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‘Had me rolling around with laughter on one page, and filled with empathy the next. *The Dead Friend Project* is hilariously brilliant, and Joanna Wallace is a rare talent’

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‘Riotously funny, dark as anything, heartfelt and searingly observed’

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‘Darkly funny and touchingly observant,
The Dead Friend Project is a page turner of an
emotional thriller’

Alison Stockham, author of *The Cuckoo Sister*

‘Wallace may have invented a new genre.
Not cosy crime or comic crime, but clever crime’

Abbie Frost, author of *The Guesthouse*

‘A wonderful antidote for anyone who’s suffered the
Groundhog Day torture of the school run! Perfectly
observed and brilliantly funny’

Alison Belsham, author of *The Tattoo Thief*

‘A perfectly paced and brilliantly executed murder
mystery with a twist and a main character you can’t
help rooting for even at her most awful’

Sarah Lawton, author of *All the Little Things*

‘A wickedly funny thriller that kept me guessing
to the last page’

Dan Malakin, author of *The Box*

‘Brilliantly dark... School gate conflicts degenerate into
murder in this hilarious and fast-moving thriller’

Guy Mopuss, author of *Five Minds*

THE DEAD FRIEND PROJECT

JOANNA WALLACE



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For Marc, Grace, Charlie, Lucy, Sam, Star and Wilfred

Almost a Year Ago

The morning after an unexpected death – that’s when the stillness arrives, ushering in the beginning of a forever she will never see. The sun is still here, the flowers, the milk she bought yesterday, her toothbrush – still damp – the spoon she stirred her tea with, where she left it by the kitchen sink. But there’s stillness instead, in the place where she was.

And her family, they touch the toothbrush and the milk she bought yesterday. As if connecting with the things she most recently touched will somehow close the gap between where she stood then and where she is today.

And it sounds different – the home, the morning after an unexpected death. The wails of anguish, the quiet sobs. The visitors at the door. All saying the same words. Words that nobody spoke yesterday morning, when the radio played, and she danced around the kitchen and laughed. I can’t believe it. I’m so sorry. I can’t believe she’s gone. Not Charlotte. The most alive person I’ve ever known.

All that aliveness. Joining the ranks of the dead.

And everyone wishes they could rewind time. To before it happened. To when she danced around the kitchen and took that milk from the fridge. And they would tell her. Don't go for a run this evening. Take a break from the marathon training. It's almost November, it's dark outside. Stay indoors and watch TV. You know about that bend in the lane. You warn your children about it every day. You know what could happen if a car comes around that bend in the darkness. If you run out into the lane at the wrong time.

And everyone's so busy rewinding the last twenty-four hours, no one pays much attention to Charlotte's youngest child. They cuddle him as they pass and bring him his sippy cup of juice, but they're too lost to look at what he's drawing. Maybe they notice the face and the arms and the legs, but it doesn't look like a monster, so no one knows it's the monster and he doesn't have the words yet to tell them. So, they cuddle him and kiss the top of his head and tell him it's a lovely picture. But it isn't a lovely picture, it's the monster – moving from his crayons to a locked room somewhere inside his developing mind. And maybe one day a clever therapist will unlock the door and Charlotte's youngest child will think again of the monster. But by then it will be distorted into something different. Twisted from memory into something he thinks he imagined or maybe he dreamt. The lady in the yellow coat. Banging at the front door and waking him up. The lady in the yellow coat. Pulling Mummy out the house and making her scared. The lady in the yellow coat. Chasing Mummy into the road. The monster who didn't look like a monster.

Making his mummy be dead.

1

The school bell is loud but almost goes unnoticed, underneath the chatter of parents standing out here in the playground.

‘Mum! Can I go and play at Noah’s house?’

‘Not today, Jack,’ I say, flicking my eyes to the seven-year-old child looking up at me – marvelling at the mystery for which I’m never quite fully prepared. How someone so recently released from a classroom can look like they’ve spent the day playing with a cement mixer.

‘But Mum . . .’

‘It’s a bit early for playdates, isn’t it? I mean, it’s only the first day of school.’

Those grey trousers, so spotlessly clean when he put them on this morning, are already scuffed with dirt. And that navy-blue school jumper is covered in . . . what is that? Paint? And wasn’t he wearing a tie this morning?

‘But Mum . . .’

‘No, Jack!’ I start to walk from the playground.

‘But why not?’ he asks.

‘Oh, come on, Jack, put on your listening ears, I’ve already told you. The school year has only just started. Give me a few weeks at least to ease back into playdates and all that . . . crap.’

I say the last word under my breath. His little freckled face, looking pleadingly up into my own, is flushed red – his hair slicked back neatly with . . . what is that in his hair? More paint? Hopefully it’s paint.

‘But Mum, I really want to—’

‘And I really want to grab you and your brother and go home. Where is Freddie anyway? Oh look, there he is – on the climbing wall. Go and get him, please.’

‘But why can’t I go to Noah’s? His mum says it’s OK. Look, she’s coming over.’

‘No, Jack, not today! Go get your brother and—’

‘Hello Beth. How was your summer?’

