain. A family home, but also a party pad that friends could visit at the weekends. And it worked, for a while . . . and then the bar remained stocked because no one came to see us. The eternal bachelors in Mark's clique and the ladies I used to spend time with were far too busy swapping partners and getting into *Real Housewives*-style drama to drive the hour out to us in the mountains. It's all false words and fake smiles. Just as plastic as the boobs that parade around Puerto Banús on a Saturday night.

‘Paradise is fabulous, darling, but only when you have a cocktail in one hand while your other hand is free to do a line of coke.’

Our lives had changed. Well, mine did anyway. These days my only friend is a woman I met the day our babies were born. Thank God for Nicole. I only wish she lived here, and not back in Scotland. It seemed like a cruel joke that the only mummy friend I have is one who happens to live thousands of miles away. We might have met under the strangest of circumstances, and our long-distance friendship might be an unconventional one, but without her, I’m not sure I would have coped with motherhood at all.

I snap the band on my wrist again to jolt my mind away from the negative memories that seem to swirl.

Snap, snap, snap.

I can feel the skin tightening and the pain is starting to bite now. I need to stop rehashing the past and focus on the now. The black dog lives in the shadows of past mistakes, and I don’t need to join him there right now.

I flip open the lid of the laptop and fire up Zoom as I reach into the fridge and grab a bottle of my favourite white wine. After pouring a large glass, I close the door just as I hear her soothing Scottish accent drawing me into a different world.

She calms me. She’s never brisk, never moans, never asks invasive questions. She’s real and blunt, sometimes a little too blunt, but she reminds me of home. The sound of her voice settles my soul.

‘Hiya, lass. Fit like, hen?’

She makes me laugh, every single time.

‘Hiya, dollface. Cheers!’ I say, raising the glass.

‘That looks like a large ’ain. Are we celebrating summat? If so, I’ll grab another bottle. I’m up for a boozy sesh, if you are?’ Nic responds, an expectant look on her face.

‘It’s a large one, but the kids are on the sofa, and no doubt I’ll get halfway through before they ruin my fun for the night.’ My Scottish accent always seems to deepen around her, as if I can let down the shield I’m creating for myself out here.

‘I thought Mark was putting them to bed?’

I raise one solitary eyebrow at her, and then smile. I don’t want to talk about Mark. I want to laugh with my friend and forget my worries.

‘He’s off out with a client. Kids have had a long day at the park so figured I would have my fun with you instead,’ I say. I put my glass down and fold my arms across my chest. ‘How’s you?’ I continue, eager to shift the focus away from me.

‘Same old same old. He’s out drinking with mates tonight. I’m glad, to be honest. The atmosphere this week has been thick as hell and I’ve no idea why. He’s been so hot and cold. I thought we were getting somewhere but . . .’

We’re back here again. We can go weeks with Nicole feeling confident about her marriage, and then the paranoia will creep back in.

‘I thought things were good last week? What’s happened?’ I ask.

‘I just don’t know, Vic. Some days I think we are through the worst, and others I wonder if we’re just treading water. This week feels like one of those weeks, that’s all. Maybe it’s ’cause the lads are home from offshore. He’s off drinking with them and I know what they think of me. I know what they whisper behind my back.’

‘Nic, you have to stop doing this to yourself. He chose to stay. Didn’t he?’

I watch as she fidgets, catching sight of herself in the camera and wiping under her eyes.

‘God only knows why. I mean, he had the chance to find himself someone who doesn’t have sacks of potatoes under their eyes and hair sprouting from their chin,’ Nicole responds, using the camera to search her jawline.

‘You,’ I start, edging my face closer to the camera for emphasis, ‘are a beautiful woman, and he stayed because he loves you. So, stop acting paranoid already. You’re your own worst enemy, I swear.’

I lift my glass and take a long, slow glug of the crisp cool wine.

I look towards the sofa, and miraculously, both of my children are curled up, asleep! I turn the laptop round to show my friend, placing a finger over my lips to silence her screeching coos.

‘Oh God, babe, they’re just so bonnie. Do you think God designed them this cute so that at the end of a day of them being devils, we just can’t bring ourselves to murder them?’

‘There’s probably something in that,’ I chuckle, as I slide the terrace door open and close it over gently, keeping their snores one side of the glass, so I can keep our gossip firmly on the other. ‘Grab that other bottle then, Nic. I might get some peace and quiet after all!’

I settle myself into the corner sofa on my terrace, one eye on my kids, and the other on the smiling, happy face of my friend as we put the world to rights from close to two thousand miles apart.

‘So,’ Nicole starts. ‘How’s paradise?’

‘Beautiful as always,’ I reply, a smile plastered across my face, one I hope looks convincing. ‘We had a great day at the park, heaps of kids at a birthday party, and now I’m enjoying a glass of vino on the terrace with my mate. What more could I possibly ask for?’

I don’t tell her I watched the party from a distance. Or that I cried on the way home as the kids squabbled in the pram, angry at not being allowed to partake in the cake and celebrations. No one wants to know the truth. No one needs to hear the pain. It spoils the dream.

Spain is paradise. I have a husband who works hard and looks after me, two gorgeous kids and a view over the mountains all the way to Africa. I live as close to heaven as most could imagine. What the hell have I got to complain about, right?

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THREE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

As I close the lid of the laptop, I miss her already. On days when the world feels too heavy, laughing with Victoria keeps my heart light. Her sunny disposition suits her surroundings. When I'm finding parenting a toddler in my forties difficult, watching how she tackles bringing up twins in a foreign country grounds me. She has age on her side of course, but then I'm not sure even I had that much energy when I was in my early thirties.

I admire her constant determination to stay positive. She hasn't always found it easy, especially when she struggled to bond with Sophia in the early days, but she's so much happier now, and of course I put that down to the excess vitamin D. Who wouldn't be happy waking up to clear blue skies every morning? Stress is much easier to cope with, when the world is sunny and bright.

She's a pure inspiration, and despite her being a decade younger, I often find myself telling her that I 'want to be you when I'm older'. Something that always makes her laugh. She reminds me what happiness looks like on days when I forget; she gives me hope. She takes it in her stride and always with a smile on her face and a spring in her step.

I flick through the pictures she uploaded to Instagram today. The bright yellow of birthday balloons popping against the pure blue of the sky, a large group of people smiling in the sunshine as kids run around playing in the park, dashing in and out of water sprinklers – a stark contrast to how I spent my rain-soaked day: hanging wet boxers on the clothes horse and battling Pip for a spot in front of the radiator to dry them.

I stop swiping when I reach a selfie of my beautiful friend. Her face is tilted towards the sky, sun on her features, not a wrinkle in sight. I tap out a comment – *'looking beautiful as ever quine'* – and hit the heart button. Even the sight of the sun on her face warms my cold bones.

Our chat had been a little one-sided tonight though, and as I look at her selfie, I notice she isn't smiling. Instead, her face looks almost melancholic.

I feel a pang of guilt and wonder if I'd asked enough about her during the call. We'd spent most of it focused on me and my predilection to self-sabotaging my marriage. Like a personal therapist, she'd reminded me that Andy and I had been doing well, and I was just looking for problems that weren't there. We had chatted briefly about her day at the park, but I can't recall anything more detailed than that. I make a mental note to make sure our next call is more about her than me. That's one of the hazards with long-distance friendships: often you don't remember what you want to talk about until you've put the phone down.

I've always been a believer that friends come into our lives for a reason, whether it's for a season or a lifetime. It felt like Vic had been placed in my life for a very specific reason, during a time in my life when everything felt totally upside down, and I couldn't imagine her not being there now. Who'd have thought that going into premature labour while on holiday in a foreign country would result in one of the most honest and true friendships I had experienced in my life.

If we had walked past each other in the street we'd never have looked twice at each other, or even considered how alike we could be, but all that was stripped away when we met. The day that brought us together made us equals – two mothers, enduring traumatic births, on a day no one would ever be able to understand in the same way. The universe placed us in each other's paths that day, and I will be forever grateful. We might not be the same age or live in the same country, but our bond is a special one. An unexpected one.

I wasn't looking for a friend; in fact, sometimes my life feels full of far too many of them. I can't sneeze without everyone knowing my business in this town. From cradle to grave, I will be surrounded by people who know every inch of my life. It's the way it's always been. The way it was for my parents and their parents before that.

When Andy and I got engaged, no one was shocked. In fact, it was more of a shock that we made a big deal of it. The inevitability of it had seemed obvious for so many.

We had been together almost since the crib. Our parents had been school friends. We lived two streets away from each other and I don't remember a single Halloween party when I was younger that didn't involve Andy chasing me around with a devil's pitchfork, trying to steal my witch's hat.

We'd been childhood sweethearts, had grown together in every possible way. It felt like a huge deal to move from the centre of Dundee out to suburban Broughty Ferry together, almost like we had broken the mould. Our families had always lived in the same streets, houses passed down from one generation of the family to the next. Andy and I bucked the trend. At the time, we felt like we had 'made it'.

As soon as Andy had finished his offshore training, we put down a deposit on a new build, and we felt like the fanciest of all our family members the day we put our key into that brand-new lock for the first time.

Our lives didn't change that much. We grew up, which meant no more sipping cheap cider in Camperdown Park in an evening. Instead, we sipped pints of lukewarm beer in the smoky local pub, with the same pals I'd known since before I truly knew myself.

But that's the problem: everyone knows everything. When you mess up in this kind of environment, there's nowhere to hide.

Friday nights were now spent down at our local. Pub quiz, shots and shenanigans. A ritual that hadn't changed since college. Our friendship circle was as tight now as it had been when we all rolled our skirts up before walking through the gates as teenagers.

But I broke that.

Never intentionally, but when someone in the group hurts one of our own, it's always going to split the dynamic. I just hadn't expected it to split us so much that it would feel irreparable.

I'd hurt the one person in our circle that everyone believed deserved it the least. We were the power couple. The lifers. The *#couplegoals*. Andy loved me unconditionally and worked his arse off to give us the life we always wanted. We had watched relationships come and go; love stories that started with school sweethearts burst into flames when the pressures of adult life came along. But me and Andy, we were solid. At least, Andy was.

The first quiz after the shit hit the fan, I walked into the pub and I knew, I just knew. Every single person at that table knew my dirty little secret. Glances were kept behind my back, but I felt them. Eye-rolls were exchanged each time I tried to kiss my husband's cheek or congratulate him on a correct answer. It wasn't until I had drained my fourth rosé that I fronted the situation. I tried to explain to them that I wasn't going anywhere, but that just made the awkwardness feel even more present in the

room. It was clear they wanted him to leave me, but no one had the guts to say so.

These days, I much prefer spending my Friday nights chatting to Victoria, and since Grace came along, the friendships that had been my pillars of strength over the years fell by the wayside, replaced with a sunny new positive influence. The judgement from my ‘lifers’ was just too heavy to ignore, and their anger at my betrayal never really softened. I wasn’t sure it ever would now.

Maybe that’s why it was easier to chat to Vic. I had told her what had happened between Andy and me. One night, over far too many glasses of wine, I’d let it all off my chest. Vic sat on the other side of the screen, just listening to my side of the story, and didn’t judge. She didn’t know us before I broke us, and I was in control of the narrative, so it felt easier to be honest. Or at least I was honest about *my* side of the story.

As I shut everything down in the living room and work my way around the house locking all the doors and windows, I catch sight of the picture of Andy, Grace and me outside the town hall in Spain. That was a surreal day. Registering a baby’s name in the weeks after birth is a special occasion, but turning up to an office in a foreign country to collect paperwork to enable you to fly back home is entirely different. The relief we felt that day, knowing we could finally take her home, it was like Christmas Day all over again. The smile on his face, that was real. It wasn’t just relief, it was joy, pride even. I miss that smile. It feels like a while since I’ve seen it.

I stare at the expression on our faces and can hear his voice whispering in my ear, moments before the snap of the camera.

‘We are gonna be OK, you know. This wee angel makes it all worth it. We are gonna be fine, me and you, and our wee brood. I promise.’

His voice had been full of love when he said it, and I believed every single word. I close my eyes and I can smell the roast chestnuts and feel the sun on my face, and if I try just a little harder, I can feel the hand on the small of my back. A tiny moment that made me feel safe.

Victoria is right – I need to remember those moments. All the moments when he has stuck around and reassured me. I need to focus on those

moments, and not the doubts and nagging guilt that keeps me awake and churns up fear in my stomach.

I make my way up the stairs, careful to avoid the third from the bottom, the one that always creaks. If I wake Grace now, I won't get a wink of sleep. She must be going through a growth spurt. Her sleeping pattern is all off kilter and her need to be next to someone when she feels under the weather can be quite overwhelming. I'd woken the last three mornings unable to breathe, in a panic, unable to move and feeling a weight strapping me to the bed. As soon as my body rationalised the situation, I would realise the culprit was my beautiful baby wrapped like a squid around my face. Her little body fitting neatly on top of my chest and her cheek side by side with my own.

I sneak a peek through the crack of her door, careful not to let too much light in, and I see my beautiful girl curled up clinging onto her baby piglet. Further down the corridor, I peek into the box bedroom we moved Ben into. His duvet is on the floor, my young lad curled like a ball on the top rung of his bunk bed, sound asleep but obviously shivering. Even from the doorway I can see the goose bumps spread across his arms. I pick up the duvet, and throw it above my head onto his bunk, covering him. As I pull the covers up to his shoulders, my hand catches his skin and he feels like fire to the touch, but he continues to shiver under my fingertips.

So much for a night alone in my own bed.

'Ben, darling, wake up.'

I try to rouse him gently, but his eyes spring open like I've just shouted 'fire' in an enclosed space.

'I don't want to be a lion,' he says to me. Dead serious with his eyes focused intently on mine.

'Hey, darling, are you dreaming, my boy? Wake up.' I stroke his matted damp fringe away from his eyes, watching as the curls spring back in wet defiance.

'No. But I don't want to be a lion.'

I climb the short ladder up to his bed and lift him upright. This is becoming far too frequent a problem for my liking. His immune system is shot, and I can't count the number of times he has been ill in the last few months.

He moves with my body and instinct takes over. In a fever fog, he makes

his way down the steps, swaying slightly until he reaches the bottom and falls into my arms, giving in to the exhaustion as his body melts into mine. I lift his clammy frame into my arms and not for the first time I wish my husband was here to help. My wee laddie is growing, and it won't be long before I'm not able to pick him up on my own.

I lay him on my bed and go to the bathroom cabinet to retrieve the thermometer and Calpol.

As I wait for the mercury to indicate how sick my boy is, I message Andy.
'Ben's ill again.'

Immediately I watch as the rolling dots appear.

'Is it bad?'

The thermometer beeps and I draw a short breath of relief.

'Not too bad, only 38. Caught it early. I'll keep him in our bed tonight.'

'OK,' comes his response. Is this who we have become? I stare at our exchange and wonder what happened to that couple who still acted like lovesick teenagers well into our marriage. It all feels so stunted now. So clinical. The rolling dots appear again. Then stop. Then return.

'I've ordered a taxi. Be home soon. Love you.'

I have to read the message back three or four times before it registers. The sudden shock and joy filling me with giddy excitement. I even exit our messages and go back in, just to check if I had read it correctly. I know he loves me – we wouldn't have made it this far through all this mess if he didn't – but it has been a long time since we've said it to each other regularly. It's the first time he has said those words in a text message in so long. Maybe, just maybe, we can finally get past all this. Maybe, just maybe, he's starting to believe me?

'Jesus, that'll cost a fortune,' I reply, trying to ignore the massive elephant in the shape of that four-letter word. The rolling dots come back again and this time clearly he is trying to find what to say. I stare for what feels like forever, but nothing appears.

Ben coughs and snatches for breath. I drop my phone on the bed and measure out the Calpol, sitting him up to take the magical 'unicorn' liquid as Grace calls it. I reach for the cold wet flannel I'd brought in from the bathroom and cool down the back of his neck.

'Do you think they will be mad if I can't be a lion?'

I can't help but laugh at my brave wee boy. It doesn't matter how much he tries to act like a teenager during the day; in the darkness of the evenings and in the arms of his mam, he always reverts to that little boy who simply needs a hug. Andy is famous for sleep-talking; it's a running joke in the family, and for a moment I wonder if Ben is doing the same. He has no idea how cute he sounds, and I can't help but smile, but he frowns at my response.

'Sorry, darling, I thought you were sleep-talking like Daddy,' I say, but the furrow in his brow deepens and he shakes his head at me 'No? Well, don't worry, I think you're already a lion. The king of the jungle. I've heard you roar, so I know it's true.' I wink at him, and my answer seems to have supported whatever narrative his fever is writing in his mind. He closes his eyes and lies back, pulling the cold wet flannel onto his eyelids before crossing his arms dramatically over his own chest.

'Maybe I'll just be a vampire for now,' he says.

I retrieve my phone from the floor and see the flurry of messages from Andy.

'I'm already on my way home. Don't care how much it costs. If wee Smudge needs a hug from Daddy it's worth it.'

'I'm sorry I've been so moody this week.'

'I'll be home soon. Give Smudge a hug from me.'

His messages were relatively clear; all spellings were correct. Maybe he wasn't even drunk.

My fingers move quickly across the keypad as I type a hasty reply.

'Sorry, was giving Ben Calpol. See you when you get home. x'

I debate about sending *'I love you too'* back but decide against it. He knows I love him. I'm here; I stayed.

I miss the us we used to be. When he looked at me like I was a rare object that he would never let out of his sight. I miss the way he would hug me from behind 'just because'. I miss the way he looked into my eyes, like he was still trying to find out some hidden secret. I hope one day we can get that back. Will he ever look at me like that again? I need that. If we're going to fix this, I need to feel like he can love me again, the way he did before. I need us to get back to that so I don't keep looking for the moment he will run away from me.

I so badly want to go back in time, to pause that moment – the one that

changed it all – but I can't and now I miss the dreams we were making together and wonder if they will ever materialise.

We're on pause, treading water. He hasn't left, but I'm not yet convinced he won't. I'm still waiting, for the other shoe to drop.

Now that he's not tied to this house out of fear, will he choose to stay? Or will he choose to break my heart the same way I broke his?

I slip into my pyjamas and click my phone into the charging unit. All of this is a tomorrow problem.

Just over an hour later, as I replace the cool cloth on my boy's forehead, I hear the key straining in the lock of the front door downstairs. My heart skips a beat. It doesn't matter how much we have been through and how much hurt now lives within these walls, the sound of that key in the door forever makes my heart leap.

I hear his keys hit the glass bowl in the hallway and strain to hear his footsteps coming up the stairs, and my mind wanders back to that fateful day when everything changed.

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FOUR

Nicole

Dundee – June 2019

Two blue lines. ‘Fuck!’

I stared at the inky stains and prayed my ageing eyes were deceiving me.

‘Fuck!’ No one could hear me, so I said it again. Only that time I stared into the hollowed-out eyes that reflected back at me from the bathroom mirror, spots of toothpaste speckling the glass, creating ghost-like freckles on the cheeks of the terrified woman staring back at me.

‘Fuck fuck fuck.’

I returned my attention to the piece of plastic shaking between my thumb and forefinger, my wedding ring glinting behind the plastic, but those two stubborn blue lines still stared belligerently back at me.

I looked out of the bathroom window. The sun was setting in the distance and I watched as my husband leaned up against the gate post, waiting for the taxi to arrive. The ‘almost’ summer sun had left a nice glow across his face, a pinkish tint to his cheeks. He always did suit a bit of a tan and with the summer holidays creeping closer, I was looking forward to taking a break abroad maybe. Away from all the stress. Only, I hadn’t quite banked on any little complications.

I took one last quick glance at myself in the mirror. The crow’s feet around my eyes always looked deeper and darker last thing at night, like they had given up the fight with gravity and finally revealed the true state of my face. As if I needed a reminder at the end of each day that my youth was slipping away from me.

The fine lines and wrinkles I can blame on age. They’re genetic, I’m sure. The bags under my eyes, they were a different story – not sure I could blame them on age. They were down to the sleepless nights I caused myself. No amount of cream would wipe away that visual reminder of guilt.

‘Fuck,’ I whispered, as I made my way down the corridor.

My body moved around our home as if pre-programmed. I’d all but finished

loading the dishwasher before I even realised I had started, the daily grind and predictable routine so well ingrained.

It was Saturday, which normally meant ordering a takeaway, but money was tight, so I'd cooked stir-fry. We had money in the bank, but when Andy decided to give up shifts on the rig, we agreed to live by a stricter budget so we didn't burn through our savings.

It wasn't an easy choice to make. I only hope he doesn't grow to resent me for it. As well as everything else. He loved his job, but when your wife has an affair while you're locked on an oil rig in the middle of the North Sea, it's hard to find the enthusiasm to leave her alone again.

I never meant for it to happen. I never intended to hurt him. The last few years had just been a blur, and with Andy spending more and more time on the rigs, I fell into such an easy friendship with Max and things went too far. It wasn't that I didn't love Andy. I was just so goddamn lonely.

What started out as a drink or two after work slipped into dinner and drinks. Laughs. Giggles. Companionship. Max had not long split from his wife and he just needed a friend. I was lonely, stressed, and bringing up a rambunctious young boy, mostly on my own, while his father worked away. All I wanted at the end of a stressful day in the salon was to come home and offload to someone. But that someone was never there. I would call him on the rig, but he was always around the lads. My mundane life and 'nagging' about stuff that needed to be fixed at home brought him down. Looking back, I can understand why he was always so eager to hang up. I just wished he had understood how lonely it was to do life without him.

'I just wish you hadn't done it, Nic. Wish to God you hadn't done it. I just don't understand,' he had said to me. With everyone else, he could pretend to be the big bad alpha male, but I knew where his true heart lived. He couldn't hide it from me. Even when he was angry and feeling betrayed, his huge loving heart stepped forward before any other part of himself. It's one of the many reasons I loved him, one of the many reasons why I still do.

'For God's sake, Nicole,' Kerri-Ann's voice boomed through the speakers of my phone, perched on the windowsill of my kitchen as I fussed around. I could hear her loading the dishwasher on the other side. Her fury at my complaining was being taken out on the glasses by the sounds of it.

‘Just book a holiday and bonk his brains out for a few days. You guys can fix this. If anyone can get through it, it’s you two.’

I loved Kerri-Ann. I’d always admired her honesty. She had no filter, and no need for one. If ever I needed advice, it was never my brothers I lifted the phone to, it was always my cousin.

I reached into the fridge and retrieved a bottle of Chardonnay. It wasn’t until I’d put the glass to my lips and my stomach lurched at the smell of the liquid that I remembered. Going ‘off wine’ was the hint I was pregnant with Ben the first time around, so it’s no surprise it was the same this time.

I tipped the wine down the sink and flicked on the kettle before trying to remember what it was Kerri-Ann was getting irate at me for.

‘Nic, did you hear me?’ Kerri-Ann was asking me, but I was staring at the withered teabag wobbling on my teaspoon. My hands shaking.

‘Sorry, yeah. Sorry. I’m here. It’s just . . .’

I stared at the calendar on the fridge. Dates marked in red for Ben’s football matches, doctor’s appointments in green and the tell-tale red dot where my period should have started. I’m distracted, trying to count back the days, flicking the paper back to last month and checking the scrawls that indicate Mark’s last trip offshore. The purple mark a week before his return that indicated the night of the local business awards. The night I messed up.

It can’t be. We used protection. Andy and I hadn’t used anything a week later when he got home, so surely it was his. And the test said three to four weeks; my night with Max was almost seven weeks ago.

I wasn’t planning on telling anyone, at least not until I’d been to the doctor’s. I wanted it confirmed, properly, and dated – before I told anyone. I couldn’t risk the dates being wrong, and just how reliable are the box tests anyway. Until a doctor confirms it, I’m not sure I’ll believe it’s real.

‘Kez, I think I might be pregnant.’ I don’t know where the words came from. They just slipped out, like the devil pulling them from my brain before I gave permission.

A moment’s silence, then on the other end of the line I could hear a sharp intake of breath.

‘Shit. Nic. Are you serious? Are you sure, I mean?’

I shook my head. The worry in her voice had given life to the fear already living in my chest. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything.

‘Nic – Nicole – Nicole, focus right now!’

‘Yeah, sorry, babe, I’m still here. Look, I can’t talk about it. Plus, I’m probably late because I’m heading into menopause,’ I improvised, crossing my fingers.

‘Nicole, you’re only forty. It ain’t menopause.’

‘Nah, you’re probably right,’ I tried to roll back. I wasn’t ready to have the conversation with anyone. ‘But I’m gonna pray it’s menopause, because I can’t begin to . . .’

‘Nic. Are you worried it might be . . . ?’

‘Max’s? No. Not a chance. At least, I don’t think so. It’s been almost two months since . . . I mean, and we used protection. And I’m not *that* late,’ I lie. She didn’t need to know the details. Not yet. Not until I was sure. If there was even a chance this baby could be Max’s, my marriage would be over for sure. I was trying so hard to fix things; this was not what we needed right now.

‘If I’m pregnant, which I’m not even sure I am yet, but if I am, it’s Andy’s. We had a few amazing nights when he got home, before I told him, and we weren’t exactly careful.’

There was silence, for longer than I was comfortable with. She hadn’t bought it. She knew me too well.

‘Would you . . . I mean, do you want to . . . ?’ Again, she didn’t need to ask. I didn’t need to answer. There was a silence between us that said it all.

I could hear her thoughts, all the way down the line from her house just four streets over. I could hear her opinions even when she didn’t voice them. If she were stood in front of me, her face would read, *Don’t do this. Don’t keep this baby just because you think it will mean he’ll stay.* She didn’t need to say it, but I let out a sigh that I knew she would recognise, and then we wrapped up our conversation and put a fear-coated pin in it for now.

I placed my oversized mug of tea on the coffee table and slipped under the blanket, before flicking aimlessly through the hundreds of channels on the TV, hoping for a distraction; instead, I find myself searching back through the memories of the last few years, trying to figure out where it went wrong. I’m not sure when it happened, but sometime after Ben was born, life started feeling like an endless cycle. We had talked a few times about having another baby, but the timing never felt right. The more Andy earned, the more he wanted. The more he wanted, the harder he worked. A month-

on month-off contract quickly turned into a month on two weeks off. But a bigger house meant bigger bills and keeping up with the Joneses.

We were walking through life as if on a treadmill, always moving but never getting anywhere. We put off having a second child for ‘another year’ each and every year, then at some point we just stopped talking about it.

At ten to eleven, while I was staring at the ticking second hand of the clock, my phone buzzed. Clearly Jim had called last orders and Andy had only just realised the time. At least, I assumed that was what had happened, because the text message I got made very little sense.

‘Sorry. comin now. bab?’

We’d been together long enough for me to be able to decode his drunken messages without even having to put the letters into my phone to unscramble.

‘No worries. No, I don’t want a kebab. Leftover chicken stir-fry in the kitchen if you want it heating?’

‘Yup. yup yup yup’

My heart skipped a beat; nervousness, excitement maybe.

The Andy I knew was a funny drunk. It had only been those last few weeks he had been drinking more than normal and instead of my happy cheery husband, a mournful, sulky teenager replaced him. One who would insist on falling asleep on the sofa and throwing up in the newspaper bin.

As if my body knew it was coming, I looked towards the front door a few beats before I heard the scraping of metal on metal. A hissing of profanities behind the door and then a crash that sent me shooting up from the sofa.

Opening the door, I took in the image of the man I loved, lying on his back, my bay tree lying between his legs, the plant pot shattered, and mud strewn across my brand-new doormat.

‘You silly git. What are you doing?’

My husband was sparked out on the ground in front of me, gripping what I can only describe as a posy of straggly grass pieces and what looks like a dead geranium. Still lying on the ground, he reached both his hands up high into the air, gripping the shreds of garden debris between his fingers.

‘For you. Because I hate you. But I love you.’

He was grinning with his eyes closed, and as I glanced down the driveway, I could see exactly where he had torn the grass from: the sidewalk outside our house. The geraniums I suspected came from Mrs

Watson's house next door. I'd have to apologise to her. She counted those damn flowers each day as if they were her own grandchildren.

'Helping the council pulling up the weeds, were ya? And Mrs Watson will have a fit in the morn.'

I chuckled at him as he opened his eyes and feigned a shocked expression, before I nodded to the clearly bald patch of weeds on the path in front of our gate.

'Well. Garage was shut.' He tried to shrug his shoulders as he stood from the pavement.

'I wuv you.'

'Wuv. That's a new one.' I giggled at him as I helped him sit down at the foot of our stairs.

'Do you want me to make you a coffee? Or are we at the water and aspirin stage?'

'Hmm.' He scratched at his chin, a five-o'clock shadow creeping across his gorgeous baby face.

'Booff,' he slurred. It took me a moment.

'Both? OK?'

I rose from my haunches and headed to the kitchen and could hear scuffles in the living room behind me as I poured the dark strong liquid into his favourite *No.1. Best Dad* mug.

As I stepped back into the living room, my heart swelled to twice its normal size. Andy had picked up a sleeping Benjamin from his beanbag and was sat on the sofa cradling his son in his arms like a new-born baby.

'I love watching him sleep,' he said, in what he must have thought was a whisper, but a drunken whisper is never quite as quiet as you think.

'He's growing up far too quick, Nic. I don't like it. I missed so much.'

I placed the aspirin in between the coffee and glass of water on the table before crossing the length of the living room to pick up my son's favourite blanket and sitting down next to them both.

'You didn't miss that much. He's still young, and you can do it all over again with this wee one.' I patted my stomach and smiled.

I'm not sure it was ever a good idea to tell him while he was drunk, but it just slipped out. Tipsy Andy seemed so happy, and for a moment it felt like I had my old husband back again. His eyes might have been swimming with

alcohol, but they were smiling for once, rather than staring at me filled with disappointment.

I watched as a whole gamut of emotions passed across his face, my heart racing, praying to God that the roulette wheel would land on a positive reaction.

‘What?’ he said, finally finding words. Had I misjudged? I couldn’t tell from his tone.

‘Shhhh,’ I urged him, hoping that the sleeping child might give us a little buffer zone, a way to temper the reaction. I immediately wished I could roll back time and tuck those words back into my chest again, at least until I knew, at least until I was sure.

‘What did you just say?’ His voice was louder, Ben stirring on his lap.

‘Daddy!’

I watched as Ben hugged his father, Andy’s hand tracing the length of his son’s spine, up and down, the sweaty fabric sticking to my sleepy son’s skin.

‘I’ll take him up to bed,’ Andy said. He might not have been one hundred per cent sober, but the drunken haze had lifted from his face, an unreadable expression in its place.

‘Be careful,’ I said to him as he manoeuvred past the toy tuck shop set up on the floor in front of him.

It felt like he’d been upstairs for a lifetime, and when he returned to the living room, I had no idea where to place myself. My fight-or-flight kicked in and I wasn’t sure which side of my brain was shouting louder.

He took his place once more on the sofa, staring at his hands, knitted together between his shaking knees.

‘So,’ he said, not raising his head to look in my direction.

‘So,’ I replied.

The ticking of the clock on the mantel felt louder. Thundering through the tension in the room, splitting our thoughts in two, slicing my resolve into tiny shards of fear.

‘I know it wasn’t planned, and I haven’t been to the doctor yet, but I did a test. Well, several tests, this morning.’

Silence.

‘You’re getting quite good at lying to me, aren’t you? Didn’t think to tell me this morning?’

He wouldn’t look at me. I should have waited until the morning; we could have gone to bed happy and in each other’s arms.

‘I didn’t lie to you, Andy.’

His eyes pierced into me. Surprisingly, there was no anger, just pain. Pain like I had seen the day I told him.

‘I didn’t lie. I told you, as soon as you got home. I told you . . .’

I couldn’t help but look away. Deep in my heart I knew it wasn’t true, but it was as close to the truth as I could admit. If I was being honest with him, of course I lied. Never intentionally, but I never told him when I went for dinner with Max. Never told him when my late nights were spent messaging him and sending funny memes. I didn’t tell him the first time I felt butterflies for someone else. I told him after we slept together and I lied when I told him it meant nothing. Of course it meant something. It meant enough that something in me knew our ‘friendship’ was wrong, because if it wasn’t, wouldn’t I have told him sooner? I may have only slept with Max once, but I was cheating on my husband in other ways long before our lips even met.

I raised my eyes from our threadbare carpet and took in the pained face of my husband. His lips so tightly shut I could barely see where they separated. Both of us too scared to say anything that might rip apart the last remaining stitch holding us together.

I reached out, took his face between my palms and kissed him softly on the forehead. He tried to pull back, but I needed this, and I was sure he did too.

‘Andy. We always said we wanted another, and I know it’s not planned, and I know we’re working through some stuff, but I’m having this baby. No matter what happens between us.’

The insistence in my decision shocked even me. I hadn’t known just how strongly I felt until the words hit the air. He looked at me. Tears filled his lower lids.

‘Don’t make me ask . . .’ His voice was all but a whisper.

‘Don’t ask then,’ I replied. Defiance the chosen emotion, fear its instigator.

‘Nic. I might be half-cut, but I’m not bloody stupid, and neither are you.’

Don't make me ask again.'

I released his face from my grip, shuffled back on the sofa and took in the shape of the man in front of me.

He stood up, no longer unsteady on his feet, the seriousness of the situation sobering him almost entirely.

'Nicole. Is it mine?'

His chest was puffed out, like a seagull getting ready to take flight, his entire body coursing with adrenaline and his fingers gripping at his jeans pockets.

'Andrew Fraser Murray, this child, and any child I may have in the future, could only ever be yours.'

'You can't very well blame me for asking, can ye!' he replied, his voice rising and anger seeping in.

He stood stock-still for a moment, just staring at me. I had no words in response. He was right of course. I couldn't blame him for asking. He had no reason to believe anything I said anymore. I had broken that trust between us, and we were a long way off it being repaired.

'How did we get here, Nic? It was me and you against the world. Forever. Remember? How did we get to a place where it feels like there's this invisible man walking around in your shadow, waiting to take my place?'

In vino veritas.

Andy bent forward and collected the aspirin from the table, swigging it back with the lukewarm coffee.

'Well, I'll need to get ready for those sleepless nights again, I guess.'

He sat back on the sofa, raised his arm up and invited me in for a hug. I wasn't convinced he believed me, and his hug felt tentative at best, but I couldn't blame him. As I curled up to his chest, I ran the numbers over and over again in my mind, praying I was right. I wanted to fix my marriage; I didn't want to blow us up. Maybe this baby would help stick us back together, but then, it also had the potential to put a final nail in the coffin. Tomorrow I'd make an appointment with the GP, make sure the dates matched up.

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FIVE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

Ben was up and down all night. If I managed to clear four hours of broken sleep, I'd be surprised, but as the morning broke, so too did his fever. It wasn't just my sleep that was interrupted – poor Grace was woken by the commotion. At three a.m., Andy took her to sleep on the sofa. There's something so beautiful about watching them sleep huddled up under blankets. Their breaths rising and falling in line with each other, and Grace's tiny little fingers wrapped around the big protective hands of her father.

I got out of bed a little after sunbreak and crept downstairs, careful not to wake them as I made a cup of coffee. With my young laddie peacefully enjoying dreamland, I dared not wake him. So now I sit in bed, coffee by my side and a book in my hands, trying to read as the rest of my family catch up on stolen sleep. I should be sleeping, and I know I'll regret it later, but these days it's so rare to get five minutes' peace, so I indulge a little, turning the pages as quietly as I can so as not to shift the air around us and wake my boy.

I glance at the silver bookmark placed delicately between the pages and for the life of me I can't remember what has happened in the book so far. I want to enjoy the peace, but my mind is spinning and I just can't focus.

I close the book. Having read the first paragraph at least three times, and still unable to recall what I've read, it's clear I'm not concentrating. As I close the book, the image on the cover only serves to make my mind wander further. The artistic shot of the cocktail glass, red poisonous liquid dripping down its edges, takes me back to our babymoon in Spain. Just before Grace was born.

We'd gone off on what we had thought would be our final chance to connect and reset before the baby would arrive. A week in the sun on the Costa del Sol in a villa in the mountains. A chance to breathe fresh air and

reconnect before our little surprise graced us with her presence. Neither of us could have expected what happened next.

I stare at the image of condensation dripping down the side of the cocktail glass on the cover of my book and remember the droplets of pool water that glistened on the torso of my gorgeous husband as he served me non-alcoholic cocktails under the warm winter sun. I truly believed that we were working our way back to each other. It had felt easier since the doctor confirmed the due date. With paternity no longer in question, we planned to enjoy our final few days alone together before we became a family of four. At least, that had been the intention. God laughs at those who plan. I should have remembered that.

I replace the book in its lonely slot on my bedside table and pick up my phone, flicking through the albums until I find the picture my heart is searching for. Andy, stood in all his glory, a cocktail shaker the only thing hiding his modesty as the low winter sun bounced off his perfect cheekbones and exaggerated his toned midriff. I smile as the memory of the taste of the watermelon cocktail on my lips makes my mouth water. My racing heart recalls his hands searching for my hips under the water. I may have been heavily pregnant, but he looked at me that week as if I was the most beautiful human on the planet. I close my eyes and I can smell the barbecue on the air, can almost feel the water lapping around my body.

I wish, more than anything, that we could go back to the way we were then. I thought we were out of the woods; I honestly believed we were back on track. But it's easy to ignore fears, doubts and paranoia. That is, until you are locked in a house filled with them for two years.

I scroll through the album and come across a video I haven't watched since Grace was born. I lower the volume on my phone so as not to wake my sleeping boy and hit play on a memory that immediately fills my chest with warmth.

The bubbles in the Jacuzzi popped against my skin, tickling the hairs on the backs of my legs as the water was pushed around the small square box at full force. I could hear the whizzing of the cocktail machine in the background.

Pregnancy had been a breeze first time around. I was that annoying mum you see in all the movies with glossy hair, perfectly polished nails

and flawless skin. This time around I looked every inch of my pregnant self, from every angle. My ankles had long since disappeared, my bump seemed to spread out from each edge of me and my now saggy boobs seemed to merge into the shape of my bump. Add to that the crow's feet now collecting sweat that dripped from my temples, and I looked just like Violet from the Willy Wonka book, after chowing down on her fateful chewing gum.

My overinflated boobs bobbed on the surface in time with the bubbles and just as I was considering heaving my ridiculous heft out of the hot tub, I spotted the outline of a rather cheeky half-naked barman making his way from the kitchen to the terrace. I picked up my phone from the side of the hot tub and aimed it in his direction.

'Well, well, well. What do we have here?' I said into the camera, the image on the screen shaking ever so slightly as I tried to focus on not dropping it into the water. He handed me a tall glass filled to the rim with an almost neon pink liquid and I tried to keep my phone focused on him as I reached to take the glass from his hands.

'A sexy, sassy, watermelon soother, for my rather fiery, feisty and foxy pregnant wife!' he responded as I took a sip of the cool liquid.

I looked back, refocusing the camera on my husband's face as he grinned a cheeky, knowing smile and climbed the steps to join me. As his hips reached my eyeline, I couldn't help but focus on his Adonis belt muscles peeping over the top of the towel he had precariously tucked around his waist. With one quick movement the towel dropped to the floor and the glowing of the setting sun behind me bathed him in a warm light that only highlighted his toned body.

'Now come on, Andy, isn't this exactly what put us in this position in the first place?' I winked at him from behind the camera and watched as a moment of doubt and pain crossed his face before he brushed it away with a determined smile and playfully shook his hips before he slid into the water to join me.

I moved my camera to follow him as he came closer to me, reaching out with that cheeky, knowing look on his face before he said, 'Now, I don't think we need video evidence of this next bit, do we?' before he winked into the camera, took it from me and shut it off, throwing the phone onto the pile of towels by the steps and taking me in his arms.

I can't help but let out a girly chuckle as I scroll back through the video to the moment he drops the towel. That was one of the best nights of sex we had enjoyed in so long, and watching the video, I can remember every moment that followed it. Even if only caught for a small second, seeing my husband with nothing but a smile on his face brought back all the feels. It didn't seem to matter what life threw at us, or how much it tried to break us, how much I loved and wanted him never changed.

'Well, that's a cheeky smile if ever I've seen one.' My husband's voice brings a blush to my cheeks, as if I've been caught doing something I shouldn't. He passes me a freshly brewed cup of coffee and I smile at his thoughtfulness. It had been a while since he last brought me coffee in bed.

'I was just reminiscing,' I say with a wink as I pass him the phone so he can see the image for himself.

'Oh my God, that feels like a lifetime ago.'

He's not wrong. The world looked like a very different place back then.

'You still look as hot now as you did then, even with that little Covid bulge.' I bite my lip. Teasing had always been a love language for us, but these days it was hard to know how far I could push it. Always worried I was going to hurt his now fragile confidence.

'Cheeky cow, I'll have you know this is affectionately known as a "dad bod", and I'm proud of it.'

I let out a small sigh of relief and wink at him.

'Being a father of two takes its toll on your, um, gym time!' he finishes, letting out a low, gruff laugh as everything in me stirs. This is why I'm still fighting for us. That spark isn't gone. It's still there; I can still feel it.

He leans over to pass me back my phone, and quite unexpectedly, leans in even further, cupping my face with his hand as he plants a soft but urgent kiss on my lips. I take a deep breath in while I taste the coffee on his lips.

As he pulls away, he brushes his thumb across my cheek, looks into my eyes and whispers, 'Good morning, wifey.'

Maybe Victoria was right; I'm looking for problems where there are none. It's my own guilt and paranoia. I know I have no right to complain. I caused this pain, but it's hard. Harder than I thought. Fixing our marriage isn't just about me being patient while he learns to forgive and trust me again, it's about forgiving myself too, so I can move past my own guilt and stop sabotaging us.

‘Good morning, husband,’ I say as I watch him scoop Ben up in his arms.

‘Careful, you’ll wake him! Where’s Gracie?’ I ask, expecting to see his little shadow attached to his hip.

‘She’s snoozing. I’ve put her in her bed, Pip is guarding her of course, sat at the bottom of her bed but she’s not really ready to be awake.’

As he turns his back to walk out of the room, holding our slumbering Smudge, I slip out of bed and follow him down the corridor.

‘His fever’s better. It broke around five a.m. Neither of us got much sleep though. I’m knackered, but his chest doesn’t sound as bad as last time, so I think we caught it early.’

Andy lifts my son’s body with ease almost above his head and places him on the top bunk, pulling the duvet up to his shoulders.

‘Have you seen this?’ he says, pointing to the bruise on his face, now even more visible.

‘Yeah. Noticed it yesterday.’

Concern knits in the furrow of my husband’s brow. ‘Did you call the doctor? Is it serious?’

‘For a bruise? No, Andy. I didn’t call the doctor.’

‘How did he get it?’ is his response.

‘I’ve no idea. I asked him, but he doesn’t remember. He just remembers waking up and his ear hurting.’

I pull my husband out of the room, leaving our slumbering child to his dreams.

‘I think he probably hit himself with the lightsaber or something. You know what he’s like, and he seems to be going through a “clumsy” stage.’

‘Is that a thing?’ He looks puzzled.

‘Yes, it’s a thing. Most kids go through it as they grow.’

I make my way back into the bedroom and watch as he slips into the ensuite, undressing as he goes.

My mug is still sat on the bedside table, the liquid now forming a film over the cold coffee. As much as I need the caffeine, I can’t stomach the stuff cold, so I lie back on the bed for a moment. All I want is to crawl beneath the duvet again and nap. Motherhood in your forties is no walk in the park. I can’t handle the sleep deprivation anymore.

I gently nudge myself under the duvet, hoping that five minutes’ peace while Andy showers might be enough to charge my batteries.

My eyes can't have been closed for more than a moment before a noise pierces through my rest. My blood boils instantly. Some bugger is ringing the doorbell!

I curse as I jump quickly out of bed, hoping to make it to the door before the idiot rings it again. The last thing I need is to abruptly wake up a sleeping Grace and a poorly Ben.

No such luck. I haven't even made it to the top of the stairs before the buzzer is depressed not once more, but multiple times in quick succession.

'SHHHHHHHH!' I hiss as I throw the door open, taking in the sight of my cousin just as I hear the distinct scream of 'Muuuuuummmmyy' coming from Grace's bedroom.

'For God's sake, woman, what the hell is wrong with you?!'

Kerri-Ann recoils and covers her eyes. 'Shit, sorry, babe. I thought you'd all be up by now.'

I can barely hear what she is saying as she continues to chatter her way into my hallway. Grace's screams are piercing through my foggy brain, and I wave at my cousin to shut the hell up as I take the stairs two at a time.

I walk into the kitchen with Grace on my hip, her messy bed hair shooting out at odd angles making her look like the love child of Edward Scissorhands and Medusa.

'Oh my God, look at her. I could just eat her!'

Kerri-Ann holds out her hands to take Grace from me, but I step to the side and chuckle.

'Oh, Kez, no no no. You might think she looks good enough to eat, but we've had such a rough night and barely any sleep. She will take a chunk out of you if you come any closer.'

'It's always the little ones you have to watch,' Kerri-Ann replies as she winks in my direction. My height had been a source of amusement all our lives, and the fact I married a man who towered almost two foot above me never ceased to amaze those around us.

'Damn right it is, and this monster won't think twice about reducing you to a puddle to get to her cereal.'

I let Kerri-Ann fuss around making us a coffee while I deal with my ravenous little girl.

'Pour me one won't you, Kez, seeing as you ruined my morning's plans!' Andy has entered the kitchen, fresh from the shower, his damp dirty-blond

locks speckled with grey now glistening under the harsh kitchen lights. His dad bod is on full show and Kez doesn't miss a beat before letting out a wolf whistle.

'Plans?' Kerri-Ann asks, as she pours coffee into his *No.1 Best Dad* mug.

'Well, I came out of the shower hoping to find my wife still in bed, but it seems you had other plans for her?'

He winks in my direction and pats me cheekily on the bum as he takes his coffee and starts to walk out of the kitchen.

'I think I'll stick something more appropriate on and pop to the shop, pick us up some bits for a nice full English. Fancy it, Kez? That way you girls can girly gossip without me earwiggin'.' He shoots us a knowing look before taking back off upstairs.

As soon as the bedroom door closes, I hold up my hand to silence the inevitable inappropriate questions. It doesn't work.

'Well, when you said you had a late night, I would never have guessed . . .'

'Oh, Kez, hush up. None of that. Ben isnae well. He's upstairs sleeping.'

'You're no tellin' me that sexual tension is born outta stayin' up with a sick child all night? What rubbish. He was flirtin' like a teenager there! Things on the up again?'

