

The Playdate: A Novel

By Louise Millar

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You leave your kids with a friend down the street. Everyone does it. Until the day it goes wrong.

TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED. . . .

In a quiet London suburb, a group of mothers relies on each other for friendship, favors, and gossip. But some of them shouldn't be trusted, and others have dark secrets.

When Callie moved into her new neighborhood, she thought it would be easy to fit in. The other parents have been strangely hostile, though, and her frail daughter Rae is finding it impossible to make friends. Suzy, with her rich husband and her three energetic children, has been the only one to reach out, although their friendship has recently felt inexplicably strained. Now the police have suggested that someone dangerous may be living in their neighborhood, and the atmosphere feels even more toxic. Then there's the matter of Callie's ex-husband, and the shocking truth behind their divorce . . . a truth that she would do anything to hide.

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Editorial Review

Review
“British author Millar’s engrossing debut offers an unsettling, realistic view of friendships, gossip, and loneliness . . . What starts as a quiet story about neighbors soon builds into a gripping psychological thriller.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Millar’s well-drawn characters and impeccably structured plot instantly grab the reader and may leave parents wondering who to trust with their children. A supremely accomplished debut thriller by a writer to watch.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“A disturbing psychological thriller that probes the insular lives of social misfits in a London suburb.”—*New York Times Book Review*

“A must-read that will tap into every mother's primal fears.”—Sophie Hannah

“Like the best thrillers, it is quietly creepy and expertly crafted. Add it to your book club reading list now.”—*Stylist Magazine*

“Taut, page-turning and surprising.”—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“A captivating psychological thriller . . . The writing is taut, the action slow building, the emotions intense, and the climax explosive, making it a must read for all.”—*Lori’s Reading Corner*

“Millar’s gripping thriller has anxious moms in its crosshairs.”—*People*

“*The Playdate* is an intriguing psychological thriller that starts as a treatise on how well even best friends and neighbors truly know each other before turning into a taut chiller . . . Readers will appreciate Louise Miller’s thought-provoking drama as the masks slowly come off.”—*The Mystery Gazette*

“Suspenseful . . . I couldn't put the book down till I had gotten to the end.” (*Book Dilettante*)

“Terrifying. This is a book not to be missed.” (*A Bookish Librarian*)

“This engrossing debut novel of psychological suspense builds on the primal fear all parents have of trusting relative strangers to care for their children.” (*Stop, You’re Killing Me!*)

“*The Playdate* felt like *Gone Girl* . . . They both built great suspense from intimate relationships, and had plenty of twists and turns.” (*Reading is My Superpower*)

“Intense.” (*Steph the Bookworm*)

“A dark, edgy story of suburban paranoia and manipulation. [Millar] takes her characters seriously, considering their struggles from moral, ethical, and humanistic perspectives.” (*Curledup.com*)

“Sinister, yet beautifully written and very real, *The Playdate* is a modern Gothic novel with echoes of du Maurier. You will slip into the lives of its London cast but your allegiances will shift throughout. Louise

Millar plots her story so skillfully, you will distrust the characters to the point where you cannot even trust yourself. But you will read to the end, madly. And when you put this book down, you'll wish there were more." (Ann Bauer, author of The Forever Marriage)

"Louise Millar's novel sucks the reader in like quicksand to the surprising ended. I did not want to miss a page!" (Lee Woodruff, New York Times bestselling author of Those We Love Most)

"*The Playdate* is a leap above most suburban thrillers. Louise Millar tugs you in with smart writing and a sneaky plot before delivering the best kind of twist —the one that drives you like a demon to the finish line. So go ahead, read all night. *The Playdate* is worth the hangover." (Julia Heaberlin, author of Playing Dead)

About the Author
Louise Millar was raised in Scotland. She began her journalism career in music and film magazines. A former senior editor at *Marie Claire*, she has written for *Red*, *Psychologies*, *Stella*, the *Observer*, *Glamour*, *Stylist*, and *The Guardian*. She lives in London with her husband and daughters.

