

Prologue

You smile too much. Do you know that? It's annoying.

You laugh out loud, you wave to people in the street. Sometimes you even sing as you walk. I see your bouncy stride, your long hair flying in the breeze, your wide smile, as if you haven't a care in the world.

You surround yourself with friends – in and out of your house all the time. I've seen them, coming and going, shouting, 'See you soon!' as your front door closes behind them.

Is that what it's like to be happy? To be you?

I don't want to be you. I am better than you.

But you do have something that I want.

And I'm going to take it from you.

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Sunday

I look around the table at my family and wish that these precious hours of laughter, teasing and gentle bickering could be trapped in some kind of time warp so that I can come back and visit them in the future. I know life won't be like this forever – Millie will grow up and perhaps go off to university, and Ash's brother and sister might move to the other side of the world or have their own families before long.

I feel a moment of loss, a sense of foreboding. I don't want anything to change.

'Who wants more spuds?' I ask, pushing the unsettling thoughts from my mind.

'No thanks, Mummy,' Millie says. She doesn't seem to have inherited my desire to devour every roast potato in sight, and at seven years old, she's a skinny little thing.

'You sure, Millie?'

She nods.

I look down the table at my partner, Ash, and he smiles but shakes his head. I can't help noticing the tinge of sadness in his gentle brown eyes, and I wish I could do something to wipe it away.

'Sami?'

Ash's brother looks up from his phone, which is resting next to him on the table. He grunts and I presume that means yes.

'Do you think while we're at the table you could put your phone away?' I ask, not for the first time.

Sami and Nousha are Ash's much younger siblings – collectively referred to by us as 'the kids'. Ash has spent his life – or at least since he was in his teens – taking care of them both, and even though Sami is now thirty and Nousha twenty-six they still have a tendency to behave like teenagers. I love them, though, and enjoy their company.

'Jo's right,' Ash says. 'We're delighted that you've joined us for Sunday lunch, but it's not much of a pleasure if you don't participate in the conversation. If Nousha can abide by our one and only rule, so can you.'

Sami gives his brother a disdainful glance, but leans forward to give me a fake smile.

'I'd love some more of your potatoes, Jo. Thank you. They are quite delicious.'

We all know he's taking the piss, but that's Sami. When Ash's mother left home, deserting her children – including Nousha, who was little more than a baby – their father buried himself in his work and ignored his children. They've suffered as a result. Both of them lack discipline, and now Sami floats from job to job, lives in squats or friends' flats, and turns up here whenever he wants a good meal.

Nousha has tried a little harder and has a job. Ash pays for her small apartment because she says she doesn't earn enough to pay for that *and* for the clothes she needs. My Ash is a bit of a soft touch.

Sami's phone beeps, and his eyes instantly go to it. I can see Ash is about to lose it, so I decide to pre-empt an argument.

I push my chair back and march round the table. Grabbing Sami's phone from the side of his plate I stomp across to the dresser, open the bread bin, shove his phone inside and close it.

Millie giggles, and Ash tries not to smile as I wink at him.

'I can't believe you just did that?' Sami says, but even he is grinning at my audacity.

'Our house, our rules. Feel free to leave the table, collect your phone and go into the sitting room at any time.'

Sami knows that will be the end of his Sunday lunch, and there's rhubarb pie to follow. I may not be housewife of the year, but I'm a good cook.

I turn to Nousha. 'What have you been up to this week, Noush? Tell us something exciting.'

We all nod enthusiastically as she talks about the club she went to with her friends, and I think back to when I was her age, wondering if I treated life in such a carefree way. I don't think so. I had no big brother to bail me out, and only an uninterested mother who was more intent on bagging her next husband than worrying about her daughter's errant ways. She is already up to husband number four, and I'm getting no sense at all that she's ready to quit.

At Nousha's age I was totally convinced that I was going to be the next Meryl Streep, although as I hadn't gone much beyond a few walk-on parts in the odd soap and a few roles in an amateur repertory company, I'm not quite sure what I based

my conviction on. But I had to take care of myself and rarely had the money to go clubbing.

Her story is interrupted by Ash's phone, sitting on the dresser next to – but not inside – the bread bin.

'Excuse me,' he says, standing up from the table.

Sami's mouth drops open and he stares at me. 'How come he's allowed to use his phone, and I'm not?'

'What's your brother's job, Sam?' I pause for a nanosecond and raise my eyebrows. 'Ah yes! I can see you've remembered. He's a paediatric surgeon with patients – children and babies – recovering from operations he's performed. He's not exactly in a position to tell the hospital not to bother him while he's eating his lunch, is he?'

Sami's not bad really. Ash says he's rebelling against their father, although it's about time he realised that the man himself – thousands of miles away in Abu Dhabi – has no idea how his younger son is behaving and has even less interest, so it's a bit of a waste of effort.

Ash stares at the screen, a worried frown on his face. 'Sorry, everyone. I do need to take this.'

I cast him a concerned glance as he walks out of the room and closes the door softly behind him. I hope there isn't a problem with one of his patients.

Before I can give it another thought, my own phone pings. A text message.

Sami gives me a look, wondering if I'm going to get up from the table to read it, but he has nothing to worry about. I'm certain I know who it's from and what it says, and I feel a shiver of premonition.

Perhaps my perfect Sundays are going to be over sooner than I thought.

Do you want to find out what happens next to Jo, Ash and Millie?

Check out the book on Amazon – [here](#).