

1

A shape, white and black and grey.

The curve of the spine, the forehead, the tiny snub nose, the perfect feet with toes curled. A shape that holds the promise of new life.

I stare at the grainy image, thumb frozen on the screen of my phone, emotion clogging my throat. The ecstatic caption beneath it written by a woman I have never met, full of optimism and joy and the excitement of approaching motherhood.

*So . . . Richard and I have news! Junior has settled in nicely and is on his way. So pleased to be able to tell everyone! Excited!!!
#12WeekScan #ultrasound #instamum #instababy #babylove*

The knowledge settles like a rock in my stomach. *She's having my ex-husband's baby.* Richard has finally got what he wanted, what we *both* wanted, craved, more than anything.

I feel winded, dizzy, as if I've been kicked in the chest, all the air knocked out of me for the second time in a matter of hours. First this morning's news, and now this.

I lay the phone face down on the table, biting down the ache, the longing, the *wanting*. I stare out of the train window, the Buckinghamshire countryside racing past in a blur of fields and hedgerows. Crops harvested and stalks cut low to the ground, the earth ploughed brown, tendrils of smoke from a distant bonfire curling up into the grey autumn sky. The gentle rock and sway of the train, the vibration rising up through the flat soles of my shoes. The train is taking me back to London, back to my little newbuild house, back to . . .

To what, exactly? An empty home that will be exactly as I left it this morning. Silent and cold. Half the wardrobes newly emptied and half the books and DVDs newly absent; the framed prints and the big corner armchair gone too. Richard left me with most of the furniture at least, that was something. And all of our photo albums; evidently the past is something he wants to leave behind. But somehow I can't do the same. I'm stuck here, stuck in my own past, unable to move on. A prisoner of my own biology. Maybe my time really is up. This is it.

I settle back into my seat, the pockmarked blue material worn smooth by the years, and try to concentrate instead on the low hum of the engine, on the indistinct phone chatter behind me; a group of football fans singing at the other end of the carriage, their voices loud with alcohol.

A young woman makes her way slowly down the aisle, scanning the seats, a pink-clad baby tucked into the crook of her arm. I turn away, avoiding eye contact, looking out of the window again with a silent prayer that she will find somewhere else to sit down. Babies, babies, everywhere I look. It's a mid-afternoon train, too early for commuters, plenty of spare seats further down this carriage or in

the next. *Please find somewhere else, anywhere, so I don't have to look at your baby all the way to London.* I sense the woman pass by, walking slowly down the carriage, and let out a guilty sigh of relief.

The rest of the day stretches out in front of me, blank and empty. The rest of the week. Work. Commute. Home. A few glasses of wine, a few shots of vodka. Pulling the duvet up over my head so I don't have to think about anything. Sleeping alone in the big double bed. Next week, next month, next year. More of the same, looking for a reason to continue beyond the unthinking imperative to keep putting one foot in front of the other. *Keep going. Keep going. Keep going.* I feel empty, spent, hollowed out by a hunger that can never be sated. How can it be possible to hope and pray so hard, for so long, and end up with nothing?

I was a fool.

'Hi,' a woman's voice says. 'Is anyone sitting here?'

The young mother is back, hovering next to the table of four seats where I'm sitting alone.

'No,' I say. 'There's no one.'

'Thanks.' Swinging her rucksack into the window seat, she lowers herself gently opposite me. She's in her mid-twenties, wearing a rust-coloured jacket and blue jeans, blonde hair falling to her shoulders. She's pretty, even beautiful, in that way young mothers always seemed to me. She points down the carriage, where the football fans are still going with their half-shouted songs. 'Had to move to get away from those lads. They're passing around the Jack Daniels.'

She moves carefully so as not to jostle the baby in her arm, a tiny thing dressed in a pale pink cardigan and pink shoes with little rainbows on them. Tufts of blonde hair peek out from beneath a

pink bow over the top of her head. Her eyes are ocean-blue against perfect white, with long lashes and just the tiniest hint of blonde eyebrows. They lock onto me and a smile spreads instantly across her chubby face, her pink dummy falling out onto the table between us, a big gummy grin that dimples her cheeks and lights up her face. Despite myself, despite everything, I feel my own lips curving into a smile in return – but it’s been so long that it feels strange, almost unnatural.