'I'm not sure, to be honest. He's been dead quiet and distant the last few weeks and I've been a paranoid wreck but then he rushed home from Aberdeen last night when I told him Ben was sick instead of stayin' with one of the lads. He kipped on the sofa with Grace while I dealt with Ben, then this morning delivered me coffee in bed. Think he was hopin' for a wee summat summat before you arrived.'

My cousin can't keep the smile from her face. She knows more than anyone how hard these last few years have been. She's the only one in my family who hasn't judged me or cast me aside for the affair. She's also the only person who truly knows just how much I love that man, and the joy on her face matches the fizzing I feel in my chest.

'Don't look at me like that. I'm not counting my chickens yet. It's just one good mood, on one good day.'

She nods her head in understanding, then shakes her upper body as if changing character suddenly. 'You know what, I can't get over how

different they are,' she starts up again as I get back to mopping up the mess my daughter was making with her breakfast.

'What do you mean?' I ask as I wipe the raspberry juices from around Grace's mouth.

'Well, Ben refused to eat anything except toast. I remember you going through loaves and loaves of the stuff. You couldn't get him to eat anything else, but this wee one will Hoover any fruit you put in front of her.'

She isn't wrong. It amazes me how different two children from the same family could be. Ben is a fussy eater but was the easiest child when it came to sleep routines and playing on his own. Grace is the opposite. I brought them up the same, but they seemed to see and interact with the world so differently.

'Andy thinks Grace came back with a touch of Spain in her DNA. She loves her fruit, can't get enough of olives, and eats tomatoes like they're apples! She seems to chase the sun around the house too. Any sliver of light and she seeks it out. Ben's the opposite. He's happier wrapped in a duvet or hidden under a blanket fort, but Grace . . .'

I look up to see Kerri-Ann looking quizzically at me.

'Andy thinks Grace has Spanish DNA?' If her eyebrows were any higher on her head, they would knit in with her extensions!

'That's not what I meant, Kez. Stop it! And Max isn't Spanish, he's Italian, so that wouldn't even make sense.'

She shrugs her shoulders at me, but I can tell the conversation isn't over. She looks over her shoulder into the living room and out the door up the stairs, presumably to check no one is listening to our conversation.

'Did Andy say that himself?' she asks, deadpan serious.

'Why?' I shoot back, my anger now spiking my blood pressure.

'Look, Andy has been chatting to Brian. Remember the last time he was onshore, they went out for drinks and Andy got quite drunk? Apparently, he told Brian that he needed to figure out once and for all if he could live with Grace not being his.'

The anger hit first. What the hell did he mean 'if he could live with her not being his'? She *is* his.

As I allow the carousel of emotions to circle, waiting for one of them to land, I think back to all the conversations we had in the past. We only ever discussed paternity and testing once, and that was before our three-month

scan confirmed the dates. There was no reason to question after that. Well, that was until we brought Grace home. I would catch him looking at her, as if trying to figure out a riddle. When my brother Michael cruelly joked over a drunken Christmas Zoom that he couldn't see the resemblance, Andy had shut the conversation down so quickly I dared not bring it up again. They might not look alike, but their mannerisms, their personalities, they were so in sync that family quietened down, to my relief. At least, if they chose to question, it was always out of my earshot and for that I was thankful.

'That's bullshit. It's just Brian stirring up shite again and you know it. He loves the drama. Andy knows Grace is his.' I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince more – her or me, when I say the words – but I say them with as much conviction as my body can muster. 'The dates don't add up, Kez. You know that. We've had this conversation.'

I'm trying to take the note of frustration from my voice but it clearly hasn't worked.

'Don't shoot the messenger, Nic. I'm just tryin' to warn ya.'

'Well don't,' I shoot back. The very fine line between worry and interference was about to be crossed. 'Grace is his, we're getting to a good place and I'm not about to rock that boat again. So, drop it.'

I pick up a tea towel from the kitchen worktop and start drying a mug from the sink.

Kez takes the mug out of my hand and sets it back down on the counter.

'You're spinning out, and that's not why I told you. I just wanted to warn you. I don't want it to come out of the blue, that's all. You're right – things between you seem better.' She has softened her voice. Clearly the panic is written all over my skin because she takes me in her arms and hugs me close.

'You guys have gotten this far,' she whispers into my ear and my soul reacts to the words it so clearly needs to hear. 'I honestly think you guys will be fine. But maybe you should consider getting her tested anyway? It would help you as much as him in the long run.'

I push her back from me, holding her arms at her sides as I look into her eyes.

'Stop it, Kez. How many times do I need to tell you? Grace is HIS. Of everyone in my life, I would've thought you'd be the one person who would believe me.'

Kerri-Ann had never asked before. No one had, but Kerri-Ann was always the type of person to call a spade a fuckin' shovel, so if anyone was ever going to ask, I shouldn't have been surprised it was her. I should have been shocked it took her this long.

I let go of her and lean against the kitchen worktop, creating a space between us, ready for her to fill it with an apology, crossing my arms expectantly.

'No, Kerri-Ann. I won't be getting her tested. We don't need to. And I am pretty sure that if my husband wants to get *our* child tested, he will ask me himself.'

She picks up a spoon and heaps extra sugar crystals into her mug, slowly and deliberately stirring the liquid while formulating her next sentence. I can feel it coming, wrapped in barbed wire, so I try to head her off at the pass.

'God, you saw him this morning. We're finally getting back to *us*; why would I risk it? Why would he?'

'Well,' she starts, and my blood runs cold, her expression giving a warning before her words. 'Surely it's not a risk if you're so sure she's his?'

I don't respond.

'Look, the dates thing makes sense and you're right – I think you were both sure before the birth . . .' She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. I ready myself. 'But she was so premature.' She taps the metal spoon on the side of the china mug three times, slow and heavy.

'You *cannot* be serious,' I spit at her, my rage now fully engaged. 'Our daughter was born four weeks early because I had pre-eclampsia. Not because I lied about her due date. Do you think I would be so reckless to travel to Spain on holiday if I thought for a second that I might give birth earlier?'

'I'm not saying you knew,' stutters Kerri-Ann, but I refuse to let her dig herself out of this one.

'No, you didn't say it, but you implied it!' I can hear my voice cracking, the anger rising in my chest. 'You implied that she wasn't actually premature. Do you think I paid off the sonographer to lie to my husband about the due date too? Don't be so bloody stupid!'

I turn away from her and wipe at my eyes, tears gathering, frustration and fear leaking out of me.

‘I didn’t – I wouldn’t. Nicole, that’s not what I meant, but clearly Andy has thought about it, or he wouldn’t have talked to Brian about it. Maybe a test . . .’

‘Kerri-Ann, if my husband wanted a DNA test, he would ask me for one, even if he was thinking about it . . . Our marriage might be on rocky ground, but it’s not dead in the water yet!’

‘But that’s just it, babe, I know he is thinking about it.’

I was done with this conversation, but she wasn’t getting the hint. Instead she was like a dog with a bone, refusing to let it go.

‘Look, maybe it’s a good thing. Like you said, things are good now. Even if it turns out Grace isn’t his, I don’t think he would go anywhere. He loves that wee lassie. But maybe he just needs to know the truth.’

I pick up my daughter and brush the half-chewed bits of raspberry from her hair as I carry her towards the living room.

‘He knows the truth,’ I shout back over my shoulder.

I make sure Grace is safe in her bouncer, and head upstairs to check on my boy. Kerri-Ann can sit and sharpen the next arrow ready to fire at me if she likes, but I won’t stand and wait for her to figure out what angle to take aim from.

As I open the door to Ben’s bedroom, I find my poorly little boy rubbing his sleep-filled eyes. I’m thankful to see a touch of colour in his cheeks now.

‘Hey, Smudge, feelin’ a wee bit better? Wanna come down and get some breakfast?’

He draws a tired yawn. ‘I’m still sleepy but you and Aunty Kez are so loud!’ he grizzles at me. I pray he didn’t hear the substance of the conversation. That’s the last thing I need right now.

I pull back the covers for him to swing out of bed and as I do, I spot another bruise. This time on his leg, just under the hemline of his pyjama shorts.

‘Oh, wee man, another one? How did you do that?’

He shrugs and pulls down the hem of the shorts to cover it. I follow him as he sleepily makes his way into the living room.

‘What do you want for breakfast, buddy?’ asks Kerri-Ann. Ben’s face lights up when he sees his favourite person standing in the kitchen doorway.

‘Toast,’ he shoots in her direction, ‘and Marmite,’ he clarifies with a wink.

‘Ewwww. That’s manky. How can you eat that stuff?’ My cousin screws up her face and fakes gipping into her hands. She’s so good with kids. A natural. It pains me that her dreams of her own baby were almost certainly over. Her cheating ex stole those years from her, and it may have been her only chance to have the family she wanted.

‘Aunty Kez, Mum says that the word “manky” makes you sound like a *teuchter*. You shouldn’t use it.’

‘Using the word “*teuchter*” makes you sound like a *teuchter*, wee man!’

Those two give each other as good as they get.

‘Enough, you two. Ben, sit down before you fall down. Where’s your dressing gown?’

He heads to the hallway and, as expected, it is hanging on the hook next to his dad’s in the hallway. Little and large. I keep meaning to tell Andy to add an extra peg for Grace’s. It would be so cute to see them hanging in the under-stairs closet together.

‘I’m not stupid. You went up to get him so I would stop talking about this.’

She’s got that damn bone again; she’s relentless when she gets on her soapbox.

‘I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Kez. I went up to check on him and he was awake. Do you realise he could have heard your ridiculous accusations? Then what? Do you realise the world doesn’t revolve around you and your opinions of my failing marriage?’

That stung – I could tell. She was the last person to judge me. Hold me accountable, yes. Always. But she never judged me.

‘That’s unfair, Nicole, and you know it.’

‘You know what’s unfair, Kez? The fact I’ve had less than four hours’ sleep, was up all night with my sick wee laddie, and then you come barging in, with your loudness, and your opinions, wake my kids and turn my happy mood grey, all because you feel the need to gossip.’

That would do it. There was nothing Kez hated more than being called a gossip. As a counsellor, she was anything but a gossip. She was the one who held everyone else’s secrets close. I, however, was a typical hair stylist. The kind all the stereotypes are based on. I love a gossip – just not when the centre of that gossip is my own family.

Kerri-Ann lifts her mug of tea and in dramatic fashion, pours the rest of

the liquid down the sink, places the mug on the side and then storms out.

‘Bye, Ben baby. I’ll come back later when your mum isn’t being such a hormonal witch!’

The front door opens before she reaches it, and the shape of my husband fills the space between her and her escape.

‘Where’s the fire, Kez?’ Andy asks, taking in the puffed-up stance of a mad-as-hell Kerri-Ann. ‘Not staying for brekkie?’

She takes a glance back at me over her shoulder and for a moment I see the face of teenage Kez, the one I used to battle with on the weekly.

‘I don’t think your wife’s in the mood for my company. I’ll try again when she’s feeling less bitchy.’

‘Whatever, Kez, maybe come back when you’re in less of a judgy mood, eh hen?’

Andy blocks the doorway with his outstretched arm. ‘Whoa, ladies. Enough already. What’s got your knickers in a twist?’

‘Nothin’,’ shoots a sulky Kez.

Andy places a bag of food on the floor between his feet and hers and takes Kez in his arms for a hug.

‘OK, well, nice to see ya, and if you think you can get over this wee spat before dinner time, I’d love to ask for your babysitting skills.’

Clever tactic – Kez loves Andy and his big bear hugs. He always knows how to win her round.

‘I’d like to take my wife out for dinner. A proper date. Do you think you might hate her a little less by dinner?’

I watch as she cocks her head at my husband, his eyes softening her with each passing second.

‘Urgh, Andy, you know I can’t say no to those kids.’

‘Seven o’clock all right with you?’

‘Sure,’ she replies, kissing him on the cheek before she heads past him out the door, swinging her hair and hips like she’s just won the battle. I’m never sure how he does it, but he has an uncanny ability to defuse any situation with a smile and a hug.

I leave Grace in the capable hands of her older brother, both now quietly watching cartoons while snuggled under a blanket in the living room. I follow Andy into the kitchen and watch as he unpacks the food.

‘OK, so my husband is taking me on a date?’ I lower my voice and trace

my fingers down his spine and across to his hips, trying to put the anger caused by Kez to the side and slip back into that flirty place I had so enjoyed this morning.

‘Well, I thought it was about time. I’ve booked a table at the tapas place in town. It might not be as good as Pepe’s in Spain, but we can enjoy some sangria and patatas bravas and put the world to rights. Whaddya think?’

I heard the word ‘tapas’, and I was sure I had heard him utter ‘sangria’, but the rest of the words blurred into each other. My brain was far too preoccupied with the flecks of amber across his deep brown eyes, and the way the five-o’clock shadow highlighted his perfect jawline. I raise my hands up, running my fingertips through his hair until I reach the nape of his neck and pull his face down to meet mine. My lips connect with his and our bodies react with ease, his arms around my waist drawing me closer, pulling me deeper into a kiss that fills every empty part of my soul.

As my breathless voice leaves my chest, I barely recognise myself.

‘As long as the night ends with one of those, I’d take a Happy Meal from Maccy D’s.’

He chuckles and rests his forehead on mine, kissing the tip of my nose before whispering in my ear. ‘Never lower your standards, my love. You are worth more than McDonald’s.’

I manoeuvre myself to bite his neck playfully. ‘Well, my man, be careful. With words like that you might even make it past a kiss on the doorstep afterwards.’

He winks at me as he pulls away. ‘I should hope so too.’

I like this new side of him. Or the old side of him that I thought was long gone. It’s been too long since he has flirted with me. We used to be so good at it, playfully teasing each other all day long. I wasn’t sure when that stopped, and it’s nice to know we are still good at it.

As I walk back towards the living room to check on the kids, I hear him fussing with the frying pan as he adds, ‘Anyway, it’ll be nice to get out, and it’ll give us a chance to talk properly, without the kids around.’

Something in his tone made my blood run instantly cold. I had thought this was a playful date, but something in the way he said those last words felt like a warning. As I planned my outfit in my head, there was a part of me that was starting to worry. A chance to talk without the kids . . . was I walking into an ambush?

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SIX

Victoria

Spain – October 2022

I can't handle being stuck in the house for another day alone, so when I woke this morning in an empty bed yet again, instead of being sad, I decided to change tactics. I got up and drank a coffee on the terrace alone while my babies snoozed, and I plotted how to get to the end of the day with my sanity intact.

As I stared at the shadows being created by the rising sun over the mountains, I wondered what the 'other' me would be doing right now. The me I would have been if we hadn't had the twins. I hadn't done any real work in what felt like forever. I was itching to get my hands on a new client. I want to craft and create marketing campaigns again. I'm desperate to get my teeth stuck into a new project, but it doesn't seem to matter how many times I tell Mark I want to go back to work, there always seems to be a reason to put it off.

When we first got married, I loved the traditional values he held. I loved that he so badly wanted me to be his wife, loved that he wanted to tell the whole world that I was his. But when we thought about starting a family, we talked about all the ways building our own little tribe would be our chance to live life the way we wanted. For me, that included having a life and career of my own, once the kids were in nursery, of course. But all too quickly I slipped into the routine of playing the good wife. Days rolled into weeks that merged into months and years, and now here I was, wondering when I had decided to give up my career. When had becoming a wife meant I'd become a part of the 'staff' that ran Mark's life?

I look towards the living room, and my skin prickles at the view: a half-eaten bacon sandwich left in the middle of the table, the plate balancing precariously on the edge of my expensive Gaudí coffee-table book. Crumbs litter the floor and the spare blanket has been left rumpled at the foot of the sofa, on top of which are a number of empty beer bottles. Our carefully

crafted showhouse of a living room now resembles a university crash pad. Not exactly the Instagram aesthetic my husband so keenly aspires to.

Last night, Mark had finally rocked in around two a.m., feet as heavy as an elephant, stomping around the apartment, and singing at the top of his voice. Waking Leo instantly. The smell of cooking bacon at that time of the morning was enraging, and as I tried to rock my son back to sleep in our marital bed, I listened as he scrolled through the endless channels on the TV. I heard him thundering up the stairs and as I tried to creep out of our room, praying Leo would remain sleeping, I found Mark crouched in front of the twins' closed bedroom door, shushing it.

The argument we had was entirely one-sided, and he will probably tell me he doesn't remember a word of it when he rolls in from work later. I refused to let his drunken arse into our bedroom and made him sleep on the sofa. By the time I came down this morning, he was gone.

As I clipped Leo into his car seat, and looked over at Sophia, waiting patiently to be strapped in, it occurred to me that I may have decided not to stew on it today, but I wasn't winning that battle. I'd wandered silently around the house collecting our stuff for the beach and dressed the kids quietly as they chatted at me. Normally we would sing our way around the house in the mornings, but today I struggled to find the joy. Clearly my quiet mood had been noticed, because even Leo was silent and he didn't struggle as I clipped him in. Instead, he was smiling at me, a hopeful smile full of unconditional love.

'Oh, my wee boy. Are you OK?'

'Yep,' he replies. Curt but definitive.

'Excited to go to the beach?'

'Yep,' he says, holding out his plastic Spider-Man figurine for me to see.

'I love the bich,' he says, struggling to get the ee sound out right.

'La Playa,' I say, overexaggerating the letters.

'Playa, playa, la playa,' he replies, turning the sounds over in his mouth and committing them to memory.

'La la la la la.' I look over at Sophia and catch her trying to force one half of her seatbelt straps into the clasp by herself, a look of pride on her face as she hears the 'click'.

‘Ready, Mummy.’ She beams at me.

The drive down the mountain towards the beach is one of my favourite routes. I hate the summer crush and the tourists and try to avoid coming down to the coast in the summer months, but it’s October, my favourite month of all in Spain. The tourists have gone home, the prices at the chiringuitos have returned to normal and the sand is cool enough to stand and sit on without risking a third-degree burn.

Those of us who live in ‘paradise’ understand that this life comes at a cost. Holidays in the sun are one thing, but the summer months in Spain, when you are living here, are hell. Living inland is so much warmer than on the coast, with temperatures at least a few degrees higher, but the last thing you want to do is travel to the beach and battle the pale skin brigade as they toast on plastic lilos in a sea that is far too busy with jet skis to be safe to swim in. Instead, we hide in the mountains and wait for them to disperse. Come October, we emerge from our summer hibernation and enjoy the true Spanish summer.

As I drive down the windy roads, the shimmering of the sun on the vast sea in front of us calls to me, beckoning me closer. The mountains give me air to breathe, but the sea grounds me. I have never, in my whole life, lived far enough away from the shore that I can’t at least see the horizon over a body of water. Here, in our own little paradise, I enjoy the best of both worlds.

Today, the world feels too much. I feel the weight of an elephant sitting on my chest and a strong and physical desire to scream. The blue skies are clear, not even the memory of a cloud etched into the indigo canvas. The sky is high, the sun is low, and the temperature is perfect, but I feel grey, maybe even black. The noise in my head is so loud I can’t hear my thoughts; instead all I can hear is screaming.

The arguments between Mark and I have increased over the last few months. I need something to change. I love being a mum, but I need a purpose too.

All too often these days, our discussions consist of *‘Leo ate a strawberry today, oh and Sophia learned a new word. They both napped for two hours.’* Or, as was much more common, *‘Sophia smacked Leo in the face this*

morning when he woke her up from a nap to play with him, so he bit her back, and we spent an hour trying to decide which twin could scream the loudest.' Those were our discussions over delicately prepared prawn pil pil and glasses of Albariño. When had my life become more about giving him a bullet point rundown of toddlers' fights? Where was I in all of this? What had I done for the day? What had excited me? Or challenged me?

Last night, as I shut our bedroom door behind my drunken husband, I wondered if maybe all we needed was a holiday. Time to reconnect as a family. Away from the demands of everyday life. I know most people would think living here is like one long holiday, but the stresses of daily life will catch you out no matter where you live. Especially if you are raising two-year-old toddlers.

The last few years had been stolen from us all, and maybe we needed to find a way to recoup some of that, to get back on track. Maybe we could even take a trip back to the UK? My kids deserved to know they had a family, and not just faces they saw once a month in a black box on the screen of a laptop. I found myself dreaming of *home* more, which was odd, because until now I had never considered anywhere home. Not really. But recently, I've felt a knot developing in my chest, an uncomfortable feeling, like I have forgotten something. Like when you are sure you need to rush back home just to check you switched the iron off. This emotion, burying itself deep in my soul, feels like something new, something I can't quite put my finger on, but each night when I lie awake watching the stars twinkling over the silhouettes of the mountains in my valley, I find myself dreaming of Scotland, longing for home.

As the road winds around the mountain towards the sea, I feel something in me lifting.

I hadn't been back to Scotland in years, and the complicated pandemic restrictions made the thought of taking a flight too stressful to consider, especially with new-born twins.

When I got the call about Maggie, I was beside myself with anger. Losing her was one thing, but not being there, not being able to say goodbye, on top of everything else, just felt cruel.

Maggie had been my foster mum for longer than I remember her not being. Any of the previous foster family memories were wiped out the day she took me into her arms and showed me what a real family should be. I'd

lived with her from the age of eight until I was eighteen, but she did more for me in those ten years than anyone would ever know.

Her funeral was the most painful and surreal experience I had ever endured. I sat on my sofa in Spain with the laptop propped up on the coffee table, watching as her closest friends sat six feet away from each other in a clinical room, unable to comfort each other. The room looked bare, lifeless and soulless. Under normal circumstances, that room would have been full of loved ones, friends, family; hell, the whole community would have shown up. Maggie always hoped that if the day ever came, a party would be thrown rather than a wake; she never was one for dour moments. But instead, she left this world in silence, most of us unable to even share our memories of her.

None of her 'kids' had found her passing easy; in fact, losing Maggie brought us all back together in a strange kind of way. A new 'family' WhatsApp group had been set up, and although they were never my family, and some were only my 'brothers and sisters' for a few weeks, we banded together in our collective grief, no one else truly understanding what it feels like to lose the only person in the world who actually chose to keep you around.

My first thoughts were always of Stephen and Abigail. Two of the fifteen of us on the group chat. Many kids came and went, but us three, we were 'lifers', or as Maggie often called us, her 'meant to be mines'. We never mentioned it to the others, but the three of us knew our bond was just a little more complicated than the rest. When the grief felt too heavy to handle alone, it was always one of them I reached out to.

I could lie to myself and say that the only thing that had kept us apart was the lockdowns, but in truth, Mark had done a great job of stopping me from coming back to visit family before I fell pregnant. He insisted that surely if they cared, they would visit us in Spain. *'Why wouldn't they want a free holiday to Spain? Why would we go back to the cold, grey UK if we can fly them to Spain?'* I had offered a few times of course, and offered to pay, but Stephen is a proud man and would never take money for flights, and Abbie was terrified of flying. Over the years, I'd resigned myself to the fact that unless I went to the UK, I wouldn't see them often.

As the road wound its way around the jagged rocks, the sea coming to view in the distance, my chest opened up and my heart made a choice, as if

just seeing the water cleared the fog from my brain. Maybe it was time to go back now, visit her grave, maybe stop in on some of my fellow ‘brothers and sisters’, reconnect, see if I could find parts of myself again. Who says a holiday has to be in the sun? A blustery walk up to Arthur’s Seat could blow away the cobwebs of any bad day when I was a teen; maybe that’s all I need right now?

As the road levels out and traffic begins to build, I can taste the salt in the air. I need the sea. I need to scream at the waves and have them carry my anger deep into the ocean where it wouldn’t hurt anyone. It was something Maggie taught me to do as a teenager. She could always tell when things were getting too much. She would pop me in the car and drive me to the coast. We would stand on the shore, even if it was blowing a gale and hailing sideways, and I would scream all my anger to the sea.

The waves welcome the fury, so she would say. They whip up the anger and suck it back down into the darkness.

As I make my way closer to the shore, my heart aches with the longing to see her stood at the shoreline once more. She was calling me home. Maybe I should be listening.

As I pull into the car park, I glance at the clock. It’s only eleven a.m., and the beach is still relatively quiet. I pull out my phone and scroll to the messages.

‘Me and the kids are at the beach. Come and meet us for lunch,’ I type. I don’t ask but instruct.

‘Great. I’ll bring the camera,’ he replies.

Clearly, he has no recollection of our fight last night and my hissing, *‘You only care about the kids when you can take perfect pictures to parade to your pals,’* before I kicked him out of the bedroom.

I don’t argue. I don’t care if he wants to stage some perfect family photoshoot on the beach, as long as he holds the kids for five minutes so I can get some time alone out on the water.

As I look back up, I catch sight of a couple of new mums pushing their prams along the *paseo*. Teetering on heels and flicking peroxide-bleached extensions over their shoulders. I wait a moment before heaving myself out

of the car, determined that today I will not be taking any judgement from the plastic-Barbie brigade. I might be lonely sometimes but being friends with that lot fills me with fear.

I smile as I think of Nicole. If I could convince Mark to take a short holiday back in Scotland, we could finally meet up again. The thought brings a warmth to my chest and a smile to my lips. I'm so grateful to have found her.

Over the last few months, she has given me advice I could follow, rather than just platitudes. Without Maggie around to ease my fears, it's Nicole I call when the kids hit their milestones or when I'm worrying over that 'rash' or 'cough'. During the lockdowns, she was my saviour.

Loneliness crept up on me. It didn't happen overnight, but steadily and slowly.

When restrictions lifted, Nicole was adamant I go and meet some of the mums on the coast, keen to have me understand that sitting in the house alone with two children wasn't healthy. So, I took her advice and went to a mothers' group.

I'd hoped that some of the mothers would be like Nicole. Strong-minded, supportive, caring. I'd met plenty of amazing businesswomen on the coast before I had the kids, so I was hopeful.

But these women, they were none of those things.

Being an expat is far from easy. You have to be tenacious; you have to be hungry for success and determined to work your arse off to get it. If you're lazy and you cut corners, you'll get your arse handed to you. If you work hard, paradise rewards you. Despite what we are told back home, there isn't a '*mañana mañana*' attitude here. It's such a horrible misconception. Not only are the Spaniards amongst the hardest-working people I know, the expats who live here in Spain are anything but lazy. It's a slower pace of life, sure – living here makes you want to *enjoy* life more – but that doesn't mean they work less.

Before I had kids, I admired the women I met, the ones who battled bureaucracy in a foreign country to make a better life for themselves. I was so hopeful that the mothers I would meet would be the same way inclined. I was so wrong. The 'yummy mummies' I met that day were a totally different breed to the expats I had met previously.

When I turned up to the luncheon, I expected to see women with babies

on their laps swapping tips on how to juggle work and play, talking about all the positives of raising children while living their best lives, and I did, only their best lives seemed to be more about sipping mojitos at chiringuitos and talking about where they got the best mani-pedi. Or better yet, which plastic surgeon did the best job of cleaning up ‘down there’ so their sex life didn’t suffer.

I lasted an hour before I made an excuse and left. I never went back.

As I watch the Barbie brigade trot into the distance now, I shake my head and feel relief that I didn’t have to interact with them. Nicole keeps telling me I should try again. I tried to laugh off the experience but in truth it made me feel so much more alone. She says I just need to find my tribe. I guess that’s the bit I’m finding hard; when you’ve never had a tribe, how do you know where to look for one?

I unload the car on autopilot, pulling each part of the buggy and cart apparatus out, stacking it all on the pavement as my children watch on in amusement at my puffing and panting. Taking twins to the beach is a military operation at best, and today I have so little patience for it.

Most days, like today, I don’t feel like I’m taking part in motherhood, more that I am the vehicle being used to move these children through their lives. I am the butler, the chef, the cleaner and personal assistant. I am everything but myself.

I set up the towels and parasol on the beach, lay out the toys and plastic pots filled with snacks, all lovingly prepared at home before I left. Fruit for Leo – all that lad wanted to eat was raspberries and watermelon. Sophia is more of a savoury girl; she sits munching on a slice of Spanish tortilla as I unpack the drinks, spotting my husband walking towards us just over her head.

‘*Hola, mi familia,*’ he shouts, holding his arms out wide and bending down, Leo waddling off in his direction for a big daddy bear hug. Sophia stays put, waving her tortilla in the air, much happier munching on her lunch rather than dealing with the heat of the Spanish sand.

‘Thank God you’re here,’ I say, trying to pin a smile to my face. ‘How long’ve you got?’

He looks up, his dark eyes shining in the midday sun, his perfectly coiffed locks hairsprayed in place.

‘About an hour. I’m taking a new couple into Gibraltar to look for a property so I need to leave enough time to battle the border.’

‘Right,’ I reply, trapping the tip of my tongue between my teeth and biting down hard, trying not to show my anger in front of the kids. ‘So that’ll be another late night then?’

I watch as he debates for just a split second with himself, deciding whether to fight or to relent.

‘Well, not as late as last night. I won’t be staying for drinks. I’ll be straight home. As long as the border is OK, I’ll be home before bedtime.’

‘Right,’ I reply, knowing that the likelihood of that is slim.

I stand, brushing the sand from my shorts, and pick up the keys to head back to the car. ‘I’m gonna go grab my paddleboard, get out there while I can. You can handle the monsters, right?’

I raise an eyebrow at him, but he knows this isn’t a question.

I watch him from the car as my paddleboard pumps up. I watch as he digs a hole in the sand, and then I laugh as he turns around to grab the bucket and Leo pushes all the sand back into the hole. Mark feigns surprise and shock, and Leo falls hard on his bum laughing. The sound of his giggles carries across the sand to my ears, and I smile.

I love them. I love them all. In moments like this, I know I do. It fills me with pride to see them together, to see Sophia looking up at her dad with something close to awe in her eyes. I love to see the way Leo needs to be climbing all over his father, all the time. It’s just that these moments never last.

The electric car pump buzzes to tell me the paddleboard is ready. I pick up its heft, and despite the pain of dragging its enormous weight down the sand, it’s a small price to pay for the freedom I’m about to feel.

As I near the kids, Mark spots me.

‘Lookin’ hot, Mrs Cooper. Just as well there are no surfers out there. I’d be worried they’d steal you away from me.’

I smile at him and wish he meant that. Or at least, I wish I believed him when he said it. Instead, it just feels insincere.

‘I’ll not be long,’ I say over my shoulder as I head towards freedom.

The further out I paddle, the further I want to go. The horizon line is beckoning me, and I wonder just how amazing it would feel to keep going.

To be surrounded by nothing but ocean. No one to hear my screams, no one to judge me or question me.

I'm almost at the buoy before I realise how fast I've been paddling. My arms ache and my legs shake. As I drop to my knees and let the forward momentum carry me a little further out, I raise my trembling hands to my face and brush away the strands escaping from my topknot. As I wipe my palm across my face, I mix the salt spray with my tears and feel Mother Nature camouflaging my pain.

I look back to the shore, my husband and kids mere stick figures in the distance, small smudges of people so far away they won't hear me.

I lie down, flat on my back, arms to my sides with palms facing the sun. I take a huge deep breath, filling my lungs and opening every inch of my chest. I close my eyes and feel the fierce October sun beating down on my eyelids as I open my mouth and let go of the loudest and most guttural scream I have ever voiced.

The pain, the loneliness, the trauma. Everything that has built up, all of it, I scream it into the sky. It doesn't return to me; instead it floats away. I open my eyes and wonder if the seagulls above me recognised the call of a desperate mother.

I sit up on the paddleboard, the waves rocking me from side to side, and notice how far I have paddled. It would take me a good twenty minutes to get back to shore against the current. It would take much more strength to get back to my family than it had to float away from them.

Before I embark on my homeward journey, I slip into the sea. I tuck my paddle into the bungee cord and make sure my leg strap is attached firmly. The relief of the cold water on my warm skin feels transformative. My shoulders straighten and I splash my face with water before taking a deep breath and submerging myself. As the cold water covers the top of my head, I open my mouth and scream my secret into the deep. No one will hear me, not here.

'I hate my life,' I scream. As I emerge from the watery confessional and heave myself back onto the paddleboard, I wonder if that's enough. I wonder if it's just enough to admit it to no one.

The journey back to shore is just as difficult as I imagined it would be. The Med can be unforgiving, and tides can turn on a penny. The waves are

increasing and as I get closer to shore, I notice a swarm of jellyfish blocking my way.

It's unusual for them to still be hanging around the shoreline at this time of year, but then nature took back control during Covid, and now things seem to be a little off kilter. The extra-long tentacles of the majestic animals float past my board, like a spectacular ribbon show, dancing through the water. Today, they seem to be gathering under my board, creating a carpet in the sea beneath me. I know they're not sentient but I can't shake the feeling that they seem to be following me back to shore.

Had the mother of the sea heard my cry? Was this her signal to me that I should remain with her a little longer? Something about slipping into her cold watery arms and just closing my eyes had felt like such a powerful draw for so long now.

'Mummy!!!!'

The sound of my baby's voice drags me from my black thoughts. From the darkness that wants to draw me down.

'Mummy.'

My beautiful wee boy is stood on the shoreline, waving manically at me. Mark is standing behind him with our daughter on his hip, arm hooked around his neck and smiling and waving towards me.

My husband's other arm is outstretched, phone in hand, filming me coming in. I adjust my stance, suddenly aware of the baby belly protruding from my tankini.

Mark is still filming as I struggle to elegantly heave my board behind me, tiptoeing over the painful stones that edge the shore. Leo is clapping his hands together like a performing seal, and Sophia is giggling as her dad plays with filters on the phone in front of her face.

'How was it?' Mark asks as he sits Sophia on a towel under the parasol.

'Restorative,' I reply. 'Can you do me a favour and take this back up to the car for me? I won't be able to carry it back with the kids.'

He looks between me and the board, now covered in seawater and sand.

'Um, no. I'll get filthy.' He shakes his head and smiles at me as if the idea is the most ridiculous thing he has ever heard.

'OK then. You stay with the kids while I take it back,' I say as I lug the

enormous object up off the sand again, but this time making it look more cumbersome than before.

‘Wouldn’t want you to break a nail, darlin’!’ I shoot at him over my shoulder.

‘Don’t be like that. I need to leave, like now. I’m already late.’

I stop and wait a beat before turning back to face him.

‘I couldn’t give a rat’s arse, Mark.’ He’s shocked. It’s written on him as he looks between the kids, checking to see if they heard their mother using inappropriate language.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Mark, they won’t have even heard me!’

‘What is wrong with you? You’re so angry these days,’ he shoots at me as he walks towards me.

‘Jesus, Mark. You have no fuckin’ idea. How many times do I need to scream at you that I’m not OK? How many times do I need to tell you I’m struggling before you hear me?’

‘Oh my God, you didn’t tell me you were struggling. You asked if I could help, and I told you I was running late. If it’s that big a deal, I’ll take it.’

He tried to grab the paddleboard from me, and I swing it in his direction.

‘Fuck off, Mark, I’m not talking about the bloody paddleboard. I am STRUGGLING. I am NOT OK. I need A BREAK. Which is really bloody hard to do when you are never bloody here!’

I storm off up the beach, knowing full well he can’t follow me. If he does the kids will be alone. I need a moment to compose myself. Having a full-on domestic on the beach in front of the kids won’t solve anything.

When I get back to my family, Mark has packed up all the picnic stuff.

‘I wasn’t ready to leave yet, Mark. I just wanted you to take the bloody board back,’ I hiss at him, trying to keep my voice as low as possible.

‘God, Nicole. I can’t do anything right these days. I’m working my arse off to make enough money, so you don’t have to go back to work. I work my arse off, come home and you scream at me. I take time off to have lunch with you, and you bugger off on your own then shout at me when you get back. I don’t get what the hell is going on with you.’ Mark tries to keep his cool, but as his anger grows, so too does his volume.

I’m about to tell him to lower his voice when I see sand flying through the air and turn just in time to see the wave of hot grit hit Sophia square in the face.

‘LEO!’ I shout, as I rush over to brush the sand from my daughter’s face. As I calm down both the kids, Mark sits pouting alone under the parasol, anxiously checking his watch and phone.

I turn away, I can’t bear to look at him. I’m so sick of having this conversation and I realise, in that moment, that it doesn’t matter how often I tell him that I don’t want him to earn all the money, it’s not going to change. It doesn’t matter how much I tell him I am lonely; he won’t spend more time with me.

If I want something to change, I’m going to have to change it myself.

I strap the kids in their car seats, and as I slip on my own seatbelt, I notice an update on my phone. Instagram. Our business account.

A short video. I see the silhouette of my son against the backdrop of the sea, his chunky little arms waving at me in the distance, paddling back through the swarms of danger hidden beneath, with my scream, where no one can see. All they can see is the excited movements of my son bouncing up and down to welcome me back, and my daughter’s voice off screen giggling and shouting *Mumma*.

The caption:

‘Life doesn’t get better than this. Lunchtimes in Spain mean a moment to enjoy the abundance that the coast offers. A quick paddleboard session and picnic on the beach is so much more fulfilling than a rushed sausage roll from Greggs in a motorway service station. This is life. This is living. #SpanishLiving

If you are considering making the move to our sunny shores, get in touch to learn more. @LivingTheDream #SpanishLife #LiveBetter

I stare at the video as it loops on my screen. He is so good at this. Taking small snippets of our life and making it look like the perfect poster for any family wanting to live in paradise. Scrolling through our business feed, I see that we look like that dream family. Cocktails on the beach at sundown, paddleboarding at lunch and watching the swooping eagles fly over ruins of old castles at the weekend. Who doesn’t want this life? Who doesn’t want paradise?

But paradise comes at a cost. That’s what the brochures don’t tell you.

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SEVEN

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

The soft hum of the car engine fills the air as we drive through the familiar streets of Broughty Ferry. Andy's hand rests casually on the gear stick, his eyes occasionally flicking to me, a gentle smile playing on his lips. I can feel the anticipation bubbling within me, a mixture of nerves and excitement as I sit in the passenger seat of our BMW 2 series, my husband's pride and joy, with my hands folded neatly in my lap. I feel like a teenager again, which given we have been married for almost twenty years, is a very odd feeling; but in truth, it has been so long since we have spent any time alone that I have found myself quite nervous in his company. In fact, the last time we had spent any time really focusing on us, rather than the life happening around us, was when we were in Spain for our 'make it or break it' babymoon.

We live in this weird alternative universe now where I can remember our time in Spain as if it was yesterday, but it feels like a lifetime ago. We live in a different world now, but then a lot can happen in three years.

As we drive past the empty, boarded-up shopfronts that once hosted businesses passed down through generations, I marvel at how much can be given and taken away in the blink of an eye.

Looking at my husband's side profile, I wonder where we will find ourselves in another three years. Will we have finally gotten over this rocky patch? Can we fix us, before we become yet another statistic, lost to history?

He catches my eyes on him, raising his hand from the gear stick he takes mine in his, lifting it to his lips to tenderly kiss my knuckles.

Victoria's right – I need to stop looking for problems. The look of longing and wanting that flashes across my husband's eyes should tell me all I need to know. If he were still doubting, he would tell me; and if he was going to leave, he'd have done it by now. I take a deep breath as the shiver from the

memory of his kiss travels from my chest to my toes, butterflies spinning in my stomach as he knits his fingers in with mine.

‘God, I feel like a teenager again,’ I chuckle, blushing at the thought of our first few dates when we were kids, when I would sit for hours hoping he would just hold my hand.

‘Well, you still look as good as you did back then – not so sure I can say the same.’ He releases his grip on my hand and pats his dad bod.

‘I still would,’ I say, as I wink at him.

‘I shall hold you to that, Mrs Murray.’ He winks back.

Tonight is not about rehashing the past, or going over who made what mistakes, but a chance to get excited about the future again. Tonight, I have decided to focus on Andy and I, not ‘mum and dad’ or even ‘husband and wife’, but just the two of us, leaving behind the chaos of everyday life, and remembering who we are and why we love each other. Even if it’s only for a few hours. It’s so easy to forget who you are when your days are spent putting others first. With Ben picking up every single school sick bug, and a toddler running me ragged, it’s hard to find time to put us first, but with the kids safe in my cousin’s hands for a few hours, I can put all my responsibilities to the side, even if only for a few hours.

My phone lights up, an Instagram notification. Victoria has liked my comment on her reel earlier. I flick over to the messages app, but she hasn’t responded to that yet. I watch the reel once more and take in the beauty of my friend, poised perfectly on her paddleboard, the sun spreading diamonds across the Mediterranean Sea as her children cheer her on from the shoreline. I’m so glad she took my advice to go out and find joy. Something about her had felt flat these last few calls. She hasn’t been her normal bouncy self. A day on the sea would have done her so much good. I scroll through the comments left by others and spot one from someone who I notice comments frequently: Stephen. I assume it’s one of her foster brothers because the love and pride with which he responds to each post is evident. Today, he remarks, *‘Well, it sure as hell beats battling the waves in Edinburgh!’*

He’s right of course. I wouldn’t wanna be out on the sea in Broughty Ferry today, the wind is howling and the waves threaten to take you under for good.

‘You cold?’ Andy asks me, rubbing at the goose bumps on my arm as we

sit waiting for the traffic lights to agree to our onward journey. He leans over and turns up the heat on the AC.

‘Nah, not really. I was just watching Victoria’s latest video. She’s been out on the sea today. The weather there looks amazing.’

He rolls his eyes at me, a normal response. I have dreamt of going back to Spain since the day we landed back here with Grace. If it were up to him, he would ban me talking about the place.

‘Of course it does. I’m not sure Mark or Victoria would ever post a picture of the rain. It’s not the story they’re painting!’ he spits back. Andy isn’t a fan of Mark. They tried to chat a few times over Zoom at the beginning, but Andy just found him far too ‘showboaty’.

‘Don’t be like that,’ I say, eager to defend my friend. ‘I think it’s lovely. They really do embrace the lifestyle out there.’

‘Well, of course they do. It’s easy to have a charmed life when you live in the sun and Daddy’s credit cards pay for everything.’

We’ve had this conversation so many times. Andy can’t wrap his head around Vic and I being so close. Our lives are so different, and with such a huge age gap I guess he can’t see what we have in common.

‘Well,’ I attempt to change the conversation, ‘I may not be in Spain enjoying the paddleboarding on the Med, but I find it kinda cool that here I am, layering up in a knee-length woollen dress to eat tapas with my husband, in cold, dreich Dundee. While she’s probably slipping on a floaty number to sip sundowners on the beach overlooking the African coastline.’

I snap a selfie and send it over with the note: *‘Off for tapas in Dundee. Not quite the same . . .’*

There’s no reply. Although I know she has read it. I hope this means she’s too busy enjoying her time with Mark.

Andy pulls into a parking spot, and I try to smooth out the wrinkles in my cardigan made by the seatbelt. It had taken me forty-five minutes and five manic changes to decide on the one outfit I knew would work. A favourite dress of his, one that always made him smile. It is tighter now around the bust. Growing another baby does strange things to the shape of your boobs, but it’s the pinching around the stomach I hadn’t expected. I knew I had put on a little extra weight during the pregnancy, and Covid hadn’t helped, but I’d been working hard the last few months to lose it again. It’s not so easy

when you're the other side of forty. Another thing they don't warn us 'geriatric mothers'.

As we make our way inside, the scent of sizzling spices transports me back to the shores of southern Spain, each smell bringing with it a different memory.

The maître d' leads us to a table at the back of the restaurant, slightly hidden from view, tucked away from the noise of the kitchen.

'Your table, as requested.' The beautiful young lady smiles at my husband. I know it's her job to be polite, but the familiarity with which she speaks to him prickles at my skin. As she leaves us, I tut at Andy.

'For God's sake, can't take you anywhere without women hitting on you.'

Andy rolls his eyes and with an exasperated sigh takes his seat opposite me. 'Haud your wheesht, woman. Christ, I'm old enough to be her da, and come on now, outta the twa of us, it's hardly likely to be me that strays.'

We used to joke like this all the time. It used to be funny. But now, when he says it, it stings. I don't know how to react anymore. It had been a joke, once, until it wasn't anymore.

I'm fiddling with the fork when his hand reaches across the table into my vision, taking my fingers in his.

'Sorry' he says, and I raise my eyes to look at the man I have hurt so much. 'I didn't mean it like that. Just . . . I only have eyes for you. Pretty sure you know that now. I mean, I could've left you, and taken up with any of these women you seem convinced would want me, but I haven't.' He cocks his head and smiles sweetly at me, and I wonder what I've done to deserve him being so nice. Most men wouldn't think twice about leaving their cheating wife behind. I'm not sure the guilt I feel for breaking his heart will ever leave me.

'Plus, she was only being nice because I called and begged this morning to make sure this was the table we were seated at.'

I look around; there are more than a few empty tables.

'It doesn't look busy?' I ask, confused as to why my husband's face is pinkening a little.

'Well, no,' he says, scratching at his chin, 'but it had to be this table and it had to be tonight.'

My pulse quickens. It can't be our anniversary; that was in August, so we've already had our awkward celebration this year. It's not a birthday . . .

‘Dinnae worry, I didn’t expect you to remember.’ A note of sadness pricks at the edge of his words. ‘Do you know it’s been exactly twenty-seven years since we went on our first proper date?’

Oh my God! I vaguely remember it being around this time of year, but . . .

‘You were wearing a tartan mini skirt and a tank top thing over a white blouse. You looked like that bird from *Clueless* but with dark hair. I was the envy of every boy that night.’

‘Oh Andy. My God, how do you even remember that?’

‘I didn’t,’ he admits, ‘but I was looking through old albums last week and found the picture we took outside. It had the date stamped on it. You’ve barely changed.’ He smiles and pulls the picture from his inside pocket. The edges of the photo are crinkled but our smiles are the only things my eyes focus on.

‘Oh my God, it was a pizza place back then.’ I look around, the interior long since changed but the shape of the room suddenly much more familiar. The memory hits me like a freight train. There’d been a booth here before. Red leather seats and a vinyl-topped table.

‘We sat at the back. I remember ’cause when I first came in, I thought you’d stood me up,’ he says. I can see the love he had for me then still in the eyes of the man sat opposite me all these years later. Older, wiser and maybe a little bruised, but still there.

Andy continues, ‘I was so nervous that night. Stu and Michelle were in here, sat at the front, and I didn’t want them to ruin our date, so I moved to the table at the back and convinced the waiter to let us have the booth, even though it was only the two of us.’

‘I didn’t know that!’ I reply. Funny how we are still learning things about each other now, all these years later.

