

'If you love writers such as Jodi Picoult, Nicole may just be your cup of tea.'

The Hoopla

'I am here because they suspect me of something. I am here because I am a suspect. I know that, she knows that. Everyone knows that.' Anna

'It wasn't my fault. None of this is my fault!' Caro

Caro and Anna are best friends . . . they *were* best friends. Over a decade, Caro and Anna have bonded while raising their daughters, two little girls the same age but living two very different lives. The women have supported each other as they have shared the joys and trials of motherhood, but now everything has changed.

There's been a terrible car accident, an unimaginable tragedy that leaves both families devastated. Over two days, as Caro and Anna each detail their own versions of events, they are forced to reveal hidden truths and closely guarded secrets.

The complicated lives of wives and mothers are laid bare as both women come to realise that even best friends don't tell each other everything. And when hearts are broken, even best friends need someone to blame.

A hard-hitting, provocative and gripping read from the queen of white-knuckle suspense and searing family drama.

Nicole TROPE Blame

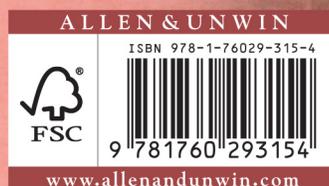
There's been an accident. Two mothers are destroyed. Two families will never be the same.

Nicole TROPE Blame

Cover design: Alissa Dinallo

Cover photograph: Elisabeth Ansley/Trevillion Images

FICTION



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First published in 2016

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Web: www.allenandunwin.com

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
from the National Library of Australia
www.trove.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 76029 315 4

Internal design by Lisa White
Set in 13.5/18 pt Minion LT by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Chapter One

‘Excuse me,’ says Anna to the policewoman standing behind the counter. She says it quietly, barely whispers it, preferring not to be heard at all. The policewoman doesn’t respond. She is in the middle of a conversation with someone else. A man wearing a long grey coat, despite the heat, is trying to explain what his lost dog looks like. He keeps saying the word ‘dog’ and sticking out his tongue and pretending to pant, in case the policewoman has forgotten it’s a dog he is talking about. Even though he’s standing a few feet away from Anna, she can smell the heavy unwashed odour coming from him. With his shaggy beard and long hair, he is starkly out of place in this suburban police station.

Anna looks around her at the peeling fake leather chairs, grey laminate counter and cream-coloured walls, and tries

to imagine someone actually designing the room. It's not even ugly. It's just nothing. If she closes her eyes, she immediately forgets what it looks like.

The man at the counter waves his arms and his smell assaults Anna again.

The policewoman doesn't seem to notice the odour—or she's very good at ignoring it. Anna furtively dips her head towards her chest and smells the perfume she sprayed on as she was getting dressed. The floral scent mingles with the man's smell, making her feel slightly sick and reminding her that she only had coffee for breakfast this morning. And that she only had wine for dinner last night. She doesn't usually drink wine, or any alcohol at all, but she was trying to see how much the rich, berry-coloured drink could alter the way she felt. 'There must be a reason so many people do it,' she had thought. She had not expected to have acid in her throat this morning and now doubts that she will ever be able to drink wine again.

She was trying to see if, with enough alcohol, she could feel like her old self, or a different self—anyone but who she was right now. One glass of wine had slowed her heart rate a little and smoothed the rough edges of her thoughts, but before allowing herself to enjoy the sensation, she had poured another glass and then another. This morning, she had chewed on an antacid tablet and dismissed the idea of rediscovering even the smallest atom of her old self as ridiculous. Her old self hadn't existed for so long, she couldn't even be sure what feelings and thoughts she was trying to recapture.

Looking in the mirror as she applied her make-up, she acknowledged that she was an entirely different person than she had been two weeks ago. Her face looked strange, filled with shadows and angles that she had never seen before. She had had to reapply her make-up because it looked wrong, as though she were a teenager making her first attempt at decoration. It didn't look much better the second time but by then she was running late, and so had shrugged her shoulders at her reflection and given up on finding her old face.

There is a mirror on the wall behind the policewoman and Anna glances at it, wondering if there are other police officers behind it, watching her. She straightens her shoulders a little. In its reflection, she looks, as Caro would say, like she belongs in some country house. 'Oh my dear,' her friend liked to say, affecting a British accent, 'don't you look fabulous.'

