



THE

PERFECT STUDENTS.

SCHOOL

PERFECT PARENTS.

RUN

THE PERFECT CRIME.

An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood with various houses and buildings, serving as the background for the author's name.

ALILOWE

*About the author*

Ali Lowe has been a journalist for twenty years. She has written for bridal magazines, parenting titles, websites and newspapers in London and then Australia, after she moved to Sydney sixteen years ago on a trip that was meant to last a year. She was Features Editor at *OK!* in London, where she memorably stalked celebrities in Elton John's garden at his annual White Tie and Tiara ball.

Ali lives on the northern beaches of Sydney with her husband and three young children.

*The School Run* is her third novel.

*Also by Ali Lowe*

The Running Club

The Trivia Night

ALI LOWE

# The School Run

  
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*For Rafferty, Savannah and Atticus*

*A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity. It dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path.*

AGATHA CHRISTIE

# I

## Kaya

Kaya Sterling does not dislike Estella Munro. The fact her new neighbour appears aloof and self-satisfied does not faze her. As far as Kaya is concerned, encountering someone like Estella Munro is a bit like drinking a flat white with bitter froth. The first acrid taste cannot be all there is to her – there has to be something pleasant beneath.

Kaya and Ollie have only lived in their new home for four days. Palm Cottage, which is not really a cottage at all by virtue of two spacious floors and four bedrooms, sits on the cliffside looking proudly out to sea, the first in a row of five houses a little along from the winding bend that leads from the heart of Pacific Pines to St Ignatius' Grammar. Four bedrooms is far more than they need for just the two of them and Kaya feels they rattle around in the big house, but Paul had insisted they move to his childhood neighbourhood and to the house he had always cycled past as a boy. He had loved the way it sits clad in a jacket of snowy white slats along the cliff face, with an overgrown, oval backyard fenced off to the perilous headland beyond; and how the beauty of the house can only be appreciated from the water, sitting atop the cliff face as it does, or as a steering wheel is twisted round that perilous turn, leaving the heart of Pacific Pines far behind in the rear-view mirror.

One day, Kaya will charter a boat so she and Ollie can see their new home from its best vantage point, bobbing together on the very waves they hear caressing the cliff face as they fall asleep each night. She has added it to her never-ending to-do list stuck to the imposing chrome double-doored fridge, which is also way too big for their requirements: ‘paint shed’, ‘make new friends’, ‘charter boat’.

Estella has been standing on Kaya’s new driveway for less than a minute, both of them under the hot October sun, with Bandit weaving through their legs as retrievers do. Kaya has already watched her neighbour take in the front yard up close, her pursed lips suggesting disapproval. The previous owners of Palm Cottage had introduced a variety of species of plant in both the front and back gardens, the effect being an unruly, almost English feel, wild and overgrown, unlike the landscaped affair next door with its perfectly clipped hedge and slick, pruned palms.

Pacific Pines, Kaya is swiftly learning, is a suburb that is vastly different from its neighbours. It sits neatly at the bottom of the headland that is one of the ancient arms to the Pacific Ocean, providing a gateway for cruise liners and cargo ships to Tasmania, New Zealand, Fiji and the United States. Ocean View Parade, to all intents and purposes a winding cliff road, is the main thoroughfare connecting Pacific Pines to nearby Lawton Sands with St Ignatius’ Grammar standing statuesque at the highest point of the headland before the cliff road descends into the outskirts of the next town.



Kaya has heard the School Run can be arduous when there is traffic, this single route out of town, which is why many of the kids take the cliff steps when they get to the bends. The steps descend steeply down to a picturesque, white-sanded beach, which itself leads to the coffee shops and main street of Pacific Pines, a suburb bustling with wealth and entitlement.

And here is Kaya's new neighbour, the embodiment of privilege. She is shorter than Kaya, with a shiny bob that bounces lightly on her square shoulders, indicative of a salon blow-dry. She is dressed in a simple, knee-length linen shift dress. So far she has only said, 'Munro, number six. Here is your post. Damn postman always gets us mixed up,' and has held out a bejewelled hand to shake the very ends of Kaya's fingers, and Kaya has felt the frostiness of the other woman's touch despite the beat of the spring sun. But in these fleeting moments, Kaya has already made an assessment of her new neighbour, and it is that she is icy and devoid of softness. She makes this assumption in one part of her brain and immediately berates herself with another, because people have bad days, don't they? Not everyone is as good at small talk as she is.