‘Yep, had to promise her a big tip. Cost me a bucket that night,’ he says as he takes the picture back. ‘I told the woman on the phone the story and she promised to help me recreate the scene as best I could.’

I can’t think what to say. I just smile at him, reaching over the table to kiss him delicately on the cheek. These romantic moments were what I had missed. We had adored each other back then, neither of us afraid to show our soppy sides.

‘I figured it might be nice to go back to the beginning. You know?’

‘Far too easy to forget the small things, isn’t it? It’s lovely, Andy. Thank

you,' I say with a smile. The words feel insufficient and lacklustre compared to his gesture.

As we look through the menu, we giggle at the differences between the true 'authentic' Spanish tapas we'd indulged in during our babymoon and the British versions. The tension and nervousness I had felt during the car ride has been replaced with a familiar sense of belonging. I'd forgotten how easy it is to spend time with him and as I take in the detail of the smile on his face, I fall more in love with him, all over again.

'I'm sorry,' I suddenly blurt out. He's halfway through a sentence when I stop him in his tracks. 'I'm sorry I broke us. Sorry I put everything we had at risk. I never wanted to hurt you. Never.'

The moment the words escape me, I regret giving in to my thoughts. The mood changes instantly and I shift uncomfortably in the spotlight I have created for myself.

'I know,' Andy says, as he pushes the last of the *albondigas* around his plate, with no intention of eating it. 'At least, I think I believe you. I don't think you are a terrible person, Nicole.' I can see he has something to say. I can feel the words taking form in his mind, and I fiddle with the napkin on my lap as I wait to see if he will continue.

'It's the lies, Nic. That's the bit we need to get past. I need to believe you again. I need to feel like you're being honest with me. I need to trust you.'

He pauses, his lips slack and ready to spill more secrets, but as he rubs his chest with the palm of his hand, I wonder if it's the pain in his heart that is stopping him from fully letting go.

'I have to earn that trust back. I know that. I am trying.'

He nods, a small smile taking shape, but as he traps his tongue between his front teeth, I know something more is coming. It's his tell. It's been the same since we were teenagers.

'OK. I swear, Andy. I promise you I never so much as looked at another person in all those years. Never. I just . . . I fucked up. Once. And I'll spend the rest of my life regretting it.'

I can see the question in his eyes, hidden behind a wall of pain, but it's so obviously there.

'I believe you. I think. But . . .'

I know there's something lurking in the background. I wish I hadn't

opened Pandora's box. As usual, when things are going well, I have to ruin it. Have to sabotage. Have to blow it all apart. When will I learn?

'Ask,' I say, knowing I've already gone too far, so I may as well face the truth. 'Ask whatever you need to know. Get it out and we can start again. Properly.'

I look around. These walls heard when my heart first beat for him, and now they witness me taking a breath and holding it deep as I pray for my heart not to break.

'OK,' he starts. Putting the fork down on the side of the plate, he looks me in the eye and takes a deep breath. I'm not ready for what he is about to ask. Even though I have no idea what it is, I know in my soul that if I don't have the right answer, it could be the end of us.

'Nicole.' His voice soft but tinged with uncertainty. 'Do you really believe that Grace is mine?'

My heart stops. I wait a beat, the weight of his words hanging heavy in the air between us. I hate that Kez was right but hate even more that I hadn't heeded her warning. I have no idea what to say. I feel the colour draining from my cheeks as I search for the right words, the truth burning like a fire in my chest.

'Yes, Andy,' I reply, my voice steady despite the turmoil raging within me. 'I am as sure today as I was the day we gave birth, that Grace is yours. Why on earth are you asking this now?'

'Was there ever a time where you weren't sure?' He asks this question with his eyes closed and I struggle to find air to breathe before I answer again.

'Yes,' I say, terrified that my honesty will blow back in my face. 'Yes, at first, I was worried. Of course. But the dates never matched up, Andy. We went over the calendar so many times. The dates prove it. And we used . . .'

I stopped the sentence there. He knew the rest. I had told him everything back then; we don't need to rehash the past.

'OK, well, like I said,' he says, as he picks up his fork and plays with the damn meatball once more, 'as long as there are no lies between us anymore, we can move forward.'

He's not looking at me. What more can I say?

'But why are you asking? After all this time? She's almost three now,

Andy. She loves the bones of you, and she acts just like you. How can you think for a moment that she's not yours?'

His eyes find mine at the very moment I lose all self-control and tears release.

Just as he opens his mouth to speak, my phone buzzes next to me before bursting into loud song.

'Nic, I'm so sorry.' Kerri-Ann's voice is urgent; it's not like her to panic. 'I think you guys need to come home.'

'What's wrong?' Panic rises in my chest. I call over the waitress and silently ask for the bill as I press Kerri-Ann for more details.

'What do you mean? He was fine when we left?' I ask, trying to motion to Andy to grab my jacket as I stand from the table and collect my bag.

'Hang on, let me get out of here. I can't hear you properly,' I say as I mute the call. 'Can you pay? Kez says she can't get Ben's temperature down and he's acting strange.'

Andy heads off to pay the bill as I rush out of the restaurant, pulling on my jacket as I race out the door.

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EIGHT

Victoria

Spain – October 2022

He promised he wouldn't be late tonight. I've messaged him four times since dinnertime, and I know he has read them. I can see the blue ticks.

I'd sat staring at my WhatsApp screen as I fed the kids. I watched him come online and then go offline again without replying. Whoever he was talking to was clearly more entertaining than his wife, the one sat at home bringing up his children.

The last message I sent him was *'Home by bedtime, eh?'* just after I closed the bedroom door on our sleeping babies. I had even kept them up an extra hour in the hopes that he would follow through with his promise. I should have known better; his promises mean nothing these days.

Although the sun had set a couple of hours ago, the residual heat from the terracotta tiles warms my toes as I take my heavy knit blanket and large glass of Rioja outside to sip by the pool. Balancing the laptop on my knees, I scroll through flight options.

It wasn't the argument on the beach that pushed me over the edge, it was watching the video he'd uploaded of me out at sea. Reading the comments solidified my decision. Everyone had been fooled by his show, and as I scream at him that I'm struggling, he continues to pretend that our life is picture-perfect. I can't keep pretending. I'm exhausted.

Nicole's right – this is the 'perfect life'.

But I hate it.

I pick up my phone and scroll to the last message I received from my foster brother Stephen. My heart jumps as I read our last proper conversation, an emotionally charged set of messages around the time Maggie died. Had it really been that long since we talked?

'Hey Ste, I am so sorry I haven't been in touch. It's been – well – I don't need to tell you. You know what it's like when kids suck up all your time,' I type, my fingers finding the words before my brain even knows what is going on. *'I want to pop back home, bring the kids and*

see family. And visit Maggie's grave. Don't suppose you have space to put me and the kids up for a few days? Flights are astronomical!'

I hit send before I have a chance to second-guess myself. I'd made a decision; now it's time to action it.

I wasn't expecting to hear back immediately, but the rolling dots appear before I even close the app.

'Spooky. Me and Abbie were just talking about you.'

'All good I hope?' I reply.

'We haven't seen you enough recently to say anything bad! Would love to have you at the house, but it's a bit of a crush here and Mallory isn't very well. But Maggie's house is sittin' empty? You guys are welcome to stay there. It's just as much yours now.'

I hadn't considered that going home would mean actually *going home* and for a moment I feel uneasy about being in Maggie's house without her.

As the messages ping between us and plans are made, I feel lighter and even excited for the first time in what feels like forever.

I'm going home.

I swirl the dark liquid around my crystal wine glass and watch the thick residue slide back down the sides. I remind myself that this is my chance to see Nicole again too. Finally, a chance for us to catch up over a bottle of wine that we can share in person.

The idea of being able to embrace her lifts my spirits. The decision to fly home feels like an important one, and although Maggie won't be there to listen to my worries, maybe being in the same room as my friend will allow me to open up properly.

I shoot off a message: *'Don't fill up on shite tapas in Dundee. I'll bring the real thing with me! Poppin' back to Edinburgh for a few days . . . let's do our next wine catch-up in person – I'll bring the Manchego.'*

Knowing she is out to dinner with Andy, I don't expect a reply, but I feel giddy at the prospect, and any hesitance I had about my plan quickly floated out towards the mountains.

The Malaga to Edinburgh flight seems like the easiest option, and although the process of getting back will be a faff, I don't care. I read the restrictions and 'Covid passport' process and decide it's totally worth the hassle.

My phone pings and then again and again. As I open the conversation

with Stephen, my heart leaps. I stare at the sepia-toned pictures shining back at me. Memories, frozen in time, smiles, caught and kept safe for days like these, when I need them the most.

The slightly gawky grin of an awkward twenty-something version of myself beams back at me. I'm stood next to a fresh-faced Stephen, the version of him before he married Mal. Next to him is a teeny-teenage Abigail, her smile so wide I can hear the laughter coming at me through the gaps of space and time. As too does the luminous smile of my foster mum, Maggie. Her presence seems to lift from the image on the phone. I remember this picture well, mostly because it is the last picture we took all together. It had been almost impossible to get us all in the same place again after that.

I flick through the other pictures, each one bringing back another visceral memory, each one pulling at the corners of my breaking heart. The caption on the final picture, one of Maggie bent double with laughter, reads: *'She was always happier when you were smiling. Is it time to find the laughter again?'*

Stephen got it. I didn't even need to explain why I was coming home. He just knows.

'I'm not sure I know how to laugh anymore,' I type back, as heavy teardrops fall onto the face of my phone, obscuring the image.

'Trust me, you do. You just need reminding. xx'

It was all I needed to hear for me to finally hit the fuck-it button.

'Sod it,' I say out loud. To no one, to the air, to the sky, to the mountains that I know won't hold my secret.

I put my glass of wine down and stand up, the alcohol I have consumed momentarily catching up with me as my head swims. I pad my way into the living room, collecting my bag from the sofa and swinging it back and forth, the alcohol clearly filling me with dopamine.

I hum the tune to 'Let Her Go' by Passenger, the sentiment of the emotions striking a note in my mind as I reach for my phone on the table and search for the song, connecting it to the outdoor speakers and letting the sound of the lyrics fill my terrace.

I pop the bank card out of my wallet, our joint account, and sing along as the comparison site accepts my details and books my flight home.

As the email pops up on my phone with the confirmation, so too does a

message from my husband.

'Vic, did you just use the joint credit card? To book flights somewhere?? Just got a notification from Viagogo. Has someone stolen your card?'

I laugh at the absurdity of his question.

'No. Not stolen. I've just booked flights.'

'What for?'

'For me. Day after tomorrow. I'm going to Scotland.'

'What? What for? I can't leave, Vic. I have clients.'

'You're not invited. I'm going alone. I told you I needed a break. So, I'm taking one.'

I hit repeat on the song and turn it up a little louder. I can imagine him now hightailing it home in wild panic, but I'm done talking. I'm done waiting. I'm done begging.

I'm going home.

And he's not coming with me.

Ding ding ding ding.

My phone is blowing up; I catch a glimpse at the first two notifications.

'What do you mean alone? Are you taking the kids?'

Of course I am, but he doesn't need to know that yet.

'Answer me. I'm coming home. Be an hour.'

I laugh, the alcohol making me feel brave. I switch off my phone, pick up my glass of wine and skip back inside.

I collect the spare duvet and pillow from our wardrobe and go back downstairs to leave them on the sofa. I'm not in the mood to talk tonight. I gave him so many chances, and today just tipped me over the edge. I don't have the patience or energy to fight. For the first time, I don't feel the need to justify any of this to him. I warned him, he refused to listen, but it's time I started listening to myself.

I pop my head around the door to check on my sleeping babies. Sophia has her arms up above her head again, legs spread and taking up every inch of her toddler bed; Leo is curled in a ball around his favourite teddy. Sleeping soundly.

I go back up into the bedroom and lock our door before heading into the en-suite bathroom with my glass of wine to run the bath.

The excitement in me is building and mixing with the heady feeling of

wine running through me. As the steam fills the room I notice my reflection, slightly obscured by fog, and as it clears, I see a smile.

I search for the 'group chat' I have with the other foster kids. There's only seven of us who keep in regular contact, and only four of them still live in Edinburgh, but as I drop the news that I am 'coming home', the chat blows up. I let them know that Stephen has offered me Maggie's house and let them know I hope to see as many of them as possible.

Abigail, the youngest of us all, offers to go and 'open up the house' and air it out for us, and announces she will be staying a few nights too. She'll be travelling up from London and is 'throwing a sickie' so she can see us.

Abbie was the only one of us still living with Maggie when the virus took her. She'd been doing her training in a care home at the time and had been asymptomatic when she brought the devil into the house with her. The guilt over passing it on to Maggie had hit her hard, and she moved down to London not long after the funeral, running from the grief rather than dealing with it. The fact that she was travelling up to see me meant the world.

As I watch the messages fly between my 'family' members, the excitement in me grows.

'Are you bringing the kids?' Abbie asks.

'Of course she is, Abs, or I wouldn't have offered her the house. She's not welcome unless she brings the bairns lol,' Stephen replies before I can.

A rush of excited memes from Abbie flood the chat in response.

'Mallory can't wait to meet them,' adds Stephen.

Stephen and his wife Mallory are the 'perfect family', just like the ones you see pictured in the expensive catalogues. It didn't matter if it was grey and raining in Edinburgh, Stephen would always find some fun way to embrace the weather, like covering the kids in mud and jumping in puddles. They make parenting look fun, easy, effortless. I aspire to be the kind of mother Mallory is. Her Facebook updates always feel so cheery and positive, never a hair out of place. I don't know how she does it. She will post a picture of their family breakfast table, fresh fruit and home-made pancakes adorning her gingham tablecloth in their rustic shabby-chic farmhouse. An image like that would take me hours to set up, and even then, I am sure people can see the stress in my eyes. I'm a fraud; she's the real McCoy.

'Beware, Mal may want to steal them for a day to play with their cousins! Could they handle a day on the farm?'

That stops me in my tracks. I'd never really considered the other siblings kids' as being 'cousins'. I know they aren't by blood, and not by any legal definition, but they were as close to cousins as many of our kids would ever have.

'She can take them as long as she likes. (I'll be at a spa for the day. I don't "do" wellies!)' I chuckle as I reply. *'My animals would feel right at home on a farm, I'm sure! And I could do with the break. I'm so tired of being a solo parent.'*

The chat grounds to a halt for a moment, and it wasn't until no one replied for a beat that I realised what I'd said.

Abigail was the first to broach the subject.

'I'm so sorry, Vic. I didn't know you and Mark had split. Are you OK?'

As I am trying to figure out how to roll back, Stephen chips in.

'Wait, I didn't know either, Vic. Jesus – you must be a wreck.'

My fingers are hovering over the buttons, because in truth, I never meant that we had split and didn't intend it to read that way, but something in me was struggling to deny it.

'No no no,' I send. *'We haven't split. God, I didn't mean it like that. He's just been super busy with work.'*

'So how long will you stay?' asks Marie, one of the quieter 'siblings'.

'Not sure – a week, maybe two. I'm in no rush to get back.'

The conversation grinds to a halt. In typical British style, this was a little too much 'emotion' for us all to deal with over text.

'Well, just get your backside over here and we'll soon have you back to your bubbly self!' says Stephen. He could always be relied on to shut down awkward conversations, ever the consummate diplomat of the family.

I place my phone on the edge of the sink as I slip into the luxuriously soft bubbles and steaming hot water. I throw open the panoramic window next to the bath and stare out at the sparkling stars, the moon shining on the sea far off in the distance.

I've made it halfway through my favourite chill playlist when I hear the garage door open and I realise I'm 'pruning' in the bath. I top up the hot water and turn up the music. I don't intend to get out, and I'm certainly in no mood to talk.

I wait to hear him tentatively try the bedroom handle, followed by much huffing and puffing as I ignore the rapid knocking. It only takes a few minutes before he gets bored and messages me.

'Come on, Nic, I'm not gonna shout at the bedroom door – I'll wake the kids. Let me in.'

'That's never bothered you before,' I reply. *'The duvet is on the sofa. We can talk tomorrow. Your "cold" dinner is in the fridge.'*

He doesn't message again. As I slip on my comfy PJ's and open the bedroom window wide, I feel happier than I have in weeks. I have something to look forward to. As I slip between the sheets and feel the October breeze floating through my room, I try to soak it all in. It'll be a different kind of cold back home, the kind that penetrates your bones, but a part of me is craving that. To feel something, anything, other than this numbness.

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NINE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

The drive home feels longer than usual, each passing mile weighed down by the heavy silence that hangs between us. With each traffic light that turns red, my pulse races.

‘I’m going as fast as I can, Nic. Don’t worry, it’s just another chest infection. Worst case, you know if it’s too bad, Kez will call an ambulance.’

But that’s exactly what is worrying me. I dare not say the words out loud for fear of bringing them to life, but it must be bad, because even if Kez is still angry with me, she wouldn’t interrupt a date unless she really felt she needed to. She knows just how rare it is for us to spend time alone.

My mind is consumed with fear. I can see Ben’s pale face and fevered brow haunting my thoughts like a relentless spectre. Why did I leave him? I knew he wasn’t right when we walked out the door. Quiet and lethargic. His temperature was fine, but a mother knows. I knew something was wrong and I selfishly chose to leave.

‘It’s my fault,’ I say, more to myself than Andy, but the words slip into the air regardless.

‘Don’t be daft. He’s got a virus. All kids get them, and it’s not like we went far, babe. We went to town for dinner. Relax.’

But that’s not what I mean. Ever since having the affair, I’d felt like I was being punished. Life was so much happier in the ‘before’. Now, in the aftermath, every area of my life felt like it was under attack. Grace’s birth should have been plain sailing; instead, I found myself in premature labour, and poor Andy nearly lost us both. If that wasn’t enough, we got through the stress of the paperwork to bring our daughter home, and walked straight into a war zone. I felt like that one choice, that one moment in my life when I chose the wrong path, had suddenly set off a chain of dominos. One terrible tumble after another. I had everything in life I could have wanted: a great family, a great kid, future dreams and a husband I adored. Then, I

fucked up; and this is my punishment. I get to live the rest of my life wondering what the next painful test will be.

As we pull into the driveway, Andy and I exchange a glance, a silent understanding passing between us like a fleeting whisper in the wind. There were more words to be said, but now was not the time.

We make our way inside, the warmth of the familiar surroundings offering little comfort as we hear the desperate sobbing of our young son coming from the living room.

The sound of Ben's raspy cough in between sobs echoes through the house and greets us at the door. Kerri-Ann hovers over him, crouched on the sofa holding a damp cloth to his forehead.

'I'm so sorry. You know I wouldn't have called if I didn't think . . .' Kerri-Ann's face is pained as she looks to Andy, holding out the cloth for him to take as he replaces her by Ben's side.

'Don't be daft,' Andy replies as he strokes the damp hair from the forehead of our boy.

'You did the right thing. What's his temperature?' I ask as I pick up the thermometer from the table.

'I took it just after I hung up with you. It was still sitting at thirty-nine. I know that's not crazy, but he's had Calpol, and it's not shifting, and when he started going on about not being "enough of a lion" I started to worry.'

Andy looks towards me; a quizzing look in his eyes 'Lion?' he asks me.

'Yeah, he was on about that the other night too. Something about not being brave enough. I thought it was from a TV show he was watching or something. I just assumed he was dreaming.'

The thermometer beeps and, taking it from his poorly boy, Andy reads me the figures. 'It's 39.8,' he says.

'OK, so it was 39.6 when I called you,' says Kerri-Ann, her panic evident now.

'Don't worry, he's been crying a lot too,' Andy says, wiping the tears from his son's puffy cheeks 'That can raise the temperature.'

I take my phone from my bag and dial 111.

I relay Ben's symptoms to the call handler on the other end of the line. Their reassurances do little to ease my fears.

'They said unless he loses consciousness or his temperature reaches

critical levels, we should try to cool him down,' I murmur, my voice hollow with exhaustion as I hang up the phone.

'I miss the days when we could just call up Dr Jameson and ask him to pop round,' Andy says.

'My God, Andy, that was decades ago. I can't get a doctor's appointment for love nor money these days, and even when I do, it's inevitably a locum that sees us.'

This is a bugbear for my husband. The loss of community has always bothered him. We both grew up in a street where doors were left unlocked, and you ate your dinner on the stoop with mates while your mum chatted over the fence.

'I'll take him up and give him a cool bath. See if I can get his temp down a little. Kez, bring me up a brew, will ya?'

With that, he lifts Ben from the sofa with ease and carries him delicately up the stairs, Ben nuzzling his head into the crook of his dad's arm as he does.

With a heavy heart, I follow Kerri-Ann into the kitchen as she flicks on the kettle and moves deftly around our cupboards as if she lives here. I am glad of it though; I can't focus on anything right now.

'Was it a nice night though, before I ruined it?' Kerri-Ann ventures tentatively, her voice soft with empathy. 'You both looked like excited teenagers when you left.'

I nod, a bittersweet smile tugging at the corners of my lips. 'It was,' I admit.

I'm reluctant to tell her about Andy's question, hoping if I don't mention it, the whole thing will just disappear. He had asked; I had answered. If no one spoke of it again, maybe that would be it.

But Kerri-Ann knows me too well. I can feel her eyes boring into me.

'Has something happened?' she asks, and I think about lying.

'No. Not as such. Our conversation got cut a little short,' I say, hoping that's enough to satisfy her curiosity.

It's not.

'Right, and what conversation was that?' she continues, looking over her shoulder in case Andy reappears.

'Kez. I know you mean well, but this isn't a conversation I want to have with you. This is between me and Andy.'

I don't want to fight with her, and it's rare that she steps over the line, but this feels like an intrusion.

'Nic. I'm not judging you, but you can't ignore this anymore, and if Andy is talking to Brian about it, maybe you need to talk about it too.'

The kettle boils and clicks off, and I'm grateful that the distraction pulls her gaze from me. She might not feel like she's judging me, but I feel it keenly anyway. I feel the weight of it on my shoulders, on my chest, on my lungs.

'Kez. For the last three years, I have been treading on eggshells. Waiting patiently for the day he won't recoil under my touch. Waiting for him to look at me like he loves me again, rather than looking at me like I just broke his heart. This last few weeks, Kez, we have felt closer to "us" again. Finally.'

As she stirs the milk into the mug, she turns to look at me.

'Are you getting it all back?' she asks, raising her eyebrow.

I feel my cheeks flame. 'Yeah. Mostly. It's taken us so long to get back here. I can't risk anything throwing us off course.'

Our physical relationship had taken a real beating. The passion on our babymoon was a false start. I assumed it would fix us, and it did while we were there, but it's easy to play a role when you're away from home. Easier to pretend. We ignored the elephant in the Jacuzzi with us. We can pretend that having a new-born baby in the house, and then battling the stresses of Covid were what destroyed our intimacy, but it's not true. I destroyed that.

'Nic, I know you think if you just ignore this, it will go away. I get it. But that secret, that doubt, it lives in the house with you both. It will grow daily, and you can't stop it. Wouldn't it be better to rip the plaster off now? Maybe if *you* suggest a test, it will put his mind at ease?'

I'm losing my patience now. She just doesn't get it. I have fought for three years to keep him here. I can't risk losing him now.

My silence is not helping her curiosity. I see her studying my face.

'Nic, is there any part of you that's worried?' she asks.

'Of course there is, Kez. I know we did the maths, I know that Max and I used protection, but I understand why he's worried.'

'Do you?' she prods. Digging deeper, unpicking a wound I thought I had hidden.

'For fuck's sake, Kez. Of course I worry. I worry each time I see him

staring at her, searching to see himself in her. I know she doesn't look like Ben, and the comments from my brothers about her looking like the milkman never bloody help. I was so sure. I am sure. But if there is even the slightest tiny possibility, I'm not sure I even want to know.'

I can hear his footsteps padding across the landing upstairs. My heart races and I'm desperate for the conversation to end in case he hears us. Kez can see my panic.

'I know,' she says, patting my crossed arms. 'But Nic, he deserves to know one way or the other. You know he does.'

I hate that she's right. It almost doesn't matter if I'm sure. If there is any part of him that doubts, any part at all, I owe it to him. I'm just not ready.

'I can't . . .' I whisper hoarsely, the words catching in my throat like thorns. I stare at the dark liquid in the mug, still spinning, but slowly, and feel myself sinking down into the vortex it's creating.

'I'm gonna take this up to him,' Kez says, leaving me in the kitchen with my own thoughts.

I slump against the refrigerator door, the weight of the evening crushing the air from my chest.

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TEN

Victoria

Spain – October 2022

I wake up with a chill across my bare shoulders, the breeze from the open window gently waking me from my slumber. I prop myself up against the headboard and glance at the time. Ten a.m. – I hadn't slept this late since before I had the twins.

I can hear the clattering of plates downstairs, and the faint giggles of my kids. I lift the duvet and swing my feet out of bed, the pads of my toes curling as they hit the cold marble floor. The empty bottle of wine sits on the edge of my bathroom unit, a ring of red staining the white porcelain beneath, my empty glass a reminder of my anger and petulance last night. As I look into the mirror, I see the regret all over my face, deep sunken eyes rimmed with hangover.

All I want to do is pick up the phone and cry down the line to Maggie. I resent the world for taking my guiding light from me when I need her the most.

Hangovers have a way of intensifying all emotions, but the grief today feels physical; her absence feels like a gaping wound at the centre of my soul.

I take one of my bamboo face pads and slather my face with cleanser, wiping away the remnants of last night's anger and this morning's regret. With the bravery of Rioja no longer coursing around my bloodstream, all I feel is guilt seeping out of my pores and slipping down the exhausted face that returns my gaze.

I have booked a flight.

To Scotland.

On my own with two kids under three. What on earth was I thinking?

I spritz toner across my face, the cold spray waking up the cells of my skin.

Time to face the music.

As I tiptoe down the stairs of our home, I listen to the chatter between my

husband and our kids. He's singing along with a Spanish cartoon. I can hear Leo trying hard to make noises that resemble the words coming through the speakers, and Mark overexaggerating the pronunciation.

This is what I'd imagined. This is what I always thought family would look like. But this is what he does. When I tell him I need help, he pulls out the 'Disney dad' routine. It never lasts.

As I reach the bottom of the staircase, Sophia spots me and shouts out. The lounge table has been shifted and Mark has put down a massive picnic rug on the floor. Toys sprinkle the floor as Sophia lines up teddy bears around a fake firepit, plastic plates and wooden fruit and veg piled high ready to be distributed.

I sit behind her, pulling her into my lap and kissing the crook of her neck. It doesn't matter how old they get, that new-born smell still remains. As if a reminder to my soul that she's mine. Part of me. She giggles at the tickling of my breath on her skin and throws her hands up, misjudging distance and speed and hitting me square in the forehead with the sharp end of a wooden banana.

'Shhhhh—' The word almost escapes my lips before I have the ability to stop it, but I catch it just in time. Sophia spins her head around to look at me, concern in her eyes.

'Sorry, sweetie, it's OK. Accident. Not your fault.'

She climbs down from my lap and rests her palm on my forehead. 'Ouch, Mummy.'

'Yes, darling. Ouch. But it's OK.'

Then, without taking a beat, she moves her hand to my chest. 'Ouch, Mummy,' she says, her hand directly over my heart space.

Out of the mouths of babes.

'Here you go.' I hear his voice before I open my eyes and see the cup of coffee held out in front of me. 'I assume you need this?'

He isn't trying to be mean; in fact, his voice is full of concern, maybe a touch of trepidation too, but the judgement within his words makes my skin prickle.

'Thank you,' I reply, trying to keep my tone neutral.

He walks back into the kitchen and returns with Leo on his hip.

'Why don't I stick a movie on for these rascals, and we can chat? On the terrace maybe?' says my husband while tickling his son's belly and making

him throw himself back in laughter. They look so cute together, like the pictures you see posed in frames in the shops. His features matching his dad's, his smile almost as big and just as beautiful. They fit together like puzzle pieces.

'Poc-yo, Daddy.' He beams as I rub my temples. The headache I knew would rear its ugly head at some point is starting to pinch at the back of my eye.

'Not *more Pocoyo*? Aren't you bored of Spanish cartoons? Why don't we put Nemo on?' With the ease of an expert weightlifter, he reaches down and scoops up Sophia in his other arm, flying them through the air, one under each arm as they giggle in tandem before he plops them on the sofa. As Mark fusses with the blankets and TV remote, I make my hasty escape into the fresh air.

It's cooler today, a breeze moving white clouds across the sky, chasing each other's tails as they head towards the coast. *Emotions are like clouds. Let them drift in, and they can also drift back out just as quickly.* I wonder how long a cloud must linger in the sky before the threat of rain dissipates and a storm rolls in.

The goats that live on the opposite mountainside are out grazing, the bells creating a soundtrack to the day, with the palm trees swaying softly in the autumn breeze. I close my eyes and drink it all in. Filling my soul with the love that this country has always offered me. It's not that I hate it here. I don't. I love it. I just hate *me* here right now.

I feel his arms as he slips them around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder before whispering into my ear, 'I'm sorry.'

I'm not sure he knows what he is saying sorry for. The sigh I let out feels like it comes from somewhere so deep I don't have access to it alone. It's somewhere only he can unlock.

'I just . . .' I start, not sure where my thoughts are going, but knowing I need to say something to fill the space between us. 'I'm exhausted, Mark. I don't know who I am anymore.'

'You are Victoria Cooper. Kick-ass mum, wife, and businesswoman.'

I know he means well, but the description makes my heart hurt.

'I don't feel kick-ass, Mark. I feel like I'm failing at everything. I'm a terrible mother, an even worse wife and as for a businesswoman, I don't

remember the last time I used my brain for something other than figuring out how to put together a Kinder Surprise toy!’

My voice is already cracking with tears. I can feel them gaining power and strength at the base of my chest. I take a deep breath, hoping the weight of the air will keep them from rising any further.

‘Let’s sit down,’ Mark says as he takes my waist and turns me towards the rattan couch.

He has brought out my heavy blanket, and there is a pot of fresh coffee sat on the table. I don’t remember the last time he did something like this.

I sit cross-legged on the sofa and cover myself with the blanket, picking at the red threads that trace their way through the mustard knit.

‘Talk to me, Vic. What the hell is going on with you?’

Jesus Christ, and it started so well.

‘What the HELL is wrong with me? Really?’ I know it’s not exactly what he said, but my brain reacts before I can think straight and I choose defence. Well, I don’t so much choose it, it chose me.

‘OK,’ Mark replies, taking a deep breath and shaking his head. ‘Let me try that again. What is it that’s bothering you?’

My husband has watched far too many episodes of *Couples Therapy*, and is doing all he can to stay calm, and get to the ‘bottom’ of things, but the truth is, it doesn’t matter how many times I tell him, or in what language I choose to tell him, he won’t listen because he doesn’t want to. He has no desire to change, to adapt. He wants his life the way he wants it, and right now, I’m not sure I want my life to play out the same way. He’s unwilling to compromise, so it’s up to me to make a choice, and I can’t do that sat in front of him.

‘I just need to get away for a bit, Mark.’

‘What do you mean by a bit? And what do you mean by “get away”. From who? From the kids?’

The tension pulses from behind my eye and wraps itself around my temples. I bite back the words I know I shouldn’t spit at him and instead try to find a new way to explain.

‘This isn’t how I imagined my life panning out, Mark. This isn’t what I thought parenthood would be. I’ve lost myself along the way and I need to find me, get some space and figure out what kind of parent I want to be.’

He laughs. Out loud. His head rolls back, feet lifting from the floor – a

proper belly laugh.

I stand, throwing the blanket to the side. 'If you are not going to take me seriously, why bloody ask?' I shout, the volume of my voice cutting through his laughter.

'Sorry.' He stops laughing. 'It's just, you already are a parent. You don't get to just wake up one day and decide to take off to "find yourself". You're a mum. You have kids to raise. And this life really isn't that bad. You're not special, love, we're both exhausted. Why don't I book you into that spa on the coast for a day? Or we could look at a family holiday to Ibiza or something.'

How many times do I need to tell him I am not happy before he understands that this can't be fixed with a spa circuit?

'I mean Jesus, Vic. I thought you were leaving us when you sent that message last night. Why don't I see if we can change those flights, book us a family holiday for the New Year maybe?'

The worry that had been on his face not ten minutes ago has been washed away, replaced with a smug relief.

'Mark,' I say, and pause, waiting for him to look up at me.

He doesn't. He doesn't even respond.

'Mark!' I raise my voice as my blood pressure does the same.

Still nothing.

'This. This is the problem, Mark. Keep acting like this, Mark, and our marriage will most certainly be heading that way.'

His lips thin as he clenches his jaw and takes a deep breath in through his nose. He slowly raises his eyes to look at me, but the love that was there a moment ago has been replaced, and I've seen this look before. I don't like it, and I know immediately where the conversation is about to go.

'Don't you dare threaten me. You are not about to abandon our family just because you're too tired. You live a charmed life. I give you everything you need and provide this family with only the very best. You'd be lost without me.'

This isn't the first time he's said it, but it is the first time those words hit the air without being coated in six pints of beer. He is sober, stone-cold sober and deadly serious.

I take a sip of my coffee and ready my nerves. I've booked the flights so either way I know I have an escape.

‘And therein lies the problem, Mark. Exactly that. You think I have a charmed life, but this isn’t the life I want. I don’t want or need you to provide a roof over our heads. We’re supposed to be equals in this marriage. I’m not “abandoning” my family; I’m taking the kids with me. They are not the problem, we are. You are.’

He tries to interrupt me, but I close my eyes and hold up my hands. I know how much he hates being silenced, but I take the risk anyway.

‘No, Mark, let me finish,’ I continue, breathing in deep before I start again. ‘I don’t need you to provide me with a charmed life. We, together, are supposed to provide a good life for our children. I never wanted to be the “staff” left at home looking after the kids. I wanted a partner who’d be a role model for our kids. I can handle being tired, I can handle being exhausted, but I refuse to live my life lonely.’

His cheeks are flushing and I know what’s coming. I can feel it before I see it.

‘How bloody dare you,’ he spits at me. ‘You ungrateful cow. I take care of the business and you take care of the kids. That’s how this family shit works. That’s how parenting works. I know you don’t exactly know what it looks like to have a *normal* family, but this is a *normal* family, so get with the programme.’

Right then, when he brings my family into it, is when I know I’ve made the right decision.

‘No, you’re right. I don’t know what a normal family looks like. I don’t have a blueprint to work from. But I know what I want for my kids. That dad that I saw this morning, the one who had them playing on the carpet with toys, watching cartoons with them, and yes even being the one to help with teaching them right from wrong. That’s the father I want for my children.’

‘Exactly,’ he responds, puffing his chest up as if he has won the argument.

‘No,’ I say firmly and watch as his face drops. ‘No, Mark. I want that dad all the time, and not just for ten minutes or because it makes a pretty picture for Instagram. I want someone to help me raise these kids. I can hire a photographer to create portraits for our walls, I can’t pay someone to come in and help me parent, and even if I could, I wouldn’t want to.’

‘You’re being ridiculous. No one can be everything. We play to our strengths. I spend more than enough time with *our* kids. I deserve to have a

life too, and I love my job and it puts a roof over our heads. If you want help, get a cleaner and a nanny, then you can take alone time when you need to.'

I stand, removing the blanket from my lap. I'm not even angry anymore, I'm just done.

'Look, sit down,' he says, tugging at my trousers and softening his tone. 'We used to be good at this communication malarkey. No one in the world understands us better than each other. We can figure this out. Sit.'

As much as I resent being spoken to like a naughty puppy, I take my seat again. This time I reach for a pillow to place in my lap and hold against my chest.

'I never wanted to be a single mother. I watched Maggie struggle alone, and I wanted more for our kids. I thought I would laugh more, be full of love, be full of joy. I thought I would be good at it, but it's hard to be good at something when you're tackling it alone all the time. This was never the plan.'

I snap the band on my wrist, the pain cutting deep, and he sees it.

'Do you need to go back to therapy? Is this that postnatal depression shit again?'

'Yes, Mark. Maybe I do need to go back to therapy, but I think you need to come with me. Not because I still think I'm a terrible parent, but because I worry you are. You're never here, and when you are it's only for the fun bits. When was the last time you did the bedtime routine? Or bathed the kids? When was the last time you battled the Mercadona shop with twins in tow?'

He rolls his eyes and leans back. He's losing patience but I don't care – he needs to hear this before I leave.

'When I was last in therapy, I was convinced I was a terrible mother. Leo was super clingy and aggressive, and Sophia . . . I was convinced she didn't see me as a mother but a nuisance.'

I take a breath while I take in the sight of the man I once loved sat stony-faced and unaffected.

'I was depressed, suicidal and was dealing with postnatal depression,' I continue, as I watch him roll his eyes and cross his arms, getting ready to defend his own position.

'But this is not postnatal depression, Mark. This is clarity. My relationship

with the kids is better than ever now, because I got help and did the work.’ I pause, knowing the next sentence will sting, ‘And honestly, Mark, they can no longer rely on you to be here. You’re far from a constant in their lives. You’re an occasional visitor and we all deserve more.’

Then, I see it. I watch as his cheeks soften, the brow unknits, and he lowers his hands from his chest. Here it comes . . .

‘Vic, you have held down the fort with two kids while I went out to make the bread and butter to put on our plates. It’s not easy being the sole breadwinner, and sometimes I miss bedtime. But we’re just finding our groove. I let you take the time you needed to get back on track after the sadness and whatever, we just need to find our groove again.’

‘The sadness and whatever . . .’ I repeat, hoping he will take it back. He doesn’t.

I’m done. He is never going to take me seriously until I do something.

‘You don’t need to run off to Scotland. I’ll take a couple of days off, maybe work mornings for a few days too. I’ll help and you can book into the spa for the morning? Like you said, you’re just exhausted, Vic.’

There it was. The sticking plaster he hoped to spread across the enormous wound at the centre of our marriage.

‘No, Mark. I’ve been telling you for months I need help. I’ve begged for months. We both need to decide what kind of life we want, and if we’re not on the same page, we need to figure out how to move forward.’

‘But that’s not how family works, Vic! We get through things together. That’s how I want our family to work.’

‘Don’t do that, Mark. Don’t make me out to be the bad guy just because you don’t agree with my approach. I don’t recognise myself anymore. I never intended on being a stay-at-home mum, never wanted to solo-parent. I wanted a family, but I wanted a life too and you won’t even entertain the kids going to nursery. I am not OK, Mark. I need to decide what I want from my life, and I can’t do that here with you putting sticking plasters over problems rather than facing them.’

‘What about the kids?’ he asks. Quietly, almost a whisper, as if maybe if I didn’t hear the question, I wouldn’t give him an answer he didn’t want.

‘What do you mean, what about the kids? I’ve already told you, I’m taking them with me.’

The fear that travelled across him was so obvious it was like someone

taking a paintbrush of luminous paint across his face.

‘So, you’re telling me you are “not OK” and that you need to decide what you want for your life, but you think you can take my kids away from me while you figure shit out? Without even asking my permission? They’re my kids too!’

‘Look.’ There was no longer space inside me to be apologetic and I’d long since lost my patience. I had drawn my line in the sand last night, now I need to stand on the right side of it. ‘I don’t need your permission to take my kids on holiday. I’m not kidnapping them, I’m not leaving you, I’m simply taking some time. I can’t rely on you to be here for them twenty-four-seven and if you’re honest with yourself, you know you wouldn’t cope. You have never so much as spent a day alone with them.’

I wait for him to say something, but he sits stock-still, stubborn and silent, staring at the floor.

‘Have you,’ I start up again, this time using my hand to lift his chin to look into his eyes; I want him to hear this, and to see me. ‘Have you ever, even once, asked me permission to go out drinking with the lads while I stay at home with the kids?’

‘God no, why the hell would I? I’m a grown man for fuck’s sake.’

And right there, I see the curtains open, and the light of realisation flick on.

‘Exactly. I’m a grown-ass woman who knows that if I don’t walk away now, to find some patience and figure out how to move forward, I will blow any remaining shreds of our marriage. So, I’m not asking permission, I’m telling you. Me and the kids are going to Edinburgh. I’m going to sort out the stuff with Maggie’s estate, take some time to grieve her properly and take time away from the anger and resentment that lives in this house to decide if this is the environment I want our kids to grow up in. I suggest you take the time yourself to decide what you want too.’

As I walk towards the house, leaving my husband staring out at the Spanish vista, I wonder if I have just opened Pandora’s box.

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ELEVEN

Victoria

Edinburgh – October 2022

I place my handbag under the seat in front of me and sit back in the far too upright plastic chair. I'd forgotten how uncomfortable budget airline seats are; the enclosed space feels even more claustrophobic with a mask covering my face. The hot air and my heightened heart rate combine to create a sticky condensation across my top lip.

With my beautiful babies distracted, pointing at all the aeroplanes on the tarmac, I reach for my phone and reply to the message I'd received from Nicole. I have a feeling this trip home won't be all unicorns and rainbows. Facing reality without Maggie will be tough, and as much as I'm excited about seeing Stephen and Abbie, knowing I will also get to spend some time with Nicole feels like a good balance. If things get too heavy, I know spending time with her will lighten my step.

'Just boarded my plane to Bonnie Scotland. Can't wait to see you. Poor Ben, that wee laddie has caught every bug going this year! Hope he's feeling better?' I type and hit send.

Reaching into my bag, I retrieve a journal that Nicole sent me for my birthday. Emblazoned on the front of the gorgeous bright blue notebook are the words: *'I write so I can hear myself think'*.

I scrawl the words *'What is a perfect family?'* at the top of the first page and below it I write the words *'Does a family have to be perfect to be right?'* and then below that I scrawl *'What does family even mean to me?'* I know I need to be able to answer these questions before I land back on Spanish soil.

As the plane takes off, and my kids giggle with excitement watching the hills of Malaga fly past our window, I stare at the words on the page and feel something niggling at me. Where was my husband in all this? My pen hovers over the page, but fear is keeping me from writing the words that dance on my tongue and whip tornados in my mind. As my world sinks beneath me and I rise into the clouds, the sun streams through the window

and I find my strength. *‘Do I love my husband enough to make this work? Will he change?’*

I look behind me and spot a family of four spread across two rows. Mum, dad and two teenage kids. They are laughing and joking, the love and joy so evident on their hidden faces. I can’t help but wonder what our family will look like by the time our kids are that age.

I look down at the notes in my journal and it hits me like a thunderbolt to my solar plexus; I can see us, as a family, but I can’t see Mark. I can’t see us as a family of four, sat on a plane like the family behind. The thought terrifies me.

The rest of the flight passes without drama. We even manage a short nap all together. As I collect my belongings and check the weather outside the window, I’m thankful it isn’t lashing it down. Edinburgh is a beautiful place most of the time, but the city shines differently in the winter sun. The grey buildings seem to shimmer with hope, a little whisper of spring not far away, hiding just behind the winter.

I collect our luggage and make my way into arrivals, walking blindly towards the taxi bay when I get a sharp tap on the shoulder.

‘Oi, missy, been gone so long you don’t recognise your own sister?’

I look up and am met with the beautiful dotting eyes of Abbie. Her fresh pale skin, still the same shade of ivory, speckled with the most deliberate-looking freckles, but her once luminous eyes, the ones I remember being so bright with wonder, now seem older, wiser, more pained. Losing Maggie must have been hard but working in a care home these last few years has very clearly taken its toll.

‘Oh my God, look at you. Look how beautiful you are!’ I swoon as I take my foster sister in my arms.

‘What are you doing here? You must have driven up from London the moment I booked the flights. Are you mental?’ I say to her as she takes my rucksack from my shoulder and prises my suitcase out of my hands.

‘Well, I couldn’t very well have you struggling with two bairns alone in a taxi, could I? Speaking of which . . .’

I watch her eyes light up as she moves in front of the buggy and bends

down to meet my beautiful babies. I put the brakes on, caring little about the throng of travellers who now have to part like the Red Sea to pass by.

‘This,’ I say to the slightly bemused faces of my kids, ‘is your Auntie Abigail.’

I hadn’t even thought of how I would introduce the kids, but it feels right.

‘Cool Auntie Abbie, please. If you don’t mind!’

‘OK,’ I say, a smile on my face that I hope hides my pride in how much she has grown up. ‘Cool Auntie Abbie it is.’ I kiss her on the cheek, give her a quick squeeze and then unbuckle Sophia from the buggy, lifting her into the outstretched arms of my foster sister.

‘Oh, aren’t you just beautiful!’ she coos, then looks comically between me and her in quick succession. ‘Is she a daddy’s girl?’ she asks. I know exactly what she means, of course; Sophia looks nothing like me.

‘Well, no. Not really, I mean, looks wise maybe, but personality wise, she’s much more like me.’

‘Awwww, well, I guess there’s a blessing in there somewhere then,’ she says in a sing-song voice to hide the stabbing judgement as she traces her finger across Sophia’s nose and cheeks before winking at me.

Abbie and Mark never did get along. She found him brash and arrogant, but then I’m not sure any man would have been good enough for me. Poor Mallory got the same treatment when Stephen first brought her home, but Mal spent years thawing our mini-protector. Nowadays, they are the closest of friends. Mark never did try to integrate. He always said he never saw the point; they weren’t my real family.

When we got married, Maggie walked me down the aisle. The tears she shed as she walked by my side were so extreme, it broke the tension in the room, with all the guests laughing and passing her tissues. By the time I reached Mark, most of the attention was on her, which she knew I needed more than anything. I hated being the centre of attention. The idea of everyone looking at me had put me off getting married for so long.

She made my big day so much less intimidating.

Mark, however, had been furious. He spent most of the wedding breakfast grumbling about how the wedding pictures would look, with her tear-stained face and everyone laughing, the focus on her and not him stood in his designer suit at the foot of the aisle. Things only got worse when it was Stephen who rose from his chair to give a speech. It should have been

Maggie, but unbeknown to me, the two had conspired to have Stephen, normally the shy retiring type who keeps his emotions to himself, offer a few warm words instead. Mark was utterly confused. *‘Well, it’s hardly traditional, is it? He’s not even family,’* I remember him saying. *‘I understand Maggie wanting to be part of our day – you lived with her – but it’s not like Stephen is your real brother.’*

Thankfully, Stephen hadn’t heard his words, but Abigail did; and Abigail never forgets.

‘Hey, sis, where did you go?’ Abbie has my daughter on one hip and with the other hand she is shaking my shoulder. ‘You’re a million miles away. I thought you’d be happy to see me.’

I blink hard, and as I do, a single tear I hadn’t known was there trips down my cheek and I brush it quickly away.

