

Day 1,215

Thursday, 15 November 2018

I'm tidying the living room when he arrives. First, he pulls up outside my house in a grey car. Next, he walks up my path. He has a slim folder tucked under one arm and long legs. It only takes him three strides to reach the door.

At 10.57 a.m. the tall man rings my doorbell.

I like it when people are punctual. I don't get many visitors – my best friend Sadie and her kids James and Matilda, and the Tesco delivery man, are my only regulars. Sadie is often late and frazzled, but I let her off because she's a single mum with a busy job – a cardiac nurse at the biggest hospital in Glasgow. The Tesco delivery man is always right on time.

I take deep breaths, watch my feet walk to the door in their blue Converse. Look at my right hand as it reaches for the handle, grips, pushes, pulls. I draw the door towards me, slowly, and do a quick scan. Checked shirt, buttoned right up to the neck, under a navy duffel coat. A few years younger than me, I think. Or maybe just someone who benefits from fresh air and sunshine. He has dark hair, short at the sides and longer on top. A friendly face – open eyes and an easy smile, not forced.

I don't get a lot of visitors. But this one seems OK, on first impression.

He offers a hand. 'Meredith? I'm Tom McDermott from Holding Hands, the befriending charity. I've been looking forward to meeting you.'

I wish I could say the same, but of all the things I have to

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look forward to – and it’s a short list admittedly – this isn’t one of them. Meeting new people has never been a joy. Especially people who visit solely to make sure I’m not neglecting my personal care, or wasting away, or drinking vodka for breakfast. When the boxes have been ticked and the forms have been filled out, I’m really rather boring.

I shake Tom McDermott’s hand, because it’s the polite thing to do. He’s the first man to come to my house since Gavin – lovely, sweet Gavin, who was no match for my nightmares – but I don’t feel threatened. I don’t find Tom McDermott intimidating, in his checked shirt and duffel coat, standing on my doorstep.

Still, I don’t let him in. Not yet. Even though I invited him here, grudgingly, after Sadie left the leaflet on my kitchen table under a box of Tunnock’s Teacakes and I went through the motions. The same leaflet that Tom McDermott has just fished out of his folder and is holding up in front of me. I interlink my fingers behind my back in response to the large black capital letters: ‘WE’RE HERE TO HOLD YOUR HAND’. An act of defiance that only I’m aware of.

I look at the two people on the front of the leaflet. I know their faces well – I’ve seen them several times a day because they’re attached to the front of my fridge with a magnet in the shape of a heart. One is a middle-aged woman, the other a man who looks old enough to be her grandfather. He has cloudy eyes and a tuft of white hair on either side of his head, and looks tiny in his armchair, shoulders hunched up around his ears. They’re smiling at each other and – right on brand – holding hands.

‘I always thought befriending was for old people,’ I tell Tom McDermott, ready to label the leaflet as Exhibit A.

‘Actually, we try to reach out to anyone who might need a friend. Elderly people, teenagers, anyone in between.’

‘I have friends,’ I tell him, stretching the truth.

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‘Maybe you have room for another one?’

I think about this, about the way my tiny circle might not pass for a circle at all – unless cats count – and I’m not really concentrating on what he’s saying about training and risk assessments and codes of conduct. But I decide I’m curious enough to let him into my house.

I couldn’t move my almost-completed jigsaw of Gustav Klimt’s *The Kiss* from the coffee table in the living room, so I’d carefully pushed it against the wall. If Tom McDermott needs a table, we can move through to the kitchen.

I leave him there and go to make us tea. (‘No sugar – I’m sweet enough,’ he tells me with a wink, and somehow it comes across as quite endearing, not sleazy.) When I return, he’s kneeling down, looking at *The Kiss*.

‘How long did this take you?’ he asks.

‘A few days, just doing the odd half-hour here and there,’ I say, setting the tea tray on the floor. I’ve added a plate of chocolate biscuits, despite Tom McDermott claiming he’s sweet enough.

‘Amazing,’ he says, and I *think* he’s talking about the jigsaw, not the biscuits, but he reaches for a bourbon and takes a bite. He stays on the floor, his long legs crossed, and washes his biscuit down with a gulp of tea. For a total stranger, he’s making himself very comfortable in my living room. I perch on the end of the couch, my mug sending heat into my palms.

‘Meredith, it’s really good to meet you. Before we start chatting, let me give you some information about the charity. It was set up in 1988, right here in Glasgow, by a woman called Ada Swinney, whose mother was housebound due to dementia. Our mission today is exactly the same as Ada’s was back then – to offer company, friendship and support to anyone who needs it.’

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I don't know what to say, so I sip my tea.

'The most important thing, at all times, is that you feel comfortable and safe. At any time, if you don't, you can tell me to leave and I will – no questions asked!' He takes some forms out of his folder. 'Shall we get the boring stuff out of the way first?'