Anna smiles down at her shoes as she thinks about Caro's terrible accent that always came out sounding more New Zealand than British and never failed to make her laugh. Caro loved accents despite being hopeless at them. Only four weeks ago, she had insisted on pretending to be Italian when they tried out a new coffee shop. Caro's ruse had fallen apart because the owner was actually Italian and had attempted to have a conversation with her. Anna had eventually excused herself to go to the bathroom because she could see her choked-back giggles were irritating the woman. Caro had simply pretended

that she was speaking Italian until she finally gave up and went away.

‘She probably thinks you’re insane,’ Anna had said on returning to their table.

‘That’s Mrs Insane to you,’ Caro had said, stealing the last piece of mud cake.

Anna had left for school pick-up feeling lighter than she had all day. She had breathed in the late-spring air and felt, if not content, at least better than she had. For what seemed longer than an hour, she had just been a woman having fun in a coffee shop.

Anna looks at the mirror again and quickly stops smiling. She smooths down the front of her wraparound dress, which she bought last year. The fabric is soft and has a delicate rosebud print. She remembers how excited she was to find it on sale, marked down three times to a price that she could finally afford.

‘Buy it,’ Caro had said as she watched Anna twirl in front of the boutique’s large gold-framed mirror.

‘But it’s still expensive. When will I ever wear it?’

‘We’ll have a night out together,’ said Caro. ‘We’ll go drinking without the husbands and pick up gorgeous young men.’

The dress had hung in her closet ever since, waiting to be worn. Anna had only pulled it out this morning when she had run out of other options. She had held it to her cheek for a moment, remembering. ‘I found somewhere to wear it,’ she would like to tell Caro.

Because it's a wraparound dress, she can wear it even though she has lost weight in the last two weeks. 'Eat something,' says Keith every time someone else brings over a meal. There are at least five different kinds of lasagne squashed in the freezer, all in dishes she knows their owners will require back.

'Why can't they just use something disposable?' she said to Keith as she watched him note exactly who the latest one was from.

'I suppose they think these look better. I'm heating this one up now; please eat some of it with me.'

'What's the point?' she had replied, making him shake his head. She left him in the kitchen and curled up on the couch in the living room, switching on the news but muting the sound.

She hadn't asked that question to be difficult. She really would like to know if there is any point in her continuing to exist, continuing to feed and dress herself, or even get out of bed in the mornings. She doesn't think she has ever looked this thin and this old. At a certain point, she seems to have crossed a boundary between waif-like and haggard. 'So what,' she thinks, staring at the reflection of her collarbones in the police station mirror. 'So what.'

'You need to eat, Anna, because there's going to be a day when you're ready to move on, to move forward,' said Keith, who had joined her in the living room. He'd handed her a plate of lasagne and given her a fork. 'You want to be

physically strong enough to get on with your life. We both need to be strong enough to get on with living.'

'What if I don't want to get on with living?' she had asked and put the plate on the coffee table, next to the sandwich he had made her for lunch.

'I don't know,' he had replied, and then she had watched him shove three large forkfuls of the lasagne into his mouth, barely even chewing one mouthful before opening his mouth for the next one.

'You'll choke,' she said and he had shrugged.

'You can do something with your life, Anna; really do something,' he said, as though she were now free to embark on some great adventure. 'You could go back to school and study for your master's degree in art, or you could study teaching . . . anything!'

Anna had been unable to suppress a bubble of laughter. Sometimes the things Keith said were so stupid that she thought about hitting him.

'We could try for another child,' he said quietly after she had finished laughing at him.

Then she *had* hit him. It had happened so quickly that she had barely felt herself move as she leapt to her feet, whirled around and slapped him across the face. The stinging sensation on her palm made her aware of how numb she had been feeling and she had looked at her hand, almost enjoying the tingling.

She had never done anything like that before and had a vision of herself powered by rage.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’ he had yelled. He had dropped his plate of lasagne on the floor and the congealed mess of yellow and brown made Anna feel sick.

‘Arsehole,’ she had replied and then had gone to the kitchen and found an unopened bottle of red wine. ‘Well what have we here?’ she’d heard Caro say so clearly that she had turned around—expecting her to be there.