‘I’m fine,’ I lie, ‘they’re happy tears. It’s so nice to see you holding my baby girl.’

Abbie bounces Sophia on her hip, and I can’t take my eyes off the smile on both their faces.

‘I’ve missed you, you know,’ I say as I take Sophia from her so she can bend down to meet my young boy.

‘Missed you too. But hey, you’re here now. So, no more tears, OK? Let’s get these monsters back to the house so we can have proper cuddles!’ She beams as she plants a huge raspberry on a giggling Leo.

We laugh about old times, new times and all the times in between. We talk about both family and local gossip, and as she drives the streets towards my old home, my soul settles into a routine I didn’t realise it was missing.

‘I miss this,’ I say, as we turn down the road to Maggie’s house.

‘What, you miss this place? My God, Vic, it’s a shithole. You’re living the dream. Why the hell do you miss this place?’

That’s all everyone sees. The gloss, the top coat, not the mess that lives underneath.

‘It’s not until you leave that you appreciate it. I don’t miss the weather, but there is something about the cold crisp air that feels different. I can breathe.’

I roll the window down just a little, the familiar smell of Scotland catching the emotions that are sitting at the back of my throat in the lump that has been forming since we landed.

‘Well, maybe the thing that’s stolen your voice also stole your breath,’ she says, not taking her eyes off the road ahead, but raising an eyebrow in my direction. ‘It’s not the cold air letting you breathe. It’s not having his hands wrapped around your vocal cords . . .’ Her words trail off as a driver behind honks his horn. It’s reassuring to see some things never change. You can always rely on the impatience of British drivers. I smile and wave through the rear-view mirror at the angry reddening face of the man in the car behind.

‘Anyway,’ I continue, distracting Abbie from a potential road-rage incident, ‘it’s not just the air that I miss, it’s this: chatting, gossiping with friends, laughing.’

‘Surely you’ve got enough fancy-pants pals over there to gossip with? I’ve seen *Towie does Marbella*; they love a bit of drama over there.’

‘That’s not really my scene,’ I admit, regretting my topic change. ‘The only people I gossip with these days are my kids.’

‘But you have friends?’ she asks, this time turning to look at me, with worry in her eyes.

‘Well, I did. Before the kids, but late nights in the clubs with bottles of Grey Goose don’t mix well with twins waking you up at six a.m.’ I laugh, but the look of worry hasn’t shifted from my sister’s face.

‘Maggie mentioned you’d struggled since the bairns had come along, but I didnae realise you were so isolated.’

I chuckle and roll my eyes in Abigail’s direction.

‘What?’ Abbie responds.

‘My God, it only took us half an hour and listen to you – that London twang you had when you met me off the plane is already gone. Bairns? Didnae?’

‘You cannae talk. Listen to that posh accent you’ve got. Whisked off to Spain and you’ve ditched more than your family. You sound more like him than ever!’

‘Funny though,’ I reply, trying to take the barb out of her comment, but I know she’s right. I ditched them. ‘It doesn’t take long to slip back, does it?’

‘That’s because it’s home. We don’t have to pretend to be anything other than ourselves here. It feels . . .’ She pauses, looking around, and then glancing in the rear-view, smiling at the faces of my kids in the rented car seats in the back. ‘It feels right,’ she finishes and lets out a sigh.

‘Looks like we both needed a trip back home, eh?’ I ask as I put my hand on her arm.

‘Ach, anyway, gossip is gossip the world over. It disnae matter who’s mouth it’s coming out of. Sure, have you no got someone you gossip wi’ over a bottle of wine?’ she asks, leaning in on her accent, even thicker than it was before, comfortable now the mask has slipped.

‘You know what, hen,’ I reply, winking at her smile of recognition. ‘The closest friend I have lives in bloody Dundee. Would ya believe it? And we’ve only met in person once! Face to face like.’

Sitting at the traffic lights, Abbie turns to look at me, a puzzled expression on her face, and I fill her in on the weird and wonderful friendship that Nicole and I have developed.

We pull into the driveway of Maggie’s house just as I finish an abridged version of the events that brought Nicole and I together. Everything looks just as it had when I left. The painted owl with the number 111 looks a touch more weather-worn, but still sits proudly in front of the big green door to my family home. Neither of us are quite ready to get out. Abbie sits still, hands in her lap, staring straight ahead with the engine still running.

I expect the door to fly open, for Maggie to rush out to greet us. Only she’s not there. I know she’s not there. Her hanging baskets sway in the breeze, as if waiting patiently for her to tend to them; but the door remains closed. The curtains sit still.

‘So, are you gonna see your Zoom pal while you’re here?’

‘I hope so,’ I say. ‘The last time we saw each other, we met for coffee on the beach in Spain, so I think we’ve decided a walk along the beach in Broughty Ferry would be fitting for a reunion.’

There’s nothing left to say, no more stalling tactics to use now, but neither of us are ready.

‘OK,’ Abigail says, slapping her thighs and taking the key from the ignition. She steels herself, and looks at me, tears pooling in her lower lids. ‘It’s about time we do this, right? At least we’re doing it together.’

As I get out of the car, I close my eyes and send a thought to wherever she is. *‘It won’t be the same without you, Mags, but I’m here. I’m home. And I brought my bairns with me.’*

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TWELVE

Victoria

Spain – Three Kings Day – January 2020

I always find Christmas a tough time of year, but this year, as I stroke the overinflated bump of my belly, feels harder than most. I so desperately wanted to be around family; instead, I find myself alone. Mark is busier than ever with work and with Maggie unable to fly over, I'm sat alone with my thoughts, which at this time of year is always dangerous.

Maggie always made an effort for the kids at Christmas, but the festivities always led to me questioning my own family story. My own birth. I never knew my father, and I don't even know if my mother knew who he was either. His name was left off my birth certificate. When I fell pregnant with the twins, I asked Maggie to send all my paperwork to me in Spain so I could piece together information. It's obvious my mother struggled with drug addiction for most of her life. She'd been clean right up until I was almost a year old; then, from what I can tell from the records, she had one night where she gave in to temptation and overdosed. I try to tell myself that she wouldn't have wanted to leave me alone. It may be wishful thinking, but it's the only way I can cope.

I'm feeling the weight of my pregnancy today, not just the physical weight of carrying two almost full-term babies at the same time, but the weight of it emotionally. Despite Maggie being desperate to pop over and 'help', her health had been on the decline, so we planned for her to come over once the twins were born instead.

I pick up my phone and drop her a message.

'I'm not enjoying this anymore. I look like a beached whale, and I am pretty sure my skin can't stretch any more than this!' I type.

Instantly, the reply comes back.

'Sweet girl, you couldn't look like a beached whale if you tried. It won't be long now. Keep your chin up. You've got this!'

Always on hand for encouragement. I thank the Lord I'll have her to help

guide me once the babies are here. I've no idea what I'm doing, but I know with her by my side, I can tackle anything motherhood throws at me.

I wander around the nursery room picking up a few of the countless teddies she's sent over. A gorgeous little purple hippo that rattles, just small enough for a new-born to grip, and a huge bright red dragon with crunchy wings. At the side of the room sit boxes of onesies and outfits, picked and packed with care and love. I might not have a mum of my own, but Maggie made sure I wouldn't want for anything.

Maggie had already celebrated her Christmas, the same way she always did. Each year, Maggie would hire out the community hall, lay out trellis tables and pile on as much food as possible. Every child she had ever fostered had an open ticket. They could come alone or with their own family in tow, but no child who had ever passed through her door would find themselves alone on Christmas Day. Some years it was ten of us, but other years there would be as many as fifty. Gifts were supplied, food was eaten, and love was shared. Christmas was never about faith for us; it was about family, love and support and no one being left out in the cold. But the last few years, something had always got in the way of us making it back to Scotland for the big day.

Our first Christmas together, Mark took me to the Maldives, and as much as I missed the annual gathering, I enjoyed being spoiled. After that, it seemed like he wanted to level up with each trip. Ski trips in Canada, cruises around the Virgin Islands.

I'd put my foot down and said I wouldn't miss the festivities this year. I was sure it would be fine. I knew mums who flew well into their final trimester and I'd only be thirty-three weeks, but with twins the doctor recommended not flying after thirty-two, so even if I wanted to, I couldn't. Mark put *his* foot down on that one. Stalemate.

'Next year,' I'd told Maggie, 'next year I promise. And I'll have our babies with us. Their first Christmas in Scotland.'

I'd never heard about Three Kings until we moved to Spain. And if I thought Christmas Day was all about family and tradition, I knew nothing until I'd experienced *Los Tres Reyes*. Most families and friends will exchange a few small gifts on Christmas Eve, and then on Christmas Day, but it was generally a small family affair.

Tres Reyes is when everyone *really* celebrates.

As I watch the crowds starting to gather and the chatter outside my windows increases, I feel so alone.

I send Maggie hourly updates on the festivities, plus photos and videos to keep her going through the dark and rainy Scottish winter.

I miss her so much. It doesn't feel right doing this without her.

Mark has been out for hours now. It might be a national holiday, but so many of his clients just don't understand how Spain works. It was no surprise that he got a call from a hassled newly relocated couple. Their electricity had been cut off, and neither spoke anywhere near enough Spanish to get an answer from the company. Mark had picked up his car keys and his superhero cape and gone off to the rescue. He didn't need to. He could have just explained how to get an 'English-speaking operative' on the phone, but the truth of the matter was that he loved playing the hero. I'm tired of waiting for him, so I decide to waddle myself to the town square, alone. At the very least, Maite and Alejandra, my only two Spanish friends in the village, would be sat in their usual spot just outside the pharmacy, so I could join them.

As the light begins to fade, cotton-candy colours streak across the sky and the twinkling lights from the Christmas decorations flood reflections of colour like diamonds on the roads beneath our nursery window. I have to admit I'm a little jealous he's out working; I miss it already. I'm already bored with my own company, but Mark keeps telling me I will have all the company I need when the babies arrive.

I stroke my bulging belly and wonder if I will be good at this new job I've been given, and if I will be able to balance this my new job with my current one. This is the only job I've ever undertaken where not one single person has even vetted me to make sure I am up to the task. No one checked references, or past history. No qualifications, I'm just expect to 'wing it', it seems.

I have no worries about Mark; he'll make an amazing father. He has wanted this his whole life. I'd always wanted to be a wife. I hadn't thought much about children until he came along, but the picture he paints of our future fills me with joy.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. These babies are taking up almost my entire body and it's so uncomfortable. It's only a few weeks until our scheduled C-section, and I have no idea where on earth they are supposed

to grow into next. I can't imagine going full term into February with them. I was worried at first when they mentioned an 'early' C-section, as a precaution, but now I understand why. My skin is stretched to splitting point. Surely a human body is never supposed to get this big?

I catch the faint whiff of roasted chestnuts, a heady promise floating on the breeze through my open window. My stomach rumbles.

At least, I think it does. It tightens, and I feel a bubble, popping sensation maybe a slight twinge.

'God, I can't wait for this to be over,' I mutter. I wouldn't even consider saying those words out loud to Mark. Everyone else loves pregnancy. All the other mothers I see on Instagram seem to embrace it, but not me.

I reach into the drawer of the side table under the mirror in the hallway and pull out my emergency concealer. Age catches up on us all eventually, but a good concealer and a decent filter are a godsend. I tap around my eyes to get the blood flowing, pinch my cheeks, shake back my hair and point the camera at the mirror before taking a snap. My bright red Christmas jumper gives my face a glow, and the filter smooths my complexion and my fears.

#ThreeKingsReady – heading out to join the festivities #TresReyes #FelizNavidad

I step out of our door and take in the heady smell of *dama-de-noche* on the air. The smell leaves me weak with emotion as I hear Maggie's words in my head. It's her favourite smell. I make a note in my phone to check on Amazon to see if I can get a winter jasmine plant sent to her as a Christmas gift. My stomach aches again, this time even lower down. I don't have time to worry about the pain right now. If I don't head into town, I won't be able to make it through the throngs of people lining the pavements. An eight-months-pregnant woman with twins can't navigate these narrow Spanish streets so easily.

There is a car, trying desperately to push its way out of the driveway of the villa on the hill. The locals bitch about 'The Guiri House' all the time. It used to be owned by the family who own the farm, but they sold it off to a British couple a few years ago. Since then, the villa has attracted the attention of the locals each summer, with the raucous house parties that

seem to go on all summer long. I've never seen anyone there at Christmas time before. I watch as the driver pounds at the steering wheel with his fists.

I can't see into the back seat, the tinted windows are hiding his companions from view, but the sound of the horn fights against the music from the speakers blasting music through the streets.

Bloody tourists never learn.

I raise my phone, snap a picture and send it to Mark.

'Bloody Guiris are back – and this time trying to drive through a parade!'

The cobblestone streets of my remote Spanish village are adorned with vibrant decorations and smells linger in the air as the birds swoop low over the trees above my head. The parakeets chirp away and follow the crowds as the eagles soar in the endless high air currents above, making their way back to the mountains beyond to nest for the night.

I hear the cackles before I see the bodies of small children emerge from the doorway to my left. I watch as their teacher tilts her head to the sky and lets out a call that seemed to silence the troops instantly: *'Ahora mi niños, silencio y no te muevas.'*

Like a scene straight out of *The Sound of Music*, each of the children stops dead in their tracks, turns to face their leader and puts their fingers on their mouths.

As I watch her walk through the crowd of children, checking on each along the line, I wonder if I'll be able to do that for my own children. Would I be able to command that kind of respect? It seems like the most disorganised and least thought-through part of human nature. *'Here, human only slightly older than a child yourself, have another human being to raise. Make sure you raise it well, but I won't tell you how. You must figure it out yourself. Good luck, don't fuck it up.'* You can tell God was a man, if he ever did exist. A woman would never put something like this in place without leaving instructions.

I make my way to the pharmacy on the corner. Maite is already in situ, sat on one of her folding wooden chairs. In her hands is a glass of 'medicinal' wine, as always. She owns the shop, but her daughter runs the counter these days; Maite mostly runs her mouth. Gossip queen of the mountains this one, but never in a malicious way.

She wasn't just known as the gossip though; everyone in the village called

her '*búho sabio*', or wise owl. She was never short of a wise word to say. Maggie is obsessed with owls, so it feels like a sign from above that she dropped into my lap. As I approach Maite, she reaches behind her chair and pulls out a second seat, passing it precariously to me and nodding to what I assume she thought was an open space for me to plonk her folding device. It isn't an empty space, not even slightly – a couple, British, obviously looking at how they are dressed, are standing there looking around, trying to suss out the situation.

'Excuse me,' I say, as I attempt to open the chair. The man quickly looks me up and down, and despite clocking my clearly enormous belly, he tuts and looks away.

'Oye,' Maite starts up. She's not shy about confronting the '*thoughtless guiris*'.

'*Ella es embarazada*. MOVE!'

The guy looks over his shoulder and laughs at Maite.

'She thinks I'm embarrassed,' he says, the words escaping the corner of his mouth, directed at his female companion.

'Oh, is that what she said? You're so clever. I'm so glad you speak Spanish.' The young girl kisses him on the cheek, and I laugh out loud. The volume of my own voice catches me a little unaware.

'No, darlin', she didn't say embarrassed. *Embarazada* means pregnant. She's shocked you won't move for a heavily pregnant woman,' I say. I'd obviously left my British filter at home today and decided to embrace my Spanish passion. I'm not sure if the shock on his face was more from true embarrassment of translation skills, or the fact I'd called him out on his shameful behaviour.

I take my seat next to Maite and fold her hand into mine just as Alejandra pops her head out of the door with a glass of *Casera* in her hand for me. I'm glad I didn't just sit on the terrace alone. I might be missing Maggie, and Mark, but these two would help me feel much less alone.

As I sip the cold liquid, I feel the relief as it hits my stomach. Now I understand why people say pregnant women 'glow' – it's not glowing, it's not perfectly placed highlighter to make you look like the sun has kissed your cheeks to make you sparkle. No, it's an internal fire that burns constantly, sometimes rising to the surface and presenting as a 'glow', or in my case, a sheen of sweat that starts on my top lip and doesn't stop until my

ever-fragile baby fuzz hairline is soaked. Glowing, my arse. I wasn't perspiring either; I was full-on sweating.

'Do they give you these waves of heat during pregnancy to prepare you for the hot flushes later in life?' I ask Maite, who tips her head back and laughs out loud.

'Oh, *mi cariña*, everything you go through during pregnancy is to prepare you for the joys of motherhood. Dealing with this heat will help you learn how to cool and calm yourself when your children enrage you. The sleepless nights with sore boobs and a bust bigger than your bum is to prepare you for the sleepless nights you will endure forever more as you worry about your children. The snapping of your hair and nails, to prepare you to put aside the silliness that is material beauty.'

'Oh really? And the kankles?'

'Kankles?'

I lift the hem of my skirt and show off my once delicate feet, now blending into my calves, no sign that a slim ankle was ever there to begin with.

'Aaaahhhh – KANKLES. *Bien*. They are there to remind us that this is a very long road to walk, one that won't always be easy, but one we can endure. Our legs will hold us up strong and ready to fight another day.'

I have no idea if these are pearls of wisdom passed down through the generations or just small nuggets of insight from my ever-wise friend, but I don't care. Her words make me feel safe and understood.

Alejandra pulls a chair from inside the pharmacy and plonks it down next to mine. I listen in as mother and daughter talk over my head, reminiscing about past parades.

Gossip and wine on the doorstep – this wasn't such a bad life. It's not so different from home really. It used to be Maggie with a fag and a cuppa on the stoop with her next-door neighbour spreading gossip over the fence. Some things don't change no matter the culture or language, I guess.

I can hear the drums, bouncing, thumping. The white walls of my sugar-cube village are shuddering with excitement and the kids' faces say it all. I watch as they grab at each other's backs, scrambling to see over each other's heads. As if Moses himself is about to appear in the street, the throngs of bodies part and we can finally see down the long main street.

With the setting sun behind me, the scene behind the floats is darkening

quicker, navy-blue skies providing the perfect backdrop for the bright lights. Quite what fifteen-foot-tall jellyfish have to do with the birth of Christ I will never know, but just the sight of the bright colours was painting joy on the faces of every small and grown child in the audience.

A tightening crosses my stomach again and I reach for my glass of *Casera*, the relief only brief this time. As I take a deep breath in, a wave of dizziness hits me and I close my eyes, hoping it will pass, but as I do, the tightening creeps from my lower abdomen upwards across my belly, like lowering into a bathful of hot water. I can feel the heat shifting upwards across my stomach and around my back.

I let out a deep sigh, and a noise I don't recognise comes with it. I grip at my hips tearing at my skin, my nails searching for the source of the pain.

'Mi niña, que pasa. ¿Estas bien?'

I can feel Alejandra's delicate touch on my arm, the weight of her briefly steadying me. I can't open my eyes; the fear is keeping them tight shut.

Boom boom boom.

I can hear the drums. The warning signals.

Boom boom boom.

For a moment I'm not sure if the thudding I can feel in my chest is the rising of my own heartbeat or the thundering of the band.

'Is it starting? Mummy, mummy, is it starting?'

I can hear a child at my feet shouting, each word strained at the back of his throat with anticipation.

'Yes, darling, I think it is,' the mother replies. Her words sound like they are being uttered underwater.

'Yep – arrrrghhhh – yes it's starting . . .' My own words are drowned out by the sudden start of the booming music. The trumpets and drums setting the pace. Slow, steady, deliberate.

'It's staaaarrrrtttt . . .' I can't get to the end of my sentence, and before I know it, I can feel the thin fingers of Maite reaching my other arm. My two guardian angels hold me on either side, and I double over.

'Sí, mi niña, it's starting.'

'It CAN'T START YET!' I scream, my voice suddenly heard above the noise and commotion just a little further up the road. *'Maite. It's too soon. Maite . . . it can't happen now. I'm booked in. It's all planned. It's too soon. Make it stop.'*

‘My child, it seems even the birth of Christ himself won’t stop your little darlings from making an appearance today. This is good; God will watch over you. This is good luck.’

‘God is a little busy celebrating the birth of his only son right now, Maite!!’

Both women laugh hard.

‘Come. Come. I’ll call Pedro. He will know what to do.’

‘Mark. Maaaarrrk.’ I try to point to my bag, still under the chairs now abandoned by the front doorstep. I watch as Alejandra crawls beneath the crowd to grab my bag and pull out my phone. She points it at my face to unlock the screen and quickly scrolls to Mark’s number.

‘He is not answering.’ Alejandra looks worried, and I try to smile, but I assume what appears on my face is a contorted attempt at a grimace based on her response.

‘Don’t worry,’ she says, hitting the redial button.

We make our way against the human traffic until we reach a side road.

‘*Hola, Pedro.*’

I can hear the chatter between Alejandra and our local doctor on the other end of the phone, but I can’t focus on the words. Instead, I am trying to put one foot in front of the other while my brain is trying to convince me that any second now my babies will just fall out from beneath me onto the cold, dusty cobbled streets.

‘Pedro is with an emergency.’

All the angry thoughts are running around my mind, but the only words I can articulate are: ‘Why? Where? No. Why?’

‘A tourist having a baby. He will come back very soon he says. If the contractions come quicker, he says drive to the *Urgencias* and he will come there.’

‘Mark. Maite. Mark is not here.’ The fear of going through this alone terrifies me.

I grab the phone from my friend as I hear his voicemail kick in and hit the microphone button.

‘Mark. Unless you want to miss the birth of your children, you will get your ARSE HOME NOW!’ I scream into the phone, trying to ignore the shocked faces of my friends as I lose my cool.

I had a birth plan. We had planned this. This wasn’t the plan, and I am

freaking out. I am not ready.

‘Mark, where the bloody hell is Mark?’ I shout at everyone and no one. I scream as another wave of contractions take over my body, doubling me over.

Maite’s hand is outstretched towards me, holding my phone closer to me. It’s not until I hear Mark’s voice come through the speaker that I realise what is going on.

‘What do you mean you can’t get here, Mark?’ I scream at the phone. ‘I’m having your children. I’m bent double in a bloody alleyway about to give birth to not one but twooooooooooooo,’ I scream as another wave of pain takes over.

They are coming thicker and faster, more painful, and I can’t breathe in between.

Alejandra lifts the phone to her mouth. ‘Mark, it’s very important. Two babies is very dangerous.’ She speaks slowly, her words chosen carefully and delivered with more patience and calm than I believe any of us truly possess right now.

‘Maite. How long?’

I look at Maite, who has been taking notes of my contractions on her phone.

‘I don’t think long,’ she says, shaking her head and looking at her watch as she takes in the state of me.

‘MARRRK! WHAT THE HELL?!!!!’

There is silence on the other end of the phone. He has muted me.

Click. Noise.

‘OK, Pedro says come here. The roads are closed, and the ambulance can’t get to you, so you need to come here.’

‘Where is HERE, Mark? Where the hell are you?’

‘I am at the *Urgencias*. A holidaymaker went into labour. I’m here translating.’

The rage building in me is probably very much misplaced, but in that very moment I want to murder my husband. He is at the A&E helping a stranger give birth, while his wife is stranded in labour with twins.

‘But, if you get Maite to bring you here, I can film you arriving. Maybe having the twins here will be good. We can show everyone how good the Spanish health care system is.’

‘BUGGER OFF WITH YOUR BLOODY FILMING!!!’ I scream. Not for the first time, I am considering all the ways I can hurt him with that bloody phone.

‘I want to go to *Hospiten*! I don’t want to have my babies in the local *Urgencias*. I want to go to *Hospiten*; this isn’t the GODDAMN PLAN!!!’

Maite taps my arm gently. ‘Maybe it is God’s damn plan, my dear.’

I’ve run out of patience now. ‘GET ME TO *URGENCIAS*,’ I scream at Alejandra.

‘I go get my car,’ she says, and then shrugs at Maite. The words might not have been said, but the expressions said it all: neither woman had much faith that they could bring the car here, let alone drive me through the blocked roads to the urgent care centre.

* * *

We pull into the emergency drop-off zone to find another car just abandoned in the middle of the turning circle, the same one I’d seen leaving the Guiri house earlier – bloody tourists. In Spain, even if someone is bleeding out, you know not to park in the emergency bay. These urgent care units only have room for one ambulance at a time and this guy’s car was blocking anyone from getting close.

‘*Joder!*’ Alejandra swears loudly. ‘Maite, you take her in.’

Maite gets out of the passenger seat and opens the back door, using all her power to help heave me out of the car. My fear seems to weigh down every step I take towards the doors.

As I’m led through the automatic doors, I spot Pedro coming out of one of the surgery rooms, paperwork in hand and a face as white as a sheet. My husband follows him out, just a few steps behind.

‘MARK!’ I shout. Our eyes lock and for the first time today, I feel instant relief. Everything will be fine, as long as I’m with him. Everything will be OK.

‘Wait wait wait!’ he says, as he stuffs his hand into his pocket and pulls out his phone. With a quick flip of his hair, I watch my husband disappear as he is replaced by MarkyMark, his Insta alter ego.

‘Well, it seems our beautiful babies wanted to arrive in the world a little earlier than planned. The excitement of the Three Kings was something

they didn't want to miss. So, if you are wondering why we're not streaming the parade, please understand that we're a little busy live-streaming something different.'

Without warning he flips the camera around, raises his hand and shouts, 'Say hello, honey, if you can . . .'

I could kill him.

I shoot him a look I know he won't want on camera and as he lowers the phone I hiss at him, 'Put that damn thing away.'

'Aww baby . . .' he starts, but Maite holds up her hand to silence him.

'Babies first,' she says, 'work later.'

He might have tried to argue with me, but no one argues with Maite.

Pedro guides me into an examination room.

'Now, Toria. Let's see how long the babies have.'

I look towards Mark. I don't understand the joy on his face. Why isn't he more scared?

'Mark, I can't have the babies here. We have a plan. How long will an ambulance take? I want to have them at *Hospiten!*'

Pedro is shaking his head. 'No no, I don't think so. Ambulance is an hour. I think you might be having the babies here.'

'AN HOUR.' I grip at Pedro's arm, and the pain from my fingernails is evident on his face.

'Yes, but babies will not be an hour. I think they are going to be here very soon.'

This was *not the plan!*

'Don't worry, I have called the ambulance. Two. One for you and one for the other lady. She has a problem too with her baby.'

'A problem? Is there a problem?' My heart is racing and the whole room is spinning.

'No, *ni niña, cálmate*. You will be fine.'

I look towards Mark, waiting for him to explain, but he just nods towards Pedro.

'Lie down. We will keep calm and I have more doctors to help if the babies come before the ambulance.'

I'm having what feels like a rare break in the contractions, so I close my eyes and try to give in to the exhaustion taking over my body. As I do, Mother Nature laughs at me, hard and sharp and with a scream I was sure

wasn't coming from me but from them, both of them, inside of me, screaming to get out.

'Two mamas at the same time. God is having fun with his son's celebration today. We will have new kings and queens together in the same room.' Pedro looks almost giddy with excitement. Nothing as dramatic as this ever happens in these small villages and by the looks of Pedro's face, he is already gearing up to tell the story in the bar later tonight.

I scream again, my hands find their way under my knees and something in me doesn't wait for the word.

By the time the nurse is asking me to push, I am already doing it. My body, just taking over and doing the hard work.

I watch as Mark runs to the foot of the bed and pulls out his phone.

'DON'T YOU BLOODY DARE!!!!' I scream at him.

'Shhh, Toria. Focus. ¡Señor, siéntate!' The nurse is not messing around. We've been joined by a new doctor I don't recognise. He looks exhausted already. He dishes out instructions and vows to 'be right back' before leaving again.

Just when I think I am far too tired to push again, I feel every single muscle in my body knit together and as I let out a final scream, our first child is born.

'A GIRL!!' Mark shouts. 'A beautiful baby girl!'

The nurse at the side of the room takes my baby and wraps her in a towel before letting me kiss her. She then walks, quite casually, out of the room, with my baby in her hands.

My shock doesn't have time to land. I look at Mark in horror; he nods and leaves the room to follow her.

'OK, no time. Now the other,' says the doctor.

'FUCK THIS!' I shout, looking at the face of the beautiful young nurse who couldn't be far into her twenties yet. I don't know how much English she understands but those words will carry in any language.

'No more. I can't. No more.' I shake my head furiously. Sweat from my fringe drips down my face.

She chuckles, wanders over to the side of the room, takes off her gloves, washes her hands calmly and then strides back over to me with a look of glee on her face as she snaps on a fresh pair of blue gloves.

'OK. *Vamos*,' she says, looking at the doctor who seems just as eager to

get started again.

‘I’m not a bloody race car! You can’t just start me up again!’ The young nurse laughs and winks, and then I felt it. As if that wink had magical powers, the waves start again.

‘OH, FUCK NO!!’ I scream, just as my husband enters the room once more.

‘Where is she?’ I manage, in between pants.

‘She’s being weighed next door. Don’t worry. Guess what? That dude’s wife just had her wee baby too. They’re Scottish too, you know.’

‘I don’t soddin’ care where the hell the tourists are from,’ I say through gritted teeth, my body getting ready. ‘It’s their fault I’m in this bloody place!’

The second birth is even quicker than the first, but as I watch the nurse take my son into the next room, I can hear the commotion and see nurses running in and out in panic.

‘What’s going on?’

I make Mark go out to find out what the situation is, and then it’s just me and the nurse. She’s checking me over, pulse, blood pressure, and giving me the injection to release the placentas and I realise this is the very last time in my life that I will be just me. I have been ‘us three’ for the best part of eight months, and for the rest of my life, it will be us four. But in this moment, despite the nurse going about her business, I feel alone.

Something inside me is reaching for something. Something is missing. I don’t like it. My heartbeat feels off. My breathing. I have been breathing for three for so long; now my lungs feel lost.

I’m a mum now, but I have no babies. Something isn’t right.

I try to swing my legs over the side of the bed and the nurse rushes over and plants me firmly back in bed.

‘No. *Cuidadosa*. It’s dangerous. Not yet!’

She’s pointing a finger at me, as if I am being told off by a school master.

‘My babies.’

‘I bring them. Don’t worry.’

She smiles and goes back to her paperwork.

‘My babies!’ I say, more sternly. ‘I want to see my babies now!’

The door creaks open and in walks my husband carrying a bundle wrapped in blankets, tears streaming down his face.

‘Here’s our wee boy!’ he says to me, handing him over to place him in my arms. The feeling that sweeps over me is like warm runny honey over my skin: soothing, calming.

A few moments later, as I stare at my beautiful baby boy, another nurse comes into the room pushing two little baskets. One, empty, for my boy. The other holds the wrapped bundle of my baby girl. I watch as my husband bends down and picks her up in his arms, smiling so purely. He wanders in silence over to my side of the bed and sits down as lightly as he can. I look from one to the other, and then to the face of the man I love.

‘They look like you,’ I whisper, taking in the dark curls of my boy, thick hair covering his head and long dark eyelashes. He’s beautiful. In every conceivable way.

‘I won’t ever let anything hurt you,’ I say to him, a tear making its way from the bridge to the tip of my nose.

‘Do you want to meet your daughter?’ Mark asks, tentatively, as if I might judge him for trying to choose between them. I smile as we try to figure out how to exchange babies, scared to drop one.

Her face is so angelic, softer than her brother’s, her eyelashes more delicate against her complexion. Rosy red lips and a blush across her cheeks that any MAC make-up artist would envy. Her hair has a slight lightness to it, tinges of auburn. I marvel at how alike they look, but how very different they look too.

Without warning, I break into deep, guttural sobs.

‘I can’t believe I have two babies. How did that happen?’ I try to laugh, but I can’t place the emotion I’m experiencing. There is something about looking at this gorgeous innocent baby girl that stirs something deep inside me. I want to be a good mum; I so desperately don’t want to let her down. My boy has the very best role model in Mark, but will I be enough for her?

‘She’s real. He’s real. I’m a mum now. There’s no more waiting, no more time to learn.’

Mark takes our daughter from my arms and places her in the bassinet, next to her brother, and for the first time I see them side by side.

‘No matter what you do, Victoria, I know you’ll be a great mum. But look at them – even if we fuck up, even if we’re terrible at this, they have each other. A bond that will never be broken. You’ve already given them more than we ever had. A sibling, a friend and protector – a family! No matter

what happens, they have more of a family than we ever had. You did that. It's just us against the world now. Us four, no one else.'

My snotty nose doesn't stop running and the nurse is the one who notices, passing me a tissue as she moves the babies' cribs closer to me.

She lifts the arm of one and slips on an arm bracelet with her name. '*Bebé Cooper – Melliza 1*' Twin One. Once my baby girl has her jewellery on, she moves on to my son. '*Bebé Cooper – Mellizo 2*.'

It's quiet in the room. For the first time in hours, I can hear myself think. We sit, staring at our beautiful babies, lying side by side, breathing, happy and healthy. It might not have been how I planned it, but we know how much God loves to laugh at those who plan.

Pedro comes in with the doctor in the white coat and explains the process. The twins' vitals are good and strong. Being born at thirty-six weeks can often mean twins will need extra help, but both are stable enough to transport to a larger hospital where the NICU staff will check them over.

Once all the explanations are over, Pedro asks if Mark would help him explain the process to the couple next door. Apparently, the poor mother lost an awful lot of blood when her placenta ruptured during the birth. She was in and out of consciousness and would be taken to the public hospital on the other side of Marbella for a few nights of observation. They had welcomed a healthy baby girl, and at thirty-five weeks, the baby was doing surprisingly well, if a little underweight.

Mark offers to chat to the husband and has apparently already offered to help as much as he can with getting them passports and paperwork sorted to get back to the UK. Even on the day of his children's birth, he couldn't help but hustle. I should be mad at him, but instead, all I feel is pure pride. He'll be a great dad.

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THIRTEEN

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

I lie in our bed, propped up by pillows, the duvet pulled high as I warm my hands on the mug of coffee Andy woke me with just ten minutes ago. Exhaustion fills each of my bones, the weight of it pinning me to the bed. Yesterday had been so tough. Andy and I had spent most of the day on rotation, each of us keeping an eye on Ben for hours at a time. Constant schedules of Calpol and cool baths. The GP had called, via Zoom again, and told us there was a ‘nasty winter cold’ doing the rounds; half of his school was down with it. Apparently that would explain his ‘clumsiness’ too. How he could be so sure just by looking at my son’s face over a camera I’ll never know, but with his temperature stabilising, what else could we do? It was more of a risk to take him to the hospital with infection cases on the rise again.

Andy is already bustling about; I watch him with a mixture of affection and admiration as he prepares for another day at work. For a long time, I wondered what my life would look like without him in it, without the predictability of his morning rituals – the clink of his coffee mug as he places it on the dressing table while opening the wardrobe, the soft murmur of his voice as he talks himself through his outfit for the day. I wondered what it would be like to wake up and not see his smiling face or hear the humming from the bathroom as he brushes his teeth. I wondered if I would be lonely without him.

As I watch him go about his pre-work routine, it occurs to me that it’s these small things I would’ve missed the most. Not the weight of his arms around me at night, but the way he warms the room with happiness each morning.

‘Wear the pink one,’ I say, as I watch him flit between the choice of two shirts. ‘You look great in that one.’

He models the two shirts in front of him, a cheeky smile across his lips.

‘Pink to make the girls wink?’ he jokes.

He doesn't wait more than a beat before throwing the shirts over the back of the chair and walking with purpose over to the side of the bed. In one swift move he pulls back the duvet with one hand and takes my coffee cup from me in the other before taking my hand to raise me out of bed.

'As long as it grabs your attention, that's all that matters,' he whispers into my hair.

His hands move to the back of my neck, holding me tight as he kisses me deep, full of wanting, needing. Passion was never the issue between us; before, the sex had always been good. Until I did what I did, and he pulled away. But this, this kiss is not lacking. This kiss feels like him again, like us.

I trace my fingertips up his back, following his spine all the way to the nape of his neck, gripping it tightly until he releases my lips and moans into my ear before kissing my neck. These are our hotspots. We both know the intention, and I can feel his insistence growing. I tilt my head back and let him indulge in the softness of my neck as he trails kisses across my collarbone.

His hands move to the small of my back as he lowers me onto the bed. As my pulse quickens and my breath shortens, I know all too well how lucky I am not to have totally fucked up my marriage. In this moment, I love him more than ever before.

Bang Bang Bang.

'Daddy! Mummy! I'm hungry!'

Just like that, the spell is broken. The sound of my son's voice pierces the bubble and we are no longer lovers indulging in a morning smile, but parents again.

'Sorry, wee man. I'm coming.' My gorgeous husband is hovering just above me, propped on his elbows, his face so close to mine I can see the beginnings of a new wrinkle taking form at the edge of his eyes, creased in the smile he is giving me.

'Well, this'll have to wait,' he says to me as he grabs the towel I hadn't even noticed he'd dropped on the floor. Wrapping it around his waist, he winks again before unlocking the door and letting our son into the room.

'Hey wee man. You're hungry? You must be feeling better?' Andy asks, ruffling his hair.

'I have to be better,' he says, jumping up and down with excitement on the

spot. 'We are seeing the double-doubles today! I can't be sick.'

I chuckle at the sound of our nickname for the twins. When the babies were little, I used to call them the double act. Ben found it hilarious and so the double-doubles were born.

The fluttering in my chest doubles as I think about seeing Victoria in person for the first time in almost three years. There was a time when I wondered if that would ever happen again.

When I got Vic's message yesterday with her plans, it was a much-needed boost during a day of stress and worry. Ben seemed so excited at the idea of seeing the twins in person that his mood perked up for first time.

Andy's voice interrupts my reverie, drawing me back to the present moment.

'Nic, don't forget to grab the brolly and the rain cover for the buggy. It's wet as hell out there and it's not likely to get any better,' he warns me, a gentle smile playing at the corners of his lips. 'It'll be wonderful for all the little ones to be together again, won't it?' he says. 'Is your sister awake yet?' he asks Ben.

'Dunno,' my son replies with a shrug.

Andy laughs as he leaves the room to go check on his princess. He seems happier despite the question that sat awkwardly in every room we entered. Victoria's visit will distract us for a few days while I figure out how to bring it up again, but that kiss, the way he just held me, that didn't feel like a man with doubts.

Andy returns with Grace in his arms, her beautiful dark curls spiking out at odd angles, sleep creases across her tiny plump cheeks. They both yawn in tandem as Grace reaches out her arms to me, eager for a mummy cuddle.

'Are you excited? We're going to the beach today, to see Sophia and Leo!' I bounce her up and down on the spot.

Andy continues his routine, shuffling around the house humming along to the radio and leaving kisses on each of our cheeks before he slips out of the house to tackle his daily commute. I'm sad, of course, that he can't be with us to see Vic, but Mark isn't here anyway, and he can catch up with her at the weekend. Today is just for us. Seeing her again, being able to hug her, will make it all feel real. Not just our friendship, but the memories of a day we share that still feels like it happened to someone else.

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FOURTEEN

Nicole

Spain – January 2020

The sun hangs low over the horizon, casting a warm glow across the golden sand of the Spanish coastline and highlighting the paddleboarders out at sea in a kind of heavenly halo. I make my way towards the beach, feeling the gentle breeze brush against my skin, carrying with it the salty scent of the sea. It's a welcome relief after the stifling claustrophobia of the hospital, where I've spent the past week in a whirlwind of worry.

I don't even remember the first few days. From the moment I was put in the ambulance, the world blurred and I can't remember arriving at the hospital. When I woke in a new room, hooked up to drips and monitors, I couldn't even recall the birth of our wee girl. As I reach the long stretch of the *paseo*, I look around and wonder if all of this is a dream.

A couple skate by on rollerblades, holding hands and giggling as they pass, apologising for almost bumping into the pram I'm pushing ahead of me.

I close my eyes and take in the sounds around me. The rustling of the wind through the palm leaves, the sound of seagulls above and the sea as it laps against the shores. Such a world away from the screaming and beeping and constant chatter of the ward. It's the first time in a week I've heard anything close to silence. She's so tiny and fragile, but I'm grateful they have let us take her out of the hospital now. Andy had dropped us near the beach on his way to the *Gestoria*. He was meeting Victoria's husband there, to finalise the paperwork for our trip home. We'd been so fortunate that Victoria had gone into labour on the same day. Had Andy not met her husband, this whole process might have been so much harder. Instead, Mark had taken the stress off both our shoulders. I'd heard a lot about Victoria through Mark when he visited us at the hospital and we'd exchanged pleasantries over FaceTime calls, but I was excited to spend time with her in person.

Her twins are still in the NICU at the posh private hospital just down the

road. They aren't due to be released for a week or so, but Victoria seemed keen to meet up for some 'fresh air and a gentle stroll'.

I watch the gentle fluttering of my baby girl's soft eyelids and I'm thankful for the cool breeze. I was so worried that she might be too hot wrapped like a burrito in her bassinette, but it's the only way I can get her to sleep. In fact, this is the longest that she has been quiet since she was born. She screams constantly, unless she is wrapped tightly in a cocoon. Ben used to fight like a trained boxer when I would attempt a swaddle, but Grace seems unable to settle unless she is curled up on my chest or tightly encased. I know the silence won't last, but I'm grateful I'm not turning up with a screaming new-born to a mother who is unable to hold her own outside of the Perspex cases of a NICU unit.

As I reach the spot where we've arranged to meet, I spot Victoria sitting on a bench looking out towards the sea. She looks exactly like her Instagram pictures, which irks me a little. I always assumed most people used filters, but Victoria didn't need to. Her dark hair was shining in the winter sun, glossy and straight, not a wisp out of place. I tried to remind myself that I'd looked that good just after Ben too.

I raise my palm and flatten down the strays that have escaped the clip at my crown. At least the cool breeze will have left a pink tinge to my cheeks. Her face lights up with a smile as she catches sight of me, and I feel a surge of gratitude towards this total stranger.

'Nicole?' she calls out as she stands and smooths the floaty top over her hips. She's self-conscious, I can tell. I remember that feeling, the first time you don't recognise your own body anymore.

Grace begins to stir slightly as I make my way towards her, her lashes flickering open to reveal a pair of curious blue eyes. I can't help but wonder how long it will take for them to change in colour, and if she'll get my colouring or Andy's. Right now, I can't tell who she looks more like.

'Hey, Victoria?' I greet her, returning her smile. 'So good to finally meet you.'

'You too,' she replies, embracing me in a warm hug, but our bodies kept at a distance. We both laugh at the silent acknowledgement that neither of us are quite used to not having huge bumps to navigate anymore.

'Oh my God, look at this wee one. Grace, that's right, isn't it? She's such a bonnie wee thing.'

A trace of a Scottish accent tickles the edges of her words.

I glance down at my daughter, a swell of pride in my chest. 'Thank you. How are the twins doing?'

Victoria's smile falters slightly at the mention of her babies, a shadow crossing her features. 'Still in the NICU,' she says. 'But they're fighters. Just struggling to thrive, so the nurses keep saying. Sophia and Leo . . .'

'Oh, Victoria. What beautiful names!' I say as I do the very British sympathetic head-tilt.

'Yeah, Sophia is an easy name in Spanish and English, and Leo, well, Mark always wanted that name, so I figured I wouldn't argue.'

She lowers her head a little but as she raises her face once more, I see a slight reddening of her eyes.

I squeeze her hand in solidarity, knowing all too well the worry she is going through. Grace was only under observation for a few days and that was scary enough. Not knowing how long your babies will be in the NICU must be terrifying.

'They'll be home before you know it,' I reassure her, hoping my words hold some measure of comfort.

I take my seat next to her on the bench and drag the pushchair to the side of me. I try to keep the back and forth movement constant in the hopes that Grace will stay sleeping, or at the very least, stay quiet. We both sit looking out to sea, the waves crashing against the shore, in companionable silence for just a moment.

When the conversation starts back up again, it's as easy as if we have been friends for a lifetime.

In many ways, we couldn't be more opposite. Victoria, a child of the care system for most of her life, travelling to a new country to find a sense of home; me smothered by a huge family and walls that hold too many secrets of past generations. I married my childhood boyfriend and moved half an hour from my family home; she found a whole new life in Mark and moved to a foreign land with no hesitation. But as much as our differences were obvious, it was our similarities that saw us knitting together a new friendship. We laughed over the things we loved and hated about 'home' in equal measure.

But it wasn't the only thing that bonded us, yet in the half hour that passed, neither of us had broached the subject yet.

‘So, how are you really?’ I ask her finally. She turns to look at me and need say no words.

‘Well, it’s mad. Isn’t it? I had it all planned,’ Victoria started. ‘I had my playlist arranged; I’d even done a tour of the labour ward, met the nurses, everything. I thought because I had it all planned, it would be fine.’

As Victoria recounts the story of her own labour, I marvel at the strange way life throws people into our orbit. The ‘Guiri’ house she spoke of was actually Andy’s brother’s. The one we were staying in. We both chuckled at the idea that Victoria’s text about the idiot driver was Mark trying to get me to the hospital. We’d both been passengers in each other’s story long before we even realised.

‘The whole thing is nuts, but I’m grateful in a way. I think,’ I say as Victoria brings her story to a close, ‘I could’ve gone through this whole process alone and terrified, and we would still be struggling to figure out all the paperwork, but instead, the universe threw us together. Maybe we were always supposed to meet.’

Even as the words escape my mouth, I regret them. I sound like some hippy-dippy old woman.

‘God that sounds so trite,’ I say to her, trying to wipe the words from the air and rewind time.

‘No, I think I know what you mean, and I agree. I don’t have many mum friends here, and as much as the hospital is beautiful, being in private rooms means you don’t meet the others. I’ve been quite lonely since the birth, haven’t spoken to anyone but Mark, and he’s never there at the moment.’

The guilt hits me. That’s our fault. ‘Oh God, I’m so sorry.’

‘No no no,’ Victoria says, taking my hands in hers and shaking me wildly. ‘God no, I’m not blaming you. If it wasn’t you guys, it would be someone else. Mark loves his work. And with the babies needing a little more help than we first expected, he would be working harder anyway to make extra cash. It’s not your fault. I’m glad he’s been able to help. With all the stress of premature babies, I can’t even begin to understand how you are coping with the stress of repatriation too!’

‘I mean, I’m not really sure what else could have been thrown at us.’ I laugh, because if I don’t, I will cry, again. ‘We fly to Spain for a “babymoon”, go into premature labour on Three Kings Day, get stuck in urgent care before the ambulance can get there and then go into shock with

placental abruption – all whilst navigating a language I don't understand and a legal system that makes no sense, just to get the documentation to get us all home. Honestly, you couldn't make this up!'