I answer all his questions and nod in all the right places until the forms are back where they belong.

'You're clearly a bit of a star at jigsaw puzzles,' he says. 'What else do you like to do with your time?'

After a few long seconds of Tom McDermott smiling – he has, I concede, kind eyes – and me looking blankly back at him, I say, 'I read a lot.'

'Well, I can see that!' He gestures at the books lining an entire wall of the room, then jumps to his feet in one surprisingly smooth motion for someone with those legs. 'Quite a variety you have here, Meredith. Plenty of classics . . . history . . . art . . . do you have an all-time favourite?'

'It's actually a poetry collection. Emily Dickinson.' I join him at the shelves and reach for a slim orange book, its spine soft and creased from decades of use, from the touch of fingers much older than mine. I bought it in my favourite second-hand bookshop; it has '*For Violet, ever yours*' handwritten on the inside cover. I've often wondered who Violet was, and why a book given to her with so much commitment ended up being available to me for two pounds. Whatever its story, I feel safe with it in my hand.

'Dickinson. She felt a funeral in her brain, didn't she? Genius.'

'You can borrow it, if you like.' I surprise myself by offering him the book.

'I would love to. Thank you, Meredith. I'll take very good care of it, and give it back to you the next time I see you.'

I'm a little taken aback. I expected him to say – politely, kindly – that he couldn't possibly take my favourite book. But by the time I've taken my seat back on the couch, he's tucked it

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into his folder and has helped himself to another chocolate biscuit.

‘Meredith, I know you haven’t left your house for a very long time,’ he says.

‘One thousand two hundred and fifteen days,’ I tell him.

‘A very long time,’ he says again.

‘Well, it’s flown by.’

‘You count the days?’

I shrug, feeling stupid. ‘I guess I have nothing to count down to, so I count up.’

I fold my arms across my body, well aware of the message that sends.

‘We don’t have to talk about that, if you don’t want to.’ He keeps his voice soft, a contrast to my sharpness. ‘I’m here to get to know you. I’m interested to learn about your life, what you like and don’t like, how you pass your time. And . . . well, maybe we can figure out a way to help you get back into the world?’

‘I am in the world,’ I say defiantly.

‘Yes, of course you are. But –’

‘And I have a cat. Fred.’

‘Fred? Astaire, Savage?’ He grins.

I don’t. ‘Just Fred.’

‘I love cats,’ he says. I’m beginning to think that Tom McDermott will agree with me no matter what I say. He thinks my jigsaw is amazing. He loves Emily Dickinson and cats. I’m also beginning to regret giving him my most treasured poetry collection. I might never see him – or that beloved, faded orange cover – again. I wonder if I could ask for it back. Maybe he’ll go to the bathroom and I could slip it out of his folder and put it back on the second shelf from the top, where it belongs.

But he shows no sign of going to the bathroom and wants to keep talking about cats.

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‘What happens if Fred gets sick?’ he asks.

Tom McDermott has underestimated me. I’ve been asked all these questions before.

‘Fred has never been sick,’ I say proudly. ‘But I have a very good friend, Sadie. Sadie would take Fred to the vet.’

‘Ah. That’s good. What else does Sadie do for you?’

‘She picks up my prescription once a month. That’s it. She’s my friend, not my carer.’ My shoulders feel tense. They’ve been frozen in place – somewhere near my ears – since I gave him my book. ‘I don’t need anything else.’

‘And you work . . . full-time?’

‘I’m a freelance writer, so it varies. But I’m kept busy.’

‘A writer? That sounds exciting.’

‘It’s not really. I don’t have bylines in the *New York Times* or anything. It’s just web content for businesses.’

‘Believe me, it’s exciting compared to what I used to do.’ He pulls a face. ‘I got made redundant from my job in finance last year. So I’m taking a bit of time out, trying to figure out what to do next.’

I nod. I’ve never been good at small talk.

‘What about your family, Meredith? Do they visit often?’

My stomach clenches. I take a gulp of my tea.

‘It’s complicated,’ I tell him.

‘I’m pretty good with complicated,’ he says, and his voice is gentle. ‘But we don’t have to go there, Meredith.’

‘I have a mother. And a sister. Fiona. Fee. She’s eighteen months older than me.’ I rush the words out of my mouth.

‘What’s your sister like?’ It’s a natural question, out of his.

‘Different from me. But I don’t know anything about her any more. We haven’t spoken for a long time. I don’t see her or my mother at all, actually.’

‘It *is* complicated,’ Tom says softly. Then he waits, and the fact that he’s giving me space makes me wonder if I can say

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more. But I can't find the right words, so I go back into the kitchen for more biscuits.

Half an hour later, I stand at my front door and wait patiently for Tom McDermott to leave, to take three strides down my garden path and get into his grey car and drive away. I'm exhausted from all the talking, all the questions, all the worrying about my book, all the pretending my life is a ten when the truth is that most days barely scratch the underside of a six.