‘Hi Emily,’ I say, staring into a face that can only be described as an exclamation. Huge bright eyes, razor-sharp cheekbones – there’s an almost other-worldly quality to attractiveness as combative as that. She’s wearing trainers, Sweaty Betty leggings and a Sweaty Betty sports bra – no coat, even though it’s cold today, and there’s not even the suggestion of frizz escaping from her long, elegant ponytail. A couple of Minions rucksacks are draped casually over one of her delicate shoulders, a yoga mat is slung over the other, a dispenser of hand sanitiser is clipped to her waistband and there’s a Tupperware container of chopped vegetables clasped in her manicured hand.

‘It seems the boys have their hearts set on a playdate,’ she says, popping a slice of carrot into her mouth. ‘I don’t mind Jack coming round to ours for his tea. You know me. The more the merrier.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Emily, but I don’t know. It’s the first day back—’

‘She said it’s too early for playdates and all that crap,’ says Jack, demonstrating the remarkably selective superpower of his listening ears.

‘Beth.’ Emily’s taking a step towards me and whispering, suddenly serious. ‘I hope this doesn’t sound preachy—’ Oh God, am I in trouble? ‘It’s just that I’ve been a mum for a very long time now. Nineteen years, can you believe it? Georgina’s off to university in a few weeks . . .’ She always does this; the same irrelevant information dropped into every conversation. ‘And little Tobias – not so little any more! He’ll be sitting his A-levels next year! Anyway, like I say, I’m not being preachy,’ beginning to sound a bit preachy, ‘but something I’ve learnt during my nineteen years of being a mum . . . Beth?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you know what happens every time you swear in front of your child?’

‘No,’ I reply. ‘Does a fairy die?’

‘You reduce yourself in their eyes,’ she continues, ignoring my last words. ‘Every time you swear, you become smaller and smaller to the people who look up to you most.’

‘I want to become smaller and smaller.’

‘Right,’ she says, taking a step back and appraising me with those enormous, freakily intense eyes. Does she ever

blink? I'm not sure I've ever seen her blink. 'Well, baby weight can be difficult to shift, can't it?' she continues. 'How old is Hope now?' she asks, looking at the small human in my arms.

'She's eighteen months,' I reply. 'Jack, stop hitting my leg with your book bag.' My voice is raised, irritation seeping in.

'Why don't you grab a couple of after-school snacks, Jack, and go over to play on the climbing wall?' says Emily, holding the Tupperware pot out to my child. As well as carrots, there is chopped up cucumber in there and red peppers and what's that? Is that a courgette? Who chops up a courgette and brings it into the school playground? And then has the audacity to call it an after-school snack?

'Thanks, Emily, but Jack refuses to eat vegetables,' I say, just as Jack grabs a handful of chopped vegetables and shoves them into his mouth before running towards the climbing wall.

'Isn't it lovely watching children having fun together,' she's saying, gazing around the playground, her smile verging on eerie. 'So important for them to let off steam. That's why I think playdates are important. It would be so lovely if Jack could come back to our house today, it will be good for Noah to have someone his own age to run around with and he seems to love playing with Jack. Poor Noah has been so busy lately. We only got three weeks away in the house in Tuscany and he spent the rest of the summer working with his tutor.'

'Why's Noah got a tutor?'

'So he can pass the exam to get into a decent secondary

school,' she says, offering a mushy piece of courgette to my daughter.

'But that exam isn't for another . . .'

'Three years, I know. We probably should have started the tutoring earlier.'

'Earlier?' I say, as Hope kicks her legs and wriggles in my arms. She's laughing, yelling 'More!' and reaching out for more of the mushy, green stuff.

'Well, secondary school is so important, isn't it?' Emily says, picking out more courgette for my daughter. 'If Noah doesn't get into a good one, he probably won't do well in his GCSEs and A-levels, which means he won't get into a good university,' she says, smiling at Hope. 'And then he won't get a good job,' she adds, in a sing-song voice.

'Right,' I say, reaching out towards the Tupperware container. I want to understand all this fuss about the courgette. I drop a piece into my mouth. As I suspected. Gross.

'Emily! Emily, I just heard something really interesting.' If Emily's face is an exclamation, Danielle's is a question mark. The woman always looks anxious and confused. She's running towards us wearing Sweaty Betty flowery leggings and a flowing yoga top. It's a decent attempt but she's not carrying off the look anywhere near as effortlessly as Emily. Less Sweaty Betty chic. More . . . sweaty.

'You'll never guess what,' she's saying to Emily, after directing a nervous but friendly nod towards me. 'I was just speaking to Kylie, you know Kylie – Finn's mum. You know Finn? The kid with the eyepatch. Well, his mum Kylie is the Australian woman who works in the school office, and she was saying—'

‘That Australian mum is called Kylie?’ I say with a smile. ‘That’s brilliant. I can’t wait for her to throw a few shrimps on the barbie.’

‘Have you become friends with Kylie, Beth?’ Emily asks, smiling back at me. ‘I must say, I think that’s the most wonderful news.’

‘Why?’ I ask, looking from her to Danielle.

