

All That Life Can Afford

a novel

Emily Everett



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For my mother, with me on all my travels

*When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is
in London all that life can afford.*

–SAMUEL JOHNSON



Prologue



It was almost midnight. The water of the bay unfurled darkly far below, shimmering with white lights, each one a boat or yacht. It was achingly beautiful. By the time the countdown started—*ten, nine, eight*—the party’s excitement was building around me, and then building inside me—*seven, six, five*—and I let myself rise up on those euphoric waves. I didn’t have to worry about Callum. I didn’t have to worry about anything—*four, three, two*. I only had to stand here on the edge of the world, smiling like a fool, and count down to zero.

The sky exploded with light.

Fireworks, but they weren’t coming from the hillside. They weren’t coming from land at all. My eyes found it: a barge, out in the Mediterranean, lit now with tiny flashes that arched skyward, spun, grew dizzy, then heaved their sparkling guts to spatter the black sky. I swayed, tipping back to take them in. All the surrounding hills must be like our hill, crowded with tipsy revelers at grand villas, retinas burning like they’d looked into the sun. And I was one of them.



1



LONDON
OCTOBER 2009

I'd never been a great actor or a convincing liar, and an American in Britain will always be scrutinized. I prayed the ticket inspector might think I was an idiot, like all Americans, and not a crook, like most of the people he found on the train to Brighton without a ticket to cover their fare.

Instructors like me had to pay for our own tickets when we traveled to teach weekly SAT-prep sessions at posh boarding schools around the English countryside. Not that you'd know they were schools—more like mansions, refurbished monasteries, drafty Hogwarts-type castles. I'd seen a few already in the four months I'd worked for Kramer Test Prep, but this was the first time I hadn't had the money for my train ticket. I'd formed a weak plan on my way to the station. *A shite plan*, my flatmate Andre would've said. My first plan had been to borrow the money from him, but he hadn't come home last night.

I'd been poor all my life, in a mundane, lower-working-class way—food stamps, hand-me-downs, pancakes for dinner—and it had bred in me a scrappy sort of boldness that only backfired about fifty percent of the time. Sometimes it seemed like that scrappiness was the only thing I still shared with my father.

The plan was a big risk, but I'd be fired if I missed my class. The travel bonus was £40 each trip; that alone made a typical ten-week class worth more than half a month's rent to me. I'd emailed my supervisor the second the

Brighton class was posted, terrified that someone would scoop it up before me. I needed that bonus, even if it only came at the end of the whole class, months later. Months of Saturdays spent on long train rides, cursing everything: the city of Brighton, its icy coastal winds, its historic clifftop boarding school for girls, which I had never heard of but which, when mentioned, impressed my British acquaintances so much—*You teach at Roedean?*—that I’d quickly learned to use it as social currency.

But it was actual currency I needed, and so far I hadn’t seen a pound for my Roedean SAT class.

The shite plan was not complicated. For the first forty-five minutes on the swaying, southbound train, I only had to pretend to sleep. No easy task, my body thrumming with nervous energy. Fare-dodging was no joke here. I’d once seen a ticket inspector rap his knuckles loudly on a train window for ten minutes, trying to wake a “sleeping” man, certainly ticketless. The man later hid in the bathroom, and two stations later the ticket inspector walked him off the train to a waiting semicircle of British Transport Police. Here on an easily revoked student visa, I feared even the lightest brush with the law.

The visa was my ticking clock: I had a year, essentially, to create a solvent, stable life. By this time next year, if I wanted to stay in London, I’d need a completed master’s degree, which would earn me a two-year “post-study” work visa. Then I could really begin to make my way in this place that felt more like home than home had in a long time.

On good days I believed it was possible. I could walk through London, my city, and feel that I had achieved something great just by being there. Here I was, taking the Tube, rising on an escalator, emerging on the South Bank, strolling along the Thames and snapping photos and stopping on benches to read my book whenever the sun came out. But then I’d be sitting there, the breeze flipping the pages of my book, not reading but wondering if I had enough to buy a panini and a tea at the little café tucked into the bridge arches near Waterloo. Some days I did have enough, and it was a perfect day, a day I could make a Polaroid snapshot in my mind and store as evidence that I’d made the right choice in coming here. And on days when I didn’t have enough, and I went back to the flat and ate spaghetti with butter and stale

Parmesan shaken from a can, it was still a perfectly good day for a broke grad student, getting by, not asking for help from my father or anyone.

Finally, I heard the ticket inspector coming down the carriage, pausing at each seat. I kept my head against the window, eyes closed, hands folded in my lap, my teaching textbook open on the tray table. I felt a blush rising and willed it away.

“Ticket, miss,” the inspector said, standing over me. He had lowered his voice slightly, perhaps trying not to startle me awake, and the possibility of this—his kindness—filled me simultaneously with hope and self-loathing. I let my eyes flutter open.

“Oh, yes, I’ve got it here,” I said, a bit breathless, reaching into both pockets to search for it. And then, with an apologetic smile, rummaging through my book bag as well.

My stomach was churning. I’d come to London to leave this feeling behind. I didn’t like what it said about me—that I was still scraping together the same threadbare life I’d had back home. That I was capable of this deception. Morally and literally bankrupt. Today would be the last time, I decided.

Finally, I handed the inspector the ticket I’d purchased with my last pounds at Victoria station. With one hand he held the ticket, and with the other he brought out his hole-puncher to mark it spent. I did not breathe. Maybe he wouldn’t look. Maybe he’d punch it, hand it back, and walk away, and I would be free.

“This ticket’s for Haywards Heath.”

My stomach dropped, and I felt the first beads of sweat form on my spine. I would have to do the full show, then. I summoned a smile. “Yes, that’s right.”

“You need a ticket to Brighton, miss.”

“Oh, why?” I said, leaning on my American accent. “I’m only going as far as Haywards Heath.”

The inspector looked away up the carriage, then back at me. “That was two stops ago. We’re nearly to Brighton now.”

“What?” I said, and made to stand, bumping into the tray table, tipping my textbook off and onto the floor, where notes and marked tests sprayed from its pages. The inspector bent for the book while I made a show of struggling to close the tray table.

“I’ve missed my stop?” I asked, letting in a small note of hysteria.

“She was sleeping the whole time, poor dear,” the woman across the aisle said, unfurling a deeply posh accent. She handed some of my papers back.

The inspector nodded deferentially to the woman but continued to reach for his radio. “There are protocols for this kind of thing,” he said to me. “You’ll have to pay at the next station, I have to report it—”

Panic surged up my spine. “Oh, I knew this would happen,” I interrupted. “I should’ve just gone straight to the school.”

The inspector glanced at my textbook, still in his hand. The kindness had gone from his face; he was scrutinizing me now. I’d miscalculated. “You’re a student?”

I had always looked young: something soft in my curved lips and heart-shaped face, girlish in my long, straight, dark blond hair. No doubt he’d encountered many broke, ticketless students in his time on the trains.

“No,” I said, stepping out into the aisle. “I’m a teacher.” I had dressed the part—a knee-length, collared shirt dress, belted at the waist, without a single wrinkle. Neat black flats. All purchased at H&M for less than £25, but exactly the bohemian-professional chic that all the high street shops were selling for £125. I’d pulled my hair back into a trim bun. “I was supposed to stay with a friend in Haywards Heath this weekend. I start at Roedean Monday morning.”

Both the woman and the inspector looked at me with surprise.

The Roedean day and boarding school had not educated any actual royals, but it did the next best thing—welcoming their cousins, stepchildren, and inconvenient love children, plus the sons and daughters of Sussex aristocrats, international financiers, and various other new-money progeny. It was beautiful: huge Victorian halls of soft Easter-egg-yellow stone, perched on famous white cliffs high above the English Channel. All designed by Sir John Simpson in 1885 and scarcely modernized since. I knew it mostly from a

cold, medieval classroom and toilets that hardly even pretended to flush when you pulled the chain, but I didn't need to say so. I hoped the warm glow of those historied halls might extend its protective warmth to me, here in the train carriage.

"It's just for a few weeks," I said, smiling modestly as if I couldn't quite believe it. "It's for the university entrance exams, in America. That's where all the students want to go now."

The inspector studied me and said nothing, but the woman across the aisle laughed. "Want to be far off from their parents, I expect," she said. "Those boarding school types, you know."

The inspector looked at her. He looked down at my textbook. I held my breath.

Finally, he shook his head in surrender. "You'll have to ride on to Brighton, miss, and get the train back from there. Two stops to Haywards, any northbound train." He handed back the punched ticket. "Probably won't set you back half an hour, if you're lucky."

"Lucky to have you to set me straight," I said. I was so grateful, it was all I could do not to hug the man. He seemed to notice something of this in me and turned quickly away.

When he was gone, I dropped back into my seat, heavy with the weight of my relief. I smiled at the woman across the aisle. "Such an idiot, I'm going to be so late now."

"Can you ring your friend?" she asked. "Let her know you'll be on a later train?"

I agreed that was exactly the thing to do, and then had to pretend-dial my phone and pretend-tell my friend the whole story from the beginning, pausing for replies. Pantomiming this was exponentially more humiliating than lying to the ticket inspector had been. I wanted to feel my triumph—paying with charm and class instead of money—but all I felt was the unanswerable failure of needing to do so. I tried to imagine the shame running off me like rain off a coat, like I was too hardened to feel it.

My Roedean class would go well, I told myself. I would remember all my students' names. On break, the teachers' staff room would be empty, as it

always was on Saturdays, just a low table with self-service snacks and coffee and a jar for payment, overfull with coins and bills. I would borrow what I needed for the train ticket home to London and pay it back when I was down again next weekend, after my bartending paycheck came in. Next week would be better.

I traveled all over London on the Underground for my SAT-tutoring students, captive time I normally used to read for my master's program. But today I'd finished the reading—a rare miracle, I was always behind—so I picked up a left-behind magazine from the next seat. The Tube rocked us from station to station, and I passed the time picking through a special travel feature on Cannes. The article itself was pointless and vague, but it was hard to believe the beauty in the photo spreads: that sand could be so pale, that water could be so brilliant, that fields of lavender could feel so soft and swaying on paper.

I'd spent many hours of my youth lost in glossy pages like these—*National Geographics* specifically, slipped from the bottom shelf of library stacks and carried to the comfiest chair. I dog-eared the best photos, the most exotic locations. It was a game Mom had invented for me when I was too young to sit still with a book. A game for me to collect and show her the photos at the end, before we left. Later on, it was the internet Mom came to the library for, for Craigslist ads, but in the beginning, it was just the newspapers. She wasn't looking for jobs; both my parents worked at the nursing home in town, Mom as a health aide and Dad doing maintenance. She was combing the classified ads for blood glucose test strips. Matchstick-sized plastic tabs to measure her sugar levels from a finger-prick of blood. She'd had Type 1 diabetes since she was twelve.

The test strip packs at the pharmacy could be \$60 or \$70, which didn't go far, testing so many times a day—morning and night, before and after meals,

and whenever Mom's levels felt off, which seemed to be always. But sometimes other diabetics had more test strips than they needed, or didn't need to test as often, or someone died, and then they resold the packs for much less, and Mom would scoop them up, even if it meant a long drive with me along for company. When I was older, I discovered that Mom also rationed her doses of insulin, which cost a fortune even with insurance. Later, when it was too late, when she was dying, the specialists said that she had shortened her life by decades, as if it was something she'd done on purpose—weighing not just the sugars in her bloodstream but the dollars in the bank with each injection. Because this one essential thing that other bodies made for free, her body had to pay dearly for.

In those early days at the library, I tried to find three or four beautiful photo spreads to show Mom. She'd squish right into the chair with me and slide her fingers over the pages as if she could feel them; thin, curving beaches; chalky Roman ruins; big skies and craggy seaside cliffs. Whenever there was a road on the page, her fingers had to follow it. "When we retire, I'm going to travel," she said. It didn't have to be abroad; Yellowstone was her favorite, the ripples of rock waving like water. Her retirement plans: renting a used RV, driving around with Dad. "We don't need to live like kings," she said.

When I was old enough to read real books at the library, I imagined myself traveling, too, into those pages. While Mom disappeared into the classifieds, I disappeared to mythical lands: danced at court with Lancelot and King Arthur, wooed Maid Marian with Robin Hood, stepped lightly off a London windowsill with only Peter Pan's hand to fly me. Mom talked to the librarians and pulled more books about England off the shelves for me. It was a long time before I realized this magical place was a real country, just across the ocean from Massachusetts. She laughed when I asked her—was England like Neverland?—and soon it became a teasing sort of joke between us. England was a dream place, but one that maybe I would someday get to visit. If I was good, if I did my chores, if I studied hard.

I was in middle school when I found Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice* first, then all the rest, read and reread endlessly. Discovering Austen's

England was like returning to Camelot, to that magic. The balls and dancing and dresses, the gentlemen passing you up into a carriage or jumping you down from a sea wall. They were irresistible: the books, the soft dreamlike edges of what passed for struggle and suffering in that world—a broken engagement, an elopement, a disinheritance. No one was sick, or if they were, it was romantic, like in *Sense and Sensibility* when Marianne Dashwood nearly dies from heartbreak. It wasn't a mundane hindrance, like co-pays or Craigslist or calling strangers on the phone.

I still went with Mom to the library when I could. She looked for test strips; I researched colleges, studied for the SATs. She was so proud when I got into Smith, right on the hill in our hometown. Dad, true to form, only cared that I'd gotten a full ride. A need-based scholarship that included room and board, plus the option to do what most Smithies did: a whole junior year studying abroad with subsidies and a living stipend. Mom and I pored over the photos in the study-abroad brochures. It was the first time that getting to England seemed possible for a girl like me.

The train lurched forward, shaking the magazine in my lap loose. I put a hand out to catch it. A toneless female voice announced, "The next station is Knightsbridge. Please mind the gap between the train and the platform."

I looked down at the spread of Cannes, still open across my knees. While the train pushed west to my stop, I watched the wind-ruffled Mediterranean rippling on the page. So clear between the waves, the light shone right through it. I found a promenade overlooking the water, a curl of sand-colored stone lined and arched over with palms. I put my finger to it, like Mom would've, and traced it till it slipped away into the binding, lost to me.



AFTER MY TUTORING SESSION IN Knightsbridge, I had to catch the Tube back north to Bloomsbury for my next student. For that, it was both quicker and more scenic to walk down to Victoria station. I would've liked to extend the walk, enjoy a little more of the sunny day and this classic, storybook part of London. Maybe loop a little out of my way, into Green Park. From the top of

the park, I could see Mayfair, the beautiful, posh London neighborhood where Mr. Darcy keeps a flat in *Pride and Prejudice*. Then turn south along leafy, tree-lined paths, let the growing flow of tourists carry me down to the gates of Buckingham Palace, leave them snapping selfies and continue on.

Instead, I set a reasonable pace, cutting diagonally through Knightsbridge. No tourists here; if I passed anyone, it was a cashmere-swathed woman, eyes on an iPhone, her tiny dog in Burberry plaid trotting ahead at the end of a leash. This was the wealthiest neighborhood in Chelsea, which was itself far and away the wealthiest borough in London.

I was familiar with Chelsea because my roommate Andre and I shared a guilty pleasure: watching a silly reality TV show about the rich young people there, *Chelsea Made*. Their grandparents were chocolate magnates, kings of banking, shipping tzars. In our dump of a flat, it was irresistible—watching these spoiled early-twenties kids and the small things that passed for difficulty in their lives: fights, fallings-out, strenuous party-planning. They lived in our city, but it was almost impossible to recognize the place through the lens of their lives. We loved it.

As a tutor, I went to the prettiest, poshest neighborhoods, the greenest tree-lined streets, the houses of whitest eggshell stone, the drivers in sleek black livery leaning and smoking on their sleek black cars, idling on the curb. I rang the bell and was ushered in, not by parents but by nannies, housekeepers, personal assistants, cooks, and, occasionally, other subject tutors on their way out—naturally sheepish as we crossed in the doorway, trading our narrow expertise for cash that would never buy us a fraction of what we saw inside. Within, everything gleamed, like shine was shorthand for expensive. Polished wood-panel walls, slick marble floors, glossy grand pianos, gilded mirrors perfectly positioned to catch the liquid light from the chandelier.

But of course, within these homes, I was not a storybook heroine. I was still me; still broke, still trying to leave behind the secret of my own home, tense and worn and working-class. It wasn't fine homes, fine things I needed. What I needed was more afternoons like this, strolling the quiet side streets, London unfolding before me like the roads my mother traced with her scarred

fingertips. More days like this, when I could feel that the future here held more for me. Soon.

My walk brought me to Sloane Street, where I crossed into Belgravia, the buildings there silent and uniformly cream-colored. I had one regular tutoring student in this area, a boy as quiet and pale as the neighborhood itself. My Kramer paperwork said he was the son of Austrian diplomats, but I had never seen them, despite coming and going from their home every week for nearly two months.

The students I tutored were, for the most part, regular teenagers. I liked them. They had acne and awkward too-long limbs and bitten-down nails. Over many tutoring sessions, their shyness would abate, and finally, they'd start to tell me about themselves. Then I could hardly get them back to the lesson, like I was the first adult to listen to them in years. They shared their fears about school or the future, what they hoped for, what they didn't understand, what they were good at that no one knew or cared about.

It was extraordinary, almost disorienting, to feel bad for a kid whose weekly allowance was probably more than my family's monthly income. But in a lot of cases, I did feel bad for them. My mother was gone, yes, but for twenty-two years she'd been the warmest, kindest, gentlest part of my day, someone who always listened to me, understood me. Even when she began to wear down and disappear last year, her hugs were still fierce. Fortifying. Even in their palatial houses, my students had never enjoyed even a fraction of something so invaluable.

Queen Mary University of London was a cluster of gray stone and tan brick buildings on Mile End Road, a slightly seedy area in East London. My walk from the Tube station took me past betting shops, pawnshops, greasy spoons, and far too many of those white ghost-bikes erected wherever a cyclist has been killed.

After my class on the literature of the First World War, I'd take the Overground up to North London, where I bartended a few nights a week in a music venue called the Garage (pronounced *GARE-idge*) that seemed to specialize in hard-core rock and hearing loss. I'd answered a job posting when I first landed in London, did a five-minute interview, and came back the next day for my first shift. I received almost no training, an ugly polo shirt, and a fistful of foam earplugs. I learned to read lips and not to expect tips. There was nothing good about the job apart from the biweekly paychecks, which helped me float along until my larger, monthly paychecks came in from Kramer.

I jogged up the steps of the humanities building and hurried to the classroom, to the only empty chair in the circle of desks. Professor Wright started class a moment later. For the last few weeks, we'd been studying what she called the Trench Poets, reading beautiful, tragic, catastrophic poems written by soldiers who were dug in at the Somme or Ypres for months while their friends were killed around them. The poems were impossible to look away from.

“Well, it’s Sassoon time,” Professor Wright said. “Who wants to give us a reading, start us off?” She looked around, but not at me. By now, we both knew I wouldn’t volunteer.

One of my classmates raised his hand, and Wright nodded him on. “‘The Humbled Heart,’ by Siegfried Sassoon,” the boy began. Then he delivered, from memory and without hesitation, the entire poem.

I would have been surprised, but I’d seen the same thing week after week. My classmates were all British, or from Commonwealth countries. They knew these wartime poets deep in their bones, drilled into them from childhood like the Pledge of Allegiance.

I made a note to research the poem further and tried to reassure myself—I could figure it out on my own, even I couldn’t always keep up in discussions—but deep down, I knew how laughable that was. Between bartending and teaching, I averaged almost thirty hours a week. I barely had time to do all the reading, let alone time to build the vast historical and cultural context my “peers” had by birthright.

Professor Wright was speeding through some of that context now, talking about when Sassoon was hospitalized with shell shock, where he met another soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen. And then she rushed on—a third poet I hadn’t heard of, who seemed to have somehow saved Sassoon from court martial—and two of my classmates chimed in about some letters that I had never read or heard mentioned, and the others were nodding, adding their own comments and favorite lines, and I listened and took notes and wondered why I had thought this was a good idea.

Here I was, finally in London, in love with the city but not with my place in it. Queen Mary was just another world where I didn’t make sense. I’d felt like that since middle school, when I landed in honors classes with the upper-crust kids—the sons and daughters of professors, provosts, business owners. My old friends from the neighborhood, kids who grew up on the same street, in the same small houses, fell away. A few to sports and clubs, some to the vocational school, but most to after-school jobs. By then I was working at a local ice cream shop, my honors classmates stopping by for sundaes, laughing together in the booths for hours, dropping their parents’ money into

my tip jar. Later, it was my Smith College classmates. Maybe a professor or two, always surprised to see me there, forearms smeared with dried hot fudge and ice cream.

Professor Wright let us go with a reminder to begin brainstorming topics for our master's dissertations. She said we could stop by office hours if we wanted to talk out some ideas, and a few students approached her while I was packing up. I didn't have time to stay after class, just like I wouldn't have time for office hours. I had to stop at the library to borrow the next assignment—Pat Barker's *Regeneration* novel trilogy—before anyone else did, so I wouldn't have to buy it. My bar shift started in just over an hour, and I had a long Overground journey to get there, and a few pounds for a ploughman's sandwich to eat on the train.

I squeezed by the students waiting for Professor Wright, discussing their erudite dissertation topics. I hadn't made close friends at Smith—it might as well have been a foreign country for how well I belonged there—but I had at least fit in academically. I had kept up with my classmates, even surpassed them in literature classes. It was where I'd learned to want a job in publishing. When I was lonely at Smith, I'd remind myself that it was only for a few years, only for undergrad, and then I'd be in England, where I'd meet people who didn't know me at all. I would arrive, blank like a sheet of notebook paper, and write myself new.

I made it halfway through the first *Regeneration* novel on the two-hour journey home from teaching my Saturday class at Roedean. After a morning in such a picturesque school, my classroom full of sweet, well-groomed, well-dressed girls who used thousand-dollar iPads for calculators, it was always grim returning to my flat. We lived in the first of three brick apartment buildings huddled around a courtyard of chipped and broken paving stones. Una House was on the Camden side of Kentish Town, which was not nice, which was why we could afford the rent for our three-rooms-and-a-kitchen ground-floor flat. I paid less rent than my roommates because it was my job to pay the council tax for the flat—a monthly tax funding rubbish removal and services for the local borough.

When I unlocked the door, I could hear someone clinking dishes in the kitchen sink. It was an unusual sound; microwave meals and takeout containers didn't clink.

Andre had his back to me when I stepped into the kitchen.

"What's happening here?"

Andre didn't answer but turned to the side to show me: a black trash bag open at his feet, both hands full of dry, crusty, filthy dishes. He dropped them into the bag with a crash. "I told him," he said. "I told him he could wash them, or I would bin them. They're *months* old, Anna. Look at the mold."

I held up my hands. "You think I haven't noticed?" Tom was our other flatmate. He was rarely seen but often smelled—the musty dirty-socks odor of his room, the cologne cloud when he went out, the moldy half-eaten

casserole left sitting on the counter since late August. Hating Tom was what first drew me and Andre together when I moved here in June. We also shared a petty, self-defeating stubbornness, which was why we'd refused to wash Tom's dishes, which was why the dishes had moldered for months and why the flat now had mice. It had never been a nice place—Andre had warned me when I answered the ad he posted on gumtree.com—but it had felt homey when he showed me around. Now I knew that homey feeling was not the flat but Andre himself.

"When'd you get home last night?" I asked, prodding him in the shoulder on my way to the fridge.

"Miley Cyrus showed up at G-A-Y. They kept saying she would do a set, so I stayed and stayed. I made a friend. Took me home in his *Range Rover*," he said, wagging his eyebrows.

"I rode in a Range Rover this morning. One of the Roedean girls got her driver to drop me at the station on her way home."

"Sending a driver for your kid is a great power move," Andre said, tipping the last dish into the black bag. "Make all the other mums feel poor."

I laughed. "Is it possible to sit in a Range Rover and feel poor?"

Andre spread his arms wide. "I did it just last night."

"Fair." Andre and I had connected right away; he was another working-class imposter like myself, from an East London public housing estate, but clever enough to get into University College London, one of the best universities in England. He'd had about as much success as me blending in there, among the brick and ivy and white marble cloisters, but it all seemed to roll off his back. "Accents here, they give you away straight off," he'd told me. "You, you just sound American—there's no economics there. But the second they hear me speak, they hear the housing estate. Scholarship kid, bursary-funded. I can't hide it, so I don't bother trying."

He'd graduated last year but still worked there as a postgrad research assistant. Prestigious, but it didn't pay much more than my two part-time jobs, so being constantly "skint" was another thing we had in common. Another reason we loved leaving our reality behind when we watched the rich kids on *Chelsea Made*.

Andre bent over, struggling to knot the bulging trash bag. “We’ve got to get rid of Tom. Get Liv to move into the gaff, take his room, don’t you think?”

The dishes tumbled noisily together as he dragged the bag down the hall, so I had to raise my voice over the din. “Liv’s happy where she is. House full of handsome British men, who could blame her.”

“Why’s she always coming round here then?” Andre called from the door. I heard Liv’s ringing laugh in answer.

Liv, my only real friend here besides Andre, was another American grad student working for Kramer. We’d met in SAT-teacher training. Born and raised in New York, the daughter of South Indian immigrants, she was city-smart—always cool and calm in a way I tried to emulate.

“I ask myself the same thing,” Liv said, wrinkling her nose as she came into the hall. “What is that smell?”

“Our cue to leave,” I said, though the truth was I barely even noticed it anymore. “Let’s all go for a walk.”



WE ALWAYS WALKED TO THE same place if it was sunny; the best place to spend a few loose hours was Hampstead Heath. One of the city’s biggest parks, but not at all parklike—vast and hilly, green grass and forest, unmanicured. Big enough to bridge the divide between some of the richest and bleakest neighborhoods in London.

My shabby corner—Camden, Kentish Town, Gospel Oak—just touched the southernmost tip, but across the Heath was Hampstead to the west and Highgate to the north. They even had their own little weekly paper, the *Ham & High*. Liv and I had wandered around there in our early days, observing old money and well-heeled businesspeople, expats and ex-oligarchs, celebs who liked privacy, celebs who liked pints at the pub (most notably that fall, Kate Moss). Craned our necks at the gate of the second-largest private home in London (the first being a little house called Buckingham Palace).

On a rare warm day, the Heath was where both sides mixed—the Ham & High set and the rest of us. Everyone sun-starved, climbing toward the same grassy peak: Parliament Hill, the highest point and finest view in all of London.

It was a steep ascent from Gospel Oak, and by the time we reached the top, Andre and Liv and I were breathless and starting to sweat. There were people all around us—families with children, young people with boxed wine, couples taking selfies with the staggering skyline view behind them. As a true Londoner, Andre was immune to the view, and he rolled his eyes when Liv and I turned to take it in, irresistible like a gravitational pull.

All of the city sprawled below us; I devoured it, like always. Like I could tell Mom about it later, on the phone. North London, low and tight and townhomed; then Central London, with its gray and white stone primness. Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, and Big Ben clustered just before the Thames, the London Eye Ferris wheel just behind. The white cathedral dome of St. Paul's buried out east, among the glass skyscrapers in London's banking district. Even though fairytale England had been our old joke, Mom had always believed that I could really get here someday. And I'd always believed that she'd be there for me to call long-distance.

"You bloody tourists, let's find somewhere to sit," Andre said.

I pointed them just a little down the hill, on the south side. "How's this?" I said, indicating the spot as if I'd just found it. "A little less crowded." Back when I'd first moved to the city, I'd come up here to read, and to promise myself that all of London, every layer of it stretching below, would someday open itself to me.

We settled in the grass, and Liv took out three slim silver cans of gin and tonic from the shopping bag on her wrist. "My treat. Mum of my student gave me a cash tip, can you believe it?"

"How'd you manage that?" I asked. I cracked open my can, put my mouth to it when it fizzed over. The gin tasted bright and metallic.

Liv shrugged. "It was our last session. She said I was great."

"You are great," Andre said, raising his can to toast her. "And generous to boot. Good taste in friends. I could go on."

“I never get tips. I just shell out for train tickets,” I said. At least this time I’d had the money to buy the full ticket from Victoria, and to repay the money I’d borrowed from Roedean’s staff room jar.

“It’s criminal, Kramer putting you on the hook for all the trains,” Liv said. She taught classes in Kramer’s London headquarters, not as desperate for the travel-bonus pay as me. “Your dad really won’t help you at all? Even for books or school stuff?”

I shrugged. I hadn’t seen or spoken to my dad since I moved here five months ago. “I would never ask him.”

Liv shot me a look. “I don’t *ask* my parents for it. They just want to help.”

“He wouldn’t want to help, and I wouldn’t want his help. It might be the one thing we agree on.” I said this mildly, like we just had the regular sitcom-family problems. Liv knew about Mom, and that my father and I weren’t close, but nothing more than that. I didn’t want to tell the story, not now. The afternoon was too pretty, the spot too perfect, the gin and tonic buzz too pleasant.

Not that it was a very complicated story. My mother died. Last March, a month after I’d been laid off from the small press publisher I’d worked for since graduation—the recession reaching its long fingers into even the nonprofit world. By mid-April, I was back at my old ice cream job, a part-time grief zombie. On Mother’s Day, I swirled soft serve all day for moms out with their kids. Miserable, but I dreaded going home more. Watching my dad pretend it was just another Sunday. Both of us moving around the house like we always did—like it had a crater in the middle, a still-crumbling hole, and if either of us put a toe near it, it would cleave open and suck us both down.