‘She’s absolutely beautiful,’ I say. And it isn’t just one of those things you say to a new mother, the polite response when their baby is presented to you. It’s true enough that *all* babies are beautiful in their own way, to their own parents especially. But this one is unbearably, impossibly cute.

‘She likes you,’ the young mother says with a shy grin.

‘She’s very smiley, isn’t she?’ I say, unable to take my eyes off the baby. ‘So sweet.’

The woman’s phone rings on the table between us. She checks the screen and silences it.

‘How old are yours?’ she says.

My smile falters. No matter how many times I’m asked about my own family, I never quite get the answer right. It always sounds like an apology or a defence.

‘Me and my husband, I mean ex-husband, we couldn’t . . .’ I tear my eyes away from the baby in her arms. ‘We wanted kids, but it never quite worked out for us.’

‘Oh.’ The young woman colours slightly. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—’

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘Really. I’m godmother to my friend Tara’s children. She has three boys.’

‘This little one doesn’t have a godmother yet.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Mia. She’s three months and one week old, today. And I’m Kathryn,’ she adds, with an embarrassed smile. ‘Hi.’

Her phone rings again and she silences it without answering. Looking closer, she’s young to have a baby, not much older than twenty, nearly half my own age. I’m old enough to be *her* mother, I realise with a familiar pinch of sadness. She wears no wedding ring, and her ears are pierced twice – low and high – with unfussy studs in each. She looks like she might be more at home out clubbing than looking after a baby.

But there is something else too, a pulse of unease that she’s keeping just beneath the surface.

Her phone beeps with a message, and as she reaches for it the sleeve of her jacket rides up, revealing purple-black skin above her wrist, a line of ugly bruises spreading up towards her elbow.

She sees me looking and hurriedly pushes the sleeve back down again. I give her a sympathetic smile.

‘I’m Ellen,’ I say. Lowering my voice, I add, ‘Is everything . . . OK?’

‘Yeah.’ She tucks a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. ‘Actually, I don’t suppose you’d be able to hold her for a minute while I get myself sorted out, would you?’

Yes. No. I would love to hold her. More than anything. Please don’t ask me to.

‘Of course,’ I say, sitting forward in my seat.

Kathryn half stands, leaning over the grey plastic table between us, handing the baby to me. It feels awkward at first and for a moment I think I might drop the baby or she might wriggle free,

but she seems quite content to lie back, nestled into the crook of my elbow. She's not heavy, just a warm, solid presence, wonderfully and joyfully alive in my arms, her big blue eyes gazing up, her lips curling into a smile. *Babies love faces*, that was what all the books said. They were hardwired to respond to eye contact and smiles, their own eyes focusing to close that first distance between mother and child. The distance between us now. How is it possible to feel a loss for something I've never had and probably never will have?

'You're a natural,' Kathryn says, then immediately puts a hand to her mouth. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . . That was a stupid thing to say.'

I shake my head, unable to take my eyes off the baby.

'No need to apologise.'

Mia reaches out, the tips of her little fingers brushing my cheek with the lightest of touches, tiny points of warmth on my skin. She makes a happy gurgle of delight as I lean a little closer, allowing her fingers to touch my chin, my jawline. I reach over with my right hand and Mia's fingers wrap around my index finger, a tiny clamp, as gentle as a feather. She has the smallest, most exquisite fingernails. I blow a raspberry onto her fingertips and she giggles, a hearty chuckle that warms my heart.

'Nice to meet you, Mia.' I smile down at her. 'My name's Ellen.'

Kathryn has pulled the white rucksack onto her lap. She has a pen in her hand and is busy digging through the contents, rearranging the bottles and nappies packed inside. As she zips it closed, her iPhone starts ringing again, vibrating against the plastic tabletop. The screen displays a man's face, thirtyish, dark ginger hair, stubble, a kink in the bridge of his nose as though

at some point it has been broken. The name below the image is *Dominic*.

‘Sounds like he’s keen to get hold of you,’ I say.

‘I’d better answer.’ She nods distractedly, glancing again at the phone’s display. ‘Would you be all right with Mia just while I take this call? It’s . . . urgent.’

‘Sure. Go ahead, we’ll be fine for a minute.’

‘I’ll just be down there.’ She gestures over her shoulder, down the carriage. ‘I’ll be back.’

I look up again and I swear I see tears glistening in her eyes.

