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WARNING
THIS BOOK MAY
CAUSE SLEEP
DEPRIVATION

SARAH PINBOROUGH

Sarah Pinborough

**Cross Her Heart: The gripping new
psychological thriller from the #1
Sunday Times bestselling author**

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Cross Her Heart: The gripping new psychological thriller from the #1 Sunday Times bestselling author / S. Pinborough — «HarperCollins»,

WARNING: This book may cause severe sleep deprivation‘A pacy, twisty thriller that will hook you with its first few pages’ StylistLisa. Ava. Marilyn. Three women, three secrets and a hidden past that could destroy them all.‘Once the first reveal hits you in the face, you’ll be lucky if you can put the book down’ IndependentOne of these women is living a lie...but who?‘A dark and compulsive read’ Woman & Home‘Brilliantly clever and compelling, I loved it!’ B. A. Paris‘The author’s storytelling is as sure-footed as ever’ Guardian

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S A R A H P I N B O R O U G H

CROSS
HER
HEART



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Dedication

For Irvine, thank you for having the faith!

1

AFTER

HIM

Bitch.

He grips the edge of the paper so tightly the neat lines of carefully written words twist into odd zigzags that crunch some sentences but highlight others, taunting him.

I can't cope.

You're too angry.

You frighten me when you hurt me.

I don't love you any more.

The world is shaking and his breath comes heavily as he scans to the end.

Don't come after me. Don't try and find me. Don't try and find us.

He reads the letter three times before it sinks in. She's gone. They're gone. He knows it's true – he can feel the fresh emptiness in the house – but still he rushes through the rooms, pulling open hollow cupboards and drawers. There is no trace of her, however; no passport or driving licence, none of those important things that frame her life.

Don't try and find us.

He returns to the kitchen table and crumples the letter, suffocating her words in his clenched fist. She's right. He is angry. More than angry. He's raging. It's a white heat inside him. He stares out through the window, the battered ball of paper damp in his sweating palm. Vodka. He needs vodka.

As he drinks, a seed of a plan takes hold in the dark soil of his mind and starts to grow.

She has no right to do this to him. Not after everything they've been through.

He will destroy her for it.

PART ONE

2 NOW

LISA

'Happy birthday, darling,' I say, from the doorway. It's only six thirty and I'm still bleary from sleep, but my kitchen hums with teenage life. It's like a surging wave hitting me. I don't remember *ever* having this much energy. It's a good feeling. Full of hope and confidence.

'You didn't have to get up, Mum. We're just leaving anyway.' She's smiling as she comes to kiss me on the cheek, a cloud of apple shampoo and pink deodorant, but she looks tired. Maybe she's doing too much. Her GCSEs are coming up and between morning and evening swimming training several times a week, spending time with these girls, and going to school, I barely see her any more. Which is, as I keep telling myself, how it should be. She's growing up. Growing *out* from me. I have to learn to let go. But it's hard. For so long it was us two against the world. Now the world is nearly hers to grasp for herself.

'It's not every day my little girl turns sixteen,' I say as I fill the kettle and wink at her. She rolls her eyes at Angela and Lizzie, but I know she's happy I still get up to see her off to school. She's at once grown up and still my baby. 'And anyway,' I add. 'I've got my big presentation at work today so I need an early start.'

A phone buzzes. All three heads drop to screens and I turn back to the kettle. I know there's a boy called Courtney in Ava's life. She hasn't told me about him yet, but I saw a message come in when she left her phone on the kitchen table last week, a rarity in itself. I used to check her phone occasionally, when I could, but now she uses a passcode, and as much as it pains me to admit it, she deserves her privacy. I have to learn to trust in my bright daughter's sensible mind to keep her safe.

'Do you want your presents now or tonight at Pizza Express?' I ask.

Ava's clutching little gift bags with coloured tissue poking out the top, but she doesn't share with me what her friends have bought her. Later, perhaps she will. A few years ago she would have *run* to show me. Not any more. Time flies. Somehow I'm nearly forty and Ava is sixteen. Soon she'll be flying my nest.

