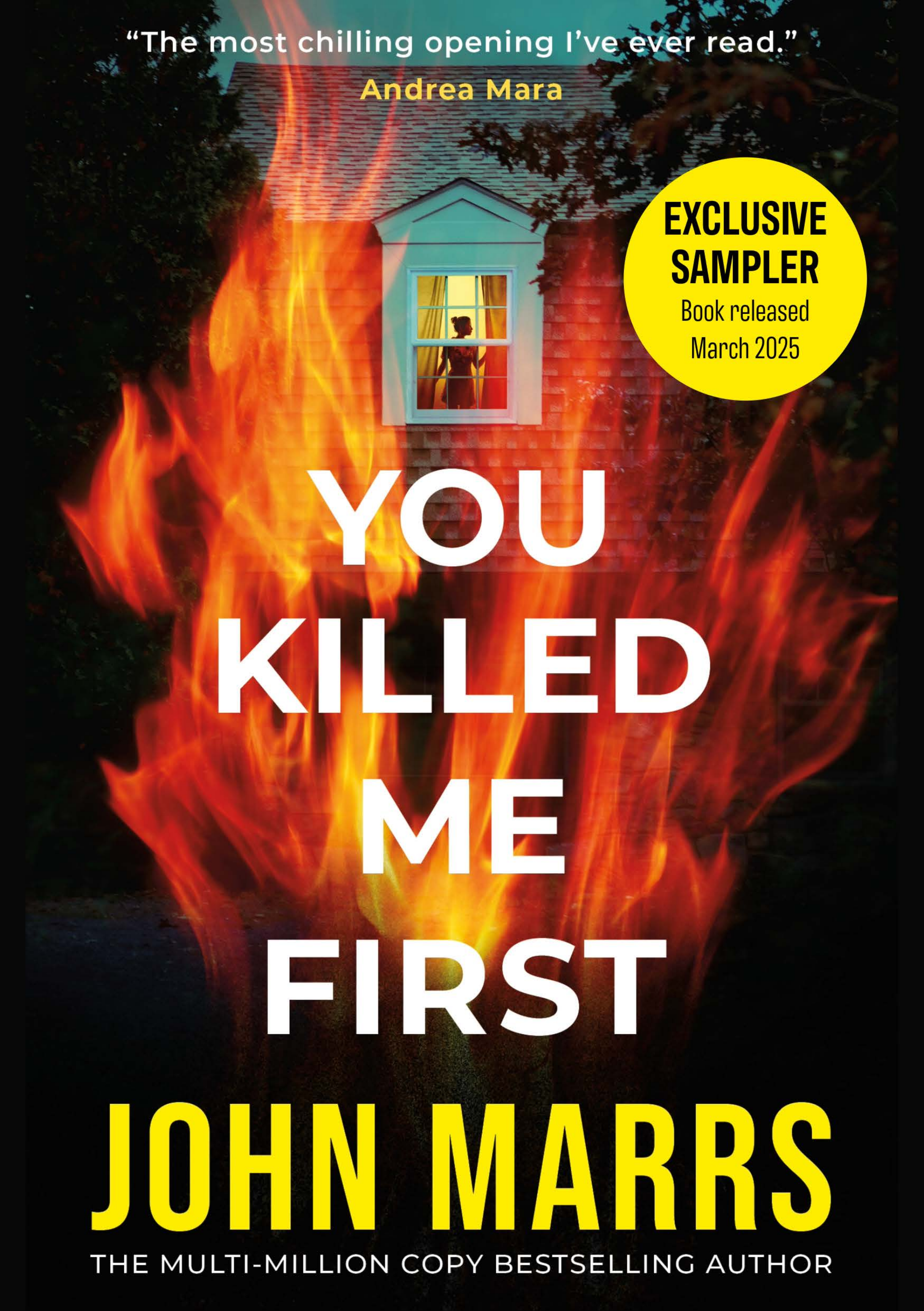


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PROLOGUE

5 NOVEMBER, BONFIRE NIGHT

It's a commotion of crackling, sputtering and popping noises that brings her back to life.

She opens her eyes but it's close to pitch-black in there, and when she tries to focus on anything, it's blurred. Her head is pounding like a pneumatic drill trying to penetrate concrete. How much did she have to drink last night, she wonders. She can't remember even the most hellish of hangovers being as debilitating as this. Or is it something more sinister? Has she been involved in an accident, injured her head and blacked out? Or did she suffer a stroke in her sleep? Is that why she can barely move or see a thing? Is her brain holding her body prisoner?

A scent of smoke follows. It's vague at first and she can't be sure if it's getting stronger because she's regaining her senses, or if something is actually on fire. Is it the house? The fear of God flashes through her. Her worst nightmare. She tries to sit up in her bed but she barely budes. She can feel her hands, fingers and feet moving but they won't lift up. Something is stopping them, a weight pushing her down, along with the rest of her body.

She's still so woozy, but panic, she learns, can be sobering. She tries to think rationally.

She's suddenly aware it isn't a mattress she's lying on. It's way too firm, icy cold, and her clothes are absorbing something wet.

Her vision is slowly returning, and she knows that wherever she is, she needs to get out of there. She curls her fingers in on themselves and realises there's something binding them together – it feels tight like cling film, but it won't stretch or tear. It's a heavier plastic wrap. She's wedged in more tightly than a tinned sardine. It's no accident she's here. Someone has put her here. Why can't she remember anything?

She is straddling the fine line between confusion and terror.

There's a terrifically loud explosion and she screams – or tries to. Something restricts her mouth from opening as it should. She's been gagged. She feels sick with fear, but knows that if she vomits, she'll likely choke on it. So she twists her head as far as she can from side to side, until she lowers the gag and it rests on her chin.

'Help me!' she yells as best she can, but even she knows how pathetic it sounds. However, the self-preservation instinct that's been both her downfall and her salvation all these years drives her on until another deafening explosion drowns out her whimpers.

She begins to cough. The smoke has grown slowly thicker. She wriggles and squirms to breathe in unpolluted air and it's only when her ear touches the ground that she feels something lodged inside it. Before she can figure out what it is, there are more thunderous outbursts, and through gaps in her prison, she spots the flickering of bright multicoloured lights.

Only then does it hit her with the force of a wrecking ball. She knows exactly where she is and why she can't escape.

It's November the fifth and the explosions are fireworks.

She is trapped in the middle of a burning bonfire.

She shrieks as she tosses back and forth, contorting her body. But the wrap she's cocooned inside limits her movements.

Suddenly, there's a vibrating in her pocket, like a phone, followed by a resounding ringing in her ears, and she realises what's lodged inside one of them – some kind of open-ear headphone

device attached by a hook over the top. The ringing continues but she is powerless to answer it. Then she remembers it'll likely have a touch-sensitive tab that, once pressed, allows you to answer the call. If she can explain to whoever is trying to contact her what's happening, maybe they can help?

She rubs her ear upon the ground beneath her and nothing happens. She lifts her head up as far as she can and slams it down on the ground. It hurts her and it hasn't worked. She tries it again, and again, over and over, her ear throbbing with each collision. Meanwhile, all around her there are more and more explosions as the heat intensifies.

And then it happens. A voice manifests through the headphones.

'You're conscious then.'

'Please help me,' she cries, barely able to get her words out. 'Someone is trying to kill me and I need you to . . .'

Her voice trails off as the words sink in. *You're conscious then.* Whoever it is knows where she is.

'Please get me out of here,' she says.

'Do you think I'd go to all this trouble just to free you now?'

'I'll do anything,' she pleads in desperation.

This earns a laugh. And only then does she recognise her caller.

'I don't know what you think I did, but I'm sorry,' she sobs. 'I'm begging you, I'll do anything. Just help me.'