He's taking his time to go. He's already thanked me profusely for my hospitality, looking straight into my eyes and telling me he'll be back to see me next week, if that's OK with me. Fred watches us from his favourite place, the comfy chair on the upstairs landing. It's the first man in the house for him too; I wonder if cats pick up on things like that. Part of me is pleased that he didn't come down to welcome Tom.

'Remember, there's no obligation on your part,' Tom says. 'If you hate my jokes, or can't afford all the biscuits I eat, you can tell me to sling my hook at any time. No hard feelings, I promise.'

'You've got my favourite book, so I suppose I'll need to see you again.'

'Very true.' He smiles. 'And I'm looking forward to seeing what jigsaw you're working on next.'

'A mosaic tile design,' I tell him. 'It's intricate.'

'Well, I can't wait to see it. Until then, Meredith.'

I raise my hand to bid him farewell, but he pauses on the doorstep.

'One more thing, Meredith . . . if you don't mind? I'm curious – there must be something you used to do that you miss? One thing you can't do at home?'

It's started to rain heavily. Tom McDermott buttons up his duffel coat. Behind his head, the dense, grey clouds of the

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late-afternoon sky move towards me. I'm aware of them, without looking directly at them. I inch backwards, away from the open.

'Swimming. I love swimming,' I say softly.

'I'm a terrible swimmer,' he says. 'I can do doggy-paddle, and that's about it. Anyway . . .' He pulls the collar of his coat tighter round his neck and shakes a raindrop off the tip of his nose. 'I'll be swimming home at this rate. Goodbye, Meredith. You take care.'

'You too, Tom McDermott,' I whisper as I close the front door.

That night, I dream I'm doing doggy-paddle in a huge lake with Emily Dickinson. Tom McDermott and the old man from the leaflet are sitting on the side, watching and waving and eating chocolate biscuits.

Day 1,219

Monday, 19 November 2018

I check the clock. 8.19 a.m. Almost right on schedule. Plenty of time to exercise before putting my eggs on to boil at 8.54 a.m. Two eggs, five minutes, for the perfect runny yolk. It took me three days to master it and it was worth the trial and error.

But before perfect eggs, twenty minutes of cardio. What a revelation it was, the discovery that a twenty-minute workout each day – with a rest day of choice – is all I need to stay fit. I have a few favourite YouTube workouts, but I mix it up now and then, just for fun. And the beauty of doing it at home, alone, is that nobody sees how out of breath I get after six rounds of burpees.

I always follow cardio with relaxation: stretching, deep breathing and positive affirmations. ‘I accept myself unconditionally’ is one of the recent additions to my repertoire. This morning, yet again, I struggle to get on board with it; it doesn’t quite roll off the tongue. Diane, my therapist, tells me to stick with it, that it has to become a habit to have an impact. I told her that I didn’t think affirmations were supposed to be lies, which led to a long conversation about self-sabotaging behaviours.

Morning workout done, and with my eggs simmering, I drop two slices of sunflower-seed bread into the toaster until they turn golden brown. I give them a light spread of butter, slice them neatly into soldiers and pop them on to a plate. Next, the eggs go into their spotted cups, I crack the tops (the best part)

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and sit down at the table with tea in my favourite mug, the one that matches my egg cups. It's 8.59 a.m. Perfect. I get a kick out of these little achievements.

I do a few hours of work offline, have a cheese and pickle sandwich for lunch, then log on. I try to limit my time online because I know how easy it is to get stuck there. A digital hour is like ten seconds in the real world. I wrote a schedule once, but quickly realized it didn't allow for those spontaneous Google moments that pop up on a regular basis, like when you need to know how to make a béchamel sauce or can't remember the name of Henry VIII's fifth wife (he popped into my head when I was thinking about misogyny one day, and I always get the Catherines mixed up).

I know some people think the internet is the root of all evils, but I couldn't survive without it. Literally. I can get anything I want delivered to my house, often within twenty-four hours. Fresh milk and tampons and batteries and books. I don't even have to answer the door, if I don't feel like seeing anyone that day. I have a box attached to the front of it, big enough for parcels. I fitted it myself, I'm proud to say.

Luckily I found a clever app that records the time I spend online and disconnects me when I reach my daily limit of eight hours. Up to six of those are spent working, depending on how many projects I have on the go, which leaves two hours for misogynistic kings and everything else. Even after all these months, it still surprises me when I hit the limit. But it makes me use my time.

After catching up with the news (it's International Men's Day, which leads me down a rabbit hole of opinion pieces about toxic masculinity), I sign into StrengthInNumbers, the online support group I joined after Sadie emailed me a link with 'CHECK THIS OUT!!!' in the subject line. That was just one of her bright ideas. She has a lot of those, sending

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me links to new books or articles she hopes will give me the push I need to become a Normal Person again. She emails me reviews of new restaurants, texts me with Groupon deals for spa weekends and afternoon tea deals. Just in case, she writes. I delete them without reading them. I know Sadie means well, but I don't want to spend my free time reading research papers on social anxiety disorder or books about agoraphobia by people with a string of random letters after their names.

