

1

Beth

Today

Her eyes fly open, her heart thudding under the weight of the doona. The room is middle-of-the-night dark. A noise woke her up. The click of a door. Dream or real? She strains to hear. Silence, except for her own panicked breathing.

She swings her legs out of bed to check on Tilly. She is used to making this journey in the dark; turning on lights would make it easier to navigate but harder to fall back asleep afterwards. Her eyes adjust, the carpet cushioning her footsteps across the landing. The house is warm after the hot March day, with heavy rain forecast for later in the week. The rain is badly needed but Beth isn't looking forward to it. There's a leak in the garage roof that strikes with the same unpredictability as her ex.

Tilly is lying on her side, the sheets kicked off, her lava lamp bathing the room with a pink hue. She's snoring softly, her hair in its usual tangle, and Beth is overcome with a rush of love. Seven years old. Enjoy this age, other mums have told her. They're fairly independent but still need you; still playing and riding their bikes, instead of being glued to their

phones and social media. Beth *is* enjoying it, when she's not stressing about making ends meet, or worrying about Kane.

She backs out of Tilly's room, leaving the door ajar, which her daughter insists upon. She is almost back to her own bedroom when she stops short. Another faint sound from downstairs. The roll of a drawer being opened? Someone is down there.

Beth knows what to do, she has practised for this, but that doesn't make it any less terrifying. What is less than a four-metre walk feels like four kilometres; she waits between each step to regain her balance and listen for further sounds. The bedside table is nothing more than a black shadow. Her hand feels around its surface, cautious not to knock the glass of water or the photo-frame, before closing in on the familiar shape of the alarm fob. Now step by careful step back to Tilly's bedroom, closing the door as softly as she can, locking it from the inside.

Beth sits on the bed and takes Tilly's small hand in hers; her daughter is going to be petrified when she wakes up. Beth braces herself, steadies her own shaking hands, before pressing down hard on the red button.

The wail of the alarm splits the night apart.

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The panic button goes straight to emergency services. Two weary-looking male officers are on her doorstep in less than ten minutes.

'Nothing's been taken, as far as I can tell,' she tells them breathlessly. 'This way ... The back door was left open ... My car keys are on the floor just there.'

On the face of it, the break-in was a foiled attempt to steal her car, the thief abandoning the keys once the alarm began to scream. The fact that Beth's handbag is still on the kitchen counter, with her purse and credit cards intact, supports this theory.

Her house is known to the local police, which is why they were so

quick to respond. Kane's name is suggested almost immediately. When did she last hear from her ex? Does he still live at the same address? Is there a reason he would feel entitled to the car? The answer to the last question is that Kane feels entitled to *everything*. Every item she owns. Every cent in her bank account. Every thought in her head.

The police officers have a look around, noting some damage to the lock on the sliding door that leads out to the back garden. It is a dark cloudy night; not a lot can be done beyond sticking a head inside the shed and running a high-beam torch along the fence line.

'It looks like the intruder has gone, Ms Jenkins.' The older one, a heavyset man in his fifties, has done most of the talking. 'Do you have somewhere else you can stay tonight, to be on the safe side?'

Beth tries to weigh it up while Tilly clenches her hand. Descending on her dad in the dead of night seems extreme, given that the threat has obviously passed.

'It's okay. I feel safe enough to stay here.' Her voice sounds feeble and unconvincing.

The police officers leave with the promise to send detectives first thing in the morning. Beth deadlocks the front door and arms the alarm system. She became complacent about setting the alarm every night. Tilly triggered it a few times sleepwalking, frightening the life out of both of them, but that's not a good enough excuse. No more complacency, no more letting her guard down. The only positive is she continued to keep the fob on her bedside table, the panic button within reach.

Tilly comes into Beth's bed with her. Poor thing. Waking up to the shriek of the alarm. The intimidating presence of the police officers. The worry that whoever it was might come back. It takes a long time to settle her down.

'But what if they are hiding somewhere, Mummy?'

'The police would have found them, pumpkin. They know all the best hiding spots.'

Tilly finally stops twitching and succumbs to sleep but Beth has never felt more alert, her muscles rigid and ready to spring into action, her thoughts going a hundred miles an hour in the darkness.

Is there a reason your ex-husband would feel entitled to the car?

There is a reason, although Beth felt too tired and mortified to go into it. Suffice it to say, the car was a sore point, for both sides.

