

Lara King Official Website

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August 26th 2018

1500hrs

Now is your chance. Grab it whilst you can. Take a long look at my face. I hope I am how you imagined. I can't shoulder the burden of your disappointment. Not today. So, let's start with my skin. Is it as flawless as it looks on those pages? My hair – the shine – I try hard with that, although I suspect right now it might be looking matted and lifeless.

Lara? Lara? Over here! Look this way!

I know. You've rarely seen me like this. I'm normally dressed so beautifully. My hair blow-dried, my make-up perfect. I'm sure you know already, that even if I'm going for the *au naturel* look it takes a lot of preparation. Day in, day out. Normally I call the shots. But after everything that's happened today, I need to be told what to do. Conor had had to ring me, just before the press conference.

'It's OK,' he had said. 'Listen to me, Lara. I'm handling the media. But for now, do as I say. I've asked Lily to bring everything you need.' And so I had done as I was told. Lily arrived soon after, with a change of clothes for me.

We had been led to the back of the police station into a room with three wooden chairs and a pine-coloured table.



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There was a mirrored wall too. It crossed my mind I was being watched. But then again, I was always being watched. I had taken off my workout gear and put on a pair of jeans, fingers unable to grasp the buttons.

‘Here.’ Lily had squeezed my hands. ‘Stop. Let me.’ She had pulled tight my waistband but then I saw her hands were trembling too. Lily, who could handle anything. I then shook out my hair and took off the remnants of my make-up with a cleansing wipe. It was at this point I was barely able to breathe, sweat trailing down my face. We had walked out together, Lily and I, side-by-side.

And now, it’s time. I watch you, necks stretched high, camera phones tracking my face. Please. Don’t judge. Just listen carefully to what I am about to tell you.

I know you’ll care. You’ve always taken mine and my daughter’s lives in your hands, and your hearts. Most of you anyway. Some of you dismiss me. You might pretend you’ve never seen any of our reality shows or clothes ranges. Dissected mine and Matthew’s pap shots in the showbiz pages. ‘*Lara King? She’s famous for nothing.*’ That’s where you are wrong.

Before I go any further, I need to say something to you all. I’m still getting to grips with the fact that this is my reality, but I hope *you* realise this is true life too. That the lines between fact and fiction are no longer blurred. That this is not a show-piece for the glossies. It’s not some new storyline for the latest television show I may be appearing in.

I watch the trail of lights, immortalising the image of me in cyberspace. A montage for you to watch, on repeat. *Record. Click. Upload.* ‘*Look who we saw today!*’ you might write. ‘*Much prettier*





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on camera. Or perhaps you'll be kind. Say how pretty I am in the flesh. And you might even remark that you are surprised I'm quite tall. Most of us are shorter in real life. And so it goes on. Of course you'll probably assume – just like everybody else that is walking past – that the world's media have been called here today because I've got a new product to launch. A perfume, perhaps. Notes of jasmine. Something citrus. Fresh and light.

But then you'll peer closer, and as the sun stings your eyes, you'll just about be able to see the redness around my lower lids, my hands shaking as I grip the microphone. And then you'll see Matthew next to me, that familiar blond hair and green eyes, his tanned arm behind my back and you'll be comforted by his presence – after all, you've welcomed him from Australia so generously. You'd be awed even. A gasp. A hand gripped around your friend's arm. 'Oh my God. Look who it is. Oh my *God.*'

But then you'll wonder what on earth is going on. You might even be a little frightened when you see my face. It's at this point I think of Ava's nanny, Joan. How am I going to tell her what's happened? The sag of her features as I detail the events of the day. The way she will push back the curls behind her ear, softly, as though her hair might break if she touches it too hard. And then, the things she will say to me afterwards.

I watch as the police usher you all away as we're about to start. I see you at first bewildered and then angry, as though you have a right to my life. Which, I suppose, you do. Or parts of it, anyway.

And so it begins.

Silence other than the rasp of my breath and the click-click of cameras. A magnified screech, as my lips touch the cold metal.





REBECCA THORNTON

‘Hello,’ I clear my throat. ‘Hello. Thank you. For being here.’

I watch you on the pavement, heads turned towards me. You know something is wrong now, I can see it in your faces. But savour this moment because you don’t know, just yet, quite how bad things are going to get. Or how your daily lives will be wholly consumed with what’s happened. Yes, and I mean all of you. None of you across the globe will be immune, no matter how you try.

I’m so thankful for those I know will help out. My cheerleaders. But then the memories of today start unfolding in my mind, clawing and strangling my brain. And as the world around me sharpens into an almost unbearably bright Technicolor light, I lift my face to you.

Are you ready?

Today, I need you to put yourselves in my shoes. I want you to imagine what I’m going through. Shut your eyes if it helps. Careful, though. You might want to steady yourselves.

Today, I need you to see me for who I really am.

A mother. A human being. A person with flaws.

Today, I’m not the Lara King that you think I am.