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Playdate
FRIDAY

1
Callie

The water is cold. I knew it would be, despite the disco ball of early summer sun that twirls through the willow trees onto the dark green, velvety pond. I pull my foot out quickly and rub its soft, icy edges. A small yellow leaf sticks to my ankle. I'm not sure I am up for this.

"There's something slimy in there," I say.

Suzy adopts the pout she uses when she's trying to get Henry to eat broccoli. "Come on—it's yummy." We both laugh.

She stands up, towering above me at her full five feet ten. With one swift movement, she pulls her gray toweling dress over her head and kicks off her flip-flops. She stands at the water's edge in a black bikini and looks out. An elderly lady glides toward her with smooth, long strokes, a blue rubber hat perched on wire-wool hair. Suzy smiles and waits patiently for her to pass.

I sit back on my elbows. There are about twenty women on the grass, in various small groups or alone. Some are reading, some talking. Two are lying close together, laughing, their legs entwined. I look back at Suzy, who is still waiting for the old lady to move safely out of her path. It takes me a minute to realize I am staring at her body. It's not that I haven't seen it a hundred times before, marching naked round the swimming baths' changing room after the kids, or whipping off her top in her kitchen when she gets gravy on it. No, what is strange is to see her body unfettered by children. In the two and a half years I have known Suzy, there has almost always been a child attached to it: feeding at a breast, astride a hip, wriggling under an arm.

Suddenly I notice how young she is. It's amazing how well her body has recovered from three children. She has a thick waist, and a flat stomach with no hint of the soft pouch of flesh that Rae has left on mine. Her substantial bust sits high, politely accepting the support of the bikini, but not really needing it. Her skin is creamy and smooth, her frame strong and athletic. Taking a deep breath, she lifts her arms with the

confidence of a girl who's spent her childhood lake-swimming in the Colorado mountains, and dives into Hampstead Ladies' Pond, ejecting a startled duck.

I lie back and try to concentrate on where we are. A fly buzzes at my nose. There is an air of calm around the pond. A hidden world behind the trees of Hampstead Heath, where women swim and stretch and smile; far from the company of men. Perhaps this is what the inner sanctum of a harem feels like.

Yes, I think. What could be better than this? Sitting in the early summer sun on a Friday afternoon with no kids and no work to worry about.

Yet that is not really how I feel at all.

The hot sun pricks my face a little unpleasantly. I try to focus on the sounds around me to relax. I used to collect interesting sounds, storing mentally the tiniest hum or echo, or whisper of wind that I heard and liked, in case one day I might need them. Today there is birdsong from a warbler, the soft swish of Suzy's strokes, the crack of a squirrel on a twig.

It is no use. However much I stretch my legs out, the tension that makes my buttocks and thighs clench won't release. My mind is racing. I need to tell Suzy. I can't keep this secret from her. There is enough I hide from Suzy already. I sit up again and check where she is. She's traveled to one side of the pond and is working her way back.

Oh, what the hell. I am here now. I stand up and walk over to the ladder, and begin gingerly to climb into the murky water. The notice board says there are terrapins and crayfish in here.

"Good girl!" Suzy calls across, clapping to encourage me.

I roll my eyes to show her I am not convinced. The water is cold and earthy as I lower myself into it, shivering. Bit by bit, the icy ring moves up my body until I am almost immersed.

"Just swim," calls Suzy. Her bright American tone echoes out across the pond and the female lifeguard looks over.

I launch myself off the edge. I am not a good swimmer. Suzy approaches me.

"This is so great," she says, turning on her back and looking up at the clear sky and treetops. "Next week, I'm going to book us a day at that spa you told me about in Covent Garden."

My legs dip, and water goes in my mouth. I splutter, kicking hard. I can't touch the bottom.

"Hey, you OK?" she says, holding my arm. "Let's swim to the middle then turn back."

I take a breath, clear my nose, and follow her.

"Suze," I say, "I can't spend money on stuff like that at the moment."