Now she swallows twice, reliving the cheap acidic taste that she had managed to ignore in order to finish half the bottle and collapse into bed, only to be woken four hours later by a raging thirst. ‘You’re such a lightweight,’ Caro used to say whenever she managed to convince Anna to join her in a drink.

Anna takes a step back, so she is further away from the man who has lost his dog, pats her hair and straightens the dress’s belt. She knows, without another check in the mirror, that to the outside world she looks well put together, regardless of how she looks to herself. She could be on her way to lunch at a beachside café or she could be planning a day of shopping. She could be anywhere but instead she is right here, waiting for the policewoman to notice her.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Keith had said when he came into the bedroom before he left for work and found her sitting on the floor, surrounded by dresses and pants that, not knowing what to wear for this interview, she had rejected, but she told him not to. She is sure that they will not allow anyone else to be present in the interview, and she is also

sure that she does not want Keith sitting next to her today, or, possibly, ever again. Anna had known that he wouldn't mention her slapping him. It has never been his way. Keith had always been able to compartmentalise their arguments and dismiss them as single moments in time. He'd just pretend it had never happened. Perhaps he'd been afraid to push her for an explanation in case it pushed her too far or opened a discussion he didn't want to have. Either way he said nothing and she did the same.

'You should have hit me back,' she wanted to say but knew that Keith would have been profoundly shocked by that.

'He is . . . dis . . . dis . . .,' says the man, trying to indicate, Anna thinks, that the dog has spots of colour. 'Is . . . is,' he continues and then looks around, and not finding what he's looking for, growls at the policewoman.

'Like a leopard,' she says. Anna has no idea how the policewoman has understood what the man was trying to say.

'Dat,' he says, pointing a finger at her. 'Like dat.' His accent sounds European but Anna doesn't know from which part. Keith, as he tells her all the time, always knows. He makes a habit of talking to strangers with accents, just so he can enjoy their incredulous expressions when he picks, say, the state they're from if he's talking to an American, or the county they're from if he's speaking to an Englishman.

'Pity it's not the sort of thing you can make money from,' she always thinks as she smiles and congratulates him on

his accuracy. 'Keith is easily impressed with himself,' she told Caro once when they were exchanging confidences about their husbands. 'Most of them are,' Caro had said.

Anna smiles again as she remembers how Caro's laughter had set her off and the two of them had giggled like much younger women. There was a freedom in uncontrollable laughter, a feeling of being right in the moment, and Anna had not experienced such moments with anyone but Caro since she was a child.

The policewoman sighs and writes, in a small notebook, the dog's description. 'Okay; we have everything we need. We'll call you if we find him.'

The man nods and smiles and his shoulders slump forward a little, as though he is relieved that the police are on the case. He shuffles out of the station and the policewoman turns her attention to Anna. Her hair is tightly slicked back into a short ponytail. She is wearing a vest covered in pockets and has a gun holstered at her side.

'Do you really find lost dogs?' Anna asks.

'No, not really,' she replies, giving Anna a small smile, 'but he comes in every week to report it. I used to try and explain that it's not something the police do but he doesn't seem to understand, or want to understand, so it's easier just to take down the details and tell him we'll do our best.'

'Doesn't he wonder why you never find him?'

'We don't think the dog actually exists, but it makes him happier to report it missing.'

‘But surely you need to help him understand that?’ Anna asks, finding herself aggrieved on behalf of the old man.

The policewoman seems to realise that she has unwittingly found herself in a conversation and stops smiling. ‘Can I help you?’ she says.

‘Oh yes. I’m . . . um . . . I’m here to meet with Detective Anderson,’ Anna replies and feels herself flush at the words. This is not a situation she has ever imagined she would find herself in.

The policewoman consults a computer on the counter.

‘You are?’ she asks.

‘Anna McAllen.’

‘Yes, Anna McAllen,’ says the policewoman, agreeing with Anna that she is, indeed, who she says she is.

‘No one else would want to be me,’ thinks Anna.

‘Come this way, please.’ The policewoman’s tone is low and her voice formal. The change is alarmingly sudden, making Anna wonder what she’s heard. She glances at the mirror again, wondering how many people are judging her.

She is no longer a nice woman seeking help. She is here to be interviewed, to help police with their enquiries. No one has said these words to her but she is thinking them. Whenever she’s heard the phrase on the news, she’s known instantly that while it sounds like a friendly exchange of information, it is anything but.