Estella looks Kaya briefly in the eye before her gaze snaps to Ollie as he dribbles his soccer ball on the tiled deck outside their new front door: bounce, bounce, bounce. For Kaya the sound is as familiar as birdsong, and as comforting (if she can hear the bounce, she knows Ollie is near) but Estella squints dramatically each time plastic meets ceramic.

‘Ollie!’ Kaya is suddenly conscious of the noise. ‘Please stop the bouncing until the lady has—’

‘Munro,’ the woman snaps, as though she thinks Kaya has forgotten her name already, as if she has pegged Kaya as one of those women who cannot process basic information. She looks over Kaya’s shoulder and into the house beyond, down the hall, possibly in search of another human, for proof of life. She will not find any.

‘Munro with a “U”, *not* an “O” like Marilyn,’ she says.

‘That pesky “O”.’ Kaya smiles. ‘Some like it *not*.’

Estella’s lips move stiffly upward and Kaya feels the heat rise up her neck. Perhaps Estella just didn’t get the joke! A bottle is thrust into her hands. ‘This is for you and your husband,’ Estella says. ‘A 2017 Châteauneuf-du-Pape.’

‘Oh,’ Kaya stutters, taken aback. The thrusting of the bottle had felt more perfunctory than welcoming, suggesting that a gift from the cellar to one’s neighbours is just the ‘done’ thing in these parts, but Kaya realises that even if the sentiment is not necessarily there, it is a kind gesture, nonetheless, and she appreciates it.

‘Thank you so much, Estella,’ Kaya says. ‘This looks lovely. It really is kind of you. But, just so you’re aware, my husband is . . .’

The words trail off, as they always do when Kaya delivers The News.

‘Oh,’ Estella says. ‘Is your husband . . . *dry*?’

‘Dry?’ Kaya does not compute.

‘Does he not *drink*?’ Estella pulls her jacket closed.

‘Oh no, Paul’s not dry,’ Kaya tells her. ‘He’s dead.’

She doesn't mean to say it quite like that, so abruptly, the word 'dead' fired like a bullet from a gun, but she has learned it is sometimes easier to simply rip off the Band-Aid. She has also learned it is best to use the word 'dead', however confronting it may be, instead of a less jarring turn of phrase that could be open to interpretation, such as 'gone' or 'left us'. These might suggest divorce, adultery even, and neither of these things apply to her marriage to Paul, or the way he was taken from her.

'Good Lord!' Estella's palm spans the breadth of her collarbone. '*Dead?*'

'Yes. As in deceased.' *No longer here. Gone. Left us.*

Ollie resumes his bouncing.

'Right,' says Estella, stumped.

'I'm so sorry,' Kaya tells her. 'To come out with it like that, I mean.'

'When?'

'Well, just now . . .'

'No, no. I mean, when did your husband . . . *pass?*'

'Oh!' Kaya touches her forehead, an underwhelming face palm. 'Paul died a year ago.'

Estella rubs her chest in a circular motion, as if she is trying to massage the stress away. Kaya waits silently as her neighbour processes her own grief.

'How?'

'Cancer,' Kaya chirps. It is force of habit. A way to try and soften the blow for others, to trivialise the last nineteen months of hell so that the recipient of The News does not feel awkward.

‘I see.’ Estella twists her wedding ring on her finger. ‘My deepest condolences.’

‘I just . . . I find it easier to tell people straight out, because then they’re not wondering what I’ve done with Paul,’ Kaya says. ‘You know, if I’ve got him stashed in a cupboard upstairs!’

Estella’s left eyebrow raises a fraction.

‘I mean, I did have him in the cupboard for a while back in Perth.’ Kaya hates herself for being so glib. ‘But then when we arrived here in Pacific Pines, we scattered the ashes. Paul now currently resides partly at his old school, partly in the ocean . . .’

‘Quite!’ Estella turns her head towards Ollie, whip-lash-fast. Kaya has seen movies in which the baddie breaks someone’s neck with less force. ‘Do you work?’

‘Me?’ Kaya is thrown. ‘Yes, I’m a physio . . . I’m hoping to rent a room at Total Physio in Lawton Sands, once Ollie and I have settled a little.’

