

'Gripping, dramatic, with twists you won't see coming'

SALLY HEPWORTH ON *THE EX*

you
need to
know

EVERYBODY'S
HIDING
SOMETHING



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you
need to
know

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PROLOGUE

Christmas Eve

Mimi

She had learned from a young age that it's never like it is in the movies. For one thing, there's no soundtrack. In a film, if something dramatic happens, or something horrific or frightening or desperately sad, the music will tell you how to feel. It will swell or thrum or thump. Violins might pierce your soul. A bass drum might crash around inside your ribcage. But the thing is, it changes the whole feel of it. You start to imagine that a terrible accident could be an exciting event. A chance to step in and save the day.

Whereas the truth of this type of situation is vastly different. When she was small, maybe seven years old, Mimi was at a restaurant with her family when a teenage girl at another table started choking. Most people will have seen somebody choking on television or in a movie, but they might never have seen it in real life. On the screen, it's often comical. The person might be gesturing wildly, eyes bulging. Someone else doesn't get what's going on. A hero swoops in

and expertly performs the Heimlich manoeuvre. A piece of chicken flies across the room. People applaud.

In real life, it doesn't work that way.

The first thing Mimi noticed was the silence. She remembered she was blowing bubbles in her lemonade. The restaurant was noisy, chaotic. There might have been a shriek, or the clatter of a fork being dropped onto a plate, but she dismissed these as a normal part of the chaos. Then the hush fell. And from the silence, two or three panicked voices.

All around her, people seemed to have frozen in place. Her eyes were drawn to the table in the centre. A mother and father standing either side of their daughter. The daughter's gaping mouth. Someone else, an older brother perhaps, leaping to his feet and his chair crashing to the floor. The noise of it landing made Mimi jump in her seat.

And then the wailing started. Everyone responds to crisis situations in different ways. There are the capable types who calmly assess the situation, step in and help. The people who throw their hands up and back away, and the people who fall apart. The mother was falling apart. She didn't know how to help her daughter, her daughter who couldn't breathe and was turning redder by the second. And maybe without even realising it, she'd begun to scream. That scream was the most sickening noise Mimi had ever heard in her entire — albeit short — life. She couldn't say what it was about it. Was it the anguish she could hear within it? The fear? The rawness? It was strangled and it was animalistic and it was frightening and she wanted it to stop.

In the meantime, other diners had converged on the table. Mimi couldn't see the teenager's face anymore. Someone had hoisted her out of her chair and now they were attempting to do the Heimlich manoeuvre. But from the frustrated shouts, it didn't seem to be working. That's when Mimi's mum took her by the hand and led her out of the restaurant. Maybe she saw the look on her face, or maybe she was afraid they weren't going to be able to save the girl, that she might die right here in the middle of the restaurant and she didn't want Mimi to witness that. They wandered up and down the footpath outside and her mother chatted to her about different things. She couldn't remember now what they spoke about, but she could recall that sense of knowing. *She's trying to distract me.*

Soon there was the wail of a siren.

Mimi never found out whether that girl was okay, but she did think about it a lot. She replayed the scene in her mind as she fell asleep at night. She heard the sound of the mother's cries and her skin would crawl and her stomach would churn, and sometimes tears would sting her eyes and she didn't really understand why.

Thirty years had gone by since that night at the restaurant and tonight, Mimi had found herself thinking of that mother again. It was Christmas Eve, so she shouldn't be thinking about her. She should be thinking about happy things. Warm, feel-good things. *Must remember to hang the stockings tonight when we arrive at the holiday house. Was the turkey I bought too big for that oven up there? I should have double-checked with Jill. Did Pete's brother, Darren, remember to pick up the prawns this*

morning? And was he smart enough to pack them in an esky with ice for the drive up?

Did we buy enough gifts for the twins? They're only babies, I know they won't remember their first Christmas morning. And there's very little that they need — what with all the hand-me-downs from Callie and Tara. But still, I don't want them to miss out.

This is what I should be thinking of.

Mimi loved the lead up to Christmas. She always had. The way the world felt different. Not just festive, that was a given. But magical. She still got a funny little jump in the pit of her stomach when a shopping centre Santa waved at her.

So why was she thinking about that woman right now, instead of about eggnog and candy canes?

It was because of the accident on the freeway.

It was just like when that girl was choking in the restaurant. There was an eerie silence. Then, the sound of someone grunting in pain.

And finally, something else. A woman's tortured screams. She sounded just like the mother in the restaurant and Mimi was thinking: *No. Not this again. No, no, no.*

But then she realised. *The person who's screaming is me.*

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesday 1 December

Mimi

Mimi lay on her stomach on the rug, her sketchbook and pencils in front of her. A bead of sweat slipped down from her forehead and curved around her cheek. She should hop up and turn on the aircon. Summer had well and truly arrived.

