

Praise for *What Rhymes with Murder?*

‘I loved this charming story about murder, motherhood and caffeine. Frida is a delight; a quirky and modern Miss Marple leading an unlikely group of neighbourhood sleuths. *What Rhymes with Murder?* packs an unexpected punch.’

Sarah Bailey, author of *The Housemate* and *Click*

‘When there is a death at the library’s Baby Rhyme Time, an eclectic band of locals combine the chaos of parenting with trying to solve a murder. Penny Tangey’s *What Rhymes with Murder?* is like if Agatha Christie joined a mothers’ group and ordered a soy latte. There’s pram swapping, pelvic-floor Pilates, murder and laundry. The story is peppered with delightful zingy one-liners and romps to a conclusion no one saw coming. It’s sharp, funny, and sneakily profound.’

**Vikki Petraitis, author of *The Unbelieved*
and *The Stolen***

‘Captures the hilarity and chaos of new motherhood with tender honesty, all wrapped in a wonderfully satisfying whodunnit. It’s equal parts laugh-out-loud funny and genuinely moving – I devoured it.’

**Balli Kaur Jaswal, author of *Erotic Stories*
for *Punjabi Widows***

‘A cosy crime set at Baby Rhyme Time is exactly the kind of book I didn’t know I needed. A mystery that I think I’m one step ahead of, only to find everyone else knows on the next page, and I’m just as befuddled as the protagonist, Frida. I was honestly thrilled one night that dinner plans were cancelled on me, because I had more of Penny Tangey’s hilarious book waiting for me at home. I flipped through the pages voraciously, laughing out loud, paradoxically wanting to find out whodunnit, but never wanting it to end. At times, the book deals with hefty themes, trauma bubbling to the surface, but you are never far from a pithy remark, a wildly unpredictable situation or Frida’s hilarious misunderstandings to lighten the mood. I love that through all the twists and turns of the plot, there is baby Finn being an adorable life-affirming counterpoint to the grisly murder. This book is so Melbourne, it made me want to try and order a magic at my local Sydney coffee shop.’

Adam Richard, comedian and writer

‘Murder, mystery and sharp takes on motherhood,
all threaded into a great domestic noir. Oh,
and it’s a hoot!’

**Matthew Spencer, author of *Black River*
and *Broke Road***

**WHAT
RHYMES
WITH
MURDER?**

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PENNY TANGEY

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WHAT RHYMES WITH MURDER?

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To my gang: Lincoln, Leo, Nina and Lex

1

WHAT RHYMES WITH BABIES?

I stare at a flight of concrete stairs, bewildered. Squeezing the rubber grip on the pram's handle, I check the sign in the library lobby again. It still shows an arrow pointing up, with the words: 10 AM BABY RHYME TIME UPSTAIRS. I'd assumed the session would be in the children's section, on the ground floor, though I suppose that would disrupt the other patrons. *But how am I supposed to get a pram upstairs?*

I swivel the pram to the left, and then to the right, then rock it back and forth. I feel like a failure, and I blame Ben. When he asked about my plans for this morning, I said I didn't have any. Ben pointed at my three goals, printed out and stuck to the fridge. I used the Comic Sans font to keep it light with a hint of self-aware irony:

1. Go out every day
2. Read
3. Exercise twice a week

‘I’m just saying,’ Ben said, without having said anything at all.

‘It’s too cold outside for Finn.’

‘We’re in Melbourne. It’s never too cold.’

Ben grew up in Tasmania, and you can tell.

‘There’s nothing to do out there,’ I said. ‘Babies don’t actually like anything.’

Ben responded with a series of suggestions that I rejected with excellent reasons: ‘Too far. Sounds horrific. Only for toddlers.’

Finally, spotting the library flier on the fridge, Ben said, ‘Baby Rhyme Time. Wednesday, ten am, East Melbourne Library.’