‘Can I be honest?’ Emily asks, clipping the lid shut on the Tupperware container and dropping it into one of her bags. ‘I’ve been so worried about you. We all have, haven’t we?’ she adds, glancing at Danielle, who does more of that peculiar head nod. ‘We remember what you used to be like. The life and soul of the party! Always making us laugh with your hilarious jokes.’

‘Hilarious,’ agrees Danielle.

‘But for the last year,’ Emily says, taking a step towards me, ‘you’ve been keeping yourself to yourself. And it’s perfectly understandable, you know, what with . . .’ She’s looking towards Danielle again who’s looking anxious. ‘You know, what with . . . everything that happened.’ She reaches her hand out towards me. ‘You’ve been through so much, all we want is for you to be happy again. So, I’m so pleased to hear you’re making new friends.’ She squeezes my arm. ‘I think it’s great that you’re meeting up with Kylie for a barbecue.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I ask, taking a step back and shaking her hand from my arm. ‘I’m not meeting up with Kylie. I literally just found out her name.’

‘So, why were you talking about her barbecue?’

‘I was making a joke, that’s all! About her being so . . . you know, Australian.’

Not a great joke, I admit, and certainly not hilarious, but I don't think it warrants this tumbleweed.

'So, what was she talking about?' I ask Danielle, when the silence becomes unbearable.

'Who?'

'Kylie. The Australian mum who works in the school office. You said you were talking to her and heard something interesting.'

'Oh yes,' says Danielle. 'Kylie was saying that a new family is joining the school this term and guess what? They've moved into Charlotte's old house.'

'Oh, that is interesting,' says Emily, unclipping the hand sanitiser from her waistband.

'How does Kylie know?' I ask.

'She works in the school office,' says Emily. 'Kylie knows where everyone lives.'

'But addresses are confidential,' I say. 'Surely she shouldn't be passing personal information around?'

'Oh, no one cares about things like that, Beth! Chill out and go with the flow,' laughs the woman currently micromanaging every step of her child's life journey – from *Minions* to billions and every overachievement in between. 'I wonder whether the new family know,' she's asking now, rubbing antibacterial gel between her fingers and into her palms. 'You know, what happened to Charlotte? I wonder whether they were told, before they bought the house.'

'My second cousin is an estate agent,' says Danielle, 'so I know there are very specific rules about this. I think it's in their code of ethics.'

‘Estate agents have a code of ethics?’ I laugh. ‘What’s that written on, a postage stamp?’

‘Emily, guess what?’ Suddenly Fara appears and I know I’m looking as dumbfounded as Danielle because it’s a mystery to me why someone as brilliant as Fara remains so utterly devoted to Emily. She’s got more degrees than children, and Fara has a lot of children. Four or five, at least. And she never shouts at them, even the annoying one, she always speaks calmly and uses interesting, intelligent words, which isn’t surprising because I heard she’s descended from a long line of brilliant people. Her dad is a top politician in Nigeria and Fara has clearly inherited all his brains and charm. Yet here she is, desperately vying for Emily’s attention. I don’t get it. ‘Guess what?’ she’s saying again. ‘That’s the new mum, over there – the one who’s just moved into Charlotte’s old house.’

We all turn in the direction of Fara’s pointed finger, to gawp at the new mum who’s just moved into Charlotte’s old house. She’s holding a small child, who I guess must hear a lot of swear words because the new mum is tiny. She looks young and athletic, with gorgeous dark curls tumbling over her shoulders. She’s wearing blue jeans and a black fitted jacket and looks like she may just have stepped out of an advert. One of those weird perfume adverts on TV that never seem to have any discernible storyline but do, I suppose, provide an opportunity for the insanely attractive to hang out with their own kind for a while.

‘I think she looks lovely,’ Emily says, after a moment. ‘Very warm, and friendly.’

‘I agree,’ says Danielle, ‘I think she’ll fit in really well.’

‘I concur,’ says Fara.

Concur? There’s my word of the day and now it’s definitely time to leave. I look over to the climbing wall and start to wave, trying to attract Jack’s attention.

‘Still makes me shiver,’ Emily says, running her hands up her bare arms. ‘Even though it’s been almost a year since . . . it happened, I don’t think it will ever stop feeling weird, standing here in the playground, without Charlotte.’

‘I know,’ says Fara. ‘And it must be so tough for you, Beth,’ she adds, looking at me. ‘What with you and Charlotte being such good friends.’

I nod, straining my eyes, trying to see my two sons. From over here, all the children on the climbing wall look the same.

‘Have you stayed in contact with them?’ Fara asks.

‘Who?’

‘Charlotte’s family,’ she says. ‘Bill and the children. Do you still speak to them?’

‘No,’ I reply. ‘Not since they moved away.’ They’re all staring at me. ‘And I’ve been busy . . .’

‘Of course,’ Fara says, smiling.

‘We’re still in contact with Bill,’ says Emily. ‘I speak to him on the phone every so often. He’s incredibly strong, doing everything he can to help those children. But . . .’ another shiver, ‘I’m not sure he’ll ever forgive himself.’

‘For what?’ Fara asks, as I spot Jack’s laughing face amongst all the others on the climbing wall. I stand on my toes, waving, and call out his name.

