

THE TRAD WIFE

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For Claudia Cavanagh

with love

Prologue

I'm locked in the cellar of a trad wife, and I am mad as hell. This was my scoop, but I've become the twist in someone else's true crime podcast. When I came round just now, I was lying crooked and splayed like a body at a crime scene. *It is a crime scene*, if only the police would show up. Welcome to my TED Talk on why I should have trusted my instincts.

My head's pulsating like crazy. My fingers find an egg-shaped lump, and pain screams inside my skull. When it settles back to a throb, I gingerly push myself up, rubbing away the grit coating my parched lips. I am so screwed.

Faith Eversen has a lot to answer for. Faith, the hashtag wholesome influencer, loved for her authenticity and vintage charm. *It's quite the turnaround, Faith. Like when a puppy turns into an axe murderer. Cheers for the peek behind the scenes though, even if it's gloomy. Can I suggest some mood lighting?* Sounds like I have a screw loose. Maybe I do. I don't know any more.

Can't see a bloody thing. I haul my protesting body to standing and my knees give out. I stumble and crash against the wall like a drunk. My head spins and dizziness hits, then I wince at a sharp pain in my ribs. Are they cracked? I don't touch my ribcage in case I make it worse. My heart's going too fast, but once I've steadied myself, I shuffle along the wall until I reach the door and try the

handle. It's locked. If only I could channel my red-hot fury and blast my way out of here. Just need my strength back first.

'Hello?' I call out in a raspy voice. I place both palms on the door. 'Let me out!' The words scratch my throat and reverberate through my skull. This can't be happening. I have to find Willow. A tremor in my chest sends shock waves through my body at what they'll do to her.

She's ours now. The parting threat is a knife to my heart. The words echo in my head along with a pounding in my ears. I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but it stays put. I'd die for her, but that would play into their hands, and her own nightmare would only just begin.

'Willow?' I croak, my throat dried out. I push away the dread, but my chest seizes up and my world collapses. This is the worst day of my life. What if it's my last?

Chapter One

Ten weeks earlier

Faith's latest video has dropped. She appears on-screen in her beautifully rustic kitchen. You could fit my entire cramped apartment inside that kitchen. Twice. 'Today, I'm making raspberry preserve. My children love it on fresh baked bread.' The soft cadence of her voice calms me.

Her peachy skin is make-up free. Her golden hair tumbles down in loose Pre-Raphaelite ringlets. I bet it smells of fresh apples. I glance out of my small kitchen window at pink sky above the high-rises. Morning traffic builds outside our apartment, and Willow sleeps while I make her school lunch. Faith scoops something into a copper jug.

'You pour the wheat berries into the grinder to mill the wheat.' She gives us a shy smile. 'It's easy.' She nods encouragement. Faith bakes her own bread. Of course she does. I've never heard of wheat berries, but I can make Willow's lunch sarnie in under a minute. Faith spends that time manually grinding wheat. She turns the metal lever in big circles and says it's a great upper-body workout.

I check a message on my phone and go to the fridge. By the time I return, the dough has risen and she's scoring the top with a lavender sprig design. I snicker. As if hungry

kids care about bread artistry. I'd think it a wind-up if I hadn't seen her other reels and videos, but she lacks the arch eye contact with the camera, tongue firmly in cheek at the lunacy of a mother of six decorating their daily bread.

Faith slides the baked loaf from the Aga, and in a final touch, she adds daisy flower heads and a lavender sprig from her own lavender fields.

'Mmm.' She inhales. 'The aroma's so calming.'

This is no ordinary sandwich. This is a trad wife sandwich. Hard to believe that some women choose to live like this. It's part of my fascination. I eye my own sandwich effort with shame. I thought I was making a nutritious lunch that Willow would like to eat, but in the trad wife universe, store-bought is the devil's work.

A little girl wanders into shot wearing a sweet cotton smock that could be home-made or could have cost a fortune. She wants to help. Faith's forever composed, never losing her shit even though she's knee-deep in kids. She's like a Victoria's Secret model dressed as a pioneer from the nineteenth century. She's stepped back in time, wearing a blue chambray dress and white cotton apron, evoking a rose-tinted yesteryear. Her content isn't relatable, but it's oddly compelling. It's her niche and she's the best in the business.