The twins were side by side on their backs, both gazing up at the colourful mobiles hanging from their play gym. She should have been giving them some ‘tummy time’, but they hated being on their stomachs at the moment and she rather preferred happy gurgling twins over anguished screaming ones. Not to mention the fact that Elliot had recently mastered the art of rolling front to back. Now, as soon as Mimi put her on her stomach, she immediately flipped back over anyway. So what was the point? If anything, it would only mean Elliot showing off in front of James. What if that created some sort of rift between the sisters? What if years in the future, James was sitting in a therapist’s office, explaining how her inferiority complex first stemmed from the days when her

mother placed her next to her capable rolling twin while she stayed stuck on her stomach and screamed.

Actually, they were probably both going to end up in therapists' offices, complaining that their parents had wanted boys, not girls, as evidenced by their two very boyish names. Which wouldn't be fair, really. Mimi was perfectly happy with having girls. It was Pete who'd been hoping for boys. He might have tried to hide it but it was bloody obvious. Whereas Mimi, well, Mimi hadn't wanted *any* more children at all.

She put down the pencil she'd been drawing with and gave her hand a small smack. *You're not supposed to have thoughts like that, not consciously.* Yes, it was true that Pete had been the one pushing for another child, but it wasn't his fault they'd ended up with two for the price of one.

That was life. It liked to play funny tricks on you. Sometimes they were small pranks. Like when she stayed up until one in the morning finishing her daughter's school project — she knew she wasn't supposed to do the work for her, but she also knew that every other parent was probably up late creating the papier-mâché sculptures of the earth too. She knew because she and the other mums joked about it at school pick-up. 'How did you go with your homework this week?' *Ha ha, wink, wink.* But anyway, the next day when she woke up bleary-eyed, her daughter woke with a bad cough and couldn't go to school, and Mimi realised she could have watched Netflix and drunk wine and gone to bed at eleven.

But other times, it was an extra funny trick. A real zinger. Twins! When your husband convinced you to have just one more baby. That with three children your family will be

complete. That it'll be so much easier this time, because Callie is sixteen and Tara is eight and they're self-sufficient and they're great kids and they'll help out with the baby.

The problem was, Mimi had felt their family *was* complete. She'd had such an unexpected path to motherhood. As young newlyweds, they'd been completely blindsided by the discovery that Mimi had fallen pregnant with Callie at twenty-two. The pregnancy was smooth, the delivery unexceptional. And then Callie had been a dream baby. She fed well, she slept well. So before long, they figured they may as well have another. It hadn't been their plan to have children in their early twenties, but why not?

Apparently, the reason why not was Mimi's uterus, which decided it wasn't going to be so compliant the second time around. And so, they'd gone through years of heartache trying to fall pregnant. That's why there was such a huge age gap between their two eldest girls. When Tara had come along, Mimi had felt such a sense of relief. Of contentment. As though for years she'd been trying and failing and trying and failing to do this one simple task: bring Tara into the world. And now that she'd done it she could relax. She could breathe again.

She'd thought she and Pete were on the same page about that. But then she'd understood. He was aching for a son. A bit of an annoying cliché really. What could a son do for him that their daughters couldn't? It didn't help that he'd grown up with two brothers and was missing being surrounded by all that bloody testosterone. So, despite knowing she was done, Mimi had given in and they'd started to try again. And

for whatever reason, her uterus had decided it was back to being amenable and she'd fallen pregnant with the same speed and ease as she had back in her early twenties. *Thanks a lot, uterus.*

She licked her upper lip and tasted salt. Sweat. Their house was meant to be ecologically designed for environmentally friendly heating and cooling, but she'd never found it to be as effective as flicking the switch on the aircon. She wished they'd put in a swimming pool last summer when they'd suffered through the heat and begun to discuss the idea. But then everything had changed. The twin pregnancy. And of course, entangled with the news of new life was the news of loss. In the end, a swimming pool was the last thing on their minds. Besides, Pete had pointed out they'd forever be scooping leaves from the water because of the bush behind their house. So, in a minute she'd give in and resort to technology to cool herself down.

If she was honest, today had been a pretty good day. Although she did have a new bar for what was considered a good day now that she had twins. But Callie and Tara had both got ready for school and out the door on time for once this morning — without any arguments. And Callie had even changed one nappy for her. That was a particularly big deal, because soon after the twins were born, Callie had made a family declaration that she was never changing any nappies. In stark contrast, Tara's response had been to morph into a very capable — if a little short — live-in nanny.

