

Chapter One

It's amazing how many children you can fit in a minivan, if you tessellate carefully and maintain only the most basic level of safety. Four in the very back, two of whom are painfully wedged in the space normally accorded one child. A single lap belt over those two, a choice both illegal and stupid, but there you go and thank goodness they were skinny. Frances Bloom always had this vague belief that the pressure of all those little bodies would hold them in place in the event of an accident. Ten seconds with a physicist would have cleared that up, but she didn't know any, and seeing as she rarely made it above 20 mph in traffic she might have been right. She was a careful driver, especially with other people's kids in the car, and so far she hadn't needed to put her nutball theory to the test.

In the middle the two littlest ones sat securely in actual car seats and, next to her in front, holding sway over the CD player with the attention to power and detail only a teenager could wield, her eldest daughter, Ava. Seven children, the genetic arsenal of four families. One big crash and the entire neighborhood would have had funeral scheduling issues. Not that it was a joking matter, of course. Frances just had these thoughts, what could you do? Rather than fight them and run the risk they'd deepen her wrinkles, she just let the buggers run.

She'd been doing this carpool for too long, she thought. It probably wasn't a good sign that a car crash sounded like just one of several options, rather than something to be avoided. But honestly, how many times could you break up a fight over the CD player, or who had to sit in the middle, or whether they could watch a

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DVD, which they couldn't, and never could have, even before the in-car machine broke. When it was a full house, like this morning, it got so raucous that a tribe of howler monkeys would have fallen silent in awed appreciation. Mind you, these were professional children, the offspring of creative people and deep thinkers, who'd marveled over them as babies, encouraged them to express themselves as toddlers, and wished they'd been more consistent and mean to them now they were old enough to sass back.

In the far back seat she had the two sibling children of her neighbors Anne Porter and her husband Charlie. Kate and Theo, lovely names, less than lovely children. Kate, 6, specialized in the surprise attack, and often sat silently through the entire trip, rousing herself only to shove her brother viciously out of the van at the other end. Theo, nearly 10, never saw it coming. It wasn't that he was thick, per se, it was just that he never saw it coming. Theo himself preferred a full frontal physical assault with optional screaming in the ears. God knows how that dynamic would play out in therapy.

Interleaved between them, like two all-beef patties, were her son Milo, who was 10, and his cousin Wyatt, who was 6. They weren't really cousins, they were second cousins, or cousins once removed, or something. Wyatt's mother was Iris, who was actually *Frances's* cousin, but it was just easier to call the kids cousins and have done with it. Wyatt reveled in the riches of two mothers, and his other one was an actress, famous for being America's Honey. It wasn't a secret she was gay, it was just that America apparently didn't give a shit.

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Right behind her, where she could reach back and hand them stuff at the traffic lights, which she often did, were her youngest child Lally, and her neighbor Bill's son Lucas, both of whom were 4. It was a complicated carpool, and had evolved over time. At first the various parents had tried to take turns driving, but as Frances had a kid at every school, it quickly became clear it was just easier if she did it. She preferred it; she was the only parent who wasn't "working" (let's not get into the atom splitting of who's doing more work, stay-at-home parents or not, let's just agree it's a shit show for all of us, and move on), so she wasn't trying to get anywhere herself, and often did the driving in pajamas. She also hated the feeling in the house just after the kids had screamed and yelled their way through getting ready, finding shoes and losing shoes, hunting down books and bags and hats and whatever, all of which they could have gotten ready the night before, not that she was making a point or anything, and had scrambled through the door and down the path to someone else's car... it made her feel like she'd been picked last for the team, or left behind at a train station, or like when she'd come home to an empty house after her own days at school. *I want to go too*, her inner child cried, and her outer adult volunteered to do all the driving and everyone was happy.

The elementary kids got dropped off first, then Ava at her school, and then finally Lally and Lucas at the preschool, where they needed to be physically signed in. She would read a story, maybe two, then pause at the kissing window for a proper goodbye with optional pretending she couldn't see her kid... 'where's Lally? Oh, there she is!' Jesus, did they ever get tired of that? Then she was free. Free to go to the store. Free to go home. Free to drive head first into the nearest wall, which is

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what she might have done, if she didn't have to go back in three hours and pick up Lucas and Lally. Frances wondered how many other people were overwhelmed by anti-climax but kept plodding along, taking care of their kids, picking up juice box straws so animals wouldn't choke on them, collecting corks or buttons or whatever craft supply was needed, replacing the batteries in the smoke alarm as soon as the first ping of complaint was registered. Maybe this was what they meant by staying together for the children. It had nothing to do with marriage at all.

