FIRST DAY OF MY LIFE

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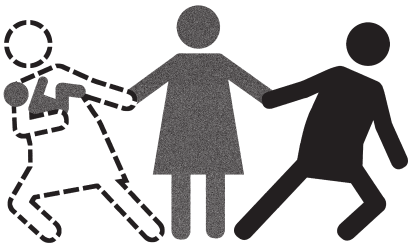
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For Mum, Dad and Helen

Prologue

OPERATOR: Emergency. Which service? Fire, police or ambulance?

CALLER: (*breathless*) Police!

OPERATOR: Connecting you now.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: You're through to the police. What is the address or location of your emergency?

CALLER: (*hysterical*) Someone's taken her! Someone's taken my baby!

POLICE CALL HANDLER: Can you repeat that please?

CALLER: My baby! She's gone! Please, you need to help me!

Caller breaks down in tears.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: OK, I need you to listen to me. Can you tell me your exact location?

CALLER: (*inaudible – voice muffled*)

POLICE CALL HANDLER: I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that. Can you say that again, please?

CALLER: I'm in Newfield. Newfield, Nottingham. The BP garage on Larwood Avenue. Please, you need to do something. They've got my baby.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: A unit is on their way. Can I get some more details from you? What's your name?

CALLER: It's Caroline, Caroline Sinclair.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: OK, Caroline. When did you realize your baby was missing?

CALLER: Just now. I came back to the car and she was gone. I was only inside for a few minutes. Oh God . . .

Caller starts crying again.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: How old is the baby?

CALLER: (*inaudible*)

POLICE CALL HANDLER: Caroline, how old is the baby?

CALLER: She's twelve weeks.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: And what's her name?

CALLER: It's Olivia.

Caller becomes hysterical again.

POLICE CALL HANDLER: Try not to panic, Caroline. A unit will be with you very soon.

CALLER: Tell them to hurry, please! I just want my baby back. I just want my baby.

PART ONE
FRANKIE

Chapter 1

'Jojo, it's me. Where the flip are you? I've got to be at the salon by midday, remember? If you're not here by eleven, I'm going without you, OK?'

I hang up and place my phone face down on the table.

'Still here?' my eighteen-year-old brother Luca asks, making me jump.

'It's not polite to sneak up on people,' I tell him as he lumbers into the kitchen, wearing nothing but a pair of grimy-looking boxer shorts.

'As if I'd waste my time,' he retorts, opening the fridge, then letting out a lingering belch as he peruses the contents.

'You could at least put a T-shirt on,' I say, scrunching up my nose in disgust.

'Are you joking? It's thirty-three degrees already,' he replies, shutting the fridge and opening the freezer below. He sticks his hand into the almost-empty bag of ice cubes and pulls out a fistful, stuffing them into his mouth.

'I hope you washed your hands.'

'Maybe. Maybe not,' he says, grinning as he crunches down on the ice.

'You're disgusting.'

'Why, thank you,' he says, performing a little bow.

I drag one of Mum's rubbish magazines across the table towards me and pretend to concentrate on an article about a woman who's convinced her goldfish is actually her dead husband, while Luca bangs about making toast.

Mum and Dad purposefully had Luca and me close together (there's just eighteen months between us), in the hope we'd get on. Their plan backfired spectacularly. In fact, Mum reckons if bickering were an Olympic sport, the two of us would have a clutch of gold medals by now.

I didn't think it was possible, but just lately Luca's been even more of a pain than usual. He picked up his A level results last week, and despite barely revising got more than enough points to secure his place at Bristol. He's been lording it about ever since, making out he's God's gift to academia.

'You know what your problem is, Frankie?' he says, leaning against the sink while he waits for his toast to pop up.

'Enlighten me,' I say, rolling my eyes.

'You've got no tolerance.'

'Now that's where you're wrong. I've got no tolerance for you, Luca Ricci.'

'Nah, you're the same with everyone. No wonder Jojo's ditched you.'

'Erm, excuse me?'

'I heard you leaving that arsey voicemail just now.'

I close the magazine. 'So you *were* eavesdropping on me?'

'Don't flatter yourself, Frankie, you're not that interesting. I had no choice. You've got a voice like a foghorn.'

'It's called projection,' I snap. 'And for your information, I wasn't being arsey, Luca, I was being direct. Jojo's nearly an hour late.'

I gesture at the oven clock. 10:59.

'Maybe she went to school without you,' Luca suggests, slathering butter on his toast.