'Honestly though, Nicole, I'm fluent in Spanish, had the whole birth thing planned. I know these streets like the back of my hand, planned various routes to the hospital and then the universe laughed at me by shutting every single road between me and the only escape route off the mountain because my babies decided that *Tres Reyes* was the perfect time to arrive. I had it all planned, and it still went to shit.'

'It's madness, isn't it?' I say, as we both dissolve into fits of laughter.

'Goddamn hormones,' Victoria chokes back. 'One minute I'm laughing, the next I'm sobbing. I feel like I'm losing my mind.'

'Get used to that,' I warn her. 'If you think this is a rollercoaster, wait until sleep deprivation kicks in. I hope to God you have a good support network. With twins on your hands, you'll need to take advantage of any help you can get!'

I stop talking, aware that I'm now sounding like a know-it-all mother. That's the last thing any new mum needs.

We trip back to happier topics, Victoria reminiscing about her Scottish roots, making me long for home. This holiday has been exhausting. I was ready to get home and start our new lives.

As we sit there on the beach, my daughter sleeping peacefully beside us, I'm grateful for the unexpected friendship that seems to be blossoming between us.

'We'll have to stay in touch,' I venture. 'When you come back to Scotland, come visit us, and we'll come back here for sure. But we can keep in contact over Skype or whatnot?'

I sound desperate and for a moment I want to roll my words back. This lovely, glossy, first-time Insta-mum won't want to stay in touch with me, surely.

'My God yes, let's do that,' she replies. 'I'd love to stay in touch. Our kids have a special connection now, and I'd love to hear how you guys get on back home. I'm on Facebook. You can add me if you like?' She pulls out her phone and I do the same.

'Well actually, Andy already gave me your Instagram!' She looks shocked

for a moment. 'Not that I'm stalking you or anything – Mark gave it to him.'

'No no, it's fine,' she says tapping something into her phone. 'It's just, well, Insta is more of a work thing. You know what it's like. I don't reply to messages on there. Mark likes the pictures on there to always be super positive, so you know . . .'

As her words trail off, she lifts her phone and takes a picture of the setting sun.

'It's beautiful here for sure, but it's only the pretty stuff that lands on Insta.' I can see a worry creep across her face as the golden glow lights up her perfect features. 'I know Mark wants to plaster the kids all over our page, but I don't want their faces on there, you know? So, let's keep in touch and do Skype chats when we can. That way we can show off our babies for real.'

I like her. The longer I spend in her company, the easier it feels to talk to her, and with no idea when we will next see each other, I find myself missing her already.

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FIFTEEN

Victoria

Broughty Ferry, Dundee – October 2022

I'm so glad I arranged to drive to Dundee to see Nicole today. As much as it has been lovely to be home, it's quite intense being surrounded by Maggie's things for long periods of time. I found myself worrying the kids would spill juice on the carpet or break one of her many figurines, forgetting of course that Maggie couldn't care less anymore. But the hardest thing was expecting her to walk in the room every time the door handle turned. The healing powers of the Scottish salty sea air and the calm wisdom of my fabulous friend is exactly what I need today.

As I drive, I try to ignore the incessant buzzing from my phone. I know who it is; he's been pestering me all morning. I turned off my location tracker when we landed in Edinburgh and it's driving him mad that he doesn't know my every waking move. Right now, I just need some space, and it doesn't seem to matter how much I try to explain that to him, he refuses to let me breathe. I will not allow his persistence ruin my mood. Today is not about him. It's not even about us. It's about me and Nicole, and the kids.

I pull my car into a parking spot along the seafront. The crisp October air stings my cheeks as I step out and breathe in the salty sea breeze. Despite the cold and miserable weather, there's a warmth flooding my insides as I recognise the familiar sights of the beach Maggie would bring us to for the holidays.

I push open the door to the café where Nicole and I are meeting and scan the room until my eyes land on her. She's seated at a table by the window with her daughter bouncing happily on her knee, a spoonful of cream heading for her lips as Nicole attempts to make her laugh. It's such a wholesome sight, made all the more beautiful by the sight of her older son Ben laughing along with his little sister.

'Nicole,' I call out. 'God, girl, is that you in the flesh?'

Her face lights up with a radiant smile as she stands to greet me, Grace

nestled in her arms.

‘Victoria,’ she replies, pulling me into a warm hug. ‘God it’s good to see you.’

We settle down at the table, the children chattering excitedly as they dig into their overloaded hot chocolates.

It’s not long until the sugar hits their systems and before I even have to say anything, Ben suggests we take the ‘double-doubles’ to the beach to run around. As we leave the café, he takes hold of Grace’s stroller and walks it diligently across the road while Nicole helps me wrangle the twins, who are now of course far too excited to get back in the buggy.

As we walk along the shoreline together, the kids playing in the sandbanks, the chat comes as easily as it does over Zoom. With the pleasantries of the ‘*how was the flight*’ and ‘*how are you finding the cold*’ out of the way, it’s not long before we slip into more serious conversations. Ben unclips Sophia from the pushchair and the four children run ahead, picking up rocks and shells along the way.

‘You know what,’ Nicole starts, ‘I’m not sure I ever expected to see them together in the same place. For a while there, it seemed like the world was doing everything it could to keep us apart.’

I feel the same and smile back my recognition.

‘It’s funny though,’ I reply, ‘it’s as if they were always meant to be friends. Look at them!’

Grace seems to have taken a real shine to Leo, and the two are walking hand in hand along the shoreline.

‘Cute,’ Nicole muses. ‘You never know, they might end up married when they’re older, and we’ll look back on this day and laugh.’

I smile. ‘Who knows,’ I reply. ‘Stranger things have happened.’

As we watch the children play, their laughter echoing against the backdrop of the sea, the chat finally turns to the real reason I am here. It’s so much harder to hide when you are stood in front of someone. When Nicole asks me what made me decide so suddenly to come home, I think about lying for a beat, but her eyes and her warmth make me feel safe. Once the floodgates open, it’s hard to stop the deluge of emotion that pours out of me.

As Nicole passes me a tissue to wipe up my tears, we take a seat on the bench facing the sea.

‘Vic, I had no idea you were struggling this much. Why on earth didn’t you tell me sooner?’ Nicole asks as she rubs my back.

‘I’m not entirely sure I realised how bad I was feeling myself until I booked the flights. I thought maybe it was just grief, mixed with the exhaustion of single-parenting most of the time. But honestly, I wonder if it’s Maggie that I’m grieving, or a life I honestly thought I was going to have that never materialised. This place, as much as I bloody hate the weather, has already made me feel calmer than sitting at a beach bar alone with a cocktail.’

The wind whips at our ankles and I pull my jacket tighter around my body.

‘Yep,’ I continue with a shiver, ‘I really hate this weather. But it’s not just this place, Nic. Do you know, I hadn’t seen my foster siblings since I left here? Maggie came to visit a couple of times before she died, but Abigail. . . I haven’t seen her in years. I’m not sure I ever realised how much I missed her.’

I watch the children playing and realise that all this time, I’d been searching for a family like the ones in the fairy-tale books. Only, I already had a family and I never appreciated it.

‘It’s not like Mark took me away from them on purpose,’ I say, but immediately I wonder if I believe the words I am saying. ‘Well, maybe he did. But I don’t think it was in a malicious way, just in a “I will fix you” kind of way. But I feel like I’ve been moulded into this perfect trophy wife, the one who sits at home, cooks the food and makes the kids look pretty for pictures, but it’s not a life, Nic. It’s not fulfilling. I need more than that. I want real love. I want someone who wants to raise these kids *with* me. I want someone who wants to make memories with all of us, not make reels for Instagram.’

In the last hour, I had explained all the ways Mark made me feel invisible, told her all the times I have felt lonely. I hadn’t understood just how much keeping those words inside had affected me. The more I talk, the lighter I feel. She has listened without judgement and without comment. She hasn’t hated on Mark, but neither has she made excuses for him. Now she says, ‘You deserve to be happy, and if you’re not happy, you deserve the chance to find that happiness.’

‘I don’t know, Nic, it’s not like I want to walk away. We have kids

together and I can't just decide that I'm done. But I don't remember the last time he made me laugh. I don't remember the last time he asked my opinion on anything that isn't to do with the children, and I can't remember the last time I looked in the mirror and felt desired. But if this is it, if this is my life now, I'm not sure I want it.'

I couldn't have said those words to anyone else. I couldn't be this honest, this blunt. But as the words hit the air, I realise just how long I've waited to say them.

'Vic, listen to me,' Nicole starts. She takes my sweaty hands in hers and looks me dead in the eye, her expression immediately setting off the waterworks again. 'You're not a failure if your marriage fails. You are not the problem if it ends. If a marriage isn't right, it's not right for either of you. Having children won't fix problems in your marriage – I know that all too well – but they sure as hell can highlight problems you never knew you had.'

'Abbie told me last night that she and Stephen had always worried that Mark was too selfish for me. That I slip into the role of fixer. Even if it hurts me, I put Mark's needs ahead of my own.' I look at my friend and notice her nodding slowly. 'Do you think that too?'

'Well,' she starts, tentatively, 'some nights, I hear the way you talk about how little he helps you and wonder how the hell you let him get away with it. But everyone's relationship is different. I wasn't there to see the beginning, and I've only ever known your marriage through the lens of a laptop, and I'm not here to judge.'

She lays her hand on my lap as I fiddle with the corners of a soggy tissue in my hands.

'But,' she starts again, 'I don't remember the last time you told me he looked after the kids so you could get your hair done, or pop to the shop alone, or go out with friends. He treats looking after the kids like babysitting and makes you feel guilty for that, but it's not babysitting if they are yours – that's just parenting.'

If I was worried that meeting in person again would change our friendship in any way, I shouldn't have been. Nicole is as blunt and wise in person as she is when she's in that little box on my laptop.

'I'm just sorry you never felt you could talk to me about all this on our calls. All this time, Vic, your life seemed so rosy and you were miserable. I

wish I could have helped.’ Her eyes look sad; I reach forward and wrap my arms around her shoulders, pulling her in for a proper hug. ‘Nic, you’ll never know how much you helped just by being there. And this . . .’ I say, gesturing between the two of us, ‘I got on a plane on my own with two kids, feeling brave enough to tackle this alone because you make me feel brave.’

‘Muuuummmmy.’ Sophia is running towards me at a rate of knots, Ben following closely behind her, his arms outstretched in case she trips over. It’s so lovely to see them interacting with such ease.

‘Muuuuuummmmmmy. It’s ffffeeeeeezing.’

I chuckle at her dramatic shivering as I lift her into my lap.

‘Here,’ I say as I wrap her inside my jacket and snuggle her close. ‘You havin’ fun?’

‘Yep,’ she replies, very matter-of-factly. ‘Ben’s so funny.’ Her eyes are beaming, and the pink of the cold on her cheeks suits her.

I have my head buried in the nape of my girl’s neck, blowing raspberries as she giggles, when I hear the wheezing next to me increasing.

‘It’s OK.’ Nicole is rubbing Ben’s back; he’s bent double and as he raises his head I can’t hide my shock. His face is almost blue.

‘Jesus, Ben, are you OK?’ I say, as I put Sophia on the bench. Grace and Leo have found their way back to us too. They stand watching Ben coughing with fear on their faces.

I watch as my friend reaches over and lifts Ben’s fringe, beads of sweat obvious on his brow.

‘You’re burning up again, pal. Deep breaths, OK? Do you feel dizzy?’

Nicole is rummaging in her bag and for the first time, I feel proper panic.

‘Mum, I don’t feel good.’

With that, we watch helplessly as his body crumples and Nicole only just catches him as he collapses to the ground.

‘SHIT!’ Nicole screams. ‘Victoria! Call an ambulance!’

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SIXTEEN

Nicole

Broughty Ferry, Dundee – October 2022

‘What are they saying?’ I shout.

I can’t hear the roar of the sea anymore, or even the screams of the gulls overhead. All I can hear is the rushing of the blood in my ears.

‘She’s just trying to find the closest ambulance,’ Victoria replies. If there was any part of me that thought I was being even the slightest bit melodramatic, the look on her face banished that.

I thought I had got his fever under control yesterday. ‘He was fine this morning.’

As I move his fringe, I watch as his eyes begin to quiver a little and before I know it, he’s shaking violently in my arms.

‘He’s fitting!’ I shout at Vic. ‘Oh my God, Vic, tell them he’s having a fit! Ben, baby boy. Hey, Ben. Look at me. SHIT! VICTORIA, WHERE ARE THEY!!!’

My whole world is slowing down and speeding up all at once. My focus is blurring as I try to remember the steps to keep my boy safe. He’s lying on the sand as I hold his head on my hand, his body thrashing out.

‘They’re on the way! Nic, five minutes out. Here . . . listen.’

Victoria places the phone on the bench, the speaker on and volume up, but with the wind whipping around I can barely hear the voice on the other end.

‘. . . long has the seizure . . .’

I can barely hear the words.

‘He’s stopped shaking. How long did it last? Vic? I can’t think . . . it all happened so . . .’

‘About a minute and a half. He was shaking for about a minute and a half.’ Victoria lifts the phone to her face and is able to speak more sense to the woman on the other end than I can even comprehend in this moment. I’m not sure I would even remember my own name right now if she asked me.

‘OK,’ says the lady on the phone. ‘Keep him on his side and as calm as

possible. Someone will be with you soon. Let me know when you can see them, OK? Is the little lad conscious?’

‘Ben? Ben?’ I stroke his face and watch as his eyes open, but he’s looking through me, not at me.

‘Ben, are you OK?’ I want so badly to lift him up, but the terror has me frozen to the spot.

‘He’s got his eyes open, and he’s breathing,’ Victoria informs the call handler.

Grace appears by my side, still holding Leo’s hand, but in her other she’s holding the blanket from her buggy outstretched towards me.

‘For Ben. It’s too cold. Look, he’s blue, he’s cold.’ Her voice full of concern, she drops Leo’s hand and places the blanket on her brother’s legs, tucking it under as tight as she can with her tiny little hands. My heart breaks, and I reach out for her. She climbs onto my lap and kisses my cheek gently.

‘It’s OK. Don’t worry, Mummy. Ben is a lion. He’ll be OK.’

With that, the tears fall. Not in any way invited, or welcomed, but forcing themselves out of me anyway. As I bury my fear in my daughter’s hair, I hear sirens in the distance and take a breath.

‘Ben. Smudge. Smudge, open your eyes and look at me.’ His breathing is short and shallow. ‘Baby? Ben? Please, my boy, talk to me. The ambulance is here, baby. Don’t worry, we’re gonna get this fixed OK. HURRY!’ I shout out towards the hi-vis vests I can see running towards me, masks over their faces and equipment in each hand.

‘Hello there, is this Ben?’ The female paramedic bends down beside my son as her male partner starts to unpack equipment by his side.

‘My name is Lynsey. Can you see me, Ben?’ She takes out a thermometer gun and aims it straight at his head. The beeping comes almost instantly. Ben mumbles a response but can’t seem to find words.

‘Nice to see you’re awake, Ben. Can you tell me how many fingers I’m holding up?’

As the paramedic goes through the checks, her companion is unfurling the stretcher.

‘It looks like a fever seizure. How long did it last, Mum?’

I try to find my words, looking between the strangers surrounding my son and the calming face of my friend. Thank the Lord she was here.

Victoria answers for me, as I stare at my son, a mask on his face pumping much-needed oxygen, as the paramedics lift him like a rag doll onto the stretcher.

‘OK, we’ll get him to the hospital to get checked . . .’ The paramedics look between us and the kids at our feet, and with no questions needed to be asked, Victoria kicks into gear.

‘Nic, you go with Ben. Give me your keys. I’ll grab the car seat from your car and follow you to the hospital with the kids. I’ve got Andy’s number. I’ll call him and get him to meet us there, OK?’

Everything is happening around me. The pale face of my young boy seems ghostlike against the bright plastic of the stretcher.

I hand over my keys, my buggy and my baby girl to my friend as I follow the paramedics to the ambulance.

‘Vic,’ I shout back over my shoulder, watching her corralling three kids under three alone. ‘Thank you!’

‘Go!’ she shouts back, strapping her two into the buggy and sitting Grace on the hood of the buggy, her legs balanced over the handlebars. ‘I’ve got this! Go, I’ll see you there!’

Riding to the hospital in the back of the ambulance is terrifying.

‘Can you tell me a little about the last few weeks? Has Ben had any other issues?’

The paramedic places her stethoscope around her neck and pulls out a clipboard. It isn’t until I mention the bruise on his neck and leg that she seems to change tack with her questions.

She examines the bruises and makes a note in the margins of her paperwork.

‘Is there something I should know?’

She tucks the paperwork into her bag, her eyes creasing above the mask as she attempts a warming, invisible smile.

‘His heart rate is stabilising, and his breathing is shallow, but the oxygen will help. The doctors will be able to tell you more when they’ve assessed him. How are you feeling?’

I feel like the last question might be a little redundant or asked deliberately to throw me off asking her more questions.

The ambulance takes a sharp corner and then stops abruptly. Before I can collect my thoughts, the back doors swing open, and I'm faced with what looks like the entire cast of *Grey's Anatomy*. All masked up, gloved up and ready for battle.

'Shit. Is it that bad?' I ask, looking towards the paramedic.

'Don't worry, they've got this. They know what they're doing.'

As my boy is wheeled out of the back of the ambulance, I listen as the paramedic reads out my son's age and name, before reeling off a bunch of numbers that mean nothing to me. It's the next bit that scares me most.

'Dizzy spells, loss of weight and suspicious bruising.'

Saying it out loud like that, all those symptoms together, they sound so much more ominous. Had I missed something? Had the doctor?

'Is my boy OK?' I shout at the back of the white coats that are wheeling him towards bi-folding doors that seem to be the portal to every parent's hell.

One of the white coats turns around and looks at me. She taps the arm of the paramedic, who stops and turns to face me.

'Why don't you come with me. Ben's having problems breathing so they're going to rush him straight into resus. You can sit with him in just a second, but they need a few details first.'

I watch as the bed is wheeled through the doors, him on one side and me on the other. I feel like my soul has been ripped out of my chest.

'What have I done? What did I miss? He had a fever yesterday. Should I have brought him in? Our GP said not to.'

The kind woman guides me into a chair in a quiet empty room. 'I'm going to go and grab you a cup of tea, OK? I'll be right back.'

I place my bag at my feet. Too numb to even look through it to find my phone.

How the hell did I get here?

Andy. That's who I need right now.

I rummage about by my feet and pull out the phone. A message from Andy: *'I'm coming. Won't be long.'*

My heart leaps. Thank God for Vic.

The paramedic hasn't even returned with tea before I'm taken to resus. My boy lying on a bed, strapped up with wires, a mask over his face pumping his lungs with oxygen.

‘Don’t worry, he’s breathing a little better now. Do you want to take a seat? We need to run through a few questions with you,’ the nurse says.

I must remember to keep looking in the direction of the nurses when they speak to me; their voices are often mumbled behind the masks.

I sit down in the chair next to my son, nothing but a thin curtain between me and the old man sat in the next bay, groaning so loudly it’s hard to hear my own thoughts.

‘We just need to establish a few things before we take Benjamin off for tests,’ says the nurse.

I nod, my body going into autopilot.

The kind nurse perches calmly on her haunches in front of me as she asks me questions that feel more akin to a police interrogation. I can understand why. A young lad comes into A&E with bruising all over his body and difficulty breathing, safeguarding is obviously a concern. As much as I hate being under the microscope, I understand and try to answer her questions as calmly as I can.

‘Honestly, I don’t know. The doctor saw the bruises and wasn’t worried. He said this winter flu thing would be making him a little clumsy – that’s all.’

I try to stop my voice from shaking but I’m failing. It feels like I am failing everything. My marriage, my kids. How could I have let things get this bad? Why hadn’t I questioned the doctor more? Why hadn’t I pushed for an in-person consult?

‘The first thing we need to do is run some tests,’ the nurse explains, as another young woman pulls back the curtain surrounding us and carries in a tray filled with tubes.

‘We need to take bloods, if that’s OK. It should give us a clearer idea of what is going on in Benjamin’s body.’

‘Please call him Ben,’ I say. ‘He hates being called Benjamin.’

As I look at his sunken, pale cheeks as he tries to breathe air through the oxygen mask, I pray to God it won’t be long until he’s performing his dance routines in front of us again.

‘No problem. Ben.’ She writes a note on his chart.

‘I missed something. Didn’t I? I should have brought him in sooner? I asked the GP. He told me not to worry. What’s wrong? Can you tell me?’

‘We don’t know anything yet, but we’re going to run bloods and see what

comes back. We would like to take him down to run a CT too, if that's OK?'

I'm taken back into the relatives' room where I sit for what feels like hours. It could well have been only moments, but time seems to mean nothing right now. As the door opens and I see my husband's face, I breathe a deep sigh of relief. Kez follows him into the room.

'Oh my God! You're both here!' I leap from the chair and wrap my arms around my husband.

'We're all here. Vic is outside with the kids,' Kerri-Ann says. 'She's lovely by the way. God knows how she wrangled those kids on her own to get here. They won't let her in though – she's not family.'

I fill them both in on the events of the day and watch as the panic fills in all the creases in my husband's face.

Kez takes charge. 'Right, OK. Here is what's gonna happen. I'm gonna get Victoria to drive me back to the beach to collect your car. I'll take Grace home and wait for you there. Andy, obviously you stay here with Nic and Ben. Keep me up to date. Vic is gonna head back to Edinburgh with her two, who are bloody gorgeous by the way . . . and how cute are Leo and Grace together?' Amongst all the worry and stress, I had completely forgotten that poor Vic must be outside doing her nut in.

'She says she can pop back tomorrow or the next day to see you guys, depending on how Ben is doing obviously,' Kez continues.

My life is being rearranged around me, but for the first time, I'm OK about it.

Kez hugs us both and leaves the room. Andy takes my hand and sits me back down on the pleather armchair, the cold tea the nurse eventually brought still sits on the table, a film long since formed over the top.

'So, they're doing tests?' Andy asks.

'Yep,' I reply. Neither of us know what to say to each other. This all feels like a bad dream.

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SEVENTEEN

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

We'd been sat in the relatives' room for what felt like hours, when the nurse finally came to tell us Ben was being moved into a room. At first, I was relieved. Getting out of resus and into a room meant we were getting somewhere. But when they explained why, my heart sank. With a lower count of white blood cells, his body was finding it hard to fight off infections, a condition known as neutropenia. Ben had been moved into an isolation room.

All the medical staff coming in and out would have to wear full protective gear, and so would we, to make sure that we didn't bring any other bacteria or germs into the room with us. We were both tested for Covid, and then given a full set of gowns, masks and protective shoe coverings. It was only then they explained that Ben had developed quite severe pneumonia, and so while they were trying to get to the bottom of what exactly was affecting this body, they were treating the pneumonia first to get his vitals stable. We had to choose one parent to be the 'primary' and only that parent would be allowed in. No other visitors would be permitted.

'So, wait, you're saying that only one of us can see him? That's madness!' Andy says to the doctor.

'I understand how tough this is – honestly, I do. But as much as restrictions have been lifted, in here, we must be careful.' The young doctor looks as pained to say the words as my husband does hearing them.

'Well, clearly you have to go in!' says Andy, his words a little sharper than I would have expected in the moment. 'He'll need his mum.' He doesn't look at me; instead he looks at his feet.

'Don't worry, Mr Murray. You can swap a little later, but obviously we'll have to test for Covid again before you do.'

Andy pulls me close to him and hugs me hard. He breathes deep and I feel his body sink into mine as the weight of him feels heavier on my shoulders.

'It's just, he's my wee boy too, you know? Give my wee Smudge a hug

from me, OK? Tell him I'm here. I won't go anywhere until he's better. I'm right here,' he says as he squeezes me hard.

Before suiting up, I message Kerri-Ann, and try to explain as best I can what's going on. Then I message Vic.

'Thank you. For everything. I am so sorry we got cut short, but it's serious. He's got pneumonia and low white blood cells. He's in an isolation ward while they try to get his vitals up. They won't even let Andy in.'

She replies almost instantly.

'We've just pulled into the services for a wee – almost home. Can I pop back tomorrow maybe? See you for a coffee at the hospital café? I'm here for you, OK? If I can help at all just call!'

I make a plan to message her later; maybe Kez can keep an eye on all the kids at home for an hour or so while Vic pops up to see us.

I take my place next to Ben's bedside and watch as the delicate chest of my son rises and lowers rhythmically with the machine. For the first time since I was a kid at school, I pray. I pray to a god I'm not sure I believe in, to all the gods I don't even know about and to the devil himself not to take my son.

After a few hours of staring at the shape of my baby boy lying in a hospital bed, the nurses tell me to take a walk and get some air. Andy is still waiting in the relatives' room and has asked a nurse to tell me to come and get a coffee. Being cooped up in protective gear for hours on end wasn't healthy for anyone.

As I make my way to the coffee shop, I text Andy.

'I'm grabbing a coffee. Where are you? Want one?'

The sound of my heels echo down the corridor as I count my steps. I try to focus on the small details around me to drown out the spinning that is making my world feel unstable.

'I'm in the gardens outside. Grab me a black coffee and join me.'

I don't need caffeine to keep me awake; I'm wired and not sure I will ever sleep again, but I feel like I need something to strengthen my insides.

As I reach the bench, I am met with the pain-filled eyes of the man I love and although still filled with fear, my heart feels lighter. My phone buzzes away in my pocket; no doubt Kez has now filled the family in. I stare at the screen, a million updates and multiple messages from pretty much every

member of the family. I don't really want to talk to any of them yet. What would I even say? I've no idea what's going on and we're still waiting for test results to come back. Kerri-Ann would keep them at bay for me for now.

We sit at opposite sides of the bench, as far apart as we can handle, both staring straight ahead.

'Have they said anything yet?' Andy's voice is hoarse. I can hear the leftover tears collected in his throat, waiting to pounce.

'Nothing. Just more tests,' I reply.

'I can't lose him, Nic. That boy, my boy . . . I can't . . .' He bends forward and knits his fingers into his hair, the silver of his wedding ring glinting beneath the waves. I want to reach out and hold him.

'Andy, he's not going anywhere. I won't let him.' It sounds as ridiculous coming out of my mouth as it did in my head, but I'm not sure what else I'm supposed to say. I carried that boy in my body for nine months, blotted every tear, wiped up every scrape and tucked him in to peaceful dreams every night of his young life. Of course he's not going anywhere. He's a part of me. I could no easier live without him than live without my own heart.

'I knew something was wrong,' he says, scratching his face and the rough five-o'clock shadow that covers his chin. 'I knew he wasn't right. He hasn't been for days. I need to learn to trust my gut. Why the hell did you take him to the beach?'

I watch him rub ferociously at his eyes as I calm myself before I answer. 'Andy, he was fine this morning. His fever was gone, and he was excited. I thought it would be good for him to get some fresh air.'

I try to keep my voice steady.

'Andy, I didn't do this. You know I didn't.' I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince: him or me. Silence. Both of us sat going through the same pain. Both looking for someone, anyone to blame. 'If we missed something, it was the doctors as much as us,' I say, trying to break the tension.

'I know,' he replies, turning to look at me. 'I know, it's just . . . I don't want to lose my family. I feel like I'm only just getting you all back, and now . . .'

'Andy, you never lost me. I never went anywhere. I promise I won't. Ben

is not going anywhere either. Me, you, our wee boy and our angel girl are all gonna be fine. I promise.'

I had no idea if any of this was true, but it was what I needed to hear right now, and it seemed the only way to hear that reassurance was to give it to myself.

'Listen, it's freezing. Why don't we go and sit in the relatives' room, in case they have updates. We'll both end up sick if we sit out here,' I say shivering, my loose-knit cardi doing little to keep me warm.

As if the universe was listening, the heavens opened, and rain found its way to us.

'Come on,' I say, as I stand in front of him, an arm's length apart, desperate to hug him, but knowing the risks of contamination. We couldn't risk taking any extra bugs into the room with our sick son.

'I love you, Nicole. I love our family.'

He is staring at his feet, kicking the rough stones beneath his toes, creating a scar in the mud. I try to catch his eye.

'Look at me, Andy. I know you do. Don't worry, our wee lad will be fine soon, and we can go home and snuggle with our baby girl too.'

I know we have to tackle the Grace issue, and seeing just how torn up he is, I understand why – now more than ever. As soon as this is over, I'll get Grace tested. For his peace of mind more than anything.

Andy closes his eyes, his eyelashes wet with tears, and keeps them closed for a beat longer than feels comfortable. As we turn back towards the hospital, I feel a knot tightening in my stomach, growing step by step and taking up an uncomfortable amount of space inside me. The night is drawing in, the darkness of the sky giving in and welcoming the evening without argument. The clouds above turn darker, and we make our way back into the hospital. I'm ready to cover myself in protective plastic again for the sake of my wee boy.

As we near the relatives' room, I recognise one of the nurses walking towards us with a definite purpose. By her side is a doctor I haven't met yet.

'What's going on? Has something happened?' I ask.

With a mask covering her face, I can't tell a damn thing. Her expression is hidden from me, her fears only voiced on the paperwork in her hands.

'Mrs Murray, we've spotted some worrying signs in your son's bloodwork, and we'd like to do a little more investigation. Dr Williams is

going to take a little more blood and then we will discuss next stages. Is that OK?’

What could I say to that? I wasn’t about to refuse them access to my son, but as I watch them take more of his life force, I wonder what is worrying them so much.

A new nurse approaches her from behind, tapping her on the shoulder before saying, ‘His oxygen levels are dipping again.’

‘OK, keep an eye and I will put a rush on this,’ she replies to the other nurse as she nods to the doctor and leaves him with us.

The doctor steps to the side of the corridor and invites us to do the same.

‘We’re waiting for a few more results to come through. I suggest that one of you stays here overnight. Then I’ll check in with you during rounds tomorrow morning and let you both know where we’re at.’ The doctor’s tone wasn’t giving anything away at all.

‘OK, well, Nic, you stay here. I’ll go home and take over from Kez and bring you back some stuff in the morning?’

We nod to each other and say our goodbyes to the doctor.

‘Love you,’ I say to Andy just as he is about to leave.

‘I love you too,’ he says back, and my heart leaps at the truth behind his words.

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EIGHTEEN

Victoria

Edinburgh – October 2022

As I sit on the sofa surrounded by memories of childhood, I can't focus. All I can think about is poor Ben in that hospital bed and how helpless Nicole must be feeling right now.

Abbie had greeted me at the door and listened to the details of the drama-filled day as she made a pot of tea and fussed around helping me feed the kids. With them both now fast asleep in the beds upstairs that Abbie and Stephen once slept in, we sit down for the first time today in complete silence.

'I'll drive you round to the cemetery in the morning if you like? Before you head back to Dundee?' says Abbie. The kindness in her voice steadies me. That was why I was here, after all, wasn't it? At least, that's what I've told her and Stephen.

'That'd be great, thanks,' I say as I sip from the delicate bone china teacup. Abbie had taken on Maggie's need to always serve tea 'the right way'. She always insisted on putting a lump of sugar in, and clearly Abbie had taken note. I can feel the sweetness of the liquid boosting my mood.

'How were the kids today?' Abbie breaks the silence, obviously keen to chat, and I don't have the heart to tell her I need quiet.

'They were amazing. I was worried they'd be a nightmare. They're both in that terrible-twins phase now, so it could have gone either way.' I laugh.

'Bringing up kids is hard at the best of times, but twins . . . I honestly don't know how you do it. I think I'll be sensible and stick to just the one.'

I can imagine her being a fabulous mother. She's so caring and compassionate.

'Trust me, I didn't choose it!' I laugh again. 'Honestly, there are days I think I was made to be a mother, and then there are months when I question if I should have ever taken the task on.'

'If Maggie were here, she would say, "*Kids are a blessing*",' she says, as

she blows cool air over the top of her already lukewarm cup of tea 'but you didn't exactly sign up to take on two at the same time, I guess.'

'I love them both, I really do. But I'm not sure I'm always the best mum.'

Abbie gets up from the wing-backed chair Maggie once sat in and joins me on the sofa, taking my hands in hers.

'I know you really wanted Maggie around to help with all this kind of stuff, and I'm sorry she isn't. I know I can't offer practical advice, but you know, you still have a family to lean on. You don't have to do this alone. I might not be as experienced as Maggie, but you can always talk to me.'

I'm not sure where the tears come from, but her sudden outpouring of love and support catches me totally unaware.

'Oh, babe,' she whispers as she pulls me into her chest. She draws herself back, wipes the tears from my cheeks and holds my face in her palms. 'You're not alone. You're never alone. You only ever need to reach out.'

Her warmth and comfort give me permission I didn't even know I needed to let go. I sob as she rocks me, and try through spluttered sobs to tell her just how hard I'm finding motherhood and, to my surprise, I even explain how hard I'm finding marriage. Maybe opening up to Victoria has unlocked something.

At some point during all the outpouring, the grandfather clock chimes in the hallway and I realise I've been monologuing all my woes for a good hour. My shoulders already feel lighter.

'The thing is, it's so easy to create a bubble for yourself out there. You work, day in and day out, to create a life everyone expects you to have and forget that the real world continues to turn outside of that bubble,' I say, and she nods.

'I get that,' she starts, and I can see she has something more to say, but she closes her mouth again, keeping her thoughts to herself.

I place the delicate cup on the saucer in front of me and get up to look at the photos in frames on the mantelpiece. They haven't moved since I left for Spain. The one of the four of us at Christmas that she sent me a copy of sits front and centre. I remember Stephen taking the picture and laughing at Maggie as she took a drag on her cigarette before hiding it and her glasses behind my back. '*A girl's gotta look her best,*' she'd said. I remember it like it was yesterday. Sitting next to the picture was a tall glass vase holding a huge bunch of gerbera daisies wrapped in foil.

‘I bought those to take the grave tomorrow,’ Abbie says.

Daisies were Maggie’s favourite. Unpretentious, bright, and best of all, cheap as chips. She wasn’t one for big expensive presents, and when any of her children would ask her what her favourite flowers were, she only ever said daisies. I suspected it was because she knew the young girls could go into the field behind her house and pick them for posies. Most days, you could wander around her house and see tiny little jars filled with water, wilting and dying daisies splayed out at messy angles, but each given with love by the children she took into her heart. To see them super-sized, almost the size of Abbie’s head, makes me smile.

‘I know the cemetery is filled with daisies in the summer, but I figured they’d brighten up the grave for a wee while, you know, until spring comes around again.’

‘My God, Abbie, she loved you so much, you know,’ I say, as I glance at another picture, this one just Maggie and Abbie, caught in a fit of laughter, both creased in giggles.

The two were inseparable. They laughed together like long-lost friends, gossiped together like fishwives with their husbands lost at sea, and half the time I wondered if she was placed here specifically to help Maggie. Abigail had healed Maggie’s broken heart when she lost her husband. She was the last child Maggie agreed to foster after Dennis died.

‘You, my beautiful Abigail, are the very best of her. Do you know that?’

We cry together, silently but with smiles on our faces, as we move along the pictures, talking through the memories of each.

‘I haven’t been here in so long,’ Abbie says. ‘Sometimes, I just can’t bear it. It doesn’t make sense to me that she’s not here anymore. Sometimes, I think if I just don’t visit, I can pretend she’s on that year-long cruise she always threatened to take,’ she continues.

I hadn’t noticed the time, hadn’t even realised how exhausted my body was, but as I yawn, I can feel every single muscle in my body screaming.

‘Hey, Abs. I’m done in. Wake me early, OK? We can go to the cemetery first thing.’

She pulls me in for a tight hug, and I let my body sink into hers.

‘You take Mag’s bed,’ I say to her. I’m not ready to be in that room alone, and I feel the need to cuddle with my kids. ‘I’m gonna crawl in next to Sophia for the night.’

As we move around the house, locking the doors and switching off the lights, my heart aches to hear Maggie saying goodnight at the top of the stairs like she used to.

I climb into the small single bed and try to mould my body around the starfish shape of my daughter who is lightly snoring. As I stroke her dark blonde curls, my mind wanders to my husband. I pick up my phone and type a message.

'It's been a rather dramatic day. Sorry I missed your calls. I'll call you tomorrow to explain everything. But here, thought you would like to see a pic of the kids all together.'

I attach a picture of all four children on the beach and hit send. I wait a good few minutes to see if I get a reply, but as I see the ticks turn blue and nothing in response, I shake my head in resignation. He'll be out with the lads drinking again, of course. Why would I expect anything different? While I lie in my childhood bed, trying to make sense of the past and how to move forward, he will be carrying on like nothing has happened. I envy his ability to switch off like this.

I thought coming here would help me realise that 'absence makes the heart grow fonder', but the longer I'm here, the more I realise your heart has to be with that person, for it to miss them. Maggie's absence pains me, but Mark's . . . I wasn't so sure anymore.

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NINETEEN

Victoria

Edinburgh – October 2022

We spent the best part of an hour trying to get the kids ready, which for me felt like an accomplishment. It normally takes so much longer, but with Abbie's help it was remarkable just how much easier it was to tag-team with the twins.

'How on earth do you do this on your own?' Abbie asks as she packs spare clothes and nappies into the change bag. Sophia's already out of nappies, but Leo is a little further behind. He's so good at home, but this new environment and all the changes seem to have unsettled him.

'I don't really have a choice. If Mark is at work, I just accept it's going to take me longer to get out of the house. In fact, half the time he's no real help even when he is there. It's hard to pack a change bag with a phone in your hand! I can't remember the last time I just grabbed a set of keys and walked out the door in the way he does. It's a full military operation with kids.'

I laugh, but deep down I'm livid. It's only now, with the help of Abbie, that I realise just how little Mark does to help. But the guilt of speaking badly about him gnaws at me, and I feel myself rolling back again. 'He's not good at planning ahead, that's all.' I regret my words instantly as I register the look on Abbie's face. She's less than impressed.

'You need to stop making excuses for him, Vic. He's a father. It shouldn't be just down to you to raise these bairns. It took two of you to make 'em, it's gonna take two of you to raise 'em.'

'Right, kids, let's get in the car,' I shout, putting an end to the conversation for now, but I know she's not done. I know she has more to say. I can almost read the words that are settling on the tip of her tongue.

We drive slowly towards the coast. I'm glad we found a cemetery outside of the city for Maggie to rest in. As we pull into a parking space, I ready myself.

'I'll stay here and look after the kids while you pop in,' Abbie says she

turns off the engine.

‘You don’t mind?’ I ask. Sophia might understand the concept of heaven and angels, but I’m not ready to explain to two almost three-year-olds what a graveyard is.

‘Course not,’ Abbie replies, patting my hand. My knuckles are white with tension as they grip the flowers.

‘I don’t come here enough. I know Stephen does, and I know a few of the others have been up to lay flowers, but there’s something . . .’ She pauses, clearly unable to find the words. ‘I don’t know,’ she continues, ‘it’s like with the house, I guess. Being there without her reminds me she’s not coming back. Coming here makes it too real.’ Abigail stares towards the gated entrance, her eyes full of grief.

‘I don’t think it matters if you come here all the time,’ I say to her, closing my eyes and taking in as much air as I can to fill my lungs and give me the strength. ‘I think it matters more that we remember her every day. That we talk about her. Don’t let her fade from memory. That matters more.’

That’s the story I had told myself, all through the lockdowns, that it didn’t matter that I wasn’t here to see her grave or say goodbye. I loved her, and wherever she was now, I was confident she knew that.

I climb out of the car just as Abbie puts a Disney playlist on the stereo to keep the kids occupied. As I walk towards the gate, the sound of their laughter lightens my steps, but as I near Maggie’s headstone, guilt and grief bubble to the surface.

I kneel in front of it, placing the huge gerbera daisies to the side while I wipe the mud and dust from her name. I run my fingers along the gold-etched letters and the sharp marble ending slices my skin, drawing a drop of blood. I suck hard at my finger, but don’t stop the tears as they pool behind my eyelids.

‘I’m sorry I wasn’t here. Sorry I let you down,’ I say. ‘I’m messing everything up, Maggie. I thought I would be a good wife, and a good mum, but I’m not so sure. I wanted to be the mum you were to me, but I’m failing.’

I wipe the tears away from my face, angry that I’m letting my emotions get the better of me. She deserves more than this. She deserves more than to be trapped beneath the mud, in a cold dark box, alone. She deserves to be sitting in the sun, on the beach in Spain with us.

‘I wish you were here. Wish you were here to tell me how to do this. To tell me what I’m doing wrong. You’d tell me what it is I’m missing. But you’re not here. So, what do I do? How do I do this? How do I fix it?’

I unwrap the flowers and arrange them into the tiny holes in the vase beside her headstone.

‘I can’t do this, Maggie. I can’t be a mum without a mum. I can’t do this without you. I’m failing, at everything. I don’t know who I’m supposed to be, or how to get back to who I was. How am I supposed to help mould these babies into strong humans when I feel like such a weak person myself?’

I’m talking to the stone like I expect it to reply. Part of me is begging her ghost to rise from the soil and give me the answers. Instead, I feel a steady hand on my shoulder. The sobs come loud and heavy until I feel arms wrapping around me.

‘You’re not a failure.’ I hear a voice I recognise but it’s not Abbie. The hand is not that of my sister, but Stephen. ‘Being a parent is tough, but it takes a family to raise a child. You just need your family, that’s all.’

I look around and see the ever-adoring face of my brother.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ He wasn’t supposed to make it here until tomorrow.

‘Abs messaged me. You’ve been keeping secrets, missy. You’re not OK, and Abbie’s worried about you. Reckons you need some brotherly love right now.’

I get up from my damp, muddy imprint on the ground and throw my arms around him.

‘What about Mallory? The kids?’

‘Well.’ He winked. ‘I’m pretty sure I can leave my kids alone with their mother for a few days to come and see you.’

His arms around me feel like peace, a warm blanket over me, security. My heart slows and my breathing regulates. I haven’t felt this safe in so long. I’d left home to build a family, a future. We’d moved to Spain in search of a community that would help us raise our children; but as I stand in this graveyard surrounded by ghosts, I feel more comfort than I have ever felt in Spain. Abigail and Stephen are not my blood, not my kin, but they are my family. As I hug him tighter, I feel like I’m right where I need to be. Where my soul feels calm.

We stand in that cemetery crying on each other's shoulders until the cold wind brings a nip to our fingers, and as I walk back to the car arm in arm with my big brother, I see the smile burst across Abbie's face.

'The triple threat back together again. Look at us,' she says as the eager and confused faces of my children stare at us from the back seat of the car.

'Look, I know you're going to Dundee today,' Stephen starts as he unlocks his car, 'but how about we drive back to the house, have a quick cuppa and a catch-up and then you can leave the kids with us for the afternoon while you get some time with your friend on your own. Taking kids to a hospital right now is not the best of ideas, and I'm here with Abs to help.'

I look between the faces of my siblings and realise they had planned all this behind my back.

'I can't . . .' I start, but Stephen silences me.

'Don't even with your "*I can't*". Just don't. I've got two kids – I know how to change nappies!'

I shrug my acceptance and we make our way back to the house to drop the kids off.

With Stephen around, the laughter flows. He was always the clown of the group. He scoops up his niece and nephew from the back of the car and bounces them on his hips all the way through the house into the back garden. As the kids run around the garden, we sit on Maggie's bench and watch the clouds roll over. As the cups of tea go cold in our hands, we relay memories and laugh.

Abbie recalls the day she tried to sneak a bottle of vodka upstairs into her room, only to find Maggie sitting on the bed with two glasses and a cheeky look in her eye.

'You see, Maggie wasn't your traditional, typical mum either. She didn't do everything right, but we knew she loved us. Right?' Stephen asked, looking between us, waiting for confirmation he never needed.

'Yep – agreed,' I say.

'That's what being a mum is, Vic. It's not being perfect. It's not smothering your kids. It's not making sure they can read before everyone else or can speak four languages before they can tie their shoelaces. It's

showing them love. Making them feel safe. And filling their lives with people who love them. Those kids, they're loved. You can see that.'

That was the problem though, right there. He'd hit the nail on the head, and he didn't even realise it.

'But they don't have family,' I say, taking my phone out from my pocket to scroll through pictures to show them.

'I thought we could build our own, just us four, but I feel like I'm raising them alone most of the time and I can't shake the feeling that I'm just not enough. Sophia is always searching the skies for something, like she can't settle, and she doesn't like her brother at all. They fight all the time. And Leo, all he wants is to play with someone, but he doesn't have cousins, or a family to learn from, and his sister isn't interested. I'm not enough – they need more.'

'They have family, Vic. We're your family. That'll never change. My kids are their cousins, so are Jonathan's, so are Marie's kids,' Stephen says, his eyes full of hope and his face flushed with love.

'And mine too. When they come,' says Abbie. A cheeky smile on her face.

'If they come?' I ask, raising an eyebrow at her.

'Nope. When,' she replies, tapping her belly.

'You're no' serious?' I say, recoiling and looking between their two faces, trying to determine just who knew what.

'Aye, deadly,' she says. 'I was gonna wait until the scan next week to tell ya, but Stephen already knows so . . .'

'Oh my God, Abbie. I'm so happy for you.' I wrap my arms around her and squeeze. 'You'll be the best mum!' I say to her, and I truly mean it.

'And you'll be the best auntie. I'll be coming to you for all the advice, so stop with the nonsense about you being a terrible mam. You're not. You've had a rough time, twins during a pandemic and no family around. You just need to fill your cup with love again, that's all.'

* * *

Time is ticking on, so I drop Nicole a message and let her know that I'll be over a little later than expected but that at least I'll be alone so we can chat uninterrupted.

I open my messages to Mark, staring at the one I sent last night. I was

planning on calling him, but if he can't even be bothered to reply, what's the point? I'll call him when I get back from Dundee. I don't want his grumpiness to ruin the mood anyway, but I won't be accused of ignoring him again, so I shoot off another message.

'Hey. Sorry I haven't called, just been to the grave with Stephen and Abbie. It's cold but beautiful here. Off to Dundee in a mo to see Nicole again. Her wee boy is in hospital. Long story, I'll explain when I get back. Hope you're OK?'

I watch as the message delivers, but the ticks remain grey.

'What's wrong, Vic?' Stephen asks, clearly noticing the look on my face.

'Oh nothing, just Mark.'

'Shall I grab a bottle of wine from the shop so you can tell us all about it when you get back later?'

I nod at him. That sounds like exactly what I need right now.