‘Kathryn, are you sure you’re all right?’

‘Yeah,’ she says, getting up out of her seat. ‘Thank you. I won’t be long.’

She reaches out and touches her fingertips gently to the crown of the baby’s head, as if reluctant to leave her even for a moment. Then she takes her phone down the aisle, through the sliding glass door and out into the space between the two carriages, mobile clamped to her ear.

Mia gazes up at me and yawns, blue eyes blinking shut for a moment. I rock her gently from side to side, her wonderful weight in the crook of my arm, the unfamiliar smile returning to my lips. My heart fills my chest, a powerful rush like the strongest drug, a tide of emotion I haven’t felt in so long that I’ve wondered whether it even still exists inside me.

I allow myself to imagine – just for a moment – what it would be like if this little one was mine. If I was returning from the hospital with a baby in my arms, instead of a prognosis even bleaker than the last time. To finally use the little box bedroom for what it had been intended for, saved for: a nursery. Instead

of a quiet, empty corner of the house left in stasis like a shrine to a life unfulfilled, to something that will never be. I've imagined this for so long, dreamed of it, of night feeds and cuddles and tiny fingers, walks in the park and first words and bedtime stories. All the little things that parents take for granted. I lean closer to Mia's forehead, breathing in that indefinable soft-sweet baby scent of pure, clean skin and talcum powder and new life. Wondering if Kathryn knows how lucky she is.

There's a shift in the train's momentum, its speed easing as it begins to decelerate into the next station, the last stop before Marylebone. Open countryside has been replaced by busy little villages and roads, church steeples and barn conversions, commuter land on the way into northwest London. I look up to see if Kathryn's on her way back, but she's still hidden from my view in the vestibule connecting the two carriages. How long has she been gone now? Two minutes? Three?

The next stop slides into view. *Seer Green and Jordans*, a little two-platform country station with a footbridge and a small glassed-in waiting room, a handful of people waiting to board. Kathryn has not reappeared. The train wheezes to a stop in a shudder of brakes, an ageing squeak as heavy carriage doors swing open and a few passengers step down onto the platform. I raise myself carefully out of my seat and look around, checking the other way down the carriage in case Kathryn has somehow slipped past while I've been busy with Mia. But I can only see the football fans, all in identical red and white-striped shirts, with close-cropped hair and long legs sticking out into the aisle. The table across from me is occupied by a small red-faced man in a pinstriped suit, who has managed to spread out his briefcase, laptop, newspaper and raincoat across

three of the four seats, and most of the table. He has not looked over at me once.

‘Excuse me,’ I say to him. ‘I don’t suppose you saw the woman sitting here? Did she come past us just now?’

The man glances up, gives a single irritated shake of his head, and goes back to his laptop. I’m about to stand up, to walk down to the vestibule in search of her, when movement outside catches my eye. A figure hurrying past, right by my window. A blonde woman in a rust-coloured jacket.

Kathryn is walking away down the platform.

2

It takes a second to process what I'm seeing, to make sense of what my eyes are telling me. Is Kathryn suddenly ill? Confused? Is it a prank? Has someone taken her jacket, walked off the train wearing it?

No.

It's her. Blonde hair swishing from side to side as she marches down the platform, hands thrust deep into the pockets of her jacket, head down as if she doesn't want to make eye contact with anyone. I lean over to rap on the window as she passes, the glass cold against my knuckles, the move made awkward by the baby on my left side.

'Hey!' I shout, sensing other passengers turning towards me. 'Kathryn! Hey!'

She looks up and our eyes meet for just a second, long enough for me to see the expression on her face, to notice the tears on her cheeks. She mouths a single word. *Sorry*. Then drops her gaze and hurries on, wiping her eyes and striding down the platform towards the barriers.

A second later and she's out of sight.

An automated female voice comes over the speakers. 'This train for London Marylebone only. Please take care of the closing doors.'

A handful of new passengers have boarded for the final stretch of the journey, hoisting bags into racks and looking for seats. The train doors swing shut with a heavy finality. *Slam, slam. Slam.* This isn't supposed to be happening. It's a mistake, some kind of misunderstanding. I was just going to hold Mia for a few minutes, give Kathryn a moment's respite, then hand the baby back. I don't really know how to look after—

Someone is talking to me.

'Sorry, what?' I turn to face a thin man in a black beanie hat standing next to my seat. 'What were you saying?'