Frances pulled into the elementary school lot and Ava got out, sighing as if she were a fourteen-year-old Victorian child disembarking for her day down the mine. She pulled open the door and swung her arm wide.

"Medium sized children may now escape. Mind the gap, and watch out for speeding moms on cellphones."

The children had already unbuckled and piled out, high-fiving Ava as they passed her. Kate stopped, and Frances turned to see what was up. The little girl's face was a study in conflict.

"What's wrong, honey?"

Kate looked at Frances, and her chin wobbled.

"I left my toilet roll tubes at home."

"Oh." Frances looked at her eldest child. Ava shrugged, and looked back inside the open minivan.

"They aren't in the car."

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"Oh, ok." Frances smiled at Kate. "I'm sure the teacher will have lots of extras." She herself had, over time, sent in three thousand toilet roll tubes. For all she knew they were building a particle collider out of them, or an accurate re-creation of the New York subway system. Let's hope they didn't use the obvious choice for subway trains.

"No, I have to have my *own* ones." Kate's eyes were filling with tears, her shit fit indicator dropping to DEFCON 3. "It's for the class project. Everyone else will have them."

Frances weighed her options. On the one hand Kate was only 6, and would not only survive but forget the trauma of not having toilet rolls. But on the other hand, she was a member of the Yakuza-esque organization known as Miss Lollo's First Grade Class, whose members fell on the weakest like wolves on a lamb. Forgetting to bring toilet rolls and having to borrow some was a Noticeable Event to be avoided at all costs. It wasn't on the level of peeing oneself, of course, it wasn't going to give rise to a nickname you couldn't shake until college, but it wasn't great.

"My mommy put them in a bag, but she forgot to give them to me." A note of accusatory steel had entered her voice. Frances gazed at the little angel, whose mother had been heard calling her Butterblossom. Kate's eyes had gone flat like a shark's. She knew she would get what she wanted, the only question was when. *I am younger than you, old lady*, her eyes said, *and I will stand here until age makes you infirm, at which time I will push you down, crunch over your brittle bones and get the toilet rolls I need.*

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“Alright, Kate. I’ll go back and get them after I drop Ava, ok, and bring them back to school for you.” Frances knew she was being played, but it was ok. She was soft-hearted, and she could live with that.

“Suckah...” Ava headed back to her seat, shaking her head over her mother’s weakness, a weakness she loved to take advantage of herself.

“Thanks, Frances!” Kate beamed an enormous smile and turned and ran off, the transformation from tremulous waif to bouncy cherub instantaneous. Behind her in the line of cars, someone tapped their horn. Ok, the brief honk said, we waited while you dealt with whatever mini crisis was caused by your piss-poor parenting, because we’re nice like that, but now you can get a move on because we, like everyone else in this line, have Shit to Do. Amazing how much a second of blaring horn can communicate.

Frances waved an apologetic hand out of the car window, and pulled out of the gate.

She dropped the other kids and was back at Anne's house in half an hour. Having carpool duty wasn’t the onerous task the other parents thought it was: all three schools were close to home, and all four families lived on the same block. As Frances ran up to Anne's door she looked over and saw her own cat watching her. She waved. He blinked and looked away, embarrassed for both of them.

She knocked softly on the door, but no one answered. Maybe Anne had gone back to sleep. She turned the handle and pushed open the door, peering around. Yup, there was the bag of toilet rolls. She grabbed it and was about to shut the door

again when she saw Anne lying on the floor, her face turned away, her long hair spilling across the rug.

“Anne! Holy crap, are you ok?” But as she said it her brain started processing what she was really seeing. Anne, on the floor, check. But now she’d turned her head and Frances realized she was fine, in fact she was better than fine. Frances had instinctively stepped over the sill and now she saw that Anne was naked, her face flushed, a man between her legs, his head below her waist.

“Shit...” Frances dropped her eyes, began to back out, “Sorry, Anne, Kate forgot her toilet rolls...” Stupidly she raised her hand with the Whole Foods bag in it, because of course, that would make it better, that she’d interrupted Anne and Charlie having a quickie on the living room floor.

The man realized something was wrong, finally, and raised his head, looking first at Anne and then turning to see what she was looking at, why her face was so pale when seconds before it had been so warmly flushed.

Frances was nearly through the door, it was closing fast, but not before she saw that it wasn’t Charlie at all. It was someone else entirely.