Ryans-world.com

Entry: August 26th, 1600hrs

Author: Ryan

Guys, I'm here. Right near the spot where she disappeared. Well, as close as we're allowed. The forensics, they've taped off an entire area. They're on their hands and knees sweeping up tyre-tracks and it's looking like something out of the Burning Man Festival. I'm standing about three yards from the Sky News van. You might even be able to see me if you switch on the TV now. I've got a grade one haircut. I'm wearing a white T-shirt. Denim cut-offs. I'm waving. See me? Look closely, because I'm not sure you'll be able to hear much of the report. The noise, you see. The helicopters with heat-seeking equipment, flying over the Canyon droning in and out of earshot.

There are dogs too, sniffing around for little Ava King. I saw them in the distance, over by the police cars. Their noses were pressed into a small pink cardigan and then they were ushered out into the rocks. 'Go. Find her, Cyrus,' I heard one policewoman yell. I saw her fingers, crossed tight behind her back.

They'll be sniffing out a sweet scent, I reckon. Almonds and coconut milk. She looks like she'd smell like that, doesn't she? Pure and perfect and so innocent. Although I have to keep reminding myself that I don't know actually know her IRL.



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They're really working those animals, though. They're crawling around the place, going down the ravines, under rocks, mouths foaming white in the heat. The police are scraping the ground with sticks, shouting her name and you have to think that if she's got lost around here, they've ploughed enough resources into giving her the best hope of being found.

Everyone's here too. The public, I mean. Like, thousands and thousands of people. Already. It's fucking crazy and the media vans, they keep screeching up along the road, clanking around to see where they can set up their big satellite dishes, and who can slick on their frosted pink lipstick the fastest.

We're all suffocating with the heat but people are giving out free bottles of water and sandwiches and stuff. 'Feeding the five thousand.' That's what I heard one person say.

The most screwed-up thing is that I reckon when she disappeared there was no one around. For miles and miles. It's endless here. Some of the view obscured by trees and bushes. I'm looking down now at all the shrubs, a patchwork of grey, brown and green. Six years old and all alone. Her heart must be going batshit in her little chest.

All this shouting and screaming isn't gonna be of any use though, not if someone's taken her. She won't be anywhere near here. That's what I heard the *Sky News* woman say. Apparently Lara reported hearing a car drive off.

Women, men, children, they're all weeping, shouting, 'Ava, Ava.' Flies buzz all over the place, their thick black bodies pressing themselves right in my ear. But I'm sure she's OK. She said so, didn't she? Lara. She said in her press conference that she was sure her little girl was fine. That she was clinging on to hope.





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It's weird, cos they don't look like they think she's fine. They've blocked all the roads and I heard some detective shouting about the interstate. Three hours he was saying. If we don't find her in three hours.

Then what? I wanted to shout. Then what?

Anyway, they want me to speak! On camera! Imagine that. Me, the school geek always behind my computer and now I'm racking up traffic like a shit-storm and I'm going to be on live TV! Holy shitaake!

OK, so guys, I'm going to be your number one destination throughout the investigation. Check here first for all the latest and I promise you, I'll be here with all the exclusives. You all know how much I love Lara and Ava. I'm devastated but I'll do my best to be a good gatekeeper.

Anyway, gotta drink some water. My mouth is so dry. Be right back after. Tune in.

Here with the latest updates on missing Ava King, bought to you by Lara and Ava King's number one fan.

Twitter: @ryan_gosling_wannabe



August 26th 2018

1530hrs

What would you do if your child disappeared into thin air? I mean, what would you *really* do? You might pound the pavements screaming their name, breath sour with fear. Air escapes you.

And when you get home, escorted by the police, you might fall into the arms of your husband or wife or a member of your family. Slamming your fists into their chests, your knees dropping to the ground. Pleading. With who, you don't really know. And then with a renewed vigour and a sense of hope, you'd go out again. Back to where your child disappeared. You'd watch as the police knocked on surrounding doors and took witness notes and because you were there, in the action, you might feel you were doing something. Anything.

You might consider me for a minute when I tell you that my child has disappeared, yet despite the world's gaze on me, I have absolutely no control over where I look for her. I cannot open the front door to our home in The Hidden Hills. I cannot press the pattern of small, shiny gold buttons that remotely open the huge iron gates, with the hand-carved wooden sign on it. *Los Palisades*. I cannot use my thumbprint to access the extra security we had installed.

If I *could*, I might for a moment sweep my gaze across the lawns for any sign of her – my eye-line darting in and around



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the uniformly cut grass, the luscious, rare rose blooms spilling down from the clean lines of our house – even though we were miles from where she disappeared. I'd still glance over to the pool – as I always did. A habit I'd been unable to relinquish from before she'd learned to swim. The clench of my stomach just until I reassured myself, two or three times over, that there was no small body, face-down in the softly lapping turquoise water.

I would then race down our cobbled drive, lined with newly buffed cars. I'd curse the palm trees forcing me to weave my way around their silvery trunks. I'd ignore the burn of my lungs. The way my legs would barely be able to hold me up. I'd run, purely because I'd be incapable of driving. Or perhaps it would kick-start my senses afresh. And I'd try and think back to where it had all started, my throat swollen with the catch of my breath.

I'd try and revisit that moment we'd left the house, water bottles under our arms. Me, in workout gear despite having no intentions to exercise. Her in a navy sundress, embroidered rabbits across the collar. Silver Superga trainers. Her face tilted up to mine, scrunched up against the sun.