I couldn’t argue with that. It sounded perfect. Until now. I’m so close, but the stairs make it seem so far. I should quit and go home. It would be a relief, although also depressing that the simplest outing is beyond me.

On the other side of the glass doors a young woman sits at the communal study table. I imagine she’s writing an essay for uni. I remember the days when I got to think, study and learn all day.

Two people walk past me and up the stairs. One of them looks like my high school maths teacher, Ms Billington. Her grey hair is cut in the same bob, though Ms Billington would never wear a puffy vest. Beside her, a younger woman lifts her billowing ankle-length green dress as she ascends the stairs. Her long red hair flows down her back. She could be in a blurry painting of a boat drifting down a river lined with weeping willows.

Lacking babies, neither of these women look like they’re heading for Baby Rhyme Time. Maybe I have the wrong day?

Another woman walks into the foyer, also sans baby. She has

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grey curly hair tied back with a peacock print scarf. She examines the community noticeboard, which is covered with fliers about upcoming events and classes. After quickly glancing over her shoulder, the woman takes a pin out of another poster and starts to put up a new flier.

Just then a woman wearing a lanyard enters. She sports a calf-length purple tartan skirt, black ankle boots and a black skivvy. She could be on the cover of *Librarian Vogue*. I didn't expect people at the library to be so stylish. I've only worn my second-best tracksuit pants.

'Excuse me,' the librarian says. She looks vaguely familiar to me. Curly-haired lady ignores her.

'Excuse me,' the librarian says more loudly. 'If you have a notice to display, please come through to the desk and we can help you with that.'

'It's a free event,' the woman says. Turning to the librarian she holds out her leaflet. 'Herstory tours of East Melbourne. My name's Mariana – I'm a historian.'

'Thank you, Mariana, I'm sure your tours are fantastic,' says the librarian. 'We just need to follow the policy for displaying notices.'

'Too many policies these days,' Mariana says. 'What about common sense?'

Mariana and the librarian are walking back into the library when Mariana stops suddenly, pointing to a sign. 'What's this?!' Her voice is angry now, not just irritated.

'I'm hosting Rhyme Time at ten o'clock,' says the librarian.

'Not that,' says Mariana. 'Underneath.'

In smaller letters the sign reads:

PENNY TANGEY

10 AM

FAMILY OF THE SACRED CHILD

MEETING ROOM 1

Mariana folds her arms, waiting for an explanation.

‘It’s a booking for the meeting room,’ says the librarian.

‘Family of the Sacred Child are a religious group,’ the curly-haired lady tells her. ‘What happened to separation of church and state?’

‘I really need to get ready for Rhyme Time now,’ says the librarian while raising her hand and gesturing to someone across the library.

Another lanyarded person, this one with an asymmetrical haircut, comes over.

‘Good morning, Mariana!’ the new librarian says cheerfully to the older lady.

Perhaps Mariana is a regular here.

‘Mariana would like to talk about our Community Spaces Policy,’ says the purple-skirted librarian. ‘Sorry, I’m due at Rhyme Time.’ And with this deft handball, she takes two steps backwards and turns towards the stairs. As she does, she notices me standing in the corner next to the umbrella stand. ‘Are you looking for Baby Rhyme Time?’ she asks.

‘Yes, but how can I get up the stairs with this?’ I gesture towards my pram.

‘There’s a lift around the corner.’ The librarian points to a narrow corridor beside the stairs.

‘Silly me! See you there!’

I look over my shoulder as I push the pram to the lift and see Mariana talking to the other librarian. Mariana is waving her arms

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and tossing her head in obvious disgust. I didn't expect so much drama and conflict at the library.

I push the pram into the lift and, as we slowly ascend, check the time on my phone and see that – high five – I'm not even late.

I resist the strong urge to check my emails or socials, because I am a very present parent. I have certainly never been reading a thread about Bea Arthur's behaviour on the set of *The Golden Girls* and looked down to see my baby gazing adoringly at me and then felt a surge of guilt at nearly missing the moment.