The funny thing was, when Mimi was pregnant she'd assumed Callie was going to be the one helping out and that

maybe Tara might act out a bit because she'd been replaced as the baby of the family. But instead Callie had been more and more withdrawn lately, spending increasing amounts of time locked away in her bedroom, while Tara seemed to have matured five years in the space of a month. Of course it was to be expected that Callie would go through a teenage stage like this, but it was still a shock because right up until this year, Mimi had thought Callie had somehow skipped the scary teen stage. They'd remained close, right through the start of high school and through Callie getting her first period and pimples and awkward growth spurts. Callie had kept confiding in her and joking with her. But now, along with retreating to her room all the time, she'd become snappy and irritable. It was as if she was a different person.

Meanwhile, Tara was so helpful that Mimi needed to be careful she didn't start to lean on her too much. She was eight, for goodness sake! She still needed to be a kid and have fun and not take on the burden of motherhood. She needed to enjoy being the big sister. Her responsibilities shouldn't extend beyond keeping her room tidy, doing her homework, helping out with some family chores.

On more than one occasion Mimi had been slow to rouse herself and climb out of bed in the night when the twins had woken for a feed, only to find Tara already in their room, scooping one out of the cot to comfort her, an expert arm reaching in to give the other a tender pat while she waited for her mother.

And the temptation was there for Mimi to accept her help, to allow Tara to hold James while she picked up Elliot

and started warming the bottles. But she stopped herself and sent Tara back to bed. The only one helping her should be Pete. Tara was a child; she needed her sleep. Thankfully, on her way back to bed, Tara always snuck into her parents' bedroom and nudged her dad awake so he'd know Mimi needed the help.

Mimi picked her pencil back up and had another go at the sketch she'd been working on, but she wasn't feeling inspired. She was meant to be creating a cute little monkey for a jungle scene and the little bugger wouldn't sit right in the trees for her. She checked the time. Was it too early for a glass of wine? Often just one glass helped her to relax and get her creativity flowing. It wasn't even midday. Maybe she could have one later with lunch. That was the upside of bottle-feeding — she was allowed alcohol again.

She'd struggled to breastfeed the twins from the beginning. Both Callie and Tara had been good feeders. They'd latched on in the exact way all the breastfeeding literature described. She could remember looking at other mothers in the hospital having trouble feeding and couldn't understand why it was so hard for them. She was ashamed to admit that a small part of her thought she was somehow superior because her babies could feed.

Now she wanted to go back in time and hit herself over the head with a breast pump. She wanted to reach back and comfort those mothers, shield their eyes from her smug face as she sat and nursed her daughters. Because now she got it. She bloody well got it. Breastfeeding was not the easiest, most natural thing in the world. It was fucking hard. And

her success the first two times had nothing to do with some innate ability she possessed as a mother. It was dumb luck.

And so, the twins had been supplemented with more and more formula from the day she came home from hospital until eventually, her abysmal supply of milk dried up. But she hadn't cried about it. And she hadn't felt like a failure. She'd celebrated. Because fuck she'd missed wine.

She felt her phone buzzing in the back pocket of her jeans and slipped it out. It was Jill, her mother-in-law. As Mimi slid her thumb across the screen to answer, Elliot opened her mouth and let out a huge wail, as though she'd been waiting for the right moment.

*

Jill

Dear Frank,

Three Hail Marys this morning. Sitting up here in bed. That's all I could manage for my sins. I suspect if I went to a priest he wouldn't think that was enough. And I'm supposed to get down on my knees to do it. But I was tired. And cranky. So three was the magic number today. Besides, I know what you would say: 'Why are you bothering with that, woman? God isn't sitting around waiting to count your prayers. He's got better things to do.'

But I don't know how else I'm supposed to atone.

Love,

Jill

*

Jill folded up the piece of paper and placed it on her bedside table. Later she'd put it in an envelope, seal it up, address, stamp and post it. A waste of time, but she'd still do it. When she first started, the letters were longer. In them, she would beg for forgiveness. She would tell detailed stories about her days, about the boys. Sometimes as she wrote, spots of ink would be smudged with her tears. But that hadn't happened for some time now.

She smoothed her hands across the floral bedspread on her lap and briefly considered pulling it right back up. Easing herself down flat again. Closing her eyes and praying for sleep. But she knew it wouldn't come. Sleep never seemed to come when she wanted it anymore.

She always used to start the day with a cup of tea in bed. Frank would bring it to her. Place it on the bedside table right where the letter was sitting. Now if she wanted to start the day with a cup of tea she had to get out of bed and make it herself.

Most days she hated him for leaving her. She hated that with Frank gone, it sometimes felt as though she'd lost all of her best parts along with him. Her sense of humour. Her patience. Her compassion. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. They weren't gone, not completely. They were muted.

She glanced sideways at the folded paper. Considered picking it back up and rewriting it. She'd been far too brusque. Far too dismissive. But then, what else would she say? She had no news to share. No cute little stories.