‘For not being with her,’ Emily says. ‘That night. At the end.’

‘But he can’t blame himself for that,’ Fara says. ‘How could he have possibly known what was going to happen?’

‘He couldn’t,’ Emily agrees. ‘But you know what it’s like with hindsight. I think he regrets coming to my party that night. I think he wishes he’d stayed at home with them. If only I hadn’t had that party . . .’

‘Oh, come on, Emily,’ says Danielle. ‘You can’t think like that. Everyone was at yours that night; we’d all been looking forward to it for ages, especially the children. It was a fabulous evening, until . . .’ Her voice tails off and I’m about to shout out to Jack again when something stops me. Something I just heard. Something that didn’t sound right.

‘What did you say?’ I turn towards Emily.

‘When?’

‘About Bill.’

‘How we still speak on the phone occasionally. How he’s so strong, doing everything he can for—’

‘No, after that. What did you say about hindsight?’

‘How I think he regrets coming to my party that night.’

‘And?’

‘How I think he wishes he’d stayed at home with them.’

That’s it. ‘What do you mean, *them*?’

‘Them,’ she says simply. ‘Charlotte and Leo.’

‘But little Leo was at your party, wasn’t he? I remember his sisters Amber and Poppy being there.’

‘No, he stayed at home with Charlotte.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ Emily says. ‘Obviously he wanted to stay at home with his mum.’

‘Are you sure?’ I ask, staring at her.

‘Yes,’ she replies.

‘Why didn’t I know that?’ I ask. ‘Did you know that?’ I add, looking from Fara to Danielle.

They nod but Emily answers. ‘Well, it’s like I said earlier, Beth, we haven’t seen much of you since it happened. You’ve kept yourself to yourself. That isn’t a criticism,’ she says, taking a step towards me. ‘It’s perfectly understandable. What with everything that happened to Charlotte and then, you know, all the other stuff—’

‘Right,’ I say, interrupting. ‘I just want to make sure I understand this correctly. Charlotte was at home with Leo on the evening that she died?’

‘Yes.’

‘How old was he then? Around two?’

‘Two and a half, I think,’ Danielle says. ‘I remember Charlotte had a lovely party for him in the Easter holidays.’

I ignore this. ‘Was anyone else with them?’ I ask Emily.

‘No, Bill, Amber and Poppy were at the party.’

‘So, why did she go out for a run?’ They’re all staring at me. ‘That’s what everyone said happened. She went out for a run in the dark and got hit by a car coming round that blind bend. But Charlotte would never leave her kid in the house on his own.’ I close my eyes for a moment, trying to focus. ‘It doesn’t make sense—’

Suddenly I see Jack running towards me and as soon as I see his face, I feel sick. From the moment I gave birth to Jack seven years ago, there has only ever been one of two expressions plastered onto his face. Happy. Or pissed off. Never anything in between. But this look is completely different. Fear. I think I might scream.

‘Mummy, Mummy! Freddie fell off the climbing wall and now he can’t move his arm.’

Passing my daughter to Danielle, I run towards the climbing wall and he’s there. Lying on the ground and crying. Freddie. Five years old and usually so boisterous. Now curled up into a terrifying ball of pain.

‘This is why children aren’t supposed to play on the climbing wall unsupervised. All you parents standing around and nattering, not paying any attention. I knew something like this would happen again one day. I said as much—’

‘Not helpful, Carl,’ I snap at the grumpy school caretaker, before helping Freddie to his feet. Grabbing my daughter from Danielle, I strap Hope into the pushchair while pleading with Jack.

‘No, Jack, please! You can’t go to Noah’s for a bloody playdate because you’re coming to the hospital with me. Why can’t I ever just walk into this bloody playground, collect you two and just *leave*?’

And now I’m running towards the exit, aware of other people staring in my direction and panic pushing the occasional swear word from my mouth. So, it’s strange, the silence I fall into as I approach her. That new mum who’s just moved into Charlotte’s old house. And even stranger that, I’m fighting a peculiar urge to warn her . . . but of what, I’m not entirely sure. Freddie whimpers: he’s injured, and there’s no time for thinking. I put down my head and run faster.

2

‘Mummy! My arm isn’t hurting any more. Can I go back on the climbing wall?’

‘No, Fred. We need to go to hospital and get you properly checked out.’

‘But I don’t want to go to hospital,’ he shouts, kicking his feet into the back of the driver’s seat.

‘See, he’s fine. Now can I go and play at Noah’s?’

‘No, Jack!’ I say, glancing at my eldest child. He’s sitting in the passenger seat beside me and looking angry. ‘We need to get a doctor to look at Freddie’s arm.’

‘That sounds boring! How long is it going to take?’

‘As long as it takes.’

‘Mummy?’

‘Yes, Fred?’ I ask, staring into the rear-view mirror at my two youngest children strapped into their car seats – securing everything in place, other than smiles.

‘Have you got any Haribo? Green ones. I only want green ones.’

‘I don’t think I have, but I’ll try to get some after we’ve got you checked out.’

‘Where are you going to get green Haribo?’ asks Jack.

‘I don’t know. The supermarket, most probably.’