I’m here because they suspect me of something. I’m here because I am a suspect. I know that, she knows that. Everyone knows that.

‘It’s just routine,’ Detective Anderson had told her when he called yesterday. ‘It’s just so we can get all the facts down.’

‘But you already have the facts,’ she said. ‘You were there.’

‘I wasn’t there when it happened, I was only at the hospital. Trust me, it’s no big deal. We just have to do it in a formal situation so we can get your statement on camera. It can wait if you’re not . . . ready.’

‘Why does it need to be on camera?’

‘Anna, I don’t want you to get upset about this. It’s more to do with how the case against the driver is going to proceed. We just need a clear statement from you. But, as I said, it can wait if you’re not ready.’

‘No,’ she had said. ‘I’ll do it. I’ll come in and do it.’

It was, for a moment, a relief to think that she could leave the house, that she *should* leave the house. Bereaved people were supposed to stay home, out of sight and away from people who were trying to get on with their lives. Last night, she had looked at the walls of the hallway leading to their bedroom and wondered if they were moving closer together. She’s found herself standing in the garden at all hours, sucking in deep breaths of air to carry back inside with her.

Anna follows the policewoman through a door into the back of the station, which is really just a collection of small rooms. The air-conditioning seems to be failing in the face of the heat and she feels her lip bead with sweat. She reaches up to touch her cheek and finds it wet. Again, she has been crying without having realised. Anna had always

assumed that crying involves the whole body, starting with heaving shoulders and guttural sounds, but now she knows better. She can be standing in the kitchen, thinking about whether she would like a cup of tea, and absent-mindedly touch her face and find it wet. She is always embarrassed when this happens and is glad Keith hasn't caught her.

Even when she thinks she is coping, she is not. Anna wipes her face quickly.

She reaches into her bag and touches her phone but instantly withdraws her hand. She cannot call Caro now. She cannot call Caro ever again but, oh, how she wants to. More than anything, she wants to call Caro on her phone and say, 'You won't believe this but . . .'

Detective Anderson is sitting in an office with the door open. He is reading something on a computer screen when the policewoman knocks on the door. 'Detective Anderson, Anna McAllen is here for her interview,' she says.

'Ah, Anna,' he says, standing up. 'Good of you to come.'

Anna nods at him, maintaining the charade that she is doing him a favour. 'Thanks, Missy,' he says to the policewoman, and she nods and leaves. He leans back a little and braces his hands against his back, and Anna is struck, as she was when she met him two weeks ago, at how tall and broad he is. He towers over her, and when Keith stood next to him, her husband looked like a boy in comparison.

'Follow me; we'll pick up Cynthia along the way. Are you okay?'

Anna wipes her cheeks again and nods. 'Just fine.'

Detective Anderson grimaces a little, in recognition of the outright lie.

She follows him down a corridor, waiting while he knocks quickly on a closed door and then moves off without saying anything. Behind her, she hears the door open and knows that Cynthia, whoever she is, is walking behind her now.

Once all three of them are seated in a small room with a table, three chairs and little else, Anna feels a shift in Detective Anderson's demeanour. He sets up a camera, and then sits down and looks at it.

'It is eleven am and this is the West Hallston police station. Attending are Detective Sergeant Walter Anderson and Detective Sergeant Cynthia Moreno.

'To begin with, Mrs McAllen, I want to make sure that you understand we are going to ask you some questions but you do not have to say or do anything that you don't want to. Do you understand that?'

'Yes,' says Anna softly.

'I also want to let you know that we will be recording this interview. Are you happy to let us record it?'

Anna looks at the camera, 'What happens if I say no,' she asks.

'Then we can use a tape recorder or we can type up our questions and your answers as we go,' says the detective.

'No, no it's fine, you can record it.'

'Okay, and one more thing, Mrs McAllen. I just want to let you know that you don't have to say anything but if,

for some reason, this ends up in court then there may be a problem if you bring up something that you have not mentioned in this interview. And anything you do say may be used as evidence in this case. Do you understand that?’

Anna nods.

‘Can you answer that verbally please Mrs McAllen.’

‘Yes, I understand that, and please call me Anna.’