The lift doors open. I step onto a wide shiny-floored mezzanine. To my right is a railing overlooking the library below and to my left is a meeting room. Through the doorway I see a small group of people seated around a white, laminated table, including the woman in the green dress. She's twirling a strand of her red hair around her finger. I catch her eye and she winks at me. It's an odd thing for her to do, but it makes me smile. She must be part of the religious group Mariana is so vehemently opposed to.

The balcony side of the landing is covered with Lego blocks on towels. The *Vogue* librarian has beaten me upstairs and is crouched beside the Lego.

Now I remember where I've seen her before. She's at the Gipps Street Cafe every Saturday morning drinking coffee and reading graphic novels. Ben and I also used to spend hours at the cafe on weekends, reading out bits from books and articles to make each other outraged or amused. We don't do that anymore.

Recently I've watched her in the cafe and felt jealous of her child-free weekends, then guilty for not enjoying being a mother enough, then mildly panicked as I imagined life without Finn and

how awful that would be. Since I had a baby, just buying bread can be an emotional rollercoaster.

The librarian spots me and smiles.

‘I made it!’ I say.

‘Well done!’ she chirps in a tone usually deployed to compliment finger paintings. ‘Sorry for all this Lego mess. I meant to get it out of the way before we opened but we’ve had a busy morning. Lots of queries.’

‘Yes, I saw on my way in,’ I say. I want to make it clear that I will not be one of those difficult patrons. I’ll be a delight, I swear.

She gestures towards a room at the end of the foyer. ‘You can leave your pram outside against the wall, if you don’t mind.’

As I walk away there’s an explosion of Lego being dumped into a plastic tub, the building’s concrete and glass surfaces magnifying the sound.

I slide my pram into a gap next to an almost identical pram, except it has a cup holder. I would quite like a cup holder. It would be useful for holding cups.

I unstrap Finn, saying, ‘Are you ready?’

No answer, as per usual, so I have to read his mind. His nappy smells fine. He’s not grizzling. I fed him half an hour ago. On my assessment, he’s as ready as he’ll ever be.

In the room, a group of adults sit on chairs arranged in a circle, holding babies. I take the last empty seat and sit Finn on my lap, facing out so he can look around the group. Directly opposite, a lady has a twin balanced on each knee. I try not to stare. My friend Raina is a twin and she says people goggled at them all the time, and her mum felt like they were judging her. So I know I shouldn’t

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look, but twins! It's mesmerising. Anyway, I'm not judging, I'm admiring. I feel self-conscious and incompetent with one baby. If I had two babies to feed, change and put to sleep I don't think I'd ever make it to the library with them.

To resist the magnetic pull of the twins I examine the top of Finn's head. Cradle cap is still visible under his fine blond hair. The olive oil scrub I tried last week did nothing. I fight the antisocial urge to pick at the yellow scales of dead skin.

Meanwhile, unconcerned about appearing judgemental, Finn is blatantly staring around the room while sucking on his hand. At least people-watching is keeping him happy for now. I'm sure he'll let me know if he gets bored, probably by screaming.

I catch the eye of the woman beside me and we smile at each other. She's wearing fluorescent orange yoga pants and a tight pink top with mesh ventilation panels at the sides. She looks like she jogged to the library and will jog home again. I feel tired just looking at her, but to be fair, I felt tired before I looked at her.

'How old?' I ask the enmeshed woman, gesturing towards the baby on her lap.

'Nine months yesterday. And your little one?'

'Six months last week.'

The older lady opposite says, 'It goes so fast! I remember when my goddaughter was this age. And now I'm a god-grandmother!' She jiggles the baby on her lap.

I smile but inside panic rises. I wish people would stop reminding me that time goes fast. Since Finn was born, I've been hyperaware that infancy is precious and fleeting, a temporary treasure. But time won't stand still, no matter how much I'd appreciate it.