Besides, she knew full well why she was so cranky today. It was because of the date. The first of December. Christmas was coming and there was no way she could stop it. Her friend Marjory had suggested she do something different this year for the holidays. But Marjory didn't know why it was so important that Jill stuck with tradition.

She twitched back the covers and placed her feet on the floor. Her whole body seemed to creak and groan. She hated this part of the day, when her bones hadn't woken yet and they protested against every move. She collected her thick blue dressing gown from the armchair in the corner and pulled it on. It might have been the beginning of summer but she still needed to wear it first thing. This house was always cold in the mornings, and her bones wouldn't loosen until she warmed up. She slid her feet into her slippers and headed out to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

While the kettle boiled, she leaned against the bench and wondered what she might do today. It was already 11 am, so she'd used up a good portion of the day just lazing in bed, writing to Frank and feeling sorry for herself because there was no one to bring her a cup of tea.

Marjory kept trying to convince her to come and volunteer at the Salvation Army charity store with her. She said it would be a good way for her to get out of the house. But Jill had no interest at all in joining Marjory at the Salvos. Marjory had told her stories of what the other women were like — the ones who'd been there the longest and had unofficially appointed themselves as management, who sniped at Marjory if she discounted a second-hand pair

of shoes or tutted if she rearranged the racks in a different way to what they thought was best. Marjory laughed with Jill about their self-importance, but Jill knew she wouldn't be able to stand being bossed around by a bunch of officious women when she used to run an entire staff of teachers and had control over eight-hundred students at Wattle Crest High before she'd retired.

Sometimes she thought she'd retired too early. Sometimes she felt she could walk into Wattle Crest and step right back into the principal's shoes today. Other days she knew everything had changed in the schooling system since she'd left and that her ways wouldn't cut it anymore.

She could call her daughter-in-law, check if she needed any help with the babies. But she didn't want to seem overbearing. Pete's wife had been the first to marry into their family. Mimi — an absolute goddess with her long black curls. Tall and striking, way out of her son's league. Weak and strong all at once. Despite the physical imbalance, they were the perfect match. Better suited even than she and Frank had been all those years. There was just something about them. They were equals. Best friends. You could tell there were no secrets in that marriage.

And Mimi always made sure Pete took on his fair share of the housework and the parenting. Not like when she was raising three boys with Frank. Yes, it was the new way but it was also Mimi. Strong and firm. Yet somehow, Mimi had let Pete railroad her into another pregnancy. A weakness.

It was clear she didn't want to have any more children, especially after all the trouble they'd had falling pregnant

with Tara. And Jill knew the age difference made it difficult at times for the sisters to bond. The gap particularly widened when Callie hit her teen years and had been stretching ever since. After all, what did a sixteen-year-old have in common with an eight-year-old? But at the same time, they were still sisters and they did love one another. Jill could see it in the way Callie was protective of her younger sister and in the way Tara looked up to her, even as she pretended she didn't.

The big shock had been finding out that the third pregnancy was twins. *Now you've gone and done it*, Jill had thought when she heard the news. *This might be the end of you both. The end of your marriage.*

But it wasn't, at least not yet. So far, Mimi was coping. Just. But she didn't even have her parents here to help her out. Another example of Mimi's bravery — emigrating from England to Australia all alone when she was only eighteen.

Maybe Jill should call her. At least to check in. She was closer to Mimi than she was to her other daughter-in-law, but that made sense. Mimi had been a part of their family for so long, whereas Tony met Andrea much later. Married less than two years ago. And Andrea was harder to read, which was surprising, considering she was a high school teacher — Jill ought to have more in common with her. But they simply hadn't bonded yet. In terms of looks, Andrea was Mimi's polar opposite in every way. Where Andrea was short and slim with petite features, Mimi was all hips and breasts and she towered over pretty much everyone in their family. While Mimi had those long dark curls, Andrea kept her light-brown hair closely cropped in a pixie cut.

The other thing that brought Jill closer to Mimi was the grandchildren. Apparently Tony and Andrea didn't want to have children. Ever. But who was the driving force behind that decision?

There had almost been a third daughter-in-law. They'd all thought Darren was going to marry his long-term girlfriend Charlotte but last year they'd discovered they were all quite wrong, and Darren had been alone ever since. Sometimes Jill worried that he was running out of time if he wanted to have a family. But then she'd remember — men had all the time in the world, didn't they? It was women who had a ticking time bomb in their uterus. Unfair.

The kettle boiled and she poured her cup of tea, then picked up her phone to call Mimi. For a moment, her thumb hovered over the mail icon. The email had arrived three days ago. It had taken her a few minutes, but eventually, she had recognised the sender's name. It was a name that gave her a nasty feeling in the pit of her stomach. And it was highly unusual that she would be writing to her.

Then she'd read the subject line: 'You need to know'. Her skin had prickled with irritation. What on earth could this woman have to say that Jill apparently *needed* to know? The presumptuous tone annoyed her so she'd closed the app and ignored it.