For the record I don't have either of those things.

I have to admit that StrengthInNumbers was one of Sadie's better ideas. I like the anonymity of making connections online, and it's comforting to know I'm not the craziest person in the country. Today, ninety-eight people are active – about normal for a Monday morning. Evenings and weekends are much busier, for obvious reasons. I'm lucky to be able to work from home and set my own hours, so I'm not tied to the nine-to-five grind. That's one thing I definitely don't miss. I often work late – I like being awake when the city sleeps.

I check in with a few of the regulars and ask about their weekends. Janice (WEEJAN) had a difficult time with her wayward teenage daughter, but she managed to resist eating all the chocolates in the Quality Street tin (she only had eight, and didn't make herself sick afterwards). Gary (RESCUEMEPLZ) says he went on a bender – despite his best intentions – but what else can he do while he's on an eighteen-month waiting list for a counsellor? I tell him it took twelve months for me to get my therapist Diane, who's not exactly my favourite person in the world but I certainly never feel any worse after talking to her. Janice says he could get a private therapist for fifty pounds an hour. Gary says times are tough and he can't afford to pay fifty pounds an hour. Janice points out that he probably spends that

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on beer and vodka in a week, which doesn't go down well. I leave them to argue about the dangers of self-medicating and the strengths and weaknesses of the NHS. They'll go around in circles, as usual. I'm just about to log off when a private chat window opens on my screen.

CATLADY 29: Hello?

I hover my cursor over the profile picture – a fluffy white cat, which makes me smile. I check her details: female, 29, Glasgow.

JIGSAWGIRL: Hi! 😊

CATLADY 29: I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing. It's my first time here . . . I just need someone to talk to . . . 😞

JIGSAWGIRL: Hey, that's OK. I'm Meredith.

CATLADY 29: Hi, Meredith. I'm Celeste.

JIGSAWGIRL: Hi, Celeste. I see you're in Glasgow? It's always nice to meet a fellow Weegie.

CATLADY 29: You're in Glasgow too? Oh, that makes me feel like I'm talking to a real person. Whereabouts do you live?

JIGSAWGIRL: I'm definitely real. 😊 I live in the East End.

CATLADY 29: I've just moved into a new place in the city centre. Near the art school?

JIGSAWGIRL: Seriously? That's my old stomping ground. Good times!

CATLADY 29: I'm on Sanderson Street.

JIGSAWGIRL: No way! That's where I lived. Number 48. Flat A.

CATLADY 29: Meredith, you won't believe this. I'm in 48D.

JIGSAWGIRL: OMG! How crazy is that? The flat above!

CATLADY 29: I know, right? When did you live there?

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JIGSAWGIRL: I moved out about five years ago. Decided it was time to take the plunge and buy my own place. Do you like it there?

CATLADY 29: I love the location. Tiny flat, though. Hardly big enough to swing a cat.

JIGSAWGIRL: LOL! I remember. Speaking of cats . . . who is the cutie in your profile picture?

CATLADY 29: Ah, that's my mum's cat. Lucy. No pets allowed here, unfortunately 😞

JIGSAWGIRL: I have a cat. He's called Fred.

CATLADY 29: Aww . . . you're so lucky! You'll need to put him on your profile picture so I can see him!

JIGSAWGIRL: I will! He deserves to be shown off 😊

CATLADY 29: It's nice to meet you, Meredith. What brings you here?

My fingers move quickly over the keyboard, giving my stock answer.

JIGSAWGIRL: Friendship and support. I have some mental health issues.

CATLADY 29: I hope that wasn't prying?

JIGSAWGIRL: Not at all. 😊

CATLADY 29: 😊 So, how does it work on here?

JIGSAWGIRL: Well, there are different channels for different things. Depression, addiction, PTSD . . . everything really. Those are monitored and moderated by volunteers. There are lots of advice pages as well, with links to professional helplines and resources. And you can also chat privately to people, individually or in groups. Like we are now.

CATLADY 29: It's quite daunting, to be honest.

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JIGSAWGIRL: Hey, it's OK. I can't promise to help, but I can definitely listen, if you want to talk about anything.

I imagine her looking at her screen, wondering whether to confide in a stranger. Trying to decide whether sharing whatever it is that's been occupying her thoughts or giving her nightmares will make her feel better or worse. That's something I can't give an answer to. After almost two years, I still haven't fully opened up to Janice or Gary.

CATLADY 29: Actually, I think I'd just like to chat about cats for a while, if that's OK?