'Jodie's outside,' Angela says, glancing up from her iPhone. 'We should go.'

'Tonight's fine,' Ava says. 'I haven't got time now.' She smiles at me and I think that one day, she'll be quite beautiful. For a moment, I have a sudden pang of loss in my chest, so I focus on stirring my tea and then check my presentation printouts are still on the kitchen table while the girls gather up their coats, swimming kits, and school and college bags.

'I'll see you tonight, Mum,' Ava calls over her shoulder as they disappear into the hallway and I feel a gust of damp air as they flood outside. On a whim, I get my purse and take out twenty pounds and go after them, leaving the front door on the latch.

'Ava, wait!' I'm only in my thin dressing gown but I follow her down the path, waving the banknote at her. 'For you and the girls. Go for a nice breakfast before school.'

'Thank you!' Ava's words are quickly echoed by the others and then they're tumbling into Jodie's car, the tiny blonde girl at the wheel, and I'm left behind at our open gate. They're barely all in before Jodie pulls away, and I flinch slightly as I wave after them. She's going quite fast and she can't have checked her mirrors. Has Ava got her seatbelt on? *Worry worry*. That's me. They don't realise how precious life is. How precious they are. How can they? So young and with blessed lives.

It's the cusp of summer, but the sky is heavily grey and threatening more rain, casting a chill in the air. I watch until Jodie's turned the corner and I'm about to go back to the warmth of the house when I see a car parked on the bend of our quiet road behind me. My skin prickles. It's unfamiliar.

Dark blue. Not one I've seen before. I know all the cars in our street. It's become a habit to note these things. This car is new.

My heart thrums in my chest, a bird trapped against glass. I don't move an inch; this isn't fight or flight, but a cold dread. The car's engine is turned off and there is someone behind the wheel. Thickset. It's too far away to see his face. Is he looking at me? There's a sound like buzzing flies in my head and I try to catch my breath. As my panic threatens to overwhelm me, a man, still pulling on a suit jacket while trying to wave at the driver, comes down his front path. The engine starts. Only as it moves do I see the small strip down one side. *EezyCabs*.

The flood of relief makes me almost laugh. Almost.

You're safe, I tell myself as the taxi drives by, no one inside glancing my way. *You're safe and Ava's safe. You have to relax.*

Of course it's easier said than done. I've learned that over the years. The fear never truly leaves me. I've had lulls where I can almost let go of the past, but then a random moment like this triggers a panic and I realise it will always be there, like hot tar glued to the lining of my stomach. And recently, I've had this feeling, an unsettled disquiet, as if there's something off-kilter I should see but I don't. Maybe it's me. My age. Hormones. Ava growing up. Maybe it's nothing. But still ...

'Penny for them?'

I gasp and flinch and then laugh in the way everyone does when goosed, even though the shock isn't funny. My hand is at my chest as I turn to see Mrs Goldman standing at her front door.

'Are you all right?' she asks. 'I didn't mean to make you jump.'

'Yes, sorry,' I say. 'Lost in the day ahead. You know how it is.' I walk back down towards my own front door. I'm not sure Mrs Goldman *does* know how it is. She's careful as she bends to pick up the single milk bottle from the step and I see her flinch. What does her day hold? Daytime TV? *Countdown*? *Pointless*? Her sons haven't visited for a while either.

'I think there's going to be a thunderstorm later. Do you want me to grab anything for you from the shops? I've got to get some more bread and bits anyway. Although I won't be back until quite late because I'm taking Ava for pizza after work. It's her birthday.' I don't need bread but neither do I like the thought of Mrs Goldman having to go out in the rain. Her hips are bad and the roads can be slippery.

'Oh, if it's no bother,' she says, and I can hear the relief in her voice. 'You are lovely.'