"Don't be silly, hon, I'll get it," she replies. I know she means it. Money is never an issue in the Howard house. Jez's business is thriving even in these uncertain times. For Suzy, money does not have the emotion attached to it that it does for me. It doesn't hang around her house like a critical mother, interfering in every

decision she makes, squashing dreams, telling her “maybe next year.”

Satisfied that I am OK, Suzy leaves me to swim alone. I wonder which direction to take across the pond. It is a strange sensation swimming in a natural pool, with no tiled edges to aim for, just gentle slopes of black earth veined with slippery tree roots. There is no rectangular structure to measure my lengths. It is lovely; Suzy is right. It’s just that right now my mind aches for corners and edges, for beginnings and ends.

I hear a splash and turn round. The old lady is climbing the steps out of the pond. Stunned, I realize she is about ninety. Tanned, loose flesh hangs like draped curtains from strong old bones. I think of my own grandmother, sitting for twenty years after my granddad died, watching telly and waiting for the end. How does that happen? That one old lady watches telly and another walks to an open-air pond on a summer’s day and floats around among water lilies and kingfishers?

The woman’s lack of self-consciousness about her body gives her an air of confidence as she walks past two young women gossiping animatedly, eyes hidden behind overlarge designer sunglasses, thin limbs spray-tanned the same dulled bronze. Probably business wives from Hampstead. I decide the woman could be an old suffragette or a famous botanist who spent her younger years traveling round remote South America on a donkey, finding new plants. Whatever, I sense she has no time for young women like them. And me. She’s probably earned the right to spend her days doing such wonderful things. She knows someone else is paying for ours.

This is not right. This has to end.

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I swim as fast as I can back to the steps and reach up to the railings with dripping hands. As I pull myself from the water, my body feels oddly heavy. Heavy, I suspect, with the weight of my own guilt.

I have to find the words to tell Suzy. I can’t do this anymore.

* * *

It became apparent at Easter that Suzy had a lot of plans for her and me. She has never had a daylight hour without children, she claims, since she moved to London. Even when Jez is home, he says he can’t manage all three of them together, so she always has one, whatever she does.

So since Peter and Otto both started private nursery in May, and Henry and Rae are now reaching the end of their first year at primary school, Suzy finally has the chance to do the things on the list she has been compiling from Time Out magazine and her London guidebook. All through June, we have been out most days. She knows I have no money, so we have done free things. We have Rollerbladed in Regent’s Park, ignoring the sign that says “No skating.” “They’ll have to catch us first,” said Suzy furiously when she saw it. She has waited too long to take long, gliding strokes through the flat paths of the rose garden unhindered by our children’s buggies and scooters. I don’t like breaking rules, but I go along with it.

Another day, we ate sandwiches in Trafalgar Square after a visit to the National Gallery to see Botticellis and Rembrandts. We’ve peered through the railings at No. 10 Downing Street and seen Big Ben up close. Suzy even made me come with her to the Tower of London, insisting on paying the entrance fee. As I stood waiting among German tourists to see the Crown Jewels, I had to smile to myself. These are not the things I did with friends in London before I had Rae, but I remind myself that Suzy is from America and not Lincolnshire, like me, and that she wants to do the touristy stuff in the way that I wanted to climb the Empire

State Building when Tom and I spent that one precious weekend in New York.

And today it has been Hampstead Ladies' Pond. "We should come here every day," Suzy says, as we get ourselves dressed. "People do."

Sometimes when she says these things I feel like I did in the pond today. I flail around, trying to find something solid and familiar to hold on to, but there is nothing.

* * *

It is 3:25 P.M. It has taken Suzy sixteen minutes to race from Hampstead Heath across North London in her yellow convertible to Alexandra Park. She skids to a stop outside the kids' school, completely ignoring the "No drop off" sign.

"Go get 'em, pardner," she shouts to me over the horrible American soft-rock music she likes to play loud in the car, oblivious to the looks we get from mothers walking through the school gate.