JIGSAWGIRL: I can't think of anything I'd rather do. 😊

We end up chatting for ages, not just about our mutual love of cats but about Liza, who still lives in 48B and hangs her wet knickers over her windowsill to dry. I tell Celeste I'd have thought she'd have learned her lesson after a gust of wind blew her black-lace thong into the path of the number 60 bus, circa 2002. Celeste tells me she doesn't think Liza wears black-lace thongs any more and sends me multiple laughing face emojis, and I laugh out loud at the memory.

I realize that Sadie will be here soon – she texted me last night to say she'd pop in after picking James up from school. Before I sign off, I tell Celeste it's been really nice to chat to her, and I'm not just being polite.

Sadie arrived halfway through the first year of secondary school, a head taller than all the boys and with an attitude as bold as her hairstyle. So blonde it was almost white, she wore it close to her head, shaped around her ears. The other girls in our class looked at her disdainfully from behind their permed curtains, but she reminded me of the models in Mama's Freemans catalogue. I didn't have the bouncy curls or Sadie's cool crop;

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Mama refused to pay for such luxuries. My hair was long and straight, the same boring colour it had always been.

Mr Brookes sat Sadie next to me in English, and after a quick grilling (yes, I watched *Twin Peaks*, I definitely preferred *Home and Away* to *Neighbours*, my favourite New Kid on the Block was Donnie, but Jordan was a close second), we were friends.

‘You passed the test,’ she told me a few years later.

‘You failed mine, but I felt sorry for you,’ I deadpanned.

‘We’re like salt and pepper,’ she said. ‘Totally different, but we come as a pair.’

She visits me as often as she can, sometimes with the kids in tow. James and Matilda divide their time between Sadie and her ex-husband Steve, who’s a guitarist in a Led Zeppelin tribute band and left her for a fan six months after Matilda was born. Sadie is feisty. Her response to Steve when he announced his imminent departure over cereal one Saturday morning was: ‘You actually have a fan?’ After he left with his battered suitcase, Sadie marched into the garage and drenched his prized Gibson Les Paul in pastel pink paint. She snapped a selfie with the guitar in one hand, middle finger raised just in case he didn’t quite sense the tone, along with the caption ‘This will remind you of your daughter. It’s the same colour as her nursery walls’.

That was about a year ago and things are as amicable as they can be when adultery and abandonment form part of the bigger picture. Steve’s fan left him only a few weeks after falling for his riffing skills, and he went back to the family home to beg Sadie’s forgiveness, but she’d already changed the locks. He tried to serenade her through the letter box, and she blasted Red Hot Chili Peppers on Spotify, screaming, ‘John Frusciante – now he’s a guitarist!’

Sadie has one weekend a month without the kids and she tries to cram in as much as possible. She popped in to see me once between her third and fourth dates of the day (lunch and

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dinner; breakfast and brunch were done and dusted). ‘I have a very narrow dating window,’ she told my raised eyebrows. ‘Stop judging, stick the kettle on and I’ll tell you all about Larry who still lives with his mother.’

I don’t judge Sadie, not really. Not any more than everybody judges everybody else. If anything, I’m fascinated by her dating life. It’s been so long since I went on a date, it feels like a lifetime ago. ‘You should join an app,’ Sadie told me once. ‘Just for a laugh. You never know – you might meet someone that will make you burst through that front door. I’ll come over to see you and find a Meredith-shaped hole in it.’

I laughed awkwardly. We both knew that it would take more than that for me to leave the house.

The thought of staying at home for three days, let alone three years, is so alien to Sadie that she didn’t quite believe it for the first month. Until she turned up one evening and I was lying under the kitchen table. At that point she took it pretty seriously.

Equally difficult for Sadie to accept is that I’m happy like this. Or at least, I’m happier than I was during the whole lying-under-the-table phase. It could be worse than scratching the underside of a six. I think she’s got the message, but we still go through the motions now and then.

‘What about people?’ she says.

‘What people?’ I say.

‘Other people! People you meet when you’re out. Random people who make your life more interesting.’

‘Random people have never made my life interesting.’

‘Remember that night . . . when we met that guy who read our palms?’

‘The guy who said you were going to become a chef?’

‘It could still happen!’

‘Well, I don’t think I’m going to have six kids.’

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'You never know.'

'I know that much.'

'OK, so he was a terrible fortune teller. But don't you miss those nights? Meeting ridiculous, interesting, crazy people?'

'Sadie, I don't remember half of them. And they really weren't all that interesting.'

Her face falls, and I feel bad. The people we met were only part of the story. We always created our own fun, Sadie and I, going from bar to bar, laughing and dancing and mapping out our lives.

'Don't you miss eye contact?' She says it quietly, as if she's scared I'm going to cry.

'I'm having that with you, now,' I tell her gently.

'Yes, but you must be sick of my eyes.'

'Never. Your eyes are beautiful. They change colour depending on your mood.'

She goes cross-eyed and sticks out her tongue. 'Are they beautiful now?'

I smile at her, my funny friend who'd do anything for me.

Like a dog with a bone, she's not finished. 'What about fresh air?'