PENNY TANGEY

Last week it occurred to me that in six months' time Finn will technically be a toddler, which means that half his babyhood has passed already, along with half my paid maternity leave. I cried. Then after lunch I called Ben and asked him to come home early because I couldn't cope with the lonely afternoon stretching ahead of me.

I would appreciate this year of infancy so much more if I didn't have to do it all at once. A week or so at a time spread over thirty years would be perfect. But perhaps the intensity is the point, to forge a bond that lasts a lifetime.

'I'm Nat,' says the activewear lady.

'Frida,' I say, coming back to the moment.

'I'm Christine,' says the older lady opposite, who wears bold, red framed glasses. 'And this is my godson, Frankie.'

'You're a very good godmother,' I say. 'I never see my godparents anymore.' I don't even know where Sue and Jim are now. They were Mum and Dad's best friends when I was born, then they moved to Queensland and faded from my life. We visited them once when I was a teenager and they seemed like strangers. I've never sought spiritual guidance from them.

'I'm lucky,' says Christine. 'I'm semi-retired, so I can help out when his parents need a break.'

'Have you come to Rhyme Time before?' Nat asks me.

'No, we're Rhyme Time virgins.'

The word 'virgin' sounded crass and inappropriate. There's an awkward pause so I keep talking. 'Actually, until recently, I thought Baby Rhyme Time was about coming up with words that rhyme with "babies".'

The others look at me with polite interest.

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'I can only think of scabies and rabies,' I continue, and regret it immediately. I long for adult company and conversation, and then when I get it I talk about diseases and virginity.

'It's mainly songs and stories,' says the twins' mum helpfully.

'I know,' I say. 'I just thought it was funny to imagine.'

Funny to imagine what? Babies with rabies? Babies with scabies? Obviously, babies with both would be the most hilarious; scabby *and* frothy.

A voice says, 'Diabetes.'

I turn towards the only man in the circle. He has dark curly hair, as does the baby on his lap. They are an adorable pair.

'What?' I say, confused.

'Diabetes almost rhymes with babies.'

He smiles and looks gorgeous enough for me to forget that I'm the creepy weirdo of Rhyme Time.

The woman with twins looks at her babies. 'Have you pooped?' she asks one and then the other.

The babies don't answer, so she bends to sniff them each in turn.

'Not mine!' she announces cheerfully.

I can't smell anything so perhaps she imagined it. Unless there's a permanent poo-smell clinging to me, which is possible.

I check Finn's nappy, but he's fine.

From behind comes the sound of rolling trolley wheels and a sing-song voice. 'Good morning, little ones! Good morning, parents and carers!'

The very stylish librarian manoeuvres her trolley through the doorway, shutting the door behind her. It closes with a heavy thunk, probably designed to keep the noise of Rhyme Time confined to

this room. She pushes the trolley to the top of the circle near the big window that overlooks the community garden.

Taking a seat, her purple skirt draping elegantly around her, the librarian addresses the group. 'Hello, everyone! My name is Dana. I'm the children's librarian here at the East Melbourne Library. I see new faces here today! So perhaps we'll start with introductions.'

Dana smiles encouragingly.

I smile back.

There's a long pause.

Dana nods encouragingly.

I nod back.

She says, 'Would you like to introduce yourselves?'

'Oh, you mean me!' I say, realising that I'm the new face. 'Hello. I'm Frida. I'm a Baby Rhyme Time . . . I mean, this is my first time here.'

'And who's your little one?' asks Dana.

There's another new face sitting on me. 'Oh! This is Finn.'

'Nice to meet you, Frida,' says Dana. 'Nice to meet you, Finn. Can everybody wave hello to Frida and Finn?'

The answer to her question is no, everybody can't. At least half the group are incapable of waving on request. The adults wave, though, or pick up pudgy baby wrists and flop them up and down.

'Okay then, it's time for our Welcome Song,' says Dana. The others join in and sing:

'This is the way we wave hello

Wave hello, wave hello

This is the way we wave hello

To our new friends Frida and Finn.'

