

Mine

Word count: 3000

She's all I think about; she's in the marrow of my bones. My sweet little Sumi, with her tiny baby hands and sweep of midnight hair, soft against her delicate skull. Sumi, with her flawless latte skin and beaming dark eyes. I wonder how much she's grown in the two months and twenty-six days since I've held her.

I wonder if she feels it too, this feeling of a limb ripped away.

I spend my days now spraying kitchen splashbacks, scrubbing the darkening grout between other people's bathroom tiles. I tie a bandanna around my hair and I get on my knees and work, my fingers growing sore and red. I scour away grime and I polish glass and I leave surfaces glimmering. I make everything smell like citrus, sweet and fresh. My body screams for her. Her name echoes through the corridors of my mind.

They can't keep her away from me forever. Look, I messed up. I'll admit that. But I'm better now; I'll be better. As soon as I show them that, she'll be mine again.

I call Tom. I call him again. I call while I wait for my coffee, standing outside in the cold. People in dark coats ripple past, jostling and mindless. Now that I'm back out, the world feels disjointed somehow, movements and sounds just slightly out of synch. In the autumn gloom, colours are heartbreakingly bright. The leaves are cruel bursts of orange; my cobalt coat glows, electric. Tom doesn't answer. His voicemail message sears through me.

My coffee is ready. I don't return the barista's smile. I can't. The heat of the cup bleeds through to my fingers, painful and soothing.

The house I'm cleaning this morning is blindingly white. I pull on my yellow gloves and I get to work. I'm lucky to have this job, my case worker, Amal, tells me. Yeah, well. It passes the time; it slowly fills my bank account. The real blessing is it's solitary. When the clients are home, I'm invisible to them, just a pale robot scuttling around, working my magic with potions and polishes. And so I'm free to daydream.

I lose myself in the soft percussion of sprays and sponges, and I go back to mornings from life before. Tom and I drinking black coffee, Sumi kicking her little legs in her highchair. The games we'd play after Tom left for work, the way her

mischievous dark eyes would gleam. Her fat cheeks when she smiled, her tiny crescent fingernails. The bursting feeling whenever she looked up at me.

That kind of love – I’ve never experienced anything like it. When Sumi came into my world, I felt the pieces of myself finally fuse together. I was real, vibrant.

Until Tom decided I was dangerous. Until he convinced everyone I shouldn’t be near her.

Later that night, I’m halfway through a bottle of cheap merlot when he finally picks up.

‘Brooke,’ he says. ‘You need to stop calling.’ He’s quiet and firm, like a school principal. Like he doesn’t know the curves of my hipbones, hasn’t held my wrists above my head and breathed my name into my neck. Like we don’t share a blind and passionate devotion to this breathtaking baby girl.

‘Please,’ I say. ‘I need to see her.’

He used to like my steely determination. My *intensity*, he called it, burning like a blue flame. But now I’m relentless, hysterical. The thin walls tremble, bass from my neighbour Chris’s living room seeping through. My hands are shaking too around my tumbler of wine; my leg jiggles without me knowing why. An earthquake, I think. An earthquake inside me.

‘You have to let me see her.’

‘You know I can’t,’ Tom says. ‘I just can’t.’

The next evening after my cleaning job, I go to the house. I feel dizzy being back here. I know every detail so well – the driveway littered with gumnuts, the white lacework on the verandah, the brass door knocker. I’m a knot of sputtering livewires, held together by skin.

My blood pulses as the door opens. It's Tom's mum, Misako, regal in a burnt orange cardigan, her hair pulled back in a bun. Her face darkens when she sees me. She steps outside and closes the door behind her.

'Honey,' she says. 'I know this is hard for you. But you can't be here. You need to leave.'

'Please, just tell me how she is.'

Her dark eyes are sympathetic, but there's a hardness to her.

'She's happy and healthy,' she says. 'And she's safe. You need to go and let us take care of her.'

Then she says if they have to, they'll call the police.

So, it looks like I'll have to take matters into my own hands.

I can't keep away. When I'm not at cleaning jobs, I come back to the house. Just to walk past, just to look. From the bus stop across the street, I can sit and watch, partly hidden by the orange shock of a plane tree.

Mostly, I see nothing. Crisp leaves skitter down the street. I stare at the brown fence, the dark ferns, the wide bay windows. It's torture, knowing she's inside. Tom, I can live without. I miss the heat of his touch, but I never needed him. Sumi, though, with her little fumbling hands grabbing at the loose strands of my hair. My skin aches for her.

Then one afternoon I see her, and she steals the air out of my lungs. Sumi, nestled in her pram, bundled up in a coral pink jacket. Her fat cheeks, her petal-pink lips. Her astonishing dark eyes. She's bigger than I remember, I notice with a pang. All those precious days I've missed.

