

BIG BAD ME

The poster features three main characters. In the center is Aislinn O'Loughlin, a young woman with long reddish-brown hair, wearing a blue denim jacket over a yellow t-shirt with a smiley face. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile and has her right hand raised, showing a black, claw-like glove. To her left is a young man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a checkered shirt, looking off to the side. To her right is a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a black leather jacket with a rainbow flag patch, holding a large black knife. The background is dark and textured, with a large, dark shadow of a person standing behind the central character. In the lower part of the background, there are small, lit-up houses.

Aislinn O'Loughlin

'Brilliant and refreshing, and so much fun.'

Gina Blaxill, author of *You Can Trust Me*



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First published in 2022 by
Little Island Books
7 Kenilworth Park
Dublin 6W
Ireland

First published in the USA in 2023

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Print ISBN: 978-1-91-507104-0

Cover illustration by Jai McFerran
Designed and typeset by Rosa Devine
Proofread by Emma Dunne

Little Island has received funding to support this book
from the Arts Council of Ireland.



10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



15 ½ years ago ...

There was a *smash!*

Dr Sinéad Wilder had half-convincing herself she'd dreamt it, until Katie sat up beside her.

'Mommy? 'a' go bang?'

'Sssh. Nothing, Katie-pie. Go back to sleep.'

Sinéad slid her hand under the pillow, reaching for the ... *crap!* Where was it? The stairs creaked. Sinéad tried not to panic.

'a' doin', Mommy?'

'Nothing, I'm not ... Everything's fine. Back to sleep, sweetheart. NOW!'

All right, maybe she was panicking a little. Sinéad's fingers curled around metal, but she didn't have time to feel relieved before the door burst open.

Something stumbled in.

Sinéad didn't wait to find out what. She yanked the gun out, fired – and missed. Which is good, because it was Robert. *Just* Robert.

He wasn't OK. 'Madison's gone. The front door's smashed open. But she's been in the lab. There's bits of mice and blood –'

'Blood?' said Katie. (She was two, not deaf.)

Sinéad was already up, snatching more darts off the nightstand. So when Katie reached out, she just scooped her up too. 'It's all right, Katie-pie. It's – it's an adventure. Hey, you want a sleepover with Debbie Next Door?'

Katie nodded. Just as well, because she was not coming with them.

Sinéad wrapped Katie in one of Brendan's old sweaters and snuggled her close, inhaling her husband's scent mingled with their daughter's.

'Sinéad?' said Robert. 'You OK?'

'Me?' Sinéad jogged Katie onto her hip, forcing a smile. 'Always. Let's go.'

* * *

After Brendan's funeral, Debbie had said Sinéad could call in 'any time, for anything' – and if spur-of-the-moment 3AM babysitting wasn't quite what she'd meant, you'd never have guessed from her smile as she took Katie, while Sinéad sped off with Robert in whatever-she-drove-back-then. Whatever it was, it suddenly felt way too small because Robert was getting very upset.

Sinéad glanced at the dart gun in her lap. It was loaded, obviously, but could she drive, aim and fire all at once? Did it even matter? If things went that far, crashing would be the least of her worries.

‘It’ll be grand.’ Sinéad had to sound certain, because she wasn’t. ‘Just take a breath and use that – that thing. The buzzy connection you two have, yeah?’

‘The thing,’ said Robert. ‘Right. Just – just relax. Think of Maddie, and – oh God – Bump!’

‘Ah, Bump’s fine,’ Sinéad said. ‘He’s a scrapper.’

‘She.’

‘She?’

‘You know, Maddie’s convinced,’ said Robert. ‘She’s been eyeing Katie’s princess costumes for – oh! LEFT, NOW.’

Well, that worked. Sinéad felt a split-second of relief, before fear kicked in. Because if Robert could feel Madison, that meant –

‘She’s close,’ he said. ‘Down there.’

Down that dark creepy cul-de-sac? Of course she was.

Sinéad tried not to shudder as she turned the wheel again.

The headlights caught Madison immediately. Robert didn’t even wait for the car to stop before jumping out.

‘MADDIE!’

Sinéad yanked the hand-brake and flung her own door open, tripping over the seatbelt as she scrambled out. She hit the ground awkwardly and tried not to think about the crunch of her ankle. It could hurt later.

Madison looked up from the body.

Except, that’s not quite right, because *it* wasn’t Madison – and *that* was barely a body any more. But Not-Madison – the huge leathery beast with yellow eyes and glinty claws – looked up, licked blood off its snout, then turned to growl at Robert.

‘Maddie,’ he said, ‘it’s OK, babe. Just –’

Not-Maddie pounced. Sinéad grabbed the gun.

The monster slashed out, catching Robert in the chest and sending him flying. The crack of his skull against the brick wall turned Sinéad's stomach.

But that wasn't the worst bit.

Robert looked up. Or didn't. Because it wasn't Robert any more. His eyes flashed yellow. His muscles ripped through his shirt. His jaw stretched, his fangs lengthened – but that still wasn't the worst.

The worst came when Not-Robert and Not-Maddie leapt, claws flailing as they ripped at each other. Not-Maddie's stomach was as swollen as actual Madison's these days.

Little Bump was right there, in the middle of the fight, and if Not-Robert knew, it didn't care. It slashed down, right across that pregnant belly.