'I'm sorry, but I can't. You are going to burn alive in a bonfire of your own making.'

'What? Why? What did I do to you?'

The laugh is short and cuts like a blade.

'I'll tell you what you did. You killed me first.'

PART ONE



DECEMBER

*ELEVEN MONTHS BEFORE BONFIRE
NIGHT*

CHAPTER 1

MARGOT

It's the sound of a beep-beep-beeping and a heavy engine that stirs me from my sleep.

I peek between the window shutter slats in my bedroom and spot a large removals truck parking outside number twenty-three, the house opposite. A second vehicle further up the street is blocking the junction, much to the irritation of parents on the school run. It hasn't affected me though, as my two make their own way there. Tommy and Frankie are self-sufficient, thanks largely to me ensuring they have limited expectations of what I'm willing to do for them. At the ages of eleven and twelve, they wash their own clothes, iron their uniforms, make their own breakfasts and lunches, and pack their schoolbags. That leaves me time to remain snuggled under my Bavarian goose-down duvet for longer than your average parent.

The front door is to the right of the new neighbours' property and under a wooden pitched roof porch, but I've yet to see so much as an elbow belonging to anyone aside from the removals men. However, there's a lot you can learn about a person you've never met by what they surround themselves with. Firstly, they definitely

have children. At least two, as I've caught a glimpse of two bikes being carried into the rear garden along with two scooters.

I've googled the Land Rover Defender that's been parked on the driveway since I awoke and learned that model's worth at least £85,000. It could however be leased. I don't see any mud on the tyres so I assume that, like most Land Rover owners, it's more a demonstration of status than for practical use.

It's hard to get a good look at their furniture as so much of it is covered in thick bubble wrap. But there are a couple of pieces I'm sure I recognise – a dark wooden sideboard from Rockett St George that I've had on my online wish list forever, and a mahogany chest of drawers from Made. Neither come cheap. I side-eye the Ikea Billy bookcase in the corner of my lounge that Nicu insists doesn't need replacing. I have a feeling its shelves might 'accidentally' break very, very soon.

Another thirty minutes pass and, to my frustration, I still haven't caught a glimpse of who's moving in. The house once belonged to Sue and Pete Cooper, and what she knew about interior design you could fit on the back of a Dunelm's receipt. I don't mean to humblebrag – but I will: I have a knack for knowing what goes where and why. My instinct is so on point, I could give Philippe Starck a run for his money. So when Sue asked me to help her, of course I said yes. I considered it charity work. Then, just as we'd finished, she announced she'd been offered a job at Microsoft in Texas, and within a month, they were on a flight and out of sight. Some people only think of themselves.

The house has been a rental property for the last couple of years. Three families have come and gone but there's no point in befriending renters because they're transitory. Apart from Anna, who seems to be hanging around for longer than most in the house next door to the one I'm watching. And when the last lot of occupants went on their merry way, Nicu scared the hell out of me by

suggesting their replacements could be asylum seekers. I mean, I'm not entirely unsympathetic to their cause – war, poverty, displacement, yada yada yada – and I know they must live somewhere. But why here, of all places? I emailed the chairman of the parish council with my concerns and he all but suggested I was being racist, which is ridiculous. I'd swap a kidney for a date with Idris Elba.

To my relief, an estate agent's 'Sold' sign appeared in the front garden soon after. Months of noise, rubbish skips and tradesmen's vans followed as the place was gutted. The new owners replaced everything, installing a new Shaker kitchen and four bathrooms and en-suites. I took a photo of the empty boxes in the skip and looked up brands I hadn't even heard of. They aren't scrimping on the finishes. I hate show-offs.

Curiosity finally gets the better of me and I decide to head over there and introduce myself. On my way to the bathroom, I pass the Christmas tree I arranged in front of the picture window on the landing for the neighbours to admire. It is simply gorgeous. The kids have their own, covered in tacky, gaudy baubles with no uniform design or colour scheme, which remains hidden in the dining room. I shower, slip into a pencil skirt and casual T-shirt, apply a little make-up then run a wet wipe over my Pandora bracelet and the diamonds in my Tiffany wedding ring. It gives them an extra sparkle. After carefully selecting an expensive bottle from the wine cupboard complete with presentation box, I'm ready to impress.

I'm halfway across the road when Anna's front door opens.

'Hi,' she says cheerily and raises a hand. 'You're up and about early. I don't think I've ever seen you before midday.'

Had it come from anyone else, I might have rubbed a little Savlon on that burn. But everything about Anna is harmless, unthreatening and enthusiastic. She's the kind of woman who'd lead a round of applause when the pilot lands her plane. However, we all know that too much sweetness can make you diabetic.

‘I thought I’d pop in and meet our new neighbours.’

‘Ditto,’ I reply, although I’m a little rankled. As an original resident of the cul-de-sac, I think it’s only fair I lead the welcoming committee.

‘Moving house two weeks before Christmas wouldn’t leave me feeling festive,’ I say.

‘That’s why I’ve brought these,’ she replies, and holds up a Tupperware box, gently shaking the mince pies inside.

I hold back my scowl. ‘Did you bake them yourself?’

‘Of course,’ she says, as if it would never cross her mind to drive to an artisan patisserie in town, choose a handful of theirs and pass them off as her own.

‘That’s very Bree Van de Kamp of you.’

Her blank response suggests the *Desperate Housewives* analogy is lost on her. Sometimes she makes me feel much older than my almost forty years. I hold up my own welcome gift.

‘Great minds think alike.’ Anna smiles.

No, they don’t. Because if they did, she wouldn’t be punishing her body in that supermarket own-brand outfit.

We make our way up the brick cobbled driveway and towards the house. It’s the largest one in this cul-de-sac, although not in the village. With six bedrooms – that’s two more than Nicu and I have – plus a swimming pool, I’ve quietly envied anyone who’s lived here.

The two oak front doors are open so I peer into the porch and hallway. The removals team are milling about unpacking furniture. Anna knocks with the impact of a squirrel tapping a walnut on a lawn, so I clasp hold of the black knocker and bang four times.

No one pays us any attention, and I’m about to do it again when a voice from behind us sends me leaping out of my skin.

CHAPTER 2

ANNA

We turn our heads and I think I might have just found my first girl crush. She's beautiful. Her skin is fresh and lightly tanned, her nose perfectly symmetrical, her cheekbones razor-sharp, and when she smiles, she draws you in. Her blonde honeyed ponytail hangs from the back of a baseball cap, and she has a figure I'd kill for. She's dressed from head to toe in white, wearing trainers, skintight joggers and a sports T-shirt. Nike might have created its tick logo in appreciation of her. I know in an instant Margot is going to *hate* her.

I open my mouth to speak but Margot beats me to it.

'Hello,' she says. 'You must be our new neighbour?'

'Yes, I must be,' the woman replies cheerfully.

'I'm Margot, I live opposite.'

'I'm Anna,' I add. 'I'm on your right.'

Margot is eyeing the woman up and down, desperately searching for something to critique. She has her work cut out for her.

'Oh, I was wondering who lived there,' the woman continues, looking at Margot's place. 'The sun shines directly into your

bedroom at this time of the morning and I kept seeing a figure moving about behind the shutters.'

Margot blushes, a rarity for her.

'I'd have done the same,' she assures Margot, sensing her embarrassment. 'It's human nature to be curious, isn't it?'

'A house-warming present,' Margot says, holding out her gift.

'Oh that's so sweet of you,' she replies, reading the presentation box, which is labelled 'I love chocolates'.

'It's wine,' Margot corrects. 'Châteauneuf-du-Pape, 1976. I always say you should never scrimp where wine is concerned.'