That night, I opened my laptop and looked up Queen Mary, the school where I had planned to study abroad when I was at Smith. Their MA program was only a year, and about \$17,000—a fraction of the cost of US programs, which were two years. Easily covered with a student loan. They had rolling, rapid admissions, and if I was accepted, I would get a UK student visa and the chance to extend it for two more years to work after graduating. Maybe even snag my dream job. Maybe never have to come home.

I didn't go to bed that night. I didn't ask my dad what he thought. I did a FAFSA online, started my application. I couldn't wait like Mom had, trusting that there would be more years and more money later, more chances to go. I had to go now; I knew I would not make it past that crater every day. Not for much longer. I had to hope that things could work out for me, like they did for the plucky Austen heroines I loved.

We sipped our drinks and talked as the sun sank toward the West London horizon. The city warmed through me like a blush. When we'd finished our cans, Liv surprised us by bringing out another round. "It was a pretty good tip," she said. "Drinks on me."

"How many tips before you can rent us a house across the Heath?" I joked, tilting my fresh, full can toward Highgate.

Andre shook his head. "Beautiful girl like you? You wouldn't want to live there. Too many rich men wanting to buy you things, take you out, show you off."

I grinned. "Oh, yeah, better just stick with their neglected teenagers."

"Would be nice." Liv nodded. "No offense to Una House."

"I don't need to live in Highgate. I just need to get everything sorted out—graduate, get a real job, something more secure and reliable."

Andre looked over at me, his expression softening. "You've been through the wringer this year, Anna. Give yourself time."

I shook my head. Time was the thing I had least of. I had a year to get a degree, get a visa, get the London publishing job I'd dreamed about. Really root myself in this place. The first time I'd come up here to look at the skyline, I'd promised myself that this was the right thing. London. Not just an escape; not just fleeing my mother's absence, my father's silence.

In the end, when I'd told him I was leaving, there'd been no argument, no official falling-out. It had felt more like a splitting open, like the dried husk of my worn-out family had finally, with one last tap, cleaved apart and released me. And still, sometimes I missed the feeling of enclosure. It was a thing I hadn't yet found a replacement for.

When I leaned forward and grabbed the shopping bag to collect the empty cans, it was heavy. "Is there something still in here?" I asked.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Liv said. She produced a small Styrofoam tray: four fat rolls of baklava, the flaky phyllo oozing syrup onto the cling wrap. “It’s from the corner shop by my flat. Stroud Green is all Turkish. They just slip it into your bag when you’re checking out.”

“That’s so nice,” I said.

Liv laughed, unwrapping the tray. “Well, they still charge you for it.”

The rolls of baklava were honey-sweet, nutty, crumbly heaven. We split the last one three ways, taking careful bites. The glow of sugar and gin radiated out from my stomach, up my back and into my neck. My whole body relaxed into it; here was a happiness that even we cash-strapped kids could afford. I put my sticky palms into the grass behind me and leaned back onto them, letting the last of the afternoon sun slip over my face.

Liv was often my companion on afternoons like this—our teaching done, any free hours were spent exploring London. We almost always got lost, but Liv had taught me not to mind it. That was just life in a new city, she said. And unlike Andre, we weren’t too proud to do the touristy things. Last Sunday, we’d explored Westminster: took photos with Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament behind us, studied every nook and chapel in chilly Westminster Abbey, then walked up Whitehall, past the prime minister’s residence and the Horse Guards, postcard-perfect in their red uniforms and fuzzy black hats, all the way up to Trafalgar Square, where we stood at the base of Nelson’s Column and let the black cabs and bike messengers rush around us. *A torrent*, I’d written in my journal that night. I tried to keep every moment there—like a receipt, like I might at some point be made to account for each moment. The simple and the grand: cold abbeys and sun-warmed baklava. As if these beautiful things would one day be measured against something I’d left behind, something lost and unrecoverable, and I needed to tip the balance.

After the doorman at the Savoy hotel welcomed me through the revolving door, I allowed myself a few seconds to marvel at the lobby. White marble columns stretched up to the sky-high ceiling, and the floor was a blindingly shiny black-and-white marble checkerboard. A modern frieze topped each wall: white silhouettes of ornately dressed women, standing, walking, dancing. I felt like I'd fallen right into *Pride and Prejudice*, like Lizzie Bennet craning her neck to admire the romantic halls of Pemberley. Austen loved to drop her heroines into grander settings, let them sink or swim. I could be Fanny Price arriving at Mansfield Park, or Catherine Morland at Northanger Abbey. I would try to swim—but first I had to find the elevator.

My supervisor at Kramer had left me a panicky voicemail while I was in class: a last-minute tutoring assignment. Could I be at the Savoy in an hour? He emailed me the student's intake form, which included a permanent address in North London, and a request for thirty hours of tutoring at the Savoy, all crammed into two weeks.

The liveried lift attendant smiled at me in the mirrored elevator doors as I tried to smooth my wind-whipped hair and wrinkled clothes. My ugly-duckling thing had ended, mercifully, with the last year of high school, and I knew logically that I looked the part now. But I didn't feel the part. When men noticed me on the street in London, it could be admiration, but it could just as easily be me looking the wrong way to cross the road.

I knocked on the door of the room I'd been told to, my heart thumping with nerves. What if the parents sent me away and requested someone more experienced? I couldn't let that happen. Thirty hours in two weeks—that paycheck would be my biggest ever. I could finally get a replacement for my fraying laptop charger. I could treat Liv and Andre to canned cocktails on Hampstead Heath, raise a toast to London's wealthiest children. May they all test poorly and need tutors.

A long pause and the door opened on a wispy brunette teenager. She tipped her head to the side and pursed her lips, regarding me with evident curiosity.

"Are you Philippa?" I asked.

She grimaced. "Pippa. Or Pip. Never *Philippa*."

Great start, then. Pippa swung the door open and retreated, as close to a welcome as most teenagers could manage. I followed her into the enormous suite, trying not to gawk: a mahogany dining set on tile, a living room of pearl-colored couches, and, beyond that, two ornate bedrooms. No visible parents.

Pippa crossed the room and crashed onto the couch. Her dark hair was in a loose topknot, and she wore simple gray sweats, but they were tailored and slim, conspicuously chic. I hadn't known it was even possible for sweats to be chic.

I set the Kramer materials on the table next to a vase of white lilies, then sat down on the couch, too, folding one leg under me. I'd learned the best way to charm my SAT students was to seem younger. Too close to their age to have any real authority as a grown-up, I had to be more like a friend—casual, lenient, playful. It worked both ways. They were casual with me, less self-conscious about their shortcomings, even if that only amounted to a poor grounding in geometry, or a midsize vocabulary. They trusted me to help them.

I turned toward Pippa on the couch. "So, did you—"

"Your skin is incredible," she interrupted, leaning a little toward me. She had very dark, pretty eyes, with long lashes. "How is it so clear?"

"Sorry?"

“No spots. No matter what I do, I have them. Mum’s bought me every serum under the sun.”

“Oh, well, I’m older, I guess. My skin wasn’t clear when I was your age.”

“You don’t *look* old.”

I laughed. “I didn’t say I was old. I’m only twenty-three.”

“Seven years older than this skin,” Pippa sighed. She waved a thin manicured hand at her face, which was not particularly spotty. “When did yours go away?”

I shrugged. “A little less every year, I guess, and just about gone when I went to college.”

“What uni did you go to?” Pippa’s manner was not demanding, exactly, but there wasn’t an ounce of deference in it. It was easy to imagine that she spoke to everyone like this—her teachers, her parents, her friends. Like she was incapable of modulation, or above it.

“I went to Smith College. Do you know it?”

“No.”

“It’s a women’s college in the city where I grew up.”

“All girls?”

I smiled. “All girls. It was nice.”

“Sounds like a nightmare.”

“Isn’t your school all girls?” The poshest schools were usually gender-segregated.

“Yes,” Pippa huffed, rolling her eyes. “That’s how I know it’s a nightmare.”

I guffawed, and Pippa smiled slyly. Pleased and trying not to let me see it.

“So, was it your mum’s idea to do SAT tutoring?” I asked.

“Oh, Mum doesn’t care, she’s not big on academics. An *artiste*,” she said, with an expert eye roll. “She doesn’t even care that my older sister didn’t finish uni. No, my school counselor suggested it. He knows I want to go to the States.”

“It’s great you’re getting a head start on the test. It’s a lot to tackle.” I nodded back at the books on the table. “We better get on with it.” Tutoring

sessions were normally an hour or two, but Pippa and I would need to do three hours a day.

She stood and crossed the room slowly, languorously, as if she was very tired and everyone knew it. There was something lazy and unbothered to all her movements and gestures—a funny contrast to her quick speech and wit. She seemed unflappable, not a quality I associated with my own adolescent years.

Pippa got two bottles of San Pellegrino from the minibar and put them on the table for us. Then she sank into a chair, tucking her feet under her. “Okay, Anna,” she said. “Hit me with the knowledge.”

We’d been working for two hours when someone knocked on the door. I was glad to hear it; I wanted to make a good impression on at least one parent before I left.

But when Pippa opened the door, it was hotel staff. The man set a round silver tray of fruit on the table, said good afternoon, and exited. It looked like an Impressionist painting, the sliced fruit in swirls and eddies. Kiwis, berries, grapes, glistening crescents of pineapple and melon.

“They bring it every day. Dig in,” Pippa said, biting into something brown and wrinkly. “Mum and Dad never touch it.” I looked down at the tray: a riot of artful abundance. I should play along, play it cool—like fruit art was a daily occurrence for me, too—but I found I didn’t want to.

“This is amazing,” I said, picking up a slippery half-moon of melon. I pointed it at the brown thing in Pippa’s hand. “What is that?”

Her eyes widened. “You’ve never seen a date before?”

I smiled at her shock. “I thought they were small, like raisins?”

“Way better, they’re super sweet. Try one,” Pippa commanded, her mouth still full.

I picked up a date and bit into it. The texture was chewy, a little odd. The sweetness was heavy and smooth, like maple syrup or honey.

She grinned at me. “Good, right? I bet you’ve never had fresh figs, either.”

It was time to get back to the lesson, if we were going to finish today. But Pippa was fully focused on me, eager now, waiting for an answer. I wanted to

please her.

I laughed. "Not a lot of figs where I'm from, no."

"Too cold?"

Too working-class, but I said, "Yes, probably too cold."

Pippa spun the tray so the figs were in front of me. Halved open, they were bright pink, almost lewd.

"Will we be meeting here all week?" I asked, contemplating the figs. "Your paperwork said you live in Highgate."

"We don't really live here," Pippa said. "In Britain, I mean. The last few years, we've mostly lived in France. Or at least Mum does, with my sister. Dad's always traveling for work anyway, and I'm in boarding school. Sometimes when Dad's in London, Mum and I come stay here and see him."

"Why not at your house?"

"My aunt's there right now with her kids. She offered to let us stay, but Mum didn't want to 'get in her hair.' "

"Is it weird having your family in another country?"

"I'm away at school anyway. And I go to France for holiday breaks." Pippa shrugged and bit into a slick slice of cantaloupe. "I guess your family's in another country, too. Do you go to them for holidays? What about Christmas?"

"Oh no," I said, forming my face into a smile. "I want to see what London's like, all lit up with decorations."

"It's been years since I was here for Crimbo! I remember there's a huge German market in Hyde Park. Is it snowy for Christmas, where you're from?"

"Yes, Massachusetts, do you know it? About a four-hour drive from New York City."

Pippa's eyes lit up. "New York! That's where I'll be. I mean, that's where I want to be. NYU, or maybe Columbia?"

I nodded and took a slice of kiwi. Those schools would require top-tier SAT scores, a tall order even for someone as bright as Pippa. Disappointing test results often meant angry parents complaining to Kramer, blaming the tutor.

“I’ve only been twice, but it’s my favorite city in the world,” Pippa said, practically swooning in her chair. “You must’ve gone all the time, if you lived so close.”

“A few times.” Only for school trips: the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, a musical. “I can see the appeal.”

Pippa leaned back in her chair. “It’s not just for uni. I want to live there, be a real New Yorker. But I guess maybe you never think where you grew up is very exciting.”

“You seemed pretty excited about the Christmas market a minute ago,” I teased.

“But imagine: *Christmas in New York*, Anna! The big tree and the Rockettes and the parade.”

“That’s Thanksgiving.”

“What?”

“The parade, it’s for Thanksgiving.”

She waved this aside. “I’m just saying, I’m ready for somewhere new. That’s what uni is for, right? Look at my sister; she studied right here in London. Hanging around all her old school friends. Look how well that worked out.” Not at all well, her tone indicated.

I had to agree. Smith hadn’t been far enough, and I’d never been able to convince myself that New York would be, either. It had always been London, for me. “Well, should we get back to work?” I nodded at the workbook in front of Pippa, now spotted with cantaloupe drips.

Pippa giggled at the pages, dabbing at the splotches with the cuff of her sweatshirt. “Do we have to, miss?” she teased.

I was often charmed by my students. Sixteen, seventeen years old, they felt like raw, unformed potential, the world opening for them, their skill and privilege. Their lives had an inevitable forward momentum, like they couldn’t choose wrong. I hadn’t felt that way in a long time.

“Wait, we can’t start until you try a fig,” Pippa said, pointing at the tray.

I laughed. I was laughing a lot today. Was it just the giddiness of being here, in the Savoy, trying a tiny slice of the out-of-reach London I’d been

hoping to see? The halved figs were fuchsia, lush, like a lipsticked smile. I took one from the tray and bit into it.

Every weekday, I spent three hours with Pippa. Between classes and teaching and bartending and hours of schoolwork and trips to Roedean, the two weeks were a mad scramble. I barely had time to microwave a baked potato for dinner most nights. *A jacket potato*, Andre corrected me as I stood slumped against the counter, watching it spin.

Suddenly it was November, and our last session at the Savoy. I always felt a little sad, saying goodbye to my best, most likable students. It was satisfying to see the leaps and bounds Pippa had made in our time together, to feel how her confidence had grown, but also bittersweet knowing I'd never cross paths with her again. My students dissolved back into their world, and I moved on to the next assignment. If I was lucky, they let me know their scores a few months later.

I'd enjoyed my thirty hours with Pippa. A quirky teenager hidden inside the slouchy designer clothes of a Soho socialite, she was smart and funny, but also a master time-waster. When she was tired of studying (most of hour three), she'd try to get me off topic, or drown me in details of *Gossip Girl*, a tutorial for her future New York life. She'd suggest we take a break, go for a walk along the Embankment, have dessert and coffee at the hotel café.

Today, I'd relented: our last hour and a half of studying was over afternoon tea, down in the Savoy's dining room. How could I resist? A pianist played quietly from an elaborate gazebo in the center of the room. Sitting there under the romantic glass-domed ceiling, I thought of Edith Wharton—half expecting some of her pretty, striving heroines to flounce in

and settle conspicuously at the next table, hoping to catch a duke or a widowed viscount. A server brought a tower of perfect finger sandwiches (cucumber, salmon, egg-and-watercress), tiny cakes, and scones. We sipped Earl Grey, and Pippa supervised my first scone spread with delicious clotted cream and jam—cream first, then jam, never the other way around. The crumbs dropped into the workbooks open on the table in front of us. Permutations and combinations were the last topic.

“Do you think I’ve got it?” Pippa said wryly when we finished. “Perfect score?”

“I think you’ve got what you need to know, and now you need practice.”

Pippa pouted. “I can’t practice on my own. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“You can *start* with the practice test I left last week. The one you said you’d do over the weekend?”

“That wasn’t my fault, Mum got tickets for the theater. You said to do it all in one go, but I never had four hours free.”

“It’s the only way you’ll get used to it—doing questions quickly within the timed sections when you’re already exhausted from the section before.”

Pippa collapsed back into the brocade wing chair. “It’s not fair. I want you to proctor the tests for me, like you do at Roedean.”

“Maybe your mum could do it? I could give her the instructions and all four practice tests.” My voice dropped off at the end, realizing how unlikely this was. I liked Mrs. Wilder, but she had never once sat down in my presence or even stood still. She was energetic and friendly, but always on her way somewhere. Her demeanor was so much the opposite of Pippa’s laid-back, unhurried way of moving that it surprised me to see how well they got along.

When we got back upstairs to the suite, Mrs. Wilder was just inside the door, taking off a classic Burberry raincoat.

“Mum, I’ve got so much more work to do,” Pippa said, her voice suddenly plaintive. She always became more childlike in her mother’s presence. “And these practice tests. But we’re leaving, and Anna says I’ll have to do it on my own.”

I didn't want Mrs. Wilder to think I hadn't finished the job she'd paid for. "Well," I said, "that's not quite what I—"

"Is there more to be done?" Mrs. Wilder said warmly to me, without any hint of disappointment. "Won the battle but not yet the war?"

I nodded. "The war will require more work," I said. "Top scores come from lots of practice and working through the material more than once. If Pippa does the practice tests over the next few weeks, you can send them to me, and I'll send you back the reports. Let you know which areas she should be reviewing."

"I can't do that on my own," Pippa said, visibly sagging.

Mrs. Wilder squeezed Pippa to her side affectionately. "You're a good student, Pip, I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Fine won't be good enough. The scores they want are so high, Mum! Can't Anna keep tutoring me?"

Mrs. Wilder sighed. "I'm sure Anna's a very busy young woman."

"Just a few more weeks, Mum, that's all I need."

Mrs. Wilder looked down at Pippa fondly, the wispy teen still tucked into her side. She seemed to be weighing things. "Well, Anna," she said after a moment. "You'll be on break for the holidays, won't you, in December? Would you come to us?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Come to stay with us, in December, so you can work with Pippa till she's back in school?"

"Come? To France?"

Mrs. Wilder chuckled. "Oh, it's not that far. I think you'll find it's just the next one over."

I laughed, too, but my mind was churning. "I don't think Kramer would let me go," I said. "It's against policy to—"

"We can leave Kramer out of it, I think, now they've made the introduction," Mrs. Wilder said, putting a motherly hand on my sleeve. "What's your private rate, Anna?"

"Oh, I don't—" I said, hesitating. "I hadn't thought."

“A month would be nice, wouldn’t it, Pip?” Mrs. Wilder squeezed Pippa against her again. “All the time in the world to practice, and time to enjoy yourselves, too.” She turned back to me. “We’d get the flights and all that, see to everything. There’s a separate guest suite, and we’d give you meals and Christmas lunch. And you can’t miss the fireworks over the bay on New Year’s.”

I knew I should reply, but my head was cloudy. A month in the French Riviera! But so many ways this could go wrong, blow up in my face. Helplessly, I looked to Pippa, to see if this was really what the girl wanted—to clog up her holidays with studying and practice tests. A tutor she had little in common with.

Her mouth was drawn down; she was poorly hiding a smirk of victory. Like this had been her plan the whole time. She knew that I had no family here for Christmas, that I wasn’t going home. And her mother had gone right along with the plan, almost no hesitation. To be schemed for like this by a posh teenager—it might’ve been the highest compliment I’d ever received.

Pippa smiled sweetly up at me. “Will you come, Anna?”

Liv missed her Mom's South Indian cooking, but what she missed most about New York was pizza. My last tutoring student was done by two on Sundays, in Pimlico, so I got the Victoria line straight up to Oxford Street station and met Liv there. Together we walked to Goodge Street, to ICCO—not the best pizza spot, but the pizza spot where you could get a whole pie for £5.

“You have to go,” Liv said as soon as we'd cleared the Oxford Street crowds. Though she'd already said it on the phone, several times. “You'd be crazy not to.”

“You know what I keep thinking about?” I said. “For four weeks, I wouldn't have to check my bank balance. I'd have enough. Buying groceries, train tickets, topping up my Oyster card—all the things I worry about, they'd just be taken care of. Like I'm a kid again.” Of course, the kid I'd been was well aware of the poverty line tightrope walk, but at least someone else had been in charge of the balancing act. In France, I'd have nothing to stress over but my student's test scores.

“Yes,” Liv said dryly as we turned onto Goodge Street, “I'm sure the lack of Oyster cards will be the highlight of the French Riviera.” But she smiled sympathetically. “I want that for you. Honestly, I may kill you if you don't go.”

“And Kramer will kill me if I do go.” There was a strict noncompete clause in our Kramer contracts, reinforced with heavy threats in teacher training. “What if they find out? Stealing a student? I'd be fired instantly.”

Panic squeezed long fingers around my throat. "I'd never make rent just bartending."

"It's not like they have spies in Saint-Tropez."

"It *would* be a lot of money," I conceded. "It would probably cover all my bills for three or four months."

Kramer's business model was built on undercutting teachers; they needed us hungry and desperate and willing to run all over London. They charged parents £120 an hour for tutoring and paid me £18. Barely enough for a bag of Tesco groceries. If I could pull this off, the money I came home with would keep that panic at bay for months.

"Why are you so worried, Anna? You deserve this. And Pippa deserves her teacher." Liv finished with a laugh: "And Kramer deserves to get fucked."

She'd already volunteered to take over any of my tutoring students who wanted lessons over December break, along with the last Roedean class, if I decided to go. Had I decided to go?

"Have you read *House of Mirth*?" I asked Liv. One of my favorite books. "Edith Wharton?"

Liv shook her head. "Poli sci major, remember?"

I could see the green awning of ICCO just ahead of us. I put my hand on Liv's arm, slowing her. "The main character, Lily Bart, she's running out of money and gets invited to accompany this wealthy couple to Europe on their yacht. So, she gets to live the good life with them, but it's not really hers."

Liv frowned, seeing where I was going with this. "Let me guess, it all goes terribly wrong?"

"Well, yes," I said. "It's sort of like mixing business and pleasure, isn't it? Can everyone really just get along when there's income on the line?"

Liv shook her head again. "The Wilders sound like nice people. I'm sure they'll look after you."

But Liv hadn't lived the weird double life I'd had at Smith, constantly trying to fit in socially and stay afloat financially. My first year there, while I was reading *House of Mirth* for the first time, I was also working two on-

campus jobs: washing dishes at dinner and, on weekends, cleaning the dorm across the street from mine.

Every Sunday morning when I got the cleaning supplies from the housekeeper's closet, shame slipped on with my yellow rubber gloves. Everyone looked at me funny. It was odd to see someone you recognized from class pulling fistfuls of hair from the drains. And of course scrubbing period blood off the toilet stalls was not what I'd imagined for my new college life. *What, you think you're too good for this?* Dad would have said.

Dishwashing, at least, I came to enjoy. I had more in common with the kitchen staff than my classmates. Middle-aged locals, most knew my father and aunt from high school. I watched how they interacted with students—girls collecting meals, asking about ingredients—gently and carefully, as if they were handling a small explosive in their bare hands. I learned that if a student complained about staff, it was not a small problem. It would trickle down; jobs might be lost. If I told my kitchen coworkers I was nervous to go and live within this privileged family, they would know why.

“Margherita? Is that all you wanted?” Liv asked. “Do you want a Coke?”

We were at ICCO. She went to the counter to order, and I grabbed us a small table in the back, brushed off the crumbs with a napkin.

When Liv sat down, she saw me still lost in thought. She reached across the table, took my elbow, and shook it. “Hey. You work so hard. Go have a little fun.”

“You're so sure it will be fun?” I wanted her to convince me. I wanted to go.

Liv rolled her eyes. “Yes, you nutter, I am. The South of France! Saint-Tropez! You can walk on the beach and meet a nice French lad and eat snails.” She gave my arm a final squeeze. “Don't miss your chance, Anna.”

You'll get your chance, Anna. What my mom had said to me when my plans to study abroad in London fell apart before junior year. Tear-soaked tissues and brochures around me on the bed.

It was because of her that I'd begun to dream myself into the glossy pages of a life somewhere else. Mom had always been able to imagine a future version of herself with more to explore and less to worry about. More time.

And then, suddenly, there was no more time: no retirement, no travel except the drive to Boston, to the Joslin Diabetes Center, where frowning endocrinologists and nephrologists and nurses rotated in and out of the room. They had never spoken the words—*too late*—but they had said it all the same.

A speaker called out our ticket number, and Liv jumped up to get the pizza. Alone at the table, I brushed my hair back from my face, shook my head to clear it. But I was still picturing the old chair in the library, Mom's fingers skating over the *National Geographic* pages. Sea, sky, sun, someday. So certain that there would be time to go. That her chance would come.

SAINT-TROPEZ, FRANCE
DECEMBER 2009

Mrs. Wilder arranged for a driver to meet me at Toulon-Hyères Airport. The car switchbacked up into the mountains and along cliff edges, the Mediterranean far below. Then another hour along the coast, choked with traffic. All roads lead to Saint-Tropez, but good luck actually getting there.

Finally, the car turned right up a steep hill, into quiet, residential roads. I could feel the driver urging the car upward, higher, the manual transmission protesting. With each turn, the houses and gates fell away, until one last gate stood ahead of us, sliding cleanly open.

For weeks, I'd been imagining something between Jay Gatsby's mansion and the Palace of Versailles, so the villa, when it appeared, looked surprisingly normal: cream-colored stone and a terra-cotta roof, sprawled out over the rounded hilltop, built into the side of the hill. Huge, but it had a lived-in feeling. Cars in the driveway, a pile of sandals by the front door. Two aging spaniels emerged from the shade of a low bush and trotted toward the car as I got out.

The driver carried my bags to the door and rang the bell. And then Mrs. Wilder was welcoming us in her singsongy accent.

"Pippa's just having a bite in the kitchen," she said, pointing me across the entry room. "You go join her, and I'll show this nice gentleman where to set down your bags."

When they left, I remembered the pile of sandals outside and bent to slip off my flats. The stone tile was the color of custard, cool beneath my feet. It made me think of my flat in Kentish Town, where you'd never go barefoot because you might step on a mouse turd. Or, honestly, a whole mouse. And despite that, for a moment, I wished I were back there. Safe in my tiny bedroom, Andre in the other room. Nothing at risk.



PIPPA WAS PERCHED ON A stool at a marble-topped island. Everything in the kitchen was too bright. The cabinets were like movie-star teeth, freshly whitened and a little oversized. There were no handles on anything, no knobs, no hooks. No towels, not even a sponge.

"You're here," Pippa said, looking up from a plate of waffles. "I forgot you were coming today."

"I'm here," I said with a laugh. I'd imagined a somewhat warmer welcome from the girl who had single-handedly maneuvered to bring me to France. But that was Pippa.

I pulled up a stool. "This is quite the place. I sort of get not living in North London, if this is the alternative."

"Much more space. Mum's got her studio. I've got almost the whole lower floor to myself, now that Faye's in the guesthouse."

"Is that your sister?"

"Yeah. She was at uni for fashion, but then she left. I guess maybe they didn't fawn over her enough." Pippa made a face.

"You don't get along?"

She shrugged. "Faye can be a good time, sure, and we go into town and do stuff, go shopping or get food, but it's all about her moods." Pippa tipped her head to the side, thinking. "She's very good at making people like her. At arranging things how she likes. But it doesn't work on me."

"Is she much older?" I could only imagine how formidable a grown-up Pippa would be. A Pippa who had come into her full powers of privilege, charm, and manipulation. The idea was equal parts terrifying and intriguing.

“Twenty-one. Are you hungry?” she said. “There are fresh croissants in the kitchen.”

“Aren’t we *in* the kitchen?”

“The prep kitchen’s in there,” Pippa said, through a bite of her waffle. “That’s where the food is.”

I crossed the room and tentatively pushed open the swinging doors she’d indicated. In front of me was a long, narrow L-shaped room that I immediately recognized as a *real* kitchen. Cabinets had handles; drawers had knobs. There were frying pans, cutting boards, and oven mitts. Around the hook of the L, an older woman had her back to me, a cooking magazine spread in front of her. She didn’t react to my entrance, so I took her cue and backed out again. With the plate of croissants, of course.

I returned to my stool and tore off a hunk from the largest croissant. “Is that your cook? Does she cook every meal?”

“Chef makes breakfast and dinner, and there’s a sort of cold lunch spread most days. She leaves it in the fridge for us and goes home in between.”

I nodded, but I was thinking of the kitchen staff at Smith again. I wasn’t sure if Pippa would leave her empty plate there on the island, or take it into the prep kitchen and drop it in the dishwasher herself. Should I bring the remaining croissants back and say thank you, or leave them here and say nothing? Should I move through this house like Pippa, like Chef, or someone in between?

I took another bite of croissant and held it in my mouth a moment before chewing, letting the flaky pastry melt, letting the butter coat my tongue. If Mrs. Wilder came in now and said there was a mix-up, and I would be paid not in cash but in fresh croissants every day, I’d happily agree.

“What does your mum do?” I asked Pippa. “In her studio?”

“She paints, mostly. Some sculpture stuff. When I was a kid, I’d collect shells from the beach and she’d make sculptures with them, sometimes as tall as me. One time she made one that sort of *was* me, but I was all shells.”

“I’d love to see that.”

“Honestly, it’s just creepy.” Pippa performed a comedic shiver. “No one should have shell eyes.”

“Will your father be home at all for the holiday?” I asked. I still hadn’t met him. I wanted to see what they were like together, what a regular father-daughter relationship looked like. Not something pressurized and potentially explosive.

Pippa took up an enormous last bite of waffle, nodding as she worked to conquer it. “He’ll be here for Christmas and New Year’s. The fireworks are great from up here. We always have a big party.”

“That sounds amazing,” I said. A big party—how very Gatsby of them. Nothing in my suitcase was nice enough for an event like that. But then, I wasn’t here as a party guest. I might not be invited. Probably I’d help Chef plate the hors d’oeuvres. I took a second croissant.



MRS. WILDER SHOWED ME AROUND the property, calling out things as we passed—*pool’s closed for winter, of course, but there’s the hot tub, and our little boules court*. All arranged behind the house, on a stone terrace that ran the length of it. The hill, covered with olive trees, fell away from there, like the patio was the edge of everything, nothing but the sea below. And, of course, the thin strip of Saint-Tropez busy along the shore, its waterfront bristling with boats.