‘I see. And how old is Ollie?’

‘He’s twelve today.’ Kaya turns to Ollie. ‘Ollie, say hello to Mrs Munro.’

Ollie looks up. ‘Hello, Mrs Munro,’ he says in the monotone voice kids reserve for greeting teachers in assembly. Kaya waits for her new neighbour to baulk at the formality and say, ‘Happy birthday! Call me Estella, *please*,’ like other friendly street dwellers might, but she doesn’t. She merely stares intently at Ollie before looking to her hands to study her own fingernails.

It is always the same when Kaya tells people The News – they forget how to use their hands. Fingers drum on

surfaces, ears are scratched until they glow red. She understands it, of course. How could a person know how to respond if they haven't experienced this kind of loss themselves? She'd been like that, before Paul. She hadn't understood the intricacies of grief or the politics of discussing it, so she does not begrudge the awkward hands, or the blinking eyes and the 'Um, well, anyway . . .'s. People are just people after all.

The mums at Pacific Pines Primary School had been the same. She hadn't meant to tell any of them, not on Ollie's first day, but they had all fussed around her in the school yard yesterday, cooing over Ollie and asking where Mr Sterling was. Was he at work? Were they *divorced*? (And if so, she was in good company! All the *cool* mums in Pacific Pines community were divorced. Take Tammy O'Farrell – she was a riot! Always on the margaritas and swiping right on Tinder! They were secretly jealous of her, they said, because their husbands were all like overgrown children. Oh, to be single again – although the sex part, *good Lord no!* They didn't have the energy for *that!*)

And so Kaya told them about Paul, about how she'd lost him to cancer, and she had watched as they tried not to let their eyes widen and hands fidget and their speech begin to fail them. Kaya knows that each of them fears, deep down, that if they get close to her story, it might happen to them, as if death is catching somehow, like a promiscuous strain of flu.

As she stands on the driveway talking to Estella, Kaya feels a flash of gratitude for Bec Lloyd, the kindly woman who left a box of cupcakes on the doorstep at Palm

Cottage the previous morning with a note that read: *Welcome to Pacific Pines! Please enjoy! Bec x.* Kaya had been so touched, and the cupcakes had been delicious – rich, red velvet slathered in sweet cream-coloured fondant, with ‘welcome’ written in blue icing on each and every one. Kaya had put the business card, printed with the words *Cakes by Bec* and a sketch of what looked like Cupid, the Roman god of love, eating a giant cupcake, up on the fridge next to the to-do list as a reminder of how kind Bec had been.

Estella turns away from Ollie and fixes her gaze back on Kaya. ‘Is Oliver a sporty child?’ she asks.

‘Very.’

‘Tall, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. He takes after his—’

‘Rugby?’

‘Yes, he does enjoy—’

‘Union? League? League would be my guess.’

‘Gosh,’ laughs Kaya. ‘This feels a little like speed dating!’

‘Oh dear, does it?’ Estella’s brow furrows. ‘I wouldn’t know!’

Kaya cringes. Does Estella think she is on the dating scene so soon after losing Paul? Should she clarify that she is not? Or that, even if she *was*, she is most definitely not the type to speed date? She hates the idea of someone judging her in so short a time, just like Estella is doing now. The woman probably thinks Kaya is some sex-hungry widow, in town to land herself a wealthy, married man. *Oh, the shame . . .*

‘Kaya?’ Estella all but snaps her fingers. ‘I asked if Ollie played rugby league?’

Kaya blinks. ‘Union, actually. But really, it’s all about rowing for Ollie.’

Estella regards her suspiciously. ‘Rowing,’ she mutters to herself. ‘That *is* unusual. Who does he row for?’

‘Klara Bay Rowing Club in Perth,’ says Kaya. ‘Ollie was the youngest oarsman they’ve ever had, actually. He recently won the—’

‘I see,’ says Estella. ‘And are you Catholic?’

‘I’m sorry, are we . . .?’

Another sigh. ‘*Catholic?*’

Kaya is thrown by the rapid segue. She thought they were talking about sport!

‘No.’ She shakes her head. ‘We’re not really religious.’