'Such a shame, as it gives me terrible migraines,' the woman says apologetically, but accepts it regardless. 'My husband, Brandon, enjoys a glass of anything, so thank you. It's very thoughtful.'

I sense this is not the reaction Margot hoped for. Meanwhile I feel ashamed of my humble offering. Someone who can fit into the clothes she's wearing is unlikely to touch pastries with a bargepole. As I move to hide them behind my back, she offers a theatrical gasp.

'Mince pies?' she asks.

'Yes,' I reply, almost apologetically. 'They're vegan. No sugar, but you'd never know.'

'Christmas really has come early.' She grins. 'Oh, where are my manners? Come in, I'll make us a coffee and we can treat ourselves. I'm Liv,' she adds as she leads the way along the hallway.

It's the first time I've been inside this house, and it's stunning. Everything in the kitchen is decorated in grey and white tones except for the dark brown herringbone flooring. I assume she's yet to unpack her electricals or crockery until she slides back a concertina false wall to reveal them. Margot and I perch on two of ten stools that fit comfortably around an island larger than most sheds.

Behind us, bifold doors have been opened to let in fresh air from an unusually mild December day. They overlook a generous

garden and the fields that surround most of the houses in this cul-de-sac. Outside is another seating area, a huge barbecue and a tall brick chimney. Next to the swimming pool is a summer house.

‘Tea or coffee?’ she asks as she plates up our mince pies.

‘Tea, please,’ I reply.

‘Espresso, if it’s not too much trouble,’ says Margot, knowing it likely will be. She’s eyeing up a coffee machine the size of a suitcase on the worktop. ‘Is that a Sage Oracle?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’ Liv shrugs. ‘I don’t drink the stuff, so all coffee machines look the same to me.’

‘So what brings you to Lower Ignis?’ I ask.

‘Village life,’ Liv says. ‘After a decade working in private banking in London, our priorities changed when we had the kids.’

‘How many do you have?’

‘Four-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. Oh, and the cat. It was during my maternity leave that Brandon and I started planning our great escape.’

‘So you’ll commute each day?’ asks Margot.

‘Oh, no. The city and I, how did Gwyneth Paltrow once put it? Ahh, “consciously uncoupled”.’

I have no idea what she means. ‘So what’ll you do now you’re here?’

‘A lot of yoga and Pilates, if all goes according to plan.’

‘Well, the village community centre holds weekly sessions if you don’t mind sharing a room with OAPs,’ Margot informs her. ‘I went once myself but it smelled of cabbage.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t explain myself.’ Liv smiles. ‘I’ll be opening my own wellness studio in the new year.’

‘Oh,’ says Margot. ‘Well . . . good for you.’

Her smile is as fake as her nails.

‘How about you girls?’ Liv asks. ‘What do you do?’

‘Nothing as interesting as opening your own studio,’ I say. ‘I make jewellery from home and sell it online and to independent stores. And my husband, Drew, is a delivery driver.’

‘Oh, I love jewellery that’s not mass-produced,’ says Liv. ‘Handcrafted pieces are always so much more personal, aren’t they?’

I spot Margot slowly covering her Pandora charm bracelet with the palm of her hand.

‘I’d love to see some of your designs,’ Liv goes on. ‘I have some fashion influencer friends who love championing fresh designers.’

Imposter syndrome strikes and my face reddens. ‘They’re probably not that good.’

‘I’m sure with a little more practice you’ll get better,’ says Margot.

‘And how about you, Maggie?’ asks Liv. ‘What do you do?’

‘It’s Margot.’

‘I am *so* sorry,’ Liv replies.

I’m not entirely convinced Liv didn’t say that on purpose. And if I’m right, I think I like her already.

CHAPTER 3

LIV

Of course I know her name is Margot. But even after a few minutes in her company, I recognise her type. I've met a thousand versions of her in my time. Their narrowed eyes bore holes into you, searching for a flaw to help them feel better about themselves. I could be doing her a disservice. We'll see.

'So *Margot*,' I continue. 'What do you do?'

'Like you, I used to be London-based, but now I'm a full-time homemaker.'

Again, I might be misreading her, but she utters the word 'homemaker' with barely disguised contempt.

'How old are your kids?' I ask.

'My eldest turns thirteen in a few months and her brother is eleven.'

'Tricky ages. They must keep you busy.'

Her smile is tight. 'I'm very hands-on, so I barely have a minute to myself.'

I catch Anna raising an eyebrow ever so slightly, suggesting Margot isn't quite as she'd like me to believe. I'm not saying to be an involved parent you must neglect yourself, but she is

turned out almost too well. Nails perfectly manicured, no visible grey roots in that thick, shoulder-length head of auburn hair, and a wrinkle-free face. There are hints of freckles under her make-up that start at her pronounced cheekbones and spread under eyes that are so green, I'm not entirely convinced she's not wearing coloured lenses.

'You must have help with the kids if you're planning to launch your own business too?' Margot asks.

'Actually, Brandon's taking a career break to be a full-time dad. It made financial sense.'

'Must have been a little emasculating for him,' she says – a presumption, not a question.

'Not at all, it was his idea. What did you do before you became a homemaker?'

'Oh, that's a long story,' she replies, but I'm left with the impression she'd like me to ask more.

'Who wants another mince pie?' I say instead, then I answer my phone when it rings. 'How goes it, babe?' Brandon grins via FaceTime. The kids are behind him, strapped into their car seats and waving vigorously. I left London at the crack of dawn, long before my family stirred.

'All good here. Whereabouts are you?'

'Junction two of the M1. We'd only just reached it when Imogen needed a wee.'

'We have guests,' I say, and angle the camera towards Anna and Margot, who smile stiffly at a man they've never met. 'Brandon, meet our new neighbours Anna and Maggie – sorry, *Margot*. Guess what Anna brought with her? Homemade mince pies.'

'Well, you two are going to be BFFs then,' he says.

I don't think Margot realises I can see the reflection of her rolling her eyes in the screen.

I wander into the hallway and explain what's left to bring in from the lorries. It's as I'm returning that I hear Margot talking to Anna.

'Should you really be eating a second?' she's saying, pointing to the mince pie in her hand. 'Salad can taste nice too, you know.'

An embarrassed Anna moves the pastry from her mouth and back to her plate.

I enter and Margot rises to her feet, patting out the creases from her skirt. Anna follows and I wonder what the dynamic is between them.

'We should leave you to get on with it,' Anna says.

'Brandon and I were thinking of having a small get-together on New Year's Eve,' I say as I lead them towards the front door. 'It's short notice and you probably already have plans, but it's our way of apologising to the neighbours for all the noise the remodelling must've brought.'

'It has been quite loud at times,' Margot says.

'Why don't you come over if you're free?'

'I'd love to,' says Anna.

'Nicu and I already have a few offers,' Margot replies, 'but if we can make time, we'll drop by.'

'Oh, yes, well you're more than welcome to come too,' I add, unable to resist a final opportunity to tease. Her face turns the colour of the wine she gave me.

Of course Margot will come. She won't be able to resist. I press the AirDrop symbol on my phone, select both their mobiles and send them my telephone number.

'I'll text you with times,' I add. 'Thanks again for coming over with the mince pies. Oh, and the wine.'

I give them a wave and close the door behind them. Then I remove the cork from Margot's bottle and pour myself a very full glass.

CHAPTER 4

ANNA

Liv's and my definition of a 'small get-together' are worlds apart.

She made it sound like she was asking a few friends for a late New Year's Eve supper. Then her text said there'd be a theme to it, 'Summer In Winter', that it was starting at 2 p.m., and there'd be a barbecue. But as Drew and I leave our house and spot cars parked back-to-back, and laminated signs attached to lamp posts reading 'This Way To The Party!', it's evident that Liv had something much grander in mind.