'I have my windows open all the time, and I often stick my head out the back door for a nice big gulp of Glasgow's finest.'

'Meredith, don't take the piss.'

'I'm not.'

And so it goes, until one of us gets bored and we start talking about other things.

'I hate seeing you like this,' she said to me last Christmas Eve, after we exchanged gifts, pulled crackers and shared a tight hug. She was going to pick James and Matilda up from Steve's and go home to start preparing for lunch with her family the next day.

I stepped back from her and sighed. 'Like what?'

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‘Like . . . alone.’

‘I’m not alone, Sadie. I have Fred.’ Ever supportive, he mewed loudly from the kitchen. ‘And I’m not lonely or miserable. I have been, but I’m not right now.’

‘Nobody should be alone on Christmas Day,’ she told me in the cross voice she uses to hide more complicated emotions.

‘I have Fred,’ I said again. ‘I’m going to watch *Some Like It Hot* and start my new jigsaw. I can’t wait.’

‘You and your jigsaws!’ Her voice was less cross. She punched me lightly on the arm before closing the front door behind her. I stood there for a while, my hand pressed against my side of the frame. Sometimes when she leaves, it feels as if all the life has been sucked out of the house.

Today, James has a cold, Matilda has a new tooth, and Sadie has a hangover. ‘We won’t stay long,’ she promises as they discard hats and coats and boots all over my hall. Fred has no time for children; he’s hiding under my bed.

‘What have you been up to?’ I ask her. ‘You look worn out,’ I add, the way only lifelong friends can. ‘Actually . . .’ I look at her closely. ‘You also look *amazing*. Your eyes are shining.’

‘I’ve met someone,’ she whispers, unable to stop the smile that spreads across her face. She gives me the look that tells me this isn’t a conversation for little ears. By the time she’s emptied a bag of toys on the living-room floor and unwrapped a biscuit for each of the kids, I’ve made us tea and piled my favourite vintage plate – one of my best eBay wins – with grown-up treats.

‘I can’t eat a thing,’ Sadie says between gulps of her tea. ‘Ooh, these do look good, though. Maybe just one.’ She takes a bite of chocolate and peanut butter brownie. ‘Mer, this is incredible.’

‘Yes, but tell me about your someone,’ I say.

‘Colin,’ she says, and I swear her cheeks flush and her eyes

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sparkle when she says his name. ‘We met online, two weeks ago. We’ve had three dates. I’ve never met anyone like him.’ She reaches across the table and grabs my hand. ‘I’m so happy, Mer.’

Over two cups of tea, she tells me that Colin is forty-two, a joiner, divorced, has no kids, but is absolutely fine with dating a single mother (‘Unlike most of the idiots I meet,’ she adds). He’s generous, he’s funny, he’s self-deprecating, he’s tall, and he doesn’t give two shits about the Old Firm. Basically he’s Sadie’s ideal man. ‘He’s completely different from Steve,’ she says. ‘Mer, I think I could really fall for him. Can you believe it?’

I return her grin; it’s contagious. And yet her excitement reminds me of how deprived I am of such a chunk of the spectrum of normal human emotion. When I think about Gavin, I remember what it was like to be in a relationship, but not how it *felt*. As if it happened to someone else who told me about it at the time. My life is divided into before and after, and the before remains out of my grasp.

Matilda toddles into the kitchen, chocolate smeared across her face. She launches herself at me, buries her head in my lap.

‘Oh god, you’re covered in chocolate!’ Sadie jumps up. ‘Let me grab some wipes and get you cleaned up. Tilly, come here, you wee rascal.’

‘Sadie, it’s fine,’ I tell her, ruffling the curls that are now tickling my chin. Nobody has been this close to me for a long time. I wrap my arms loosely round Matilda’s wriggling body, savour her biscuity little-girl scent. I know she’ll have moved on to something else in a minute. While Sadie rummages through her collection of bags in the hall, I look at Matilda’s tiny feet, encased in striped tights, her chocolate-tipped fingers. I tickle her rounded belly and she giggles. I laugh too, and she looks up at me.

‘Let me see your teeth,’ I say, and she opens her mouth wide, throws her head back to give me a better look.

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‘Wow! You have lots of big teeth!’ She nods enthusiastically, her mouth still wide open. Her blue eyes fix on mine, and she stays surprisingly still, holding my gaze until Sadie barrels into the room.

‘Aw, look at you two, having a moment!’ she coos, but the next thing I know she’s swept Matilda up into her own arms, transferred her into the living room, and the moment is over. I feel cold suddenly, without her warm body next to mine. I pull the sleeves of my sweater down over my hands and cross my arms over my abdomen, trying to give myself the heat I never get from anyone else. I sit like that, cold and serious with a painful lump in my throat, until Sadie is back in the room.