'It's fine.' I smile and I feel an awful ache I don't fully understand. A kind of empathy for someone's fragility. For everything people hold inside. Something like that anyway. I listen as she gives me her small list of items. Everything just enough for one. I'll add some Battenberg to it. A little gift. I should try to pop in for a cup of tea with her at the weekend too. Her days must be long and it's so easy not to notice the lonely people in this world. I should know. I was lonely for a long time. In some ways, I still am. I try to be kind to lonely people now. I've learned that kindness is important. What else is there, really?

Since PKR opened a second branch, we've been moved to a smaller but more stylish office and even though it's a while until Simon Manning is due to come in, when I get there at eight I feel slightly sick with nerves and my hands are twitchy and trembling. I tell myself it's just about the presentation, but that's rubbish. It's also about Simon Manning. Simon has moved into some strange limbo between potential new company client and something *other*. A flirtation. An attraction. The way he looks at me has changed. I don't know how to deal with it. It's a low-voltage hum in my head.

'This is for you.'

I look up from checking through my presentation pages and see Marilyn holding up a pack of three Ferrero Rocher chocolates. 'For good luck. And this,' she takes her other hand from behind her back to reveal a single glass bottle of bubbly, 'is for when you've nailed it.'

I grin at her, flooding with warmth. Thank God for Marilyn. 'If I nail it. I know he's been speaking to other recruiters.'

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’ve got vodka in the drawer for if you fuck it up.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘What are best friends for?’

The great thing about this new open-plan office is that my desk and Marilyn’s are facing each other’s, a little island of two. Marilyn designed the whole layout and it works well. She’s got an eye for spaces. Maybe comes from being married to a builder for so long.

‘Look at Toby,’ she says, nodding across the room. ‘He’s like a pig in shit with these new girls.’

She’s right. We lean against her desk and watch as he preens himself. The new women all look under twenty-five, and at thirty Toby probably seems like a sophisticated older man. He’s certainly playing up to it. Breathless nervous giggling wafts over as he says something obviously hugely entertaining while explaining the photocopier.

‘They’ll learn,’ I say. It’ll be entertainment for us for a while at any rate. It’s good to be at work, under the bright strip-lighting and with the uniformity of desks and red office chairs and smart clothing. It makes my momentary unease from this morning fade like the remnants of a bad dream.

At nine, Penny, our glorious leader and the PK in PK Recruitment, calls us all together. We gather in a semi-circle around her office door and Marilyn and I hang a little bit back, like sheep herders perhaps, or nannies. I like Penny. She’s brisk and efficient and doesn’t feel the need to be too familiar with her staff. I’ve worked here for over ten years and I don’t think we’ve ever socialised personally, only the two of us. Marilyn finds it odd, but not me. Even though Penny’s about my age, she’s my boss. I don’t want her trying to be my friend. It would make me uncomfortable.

‘It’s so lovely to be able to welcome our new team members at last,’ she starts. ‘It’s wonderful to have Emily, Julia and Stacey joining us and I hope you’ll be very happy working here.’

The three young things, tanned and fully made up, beam at her and then exchange sideways happy glances with each other. I hope they’ll all stay as friendly with each other as they are today. I met Marilyn on my first day here, and I can’t imagine my life without her. Colleague and best friend rolled into one. She suffocates my loneliness.

‘Also, I owe a big debt of thanks to Toby, Marilyn and Lisa for holding the fort so well in this transition period. Marilyn and Lisa are senior staff here. If you have any problems, don’t hesitate to ask them for advice – they probably know more about the day-to-day running of this agency than I do.’

Marilyn smiles as curious eyes fall on us, whereas I look down at my feet and wish their gaze away. If only I had Marilyn’s poise and confidence. She takes everything in her stride.

‘Anyway, there will be cakes in the kitchen later and drinks in the Green Man on the corner after work for those who want to come along – which I hope will be all of you.’