'Treat day,' she'd said. 'Can you believe it? Just you and me.'

I'd think about this as I tried to remember, left or right? Which way had I manoeuvred the car?

Had I thought about the paps as I normally did when we left the house? Had I planned my whole route along the backstreets, where they might not be lurking, eyes scanning for my number plate? The way their lenses followed me, like snipers. Or had I just driven aimlessly, enjoying the day panning out ahead of us, with nothing to do. No one to see. Just me and my daughter. But I can't remember the ins and outs of my thoughts





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from this morning. If I had known what was going to happen, I'd have taken more care to engage with my inner monologue. To remember the way I'd felt a little impatient as Ava had kicked at the tyres of our car before she'd climbed into the back seat. The slight twist of her front tooth as it pushed its way through her gums.

I'd have looked carefully at the way her body was formed. The soft roundness of her stomach. The fine, blonde hairs travelling down her tanned arms.

But of course, I never thought that today would end up like this. I do, at other times. Think the worst. Catastrophise. But there was something so perfect about the way today had been panning out. Just me and her. A special treat. Ice cream. It was the first day in a long while I'd felt able to breathe.

That in itself should have been the first sign of things to come.

It was Detective McGraw who sat me down in the police station and told me that he was driving me straight home and that I had to stay indoors. Those green eyes of his, continuously locked onto one focal point a fraction above my right shoulder. White face, a fine tracing of freckles smudged across his top lip.

'I need to be out there though. Looking for her. She's my daughter. Please. There must be a way?'

'I know. And I'm sorry. We can't risk hampering the investigation. Thousands of people are out there, looking. And so we need you to stay inside your house.'

I knew he was right. That it was for the best. You see, I wanted you to be looking for her, without distraction. Surely I had learned by now – stay out of view in times of trouble. After all, a





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wrongly placed smile, a casual lift of my eyebrow could set you off, and that's not what I need right now.

I'm getting ahead of myself. I suppose I should tell you the things that happened less than six hours earlier. Just after we had pulled out of our drive, sun beating down through the windscreen.

I'll tell you as much as I can remember. The same details I told Detective McGraw in my oak-panelled study after he'd told me they'd taken my computer and mobile phone. We'd sat, me at my desk with my leather in-trays and stationery drawers all in straight lines in front of me. He was opposite me, in an ergonomic swivel chair that kept twisting from underneath him.

'I'd planned a special day out,' I told him. 'Just us. It's such . . . It *was* such a beautiful day,' the words spill out my mouth.

'Any reason for the outing? An occasion, perhaps?'

'Yes. It was my way of saying thank you. For the way Ava behaved for the announcement. Did you see it?'

'I read about it.'

'She had been so good,' I continued. 'So I told her that I'd take her out.'

'And then what? We've pieced together as much as we can of your journey, mapping the CCTV footage. You hadn't pinned any of your locations on your public social media accounts. Any private ones we need to know about?'

'No.'

'OK. If you could tell me what happened this morning, then?'

'At nine forty-five this morning we drove to Laurel Canyon. To go for a walk. On the way there, Ava grew tired. She lay down





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and fell asleep in the back of the car.’ My voice took on a robotic quality as I became more and more disassociated from myself.

‘What time was that?’

‘About ten fifteen, I suppose. We were nearing Laurel Canyon and the drive is about thirty minutes from home.’

‘What time did she wake up this morning from her night’s sleep?’

‘I can’t remember exactly. But she was exhausted from the past few days. And the heat. Why? What relevance has this got to do with finding her? Please, Detective McGraw.’ I sat forward, trying to get some air into my lungs.

‘Just trying to get a clear picture of everything surrounding her disappearance, Ms King. She fell asleep and then what?’ He waved his hand in front of his face as though swatting flies except when I looked, there was nothing there.

‘When she fell asleep, I drove from Laurel Canyon, back to Laurel Canyon Boulevard which is about halfway back to home. I drove around there for a bit, and then when I thought she had been asleep long enough, I turned around and drove back to the canyon where we were going to go for a walk.’

‘And why did you do that, Ms King? Drive around the Boulevard, I mean. Instead of perhaps waiting at Laurel Canyon, given that’s where you were about to go walking?’ His eyes rested on a large black and white picture of when I had been eight months pregnant with Ava.

‘I was just killing time, Detective. Have a few moments to myself. I rang Matthew at about a quarter to eleven or so. I like driving. I find it peaceful, when there are no paps around. With my job it’s time to be alone with my thoughts.’





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‘Right. And there were no paps around today? Or your security?’

‘Not as far as I know. And I’d kept it just me and Ava. I felt OK about that. We weren’t going anywhere with lots of people. Look, I know I shouldn’t have been on my phone when I was driving.’

‘We just want to find your daughter. That’s our main focus right now. So you were speaking to Matthew. For how long in your estimation?’

‘Twenty minutes, I guess? You’ve got my cell. You’ll be able to tell, won’t you?’ There was a level of irritation in my voice that I tried to contain.

‘Chat about anything interesting, did you?’

