Prologue

I park the car on a grass verge at the hospital, ignoring all the signs warning me that it will be clamped.

I don't care about clamping. I have to get into the emergency department. What does a car matter?

I half run because the heaviness in my chest since I got the phone call from the hospital won't allow me to run properly. Or breathe. I need deep, calming breaths.

Screw deep calming breaths.

I need to be with him.

Now. Sooner.

I can keep him alive. No doctor can do it: he needs me, holding his hand, willing him back to life.

I don't have time for the information desk – I know this hospital, see the double doors leading into the actual A & E itself, see a man pushing out of them, and I race, grabbing one swing door just before it shuts.

And I'm in.

Scanning. Peering in past half-drawn cubicle curtains. A man throwing up vile black stuff.

Two cops standing outside another cubicle. A woman on a heart monitor.

And then there he is.

I see his hand lying limply. A hand that's caressed me so many times.

I stand at the edge of the already-full cubicle, about to speak when a doctor hangs her stethoscope round her neck and says: 'I'll talk to the wife.'

She's gone instantly and I follow her, see her approach another woman. The doctor puts a comforting hand on the woman's forearm.

'I'm the wife!' I say, my voice frantic.

And then, as the doctor spins round, I see the other woman, recognise her, see the horror on her face.

'I'm his wife,' I say, 'not her.'

PART ONE

Autumn Leaves Falling

1

Sid

Oscar Wilde was right – work is the curse of the drinking classes. Not that there's any drinking done in Nurture itself. I wend my way through the hordes in The Fiddler's Elbow, neatly avoiding a guy who thinks – mistakenly – that small, dark-haired women in their thirties are only in pubs on a Friday to find handsy hunks like himself, and congratulate myself on not sweeping his feet from beneath him. Krav Maga is a great self-defence tool but there's a time and a place for everything.

I'm heading for the snug at the back of the pub where my Nurture colleagues will be settled in.

Nurture is an advocacy group, semi-funded by the state, set up to improve the health of the people of Ireland and to educate anyone who thinks curry chips, a deep-fried burger and a sugar-laden soft drink is a fully balanced meal.

However, education is a tough job and we need a Friday-night decompress as much as any other worker, so on Fridays, even the most goji-berry-loving among us move blindly en masse across the road to The Fiddler's Elbow to reward ourselves for a week of meetings, phone calls, Zoom meetings and enough unanswered emails to bury us with guilt till kingdom come.

Because of how bad the optics would be if the health gurus were spotted regularly having a drink, eating salt-laden pub snacks and enjoying that ritual of workplace comparing whose week was worse, we converge in the pub's small closed-off snug where nobody can see us.

'The figures came in today from the Department of Health.

Diabetes Two is on the rise, despite the campaign. A year-long campaign,' laments Robbie, who's been in Nurture thirteen years, as long as I have, and is also a campaign director. I'm responsible for school health, which is like trying to hold back a flood with a very small bucket.

I pat a disconsolate Robbie on the back, trying not to spill what looks like a big brandy, and find an empty stool beside Chloe, an intern on a gap year who seems so young, she makes me feel seventy instead of just thirty-four.

Right now, Chloe looks miserable.

'Sid!' she says, eager and anxious in equal measure, and I can sense more misery coming on.

'Adrienne shouted at me today, *shouted*,' she tells me. 'Just because we were out of the coffee pods she likes. It's not my job to replace them, is it? Do you think she has a psychiatric illness?'

Chloe, a wet week out of school and not yet toughened up enough to cope with actual shouting in an office, stares at me over the top of her drink and waits for me to answer. She can't be twelve or else she couldn't be interning, but she looks it, despite the carefully applied modern eyeliner, very grown-up suit and the I-am-clever big-framed glasses.

I think of all the things I could say: 'Adrienne's good at her job but, sometimes, it gets the better of her and she goes into the kitchen for a little meltdown and a caffeine hit.'

Chloe only knows teachers, who are not supposed to shout.

Therefore a workplace meltdown has to be incorrectly categorised into a mental-health box and can't be normal people at the end of their tether. Apart from babysitting, I'd say we are her only work experience.

'This job is not what I thought it would be,' Chloe goes on. 'How do you handle it, Sid?'

Chloe has seen me with my kid sister, Vilma, who is nineteen, and I'm getting the vibe that she thinks I am Vilma's mother, therefore a nurturing sort.

I am not a nurturing sort. Not by a long shot.