Is this the start of another battle round with Kane? Just as she was beginning to relax a little. Just as she was beginning to hope that they had reached an understanding. Maybe he needs the car as collateral. Maybe he is out of his depth in some new venture. She'll make discreet enquiries tomorrow. See what she is up against this time.

The old saying comes to mind: *what's worse, the devil you know or the devil you don't*. Kane terrorising and stealing from his own family, or a faceless stranger creeping around her house?

Beth eventually falls into a turbulent sleep. She dreams of desperate hands rifling through drawers, cupboards and clothes. Possessions are strewn on the ground, trampled on, smashed. She experiences a paralysing sense of violation. Until she realises that she is not the victim: she is the guilty one, the thief.

2

Ryan

Six weeks ago

The drive home from work is the bones of a two-hour commute: the price of living so far outside Sydney. He and Mia made the move four years ago, swapping city for countryside, concrete for open space and clean air. Elliot was literally climbing the walls of their two-bedroom inner-city apartment; he needed space to expend his endless energy. They, too, needed space, having had enough of cramped apartment living and perpetually complaining neighbours.

Ryan has become used to the commute. He uses the time productively, breaking the journey into segments. The first forty-five minutes is spent making phone calls – checking in with either his mum or his sisters – while at the same time negotiating the bumper-to-bumper traffic on Silverwater Road. On reaching the motorway, he winds up whatever conversation he’s been having and listens to a playlist from Spotify. Music with a strong beat to keep him alert. The traffic on this section is fast and heavy at this time of the evening, and prone to suddenly stopping. One small lapse in concentration could lead to a multi-car pile-up. The exit from the motorway signifies the last leg of

the journey, which takes around twenty minutes. Ryan tunes into the local radio station for this part. Gets his head ready for what might be waiting at home. 'Good day or bad day?' he'll ask on arriving in the door. Mia won't need to answer: her expression will say enough.

Ryan works in a warehouse in Silverwater, a job he fell into after school and never moved on from. The money was attractive to an eighteen-year-old who wasn't academic and didn't aspire to tertiary education. He bankrolled Mia while she was at university, and she bankrolled him once she graduated and started earning double his salary. Unfortunately, nobody's bankrolling anybody at the moment. Mia's been out of the workforce most of the last ten years, since Elliot was born. Ryan's the sole income earner, which he doesn't mind except for the fact that his income hasn't changed that much since he was eighteen. He's in his thirties now. He's a father, a husband and mortgagee, all of which come with staggering responsibilities.

The property they purchased is two hundred metres from Lake Macquarie's foreshore, eight kilometres from Morisset's town centre, and forty kilometres from Newcastle's CBD. A train is pulling into the station as he passes through Morisset, giving the illusion of a quick efficient service. Transport network aside, the town has everything they need: a select choice of schools, supermarkets and restaurants. Should they want or need anything more, Newcastle is their next port of call. Ryan's job is the only thing lassoing him to Sydney. The commute is worth it, and the crippling mortgage. Elliot is doing so much better. Mia was right: constraining him to a two-bedroom apartment was cruel.

Ryan passes some of the neighbouring properties, Kellie and Dino on the righthand side, then Heather and Philip on the left. Finally, he reaches the entrance to his own property, where he stops, pulls up the handbrake, and hops out of the car to open the gate; a remote-controlled mechanism will be one of their first purchases when Mia is earning again. Once through the gates, he repeats the process, leaving the engine

running as he propels the gate back into place. The driveway is about three hundred metres of compacted gravel. As he approaches the house, he sees his son jumping wildly on the trampoline. Up, down, tumble. Up, down, somersault. The trampoline was a gift from Dianne, Ryan's mum. Elliot loves it, spends hours on it every day. There's no sign of Mia, which is odd: she closely monitors what their son is up to. Ryan beeps the horn to get Elliot's attention. He fills with pleasure as he sees his son's face light up, then winces at the reckless manner at which he exits the trampoline, clearing the steps with an ungainly jump that almost has him faceplanting on the grass. He corrects his balance and comes barrelling towards the car.

'Hey, mate. Take it easy coming off that trampoline, eh? And wait until the car is stopped before you run in front of it ... Now where's my hug?'

Elliot embraces him loosely, before pulling him towards the trampoline, words gushing as he explains the game he's been playing. Next he's dragging him to the side of the house, where his bike has been abandoned in what looks like a hurry. Then inside, to indicate a mound of half-built Lego in the playroom. The house is a 1980s bungalow, five bedrooms, three living areas, triple garage. A lot of space for three people, in addition to five acres of land in which Elliot can run, explore and endeavour to burn off some energy. Cyclone Elliot, they affectionately call him.