‘What we had planned for the rest of the week. Our work. And then Ava was awake, asking to go to the toilet. She said she was desperate.’

‘You got off the phone at this point?’

‘No. I just stopped the conversation for a bit. I’m sorry. I just, it’s difficult. Like I told you, I don’t have much alone time.’

‘So, you pulled over and Ava got out the car to go to the toilet. How long had she been awake for at this point?’

‘I can’t fully remember. I’d looked at her in the rear-view mirror before. I think we’d smiled at each other.’ I thought of my daughter, a fist lodging itself behind my breastbone.

‘And before she went to sleep, she was fine?’

‘Totally fine.’ I started to cry. ‘We had a great time. Singing Katy Perry songs along with the radio, chatting about her school friends. Laughing, joking. She was happy we were together.’

‘So by the time you stopped and pulled over so she could go to the toilet, it was, about what time?’





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‘Eleven thirty or thereabouts. I pulled over straight away. There was no one around. We were just by the side of the road, so I thought she’d be fine. I thought she was right behind the car. But then, then I was back talking on my phone. I guess at some point, I realised it had been too long. I heard a car. Another car. I hung up. And that’s when—’

‘Slow down, Ms King, and try and breathe.’

My mind pulled back to that moment. I had craned my head around, waiting for her to pop up. *Mommy. I’m here.* Everything had shifted on its axis when I realised she wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

‘I looked. I looked and looked and looked. I screamed. I screamed her name over and over.’ *She’s hiding*, had been my initial thought. Funny girl. And then as time went on, my heart had started to race.

Game’s up now.

‘And you heard a car drive off?’

‘I did. I can’t tell you if it was near or far. I heard it though.’

‘How long after you realised she had gone did you hear the car?’

‘Oh, God, I don’t know. I just don’t know. Five, ten minutes? Fifteen at a stretch.’

‘So by this point it was about eleven forty?’

‘I don’t know. I think so. Please. I can’t remember.’

‘You heard any signs of a struggle? Screaming?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think she would have gone into someone else’s car willingly?’

‘No. Oh God. Well, Joan, her nanny, I could barely get the words out now. ‘Matthew. Lily. That’s all.’





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Silence.

‘Fine. Let’s go on. You then got out to look for her?’

‘I did.’ I felt winded. ‘I looked for her for about fifteen or twenty minutes. You know, I really thought she was coming back at that point. Otherwise I would have called earlier; I heard my voice getting faster and faster. ‘I rang Matthew back. He told me to ring you. She wasn’t anywhere. I had forgotten about the noise of the car I heard. I was in such a state, I didn’t know what was going on.’

‘Look, I really think you should have one of our family liaison officers present. I think it would help.’

‘No. Please, I’m fine. I can’t. With my situation . . .’ I looked around the room at all my awards, the framed magazine front covers with me on them, hoping he’d understand.

‘Fine. Of course. Would you like us to call your friends? Family?’

‘No,’ I thought of my friends. My skin itched at the thought of anyone being near me. And then he pulled himself upright, as though he’d realised he’d been giving me too much power, been too acquiescent towards me.

‘All right. Listen, we need to search Ava’s room too. You might like someone with you when we do.’

‘Search it? That’s not necessary.’

‘We need to get a clear picture.’

‘Fine. Just don’t be disruptive with her things.’ I then thought about Joan and how much time she spent in Ava’s room. I thought about how she would ask me again and again how Ava was there one minute, and gone the next. And I’d tell her the things I was sure about. Which was this: that I do not know. I do





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not know how my six-year-old daughter could have disappeared like this.

I would tell her the things I do to safeguard my little girl. I would remind her that I check the swimming pool every time I leave the house. That we have the best security – including her favourite bodyguard Adrian – whom we trust with our lives.

But for the moment, what I would leave out is that I am guilty of doing what most parents must have done in their lifetime. If you happen to be one, please, do me the honour of reassuring me.

Tell me that perhaps you might have got over-involved in a conversation with someone whilst your child was over in the other side of the park. Looked over. Realised you couldn't spot the heft of their body. Their little legs waddling over to the next set of swings. What clothes did you put them in this morning? God. You can't even remember. Ah – that's right. Green. You'd be looking for a green anorak. And then you'd see a flash of pond-water-coloured material and your muscles would relax and you'd vow never, ever to lose concentration again.

Or – perhaps you've sent a few WhatsApp messages when you thought your little one was busy playing with their toys. You'd been caught up in a conversation with your mates. Wanted to have the last words with a partner with whom you'd been rowing. It's OK, you told yourself. Nothing to harm them. *I've got this.*

Please. Work with me here. Tell me you've done one of the above.

Because perhaps, only then, would I be able to admit to Joan when she asks me, that I made a mistake.

A terrible, unforgivable mistake.





August 23rd 2018

1000hrs

‘Lara, come here, hurry.’ Conor had pulled out his mobile phone and waved me over. ‘Look at this.’ My heels clipped over the shiny hall floor as I walked towards him. Everywhere else in the house was off-limits whilst preparations for our big announcement were underway.

‘What is it?’ My voice wavered until I saw him, one leg hoiked over the other in a pale-pink scallop-edged armchair, finger pressed up to his mouth. *Thank God.* His relaxed pose. As Head of Lara King Publicity he had the power to turn a good day into something hellish, with only a few words.