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The words are easy to follow but I'm not sure if I'm supposed to sing the welcome song to myself. I smile and lift Finn's arms up and down in time to the music while he strangles my fingers with a tight grip.

There is very light applause before Dana continues, 'Now, some housekeeping before we get started. We'll keep this session as engaging and interactive as possible. If your little one is upset and needs a break, that's absolutely fine. But it would be great if you could take them outside into the foyer area, just so everyone else in the group can still hear.'

I hope I won't need to take my crying baby out.

Dana taps her knees. 'Well then! Let's start with our Acknowledgement of Country.'

Accompanying the words with actions, Dana says, 'Here is the land, here is the sea, here are the people and here am I. We thank the Wurundjeri people for the land on which we learn and play. Hands up, hands down, we're on Wurundjeri ground.'

Next, Dana pats her hands on her knees and chants about a baker. I don't know the rhyme, but I tap away at Finn's pudgy legs and say the words when I can guess.

Finn loves 'Wheels on the Bus' and giggles when I use his tummy to honk the horn. For 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' I turn him around and hold his hands, gently rocking him back and forth. He looks into my eyes and smiles while poking his tongue out. I glance at Dana to see if she has noticed how adorable Finn is, but she's staring over our heads towards the door. I follow her gaze to the glass paned door to see what's so interesting, but the foyer looks empty.

I feel a rush of gladness that I'm not at work. I'd be preparing papers for the board meeting and bitching about HR being late with the numbers again. This is much more fun and rewarding.

'Heads and shoulders, knees and toes,' sings Dana.

I join in enthusiastically because I know this one. The tune is different from how I remember, but I do my best.

Dana reaches for three brightly coloured books on her trolley. 'I have something special to show you this morning. We have some new library books. This one is from a series called *Baby's First Shakespeare*.'

I laugh and then cough into my elbow to cover it because no-one else seems to think it's funny. Apparently it's never too early to learn about homicide, jealous rages, teen suicide and so forth.

Dana holds up the shiny new copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and reads it to the group. There are only a few words on each page, and the illustrations are beautiful and interactive with pop-up pages, flaps and touch-and-feel donkey ears. It is a lovely book, and I shouldn't have been so quick to judge. Even so, a book cannot hold the room the way songs and clapping did. The babies start to wriggle and fuss.

Nat's baby can crawl and he makes a break for it through the people and chair legs. Will Finn be like that in a few months? It's hard to imagine when he's so reliant on me for every move. He can roll but isn't using that skill to go places yet. He just flips onto his tummy and bobbles around with his head, arms and legs elevated like a skydiver plummeting to earth.

Nat drags her baby back into the circle but he's not happy about it. I smile sympathetically and I believe non-judgementally as Nat

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whisks her screaming baby out of the room. I try to arrange my face in an expression that says, *Don't worry about it, you're doing a great job, I'm sure my baby will cry too!*

Except that, to my delight, he's not! Finn is very happily trying to put his whole foot in his mouth.

'That's right,' I whisper in his ear. 'That's your yummy foot.'

I can't wait to tell Ben about Rhyme Time. Finn is so happy and engaged and it's so obvious his brain is growing.

Dana closes the book and says, 'Okay! Time for another song! This next one is very special because you are the *first people in the world* to hear it. I wrote it last night to teach you today. We'll sing this at the end of every session this year. Repetition is very important for babies to develop language. So, I'll go through the song for you once, and then you can all join in.'

Dana begins singing to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne':

'I saw a lovely wombat

And an eagle in the sky!

The wombat was down on the ground

And the eagle was up high.'

We copy Dana's hand actions as we join in for the second round. On the third time, I remember the words and actions. Finn watches me stretch my hands up in the sky like an eagle's wings. It's a nice song, I think. I might sing it to him at home.