‘What?’ he says, as I keep my eyes locked on the road ahead. There’s no need to look at his face. ‘We have to go to hospital and *then* we have to go to the supermarket? This is going to take ages.’

‘Ow! My arm hurts again!’

‘OK, Freddie,’ I say, squeezing the steering wheel tightly. ‘Not long now. Oh, look at that big bus! Let’s sing “The Wheels on the Bus”!’

‘No.’

‘OK, Jack. How about you, Freddie? We could sing it for Hope.’

‘Mummy? If you can’t get green Haribo, can you get me the red ones?’ asks Freddie. ‘They’re my second favourite. I like them nearly as much as the green ones.’

‘You can’t buy just green or red Haribo, you idiot!’

‘Jack! Don’t call your brother an idiot.’

‘He *is* an idiot.’

‘But Mummy,’ says Freddie. ‘I only want the green or the red ones. Or maybe those other ones but I can’t remember what colour the other ones are.’

‘See, he is an idiot.’

‘Jack!’ I say, slowing down at the traffic lights. ‘Oh, look at that. Another red light. Red is a lovely colour, isn’t it? I know, why don’t we all take turns to tell each other our

favourite colour? Who would like to start? Nobody? Well, I can go first. My favourite colour is blue. No, maybe it's green. You know what, I think my favourite colour is bluey green.'

'Is this why Daddy went away?' asks Jack. 'Because you're so boring?'

'Look at that!' I say, my knuckles white on the steering wheel. 'A sign for the hospital. Not long now. Who wants to play a game?'

'What kind of game?'

'I don't know. I-spy maybe?'

'You're so boring!' Jack shouts.

'Right, who wants to listen to the radio?' Red light to amber. 'This is a nice song, isn't it?' I turn the volume up. 'I really love this song, don't you?' Amber to green. 'I tell you what,' foot to the floor. 'Why don't we all sit quietly and listen to the radio for a while?'

3

She would never leave a two-year-old child alone in the house to go out running. Not Charlotte. Her children were her life, she took a break from her high-flying career to care for them, there's no way she'd have left Leo on his own.

'Mummy, look what I've found.' Freddie's sitting on the floor in the middle of the Paediatrics A&E waiting area, playing with a large toy spaceship.

'That's great, Freddie,' I say from my seat in the corner. 'How's your arm?'

'It's good,' he replies, as a light on the top of the toy starts flashing. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it isn't a spaceship. Maybe it's a lighthouse. Could I be wrong about Charlotte, too? Maybe she did leave her son in the house on his own.

'That's great, Freddie,' I say again, reaching forward to remove Hope from the pushchair, who kicks her legs and squeals with excitement at the prospect of being freed.

‘We’re just going to wait here until you can see the doctor, OK?’

He doesn’t answer because he’s stopped listening. Too busy taking toy animals out of the intergalactic lighthouse. Why are there animals in there? Hope is batting at my face and wriggling desperately to get down, so I place her on the floor, before checking briefly on Jack, who has found a collection of small cars and seems happy lining them up in rows before pushing them along the floor. I turn back towards Hope who is holding something in her hand, waving it in the air, laughing manically and . . . oh my God! It’s one of the toy animals from the lighthouse and now she’s banging it on someone’s foot.

‘No, Hope!’ I say, grabbing her back up into my arms, before apologising to a smiley woman with beautiful red hair, seated in the chair closest to mine. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I say, ‘I hope she didn’t hurt you.’

‘Oh no,’ the lady replies, glancing down at her feet, encased in bright green, sturdy-looking leather lace-ups. ‘I didn’t feel a thing.’ Lucky she isn’t wearing flip-flops. Returning her smile, I place my wriggling daughter back on the floor.

‘I bet it’s hard work with three little ones,’ she says.

‘Yes, sometimes it is,’ I agree, back on my feet, shadowing Hope who has pulled herself up and is slowly cruising between chairs.

‘How did your son hurt his arm?’ Redhead asks, nodding towards Freddie.

‘He fell off the climbing wall in the school playground. It’s my fault,’ I add, ‘I should have been watching him.’

‘Well, we don’t have eyes in the back of our heads, do we? More’s the pity,’ she adds. ‘I took my son to the park after school and only looked away for a moment. The next thing I know he’s falling out of a tree.’

‘Oh, my goodness,’ I say. ‘Is he OK?’

‘Well, he said his leg hurt, so I rushed him straight here. It caused quite a stir in the park and everyone was so lovely, a couple of people even helped me carry him to the car. Anyway,’ she says, ‘he seems fine now, thank goodness. That’s him,’ she adds, pointing towards an excited little boy scoring goal after goal on the football table. With his feet. He looks a similar age to Jack – seven or eight years old – and he’s wearing a red school uniform.

‘Ollie! Get off the table! You’re not supposed to be up there,’ she shouts before turning back towards me. ‘The problem is he’s great at climbing up things but not so good at getting back down. Always seems to be falling from a height, my Ollie.’ She gets up to try to coax her son down, and I turn my attention to the wall, covered in posters and leaflets – a patchwork of medical information. *Top Tips for Managing Stress* catches my eye and I’m halfway through the list when chatty Redhead returns to her seat. ‘At least it isn’t too busy in here today,’ she says, looking around the waiting area. ‘Hopefully we won’t have to wait too long. It’s not a bad day to come to A&E,’ she adds, ‘the first day back at school. It never seems to get too busy on the first day back.’