Drew takes a puff from his asthma inhaler as we make our way into Liv's back garden. I'm immediately struck by the number of people already here. There must be at least a hundred, some I recognise from the village and others I don't. I'm suddenly aware of how overdressed I am in my coat, tights and winter boots. There are gas heaters everywhere which are creating their own balmy microclimate. Some men wear shorts, and most of the women are in floaty maxi dresses and flip-flops. They look as if they've just stepped out of the fashion pages of *Grazia* while I look as if I've fallen out of the winter edition of budget catalogue *Damart*.

Lighting rigs shine down upon a DJ whose headphones barely reach her ears over her copper-coloured Afro. Some guests are dancing while others laugh at a joke under a tile-roofed pergola. At the end of the garden are a dozen or so kids shrieking and jumping into the heated swimming pool. A white mist rises from its surface.

The aroma of cooked meats directs my attention to the barbecue. A ginormous grill is being manned by two chefs dressed in full whites. Chicken, salmon, burgers, coleslaw, salads, breads, cheeses, prawns and ribs are all on the menu.

‘Wow,’ I say as I turn to Drew, but I only catch the back of him. I wish he hadn’t, but he’s spotted the free bar and he’s not going to waste any more time with me.

A burning firepit catches my attention. If I don’t move, I know it’ll be the only thing I focus on all afternoon. I turn sharply so it’s not even in my peripheral vision.

I spy Margot waving at me as she and her husband, Nicu, arrive through the gate with Frankie and Tommy. I’m quietly relieved when their kids hurry in the direction of a group of young people they recognise. I’ve tried and it’s not their fault, but I will never feel comfortable around them.

Margot is as well presented as ever and slips an unnecessary pair of sunglasses down her nose to take in the party with those piercing green eyes of hers.

‘Well, this isn’t what I expected at all,’ she begins. ‘It’s quite . . .’

‘Lavish?’ I suggest.

‘I was going to say *desperate*.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it’s a bit “look at me”, isn’t it? “Hey everybody, come to my party and be my friend.” Don’t tell me you weren’t thinking the same thing.’

Nicu shakes his head wearily. ‘My wife has a unique way of putting a negative spin on just about anything.’

Liv appears from inside the house and makes her way towards us.

‘This party is a-maz-ing,’ Margot says before I have the chance to say hello.

‘I’m so glad you could make it!’ Liv replies and air-kisses all three of us.

I take in her figure-hugging lace dress and matching white Birkenstock sandals. She’s flawless from her styled hair down to her perfectly pedicured feet. I curl my callused toes in my knock-off UGGs.

‘I love that necklace,’ Liv says, reaching out her thumb and forefinger to gently bring my gold chain closer to her. ‘Is it one of your designs?’

I tell her yes and she examines the gemstones more closely. The design is of two flames shaped from orange carnelian and amber.

‘I meant it when I said I’d love to see what else you do,’ she adds. ‘I’ll text you to see when’s best.’ She looks down at our hands. ‘You don’t have drinks!’ She makes eye contact with a waitress and politely beckons her over to take our order. I ask for a lemonade, Nicu a San Miguel and Margot a vodka and cranberry juice.

‘Brandon,’ Liv says, her voice raised, as a tall man with thick, wavy blond hair approaches.

He’s dressed in a floral short-sleeved shirt unbuttoned midway down to reveal clipped chest hair, and shorts that cling to his muscular thighs. Does this woman have *everything*?

‘This is my husband,’ she announces, beaming.

If I was her, that smile would never leave my face.

I’m about to shake his hand when he comes in for a hug. ‘You must be Anna,’ he says, and holds me so close to his chest that even through my coat, his pecs make my nipples hard. A perk of being a wallflower is that no one notices.

‘And I’m Margot,’ she says, introducing herself. ‘So lovely to meet you. This is my husband Nicu.’

The two men shake hands and, for a moment, I imagine them wrestling in just their shorts. Good Lord, what is wrong with me today?

‘And your husband,’ Brandon says to me, ‘is he here?’

‘You’ll probably find him at the bar,’ Margot chips in. She squints ahead of her. ‘Yep, there he is, settling himself in for the afternoon.’

I shift from foot to foot.

‘Daddy!’

Two small children run up to Brandon and tug at his arm. ‘Can we go swimming now?’

‘Good to meet you all,’ he says to us, ‘but duty calls.’

But before he is dragged away by two pairs of small hands, his attention lingers on Margot for a fraction of a second longer than the rest of us. She reciprocates.

‘He’s so hands-on,’ Liv coos.

‘I bet he is,’ Margot replies, with a subtle smirk. ‘This is quite some bash,’ she continues.

‘You think it’s completely over the top, don’t you?’ Liv says apprehensively.

‘No, not at all,’ lies Margot. ‘Who cares if you make friends or buy them?’

‘Margot!’ I chastise.

‘Oh Anna, I’m joking. Sometimes you’re much too woke for your own good. Who are all these people?’

‘Some are your neighbours,’ Liv explains, ‘others are friends from London. And a few are potential clients and investors in the wellness studio.’

‘Have you chosen a location for it?’ Nicu asks.

‘A redevelopment close to the railway station in town, as I’m targeting pre- and post-work commuters. The refurbishment started a few weeks ago and we hope to finish by early June. I also

want to attract new mums who want to exercise under the same roof as their babies, so we're installing a crèche and a café. Are any of you yoga fans?'

'Margot and I went to a couple of classes last year but I wasn't very good,' I admit. 'I'm not very flexible.'

'It was like watching Geppetto operating Pinocchio,' says Margot.

'And you, Margot?' Liv asks.

'I'm a little rusty. I don't have as much free time as I used to.'

'Self-love is so important, you should definitely make some time for yourself.' Liv shoots a glance at me with a twinkle in her eye, then says to Margot, 'It might have been a while since you had your kids, but I bet we can still get your pre-baby body back in no time.'

I cover my smile with my hand. Margot's kids are her stepchildren.

CHAPTER 5

MARGOT

Has she just called me fat? Do I look bloated? My hand slips to my waist where I allow it to rest on my stomach.

Nicu keeps his head down but I hear him emit one of those snort-laughes that he tries to disguise by clearing his throat. He can be so rude sometimes. I put it down to him being Romanian. They're much more direct than the British. They'll just stand up and leave mid-conversation if they're bored, while we're in it for the duration and wait until later to be snarky about it.

The fact is yes, I should keep more active than I do. Motherhood doesn't keep me as busy as I'd like people to think. And when God was handing out maternal instinct, I was probably too distracted by *The Kardashians* to stand in line. But I try my best. We all make mistakes and I like to think I learn from mine. Sometimes. It's my family who are in the wrong anyway, so there's not actually that much to learn.

'If you excuse me, ladies,' says Nicu, and wanders off in the direction of an egg-shaped man who has stuffed himself into a pair of ill-fitting chinos.

‘So, have you finished everything you’re doing to this place?’
I ask Liv.

‘Most of it, but we’re hoping to start work on an orangery at the back of the house in the summer.’

Why she can’t call it a conservatory is beyond me. As is why she needs another room in an already oversized house. My guess is it’s more for bragging rights than usable space.

‘Would you like to have a look around?’ Liv asks.

‘Oh yes please,’ says Anna a little too eagerly.

But quietly, so would I.

We follow her and step through a second set of bifold doors and into the dining room. A cat brushes against my legs, a plump off-white thing with so much fur, it looks like it’s wearing an oversized Afghan coat. Perhaps sensing I’m not an animal person, Liv shoos it away.

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘Cat Face doesn’t believe in personal space.’