'That's all for Baby Rhyme Time,' Dana says when we've finished. 'Thank you for coming today. Feel free to stay around a bit longer. We have lots of toys to play with.' She gestures to the trolley then says, 'Oh, I've forgotten the scarves!' She grabs a container from the trolley and says, 'You can use these for now.'

She tips egg-shaped rattles onto the floor then dashes from the room with the energy of someone who regularly sleeps for eight hours straight without interruption.

I position Finn in front of the rattles and sit behind him.

I take a photo of Finn rattling an egg and donking himself on the head with it. I send Ben the photo and then write: *Finn loved Rhyme Time. He was way more engaged than the other babies*

In fact, I spent ninety-five per cent of the session staring at Finn, so I really don't know how engaged the other babies were. Anyway, 'Wheels on the Bus' isn't a competition, I remind myself. I delete the second sentence before sending the message.

A squawk makes me look up. Finn and the curly-haired baby are struggling for possession of an egg rattle. I missed the start of the dispute so don't know who has the stronger claim. To be on the safe side I say, 'Finn, share, please.'

At the exact same time the man of the group says, 'Anindita Ayu, sharing!'

Finn reaches his hand forward, and I'm sure he's going for the face, not the rattle. I grab his hand and say, 'Gentle!'

The other baby takes the opportunity to launch her body towards the egg rattle, which she grabs with both hands and her mouth.

The man smiles with the kind of dimples and charm that you would think could bring about world peace. 'Sorry about this.'

I take another egg. 'Look,' I say, shaking it near Finn. 'There's plenty.'

Finn takes the proffered toy and calm returns.

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‘Thanks,’ says the man. ‘I’m Josh, by the way.’ He’s wearing a light blue jumper that brings out the colour of his eyes. ‘And this is Anindita, or Dita for short,’ he says gesturing to his baby now gumming happily on an egg rattle.

I tuck a strand of frizzy hair behind my ear. ‘Nice to meet you, I’m Frida. And this is Finn.’

‘Dita’s mother had gestational diabetes,’ says Josh.

‘That’s no good,’ I say, not sure why he’s revealing personal medical information to a stranger.

‘That’s why I thought of the rhyme.’

‘Right! Babies, diabetes, they do almost rhyme. Thanks!’ Then, still surprised by his candour, I ask, ‘Is she okay?’

‘Yes, it was stressful, but we got through it.’

‘So . . . is she working at the moment?’ I ask.

‘Yeah, she’s a doctor. So is my husband.’ I must look baffled, because he explains, ‘The three of us are co-parenting.’

I want to ask more questions but don’t want to seem nosy, so I just say, ‘That’s great!’

Nat comes and sits beside me holding a squirming baby and a little stack of paper.

‘Hi, Frida,’ she says as she thrusts a leaflet towards me. ‘I’m running Mums ’n’ Bubs Pilates sessions at the library. I look at the leaflet:

MUMS ’N’ BUBS PILATES

WITH PHYSIOTHERAPIST NAT O’BRIEN

EAST MELBOURNE LIBRARY

8 WEEK COURSE BEGINS

10AM MONDAY 9 SEPTEMBER

‘Can babies do Pilates?’ I ask.

Nat laughs like I’ve made a joke. ‘I incorporate the babies into the exercises and it’s a great way to bond with them. I co-owned a physio practice but I sold it just before I had Eric, you know, it all just got a bit overwhelming. I thought this would ease me back into work.’ Nat talks fast. ‘And it’s something I can do with Eric.’

Her baby grabs a strand of hair that has come loose from her ponytail and pulls. Nat winces and tries to unclasp his fingers.

Josh says with a smile, ‘Can dads come too?’

‘Of course! I should probably change the name, shouldn’t I? Maybe Mums ’n’ Bubs ’n’ More?’

That is definitely worse.

‘A lot of the class will be focusing on recovery after pregnancy and birth, but it’s a very individual thing,’ Nat says. Eric tries to throw himself out of her arms and she shifts him onto her other hip. ‘Very individual, so anyone is welcome, all levels. And of course, you could come as a family with your partner if she’d like.’