Plus, she can't really think I'm Vilma's mother? I'm thirty-four, not forty-four, although my skincare regime is a little lax, if I'm honest.

The barman finally hands me my large glass of wine and I'm about to test how acidic it is before replying when I think, who am I kidding? I'd drink battery acid at five-thirty on a Friday. Still, the battery acid works and I sigh deeply after my first deep drink.

'Chloe, without meaning to sound unhinged, sometimes I go into the office kitchen and have a little rant at the microwave. It lets off steam.'

I had a mini-canteen breakdown yesterday when a frantic phone call came in about a pancake-and-cream franchise setting up shop right beside a school which famously has no sports area whatsoever. I tell Chloe this.

'But you didn't shout at anyone, did you?' says Chloe, sounding younger every moment.

Patience has never been one of my finer qualities, but I try my best.

'Work can push people, Chloe. Adriana's brilliant at her job; passionate. It was nothing personal, I'm sure, but I'll talk to her if you like. Did she say sorry?'

Chloe blushes. 'Yes, several times, but that's not the point, is it?'

'The workplace can be a tense environment,' I say, thinking that the pub is doing its job and I am relaxed enough to stop myself throwing the contents of my glass over Chloe to show her how people can really react when they're irritated.

'Want a nacho?' I hand Chloe the packet to change the subject.

'I don't eat processed foods,' she says piously.

'Suit yourself.' I snap my packet back.

Chloe hasn't a clue as to what work is really like as opposed to what young people think it is going to be. The microwave

getting shouted at and that accountant who'd faked his CV and nearly lost us our government funding because of the subsequent funds-going-missing fall-out are about the worst things that have ever happened there. The money's not great and I'd be better off if I'd moved jobs years ago, but Nurture is a nice, steady place to work, despite the setbacks like cream-and-pancake franchises. Nurture is truly my second family.

If Chloe knew what horrors some offices held in store for newcomers, she'd take being screamed at in the kitchen any day.

When I finish my wine, I use an app to call a taxi from the only taxi company I ever use. Everyone else has different systems and can't understand why I prefer to wait twenty minutes for someone I know to turn up and bring me home, but I don't care. When the text comes that my driver's here, I say goodbye to everyone and try not to get sucked into any more open-ended discussions about terrible work traumas. Everyone is relaxed by now and it's a good time to go. My own couch, possibly a hot bath and a box set await me. I never drive into the office on Fridays and walk in because my bijou apartment – very bijou – is only two miles away from our city-centre offices. But I never do the walk home.

Tonight, my driver is a lovely man called Gareth, who looks like a bouncer and has a husband and two apricot-coloured chugs (pugs crossed with chihuahuas: 'Their breathing's much better, Sid, love, when they're mixed breed') at home. As he's finishing his shift, he's perfectly happy to sit without much conversation – the chugs are losing weight as per the vet's instructions, thankfully – and listen to Lyric FM playing quietly over the radio.

I phone Vilma from the car: 'Hi, Vilma, tell me – do I look old enough to be your mother?' I ask.

My little sister snorts down the phone, then hits protective mode: 'No! Who said that?'

I sink into the back seat. 'A girl in my office, about eighteen, an intern. She's probably seen you come to get me for lunch because I had the distinct feeling she thought I was your mother.'

'Don't be an idiot.'

'Really.'

'What did she say?'

'It's not what she said – it's that she thinks I'm the motherly type,' I mutter, sorry I started this.

'You're the "take down the patriarchy" and the true sisterhood type,' says Vilma. 'You look out for the women you work with. You dumbass.' She uses the term with affection. 'You like them to be prepared, same way you prepared me for life after school, and *in* school for that matter. That's why my friends love you. You tell us to take no shit and we don't. You're our special ops trainer, Sid: leave no woman behind. Sort of like the Army Rangers – be ready for anything.'

I say nothing for a moment: I always wanted Vilma and her friends to be prepared for life because women are notorious for playing by the rules when the other half of the human race long since ripped up the rule book. I adore Vilma – nobody is going to hurt her on my watch.

'That's probably it,' I say, aiming for cheerful.

'Besides, you've got Mum's skin: olive and anti-ageing, horrible sister. I've got Dad's: pale and liable to burn after five minutes in the sun. You look way too young to be my mum . . . You'd have to have had me when you were fifteen, and in all the pictures I've seen of you at fifteen you look like you're considering entering a convent.'