The man points a bony finger at the seat Kathryn has just vacated, her rucksack left behind next to it.

'Is that free?' He's holding up all the other passengers trying to move down the carriage but seems oblivious.

'She just had to step out to make a phone call,' I say. 'She's coming back in a minute. Sorry.'

He stares at me for a moment and then asks the same question of the red-faced businessman at the table opposite, who grunts a reluctant affirmative. The thin man settles himself into the seat, folding his long legs beneath him and taking a laptop out of his rucksack.

There's a soft judder and squeak of wheels as the train begins to move again. Rolling slowly at first, the platform at Seer Green starts to slide by, past a steel fence separating the station from the car park beyond, massed ranks of vehicles side by side. Passengers carry bags and clutch tickets as they walk towards the station exit.

I catch a glimpse of a couple of men shaking hands, two middle-aged women embracing; a station worker in a hi-vis jacket; a man in a parka, a couple of teenagers walking in; a single figure in a raincoat. I stare out of the window, disbelief fogging my thoughts, as if the train might stop at any moment, as if the situation will put itself right if I just wait a few more seconds. The red-faced man at the table across the aisle is glaring at me with undisguised irritation, his brows knitted together. I return his stare with one of my own, and he drops his eyes back to his laptop.

I throw one last look back at the platform. Perhaps Kathryn was meeting someone here. Then my view is blocked by trees as the train angles away from the station, picking up speed. For a split second I think about standing up and pulling the emergency cord before we've got too far out of the station. Is it a genuine emergency? Is anyone in danger? What's the best thing for Mia?

The baby whimpers in my arms.

'Shh,' I say in a soft voice, rocking her gently. 'Did I startle you? Shh, it's OK.'

Mia settles again and stares up at me with big blue eyes. A long lazy blink and a small smile that makes my heart swell. I'm a calm person; I need to stay calm for the baby's sake. Mia doesn't seem to need anything right now, she isn't crying to be fed or changed or rubbing her eyes for a sleep; she seems happy enough to be held for the time being.

No one else in the carriage seems to be aware of what's just happened. I am on my own with a stranger's baby. Where's the guard or the ticket inspector when you need one? I should find one of them, get them to radio back to the previous station and tell them to keep Kathryn there. The next station's the end of the

line – Marylebone – and I can wait there with Mia until Kathryn comes in on the next train. They run every half hour and I have nothing else in my diary for today, nothing calling me home. I could even offer to get straight onto the next train back to Seer Green. Reunite mother and daughter, put all of this right.

There's only one problem with all of that, one doubt niggling at the back of my mind: I'm assuming that Kathryn *wants* to get the little girl back. That she *wants* to be reunited. That this is all some terrible mistake, a momentary lapse of concentration, an exhausted young mother at the end of her tether. A cry for help, perhaps. Postnatal depression?

But what's just happened seemed entirely deliberate. Calculated. Planned, almost. And I saw the look on Kathryn's face as she walked away. A single glance as she hurried down the platform.

I knew that look; I've seen it before. A long way from here, many years ago, a different life.

Fear.

Fear for herself, or for her baby? Fear of what she'd just done, or what she might be about to do?

I scramble to make sense of the fragments I've gathered in the last ten minutes. A young mother travelling alone. Bruises on her arm. Phone ringing constantly. A brittle, tearful unease she was struggling to disguise, just beneath the surface. Her child left with a total stranger. There doesn't seem to be anything accidental about it: she'd done it to protect the child, somehow. And now that child is my responsibility for now, at least.

Taking Mia straight back to her might mean putting her right into harm's way. Into contact with the father who left Kathryn with those bruises on her arm. Perhaps social services would be able to

keep her safe, or perhaps Mia and her mother would end up as two more statistics, two more casualties of a violent, controlling man taking out his rage on a partner who dared to leave him. It's a depressingly familiar story, as old as marriage itself. But what other choice do I have? It's not as if I can take Mia home, back to my little house in South Greenford, is it?

I let the thought sit for a moment, like a forbidden taste on my tongue.

Then I dismiss it. Mia has a mother, and she belongs with her.

The train picks up speed as it pushes deeper into northwest London, streets and shops and houses passing by. My phone vibrates with a text and I shift Mia to one arm as I wrestle it out of my handbag.