An hour later, when Sadie and the kids have gone, I follow their trail around my home, sweeping up crumbs, wiping chocolate fingerprints from surfaces, putting things back in their rightful place. I know Sadie finds it hard to relax when she’s here with the kids. I think she thinks the mess they make bugs me, but it doesn’t. ‘Your place is immaculate!’ she always says, and sometimes it sounds like an accusation.

It’s true, but what does she expect? It’s only me here, with a very particular ginger cat who has fastidious toilet habits and cleans himself several times a day. One plate and one fork in the sink does not take long to wash. It takes me days to fill the laundry basket. I create very little waste. And in any case, I like things to be in order. I feel out of sorts if I’m living in clutter.

But the kids’ mess is different. It reminds me that I have people in my life who care. Who’ll keep coming back into my home for as long as I’m here and leave a trace of themselves behind. Tidying up after them gives me a taste of what it would be like to be a mother. To have small people relying on me to keep them clean, warm, happy and safe. It hurts to think about that too much.

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I clean the kitchen table, think about Sadie curled up on her couch, grinning at her phone. At those early relationship texts that cause your heart to leap. I don't know if my heart will ever leap again.

As I'm returning the dustpan and brush to the cupboard under the sink, I spot Matilda's yellow sippy cup in the big plant pot in the corner of the kitchen. I wonder why she chose that spot to hide it. I think about leaving it there for her to discover the next time she visits. Instead, I take it into the living room and put it in the centre of my bookshelf. I want to be able to see it, when I'm sitting there at night, doing a jigsaw or reading a book. It looks out of place in the room and perfectly at home at the same time.

Day 1,222

Thursday, 22 November 2018

Tom, his big smile and his duffel coat are back.

'I'm so sorry, Meredith,' he says as he sits down on my couch. 'I forgot your Emily Dickinson book.'

My heart sinks. I would have cancelled today, if it hadn't been for my book. I like Tom, but I worked late last night and I'm not in the mood to chat.

'Oh, don't worry,' I say woodenly. 'I'll make tea.'

While I'm waiting for the kettle to boil, I stare at my reflection in the oven door. Do oven doors make you look older? I have no idea, but there's definitely the burden of something on my face today that I've not seen before. I'll be forty in a few months. The only man in my life is here because he makes friends with complete strangers while he figures out what he wants to do for a real job.

I pour the tea, pile the biscuits on a plate and trudge back through to the living room, where I find Fred lying on Tom's lap, legs akimbo, purring loudly. I stare at him. Clearly he's now more than happy to welcome Tom into our home.

'Doesn't he love getting his belly rubbed?' Tom grins at me.

Fred glances in my direction as I put the tea tray on the coffee table, then turns his attention back to his new best friend.

Judas, I think.

'How's your week been, Meredith?'

I shrug. 'Same as usual.'

Tom reaches for his tea, and Fred jumps off his lap. He does

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a figure of eight round my ankles, and I reach down to rub his head, letting him know I forgive his minor indiscretion.

‘You know what I’d love to do? A jigsaw. I haven’t done one since I was a kid, and I don’t know how good I was at them then, but I’d like to give it a go. Are you up for it?’

I realize that I am, actually, up for it. I’ve finished *The Kiss* but not started on the mosaic tile design yet. And at the very least, a jigsaw might distract Tom from asking any more tricky questions. ‘Do you want to pick one?’ I point to the boxes on the lower shelves of my bookcase.

He chooses quickly, instinctively – Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence’s magnificent cathedral, in a thousand pieces. ‘That’s a tough one,’ I tell him. ‘So much detail.’

‘I like a challenge,’ he tells me. ‘Anyway, my teammate is a pro.’

I move the tea tray on to the floor and spread the jigsaw pieces across the table. ‘Always start with the edges,’ I tell him. ‘But first we separate the colours. It makes it so much easier.’

We work in silence for a few minutes, creating order from the tiny parts of the Florentine landmark. He collects the light colours; I gather up the dark.

‘It took more than a hundred and thirty years to build,’ I tell him. ‘The huge dome was always part of the plan, but it took them a while to figure out how to do it, so it was left exposed for years.’

‘Wow. The view from the top must be amazing.’

‘Let’s look for edges now,’ I tell him, but I’m thinking of myself walking the hundreds of small, narrow steps to the top of the cathedral. Of how tiny I would be, compared to the Florentine skyline, but how big it would feel when I finally reached the summit. Like being on the huge roller coaster at the Camelot Theme Park when we were kids. Our bare legs dangling at the highest point, Fee liked to point out what she could

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see on the ground, laughing at how tiny everybody was. All I wanted to look at was the sky.

We lose track of time, and Tom ends up staying longer than an hour. 'I'm sorry, Meredith. You must have things to be getting on with.'

'It's OK. Time flies when you're trying to build a cathedral.' I look down at our work, edges complete, the cloudy sky beginning to take shape.

He laughs loudly, an unfamiliar sound in my quiet little house. 'Meredith, you're funny.'