Outside was the only way to get from the main part of the house to my accommodations, an addition built onto the end of the villa. We passed Mrs. Wilder’s studio, and then a blue-and-white-tiled party space with all glass walls that could be folded away accordion-style.

My “guest suite” was on the far side of this space: a small living room, two bedrooms, one lavender-scented bathroom. It felt Grecian, the white stone walls simultaneously earthy and modern. My bags were already next to the better bed, and an envelope with my full fee for the month—a staggering amount—was on the dresser. We’d agreed on three hours of tutoring a day, and I’d decided to charge £80 an hour, two-thirds of what Kramer would’ve charged. Just seeing the fat envelope seemed to open up my ribs a little. More

space for my lungs, less of the bank-balance tightness that lived there with every breath.

On her way out, Mrs. Wilder gave me a bus schedule and a second envelope of euros—pocket money for my stay. I protested, but she insisted it was part of hosting, her dearest hope that I'd enjoy it here and explore and feel at home.

And then I was alone in my new suite. I should've unpacked, made use of the day. I had two essays to write to wrap up the semester, both due next Friday, and I still didn't have a topic for my dissertation. But all I wanted was to be back outside; after November in London, I felt like the sun had hardly touched me in weeks. I gathered my books and notes and went out to the terrace. The loungers were arranged to look over the hill and the port below. Hard to keep my eyes on my work, with that view: the sailboats like little origami birds, the sea throwing back its own light, reflective and fluid like a sequin dress. And the bright continental sun above, welcoming me, pressing on me like a hot hand.

It felt like the very air here was different, and that I was different in it. A world away from my old life and my old family, but it was more than that. A shift from fiction to reality: all the evidence around me that the things I'd read about in a lifetime of library books were real—Gatsby parties, villas, chefs, green olive trees, and blue sea. Evidence that you *could* get lucky. Like the pages I'd lived already had no bearing on the pages that might lie before me, if I could just find a way to fit myself into them.



WHEN I WOKE UP, THE sun was directly above me. My clothes were heavy with the heat of it.

I heard Pippa, and there was mischief in her voice. “Anna’s asleep.”

The sunlight was red through my still-closed lids. “Must be the jet lag,” I said, teasing. We were only an hour off London time.

“Not like she’s missing anything.” This voice was sardonic: irony and boredom jockeying for peak position. I opened my eyes to see who it

belonged to.

Two loungers down, a girl was sitting cross-legged with a plate across her lap. If this was Gatsby's mansion, here was Daisy Buchanan, ready to steal all the hearts.

Even folded up on the lounge, in leggings and an oversized shirt, she looked elegant, slim and birdlike in that way I'd always longed to be. Her dark hair was pulled back, and her skin was radiantly tan, no evidence of makeup. Full lips, dark eyes with heavy hooded eyelids, like the long lashes dragged them down. She surveyed me through them. "You must be the tutor," she said.

I pushed myself upright on the lounge, suddenly embarrassed to be caught sleeping. "Yep, I'm the tutor."

Pippa was already losing interest in this introduction. "My sister, Faye," she said. I'd seen the guesthouse, where Faye was staying, from the window of my suite: a small outbuilding across the lawn, surrounded with gracefully drooping willow trees. Effortlessly pretty, like its occupant. She had already turned back to the plate in her lap, which held only thin curls of cured meat and a handful of cornichons.

"You don't really *look* like a tutor," she said.

I laughed awkwardly. "Too young?"

Faye surveyed me while she chewed. "I guess I thought you'd be a bit of a boffin. You know, mousy. You're much prettier."

"Thanks," I said. It hadn't quite sounded like a compliment when she'd said it. I felt like I was being evaluated, but why?

"You tutor teenage boys? Looking like that? Bet they *love* you." Faye scrunched a strip of prosciutto with her fingers and dropped it into her mouth.

"No one loves the person who makes them do geometry. Is that lunch?" I ventured, hoping to change the subject. "I haven't missed it, have I?"

Pippa shrugged. "Mum told me to come and make sure you got some. It's always fresh baguettes, meat and cheese, stuff for sandwiches. There's more than that," she said, nodding critically at her sister's plate. "She just doesn't eat bread."

Faye laughed. “You eat all the bread, Pip, but then don’t come whinging to me when your skin’s all spotty. It’s pure junk.”

“Bread doesn’t give you spots.” Pippa scowled. “It’s hormones.”

“Anna,” Faye said, turning her catlike eyes to me, “you’re earning your keep as the smartest person here. So tell me, which of us would you trust on matters of skincare?” With the cornichon in her fingers, she made a circle in the air around her perfect oval face.

There were only wrong answers here, pitted between them. “Skincare’s not on the SAT,” I joked, gathering my notebooks.

“I wish it were,” Faye said. “Maybe then I’d be the star pupil in the family, for once.”

Pippa scoffed. “If you cared about that, you’d have stayed at uni.”

Faye shrugged her indifference. I had a flash of my first impression of Pippa in the suite at the Savoy—cool, unflappable. “It didn’t hold my interest,” she said, with a playful smile. “We’re not all made for academia, like Anna here.”

“Oh, that remains to be seen,” I laughed, thinking of the unwritten essays and undecided thesis. “I’m just figuring it out as I go, half the time.”

I wanted to stay and ask Faye more about herself, but I also wanted to get away before I said something inane. I pointed at the long house and its many different doors. The only entrance I’d used was on the other, uphill side of the house. “Which way to the kitchen?” I asked.

“It’s that one,” Pippa said. “I’ll come in, too. Mum’s making me a sandwich.” She looked back at her sister. “*Double bread.*”

I stood and tucked my books under my arm, and said to Faye, “I guess maybe I’ll see you at dinner.”

She shook her head, already looking back at her plate. “No, I’ll be down in town tonight.”

“Oh, okay.” I gave her a stupid little wave and turned toward the house before I could blush and die from it. As I crossed the patio, the wide flat stones felt warm against the soles of my feet. I had been right to fear this grown-up version of Pippa. Magnetic, just as canny, just as in control.

On my second night in Saint-Tropez, Mrs. Wilder declared that Faye and Pippa *really* wanted to take me for dinner at their favorite place, Bar Sube, and show me around the port. I was wary of the plan—clearly her idea and not Faye’s—but still I found myself in a smooth black SUV, Faye at the wheel, Pippa in the back chirping comments up to us.

“Sorry you’re saddled with me tonight,” I said to Faye, trying to strike the right note of irony. “I’m sure you’ve better things to do than take me around.”

She shrugged. “Things are quiet this time of year, most of my friends aren’t back for the holidays yet.”

“Well, I appreciate the tour. I’m hoping I can find my way around a little, soon, the buses and all that, so you all don’t have to babysit me.”

Faye grinned, her neat white teeth showing. “We don’t even babysit this one,” she said, tipping her head to the backseat.

The pretty port town was closing in on us, denser and tighter along the narrowing streets. I tried to take it all in so I could describe it perfectly in my journal later. Strings of lantern lights hung over the water, crisscrossed over the cobblestones, stretched between café awnings and trees and lampposts. Boats and glowing yachts bobbed right along the sidewalk.

Faye swung the car abruptly into a parking spot and tugged up the brake. “Let’s go,” she said, door already open. “I’m starving.”

I followed her: across the cobbles, through a hotel, up a grand interior staircase, and into a dimly lit bar. Bar Sube. Tables lined the walls, every

piece of furniture in varying shades of silky leather: tan, mahogany, chocolate. The hostess welcomed Faye and Pippa by name, and then led us without hesitation to the nicest table, overlooking the port.

“Don’t sit there,” Faye said, nudging Pippa from the chair she’d reached for. “Give Anna the seat with the view.”

“Oh, I don’t care,” I said, but then Pippa made a show of pulling out the chair for me like a gentleman, and I sank into it, giggling.

When the waiter came by, I expected menus, but Faye ordered for all of us in rapid French: a few dishes and a bottle of rosé—just two glasses, please. Pippa huffed and ordered a spritzer of some kind.

“It’s tapas here,” Faye said when he’d left us. “So I got us a bit of all the good ones. We can get more plates later, if you want.”

A long shadow fell over us. I assumed it was the waiter bringing wine, but Faye leapt from her seat.

“You’re here,” she said, throwing her arms around a tall, handsome man in a dove-gray button-down shirt. “When did you get in? Theo said you weren’t coming for two more weeks?”

He was as beautiful as she was: that same easy grace, the born-with-it good looks. I could see others in the restaurant turning back to their meals after watching him walk by, because they couldn’t not look.

“I was supposed to be with my aunt and uncle in Lisbon, but they decided to go to my cousin’s in the country,” he answered. “So here I am.”

When Faye released him, he took a step back, and his eyes fell to Pippa and me. Some flutter of recognition crossed his face. Presumably for Pippa, since there was no way I’d have met a man like this, from Faye’s set.

“We’ve only just sat down,” Faye said. “Pull that chair over.”

He tipped his head to us, apologetic. “Oh no, I don’t want to interrupt. I was just going to sit at the bar.”

But Faye insisted, and Pippa and I made space for him between us. Who wouldn’t make space for him? He looked to be my age, with thick, silky, coffee-colored hair, long enough to fall across his forehead as he bent over the chair. He had delicate features, almost feminine in their perfection: dark

eyes, long lashes, smooth cheeks and sharp cheekbones. A jawline any man would kill for.

“Pippa, I’ll bet you don’t even remember me,” he said, turning in his seat.

“Let’s see—Carl? Calvin?” she said, teasing, pretending to rack her brains. “Sorry, I’m shit with names.”

He laughed, a genuine laugh but also a generous one, encouraging. “I guess I didn’t make that much of an impression.”

“Anna, this is Callum,” Faye said finally, leaning back in her chair. “He’s a friend from London. A lot of old school friends end up here, for the holidays.”

Callum reached a hand across the small table and shook mine briefly. “Nice to meet you, Anna,” he said. My hand looked white in his, which was much tanner. I would’ve guessed that he was Spanish, or maybe Italian. His accent was British.

“Callum—Isn’t that an Irish name?” I said, eager to hold his attention. “My father’s side of the family is Irish.”

“Scottish, actually, in my case,” he said. “On my mother’s side. But most of my family is Portuguese.” Of course—he’d said as much when he arrived, family in Lisbon. I was already making an ass of myself, just trying to talk to him.

“You’re visiting from London?” he asked politely. “What part?”

“But she’s American, can’t you tell?” Faye cut in. “From the States originally. She’s here for the month, to tutor Pippa.” And now he knew the score: that I was the tutor, living on wits alone.

Pippa scowled at Faye. “It’s not like I’m remedial. The tutoring’s for the SAT tests, so I can go to uni in New York.”

Callum nodded and smiled. “The American fascination with test-taking, I’m familiar.”

“I’m just here to make sure she has everything she needs to do well. The material itself isn’t a problem for her.” I nodded at Pippa, hoping I’d helped.

Callum tipped his head to the side, his dark eyes regarding me curiously. “Isn’t it more important to know the material than to know how to regurgitate it on a test?” A little smile drew my eyes to his lips.

I returned the smile. “Isn’t being able to present and communicate your knowledge just as important as the knowledge itself?”

“Ignore him,” Faye said, waving her hand. “We all do. Thinks he’s our resident intellectual, just because he’s doing a law degree.” Callum made a face at her, and she made it back. Like they were siblings, cousins, old classmates. It didn’t seem romantic, but still I felt a thin throb of envy.

“But you won’t impress Anna with your law degree,” Faye said to Callum. “She’s already in a master’s program.”

“What is it you’re studying?” he asked.

“Anna loves books,” Pippa said to him, like she was telling him I kept pet rocks and he should be nice about it. “Always banging on about them.”

“So it’s a literature program?” Callum said, pronouncing the word like my classmates did, sharp *T*’s and only three syllables: *lit-tra-ture*. I was used to the accent, of course, but coming out of his mouth, it was distractingly charming. I wanted him to talk to me all night.

“Yes, I’m at Queen Mary. What about you?”

But then the bottle of rosé arrived, sweating in a tall silver cylinder, and Callum turned away to ask the waiter if he might bring us one more glass.

Faye put one long-stemmed glass in my hand and filled it. She said something about the vineyard, the year, to Callum, and I mentally excused myself from a conversation I could add nothing to. I settled back into my armchair and looked out over the terrace. Behind the mountains that ringed the bay, the sun was setting. The horizon flushed gold and orange, the dark descending from above like a heavy theater curtain. “Happy” was not quite the right word—that required a level of ease I did not feel. It all seemed unreal, immaculate. The wine in my mouth was cold and light.

“It’s so pale,” I said when Faye topped off my glass. “Almost clear.”

She smirked. “The best rosé is. More dry and delicate.”

“Oh, please don’t get her started.” Pippa flopped dramatically back into her seat. “I’ve had enough lessons for today.”

Callum grinned at this. The wine glowed in my empty stomach, and I wanted to touch his bottom lip, just lightly, with the tip of my finger.

“This won’t be on the test,” I said to Pippa in my strict-teacher voice. Turning to Faye with my glass, I said, “I assume it’s French?”

Faye smiled, pleased with my curiosity. She seemed less on guard, less catlike and smug than yesterday by the pool. “It’s local wine,” she said, leaning forward. “Provence is the home of rosé. Drive an hour inland—the vineyards there make better wine than you’ve ever tasted.”

“I haven’t tasted much,” I said. “And what I have hasn’t been great.”

“Well, you’re American. That can’t be helped,” Faye said, waving a hand at me. “Americans have no real sense of wine.”

“No real taste at all, really,” I said, nodding. “We only recently started walking upright.”

Callum laughed out loud, and Faye put a hand to her mouth, holding in a smile until she could swallow her sip.

Pippa, still slumped back in her chair, was watching her sister carefully: taking in her looseness, the growing good mood. It looked like she was doing some mental calculations.

“Can I have a little wine?” Pippa held out the glass her drink had come in. “Please?”

Faye weighed this, her hands settled on the wide arms of the chair. “Fine, but just a little,” she said at last. “You know Mum doesn’t like it.”

“All the French kids drink, even younger than me,” Pippa said.

Faye tipped an inch of wine into her glass. “We’re not French, are we? You should have to sneak and beg like we all had to.” She nodded toward Callum, who smiled and shook his head.

It was hard to imagine that either of them had ever had to sneak or beg for anything. They were just that sort of people. Everything would open for them—doors, bottles, bodies, velvet ropes, and top schools.

“What do you think of Saint-Tropez, Anna?” Callum asked, while Pippa teased Faye for a heavier pour.

“Oh, this is about all I’ve seen of it,” I said, gesturing around the restaurant. “I only got in yesterday.”

“Did you fly into Nice? Or Toulon-Hyères?”

“Toulon,” I said. Absolutely no chance I was going to pronounce the second part right. “The drive through the mountains was spectacular. The traffic at the end, less so.”

Callum nodded. “Oh, that was nothing. You should see it in the summer. Total gridlock. And all the old money blue bloods flying over you in their helicopters.”

“Next time I’m definitely coming by superyacht,” I said. Was he not an old money blue blood himself, then? He certainly looked the part. There were always shades of British class snobbery that I missed, as an American, but still—it was impossible to imagine any set that wouldn’t want Callum in it.

The waiter arrived, fanning out pretty plates over the tabletop. We had seven dishes to share. When Andre and I ate together, he always teased me for my American cutlery habits, and I shrugged and changed nothing. But here, I mimicked the others: I switched the fork to my left hand, tines pointed politely down, not up (Andre called tines up “the American shovel”). I kept the knife in my right, cutting and then loading the fork, nudging food onto the tines. I hoped it looked natural, but it felt ridiculous.

The food was unbelievable, of course. Fingerling potatoes smashed flat and crisped in goose fat, chorizo in a cast-iron skillet (delivered to the table still in flames), whipped ricotta drizzled with honey and pistachios, discs of pink salmon on crostini sprinkled with dill, tiny hand-folded pies with lamb and rosemary inside. It tasted so good, they were lucky I used cutlery at all.

All of us seemed to be loosening slightly—from the food or the wine, I didn’t know. Callum managed some sarcastic banter with Pippa—the queen of that kingdom—and then asked more sincerely about her university plans, her favorite subjects at school. He had questions for me as well, about my time in London, my course at Queen Mary. He seemed genuinely curious—not just polite—and warm. Warmer than Faye, though that wasn’t hard.

After the plates were cleared, a man in all black came to our table and talked with Faye in a mix of French and English, asking about the food, asking after her mother. He said a familiar hello to Pippa in English, with a hope that her schooling was going well, and nodded politely to Callum and me. They all talked on—about the food, the weather, the wine—and I leaned

back in my chair. I was happy to stay quiet. It seemed that if I opened my mouth, I might say too much, say something silly, like how I felt—unlocked by the pale wine and the open possibility of this beautiful night continuing on, and all the beautiful nights after, also possible and open.

But then the man turned to me and introduced himself: Guillaume. He hoped my stay in Saint-Tropez would be enjoyable, and that I would come to eat many more times. I only realized that he must be the owner after he'd left the table.

He returned a few minutes later with a plate of oysters, a dozen, three for each of us. The freshest, he said, perfect, only just in and *magnifique*, exquisite. His treat, we must try. He waited.

I tried desperately to catch Pippa's eye for help. She would know that I'd never had an oyster, just as I'd never had dates or figs before her suite at the Savoy. It had been one thing in front of her; I didn't think Faye would be so kind about my ignorance. No doubt it would amuse her greatly. And I certainly didn't want Callum to see it, or the restaurant owner, or anyone else in this elegant place.

But Pippa was focused on Faye, who was talking with Guillaume about their plans for the New Year's party. Apparently he knew the caterer, or was the caterer, or had once been the caterer—I couldn't follow it. And then the tray was being held out to me, and I had to take my oyster. I held it clumsily in my fingers, cheeks already reddening. I would look like a fool in front of all of them.

Under the table, I felt something cold against my other hand and turned to see Callum with a secretive smile. The metallic touch came again, and I closed my fingers around the tiny fork he held out for me. I hadn't seen them on the tray.

While Faye and Pippa talked with the owner, Callum angled himself so I could watch his subtle, secret demonstration: squeezing a wedge of lemon over the shell, then gently prodding with the tiny fork to loosen the oyster, tipping the shell back, slipping the oyster whole into his open mouth. A moment to chew and savor, and then swallow. It was kind of him to do this for me, of course, but also surprisingly intimate—these movements

performed just for me, for my eyes—and I wondered if he could feel my eyes on him, the way I could still feel his warm fingers putting the cold fork in my hand. He set the empty shell back in its cradle of ice on the tray, upside down, and nodded at me, the smallest encouragement.

I took a deep breath and had only just swallowed my first oyster—shocking, creamy, cold—when the owner turned to me, eager for my reaction. I saw Callum hide a smile, the corners of his lips rising up the tiniest fraction. “Perfect,” I said to Guillaume, “they’re perfect, just as you said.”

From: Olivia Iyer <livlafflove@gmail.com>
To: Anna Byrne <abyrne10@qmul.ac.uk>
Date: December 8, 2009 at 2:03 PM GMT +1
Subject: Re: Re: Bonjour

I know you're busy gallivanting around the South of France with your new posh family, but where's my reply? I need DETAILS. You promised I could live vicariously through you. The weather, at least. I'll shock you: here, it's rained, no joke, every day for a week and a half. You could wring me out. Your phone is a brick over there, I get that, but you've got to send me at least a few photos. And bring me home something nice, too, since I'm pinch-hitting with all your students. What are you eating? What do they do for fun? You sound like you actually like them. Are you making friends? Meals, drinks, fromage, gâteau, what's happening? Any cute garçons?

DETAILS!

xx
Liv



I WAS LOST IN TOWN, but not at all concerned about it. The port area was so small, I knew I'd eventually be flushed out onto some main road I recognized or come upon a stop for the bus that had dropped me here, with a book under my arm and a pocket full of euros.

It was Saturday, no lessons with Pippa, and a brilliant, unseasonably warm afternoon. I was giddy with the free day and the sunlight, and celebrating the completion of my course essays, which had been hard to finish with so much to distract me here.

I'd first gone to the only real tourist attraction in town: the Citadelle de Saint-Tropez, a seventeenth-century stronghold of weather-beaten khaki stone, spiked with thin-necked cannons. I thought of Liv's email and took a few photos with the nearly useless camera on my nearly useless phone: a breathtaking panorama of the bay, the boats, the mountains beyond, and the forested green hills behind us.

After, I headed into town on foot, intent on Christmas shopping. There were plenty of shops, absurd window displays—silk scarves at Hermès, gold watches at Rolex, sheath dresses at Dior and Celine—but not the kind of shops I was looking for. I kept wandering, and eventually found myself in an alley that narrowed into a ripe-smelling fish market, the day's catch still flapping on ice as I tried to squeeze through. When I emerged, at last, onto a wide street with bright, breathable air, I leaned back against a bank building and laughed at myself.

"Well, I was going to ask if you're lost, but you seem to be enjoying yourself," someone called to me. I turned toward the voice. Callum, coming up the sidewalk, carrying a small sack of groceries.

"Can't I be both?" I asked, pushing off the wall. "Lost and enjoying myself?" The swell of excitement, the nerves I had to swallow down—it was a bit much, considering we'd only met once. But there was no harm in it. I thought of Liv's email: *Any cute garçons? Oui.*

"You're staying around here?" I asked. "This is your neighborhood?"

"Two streets that way." He jerked his head to the left and then pushed back the hair that slipped down over his forehead. *This* was what I should be

taking photos of for Liv. Easily as breathtaking as a view of the bay. “Actually, I buy my fish down that little alley you’ve just come from.”

“A little too fresh for my taste,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “I like my food not moving.”

“That’s very American of you.” He nodded sternly. “Would you like to not be lost?”

I shrugged. “I wanted to do a little Christmas shopping. But I can’t seem to find the middle ground between Rolex and gutted fish.”

He laughed, a charming low bark. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Just some little gifts, to send home. Souvenirs, but not cheap crap?”

“You don’t mind a trek?” he said, already turning back the way he’d come. “It’s about ten minutes.”

He was a good guide, helping me get my bearings, pointing things out to me as we walked—good breakfast spots, his favorite bakery, the historical marker outside the apartment where Henry James spent a few summers.

“You’re a fan, I assume?” he said.

“Of course. We American expats have to stick together in Europe.”

“And are you writing the Great American Novel, too?”

I shook my head. “I’m hoping for the Passably Decent British Dissertation, actually.”

He chuckled. “Seems very attainable. And next?”

“A visa to stay and work. A job in book publishing, if I can swing it. That’s what I did before I got here.”

We were passing an ice cream shop, the windows stacked high with cellophane bags of candy. I stopped outside it. “Do you mind if I just run in? Pippa’s mad about sweets,” I said, repeating the phrase she’d used. Candy, biscuits, lollipops, and chocolate-covered almonds fueled her daily study sessions. We worked one hour every morning before lunch and two hours after. I was anxious about earning my keep, but Mrs. Wilder said three hours a day seemed like plenty to her, it being Pippa’s holiday time, too.

“How’s it going with Pippa?” Callum asked when I emerged a minute later. “Bad enough you have to bribe her with candy?”

I laughed. “She’s a good student, very smart. But when she’s bored with the material—which is very boring, to be fair—she’ll try to get me off topic. Asks me all about America, boys, college, that kind of thing. Junk food helps.” I didn’t mention that once she really burned out, that third hour, she could be fractious and sullen. Still, we’d settled into a decent routine. In the afternoons Pippa got all her questions answered, and then it was time to watch *Gossip Girl* and pass a jar of Nutella between us, dipping in biscuits or pretzels or, in Pippa’s case, fingers. She insisted I looked like the show’s lead bombshell, Serena van der Woodsen, but I didn’t see it at all. The character was several shades blonder than me, and several inches taller and thinner, too.

Faye joined us sometimes, and Pippa coached her sister and me through the show’s soapy plot lines. The ridiculous drama reminded me of watching *Chelsea Made* with Andre. Twice Faye played boules with us on the court behind the house, and yesterday Pippa had persuaded Chef to make us affogatos—espresso poured over vanilla ice cream—and we’d eaten them in the hot tub in our swimsuits. Even Faye had one, despite the sugar and carbs.

I opened one of the oversized bags of sour gummies I’d bought, and Callum and I dipped our hands in as we walked. “Pippa does seem very bright,” he said. “The snark is strong with that one.”

“Maybe a little too strong, sometimes.”

He smiled, chewing thoughtfully. I liked watching his mouth move, the lips turning up or down as he considered whatever I’d said. And walking side by side—his dark, romance-novel eyes on the road, not on me—I didn’t get so nervous. “Still,” he said, “Pippa must be a hard worker, studying on her holidays. Faye’s a few years younger than me, so it’s not like we were classmates, but I don’t remember her being so focused.”

“You went to the same school?”

“Only at first; we went to different places after year six. You know, boys’ schools, girls’ schools. But a group of us from that area—near the Heath—we’ve all stayed in touch.”

“Well, now I have to guess if you’re Ham or High,” I said. Hampstead or Highgate.

He laughed. "No clues."

"I'm leaning toward Highgate."

"Why's that?"

"Hampstead always feels like an older crowd. Feels a little stuffier to me. Am I right?"

"Spot-on, actually. But my grandparents are in Hampstead, and they love it." He stopped and pointed across to a large shop window, framed with lace curtains. "This is the shop I was thinking of. Good for small stuff."

The woman behind the counter stood to offer us help as we entered, but Callum declined in shy, neat French.

"Well, let's see," he said, turning to take in the wares. "You'll probably want something small, since you're shipping back to America. Does your mother cook? Maybe some herbes de Provence?"

I hesitated. "It's not going to America. Just to London."

He turned to look at me, an attractive, confused frown pulling at his lips. "You said you were shopping for back home."

I shrugged, letting my fingers comb through the folds of a silk scarf hanging on a hook next to me. "London is home."

"But your parents, what about—" He seemed to stop himself, recognizing the awkwardness of the question, or the awkwardness of requiring me to answer it. "I'm sorry, that was rude—not any of my business."

I lifted the scarf up a few inches with my forearm and watched it slide off, slippery and heavy like running water. Should I make an excuse or just tell him? And then, before I could decide, I was saying it: "My mom passed away. My father and I, we had a sort of falling-out. But we were never close."

Callum nodded slowly, sympathetically. "That's really rough, I'm sorry."

I twisted my fingers into the tasseled fringe of another scarf, black and green velvet. "It's okay."

He looked around the shop, giving me a moment. "I never really liked Christmas shopping," he said finally. "It's so hard to find something they'll actually use." Probably the people in his life already had everything. He

dressed simply, but he looked rich like Faye did—like simplicity was the mark of it.

“No, it’s not really my thing,” I agreed. I’d been ten the first time Dad enlisted me to help him find a present for Mom. A Goldilocks gift: something nice, but not so nice that she would panic about the cost. Her mouth tensing into an anxious line while her fingers worked through the wrapping paper. Wondering if what she unwrapped would mean cutting corners elsewhere. Groceries, school clothes, test strips, insulin.

“Who is it you’re shopping for, then?” Callum asked.

It sounded a little like the lines men at the corner store sometimes used, to ask-but-not-ask if I had a boyfriend. *Any plans this weekend? Is that just for you? Who’s going to help you unpack all these groceries?* But it seemed unlikely Callum meant it like that, for me.

“My two best friends in London,” I said, and smiled up at him so he’d know I was welcoming the change of topic. “My flatmate Andre, and Liv—she teaches with me.”

“Brilliant,” he said. “What do you think? There’s a lot of soap, isn’t there?” A whole corner was devoted to soaps and lotions, all a milky lilac color and strongly scented with lavender. “Do your friends like soap?”

“I have no idea,” I said, realizing it was true. Maybe *best friends* had been a bit of an overstatement. I’d only known them six months. Still, there was no one clamoring to go in front of them in line. I’d sent a few postcards to old friends—from the neighborhood, from Smith—but we hardly kept in touch these days beyond commenting on each other’s Facebook posts. I hadn’t been the most present human after Mom died, hadn’t returned messages or answered calls. And then it had felt easier not to, once I knew I was leaving.

Callum offered a woven pouch with a tiny embroidered stalk of green-gray lavender on it. His fingers around it were long and tan and distracting. “What about these? Maybe a little bit nicer?”

He held the perfumy pouch up to my nose for me to smell. “Andre might like that,” I said. “We have a really filthy roommate. Flat smells atrocious.” I wrinkled my nose, and Callum laughed. It was what I’d been trying for: that

laugh. Trying to pump the sunlight of his smile into my body before he took his little sack of groceries and left.

For Liv, I chose a set of two tea towels, blue bays and white sailboats. I'd never been over to her house and not seen a spill of some kind. Her roommates were great, but not great cleaners.

"Do you think I should get something for the Wilders?" I asked. "I'll be with them for Christmas." I looked around; nothing here would be nice enough for them. It was only nice enough for people like me. It'd been good of Callum to know to bring me here, to know this was what I could afford, without making me say it. Like when he'd pressed the oyster fork into my hand, unasked, under the table.

"I wouldn't bother, honestly," he said, shaking his head. "But if you want, there's a nice fromagerie near the bus stop here, and a wine shop. Get them a bit of both and you're golden. Very French."

I chose the largest, prettiest lavender pouch and carried it with my tea towels up to the shopkeeper. When she saw that was all I had in my hands, her brow furrowed. "Oh, but you were admiring the scarves," she said in accented English. "You must at least try."

Before I could say anything, she'd hopped off her stool and returned with an armful. She draped the first scarf, heavy silk, over my shoulders. Behind her, Callum was trying and failing to hide how funny he found my predicament. But then the shopkeeper turned to him and said, "Beautiful, yes?"