She disappears back into her office and our little cluster fragments. I glance at the clock. Still a while before Simon gets here and the importance of this meeting kicks in, all thoughts of ridiculous attraction evaporating. My stomach churns and I take a couple of deep breaths. I can do this, I tell myself, only half-believing it. I have to do this. The commission alone is worth this anxiety and I’m bound to get a better annual bonus on the back of it. Maybe even a pay rise. I need to save for Ava potentially going to university. I don’t want her starting her adult life with baggage and I’m determined to help. I’ll protect her from the world however I can.

I have to. I know how terrible it can be out there.

3

AVA

The cafeteria is like the changing room at the pool, hot and moist, and the windows are misted up as the summer rain pelts at the glass outside. I don't mind the rain so much. Ange does because her carefully straightened hair starts to frizz as soon as the first drop falls, but unless the sun is properly baking, I prefer spending our lunchtimes indoors. It's how I always spent them before, when I used to hang out with Caz and Melanie, which feels like a lifetime ago now. It's the only thing I really miss about them. Angela is more of an outdoor girl so we have lunch on the benches normally. Not in this downpour though. Today we're safely inside with everyone else.

'So, what do you reckon?' she says. 'For Saturday? Crash at Jodie's? We could go to the pub first and then make a punch or something. See if anyone else is around?' One thick black eyebrow, filled in with pencil, wriggles like a slug on her olive face as she tries to raise it suggestively. If I did mine like that I'd end up rubbing brown all over my face. Angela is way better with make-up and clothes than me. When she's all dressed up she looks about twenty. I just look about twenty stone. I'm the ugly duckling of our group, I know it. Please God, let me one day turn into a swan.

'Yeah, sounds good,' I say. 'If the others can come.'

Angela's fingers fly over the keypad of her phone, and I know mine will buzz in a minute once she's sent out the message to our *MyBitches* WhatsApp group. Lizzie came up with the name. We *are* each other's bitches after all, she'd said, and we'd laughed. She was right. I can't believe I've only been at Larkrise Swimmers for a year. I've only known these girls for about ten months. It feels like we've been friends forever. Well, I *kind* of knew Angela before because we're in the same school, but we've never been in any of the same sets so she was only a face in a crowd, like I was to her. Now look at us. *MyBitches*. It still makes me smile. But I think I prefer *The Fabulous Four*, as our coach calls us. We're his winners. We may compete as solo swimmers but we drive each other to be the best. We clicked right away, from the first morning practice, like jigsaw pieces slotting into place around each other, coming together to make a brilliant picture and put Larkrise on the competitive map.

We're different ages, and in a lot of ways, it's better. Gives us more to talk about. Me and Ange are the only ones at King Edward's Grammar, Lizzie is in sixth form at Harris Academy, *Arse Academy* as it's known, the shithole school in the middle of town, and Jodie is a first year at Allerton Uni. She's nearly twenty-two and competes with the adults but she's one of us really and she doesn't seem to care we're younger than her. She trains with us because her lectures clash with the adult sessions and she says she prefers mornings. She doesn't stay in halls but at her mum's house here in Elleston and so she hasn't really got into uni life. She helps us with our techniques and she's pretty cool. She never makes me feel like I'm way younger than her. Not that five years is *that* much younger, but the sixth formers at KEGS make you feel like they're thirty or something, constantly looking down at us.

'Lizzie's in,' Ange mutters, focused on her phone, as if I can't read my own pinging matching messages. 'Jodie says her mum's not back this weekend. She'll double-check but she's pretty sure.'

Another bonus to having a friend at uni – much more relaxed parenting. Jodie's mum does interior design or something for big posh houses, and she has a boyfriend in Paris where she's currently living while she works on some project. It all sounds very glamorous, but more importantly means she's hardly ever home. I've never met her and Jodie pretty much has the place to herself.