Her thumb moved away from her inbox now and instead, she phoned Mimi.

*

Andrea

‘Miss, what if I was anaphylactic? Would I still have to make a cake?’

‘If you were anaphylactic, it would depend on what you were allergic to. But you’re not, so it’s irrelevant.’

‘Okay, but what if I had a religious reason? Like, it’s against my faith to use flour or something.’

‘I can’t say I’ve heard of any religions that are against flour. But as I’m confident that’s not the case for you, it’s once again, irrelevant. Get baking, Menasse.’

There weren’t many enthusiastic faces in the class in front of her and Andrea wasn’t overly thrilled with being roped in to cover for the food tech teacher herself. She wasn’t supposed to have any classes on this afternoon and her plan had been to mark her Year Eleven history assignments.

They had the ceiling fans turned up to the highest setting but it was still sweltering in the classroom. Although Andrea shouldn’t complain; one of her university friends had ended up picking up a teaching job out in the far west of Sydney. At least here on the North Shore it didn’t get as hot as it would out there.

Now that Grant Menasse had stopped trying to argue his case against baking, the class settled down and started on their recipes. Andrea did a lap through the tables, checking in on them all, and then headed up to the front of the classroom and sat down at the teacher’s laptop, which was sitting open on his desk. Apparently he’d left in a hurry after

lunch. Food poisoning. She wondered if it was from tasting his students' food. Either way, she wasn't planning on doing any taste-testing herself during today's lesson.

She found his password on a Post-it in his top drawer — very secure — and logged in. She opened up the web browser and found herself idly googling 'religious beliefs against flour'. She clicked through to an article on religion and dietary choices and was skimming through it when she heard snickering coming from the class. She looked up and the snickering erupted into full-blown laughter.

'What? What's the joke I'm missing?'

Several students pointed behind her and she turned around to see that the smart board was mirroring the laptop screen. They could all see her search.

Grant was looking positively delighted. 'She took me seriously,' he shouted. 'She actually believed me.'

Andrea pursed her lips and minimised the browser window before snapping the laptop shut. 'I did not,' she said. 'You made me curious, that's all.'

Thank God she hadn't been looking at something worse. Imagine if she'd been googling something like 'weird rash from underwear' or if she'd logged into her Facebook account, which included photos of the big night out she'd had last weekend with six other teachers from Redmond High. She was always careful to keep her Facebook account locked down tight so that students and parents could never find her on social media, but that wouldn't help much if she splashed it across the screen at the front of the class for everyone to see.

Right, from now on, always make sure the mirroring feature is turned off before using any computers in class. Lesson learned.

‘Excuse me, Miss, did you find anything?’ Chariot Stevenson asked politely.

Andrea smiled despite herself. She’d been caught out, she might as well run with it. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘Although I suppose there could be a fringe religion with an aversion to flour. Didn’t someone create their own Jedi religion once? Maybe Jedis are anti-flour.’

‘Nah, I reckon Jedi’s thing would be veganism,’ Ahn called out from the back of the class.

‘Are you kidding me? No way Jedis would be vegans. What about Scientologists? They’re into some weird shit, right?’ This from a student Andrea didn’t know.

‘Oy! My mum’s a Scientologist,’ said Grant.

‘Yeah, and?’

‘Yeah, fair enough, she is into some pretty weird shit.’

Andrea knew she should be reprimanding them for swearing, but she couldn’t really be bothered. She was kind of enjoying the religious debate that had sprung up. Only a few students were still keeping up the pretence of following the recipes. The rest of the class had abandoned their mixing bowls.

‘What about food that needs to be halal, or what’s the other one ... kosher? Is flour kosher?’ put in a student from the back row.

‘I think it is, isn’t it? Kosher is about meat, right?’ said Ahn.

‘All animal products,’ clarified Kiara.

‘I eat halal,’ Tanisha said. ‘And I do Ramadan.’

‘Oh my God. Do you lose, like, heaps of weight?’ asked Chariot.

‘It’s not a *diet!*’

Was this discussion healthy or disrespectful? Maybe Andrea ought to steer them back to their recipes.

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She was dead tired by the time she arrived home. After the food tech class, she’d been pulled into a meeting with the head of the English department who wanted to plan the Year Nine excursion for early next year, which Andrea thought really could have waited until January. And then she’d begun marking the history assignments, which started off so promising with a well-thought-out piece from Rashida Hamdi but immediately took a turn for the worse when she moved on to Jessica Kingston, and it had been progressively more disappointing from there. It was funny how often kids thought she was out to get them when she gave them a poor mark, when in reality she wanted nothing more than for them to succeed. She wanted every one of these assignments to be well thought out, well-researched, well-written, kick-ass commentaries on ‘The role of Nicholas II in the collapse of the Romanov Dynasty’. Because then it would mean she was reaching them, that they were listening in class, that they cared. Instead she was dishing out marks that barely scraped by as a pass.