‘Really?’ I ask, turning to face her.

‘Oh, yeah. I mean, obviously there are certain days of the year you definitely don’t want to be here. Fireworks Night – that goes without saying – and Halloween. I think

it's all the sugar – sends everyone doolally. We were here one Halloween when Ollie was a toddler, and it was horrendous. There were all these children running around in scary costumes, a woman literally collapsing in that corner over there, a small child literally dying over there, and all these kids puking into their trick or treat buckets. It was carnage. I told Ollie, I'm never bringing you here at Halloween ever again.'

'Christmas is just as bad,' I say, remembering. 'A few years ago, Jack, that's my eldest, he was so excited to open his presents, he slipped on the stairs and almost knocked himself out. My husband and I,' another glance at those stress-busting tips, 'I mean, my ex-husband, we were beside ourselves with worry. Luckily, Jack was fine, but we had to wait so long to see a doctor, I thought we'd be here until Boxing Day.'

'Thank goodness you weren't,' she says. 'Boxing Day is one of the worst days. Almost as bad as Christmas Eve. I think it's all the excitement. And the sugar, which never helps anything. Nor does tiredness. Have you ever been here on New Year's Day?'

'No,' I reply, after thinking about it for a moment.

'That's good,' she says. 'Try to keep it that way, because believe me, it's awful here then. All the kids have been up so late and when they're tired, of course they're going to slam their fingers in car doors and get their heads stuck in saucepans or what have you. We were here one New Year's Day, and it was rammed – standing room only – and I said to Ollie, never again.' I glance over at her son. Luckily he hasn't clambered back onto the football table because he

clearly has a death wish, or maybe he just enjoys spending his holidays with NHS staff. He's sitting on the ground with Jack now, helping to set up an elaborate car race.

'It's relentless, isn't it?' Redhead says. 'The things us parents have to deal with. We try our best, obviously, but you can't watch them every second of every day, can you? It's like when we were in the park earlier, I didn't think I had to keep my eyes on him constantly. I mean, why would I? We've been to the park hundreds of times, we're always there – it's his favourite place in the world.'

My eyes move back towards the overloaded wall of information. There are a few posters about breastfeeding, but I skip over them. Been there, done that.

'And of course there's Easter Sunday!' She's talking. Again. 'If you're going to throw that amount of sugar into a competitive version of hide and seek, you're asking for trouble. Personally,' she adds, 'I think everyone should sign a disclaimer before setting off on an Easter egg hunt and as for the summer holidays . . .'

I'm still listening but find my eyes keep moving away from the talkative lady with beautiful red hair who seems completely obsessed with sugar intake. I glance towards Freddie, who still looks fascinated with that peculiar toy. Jack and accident-prone Ollie are lying face down on the floor, playing demolition derby with the little cars. Hope is sitting by my feet, knocking two building blocks together, and my eyes are drawn back to the wall. It's a very haphazard display of information, with random posters covering every spare inch; a mish-mash of fragmented advice. *Seven Silent Symptoms of Sepsis* has been pinned at a weird angle, partly

covering something else, and I've nearly finished reading the list, when I recognise her smile. Almost completely obscured by silent symptoms, but not quite.

Redhead is still talking, recounting all the ways young children can break a bone on a beach, when I excuse myself and walk towards the wall. Peeling back the leaflet about sepsis, she's there. Charlotte. She looks so happy, her mouth turning upwards into a smile, her eyes sparkling. So alive. She's got that look on her face, that look she always has – just before she's about to laugh. I wonder what she's about to laugh at.

Bright green, sturdy-looking leather lace-ups appear next to my shoes and Redhead is there at my shoulder.

'Who's that?' she asks, sounding distracted, before turning to check on her son. She's probably terrified he's going to hurt himself. The poor woman really does need eyes at the back of her head.

'Her name was Charlotte,' I reply. 'She used to be a doctor here. She was killed last year. Hit by a car.'

'Oh, that's awful,' she says with a shiver.

'Yes,' I agree. 'I knew her,' I say, still staring at the poster. 'You may have seen her, actually, one of the times you came here with Ollie. She was so great with kids.' I feel tears in my eyes and wipe them away.

Redhead looks uncomfortable at my sudden outburst and sticks her hands deep into her pockets.

'That's really sad,' she says. 'But I don't think I remember her. There are a lot of doctors here.' She turns to check on Ollie, who thankfully hasn't dislocated anything in the last ten seconds, giving me time to wipe my eyes again.

‘She was my friend,’ I add. ‘We met at toddler group and our children went to the same school.’

‘What school was that?’ she asks. ‘St Michael’s?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought so,’ says Redhead, seeming relieved to get back onto less emotionally soggy ground. ‘I recognised your children’s uniform. My Ollie used to go to St Michael’s, but I moved him to Pond Street Primary because, to be honest, I didn’t like the attitude of some of the staff there and, also, I found the St Michael’s mums to be quite snooty. No offence. Not the mums like you, obviously. The other ones. The posh ones.’ We stand in the briefest moment of silence. ‘So, why is your friend on a poster?’ she asks.