'Life's a bitch, and then you marry one. As they say.' He winks at me.

I roll my eyes at him, and he holds his palms up in mock surrender.

'Look, I'm always gonna be on your side, sis. You know that. But from the little Abs has told me, I'm not that far off, am I? Marriage isn't all rainbows and butterflies, no matter how much we profess on Instagram. Life ain't easy, and marriage is even tougher than life.' He spins the wedding ring on his left hand, the gold glinting in the dying sunlight.

'All not quite so well on the western front?' I ask.

'Let's just say, Covid has got a lot to answer for.'

None of us were getting out of this decade unscathed it seemed.

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TWENTY

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

There was no sleep had last night. Not one single moment. Instead, I lay on the cot bed, and watched the clock tick down the minutes.

Doctors and nurses would come in periodically, adding more meds to Ben's IV lines and checking on his stats. Each time I asked if there was any update, only to be told that nothing would be known until the morning. How could I sleep, when in some lab, somewhere in this hospital, sat the results of my son's tests?

My thoughts bounced off the walls, with nowhere to land, and the more I stared at my phone, the less I knew what to say to anyone. My brothers had all messaged, as had their wives. Kerri-Ann had spent the night at ours and was sending regular updates on Grace and Andy, and of course Andy was messaging every half an hour with questions spurred by Dr Google.

Victoria had messaged too. She and Kerri-Ann had talked, and she was planning on stopping by later. I tried to tell her not to worry. It was a long drive for a freezing cold outdoor coffee in the middle of winter, but she was having none of it. A huge part of me was relieved. I had zero patience for family, but my friend, my god, I needed some of her energy right now.

At eight a.m. on the dot, the nurse wakes me up with tea and a slice of toast, before pulling up a chair and asking a few more 'standard questions'. How was Ben's diet? Was he sleeping more than normal? How were his energy levels?

A lull in her interrogation allows me the space to ask a question I knew I needed to ask but didn't want to hear the answer to.

'What did I miss? I'm so careful. Never give him medicine unless he really needs it. He's been on echinacea, zinc and magnesium every day since the first wave. What did I miss?'

The nurse looks so sad.

'The doctor will be in soon and he'll explain. He should be with you before eleven.'

Ben woke, briefly, just after nine. I was sat staring out the window when I heard his little voice, muffled by the mask, calling my name.

‘Hello, my wee man. How are you feeling?’

He blinks hard, tears dripping down his face. He looks so scared.

‘Don’t worry, Smudge, the doctors are looking after you. You gave us all a wee fright. But don’t worry, OK? Breathe slowly.’

He nods his head, attempting to evacuate the tears from his tiny eyes.

‘I love you, Mum. I’m trying to be a lion,’ he mumbles from behind the mask, his words muffled and more childlike than ever.

‘My baby boy. I love you too.’

His eyes are rolling. Even this small interaction is exhausting his wee body.

‘Go back to sleep, baby. The medicine will help.’

I stroke his face and take in the shape of him, this tiny little being that we’d brought into this world. So perfect, so full of life, now struggling to cling to breath in his lungs. I don’t know what is attacking him, but I can see it winning, and it’s terrifying me.

I take myself off into the gardens again. This time the sky remains blue, with powder-puff white clouds of hope moving quickly across the sky. I just need just a few moments of peace and quiet to gather my thoughts before the doctor’s rounds.

‘*On my way,*’ comes a text from my husband.

‘*Great. See you soon. X,*’ I reply. I have no idea what today is going to bring, but as long as I have him by my side, we can get through this.

I make my way back to the ward, and change back into my protective gear, walking into the room just as the nurse is reading the charts to the doctor. It’s only nine-thirty. I hadn’t expected them to be here so early; Andy isn’t even here yet.

‘OK, so can we schedule a lumbar puncture, and get those test results rushed through too, and in the meantime, let’s talk to the blood centre and make sure they’re aware of what we might need. See what the situation is their end. Also, start checking databases.’

He hasn’t seen me standing there, not until the nurse taps his arm and he turns to look at me. ‘Ah, Mrs Murray. Great timing.’

That seems a little insensitive, but I try not to prickle at his words.

‘We’d like to take Ben down into theatre and take a bone marrow sample.’

Would you like to sit down? I'll explain a little about what we've discovered so far.'

Words are spinning, all meaning lost, but the term 'lumbar puncture' is making my stomach lurch.

'Um. My husband is on the way. Can we do this together? I'd like him to be here too?'

'No problem,' replies the doctor. 'Why don't you go and take a seat in the relatives' room and I'll come and find you both in a short while. Does that sound OK?'

I walk silently down the corridor and take my place on what has become 'my chair' in this room. It's not long until the shape of my husband appears. As he walks in, I spot the doctor over his shoulder and beckon him in.

'The doctor has an update,' I whisper to Andy as he takes a seat.

The doctor pulls over a chair to sit in front of us. He takes his time as he slowly explains the blood results and the litany of complicated factors that were causing the decline of our son's health.

As soon as he mentions blood issues, something in my brain clicks and instinctively I know what's coming next. I hoped it wouldn't; it's every parent's worst nightmare, but I knew it was coming.

Acute myeloid leukaemia. AML. Our son had been suffering with a blood cancer for much longer than we'd realised, and now, with his immune system struggling so fiercely to fight off the cancer, it wasn't strong enough to fight off the virus that had taken a hold, so it quickly turned into pneumonia.

The perfect storm.

That's the phrase the doctor used at one point. The pandemic had created the perfect storm for this disease to go unchecked. The fact that all his appointments had been conducted over Zoom meant that the GP hadn't picked up on the slightly jaundiced eyes, or the random bruises, both of which would have indicated bigger issues. If it hadn't been for the pneumonia, we wouldn't have known, maybe until it was too late.

He explained that a bone marrow test was needed, and so Ben would be taken down to theatre. Most of the time the procedure can be done under local for adults, but it's such an invasive and painful procedure that with children they prefer to put them under.

They would wheel him off to theatre as soon as possible, in the hopes they

could rush through the results and plan a course of treatment as soon as possible.

By the time the doctor was done explaining everything, my head was spinning.

‘You have another child, I see, from the records. A daughter?’ the doctor asks.

‘Yes, Ben has a sister. Grace. She’s almost three.’ My husband’s voice seems to come through the fog.

‘OK, so we might need to look into a blood test with her if that’s possible? Siblings are often the closest match. We know most parents would prefer to be donors, but with only a fifty per cent match each, a sibling match is preferred if possible. Before we go on the hunt for a match outside of the family, we like to test the closest family members first.’ The doctor shuffles a few papers, and hands me a bunch of leaflets. I can’t read them. My eyes are swimming and I can’t focus. ‘With your daughter being under the age of consent, we would obviously need special permission, but as I mentioned, siblings are often the closest match, so it’s important we test her first.’

There’s a silence. Longer than normal, so I find the strength to move my head and as I do, I see my husband looking straight at me.

He doesn’t look at the doctor; instead, he keeps his eyes locked onto mine. ‘Of course. We can ask her aunt to bring her in.’

As the doctor leaves the room and closes the door, the energy in the room feels forever changed. I look at my husband’s pale expression and as he opens his mouth to talk, I know exactly what he’s going to say.

‘Nic . . .’ he starts.

I hold my hand up and close my eyes.

‘Nic. You heard the doctor. A sibling is the closest match. What if . . .’ I know he wants to finish the sentence, but I just can’t hear those words right now.

‘Look, we’ll get Grace in, get her tested as a possible match. No matter what our worries are, she is Ben’s sister and the closest possible match we have. The rest, we’ll deal with later.’

Ben is out of surgery, and with him still being so vulnerable, the ‘only one parent at a time’ rule is being very strictly adhered to. We decide that this

time, Andy should go in. Kez had arrived with Grace while we were waiting to hear news of Ben. The nurse had met them at reception and she'd gone with them to get Grace's bloods taken, so I sit in the corridor and watch as my husband goes into the room to be suited up with his protective gear. I know it will raise Ben's spirits to come around from the anaesthetic and see his dad sitting by his side. His hero.

I sit patiently outside on the plastic bucket chair. Retrieving my phone from my bag, I see a message from Kerri-Ann. The bloods have been taken and they are heading to the Leaf Café in the gardens to get a drink and a 'treat'. I feel like a terrible mum not being there with Grace as they took bloods. I know all too well how much my wee girl hates needles. It's the hardest part of being a parent, knowing you can't split yourself in two. I'm grateful Kez is with her. She can make Grace giggle no matter the situation.

'Don't know where I would be without you, Kez. I couldn't have handled all this without your help,' I text, knowing that if I try to say the words to her face I'll burst into tears, and that's the last thing any of us need right now.

'That's what family's for,' she replies.

'Heading your way now. How's my wee princess?' I quickly type, as I wave to my husband and head back down the corridor.

'A big brave "lion" apparently. She's asking after her brother,' Kerri-Ann replies almost instantly.

Up pops a picture message, a picture drawn by Grace of her and her brother, holding hands on the beach. Clearly the trauma of the day hadn't wiped out the happy memories we'd been making. I was grateful for that. As I look at the sketched drawing, full of bright colours and joy, I say a silent prayer, hoping He can hear it. If He is real, I pray that if He saves my wee boy, I'll take both my children on the best beach holiday of their lives. Castles in the sand, ice creams and donkey rides on the beach in Spain with our fabulous friends. Me, my man, and my two gorgeous kids. That's all we need.

I reach the café and see my precious wee girl sitting at the table with a piece of paper and crayons scattered around, diligently colouring in a new beach scene.

‘So, what’s the score?’ Kez asks.

‘Well, Andy is in there with Ben now, waiting for him to wake up, then we wait for the results I guess,’ I reply.

‘Andy hasn’t really explained what’s going on, Nic. What are they testing him for and why do they need Grace too?’

I guide her to a table behind my daughter, ‘Sit here, let me check on Grace and I’ll explain everything.’

I leave Kez at the table and wander over to where my girl is sitting, stroking the plaster on her arm. I raise her hand and kiss it gently. ‘Oh my girl, you were so big and brave,’ I say. Her doe-like eyes stare deep into my soul. It’s taking all my strength and willpower not to burst into tears, but I have to stay calm. I can’t panic her.

‘I had to give special blood so BenBen can be a lion again,’ she says to me, and then points at the drawing. I assume the huge scrawl of scribbles is a lion, the orange swirls on four legs and a speech bubble with a loud *roar* coming from it.

‘Ahh, he will love this. Why don’t you make it really super bright while I chat to Aunty Kez for a minute?’

She nods her head enthusiastically and I make my way back to Kerri-Ann, lowering my voice as I fill her in on all the details.

‘Wait, so they’re gonna test Grace to see if she is a match? Are you worried?’ Her voice is shaky.

‘Worried about what? That she might not be a match? Honestly, even if she is a match, it doesn’t mean they can use her. The doctor has already said we’ll have to go through an ethics committee before we could use her stem cells anyway, if she is a match, because she’s underage. So today is just to see where we’re at.’

‘I didnae mean that,’ Kerri-Ann replied.

‘What do you mean then?’ I ask, shuffling uncomfortably on the hard wooden bench.

‘I mean, what if these tests show up something?’

‘AML doesn’t work like that. It’s not contagious, and it’s not hereditary.’

Kerri-Ann lets out a huge sigh, lowers her head and shakes it slowly. I know what she wants to ask, but I’m so sick of this conversation and hope that today of all days she’ll read the room and drop it.

‘Nicole. I mean, what if the tests show up that Grace isn’t Andy’s?’

The rage building inside me comes like a tsunami, rolling so quickly through my body I hardly have time to stop it.

‘I’m a little more concerned about finding a match that will save my son right now. We can deal with the paternity stuff later. Not that they can even tell with this test. It’s a blood test, you idiot. Not a DNA test. They’re not testing paternity!’

Kerri-Ann holds up her hands in surrender. ‘OK, OK. I just want to make sure you’re prepared. That’s all.’

‘I’m not prepared for anything. At all. I’m not prepared one single little bit. I’m not prepared to be told how long my son might have to endure treatment. I’m not ready to hear how much of his body is being ravaged by cancer before he’s even reached double digits. I am not ready to sit, all day every day, outside of a hospital room, looking in, while men and women poke at my child like he’s some kind of science project. I’m not prepared for any of it.’ My voice is rising, and as the anger rises, so too do my shoulders.

Kerri-Ann looks defeated, and I feel bad for shouting at her. She’s been so great looking after Grace and this is how I’m repaying her.

‘I’m sorry, Kez, it’s just all too much. I can’t think about that right now, not with all this going on.’

We sit in silence for a while as the temperature between us cools off a little. Each sipping on our lukewarm tea and waiting for the other to speak.

It’s Grace’s voice from the next table that spurs us into action.

‘Muuuummmmy, I’m finished!’ she shouts.

‘Right,’ I say, standing up from the table and not looking Kerri-Ann in the eye. ‘Time to get moving,’ I say, as much of an instruction for myself as for Kez.

‘Who is that?’ I say, pointing to the group of stick people on the picture.

‘That’s you and Daddy holding hands.’

I giggle a little at the size difference between the two, her dad obviously the giant in the picture.

‘That’s BenBen as a big brave lion,’ she says, pointing to the most colourful part of the picture, bright orange swirls that seem to burst from the page. ‘And that is me and my new brother and sister.’

I can’t help but laugh, raucously, almost pulling a muscle as my head snaps back.

‘Oh, sweetie, I’m not having any more babies. You and Ben are the only babies I need.’

‘No, Mummy,’ she says, turning her head to look me dead in the eyes. As serious as I have ever seen her. ‘No, Leo and Sophia. My new brother and sister.’

I pull her in for a tight hug, loving that she is so caring that she has already taken the twins into her heart and made them family.

‘Ahhh, baby, they’re not your brother and sister, but they can be best friends. Right,’ I say, putting down the drawing. ‘I need to get back in there. Hopefully the doctor will have some answers.’

I say my goodbyes to my wee girl, hugging her closer and tighter than ever before.

I meet Andy in the corridor outside Ben’s room. He’d woken and the doctors were now in there doing their checks. Dr Butler had explained to Andy that the bone marrow test results would be back this afternoon, and the blood tests for Grace should be quicker as they’d put a rush on them. Kez had taken Grace back home.

Andy’s sunken eyes look like he hasn’t slept in a month, and I worry that if this is how we look now, God help us in the coming months.

‘Did he wake up at all? Has he seen you?’ I ask him.

‘He squeezed my hand. The nurse said that was a good sign. He’s so weak at the moment that any show of strength is a step forward. His breathing. My God . . .’

As we hug in the corridor, I hear a cough behind me.

‘Mr Murray, Mrs Murray, might we have a word?’ It’s the doctor and a very worried-looking nurse. My chest feels tight as my whole body prepares for the worst.

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TWENTY-ONE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

‘Mrs Murray?’ The nurse is looking at me, her eyes full of concern. ‘Mrs Murray, are you OK?’

‘I’m sorry, I feel a little . . . faint. Sorry. Repeat that again?’

‘Can we . . . I’m sorry, this is all a little much. Can we go somewhere a little . . .’ Andy is taking control. How is he doing that? How is he remaining calm?

‘Of course,’ says the stern doctor stood at her side. ‘Let’s pop in here, shall we?’ The doctor hustles us into a side room.

I’m guided to an empty chair. I sit down, or at least, I assume I do, I don’t remember doing it, but somehow I have.

‘It can happen sometimes. Nothing to worry about, but we’re going to send the bloodwork off again to double-check. If that’s OK?’

‘They’re having pancakes,’ I say. Not really sure what else to say. ‘At home I mean. Does she need to come back in? I can call them.’

I’m not making sense, but I’m trying to give my brain just a moment of buffering time to compute what she just said.

‘Can you just explain that to me again. Please,’ Andy says, taking the paperwork from her hands. I watch as his eyes scan the paper, but I’m pretty sure he has no idea what he’s looking for any more than I would. He passes me the folder and all I can see is lots of numbers and letters, but they mean bugger all. I was hoping there would be some big yellow Post-it notes stuck to the page with a human explanation.

‘You see this here. That’s the paperwork we were sent by the Spanish authorities. That there says your daughter has blood type B,’ says the nurse.

‘OK,’ I say. ‘And both the Spanish document and translated one say the same? Right? So, it wasn’t a mix-up with the translator?’ I ask, pointing to the two sets of paperwork.

‘No,’ she replies. ‘Not that I can see. And I had someone check for me. The records on file say the same thing. But this test . . .’ She pulls a piece of

paper from underneath, the logo and insignia from this hospital stamped at the top. 'This is the test we just did, which is showing that Grace is blood group O.'

'OK. So that means she isn't a match for her brother. Right?' Andy asks.

I'm still staring at the paperwork, but there is no response coming from the nurse yet. I look up and she's staring at me, as if she's waiting for the penny to drop.

'That's right. If this test is correct, Grace isn't a match . . .' I can hear it in the way she said that last sentence. I'm almost waiting for a but, or an and, something to end the sentence that seems to just hang there without a conclusion.

'OK, but that's not unusual, is it? Sometimes siblings aren't a match, so why do you want to test her blood again?' Andy is asking, his voice calm and steady.

The nurse remains quiet and shares a knowing look with the doctor, who seems to be keeping his lips tightly shut. I hadn't noticed the woman standing just a step or two behind them, but she comes into full view now. She isn't wearing nurses' scrubs; instead, she is wearing a smart suit covered over by a long white jacket.

'Mrs Murray, I think this is where I might be able to explain a little better. Mr Murray, would you like to take a seat too? This might take a few moments.'

Andy perches on the arm of the chair next to me, he and I both looking between the faces of three strangers who seem to know more about our lives than we do right now. It's not a dynamic I'm enjoying.

'Mrs Murray, we haven't checked yet if Grace's stem cells are a match. It's critical that we match blood first. If the blood group isn't a match, it can be deadly.'

I'm still missing something. They're all staring at us like they're expecting us to magically understand what it is they don't want to tell us.

'For God's sake, I don't understand. I'm working on four hours' sleep and I have a son in isolation. Can someone explain to me why you want to retest the blood?' Andy is losing patience now, and I can see the frustration colouring his knuckles.

'Mr Murray. Grace is blood group O. Nicole is blood group AB, and you are blood group B. The paperwork from Spain says Grace is blood group B,

but this test disputes that. If this test is correct, Grace can't possibly be Ben's sibling.'

'I don't understand. Has there been a mistake?' I ask.

'It's possible,' says the nurse. 'That's why we would like to retest, make sure there was no cross-contamination or error.'

'But what you are saying is that either the paperwork is wrong, or Grace isn't a full sibling of Ben.' Andy had clocked onto what they were saying, just a breath before the realisation dawned on me.

It was sinking in now. Had I been wrong all this time? I'd checked the dates, the doctor checked the dates – how can this be happening? I was so sure.

'Mrs Murray.' The doctor in the long white jacket directs her answer to me, not my husband. 'What we're saying is that if this test is correct, Grace is not your biological child.'

'Not my husband's child, you mean?' I ask.

'No, not your husband's biological daughter, but also, not *your* biological daughter either.'

I stare, unable to breathe.

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TWENTY-TWO

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

Andy barely took a breath as he explained, in detail, what he remembered of that day. I watched, unable to even find the strength to speak, as the doctors took countless notes and asked clarifying questions. *‘How many doctors were there?’ ‘At what point did they realise Nicole was bleeding out?’* So many questions, yet I couldn’t remember any of the details. Clearly my brain had blocked out most of the trauma. The whole episode felt like it was happening to someone else.

‘OK, I need to stop you there. If you don’t mind,’ says the doctor, his fingers still furiously tapping on the glass screen of the iPad as he notes down the details of that day. ‘Andy, I need you to think for me . . . you mentioned that the nurses were checking the baby over.’ She takes a deep breath, as if readying herself for bad news. ‘Was there, ever, a time when your daughter was out of your sight?’ She’s asking Andy directly, which makes sense. I was unconscious for most of the journey to the hospital.

Andy places his hand on mine for the first time and squeezes hard. ‘Yes,’ he mutters.

My stomach drops. ‘What?’ My voice is louder than I had anticipated. ‘When?’

‘Mrs Murray, stay calm. Please. Andy, can you explain to me exactly when, and for how long?’

‘Just after the birth. It was so crazy; there was so much going on. So many doctors running around. Nicole went into shock and was bleeding out. They took Grace into the next room to do the tests and paperwork and clean her up. She was only next door for about ten minutes.’

I stare at him. How could he have let this happen? Then I remember, like a fog lifting. ‘Wait, after I kissed her. After they showed her to me. I went cold, they took her next door. But you went with her. I remember you leaving the room.’ My brain doesn’t want to remember this day, not at all.

As I search through memories trying to piece together his story with my reality, pain explodes in my head.

Andy looks at me sheepishly, and then bursts into tears.

‘Oh my God, it’s all my fault,’ he sobs. The doctor leans forward and rubs his back. ‘Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I’ve blamed you. All this time. I’ve hated you. I knew she wasn’t mine. I was so sure you were lying, and it was me all along. It was all my fault.’

The words fall from his lips at a rate of knots. Faster than I had ever seen him talk.

‘Andy. What the hell are you telling me? Andy. ANDY!’

I shake his shoulders, and the doctor takes a step back.

‘Mrs Murray. Breathe. Let Andy talk.’

He sits up, straightens his back and looks me in the eyes. For the first time in what feels like years, I can see my husband, all of him. Nothing hidden. I can see the man I fell in love with. The boy in his heart, the man in his soul. I can see it all.

‘They took her into the room, and I watched as they started writing the details, and then another nurse rushed in with Mark’s baby. The first one. They rushed us out and we stood in the corridor. Then they rushed in with the second twin and there was so much commotion. You were wheeled out of the room and there was blood everywhere. When I turned back, there were two nurses standing there, one with our baby girl and the other handing a baby to Mark and putting the other in a bassinet.’

‘So, you’re telling me that there were three babies all in that room at the same time?’ The look on the doctor’s face said it all. They wouldn’t allow that here in the UK these days, and I can see why now.

‘Yes,’ Andy replies.

‘OK. So, we are talking about a potential swap here then. There’s every chance that the babies had their tests done, and in the confusion were switched after the nurse had written down all the details on Grace’s paperwork, and that would explain why the bloods match in paperwork but not in reality.’

Everything was slotting into place, and suddenly I feel like the biggest failure of a mum. How had I not noticed? How had I never questioned? Surely as a mum I would know if a baby was mine or not.

The doctor was flipping through all the paperwork, reading notes,

comparing charts.

‘We’ll need to see if we can contact the other mother. We’ll discuss this with the hospital in Spain and figure out how to proceed. It’ll be tricky, especially if the other couple don’t speak English.’

I grab Andy’s arm. ‘Andy.’ I widen my eyes and stare at him without blinking. I don’t need to say anything. I’m not ready to tell the doctor that Victoria is actually here, in Scotland, with her kids.

My heart is racing. Could the signs have been there and I missed them?

‘Oh my God. Why didn’t I know? How could I have not seen it?’ I interrupt the flow of conversation between them, and now both sets of eyes are staring at me as I try to remind my body how to breathe in and out.

‘Mrs Murray, don’t blame yourself. This is a highly unusual situation.’ She closes the flap on her iPad and stands. Clearly, she has enough information to work with, but I’m still sat here with a million unanswered questions.

‘I’ll make contact with the hospital. This obviously complicates things a little, and with Ben’s declining health, we’ll kick-start all back-up options too and make sure we step up the search for a suitable donor in the meantime. It might be wise for you to consider talking to a lawyer. We may have to move quickly with this.’

With that, she pats Andy on the back and leaves the room.

* * *

He can’t look at me, his hands wrapped around the back of his neck as he doubles over. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he mumbles.

I shake my head, unable to make any other words materialise.

‘Tell me what happened, Andy, please. I don’t understand. I don’t remember anything between kissing her in that room and waking up in the hospital the next day. Do you really think they swapped our girls?’

‘Oh, Nic. It all happened so quick. As soon as they took the baby away, you started bleeding out. Your body went into shock, and you passed out. Everyone was running around – things got hectic. The ambulance turned up and between the surgeon who was there on standby for the twins, and the paramedics, they stopped the bleeding and blue-lighted you and Grace up to the hospital. When I arrived, they were wheeling you into surgery and they

ushered me into a room with Grace, and I just sat there. Waiting. Later Mark explained that the doctor had told him you had a placental abruption.'

'So, did anyone come and tell you what was going on? Did anyone check the baby over once we got there?'

I am blinking hard, trying to take in all the information, but I can feel the pressure of a migraine waiting in the wings, ready to pounce.

'They had volunteer translators. One of them popped in and helped with a few bits. It was the same woman who came back the next morning when you were awake. Honestly, they didn't have much to do with me and Grace while you were gone. They checked her over a little more than normal, so I was told, but only because she had been born premature. Despite her small size, she seemed to be doing fine so we were told no other checks were needed. I even checked with Mark and he told me it was totally normal.'

'I remember, you know,' I say suddenly, the images from that day coming more into focus in my mind. 'I remember you handing her to me the first time that day. That mop of hair – I remember being amazed at the colour of it. You told me she clearly took after me. Oh my god, Andy, Mark has the darkest, thickest curly hair. She's got his hair, not mine.'

I hear the words, but my heart feels them. Bile rises in my throat.

'She has his hair because she's his. Oh my god, she's his daughter. She's Victoria's daughter, not mine. Oh my God, she's not our baby girl!' I can't breathe.

'Nic, we can't tell her. Not yet. You know that, right?' Andy says.

I wipe the tears from under my eyes and look at him, stunned. 'What the hell do you mean? Of course we have to tell her! Andy, listen to me. Sophia, that beautiful wee girl that I met on the beach yesterday, the one who took such a shine to Ben, she's our daughter. We have to tell Victoria, at least before the doctors do. We won't be able to keep this quiet for long and it'll be better coming from us than a stuffy doctor.'

Andy stands and straightens his jeans before plunging his hands deep into his pockets and striding towards the door. He opens it, looks around and closes it again.

'Nic, our boy is in critical condition. We could lose him. Are you ready to deal with losing Grace at the same time?'

'Don't be so bloody stupid! Why the hell would we lose her?' I raise my

voice. 'You actually can't be serious? We're not going to lose Grace. She's our daughter. But what about Ben? What if Sophia can help?'

'Nic, you don't know Victoria all that well. I mean, I know you're close, but you don't know her . . . what if . . .'

I shake my head. There is no way the woman I know would stand in the way if she knew she could help. 'No,' I say. 'No chance. Victoria's not like that. She will want to help.'

I watch as he bites his lip, thinking about his words carefully. 'Nicole. If Grace is Victoria's child, not Sophia, we have no idea how she's going to react when she finds out. No idea at all.'

Stalemate.

Silence.

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TWENTY-THREE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

We'd been walking around the gardens for half an hour, neither of us talking. 'I don't know what to say, Nic. Where do we even start with all this?'

I'm not sure why he expects me to have the answers. All I feel is numb. I'd carried a child for eight months. I'd loved her, sung to her, talked to her and shared my deepest and darkest secrets with her in the cold and lonely months leading up to her birth. I'd named her, wiped her tears, mopped up her sick and patched up her scratched and war-wounded knees. I'd looked into her eyes and seen my own. How was all of that a lie? How were they two different babies?

'I don't get it, Andy. Wouldn't I have known? How did I miss it?'

He's silent. We both know why I missed it. The older she got, the less she looked like Andy, so the more I would search for similarities in their personalities. Had a part of me been so scared she might not be his, that I overlooked the signs in the hope that I was wrong? Never, even in my wildest nightmares, would I have ever considered that she wasn't mine.

'I wanted so badly for her to be my little girl, you know,' Andy says, sadness etched into every breath.

'She is yours. She's as much yours as she is mine. She was yours. I never lied to you.'

'That's not what I mean, Nic. You know that. Just, please, let me get this out.'

We take a seat on one of the benches in the gardens. He takes my hand but doesn't look at me; instead he takes out his phone, the image of Grace on his screen, her big brother beaming a huge smile behind her as she stares straight at the camera, her eyes big and bright, love all over her face. Our daughter. Our only daughter. The only daughter we have ever known.

'I wanted her to be mine. I was mad, for so long, and I was so convinced at one point that she wasn't. But my god, she is just the light of my life, and

I knew that if I didn't embrace her, I would lose you. I didn't want to lose you. I was trying to find a way to make her mine, in my head, so I could keep being us. I thought so many times about getting her tested. Even sent off for a kit a few weeks ago, but you seemed so convinced, and I just wanted us back. So, I didn't do it. I asked you, the other night, asked you not to lie and chose to believe you.'

It hurt me to think he'd been going through this all on his own. Then it dawns on me.

'Jesus, Andy. Can you imagine if you had tested her? One of those test at home paternity kits would have told you categorically that Grace is not yours, but it wouldn't have said anything about me not being her mother. If you had done that test . . .' I can't breathe, my chest closes at the thought of how close I could have been to losing him, and we might never have known. 'Those tests, Andy, they don't show the link to the mother. You would have believed, I would have believed . . . It would only have tested her link to you. . .' I'm rambling now, my words so eager to hit the air that as they do, they barely make sense. The room around me spins.

'I know,' he replies, his eyes filling with tears.

'Why didn't you talk to me about it?' I ask him. 'Why didn't you say anything?'

'I tried a few times, but you were so angry with me for questioning you that you couldn't hear me. You didn't want to. It was more important to you that I believed you, and not that I accepted it. I just wanted to find a way to accept all of this and move forward.'

'And look where that got us,' I say, a note of bitterness in my voice.

'You blame me, don't you. For not staying with her, that day. I knew it.'

I turn to look at him, this beautiful man that I have loved for most of my life, the man I was so close to giving up, and I know in my heart I don't hate him. I know I don't blame him. But right now, yes, I am angry.

'OK, no more lies, right?' I say to him. He nods his head and takes a breath, waiting to hear it.

'I am pissed you didn't keep an eye on her. I'm pissed you didn't notice. But I'm more angry about the fact that you didn't tell me sooner. If you had asked to get her tested, if you had told me sooner, rather than talking to Brian behind my back, we might have . . .' I stop myself. It's not fair. I know it's not him I'm angry with – not really. I breathe and start again. 'I'm

angry with myself, Andy. I'm angry I didn't get her tested. It would have been the kind thing to do, for you, for us all, and I'm angry because maybe a part of me was worried too. I'm angry because that wee girl there, that gorgeous wee human is PART OF ME. She's an actual part of me now, and I can't let that go. I can't let someone take her. She's my child. I know her personality; I know her ticks. I know how to get her to sleep and how to soothe her. I *am* her mother. No one else knows how to do all of that, so how am I now supposed to give her up?

He's nodding along with everything I say, and he isn't even trying to hold back the tears.

'But, Andy. How can I not tell Victoria? How can I keep this from her? Doesn't she deserve to know as much as we do? Don't we deserve the chance to get to know our real daughters?'

'I know. I know.' I can hear the debate in his voice; I can see the conflict written all over him as he wrings his palms together. 'She's not the baby you sang to sleep in your stomach. She's not the one who shared your heartbeat. She's not the baby who grew inside of you. She's not the baby you nearly lost your life for,' he says. 'But, Nic, I can't. I can't lose her. I can't lose her and lose our wee Smudge too.'

I let out a deep and painful sigh. We are going round in circles and we don't have time for this.

'But what about that baby girl, Andy? What about our baby girl, the other one, the one who is living with another mother? Is she not your child? Are you not her father? What if she can help save our wee boy?'

He shakes his head, slowly. 'I just, I can't . . . I can't imagine . . .' he mumbles.

My brain is working overtime, and somewhere in the back of my subconscious, something is niggling. I can't shake it. 'Victoria says all the time that her daughter, Sophia, doesn't act like a twin, doesn't want to play with her brother.' I'm trying to focus, but pieces of the puzzle keep floating into my orbit, each one filling in a part of the story I didn't know was even missing. 'Shit, Andy. Grace is a twin. Do you think that's why she and Ben formed such a strong bond? She was looking for a brother?' As the realisation hits my husband, I watch his face grey. I'm not sure I have ever seen him look so utterly stunned. 'It's why she was so clingy, in the beginning. Remember? She couldn't be away from me. Not because she's

clingy, but because she lived in the womb with another. She can't be alone, Andy. Ever. If she's not cuddling you, or me, or Ben, she's attached to Pip.'

I pause, and try to gather my strength.

'Andy,' I say, as the mist clears and I pick up my phone to show him the picture of all the kids together. 'Look.' I pass him the phone and he zooms in.

'Look at her holding Leo's hand. What if something in each of them recognises the other? Look at them. Tell me they don't look alike?'

I watch as the recognition settles in his soul before he moves the image to focus on Sophia.

'Nicole. She looks like you. She looks like me. She even looks like Kez.'

We sit, staring at the phone for what seems like forever.

'I don't know how to do this,' I say to him. 'I have no idea how she'll react. But we have to. Right? We have to. For Sophia, for Grace. Andy, we have to tell her, even if you don't want to, for Ben's sake.'

Ben, my beautiful boy. How would he deal with all of this? How on earth would he cope, dealing with treatment, and having his sister, who he dotes on, taken away and a stranger put in her place?

'OK – so we have to tell her. We have to tell them. But let's not tell Ben yet. And telling them doesn't mean anything has to change. Does it?' he asks.

I hadn't even thought that far ahead yet, but maybe we don't have to change anything? Maybe he's right?

I thought me cheating on my husband would be the hardest thing our marriage would ever face. Then the pandemic hit. I thought Covid had killed our marriage; I thought it was the biggest thing to have ever hit our family. Then Ben got leukaemia. Just as I thought we might be able to knit our family back together, pull together to show him love and family and the strength of hope . . . I thought that would be the biggest thing our family would face.

Now this.

I'm not sure a family can take much more. I'm not sure I can take much more.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Victoria

Edinburgh – October 2022

As I'm collecting my stuff together to leave for Dundee, my phone dings with a message from Nicole.

'Ben isn't OK at all. Can we do coffee tomorrow instead? I need to pop home and spend some time with Grace.'

I reply that of course it's not an issue. I'm eager to see her again but it's understandable – our kids come first at the end of the day, and it sounds serious.

'Hey, Stephen. Wanna go grab that bottle of wine? My plans have changed. Going to see Vic tomorrow, so let's open that bottle shall we?'

Our family therapy session lasted well into the morning hours, and for the first time ever, I let it all out. It may have been the wine talking or just the fact that being away from Mark felt like I could finally be honest. No cameras in my face, no audience to play up to, no mask to hide behind. Instead, I just laid it all bare.

Stephen spent the first bottle of wine telling me that I needed to stand up for myself more. *'Tell Mark you don't want to be a bloody InstaWife and tell him to stop drinking and buck up his act,'* he kept saying. Something told me it was never going to be as easy as that. Stephen's attitude changed come the third bottle of wine, by then he was telling me that in fact, sometimes it's just better to walk the hell away from a toxic relationship that will never change.

Abbie's mindset had started the other way around. Despite her bottle being non-alcoholic, she certainly got braver by the glass. During bottle one, she was all: *'Be quiet, Stephen. She doesn't need to stand up for herself. He's had his chance. She needs to walk – no, RUN the hell away.'* By our third bottle, she was arguing with Stephen again but this time telling him that marriage is something that needs to be worked on. That just because someone messes up it doesn't mean they can't change.

As I watched them play emotional tennis with my own marriage on centre court, it didn't take long for my thoughts to shift from my own personal worries, to thoughts on their separate reactions to my news. It was clear Stephen was unhappy in his marriage and the cracks in his relationship had only widened during the lockdowns. I tried to think back to the Zoom calls, the 'weekly check-ins' that we'd had, and wonder how I didn't see that Mallory was never really on the calls. Stephen would sit chatting away with his kids in shot, but he never really talked about himself. He was always asking about everyone else. I knew that tactic all too well, so why hadn't I spotted it in him?

With just Abbie and I, he poured out his pain quicker than the wine and it pained me to see how much he had struggled alone. He and Mallory seemed to be at the point of no return, but just like me, he was clinging on. Maybe it was similar childhood traumas that made us react in the same way. When your parents abandon you and walk away at a young age, the last thing you want to do is repeat those patterns. That kind of trauma stays with you. Those broken relationships, they form who you are.

Abbie, she was a law unto herself. She had met, fallen in love with and married an army lad in a registry wedding during Covid, all within the space of a year. It wasn't a shock to Stephen that she was pregnant; Abbie was desperate for her own family. Marrying into the military life meant that she was instantly welcomed by a huge ready-made family, and now having one of her own. And me, well. Looking at the faces of the only family I recognise, I might be able to see a little of why I run. Why I ran. Away from them. Away from Maggie. I thought if I chose *when* I walked away, it would hurt less. I was so sure that if I was in control of who was in my life and when, that I wouldn't feel lonely.

But in truth, I have never felt as loved as when I'm sat with this group of misshapen pieces. All the pieces of various puzzles that never fitted in with their own pictures, but somehow made this wonderfully beautiful image when placed next to each other. We'd passed through each other's lives at different stages, through a revolving door that only ever seemed to let new people in and never left anyone out in the cold, and somehow, it worked.

As I climb into bed, the wine swirling in my head as I lie on the pillow, it's obvious now I'd done what I'd hoped to do. I had found myself again. I just wasn't sure Mark was going to like the outcome.

I stare at the cracks in the walls, grateful Abbie had taken Sophia into bed with her. Wine and babies really don't mix. The patterns on the wallpaper and shapes of my memories in the darkness of the room merge with the wine and take my thoughts somewhere new. There were so many shapes of family out there, so many ways to raise a family. So many different 'blends'. I'm trying so hard to create a canvas with perfect symmetry – straight lines and precision-placed images – but the painting that made most sense to me was the abstract. The mish-mash of shapes that made life interesting. Nothing about my life had been standard; maybe I was never meant to be a cut, copy and paste kinda girl. Maybe, misshapen and unique was always destined to be my life.

Stephen and Abbie call me *sister* and mean it. I'd turned my back, but they never did. This was my family. Disjointed maybe, but they love me unconditionally. That was what my heart had been searching for.

As I slip towards sleep, I wonder if the answer to fixing me lay on the cobbled streets of home, rather than on the cobbled streets of the mountain of many voices. Here, in my hometown, I only need to hear one voice echoing in the distance. My own. And with all the noise now fading from my mind, I can hear myself.

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TWENTY-FIVE

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

We debated for a while as to who would stay with Ben this evening, but with a lot of explaining to do, and a lawyer to find, we agreed it would be better if I went home and got started. The next few days were going to be a rollercoaster, and Grace deserved one last night of normality before the shit got real. I'd messaged Kez. She didn't know it yet, but I was about to drop the biggest bombshell on her.

Kerri-Ann is feeding a hungry- looking Pip as I walk in. His chin resting patiently on the edge of the kitchen table, balancing on his hind legs with his paws framing his cute wee face as he watches her spoon the chunks into his bowl.

'Sorry, I'm looking for my cousin. You haven't seen her, have you?' I chuckle.

'Shut it, you.' She laughs back. 'I've only ever forgotten to feed him once and you never let me live it down!'

'You're a godsend, I swear,' I reply, as I head straight to the fridge to pull out the wine and pour two very large glasses.

'Oh shit. Has it been that bad, babe? What's going on?'

I pass her a massive heavy blanket and nod towards the back door.

'Hell's bells, it's an outdoor event?' Kerri bit her lip as she turned and made her way into the back garden.

I'd been rehearsing this conversation. All I had to do now, was get through the whole story without totally breaking down in tears. I grabbed the baby monitor from the kitchen worktop, stole a breath for strength and made my way outside.

When I've told the whole story, I stop talking and just look at her. She has all the facts now. I'd asked her not to interrupt while I went through the entire story from start to finish and to her credit, she didn't once open her mouth. In our entire lives, I'd never known her to stay quiet for so long.

I drum my nails on the side of my now empty wine glass, nervously

waiting for a response.

Nothing came.

I look up and she's staring, somewhere in the middle distance. I follow her eyeline to see what she is looking at. A bright rainbow painted across the windows of the bedroom facing the garden. My daughter's room.

'Kez?' I ask tentatively, but her eyes don't shift. Instead, I watch as she gulps, and as she does, a tear drops heavily from her eyelids.

She stands up. Silently, and goes to the back door, opening it and disappearing into the kitchen. When she returns, she's holding two bottles in one hand and two shot glasses in the other. A bottle of wine and a bottle of tequila.

She sits, heavy, on the seat next to me. She lets out a big sigh, turns to look at me and opens her mouth but nothing comes out except a sigh.

She pours two very generous shots of tequila and hands me one. She nods at me as we both take the shot.

She refills our wine glasses and sits back in the chair.

'OK,' she starts. 'OK. Right. So.'

I've never seen her this lost for words.

'So, your son goes into hospital with a fever and bruise and gets diagnosed with leukaemia, then you find out that your daughter isn't your daughter. Not yours *or* Andy's and you figure out that your daughter is living with this mystery woman who you've built a friendship with, but only recently saw in person again, and she just happens to be in the country and coming to meet you for a coffee at the hospital tomorrow. Have I got that right?'

She's talking to me, but she's staring at the side of my shed, shaking her head back and forth as she tries to make sense of it all.

'This all sounds like the start of a bad *Jerry Springer* episode,' she says to me. 'I just hope no one is going to lose their shit and start throwing stuff.'

She takes a large glug from the glass of wine in her hands.

'So, I assume you're gonna tell her tomorrow?' Kerri-Ann asks.

'Well, that depends. Andy really doesn't want to tell her. He's terrified he's gonna lose Ben and now Grace too,' I say. 'I just don't know what to do for the best, or how to handle this.'

'So, what about Ben?' Kerri-Ann asks.

'He's not OK. His body isn't fighting off the infection and it doesn't

matter what the doctors do, he doesn't seem to be responding to meds. Until he does, we can't even think of treating the leukaemia. It's all mixed up together. Can't treat one without the other.'

As if the universe was listening, I get an update from Andy.

'Ben woke up. He still can't breathe without the mask, so he didn't talk much, but we put the TV on and he watched Friends reruns for a while. He's sleeping now. What did Kez say?'

I tap out a quick reply then turn back to Kerri-Ann. 'So, will you come with me tomorrow? We might need you. I don't know how all this is gonna go down, but I'd rather have you with me.'

'Of course,' she replies, leaning forward and hugging me close.

'Don't worry, we've got you. You have a massive family that will stand behind you, every step of the way. No matter what you want to do, we've got your back.'

As I slip beneath my sheets and pull Grace in for a sleepy hug, I smile as she wraps her koala arms around my neck. I don't want to see Victoria tomorrow. I'd been so excited, but now this new friend felt like a cuckoo in my nest, getting ready to steal my child. Or am I the cuckoo? Either way, everything feels just a little harder tonight than it did last night.

Just as I'm drifting off to sleep, I get a message.

'Can't wait to see you tomorrow. Hope Ben is better. Vic xx'

My blood runs cold. How on God's green earth was this all going to play out?

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TWENTY-SIX

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

‘So, we are all sorted? We know the plan?’ I look between the faces of my husband and my cousin and feel like some kind of Mafia boss laying down the law. We are in the hospital canteen, cups of stale coffee going cold in front of us, all three of us unable to stomach anything.

‘Yep,’ says Andy, rubbing his eyes and scratching his stubble, a night on the cot-bed in the room of many machines has left him looking ten years older. We had agreed that Andy would go back to Ben’s room. Right now, one of us needed to be with him at all times. The results of the bone marrow tests were due any minute.

‘Are you sure about this, Nic? Are you sure you don’t want me to stay here with you?’ Kez asks.

‘It’s fine. She’ll think it’s really odd if you’re sat with me. It would feel like taking a friend on a blind date for fear of a serial killer and I don’t want to start this conversation like that. Take Grace into the gardens, and at least when I know more, we can decide if I’m bringing her to meet you both or not.’

We all knew that the legal implications of this meant that lawyers would soon have to be involved, and I didn’t want to do that without first having a face-to-face conversation with the woman I was about to share the hardest of times with.

‘Look, before we get legal involved, we need to figure out if there’s a way we can handle this that won’t destroy the kids caught at the centre. Victoria’s a beautiful human being; she’s a good person. Let’s see if we can sort this out like adults. We have to at least try to do this the right way.’

I watch as Kerri-Ann walks out of the canteen pushing Grace in the stroller, my beautiful girl giggling and throwing around a lion teddy she’d found in Ben’s room and insisted on bringing to the hospital for him.

Andy bends down and kisses me, hard on the mouth.

‘I love you,’ he says, staring deep into my eyes. He’s scared. It’s written

all over him.

‘I know,’ I say in return. ‘I love you too. Don’t worry, I’ve got this,’ I say to him, steeling all the inches of bravery I have in my body and holding them close.

‘I don’t know how you’re doing this,’ he says. ‘I’m losing my mind here. How are you staying so calm?’

‘I’m not calm, not even a little bit,’ I reply. ‘I’m terrified. I’m angry. I’m heartbroken and grieving already over all the time I’ve lost with our own child and preparing to grieve over the thought of giving our daughter to someone else. I’m anything but calm.’

I have to take a deep breath. If I don’t, I’ll burst into tears, and now is not the time.

‘I’m not calm, Andy. But I lay in bed last night thinking, if I don’t handle this exactly right, we could lose them both. We need her to be on our side, because if her daughter turns out to be the only one who can save our son, if Sophia holds the key . . . if she is our only hope, I can’t mess this up. I have to get this right. If I don’t get her on side, Andy, we could lose them both.’

He kisses me again, hard and slow, lingering, as if this might be our last normal moment before the world turns on its axis.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Victoria

Dundee – October 2022

The drive to Dundee was possibly one of the most relaxing drives of my life. I'd forgotten how it felt to just put the music on loud and sing alone in the car. My life had been filled with Disney tracks for the last few years, but as I pull into the car park at the hospital, I marvel at how much younger I feel for just having an hour alone in a car with some bangin' tunes.

They should prescribe this, for new mothers; we should be given tokens for pure alone time. It's beyond restorative. With the sun shining on my back as I lock the car, I marvel at how much I love this place. It might be cold, but the crisp October air fills my lungs with hope and promise.

I make my way up to the seventh floor and head towards the canteen. Nicole is sat just a short distance away across the room with her back to the door, her dark bobbed hair in loose waves on her shoulder. I recognise the jumper she's wearing straight away. It's her comfort jumper. She would wear it on the 'bad' days during lockdown.

'Well, I would recognise that jumper anywhere!' I say loudly as I approach her and watch as she turns to face me.