'And why would she do that? We had an arrangement.'

Jojo was due to call for me at 10 a.m. From here, we were going to walk to school together, pick up our GCSE results, then celebrate/commiserate* (*delete as appropriate) over a McDonald's breakfast before my shift at the hair salon, reconvening in the early evening for a party at our classmate Theo's house.

'*We had an arrangement*,' Luca repeats in a high-pitched voice.

I chuck the magazine at him. He dodges out of the way just in time, leaving it to land in the sink.

'When are you going to uni again?' I ask, standing up.

'You'll miss me when I'm gone.'

'Yeah, right,' I mutter, hoisting the slightly soggy magazine out of the washing-up bowl.

I deposit it on the table and glance back at the oven. 11:00.

'Looks like you're on your own,' Luca says, wiping his buttery fingers on his boxer shorts.

'Oh, piss off,' I reply, picking up my phone and marching out of the kitchen.

'Good luck!' he yells after me. 'Something tells me you're gonna need it!'

*

Swearing under my breath, I slam the front door behind me and set out across the green that separates our row of houses from the main road. Not that it's especially green right now. We're in the midst of a massive heatwave, and every patch of publicly owned grass in Newfield, the town where I live, has been bleached a dirty shade of yellow.

I thought it was amazing at first. After a damp, miserable start to the summer, I rejoiced at the rocketing temperatures and record hours of sunshine. Fast-forward seventeen days and I'm well and truly over it. I'm over waking up every morning covered in a sticky layer of sweat. I'm over the constant noisy whir of the fan next to my bed. I'm over wearing the same shorts and vest-top combinations. But most of all, I'm over feeling knackered all the time. I've only been walking for a few minutes and already my breathing is heavy and laboured, sweat trickling down the back of my neck. I stop walking and remove a bobble from around my wrist, sweeping my already damp long dark-brown hair into a messy topknot.

Today must be one of the hottest days so far. The air is thick and syrupy and the tarmac so hot it shines like liquid. I squint up at the sky, an ominous shade of dull blue dotted with sickly yellow clouds, and wonder if today might be the day when it finally breaks and we get the thunderstorm the weather forecasters keep promising is just around the corner.

I cross the road, and then take a left down Temple Street, before turning onto Larwood Avenue.

Only it's blocked off by a length of police cordon tape.

I frown. If I don't go down Larwood, I'll have to go the long way round, and I'm cutting it fine as it is.

I glance behind me to check no one is looking before diving under the cordon.

I've walked maybe two house lengths when I hear footsteps behind me.

'Oi! Where do you think you're going?' a voice calls.

Reluctantly, I turn round.

A police officer is striding towards me wearing a deep frown. 'And what do you think you're playing at?' he asks.

'I'm going to school,' I reply with a shrug.

'In August?'

'It's GCSE results day.'

'I don't care what day it is. Did you not see the cordon?'

'The cordon?'

'Yes, the cordon.'

He points. I turn around and pretend to notice the cordon tape for the first time.

'Oh my God, I totally didn't see it there,' I say, shaking my head in wonderment.

The police officer folds his arms across his chest and sighs. 'Funny that, considering I watched you duck right under it less than thirty seconds ago.'

'Did you really?' I say, blinking in confusion. 'Wow, I literally have no recollection of doing that.' I laugh a tinkling laugh. 'I must be more preoccupied with my results than I thought.'

I give him my very best smile. (For the record, I have a great smile. 'Dangerous', according to my ex-boyfriend Ram. Like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, according to Maxine, my boss at the salon.) The police officer just glares back, somehow immune to its usual powers.

‘Can I go now?’ I ask. ‘It’s just that I’m kind of running late.’

He sighs. ‘Go on, then.’

I smile – maybe he’s not so bad after all – and thank him, before continuing up the street.

‘Er, what do you think you’re doing?’ he calls after me.

I turn back to face him. ‘You said I could go.’

‘Yes. Back the way you’ve come. This street is a crime scene.’

‘A crime scene?’ I ask, screwing up my face.

‘Yes.’

I peer up Larwood Avenue. Apart from the cordon tape, a few police cars and some official-looking people milling about, nothing appears to be out of the ordinary. No blood splatters or chalk outlines or forensics tents.

‘What sort of crime scene?’ I ask.

‘None of your business.’

‘But if I don’t cut down here, I have to go all the way around.’

‘Not my problem,’ the police officer says, walking me back towards the cordon.