‘And lastly,’ continues Detective Anderson, as though he hasn’t heard her, ‘you have the right to let a friend or relative know where you are and you have the right to talk to a lawyer.’

‘A lawyer?’

‘Yes—would you like to speak to a lawyer?’

‘Do I need to speak to a lawyer . . . I mean, I don’t know; I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m just . . .’ Anna feels a light sweat of humiliation break out all over her body as she scrabbles in her bag for her last remaining tissue.

‘Control yourself,’ she thinks.

‘That’s okay, Anna,’ says Detective Anderson and is then silent, giving her time to finish blowing her nose.

Anna has never been one to cry in front of other people. She feels humiliated any time she does it. She has always thought of herself as being made of stronger stuff but is aware that tears are the expected reaction to what has happened, especially in front of the police, especially in front of family; otherwise, how will anyone know that she is grieving?

‘It’s okay,’ he says again, and Anna takes a deep breath and looks straight at him. In addition to his height, he has

thick black hair and green eyes. There is a light stubble on his chin, and Anna clutches her tissue tightly to prevent her hand from reaching out to touch him. 'What kind of a person are you to be noticing his looks?' she thinks.

'I just need to ask you these questions and I need to let you know again that this is being recorded,' he says. His tone has softened and Anna sees the man she met two weeks ago but, having had a glimpse of his professional demeanour, she reminds herself that she is in a police station and that anything she says, as he has just explained, may be used against her.

'Words can be weapons,' her mother always told her.

'Our local weapons expert,' was how Peter and Anna used to refer to her when they were teenagers, because no one was more devastatingly accurate than their mother.

'Yes, yes, I can see that,' says Anna, gesturing to the camera. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but can I get another tissue?' She is feeling flustered and wishes that Keith were sitting next to her.

'Here you go, Anna,' says Detective Anderson, sliding a box of tissues across the table. 'Just relax. I know this is a really difficult time. We can leave it for another week.'

'She'll still be . . . be gone in a week, Detective. I just want to get this over with.' Anna tries to say the word 'dead' every day but simply can't. She remembers that only a couple of weeks ago, she would, as most people do, say she was 'dead tired,' or that she'd 'rather be dead than wear a bikini again' or that 'the stores were dead today'. Now, she cannot say

the word, but she thinks it all the time, repeating it in her head until it momentarily loses its meaning, making her think that she has conquered it, but then she opens her mouth to say it and cannot even get the first syllable out. ‘My daughter is d . . . My daughter is de . . . My daughter is . . .’ she will stutter and then just give up.

‘I understand,’ says Detective Anderson. ‘Why don’t you take a few deep breaths? Cynthia and I have as much time as you need.’

She does take a few deep breaths, and uses the time to look at Cynthia—as he has called her. She is about the same height as Anna, with curly brown hair tied in a messy bun. Her breasts strain a little at the blouse she is wearing, drawing Anna’s eyes to them. ‘She looks too young to be in here, too young to be a detective,’ she thinks. There are no lines on her face, only a few freckles. *Pretty. Too pretty. Look how pretty my detectives are.*

This morning, in the mirror, Anna had seen how the grey circles under her eyes have become more obvious because she is so pale and her face is so much thinner. Her skin is now dry and flaky. She cannot seem to moisturise it enough.

Detective Anderson clears his throat.

‘I can’t seem to stop crying,’ says Anna. She has no idea why she has said this because it is not strictly true. She has moments when she is not crying, moments when she is not even sad; moments when she feels nothing. But those moments are overwhelmed by all the other ones where she

finds herself in the grip of violent, debilitating emotion, and looking at Detective Anderson, she does feel as though he might understand such a thing.

‘I keep thinking that eventually I’ll get it together or . . . I don’t know . . . dehydrate or something, but that’s not happening. Do you think I’ll ever stop crying?’

Chapter Two

Caro is running late. Geoff offered to drop her off but she didn't even bother answering when he first made the suggestion. She didn't when he suggested it twice more either.

'I don't think you should be driving,' he stage whispered to her in a final attempt to convince her to accept his offer of a ride.

'Oh, fuck off, Geoff,' she said in reply while unloading the dishwasher this morning.

He had sighed because Lex was in the room and he never swore in front of her, and then he had taken his briefcase and Lex had taken her school bag and the two of them had slunk out of the kitchen, their heads bowed under what Caro assumed was the collective weight of their disappointment in her.