"Yes," he said, grinning. "Very beautiful."

When I smiled and shook my head (the price was more than I'd spend on a whole outfit), the shopkeeper took it off and put another around my neck, and then another, turning me this way and that by my elbow, commanding Callum to admire the scarf, or me, or me in the scarf. The last on the counter was a gauzy blush-colored thing, and I held it up for him. "Look, it's just the color of the wine we had at Bar Sube."

"It is," he laughed. "The perfect souvenir. You need a Christmas gift, too, you know."

I ran my fingers over the fabric, light like a breath of air. It really did remind me of the ros  : cool, delicate, the faintest hint of pink. The headiness of that first night out. Too expensive, almost certainly, but the euros were there, in my pocket. And Callum was right. No one else was getting me a Christmas gift.

I didn't even look for the price tag, just handed it over to the shopkeeper to ring up. She had earned it. And I left happy, a hundred euros lighter.

On Wednesday, Pippa protested so much about her period cramps that Mrs. Wilder made her lie down with a hot-water bottle and declared it a day off from study. Faye, bored and aimless, declared her intention to drive to her favorite rosé vineyard in the countryside. I could come with her, if I wanted. Mrs. Wilder checked the wine cellar, said a few cases would be fine, and reminded us to be back in time to dress for dinner—family and a few friends, a nice restaurant down at the port to celebrate Mr. Wilder’s arrival for the holidays.

It was a beautiful drive, about an hour and a half. The lavender fields we passed were silvery green, waiting for spring. As we drove, Faye complained—some drama with the flighty aunt who lived in their Highgate house—but I could tell she was in a good mood. The more time I spent with her at the villa, the more unpredictable she felt to me, by turns inviting and aloof. But always, somehow, captivating.

Last night, I dreamed that I’d begun to look like her: my arms and legs and torso lengthening, fingers and facial features sharpening into delicate replicas. My hair deepening to a dark nut brown. And in the dream my mother saw me and said, “Anna, sweetheart, I almost didn’t recognize you.” When I woke up, I saw a young man crossing the moonlit yard from my window. He paused to pet the silent dog that trotted out to greet him, then knocked on Faye’s guesthouse door. Yellow light sliced across the willow trees when she opened it for him.

I wanted to ask her about it, on the drive, but I wasn't sure how she'd react. When we pulled in and parked at the vineyard, there was one other car there: a lime-green time capsule from a seventies movie set. We parked next to it just as Callum stepped out.

"Where'd you get *that* thing?" Faye called to him, ogling the classic car.

"It's a loaner. An old family friend, he doesn't drive much anymore," Callum said. "He's always asking me to take it out when I'm here, to clear out the cobwebs."

"I didn't know you were coming," I said, just so I wouldn't keep standing there, silent and clueless.

"Not meant to be a surprise," he said with a shrug. "Faye said I could tag along."

"I didn't think you'd want to," she huffed, circling the car. "A Citroën, what year?"

Someone from the vineyard emerged to greet us. This turned out to be the thirty-something daughter of the farm, and when she clocked the caliber of cars in the lot, I could practically see the cartoon dollar signs in her eyes. She was happy, of course, to give us a tour, though the vines themselves were pruned back to almost nothing, bare and twisted on the wooden frames. "Grapes only grow on first-year shoots," she explained in her elegant accent. "Anything older, it's only leaves." The rest of the farm was idyllic: fields and pavilions, an enormous ancient farmhouse of yellow stone, a barn turned tasting room, a paddock with three silky brown horses. I went to the fence, but they pretended not to see me, munching their hay, tails drifting in the December breeze.

After, Callum got meat and cheese and bread from the Citroën, and we sat at a long table in the cavernous tasting room, eating our picnic while the vineyard daughter brought us flights of wine. Just a few sips in each glass, every shade of pink, but more than enough to put the same pink in my cheeks.

"That's why you have to bring food to these things," Callum said. "Otherwise you can't drive home."

“Oh, she’d be more than happy to put us up for the night,” I said, nodding at our hostess. But I was glad he’d thought of it. The bread did its job; I was light, glowing, happy, but not tipsy.

We stayed so long that the afternoon sun slanted in through the barn windows, making pale honey-colored stripes on our table as it lowered toward sunset. Faye bought four cases, blond wooden crates the vineyard daughter helped us carry out to the car. Callum put the two bottles he bought in the trunk, started the car, then stepped out again to say goodbye. He and Faye parted in the way of British friends, a peck on each cheek, and then, suddenly, I got the same: Callum in front of me, bending slightly, touching those sharp statue-like cheekbones to my cheeks. His lips were light, quick, warm, gone, and I smiled and said the normal things—said goodbye; drive safe; yes, it had been worth the drive. But as we waited for him to pull out ahead of us, my mind was filtering back through the milliseconds, searching out the touch of those lips again.

After half an hour driving through fields and hills and small villages, we turned onto a broader highway, still devoid of cars. And then, ahead of us, the unmissable green sports car was on the shoulder of the road, Callum next to it, phone held up to the sky.

“Shit,” I said as Faye pulled in behind him.

“I can’t get a signal, can you?” he said when we got out. There was a frantic edge in his voice. My phone almost never had service in France. Faye checked hers and shook her head. Most of the drive had been like that, the area too remote.

“What happened?” she asked. “Do you have a flat or something?”

Callum flung a hand back at what Faye had missed, though I had not: a thin eddy of steam rising from the hood. “The gauges went mad, and then it was smoking,” he said, pacing now, eyes wide, phone held aloft. “I think I’ve killed it.”

“You can ride with us. When we get back to town, we can call someone to come get it,” Faye said.

“You can’t just leave a car like this on the side of the road, Faye. It’s not even mine. I promised I’d take care of it.”

Her nostrils flared. No one ever challenged Faye. “Well, we can’t do anything just hanging around. We have plans tonight.” She turned to go, waving me on.

Was she being serious? “We can’t just leave him here,” I said. “It’ll be dark soon, something could happen.”

Faye stopped and faced me. “I am not a tow truck. I can’t fix this. And we can’t miss dinner.”

“I can miss dinner,” I said before I’d even thought it. I shouldn’t, of course. It would very much behoove me to be there, meeting the man who was, ultimately, paying for me to be here.

“You can’t just bail,” Faye said. “It’s a special chef’s table, a planned menu, all paid in advance.”

Callum folded his arms on the low roof of the car, then let his forehead rest on them, face out of sight. “Just go, both of you,” he said. His voice was strangled, almost breathless. A prickle of recognition ran up my spine.

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to just leave you here on the side of the road.”

He looked up finally, and what I saw on his face—worry, anxiety tipping toward desperation—echoed through me. I’d stood on plenty of roadsides in my life, unsafe and alone, when my old Cavalier quit on me. From the look of it, Callum was barely holding it together.

Faye was heading again for her car. “We can’t do anything standing here. We’ll call someone in town. They’ll come and get him.”

“That could take hours,” I said. “He could be here all night.” Probably neither of these people had ever waited for a tow in their lives.

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

I threw up my hands in frustration. “A tow truck isn’t room service, Faye. The garages in town might be closed when you get there. The least I can do is stay.”

Faye huffed, opening the car door. “Fine. I’ll call the garage when I get home. And let Mum know you’ll miss dinner.”

Gravel flew up when she drove off. Callum said nothing but started pacing again. Without Faye there to inflame things, I could see I’d been right:

he was nearing full panic.

“Hey,” I said, crossing to intercept him. “Just stop for a minute, okay?” I’d never reached for him before, but I put my hand on his arm and held it till he turned toward me. “What’s going on?”

“What if I did something to it, to the car? What if I ruined it?” He looked at me, but I could tell he wasn’t really seeing me. His mind was reeling through the worst-case scenarios. Stacking them up as certainties. When my mom panicked like this, it was always the same: her blood sugar was plummeting, refusing to stabilize, dangerously low. She chewed her huge, chalky sugar tablets, tested, then tested again. Her eyes on the needle-prick of blood sliding onto the test strip, the meter’s numbers still dropping. She chewed more tablets, washed them down with Coke, stared at the numbers again. And all the while I talked to her, tried to pull her attention back to me. Reminded her, again and again, that we’d done this before. It’d been fine all the other times, and it would be fine this time, too. It just took time for her levels to respond. She’d be okay. We’d all be okay. No seizure, no ambulance, no IVs, no ER bill.

To Callum, I said gently, “I’m sure it didn’t break down because of your driving. It’s old and needs upkeep. You said so earlier, remember?”

He shook me off and turned toward the car again. “You don’t know that.”

With Mom it had been easy to identify the panic: low blood sugar is a medical emergency. I had to figure out why Callum was upset. It couldn’t just be the car.

“Tell me what’s happening,” I said, putting my hand on his arm again. We were standing in front of the hood, the smoke just barely there now. “Explain it to me.”

“Why?”

“Please,” I said quietly.

He breathed out, a slow, heavy exhale. “The family friend who lent it to me, he’s pretty old. He doesn’t have a lot. Money, sure, but his wife died last year.” Callum turned to look at me, his back to the car now. “His kids are grown up, they have their lives, they don’t visit. He’s too old to go to them. This car—it’s kind of all he has. He *visits* it in the garage. Polishes the

chrome by hand, every week, even though it never goes anywhere.” He let his head drop. “And I’ve killed it.”

“I’m sure whatever’s wrong, it’s not that serious,” I said. “Everything’s fixable.”

“Is it really?”

“It is when you have money,” I said. “A car this old has been through dozens of repairs. What’s one more?”

Callum’s lips lifted into the smallest smile. “You think so? This isn’t really my area of expertise.”

I had to laugh. “Well, you’re in luck, it’s definitely mine. Reliable cars weren’t exactly a fixture in my family.”

He smiled again, a real smile. His shoulders had dropped, his whole body opening, relaxing. “Probably you’re right,” he said. “I just don’t know how I’m going to tell him.”

“He’ll understand. I’m sure your visits mean more to him than a few car repairs, anyway.”

“I appreciate you staying with me,” he said, moving to lean on the bumper. “Otherwise I’d just be sitting here, panicking all night.”

I put my coat on and sat next to him. The day’s warmth was fading fast, but the heat from the hood felt good. That was when I smelled it: a sweet, chemical scent, something like toasted marshmallows and window cleaner. The smell coolant makes when it leaks on hot engine parts.

I jumped up. “Would you pop the hood? Just for a minute.”

Callum raised his eyebrows. “Is this the part where you tell me you’re a mechanic?”

I shrugged. “I’ve owned a lot of old-ass cars.”

Callum opened the door and reached in to release the latch. I felt around for the hook under the edge of the hood, and by the time I found it, Callum was next to me, helping me lift and prop it open on the support arm.

I looked down to where the coolant tank had been on my Cavalier, but this one was smaller and up on the driver’s side, just above the wheel well—a clear plastic jug, plainly empty.

“Looks like you’re out of coolant,” I said, pointing at it.

Callum stared at me. “You just *happen* to know what’s wrong?”

I laughed. It was lucky, really. “I know nothing about cars. But this happens a lot with older models. Shit leaks. Lean in, smell it.”

He bent under the hood with me.

“That sweet smell. The car I drove all through college, it had a banged-up radiator, a really slow leak. I had to top off the coolant once a week, keep an eye on it all the time. I used to call it my thirsty car.”

“Will it be okay? How bad is that?”

“The engine overheats without it. Obviously, I don’t know for sure that’s what’s wrong, but I’d think as long as you didn’t drive it for miles and miles after it started smoking, the car should be fine.”

His face slackened, his whole body practically drooping with relief. “I didn’t, no. I pulled over right away.”

“Then you did the right thing. If we had a jug of coolant, we could fill it up. Once it’s cooled down and the tank’s safe to open.”

Callum went to the trunk, searching fruitlessly behind the wine bottles and spare tire. “Can we use wine?” he joked. “Maybe French cars exclusively drink rosé.”

“Honestly, just water would probably be enough to get us back to town.”

He straightened up from the trunk, and we looked at each other for a moment.

“I wonder what French cars think of natural spring water?” he said with a little laugh, bending again to collect the wine bottles. He’d seen it, like I had—just before we’d turned onto this highway, there’d been a small river running right up along the road. You noticed it because the road got windier, following it.

We each had a sip of the very nice wine before pouring it out onto the roadside gravel. “To Anna—student, tutor, undercover mechanic,” Callum said, toasting his bottle to me.

“Let’s wait and see if I’m actually right,” I said. “Maybe I missed my calling. I’m sure being into cars is more lucrative than being into books.”

We locked the car and started up the road. Half a mile to the river maybe, not long, the trees leaning over us, almost watchful. “I did sort of wonder if

your dad was a mechanic,” Callum said.

“He’s not. But he’s handy—he can fix anything, even car stuff. Makes sense he always thought the things I was good at were useless. Book-smart and street-dumb, you know?”

Callum grimaced. “Did he want you to be a doctor or something?”

“Sure, or a lawyer, or an engineer maybe. Something concrete and useful and financially secure.” I shrugged and shook my head. “I was his greatest disappointment in a lifetime of disappointments. Betrayed all the promise of my early report cards by failing to turn academic success into financial success.”

“That feels a little mercenary.”

I shrugged. “Don’t parents always want their kids to be better off than them? More secure?”

It wasn’t like I didn’t understand it. In my father’s eyes, my only job was to take with both hands whatever the world would allow me—education, opportunity, everything—fist over fist, until I had climbed so high that nothing could touch me anymore. None of the things that had crushed him and Mom against the first of the month: co-pays and prescriptions and premiums, car repairs and groceries and gas. So I would never have to hesitate over the astounding cost of a girl’s Little League softball jersey that might be worn a season or two at most.

“Sure,” Callum said. “But you have to let kids go their own way, too.”

I suddenly felt how revealing the conversation had become. “Well, I did eventually, didn’t I? Here I am, hitchhiking in France,” I joked, waving my empty wine bottle in front of us. But what would it feel like to be here, if I’d left with my father’s blessing? If I’d felt from him a fraction of the faith Mom had had when we looked through the brochures and magazine spreads together? Those years had taught Mom and me to be hopeful and taught him to be hard.

Time to change the topic. “What about you? Did you always want to be a lawyer?” I asked.

Callum laughed and shook his head. “That’s an American term. I’ll be a barrister when I’m done.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but really I was thinking of how good a smirk looked on that curved bottom lip of his. “Okay, did you always want to be a barrister, then?”

“No, actually, I thought I would do politics for a long time. But I don’t know—as I got older, really saw how things worked, it didn’t seem like a real profession anymore. Or like a place I knew I could do good, be useful. I still have a long way to go—this year is just my bar training—but I’ve already done some good internships, so at least I know I enjoy the work.”

We turned onto the side road and climbed down the mossy bank to the river. Callum stepped out on a rock, and I handed him the bottles one by one. He handed them back to me, ice-cold and glistening. By the time we made it back to the road, it was starting to get dark, just a soft glow in one corner of the sky, mostly blocked by the trees arching over us. The bottles were so cold, I had to hold them with just the tips of my fingers.

“Well, now that we’ve done my studies, we have to do yours,” Callum said, clinking his bottle into mine as we walked, the gravel skittering out from our shoes.

“Not sure there’s much to tell. Just a bookworm trying to take it full-time.”

“Sure, but why British lit?”

“What’s wrong with British lit?”

He shrugged. “I’ve always thought Americans found our writers a bit too stiff and starched. Our movies, too, all that Merchant Ivory stuff. It’s not cool, as the kids would say.”

I laughed. “I fell in love with British writers way before I knew what *cool* was. Austen, of course. She was my gateway drug.”

“A romantic, then?”

“It’s more than that.” I looked over at him, trying to make out his face in the gloom. Did he really care? I was about to make a very broad, sweeping statement, not very academic. “A lot of American writing can be very bootstrappy, you know? That focus on individual choice and fate and forging your destiny. British writers do write about those things, too, but I think they do it more honestly. They tell the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That where you come from matters, that money and class are real. Those things eliminate and elevate people. They have power.”

“I can see why that would resonate with you,” Callum said.

His voice was only curious, but the comment still stung a little. The fact that he had clocked me so easily—lower class, with my junk cars and street smarts. It zinged through me, a sharp reminder that I was talking too easily, sharing too much. Wasn’t I trying to live differently here, start fresh? The last thing I wanted was for this handsome, funny, snarky man to see me as just some sob story.

I shook my hair out of my face, forced my shoulders down and back. “Anyway,” I said lightly, “it’s a good course, at Queen Mary, and I’ll be finished by September.”

“After you write the Passably Decent British Dissertation,” he said.

“Yes, the small matter of the massive research paper,” I laughed. “First thing when I get back to London, I have to decide on a topic. It feels too open-ended. What do you write about when you can write about anything?”

“You play the hits.”

I shook my head. “It’s not like I can write about Austen. Nothing new under the sun there.”

“Well, you know,” he said, leaning closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially. His breath on my ear sent a jolt through my stomach. “Mum might still have some of my old GCSE book reports. I’d let you copy.”

I laughed so loudly the empty road echoed with it, and Callum did, too. I felt like the trees were listening, silent eavesdroppers to our conversation. Witnesses to the color in my cheeks that had nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Callum. “God, it’s quiet out here,” I said. “I haven’t found anywhere this quiet in London. And believe me, I’ve tried.”

“No, even out on the Heath, it’s not wilderness,” he agreed. “You’ve got to give up on Parliament Hill. Have you tried Hyde Park? I’ve found some quiet nooks there, believe it or not.”

I looked at him, his face barely a silhouette in the dark. “How did you know I go to Parliament Hill?” Faye knew I lived in North London, but I’d

never mentioned the park.

I heard his breath catch a little, just for a moment, but his silhouette was impassive. “Everyone in London goes there,” he laughed. The sound in the cold air was brittle and false.

But then the car was in front of us and we had work to do: opening the hood again, checking the engine and tank were cooled, opening the lid, pouring in our icy river water. We got back into the car, and Callum turned the key very slowly, his face tight, waiting for something terrible to happen. But the engine turned over normally, the lights came on, and the ancient gauges settled into a safe range. He sighed and crashed back against the seat, heavy with relief. “You’re a miracle worker, Anna. A Citroën whisperer. I really owe you.”

I waited until we were back on the highway, the black stripe of road disappearing beneath us. “You know, you’re right: you do owe me,” I said lightly. “So what aren’t you telling me, about the Heath?”

He was quiet for a few seconds, the only sounds the purring sports car and his fingertips drumming on the steering wheel. Nervous, uncertain. Not at all like him, I thought, but really, what did I know? This was only the third time we’d met.

“Sorry, I didn’t know how to say this without sounding creepy,” he said.

I had to laugh. “Well, maybe not the best start, then.”

In the glow of the dashboard lights, I watched his half smile, still wary. “I saw you once, up on Parliament Hill,” he said. “This summer. I sort of recognized you when we met at Bar Sube.”

“Really?” I said. “That’s so random.” Not an intelligent response, but I didn’t know what the correct reaction was. I saw dozens of people every time I went up to the Heath, alone or with Liv and Andre. I would never recognize any of them again on the streets of London, let alone in a foreign country. “Was I with friends? Were we being loud or something?” British people constantly complained that Americans were too loud.

Callum shrugged and shook his head. “You were alone, just reading a book. Or really, you were sitting with a book open in front of you, but you never looked down at it. Glued to the city view.”

I'd had many nice summer days on Parliament Hill, but when I went there alone, it was usually because I needed to be cured of something. Something only the sight of London, the promise of it, could heal. What had he seen, there, watching me?

"God, what a tourist," I joked, feeling somehow exposed. "Must've been when I first moved. I'm much better at blending in now."

He smiled and shook his head, eyes on the road. "I doubt you'll ever blend in."

We merged onto a busier highway, and I settled back in my seat, enjoying the way it held me, enjoying the heat of the car after the cold night. Enjoying the warmth of Callum next to me, wondering if we'd ever be so close, so alone, again. Pointless, of course—the best I could hope for, from him, was another kiss on each cheek next time I saw him in town, or out with Faye. But that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy it: the little rush of it, each time. It didn't seem like he'd really given me the whole story about Parliament Hill, but I also didn't want to put him on the spot. And really, why poke holes in it? What a simple, miraculous thing: to be remembered.

I stood with Faye on the cobblestones, waiting while she reapplied her red lipstick in a compact mirror. The only thing remarkable about the building we'd been dropped at was its color: a bright turmeric shade of yellow, raucous against the muted sand-and-stone palette of all Saint-Tropez.

I tried to smooth the wrinkles from my shirt dress. The cut was flattering, sliding off my hips, but it needed ironing. I was sure there was someone at the villa who took care of this service, but I didn't know if they would do it for me, and I couldn't bring myself to ask. I'd dressed it up with the new rosé-colored scarf I'd bought last week, shopping with Callum.

There hadn't been time to look for a better outfit; Faye had simply appeared at my guest suite after dinner, asking if I wanted to "come with." She was going out to see London friends who'd just arrived back in town for the holiday. I wondered if maybe Callum would be there.

Faye clicked her compact shut and waved me forward, as if I'd been the one keeping us waiting. The door was heavy, carved wood, and it swung open as we neared, a doorman nodding on the other side. A gold placard with a lotus flower read *PAN DEÏ PALAIS*.

We stepped into an ornate hotel lobby, and I hurried to follow Faye down a long hall of oriental carpets. The furniture was all a lurid red, like the insides of something cut open. We passed a dining room with a sepia-toned scene on the walls: lush palm trees in the foreground, and in the distance, a building with onion domes.

"What's with the decor?" I asked Faye.

“The whole place is an homage to India,” she said, not slowing. “A French soldier built it as a house for the Indian princess he loved. Eighteen hundreds.”

“Big house.”

She shrugged. “It’s a small hotel. There’s only twelve rooms in the whole place.”

“And your friends are staying here?”

“Two of them. They’ll be in the bar, I’m sure.” She waved a hand in front of us, to indicate that it lay ahead. But there, ahead of us, changing his clothes in the hallway as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, stood a gorgeous early-twenties man I recognized instantly. He was from *Chelsea Made*. Julian, great-great-grandson of the man who invented McVitie’s biscuits, biscuits Andre and I often ate while we watched the TV show in bed. I favored the dark chocolate ones, Andre the chocolate-caramel ones. We both favored this man currently tugging a T-shirt up and over his white-blond head in the hallway in front of me.

“Don’t mind me,” he said with an impish smile, dropping the T-shirt into a bag at his feet.

“Dinner *and* a show,” Faye said dryly.

McVitie’s Julian grinned, clearly recognizing Faye. Peers of some kind, at least here—familiar, even if the Wilders weren’t chocolate-biscuits royalty. “If you want the full dance, that’ll be extra,” he said as we slid past him. Already, he was pulling a fresh shirt on, beginning to button it over his camera-ready abs. Probably he was changing for a fancy dress code, some last-minute yacht-party invite. Oh, to be McVitie’s Julian for a day.

Once we were around the next corner, I finally let go of the giggle that’d been building behind my ribs. Faye rolled her eyes but giggled, too, shaking her head. “Pull it together, Anna.”

“Do you see much of that lot?” I asked. “I know I should be embarrassed—watching such a silly show—but it’s sort of irresistible.”

She shrugged. “London’s a small town, you know, but Chelsea’s not really my scene. I just have a few friends in the wider circle—the *fringers* you see in episodes with big garden parties or galas.”

“You haven’t dated any nice Chelsea boys?” I teased.

Faye threw me a look. “I don’t really like them nice.”

The bar, when we finally reached it, was very small and empty. Empty because everyone was outside: one wall of the room was completely open to a tree-lined garden, warmed with heat lamps, white chairs and tables lit by lanterns and moonlight. They glowed ghostly against the dark grass. Beyond the trees, I could see the blue-green luster of a large heated swimming pool, steaming copiously.

Faye rushed out into the garden, and a table of three improbably handsome men stood up to embrace her. Forget McVitie’s Julian, I wanted to be *her* for a day. Then I recognized, with an eager, skittish swoop in my stomach, that Callum was among them. He smiled shyly at me while everyone made a fuss over Faye. I wondered if he would want to introduce me to these friends. Tell them how I’d helped him, with the car. The idea was appealing.

But it was Faye who did my introduction: American master’s student, here from London to tutor her little sister. “Of course I couldn’t just leave her stuck in the house.” A less-than-thrilling endorsement.

I laughed. “Oh, yes, really terrible for me, being stuck in a villa.”

Faye gestured around the table with her sunglasses. “You know Callum, of course, and this is Simon and Theo. But where’s Lucy, I thought she was here?”

Callum pulled in more chairs from another table, offering me the one next to him. I sat down, grateful to have a friend beside me. Faye often seemed to forget I existed.

A tiny slip of a girl in a short skirt and sky-high heels dropped into the chair on Callum’s other side a moment later. Lucy, then. She smiled at me in the smallest way possible, lips tightly sealed, then turned to speak to Callum, crossing her legs in a way that felt calculated to draw his attention to them. But what I noticed were her shoes: black with a mirrored gold heel, the heel itself was the letters *YSL* stacked on top of each other. If she wanted to look classy, well, she’d probably struck out, but if she just wanted everyone to know she wore designer shoes, she’d knocked it out of the park.

I didn't want to see Callum admiring any legs that weren't mine, so I turned away. The waiter came by then, offering Faye and me small menus shaped like palm leaves. I reached for one, but Simon spoke up. "Don't bother with the cocktails here, they're not very good," he said with a light French accent. I froze, looking at the waiter, who had surely heard this. His cordial smile was fixed in place, his hand still in the air, menu halfway across the table. And then Faye was speaking to him, ordering a bottle of rosé and two glasses, and he was gone.

Shaken by the rudeness, I sat back in my chair. Lucy was leaning on the arm of Callum's. "Will you nip up and look at the lock?" she asked. "I know it's just one suitcase, but half my clothes are stuck inside." Maybe that explained why she was wearing so little in December.

"What, right now?" he said. "Everyone's just got here."

Her eyes flicked up to me. "Not like we'll miss much. It's probably a quick fix." She stood insistently, and after a moment, Callum rose to follow.

"Sorry, guess I'm the locksmith now," he said, turning to me. "Back in a minute."

I smiled and nodded. Not like I had a claim to him, a right to the jealous flames licking up the inside of my ribs as they walked together into the hotel.

The table had fallen into a lively debate about several people I didn't know. Eventually the waiter returned with our wine. I couldn't really apologize for Simon's rudeness, so I overdid it with a nervous flurry of *mercis*.

A minute later, Lucy returned alone and announced to the table that Callum would be down shortly, once he'd cracked her suitcase lock.

Undeterred, Faye held up her glass and declared a toast to being all back together in one place.

"Did you all come from London?" I asked.

Simon shook his head. "Not me, I've lived here the last year. I can't stand London anymore." As he said it, looking at me from under low, heavy brows, I recognized him: the dark figure coming to visit Faye in the night. I thought of Faye saying, *I don't really like them nice*.

“Yes, London’s such a bore now, isn’t it?” Lucy said, rolling her eyes, tugging tiny, childlike fingers through the ends of her curls. “Nothing to do. I can’t *bear* to be there more than a few weeks at a time.”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed. If that was how she felt about London, she’d probably spontaneously combust in my hometown. Bored to detonation within minutes, just a pile of ash and a smoking pair of high heels.

“London’s not boring for me, since it’s all still pretty new,” I said.

“Well, of course. It must seem *very exciting* for you,” Lucy said. “Where are you from again?” Her voice was innocent, even friendly, but I’d been taunted enough in school to know it when I heard it.

“Boston,” I said. The answer I’d learned to give, since no one knew what Massachusetts was.

“Like the tea party?”

Simon sniggered into his wineglass. My cheeks burned.

“And you’re enjoying Saint-Tropez?” Theo asked sincerely, turning in his chair next to me. “Is this your first time?”

I nodded. “It’s been great.”

“Yes, you’ve really hit the lottery,” Lucy said. She smiled sweetly, tipping her head toward Faye. Indicating my ticket for admission.

“This weather, I’d say we all have,” Theo said with an easy smile. He was very handsome, but in a different way from Callum: it felt almost exaggerated, movie-star stuff. Like Paul Newman in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Tall and broad, muscled, tan. Eyes too blue, short ash-blond hair charmingly wavy on top. He made Julian in the hallway look like a little boy. But then, he also looked familiar, which made no sense; I would absolutely remember meeting a man this staggering.

“Trying to figure it out?” Faye asked, arching an eyebrow.

Everyone laughed, and I blushed in confusion. “Figure what out?”

“Where you know him from.”

I looked back at Theo, but I was now too embarrassed to actually see him. “Where, then?” I asked, smiling up at him gamely. “Did we go to summer camp together?”

“Nursery school,” he said, returning the smile, melting me right into my seat.

“Of course. And you never shared your toys,” I laughed.

Faye rolled her eyes. “He’s on your favorite TV show, silly.”

“You can’t be,” I said to him, genuinely surprised. “I’d remember you.”

“He’s a fringer,” Faye said.

Theo laughed easily. “I’m not on much, just filling out the parties really. I don’t even get that banner across the bottom of the telly.” He held out his thumb and forefinger and mimed his name sliding across the screen. Leaning over, he put his arm around my chair, as if pulling me in conspiratorially. He said in a stage whisper, “But it’s not like they didn’t ask me.”

I had no trouble believing that *Chelsea Made* had wanted young British Paul Newman for their reality show. “But it must really pay,” I blurted out.

I saw Lucy’s lip curl, but Theo just nodded. “Two thousand pounds an episode, even if you’re only on-screen for three minutes,” he said.

Callum arrived then. As he bowed to receive a teasing round of applause for his victory over the suitcase, I saw his eyes land on me, drift to the arm around my chair, follow the arm back to its owner. Theo leaned in toward me again, picking up our conversation.