The truth is, Kaya did go to a Catholic school, but she has never been a woman of faith. Except when Paul was dying. Then she had prayed like they told her to at school, at church on her knees, and yet nothing happened and Paul had died anyway, and now she feels positively hard done by. So no, she isn’t religious. After all, what has God ever done for Kaya?

‘A non-believer, then?’

‘Well, I suppose if you have to categorise me, then yes.’

Estella’s shoulders drop a little, as though a weight has been lifted. ‘And Oliver is currently in Year Six at Pines Primary?’

‘It’s just Ollie. And yes.’

‘So he’ll be going to Pacific Pines High School this coming January, I presume?’

‘We’ve applied to St Ignatius’ Grammar, actually,’ Kaya says and she is sure she sees the other woman flinch. ‘My husband Paul wanted him to go. It was his last wish.’

It is true. The only reason she and Ollie upped sticks from the comfort of Klara Bay and now reside in this wealthy school community four thousand kilometres away is because Kaya had promised Paul, on his deathbed, she would do it, that she would uproot herself and Ollie and move to Pacific Pines to get him in to Iggy’s.

‘So, you are an atheist, but you’d like your son to have a Catholic education?’ Estella asks, her head tilted to the side in faux confusion.

Kaya shrugs. She knows it sounds sacrilegious, but Paul had been raised in the Catholic faith, and he’d turned out OK, and so Kaya had agreed to it. Paul had considered it a school of opportunities and so why wouldn’t she also want that for Ollie?

‘Anyway, it’s only really worth the effort if the boy is baptised,’ Estella chirps. ‘You know, Kaya, you wouldn’t be the first person to move to Pacific Pines to try and get their child into St Ignatius’ Grammar. I mean, the competition for places is *insane*. Two hundred students for one hundred and twenty places! Of course, in the past, you would simply put your child’s name down at birth and he’d be guaranteed a place, but Ursula Deacon changed the policy when she came in as principal two years ago, so this will be the third annual Gala Day. It’s not a bad thing, I suppose because it does weed out the wheat from the chaff. Not that it will be a challenge for *my* boys.’



Kaya must look confused or overwhelmed or both because Estella leans in and says, ‘You *do* know about Gala Day, Kaya?’

Kaya nods. Ollie is registered for it. In three days’ time, he will join those two hundred other pre-teens vying for a place at Iggy’s in one long day of assessment – first on the sporting field and then in an interview – followed by a parents’ cheese and wine party afterwards. Pretty gruelling for an eleven-year-old boy (so far as Kaya knows, St Ignatius’ Grammar is the only school in the country that has such an elite and brutal selection process and offers places so close to the start date), but Ollie seems OK with it – and if Ollie doesn’t mind, neither does she.

‘Gala Day is being run by Ursula Deacon’s son Sam this year,’ says Estella. ‘Have you heard of him?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘He’s the head of sport.’ Estella looks out across Kaya’s garden, pensive. ‘He was away playing rugby for Saracens in England and moved back to Australia a few months ago. He’s the one you need to impress. But, like I said, you do have a much higher chance of entry if your son is baptised. Fortunately, we are a Catholic family,’ muses Estella. ‘The twins were baptised a few years ago, and will be confirmed next year.’

‘You have twins? How lovely.’

‘Archie and Jonty. Identical. Both academic and *very* sporty – in fact they’re off somewhere playing cricket right now. Definitely Iggy’s-bound.’

‘Oh! They have places already?’

‘Well, no.’ Estella straightens her back. ‘But they will. On their own merit, of course, but it helps to have friends in high places, and I am very good friends with Martha Weaver, Felix Weaver’s mother.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know who Felix is,’ says Kaya, feeling like she has failed yet another test. Should she know Felix Weaver as *well* as Sam Deacon, the sports master?

Estella feigns shock. ‘Felix is the outgoing school captain at Iggy’s! Delightful boy. Martha and I are very close.’ She crosses her index and middle fingers and holds them up to denote just *how* tight she is with the school captain’s mother.

‘Naturally, Martha has put in a good word with Ursula Deacon for the twins already,’ Estella continues. ‘In fact, Felix will also be helping to spot the talent at Gala Day – it’s been the departing school captain’s role for the last two years – so I’d be surprised if my boys are not hand-picked.’

Kaya wonders if Estella has not contradicted herself. First she said her boys will get into the school on their own merit, and now she’s saying she thinks they’ll get a leg-up because of their mother’s connections. Perhaps natural talent just isn’t enough at this elite college.