She had smashed a mug after they'd left. It was the last thing she had removed from the dishwasher, coinciding with the sound of the garage door closing, letting Caro know that she was now truly alone. She had watched, fascinated, as the mug exploded into shards. It had not been as cathartic as she'd thought it would be.

She had smashed it into the sink because she knew that she would have to clean it up afterwards. Only as she was picking up the pieces had she realised that the mug was an old favourite, large enough for a generous cup of coffee, with a silly picture of a dog decorating the outside. It had been a gift from a great-aunt who was no longer living and Caro had always treasured it.

'Sorry, Gertie,' she had said, looking up at the ceiling, then muttered, 'Just fuck, fuck, fuck,' as she picked the pieces out of the sink.

Her thoughts had turned to Gertie's funeral. Keith had been away on business, so Anna had come with her. They had sat together in church, and Anna had kept her arm around her friend's shoulders the whole way through as Caro sobbed messily and embarrassed her mother. Afterwards, as they were making their way back to Anna's car, two women from Gertie's nursing home had stopped them and enquired if they were lesbians. Caro and Anna had howled with laughter the whole way home. Then Anna had joined Caro for a gin and tonic, so they could toast Gertie, who always said that her longevity was due to the gin and tonic she had every day at exactly five o' clock. 'If

I were a lesbian,' Anna had said, 'you would definitely be my first choice.'

'No I wouldn't,' said Caro. 'I don't think I'm anyone's first choice anymore. I'm so fat.'

'Don't say that,' Anna had said. 'You're gorgeous and I would do you in a second.'

'Anna McAllen, what would your mother say?'

'She'd say . . . oh, who cares what she'd say.'

'That's right,' said Caro, 'who cares what anyone says. Let's run away together to an island where they serve wine and tea and all we're required to do is read books and be lesbians.'

'God,' said Anna, 'I'll take that any day of the week.'

Caro picked the last piece of the mug out of the sink, pressed the sharp sliver against her thumb and wondered how much pressure it would take to draw blood, but hadn't been brave enough to try to actually hurt herself.

After that, she'd had a cup of coffee and then another cup of coffee, and then she had given into her craving and had a vodka and orange. 'Look at me celebrating,' she said as she raised the glass to the empty kitchen. She had wanted one more but knew that she had to drive. 'Too little too late,' she thought as she forced herself to return the vodka to the freezer. The orange juice was just for colour.

The alcohol stopped her hands shaking, and allowed her to shower and dress. 'On a bender' is a phrase she has heard for years but never really paid attention to. But, as she finished her drink, she had acknowledged to herself

that she was, indeed, on a bender. It was a phrase that conjured up out-of-control celebrities, giving it an edge of glamour. The edge wore off quickly after the first lot of vomit that didn't quite make the toilet.

Two weeks and counting. She has become attached to her breakfast drink remarkably quickly. Before this, she had been quite capable of making it to midmorning most days.

'I think you should have a lawyer with you,' Geoff had said to her last night.

'I'm only helping them with their enquiries,' she said. 'If I take a lawyer with me, it looks like I'm guilty.'

Geoff had looked at her and slowly raised one eyebrow in a move she's pretty convinced he practises in the mirror. It's a lot more effective now that he's bald, but also makes her want to laugh at him, which, she imagines, is probably better than spitting at him.

'I know,' she had said in response, 'I know you think I'm guilty and I just don't give a fuck, Geoff. I've tried to explain what happened and you don't want to hear it. That's fine, but you don't get to judge me, because you weren't there! You've already made up your mind because you always make up your mind against me.'

'I'm just trying to protect you, Caro—I don't want you to go to jail.'

'You are not,' she had said slowly, 'doing anything of the sort. You want me to walk in there with my lawyer so I look like I have something to hide. Having me in jail would solve all of your problems.'

Geoff sighed. ‘How much have you already had to drink, Caro?’ he asked. She’d opened her mouth but no answer had come out. In the last two weeks, she has spent a lot of time not answering him, believing silence was better than an argument. Instead, she left him sitting in the living room and locked herself in their bedroom. This time, it had taken everything she had to remain upright as she walked away from him, the room tilting from side to side. Once she was in the bedroom, she managed a shower and a night of black sleep, untouched by bad dreams. She had woken at dawn to throw up, much as she had woken the day before, and the day before that.