How you doing? You OK? Xx

Which is Tara's coded way of asking: *how did this morning go with the specialist? Do you want to talk about it?*

I put my phone face down on the table. Tara can wait. I look up and see the thin man across the aisle staring at me. As soon as I make eye contact with him, he looks down at his phone again. He's wearing black fingerless gloves and is holding the phone at a strange angle, almost vertical.

Did he just take a picture of me and the baby? Or did I imagine it?

He shifts in his seat under the weight of my stare, angling the phone away from me. His laptop is open in front of him. There's something strange about his fingertips, the skin wrinkled and pale. His black beanie cap has ridden up slightly and I notice for the first time that he has no eyebrows at all, the skin above his eyes

a strange, mottled-red blank. There's something weird about him altogether, as if he doesn't belong here and doesn't quite know how to act.

I feel my left arm stiffening around Mia's small body, tucking her in a little closer. Now that we're alone together, she feels as delicate as porcelain in my arms, as if any bump or jolt might break her perfect skin, fracture her tiny bones. Every stranger turning into a potential threat.

I tell myself to relax. For the next ten minutes at least, there is nothing that is going to hurt her, nothing will happen to her. I'll take care of her until we get to the next stop – the end of the line – and then find someone responsible, someone in authority, explain what's happened and make sure Mia's in safe hands. I'll do the right thing.

I flip my phone over. I could call 101, ask for the British Transport Police and get them on the case. They'd have officers at Marylebone or nearby, close enough to respond and reunite mother and baby. But – again – that's assuming that Kathryn actually *wants* her baby back. Maybe it *is* postnatal depression, and she was worried she might harm her baby. It would be better to talk to the police in person.

I touch a gentle fingertip to the baby's cheek in what I hope is a soothing gesture.

'What are we going to do with you, little one?'

Mia gives me another gummy smile, a little chuckle. There's something about a baby's laugh that defies words – something perfect and pure and joyful – this human thing she has only just learned to do, an expression of happiness in its original form. It has to be the best sound in the world.

She seems unaware, or undisturbed, by her mother's sudden absence. Perhaps she'll start to fret and cry soon, whimpering in that way small babies do, but for now she seems calm.

What else could help me to get her back where she belongs? I don't even know Kathryn's surname. She has taken her handbag and phone but left the baby's bag, the bulky cream-coloured rucksack that's full of baby stuff. That means something, doesn't it? That it was deliberate? Another thought strikes me: *maybe the baby wasn't even Kathryn's in the first place*. Had she actually said it was? Did she use the words 'my baby' at any point? I think back to our brief exchange. *No*. She only said 'Mia' or 'her' – or was it 'the baby'? Had she taken Mia from someone else? From a nursery, or a hospital, from someone's house? Snatched her from a pushchair outside a shop, or in the aisle of a supermarket? Then panicked and handed her off to a stranger before she could be caught?

But something about her manner, our brief conversation, makes me think it's unlikely. There was a familiarity between Kathryn and Mia, a connection that seemed genuine.

I lean over and pick up the rucksack. It's deceptively heavy and not easy, one-handed, with the baby snug in my other arm, but I manage to hoist it over the table and put it down next to me. In one of the mesh pockets on the side is a bottle of formula milk, in the other a half-drunk bottle of Diet Coke. I undo the zip and pull the bag open.

At the top of a bundle of baby clothes is a single sheet of A4 paper, folded once. It's a receipt or delivery note of some kind, a list of baby things, formula milk, bottles, nappies, clothes. I pull it out and frown. The word 'Ellen' is written in looping capitals on the bottom half.

I turn the paper over.

The back is blank except for a handful of words scrawled hastily
in the centre, in messy black biro.

*Please protect Mia
Don't trust the police
Don't trust anyone*

3

I frown at the sheet of paper in my hand. Read the words a second time, turn the paper over to see if there is anything else on it, anything at all. But it's just a computer-printed delivery note from a company called BabyCool.com. Nothing else handwritten, only my name on the front and, on the back, those ten words scrawled in biro. Instinctively, I fold the paper in two and check to see if anyone else has seen what I've seen. But the businessman is tapping on his laptop and the thin staring man is writing in a small notebook, seemingly oblivious to me and everything else.

Don't trust anyone

Perhaps paranoia's a feature of postnatal depression. Is it? I can't remember what I've read. Perhaps Kathryn feared that she might do something to the child herself. Perhaps this is all a cry for help. But not for *her* safety. For the baby.