“Next time you watch your favorite show, look out for the ones who show up, have a quick coffee and a gossip with one of the primaries—who pulled who at the cocktail party—then disappear. Those are the smart ones. Just collect their check and go about their normal lives.”

“Which are not at all normal, I’m guessing,” I said, leaning back in my chair, trying to open the conversation to include Callum, who’d just sat down. He didn’t look at me, though; he looked down into his drink, like it demanded his immediate and full attention.

“What’s normal?” Theo asked.

I turned back to him. “A week here and I have no idea anymore.”

He grinned. “Are we really so strange?”

I couldn’t resist smiling up at him again. After Lucy’s barbs, his warmth felt like actual heat, like turning toward the sun. But before I could answer, Callum spoke.

“We can’t seem that strange, if that’s your favorite show,” he said snarkily, fixing me with his dark eyes. “Different zoo, same animals, right?”

He and I had teased each other before, but this did not feel like that. It felt unkind, like he was calling me out. In front of everyone.

Only sarcasm could save me now. “Come on, that’s not a fair comparison,” I said, keeping my voice light. “At least zoos serve a purpose.”

Theo hooted at this, and Faye and the others laughed, too. Wine was poured, conversation resumed. But I stayed quiet. Had I imagined it? Why would Callum give me a hard time?

Turning toward him, I tried for an easy smile. “Is this the part where you tell me you’re an undercover locksmith?” I said, echoing what he’d said about me being a mechanic.

“I’m what?” he said, as if he hadn’t quite heard. He didn’t look at me but instead reached for the wine across the table.

“An undercover locksmith.”

He shrugged. “Oh, right.” Lucy nudged him to fill her glass, and he turned toward her, his back to me. A clear brush-off.

I’d done nothing, said nothing; there could only be one reason, and it stung. Callum was too embarrassed to acknowledge me as a friend, now that all his real friends were here. I was only good enough to talk to when no one else was around. When he needed my help.

I reached for my glass and took an overlarge gulp of the cold wine. I could feel the dull blush climbing up my neck, above the collar of my dress. I’d been so stupid to think that he and I had really connected. Stupid for all the things I’d accidentally revealed to him in conversation, each one presenting itself to me now, one by one, in dazzling shame: my reeking flat; my junker car; my unplanned, unpromising dissertation. The silent dysfunction of my family: dead mother, disappointed father. The first private moment we’d shared—when he’d discreetly shown me how to eat the oysters—felt excruciating to remember, now that I was sure he saw it as I did. A clear sign that I didn’t belong with his snobby, too-cool-for-fucking-London friends.

Lucy murmured something, and Callum laughed, leaning back in his chair. I wanted to catch his eye—I wanted to be wrong about everything—but he was looking down again, moving his hands around the wineglass like he was testing for cracks. Probably deep in thought about Lucy and her perfect little fawn legs. I turned fully in my chair, thinking of the bathroom, my only excuse for escape. Instead, I found Theo.

“What’re you enjoying most about Saint-Tropez?” he asked. I couldn’t tell if he was genuinely interested or just drawing me back into conversation, noticing my discomfort. Either way, it was a kindness.

“Mostly the good weather,” I said. “I can see why you all come here for Christmas.”

He nodded. “No one stays in London for the holidays. The rain washes away the Christmas spirit.”

“Even in Chelsea?”

“I can’t be arsed with all the holiday parties, honestly,” Theo said, shaking his head. “You spend too much time in Chelsea, you sort of start to lose the thread. All of SW is a bit much, isn’t it?”

I laughed. Callum looked over at the sound, as if it were disruptive.

I turned away from him, toward Theo, insulating myself with his attention. With the crush of chairs at the table, the arm of his chair overlapped with mine, and he was leaning forward on it. He was very, very close. “It is,” I agreed. “Knightsbridge and Sloane Square, especially. North London seems a little more low-key. A little more bohemian. I’ve worked with families in both places.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re the more qualified to comment, of the two of us,” he said. “The ideal observer really. In the home but not *of* the home.”

“I’ve always felt like that,” I said, nodding. “Everywhere, not just tutoring.” My brain felt pleasantly fuzzy; Theo had leaned in for a moment to refill my glass, and his light citrusy cologne lingered.

“Really? I feel like a smart pretty girl can fit in anywhere. Or at least if she has a sense of humor, which you do.”

I took a sip so I wouldn’t have to speak. Was he flirting?

“So what brought you to London?” he asked.

“Technically, a master’s program. But I’ve always wanted to get to England. I was even supposed to study abroad in London when I was an undergrad. But it didn’t work out.”

“Visa issues?”

I shook my head. The reason wasn’t something I liked to remember; I certainly wasn’t going to talk about it here. “Family thing,” I said, with a dismissive wave of my wineglass.

“Well, at least you got here in the end. Is studying here much different than America?”

“It is, actually. There’s a lot more room to slack off, then panic and make it up at the end.”

“But you’d never do that,” Theo said coyly. “You’re a good student.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Are you so sure about that?”

“Can you be a good teacher and a bad student?”

“If anyone can, it’s me.”

“I’m glad my test-taking days are behind me,” Theo said. “Though maybe if I had a teacher like you, I’d like it.”

Definitely flirting, then. I took another sip of wine, let it cool me. “Sorry, I’m not taking on any new students at the moment.”

“A waitlist? I’m a patient man.”

“You won’t have long. I’m back to London after New Year’s.”

“That’s plenty of time. And I’m often in London for work.”

I leaned in and dropped my voice. Pulling my fingers through my hair like Lucy had, I said, “But don’t you just find London *such a bore*?”

Theo tipped back in his chair, surprised, laughing heartily—long and loud enough to draw attention to us. I could feel Callum’s narrowed eyes on us. Good. He should see that Theo wasn’t too good to talk to me.

Faye smiled her catlike smile. “You two coming with us? Or shall we leave you to it?”

I performed a carefully neutral shrug. “Where to?”

“You’ll see,” Faye said, waving the waiter over for the bill. “I think it’ll be a first for you.”

Simon led us through narrow streets until the bay was in sight, Lucy leaning heavily on Callum's arm as her heels wobbled over the cobblestones. Brightly lit boats glowed along the water. I'd been thinking of *Gatsby* when I arrived here, but if I was in a Fitzgerald novel now, it was probably *Tender Is the Night*. Young American, newly arrived in the French Riviera, seduced equally by its beauty and its beautiful people. Destined for disaster.

We stopped for a few minutes so Simon could buy a pack of cigarettes. The breeze over the water felt good, and I turned into it and felt something slip away from me.

My scarf—it was so light, almost made of wind itself. The only nice thing I owned, leaving me. But as I turned to dash after it, I saw that Theo was already there, laughing, catching it with just a few steps and the long reach of his arms.

He came back to me and made a show of draping it around my neck just so. Half joking, but he was gentle with the delicate fabric, and I could feel his hands.

"That's better," he said, smiling. "Isn't she beautiful."

I glanced across at Callum and saw he hadn't missed it—the image such a perfect reflection of the moment we'd shared in the shop, the shopkeeper draping the scarves on me, requiring him to say that they were beautiful. It was funny. This, at least, he'd have to smile at, comment on.

But he said nothing. And his silence felt so vicious that I turned to Theo and gave him my sweetest smile. "Thank you for saving it," I said. "I just got it. Shopping on my own, here in town," I added, making sure Callum would hear. If he wanted to pretend that afternoon together never happened, I could, too.

Callum gave a bitter little laugh and said, "I'm sure Theo could buy you plenty more, if that's what you're after."

My neck felt hot, red, and I turned away before Callum could see that his dart had landed. Like I was some gold digger following them around. Theo was already laughing it off, making a show of bowing gallantly before me. "She can have all the scarves she wants, our Anna," he said.

The streetlamps washed the scene yellow and gold: the buildings all in shades of white and terra-cotta and pale lemon, the town of Saint-Tropez curving inward along the water, almost protectively hunched around the harbor. When Simon returned, we cut across the broad stretch of open-air cafés to the sidewalk right on the water.

Gleaming speedboats were crammed flank to flank here, nosed up to the sidewalk, bobbing eagerly at our feet as we passed. Farther down, the biggest yachts were moored: three swaying stories, gilded and glowing with light. Music pumped from the nearest one. I could see people filing on, a bouncer by the gangway checking names and plus-ones from a list. The process was a slow one; it seemed that all the women boarding had to step to the side and remove their heels, dropping them into a basket.

“You can keep yours on,” Faye said, following my eyeline. “Soft-soled shoes are allowed.”

I stopped dead. How could I be going on that yacht?

Faye was waiting for my reaction, greedy for it. I tittered nervously and said, “First time since I got here I fit the dress code.”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far,” Faye said, eyeing my faded tennis shoes. “I’ll dig around and find you some better clothes, for next time.”

When I looked back at the yacht, Lucy was leaning against the bouncer, unbuckling her heels. Callum was onboard, watching us approach. Theo stood on the short gangway, waiting for Faye and me. I could still feel his hands on my shoulders, arranging my scarf. With the bright lights of the boat behind him, he was silhouetted: a tall, broad, inviting outline, blank, completely unknown.

He said, “Aren’t you coming, Anna?”

From: Anna Byrne <abyrne10@qmul.ac.uk>
To: Olivia Iyer <livlafflove@gmail.com>
Date: December 25, 2009 at 10:02 AM GMT +1
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Bonjour

Happy Christmas!! Hope NYC is snowy and cold and festive. Are you staying through New Year's?

I only just got out of bed here. Last night I went out with Faye and her friends to a beach club, one that opens in the winter only for Christmas Eve and New Year's. You wouldn't BELIEVE who we saw there—Elton John, and his partner, on the dance floor! Very dapper, of course. Everyone left a little ring of respectful distance around them, like royalty. Partying on Christmas Eve was a bit weird, but Theo says it's traditional to spend the eve with your friends and the day with your family. I go out with them at least a few days a week. Bars, boats, nightclubs, restaurants. Don't worry—I've been taking photos for you!

Faye's been lending me some of her nice clothes when we go out. They're beautiful, but she's a little weird about it, even though it was totally her idea. Like she wants me to wear her

clothes, but also wants to make sure everyone knows they're not mine. Everyone here seems to treat me sort of like a novelty, because I'm new and American. But honestly, it's been fun!

Missing you!

xx

Anna



CHRISTMAS, LATE MORNING. MRS. WILDER was in top spirits in the kitchen, singing along to every holiday song on the radio. Mr. Wilder had posted up in the dining room with the newspapers and a carafe of coffee, and he periodically urged his wife to “stop faffing about and come sit down.” But she was busy preparing a traditional Christmas meal. Or heating, more accurately—Chef had prepped all the dishes the night before, so Mrs. Wilder’s only job was to put the right dishes in the right ovens (ovens, plural) at the right temperatures, and not for too long. Pippa and I sat cross-legged on the sofa in the living room, eating Toblerone and white-chocolate-dipped almonds from our stockings. Yes, I had a stocking. One did not have to be young to get a stocking in this family. One did not even need to be family, apparently.

Singin’ in the Rain was on the television, with the sound down low. I was trying to teach Pippa a card game from home, spit. Our fingers on the cards were greasy with chocolate. From the prep kitchen Mrs. Wilder and George Michael sang “Last Christmas.”

Earlier, after emailing Liv, I’d thought about calling home, to say Merry Christmas. Our first Christmas without Mom. But it would’ve been predawn in Massachusetts, a weird time to call even if you did know what to say to your dad if he did happen to answer. And I definitely didn’t. I decided to let the day wash over me, see how I felt once the festivities had exhausted themselves here.

Mrs. Wilder poked her head into the living room and said that “luncheon” would be ready in ten minutes, and would Pippa go get her lump of a sister out of bed.

“I’ll go,” I said. I wasn’t exactly sure what Pippa might find there in the guesthouse—or, rather, who.

Taxis had queued up all night outside the beach club, so Faye, Simon, and I piled into one car when it was time to leave. At my door, Faye put her hand out impatiently, and I slipped off the heels and handed them back to their owner. They dangled from her fingers as she and Simon continued on up the guesthouse path.

Callum hadn’t warmed up at all since that night at the Pan Deï Palais hotel. The shift was so abrupt, and so complete, that I’d had to accept that this, now, was the real Callum, and the kinder version I’d helped with the Citroën was only an anomaly. He watched me often, with those eyes, and I wondered if he thought I was a poser, now that I was wearing Faye’s clothes, or a social climber, like Becky Sharp from *Vanity Fair*, attaching myself to his friends with suspect aims.

I slipped on my shoes and walked the white stone path along the villa and out to the guesthouse. Passing my own room on the way, I imagined dialing the phone, calling home. Listening to it ring, wondering if I wanted an answer.

What would my father think of this place, this lifestyle? To me it felt like *The Sun Also Rises*. Of course that was Spain, but the way Hemingway described those long days, going from one balmy spot to another, eating and drinking, finding friends—that was how it felt here. Everyone young, beautiful, aimless, charged with their freedom and an everlasting reserve of energy. They had no demands on their time. And for the first time in my life—as long as I’d finished my three hours of tutoring with Pippa—neither did I.

At the guesthouse, I knocked on Faye’s door. “Lunch is on the table,” I said, entering when she called.

“I’ve just been thinking about New Year’s. I pulled some dresses for you,” she said from the couch, as if we were continuing a conversation.

“You don’t have to do that, really.”

She stood and stretched. “Most of my formal dresses won’t fit you, of course,” she said, gesturing at my hips, as if I hadn’t noticed how different our bodies were. “But I have a few I think will really make your curves pop.” Clothes were made for girls like Faye, light and angular, but still, she always seemed to have a few that suited me, gave me that cartoony Jessica Rabbit shape. And then she would frown in the mirror, like I’d displeased her, like the whole thing hadn’t been her idea, and shoo me away like a begging dog.

When we were outside on the path, she nudged me with her elbow. “What’re you waiting for with Theo? He obviously fancies you.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said.

“He’s not just one of those London finance bros. I mean, he is in finance, but he’s a smart one. He went to Cambridge, you know?” I had a flash of Faye as Austen’s Emma: entertaining herself by matchmaking for her poor little friend Harriet, getting her hopes up for a gentleman. Faye in the bonnet and corset, turning to Mr. Knightley—*Her father’s only a tradesman, isn’t that tragic?*

“Don’t you think Theo’s just a flirt?” I said.

The truth: Theo’s continued attention felt marvelous, intoxicating, life-giving. Like waking up. No one had looked at me like that since various short-lived college boyfriends, and none had been half as handsome and charming as Theo. But I’d been wrong already, with Callum—and look how that had turned out.

“Look, I’ve known Theo a long time,” Faye said. “He’s a good one. He doesn’t mind that you’re not quite one of us, right? Or maybe he likes that. I mean, you’re not like the other girls around here, or in London.”

“I’m definitely not,” I agreed. It had never occurred to me that not fitting in could be a good thing. Theo thought I was smart, and funny, and pretty; he didn’t know I was broken, motherless, floundering. He never had to.

Faye and I climbed the villa’s front steps, hot salty cooking smells reaching out for us. Holiday music gathered behind the ornate door, stymied like smoke, and I paused just a moment with my hand on the doorknob, enjoying my own anticipation. I was meant to be in London, alone, but here I

was instead, while Bing Crosby sang “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” I could see through the stained glass: candlelight flickering on the crowded table, bodies moving into seats. A family, whole, a sort of harmony to them. A seat for me.



BACK IN MY ROOM THAT afternoon, I sat in bed, legs under the goose-down duvet, back against the headboard. One hand lifting slices of Terry’s Chocolate Orange to my mouth, even though I was still full from lunch, and the other hand on my laptop, scrolling Facebook. All my old friends and acquaintances—Smith housemates, college ex-boyfriends, high school friends, neighborhood kids. People who’d spent time in my life, then passed out of it, or I had passed out of theirs, and now we existed together only here, wished each other happy birthday, gave condolences, or offered congratulations. They were only photos, and tonight, families: hugging in front of a Christmas tree, a kitchen stove, or a pile of shredded wrapping paper. Sitting at a table so full of laughing family that the chairs elbowed each other for space.

I opened a new tab on my laptop and topped up the balance on my pay-as-you-go phone, enough for an international call. I would call my aunt Tori’s house—Dad would probably still be there. The Christmas meal over, sitting around drinking coffee, listening to Tori complain about management at the hospital. She’d help, tell me she was glad I’d called even if she wasn’t, pass the phone to my dad in such a way that he would only feel obligated to say hello and how are things and Merry Christmas and bet this call is costing you a fortune, huh, before passing it back. I’d feel worse, or better, or glad I’d tried, or upset I’d bothered, but at least I wouldn’t feel the blank space, the empty photo where my family should be.

I was the one to blame, anyway—the day my father and I finally lost faith in each other. The day I saw I couldn’t just skip off to London for a study-abroad year, like everyone else.

It was the last week of my sophomore year at Smith. I was finishing a shift at the ice cream shop when my cousin Sylvie called from the salon downtown. She was looking out the window, at my mom sitting in her car, which had just plowed into a row of parked cars.

By the time I arrived, two police cars were there, pulled alongside my parents' ancient little Accord like they wanted to make sure Mom couldn't make a getaway. Hurrying toward them, I saw that one of the policemen was out and talking to my mom through her window. Then he opened the door and stepped back to let her out. It was a funny gesture—something a man of manners might do, opening the door for a lady. But really, he was giving her space, trying to see how she moved. If she was drunk, if she might stumble.

And she did, of course—just lurching a little, her torso making small arcs with each step. I got there just as the cop was catching her arm to steady her. He nodded back to his partner, still in the car, and said, “Yeah, grab the Breathalyzer.”

“Mom,” I said, reaching for her. “Mom, are you okay?”

She looked at me from droopy eyelids and smiled. “Anna.”

The cop put his arm out, barring me from her. “Step back, miss.”

“Please, she's diabetic,” I said. “She has low blood sugar. She's not drunk.” Mom had what her medical charts called “uncontrolled diabetes”; she hated the term, which made it sound like she wasn't trying. But it was true that her levels were dangerously unpredictable. I'd been in school with a girl who was diabetic, and I never once saw her show signs of high or low blood sugar. She was an even keel. Mom had never had that.

The cop looked at my mom, at the holey T-shirt and gray sweatpants she wore for cleaning the house on Sundays. He looked at the patched-up car my parents shared, its poorly covered rust spots, the tailpipe hanging low underneath, the bumper now crunched in. He decided what kind of people we were. “Step back, miss,” he said again.

Fear was running through me like a current, but I spoke as calmly as I could. “Her blood sugar is low. She'll have a seizure if she doesn't get sugar. She could die.” I turned to Mom. “Where's your glucagon gel, Mom? The emergency stuff?”

My mom shook her head in slow dips, like it was too heavy to hold up. “All out. Gonna get a Coke,” she slurred, looking back at the car. “A’ the store.” I looked at the cop, hoping this had convinced him I was telling the truth. But it had just convinced him she was wasted. I saw his face, his certainty, and panic zinged through my body. Calm wasn’t working. If they wouldn’t help her, if they wouldn’t let me, this would go bad very fast.

I reached forward and yanked up my mother’s shirt. On her stomach, just above the waistband of her sweats, was the port for her pump. “It’s insulin,” I insisted. “It’s a pump. She’s diabetic.”

The cop brought his arm down hard enough to break my hold, then elbowed me backward. “If you don’t get the fuck out of here, you’re both gonna be on the curb in cuffs.”

My arm throbbed and I stumbled back, almost falling on the uneven street. That’s when I saw that people were beginning to gather on the sidewalk—downtown window shoppers, dog-walking dads, Smithies on a run for bubble tea. Watching me argue, watching my mom swing gently on the spot. I wanted to tell them to fuck off, to stop watching, but instead, I pushed through them, into the salon.

My cousin sprang back from the window, where she and the other stylists and their customers were all shamelessly watching. “Coke,” I said, without preamble. “You have a fridge?”

Sylvie took me back to the break room and rifled through the mini fridge. She knew about my mom. “I called your father,” she said quietly while she searched. Finally, she put a can of Pepsi in my hands.

“Call 9-1-1,” I said to her, my voice shaking. “Ask for EMTs. Just tell them someone’s having a seizure, okay? Just say that.”

When I got back outside, the police were pushing the onlookers back. My mom was sitting on the curb, her head drifting lazily toward one shoulder. Shivering, even though it was seventy degrees out. She could be in a coma in twenty minutes.

I held up the can for the cops to see. “Just let me give her some sugar,” I said. I couldn’t keep my voice down anymore. “If she’s drunk, it won’t do

shit. If she's diabetic, it means you won't have to hold her head when she's seizing on the fucking sidewalk."

The first cop shook his head. "Field sobriety test. Then Mom can have all the Pepsi she wants."

I realized then that's why they were moving the crowd back. Making my mom stagger up and down the sidewalk in her sweats for the weekend shopping crowd. Stand on one leg.

"No," I said. "No, what happened to the Breathalyzer?"

The second cop shook his head. "She can't blow enough to hit it."

"Of course she can't." I took a few steps toward Mom. "I'm going to give her the soda, okay? It won't ruin your test. It's just soda."

"Don't you touch her," the first cop said. "She drinks anything, it ruins the Breathalyzer."

"You just said she couldn't *do* the Breathalyzer." I turned to the second cop. "If you stand her up there, she's going to collapse, and then you'll have a concussion *and* a seizure to deal with."

He didn't answer me, or even look at me, but he did shoot his partner a look. Probably thinking of all the paperwork they'd have to do if Mom had a diabetic fit on Main Street in front of a crowd. "She did have the pump, Rob. In her pocket. Connected to her thing." He touched his own stomach.

The first cop shrugged like we were both wasting his time. "Fine. Just a sip, then. Hurry up. We've gotta get this show on the road."

I dropped onto my knees, cracked the can, and held it to my mother's mouth. She parted her lips, but her eyes were unfocused. I tipped the liquid into her mouth and it fizzed, and in another second, it was running back out again, pouring down her shirt, splashing both of us.

"Why isn't she drinking?" the first cop hissed. Like I was playing a trick on him.

"She can't swallow," I said, my eyes now streaming with tears. "That's what happens." I put the can back to her lips. I poured another sip into her mouth and prayed. Mom had promised me. You could absorb the sugar through your gums, she said. Even if you're so far gone you can't swallow. She had prepared me for this, just in case.



WHEN MY FATHER ARRIVED, HE was panting, red-faced, white shirt patchy with sweat. With no car, he'd run the half mile here from home. He pushed through the bystanders, yelling at them to move. The cops stopped him, of course, and I could hear them arguing, hear that my father skipped over pleading and went right to shouting and swearing at them. I knew he was just as frantic as I was, but all I could think, in that moment, was how he was adding to our little family sideshow. I kept my eyes on my mother's face and poured more soda into her mouth, again and again, until she was soaked with it. Probably my father would end up in handcuffs, but I could only save one of them right now.

The thing that saved all of us was that the EMTs arrived. Two of them went to talk to the cops and Dad, and two of them came and sat next to my mother on the sidewalk, one on each side. Sylvie must have told them everything on the phone because they opened a little kit with a syringe in it. "Glucagon," the woman said to me, so gently that I knew I looked completely crazed. "I'm going to give her an injection. It'll work much faster, okay?"

I sat back on my heels. I couldn't speak. My wet shirt clung to me, sticky with soda. But Mom's eyes were more open now, and she was in them again. While the EMTs disinfected a spot on her upper arm, Mom looked at me. "Don't cry, Anna. I'm okay," she said. Still a little slurred.

The EMTs were trying to tell me I'd done a good job, done the right thing. But they felt fuzzy now, like I couldn't really hear them. Now that Mom was going to be okay, I was so mad I could hardly see. At the cops, at everyone watching. I stood and stepped up onto the sidewalk. The blood rushed into my cramped legs, but it just felt like more anger, hot and pumping.

Then Dad was there. He hugged me, his sweat-stained shirt sticking to me. "These idiots," he said. "They could've killed her."

But I couldn't give my anger to the cops, or the people watching, or the Smithies sipping on their thick bubble tea straws. I could only give it to my father. A person I could blame for this, and maybe for everything.

“Why was she driving?” I said, pushing him off me. My voice was too loud. “You were home.”

“She was fine, Anna. Completely fine when she left. She just said she was going to get a few things. Not out of it or anything.”

I shook my head. “So she went from completely fine to half comatose on a four-minute drive? Sure, Dad.”

“You think this is my fault?” he snapped. “You know how fast her hypos hit.”

“I can’t believe you. How could you let her leave like that?” I said, even though I knew I was being unfair.

“Jesus Christ, Anna, not everything that goes wrong in your life is my fault. As much as you want it to be.”

“You should have taken her yourself.” I was shouting again. It felt like I couldn’t control my voice anymore. It felt good not to.

Now he was yelling back. Switching into that higher gear he saved just for me. “Oh no, you don’t tell me what to do. That’s not how this works.”

“You think I want to? I want you to be the grown-up. Take care of her instead of fighting with the fucking cops, making a scene.” It wasn’t enough that we had to live this way, every single day. We also had to see how it looked to everyone else. Like we were some trashy family who couldn’t take care of ourselves.

He sneered at me. “Don’t act like you take care of her. I do. You don’t do shit for her anymore. I know why you never come home.”

I laughed viciously. “I never come home when *you’re* home. What, Mom didn’t tell you that?”

I saw this hit the mark, his eyes shifting to Mom and the EMTs, then back to me. “You only went to that yuppie school to give me the middle finger. And now you can’t even see your family. You’re too *busy* up on the *hill*,” he snarled.

For once, I didn’t shrug it off. I didn’t bite back my answer. “Yeah, I am.” I pointed at him, in his sweaty, clinging shirt. “So I don’t end up like you.”

He took a step toward me, until my pointing finger was in his chest. “You spoiled— You think you’re better—”

The second cop inserted himself between us. “All right, guys,” he said. “Time to take a lap and cool off.”

And oh, I knew everyone in the crowd would love that. Domestic dispute right downtown. Officer had to step in and break it up, they’d tell their families at dinner. Real ugly.

One of the EMTs came over to us. “Which one of you’s going to ride in the ambulance?” he said.

“Ambulance?” my father repeated. I knew him; I knew he was worrying about how much that would cost. When the bill would come in the mail, which month it would hit the bank account. My mom would be back to normal in a day or two—they’d hydrate her, stabilize her levels, make sure her ketones weren’t too high—but we’d need months to pay for it. Hours on the phone, to negotiate a payment plan. Always a separate bill for the ambulance ride.

And here I was, only worrying about the scene we were making. I felt shame warming up under my skin, dripping down through my body like hot candle wax. I felt like I would die if I stayed there another moment.

“I’ll go, you move the car,” I said to Dad. “If they tow it, that’s three or four hundred bucks.”

He looked back at the old Accord, rubbed a hand over his forehead, and nodded once. I was not forgiven, would probably never be, but necessity required us to be on the same side again, for a while.



A FEW WEEKS LATER, WHEN my junior year tuition bill came, it was two grand more than I’d expected; I hadn’t been given my usual on-campus work-study award because I would be abroad in London. The financial aid office said a loan could be arranged, but it all felt suddenly too risky. I’d never had a loan before, and there was no guarantee my UK student visa would allow me to work and earn money there. No guarantee my travel stipend from Smith would be enough to live on. No guarantee my mother would be safe and

healthy while I was gone, the same when I returned. Chances I could not take.

The day I gave up on London, I cried in my mother's lap like a child, leaving huge tear splotches on her scrubs. "What if this was my only chance?" I said.

"I don't believe that, honey," she murmured, rubbing my back. "You'll get your chance to go, I know you will." And I heard it, the relief in her voice. Proof that she needed me to stay, that my father was not enough. Now, of course, I saw it differently. My mother worked with sick and dying people; she must have suspected or known that her health had passed the tipping point. The point of no return. She was always tired, that year, and too thin, like clothes on a hanger, but I'd grown accustomed to it as if it were a personality trait, a way she had always been. The way you barely notice the heat at the end of a long summer.

When I finally left for London, it was in bitterness. I had chosen to stay, I had sacrificed, I had done everything I could. And none of it had saved her. I didn't blame my father anymore; I blamed the whole world. I wanted to step outside of it, forget it, shed it like a skin and start new. And here I was, and probably my father did blame me for that, and he had a right to. I'd left him there, alone with the crater in our empty house.

A streaky peach-sherbet sunset glowed in the window of my guest suite, the squat olive trees on the hill silhouetted low against it. I picked up my phone from the bed and dialed the number. Not Aunt Tori's, but home. It was getting late there. I could see my dad clearly, moving around the quiet house. Settling in front of the TV, a can of store-brand root beer on the table next to him. Lifting the cold can to his mouth, reaching out automatically with his sleeve to wipe away the ring of condensation it left before my mom could hassle him about it.

The phone rang four times and I heard the click of the answering machine. Even if he'd answered, even if he'd been nice, we'd both have known: it wasn't really him I wanted to talk to. I wanted Mom to pick up. I wanted to hear her voice on the phone: *Oh, honey, hi, what time is it there?* I wanted to tell her about living with Pippa and Faye. Dancing with Theo and

Elton John. How simple and easy and beautiful life was here, my old life far in the distance, a sailboat slipping out of the orange-streaked harbor. I wanted to say, *Wish you were here, Mom.*

A traditional New Year's Eve in Saint-Tropez meant La Grande Anchoïade—locals set up long tables along the Quai Suffren and served anchovy dip with crusty bread and aperitifs to anyone who came by. I walked along the waterfront with Pippa and Mrs. Wilder all morning, and we gossiped about the night's festivities, and ate too much, and said *merci* and *bonne année* a hundred times. I told myself Mom would have loved it—the salty fish, the bitter liqueurs, the locals, the tradition of it. But of course, even if she'd been there, she wouldn't have been able to partake: the chunks of homemade bread impossible to carb-count, no way to get her insulin dosage right. She had never been able to relax, to fully enjoy things. And neither had I, as soon as I was old enough to understand that about her.