Mia appears from the direction of the kitchen. Her face is pinched, her mouth in a tight line. Must have been a tough day.

Ryan smiles at her tentatively. 'Hey, I was wondering where you were hiding.'

'We need to talk.'

His smile falls away. His wife rarely interrupts this special time with Elliot. His son usually drags him from pillar to post when he arrives home, trying to fit in every thought and game since Ryan left for work. He's more frenetic at the moment because he's on a break from

medication. School holidays are a good chance to ease off the drugs and some of their worrying side-effects.

‘Elliot, it’s challenge time. Are you listening?’

His son jerks to attention. ‘I’m listening. I’m listening.’

‘Great. It’s a triathlon challenge, today. Stage one – ten laps of the house on your bike. Stage two – one hundred bounces on the trampoline. Stage three – run all the way down to the gate and back. Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll start the timer.’

‘I’m ready, I’m ready,’ he shrieks.

‘Go!’

Elliot flies down the hallway, yanking open the front door before crashing it shut in his wake. Mia and Ryan wear matching grimaces. The original door had glass panes. This one is Elliot proofed.

A moment of silence. Ryan assesses his wife. She is stunningly beautiful, despite everything she has been through. The non-stop pace of day-to-day life. The broken nights with never enough sleep. The heavy burden of their financial worries. The disaster they had two years ago. Today she’s wearing denim shorts, a striped t-shirt and white sneakers. Dark brown hair, a golden sheen on her skin. But her tan is not as deep or as convincing as other summers. Up close her navy-blue eyes are jaded and wary. Her face has thinned, and her mannerisms have become more abrupt over the years: a mirror of Elliot?

‘What is it?’ Ryan asks, stepping closer. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Come here,’ she says, taking his hand and guiding him towards the kitchen.

This is their favourite part of the house. An enormous open area comprising kitchen, dining and living. Floor-to-ceiling glass looking out on the limestone patio, the pool and its surrounds, then lawn and garden beds, followed by paddocks and trees. Mia doesn’t have time to appreciate the view. She goes to the kitchen island, picks up her phone, clicks and scrolls.

‘Here.’ She shoves it at him.

The news headline on the screen is in large bold font. The words punch him in the face.

Million-dollar reward for information on missing Irish backpacker.

Fifty per cent of the reward is being put up by the family, fifty per cent by NSW Police, according to the attached video-clip.

‘It’s two years since we saw our daughter.’ Siobhan McAllen is speaking from her home in Dublin. ‘We just want to know what happened.’

‘You *know* what happened, for God’s sake,’ Mia interjects, standing tensely by the kitchen counter. ‘Tara went for a swim at an unpatrolled beach. She got caught in a rip.’

‘Shush,’ Ryan says. ‘Just let me listen.’

The journalist runs through the basic details of Tara’s arrival in Australia, her short-lived job as an au pair in the Newcastle area, before she headed for the bright lights of Sydney. Drinks at one of the infamous Bondi pubs popular with backpackers. A fateful swim at dusk on the southern end of the beach.

‘It doesn’t add up,’ Siobhan McAllen says, the camera zooming in on the framed photograph clutched in her hands: a younger version of her daughter with pouting lips and heavily applied mascara. ‘Tara didn’t like swimming in the ocean. And she definitely wouldn’t have gone swimming in an unpatrolled area.’

‘She’s wrong,’ Mia interrupts again. ‘Tara was in our pool every chance she got. She *loved* swimming. Plus, she’d been drinking. Her decision-making was compromised.’

Ryan shakes his head incredulously; his wife has begun to believe her own lies.

‘Tara’s body was never found,’ the journalist continues in a sombre tone. ‘There are no witnesses who observed someone struggling in the water.’

The segment ends with a repeat of the reward amount and a phone number to call with any information.

Ryan exhales a shaky breath. ‘That’s a shitload of money.’

‘I know.’ Mia’s fists clench and unclench as they rest on the counter. ‘This is the last thing we need right now.’

His wife has been updating her résumé and skills, with the aim of making another attempt at returning to work. Now this reward may derail those plans, put everything in jeopardy for the second time.

‘But we’re safe, aren’t we?’ he asks, searching her face for reassurance.

She was the one who orchestrated the plan, managing it like one of her large complex projects. Each step outlined in detail, the risks identified and mitigated, all the while conscious of Siobhan and the family, seeking to give them closure and not leave them in a terrible state of limbo. Now here is Siobhan, bleating that ‘it doesn’t add up.’