‘Cat Face?’ I repeat.

‘It’s what happens when you let your kids name the family pet.’

She stops like she’s a guide at an art gallery expecting us to admire a painting.

‘It used to be so bright and floral in here,’ Liv continues. ‘Like Orla Kiely walked into the room and exploded. Not the aesthetic we wanted.’

‘Margot,’ chirps Anna, ‘didn’t you help decorate this place for the last owners?’

I silently curse her.

‘Oh, sorry,’ Liv says. ‘I hope I didn’t offend.’

‘Not at all,’ I reply. ‘I showed them a couple of Pinterest boards, that’s all.’

The main lounge follows, and then we are upstairs, where Liv and Brandon’s room reminds me of an over-styled boutique hotel room, with its panelled walls, low-level lighting, carpets so deep

you can't see your toes, and floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with books. No one could possibly read this number of novels in their lifetime. I'd swap another kidney for some of the outfits in her walk-in wardrobe. I'll never give her the satisfaction of admitting it aloud, but her sense of style is impeccable.

'And the best part of this room?' Grinning, she opens the wardrobe and inside is a minibar. Now we're talking. She removes a chilled bottle of Veuve Clicquot from a fridge and, before asking if we want a glass, a cork flies through the air and disappears into the carpet.

'Sit, sit,' she encourages, and Anna and I sink into a chaise longue under the window while she plonks herself on a bed that could fit a football team.

I can't help but wonder why she's holed up in this room with two relative strangers while her old friends and potential investors are outside making the most of her hospitality.

Tears fill her eyes. This, I was not expecting. Anna and I look to one another.

'Liv, are you okay?' Anna asks and moves towards her, putting a hand on hers.

'I'm sorry,' Liv says as she takes a handful of tissues from a chrome box on a nightstand. As she stretches, her dress reveals the outline of what looks like a belly bar in her navel. Newsflash, Liv: this isn't 1996, and you're not a Spice Girl.

'I think it's only just hit me this barbecue is sort of a farewell party,' she continues. 'Only, most of the people I've spent my adult life being around don't know it yet. That version of me, she feels like a stranger. I want to start the new year living a normal life amongst normal people.'

Normal? Isn't that another way of saying boring? So first I'm fat and now I'm dull.

‘I never truly fitted in down there,’ she moans. ‘I was always playing a part. But here, I want to be myself. And only today has it registered that it’s no longer a pipedream. It’s actually happening.’

Quite the oversharer, isn’t she? When tears spill again, I beat Anna to the punch, slide on to Liv’s bed and wrap my arm around her. Christ, she’s skinny. It’s like comforting a chopstick. Her head tilts towards my shoulder, and before I can stop it, a blob of wet mascara drops on to my pink top. The thanks I get for being a nice person.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘Let me get a cloth. It should be okay, polyester doesn’t usually stain.’

‘It’s silk,’ I reply.

‘You girls really are too kind,’ she says to us both.

‘You’re one of us now,’ says Anna.

Liv’s face crinkles and her smile returns.

‘If you make her cry mascara tears again, you’re paying for this to be dry-cleaned,’ I warn Anna.

They laugh as if I’m joking.

CHAPTER 6

LIV

Oh God, I think I've made a fool of myself in front of Anna and Margot, two people who barely know me. Hardly a great start. I'm grateful they don't appear fazed by my tears. But I want to start as I mean to go on, and that'll only happen if I'm being myself. Not the version I have been, because I'm not that Liv anymore. Margot and Anna don't need to know who I was or what I'm capable of doing to get what I want.

'How did you deal with leaving London, Margot?' I ask. 'You mentioned before you once lived there.'

She rises to her feet and makes her way back from the bed and on to the chaise longue.

'Oh that's all such a long time ago now, I barely remember,' she says dismissively.

'I remember you well,' Anna says to her. 'You were everywhere when I was a teenager.'

'What am I missing?' I ask, genuinely confused. I have no idea who Margot is or was.

'I used to be in a pop group,' Margot says. 'But like you, that version of me feels like light years away.'

I sense a contradiction here. Part of her clearly wants to tell me about it, but there's another part that's reticent. Regardless, this time, I bite. 'Oh really? Which group?'

'The Party Hard Posse,' Anna pipes up. 'You must remember "Never Stop (Yeah Yeah)" and "Get Up On The Dancefloor"?'

I look at her blankly.

'Four boys, three girls?' she adds. 'Margot, sing something.'

'No!' Margot replies, aghast.

'Then I will,' says Anna and launches into the chorus of a song I vaguely recall. Margot looks as if she's fighting to swallow down bile.

'Yes,' I say, 'I think I know that one.'

'They toured with Britney Spears, Enrique Iglesias and Will Young,' Anna continues as if she's written their Wikipedia entry.

I'm slowly beginning to decipher their dynamic. I think Anna enjoys having someone to look up to and Margot delights in the applause.

'Why did you give it up?' I ask.

'It ran its course. Singer-songwriters fell into favour and there wasn't any room in the charts for bands like us.'

'But if they ever got back together, you'd rejoin, wouldn't you?' Anna asks.

'If the right offer came along, maybe,' she concedes. 'It might be fun to be back on stage.'

There's more to her story than meets the eye and I make a mental note to look her up online later. There's nowhere to hide on the internet. Unless, like me, you hide behind a paywall.

'I suppose I should venture downstairs and start playing hostess again,' I say as I top up their glasses with the rest of the Veuve. I raise mine up. 'But first, here's to new friendships.'

We clink glasses. Margot knocks hers back so quickly it barely touches the sides.

We're re-entering the garden when Anastasia, one of my soon-to-be-former London friends, appears, tinsel draped around her neck and a piece of mistletoe wedged under a hairband. Going by the way she sways as she stands, she's making the most of the bar.

'Margot Ward!' she cries at the sight of her, eyes ablaze.

'Not for a decade,' Margot tells her. 'It's Rosetti now.'

'My little brother used to have the biggest crush on you. He used to say that when he grew up he was going to marry you. He's gay now.'

None of us are sure how the two are linked.

'So did you stay with that dancer?' Anastasia asks.

Margot's face hardens. 'Yes, we're still together.'

Something tells me I should be steering Anastasia away from this conversation, yet I can't help but want her to drive towards it. So I say nothing.

'You two were always on the covers of the celeb mags, weren't you?' Anastasia persists. 'What did they call you? "The Homewrecker"?'

Anastasia momentarily loses her footing. I grab her arm to stop her from falling. The distraction provides Margot with an excuse to remove herself from the situation.

'It was lovely to have met you,' she says, 'but I need to check on my kids.'

And with that, she slips her sunglasses back on, throws her head back and walks away, every inch the star she apparently used to be.

CHAPTER 7

'Why do you think you're here?' he begins.

His voice is soft and calming and at odds with the spikiness I feel.

'I'm not mad, I know why I'm here,' I reply. 'Read your notes.'

I look towards a brown manila folder lying on the wooden table that separates us. A few sheets of white A4 paper poke from the side, but I can't make out what's been written. I can hazard a guess though.

'I read them this morning,' he says. 'But I'd prefer to hear it from you, in your own words.'

I look around the room. It's white and sterile, much like the rest of the building. Everything here is colourless: the people, the bedroom I'm forced to share, the lounge where the only voices are those coming from a television no one watches, the dining room where we eat in silence.

He and I are both sitting in leather armchairs opposite one another. There are two framed photographs hanging from the wall, both generic Ikea images. One is of a pier leading out into a blueish lake and the other is of grey pebbles on a calm shore.

'What is it with psychiatrists and water?' I ask.

'You've seen a psychiatrist before?'

'You haven't answered my question.'

'If I answer yours, will you answer mine?'