It occurs to me that there might be something else inside the backpack. I lay the note on the table and begin taking items out of the bag one at a time, setting them on the table in front of me. Half a dozen nappies, a packet of wet wipes, a tight roll of plastic nappy

sacks, two white cotton sleepsuits, vests, scratch mittens and a tiny knitted woollen hat, three bottles of formula milk made up and a small can of formula powder, half-full. Two folded muslin squares, one white and one yellow. Two dummies, still in their blister pack. Some kind of harness – Baby Bjorn – with a complicated set of straps that I recognise as a baby sling. In the front pocket of the rucksack is a new tube of Sudocrem, a travel packet of tissues and a small bottle of sunblock. Another piece of paper, torn from a notebook, with some kind of daily schedule scribbled on it in the same handwriting as the note I'd found with my name on it. A column of instructions down the left-hand side: *6-7 feed/change, 8.30 nap, 10 feed, 11 nap, 12.30 feed/change, 1 nap, 3 feed, 3.30 nap, 6 bedtime routine, 6.45 feed/bed*. A squashy purple octopus with a smiling yellow face, a bell inside that jingles when I take it out of the bag.

Mia's head turns toward the sound of the bell, hands grasping.

'You want this?' I pick up the toy, hold it out to her. 'The octopus?'

Mia coos and clutches the toy to herself, small mouth closing on a soft fabric tentacle.

I survey the train table, half-covered with the contents of the rucksack. All the paraphernalia needed to leave the house with a baby. Enough for a day out, perhaps? A second day, at a push. Then what? Maybe this was just as much as Kathryn could carry, as much as she could gather in a hurry and pack into a single bag. But there is nothing else which gives a clue to Kathryn's identity, her full name or where she lives. Nothing to quickly identify Mia to the authorities, to get her back to her family as soon as possible. The daily schedule is curious and I wonder if it's been written for my benefit. But she'd not had time to write it in the minutes that I had held the baby. Just my name, and that

strange message, after we'd first said hello. I'm at a loss to work out why she has chosen me.

The football supporters at the far end of the carriage are singing another song, the words interrupted by hoots of laughter and shouted obscenities and I make a mental note to give them a wide berth when we get off.

People begin to stand up as the train slows, pulling bags from the luggage racks and shrugging on coats and jackets, an air of purpose filling the carriage as the train approaches its final destination. The red-faced man in the pinstripe suit opposite gathers up his possessions into a briefcase, puts on his jacket and hurries down the aisle, barely giving me a second glance. I begin to repack Mia's bag, putting the spare clothes at the bottom, the formula milk and nappies near the top. One more quick glance at Kathryn's strange note before I slip it into my handbag and slowly get to my feet, making sure to keep a firm hold on Mia.

How do you put on a rucksack when you're holding a baby? Everything – every move, every previously simple action – now seems loaded with extra layers of complexity. Laying Mia very gently on the tabletop, cushioning her head to lay it softly on the grey plastic, I swing the rucksack up onto my back, then pass my handbag strap over my head, keeping my eyes on Mia the whole time in case she tries to flip herself onto the floor. But the baby simply grins at me, happily kicking her chubby legs like a little frog learning to swim, and I scoop her up again.

'Come on, you,' I say softly. 'Let's go and find your mummy.'

The strange thin man is still in his seat, scribbling in his notebook in tiny, spidery handwriting. He doesn't seem to notice any of the activity and doesn't look up as I pass. He's dressed entirely

in black and dark grey, I notice. Black jeans and Doc Martens, grey sweatshirt and a scuffed black leather jacket. Not a single note of colour; the skin of his face so pale it is almost translucent. Something else strange about him. Something not quite right.

I step carefully down onto the platform, the air filled with echoing footsteps and thick with diesel exhaust. Marylebone is rich with Victorian red brick, steel girders criss-crossing the glass roof high above. I move away from the train door, look up and down the platform in case Kathryn has somehow managed to get back onto the train at Seer Green and is here right now, searching for her baby, hoping I might catch sight of her rust-coloured jacket moving towards us amid the disembarking travellers. A sea of faces travels down the platform, a group of slow-moving pensioners, a young family on a day trip, shoppers and students and a few suited commuters mixed in. No young women scanning the crowd. No sign of Kathryn.