I spent the afternoon with Pippa and her father, stringing white lights through all the olive trees in the front and back yards, along the eaves of the house, and on the railings on the terrace. Pippa griped about it, but it was clear that both she and Mr. Wilder loved this job, theirs every year, when Faye was getting her hair blown out and Mrs. Wilder was fussing over the men unloading sound equipment from a box truck. They were expecting more than two hundred guests.

My suite abutted the main party space, the blue-and-white-tiled indoor-outdoor ballroom with glass walls that folded away. "This will all be open," Mrs. Wilder had told me, "people flowing back and forth from the terrace to the front yard. Band and dance floor here, bar on this end."

Faye had lent me a dress of liquid black sequins, slick and heavy like poured oil: sliding over my curves, dripping down in a low cowl in the back, finishing in a fringe of tiny beads a few inches above my knees. When Faye pushed me in front of the guesthouse mirror, I wanted to gasp or laugh, but in actuality I'd been unable to make any sound at all.

As a teenager, I'd read jealously about the parties at Jay Gatsby's mansion, and tonight I would disappear into that fictional, mythical world. I would look the part, fit right in. And then it would be January, and the spell would be broken. I'd leave my glass slippers and catty fairy godmother (Faye godmother?) and go back to real life in London. Would I be different there when I returned? Would it be enough to know that I'd lived a fantasy before the clock struck midnight?



MOST OF THE EARLY PARTY guests were family friends, and I met them all, explaining over and over again what the SATs were and why Pippa would be taking them. Men watched me when I crossed the room for a fresh glass of champagne. I said yes to every passing hors d'oeuvre before the server could even say what it was: cold oysters, hot croquettes, stuffed dates, shrimp ceviche, escargot, chorizo, tiny tarts filled with caviar and crème fraîche, even a miniature cup of bouillabaisse, fish stew. I was determined to eat enough now, and throughout the night, so that the never-ending flow of wine and champagne wouldn't overwhelm me. I didn't want to be drunk and sleepy at eleven p.m. "You numpty, that's what cocaine's for," Faye had said when I'd mentioned it. I'd stick to canapés.

The friends I knew finally arrived around nine o'clock. That was also when Faye emerged from the guesthouse in a vintage flapper-style dress, looking just like I'd known she would: like a real-life Daisy Buchanan. The underdress was a knee-length cranberry-colored velvet sheath. It was overlaid with a fine gold netting that resolved into a long fringe from knee to ankle that danced whenever she moved.

She said nothing, but examined me: the long loose curls she'd put into my hair, the dark eyeliner, the highlighter on my cheek and brow bones, the perfect wine-stain lip. She put her fingers into my curls, shaking them out more, pulling some forward to sit on my shoulders, as if I were a doll she was playing with. It was a little embarrassing, in front of everyone, but I let her.

"You're so glamorous," I said. "That dress is perfect on you." I let my fingertips graze the velvet, plush and cool. I wanted to tell her what it felt like: being here under the strands of lights, in our gorgeous dresses, at the center of all this beauty. What it felt like to be beautiful among all these beautiful people.

At that moment Simon seized Faye's arm and spun her away from me, across the blue and white tiles, presumably to show off the fringed dress that swished around her legs like water. The spin ended in front of Callum, who rolled his eyes and shook his head when Faye held her free hand out playfully for a kiss.

Theo was crossing the room toward me. He was in a charcoal suit, the shirt almost the same color. No tie. The dark outfit set off his light hair, his too-blue eyes. The jacket and pants were very fitted and flattering, skimming off his muscled arms and broad shoulders, emphasizing the length of him. He looked like he should be at a movie premiere. He kissed Faye and Lucy on both cheeks, and then me the same way, and I pretended it felt fine and normal, even though his closeness, his cologne, his face next to mine, was dizzying.

"Look at you," I said. "You look so elegant!"

Theo grinned. "You, on the other hand, are stunning. That dress, Anna, you're a heart-stopper!" He nodded toward Simon and Faye. "Should I spin you?"

"Oh god, please don't," I said, hiding my hands from him, fumbling my champagne flute. "I'm just trying to blend in."

"Trying and failing," he said. "But in the best possible way."

"Take a good long look," Faye called, turning her sly smile on Theo. "She's only here a few more days."

"Surely not," Theo said, frowning at me.

I felt all eyes look to me. “Yes, I go back on the second.”

“Back to real life?” Callum said with a smirk.

“Back to the books,” I said lightly, “just like you.” Reminding him that we were both still in school, in London, even if that was where the similarity ended. His eyes skimmed down my clearly borrowed outfit, which only seemed to confirm this. I always felt he was appraising me, looking for something. And, obviously, failing to find it.

“Something wrong?” Theo asked. I looked up; he was closer than I’d thought, and watching me, something between curiosity and concern.

I pushed my hair back behind my shoulders, breathed out, and smiled up at Theo. “Nothing a trip to the bar won’t solve,” I said, nudging his empty glass with mine. He laughed and offered his arm.



FIVE MINUTES BEFORE MIDNIGHT, PIPPA arrived, tugging at my elbow. “You have to come,” she said. “You’ll miss the fireworks.”

It had been that kind of night—Faye led me to the dance floor, Mrs. Wilder steered me to meet someone, Lucy dragged me to the loo to zip up her jumpsuit. I let myself be led to the pool side of the terrace—the pool built over to serve as a second dance floor—where Mr. and Mrs. Wilder were holding court with some of their well-dressed, middle-aged friends. Everyone was tipped out toward the hill, waiting expectantly.

I assumed the fireworks would be lit off from the hillside just below us. I turned to ask Pippa, but my guide had vanished. Instead, I saw Faye coming through the crowd.

“What are you doing *here*?” she said, grabbing my wrist and pulling me back with her. “You want your kiss at midnight from some old guy?”

I wasn’t drunk, but tipsy enough to wobble on my heels as Faye tugged me after her, the crowd squeezing in on us. “Oh, c’mon,” I said. “Do people really do that?”

“Yes,” Faye said. “It’s tradition, you have to kiss someone at midnight. It’s for luck. Everyone does it.” And she threw a look back to me as we

worked our way through the crush of bodies. The look said, *Theo does it*. I was being delivered to Theo. Had my delivery been requested by the recipient? Or had Faye simply taken it upon herself to arrange it? One of the last bodies I passed in the crowd was Callum, who stepped back to make way for us with a tight-lipped smile.

And then I was right up against the railing, at the far end of the terrace, packed with partygoers. The hill dropped away steeply below, the Mediterranean opening wide like a grin. I knew without looking that Theo was just behind me, encircled by friends; his height cast a shadow, blocking out the lights from the house. I waited there, my whole body tensed, but he gave no sign he'd noticed me. If I leaned back, his body would be there. And then what?

Callum arrived next to me, suddenly, Lucy behind him. He handed me a glass of champagne. "You'll need this," he said. "For midnight."

I smiled politely, hiding my surprise. "Thank you," I said. "I guess you're much better at this than I am."

"At what?"

"Fancy parties, champagne."

He shrugged. "Actually, parties aren't really my thing. I never know what to do with myself."

"Oh, please, you fit right in," I said, gesturing at the black suit, the tousled hair. "Look at you." It was about the silliest thing I'd ever heard—the idea that this gorgeous, arrogant man didn't belong at the party. He'd belong at any party.

"Oh, it's easy enough to look the part," he said, nodding at my loaner dress.

I laughed and turned back to the railing and the view. "Well, thanks for the champagne." I felt rather than saw him leave.

I wasn't going to let him ruin this. It was almost midnight. The water of the bay unfurled darkly far below, shimmering with white lights, each one a boat or yacht. It was achingly beautiful. By the time the countdown started—*ten, nine, eight*—the party's excitement was building around me, and then building inside me—*seven, six, five*—and I let myself rise up on those

euphoric waves. I didn't have to worry about Callum. I didn't have to worry about anything—*four, three, two*. I only had to stand here on the edge of the world, smiling like a fool, and count down to zero.

The sky exploded with light.

Fireworks, but they weren't coming from the hillside. They weren't coming from land at all. My eyes found it: a barge, out in the Mediterranean, lit now with tiny flashes that arched skyward, spun, grew dizzy, then heaved their sparkling guts to spatter the black sky. I swayed, tipping back to take them in. All the surrounding hills must be like our hill, crowded with tipsy revelers at grand villas, retinas burning like they'd looked into the sun. And I was one of them.

I felt a tug somewhere behind, and then the sound of Theo's laughter tumbled over me. I turned toward him and saw that he had my long hair half gathered in one hand, as if he'd been pushing aside a curtain. He was smiling, luminous, the lights from the house crowning him in gold.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"You just look so happy," he said, raising his voice over the cheers and whoops.

"I can't hear you," I said, though I'd heard him perfectly. *Come closer.*

Theo bent slightly and tilted his head down next to mine. His fingers brushed my hair back from my ear. Trills of electricity flickered down my neck and up through my scalp.

"You look so happy," he repeated, and the words came with a light sensation of breath, of the air stirring around us. Next to us, people were turning to each other, leaning in, kissing and hugging.

"May I?" Theo asked, but quietly, and in the din, I could hardly hear the words. His hand slipped down to lie flat against my neck. He pulled my face toward him, already leaning down to press his mouth to mine. His lips were soft, searching, and he smelled like champagne. The kiss was gentle, almost like a question. Then he pulled back slightly, so our lips were an inch or two apart.

"It's meant to be good luck," he said.

I leaned back in, closing the space between our mouths. I kissed him this time, and it was not a polite midnight-on-New-Year's kiss. I let my body lean against him; I let his bottom lip push my lips open. I felt the heat from his mouth, the breath there, and wanted more.

But then Callum was trying to leave, pushing through behind us, and Theo stepped back to make room for him. Faye was there, pulling me sideways into a one-armed hug, pressing a kiss onto my cheek.

After that, the music became too loud to talk, and we were only dancing. Everyone, everywhere, was dancing now. On the two dance floors, on the terrace, under the lit-up trees, in the yard on the grass and on the paved walkways, the hazy streaks of decayed fireworks still hanging in the sky over us. We all danced together, but Theo's hands were always on me. On my lower back, on my hip, or his fingers slipped along my arm, slid momentarily between mine. I let that feeling, the drinks, and the thumping music settle into me. Even if I left Saint-Tropez with only this moment, it would be enough. I felt the starry-velvet sky over us, and the heavy slippery weight of my dress, and Faye's fringed body swaying to the music next to me.

Eventually the pull became too much, the tease of Theo's hands, his body next to mine but not close enough, not pressing against me like I needed. I leaned into him, let my hips find his, felt the zing of heat throb through my body. When I tilted my head back to look up at him, his eyes were half closed, his mouth dropping down to mine, already opening. He put a hand into my hair and tugged me closer, kissed me more urgently. When I let my lips part under his, I felt his body sigh against me. Dancing bodies surged around us in the dark, and I put my hands around Theo's neck and held him against me as we kissed—his hard torso, the whole long length of him. Then I found his hand and pulled him through the crowd.

We made it only as far as the little guest suite living room, the DJ's speakers thumping just on the other side of the wall. Theo's hands were tugging at the dress, the sequins scratching us as he pushed it up my thighs. He picked me up like I was nothing, weightless, and held me against him, and I put my legs around his hips, pressing into him. I felt his body against me, and the music throbbing through both of us. His hands were on my back, his

teeth on my neck. I clung to him; I let him kiss me until I felt like a bow unstrung, my whole body slack and useless with desire. “Bed,” I groaned into his mouth, and he carried me to the bedroom that was still mine for two more days.

LONDON
JANUARY 2010

When I got back to the flat in Kentish Town, cold and bleary and dragging my bags, Andre had stuck a poster for *Chelsea Made* on our door. He'd even cut out one of the girls' perfect blond heads and put in a photo of my face instead. I laughed and hugged him and tried to pretend I was glad to be home.

I'd ended up staying one more week in Saint-Tropez, after New Year's, working with Pippa till she left for boarding school. I wired Andre the rent and missed my first week of classes. It'd been an easy decision: another week of excellent pay, another week in paradise, another week with Theo.

The strongest aphrodisiac is a ticking clock, and Theo and I both felt it. Not that we needed anything to boost our chemistry, of course—it had only grown, after New Year's, after we realized that lying in bed every night, tangled in each other and Egyptian cotton, was much more fun than simply flirting. Each night at his hotel, when I was determined to get dressed, go home, be the good houseguest and tutor I should be, he would put his hands on my face and kiss me slow and deep, tug my bottom lip between his teeth, pull me back to bed. Convince me to stay longer, stay for one more, stay the night.

Miserable on the flight home, I'd put aside my coursework and read a few chapters of *Sanditon*, Austen's last novel, left unfinished when her health

declined. I'd read it before, but this time I felt like I was in the book—like I was the young woman who goes to stay with a privileged family by the sea and gets caught up with them, a bit seduced by their world. It felt romantic, what had happened to me. That feeling didn't last long in London.

I'd been home for three weeks, finding my way back into routine. I picked up my old tutoring students and a few new ones, plus a ten-week class at a boarding school outside Woking, an hour from London. On the train, and at night, I tried to keep up with my reading for class.

But when I let myself lie back in bed, surrounded by books, it was the nights in Saint-Tropez I thought of. The gloss of wine and newness over everything. The fireworks wheeling over the water, over us, Theo's hand on my neck, pulling me in at midnight. A reprieve from the whole length of my life, a vacation from myself and the person I'd always been until those few brightly lit weeks.



"OI," ANDRE CALLED, RAPPING HIS knuckles on my mostly closed door. "You've got post, Cinderella."

"You're going to have to stop with that," I said, crossing to open the door. "My hair is starting to smell of Tom's dirty socks again. The fairy tale is officially over."

"Nah, don't say that!" Andre said, slapping me lightly with the envelope before handing it over. "Prince Charming just hasn't been round yet. You know, with the shoe."

I gestured to the stack of Tom's empty pizza boxes in the kitchen. "I don't think this is really his scene."

For work, Theo split his time between three cities: London, Frankfurt, Madrid. Two weeks in each office, typically. *I'll ring you*, he'd said.

Andre shrugged. "I guess we can always catch him on the telly. New season starts up soon."

I laughed and nodded, but my stomach had squeezed into an unhappy knot. Probably Andre was right. Probably the next I'd see of Theo was on-

screen. His tall, unmistakable figure in the back of whatever party or fundraiser dinner would be the grand finale of that episode. Maybe he'd have his arm around some waif of a girl with bird ankles and honey highlights. And all would be right with the world, and I would not be part of it.

I pushed some books aside and flopped down on the bed, unfolding the letter from the envelope. It was from Queen Mary: my marks from the two course essays I'd written in Saint-Tropez. I held up the numbers for Andre to see, one hand hiding my face.

"I went all the way to bloody Mile End to deliver those essays for you, and that's what you get? Absolutely criminal," he said. Trying to make me laugh.

I could not laugh. *Unsophisticated and lacking depth*, the essay feedback said. *No new ideas. Undergraduate-level work*.

How had I let this happen? I'd dashed off the essays, rushed them to get back to the better things—a soak in the hot tub, a gourmet dinner, a day down at the port, exploring. But nothing was more important than getting my degree, my ticket to stay. If I failed, I'd have to go home, and—

My throat tightened around a small sob. I swallowed it down, but Andre saw.

"Anna, it's okay," he said. "You'll have plenty more papers."

"More *undergraduate-level* ones, I'm sure," I said, tugging up the bedsheet to wipe at my eyes. "I've never had a bad grade on anything, ever." I'd never had the things other kids had, growing up. But good grades, that was the one thing I could always count on.

"Hey, these're still passing grades," he said, sitting down next to me on the bed. "No real harm, right? As long as you do better on the next ones, you'll be grand."

My chest felt tight and hard, like a stone. I still didn't have a topic for my dissertation, even though our proposals were due at the end of the month.

"C'mon," Andre said, taking the letter from my hands. "Let's go out and get a drink. You're halfway to a master's degree now, that's all this letter says. Halfway there."

I sighed. "Can we get curry chips?"

“We can get curry chips.”

I let him pull me up from the bed and into a tight hug. Over my shoulder he said, “Six weeks with the chef and your Chelsea boy, and you’re soft as a two-minute egg. My mother would shake you till your teeth rattled.”

“What would I do without you, Andre?”

He laughed. “If all Cinderella wished for was curry chips, that fairy godmother job’d be a cinch.”



WE WERE IN A BOOTH at the Abbey, just starting our first pints, when I saw a missed call on my phone. Mrs. Wilder.

“Oh no,” I said. “Oh no.”

“What is it?”

I felt heat in my cheeks, and then it was everywhere. Nervous, sweaty dread. “Pippa said she’d be getting her test scores back this week. They’d only call me if they were really awful.”

Andre shoved me a bit. “Don’t be stupid. Go outside and ring them back. You don’t know it’s bad news.”

“They’d’ve just emailed me the results if they were good.”

“Go,” Andre said. “No chips till you come back.”

I left the noisy pub and turned left up Bartholomew, walking toward the health center, until the sounds of Kentish Town Road fell away. I found the missed call and tapped it.

“Anna! There you are,” Mrs. Wilder exclaimed in her singsongy voice. “Pippa’s done it! In the seven hundreds all across the board, ninetieth percentile. Just brilliant.”

“What? Really?”

“You know she likes to play it cool, but I could tell she was really chuffed. You know she’s had her heart set on NYU for years. Chuffed to bits.”

“Those are definitely NYU scores,” I said. The relief was like a deep breath, opening behind my ribs.

“We can’t thank you enough, Anna.”

“She did the work. She studied really hard. Even when she didn’t want to,” I laughed. That had been every day. “I’m so happy for her.”

“We all are. But listen, that’s not the only reason I called. I wanted to ask you something. A sort of favor.”

“A favor?” I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice.

“Well, you remember the house in Highgate? My sister was staying there, with her kids, but they’ve had to dash off to San Francisco just now, and the place needs looking after. It’s not a lot of house to take care of, Anna—you’d just need to water the indoor plants, check the mail, keep an eye on things. And there should be fish to feed in the koi pond, if the kids haven’t killed them off.”

“Of course,” I said. “I can stop by and check on things. That’s fine. Are there keys somewhere?”

Mrs. Wilder laughed. “No, dear, I’m saying we’d love you to *stay* there. You know these old houses, I worry about a pipe bursting or something. Saves us paying a service to look after it. I think you’d like it, and we’d like to have you in it. I’ll know the place is in good hands while we’re all scattered to the winds.”

I put my hand out and caught the wrought iron fence next to me.

“Anna, are you still there?”

“I’m here. I’m just—just a bit surprised.”

Mrs. Wilder laughed again. “Oh, don’t be. I think you’ll find it such a nice quiet place for your studies. Faye stayed there when she was in uni, you know. All her friends lived in the neighborhood, and it’s just a quick trot down to King’s Cross.”

“Right,” I said. “That makes sense. I haven’t spent much time in Highgate.” Just across the Heath, but a different world entirely.

“You’ll love it. Probably see some *familiar faces*.” Mrs. Wilder said this pointedly, with what sounded like a knowing smile. Theo had not escaped her notice. Did he still spend time in Highgate when he was back in London? Did all of them?

“Well, I’ve got to run, Anna, we’ve got tickets to a thing. You’ll let me know?”

I shook myself back to the present, the sidewalk and the fence under my fingers. “I will, absolutely. And I’ll email Pippa, give her my congratulations. Such good news.”

“The best news,” Mrs. Wilder said. “Ta, dear.”

Three o'clock in the afternoon. I was scrambling through my suitcases, about to be late to meet Theo because I couldn't find my sneakers. "Wear your trainers," he'd said on the phone. "There's a walk I think you'll like." He wouldn't say where, but really, who cared? The moment his name came up on my phone, the moment he said my name like he always did—*Anna!* like it was amazing, a bit of good news he'd just heard for the first time—I would've said yes to anything. And anyway, walking was the best way to get to know Highgate. My new neighborhood.

Mrs. Wilder had warned that the house was "a creaky old thing," but of course it wasn't. It was beautiful. Precise. The table legs all rested squarely on the dining room floor. The chairs didn't wobble. Dresser drawers slid open—silently, without protest—and closed again. Mugs were unchipped, upholstery unstained, carpets unworn. It was, in short, unlike any place I had ever lived. A place where money had been spent freely, without days and weeks of agonizing, doing "the books," as my mother had called it, to see if some modest purchase or repair might be possible.

I would very much still have to do my own "books" here, but my expenses would be much less than I was used to; I'd found someone to sublet my flat at Andre's, so I was currently living rent-free. Already I felt lighter. Free of the nagging, hesitating thing that could snatch joy from joyful days like this one, a day I hoped to spend walking hand in hand with Theo, somewhere mysterious.

I gave up on my suitcases and rushed to the next room, where I'd left a few tote bags of overflow. As I was pawing through them, I noticed a door behind the bags. It rolled open eagerly, revealing a closet the size of my bedroom in Kentish Town. I stared in disbelief. Clothes hung along every wall, tightly packed, and below them were rows and rows of shoes. Faye's shoes.

Mrs. Wilder had warned me of this, too—that Faye had “forgotten a few things” when she left London, but she shopped so much, she never missed them.

Far in the back, I found a plain white pair of tennis shoes and pulled them out. I slipped my feet in and laced them up hurriedly before I could examine the act and feel strange about it. Faye had lent me clothes before. Shoes almost daily. If she were here, she'd be dressing me herself, pushing me out the door, telling me to borrow the beautiful waxed navy raincoat hanging to my right, too, in case it rained wherever Theo was taking me. But I wasn't going to do that. I picked up my black canvas H&M coat by the door and stepped out onto the wide stone stairs.

Theo was there, at the gate on the street, smiling up at me, fluttering all the butterflies in my gut. Blonder, taller, broader than I'd remembered, in perfectly faded jeans and a dark Barbour coat. Always with a light sheen of attractive stubble emphasizing his strong jaw. And then those eyes, almost too light to be blue, uncannily pretty. He was only a year older than me, but he felt very grown-up, more real here. Nothing in France had ever felt real. But here we were, in the city that was mine, too.

At the gate, Theo leaned down and kissed me, lightly, as if we'd only just seen each other yesterday. His warm, citrusy cologne washed over me. “I'd forgotten how lovely your eyes are,” he said.

“I never gave you the address,” I said, only just realizing it. “But here you are.”

He laughed. “Oh, I've been round before.”

Was that weird? But no, of course he'd been here—Faye had probably thrown plenty of parties when the house was hers.

“Well, Anna,” he said, offering his hand. “Should we crack on?”

It was a cold day, but the sun was warm on my back and in my hair as we walked down the sidewalk. “Where are you taking me?” I asked, nudging him with my shoulder. I assumed we were going to Hampstead Heath, its miles of hills and woods. Did Theo think I’d never been there? I wondered if he’d mind that London Anna was not as clueless as Saint-Tropez Anna. I suspected he liked that about me—about our dynamic. Liked taking me under his wing a bit.

“You’ll see. It’s a bit dark,” Theo said, nudging me back. “But I think you’ll like it.”

But nothing could be dark here. Makepeace Avenue was a street of grand houses, all inexplicably designed in the classic Tudor style: white, with exposed wood beams along the eaves and seams of each building. It was like time-traveling to the Elizabethan Age, since almost all housing in London was plain, modest brick. The strangest thing about this place was the stunning silence of it: the empty sidewalks, the narrow hedgerowed streets, thin strips of barely trafficked road between overgrown houses, gardens tucked behind. I’d already found the best view. All I had to do was walk to the end of the road and look down the hill, and there, pinched atop the tree-lined street, was all of London. The view Liv and Andre and I had climbed Parliament Hill for, here, practically at my doorstep.

I followed Theo up and over a low hill. It was distracting, having his body next to mine, after so long without it, wanting it. I had missed him, more than I’d wanted to admit. When we reached the end, Swain’s Lane stood ahead of us, and behind it, behind a black wrought iron fence, was a dense green forest.

“Look again,” Theo said, waving me toward it.

The forest was thick not just with trees, but with gravestones, too. “Oh,” I breathed. “What’s that?”

“That’s our walk,” Theo said, grinning down at me. “Highgate Cemetery.”

I crossed the lane, letting my fingers find the fence. On the other side, endless headstones too old and worn to have names or dates crowded

shoulder to shoulder, leaning on each other wearily like the last old men leaving the pub at closing time.

“How old?” I asked, without turning away.

“Depends what part,” Theo said. He was farther away than I’d expected, still standing on the far side of the street, watching me with evident enjoyment. “Should we go in?”



THE CEMETERY WAS ENORMOUS; IT took us a few minutes just to walk up the hill to the entrance. “I thought you might fancy it,” Theo said. “A bit of the history of your new neighborhood.”

He steered me away from the center, the newer, neater headstones. We wound down the hill, along a dim path, deeper into the woods. He held my hand while we walked and told me all about the history—the oldest graves, the biggest tombs, the most well-known residents. Each path we turned down was more secluded, more haunting. If there had once been order here, straight lines, right angles, it was tumbled long ago by tree roots, the upheaval of earth and growth and time. Ivy and moss climbed everything; ferns covered the ground.

“I didn’t know you were such a history buff,” I said.

Theo smiled ruefully. “A man isn’t born into finance, Anna. He’s pushed, kicking and screaming, by his parents.”

“You studied history at Cambridge?”

“Only a bit, as much as my college would let me. I was admitted for economics. You know, here, they want you on one track. Don’t like you to faff about much.”

“I think that’s why so many of my students want to study in the States,” I said. “My father, he didn’t understand me studying English. He would’ve loved a *finance* daughter, but I hate that stuff.”

Where I grew up, saying you wanted to study books was about the same as saying you wanted to be an artist or a pianist or a poet. It wasn’t a livelihood, not something the world *needed* from you, or from anyone.

Saying so might even sound like you thought you were better than everyone else, the people working their regular, necessary jobs.

But at Smith, you could major in women's studies, or classics, or film, or a hundred other things that would give my father an aneurysm. I let myself declare English and told Dad I had a concrete plan: to work in publishing, help bring new books into the world.

He'd just laughed. Mom reminded him that lots of English majors teach—good and important work—and he reminded her that teachers made next to nothing, and what was the point of going to the fancy school just to end up right back where I was before?

“Do you think you'll keep teaching?” Theo asked. “Once you're done with the master's program?”

“Probably not,” I said. “It's not like SAT stuff is a natural transition into classroom subjects here.”

“It's not?”

I shook my head. “Why would anyone want an American teaching their British kids British literature?”

Theo chuckled. “That's a fair point. But then, you're not like other Americans. You're much more cultured. And so well-spoken, too.”

I laughed. “Thanks, I guess?”

“No, really, it's in how you carry yourself. You're very classy. No one would ever guess you came from such modest means. Usually you can tell straight off, with those types.”

I looked up at him, trying to read why he would say something so unkind. But it was clear from his face that he thought he was complimenting me. And I guess he was? Complimenting me and insulting everyone *like* me?

“So then, if teaching's out, what's next?” he said, oblivious.

“I'd hoped to get a job at a publisher, maybe,” I said. “But now that I'm here, it seems like those jobs will be very competitive.”

“Oh!” Theo said, turning to me. “But you'll have to talk to Tess. I'll introduce you. She interned at some publisher or other, down Haymarket. Or maybe an agency of some kind? Anyway, she's very much a book person, like you.”

I doubted she was much like me at all, but it was nice to hear that Theo was happy to introduce me to his friends. I'd been wary of a repeat of the Callum situation, someone who was happy to talk to me until there was a crowd around. I really liked Theo; I didn't want to be his little working-class secret.

"That'd be great, I'd like to meet her," I said.

We turned down another path, narrowing into denser woods. "I wasn't sure you'd call," I said hesitantly. "I wasn't sure if we'd see each other again. If it made sense to, here."

Theo pulled me closer to him as we walked. "It makes sense to me because I like spending time with you," he said.

Most of that time had been in bed, of course, but we'd been perfectly compatible there. Surprisingly, for how little we knew each other. I didn't have a lot of free time, but I was happy to give what I had to Theo. To stay as much as I could in the glow of him, the heat lamp of his affection.

I smiled up at him. "How should we spend our time, then?"

"You haven't seen half of what London has to offer, I'd guess. Why not let me show you around, take you out to all the good spots?"

"You have been a good tour guide today," I said, leaning into him.

So, Theo wanted to be my well-versed and well-funded host—maybe I should have been insulted, but I only found it charming. I did want to see how London, my home, expanded for people like him. And I wanted this smart, sexy, attentive man to want to show me. "I'd love that. But I'm also happy to just go for a walk," I said, gesturing at the path. "I don't need to be constantly wined and dined."

He grinned. "But Anna, the wining and dining is really my forte."

"Well, just don't get your hopes up," I teased. "You won't be able to top us dancing with Elton John on Christmas Eve, wherever you take me."

"Oh, I think we can do even better."

"Mick Jagger on Valentine's Day?"

Theo shook his head. "He's never in town. We could definitely rustle up Ronnie Wood for you, though, if it's Stones you need. He's round the Mayfair galleries quite a bit."

“I guess that’ll do.”

“You’ll have a good time, I promise,” he said, squeezing my hand.

“I’m sure I will,” I said. It was true. I was eager for anything, for everything. Maybe that was what Theo liked about me. It wasn’t hard to imagine; if he spent all his time with too-cool girls like Faye and Lucy, who were essentially allergic to enjoying themselves, my sincere excitement was probably attractive.