'Cool,' I say. I want to check my Facebook, but I've told myself I won't until the end of lunch. I pick at the dregs of my cold jacket potato instead. My shoulders ache from the butterfly this morning – not my best stroke – and the gym session last night. We push hard, but I've been slacking a bit recently and I'm feeling it. I need to get my shit together or it will start to show to the others, or worse, I'll start letting the club down. I've always had to work harder than them to stay fit. Lizzie is

naturally toned and runs like a gazelle. Jodie is only five foot three, but she's all muscle, lean, angry and boyish in her swimsuit and Ange has the curves. Her own *personal floats*, as Lizzie would put it. Not that her boobs stop her cutting fast through the water. All her femininity dissolves as soon as she dives under the surface. I'm not quite sure how I fit into the pack. *More ass than tit* is how I overheard twatty Jack Marshall talking about me last term – it still stings badly – and he probably had a point. I've inherited my mum's pear shape. Any extra weight goes straight to my thighs, and they're big enough even when I'm barely eating.

I may tell Mum that Jodie's mum is back this weekend, just to stop her worrying. I feel a flash of guilt. Of all of our families, my mum is the most protective. I never noticed it much before. It's always been us two together – and Auntie Marilyn – and I know she loves me more than anything, and I do love her too, but I'm sixteen now and I have to have my own space, like the rest of my friends do. *Text me when you get there. Text me when you're leaving. I'll come and pick you up, no, really, it's no problem.* I know she means well, but no one else's mum does that and I can't help but feel embarrassed. It makes me feel like a child, and I'm not. I'm pretty much a woman. I have my own secrets now.

Our phones buzz again and we laugh in unison at Lizzie's message. A gross spunking dick gif. 'So, are you gonna?'

Ange always does this weird half-American accent whenever the subject is sex. She breaks off a piece of doughnut and pops it in her mouth, but her brown eyes are sharp on me as she chews.

I shrug, casual, although my heart trips. Am I? I said I'd do it when I was sixteen, and part of me wants to – at least used to want to – but I don't see why it's so *urgent* I do it straight away. But Courtney is hot, and he's totally different and more than anything he's cool. Cool boys have never really liked me before and I kind of feel I owe him now. He's probably not used to waiting, even though we've only been sort of seeing each other a couple of months.

'Probably,' I say, and Ange breaks into an excited grin.

'Oh my God, I bet he's totally experienced. Way better for your first time.'

'He's been pretty good so far.' I stick my tongue out at her, wiggle it crudely, and wink.

This time she shrieks loud enough to make several girls at other tables turn and stare.

The banter comes easily and I know I probably *will* do it with Courtney this weekend, if only to get it out of the way, and it's not like we haven't done most other things anyway apart from *that*, but I don't feel the way I used to about him any more. I'm not overwhelmed by him like I was at the start. Not since ... well ... not since the messages started. I've got a new secret now. One I haven't shared even with the girls. I can't. It's something which is entirely mine and it's making Courtney and all his *cool* seem like teenage-boy bullshit.

My new Facebook friend. Someone I can *really* talk to.

The bell rings out overhead signalling the end of lunch and my heart races. I made it through the hour without looking at Messenger. I don't like to check in front of Ange or the others and I've turned my notifications off. We have sharp eyes as well as strong muscles. We demand to know everything of each other. If it pinged, I'd have to share. We are *one*.

As Ange disappears off to Geography, I clear our trays before going to English revision. Only then do I click into FB Messenger. My heart thumps, but quickly falls. No new messages. I can't believe how disappointed I feel. It's my sixteenth birthday. It's important. I thought he *cared*.

Maybe later, I tell myself, as I pocket my phone, determined not to be too upset. To believe in him like he said I should. There'll be a message later.

4

LISA

It's gone way better than I expected, and two hours after our meeting starts, the deal is done. I'm still trembling, but this time it's with pride, exhilaration, and general relief at not messing it up. I walk tall as I lead Simon through to Penny's office, and all heads turn towards us, even Marilyn's. It's not only that I've obviously negotiated the contract and it's a big one, it's also that Simon Manning is not a man you can ignore. He's not handsome in a smooth estate agent way like Toby, all hair product and overpowering aftershave, but he exudes something attractive. Handsome probably isn't the right word. His nose is slightly misshapen as if it's been broken a few times and he's got the thickened out body of someone who used to play rugby but maybe doesn't so much any more. Still physically fit, but with less intent. There's grey hair at his temples, and he has a confidence about him which is alluring and friendly. But then he *should* be confident, I think, as I shake his hand and say goodbye for now, trying not to enjoy the feel of his strong grip, and leave him with Penny. He's about to open his fifth hotel and health club. He can't be much more than forty and he's well on the way to building an empire.