‘Everyone’s going shit-crazy online,’ he tapped his phone. ‘They’re all wondering what the fuck is going on.’ He gave a triumphant nod. ‘Look – all the showbiz blogs have published the photos of the events company setting up outside yours. The surprise for the public was a genius idea. And so was the media black-out.’ Not wanting to crease my black Lanvin dress, I perched on the wood-carved arm of the chair, and peered across at the picture on the screen.

‘Look,’ he went on. ‘Papa Razzle dot com. *Lara’s Big Secret*, they’ve called it. It’s a massive front-page splash. That will mean all the news sites will soon follow.’

Although I was used to being headline news, my stomach still swooped. He was right. They were fuzzy images, obviously





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taken with a paparazzi drone, but I could still see aerial shots of the vans outside the property, navy curlicue writing on the bonnets. *Bear Productions*. I could see the clear blue water of our swimming pool, the twelve state-of-the-art, solar-powered white sun-loungers along both sides and the gold-plated cherub statue given to me by a Saudi prince, that held trays of drinks.

If I looked closely I could also make out Matthew, one leg folded up, his beautiful, golden body roasting in the sunshine. Conor read my thoughts.

‘Matthew – he’s scheduled to arrive about an hour before the announcement. Is that right?’

‘Yes,’ I told him, excitement zipping up my body. ‘That’s right.’

‘Oh, wait, look here,’ I felt the coolness of Conor’s arm on mine, ‘all these comments under your latest Instagram post, speculating on your *surprise announcement*. Millions of them. Some of them have called it. But other theories are crazy.’ I skimmed through them and couldn’t help but soak up the excitement spreading around my loyal fans. I thought about Ava and the big day ahead. How things were about to change for everyone.

‘Hey, what’s the time?’ Conor flicked his eyes down to the silver Rolex I’d given him last year. He wore it well, even with his usual outfit of plain white T-shirt, ripped jeans and red Converse boots. ‘Manny’s about to arrive, isn’t he?’

‘Yup,’ I stood, smoothing my hands down my dress. ‘He’d better be on time.’

‘He will be. He’s got too much riding on this. Just don’t tell Ava he’s writing a big feature on you guys.’ Conor lifted himself up. ‘She’ll freak. Just say he’s a friend, or something. Got it?’ I nodded.





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I'd seen Manny's byline picture many times. He looked like the Uncle out of that *My Family and Other Freaks* show that Ava loved and I knew for that reason, she would warm to him. I just hoped not too much. As for the rest of the day – well, she'd never let me down but this was bigger than anything we'd ever done together before. A new chapter. The promise of something glittering.

Conor and I had timetabled every second of the announcement, and his team back at Conor PR headquarters had scheduled everything seamlessly. Ava and I had practised every spare minute.

'Mom, OK, so listen,' she had asked me as she sat on the ostrich-feather stuffed ottoman at the end of my bed each morning. 'Have I got it right?' She had cleared her throat. 'Hi, everybody, I'm so excited for what's ahead,' she repeated. 'You've all been so supportive of us, and we are so grateful to you but everyone needs a change, in order to grow and be nourished.'

'That's it. But back straight.' I had thought about the media training I'd been given by Conor when I'd first arrived in LA.

'You need to be familiar yet distant,' he had told me. 'And number one rule. Always authentic. Anything else and they'll smell it a mile off.'

'And remember, Ava,' I had whispered. 'No ruining the surprise.' I held a finger up to my lips. 'Our secret. OK? We want it to have the biggest impact it can and so no telling.'

'I know, Mom.'

'Good girl. I can't believe how lucky I am.' She sat bolt upright then, hands in her lap. I willed her to stay in that position, because since we'd told her about the announcement she'd





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been fidgety. I silently prayed that when Manny turned up, she'd be on best behaviour.

'Right,' said Conor, after the doorbell went. 'Manny. You go into the living room where they're setting up everything. I'll say hello to him, bring him to you and then leave you to it. Remember. Your narrative for today is . . .' He rubbed his hands together.

'Yup,' I sighed. 'I got it. Everything is shiny and golden.' Conor looked around, his gaze settling on a huge gold statue of Buddha on the hallway table.

'That's the one. Now quick. I'm going to answer the door. Go. Get Ava too so we can introduce them.'

I started to feel hot. It was all beginning. I took one last look in the hallway mirror. I considered what Manny would make of me in the flesh, when he had a proper chance to scrutinise me. If he'd notice the three tiny freckles, triangulated on the top of my left shoulder. Or the shimmering flecks of gold in my otherwise green eyes. If he'd wonder whether my caramel-streaked hair, beautifully plumped pink lips, and thick eyelashes were the real deal. *All mine*, I'd shrug when people asked, my voice laced with false apology. Or if he'd be able to help himself wondering how much the diamonds round my neck were worth. And quick as a flash, I thought of back then. The snarl of her mouth. The glare of my hands under the bright lights. I snaked my hand up around my throat and pulled at the necklace.

