

## I

Two men and two women sat in the far corner of a café underneath the framed photo of sunflowers at dawn in Tuscany. They were basketball-player tall, and as they leaned forward over the mosaic-topped round table, their foreheads almost touched. They spoke in low, intense voices, as if their conversation involved international espionage, which was incongruous in this small suburban café on a pleasant summery Saturday morning, with freshly baked banana and pear bread scenting the air and soft rock drifting languidly from the stereo to the accompaniment of the espresso machine's industrious hiss and grind.

'I think they're brothers and sisters,' said the waitress to her boss. The waitress was an only child and intrigued by siblings. 'They look really similar.'

'They're taking too long to order,' said her boss, who was one of eight and found siblings not at all intriguing. After last week's violent hailstorm, there had been blessed rain for nearly a week. Now the fires were under control, the smoke had cleared along with people's faces, and customers were finally out and about again, cash in hand, so they needed to be turning over tables fast.

'They said they haven't had a chance to look at the menus.'

'Ask them again.'

The waitress approached the table once more, noting how they each sat in the same distinctive way, with their ankles hooked around the front legs of their chairs, as if to prevent them from sliding away.

'Excuse me?'

They didn't hear her. They were all talking at once, their voices overlapping. They were definitely related. They even sounded similar: low, deep, husky-edged voices. People with sore throats and secrets.

'She's not technically missing. She sent us that text.'

'I just can't believe she's not answering her phone. She always answers.'

'Dad mentioned her new bike is gone.'

'What? That's bizarre.'

'So . . . she just cycled off down the street and into the sunset?'

'But she didn't take her helmet. Which I find very weird.'

'I think it's time we reported her missing.'

'It's over a week now. That's too long.'

'Like I said, she's not technically —'

'She is the very definition of missing because *we don't know where she is.*'

The waitress raised her voice to a point that was perilously close to rude. 'Are you ready to order yet?'

They didn't hear her.

'Has anyone been over to the house yet?'

'Dad told me please don't come over. He said he's "very busy".'

'Very *busy*? What's he so busy doing?'

The waitress shuffled alongside them, in between the chairs and the wall, so that one of them might see her.

'You know what could happen if we reported her missing?'

The better-looking of the two men spoke. He wore a long-sleeved linen shirt rolled up to the elbows; shorts and shoes without socks. He was in his early thirties, the waitress guessed, with a goatee and the low-level charismatic charm of a reality star or a real estate agent. 'They'd suspect Dad.'

'Suspect Dad of what?' asked the other man, a shabbier, chunkier, cheaper version of the first. Instead of a goatee, he just needed a shave.

‘That he . . . you know.’ The expensive-version brother drew his finger across his neck.

The waitress went very still. This was the best conversation she’d overheard since she’d started waitressing.

‘Jesus, Troy.’ The cheaper-version brother exhaled. ‘That’s not funny.’

The other man shrugged. ‘The police will ask if they argued. Dad said they *did* argue.’

‘But surely –’

‘Maybe Dad did have something to do with it,’ said the youngest of the four, a woman wearing a short orange dress dotted with white daisies over a swimsuit tied at the neck. Her hair was dyed blue (the waitress coveted that exact shade), and it was tied back in a sticky wet tangled knot at her neck. There was a fine sheen of sandy sunscreen on her arms as if she’d just that moment walked off the beach, even though they were at least a forty-minute drive from the coast. ‘Maybe he snapped. Maybe he finally snapped.’

‘Stop it, both of you,’ said the other woman, who the waitress realised now was a regular: extra-large, extra-hot soy flat white. Her name was Brooke. Brooke with an ‘e’. They wrote customers’ names on their coffee lids, and this woman had once pointed out, in a diffident but firm way, as if she couldn’t help herself, that there should be an ‘e’ at the end of her name.

She was polite but not chatty and generally just a little stressed, like she already knew the day wasn’t going her way. She paid with a five-dollar note and always left the fifty-cent piece in the tip jar. She wore the same thing every day: a navy polo shirt, shorts, and runners with socks.