She was so tired that she almost didn’t go to check on apartment 5A. The last few days everything had been fine, so

maybe it was better to leave them be, and besides, Tony hadn't been too keen on her interfering. But at the last minute she felt a wave of guilt. What if everything wasn't fine? What if she didn't check and something happened? So, she headed down the hall past her own apartment door to 5A.

The funny thing was, in this type of apartment block, in this part of Sydney, you never would have imagined anything close to what was taking place behind the door of 5A. And yes, it might have been classist of Andrea to assume these problems only happened in lower socio-economic areas, but it had still shocked her when she'd seen what was going on.

The apartments here cost at least five times the amount she would have been able to afford had it not been for Tony. The real estate brochure had described their home as 'an executive haven of total opulence with show-stopping 180-degree harbour views and grand scale proportions'.

Andrea still remembered poring over the photos and feeling a heady combination of disbelief, desire and nausea. The sprawling balcony with porcelain tiles. The double-height ceilings and the gourmet stone kitchen. The herringbone timber floors and the plush bedroom carpet. And downstairs, a huge, sparkling swimming pool with an infinity edge, overlooking the harbour. She desperately wanted to live there, of course she did; it was stunning and luxurious. Never in her wildest dreams would she have envisioned one day living in a place like this. But wasn't it too much for one couple? Too indulgent? Too extravagant?

In truth, when Andrea first met Tony, he wouldn't have been able to afford it himself. He'd been working as an

accountant, doing well enough for himself but certainly not wealthy. But then earlier this year he'd sold his book. It had been a huge shock. He hadn't even told anyone he'd been working on something.

His two younger brothers were already published authors. There was Pete, the middle brother, who earned a decent living writing an adventure series for middle-grade readers. And Darren, the youngest, had won the Esther Arlo Prize for an unpublished manuscript.

Andrea had been astonished to discover that both his brothers were published authors. Tony had shrugged it off though. *Is it any different to families of actors or singers?* he'd said, perhaps a little defensively. Later, she'd understood why he was defensive about it. He'd been secretly working on something himself and was nervous to admit he was following in his younger brothers' footsteps. He was afraid he might not live up to their success.

But everything changed when Tony's crime novel, *Don't Breathe*, was put out to auction and there was a frenzied bidding war for the rights. It hadn't even been released yet but he'd already made more money than his two brothers combined with the exorbitant advances he'd received from all over the world. They'd started looking at new apartments almost the second the first payments hit their bank account. The book was due out in February and the publicity campaign was ramping up. Meanwhile, Tony was already hard at work on the sequel.

It had been a big adjustment for Andrea to get used to an author husband as opposed to an accountant husband.

Especially when they'd only been married such a short time before everything had changed. It was almost as though a personality shift had accompanied the professional switch. Not necessarily in a bad way ... just different. She still wasn't sure if she was entirely used to the new him. One of the things she'd always loved about Tony was his gentlemanly nature; he had an almost old-world charm, the way he would hold doors open or insist on walking on the road-side of the footpath. Some women might have found it sexist for this day and age, but Andrea had always thought it was sweet, if a little formal at times. And it was such a divergence from her previous relationships. Before Tony, she'd made some bad choices. She'd mistakenly believed she wasn't worth better treatment. Tony had shown her that she was.

But lately, it wasn't that he'd lost those tendencies, it was perhaps that they'd become a little stiff, a little more perfunctory this past year. Or maybe it had nothing to do with the change in career and it was simply a case of him becoming more complacent as their second year of marriage progressed. That was normal, wasn't it? The honeymoon period couldn't last forever.

Although was it normal for the sex to slow down as much as it had? When they'd first started sleeping together, Andrea had discovered that in contrast to his old-fashioned ways, he was quite adventurous in the bedroom — keen to experiment with role-play or games. Andrea felt like it added an extra dimension to their relationship. It was exciting knowing that the conservative man everyone else saw was unexpectedly wild in the bedroom — and that she was the only one who

got to see that side of his personality. Although as much as she enjoyed his exploratory side, she did have to suggest that once in a while they might just relax and have some ordinary vanilla sex.

Was that why things had slowed down? Was he disappointed that she didn't always want all the extra bells and whistles, metaphorically speaking, of course. Although now that she thought about it, there might have been a game involving a bell once. Perhaps she needed to try harder, put more effort in.

As Andrea approached 5A now, she stepped lightly and slowly, creeping up on the door so she could listen and decide whether or not it was necessary to knock. When she reached the door, she held still, leaned up close and pressed her ear against it. At first there was nothing, but eventually, as her senses tuned in and she blocked out everything else, she heard it. The sound of quiet crying.