Elliot comes bursting through the door before Mia can assure Ryan that they’re strong enough to withstand another round of scrutiny and questions.

‘Stop the timer, Daddy. I’m here, I’m here.’

Ryan stops the timer. Gives his son the attention he needs and deserves. ‘Thirteen minutes, forty-nine seconds. I think that must be a record. You’re Superman.’

The rest of the evening follows a strict routine. Ryan plays Lego with Elliot, fishing out the right colours and sizes while his son presses them into place. They have dinner, where Elliot is encouraged to chew his food properly and wait his turn to speak. Elliot is allowed an ice-cream for dessert, because his reward chart shows that he has been trying really hard today. Their last activity of the day is a family walk. The lake’s calming influence is just a few minutes from the house. Mia links her arm through Ryan’s while Elliot runs full steam ahead. The view is breathtaking. Blue melding with orange as the sun falls towards the horizon, the water rippling and reflecting the colours of the sky.

The breeze lifts Mia's dark-brown hair back from her face, revealing the graceful curve of her neck. On her left upper arm, the tattoo she had done after Elliot's birth: a small yet intricate tree.

'The tree symbolises strength and growth,' she said at the time. 'Being a mum makes me feel incredibly strong. As he grows and learns, so will I.'

Not a day goes by without Ryan thinking that he's not good enough for her. Not a day goes by without her beauty stopping him in his tracks. But her eyes, the same colour as the lake on a sunny day, flash with trepidation as she turns to speak.

'That amount of money will make people stop and think.' Her fingers are digging painfully into his arm, transferring her fear. 'The cops will want to talk to us again. No matter what happens, we must keep Elliot out of it.'

3

Mia

Two years ago

The girl, Tara McAllen, is due to arrive at Morisset Station at midday. Poor thing will be exhausted. More than twenty hours on a plane, and half that again in various transit lounges and the train up from Sydney: she'll be jetlagged, disoriented, dying for a shower and a proper meal. Mia will make sure that Tara makes a priority of phoning her mum. This is her first big venture from home – she is only nineteen! – and her mum will undoubtedly be on stand-by, regardless of the late hour in Dublin.

The train is approaching, one minute away according to the announcement board. Mia can feel the rush of air that precedes its arrival. She and Ryan had high expectations of this service when they moved to the area, envisaging Ryan commuting by train every day. The reality is that the train takes even longer than the motorway and necessitates an additional bus ride for Ryan at the other end. As a result, her husband uses the family car for the commute, and they had to invest in a second car as a run-around for Mia. The run-around, albeit as cheap as they could get away with, is a further drain on their already stretched finances. For this reason, the train station always has an air of

disappointment, of unfulfilled promise.

The train arrives with a whoosh. Announcements are made over the intercom. *Stand clear of the doors. Morisset, then all stations to Newcastle.* Half a dozen passengers alight; this is not a busy time of day. Tara is easy to spot. Dyed black hair in a perky ponytail. Leopard-print leggings and a skimpy black top. A large khaki-coloured rucksack, which must be heavy because she dumps it on the ground while she gets her bearings. Mia waves to catch her attention before hurrying down the platform.

‘Hey, Tara. I’m Mia. Great that you got here okay.’

Tara seems surprised to see Mia’s outstretched hand. She shakes it awkwardly. She is wearing a lot of make-up, fake eyelashes and badly applied tanning product.

‘Let me take your rucksack. The car is this way.’

One positive about Morisset is that parking is never a problem: the commuter car park is not even half full. Mia is driving Ryan’s SUV today: bigger boot and a newer model, lending a better first impression than the eight-year-old hatchback she usually gets around in.

‘Is this all there is?’ Tara asks as she surveys the paltry line of shops across the road from the station. The shopfronts are unexciting, the only pedestrians in sight are elderly, and the whole scene screams the sedateness of a hot Saturday afternoon in country New South Wales. The people in this town are friendly and caring, with strong community values. The town has everything Mia and Ryan need, and more. Of course, Tara would prefer a big shopping mall and a thriving social life. What nineteen-year-old would want any different?

‘Afraid so. But Newcastle isn’t too far away and it’s a great little city. Even better than Sydney. Well, that’s how the locals feel.’

‘How far to your house from here?’

‘Ten minutes or so.’