Today she was dressed for the weekend, in a skirt and top, but she still had the look of an off-duty member of the armed forces, or a PE teacher who wouldn’t fall for any of your excuses about cramps.

‘Dad would *never* hurt Mum,’ she said to her sister. ‘Never.’

‘Oh my God, of course he wouldn’t. I’m not serious!’ The blue-haired girl held up her hands and the waitress saw the rumpled skin around her eyes and mouth and realised she wasn’t young at all, she was just dressed young. She was a middle-aged person in disguise. From a distance you’d guess twenty, from close up, you’d think maybe forty. It felt like a trick.

‘Mum and Dad have a really strong marriage,’ said Brooke with an ‘e’, and something about the resentfully deferential pitch of her voice made the waitress think that in spite of her sensible clothes, she might be the youngest of the four.

The better-looking brother gave her a quizzical look. ‘Did we grow up in the same house?’

‘I don’t know. Did we? Because I never saw any signs of violence . . . I mean, *God!*’

‘Anyway, I’m not the one suggesting it. I’m saying *other* people might suggest it.’

The blue-haired woman looked up and caught sight of the waitress. ‘Sorry! We still haven’t looked!’ She picked up the laminated menu.

‘That’s okay,’ said the waitress. She wanted to hear more.

‘Also, we’re all a bit distracted. Our mother is missing.’

‘Oh no. That’s . . . worrying?’ The waitress couldn’t quite work out how to react. They didn’t seem *that* worried. These people were, like, all a lot older than her – wouldn’t their mother therefore be properly old? Like a little old lady? How did a little old lady go missing? Dementia?

Brooke with an ‘e’ winced. She said to her sister, ‘Don’t tell people that.’

‘I apologise. Our mother is *possibly* missing,’ amended the blue-haired woman. ‘We have temporarily mislaid our mother.’

‘You need to retrace your steps.’ The waitress went along with the joke. ‘Where did you see her last?’

There was an awkward pause. They all looked at her with

identical liquid brown eyes and sober expressions. They all had the sort of eyelashes that were so dark they looked like they were wearing eyeliner.

‘You know, you’re right. That’s exactly what we need to do.’ The blue-haired woman nodded slowly as if she were taking the flippant remark seriously. ‘Retrace our steps.’

‘We’ll all try the apple crumble with cream,’ interrupted the expensive-version brother. ‘And then we’ll let you know what we think.’

‘Good one.’ The cheaper-version brother tapped the edge of his menu on the side of the table.

‘For breakfast?’ said Brooke, but she smiled wryly as if at some private joke related to apple crumble and they all handed over their menus in the relieved, ‘that’s sorted then’ way that people handed back menus, glad to be rid of them.

The waitress wrote  $4 \times \textit{App Crum}$  on her notepad, and straightened the pile of menus.

‘Listen,’ said the cheaper-version brother. ‘Has anyone called *her*?’

‘Coffees?’ asked the waitress.

‘We’ll all have long blacks,’ said the expensive-version brother, and the waitress made eye contact with Brooke with an ‘e’ to give her the chance to say, No, actually, that’s not my coffee, I always have an extra-large, extra-hot soy flat white, but she was busy turning on her brother. ‘Of course we’ve called her. A million times. I’ve texted. I’ve emailed. Haven’t you?’

‘So four long blacks?’ said the waitress.

No-one responded.

‘Okay, so four long blacks.’

‘Not Mum. *Her*.’ The cheaper-version brother put his elbows on the table and pressed his fingertips to his temples. ‘Savannah. Has anyone tried to get in contact with her?’

The waitress had no more excuses to linger and eavesdrop.

Was Savannah another sibling? Why wasn’t she here today?

Was she the family outcast? The prodigal daughter? Is that why her name seemed to land between them with such portentousness? And *bad* anyone called her?

The waitress walked to the counter, hit the bell with the flat of her hand and slapped down their order.