‘How wonderful.’ Kaya hopes Estella does not sense the weariness in her voice. ‘I’m sure your boys will be an asset to the school. Am I right in thinking you have a daughter too?’ Kaya already knows the answer to this, because she has heard the two of them arguing in the garden: yelling and hissing and snarling. Yesterday she heard the teen shout, ‘You’re so old, *Estella*. What would *you* even know?’

and then Estella's clipped reply, 'Now, now, mind those pesky hormones, Felicity!'

Estella's pupils are pin dots. Her skin, flushed and alive when she was speaking about her twins, has turned dull, the glow extinguished like the blowing-out of a candle.

'I do,' she says. 'Felicity is seventeen. She's off to university in January – she has just finished her exams at Asher's Girls' School. Asher's is the sister school to St Ignatius' in case you don't know. I went there as a girl, actually. We both did, my husband and I. What I mean is Conrad – *Dr* Conrad Munro – is an Iggy's old boy, although he was three years ahead of me. He was school captain, in fact.'

'That's interesting. So was Paul!'

Estella folds her arms. 'Well, why didn't you mention that? The sons of old boys definitely get preferential treatment when it comes to school admission.'

'I didn't get the chance . . .'

'And your surname?'

The quick-fire question round is back.

'Sterling. Kaya and Ollie Sterling.'

Estella pauses. She bites indelicately on the lacquered red tip of her thumbnail. 'Nope,' she says after a moment. 'I don't recall him. Conrad may, he's better with names than me.'

Kaya opens her mouth to offer more details about Paul, but Estella beats her to it.

'Well,' she says, 'I must get going. My trainer is arriving at twelve. Carlos is the best in Pacific Pines. Do let me know if you'd like his number.' She looks at Kaya's hips. 'Anyway, welcome Kaya. I hope you and *Ollie* will be very happy here.'

‘Thank you,’ says Kaya, slightly bemused by it all.

‘Oh, and what kind of car do you drive? A Holden?’

‘No, a—’

‘Good. As you know, Holdens have gone out of production, so there’s been a spate of thefts recently – parts are astronomical on the black market! Doesn’t apply to us of course – our cars are all relatively new.’

*All?* thinks Kaya. *How many does the woman have?*

Estella turns back down the driveway, her quilted designer bag swinging about her hips at the end of a gold chain-mail strap. Kaya watches her go, wondering why her neighbour has brought her expensive bag with her from next door. Has she done it to make Kaya, in her denim shorts and a vest top and covered in plant mulch from moving pots around all morning, feel bad about herself? Kaya blinks the thought away, annoyed at her own attitude. She does not want to dislike Estella – after all, wasn’t the purpose of the woman’s visit to welcome her, with wine?

When Estella reaches the front gate, she turns around. ‘Pacific Pines High School really isn’t a bad alternative, Kaya,’ she says. ‘I’m sure Ollie will fit in perfectly there if he doesn’t get a place at Iggy’s.’ Then she unlatches her own fence and disappears from view.

Kaya feels her shoulders slump in defeat because she realises she has lost a competition she didn’t know she was a part of.

Ollie sidles up beside her. ‘She is *awful*,’ he says, his top lip pulled up to his nose.

‘She isn’t that bad,’ Kaya laughs. ‘I’m sure she’s nice deep down. Some people just don’t make a good first

impression. Anyway, let's get cleaned up and go and get some birthday ice cream!

Ollie bounds off to change his muddy shorts, and as she stands watching the closed gate in front of her, Kaya wonders what Paul would have made of Estella. She is pretty sure he would have been disappointed. Women like her always got his goat: the pushy, self-important types. Women who carry an air of superiority inside their extravagant designer handbags. But really, it is no use wondering what he might have thought because he is not here, and this means he can no longer influence Kaya with his amusing character assessments. And even if she does hear his voice everywhere and his sardonic one-liners in the strangest of places, she understands that now he has been gone a year, it is time to make her own mind up about things and start afresh here in Pacific Pines. So she decides that even though Estella does not radiate the warmth of, say, a plug-in heater, she is not downright hideous, either, and at this point in time, before she gets to know the *real* Estella Munro, Kaya is prepared to take any form of friendship she can get.