Tara’s face hardens as she makes the calculations. The house is outside Morisset, which is outside Newcastle, which is outside Sydney.

All these details were in the job description, but Tara was obviously envisaging something more built-up.

‘Where do you live in Dublin? Is it rural or city?’ Mia asks, taking a right turn out of the car park. It’s a shame that the main street is so particularly quiet today. Maybe if some of the younger population were hanging around, Tara might look less despondent. First impressions can be hard to shake.

‘City,’ Tara says. ‘Close to everything, you know?’

Point made. Her accent is flatter than the Irish accents Mia encountered through work. Plenty of Irish accents in Sydney’s technology industry. In fact, Mia favoured the Irish candidates whenever she had to hire for a new position: they were invariably hard working, intelligent and fun. These are the reasons she gravitated towards an Irish au pair.

She decides to move the subject away from geography. ‘You must be hungry. Ryan and Elliot are making lunch, a barbecue. You can have a swim in the pool if you need reviving. Try to stay awake for as long as you can. Nothing worse than getting out of sync on your first day.’

At least the weather is delivering. Perfect blue sky. Searing sun. Tara’s leggings are too warm. She’ll feel better once she has had a swim and changed into something more suitable.

But Tara is not ready to change the subject. ‘How will I be able to go anywhere? Is there a bus?’

‘Yeah, there’s a bus, but it depends on the time of day. Ryan and I can give you a lift, if needed.’

Tara hasn’t even arrived at the house and she’s already planning her escape. More worryingly, she is yet to meet Elliot face to face. There was a FaceTime call a few weeks ago where everyone met briefly. Elliot waved and said hi before disappearing to play whatever game he was playing. Tara’s mum, Siobhan, said hello and enquired about the weather and what Tara would need in terms of clothes. Mia gave Tara and Siobhan

a tour of the house and garden, spending a long time showing off the pool, which she believed to be their strongest selling point.

Mia is only beginning to realise how inadequate that FaceTime call was. From Tara's perspective and her own.

Energetic eight-year-old, her carefully crafted job description said. The understatement of the year.

'Tara is used to kids,' Siobhan proclaimed. 'There's a brood of younger cousins.'

Tara is staring sullenly out the car window. She is not coming across as child-friendly, or any form of friendly for that matter. Mia understated Elliot's challenges, but was Siobhan just as bad, overstating her daughter's affection for children?

Mia pulls up at the gate to the property, and although it would be easier for Tara to get out to facilitate its opening and closing, she does it herself. The gate is rusted and doesn't do much for their street appeal, but the wattle trees and magnolias lining the driveway make a better impression.

Tara sits up a little straighter as the tyres crunch over the compacted gravel. The house is yet to come into view.

'Why is the driveway so long?' she asks in an accusing tone. 'Why does the house sit so far back from the road?'

The questions would come back to haunt Mia. It was like Tara had foreseen something, a premonition of what was to come.

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Mia tries to see the house through Tara's eyes. Blond brick. One level. Five bedrooms, three bathrooms, the expansive kitchen: the heart of the home. But Tara is not of the age to get excited by stone benchtops or the bi-fold doors that connect the kitchen to the outside patio. She only has eyes for the pool.

‘This is really nice,’ she says, crouching down to run her hand through the water. Then she points a finger, topped with a hot-pink fake nail, to the two sunbeds positioned side by side on the limestone pavers. ‘That’s going to be my office.’

Mia feels a glimmer of hope that everything is going to be okay. That the promise of a suntan will make up for the poor location. That the lure of the pool will compensate for the drudgery of childminding. So far, her only interaction with Elliot was a standoffish ‘howya’ on her arrival. She didn’t notice that the boy was clutching a toy A380, a clue that he loves everything to do with planes and airports, the subject matter offering an excellent ice-breaker. Ryan received a faint smile, a nod, and a slightly more interested ‘howya’. Her social skills are clearly on the underdeveloped side.

‘Why don’t you have a shower or a swim while I finish getting lunch ready?’ Mia suggests smoothly. The meat is ready, chicken skewers and homemade burgers laid out on foil-covered trays. Elliot is occupied helping Ryan clean up the barbecue. Mia can throw a salad together while Tara freshens up.

The girl decides on a swim, retreating to her new bedroom and reappearing shortly afterwards in a skimpy black-and-white-print bikini. Her fake tan is deep brown around her midriff, and splotchy on her neck and ankles. Is she aware that tanning products usually don’t offer any sun protection? Mia averts her eyes from Tara’s bare flesh and offers her a bottle of sunscreen.