Nat jumps up. ‘Anyway, I’d better go.’ She hoists her baby onto her hip and walks to the door. Eric’s arm is draped over her shoulder, still entwined with black hair that’s no longer attached to Nat’s head.

Josh, still smiling, says, ‘That was a bit awkward.’

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘It’s shit people still assume carers are women and everyone’s straight.’

Josh smiles, ‘It’s not your –’

He’s interrupted by a high-pitched, terrified scream, closely followed by a dull thud.

2

CRY TIME

‘What was that?!’

My change of tone startles Finn and he begins to cry. I scoop him up, holding him close.

‘Kids mucking around?’ suggests Josh.

‘It didn’t sound like it,’ Christine says. She stands, leaving Frankie lying on his back on the floor, and walks to the open door. Christine is very brave. The last thing I want to do is walk *towards* the bloodcurdling scream.

I scan the room for another exit, an escape. The back wall is floor-to-ceiling glass that lets in streaming sunlight and a beautiful view over the East Melbourne rooftops and community garden. But the windows don’t open. The door into the corridor is the only exit.

‘I can’t see anything,’ Christine says in a theatrically loud whisper.

Nat enters, looking confused and shaken.

‘What’s going on?’ asks Josh.

‘I think there’s been some kind of accident,’ says Nat. ‘Everyone’s rushing around downstairs. They told me to come back up here.’

‘I’ll go see if they need help,’ says Christine, picking up Frankie and deftly redirecting his little hand from snatching her enticingly bright glasses.

‘We probably shouldn’t get in the way,’ says the twins’ mum.

‘I’m a doctor,’ says Christine. With a curt nod, she strides from the room.

Finn pulls at the neck of my top. He’s staring at me with his mouth wide open, clearly communicating what he wants. I sit on the floor to feed him.

I wish I’d followed in my parents’ footsteps and pursued a practical vocation. Mum and Dad are nurses, and they’re great in a crisis. My skills are a lot less useful. No-one needs a budget-tracking spreadsheet during a proper emergency. In any case, my instincts aren’t heroic. I want to run away. The only reason I haven’t is because everyone else is staying and I’m not brave enough to leave on my own.

Through the now open door I see a librarian go past carrying an A-frame sign. She’s the one who had to deal with the angry customer earlier. At the time it seemed like high drama but things can always get worse.

We sit, tense and unspeaking. Dita squawks and Josh plays silent peekaboo to distract her. He’s very good. Every time he takes his hands away, he has a new expression. Dita is endlessly fascinated and delighted.

I catch Josh’s eye and he smiles. I am slightly fascinated and delighted.

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Finn stops drinking and I change him to the other side.

Eric crawls around the room energetically and then gets stuck under a pile of chairs. He can't go forward and he can't go back. Nat reaches in to pull him out, but the stack of chairs wobbles as if it might topple.

Josh leaps to his feet. He moves the stack so Nat can pick up Eric without fear of injury.

'Thank you,' she whispers.

They return to their seats. Silence again.

A siren sounds, far away but getting louder.

'Ambulance,' says Nat.

A young police officer walks past the door, then returns to stand in the doorway. The adults turn towards him expectantly. The babies keep doing their own things because they don't understand that police have power.

I feel relieved just seeing him there. My images of bad things lurking in the foyer are dispelled by the reassuring presence of an authority figure.

'Excuse me,' he says. 'There's been an incident downstairs. We'll need to speak to everyone here, so I have to ask you to please stay in this room until I come back with my colleague.'

'What happened?' asks Josh.

'There's been an accident in the library,' says the police officer.

'Oh, that's okay then,' says Nat. 'I mean, it's not okay, but you know what I mean?' She runs her hand over her ponytail.

I know what she means. An accident is better than a murderous rampage.

'What was the accident?' Josh boldly asks what I'm wondering.

The police officer pauses, probably deciding how much to tell us. 'Someone fell from the mezzanine.'