“Have you noticed them? All the angels?” Theo asked, pointing at a statue. “Highgate is famous for them.”

“They’re beautiful,” I said. We’d already passed dozens—angels praying, weeping, playing music. Angels sleeping on the tomb as if it were a bed, heads on their folded arms, wings loose and drooping behind them.

Theo shook his head. “It’s all a bit much, to me.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Isn’t the grief of your human family enough?” he said. “Do we really need angels weeping, too?”

I laughed, though I hadn’t meant to. It was sweet. “People need all sorts of strange things, in mourning,” I said. “I guess I don’t begrudge them an angel or two.”

We hadn’t buried Mom. She’d wanted to be cremated, but there was no such thing as an affordable urn, so the funeral home gave us the ashes in a black plastic box, like an oversized film canister. She’d been so small, near the end. Almost nothing at all, thin as a bone under the blanket. The box had been opened only once; I scooped out a jam jar of gray ash the day before I flew to London. I brought that dust to England with me, and it was the farthest my mother had ever traveled. Her first time overseas.

“Where’d you disappear to?” Theo said. He pulled my hand toward him again, to his chest, tucking it inside his open coat.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I was just thinking—maybe the angels are a way to make it seem like the whole universe is grieving with you, even the heavens. Like the rest of the world can’t just go on like normal.” Which is, of course, exactly what the rest of the world does.

Theo dropped his voice. “You, ah— You sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

I hesitated, turning to look at a tree with its branches twisted around an old tomb, hugging it close. It would be too hard to explain my mother’s illness to Theo. He’d never lived in a country where people had to ration their insulin, weigh their health against their income.

I didn’t want to tell Theo about it. This thing with him was heady, intoxicating—why weigh that down? I didn’t have to complicate our time together with any ugliness. I didn’t have to let those two worlds meet.

“No,” I said, turning to him with a smile. “I was just thinking about this book, by Joan Didion. Have you read her?”

Theo visibly relaxed. “Can’t say that I have, but the name’s familiar. I’m ashamed to think of the last time I read a book that wasn’t about emerging markets or currency manipulation.”

I winced theatrically. “Keep talking about that, you’ll have to dig me a grave here.”

He laughed, and the sound was a shock, with the quiet forest hanging over us.

We explored each neglected path and overgrown corner in almost complete privacy. When it started to drizzle, Theo led me back around to the main path. Tourists in raincoats were clotted there, blocking our way, gathered around a tomb with an oversized bust on top.

“Karl Marx,” Theo said as we squeezed past the group. “The most famous inhabitant, but not the largest funeral.”

“Whose was that?”

“Tom Sayers, bare-knuckle prizefighter. A real working-class hero—started off as a bricklayer, helped build King’s Cross. Over thirty thousand people turned out for his funeral procession,” he said, gesturing toward Swain’s Lane. “They closed Parliament for it.”

I couldn’t help but smile, watching Theo’s history-nerd side come out. Really, he would’ve made a great teacher, if his parents hadn’t interfered. Kind, curious, generous. Hard to imagine a better guide to London, for me. “Where’s he buried?” I asked. “Did we miss it?”

“He’s buried in the west cemetery, just across the street. It’s open to tours only, unfortunately. I wish you could see it.”

“And are the tour guides on that side just as good-looking?” I teased, steering us down one last shaded path, hoping for a moment of privacy.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “Real ugly buggers.” Then he stopped on the path, pulling me against him. “And don’t forget, this guide also makes you coffee in the morning.”

I tipped my face up to him, the way I’d been longing to since we’d entered the dark cemetery. I needed him to kiss me, to pull my bottom lip into his mouth, to tug it gently with his teeth. It was too much to be near him this long and not have that.

“Oh, is this an overnight tour?” I whispered.

He caught my hair up in one hand, tipping my head back, bending to kiss my neck. The bare sensation—cold rain and warm lips—were at odds, and my whole body glowed with it. His mouth inched slowly up to my jaw, and then to my ear, and I held my breath so I wouldn’t release the little moan in my throat.

“Oh, yes,” he breathed into my ear. “It lasts all night.”

Theo did make me coffee in the morning. He knew more about the house than I did, coaxing the massive espresso machine to life like it was an old familiar friend. I wondered at this, while we drank our coffee, but then the mugs were empty and he put me up on the counter and fit himself between my knees and kissed me until all I felt was a hollow, hungry need.

We went back to bed—his arms around me, pulling me in and under him, just where I had wanted to be since the moment we’d woken that morning. It no longer seemed surprising that Theo had called, that he wanted to continue where we’d left off in Saint-Tropez. He’d be crazy not to, the way our bodies fit together. And I’d be crazy to mind that he spent half his time in other countries. As long as I got these bright, breathless mornings whenever he was in London, I was happy.

We dozed after, and then it was lunchtime. I was supposed to meet Liv and Andre in Finsbury Park, but Theo convinced me to cancel. He wanted to take me to a pub in Highgate Village for the traditional Sunday roast—roast beef, root vegetables, fingerling potatoes, doughy Yorkshire puddings to sop up the gravy. And we’d probably see some of his friends there; he was sure I’d like them.

Before he got in the shower, he handed me an iPhone from his bag. “Put your SIM card in that,” he said.

“Theo,” I protested, more stunned than anything, “I don’t need you to buy me a phone.”

“I didn’t. It’s my old one. Doesn’t hold a charge very well, but still miles better than that old brick you’ve got.”

While I waited for the iPhone to boot up, I dug through my suitcases for something that wasn’t too cheap-looking to wear to meet Theo’s friends. I pulled out my favorite jeans. Jeans at least were universal across class and country. The more battered, the better.

My eyes caught on the white tennis shoes by the bedroom door, where I’d kicked them off last night. Faye’s, left behind, wholly unmissed.

I went silently into the next bedroom, where the closet yawned open just as I’d left it. I stepped inside and let my fingers slip through the clothes, the hangers tinkling musically as I went: silk shirts, cashmere sweaters, knit cardigans with the tags still dangling from one sleeve.

I had Faye’s number in my phone. I could text her. I could ask.

She loved clothes; they were her superpower. But she had no attachment to them. How could she, if she’d moved away and never missed them? They were only things to her, and she had more things, and other things, and newer things.

A V-neck sweater: the dark blue-gray of storm clouds, the knit a subtle interlocking herringbone. I took the hanger off the rail and held the sweater in front of me, in the mirror. It didn’t fix everything; I was still myself in all the ways I had always disliked, and all the new ways London had brought to my notice. Back home, I hadn’t known that a haircut could look cheap, or that eyebrows could be professionally crafted. But the storm cloud sweater made me feel like I could manage a Sunday roast with Theo’s friends.

I slipped the sweater off the hanger and looked at it for signs of—of what? Of belonging to somebody? I brought it to my face, and it smelled of nothing, of no person, of mattering to no one but me.



THE GATEHOUSE WAS A HUGE Tudor-style building in the heart of Highgate Village. The walk there was short but freezing, very windy, and Theo tucked me against him, promising a table by the fireplace. I followed him into a

high-ceilinged, open, uncrowded room, lit with the golden glow of an enormous glass chandelier. Much too nice to be called a pub. The fireside table was already occupied, but Theo pulled me forward anyway, right up to the three young men seated at it.

“Mate, where’d you blow in from?” said one of them, laughing as he stood. The farthest turned reluctantly away from the fire, and I saw, with a jolt in my stomach, that it was Callum. In Saint-Tropez, seeing him almost daily, I’d made myself immune to it: the ample lips, the sweeping cheekbones, the dark, long-lashed, watchful eyes. The way his brushed-back hair, the color of black coffee, spilled over his forehead when he looked down, away from me.

“And here I thought we’d seen the last of each other,” I said to him.

“I guess this city isn’t big enough for the two of us,” he said through the same tight smile.

Oh, you can do better than that, I thought. Say how really corking it is to see me here, that American scrounger you just can’t seem to get rid of.

He stood to greet Theo, and then turned to me. The usual cursory cheek kisses were required, but I could see his whole body stiffen as he leaned toward me. Like he didn’t trust himself to do it. His lips felt hot against my cheek, still cold from outside. Then he pulled away, and his cologne, or shampoo maybe, smelled of riding in the Citroën with him, in the dark, just the two of us. It was embarrassing how alluring I still found him, even with the stiffness, his obvious unhappiness at seeing me here.

Theo introduced me to the other men, both late twenties. Sebastian, nattily dressed, and Hamza, on the short side with long, thick hair. He pumped my hand warmly.

“Here, you two look frozen,” he said. “Bit parky out there. Take our seats, scooch right up to the fire.” He waved off my protestations. “I’ll get more chairs, we’ll fit just fine.”

Hamza waved me into Callum’s chair: red leather, high-backed, the one nearest the fire. After I sat, Theo came behind and picked up the chair with me in it, moving it still closer to the fire. He brushed my hair back and bent in for a kiss. Behind him, I saw Callum scowl and turn away, head for the bar.

Theo settled in the chair opposite me. Sebastian and Hamza sat next to him, and they dropped immediately into politics. Or, more accurately, how politics would affect business. Speculating if the Labour prime minister would call a general election soon, whether the Conservative Party would win back control if he did.

“Tories will decimate him,” Sebastian said with relish. “It’s long past due.”

Theo shook his head. “Austerity, after a recession? That won’t be good for any of us, you know.”

“No joke,” Hamza said, nodding. “My boss is hedging on everything.”

Sebastian waved this away. “You lot just like Brown ’cause he bailed out a few banks. Now you’re on the take.”

I stared into the fire. In my world, the recession had been about interrupted futures—back to school, back to shift work, back to childhood bedrooms. For them, it was a question of business, numbers, and how best to capitalize. For me, it might also be a question of staying; the Tories would slash immigration limits. There was talk that they might do away with the post-study work visa scheme I was counting on.

Callum placed a small glass of rosé in front of me, wordlessly. Passing a pint of lager to Theo, he settled into the only empty chair, to my right. He took a sip of his own beer, then nodded at the debate across the table. “Riveting stuff?”

I’d planned to give him an unbothered smile, but I was, in fact, bothered. I made a face.

“Don’t panic,” he said. “We’re not all Tories, you know.”

“What a comfort,” I said, unwinding my scarf. The fire was roaring.

Callum kept his voice low. “Just Seb is, here. Bit of a lad’s lad. His father set up Kenya’s banking system, so, you know, *they’ve done all right for themselves.*” He said this sarcastically. “The rest of us vote Labour. If only to stick it to our fathers.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thank god for the Oedipal vote.”

“Well, you know, if it wasn’t for the US, Labour’d be in a much stronger position right now,” Callum said.

Honestly, it was a talent—the way he could turn any conversation, no matter how innocuous, into backhanded criticism. “Sure,” I said, reaching for the wine. “And that’s somehow my fault?”

“Well, there’s no denying your government’s policy played a part—Gordon’s made a go of it, but Blair was hugely popular before he let himself be led by the nose into a war that had nothing to do with us.”

“It had nothing to do with me, either,” I snapped, keeping my voice low so the others wouldn’t hear us. As an American, I got a fair bit of grief about Bush, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Like I’d started them myself. From others, I understood it. From Callum, I couldn’t stand it.

“Well, that’s not strictly true—” he began.

“Just because it’s a democracy doesn’t mean people like me get a say. That’s not how it works.” I gestured around the table. “It’s people like this, sitting around tables, talking about the world like it’s a business. The people I grew up with, they fight in the wars that the people you grew up with plan.”

Callum scoffed. “Oh, yes, of course, the Sunday pub war room.”

Which was more annoying, his patronizing tone or how easy it was for him to get to me? I turned in my chair toward the fire, away from him, and tried to listen to what Theo was saying—something about EU policy, or rates, or tariffs. I pulled my fingers through my hair, attempting to unknot what the wind had done.

“Your hair, you look rather windblown,” Callum said, after a few moments.

“You really know how to compliment a girl,” I said, talking to the fire.

He shook his head impatiently. “I was just going to ask if you’d been out walking on the Heath, that’s all.”

I turned back, studying him for a moment. The last time we’d talked about the Heath, he’d admitted seeing me there last summer, long before we knew each other. But he made no sign that he remembered that now. That had been the other, kinder Callum. This one would never admit he’d ever noticed me.

“I haven’t been out on the Heath since I got back from France,” I said. And then, stung by his impassivity, I couldn’t resist adding, “But yesterday

Theo took me around Highgate Cemetery.”

Callum laughed, lips parting over perfect white teeth. “Ah, yes, Theo’s Highgate tour. A favorite among many young ladies in North London.”

I forced a smile, but my stomach had tied itself in a firm, uncomfortable knot. I filed the comment away, to dissect later.

“Highgate’s not even the oldest cemetery in London,” Callum went on. “Did he tell you that? It’s just the most famous one.”

But not even Callum could ruin that perfect day for me. I smiled and sat back in my chair. “I thought it was beautiful, the way the woods are reclaiming it. And it was so sweet that Theo knew I’d like it. You know, my favorite parts of London are like that—the spots where you can see the different layers of history. It’s like seeing the seams, the centuries stitched together.”

“Did you see Marx’s tomb? Did he tell you it was bombed, in the seventies?” he asked.

“No, he failed to mention that.”

Callum’s full lips turned up into a smile. “It actually leans a little *to the left* now.”

I burst out laughing, then stifled it with my hand as a table of frowning old men looked over at me. “Sorry,” I said as Theo and the others turned toward us. “I usually try not to be such a loud, embarrassing American.”

At that moment, a trio of beautiful young women approached the table. “Theo!” the blonde exclaimed. “How long are you in town?”

As Theo stood to kiss her cheek, and then the cheeks of the other two women, my jealous brain offered me the image of him leading each of them, one by one, on a personal tour of Highgate Cemetery, down every dark, secluded path. Fucking Callum.

But then Theo turned to me. “You have to meet Anna!” he said to the women. Sweetly, with what seemed like genuine eagerness. He introduced each one: Zara was impossibly blond, with a tan that spoke of frequent trips to warmer countries. Tess and Ginny were clearly sisters, both with long reddish hair and creamy skin. Ginny seemed younger, maybe twenty, and softer; Tess was statuesque—she looked like Vivien Leigh, but with hair the

color of deep merlot. A classic film heroine, standing in front of me in dark jeans and a boatneck sweater.

“How did you two meet?” Tess asked.

I looked to Theo, and he said simply, “Oh, Anna’s a friend of Faye’s.” He raised his eyebrows slightly, as if what he’d said was a question. A question I could choose how to answer.

Callum turned in his chair to look at me, those piercing eyes, as if he was very much interested in hearing what I might have to say on the subject of my friendship with Faye. Which was based on me working for her family. Not a detail I intended to include, since Theo had kindly given me the choice.

“We never see her anymore,” Tess said, leaning toward me. “Where is she? How is she?”

“Well, she’s good,” I said. “Really good. She’s in Saint-Tropez.”

“Isn’t that lovely,” Tess said genuinely. “Where’s she staying? Is it just for the winter?”

“Up the hill from Plage de la Moune, just before you get into town. With family.” But everyone was still waiting for me to say more. “She— She’s got a lovely little cottage there. It’s absolutely busting with clothes, you know Faye.”

They all laughed and nodded. If they didn’t even know that Faye lived in Saint-Tropez, they couldn’t be that close with her. Theo must have known; he must’ve seen that I had a chance to meet his friends differently, like a peer, not like their peer’s hired help. I was glad.

Tess and the others went to the bar, and I took the moment to kiss Theo. Over his shoulder, I saw Callum frowning down at his drink, like it tasted bad. Probably he’d make sure to mention my tutoring job loudly before the day was over, filling in the information Theo and I had omitted.

When the girls returned, Hamza pulled a table over, and more chairs, and we all squeezed in by the fire. “What’re you drinking?” I asked, noticing the steaming purple liquid in their mugs.

Tess pointed to a small black vat on the bar. I’d seen the barman ladle their drinks from it. “Mulled wine. It’s so scrummy.” I recognized the neat, flat accent of the incredibly posh, the boarding-schooled elite of Britain.

Leaning toward me conspiratorially, she said, “It’s easy to have too much. Not that I’d know about that, of course.”

“I’ll have to try it.”

Ginny made a horrified face. “Don’t they have it, in the States?”

“That’s actually why I left,” I said, unable to resist. “The tragic dearth of hot mulled wine.”

The girls all laughed, loudly and unself-consciously, even though the old men were frowning at us again from their table nearby. And I felt something loosening in me, not entirely connected to the full glass of wine now sloshing in my still-empty stomach. And then Tess said, “What else brings you here? Besides the mulled wine, of course.”

“I came for a master’s program. Literature, at Queen Mary.”

Tess put her hand on my arm. Her fingernails were perfect pearl ovals. “Really? I studied literature,” she exclaimed. “At UCL. I just finished, year before last.” I remembered what Theo had said, about Tess having interned at a London publisher.

“I’ve heard that’s a great English program,” I said. “Did you have a specific focus?”

“The Romantics, I guess?” Tess said, scooting her chair closer to me. “They’re sort of irresistible, aren’t they? The drama, the stately prose, the brooding heartthrobs. What about you?” She waited for me to reply, eager, the mug of wine half raised to her lips.

I shrugged. “I know it’s not groundbreaking, but I’ve always loved Jane Austen. I read *Sense and Sensibility* in the library when I was really young, probably too young to read it, and I really fell for Willoughby.”

“Willoughby, Wickham, no one does a dreamy fuckboy better than Austen,” Tess said, arching a perfect mahogany eyebrow. “I wonder—you’re not one of those people who thinks *Wuthering Heights* is the height of romance, are you?”

“God, no,” I laughed, shaking my head. “The book is a well-executed idea, but I fundamentally hate the idea being executed.”

“Listen, Anna, I’ve just had a thought,” Tess said, leaning forward, her face lit with excitement. “Have you been to the British Library yet? Please

say no.”

“I’ve walked past it a lot, but never been inside.” It was a mystery to me what the British Library was actually for; it didn’t lend out books.

“You must let me take you!” Tess said. “They always have different exhibits on, but really, the permanent exhibit is the best part anyway. They have Shakespeare’s first folio, loads of original manuscripts. You’ll love this—you can even see Jane Austen’s *actual* writing desk. And her specs!” She was practically bouncing in her seat, her exuberance was so sincere. It made me think of Lucy and Simon back in Saint-Tropez, too sophisticated for anything London had to offer. “What are you doing on Tuesday?” Tess said, leaning in. “I have yoga, but that’s in the morning.”

“I have class Tuesday.” *And a tutoring student*, I didn’t say. But that was in Farringdon, not far from King’s Cross, very walkable. “I could probably be there by two or so?”

“That’s perfect, we can meet there! Give me your number.”

The wine was warming me from the inside and the fire from the outside. The scene around me was like a dreamy magazine spread: these handsome men, these beautiful women, their cashmere sweaters and soft-spun button-down shirts, leaning forward in their chairs, glowing with firelight and wine. They looked like they had everything they needed, like they had never wanted, never failed, never lost someone.

At the bar, Tess ordered roasts for everyone and four mugs of mulled wine. I helped her carry the drinks back to the girls.

“That’s it, let the lads fend for themselves,” Ginny said. She shot a look at Hamza down the table, a look with some history in it, but before I could wonder about it, Zara was saying my name.

“You’ve got the Stella McCartney trainers.”

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. Trainers, Stella McCartney. Faye’s shoes.

“These?” I said dumbly. I looked down at my feet and felt a thin curl of shame lick through my insides: Faye lending me a pair of her shoes at the villa, making fun of my Primark flats. The fraying threads, the glue showing around the sole. How I’d always felt with her, classless and outclassed.

She'd liked me best when I was quiet, dazzled: her own Eliza Doolittle from *My Fair Lady*, dressed up for show. Like she was waiting for me to recite, haltingly, *The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain?*, so she could clap her hands and deliver me, her novelty poor friend, to whatever bar, boat, or beach club she'd decided on.

But I didn't have to be Eliza Doolittle here, too. Maybe Callum would stay quiet. Maybe I could fit myself into this fireside magazine spread. Not spend every moment on the grinding, exhausting, needle-thin tightrope I'd been walking since I got here. In and out of fancy homes, brushing alongside the fuller life I wanted but never inhabiting it.

"I have a couple pairs, too," Zara said, nodding. "Don't you love them?"

I looked down at the shoes again. Completely white and plain, with thin white laces. How could Zara even tell? They were all waiting for me to answer. I felt rather than saw Callum watching me. Listening, hovering on the edge of his conversation and mine. I did not look up at him. "Yes, they're great shoes," I said. "So comfortable." Not a lie, but not at all the truth, either.

The atrium of the British Library was a cavernous open hall, several stories high, all brutalist white and concrete except for two interior brick walls on either side and the ceiling of skylights. Nothing like the small, dark, densely packed library where Mom and I had spent our weekends, the air sweet and hazy with mildew and book dust.

At the rear of the atrium, three additional floors jutted out like mezzanines in a theater. They wrapped around an imposing collection of books shelved behind glass, thousands of them, running the height of the whole building. Clearly inaccessible, they emanated a soft, golden glow, giving the whole hall a mythical, magical aura. I had to tilt back to take it in, and I was mid-tilt when a voice very close to me said, “That’s the King’s Library.”

I startled, and Tess laughed and pulled me into an old-friends hug. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold, and she wore suede leggings tucked into chic riding boots. Too nervous to borrow from Faye’s closet again, I’d carefully rolled the sleeves on one of my slouchy button-up shirts.

Pointing up at the towering wall of books, Tess bobbed on the balls of her feet. “It’s George III’s full collection,” she said. “More than fifty thousand books!”

We looked around at the open hall, me craning my neck. In every corner, on every seat and surface, people were working on laptops or reading books.

“Nice it isn’t the usual crush, chockablock with tourists,” Tess said. “There’s a Peyton and Byrne café up on the next floor.”

“Maybe I’ll catch a little inspiration here,” I said. “I need a topic for my dissertation by the end of the month.”

“What’re you thinking?”

I shook my head. “It’s too open-ended,” I said. “How does anyone choose?” I didn’t say that I was also, plainly, terrified to choose wrong. This dissertation determined everything.

“Theo told me you interned at a publisher,” I said, remembering. “That’s where I’m hoping to work. I was an assistant at a small press before I came here.”

Tess nodded. “I was at an agency, too, Curtis Brown. I interned at Hachette on the publicity side while I was at uni, and in editorial at Bloomsbury after. You’d like it; it’s loads of girls just like us.”

“Like us?”

“Well, you know—girls who can afford to work unpaid for six months. No guarantee of a paying gig after.”

I was not at all that kind of girl, but of course Tess had no way to know that. “I guess I’d always thought an internship was how you got the job,” I said.

“Oh, it is, very much,” she said. “But everyone in those internships, they’re top students, quick studies, really hustling. Well-connected, too, often families in publishing. When jobs open up, that’s usually who they go to.”

My stomach had knotted itself tightly under my ribs; I’d suspected this, but Tess was confirming in real time that my plan to work in publishing here wasn’t just unlikely, it was impossible. I could not afford a six-month unpaid job audition.

“I’d be happy to connect you with my Bloomsbury contacts,” Tess said. “All set to go in?”

I followed her into a dimly lit gallery, spread over two levels, noticeably colder than the main hall. A few other people were browsing, but the space was reverently hushed. “This is the permanent exhibit,” Tess said in a low voice.

We passed slowly by the uplit documents along one wall, and I tried to take them in—Leonardo da Vinci’s notebook, Michelangelo’s anatomical

drawings, Mozart's compositions. A fire-damaged Magna Carta. An ancient Hindu text written on a palm leaf. A child's birthday card, splayed flat: a train on the front, and on the back, John Lennon's scribbled lyrics to "A Hard Day's Night."

Tess took my hand and tugged me over to the wall of manuscript pages: Shakespeare's first folio, Virginia Woolf's pages inked black with edits. We examined a crumbling notebook with tiny watercolor illustrations, captioned, *The earliest known writings of Charlotte Brontë (c. 1826), an illustrated short story written for baby sister Anne*. I couldn't believe I was seeing it.

"Look, Anna!" Tess said breathlessly. I realized, belatedly, that she still had hold of my hand. With the other, she was pointing at a long glass case, with an ancient wooden writing desk at one end. The sign was simple: *JANE AUSTEN*.

I approached the glass, all but pressing my nose to it. Thin wire-framed glasses sat next to the desk, between an ink pot and a few loose leaves of yellowed paper. Handwritten manuscript pages from *Persuasion*.

My breath caught, and Tess heard it and grinned.

"Can you believe it?" she said. "They rotate a lot of stuff in the exhibit, but her things are always out!"

I let my fingers touch the glass. Here I was, surrounded by fragments of the authors I'd grown up reading. This was why I'd come to London, wasn't it? I'd been sure that I would be able to feel them here, even if it was decades or centuries after they'd lived and written. And I could; there was magic here. Tess clearly felt it, too.

"*Persuasion*'s been my favorite book since I was sixteen," I said.

Tess gave me a funny look. "Why aren't you writing your dissertation about Austen?"

"I wish I could." I was the most generic thing you could imagine: a young woman who loved Jane Austen. "Scholars have been writing about her for more than a century. What could I possibly add?"

"Who cares?" Tess said, shaking her head. "My professors always said you should look for patterns, then pull them apart, see how they work. You already know her work so well."

“I guess,” I said, giving myself a moment to think. “I always liked how so many of her heroines are girls dropped into a completely new place, a new social strata.”

Tess nodded eagerly. “*Mansfield Park*,” she said. “Fanny Price.”

“Exactly—a poor relation come to a sprawling estate. A summer away, or an invitation to Northanger Abbey. They’re fish out of water.”

Tess tapped on the glass over the *Persuasion* pages. “Even Anne Elliot goes to Bath, and Lyme.”

“Right, it jumbles up class, and propriety.”

Tess raised her eyebrows. “Don’t you think there might be a dissertation there?”

“Oh.” I let out all my breath. “I’ll probably need to go deeper than that.”

“Or broader, open it up?” Tess said, waving around the gallery, toward the pages of countless other authors.

I nodded slowly. “I could look at it more widely. Start with Austen, then jump to the twentieth century—bring in E. M. Forster’s novels and stories about Brits in Italy and India.”

“Well, this might be a bit too on the nose, but what about all those novels about Americans abroad?” Tess said. “That Henry James kind of thing.”

I was so relieved that I laughed. “Tess, that’s perfect.” I could see the whole structure opening up now: Henry James, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald. All three wrote novels about Americans in Europe—outside of class, not expected to have land or titles. They just had to be charming. Characters with money, without money, on the hunt for money. Triumphant, failing, losing sight of themselves, losing everything. The results were mixed at best. Which was perfect for a dissertation.

It wouldn’t be a stretch, would it—writing about the crucible of living abroad, the large and small tests you use to wonder, Am I succeeding? Is this what I wanted?

My phone buzzed. A text from Theo: *Drinks in Highgate Village? The Red Lion & Sun? Hamza here, and Ginny. Might get stabby.* So I’d been right, there was some history between those two. I showed it to Tess. “Oh,

yes, there's a story there," she laughed, turning to go. "I could probably write a dissertation on that."

I followed her out of the gallery, onto the first mezzanine level. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sunlit space, the open belly of the library, full of people.

This time it was Tess's phone that buzzed.

"Sounds like we're missed," she said. "Shall we head north and join them?"

"Sure," I said. "But first—" I crossed to the inner edge of the mezzanine, where it nearly touched the towering King's collection. I leaned forward on the gold railing, just a few feet of open air between me and the glowing, glass-cased shelves. Even with so many thousands of them, the spines were only a few colors, soft time-faded shades of burgundy, gold, brown. And all around me, hundreds of people writing, working, reading. "Do you think I could work here someday?" I asked Tess when she came and leaned up next to me. "Or maybe I could just live here?"

"I'd work here for free, even if it was just sweeping up the crumbs at the café," she said. "I'm not sure publishing was meant for me, really, at the end of the day. I love books—more than anything in the world—but I've sort of gone off trying to make a life from them. Uni really soured me on the whole business." I watched Tess's shoulders go up in a sad little shrug.

"You didn't like your course?" I asked.

"No one there ever took me seriously. Classmates or professors. They just saw me as this jammy little rich girl. Like I wasn't smart, just lucky. Poor me, right?" She laughed weakly. Trying to mask the old wound, but only showing it off more.

I knew all too well how easy it was to stick out in class—first at Smith, and now at Queen Mary. It was just hard to believe she might have experienced that, too. My understanding of the world was that money unlocked it.

Tess looked up at me, with a shy smile. "I think that's why it's so nice talking about books and writers again, with you."

“I actually feel that way, too,” I said hesitantly. “Out of place. In my course.”

In that moment, I knew I could tell her everything. It was just my own shame holding me back; Tess wouldn’t mind that I was different from her other friends, that I hadn’t grown up like they had. She wouldn’t mind that I worked for Faye’s family, or even that I had omitted that fact when we first met. I should try, shouldn’t I?

My whole body tensed, gripping the gold railing, anticipating what I would say. “I’ve just stopped trying to make friends, in class,” I began. “I’m too different there. I grew up differently.” I took a slow, steadying breath, steeling myself to say the rest.

“Who cares about your classmates. Their loss, my gain!” Tess sang cheerily, throwing an arm across my shoulders. “Look at you. Beautiful girl, smart, funny, living her best life in Highgate.” Then she pushed off the railing and turned toward the door. “Where’s your flat? Are you over by the park? That’s where me and Ginny are. George Michael’s a few houses down, been there for ages.”

And just like that, the moment was over. I let go of the railing, and the breath I’d been holding, and it felt like a sigh of relief: not telling Tess.

“My place is just off Swain’s Lane, between the Heath and the cemetery,” I answered. The lie, strange in my mouth, and binding. Irreversible. “It’s a great spot.”