Not now, I breathed. It was over ten years ago. *Not now*. No need to think of any of that. And bam, it hits me. A creeping sadness, a boa constrictor squeezing itself tight around my chest and I thought I was going to cry. No, I told myself. *Not now*.





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I readjusted the diamonds, pulled my back straight, and walked into the living room.

One side of the room was filled with people in black T-shirts and trousers, all preparing for the announcement by setting up chairs and live-streaming equipment. There was a brief silence when I walked in, people side-eying me – some open-mouthed – before a flurry of movement started up again. I focused on Marco under one of the skylights, holding his camera in different positions, so that I didn't have to make eye contact with any strangers. Still shaken from the earlier memories and feelings, I inhaled and reminded myself of what today was for. How this was going to be a defining moment in my life. I couldn't see Ava anywhere and so I pressed zero on the intercom dial and called for her.

And then I heard Conor.

'Lara,' he shouted across the room. 'Manny's here. Time's pretty short.' He looked around and gestured across the room. 'As you can see, we've gone big.' I walked towards them.

'So nice to meet you, Manny.' I extended a hand, firming my grip around his thick, rough fingers. A fleeting look of surprise crossed his face. I saw his eyes, behind brown tortoiseshell glasses scan the space around him; the shiny black baby grand piano next to the marble fireplace, the six Damian Hirst spin paintings I'd had commissioned and the long rows of pale grey sofas with their sumptuous cushions, arranged at exactly the same angles. He walked up to the stone sculpture in the centre of the room. I went to join him.

'That's a Henry Moore,' I said. 'Listen, Manny. I'm about to introduce you to my daughter. But I haven't told her why you're





here. I don't want too much from her, given the changes that are about to happen.' He had nodded, his fingers spread across his middle.

'Sure. I get you. Any heads up on that? The announcement, I mean.' He pushed his glasses even further up the bridge of his nose. I expected him to laugh but he remained silent, a serious look crossing his face.

'No. You'll have to wait. But let me introduce you to everyone before I get you a drink.' I waved a freshly manicured hand towards the end of the room that led into the kitchen. I sneaked a peek at our schedule book Lily had left open on the top of the piano. In it were the headshots and names of all the production staff. Each second had been rehearsed over and over again and there was no room for error. But then I saw Joan, standing by the sofa, an odd expression on her face.

'Manny, this is Joan,' I waved her over. 'Ava's nanny.' She looked pinched. I knew that expression – she saved it for when she was angry at me, something she seemed to be more and more these days. Normally I ignored it but today when I was already on high alert, I felt a surge of rage. I didn't want her poisoning the atmosphere.

'Joan,' I said. 'Please could you be an absolute dear and gather together Ava's home learning for later? And tell her to come up if you see her.' I turned to Manny. 'School of course starts soon. Joan has been Ava's nanny since day one. She's indispensable and we've been trying to keep Ava on top of things so that she's prepared when she goes back. Isn't that right, Joan?'

'Yes,' Joan replied, turning her back to me.





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‘Right then. Moving on. Let’s begin, shall we? Music, lights and action?’ I clapped my hands and just on cue, the room went silent. *Ava*.

She walked towards me, her legs making small, precise steps, as though she was on a tightrope.

‘Darling!’ Pride flooded my voice. ‘Come here. I want to introduce you to someone.’ She stepped neatly into the space I’d made for her, brown eyes shining up at me. ‘I’d like you to meet my friend Manny.’ She squashed her lips tight, like she was trying to stop herself from laughing.

‘Hello,’ she went quiet and then spoke again, ‘Manny.’ She clamped her hand over her mouth.

‘Hello, Ava,’ he said. ‘It’s a silly name isn’t it. *Manny*.’ And she opened her mouth and I saw the pink of her tongue, the flash of her small white teeth.

‘It’s a nice name.’ She laughed again. ‘I like it.’ He laughed with her, his whole body softening.

‘Well, thank you. It’s lovely to meet you and I very much like your name too.’ He turned to me. ‘May I use your restroom?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Just don’t go stealing our cashmere quilted toilet-paper.’ A dig at reporter Eva Borthwick, who’d managed to swipe a roll or two at a previous press day. I expected him to laugh with me as he had with Ava, but he’d already resumed his serious face again. I felt stung. I called over to Joan, who was standing by the door ready to leave.

‘Joan, before you go, please show Manny where the bathroom is, whilst I get some last-minute make-up done. Thank you.’





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I watched the back of him as he stooped under the door frame – a strange habit, given he wasn't particularly tall. Conor called over from the other side of the room.

'Guys, quick. Ava, Lara. Whilst he's in the bathroom, we need to Insta this moment. To get everyone pumped.'

'I need my make-up redone.' I beckoned them both over to the make-up station that had been set up for the day – a plain white table, in front of a huge, gilt-framed body-length mirror set up with lighting around the edges.

'Fine,' said Conor. 'Ava, sit with your mom whilst Tavie does her make-up.' At first, Ava sat on my knee.

'Ava, off of me, darling.' I pointed to Tavie, who was dabbing collagen gel onto my skin. 'Just until this is done.' Ava did as I had asked, but then got back up again.

'Mom,' she said, pressing her face into my neck. 'I'm scared.'