I look down at the baby in my arms, Mia blinking against the bright light, and begin walking towards the main concourse. At the barrier I reach into my handbag for my ticket, searching awkwardly with my right hand while my left supports Mia. I try to reach into my jacket pocket, just about managing to push down into it with my right hand. Not in there either. Someone tuts loudly in the queue behind me, moving away to another of the ticket barriers. Was it in my trouser pocket? I pat the pockets of my jeans but can't feel its outline. The guard, a smiling fiftyish woman with short dark hair, comes over and gives Mia a little wave.

Should I tell the guard what's happened? Or would she just direct me to the nearest police officer? I'm trying to think of the

right words to use but the guard isn't looking at me, she's grinning at Mia.

'Aren't you a little cutie?' the woman says, as the baby regards her with slow-blinking blue eyes. 'Let's give your mummy a hand, shall we?'

She taps her own pass on the sensor and the grey plastic barrier swings open.

'Thank you,' I say, a small bloom of relief in my chest. 'You're very kind.'

The guard gives Mia another one-finger wave.

'Have a lovely day, you two.'

I walk towards the main concourse and look for signs to an information point, a ticket office or wherever the station manager might be. Do the British Transport Police have offices in the big stations? I've never seen one in Marylebone, but then I've never really looked either. In central London it feels like anything that isn't a stabbing or a terror alert is a long way down the police pecking order. Is this the sort of thing they would deal with on the spot, like an imminent threat to life? Not really.

Reaching the station concourse proper, I catch sight of my reflection in the window of a jewellery shop and I'm momentarily disorientated by the shadowy image of myself with a baby tucked into my arm. It's almost like I'm looking into a parallel life, a parallel universe, where the last round of IVF has worked and I've had Richard's baby. And here I am bringing our daughter home, the wonderful warm little heft of a baby in my arms.

I know that parallel life isn't real. And yet, here I am, with Mia.

With a jolt, I catch another reflection in the glass. Just behind me, keeping pace with steady strides, black beanie hat on his head. The thin man from the carriage is following me.

4

He's walking slowly with a strange, spidery gait alongside a handful of other passengers moving down the concourse. Pretending to be looking at his phone while he walks. I think of the bruises on Kathryn's arm. The fear in her eyes. Perhaps this was the boyfriend? Not the broken-nose guy on the phone, but this man? Seeing him among regular passengers just adds to his sense of *otherness*, a sense of not belonging that seems to radiate from him. I quicken my pace.

Further behind me there are shouts, loud and angry, male voices full of protest. Some kind of row breaking out back on the platform. I glance over my shoulder to see the red-and-white shirted football fans held up at the barrier, arguing with the guards – something about tickets – their faces contorted with anger, swigging from cans of lager. The fans shouting, swearing to let them through, their mates joining in the protest, yellow-jacketed platform staff gravitating towards the commotion to calm it by sheer force of numbers.

'Stand back!'

'Open the bastard gate then!'

I walk faster, the shouts from the ticket barrier cutting through the air behind me. Another group of young men approach in a

loose group from the opposite direction, a dozen of them in their twenties, jeans and tattoos, blue football shirts. Fists aloft as they shout their songs, belligerent voices echoing off the roof of the station. A shouted challenge as they see the opposition fans held up at the ticket barrier, other passengers skittering to the side, backing off to clear a path between the two sets of fans. Gestures and taunts and more swearing, a hurled can arcing through the air, landing with a flat *smack* and a spray of lager on the platform.

Mia whimpers at the sudden noise. I obey my instincts. I quicken my pace away from the confrontation, avoiding eye contact and shifting my path away from the men, my whole body tensing against the noise and aggression. With a ferocity I haven't felt in years, I feel my right hand curling into a fist in the certainty that I will flatten the first one who dares to lay a finger on Mia.

The football fans pass by, a fug of beer breath and sweat and pungent aftershave in their wake.

I check my reflection in another shop window. The thin guy is still following me.

At the far end of the concourse is the sign for the exit: the remainder of the journey that awaits me. A five-minute walk down to Edgware Road tube, Circle line to Notting Hill, change to the Central line then eight stops to Greenford and the walk up the main road, through the park to my cold, empty house. I've done the return trip to the specialist so many times these past five years, I can do it in my sleep now. And until half an hour ago, I thought of little beyond taking that last leg of my journey back from the clinic, sitting on the tube on autopilot, knowing my own stop without even having to look up. It would be easy to let my feet take me there now, following that familiar route.