I fuss with the tea tray, feeling embarrassed. 'Nobody has ever said that to me before.'

'Sometimes people don't point out the obvious. But it's one of my best qualities.' He winks at me. 'I'm sorry again about your book. I can pop it through your door tomorrow when I'm passing?'

I think about it. 'Don't worry. Just bring it next week.'

Day 1,225

Sunday, 25 November 2018

A question I get asked a lot is, doesn't time drag? I swear, it doesn't. At least, no more than I imagine it does for anyone else. Some days and weeks and months slip through my fingers like sand. I have the same number of hours in the day as everyone and I don't have a partner or children to whittle away at them. I spend around three minutes a day getting to work, not three hours like some people. But I still sometimes get to the end of the week and I haven't cleaned the wooden slatted blinds in the living room, or removed the chipped polish from my toenails, or opened the pile of mail growing on the windowsill. There are always things I never get around to doing, like replacing the seal around the bath and organizing my wardrobe by season. Living a solitary life with minimal interruptions doesn't necessarily make me more productive than anyone else. Some days, I don't even take a shower.

Sunday is the hardest day, but I do what I can to fill the empty space. I get the papers delivered, separate the sections and spread them across the kitchen table. I bake half a dozen scones and fill the teapot, even though it's just me. Scones and plates and knives and napkins, and it can pass for a family table. Hands grabbing to get the sports section or the glossy supplement. Passing the butter dish and leaving crumbs in the raspberry jam. Chatter and laughter over the low hum of the radio. I wonder what Fee's doing today, whether she's thinking of me.

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Maybe she and Lucas and Mama are eating scones and drinking tea together. Or heading to the pub for Sunday lunch with all the trimmings. I don't want to be there, but I do want Fee here. The old Fee, at least. The Fee I shared a bedroom – and sometimes a bed – with for more than half my life. The Fee I walked down the aisle. The Fee who made me feel safe, until she didn't. Briefly I want her here so much my chest hurts. Then I remember why she's not, and my scone turns to stone in my mouth.

‘Why don’t we have any photographs of us as babies?’ I asked Fiona.

‘We do,’ she said.

‘We do?’

‘Mama has a box in her wardrobe. It has some old stuff in it. Polaroids. There’s one of you and me in the bath. You were a fat baby.’

‘I want to see it,’ I said, ignoring the dig.

I was fourteen, had my first serious boyfriend, and spending time with his family had made me look closer at my own. Normal was chatting at the breakfast table. Normal was telling the truth, even when it hurt. Normal was family pictures.

Jamie’s mum had pictures everywhere: on the mantelpiece, attached to the fridge door with magnets, lovingly presented in albums and pulled out at every opportunity to embarrass the kids. She’d created a gallery on the staircase wall, where all the professional photographs (family portraits, graduations and weddings) were displayed, carefully arranged in matching silver frames. I’d see her make minuscule adjustments to them whenever she went up or down the stairs – a little housekeeping en route to the bathroom. It was the professional portraits that fascinated me the most. It had never occurred to me that people would actually pay other people to take photographs of them in their best clothes, with freshly styled hair, in front of pastel-coloured backgrounds. The photograph of Jamie the toddler on his dad’s knee, sitting next to his mum and big sister, gave me a glimpse into another type of family. Their

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faces were shiny with joy. No empty eyes. No simmering resentment.

I stayed with Jamie longer than I should have, because being around his family made me happy. When we split up, I missed his mum more than I missed him. Sometimes, I'd take a detour to my part-time job at the chippy so I could pass their house. Even when the living-room curtains were drawn, I could feel the warmth from inside. I craved it.

'Tell me more about the photographs,' I demanded, switching the telly off.

Fiona sighed, but turned to face me on the couch, her arms crossed. 'Why? They're just ancient pictures.' But I could see through the blasé act. She was pleased she knew something I didn't. We didn't have many secrets, not yet. We'd shared a room for as long as I could remember. I knew she wore her best bra on a Friday (purple, lacy). I knew she sometimes cried in bed when she thought I was asleep.

I shrugged. Two could play that game. 'Whatever. I'll just go and find them, see for myself.'

My sister jumped to her feet. 'I'll show you,' she said.

We crept upstairs. I don't know why, as Mama was at bingo and wouldn't be back for hours. Even so, her presence was felt. She was every creak on the staircase, every rattle of the window frame. She was nowhere and everywhere, all at once.

I hadn't been in her bedroom for months. It smelled like nail polish and cigarettes, the dressing-table mirror was dusty. I turned away from it. It felt strange to see myself in her space. This was not somewhere I'd ever felt welcome. It was Fiona I had gone to when I wet my bed or had a nightmare.

'Come on,' Fiona said impatiently, pulling me towards the wardrobe. She stood on her tiptoes to reach the top shelf and grabbed an old shoebox.

I expected to have time to go carefully through its contents,

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