I close Penny's office door behind him, leaving them to it. I can feel the heat in my skin and I know I'm glowing. I can't believe how well it went. He needs cleaning staff, catering staff and hotel staff and he's happy to let PKR – *me* – manage it all. If I'd known after my first approach how many people he was interested in taking on, I'd have gone straight to Penny to handle it; it's her company and this is a big deal, maybe one of the biggest contracts the company has ever had. I'm so glad I'd been oblivious. I'd been nervous enough thinking he was going to want maybe thirty workers, I'd have had a breakdown knowing the real figures. But it's done. And brilliantly. I can't keep the smile from my face as I emerge into their office chatter.

'Oh, I always try to walk to work and back wherever I am,' Julia, the new one with the brunette bob, is saying. 'Keeps me toned.'

'Go well?' Toby asks, looking up at me, the girls' conversation no longer interesting. I can see a glint of envy in his eyes. He's so desperate to get on and succeed. He likes the slick IT clients, the ones who want graphic designers or web developers on one-year contracts for fifty or sixty thousand pounds, and yes, they probably do give him bigger chunks of commission when he places someone, but those jobs don't come along every month. I've always liked the other end of the market. Helping people who really *want* a job, whatever it is. Those who need the sense of self-worth a weekly pay cheque brings in. I know how they feel. I felt it once.

'Better than well, in fact. Turns out it's going to be a pretty big contract. At least one hundred and fifty people.' I sound like I'm bragging – and I am, but I can't help it. Pride and falls spring to mind but I let myself have this small moment.

'Wow, well done!' It's one of the new girls. Stacey. Long blonde hair, acrylic nails. Her words could sound patronising but they don't. Under her veneer of make-up and tan, I can see she's nervous and desperately wants to be liked, to fit in, and get on with her job.

'Thank you.'

'Definitely drinks on you tonight.' Julia again.

'I won't be there, I'm afraid. I'm not much of a drinker and it's my daughter's sixteenth birthday. I'm taking her out.'

'That's nice,' she says. 'Normally at sixteen they only want to be with their friends, don't they? I certainly did.'

There's something sharp in the way she talks and I smart. She's a little cocky for someone on her first day.

I look more closely at her. She's not as young as I thought she was, however much she's trying to appear otherwise. She's over thirty definitely. Botox probably.

‘We’re very close.’

She smiles, sugar cubes dipped in cyanide, and shows perfect white teeth that are reminiscent of a shark. She makes me nervous and it annoys me.

‘I’ll never have kids,’ she says. ‘I’m too career-focused. Couldn’t do it as a single mum, either. Hats off to you.’

It’s an insult wrapped in a compliment and Stacey’s eyes widen at Julia’s nerve, and Toby – obviously the one who’s been talking about me – has the good sense to keep his gaze on his screen as if reading some hugely important email.

‘Thankfully, Lisa is a superwoman who can manage everything and more. If only the rest of us were so capable.’ Marilyn has appeared alongside me. Shark smile meets shark smile and this time Julia shrinks slightly in her seat. ‘Lunch?’ Marilyn finishes. The last is addressed to me as if the others aren’t there; flies she’s already swatted away.

‘There’s always one,’ she mutters as we get our handbags and jackets. ‘In any gaggle of women. There’s always one you have to watch. At least we know which it is in this bunch.’ She casts a dark glance back at Julia. *Why does there always have to be one?* I wonder. *Why can’t things just be nice?*

‘He’s gorgeous, too.’ Marilyn has our drinks, two glasses of Prosecco, and I’m clutching the cutlery as we grab a corner table. ‘In a rugged kind of way. And it’s so obvious he likes you. All those unnecessary meetings. The way he watched you walk when he followed you through the office.’