Easy, but wrong.

Finally, I spot a pair of police uniforms. A couple of armed policemen stand guard, their backs to a tall column in the centre of the concourse. They wear body armour and are bulky with equipment, black straps and pouches and radios, pistols on their thighs and rifles across their chests, index fingers resting against trigger guards. Instead of feeling relief, though, I find myself repulsed by them, by the closeness of these weapons to the tiny life in my arms. I'm no stranger to guns, but this is different.

Still, I'm going to have to talk to them, tell them what's happened. We'll all go to a back office, and I'll give a statement and fill in some forms, and they'll take the baby away from me. I'll hand Mia over and that will be that. I'll hand her over to these men with their guns, these men equipped for war on the streets.

The thought gives me a cold, empty sensation, a pinch of unease in my stomach.

Today, here, now, I see threats everywhere. I have a powerful urge to take Mia as far away from these guns as possible. And I can't stop thinking about the note in the baby's bag. *Don't trust the police.* But what option do I have? I think we could have been followed off the train, and it seems clear that Kathryn, wherever she is, is in some kind of trouble. I head for the two armed officers, preparing what I will say. *This baby? She's not mine. She was given to me . . .* But as I approach, one of them touches his earpiece, speaks briefly into his radio, and then both hurry off towards the platforms without giving me a second glance.

I turn and watch them go, their equipment jingling as they jog towards the confrontation between the two sets of football fans, which is getting louder all the time. I can't see any other police on

the concourse. Maybe the ticket office? But this station isn't a safe place. Guns, shouting, drunks, noise, crowds. Anger. Hooligans. Police on the lookout for knife-wielding terrorists and suicide bombers. I glance over my shoulder: the weirdo from the train is still following me. But it's not just him, this whole place makes me uneasy. There's danger everywhere and I feel exposed – it isn't a safe environment for Mia. Thousands of people coming and going, packed together but oblivious to each other amid the hurry and the rush and the noise. There is a reason why train stations are a favourite target for terrorists.

Not here.

Don't trust anyone.

Kathryn trusted me. She *chose* me.

If I have even a shadow of a doubt, even a flicker, I should trust that instinct to protect the baby. I have to make that decision for her.

I feel the weight of it, having to be responsible for others again.

I scan the station again for any other police officers, but see none.

Behind me, the shouting kicks up a notch.

Get away from them, all of them. Put distance between them and you, between them and Mia.

There has to be a smarter, safer way of doing this. I should find somewhere quieter and more controlled. I switch Mia to my other arm and she stares at me, on the edge of tears now, her little body rigid with alarm at the shouting and the noise.

'We're nearly there, Mia,' I say. 'Not long now until you're back with your mum.'

But first I need to put some space between me and the strange man who's followed us off the train, whether it's me or the baby in my arms that he's following. It'll only take a minute to break contact, but I need a helping hand. I approach a stocky fortyish man in a yellow hi-vis tabard with 'Station Security' printed on the back, while he's encouraging a homeless man to move away from the cash machines.

'Excuse me?' I say.

The security guard turns, his broad face impassive. 'How can I help?'

'I'm really sorry to bother you but a man's followed me off the train and he's been taking pictures of my baby.' I turn and point at the thin man. 'He's making me really uncomfortable and I just want him to leave us alone.'

'That gentleman?' He points a thick finger, his face darkening into a frown. 'In the black jacket?'

'That's him.'

'Are you both OK?'

'I think so,' I give Mia's hand a protective pat. 'Just a bit freaked out.'

'Wait here, madam, I'll have a word with him.'

He turns and approaches him with his palms up in calming gesture, speaking quietly.

I register the look of surprise on the thin man's face, but I don't wait to see what happens next. I turn away, smile down at Mia and walk towards the big archways that lead out of the station onto Melcombe Place, where the mid-afternoon sun is fighting its way through thinning clouds. I want to lose myself

in the bustle of passengers coming and going, to get away from everyone who could be a threat.

I'll do the right thing for Mia, but first we have to go somewhere safe; in the meantime I'll take care of her for just a little while longer.

I walk quickly out of the station and head for the taxi rank without looking back.