Her beautiful face looks pained. Full of sorrow. Much more so than yesterday and I fear for the worst. As I throw my arms around her neck, there is a hesitancy in her embrace that worries me.

'How's Ben?' I ask, pulling out the chair next to her at the table.

'Not great,' she responds, looking around, over her shoulder first and then over mine. She's fidgeting. Picking at her fingers, pulling at the skin, making them bleed.

'Shall I get you a tea? A coffee?' she asks me, scrambling around in her bag.

'No, no, don't be daft. Let me get you something?'

I want to reach out and hug her again, but she stands abruptly.

'I'll be fine in a sec; I'll grab you a coffee first. Honestly, I'm fine.'

Nicole walks towards the counter to order our coffees, but her gait seems sluggish. She moves like she is a patient here herself.

When she returns, the conversation between us doesn't flow easily. She must be exhausted. I had never really noticed the age difference between us before. She's a woman who carries herself well, makes an effort and looks her best, but her dark eyes and pale complexion give away her years today. I can see the worry written all over her face.

We sip our cups of hot coffee and I wait for her to feel comfortable enough to tell me what's going on.

When she eventually plucks up the strength to explain, her words come out slowly, coated in hesitancy as she explains Ben's leukaemia diagnosis. I hold her hand as her whole body shakes and she tries to explain the intricacies of bone marrow testing. I try to comfort her, but she speaks the words as if reading from a script, as if I am a stranger. Then she says something that makes no sense to me, and I wonder if I have missed a huge part of the story.

'Wait. Hang on. What do you mean? Grace isn't Andy's? Did you even suspect?'

We had talked about the affair of course, but Nicole had never once mentioned that Grace could be anyone other than Andy's. For a moment I wondered if she had known all along and just not told me; maybe she worried I would judge her? Surely that was the end of their marriage now. My heart aches for her. I know how hard she has fought to keep him, but I guess if she knew Grace might not be his, that explains why she was sabotaging the relationship at every step. I warned her that her paranoia would kick her in the arse at some point.

'No. Victoria, that's not what I mean,' she says to me, squeezing her eyes shut. I try to squeeze her hand in reassurance, but she pulls them away from me, folding her arms across her chest as she stares at the tabletop.

'Grace is blood type O. Mark is blood type B and I'm AB. Neither Mark, nor I, are Grace's biological parents.'

She raises her eyes to look at me but my brain can't compute what she is trying to tell me.

'But. How is that possible? Was there a mix-up? Where? At the hospital?'

Words are filing the air. Statistics and blood groups, numbers and names of doctors I don't recognise. I watch as she reaches down into her bag and

pulls out paperwork. I stare at the stamp on the top of the page. It doesn't say Hospital Costa del Sol, it's a stamp from the municipal centre: the *Urgencias*.

'Wait. Hang on,' I say. 'Just wait.'

I look up and catch her eyes. She's terrified.

'We think . . . Andy and I think . . . as do the doctors . . . we think Grace is your biological daughter. And Sophia is ours.' She pauses but I don't say a word. 'Grace can't help Ben because she's not a match.'

I am shaking. Trembling. Every part of my body feels like I've been hit by a lightning bolt and I can't quite feel the ground beneath me. I'm holding the sheet of paper with the results on it, and I can see the letters in black ink printed across the page, but my brain isn't registering the words as anything other than shapes on a page. Nothing makes sense.

'Did you have any idea, Vic?' Nicole asks, her words coated in caution.

'Are you kiddin' me?' I can't believe she's asking me that. Had our years of friendship meant nothing? 'You think if I knew, I would have kept this from you?' I try to keep my anger at bay, but with so many emotions swirling, I can't keep my head straight.

'No, no. That's not what I mean.' Nicole fusses with the cup in front of her, unable to meet my eyes. 'I'm not accusing you. I just, I feel like a fool for not seeing it.'

'Are you saying I should have noticed? Make up your mind – one minute you're accusing me of knowing, and now you're wondering why I didn't?' I spit back. This whole conversation feels like a terrible nightmare and my body is fighting the urge to run away.

I flick back and forth between the pages, trying to see if there's any way they could have read this all wrong. Surely to God this has to be a mistake.

'Vic, please, I don't want us to fight. Not at all. This is . . .' She picks at her nails, and I watch a tear drop from the end of her nose onto the table between us. 'This is all utterly insane. I suppose I'm angry with myself for not ever questioning. My brothers teased us after Grace was born, said that she looked like "the milkman's child", which after having an affair was kinda triggering. I just blocked it all out.' Her voice is speeding up, as if she's trying to fill the air with words to soften the blow.

That's when it hits me. I stop flicking the papers and stare at the names on the document. I wasn't mad. I was never crazy. It was never me!

‘I thought I was the worst mum,’ I finally find the strength to say, finally find the bravery to admit. ‘I thought Sophia, I . . . I wasn’t wrong. Nicole, I wasn’t wrong. I went to therapy; I didn’t tell anyone. I was diagnosed with postnatal depression. I told Mark I was struggling to “connect” with Sophia. I knew something was wrong. No one believed me. No one listened.’

It’s all starting to make sense. All those tiny little shapes that never fitted, all those little niggles that sat at the back of my brain. I look into the eyes of my friend and wonder why I’d never seen it. Her hair was mousy brown, not as blonde as Sophia’s, but the shape of her face, the softness in her lips. I can see it. Those lips that I’d watched breathing out dreams. They were her mum’s.

‘He told me I was crazy. That it was all in my head. He told me that I’d convinced myself I was a bad mum.’

As quickly as the words form in my brain, they tumble out of my mouth. It’s only when I raise my head and look at my beautiful friend again that I realise the hurt I’m causing.

‘Oh my God, Nicole. I’m sorry. It’s not . . . it’s not that I knew. It’s just . . . I guess I’m shocked I’m not shocked. I’m shocked that it’s actually starting to make sense. Do you know what I mean?’

She nods her head, her arms crossed, hugging herself like a child in pain.

‘In a strange way, yes. I love Grace, with all of my heart. I never, not for one moment thought she wasn’t mine, but since they told us . . . I look at the pictures, Vic, and it’s so clear. Grace looks so much like you.’

I feel it again, a hesitancy in the air. Something else, another shoe to drop.

‘Is there something else? Nicole?’ I watch as she picks and picks at the skin around her nail.

‘I’m terrified Vic, so scared. Ben is in isolation, fighting for his life, and I can’t help fix him because I never noticed when they handed me my daughter, that she was the wrong baby.’

‘You can’t beat yourself up about that, my God, that whole day was an utter rollercoaster. Neither of us knew up from down that day.’

She’s biting her lip. ‘We were so scared to tell you. Our wee boy is fighting for his life, Vic, and the only person who can help him is his sister, but we don’t want to lose our daughter in the process.’

‘What do you mean lose your daughter? Nicole, never, ever in a million years would I inflict that pain on anyone . . .’ I start, and then the realisation

of her words hits. 'Wait, oh my God, Grace can't help Ben, but Sophia can. But telling us means you think we'll take Grace from you. Wow. OK.'

With the final piece in place, I see the picture clearly. Part of me wonders if they would have ever told me, had Ben not gotten sick. But then, if he hadn't gotten sick, would we have ever known?

'Look,' I say, gathering up my resolve and making a decision, 'this is messy. It's not going to get less messy, but I can promise you I am not going to make it worse.'

Nicole's features soften and I breath deep enough for us both.

'I love Sophia, and Leo. Those kids might fight like cat and dog but they are siblings. You love Grace and I know Ben dotes on her. It's not just us we have to think about here; this is two families. But we *will* find a way to make this work, OK? Together.'

I take her hands in mind, and can feel her pulse racing.

'Nicole, look at me . . . look at me now . . .' I lift her chin and look her dead in the eyes. 'If there is one thing I've learned these last few days, it's that family, oh my God, family is everything. But family isn't blood. Not always. Family is who you choose. Who sticks by you. Family is who you surround yourself with when things are tough. Those who help you through. I'm your family. You're mine. We chose each other, through the hell of the last few years, we chose each other. I promise you . . . I *promise* you, we will find a way through this.'

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TWENTY-EIGHT

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

We sit in the canteen for what feels like forever, just hugging each other, both scared to part, both scared to move on to the next section of this road. We both agree that the children need to come first. When I'm sure that she isn't about to lose her ever-loving mind, I suggest we go for a walk in the gardens and I tell her Kerri-Ann is there, with Grace.

We walk slowly towards the gardens, and I watch as she fusses with her hair, and her outfit, as if nervously *meeting the parents* for the first time. It didn't matter that she had spent all that time with Grace on the beach; this was different. The closer we get to the gardens, my fight-or-flight returns.

'Vic, promise me you won't say anything to Grace. Not yet. Please.'

She stops at the entrance to the pathway and turns to me, taking my hands in hers.

'Nicole, you have been her only mother. Until we *all* decide otherwise, nothing changes. Nothing at all. I think we've all been through more than enough. I have no desire to make this any harder for any of us.'

I hug her and hope she means it.

'I'm so glad, strange to say it, I know, that Covid locked us down like that. I'm so grateful to have found this friendship with you. To have watched you bring up Grace. Could you imagine if we were finding this out now as strangers?' Victoria says to me.

I hear her, before I see her. We both do. Looking into each other's eyes, we both hear the call of '*Mummy*' from a short distance away. She's calling me, I'm Mummy, but we both turn at the same time to see Grace bounding towards us holding a posy of dead flowers in one hand and plush lion in the other.

'Muuuummmmy,' she shouts, and I kneel down to scoop her up in my arms. I hold her close, hugging her like it might be the last time ever, breathing in her familiar scent. As I open my eyes, I see Victoria's eyes filled with tears.

I put Grace down on the ground and crouch next to her.

‘You remember Victoria?’ I all but whisper into her delicate little ear. ‘Leo and Sophia’s mummy?’ I ask, my heart heavy.

‘Toria,’ she replies, playing with the word in her mouth, finding the shape of the letters and the sounds they make as they exit her delicate lips. Lips that no longer look like mine. Lips that look like hers.

Victoria bends down to meet her eyeline, and my heart breaks all over the cracked pavement beneath us. Grace reaches out her arms, and without a second thought, wraps them around Victoria’s neck. Instantly, I see my friend’s body relax into the hug. Their cheeks touching, skin to skin, merging into each other. I watch the looks they exchange and see the souls of these two begin combine. There’s no doubt, not an ounce, left in me. Even if I had questioned before, I couldn’t deny it now. In each other’s arms, it was clear. Victoria is her mother. What then does that make me?

Kerri-Ann walks over. I catch her eye and give her the nod of approval, as if she is waiting for permission to interrupt our very strange family moment.

‘This is all a bit odd, isn’t it?’ she says, taking Victoria into an embrace. I knew she would know the right thing to do.

‘Your head must be spinning, doll.’ Kerri-Ann is trying hard to keep her emotions in check, but I can see the look in her eyes, a protective mumma bear ready to fight if need be. For me. For Grace.

‘Grace baby, why don’t you take Victoria and show her some of the flowers you like?’ I say, winking at Victoria, who seems more than happy with the suggestion. ‘I’ll stay here and talk to Auntie Kez, OK?’

‘OK, Mummy. Then I go give lion to Ben-Ben?’

‘We’ll see, baby. Off you go.’

Kerri-Ann and I sit on the bench, and watch as Victoria and Grace stroll the paths and chat among the hibernating plants.

‘My God, Nic. They look so alike,’ Kerri-Ann remarks. I’d hoped I was imagining it, painting them as equals to make sense of it in my mind.

‘God it’s weird. How can that child have grown up with me for the last three years, but within an instant fall into step with her?’ I say as I watch their mannerisms mirror each other. ‘This whole nature versus nurture thing is such a bitch. I mean, we think we are the ones who mould our children into who they become, but that girl, she was who she is from the moment

her DNA started to split. You can see it.' We watch in silence for a little while as the two peas in a pod skip around the perimeter of the gardens.

Just as my heart is starting to slow down, I hear my name being shouted from across the courtyard. It's Andy. He's running towards me, his arms above his head.

'Nic – hurry, quick!' He looks between me, and Kerri-Ann, and then he clocks Victoria, Grace in her arms waving towards her dad.

'Daddy!' she shouts.

'Hey, beautiful. I'll be back soon, OK? Me and Mummy need to go see the doctor.' He reaches me. His face is covered in sweat, and I know before he says anything.

'Nic, you need to come in. Now.'

My body wants to move, wants to follow him. I can feel my heart running already, towards my son, but something is sticking me to the ground.

'I told her. It's fine. It's all gonna be fine.' I try to get the words out quick enough, hoping that they will change whatever he is about to say, but I know it's coming.

'Nic. It might be too late. You need to . . .' He turns to look at the hospital doors, then back to me. 'Nic, you need to come. Now.'

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TWENTY-NINE

Victoria

Edinburgh – October 2022

I turn the key in the lock of my once childhood home, the same key I had used as a teenager that Maggie left on my keyring by the front door '*in case I ever needed to come home*'. As the door creaks open, I hear nothing. No screaming, no crying, no drama, just the hiss of a '*shhhhhh*' coming from the living room. After the day I've endured, I'm grateful to come home to some calm.

'Hey, guys,' I whisper in a low tone as I creak open the door and am met with the smells and sights of childhood. Happy memories flood over me, encasing me in a warm blanket, and if I stay just still enough, I can feel Maggie hugging me from behind.

'You're making stovies!' My whisper cracks a little from the emotion desperate to escape.

Stephen is the first one to get up from the sofa, peeling himself up from the leather couch as he inches ever so delicately away from my wee boy, replacing himself with a pillow to stop him rolling onto the floor.

'Hiya, pal. How did it go?' Stephen asks as he pulls me in for a brotherly hug. As his arms knit around my back, my resolve breaks and I sob into his shoulder.

'Oh no, that bad? Is her wee boy OK?' As I look in his eyes, I have no idea how I'm going to break it to him.

'Stephen, honestly, the day I've had . . . I'm not even sure I know where to start.'

I peer over his shoulder and see my wee lad stirring. Abbie is sitting in Maggie's armchair by the door, Sophia curled up in her lap like a cat, purring away as she enjoys dreamland.

'Why don't I take these two up and get them settled in bed, then we'll need a bottle of wine so I can explain it all.'

I thought I had my script planned out in my head, written word for word on the drive home, but as I look at them, all words escape my brain.

I tuck my babies under their duvets and kiss their temples. Sophia rouses, but she loves her bed, so she doesn't make a fuss as I tuck her in. Instead, she holds my face, tells me she loves me then turns to face the wall and cuddle her plushie. As I stroke the back of her head and take one of her curls in my fingers. I see it. The resemblance to Andy. I had spent so many nights staring at her colouring and wondering if maybe it was a relic of my own ancestors. I'd looked into her eyes so many times and tried to find me, and couldn't. But that goodnight kiss, the hug that she gave me, with every inch of her body touching mine, her heart beating against my own chest, that was all real.

As I close the bedroom door and head downstairs, I take one last deep breath before I go in. Once I've told them, there's no going back. As soon as someone else knows, the secret is out, and I won't be able to stop the tsunami that will come along with the earthquake I'm about to cause.

'Right, missy,' says Abbie as I enter the room, holding up a very large glass of wine in my direction, 'spill it!'

So, I did.

I sat in Maggie's armchair, across from the stunned faces of my siblings, and told them everything. I started right back at the beginning, the day it all started, the day I went into labour. As I explained the fear and the mad dash in the ambulance to the hospital with two preemie twin babies, Stephen's eyes filled with tears.

I moved on to life at home afterwards, spilling out my 'Spanish life story' beat by beat, month by month, as if telling it all in order was fixing it as a timeline in my mind, helping me make sense of it as I spoke. I tried to explain the postnatal depression, the therapy, my fear that Sophia hated me, that we had no connection and how I had worked so hard to create a bond between us.

'I'm so confused,' says Abigail, 'what has all this got to do with what happened today?'

'Let me finish, and maybe pour another glass, will you?' I motioned Stephen towards the dwindling bottle of wine. 'In fact, open another one, will ya?' I say. I need the Dutch courage for the next bit.

'So, how do I say this,' I start, as I grapple around in the fogginess that is my brain, trying to find the words to put together to make sense of this situation.

I stare at my fingernails, bitten and chewed from the drive home, and decide that maybe the best way to explain is to show them. I pick up my phone and scroll to the picture of all the kids on the beach.

‘OK, so, look at this pic,’ I say, handing them my phone, zooming in so all four kids are clear and central. ‘This is a picture of all our kids together.’

I wait a beat as they both coo over the image.

‘OMG, check out Leo flirting with the other lassie already. How cute is that. He’s gonna be a heartbreaker. What did you say her name was again?’ says Stephen, looking up at me with the phone still in his hands.

‘Grace,’ I reply. ‘That’s Grace, and it’s not his girlfriend. That’s his sister.’

If ever there was a moment in this house that was more silent, I had never witnessed it. I watch as the questions spin across his eyes and then as Abbie looks between the two of us, totally and utterly confused. She takes the phone from Stephen’s hands while his eyes are locked steadfast on me.

‘I don’t . . .’ Abbie starts.

‘Grace and Sophia, we believe, were swapped at birth. Remember the chaos I told you about, how Nicole almost died, her baby was born early . . .’

‘Wait, so . . .’ Stephen’s face greys.

‘Yep. Nicole found out yesterday when they were looking at Grace as a donor for her brother. Only Grace can’t help. Because it’s Sophia who’s related to him, not Grace.’

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THIRTY

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

Ben is in a coma. He's alive, but he's in a coma – because the doctors have put him into one. I don't even know how long I've been standing here, while a specialist tries to explain it to us again.

'Ben's critically ill, Mr Murray. Unless we act now, Ben won't be strong enough to receive treatment for the cancer. We need to get his body fighting these infections first, before we tackle anything else.'

The floor is moving and shifting beneath me. The tiles are floating, hot burning lava of hell underneath, threatening to take me under. I raise my feet from the floor but it doesn't help. The scene around me is still shifting and I feel sick with the dizziness.

'I'm gonna to throw up,' I say, not to anyone in particular.

A bedpan finds its way into my blurry field of vision.

'What about the bone marrow transplant?' Andy asks. Thank God he had the presence of mind to remember this. I almost had forgotten it in my state of shock.

'We've been in touch with the Hospital Costa del Sol, and their team are now in touch with *Hospiten*. We will get this all cleared up, and see if we can arrange testing in Spain. Once we know all the details, and of course if we have permission from the other parents, we can get an ethics committee together to decide if we can use your daughter – your genetic daughter – as a donor. If we test her, and she's not a match, we will put an urgent call out for a match and take it from there. I know it doesn't sound ideal, but while all this is going on, we can get Ben's health strong enough that he can endure the procedure.'

Andy places his hand on my thigh and as I look towards him, my world falls apart. He is crying, and not even trying to hide it. My big, strong husband looks more childlike than I have seen since he chased me around the playground.

'How is this happening?' he asks me.

‘Doctor, can you tell me, how long will all this take? How long do we have?’ I’m terrified to know the answer, but this is how I work. ‘I don’t care how scary the situation is, give me all the details. I can cope with the fallout, but I need the details.’

The look of sympathy that crosses his face replaces the staunch professionalism. Now, I can see the human beneath.

‘Mrs Murray.’ He rounds the table to crouch down in front of us. He takes my hands in his, and I can feel his fingers shaking.

‘Never, in all my career, have I faced a situation as complex as this. The genetic issue does complicate matters, but I can’t give you a timeframe. Children’s bodies can be so unpredictable. I can’t tell you if the treatment will definitely work, but I think you know that already.’

I nod at him. I’m not daft. When does any doctor give you a definitive answer like that?

‘But, and I say this with my whole heart, Mrs Murray, you got Ben to us before it was too late. I have one of the best teams in the country working on his recovery, and as soon as he is fit enough, we will fight the leukaemia. I’m hopeful.’

Hopeful.

I’m not sure what that word means anymore.

‘I don’t feel so hopeful right now.’

The words escape my lips but I never intended them to be heard. I look towards my husband. He lowers his head into his palms and his shoulders shake as he lets it all go.

I can’t cry. I’m numb.

‘It’s not your job to be hopeful right now,’ says the doctor, as he passes a box of tissues to my crumbling husband. ‘It’s your job to just keep going. Leave the hope and hard work to me.’

We wrap up the meeting and the legal lady from the hospital sits with us to fill out all the remaining documentation they need.

‘OK, so we will get in touch with the hospital and see if we can locate the other family,’ says the hospital solicitor.

Andy looks at me, his eyes pleading. As soon as we do this, there is no going back.

‘Andy, we have to do this,’ I say, and watch his face fall.

‘I know,’ he replies.

I turn to her. 'We already know them.'

The look on her face says it all.

'Yes, I know I should have said earlier, but in truth, we met in Spain, at the hospital. We didn't know about the, the mistake, and we became friends. In fact . . .' I retrieve my phone and pull up the picture of us all together on the beach. 'Grace's mother was with us when Ben collapsed. She is visiting from Spain with her twins. We told her everything earlier today. She's here, in Scotland.'

Andy and I spoke for another half an hour about what details I had given to Victoria. I explained that I didn't know if she'd told Mark yet, and of course we agreed to ask Victoria to bring Sophia in for tests. The hopefulness rose considerably, and the solicitor looked almost pleased with the revelations.

'Of course, if the father has an issue with any of this, it could get complicated, but I assume because you are all friends, that this can be worked out amicably.'

I hadn't even considered Mark in any of this. Clearly, looking at the expression on Andy's face, neither had he.

'He wouldn't stand in our way, would he?' Andy asks me.

'I've no idea. I barely know the guy. And from what I do know, I'm not a fan – that's for sure.'

* * *

As the meeting comes to a close, and we all have our plans going forward, we are ushered out of the office as another couple are ushered in. The woman looks terrified, and the husband looks like he hasn't slept in months. I want to reach out and hug the strangers as they replace us in the doctor's office. No parent should ever have to feel this kind of fear. It changes you and whatever the future held. It had already changed me.

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THIRTY-ONE

Victoria

Edinburgh – October 2022

I wake up to a piercing ache in my temples and a dull thud that seems to move in waves across the top of my skull, a throbbing reminder of the indulgence from last night's wine-fuelled chats with Abbie and Stephen. I feel like I've been hit by a truck, but I'm unsure if it's from the alcohol or the fact that my brain is only now coming to terms with all the revelations of the last few days.

A chill creeps across my feet, a draught from under the bedroom door, and as I flex my toes into the carpet, I catch sight of the journal sticking out of my suitcase. Haphazardly chunked in there when I first arrived and left abandoned ever since. I open the pages and read the notes I made on the plane. I trace my fingers over the bullet point questions I'd scrawled on the flight.

'What is a perfect family?'

'Does a family have to be perfect to be right?'

'What does family even mean to me?'

'Do I love my husband enough to make this work? Will he change?'

I had no idea, when I scrawled those words, just how impactful reading them back this morning would be. I stare at the words, written by another version of myself. The one before I found my voice again. The one before I had found my family, my fight, my resolve. Before my world changed. I am putting off talking to Mark about the swap, and that alone tells me something. He should be the first person I want to pick up the phone to, not the last person in the world I want to tell. I pick up a pen from the old desk tidy sitting on my childhood shelf and scrawl a new question below.

'How do I create the life I want for myself and my kids, without him?'

I place the journal back in my bag and tighten the belt around my dressing gown. Time to face the day. At some point, I would need to tackle Mark, and I wanted it out of the way before I go to spend the night with Nicole and the kids.

I take a deep breath and make my way downstairs.

The aroma of bacon sizzling in the pan hits me like a slap in the face, intensifying the bile that's churning in my stomach. Abbie is at the stove, flipping eggs with a practised ease, her hair in tousled bun at the crown of her head, bobbing about as she dances to the sound of Ed Sheeran.

'My God, you're cheery this morning,' I say as I walk in the room, trying everything I can not to throw up at the smell of food.

'Morning, doll,' she greets me with a smirk. 'I didn't drink the offie dry last night, that's probably why.' She laughs.

'*Bad habits . . .*' she sings as she wiggles her backside from side to side.

'Your bad habit left *me* with a hangover!' I say, trying to raise a smile to my lips.

'How are you feeling this morn?' Abbie asks me.

'Oh, I dunno,' I say, trying not to get emotional again. I had been silently crying in my sleep all night. 'As if my world has been totally tipped upside down.'

Abbie flicks off the music and leans up against the kitchen worktop. 'I still can't wrap my head around it all. If I hadn't been sober, I'd have convinced myself it was all a beer-dream.'

I slump into a chair at the kitchen island, where Stephen is seated, juggling a cup of coffee and keeping a watchful eye on my energetic twins.

'Feeling rough?' he asks, a knowing grin playing on his lips as he gestures to my dishevelled appearance.

'As a badger's arse,' I nod weakly. The twins, oblivious to the chaos around them, giggle as they shovel spoonfuls of cereal into their mouths.

Abbie sets a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me, her expression softening as she hands me a glass of water. 'Here, this should help. Something tells me you're gonna need energy to get through the next few days,' she says, her tone gentle.

I force myself to eat, hoping that the greasy food will absorb some of the alcohol still lingering in my system. As I sip my water, I steal a glance at Stephen, marvelling at how effortlessly he manages to juggle the demands of my children with his laid-back demeanour.

'My God, Mark would not be able to cope with those two with a hangover this early in the morning. How the hell do you do it?' I ask as I watch him

tickling Leo, his laugh bouncing off the kitchen walls and resting squarely in my soul.

‘Well,’ he replies, picking up the now empty bowls from my kids and wandering over to the dishwasher. ‘For starters, I am not a grade-A prick, so that makes it easier. Also, I have practice. It’s not easy being a dad, but that doesn’t mean you have the right to check out when you’re not having fun.’

He closes the dishwasher with his foot as he reaches for a large glass of water and the packet of aspirin from the window ledge.

‘This,’ he says, handing me two pills, ‘is how normal parents get through this shitshow that is parenting. And life. We drink, we bitch, we moan and complain, then we wake up the next day, take a pill and check ourselves before getting on with life.’

It’s a pointed response, and it’s not lost on me, but as I watch him move around the kitchen cleaning up behind Abigail as she cooks, I wonder what happened to my version of life. Why did I get the husband who slowly shifted from an equal partner to a child I had to look after in our relationship?

‘I don’t think I have a husband at the moment.’ As the words hit the air, I’m shocked by how little it frightens me to hear it. ‘I have twins, and a grown man-child who lives in my home and sucks all the joy from our lives.’

‘Jesus,’ Abbie says loudly as she replaces my now empty glass of water with a tall glass of orange juice. ‘Well, if that’s how you really feel, Vic, do something about it. Life is too bloody short to be miserable. The last few years have taught us that if nothing else.’

I push the food on my plate around, no interest at all in eating it.

‘I hate to bring up the massive elephant in the room,’ Stephen says before looking towards Abbie and back to me, ‘but have you thought about how you’re gonna tell him about all this?’

I don’t have any words, so I shrug. I have no clue. A big part of the ‘how’ will depend on the mood he is in when I call him, but I know I can’t put it off much longer and it would be best done without the kids in the room. Abbie gets up from the table first, to clear away the plates, as Stephen takes the children upstairs to get dressed.

‘This is a fuckin joke,’ Mark shouts down the phone, his voice raising an octave with each and every syllable.

‘I will not stand for this. And who the hell do you think you are making all these decisions without me?’

I had spent a good twenty minutes trying to explain to Mark what had happened, how ill Ben was and how him being sick had resulted in us finding out about the swap. So far, he hasn’t said a single word about Sophia, or Grace. He hasn’t asked me if I’m OK, hasn’t shared his fear, or worry. All he’s done is share his anger.

‘Mark, I’m here, alone, with two kids, and dealing with this. There was no point in me telling you anything until I knew everything. I’m not making any decisions; I’m simply explaining what’s going on.’

I had in fact made decisions, but he didn’t know that yet. I hadn’t even gotten that far, but his immediate anger and lack of worry for me and the kids had solidified my decision.

‘Well, I’m coming over. There is no way on hell’s earth those wankers are going anywhere near my kids. How dare she just presume we’ll help? Has she even asked? Has she even considered that we might not *want* OUR child to undergo some sort of procedure? How do we even know this is real? Have they even tested yet?’

I watch the screen of my phone as he frantically walks around the living room of our home, pacing back and forth, the video call glitching every time he hits the ‘dead zone’ in our house.

‘Mark, stop moving around, will you? You’re making me feel sick! Of course she hasn’t outright asked. She has, respectfully I might add, told me that Sophia is likely Ben’s best chance of a match and left it there for me to process. I don’t really think she needs to say much more than that.’

‘Well, we don’t have to help. There’s no law to compel us to,’ he spits back.

‘No, you’re right, there’s no law, but if Leo was sick, you would have no issue using Grace to help him. There’s no difference here. Sophia would be helping her brother – it’s as simple as that.’

He’s pacing the room again and I can’t take it anymore.

‘Mark, for fuck’s sake. I told you to stop moving.’

He stops abruptly and looks down the camera of his phone at me.

‘Don’t you dare raise your voice to me. You feel sick because you’ve been

spending time with that drunkard of a foster sister of yours. Clearly, they've plied you with booze and filled your head with nonsense. I knew it was a bad idea to let you go there.'

Abbie pokes her head around the kitchen door into the living room. As much as she's trying her best to stay out of the way, I know she's listening to every word, and his last statement has enraged the beast in her. Seeing the look on her face gives me an edge of bravery and I take a breath before I say, 'Let me go? Who the hell do you think you are to talk to me like that? Or, in fact, dictate to me where I can go, or when, or with who?'

The shock is evident on his face. I'm not sure I have ever spoken this way to him in all our years together.

'See? This is what that lot do to you. This is why I hate going back there.'

'What "that lot" do to me? My family? Make me brave? Remind me who I am? Remind me that I am worth more than the shit you deal out to me?'

I watch as he props the phone up on the kitchen worktop and steps back so I can see him in full view.

'Shit. Are you for real? Look at the life I've given you. The world I've built around you. You are *nothing* without me. I gave you paradise and all you had to do was shut up and enjoy it. I pulled you from that shithole in Edinburgh and gave you the world. You ungrateful *bitch*.'

There it was. It wasn't the first time he had said these words; it had been a regular fight each and every time I mentioned wanting to go back to work or have some independence. The difference was, this time, I'd heard it for the last time, and this time, I had Abigail staring at me from the other room. I had put up with this for far too long.

Calmly, and with as much grace as I could muster, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and when I opened them, looked at the face of a man I barely recognised anymore as he stood proud, his arms crossed with defiance. I finally said the words I'd heard in my head over and over again last night, but was too afraid to give life to.

'Mark. I came home to try and figure out what was wrong with me, why I wasn't happy, why I was living in paradise and feeling like I was trapped in a prison.'

He stepped towards the phone, a little closer, maybe to hear my words, maybe to cut me off, but the closer he got, the more of his face I could see,

the more determined I was to stand up for myself. *He's not in the room, he can't hurt me, or scream at me; right now is my chance to be brave.*

'You need to hear this, Mark. So don't hang up,' I say as he tries to talk over me.

'Don't tell me what to do, you little . . .'

I put my hand up, not that it silences him, but it gives me permission to cut him off.

'No, Mark, I came here to figure stuff out. I've had the week from hell and had the biggest news dropped on me from a height about OUR child, and the fact that you're more angry at my reaction than worried about the future of our kids just says it all.'

He doesn't say anything, but I watch as the reality dawns on him. He's played this wrong this time, and he knows it.

'Mark, I want a divorce. I'm taking Sophia to get tested today in Dundee, and I'm being put in touch with a lawyer to help navigate the whole thing. I'll get a separate lawyer for the divorce, and I suggest you do too.'

'Divorce! Are you mental? I'll leave you with nothing and I'll take those kids. You watch me.'

'No. No, Mark, you won't. You can talk to your own lawyer, but you won't stand in my way. You might have money, and power, and anger, but I have a family. I have all the support I need.'

He tried to argue with me, but I had zoned out already, transfixed by the shapes Abbie was cutting on the rug of our living room floor, punching the air with her fist and shaking her arse.

'I'm not listening, Mark. I have a million things to do, and you've made it clear where you stand. So that's it.'

'Don't you dare. I swear, I will get on a flight . . .'

 I cut him off mid-stream, placing my phone on silent and ignoring the call as he tries to call back.

Abbie runs towards me, wrapping me in her arms.

'I'm so bloody proud of you,' she says, a grin stretching from ear to ear.

'Why?' I laugh at her as the enormity of the situation hits me. 'I've just ended my marriage. I have three-year-old twins, am about to go through what I can only assume will be a complicated court battle and I'm divorcing my husband at the same time. I haven't exactly won a Nobel prize, Abs. I've just blown up my marriage.'

She sits on the sofa opposite me, and smiles before saying, ‘Victoria, that is the first time I’ve heard you really sound like you since you married that prick. He’s stolen the light from you. He’s given you the most amazing gift in those children, but listen to him. He’s more interested in keeping the kids for the sake of his pride than getting to know his own daughter out of love. You deserve better. Those kids, all of them, deserve better. I’m bloody proud of you.’

Before I head upstairs to pack an overnight bag, Abbie passes me a stack of paper.

‘I couldn’t sleep last night. After you passed out, I did some research. Here’s a load of numbers for lawyers that specialise in cases like this. I may have also looked up a few divorce lawyers. Not that I expected this, but the way you’ve been talking since you got here, I figured it may come in handy.’

I flicked through the pages, her neat handwriting so perfectly placed on the lines of the page, each bullet point clearly separated from the next.

‘Abs, you didn’t need to . . .’

‘No, I didn’t. But you deserve to have someone help you through this, and we’ve got you. Me and Stephen. We spoke about it before you came down this morning. If you want to, you can live here with the kids. We’re in no rush to sell, and it’s what Maggie would want. The rest, we’ll work out together. OK?’

We hug and cry, and when Stephen comes in with the kids we cry some more.

I strap the kids into their car seats and before getting in the driver’s seat, I turn to my big brother, who is standing sentry at the front door.

‘I’ve called Mal. I’m gonna stay here for a few more days. I explained the situation and if Mark turns up here, I want to be here.’

I chuckle. As much as I love Stephen, he’s not the type to throw a punch, but he grits his teeth and clenches his fists, giving me the ‘gun show’ as I laugh at him.

‘I do love how protective you are!’

‘I’ve got you!’ he says, winking at me.

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THIRTY-TWO

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

I pour the Cheetos into a bowl, watching as they tumble from the packet, the orange dust coating my marble worktops. Normally these nasty little neon-coloured strips of E numbers wouldn't be allowed in my house, but today feels like a special occasion. I know the kids have spent time together on the beach, but it didn't feel as important as today does.

It feels strange to be away from my little lads bedside, acting as if the world is turning normally outside of the hospital ward, but we've had some better news about Ben and his stats are finally improving. Andy has persuaded me to take a day away from masks, beeping machines and hand sanitiser, to spend a 'normal' day with our girl. Or as normal as normal can get in this situation. Victoria had shown up to the hospital exactly on time, with the kids in tow, and the tests have been done, so another weight has been lifted. I hadn't wanted to push the topic too soon, but I was grateful Victoria didn't even need me to ask; she all but offered. In her mind, Sophia has another brother, and that brother needs her help. Mark, it seems, is not too keen, but at least until the ethics committee get involved, Victoria wants to help as much as she can.

I reach for another bowl, and empty a family-size bag of Maltesers into it. With movies lined up and most of Grace's doll's house moved down into the living room, we are almost ready for their arrival.

The legal teams between the three hospitals have been in touch and paperwork is now moving between them to rectify things.

I carry the tray laden with treats into the front room and pull the coffee table into the middle, carefully organising the bowls in a circle.

'Jesus, it's not the Queen coming to tea. Am I gonna find cucumber sarnies in the fridge too?'

I turn to find Kerri-Ann stood at the entrance to the kitchen, holding open the sliding doors as if she had just walked onto a stage and shouted, '*Here I am.*'

‘Oh my God, Kez! What have you done to your hair?’

As if everything in my world wasn’t crazy enough, I was now staring at the image of my cousin, her once mousy brown long hair cut short and dyed blonde, perfectly placed curls framing her cheeks and eyes.

‘Well, it felt like a special kinda day, so looks like we both made an effort.’

‘That’s not effort for me, or for Grace, or Sophia!’ I say and I furrow my brow in her direction.

‘Well, no. Maybe not. I’ve got a second date with that lad from the hospital tonight.’

‘What lad? Hospital? When?’

Kerri-Ann blushed before reeling off the details of her life that had been going on while I’d been stuck in a whirlpool of my own madness.

‘So, let me get this straight, while I was looking after my sick son, you were chatting up some gynaecology specialist in the reflective gardens outside?’

‘Well yeah, gotta take these chances when I get them!’

Just as I’m about to ask for more details, I hear a knock at the door, followed by an applause of knocks. As I open the front door, I’m met by the music makers.

Leo and Sophia are stood on the stoop of my house. Sophia’s head is obscured as she holds on tight to a tall plant, her delicate fingers wrapped around the base of a wicker basket, yellow flowers springing from the near empty stalks of what I recognise as winter jasmine.

My heart leaps. She couldn’t have known, and I’m sure I never told Victoria, but seeing her tiny eyes peep round the side of the bright yellow flowers as she takes a big sniff in and says, ‘It smells so wonderful,’ I want to burst into tears.

When she was mine, growing in my belly, I would bathe in jasmine. Something about the smell calmed me, and then when we were in Spain, the winter jasmine was blooming. If I close my eyes I can still feel the gentle breeze that carried the scent from the bushes in the garden to the bubbles of the Jacuzzi that day. That distinct smell would always wake her, making her kick fiercely.

I take the plant from her and bend down to kiss her on the cheek.

‘Do you like it?’ she asks, her gorgeous green eyes boring deep into my

soul.

‘My darling girl, I love it. Thank you.’

It’s as much as I can risk. An innocent ‘my’ slipped in and the understanding between Victoria and I sits in the comfortable silence between us.

We slip into the living room and Kerri-Ann comes down the stairs holding a very sleepy Grace in her arms. Her dark curls spiral out from her temples as she rubs the sleep from her eyes. Once she focuses, her energy levels shift immediately.

‘LEO! AFIA!’ she shouts, trying to wriggle free from Kerri-Ann’s arms.

Kerri-Ann puts Grace down on the floor and we watch as they all rush to each other, a three-way hug, arms around each other like it’s the most natural thing in the world and then they giggle as they all bump heads.

‘This is all so very . . .’ Victoria starts. Her face looks pale and the dark circles under her eyes make her look tired.

‘Yeah.’ I return her confused facial expression, but then quickly flash a smile, hoping to change the mood.

‘That smell . . .’ I say as I place the plant on the side table. ‘It takes me right back . . .’

‘I was stunned that they were selling them at the garden centre, to be honest. I wanted to get you something that reminded you of Spain, and the poinsettias are not out yet, but jasmine reminds me of warm winter nights. It was Maggie’s favourite.’

‘Oh really? Mine too! Maggie clearly had great taste,’ I say with a smile.

She seems a little out of step. A little nervous maybe. I watch as she picks at the split skin around her thumbnail and twists her wedding band around her finger.

‘How’s Ben doing? Andy mentioned things might be on the up?’ Vic asks, her words still soft and tentative.

‘Yeah, the doctors seem more positive. His vitals are better. It’s just a matter of time now,’ I say before adding, ‘and Vic, thank you. For taking Sophia to get tested. I know none of this is easy, and it must be even harder being at loggerheads with Mark. Are you OK?’ I ask, my tone as gentle as I can make it without sounding like a mother hen.

‘I think so,’ she replies, her eyes full of fear. ‘I just don’t know where to start with all this.’

I lean in to give her a hug and can feel the racing of her heart as she struggles to take a full breath. After a moment, we both lean into the embrace. I feel her arms tighten and her head drop onto my shoulder.

‘I know,’ I whisper. ‘I know, but we’ve got each other, OK?’ As I cling to this now familiar shape, I feel protective over her.

This situation wasn’t just happening to us, it was happening to her too, and she had very little family to support her and a husband sat stewing a million miles away. I pull back briefly and wipe the stray hair away from her eyes.

‘You said Mark didn’t take it so well?’ I ask, terrified of the response. She hadn’t given any details over message, but by the look on her face, I could tell she’d been in tears. She didn’t need to utter a word; the colour that had drained from her cheeks told me enough.

‘No, well . . .’ Her eyes flit away from my face, taking in the shape of Kerri-Ann standing no more than an arm’s length away. ‘Hey, Kerri-Ann, are you here to make sure I don’t just take off with the wrong kid?’ she says looking at my cousin, half joking, half serious, a twitch of her lips allowing her chin to shake and tears to pool in her lower lids. ‘God, I’m so sorry, that sounded so . . . I don’t mean that. You know I wouldn’t do that, right?’ she says, her hands flying to her face to swipe at the tears falling. ‘Sorry, I’m so emotional. It’s been quite a morning, and I’m hungover.’

Kerri-Ann doesn’t answer. I have a feeling she stays quiet because deep down that’s exactly why she has turned up this afternoon. Instead, she turns her back and walks quietly into the kitchen, leaving the silence of the question hanging in the air. When she returns, she is holding three shot glasses and a bottle of caramel vodka.

‘No, I don’t think you’re going to run off with one or all of the kids, but I figure you ladies might need someone here to help with the kids if you get all emosh,’ she says as she glugs the viscous liquid into the ornate thumb-size tumblers.

‘Plus, I’ve spent practically as much time with Grace as Nic and Andy have, and no doubt Nic will have told you I basically live here, so if you don’t mind?’ She pauses, looking between us both and softening her face. ‘I’d love to get to know the kids too? While you’re here? If that’s not too much?’

‘Totally up to you, Victoria,’ I say, looking my friend in the eye and

hoping she knows we're not a threat.

'I'm more than happy for you to be here,' she replies. 'Nicole chooses to have you around her kids. She trusts you and I can see how much Grace loves you. I can no more rip her away from you than I can from Nic.'

'Well,' Kerri-Ann says, raising her glass, 'I guess we should all get to know each other a wee bitty better then, eh? Looks like we're gonna be in each other's lives a fair bit more, that's for sure.' I watch as Victoria's shoulders relax and she settles into conversation easily with Kez.

As I look at this mish-mash of family members, all in the wrong place, in the wrong order, I feel more hopeful that we can make this work. Mark, of course, is the unknown factor in all of this, and that worries me, but as I look as Grace, now sitting on Victoria's knee bouncing up and down and giggling away as the chatter continues over her head, I know one thing for sure: I can't give her up. She was mine once, as much as she is hers now.

The rest of the afternoon passes in relative ease. We make the decision that we will have fun with the kids, watch movies and do some crafts and chat, and leave the serious talk until they're in bed. I'm desperate to hear what has been decided between Mark and Victoria, but not with three mini-humans ever watchful and listening to every single word.

I watched as Grace, Leo and Victoria crouched over a wooden puzzle together, both children showing their competitive sides as they attempted to fit pieces quicker than the other.

I watched as Leo grinned wide at his sister each time she laughed, and my heart skipped at the ease and comfort that they've both found in each other's company. When Grace put the final piece of the puzzle in before Leo, she jumped up and punched the air, wrapping her arms around Victoria and squeezing her neck as she shouted, '*I win.*'

A small tug of jealousy hits me as I watch the bonds of motherhood being recast between them, but just as quickly as she had grabbed Victoria for a hug, she ran across the room shouting, '*Mummy, Mummy, look. I win.*'

The knowing look between Victoria and I didn't go unnoticed by Kez, who covered her heart space with her crossed hands. None of us knew how to do this, but these kids were making it easier than we could have hoped.

Sophia sat snuggled on my knee for what felt like a lifetime. She'd

hopped up, clutching a stack of books and a blanket and settled right next to me, handing me the first of what would be many books, with an expectant look on her face. As I read the words, she tried to follow along with her fingers tracing the page. I took her hand, wrapped her fingers in mine and followed the words in time, pausing a little with each word. We'd read four of Julia Donaldson's books before she even started to wiggle with boredom.

'Grrrrrrrr,' Sophia shouts suddenly, and I'm confused for a moment, until the low rumbling sound of her belly imitates her noises.

'Hahahaha. Has the hunger monster in your belly woken up?' I ask, tickling her stomach.

'I'm hungry too, Mummy,' shouts Grace from across the room.

'Me too.' Leo joins in with the chorus.

'Mme fwee,' says Sophia, her beautiful little voice only just audible over the ever-increasing noise of her stomach.

Kerri-Ann dished up dinner for the kids, each sat at the dinner table with their respective colour plates in front of them. Grace let her new friends choose which colour they wanted first, Leo choosing her favourite yellow plate, but just like the caring child I had always known her to be, she quickly said, 'It's okay, Leo. You can have mine. Just today.' A brief hug between friends solidifying the deal.

Kerri-Ann stayed in the kitchen to supervise the children as Victoria and I took our spots on the sofa with a mug of tea in hand. The first time we have had a proper chance to chat.

'So, tell me everything,' I say, placing the blanket over both our knees.

'God, where do I start?' Vic says, shuffling herself into the corner of the sofa and angling her body towards mine. I tuck my legs beneath myself, and grab a cushion for comfort, or protection. I'm not sure which.

'Well, isn't this nice – getting to bitch about my husband with you actually able to reach out and hug me. Still feels odd not having a box around your face!'

I know she's trying to break the tension, but we both know this conversation needs to happen at some point.

'OK,' she starts.

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THIRTY-THREE

Victoria

Dundee – October 2022

I'd half expected Nicole to be shocked when I told her I was divorcing Mark. I guess I expected everyone to be shocked.

'I think you're doing the right thing,' my friend says to me, not an ounce of condescension in her voice.

'You've been so unhappy for so long, and I think just booking that flight home was enough for you to feel like you'd already made the decision. But his reaction to all of this, Vic, you deserve better than that. Our girls deserve better than that.'

She wasn't wrong. I'd explained that before I left Edinburgh, I'd called and set up meetings with various lawyers.

'His parents are wealthy. No doubt he'll hire the very best of the best and fight me all the way, but I won't give in.' I try not to let on just how nervous I am, but clearly haven't done a very good job of it. Nicole puts her now empty cup of tea down and holds my hands still.

'Vic, you're shaking, and if you keep picking at that thumb, you'll end up with a scar, and that man has already scarred you enough!' she says, knitting my fingers in with hers.

'I don't know how you're staying so calm about all this,' I say, letting down the final wall holding back my resolve.