‘Oh shut up,’ I say.

‘I don’t see why you don’t go for it.’

‘Oh, can you imagine Penny’s reaction? Mixing business and pleasure. And anyway – no.’

She watches me, thoughtful. My lack of a man comes up at least once a year in a *serious* way, and she peppers our conversations with it throughout the other months. I wonder if this is going to be another probing lecture. Thankfully, it’s not. Instead, she holds her glass up. ‘Cheers and congratulations!’

We clink and sip our bubbles. I like the way it fizzes in my mouth. I prefer to drink at lunchtimes because it’s only ever one glass.

‘Oh, before I forget’ – she leans over and rummages in her oversized handbag – ‘I’ve got something for Ava.’ She pulls out a small wrapped gift. ‘From me and Richard. God, I can’t believe she’s sixteen. Where have the years gone? If she’s sixteen, how old are we?’

‘Old,’ I say, but I’m smiling as I drink some more.

I take the present and tuck it in my own bag. It’s not only me who’s lucky to have Marilyn. Ava is too.

I skipped breakfast because I was so nervous and although I’ve barely had half a glass, the wine is going to my head. The tension in my shoulders begins to unknot. Then I see Marilyn’s face and I know what’s coming. I was too quick to think she wasn’t going to pry today.

‘Nothing from Ava’s dad?’

‘No.’ I bristle, though she’s asking cautiously. Quietly. She knows how this goes. Another conversation that rolls around too often for my liking. ‘And I’m not expecting anything either.’ I need to change the subject. ‘Anyway, how are *you*? You seemed a bit quiet yesterday. A bit off. All okay?’

‘I had a headache. It was nothing. You know I get them sometimes.’ She looks over at the waitress heading towards us with our food. Is she avoiding my gaze? It’s not the first time she’s had a headache in the past few months.

‘Maybe you should go to a doctor.’

‘And maybe you should go on a date with Mr Manning.’

I scowl at her.

‘Okay, okay. I’m sorry. But Ava’s nearly grown up. You need to get back out there.’

‘Can’t we forget this and concentrate instead on how brilliant I am?’ I try to lighten the mood, and am relieved when the barmaid arrives with our sandwiches and chips, distracting us with food.

How could I ever tell Marilyn anything? She knows it wasn't a one-night stand like the lie I told Ava, but she doesn't know the truth of it. The *whole* truth of it. She wouldn't understand. Marilyn of the charmed life, the great husband, the nice house, the good job – happy, lovely Marilyn. If I told her, it would change how she saw me. Don't get me wrong. I wish I could tell her. I've dreamed about telling her. Sometimes I find the words sitting right in my mouth, wanting to spill out, but I have to swallow them down like bile. I can't do it. I can't.

I know how words spread. They catch fire and pass from one person to another to another.

I can't risk being found.

5

AVA

The rain has almost stopped by the time we get home, but my coat is damp from getting caught in a downpour running to the car earlier and I stamp my feet quietly on the pavement feigning more cold than I feel to hide my impatience.

‘We can watch a film if you like,’ Mum says when she finally gets out. ‘It’s still early.’

‘I’ve got to revise.’ It’s only seven and I’m not planning on going to sleep until at least midnight, but I want to get to the privacy of my bedroom. She looks disappointed, but she’s the one who’s always going on about my exams. It doesn’t stop the squirm of guilt in my guts. We used to always have sofa blanket and movie nights sharing bowls of microwave popcorn. I used to love them. I *do* love them. But life is more complicated now. He’s waiting. I *have* to talk to him. Sometimes I feel like I’ll die if I don’t.

‘Oh flip,’ Mum says suddenly, with a groan. ‘I forgot to pick up Mrs Goldman’s shopping. I’ll have to pop down to the little Sainsbury’s. Will you be okay on your own? I’ll only be ten minutes? Or you can come with me.’