I laugh despite my embarrassment, and jump out. We both know the routine. I pick up Rae and Henry, she fetches Peter and Otto from nursery. We do it without speaking now, guiding each other through our shared daily routine like dressage horses, with a gentle nod or a kick toward school or soft play or swimming.

"I'm going to take them to the park," I say, shutting the door.

"Coolio, baby," shouts Suzy cheerfully, and drives off, waving a hand above her head.

I turn and look at the arched entrance with its century-old brick "Girls" sign. Instantly, my shoulders hunch up. The massive wall of Alexandra Palace rises dramatically behind the school, like a tidal wave about to engulf the little Victorian building. I run through the gate, turn right in to the infants' department, and smile my closed-mouth smile at the other mums. Everyone told me that having kids is when you really get to know your neighbors in London. They must have neighbors different from mine. A few mums nod back, then continue arranging playdates with each other in the diaries they carry around. I've tried so many times to figure out what I've done wrong. My best guess is that it's because in Rae's slot on the class parent contact list "Callie" and "Tom" sit separately at two different London addresses; unlike "Felicity and Jonathan" and "Parminder and David" and "Suzy and Jez." Suzy says if the mothers are not going to be friendly to me because I'm a divorced, unemployed, single mother who lives in a rented flat, she and Jez won't accept their invites to stupid drinks parties in their double-fronted Edwardian houses in The Driveway, the only road apart from ours with a guaranteed catchment into this tiny, one-form-entry infant school. She says this is the price we pay for "getting our kids into a posh, oversubscribed primary school" and that "they're a bunch of stuck-up, middle-class cows" for ignoring me, and that I am much better than they are.

I try to believe her, but sometimes it's difficult. Sometimes I think it would be nice to belong. Sometimes I think that if one of these mothers invited Rae to her house for a playdate, I would fall on the floor and kiss her feet.

The classroom door opens and Henry and Rae burst out looking grubby and stressed. "What have you got to eat?" Rae murmurs. I give them the rice cakes I always carry around in my bag. She has red paint in her mousy hair and her hands are greasy as if she hasn't washed them all day. As usual I search her eyes for signs. Is she overtired? Too pale? I scoop her up and hold her too tight, kissing the side of her face till she squirms and laughs.

“Are you all right, Henry?” I say. He looks dazed and wired, checking behind me to see if Suzy is there. If she were, he would be whining by now, making his disapproval of her abandonment apparent. I put Rae down and hug him to show that I understand. He leans into me a little, and sighs. Then the pair of them head out of the outer door, gnawing their food like puppies.

At the school gate, Henry starts to run. He does it every day, yet I am so busy trying to shove their scribbled drawings into my bag that it still catches me unawares. “Henry!” I shout. I chase him along the pavement, grabbing Rae, who is following him blindly, dodging round a man, a woman, and two girls. The man turns. It is Matt, a divorced dad from another class. Or the Hot Dude That Callie Must Get It On With, as Suzy calls him. And I have just shouted in his ear.

“Sorry,” I say, lifting a hand to emphasize it. He smiles coolly, rubbing his hand over a new crew cut. Embarrassingly, I blush. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I mutter. As if.

I catch up with Henry at the play park behind the school. “Henry,” I say, “you mustn’t run like that. Remember, Rae follows you and it’s dangerous for her in case she falls.”

He shrugs a “sorry,” jumps on a swing standing up, and throws himself in the air with violent jerks, as if trying to shake out his excess energy like ketchup from a bottle. Rae sits on the next swing, playing with the tiny doll that she manages to keep hidden about her person however much I search for it before we leave for school. I am going to look up her sleeve on Monday. They don’t talk much, Henry and Rae. But, as their teacher says, they seem joined together by an invisible wire. Wherever one is, the other is never far away—just like me and Suzy.

I wonder what Rae feels about that sometimes. I wonder if she feels like me.

I watch Rae, and I think about Suzy, and I can’t even bring myself to imagine what it will be like for them both when I’m not here.

Users Review

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