'NO!' Sinéad jumped up, ignoring the pain in her ankle. Her hands were shaking, her palms were slippery with sweat and she was a useless shot at the best of times.

But this wasn't the best of times. So Sinéad fired.

1. Evie

Reader, I was born.

That mightn't surprise you, but I'm sure it surprised me. It certainly surprised me, fifteen and a half years later, when I learned *how* I was born: less 'peaceful-home-birth' than I'd imagined; more 'giant-cage-in-the-basement-birth' – my terrified mom wielding a scalpel while my bio-parents ... well, we'll get to that.

The important thing here is that I was born. And that, growing up, all I knew about the other stuff was this: I was adopted (true); and I'd inherited my bio-mom's red hair (true) and super-dangerous, ultra-rare diabetes (less true).

Sure, maybe it should've seemed odd that my diabetes was so uncommon I couldn't Google it. Or that it caused a burning-allergy to silver, and I had to take special insulin custom-mixed by my mom in her secret, unregulated lab in the basement. (Yep, seeing it all written down, it definitely should've seemed odd.) But it didn't. That was just my life. My slightly unusual, very happy life. Which – and

this is the bit you're here for, Reader – was about to fall apart completely.

So let's cut to that, eh?

* * *

The buzzing started in Jolt.

You know Jolt, right? Those generic-cute coffee-shops, with generic-cute artwork and terrible coffee-puns everywhere? (It was December, so we were currently 'Dreaming of a Flat White Christmas'.)

I was in the corner, sipping a sugar-free caramel steamed milk and totally failing to wrap my head around biology homework. Probably not what you'd expect, with my immunology-genius mom and big sister one win off being crowned SciFair Queen for life. But there I was, defying expectations and not understanding the difference between mitosis and ... um ... osmosis? ... when a weird buzz hit right between my eyes.

I dropped my pen, rubbed the buzzing spot, then focused back on my textbook. No, I didn't. I slammed the book shut, then kneaded between my eyes as the buzzing got louder. It felt like a pissed-off bee caught in my brain.

I hoped it wouldn't wind up killing me.

Does that sound melodramatic? It's not. At the time, I really wasn't sure.

Part of my 'normal' over the last few months had involved getting crazy stress-headaches. Not like this buzzing – that was new. Usually it was more ... stabby

forehead death-prickles. *Totally typical* given my ‘ultra-rare diabetes’, apparently. Something to do with hormones and – adrenal spikes (I think?) messing with my blood sugar. So, typical, but potentially life-threatening.

Very reassuring. I could avoid them by staying calm – but you try ‘staying calm’ while your body’s trying to kill you. Or while you’ve got what was starting to feel like an entire beehive vibrating in your skull.

‘Ow!’ Maybe I should text Kate. She’d know what to do.

Only, Kate was at the community centre, teaching her adorable class of under-8s judo ‘mini-heroes’. If I sent a headache text, she’d ditch them to race to my rescue.

I didn’t want that. But I couldn’t text Mom. She was on a ‘research trip to the Burnaby lab’. She’d probably forgotten she even had a phone.

OK, Evie. Deep breaths, like Kate always says. In, one two – whoa!

The back of my neck bristled, like someone was staring at me.

I looked around, trying not to be the weirdo glaring suspiciously at a room of strangers, even though I totally was. Worse, I was wrong. No-one was looking.

The only guy who caught my eye would’ve caught anyone’s eye – all rugged and handsome with a mess of dark curls and just enough stubble. Very all-Canadian lumberjacky and – *crap!* – he’d just looked at me. Literally, straight into my eyes.

My cheeks burned, and he definitely noticed ‘cos his head tilted in either concern or curiosity. I was not maintaining eye contact long enough to figure out which.

I snapped my attention away, squeezing my eyes shut, willing myself to focus on slow, calm breathing instead of the hot woodcutter who'd just caught me gawping.

My forehead stress-prickled, which was definitely bad, so I gripped the arm of the sofa and focused on not freaking out.

'You OK?'

Oh no! I opened my eyes.

Lumberhunk was right there, all handsomely concerned. My heart sped up. The angry bees were gone, but mortified death-prickles spiked in their place.

Stoppit, body! I thought. *Please, I'll drink more water, or eat a carrot or something, just don't awkward me to death in front of the hot guy!*

Lumberhunk smiled. Was he trying to kill me? I had to get out of there.

'Can I sit down?' he asked.

'No!' I jumped up, spilling my drink everywhere as I tried to grab my coat, bag and biology book all at once. Everyone was watching now. Great. 'I – I've gotta go.'

New life goal: Make it out of Jolt without spontaneously combusting from shame.

'Maybe take a sec?' said Lumberhunk. 'Before someone gets hurt?'

I tugged my coat on, ignoring the scarf that flopped out one sleeve as I shoved my arm through. 'No. Dude, you're very handsome, I mean, nice. And handsome. And I know you're trynna help but ... you're not. Thanks.'

I said that last word as he passed me my phone (helpfully). My palms were so sweaty it took three goes to jam it into my pocket. I needed my insulin.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Lumberhunk. ‘Ouch!’

‘SORRY!’ I’d swung my backpack into his face as I turned to rush away, hitting every table between mine and the exit. ‘Sorry, everyone. Bye!’

I fell out the door, into a puddle of sludgy ex-snow, then picked myself up and hurried off into the freezing Toronto winter.

It was official.

Even if what happened next hadn’t happened, I was never going back to Jolt again.

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