Faith stands apart from the crop of super-successful mumfluencers who are overdone in a high-maintenance way. Just the word 'mumfluencer' makes me shudder. I don't want a plastic woman 'influencing' me. Most online trad wives have a manic mum energy, desperately seeking MumTok gold, mining everything for content. But Faith's life is a soothing art form.

It's like dropping in on a friend for a cup of wheat berries – ha! I kid – and then you chat while she knocks out a batch of scones. Lavender-themed scones in her case, since she often tends to her lavender farm in a soft-focus way. She talks to camera like she's FaceTiming you while whisking, chopping and stirring, with an occasional smile or inquisitive look to check you're following along. She always starts by propping up her phone to film herself in whatever insane homespun activity is on the agenda. But I know different. You don't get videos that slick from an amateur effort. She's smart, a marketer's dream, and she's reaping the rewards.

While other influencers peddle their lifestyle with fake smiles, Faith simply shows us her life as if it's perfectly normal, like a mum of six young children would grind her own wheat. *Oh, you're hangry? Would you like a cookie? Hang on, screaming toddler, while I harvest the wheat crop.*

I admire her fortitude as I wonder why she does it. Seriously, why make life difficult for yourself? Her lifestyle is both nuts and aspirational with a nostalgic allure. That potent mix is behind her standout quality.

Faith is queen of the trad wives in a peach of a role. Her videos cast a spell, but I'm a sceptic who's familiar with high-performing influencers. I've even worked with a few. She floats above the trad wife trend, and the fandom loves her. It's not just the gorgeous content, it's her air of mystery. I'm endlessly speculating on her life beyond the screen.

I slap a slice of white bread on top of the cheese and ham and cut the sandwich in quarters. A quick scan of the bread ingredients shows an abundance of additives and weird stuff, but least her lunch isn't from a vending machine. My gaze returns to Faith, a picture

of contentment as she slices the loaf through the middle and adds home-made raspberry jam like it's a Victoria sponge.

Faith's riding the backlash from the girl-boss era. Millennials like me bought into a myth, but no matter how hard we work, a decent rental in the city is a distant, unrealistic dream. I do my job at full tilt, then outside of work I rush through everything else. The only thing standing still is my bank balance. As I grab a handful of cherry tomatoes, red grapes and a mini muffin for Willow's lunchbox, my eyes scan over the comments.

Beautiful!

You slay!

This is insane... she grinds her own wheat?
Has she literally not heard of store-bought?

Apparently breadfluencing is a thing.

I love this so much! You truly are an inspiration.

That designer dress is like 750 bucks.

I bet she hasn't had store-bought bread since she got married.

Trad wives are brainwashed by alt-right men.
F★★k the patriarchy.

God bless you, Faith! You and your family are so beautiful!!!

Shit like this puts the women's movement back 200 years.

I smile at 'You slay!' since olde-worlde Faith might not know that's a compliment.

Time to wake Willow. I pause the time-warp video and so begins the daily rush to get her to school and me to the creative agency on time.

Half an hour later, we crash out of the apartment just as Beverley next door is inching through her front door past a towering stack of magazines, a bag of rubbish in her hand.

'Morning!' I call. 'Shall I take your trash?' I reach out a hand for it. Willow crouches to pet Germaine, who hobbles out, her fang-like lower teeth always on display.

'Oh, thank you, Melissa,' Beverley croons in her husky voice. She's wearing her dark magenta wig and oversized glasses.

'Can we take Germaine to the park on Saturday?' Willow asks.

'Please do. You two are my angels. You have a great day.' She blows Willow a kiss.

'You have a great day too.' Willow beams and bounces off down the stairs while I dispose of the rubbish down the trash chute. Out on the street, a car horn blasts. 'Dog poop!' she calls out cheerily, dodging it on the pavement. I'm English born and bred, while my child is a native New Yorker. Her accent is softer than if we were in the Bronx or Queens, but her speech is rapid-fire with British words like 'telly' thrown in. She calls me 'Mom' which sounds like 'Mawm' in her sweet little voice.

I take her hand, and we race to the bus stop. It's not called the school run for nothing. Faith's daughter from the video is a similar age. She's always in a prairie dress, wavy hair flying out behind her when she runs free across lavender fields. I marvel over the vast difference in their

lives. No TV or devices for Faith's six kids, and no picky little eaters. They enjoy home-cooked meals and roam around the ranch. Seeing their connected family life, I wonder how to improve things for Willow and me.