'I'm not,' she replies, laughing and winking at me. 'Andy asked me that too, but I'm not calm at all, but I think my Duracell batteries are keeping me going. I'm not sure anything else can really go wrong, but if this is it, if this is the test we have to face, there's no point in me breaking down right now. I have to fight. For Grace, for Sophia and for us. But also, for Ben. I'm not calm; I'm just on autopilot,' she replies.

Kerri-Ann had been so lovely all afternoon, there to help us with the kids, but never overstepping or interfering. I can see why she and Nicole are so close. Once the kids had eaten dinner, and then spread the remains all over the kitchen table in an expression of 'art', Kerri-Ann took them upstairs to

bathe. I can hear the laughter flooding down the stairs and seeping under the door to the living room, the sound of splashing and screaming punctuating our conversation.

‘So, what will you do now?’ Nicole asks, as she reaches forward to hit play on another playlist on the TV, soft lo-fi beats filling the air as the room slowly darkens, the light outside fading.

‘Well, Abbie and Stephen have said I can have the house for now. Maggie’s house. She left it to all three of us, but we’re not in a hurry to sell, so it’s the perfect place for me to start again.’

‘That’s great. What a fab base. What about work?’

‘Well,’ I start before reaching down and pulling my journal from my bag.

‘Ahhh you’re using it!’ Nicole says, tracing her fingertips over the gold lettering on the front.

‘Of course,’ I reply. ‘Actually, I started it on the plane over here. It’s been a great way to order my thoughts.’ I open the page I had started doodling in. The spider diagram messy and chaotic, but the nuggets of an idea forming on the page.

‘I want to set up my own marketing agency. A proper business. I know what I’m doing, and I’m good at it. I’m going to look at shared office space in Edinburgh while I get set up, but I have big plans already.’

The grin that spreads across Nicole’s face gives me so much joy.

‘Oh my God, that’s the most amazing idea. You would be amazing!’

I can’t help but laugh. Her enthusiasm is infectious. ‘Any other words besides amazing?’ I jest.

‘Inspirational?’ she offers in return.

‘How so?’

‘Well, I’ve been talking to Andy for years about finally setting up my own salon rather than working for someone else, but I never quite had the guts to take the leap.’

It’s the first time I’ve seen any shadow of self-doubt in her. I’d always seen her as so confident. She always felt like the mature, measured one. Settled in her career and although struggling with her marriage, she always seemed to have a plan in motion.

‘You? Nervous to take a leap?’ I shake my head in utter confusion.

‘Honestly, Victoria, my confidence took such a beating when I became a mum. I had Ben and life just kinda ended up being a treadmill. Each and

every day the same: get up, work for “the man”, go home and parent alone. The affair, with Max, it didn’t happen because I thought I was worth more than all this,’ she says, her arms outstretched to the living room filled with nice furniture and pictures of happy memories and family holidays. ‘I think that’s the one thing no one in my family understood. None of my friends did either. They all thought I’d gotten above myself. Thought I was better than my husband, worth more, that he was punching and I wanted better. But that was never the case.’

In all our chats, in all the time we’d known each other, Nicole had never confessed this. She’d talked about the affair, told me how much she regretted it and how much she loved Andy, but this was all news to me. I shuffled on the sofa, moving the cushion from behind me to my lap, hands placed square on top in an ‘*I’m listening*’ kind of way.

‘I was so lonely, heading towards forty with a husband who had his whole life sorted. A job he loved and seemed content in. Me, I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. I love Ben, I don’t regret having kids, not one little bit, but it felt like the possibility of my dreams were all over. That’s it. Job done. I’d grown into an adult, got married, bought a house, got a job working for someone else and had a kid. What else was there to life now?’

I find myself nodding along. It doesn’t seem to matter where in the world you live, in paradise or not, motherhood is motherhood the world over.

‘I felt like that too,’ I interject. ‘I remember waking up and thinking, does this mean I have to pause all my dreams now? And with Mark so adamant that I should “*enjoy my time off*”, it just made me angry that he didn’t see motherhood as a new “*full-time job*” I’d taken on, without ever really applying for the role. He just assumed I’d want to spend my life being on call for these two mini-humans. His life stayed almost untouched, unchanged, and yet overnight I was expected to redesign my life goals and dreams.’

Now it was my friend’s turn to nod along in recognition.

‘Yep. And we don’t prepare ourselves, do we? We don’t sit and think about it before we have kids; we can’t contemplate life changing this much. Not until it does. And then what?’

I could never have this conversation with anyone else. I know that more than ever. I can’t be this honest about my regrets and fears, not even with Mark. If I said any of this out loud to anyone, they’d think I resent having

children. I don't. I regret not leaving space for myself in this new design of life, that's all.

'Honestly, Vic, I hear you. That's why I say you're inspirational. Because with almost three-year-old twins, you're about to redesign your life, for you and your kids, but include space for your dream too. I wish I had.'

'Tell me,' I say, 'or better yet, write it down!' I pass her my journal and pen. 'Write down what you want.'

I watch as her hands shake, pen hovering over the blank page, dreams yet unspoken. She smiles, takes a deep breath and writes it down.

'I WANT MY OWN SALON,' she writes. Big, bold and all in caps.

I smile at her before I say, 'Your new salon could be one of my clients. I could help with all your marketing.'

Nicole holds out her hand to shake mine. 'Deal,' she says, with a cheery note of hope in her words. Then she takes the pen, looks at me cautiously and I nod for her to continue. When she's finished, she hands the book back to me.

'I want to watch both of my daughters grow up.'

I read the words and I feel them at the same time.

'Me too,' I say, before writing it next to her note.

'Well, it's written now. We have to make it happen. That's how the magic journal works.'

There's a short silence that hangs in the air, and as much as I dare not rock the boat, I can't hold it in any longer.

'So, we've talked about kids, husbands, work and the weather – I'm pretty sure there's no more small talk to be had. So, is it time to address the elephant in the room?' Nicole asks.

I watch as the pain moves across her face as she debates having opened this particular can of worms. 'How do you feel about all this? Where is your heart at?' she finishes.

'I don't know what to say, Nicole. Honestly. I know I want to help as much as I can, obviously, but there's something in what Mark has said. Sophia is so little; I'm worried about her undergoing such a tough procedure. I've only seen what Dr Google has to say so far, but the stem cell collection looks invasive. She's only wee.'

I could see the fear written across her face, and I understood why. My daughter, or her biological daughter, is the closest possibility of a match,

and I know she doesn't want to ask me to do this, but we both know that's where the conversation is going.

'I know it sounds scary, but we don't even know if they'll let Sophia donate yet, or even if she's a match; maybe let's wait until we get the results?' Nicole is trying to defuse the situation already. I wish I could help her feel less afraid, but the truth is, I can't promise her anything. I don't know anything.

'Look,' she says, 'I'm just grateful you've done the test. Let's wait for the results.'

I'm not sure what to say now, it feels like a no-win situation. I pick at my fingernails and let my friend continue to sort her feelings as they hit the air around us. As the silence tips from a comfortable space to an awkward air, I chose honesty and vulnerability, and hope she will meet me halfway.

'Honestly, Nicole, I love Sophia. It took me so long to bond with her, but I wouldn't be without her now. And I know she and Leo fight, but they're siblings, and I'm learning that, actually, that's what siblings do best: they fight and then forgive. I don't want to lose her. But Grace . . .' I pause; saying Grace's name tugs at my heart in a way I hadn't expected. 'I'd like to get to know her. I'd like Leo to get to know her. I don't know about Mark; I need to let him calm down before I listen to anything he has to say. But I don't want to rip her from you – I know that much. I don't want to take her from her brother, or Andy.'

Nicole lets out a sigh, and at first I'm not sure if it's relief or not.

'Vic, I don't think we could "swap" back these kids now, even if we wanted to. They have their own lives, personalities and families. I don't want to tear these kids up like that. It's not fair. I don't think you do either. . . do you?' she says, her face looking lighter for releasing the burden of her opinion.

'I know how much it affects kids to bounce around,' I reply, 'and I don't want to do that to them. But I would love to see if there's a way we could raise them together somehow? Come to some kind of agreement? Be involved somehow?'

'Is that what Mark wants?' Nicole ventures, tentatively. It's the only question I'm scared to answer.

'Well, that's a different question entirely. I think we need to figure out what we want, and then I'll talk to a lawyer about what Mark wants.'

When Kerri-Ann eventually comes downstairs, she's without a gaggle of children and for a moment Nicole and I worry. We needn't have. The excitement of the day had knackered the kids out. As Kerri-Ann was busy helping the twins dress for bed, Grace had fallen asleep on the rug at the foot of the bed. Once all the kids were dressed in their pyjamas, she picked up a sleeping Grace, placed her in the spare bed Nicole had prepared for us, and before Kerri-Ann knew what was happening, the other two had crawled in beside Grace and quickly closed their eyes. As Kerri-Ann flicks through the pictures on her phone, my heart soars.

'Child whisperer, this one. I tell ya,' Nicole says.

'Nah,' replies Kez. 'I think just being around each other is what did it. They seem so happy together.'

* * *

As I climb into bed, the world spins a little. Pulling the duvet up to my chin, I reach to switch off the light and catch sight of the family picture in the frame by the spare bed. Nicole, Andy, Ben and Grace. It's obvious now when you look at the picture that Grace looks nothing like Andy. I can see why he was paranoid for so long. As I drift off to sleep, I can't help but marvel at how the human brain works. We were both so desperate to find a missing connection with our own kids, so eager to explain away all the little red flags that popped up in our daily lives, that we looked past the obvious.

Nic and I parted ways into our respective rooms with one promise: that we're on the same page. Nic, Andy and I were all sure: no matter the results tomorrow, nothing would change. We would talk to lawyers, solicitors, counsellors even, anyone we could to help work out a way to keep the girls in their respective homes, with their own 'found families', but we wanted to raise them together as much as possible. None of us had any clue in reality what that meant, but at least we were starting this journey with good intentions.

We knew there would be testing times ahead, and promised to make sure we'd go to therapy all together to try and figure out healthy ways to get through conflict, but we knew we couldn't be separated from our biological daughters any more than we could be separated from the daughters we had raised for three years.

Mark would have a hissy fit, I knew that, but the lawyers could deal with that fallout. For us, we knew exactly what we wanted going forward, and it was what was best for the girls more than anything. We would tell them everything, eventually, when they were old enough to understand, but in the meantime, we were ‘aunties’ to each in public, and behind closed doors, we would co-parent as much as possible. It seemed the only logical move for us all. As I slip off to sleep, I pray that the results tomorrow confirm our suspicions, because the time I spent with Grace today had made me feel whole again. Holding her felt like my heart recognised hers beating alongside mine. Just like when she was mine.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Nicole

Dundee – October 2022

We had known the news was coming, and had hoped it would come quickly, but hearing it confirmed was still a shock.

‘The doctor made it clear that the tests show a 99.8% probability of Sophia being both your daughter, and mine. So now all we have to do is get permission to test her as a potential match.’

I can hear a question in his voice, but he’s not asking it. I know what it is, but I dare not broach the subject. I want to explain it to him face to face.

‘Has she spoken to . . .’ he asks tentatively, not finishing the last part of his sentence.

‘Yes, but I’ll talk to you about that when we see you. Kez is gonna look after the kids so we can come and meet you at the hospital. I’ll take over with Ben and then you can come back here with Vic and spend some time with Sophia.’

I think my distraction tactic has worked because when he replies, I can hear the smile on his lips down the line.

‘That sounds great. I’ll see you when you get here.’ He tells me he loves me and I hang up.

I’d been staring out the living room window while on the call to Andy and didn’t hear the creeping of footsteps behind me, but as I turn around I’m startled by the sight of a very sleepy Sophia sat on my sofa, clutching one of Ben’s teddies under one arm and a book in the other.

‘Good morning, beautiful girl,’ I coo at her as I take a seat next to her on the sofa. I place the blanket over both our knees and as I do, she takes my hand in hers.

‘I like to read in the morning. Will you read with me?’ she says as she passes me the book she has chosen.

‘*The Very Brave Lion*,’ I say out loud, and only then does it click.

‘Where did you get this book?’ I ask her, fingering through the pages.

‘Gracie gave it to me. She said BenBen reads it to her at bedtime.’

My fingers shake as I finger through the pages reading the details of a brave lion. Clearly Ben was trying to be a big brave lion for his little sister. I make a mental note to take the book to hospital with me for him.

‘He’s sick right now, but when he’s all better, I’ll ask him to read this to you like he reads it to Gracie. Does that sound good?’

A smile spreads across her face, her cheeks pinking as she takes the book from my hands. ‘Ben is really funny. He’s not a scary lion.’ She shakes her head furiously at the image on the cover.

‘No, he’s not a scary lion, but he is a brave lion,’ I say, tears rolling down my cheeks. ‘A very brave lion at the moment.’ My heart aches for my wee boy, and as I snuggle with my other daughter while the rest of the house slumbers, I can’t help but imagine what it’ll be like to see the two of them playing together again.

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THIRTY-FIVE

Victoria

Dundee – February 2023

As the taxi pulls up to the front of the building, I can feel a shiver running down my spine. It doesn't matter how much I have prepared myself for this day, I'm not sure I was ever going to be ready for the emotions that hit me.

Abbie and Stephen wanted to come with me of course, worried about me doing this alone, but the fights I have endured over the past few months have done nothing but strengthen me. My hands might be shaking as I reach for the door handle, but my resolve is strong.

None of us could have anticipated what was going to happen in the months following the revelations, and as much as we tried to keep everything civil, there came a point where we knew it wasn't possible anymore, as the anger rose between all of us and Ben's health declined even more.

I walk towards the sandstone building, the faces of gargoyles staring down at me from the façade, fitting for a lawyer's office, a line of old white men judging me from beyond the grave. I'm shocked out of my contemplative daze as the noise of a bike bell alerts me to imminent danger.

'Oot the way, luv,' shouts a thick Dundonian accent.

'You shouldn't be cycling on the pavement,' I shout back as I avoid having my toes taken off by mere inches.

Gathering myself, I take a look down the street and wonder if I'm the first to arrive. The last time we had all been here together, things had not gone well at all.

It was only a few weeks after the results from the hospital. Mark had flown over to meet us all, and brought his own powerhouse of a lawyer with him. By the end of the meeting, Nic was in tears, Andy had to be held back from launching himself at Mark and I had left the meeting room, determined to never be in the same room as them all ever again. Little did I know things were about to get so much worse.

My kitten heels hover ever so slightly above the steps as I tiptoe my way

towards my fate. Today, everything would be resolved. For good or for ill. *'I am ready for this,'* I say to myself. *'I am strong. I am independent. I am capable.'* I repeat my mantra to myself. Not something I was used to doing, but Abbie had drummed it into me the last few months. The higher I climb, the less I can breathe. This walk feels more dangerous than summiting Mount Everest.

I reach the midway point of the staircase and pause, checking I still have the folder with me. All the evidence I had collected. My lawyer had messaged multiple times this morning to remind me to bring it. I reach inside my satchel and pull out the file. Filled with press clippings.

It hadn't taken Mark long to capitalise on the situation. As soon as we had the confirmation of the fuck-up at the hospitals, Mark used it to his advantage, contacting all the local press and spilling the private details of our harrowing journey. The angles for the stories mostly took the *'how dare they want to take my child'* approach. Not a single one mentioned the fact that we'd started this whole drama because a boy was critically sick in hospital and needed help.

It wasn't long before the expat press passed off the story to UK journalists, and that's when it all took off. Andy and Nicole were understandably upset that he'd spread such vitriol without informing them first. They hadn't even told the rest of the family the details yet, and when they found out via sensationalist and tacky tabloid newspaper articles, to say all hell broke loose would be an understatement.

Within the leaves of the folder, I flick through all the stories Mark sold, interspersed with documentation showing the cash amounts he was paid by each newspaper in our joint bank account. The lack of empathy for Nicole and Andy stunned me. It didn't shock Abigail of course, or Stephen, but it tore at the hearts of my friends.

It wasn't until Nic and Andy responded with their own story that things got really dirty. We were still waiting for Mark to approve testing Sophia when the story hit the headlines. They had played their card well, choosing the *'we just want to save our son and get to know our daughter'* approach. Neither of them hit out at the hospitals, instead choosing to say that although they were suing for damages, they also understood that accidents in extreme circumstances happen and that they were just happy their terrible story might help change laws and protocols in Spain surrounding

emergency births. They looked calm and respectable despite their pain. In comparison, it made Mark look every inch of the callous media-whore he had turned into.

They didn't mention me. Not once. The story was directed at Mark. Maybe they didn't want to upset me at the time, maybe they truly believed I hadn't had anything to do with the stories Mark leaked, but either way, those few months, we barely spoke and communicated only through lawyers.

Ben's health continued to decline and the longer Mark dragged things out, the less likely it was looking that Sophia would be able to help Ben. A national callout went public for bone marrow donors to come forward and a campaign in Dundee got everyone talking. Each morning, I would wake and put the news on to hear about my own daughter's family drama from a journalist on the TV. The isolation was crippling.

Abbie and Stephen did their best to keep my spirits up, but I had been so naïve to think we would just be able to get through this without any drama. Without consequences. I was even more naïve to think that we could do this without anyone finding out. Instead, Twitter was ablaze with people adding their own two cents to the story. Everyone having their own opinion as to how we *should* tackle the switch. *Loose Women* did a whole twenty-minute segment on the show not once but twice, and I deleted my Facebook page, sick and tired of friend requests being sent to my page by random sickos and journalists trying to get my attention.

I took down the Instagram page. Mark was furious, but I didn't want the kids' pictures up there anymore. Journos had stolen enough of them to use in the press, but even more so now, it felt wrong to have shared them knowing Sophia wasn't my child to share images of. Not really.

Mark created a new Insta page for the business, and with the press coverage it wasn't long before his numbers hit the half-million mark.

Stuffing the folder back into my bag, I steel myself before rising the last few steps to the top floor of the building. Pushing the heavy oak door aside, I see them, all sat in a row, outside the meeting room.

Our lawyers had advised us to cease contact around four weeks ago. I hadn't spoken to Nicole since then. Updates on Ben had gone quiet, with little mention on social media and only the random odd 'thinking of you' comment popping up on her feed.

Looking at her grey pallor, I fear the worst.

She's dressed in a demure black one-piece, with a black suit jacket over the top. Conservative heels and her hair pulled back in a low bun at the base of her skull. She's lost weight, her cheekbones jutting out more than normal and her clavicle clearly visible above the V of her pencil dress. I know they heard me come in because Andy has looked up and in my direction. Nicole hasn't. Her head hangs low, her fingers knitted together in a prayer-like fashion, knuckles white with fear.

I'm only a few steps away when my own lawyer bursts through the door behind me, interrupting our reunion.

'Victoria, fabulous. You're here already. Let's go over things before we head in, shall we?' His words come at me thick and fast, his accent heavier in conversation with me than it is when he puts on his professional voice.

I risk a glance towards my friends, if I can still call them that. Andy puts his arm around Nicole and gives me a shy nod, but she doesn't move. Stock-still like a statue, waiting for a breath of air to come and knock her over, shattering her into a million pieces. I so desperately want to hug her. Tell her I am sorry. Fix all of this.

I turn back to my lawyer and follow him to a bench a little further down the corridor. As we go through the bullet points of today's agenda, I can't help but try to tune in to the whispers down the hallway. I can't make out the words between sobs.

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THIRTY-SIX

Nicole

Dundee – February 2023

Andy lifts me up from the bench in the hallway and guides me through the double oak doors into the mediation room. Victoria is here, she arrived sometime ago, followed quickly by her lawyer. We're not supposed to talk, apparently. Until everything is resolved. I can't look at her; I'm terrified of what she'll say to me, so I keep my head down and slip into the room as quietly as I can. It wasn't me who made the loud noises in here the last time either, but I'm desperate for today to end calmer than last time.

Mark isn't here yet. I'm not sure what Andy will do when he arrives. The anger he has towards him now is unlike any I have seen within him.

I take my seat at one side of the table and stare at the glass of water placed on the white coaster in front of me. Condensation collecting in drops on the side of the glass. I'm trying to focus on the small details, to lower my heart rate, to stop the bile from swirling in my stomach. In my peripheral vision, I watch her place a folder on the table as she takes her seat opposite me. I know what will be in there, the same thing our lawyer asked us to bring; all the clippings of the news reports. We had to come with ammunition to fight back with this time. We had come prepared.

How had it come to all this? How had those peaceful nights talking about how our kids would play together in the park and have sleepovers turned into such a bitter legal battle? Him, that's how. Mark and his angry-ass rich parents. I wouldn't let them win. I had lost too much already. He had taken too much from me already.

I can hear Andy making small talk with the lawyers. I'm grateful that our lawyer and Victoria's lawyer seem to be on the same page most of the time. Both determined to keep this as amicable as possible and out of the press. I don't listen to what they are saying; instead, I fixate on the empty legal pad and pencil placed beneath me until I hear the door swing open. I look up, to be met with the angry face of a man I barely recognise.

He hasn't come to play nice. His stance, his suit and the set of his jaw tells

us that. I know it, and so does Victoria. I steal my first glance at her, her sharp dark bob straightened and touching her shoulders ever so gently. Her pale complexion almost glowing as the sun lights her up through the windows. She hasn't slept. I can tell. There's only so much concealer can cover. She's lost weight too, her slight figure even slimmer now as the white blouse hangs off her shoulders, draping her like a cloak. I miss her. I miss my friend.

As all the lawyers take their seats, and the ring binders are placed on the table between us, we get to work deciding the fate of our families.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

Victoria

Dundee – February 2023

No one expected a speedy conclusion. But as I exit the room, only three hours later, I am stunned.

‘It’s over,’ I say, as I take her hand in mine.

‘It really is,’ Nicole replies.

‘And thank God, ’cause I’ve missed you so bloody much.’

Mark had left the room a good ten minutes ago, keen to get on the road so as not to miss his flight back to Spain. Obviously his new clients meant far more to him than seeing his kids, or indeed meeting his real daughter. That, according to Mark, could happen once all this was resolved and he had ‘healed’. That comment was the one that sparked rage in me during the meeting. What the hell did he have to heal from? He had caused all this hurt and pain. He had not once been over to spend time with his kids, and showed no desire to either, so when he stood to leave, I was shocked but not surprised.

‘He’s not the man I thought he was, you know. Not the man I married. I don’t know what changed him, but I never thought he would take it this far.’

Nicole hugged me close, her wet cheeks pressed up against mine, our shared tears finding comfort in each other.

‘Sometimes it takes a real test to discover a person’s true identity,’ she says in a low, hushed voice, careful not to upset me more.

‘I’m sorry we couldn’t help Ben,’ I say to her, her face instantly shifting with pain.

‘It’s honestly OK. I know you did everything you could. We would never have known if it would pass the ethics board anyway, or even if we could have gotten legal consent in time. None of this is your fault. Don’t hold onto that guilt, OK? It’ll poison you.’

We stand in the corridor, unsure what to do next. Where to go, what step to take first, how to move forward. Both of us staring at the door to the room we just left, so eager to have gotten out of there, but both now facing

the door to the outside world, where we would now have to face living our new normal.

I feel the weight of a hand on my back and look over my own shoulder to see Andy stood behind me. As I turn, he takes me in his arms and hugs me so tight.

‘Thank you, Victoria. For everything.’

‘I don’t know why you’re thanking me; I’m part of the problem,’ I return, the weight of the guilt feeling heavier than ever on my shoulders.

‘No, you were part of the solution. If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t have won the right to be in Sophia’s life today. If it wasn’t for you, and how you conducted yourself, this could have been so much worse. Thank you for being on our side.’ He pulls me in for another hug, but his words didn’t sit well with me.

‘Andy,’ I say, as I pull away and look him dead in the eye. ‘I didn’t do this for you. Or even for me. Or Nic. We’re grown-ups, we can and will live with whatever consequences come from this. I did it for the kids.’ He smiles at me and closes his eyes as he nods slowly in recognition.

‘They love each other,’ I continue, ‘that much was always clear and we don’t have the right, as their guardians, to stop them being in touch with their own flesh and blood.’

Nic is squeezing my shoulder. I can’t see her, but I feel her warmth, holding me up, keeping me strong. A tissue appears in my eyeline, my friend’s shaking hands holding it out to me. I hadn’t noticed I was crying.

‘Come back to ours,’ Nicole says, her eyes pleading. ‘Come and see Grace.’

‘If you’re sure,’ I say, my heart fluttering with excitement. ‘I would really love that.’

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THIRTY-EIGHT

Nicole

Dundee – February 2023

As I turn the key in the lock, I barely have to push the door when it swings open, Kez holding the handle on the other side, Grace at her feet.

‘Mummy!!!!’ she shouts as I bend down and scoop her up in my arms. I smile at Kez as I slide past her into the living room.

‘So, how did it go?’ Kez asks, flitting her gaze between Andy and me, studying our faces for any sign of an answer.

‘We won,’ Andy says. Matter-of-factly. All his words used up for the day, his quota exhausted from all the shouting over the table in the lawyer’s office.

‘You won? That’s it? It’s over?’ Kez looks confused as she tries to sit on the arm of the sofa and nearly misses entirely.

‘Well, yes. Kinda,’ I reply. ‘Let’s fix a pot of tea and I’ll tell you all about it. Victoria is on her way round, so I should get this stuff outta the way before she gets here. She won’t want to relive it.’

As I fuss around making a pot of tea, I fill my cousin in. We had won, yes, but it wasn’t quite that simple. Mark had relented. He was ‘bored’ of fighting it now and found the battle was not anywhere near worth the money it would cost him to take it to an actual court. In other words, Daddy’s money or patience had run out and he wasn’t prepared to pay for any more. Mark was paying for his own lawyer, and Victoria’s obviously, and it was ‘draining him financially’. We wouldn’t have been able to fight Mark at all had it not been for our family chipping in to help with the legal costs.

Mark finally agreed not to keep Sophia from us, and we agreed that swapping the children back was not an option either. He finally relented and agreed to a co-parenting structure, legally, so all parents would have equal access. The turnaround felt like quite a shock as we all sat gathered around the polished oak table, all lawyers ready to fight to the bitter end. Part of me wondered if he’d found someone new. He couldn’t look Victoria in the eye

the whole time he was in the room. My heart broke for her, to see a marriage like that fall apart at the seams.

With the divorce going through between him and Victoria, they would arrange visitations for Sophia and Leo in Spain, and extra visitations would be agreed upon so Mark could travel to the UK to meet and get to know Grace.

The girls would stay in their 'found family' homes, but agreements were being drawn up to legalise the ability for both families to be in each other's lives going forward.

'Why the hell couldn't he have done all this before? Why wait this long and go through all that press drama to then just be like "OK, whatever". What a prick.'

I couldn't disagree with her there.

'He wouldn't have ever agreed to allow Sophia to be a donor though. He made that clear. He felt it was a violation of her human rights before she could decide for herself. He would have fought us all the way on that,' I told Kez. 'Well, it's too late now anyway. Maybe it always was. I'll always kick myself for not realising all this sooner. I'll always blame myself.'

Kerri-Ann pulled me in for a hug, and just as my breathing was steadying, the doorbell broke our thoughts.

'Hello, beautiful,' I say, as I open the door. Her face breaks out in a smile, something I haven't seen in far too long. I lead her through into the living room and settle her on the sofa as Kerri-Ann shows up with an extra cup of tea.

Victoria takes a sip. She's never normally this quiet, but I imagine she's waiting for me to lead the way, not speaking during the furore that led up to today. I hope we can get back to where we were.

'Vic,' I start, sitting next to her and placing my hand on her knee. 'You know I don't blame you for all this. Right?'

Her eyes give away the fear in her heart. Of course she did. She assumed I would tar her with the same brush as her husband.

'Vic, listen to me,' I say, taking the mug of tea from her and holding her shaking hands in mine. 'I know you had nothing to do with those newspaper stories. I know you didn't want all this.'

'But I didn't stop him. Did I? I couldn't. I tried, you know, so did

Stephen. He almost jumped on a plane to Spain just to give him what for at one point.'

Her fingers are cold to the touch despite having been wrapped around a mug of tea. Her nails are bitten to the quick and unpainted. The polished and veneered persona that used to show up on the camera in Spain has been let go, and a more relaxed and natural Vic placed in her spot. I have to admit I prefer the new version.

'About Ben . . .' Victoria starts, before I shush her.

The living room door opens before I have a chance to reply. Little Grace bounds into the room and throws her arms around Kez's legs.

'Aunty Kez, you promised you would come back upstairs and play with me!' Her voice, angelic and playful, fills the room and I feel the entire mood shift.

'Did I hear my name?' comes a second voice, just before he enters the room. My beautiful boy, his pale but handsome face framed by the hood of his dressing gown pulled around him.

'Hey, baby,' I say to my boy, as I pull him to sit on my knee. 'Victoria was just saying that she's so sorry you're still so poorly.' Ben doesn't know yet that we'd hoped Sophia would be a donor. That detail could wait until they were a little older.

'Did you tell her the good news yet?' he asks, his eyes lit up with excitement.

'Me and Dad thought you might like to tell her?' I offer, kissing him on the cheek and watching him wipe it away with his almost-teenage embarrassment.

'They found a match,' he tells her, and I watch her whole body let out a sigh of relief. Her shoulders relax and her face looks instantly younger.

'Oh my God. Are you serious?' replies Victoria, jumping to her feet. 'You can't be, really? When?'

'We got the call yesterday. Ben's going back in tomorrow for more tests to make sure he's strong enough now to start treatment. So tonight will be his last night at home for a while. We figured it would be a lovely way to spend it, with you too.'

I watch as she wipes a silent tear from her cheek before turning around and group-hugging Kez and Grace, then standing in front of me with words unsaid. She doesn't need to say them. I can feel them.

‘I was so worried . . .’ she starts.

‘That we would be too late?’ I finish. ‘Yeah, I know. We were worried too, but what Mark didn’t realise was that his horrible exposure only meant that more of the public were inclined to go and get tested. The hospital saw a dramatic rise in testing. His nastiness ended up helping us find an angel.’

The laughter and smiles throughout the rest of the night allowed the stress in the room to lift. Victoria and Grace spent time laughing and playing, but mostly cuddling on the sofa. Ben asked more and more questions about Spain, desperate to know what it was like to live in a hot country. If Andy and I ever entertained the idea of moving abroad in the future, it was clear Ben was more than up for the move.

The night is drawing in now and the kids are beginning to wane a little.

‘Right, milk and cookies time. Who wants some?’ I say, and everyone in the room puts their hands up. Kez and Vic included. I laugh at the childlike faces of my friend and cousin, and marvel at the amount of love in the room.

As I reach up to collect the kids’ favourite mugs, I feel his arms slip around my waist, his hot breath on the crook of my neck, making my skin react and the butterflies to awaken in my stomach.

‘Hello, beautiful,’ he whispers in my ear, and I feel my cheeks flush.

‘Hello, my sexy husband,’ I coo back as I spin to face him, lifting my arms up and around his neck.

‘It’s so nice to hear the laughter in that room,’ he says, as I take in the smell of the cold wet air that seems to have clung to his skin as I wipe the remnants of the raindrops from his face.

‘Isn’t it? I think we might be all right you know,’ I say, glancing over his shoulder towards the scene playing out in the living room.

‘I think so too,’ he says.

He kisses me back, and as his hands find their way from the small of my back to the back of my neck, his kisses more urgent. I feel a tug on my jumper.

‘Gracie baby, what’s up?’ I say, breaking away from the embrace of my man to see the eyes of my daughter.

‘Hurry up, Mummy, the hot chocolate will be cold and yucky!’ she says,

pointing at the empty mugs sat on the side. 'And Auntie Vicky is crying. Again. She says she's happy but she has tears?'

I laugh at her confused look as she stands with one hand on her hip as she presses her pointer finger against her lips in the most dramatic thinking expression I have ever seen.

Andy scoops her up, her giggles filling the space above our heads as he spins her in the air. As he lowers her in for a hug, I see the redness of his eyes.

'Oh, baby girl, lots of people cry when they're happy. Look at me . . . your mum just made me cry happy tears.'

'Really? Why?'

'Oh well, that's easy, because look at how beautiful she is. Aren't we lucky to have your mummy?'

'Do we cry every time we see someone beautiful then?' Grace asks her dad, holding his face as she asks her important life-affirming questions.

'No, just when we're really happy.'

'OK,' she says, very matter-of-factly, as she wriggles and demands to be put down. We watch, Andy's arm around my waist, my head on his chest as our wee girl runs towards the room insisting that everyone needs to cry now, right now, 'because we're all so happy.'

It's so easy for kids to accept, a new family, a new addition, new friends. I watch as the shape of my new family starts to form in front of my eyes.

'Look at that,' I say to my husband. 'That's our new wee family. Well, part of it . . .' Andy recognises the sadness in my voice.

'Don't worry, we can see our other wee girl tomorrow, and start working out the plans. From married with one boy, to gaining two daughters and a surrogate extra son in the space of a few years. That's wild, eh? How do we even explain all this?'

'I don't know,' I admit, turning to him and taking in the shape of the man in front of me. The man I almost lost. The man who had taken the biggest risk of his life to stay and work things out rather than walk away for good and I can't begin to explain the relief I feel.

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EPILOGUE

Victoria

Dundee – December 25th 2023

I place the final poinsettia on the table and straighten the crackers on the empty plate beneath it. The pops of red against the crisp white tablecloths looks so professional. I'm not so sure I could have pulled this off without Nicole's help. With only half an hour until we open the doors, I take a look around the community hall at the effort that has gone into today and can't help but wish Maggie was here to see it.

'She would be blown away,' comes a voice from behind me. Stephen is stood holding the hands of his children. Dressed in matching little tartan trousers and white jumpers, the boys look dashing, and Stephen looks every inch the proud father.

'Thanks, Stephen. That means a lot. How are things?' I ask, knowing I can't say too much in front of the boys.

'Better,' he says. 'Therapy is tough, but it's working. We'll see.'

He was so determined to end things with Mallory last year, and admitted that before I came home, he had already been looking at apartments to move into, but the last year had made both of them reassess. Now, he hoped that therapy and time would help them find their way back to each other.

'It feels like we lost a few years, I guess we all did, but with things finally feeling more normal again . . .' he pauses before looking around ' . . . well, as normal as this family is gonna get anyway.'

'It's always worth the effort,' I reply. 'Unless of course you're married to Mark!'

His eyes widen at my admission, but I laugh it off. It doesn't hurt anymore. A year down the line and I feel stronger and happier than ever before. I know I clung to Mark, but I never in a million years imagined I could create my own castle, my own life, my own fairy tale. The more time I spent with Nicole, Stephen and Abbie, the more I realised that I had been strong enough all along. I didn't need to hang on the coat tails of another

person. Maggie had given me everything I needed in life to stand on my own two feet.

‘Anyway,’ Stephen interrupts my thoughts, ‘this looks amazing. You better get ready – the queue outside is already building. Is Nicole ready?’

‘Yep, she’s all set up,’ I say, gesturing over to the corner of the hall where Nicole had set up her ‘*roaming salon*’. ‘She’s got four trainee stylists with her too, so we should be able to get through them all.’

The whole event had taken a few months to plan, but once we had opened Nicole’s new salon and academy, we needed a new event to focus on, and a mash-up seemed like the perfect idea.

Christmas Day, Maggie’s trestle tables in the village hall and doors opened up to all those who would be alone this Christmas. We had three local nursing homes who’d booked tables for the residents who wouldn’t be being visited by family. Two of the children’s homes locally were bringing their wards for the day, and the homeless shelter around the corner would also send people by.

I had used my now flourishing marketing business to get the word out about the day, with some of Edinburgh’s biggest businesses offering to sponsor the event. My two interns, a tenacious pair studying marketing at Edinburgh Uni, were here with smiles on their faces despite missing Christmas with family.

‘Sorry, Victoria, can I interrupt?’ Kate, one of the interns, was tapping me on the shoulder, phone and clipboard in hand and a giddy look on her face. ‘Only, the people from STV are here to interview you for the news before we open?’

‘Oh my God. Maggie would have kittens!’ I wasn’t sure I even recognised the tone of voice Stephen was using. A mixture of giddy childlike excitement and pure pride. It took all my strength not to let the tears fall.

‘Look, look at everything you’ve done. Look at what you’ve achieved. And this was you, Vic. Not him. You didn’t need to be Insta-perfect, and you didn’t have to use your kids. You did this.’

As I walk towards the front door, double-checking everyone is in their rightful place, I feel an odd sense of pride. Stephen was right. I did this. With the help of my family, and my chosen family, I had created a life for myself that I wanted. Surrounded by people I wanted in my life.

‘So, can you tell us what inspired this event?’ The pretty young blonde reporter was aiming a mic at my mouth as I tried to drown out the fear and project positivity, hearing my friend’s voice in my head.

‘Well, my foster mum used to do this every year at Christmas. She never wanted anyone to be alone on Christmas Day. When she passed, I wanted to carry on the tradition, but open it up to as many as I could. With the help of our sponsors, we’ve been able to do that, and hope to do so again for many years to come. Any further donations we receive will go to cancer research.’ I’d prepared answers; I knew this might happen and the last thing I wanted was to stumble over my words.

‘Cancer research, is that because of your connection to Benjamin Murray and his leukaemia battle?’

I feel the lump in my throat develop and try to push past it.

‘Yes, yes it is. I’m so fortunate that a horrible mistake led to me finding a family that has changed my life. Ben is like a second son to me.’

That was the truth. Over the last year, I’d helped with hospital rotations just as often as Kez. Nic and I had become more like sisters, and her family welcomed me in as one of their own.

As if on cue, I’m almost knocked off my feet as Grace runs headfirst into me, oblivious to the cameras focused on me.

‘Vic-Vic!’ she shouts, ‘It’s Christmas!!’

She is dressed in the most adorable sparkly white dress, red patent shoes and her hair is cut short into a bob that just touches her shoulders. She looks just like me as a kid and my heart jumps.

‘Is this your little one?’ the reporter asks quickly, spotting an opportunity to talk about the subject I had vowed I would not touch on during this interview.

‘Vic-Vic is my extra mummy,’ Grace says out loud, smiling directly at the camera as if she was made for TV.

I look around and see that Andy has arrived, and he has the twins with him. I smile and beckon them all over, and look to my intern and ask her to grab Nicole. As they all make their way over to the camera, I explain to the reporter that growing up, I was taught that family isn’t always blood.

‘Our family is made up of all the puzzle pieces that didn’t quite fit elsewhere, but together, in this mish-mash, we make sense.’

Ben peers out from behind Nicole, a little embarrassed to show his face,

his hair loss from treatment now evident, despite the baseball cap he's wearing.

'And how do you feel about everything, Ben? If it wasn't for you, no one would have ever known about all this . . .'

I see the look of confusion across his face, but as with most young boys, he has no filter and just lets out exactly what he thinks.

'I always wanted lots of brothers and sisters,' he says with a shrug. That was it. So matter-of-fact. Happy with his lot. So much like his father.

Nicole nudges herself forward, ready to take centre stage.

'I guess, we were always told people come into your life for a reason, whether they're around for a season or a lifetime. Nicole was dropped in my life at a time when I could have lost everything. It might sound like a bad Hallmark movie, but it's true. Out of all the pain, all the stress and all the worry, we found a strong friendship and a new shape of a family that we both so desperately needed. Covid threatened to tear so many families apart, and so many people lost people they loved. I'm fortunate that it brought people I love to me.'

I put my arm around her and kiss her on the cheek lightly, immediately regretting the gesture when I see the camera still on us.

'So this is your first Christmas together as a huge extended-blended family, and you're choosing to share it with all these strangers?' asks the reporter.

'Well, isn't that what Christmas is really about? Showing love to all? Surely we have shown that there is more than enough love to share around, so why keep it to ourselves?'

We finish up with the press and Nicole winks at me before turning her attention to the kids at her feet.

'Come on, folks, I want to show you where you're sitting.' She's holding the hands of each of my beautiful toddlers, both a little bleary-eyed from their early morning flight from Spain.

'Oh my babies! You look amazing!' I say as I squeeze them both in close for a hug.

'Urgh, Mummy!' says Leo, rolling his eyes at me and then chuckling in Ben's direction. He tries so hard to impress his older 'extra' brother.

I'm sad that we couldn't resolve things with Mark enough to have him here too. It feels like the perfect way to bring all the family together, but as

he embarks on his new life, I understand that some more time apart will make things easier.

I open Instagram, ready to post a picture of our kids on the private account I set up specifically to keep Mark in the loop, only to be rewarded with the image of my ex-husband with his arms around his latest conquest. A bleach-blonde Marbella babe, dripping in Gucci and flashing her polished veneers. I recognise her instantly, the PR princess from our rival relocation company. Part of me is a little jealous – I know it will take time to get over that – but a bigger part of me is happy for him. She will be the woman who hangs on his arm at parties. I was never going to be that person. Mark will be the perfect dad to our twins, when he has them. They'll get the best of both worlds. A dad who spoils them in the sun on holidays, and a family in Scotland to keep them grounded. It might not be the way I planned to raise my family, but I know we can make it work. For the sake of the kids at least.

I close my phone, turn to my kids and squeeze them tight again. It's a life I never imagined, but not one I would swap for all the tea in China.

Nicole

As we take our places at the table, plates of food in hand, I look at the faces that surround me and feel, for the first time in a long time, a sense of peace.

'Look at this,' I say to Andy, squeezing his knee. Ben is sitting across from us, crossing arms to help pull the cracker with Grace on one side and Sophia on the other. Leo grips onto the other end of Grace's offering, the two entirely attached at the hip whenever they're in the same place.

'It's a very oddly shaped family, but Nic, I wouldn't do life with anyone but you.'

He's right, we are oddly shaped. Messy, sharp edges, not quite symmetrical, but life isn't about perfection. It's not about the days that make it easy for us. It's about the days that test us, and the people we chose to fight through those tests with.

I look up and down the table, seats filled with faces of those I have loved my whole life, and those I hope to have in my life for many years to come,

family and friends, new and old; my heart swells and before I give in to the emotion threatening to burst free, I stand and raise my glass.

‘Here’s ta us . . .’ I start, winking at my husband and beckoning him to join me. A toast my dad would give at every family event, and only now do I feel the true weight of the words as I watch Andy lift his glass and rise to join me.

‘Wha’s like us . . .’ we say in union. Kerri-Ann stands up and motions to Victoria to do the same.

‘A damn few, and they’re a’ deed.’

The whole table erupts into laughter and clinks glasses.

As I sit back down, I squeeze the hand of the man I love and whisper in his ear, ‘I love our wee family.’

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Acknowledgements

Well, I can't quite believe we're here again, but it seems that releasing my debut book really was just the start of an emotional roller-coaster. Writing the acknowledgements for this book has, in many ways, been more emotional than writing them for my first. Mainly because this means I've managed to do it again! I've completed a second book. But in all honesty, I wouldn't have managed it without the help of so many fabulous people in my life.

First, I need to thank the team at Avon for all their support and guidance, from the help they gave with *This Child of Mine* and then the passion and excitement they showed for book two. I must thank my fabulous editor Elisha Lundin for her unending support and enthusiasm, and kind gentle words when I felt like throwing in the towel. To Kate Nash, my formidable agent – in this industry, it's so important to have someone to turn to when you need someone in your corner, and Kate has been that person on more than one occasion. For that, I am forever grateful.

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When You Were Mine is not just a novel about motherhood and what it

means to be family, it's meant as a love letter to friendship – to the people who have enriched my life and given me hope when times were tough – without the bond of blood to compel them. This is for the women (and men) who held me up while I was down.

This novel is in no way autobiographical; however, I couldn't have written it had I not spent my life travelling the world as an expat. The friendships I made in different countries around the world have broadened my life experience and allowed me to meet some of the most fascinating characters. None of the characters in this book are based on anyone specific, however many people inspired aspects of the characters you see on the page. Maggie was inspired by two women that have had a huge impact on my life. My auntie Maggie, who we lost to cancer back in 2015 and Avril Watson. These two women always put the love of children first. Their ability to open their homes and hearts and provide a safe and loving home for anyone who needed it inspired me.

I wrote this book with one strong desire: to dissect what it means to be family. I truly believe that those we choose to have in our lives are just as important as those we are born to. In my life, I have travelled far and wide and 'collected' family and friends along the way. To me, family is not just blood, but those who stand by you in your hardest days. I wrote this book during one of the hardest years of my life; when I was at my lowest, it was my 'chosen' family that picked me up.

Alison S, you have been my strength, I'm so grateful to have met you. Our friendship shows that it's not always the longest friendships that hold the most weight. Alison M – my wisdom, when the world feels bleak, you brighten every corner. On the days when imposter syndrome hits me hardest, it's your words I hear in my head. Ellie L – no matter the distance or seas between us, you remain my one true constant. I would not have been able to breathe this last year without you, your love helped me get to the end of this book. You are, and always will be, my sanity. Zoë R – there are no words. I'm so lucky to have you as a friend. To my Debut2023 group – thank the lord for each and every one of you – you prove that the writing world can be an incredibly supportive one. You each inspire me, daily! Lou Lou, you were my port in a storm, my safe space, you'll never know what that meant. Regan, my very own Kerri-Ann. Always there with the wise words, the shoulder to lean on and the support that only a cousin can give.

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My blood family – Perry and Sean, I'm so glad to have you back in my life. I'm so proud of you both.

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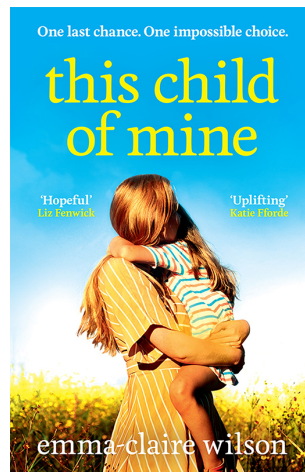
My final thanks go to all of you, those who took a chance and read my second book. Without you, I wouldn't be living my dream life, and doing my dream job. So, if you promise to keep reading, I promise to keep writing.

If you enjoyed *When You Were Mine*, why not leave a review [here](#).

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[About the Author](#)

Born in Scotland, Emma-Claire travelled the world as the child of military parents and has spent most of her adult life living in her spiritual home. She lives with her husband, two daughters, and rescue dog, Pip. Emma-Claire worked as a journalist for English-language magazines and newspapers in Spain and in 2015 launched The Glass House Online Magazine. When not writing emotional fiction, you can find her dreaming up new book ideas or wrapped in a blanket with a book in her hand. *This Child of Mine* was her debut novel, and this is her second novel.

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