'You'll be OK.' I tilted my face away from hers, not wanting to ruin my make-up. 'You've been doing brilliantly.'

'No, I mean,' she lifted her head, 'It's going to be different around here after we do this, isn't it?' Her eyes swept across the room. 'Just, everything's gonna change.' The room went silent and Tavie stood, make-up sponge in mid-air. I held my breath, thinking that any minute now, Manny was going to walk through the door.

'That's OK,' I told her but really I was getting agitated to keep things going as they were. I should have realised, though, that Ava was finding it stressful too.

By the time Manny returned from the bathroom and Conor had uploaded a picture to Instagram, Ava was back to her usual self. I watched as she threw herself at the zebra-skin chaise longue





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across the room. I looked at the contours of her face that had been brushed with a very light powder. A small, round apple of blusher on her cheeks. She looked blissful. I knew the public would be so excited to see us, to see what the new future would hold.

‘Are we ready to go?’ I called over to Manny who was flicking through old editions of *Vogue*. ‘And if so, where’s our guest of honour? Must be here somewhere.’ I forced a laugh but looked at my watch. It was later than I had thought. Even a few minutes out of schedule and the whole day would collapse. The announcement was due soon and it certainly couldn’t be done without a full house.

‘Anyone? Conor? Could you be an absolute love and help me have a look for Matthew?’ I pulled out my phone and checked WhatsApp. Offline. And he had been for the past two hours. What the hell?

Where are you, darling? We’re all here waiting. See you soon?

‘One minute, everyone. I’m just going to use the bathroom.’ My heart was pounding. I could see Ava in the corner, her eyes following me across the room.

Please, Ava, I begged inwardly. Don’t start asking where I’m going. Thankfully, she stayed put, although I could see her limbs twitching to get up and follow me.

‘I’ll be right back.’ I blew her a kiss. ‘Mummy’s just going to be five minutes. You’re doing so well.’

I walked out the room, my jaw set tight. Someone had started pumping up the music. Rihanna. The beat sliced through me, putting me even more on edge. When I reached my study, I sat





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down in my custom-designed sleek orange swivel-chair and WhatsApp'd Conor in the other room.

Lara: *What is going on? He's not answering my messages. Have you spoken to him?*

Conor: *I don't know. Sit tight. It'll be OK. Just get back in here and carry on as normal. Manny doesn't suspect anything. We'll just stall.*

Lara: *We can't stall. All the press are coming in about two hours. They expect me to be a diva. I don't want to give them any unnecessary ammo.*

Conor: *I'm on it. Don't worry. Sometimes it's good to show them you're a bit of a diva. Beefs up the narrative.*

Lara: *But I'm not*

I started to type and then deleted it. I had better things to be doing. I wondered whether to warn Fantine, the events manager, that things might be running late. No, leave it. Don't cause unnecessary panic.

I put down the phone and looked around the room. The oak panels were shiny and clean with no smudge marks on them. All my books, awards and blown-up magazine covers were in their right place. Except I could feel something was off. For a minute, I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I glanced around again and that was when I saw the key-box was half open. It was a padlocked box, gold-leafed and attached to the wall to the left of my desk, so that each set of keys hung down neatly on hooks.





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My name was etched on the outside. On the inside there were around forty bunches of keys kept under tight security. Only Favio the estate manager and Joan had spares.

Strange, I murmured. I didn't recall opening the box. At least not in the past week and even then, I was sure to close it. And if I hadn't, Joan would have noticed, given it was on her list of things to do at the end of each night. Maybe I had opened it and forgotten. After all, my mind had been on other things for the past few days. I got up and swung it open fully, tracing my nails down the hooks.

I skimmed through each key. Everything was in its place except for the one labelled 'swimming-pool annexe - indoors' which had been put back at a different angle. I readjusted it. Weird. I shut the box, except I knew something wasn't right; an uncomfortable sensation in my stomach.

It was then I thought to check the main security system. I logged on from my phone, panning to the swimming-pool annexe. The screen was blank. Someone must have obstructed the camera's view. No one could have de-rigged any of the recording devices without the system going off.

What the hell was going on? I thought about the last time I had used the indoor pool. Probably over a year ago, the weather was always too nice to need it. It was cleaned and maintained once a week and that would have been last Tuesday along with the outdoor pool. My mind started reeling.

Not the time to think about it, I told myself, checking my phone again. Nothing, but just as I got up to leave I got a text.

Conor: Lara, come back. Looks weirder you having gone to bathroom for ages. We'll sort it together.





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I took a deep breath, trying to clear my mind, but at the same time anger uncoiled itself in me, at the thought that something could go wrong on my big day. Everything had been organised with such precision and now *this*. I wondered about my plans for next year. How they'd be affected if this didn't go as I'd predicted. I steeled myself against any such outcome and strode right back into the room.

Ava was in the corner playing with a small Tamagotchi toy she'd got as a present the week before. Everyone was busy setting up. Manny sat on one of the sofas on his phone.

'Ten minutes,' I said to everyone. 'I'm so sorry. Things have been a little held up.'

I walked over to Conor who was sitting showing Marco something on his phone.

'I can't carry on like this,' I hissed. 'Pretending everything's normal.'