That explains the scream and the thud.

The police officer turns and walks away before we can ask further questions.

'Do you think it's serious?' says the twins' mum. 'We're only one floor up. How much could you hurt yourself falling that far?'

'The floors are concrete,' says Nat.

'It would depend how you landed,' says Josh.

Another siren sounds.

Two ambulances? Does that mean more than one person is hurt?

Finn grunts and turns bright red and I feel the reverberation in his nappy. I sigh and my shoulders slump. This is very bad timing. My nappy bag is out with the pram.

'Finn needs a change,' I say hesitantly. 'Do you think it's okay if I get my stuff?'

'I'm sure that'd be fine,' says Josh. 'We're not under arrest. And I don't think there's any real danger out there.'

I carry Finn to the pram and put the nappy bag over my shoulder.

I had intended to go back to the group to change Finn, but I know Finn will wriggle, and I worry about poo going everywhere, not to mention the smell. The parents' room is so close, there's surely no harm in ducking in.

On my way, I pass the railing and the temptation is too much. I walk to the edge and peer over.

At first her hair seems redder than I remembered. But then I understand. Blood has spread around her head in a pool. Her green dress is crumpled like a collapsed tent around her waist and thighs. Her calves are very white, but her knees are blotchy and purple.

WHAT RHYMES WITH MURDER?

I can't see her eyes because her head is turned to the side and her hair covers her face. She isn't moving.

No-one is helping her. Police tape marks off a square around her and she's alone inside it.

Dr Christine from Rhyme Time is squatting beside Dana, who's on the floor, slumped against a self-checkout station. Dr Christine balances Frankie on one knee while taking Dana's pulse.

A paramedic approaches Dr Christine and she stands to talk to him.

I remember I'm holding Finn and that he shouldn't be seeing this. I check if he's horrified too, but he's watching the fan above us spin slowly. I notice a clump of red hair attached to the central wheel of the fan. I spin around and walk towards the toilets.

In the parents' room I put a terry towelling square on the change table and place wriggling Finn on top. I have a strong urge to flee this tiny, confined room and run towards open spaces. I'd always thought of libraries as safe but now it feels like anything could happen here. I want to sob, but I have to focus on changing Finn. He keeps trying to roll over while I fumble as I clean him, put on a fresh nappy, throw the rubbish in the bin, repack the bag.

When I'm done, I walk out onto the landing, avoiding the railing this time, and instead pass close by the meeting room. Inside, the Family of the Sacred Child hold hands around the table, praying with their eyes closed. The Ms Billington lookalike has tears running down her face as she recites, 'Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.'

Less than an hour ago the young woman was at that table with them. She winked at me. Now she's dead on the floor of the library.

PENNY TANGHEY

I return to the Rhyme Time room and sit on a chair, clutching Finn to my chest.

‘Are you okay?’ asks Nat.

‘She’s dead,’ I say.

‘Who?’

‘The woman who fell.’

‘How do you know?’ Nat’s voice rises.

‘I saw.’

Silence, then someone asks, ‘Who was it?’

‘I’m not sure. One of those Family of the Sacred Child people. The young one.’

Nat covers her mouth in shock.

No-one else says anything. The adults sit in silence. The babies cry and babble.

I bounce Finn up and down on my knee. I didn’t know the dead woman, but she was so young. And I liked her hair, and her dress. I’m crying too. Nat sits beside me and puts her arm around my shoulders. Finn watches from my lap. He reaches to touch the tears on my face with his fist. I look down at him, not wanting to catch the eye of anyone else in the room. I’m embarrassed to be making a fuss. Dr Christine isn’t crying and feeling sorry for herself. She’s offering first aid, while holding a baby.

I’m useless in a crisis. I don’t know how to look after anyone. Sometimes health professionals tell me I’m doing a great job with Finn, but they say that to all new parents. One day they’ll realise that I’m selfish and incompetent and it will be too late.