Her heart broke as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she knocked.

*

Darren

Seeing Charlotte's name flash up on his phone still gave him that jolt, deep in his gut. And this frustrated him. He knew it wasn't going to be the phone call he dreamed about — the one where she would tell him she'd made a terrible mistake and she wanted him back. The truth was, even if her new relationship

broke down, she'd still never come back to him. She was playing for the other team now. And as much as he'd held out hope that her switch of allegiances would be temporary, he understood now that it was permanent. This was her life. Her truth. And he could see how happy it made her.

So he'd accepted the consolation prize she'd offered him. Friendship. Even though it killed him every time he saw them hold hands. Every time they kissed. Every time she looked at her new girlfriend the way she used to look at him. Actually, it wasn't the way she used to look at him. It was better. Deeper. An extra twist of the knife. A few of his mates joked that he ought to enjoy the show any time they kissed in front of him. He only just managed to stop himself from punching them. Dickheads. They didn't get it. He was still in love with Charlotte.

Besides, if he was completely honest, he was proud of her for working it out. As much as he desperately wished it hadn't meant losing her, he was impressed with the strength of character she'd shown in recognising who she was, midway through her thirties. Especially as she came from a staunchly religious family who were refusing to accept her revelation. Recently she'd called him crying because she'd invited her parents out to dinner to meet Steph, her partner. Her dad had been a no-show and her mother had only turned up to let her know that they would never approve. Darren had always got along well enough with Charlotte's parents, but he was furious with them for the way they were treating her. To let her believe they were going to join her for dinner only to show up and deliver that crushing message was the last straw

as far as he was concerned. He couldn't see how any parent could do that to their own child whom they supposedly loved. He'd have had a go at them himself if Charlotte hadn't told him not to.

Darren raked his fingers through his hair now and picked up the call, crossing his fingers that she wasn't going to be in tears again. She deserved happiness.

'Char, what's up?' He stood up from his computer and wandered out onto his small balcony to chat to her in the late afternoon sunshine. His one-bedroom, one-bathroom flat on the lower north shore was compact and in need of some updates, but he was fond of it nonetheless. There were multiple bars and cafes within walking distance, and if he leaned out over the railing on his terrace he could just catch a glimpse of the city skyline through the purple flowers of a huge jacaranda tree.

By contrast to the last phone call, the voice that greeted him was bright and bubbly.

'Babe! How are you?'

He hadn't been able to bring himself to ask her to stop calling him babe. It would come across as petty, like he was doing it to get one back at her. She called most of her friends babe, she didn't mean anything by it. But it was what she'd called him back when they were together, so it was hard to hear.

'I'm good. Great. Yeah, doing really great. You?'

'Same! But hey, listen, there's something I need to talk to you about. Something important. Can we meet? Friday night, if you're free?'

That little jolt in his stomach struck again. She wanted to talk. About something important. What if he was wrong about there being no hope for him? What if she had changed her mind?

He had to keep his voice steady when he replied, had to clear his throat to stop his tone from rising to an unnatural level.

‘Sure. I’ve got some things to shift around, but I can make that work.’

‘Oh, are you certain? I don’t want to put you out.’

The truth was he had nothing going on this weekend apart from Netflix and a couple of beers on the couch.

‘It’s cool, don’t stress. Cross Street Bar okay with you? Seven?’

‘Perfect. I’ll see you then.’

He hung up the phone and took a few deep breaths. *Don’t get ahead of yourself, Daz. She wants to talk. It could be anything. But still, she’d said ‘I’ll see you then’ not ‘We’ll see you then’.*

The last few times he’d caught up with Charlotte, Steph had always been by her side. Maybe this time it would just be the two of them.

He checked the time on his phone. 5 pm. Time to finish work. He snorted. That was an absolute joke; as if he’d achieved a single thing sitting in front of his computer all day today. He may as well have chucked his board in the back of his car and gone surfing at Freshwater Beach instead.

Maybe tomorrow would bring inspiration.

*

Andrea

‘Andrea?’ came a small voice from the other side of the door.

‘Yes, it’s me, sweetie.’

She heard the clunk of the lock turning and then the door swung open. Andrea looked down at Violet, her six-year-old neighbour. She was slight with bright blue eyes and wispy blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Violet wiped her nose on the sleeve of her school shirt and moved back to let Andrea in.

‘Is she here?’ Andrea asked.

Violet shook her head.

‘Oh honey, how long have you been alone?’

She avoided eye contact. ‘Little while.’

‘Are you hungry?’

She looked shy for a moment, then she nodded.

‘All right, let’s see if we can find you a snack.’

Violet followed Andrea around the kitchen as she opened cupboard doors and the fridge, looking for something a child would like. Caviar, truffle, quail eggs. Four bottles of champagne. Blue cheese. Smoked salmon.