I nod.

'Well, some of us believe being near water can induce calm and make people feel at ease. It promotes a sense of relaxation, especially for those experiencing mental health concerns.'

'Like me.'

'Is that what you believe you're experiencing?'

I raise an eyebrow to suggest it's a rhetorical question and he moves on.

'What do you think when you look at those pictures?'

I study the one featuring the pier. 'I think,' I reply, 'how far would I need to swim before I could drown myself.'

He doesn't react.

'Kidding,' I add.

'Are you still experiencing an urge to end your life?'

'No. Not anymore.'

'Could I ask what's changed? You were brought to this facility because you were found by Beachy Head – historically, a popular cliff edge used by people planning to end their lives.'

'Planning to end your life and actually doing it are two very different things.'

'Your medical notes suggest a history of depression. You spent time in a facility similar to this one, eighteen months ago.'

'Why did you ask if I've seen a psychiatrist before when you already know the answer?'

He doesn't answer.

'Okay, so yes, I did go to Beachy Head to kill myself, is that what you want to hear? But I didn't go ahead with it, did I?'

'Why?'

I think back to three days ago, and to the storm. To the rain lashing my face, the soaking wet clothes clinging to my body, and to looking out over the silver sea and its beckoning waves. Finally, down to the jagged rocks below. And I remember how, just as I was about to relinquish control of my body to the wind and let it carry me over the edge, I

heard her voice. She spoke to me, quite gently but with absolute clarity. I decide not to answer his question but ask one of my own.

'Does everyone have a voice in the back of their head?'

'Most people have an internal monologue, yes.'

'What if it's not your voice? What's that called?'

I have all of his attention now. 'It can be one of many things, such as dissociative identity disorder. People can feel as if they can have several personalities inside them, that can control their behaviour at different times and in different ways. These identities can have their own histories and traits.' He gazes at me for one long moment. *'Is that what's happening to you? Did a voice belonging to someone else suggest you end your life?'*

I don't tell him it actually saved it.

'No,' I say. 'I just changed my mind.'

'And what's to stop you changing your mind again and going ahead with it when you leave here?'

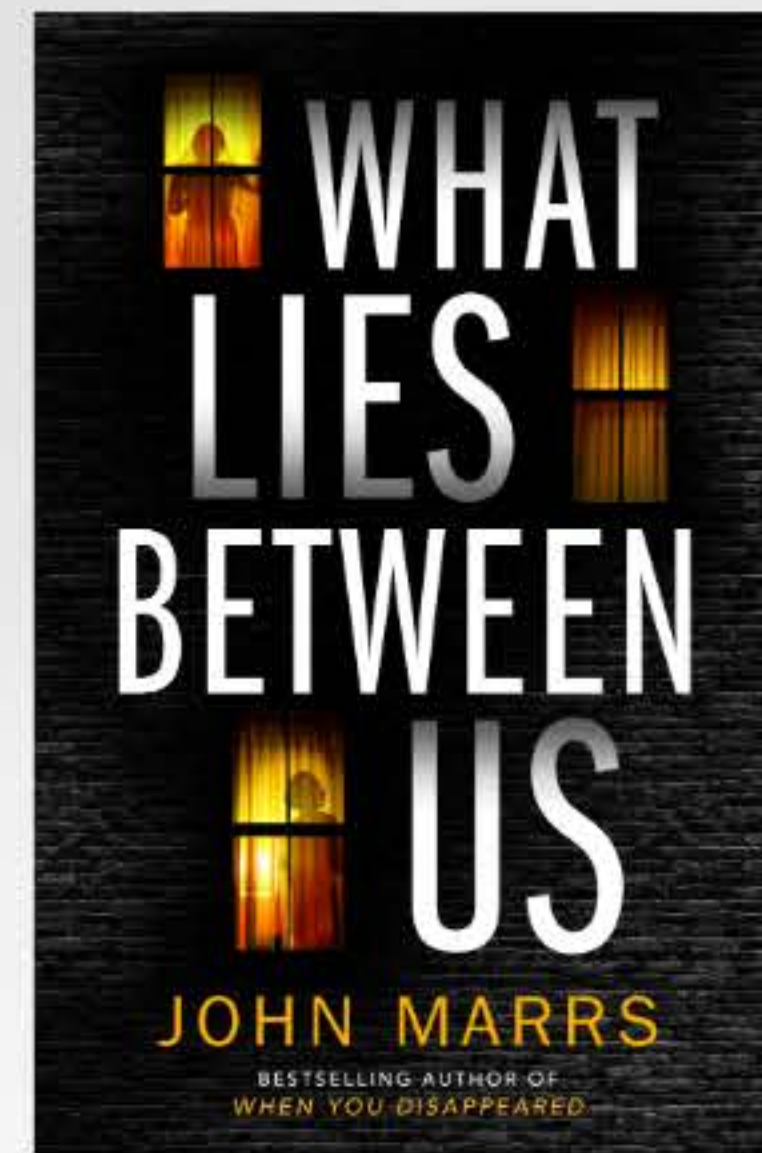
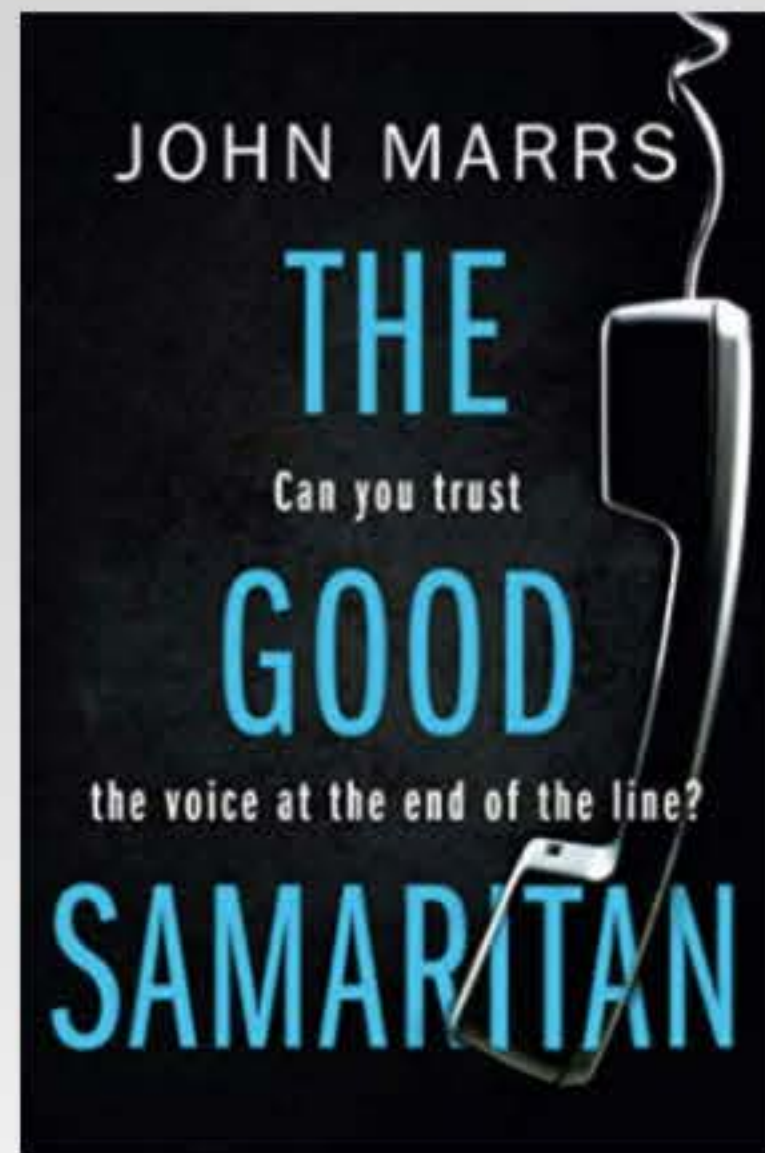
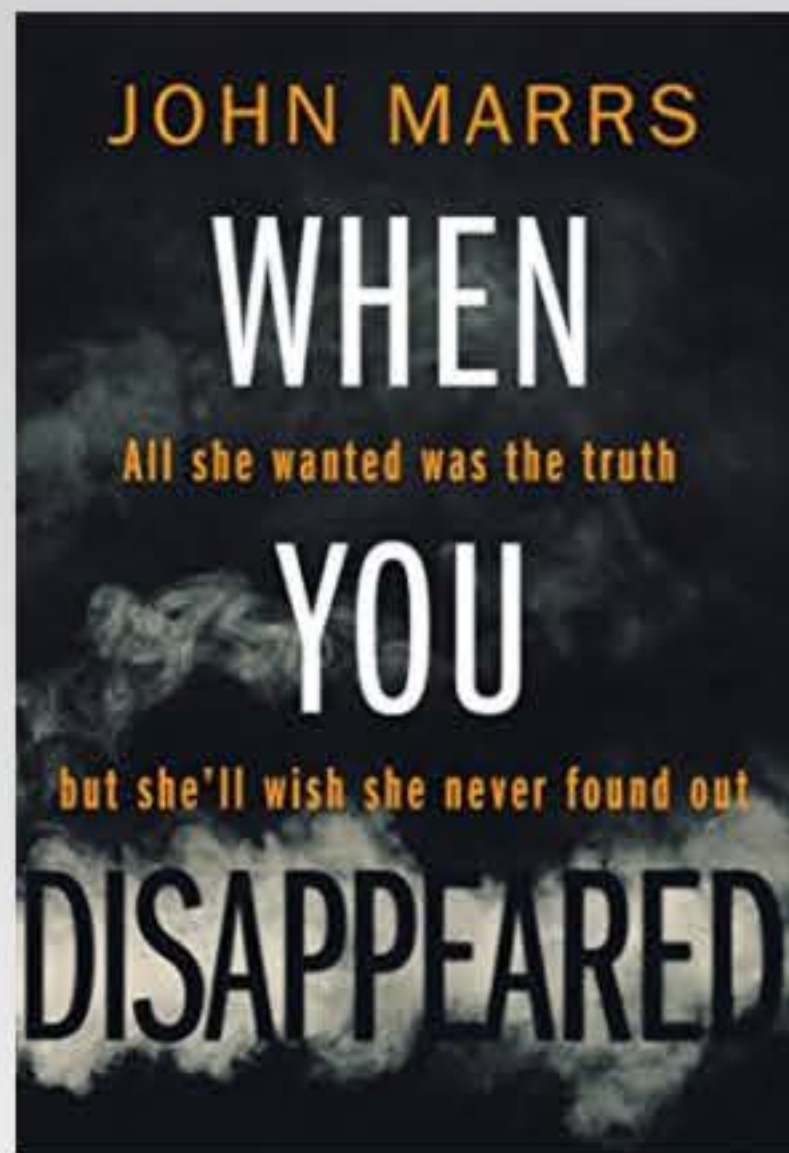
'I won't,' I reply confidently.