In the police station, a small group of people are standing in front of the counter. They seem to be protesting about something because Caro hears one man say, ‘It’s a bloody disgrace that it’s allowed to go on,’ and then the rest of the group murmurs, ‘Yes, yes . . . bloody disgrace.’ To Caro, they all look about five hundred years old, and she seethes at how long they are going to take now they have the attention of the policewoman behind the counter. Caro has parked half a block away, so that she can create the illusion she walked or was dropped off. She had hurried along in the heat and now feels sticky and irritated; even more irritated than she was this morning. She doesn’t think they’ll want to breath test her but isn’t sure. It’s not like she’s ever been in a situation like this before. Caro watches the disgruntled group, thinking, ‘So, this is your life, Caroline—what do you think of that?’

‘And I’ll tell you something else . . .’ says a man dressed in a crisp three piece suit, stabbing his finger on the counter, ‘we’re not going to . . .’

‘Excuse me,’ says Caro loudly and the group falls silent as they all turn to look at her. A few of them would give Geoff’s raised eyebrow a run for its money.

‘I’m here for my interview,’ she says quickly. ‘I’m Caroline Harman.’

The request to come into the police station had finally come yesterday from a woman named Isabel Dillon who’d identified herself as, ‘the case manager’. Caro had no idea what that meant, but she’d been waiting for a visit from the police for two weeks. Now that it was here she was terrified and strangely relieved as well.

The policewoman smiles politely at the group in front of her, checks her computer and says, ‘If you’d just give me a moment. This way, Mrs Harman,’ she continues, indicating that Caro should follow her through a door to the back of the police station. As she walks past the group, Caro hears one of them mutter, ‘Well, I never,’ and she also thinks she hears the words, ‘Wasn’t she . . .?’

She lifts her chin higher as she feels their eyes burn her between her shoulder blades. ‘They don’t know me,’ she thinks, although she knows that it is very possible they know of her. The accident was two weeks ago and had been reported on television and the internet. There were no pictures of her, but Caro knows that her name was out there for everyone to see. What she had

assumed would be old news by now is still fodder for the media. ‘Screw you all,’ she thinks as she follows the policewoman, ‘don’t you dare fucking judge me!’ She would like the story to be old news by now, to feel that the whole country has moved on from this particular tragedy but it doesn’t feel possible.

She and Anna haven’t moved on, and at odd moments in the day, Caro catches herself realising that she will never, ever, move on. She is as trapped as if she were already in prison.

‘Do I have to come in?’ Caro had asked Isabel Dillon.

‘No,’ she had replied, ‘but it would be better if you did. We can only ask that you come in to help us sort out what happened. You are free to wait until you are charged with an offence.’

‘What offence?’

‘Mrs Harman, I am sure that the detectives who will be interviewing you will be able to explain everything. Shall I tell them to expect you?’

‘Are you going to be interviewing Anna as well?’

‘That’s not your concern right now.’

‘So, yes,’ said Caro. Isabel Dillon was silent. ‘I’ll be there,’ Caro had said as she made her way to the freezer, ‘I’ll be there.’

Caro follows the policewoman along a corridor until she gets to a room at the end. ‘They’re waiting for you,’ she says, and then opens the door, turns and walks away. ‘Thanks so much,’ Caro replies to the policewoman’s back.

A man and a woman are sitting in the small room that has a table and three chairs. There are no windows and, almost instantly, she can feel herself getting edgy and claustrophobic, although she knows that may be from the vodka wearing off.

‘Mrs Harman, thank you for coming in. I’m Detective Sergeant Susan Sappington and this is Detective Sergeant Brian Ng.’

The woman stands up and holds her hand out for Caro to shake. Caro surreptitiously wipes her own hand against the leg of her jeans before she takes the detective’s, which is as cool and dry as Caro had known it would be. Detective Sappington is dressed in a grey pantsuit, which would lie perfectly against her thin body if not for the gun holstered at her side. Caro smooths her hair, pushing behind her ears the pieces that are escaping. She wonders if the detectives can see the grey in her black hair. She’s very overdue for a colour. She pulls her shirt down a little, wishing she’d thought to wear something loose and cool instead of her slightly too tight black T-shirt. She didn’t know what people were supposed to wear to be interviewed by the police but, in the end, she’d just chosen clothes that fitted.