‘Whatever you do, don’t underestimate the Australian sun. We have a saying – slip, slop, slap. Slip on a long-sleeved top. Slop on sunscreen. Slap on a hat.’

Tara takes the bottle of sunscreen in a manner that suggests she has no intention of using it, or adding ‘slip, slop, slap’ to her vocabulary.

‘Can I swim too? Can I swim too?’ Elliot asks, en-route to the dishwasher, barbecue utensils in hand.

Tara looks appalled at the idea of sharing the pool with her eight-year-old charge.

Mia intervenes quickly. 'No, honey. Let's give Tara a bit of space. You can swim with her next time.'

Elliot goes rigid with disappointment. His lower lip juts out, hands clenching around the barbecue utensils, potential weapons. Mia knows that look: her son is on the precipice of a gigantic meltdown. Damn! Damn! Damn it!

Ryan comes in and reads the situation immediately. 'Hey, mate. Get your bat and stumps. Let's have a few overs before lunch.'

A few tense moments while Elliot teeters. It's only a matter of time before Tara sees a meltdown, but please not today. She is jetlagged and obviously erring on the side of 'what the hell am I doing here?'. Things are rocky enough without her seeing Elliot at his worst.

Her son, thank heavens, accepts the consolation cricket game. Mia deftly deals with the dirty utensils while Ryan produces a cricket ball. The boys are gone within moments, heading to the front garden where Ryan has levelled out a cricket strip. Tara waits until they are out of sight – she clearly doesn't want Elliot changing his mind – before scurrying towards the pool. She throws one of Mia's good bath towels on a sunbed and jumps feet first into the deep-end, without – Mia can't help noticing – stopping to apply sun cream. Her head emerges, a genuine smile of happiness on her face, and Mia warms to the girl. She is young, unsophisticated and far away from home. She needs time to adjust. They all do.

Mia assembles spinach leaves, sliced tomatoes, cucumber and capsicum while Tara does a few lazy lengths of breaststroke. Some crusty bread, a jug of lemon squash, and the meal is ready. She takes the food outside and calls everyone to the table.

'So, Tara, what are your plans while you're in Australia?' Ryan asks after an awkward silence. 'Anything you specifically want to see or do?'

‘Just want to soak up the sun – we get so bleedin’ little of it at home. It’s a bit surreal that it’s summer holidays here. January in Ireland is so depressing, you know?’ Her eyes dart to Elliot. ‘When do the kids go back to school?’

‘The end of the month,’ Ryan and Mia answer at the same time. They laugh, Elliot giggles, Tara’s thin lips form a grimace.

‘Do you have any friends who are travelling here?’ Mia can already tell that Tara is the kind of girl who gets glammed up to go out every weekend: pub hopping, drinking from over-full glasses of wine, dancing until the early hours, spending Sundays in bed recovering. Sydney would be more her scene.

‘Nope. Mum said I’ll meet people. I hope so.’ Her grin has an edge of panic. ‘Find a friend. Ha. Ha.’

‘There’s probably an online group you can join,’ Ryan suggests. ‘Other backpackers in the area. So much easier to hook up these days.’

She snorts. ‘Yeah. Or I can just go on Tinder.’

Ryan blushes, his definition of a hook-up different to Tara’s. Mia can’t help feeling alarmed. Tinder can be a platform for predators, liars, cheaters and old men looking for sex. What if something were to happen to Tara? She is only nineteen, technically an adult but at the same time blatantly naïve and gauche. Should Mia ask Siobhan for some guidelines on her daughter’s social life and if anything is out of bounds?

‘Why aren’t you having salad?’ Elliot blurts out, noticing the lack of greens on Tara’s plate.

‘Bleedin’ hate vegetables,’ she states, without a thought as to how this might be perceived by a child. ‘Anythin’ that’s green or orange doesn’t go in me mouth.’

Elliot’s eyes widen in shock. He glances down at his own plate, his brain already formulating words of resistance.

Mia disguises her irritation and leans across the table to explain to her son. ‘Kids need to eat lots of veggies so they can grow big and

tall. When you're over eighteen, like Tara is, you can decide not to eat veggies because you're already all grown up. That makes sense, right?'

Elliot's small face is filled with doubt. 'But ...'

'No buts. You can have an ice-cream when your plate is empty.'

Rules, consistency and rewards. Tomorrow Mia will endeavour to explain their parenting strategy to Tara.

The girl needs to think before she speaks.