It's true. Because she won't let me. And now I know she's here, I don't want to. She has my best interests at heart. She has shown me a way forward. A way for me to live.

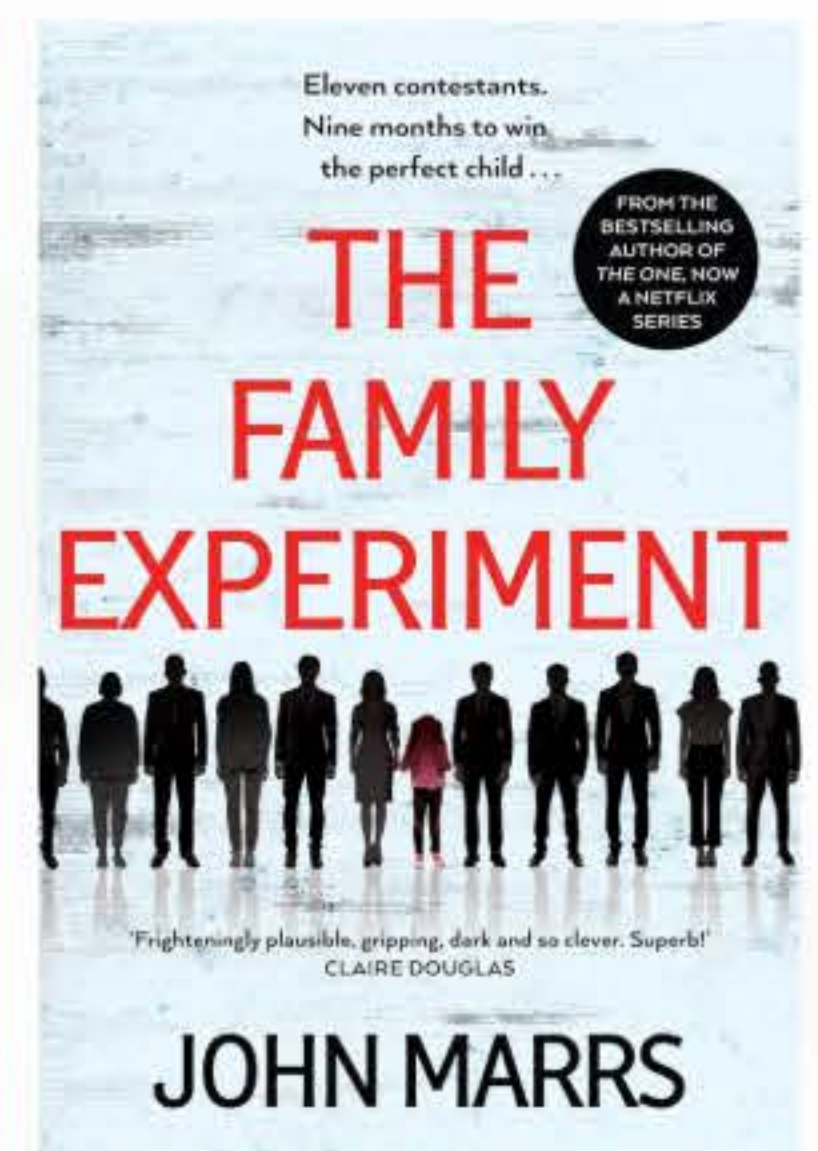