But behind the pram is a woman who isn't me. She's young and soft-looking, red hair furiously bright in the wind.

Tom, Tom, how could you leave her with some random girl?

I sink behind the tree and I watch through the gnarled branches. I hear her babbling happily – 'Puh, puh, puh!' It takes everything in me not to run over and

snatch her back. I can see a version of myself launching forwards, screeching like a wild animal. A savage blur in the sharp autumn day.

But I steel myself. I don't move. I watch as they trundle down the street, watch until they turn the corner towards the park. And I sit there, without my baby, breath wrenching in and out of my chest.

I don't eat. I live on black coffee and red wine. I call Amal, my case worker. She tells me to try to relax, to focus on self-care and rebuilding my life. I tell her I can't get better without Sumi.

I dye my hair jet black, leaving inky stains on my towel and around my hairline. It looks startling against my pale skin and pale eyes. In the mirror, I look fragile and lost. But the colour reminds me of Sumi, of her lovely, silky hair; the Japanese features from Tom's heritage. I blast it with the hairdryer and for a second, I feel calmer.

I call Amal again. I tell her Tom's left her with a stranger. She tells me that's not my concern; that everyone's top priority is Sumi's wellbeing. She asks me if I've tried meditation yet.

I go to my cleaning jobs. I run on the treadmill in the grubby room my apartment block calls a gym. I drink more coffee, more wine. And I keep going back to watch for her, whenever I get a chance. *Think*, my brain screams. *Think of something*.

It comes to me one afternoon, when I see another new woman leaving the house. This one has her hair scraped back, and she's lugging a foldable mop and a nana trolley I know is full of sprays and bleaches and sponges like mine. Before I can change my mind, I'm running over to her.

'Excuse me,' I say, catching my breath. I tell her I live across the street, pointing vaguely. I say I'm looking for a cleaner too. And she tells me the name of the cleaning company. She says she cleans for Tom every Tuesday, and maybe she could

do my house after. She digs in her bag and finds a business card. I cradle it in my hand like a precious jewel.

The next part is easy. I call the cleaning company, tell them I'm sorry, but Tom and I won't need their services anymore. I rearrange my schedule. Then on Tuesday afternoon, I arrive at the house with my cleaning supplies. I knock the brass door knocker and wait. Praying that Misako isn't there to ruin it all.

The red-haired girl answers the door, holding a black mug of steaming tea. Blood surges in my veins.

'Hello,' I say, forcing a cool smile. 'I'm taking over for Irina.'

And thank god she's stupid and she lets me in.

It's heartbreaking being here. I scrub at the stovetop, trying not to think of all the times I've sparked it life to scramble eggs or warm up some milk. I can hear Sumi cooing and giggling from the nursery, and it kills me. It just kills me. The girl – *Melissa*, apparently – is reading her some stupid story. From the words I can hear it's not one I recognise. It's not one of the ones Sumi loves.

Every minute stretches like an hour. I move on to the bathroom, ignoring the familiar sight of Tom's shampoo, his favourite Dior cologne. My nerves are flickering like strobe lights. I'm on alert for every movement, every sound. Any opportunity I might get.

Sumi starts to cry. I feel it like needles in every fibre of my body, but I hold myself back. I hear *Melissa* scurrying around, heating up a bottle in the kitchen. I hear her singing some bouncy melody, making soothing noises. Eventually Sumi's little wails subside, but my chest still aches. I keep working. I breathe and I keep working.

Now all that's left is the nursery. My heart thuds as I walk down the hall towards her.

And there she is. My precious baby girl, swaddled up in her crib. My insides turn to warm milk. Her face always looks slightly cranky as she sleeps. Melissa is sitting in the blue armchair next to the crib. She looks up from her phone and smiles.

‘She’s just fallen asleep,’ she says softly. ‘So, I guess you can just skip cleaning in here today, I don’t want to wake her. I’ll give it a quick once-over later.’

All the air leaves my body. So, I’m not going to get my chance today. But I finish the job. I leave everything gleaming, like I always do. Melissa gives me an envelope with three crisp fifty-dollar notes inside.

Then I have to wait a whole week before I can try again.

Seven days, like sleepwalking. I clean. I run. I drink coffee. At night, I dream that I’m in a gloomy windswept field, cradling a rabbit and stroking its velvety ears. It blinks its black eyes at me. I wake up and my heartbeat says her name, banging against my ribcage. Sumi, Sumi, Sumi.

The next Tuesday I show up again. This time when Melissa answers the door, Sumi is in her arms. My darling Sumi, looking right at me with her curious dark eyes. Her chubby face breaks into a delighted grin, and she waves her arms towards me, giggling. ‘Bi ti mah!’ she exclaims. My throat aches; my chest feels like it’s about to burst.

‘Oh, she likes you,’ Melissa says with a laugh, and a hot rush of fury rises in me. But I come in and I get to work.