'I was a nerd,' I protest. 'Nerds wore undistressed jeans and fluffy sweaters with cats on them.'

Vilma laughs.

She and I are technically half-sisters and she takes after my beloved stepfather, Stefan, who required no make-up when he'd adoringly dress up as a vampire to accompany her and other small children on the endless Hallowe'en rounds. He is

actually Lithuanian but has the bone structure and height of someone who just drove down from the Carpathians in a black coach. Vilma, whose name means 'truth' in Lithuanian, is the same as Stefan – pale skin, pale eyes, hair like the woods at midnight. I'm like my mother: my hair's chocolate with what Vilma fancifully likes to call bronze highlights, and my eyes are like Mum's, hazel. But Mum's a perfect hippie with her hair long and trailing, which goes with her Stevie Nicks' vibe, while mine's short. And if anyone ever catches me in a hippie outfit, kill me immediately.

'What're you up to tonight?' I ask Vilma, imagining her in the bedroom she shares in a college house, deciding whether it's a jeans' night or time to break out the big guns and wear one of the floaty skirts she borrowed from Mum – to be worn ironically, of course.

'Going to Jojo's for a Netflix binge. Drag Race old seasons.'

I can hear the rattle of clothes hangers as she speaks.

'What—'

I know what's coming next.

What are you up to tonight?

'Just here,' I say, as if here is somewhere exciting instead of outside my building. I can't face Vilma's sadness at the fact that my life revolves around almost nothing social. 'Talk tomorrow and be—'

'—safe, yes,' she replies. 'Love you.'

'Love you more.'

It takes another few minutes to get me home.

'Thanks, Gareth,' I say, climbing out right in front of the steps to my apartment-block door. That's the great thing about my taxi guys. There's none of that, 'We'll just drop you on the corner here and sure, you can walk the rest of the way' with them. I tip well and I always ask to be brought as close to the door as possible.

I'm on the tenth floor, which is utterly wonderful from the point of view of getting burgled, because there's a great

shortage of ten-storey ladders. Any would-be intruders would have to come from inside the building and, given the concierge system and security cameras all over the place, which I do not regret paying for in my management fees, it's very unlikely that anyone in our apartments would ever get burgled. Plus, I have three locks on the door. And a baseball bat inside it.

Marc, who'd been my significant other for twelve years, hadn't said a word when I insisted on getting three locks. It was one of the many things I loved about him.

Loved: is there a sadder word?

I open my three locks, step inside, relock them quickly and walk through the hall, which, finally, is no longer bare-looking, because Vilma had persuaded me to give her money for frames for some art prints, which we then hung with sticky wall hangers because we are both lethal with hammers.

Marc had taken all his pictures when he'd left.

'Sid, you really don't care about interiors, do you? It looks like you just rent the place and expect to be evicted at any moment,' said Vilma one day when she was visiting. 'Give me a few quid and I'll find pictures to give some vague sense that you're staying longer than a week.'

And she had.

Vilma is a wonderful sister, a conduit to another world. I'm not sure how I would have got by this past year without her because Marc and I were like an old married couple with our own happy routines. Without him, I was rudderless.

There was no one to make me morning coffee, no one to cook up scrambled eggs when we'd run out of groceries, no one to sit with in companionable peace while we surfed the TV stations and our various cable subscriptions.

Sometimes, when I get home, it feels as if somebody has died and left me alone in my little universe.

I conquer this by watching more and more TV and making cocktails – only at weekends – from *The Butler's Friend*, a vintage book from the 1920s which has taught me to make the

perfect Boulevardier, where the secret is not just rye whiskey, sweet vermouth and Campari, but to stir and never shake.

Apart from trips home to see Mum and Stefan, my stepfather, and when Vilma comes to see me, I exist in a world of work, home and online supermarket deliveries.

If making the perfect Boulevardier, staying in all weekend and having a loving relationship with my couch cushions were what it took to keep me sane, then that's what I'd do. Marc's leaving had shocked me and made me feel stupid all at the same time. Because, under the circumstances, our relationship was hardly built to last. It was a miracle it had lasted as long as it did, but still, I missed him. We'd grown into adulthood together but that childhood-sweethearts-lasting-forever thing is a hard trick to pull off.

Still, what we'd had was special and I knew I'd never have it again. Besides, I needed another man in my life like I needed a hole in the head. I had everything I wanted. Except for those new biker boots I was longing for.

Who needs men when you've got fabulous boots, right?