'You're doing a good job. Just focus. You're a master at this. OK? And the gossip blogs are going mad trying to find out what's going on. Everyone's on tenterhooks. So this isn't such a bad thing.'

'OK but Conor, come on. Do something, please. This is all going to shit. This is the start of everything. You said so yourself. How can you be so calm? It's your reputation on the line too, don't forget.'

'Ten minutes.' He pointed at his phone. 'Let's just give him ten more minutes. I'll set a timer and if Matthew hasn't arrived by then we'll think again. Yes?'

'Fine.' I gritted my teeth, all the while the lights seared right through me. I barely noticed Ava, still in the corner. Marco got





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up and was checking angles and lights and held up his wrist for me to see his watch.

I looked over at Conor's phone. Ten minutes. I could do this. I relented and ended up chatting to the production staff for what felt like hours, for want of anything else to do, all the while feeling more and more like I was going to combust. And then Conor's phone alarm went off. Ten minutes was up. He shook his head at me. I took that as red that he still hadn't been able to get hold of Matthew.

'Right.' Conor clapped his hands. 'I know you have all been so patient and so good, but I'm afraid our guest of honour, Matthew Raine, has had to deal with an emergency at home. His father.' I saw Conor fumbling on his thoughts, trying to work out if Matthew had ever mentioned his father in public, whether he even had a father who was still alive. And then I realised that despite Conor's earlier nonchalance, he was now nervous, his smile frozen onto his face, blinking as though he had a piece of grit in his eye. He'd prepared this day so that hundreds of press turned up. We'd have to give them something else big if Matthew didn't show. My mind sped up trying to think of possibilities.

I thought of Derek Raine, and wanted to reassure Conor he was OK. That Matthew's dad was not going to be in the spotlight anytime soon. And then I made a mental note to get Conor to stand outside and intercept Matthew when he finally showed his face, so he didn't blow our cover.

'Manny, I'm sorry about this.' I clasped my hands tight. 'It's awful form to do this to you. Keep you waiting when you've come all this way. Look. Do you want to, I don't know, sit?'





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‘Oh please, I’m used to waiting around for interviews. This is nothing. I’ve left my laptop charger in the car anyway,’ Manny said. ‘I’ll just go out and get it whilst we wait.’ He jangled his car keys at me. ‘Do I just let security know I’m going out?’

‘That’s right. They’ve got your name and details so they know you’re on the property. Rosa will see you out and deal with our security keypad.’ I pressed the intercom and dialled into the kitchen.

‘Rosa, if you could just see Manny Berkowitz out the house, I’d be very grateful.’ I turned to smile at him and as I did so, I caught sight of a Hermes ‘H’ keyring he had hooked onto his finger. On it was a white and silver fob. My heart jumped and at first I didn’t know why. Then I realised. *That was it*, I thought. It was meant to have a fob. The swimming-pool annexe key. It was meant to have a golden fob and it was gone. It was possible to use the fob to open the door to the annexe. I started to feel light-headed but knew I had to hold it together. Why would anyone want to go to the indoor pool when it wasn’t even in use? I was absolutely certain it hadn’t been me. I gripped my fingers around the diamond necklace again, feeling unable to breathe again, that familiar feeling wrapping itself around me.

‘I’ll see you in just a minute,’ I called out, looking at Conor. It was only then that I realised Ava, at this point, had also disappeared. All that was left was her Tamagotchi, its eyes blinking and mouth grinning at me, from the chaise longue.





Ryans-world.com

Entry: August 26th, 1650hrs

Author: Ryan

You know when something bad happens? Like, real bad and there are some people that just get super loud? Like, the more fog-horn their voice, the more they think they are going to erase every shitty feeling they've got? It's like that here. Online and offline. A massive echo-chamber of thoughts and emotions. It's like everyone's personally offended by this awful shit that's going down.

Let's take a deep breath. Concentrate on what's at stake here. A small girl's life. Not some shitty grudges you guys have been holding about something totally unrelated. Yeah?

In terms of news of Ava there's been nothing so far. I'm still here, in the Canyon. It's hot. So hot. I keep peeling my clothes off me. We've all given up and the sweat's now just running off our faces into our eyes, and down our faces. Everyone's blinking like there's some crazy dust storm about. If you wanna help, bring fans. Those small plastic ones.

Lara King hasn't come out her house since she left the press conference, but I can tell you now that in the past few minutes, the film star Matthew Raine has made a statement, through his people, to say that he will keep us all posted. We'd all been keeping our eyes peeled (try admitting you don't care about seeing





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Matthew Raine in the flesh even at a time like this. I promised Granma I'd try and get a photo. He's in that new sci-fi series on Netflix too. Oh my God. Meeting him is top of her bucket list!)

'I'll be in and out,' he said through his people, 'helping the search but also trying my best to support Lara. She's doing the very, very best she can under such awful circumstances, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for all your support.' But then people tell me that he's made his way back to the police station, so we're not sure what strange things are going on. I'll be sure to keep you posted as and when.

Here with the latest updates on missing Ava King, bought to you by Lara and Ava King's number one fan.

Twitter: @ryan_gosling_wannabe