‘I’m not sure,’ I reply, squinting to read the words under Charlotte’s face. ‘I think it’s about her charity work. Yes,’ I say, reading, ‘it talks about how she was training for the London Marathon when she died, raising money for meningitis research. People can still donate money in her name. Typical Charlotte.’ I take a step back and stare at her face. ‘Raising money for good causes even after she’s gone. She was an incredible person, and the most brilliant mum, somehow finding time to train for the Marathon and . . .’ the lump in my throat is immediate, ‘be my best friend.’ And certainly not the kind of person to leave a two-year-old kid in the house on his own. But if she wasn’t out running that night, what was she doing in the road? Why was she there?

‘Freddie?’

A nurse with a kind face has appeared in the waiting area, calling my son’s name.

‘Hi, this is Freddie,’ I say, pointing towards him. ‘He had a fall in the playground earlier and hurt his arm, but he seems fine now. I’m sorry if I’m wasting your time.’

‘Not at all, Mum,’ the nurse says, with a kind smile. ‘It’s like I always say – where there’s doubt, check it out.’

‘Yes,’ I say, glancing back at the image of Charlotte. ‘I think you’re right.’

4

An hour or so later, I'm turning the car into our road when Jack sees him first.

'Daddy! Daddy's here.'

Rowan is pacing up and down outside the house looking tanned and concerned. Wearing a Superdry hoodie I bought him years ago for his birthday. I park outside the house and as I get out of the car, his eyes lock onto mine and that concern is replaced with annoyance.

'Beth, why the hell don't you ever answer your phone?' he asks.

'I left it at home,' I reply. 'I thought I was only going to be out for ten minutes or so, collecting the boys from school. What are you doing here?'

'Emily called me. She said Freddie fell off the climbing wall and hurt his arm. I was worried.'

‘Daddy! Daddy!’ Jack’s out the car and looking happy. ‘Are we sleeping at your house tonight?’

‘Hi buddy,’ Rowan says as Jack jumps into his arms. ‘What’s this?’ he asks, ruffling Jack’s hair. ‘It’s on your jumper too. Is that paint?’

‘I think so,’ Jack smiles, as Rowan lowers him to the ground. ‘I think we did painting today, but I can’t remember. School was ages ago. Are we sleeping at your house tonight?’ he asks again.

‘Hello Daddy,’ shouts Freddie, clambering out the car, and as soon as I see his face, I find myself thinking about happiness. How it doesn’t need any invitation to arrive. No fanfare, no applause – when happiness wants to show up, it’s just there. ‘Hello Daddy,’ he says again, running towards my ex-husband.

‘Hi Fred,’ says his dad, ‘how’s your arm?’

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘Nothing broken, the doctor said. He’s fine.’

‘That’s good news,’ he says, carefully lifting Freddie for a cuddle, before placing him down and taking a step towards me. ‘So, what happened?’

‘When?’

‘How did Freddie hurt his arm?’

‘Like Emily said. He fell off the climbing wall in the school playground.’

‘But *how* did it happen?’ he asks. ‘Weren’t you keeping an eye on him?’

I open my mouth to answer but it’s easier to become distracted by his eyes. Almost blue, nearly green – same eyes I stared into on our wedding day, just before I grabbed the

microphone and started to talk. People said it was unconventional for the bride to make a speech and I laughed. Why wouldn't I stand up and tell everyone how much I loved my new husband? How he meant everything to me. This man with the most beautiful eyes. Eyes the same colour as the ocean, that day on our honeymoon when we went scuba diving off the coast of Mexico. I was so nervous that day, terrified that something would go wrong with my oxygen supply, that I wouldn't be able to breathe. But once we fell into the water, it was magical. Almost as though time didn't exist any more and there was nothing else, just me and Rowan. Holding hands and exploring a whole new version of life together. A better version of life; a life cocooned in my favourite colour. Almost blue, nearly green, where everything unfolds at its own pace, in its own time and . . .

'It could have been really serious, Beth,' Rowan says. 'What if he'd hit his head? Why weren't you keeping an eye on him?' Irritation, like happiness, doesn't need any invitation to arrive.

'I do my best, Rowan,' I say quietly. 'And I've been doing my best all summer, keeping *our* children safe, while you've been gallivanting with your new family.'

'Mummy!'

'Sssh, Jack. All I wanted to do this afternoon was pick the boys up from school and come home. Instead, I've been in the hospital, waiting and worrying for hours.'

'Mummy, please don't start fighting with Daddy!'

'I'm not, Jack,' I say. 'I'm just trying to explain something to Daddy because he doesn't collect you from school very often, does he? So, maybe he doesn't understand that

everyone lets their children play on the climbing wall. Even perfect people, like Emily.'

'Please, Mummy, don't start a fight,' Jack says again.

'It's OK, buddy,' says Rowan, pulling our eldest son towards him. 'You don't need to worry about any of this. Look, Beth,' he says, flicking those eyes back towards me. 'I'm sorry, OK? That was out of order. I've just been worried, you know? It must have been horrible at the hospital. Why don't the kids come back to stay with me tonight? Give you a break.'