I listen as Melissa puts Sumi down for a nap, singing to her. ‘Alright, missy,’ I hear her say. Later, she comes into the kitchen and makes a cup of black tea, moving around me while I stack the dishwasher with trembling hands. She offers me a cup and I say no, forcing a tight-lipped smile.

More spraying. More scrubbing. Now the kitchen's done; I gather up my supplies to start on the bedroom. Then I hear Melissa walk out of the nursery and into the bathroom, closing the door behind her with a click. My breath catches. This could be my chance.

I act fast, dropping my spray bottle as I race down the hall. And some god I don't believe in is looking out for me, because when I get to the nursery, her cup of tea is sitting there on the chest of drawers, still three-quarters full.

She's left the tea bag in, the bitter way I like it too. It's over-steeped so dark it almost looks like blood.

I wish it hadn't come to this, but I have no choice. I reach into my pocket and pull out my little sandwich bag, glinting with the crushed-up pills I procured from my neighbour Chris.

I pour them into her tea.

I swirl the cup around, begging the powder to dissolve. My whole body is shaking; my skin is on fire. But I do it.

You would do it too. You would.

Forty minutes later, I'm out on the street with Sumi in my arms. I'm soaring. I actually have her – my precious little Sumi, warm against my body. I force myself to walk slowly, one foot in front of the other, no cause for suspicion. The world tunnels and the only sounds are my breath, my heartbeat and the sickening crunch of leaves underfoot, a sound like tiny bones breaking.

My car is packed full of nappies and baby food and all the supplies we'll need. I drive, glancing back at Sumi. My chest swells at the sight of her, snuggled in her car seat with a fluffy stuffed bunny. We have a few hours still before anyone will notice. Melissa should still be peacefully passed out in the soft blue armchair; by the time she wakes up or Tom gets home we'll be long gone.

When this all dies down, we can come back and sort it out. Maybe Tom will even be happy, once he sees how we can all be together again. For now, I drive. I open the window a little and a slithery breeze cools my face. I drive until the suburbs and freeways fade, and we're following the grey curve of the coastline, stormy and jubilant.

The sky is bruised with purple as we settle into a motel. I give Sumi a little bath as best I can in the sink, wrap her up in a fresh nappy and a new blue onesie. She smells like vanilla; she's soft and clean and perfect. I feed her. I bounce her gently, sing her favourite songs to soothe her quiet grizzling. It takes what feels like hours, but she finally settles, tiny hands curled in loose fists. I sit back on the bed, exhausted.

I leave it as late as I can. But eventually, I have to look at the news on my phone. My chest tightens as it loads. And there it is. Of course, they're on to it by now. Words dance before me. *Baby missing. Taken from home. Urgent search.* That's all to be expected.

What I didn't expect is Melissa's face, smiling wide in some beach holiday photo, her red hair tumbling around freckled shoulders.

The words don't make sense. *Coma. Critical condition. Fighting for life.* My blood rushes in my ears.

I didn't mean for that. She was just supposed to pass out. She couldn't actually be hurt. She couldn't *die*.

A sick feeling rises in my stomach. Suddenly I'm overheated. Maybe I really have gone too far this time. I drop my phone on the bed and I press my lips to Sumi's soft, dark hair.

I sit up for hours, the clock ticking with my heartbeat. Sumi's grown some tiny new teeth, and I touch my fingertip to them in wonder. It makes her giggle. 'Ba ba pa ti,'

she says. She's so real, a growing, thriving human all of her own. We'll get through this. They'll understand I didn't mean anything bad, if I just explain.

I tuck Sumi up safe in her portacot, then I take a long, warm shower. I don't understand this churning feeling, getting stronger with every minute. I have her back. I should be bursting with light. But I can't get Melissa's face out of my mind. Then Tom's face, the last time I took Sumi without telling him; the complete horror and devastation. The way he gasped, *I thought she was gone, I thought she was gone.*

Shame is swelling up inside me, seeping heavy through my limbs. I lean against the shower wall. *What have I done, what have I done, what have I done.*

Out of the shower, I don't know how much time has passed. I check on Sumi. Then I look at my phone again.

And this time it's my face they've got, my name. *Police are urgently looking to speak to Brooke de Vries, a former nanny of baby Sumi, in relation to the child's whereabouts. They have reason to believe...*

Nanny, nanny, nanny. As if that describes what I am to Sumi. As if you can distill months of loving her, every day since she was two months old, to something as cold as a job title.

Tom's wife died before she could even hold her. She just left her here, motherless. And Tom, well. He tries, but men never expect to have to actually look after a squirming, delicate baby, do they? He'd have been lost without me. Completely lost.

But I've messed up again. I know that now in my stomach. The shame swallows me, hot and violent.

And now they're knocking on my door. I hold Sumi close, and I let them knock a few more times before I answer.