My irritation rises and I prefer it to the sad guilt of forcing cracks into our relationship. Every time she goes out and leaves me she asks this. *Every time*. What does she think is going to happen? I’ll stick my finger in a plug socket because she’s not here? ‘I’m sixteen,’ I snap. ‘You’ve got to stop going on at me like I’m a kid.’

‘Sorry, sorry.’ She’s in too much of a rush to get offended and that suits me. I don’t really want to upset her. I don’t actually like upsetting her but she’s becoming so *needy* now she can’t control everything I do like when I was little. Our pizza hadn’t been too terrible and I know she’d been trying to make it a fun time, but all her questions are so cloying and clingy and intrusive. She wants to know everything about me all the time and somehow now I can’t tell her. I don’t *want* to tell her. Whenever I think about talking to her about something – like Courtney and the sex thing – it all gets tied up on my tongue and I get moody instead. Everything is changing. I need my own space. Now more than ever.

But still, she gave me great birthday presents. An iPad mini and an underwater MP3 player, way more expensive than the one I wanted. I love the necklace Marilyn’s given me too – thick silver coil with a dark purple glass centrepiece. It’s chunky and cool and perfect for me. Sometimes I wish Mum was a bit more like Marilyn. She’s relaxed and fun. If Mum was more easygoing maybe I *would* talk to her about stuff. Not everything, I think, as I try not to rush up the path to the house. But some stuff. I couldn’t talk to her about *this*. She’d go crazy.

‘Up for a chat tonight, Birthday Girl? I’ll be around for an hour or so if you’re not out having fun!’ The Facebook message had come in when I’d checked my phone in the loo before the puddings arrived. I said I’d get home as soon as I could and to please wait. I hadn’t realised how needy I sounded when I sent it, but it does sound a bit lamely desperate and that makes me worry I’m turning into my mum. But God, why can’t people just install Messenger on their phones? Like everyone’s data isn’t already out there in one way or another? Anyone under twenty-five has made their peace with it. It’s only adults who think anyone cares. What’s the point of having a message service you only use from your computer?

A different kind of privacy.

The thought worms into my head. It’s the kind of privacy you need when keeping secrets from those closest to you. A wife maybe? Whatever *his* reasons it’s the kind of privacy that has made me turn off notifications.

We all have secrets.

I’m beginning to realise maybe secrets are great.

I'm trying not to be disappointed when I come downstairs for a drink twenty minutes later. Our chat was brief and all his replies were short. Distracted and not really answering my questions. I don't want to be upset – at least we had *some* time – but I guess I'm mainly frustrated. Courtney is all over my WhatsApp *now*. But I know what he wants. Funny how he's pissing me off with it a bit. A few weeks ago I'd have been so happy to have him chasing me and making me feel pretty and sexy. Now, he's simply another irritation.

I'm quiet on the stairs in my socks and when I turn the corner to head to the kitchen, I stop. Mum's there. She's standing by the kitchen table, staring at nothing, and there's a stiffness to her that's all wrong. The whole thing looks weird and I'm not sure why, but my heart is racing and my stomach churns. After a moment she reaches into her bag for the small bottle of Prosecco Marilyn gave her, twists the lid off and drinks it straight from the bottle.

I freeze where I am, confused and alarmed. Is this my fault? Is this because I've been so shitty? I hover in the hallway, unsure of what to do. Do I ask her what's wrong? I feel small again. I go to take a step forward, but then hesitate. There's something about the way she's standing – the stillness – which makes me feel as if I'm watching something private. Something where I don't belong. Are the cracks in our relationship coming from her side too? Does she have secrets she's not sharing? I find it hard to believe. She's an open book, my mum.

It's unsettling though. Those little bottles only hold one glass or so, but who doesn't pour wine before drinking? What would make you drain it in basically one swallow? In the end, my stomach in knots, I creep back upstairs. I can live without a cup of tea.

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