'Yes!' shout Jack and Freddie. 'Can we, Mummy? Can we?'

'But it's not your day to have them,' I say, raising my voice to be heard.

'I know,' says Rowan. 'But you've had a tough day and you're right, you have had them most of the summer.'

'I don't know . . .'

'Please, Mummy,' say Jack and Freddie. 'Please can we go back with Daddy?'

'OK,' I say to Rowan as our sons start to cheer, 'but call me if you're worried about anything. The doctor said we should keep a careful eye on Freddie after his fall and take him back to the hospital if he starts acting weird.'

'How will we know the difference?'

'Jack! Do you want me to pack their overnight bags?' I ask. 'Clean school uniform for the morning?'

'No, don't worry,' he replies. 'They've got pyjamas and toothbrushes at mine, and Jade . . .' I wince at the sound of her name. Did he notice? ' . . . and I, we'll wash what they're wearing, ready for tomorrow.'

‘Will Jade make that dinner we like?’ asks Jack.

‘Will she, Daddy?’ adds Freddie. ‘The macaroni and cheese?’

‘We’ll see. Now, say goodbye to Mummy while I get my little princess out of the car.’

‘Are you taking Hope too?’ I ask and then I cough. Why does my voice sound weird? ‘I thought you’d just take the boys.’

‘I’ll take all three,’ he says, taking our daughter into his arms and giving her a kiss. ‘Give you a complete break, OK?’

‘Of course,’ I smile. Hollow smile. Hollow voice. ‘I just assumed, that’s all.’

‘Assumed what?’

‘That you’d leave me with Hope.’

‘Make the most of the peace and quiet,’ he says, strapping our daughter into his car. ‘They’ll all be back before you know it.’

I stand and wave until his car is completely out of sight and then I turn the key in the front door. Our yellow Labrador Wilfred is there instantly, wagging his tail and jumping up to kiss me. ‘Hello Wilfred,’ I say, as he knocks over the umbrella stand with his tail, ‘sorry to leave you on your own for so long. Looks like it’s just you and me tonight.’

I take him for a long walk and when we get home, I feed him, Hoover downstairs and sort out a load of washing. In the bathroom I look at my reflection in the mirror. If I wasn’t me, how old would I think I was? What kind of life would I think I lived? I think I’d notice my eyes first. The

amber flickers escaping from dark pools of burnt wood, suggesting an intensity that never seems to fade. Brown eyes shining out from the midst of dark shadows, surrounded by a myriad of fine lines and tiny thread veins and what's that on my chin – is that a spot? That wasn't there when I looked in the mirror this morning. *Did* I even look in the mirror this morning? Aren't I too old for spots? Hardly seems fair – spots and wrinkles cohabiting on my forty-year-old face. I look tired. Exhausted, even. Maybe I should light a scented candle and run a bath. I'm sure I won some bath salts on the tombola at the school Christmas fair. Have I still got them or did I donate them back to the tombola for the summer fair? It's too late to go out and buy anything now. I glance at my watch. Twenty past eight. The evening is slipping away, why am I wasting my precious free time staring into the mirror?

I wander down to the kitchen, flick the light on and glance at the large poster on the wall. *Turn that frown upside down*. What a stupid message. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to frame that thing? I take a bottle of white wine from the fridge and reach into a cupboard for a plastic mug when I remember. There are no children here. No manic scampering or footballs bouncing off walls. Replacing the plastic mug, I open the bottle and pour wine into a proper wine glass.

I take a gulp and another and she's there again, staring at me from the collage of photos on the fridge door. We're standing together, and I can remember exactly when and where – the first school run after Hope was born. She's cradling my baby daughter in her arms, and we're laughing.

I know I was happy then, back when Charlotte was still alive. This photograph has been on the fridge for the last year and a half, but I feel like I'm looking at it for the first time. It's not the face of a woman who would leave a child alone in the house. But then what was she doing in the road, standing in the path of that car? Another gulp of wine and a promise. Spoken out loud and made by me to my dear, dead friend.

'I don't think you went out for a run that night, Charlotte, and if there's doubt, check it out. I'm going to find out what happened to you.'

Eighteen Months Ago

'Oh Beth, she's heavenly,' Fara says. 'Congratulations!'

'Thank you,' I smile.

'Is that your new baby?' Emily shouts, rushing over. 'Oh, she's beautiful,' she says, giving me a hug.

'Thanks, Emily.'

'Yes, she's very cute, Beth.'

'Thanks, Danielle.'

'Where's this gorgeous baby I keep hearing about?' booms Charlotte, charging through the playground towards us. Her son Leo is fast asleep in his pushchair clutching a toy Spider-Man as Charlotte reaches us and peers into the pram. 'Oh wow, what a sweetheart. Well done, Beth,' she says. 'How are you feeling?'

'Bit sore,' I say, 'but over the moon!'

'I'm so happy for you,' Charlotte smiles, her face radiant. Her hair scraped back into a messy bun. 'Have you decided on a name yet?'