Detective Sappington smiles and indicates that Caro should sit down.

She is perfectly polite, even though Caro is at least half an hour late. Despite her plan to be guarded, Caro finds herself beginning with an apology: ‘I’m sorry I’m late.’

‘Please don’t worry about it.’ Detective Sappington sits down and Caro does as well. The other detective just nods at her and she understands immediately who’s in charge.

‘Is it okay to start?’ says Detective Sappington and Caro nods. Detective Ng turns on the camera they have set up at the end of the table and Caro feels sweat collect at the base of her spine. ‘This is really happening and I am really here,’ she thinks.

‘It is eleven-thirty am and this is the West Hallston police station. Attending are Detective Sergeant Susan Sappington and Detective Sergeant Brian Ng.

‘To begin with, Mrs Harman, I want to let you know that we are recording the interview. Do you give us permission to do so?’

‘No, I don’t,’ says Caro, hating the idea of her face being on camera.

‘Mrs Harman, whether we use a tape recorder or a video recorder or we manually record the interview doesn’t matter. It will be recorded in some form or another. Using a video recorder does tend to shorten the process.’

Caro looks at the small camera set up on a tripod. She thinks about having to wait as the detectives write everything down and she says, ‘Okay, fine. You can record it.’

‘Thank you. I also want to let you know that you do not have to say or do anything, but if this does go to court and you attempt to use information that you have not given us in this interview it may not be accepted into the record.’

‘Do you think this is going to court?’ asks Caro, feeling her stomach flip with panic.

‘I have no idea,’ says Detective Sappington. ‘I also want to let you know that you have the right to let a friend or relative know where you are and you have the right to request a lawyer.’

‘Do you think I need a lawyer? What on earth would I need a lawyer for if I haven’t been charged and you don’t know if I’m going to be?’ Caro feels her heart speed up as she acknowledges to herself that Geoff was right and she should have had someone with her. ‘I need a lawyer,’ she rehearses in her head but the words don’t come out. She feels like her guilt has already been decided, but knows that if she gets up and leaves now, they will be convinced that everything was her fault. She wants to be able to explain things to them; she needs to be able to explain, so they understand. A lawyer may tell her that she cannot say anything, that she must keep what she knows to herself.

‘Would you like a lawyer?’

‘I . . . no.’

‘Are you happy to answer some questions about the night of the accident, Mrs Harman?’

‘Why are there two of you here?’ Caro hears the sharpness in her voice and congratulates herself. She feels like she has taken an important step and now they know she won’t be pushed around. *The best form of defence is a good offence, or something like that.* She crosses her arms over her chest.

‘I’m going to ask you some questions, Mrs Harman, and Detective Ng is going to observe.’ Detective Sappington’s voice is pitched perfectly to calmness, but instead of relaxing, Caro finds herself even more irritated.

‘Fine, whatever,’ she says. ‘I just want to go home. How long is this going to take?’

‘I’m not sure. Do you have children who need to be picked up? If so, I can get you a phone, so you can call someone to let them know.’

‘No, I don’t have children who need to be picked up,’ she says and remembers Lex’s bowed head from this morning. ‘Keep quiet,’ she thinks but Detective Sappington relaxes in her chair, waiting for Caro to continue, so, without having meant to, she says, ‘I only have one child and my husband drove her to school this morning. My mother . . . yes, my mother is going to fetch her.’

‘Right, so now—’ says Detective Sappington, but Caro speaks over her even though she doesn’t mean for the words to be heard by anyone but herself.

‘She won’t get in the car with me.’

‘Who won’t?’ asks the detective.

‘What?’

‘Who won’t get into the car with you, Mrs Harman?’

Caro looks at the wall behind the detective and shakes her head.

‘You’re doing an excellent job of putting your foot into your mouth,’ she can almost hear Anna say.

‘Lex, my daughter,’ she says. ‘Lex won’t get in the car with me because of the accident. She doesn’t understand.’

‘What doesn’t she understand?’ says Detective Sappington.

‘That it wasn’t my fault,’ says Caro, meeting the detective’s gaze, ‘she doesn’t understand that none of this is my fault.’