The woman had expensive taste. She also had expensive habits. In Andrea’s opinion, Heather was a high-functioning drug addict. Although Heather probably wouldn’t consider herself an addict at all. Mainly because she wasn’t broke and she didn’t have track marks, and she took her drugs with famous rich people at exclusive parties. The problem was, she didn’t always wait for a babysitter to show up before she left Violet to head out to one of her parties. Andrea had tried

alerting social services to Heather's neglect, but when they turned up to check on things, she'd presented herself as the perfect parent.

Eventually, Andrea found crackers, cheddar cheese and some fruit. She tried to chat animatedly with Violet while she sliced the cheese, cut up the fruit and placed the snack on a plate. She asked her about school and homework and friends. Andrea used to see a nanny coming and going from Heather's apartment, but it seemed she had quit abruptly and never been replaced. From the hints Violet gave her, Andrea gathered the nanny's sudden departure had something to do with Heather's wild lifestyle and the different men she frequently brought home.

Andrea kept hoping that maybe Violet's school would pick up on the home-life issues and register their concerns with social services, so that it wasn't just coming from the neighbour down the hall. But somehow, Heather always sent Violet to school in pristine condition. It helped that she had a driver who took Violet door to door, so she never missed a day or turned up late. Not to mention Violet herself took great care in completing her homework, often asking for Andrea's help to make sure she had it done in time.

Andrea had only spotted the driver once or twice, but she got the feeling he cared about Violet too. She'd noticed him fixing Violet's plait for her as he walked her down to the car. He wasn't what she would have imagined of a chauffeur either. He was casually dressed and he seemed to have this relaxed, cool air about him. He had a shaved head, neatly edged stubble and kind eyes.

Andrea put the plate down in front of Violet and sat next to her, trying not to watch her too intently while she ate. Violet had always been tiny and Andrea suspected that was just her build, but it was still nice to see her eat something. Her arms *were* quite thin.

Andrea certainly couldn't ever remember her own mother making her a snack after school, or watching her eat, or caring about whether or not she was satisfied. She was lucky if her mum made her any meals at all.

Andrea had been slight as a child too. Arms and legs like sticks. The kids at school called her Skinny Minnie. Not in a kind way. In her late teenage years, she'd packed on the weight as she tried to get her body to fill out, but it appeared in all the wrong places and she constantly felt out of proportion. Thankfully though, by the time she'd reached her thirties, she'd finally settled into her body shape. Accepted her petite form for what it was. Now the only time she ever looked curvy was when she ate something that didn't agree with her and her stomach became bloated and poked out like a beach ball.

'Is it good?' Andrea asked as Violet ate slowly and neatly, making sure to chew with her mouth closed. She had better table manners than Andrea's sixteen-year-old niece.

Violet swallowed and gave her a big smile. 'Really yummy,' she said. 'Want some?'

'Nope, I'm good. That plate is all for you, my dear.' Andrea paused. 'Did Mum say what time she'd be back?'

Violet looked up at the clock on the wall, her face a picture of concentration. Eventually she said, 'Little hand on the six.'

‘Six o’clock?’ Andrea looked at her own watch. It was almost six. ‘Okay, so she’s supposed to be home any minute now. I’ll stay with you until she gets here though, okay?’

Almost immediately she heard the sound of a key in the lock and she swung around to face the door.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Checking on Violet,’ Andrea said, standing.

‘Well there’s no need. I was only around the corner picking up some groceries.’

Andrea’s eyes flicked to the bag her neighbour was holding. It looked as though the only ‘groceries’ she’d bought were bottles of alcohol.

Heather clocked her looking. ‘The rest is in the car, Miss Detective. My driver is bringing them up.’ She stepped back to the door and opened it wide. ‘Thanks, but you can go now.’

Andrea glanced back at Violet, gave her a quick, warm smile and then headed for the door. When she reached Heather, she paused briefly and leaned in. ‘I’m keeping an eye on you,’ she whispered.

Heather reached out and grabbed her arm, fake nails digging into Andrea’s skin. ‘Stay away from my daughter.’ Her voice was a harsh hiss.

Andrea wrenched her arm free and swung back around to call out to Violet in as cheerful a voice as possible. ‘Lovely to see you, honey. I’ll see you again soon.’

Then she stepped past Heather and out into the hall. The door slammed behind her. Andrea held still for a moment, her arm tingling from where Heather had grabbed it. Okay,

so maybe tonight she'd only ducked out for a quick trip to the shop, rather than out partying with friends, but still, six was too young even for that. And Andrea didn't believe for an instant that her driver was bringing up other groceries. Heather had gone out for what she considered 'essentials', nothing more.

There was also no way Andrea was going to stay away from Violet. The little girl needed someone to look out for her.