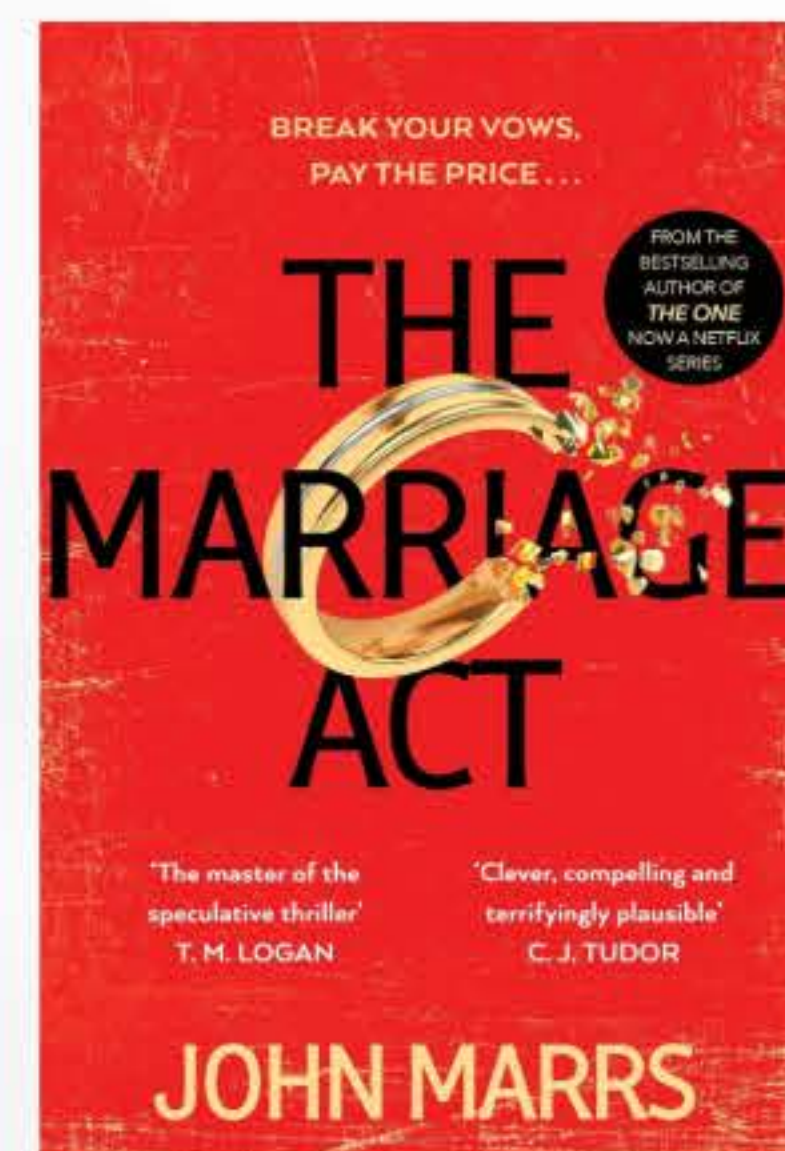
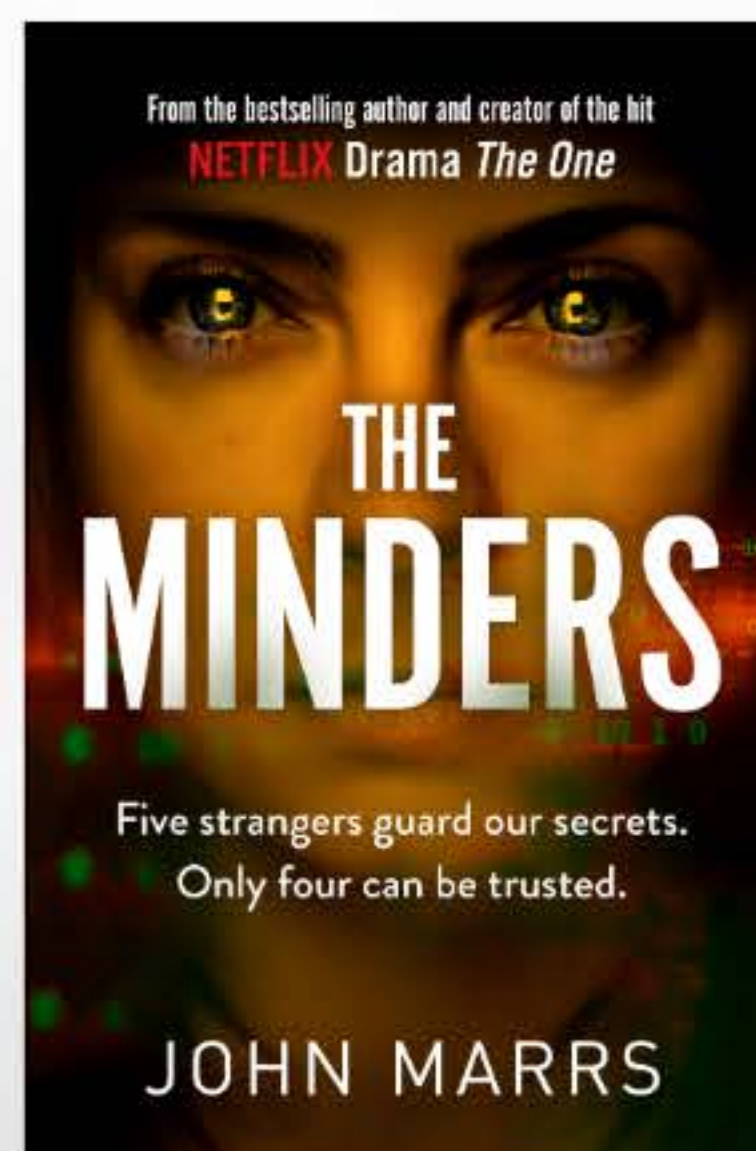
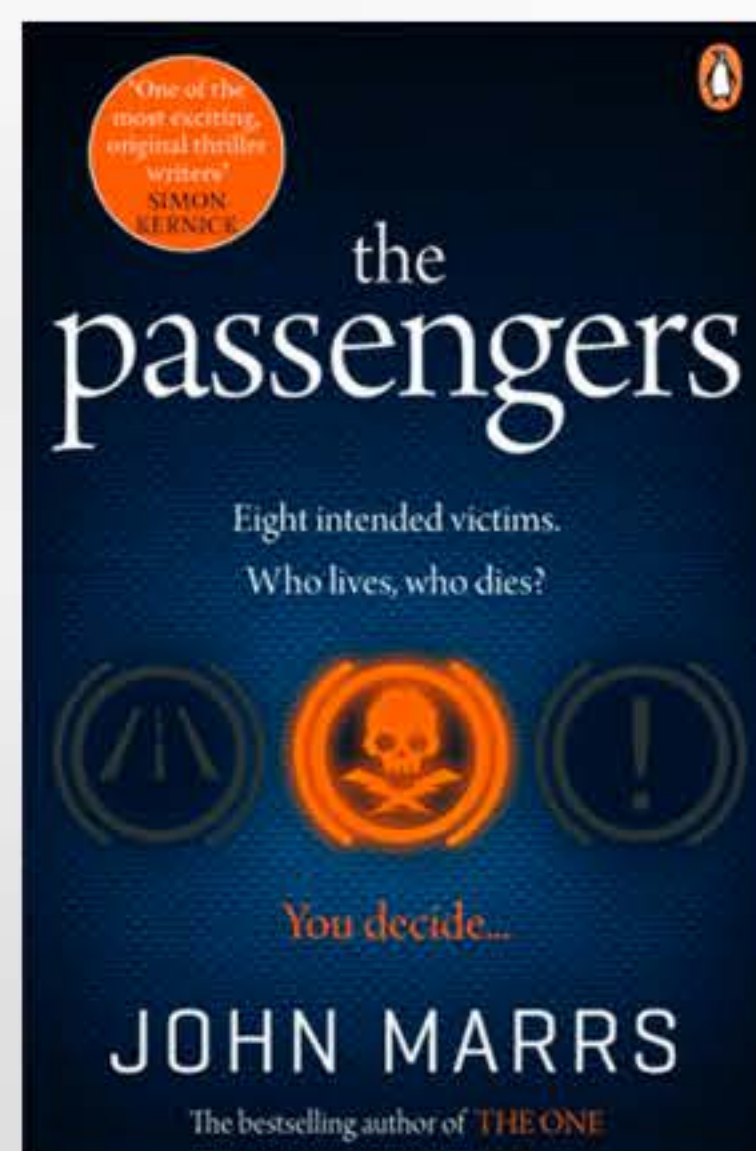
She's made me understand that it's not myself I need to kill.

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