“Perfect,” she said, leading me down the steps. “You should come round our place for drinks some night. We’re always free.”

After the British Library, Tess and I did meet up with the others. Theo swept me up in his arms and spun me around, like he hadn't just seen me two days ago. When he kissed me, it was slow and exacting, his teeth gently snagging my lower lip: a message that clearly said, *More of this later*. I felt that breathless rush again, my body easing into something loose and reactive when he held it.

Ginny and Zara and Hamza seemed to take Tess's lead, treating me immediately as an old friend. Only Callum commented on my presence.

"Don't you look settled in here," he said, indicating the bar. But his expressive eyebrows and self-satisfied smirk said more than that. *Here with these people, here in your borrowed Highgate house*. I smiled and said nothing. It seemed he wouldn't blow my cover, probably out of loyalty to Theo.

I kept my distance from him when we went out as a group—three more times, since then. Being with Theo, being in Highgate, everyone assumed I was like them. I didn't have to do much but omit—that I was living in the Wilders' house, that I was working as a tutor, that not all the clothes I wore were mine. Brushing past these facts didn't feel good, but it was better than feeling the way I had in Saint-Tropez, with Faye's friends: like a second-class citizen.

And anyway, it wasn't like I didn't omit things with Theo, too. I never talked about my old life, with him—as if I'd been born the day I landed at Heathrow with two secondhand suitcases—and he didn't push me to. He did

keep me busy, though, whisking me out several times for his London lessons. The best seafood (J Sheekey), the best speakeasy (unnamed), the best historical site (Churchill's underground war rooms, surprisingly fascinating). He wouldn't let me pay for anything.

I pushed back a few times, but gave up arguing after that. It did make me nervous at first—I was rereading *House of Mirth* for my dissertation research and thinking about Lily Bart, who'd clung to her lush lifestyle by accepting support from rich men. But I was not Lily; I genuinely liked Theo. I liked how it felt when he laughed at a joke I'd made, or helped me slip on my coat, or pulled me into his lap in the cab home. He seemed to enjoy himself just as much as I did; like I scratched some itch he had, to be the giver of good times, the consummate good date. "Hey, there are worse kinks," Andre said when I told him.

But of course Theo had to disappear; he was working in Frankfurt this week and next. There was no time to pine anyway—currently I was waiting for Liv and Andre and scrambling to catch up on course reading after a few nights out with Tess. They were coming around to see the Wilders' house, and we were going to celebrate Pancake Day, which I'd recently learned was the UK's version of Mardi Gras. Lately, I'd been too busy to see them, and hoped today would absolve me.

Finally, the doorbell toned; I opened it to a paper bundle of grocery store flowers.

"You snooty bitch," Liv cried, embracing me before she even came in the door. "This place is incredible. Like, look at this road."

"They must be taking the piss, right? It's like cosplaying the British Empire," Andre said, waving a hand at all the identical faux-Tudor-style houses up and down the street. "Should we leave our pleb shoes outside?"

"But won't your socks be full of holes?" I teased, putting the flowers in a pint glass of water. I didn't want them to see the whole cabinet of crystal vases I'd found the week before, looking for wineglasses. I knew this place was ridiculous, but I didn't want them to see quite *how* ridiculous.

I showed them the cozy living room with the squishy chaise longue, window seat, bookshelves; and the ornamental living room, with stone floors,

hard couches, and a baby grand piano. The white marble kitchen, the mahogany dining room. I led them through the leafy conservatory, then out into the backyard, to its carefully landscaped koi pond. “Well, it’s nice to meet your fish friends,” Liv said, settling on the stone-carved bench. “But it was Theo I was hoping for.”

I laughed. “He’s off again for work. Back in a few weeks.”

Andre arched an eyebrow. “You two exclusive?”

“Actually, yes,” I said, blushing a little. I’d finally asked him, before he left—hesitant to complicate things, but scared to be wrong about what I felt was growing between us. Real feelings. *I don’t want to share you with anyone*, he’d said, brushing his lips down my neck, pressing a kiss below my collarbone.

Andre nodded. “His friends here any better than in France?”

I threw some fish food to the koi. “These friends are much more laid-back,” I said. “I mean they like to go out, but it’s not velvet rope. We don’t get *bottle service* at the *club*.”

Andre nodded. “Are they a load of champagne socialists?”

“What?”

“You know, cheering for the proletariat from up in their Highgate penthouses.”

I shrugged. “They’ve been really kind, including me. They’re good people, I think.” I did think that. Okay, maybe the jury was still out on Sebastian, but I’d only met him twice.

“And they don’t mind you’re skint?” he asked doubtfully. “Can you really keep up? Isn’t it expensive, going out all the time?”

“Well, I’m not nearly as skint now,” I said. “I made good money in Saint-Tropez, and there’s no rent here. I do have to buy the fish food,” I joked, trying to soften the defensiveness in my voice.

I was making it sound rosier than it was; I’d already had to dip into the precious funds I’d brought home from France, buying rounds with my new friends, throwing cash in for the check at dinner. But it was hard to feel that worry when I was out. Hard not to stay for just one more drink. As long as I stayed out with them, I was like them. It was alchemy—Theo’s hand on my

waist, the golden glowing bar, another round, everyone laughing, turning to me as I spoke. I couldn't remember worrying about money or rent, work or school. No one in their world ever ran out of test strips, or insulin, or life.

"I'm fading," Liv said. "Let's get these pancakes going. And coffee? Fancy whipping up something with your mega espresso machine?"

"I'll ask Chef to make us something," I said, just to see Liv's eyes widen, believing me for just a moment. Then she threw a fistful of fish food at me, and we went inside.



ANDRE COOKED US WHAT HE declared to be several perfect specimens of traditional British pancakes: thin, unrisen, almost like the crepes I'd had in France. Delicious, served with a sprinkle of caster sugar and a squeeze of lemon juice.

After we returned the gleaming kitchen to its gleaming state, I made espressos for all of us, the way Theo had taught me. On Liv's insistence, we took our mini glass espresso cups into the formal living room. Andre and I perched on the uncomfortable damask sofa, and Liv straddled the piano bench, the coffee in front of her on a teak coaster.

"You play, don't you?" I said.

"My brother was the real virtuoso," she said. "But I had lessons all through college. Mom thinks I'm still taking them here."

"All the kids in Highgate play six instruments," Andre said, putting on an insufferably posh accent. "Polyglots by nursery school, polo stars by sixth form."

Liv sat up straight. "I forgot! Were you back at Westminster this week?"

Quite literally in the shadow of the Westminster Abbey, Westminster prep school was a fourteenth-century marvel of stone archways, gabled ceilings, and staggering, historical privilege. Boys in full suits and ties; the girls in sweaters, skirts, blazers. Only Kramer's best SAT teacher, Bruce, was allowed to teach there. But Bruce was too important to administer the four-hour practice tests for his class, so I was doing them.

I grimaced before I could stop myself.

“That bad?” Liv asked. “Were they brats?”

“Not them.”

After I was done timing the test, I walked up Whitehall to the Kramer office, just on the far side of Trafalgar Square, to scan the test sheets. My paycheck was in my pigeonhole, and I checked it carefully. My rate was meant to be £18—a raise I’d earned painstakingly with stellar student reviews—but I’d been paid less for the first test session at Westminster.

My supervisor, Grant, was in his office, so I knocked and went in.

“Anna, where’d you come from?” he said. The small office filled instantly with his perpetual bad breath. I tried not to inhale.

“I was wondering if I could ask you—I think there’s been a mistake. I only got eleven pounds an hour for these sessions.”

Grant looked at the pay stub. “Do you think those are your proctoring hours? From Westminster?”

There was something in his tone that put me on edge, but I smiled politely. “Yes, but that’s not my rate.”

He laughed, halitosis billowing. “You know proctoring pays eleven pounds an hour. It doesn’t follow your teacher rate, since you’re not teaching.”

I could feel my cheeks beginning to burn. “When you sent out the assignment, you didn’t say that it would pay less.”

“Oh, it’s all in your training manual,” Grant said, waving toward a shelf of teacher handbooks. “If the students aren’t *your* students, proctoring pays at the base rate.” This was not in the handbook, anywhere; I’d read it cover to cover. “But if you’d rather not do the remaining two test sessions, I’m sure someone else can pick them up,” Grant added, like he was offering to do me a favor. He knew I couldn’t afford to turn down the hours, even now that I’d found out he was undercutting me. And even if I did, he’d just pull the same trick on the next desperate teacher.

“That absolute slimeball,” Liv said when I’d finished the story. She was shaking her head, scowling deeply. “That’s why I told you you had to go to

France, you know? Why be loyal to Kramer, they're never looking out for you."

I flopped back on the sofa. "If I had any loyalty, it's long gone. They'll never pay me what my time's worth." Never enough to keep up with my new Highgate friends, like I desperately wanted to. Never enough to have the kind of life I wanted here—secure, self-sufficient, exploring and enjoying the city like Theo or Tess could. "But I can't just get my own students. I can't advertise online, on tutoring sites. Kramer scouts them."

"What happens if they find you there?" Andre asked, looking between us.

"Immediately fired," Liv said.

"But you could still find students some other way?"

"What other way?"

Liv was looking at Andre. "Remember those kids we saw on the way here, on the Heath, by the paddling pool?" She turned to me. "Three of them, all in Burberry raincoats. The mom had a little dog in a Prada coat."

"There's a lot of that around here, yeah," I said. No need to mention the closet of designer clothes here in the house with us.

"Think of what a person like that could pay for tutoring, if they had teenagers. You could charge them anything."

It was true, of course. But how did it help me? "I can't just roam the park looking for students." I shrugged. Not like I could put up flyers that my new friends might see.

"Listen, I know my school was nothing like the schools around here," Andre said. "But in mine, there was a bulletin board by the entrance, where the parents waited to pick us up. Covered in business cards and flyers—tutors, nannies, piano teachers, language lessons. You could do that, but here. I mean, this is where the rich kids are, right? All the expats? The ones most likely to be thinking about American unis?"

Liv nodded eagerly, her knees bouncing up and down on the piano bench. "Really, Anna," she said. "Ask the Wilders to be a reference. They can give you a little testimonial for the back of your new business cards!"

I put up my hand to hold them. "Just give me a minute," I said. Were they right? Could it be that easy? Living in this area, having an N6 postcode on

my business card, a Makepeace Avenue address—it would be its own recommendation, my own Highgate credential. If I could drum up even a few more students in this area, maybe word would spread from there. I was a good tutor, and I'd helped a lot of students succeed. I even enjoyed it. But if I wanted to earn a better wage doing it, Liv and Andre were right. I'd have to hustle.

They were waiting expectantly, eager for me to get on board with this plan. I took a sip of my espresso. Part of me wanted to extend this tender moment: the friends who were always on my side, gathered here in this unreal house, making time in their own overworked lives to help me make this new life work. Even though it might not succeed. Even though if it did, it would only take me further away from them, from our matching mouse-ridden flats and buttered-pasta dinners.

I smiled at them. “Where do I get business cards?”

The headmistress at North London Collegiate squinted at my new card, examining it under her desk lamp as if it might explain what I, a random girl off the street, was doing in her office. Even though I'd already explained why I was there. "Anna Byrne," she read from the card. "Byrne, that's an Irish name. But you don't sound Irish?"

"I'm American," I said with a nervous laugh. "I teach students what they need to get into American universities."

"Why, you look like you could be at university yourself! Barely older than our girls." She said this sweetly, but it was obviously a judgment on my fitness as an educator. "It's quite hard to imagine that *our* girls need additional schooling. We placed a dozen girls at Ivy League institutions last year."

"That's very impressive," I said sincerely. "But you might be able to place even more with strong SAT scores."

"I'm sure you're quite right, Miss Byrne. I suppose good SAT scores helped you get into an Ivy?"

I deflated. I hadn't asked her to hire me; I only wanted to be allowed to put my business cards out for students and parents. "I didn't go to an Ivy," I said. "I went to Smith College. It's a private girls' school. Like your school here, really—small, with great individualized teaching." Might as well try shameless flattery. Nothing else had worked.

"Isn't that lovely," the headmistress said, like I'd told her I was really quite good at finger painting. "We'll certainly keep you in mind." Her eyes

were already back on her computer screen. I stood to go.



ON THE WALK HOME, I examined my business cards. They were heavy and smooth and expensive-looking. On the back I'd listed the most prestigious private schools I'd taught at: Roedean, King's School Canterbury, St. Swithuns, Wellington, Marlborough College. Those schools would open doors for me, I knew, but that wouldn't be enough. It was *me* the headmistress had objected to: the barely-old-enough American, clothes rumpled from the train, begging to be considered. I had to rectify that. Flip the equation.

Her snooty voice spiked through my brain again as I walked. Probably people like her could scent the desperation on me. But I was desperate. I wanted to make my life in London something I could stretch out in—feel safe in, enjoy—not something I balanced on a knife's edge, like my parents had done all their lives. I wanted to live more like Tess and Ginny. It wasn't their fine dining and hand-stitched leather that tempted me, though—it was the easy way they moved through the world. It was intoxicating, the free way they said yes, so often, to so many things. They were bulletproof.

At Pond Square, I checked my balance at an ATM, then turned up the high street to a salon that took walk-ins. The stylist shook out my ponytail and suggested a softer, layered look. She snipped and sectioned, snipped more, and the scissors were so tiny, like doll scissors. I felt rather than remembered Mom cutting my hair, the dull side of the long, cold scissor blade pressing against my shoulders to keep it steady and even. Years, in the kitchen, cut simple and straight across the back. Until I got to Smith and learned to be embarrassed about it.

When the stylist finished, my hair was just brushing my collarbone, the long layers curving in, neat and flattering and symmetrical, and somehow blonder, even though she hadn't colored it. I looked more mature, more Highgate, instantly. I paid her a breathtaking amount, while Andre's voice

looped in my head, *Can you really keep up?* But if I could pull this off, I'd be able to afford the haircut with a single afternoon's work.

Back at the house, I put on a simple face of makeup, then sat at the gleaming kitchen table and looked at my notes—all the schools I'd researched. There were two schools right in the area on my list, both coed: Highgate School and St. Giles College. The latter was actually an expensive English language school for international students, but I guessed that many of those students would be hoping to attend US universities once they'd improved their English. I could try out a new approach at both schools, let New Anna take a crack at it.

I'd been thinking of Faye, on the walk home from the salon. How she moved through the world: conspicuously confident, unhurried, expectant. Quietly commanding. I needed to arrive at the next posh school like I already belonged there, like I was doing them a favor just by dropping my card.

I pushed hangers back and forth in Faye's closet. So far, I'd limited myself to wearing the simplest of her tops (nothing that would be recognizable in a Facebook photo, nothing I couldn't hand-wash) for a few nights out with Theo or my new friends. But the pieces I needed now seemed to jump out at me, asking to be worn: a white silk blouse, charcoal-gray cigarette pants, and a matching blazer with tweed ovals on the elbows. It was easy to picture how Faye would wear the pieces, open like menswear, the sleeves baggy on her birdlike arms. On me they looked fitted and smart. The pants were just an inch or two too long, but I found black slingback pumps in the shelves, and then everything fell just right. The mirror showed me an Anna Byrne who made sense here. Under the silk blouse, I felt the cold metal of my mother's kitchen scissors on my shoulders again, and I wondered what she would make of the well-dressed girl in the mirror, and the life that girl was dressing up to create.



I FOUND ST. GILES AT the end of a leafy tree-lined path, everything on the property deeply green and well tended. I spoke with a young, fast-talking

receptionist. If first impressions were everything—and it seemed like they were—I'd chosen well with a high-neck navy wool peacoat. The receptionist took it in admiringly and apologized that the director was away for the whole week, but offered to take me straight to the assistant director. I pretended to weigh this for a moment, as if an assistant director might not be worth my time, then agreed. She stood and took the coat from me, hanging it on a rack in the corner, then gestured for me to follow.

When we reached the office, the receptionist introduced me, then ducked out and closed the door behind her. The assistant director stood and held out his hand, his eyes evaluating me.

This time, I passed the test. There was something almost deferential in his welcome, his desire that I sit and make myself comfortable. He had a subtle Spanish accent, ever-so-slightly staccato, the *R*'s rolling warmly. "What can I do for you, Miss Byrne?" he asked.

Again, I took my time, as if weighing whether I felt bothered to say a lot or a little. "The schools I normally teach at are a little more traditional than this one," I began. "Old-fashioned sixth-form schools, preparatory colleges, all across Britain. I don't usually work at language institutes."

"And what is it that you teach?"

I gave him an abbreviated explanation of the SATs, and why they require test prep with expert guidance. "Am I correct in assuming that many of your students hope to study in the States? Once they're fluent?" I asked.

The assistant director nodded. "Here or in the States, yes," he said. "St. Giles is usually only one step on their educational journey, though a very important step indeed. That is why their parents send them to us—it opens up more possibilities for them. Everywhere, not just in Britain."

"Of course. And their parents pay per course, yes? Not a flat-rate tuition?" I'd done my research.

"You know all about us," he said, eyebrows lifting. "That's correct, yes." I had his attention now—he was just as interested in paying students as I was.

"Wouldn't you like to offer them something new, an additional class they might sign up for?" I waited quietly, worried I might've overplayed my hand. But I knew this school was privately owned and for-profit, like most

language schools in London. Revenue mattered, but you could only take one English language class at a time. St. Giles would probably offer a class on making a proper British cup of tea if they thought their students would pay for it.

“I could host a free informational session on higher education in the US,” I continued. “Not just about the SATs, but also about the application process, how things are done, that sort of thing. A perk for your students. And if it doesn’t generate at least twenty SAT class sign-ups, we can go our separate ways.”

The assistant director put his hands flat on his desk, palms down. “And if it does?”

My whole body felt tense with excitement—so close!—but I smiled and shrugged breezily. “We can negotiate a flat fee for a ten-week course, depending on how many students sign up. Or we could split the class tuition, if that’s easier.”

“A flat fee would be best, I think,” he said quickly.

“Of course,” I said. “Whatever you prefer.” I knew he wouldn’t want to split the tuition, which was why I’d suggested it. Now, I could probably name my price; any fee less than half of the full tuition would feel like a bargain to him. “When would be a good time?” I paused then, worried the eagerness in my voice would give me away. “Two weeks from now? That would give you time to promote it,” I said, taking out my planner, hoping he wouldn’t see my hands shaking.

I kept a pair of sneakers in my book bag when I went around Highgate to teach. Boots and heels from Faye’s closet helped me look the part, but they were no help climbing the hills of North London or running to catch a bus as I scrambled to get to the handful of new cash-in-hand tutoring students I’d picked up through local school referrals. Twenty-five international students had signed up for my well-paid St. Giles class, and I’d also managed to set up an SAT “study group” at Highgate School, with help from a school counselor who liked my pitch. That’s where I was coming from today—four girls I met after school, in an empty classroom. All starting to warm up to me after our second session.

The sun was out after a damp gray week; everyone was out on the Heath, walking dogs, walking children, walking hand in hand. I was a little early getting to the park and had a climb ahead of me: meeting Liv and Andre at our old spot on Parliament Hill.

It’d been almost three weeks since I’d seen them last, at the house. Liv had wanted to cook dinner together tonight, but I already had plans with Tess and Ginny at Soho House on Greek Street. Then on to a party at the Stables: a two-hundred-year-old carriage-horse stable converted into a nightclub in Camden, each stall repurposed into a private booth with crimson leather couches. Hamza’s older brother had booked the whole place for his girlfriend’s birthday and hired Mark Ronson out of hiatus to DJ. Theo was back, so I’d see him there after almost a month. I had all the silly butterflies just thinking about it. That kiss he always gave me, slow and breathy, that

said *Hello there* but also *I'll see you in bed later*, that made me warm from my throat to my knees. I imagined how I'd look to him with my new Highgate haircut, easy and familiar among his friends. I'd picked out a navy shift dress: chic, flattering, simple. My new friends weren't big on Facebook, but at a party like this, I'd have to be careful to duck for cover if anyone started snapping photos. I didn't need Faye to catch sight of that dress, or me in it.

I'd changed into my old sneakers, anticipating mud on the Heath, but I hadn't anticipated just how much mud. Between the men's and ladies' bathing ponds, a small black dog ran straight up to me—like we were long-lost friends—and jumped up to put his paws on my knees. I turned to shake him off, but his paws were already printed in mud on Faye's camel-colored pants.

"Sorry, sorry," a man was saying. I could hear him jogging up to the dog, admonishing it. It was only when he stood up from clipping on a leash that I saw it was Callum. "Oh no, Anna," he said, before I could say anything. "Your trousers. I'm so sorry, he's an absolute menace. Do you think they can be saved? I could replace them?"

I couldn't speak, could only look down at the black paw prints, the clumps of dirt and grass clinging to them. What if the pants were ruined? How would I explain it? The dry cleaner wouldn't even say no; he'd just point me straight to the rubbish bin. Maybe I could soak them as soon as I got home? Baking soda? *Call Mom right when you get home*, my frantic, panic-addled brain told me. *She'll tell you what to do.*

I shook my head at Callum, and felt, inexplicably, the beginnings of tears in my eyes. Forcing a laugh, I bent over to examine the stains, letting my hair fall over my face. The karma of my closet trick was finally catching up with me, and of course Callum would be the universe's perfect delivery method.

"I'm so sorry," Callum said. "I let him off leash to play with the other dogs, but then he scampered." He bent slightly, examining the muddy trousers.

"It's my fault," I said, straightening. "These are not park clothes."

Callum took a dark handkerchief from his peacoat and, before I could stop him, knelt in front of me. He pulled the fabric taut and began to swipe lightly at one knee, brushing off the mud and grass.

“Don’t, please,” I said.

“Let me just get the worst of it.”

This proximity, him crouched and close below me, was not at all the relationship Callum and I had established in London. He chose others for conversation, turned to other seats if I sat down. Never obviously unfriendly, but never anything warmer than the stiff, obligatory cheek kiss I’d come to dread. And now this; I couldn’t just stand here in silence. The dog was sniffing around my shoes.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“John Major.”

I laughed despite myself. “Nineties prime minister John Major?”

“My grandparents are big fans. But they don’t get around so well, so I take this little guy out a few times a week.”

“Of course, who would muddy the good citizens of North London without him?” I said. “Your grandparents live right around here?”

“Over on the other side of the park, more Hampstead, near the Royal Free. When I was a kid, they lived in a little apartment south of the river. Lambeth. There’s an area there, Little Portugal, but a lot of my family is still in Lisbon. It’s a great city, the seafood’s unbelievable. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been?”

Callum seemed to regret the question immediately. We both knew that I had never been to Lisbon and would probably never go, unless some other globe-trotting family found need for a live-in SAT tutor. The corners of his mouth turned down as he stood, tucking the filthy handkerchief back into his coat pocket. “Anyway, Lisbon’s great fun if you go on a holiday—everyone’s just out in the streets enjoying themselves, bands playing, dancing. The best is April 25, Freedom Day. Big street parties.” He was trying his best to slide past the awkward moment.

“Well, that’s my birthday. Should I treat myself to a little trip?” I joked.

Now that he was standing, we were close together. Closer than normal. I usually saw him in low light: pubs, swanky restaurants, nightclubs. Here in the bright sun, his dark brown hair caught the light, waved like water. And then there was his warm perpetual tan. Was I staring? What exactly was happening here?

I stepped back and bent down to pet John Major. “I’ve got to go,” I said. “I’m meeting friends up on the hill.”

“Parliament Hill?”

“Yes, it’s sort of my spot,” I said, unable to resist needling him a little more. “Maybe you remember.” The dog stretched his neck out so I could scratch under his chin.

“We’ll walk with you partway,” Callum said, with a strange little smile.

“Only if you keep your paws to yourself,” I said to John Major. I didn’t know how to handle this version of Callum, talkative and willing to wipe mud off my knees. It annoyed me, of course—that he should be friendly as long as no one was around to see it—but mostly my annoyance was for myself. For the glow, a fine hum in my stomach, just because he’d turned his charm on me today, just because he was gracing me with something warmer than civility. Pathetic.

We started up the incline. John Major dashed in front of me, his leash like a trip wire. “The PM’s just waiting for a chance to knock me down,” I said. “Roll me around to get those really good grass stains.”

Callum tugged the dog back. “At least you’ll have plenty of time to change before the party tonight.”

“I’m having dinner first, with Tess and Ginny. Soho House.” A pricey place, but I had the cash from the Highgate study group—their parents each paid individually. Probably just enough to cover my share of the bill tonight.

Callum made a face. “Good food, weird crowd.”

It was indeed the food that had impressed me, not the minor celebrities; the last time we’d all gone as a group was my first time trying burrata. Heavy, creamy, cheesy heaven. But he’d eaten all the seafood in Lisbon. I bet burrata didn’t even leave a mark on him.

“Poor Callum,” I said. “Often forced to eat delicious food at members-only clubs with his lovely friends. And not even very good at pretending he’s enjoying himself.” I’d meant to tease, but it came out a little harder than that.

He scowled at me. “Has it ever occurred to you that it’s only hard to enjoy myself when *you’re* around?”

This was so baldly unkind that I laughed, taken aback. “I’m not an idiot, Callum. I know you don’t want me around.” But then why did it still hurt to hear it?

“That’s not it. But now you’ve wrapped me up in this lie. I never know what to say when we’re out together. It’s a very hard position you’ve put me in.”

“Oh, *you’re* in the hard position? Solvent, secure, surrounded by friends and family. Out here walking your grandma’s dog.” I waved at the park, at North London, his since birth. If I’d grown up with *half* of what he had—a quarter, an eighth—I might still have a mother. A mother with all the insulin and test strips she ever needed.

But Callum was shaking his head, his hair falling forward, his brow creased in frustration.

“These are my *friends*, Anna. I’ve known them my whole life. And now I have to either lie to them or blow up your cover story. Like, it’s weird enough that you’ve decided you’re going to lie to them, but you’ve also decided that I’m going to. So yeah,” he finished irritably, “probably I’m not doing a great job pretending to enjoy it.”

You have everything, Callum. Can’t you just give me this one thing? I couldn’t say it, couldn’t admit it, so I fired up instead. “Don’t pin this on me,” I said, shaking my head. “You were a grouch in Saint-Tropez, too. As soon as Theo and Lucy arrived. I even asked Faye about it.”

Callum shot me a look. “What’d she say?”

“She thought maybe you’d just outgrown it all. The nightlife stuff.” She’d called him a self-serious spoilsport, too, in the cab home from that first yacht party, but I didn’t have to share that. Much as I might agree.

Callum’s eyebrows went up. “She’s not wrong,” he laughed. “But I guess I thought I was doing a better job of hiding it.”

“You’re really not.”

He shrugged. Not like he didn’t care, but like he didn’t have an explanation to offer. I wondered if he’d ever had to explain himself, to anyone, ever. If any of them did.

The idea annoyed me. “Explain,” I demanded.

He sighed, spreading his hands in front of him. “I guess I wonder if they’ll be doing it their whole lives—you know, going out, the clubs, the big dinners and big nights,” he said. And then, after a moment: “I don’t think that will be my life.”

I watched John Major turn and juke toward an overly bold squirrel. “I’ll tell you, to me, it seems like Neverland. You’re all the Lost Boys, young and free forever. No one ever has to grow up here.”

“*Has to*, no. But still, I think it might be nice to. Eventually.”

“No one’s making you do it, you know. If it’s not your thing anymore, why do you still come out all the time?”

He gave me a quizzical look. “They’re my oldest friends. I still want to see them, I still want to be part of their lives,” he said. “I just wish they’d branch out sometimes, do something different.”

“It’s not *all* they do.” I’d been thinking of Theo; he’d promised me a tour of Parliament this week, then the open-air food market by London Bridge. But for some reason, I didn’t want to talk about Theo with Callum, so I said, “Tess and I did a walking tour of Bloomsbury, and a Dickens one, too.” We’d talked about taking the train to Jane Austen’s house in Hampshire. “What’s a grown-up night, to you, then?”

He thought for a moment before answering. “I just want to cook dinner. Have everyone round and cook a meal together. But they’re eating six courses at Soho House, or at Gordon Ramsay’s whatever, so why would they want to be at my flat, cooking pasta?” He shrugged. “I can’t sell them on my kind of life, and they’re still trying to sell me on theirs, even though I’ve lived it.”

Callum studied me again as we walked, like he was judging whether I understood. Logically, I did. But if the shine had gone from this lifestyle, probably it was because he’d always had access to it. It was still magic to me.

The cab rides home full of laughter and sequins, shoulders pressed together, sleepy and happy and lucky—I would never be sick of that, I was sure.

“Well, what would you cook?” I asked.

He laughed. “You should cook. Make us something really quintessentially American.”

“Like what? Apple pie?”

“I was thinking more like hot dogs. Or Fluffernutter sandwiches.”

I scoffed. “Is that what you think we eat all day?”

“Isn’t it?”

“I’ve actually never had a Fluffernutter,” I said. “When I was a kid, my classmates would bring them for lunch. I thought it was so fancy, like fluff was a delicacy or something.”

“God, why?” he said, clearly disgusted.

This wasn’t something I wanted to tell Callum, but then, why pretend? He already knew about my family. He was the only one who did. And he’d proven himself pretty good at keeping my secrets, even if he resented having to do so.

“I didn’t bring lunch from home, like a lot of the kids. I had to get hot lunch—you know, the cafeteria food,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “You get free school lunch if your parents don’t make a lot of money.” If you were on food stamps, which we were.

“Right,” he said, nodding. “I think they have that kind of thing here, too.”

They did, of course, but no need for it in the schools Callum went to. “You know, when you’re a kid, you just want to do what other kids are doing. I really, really wanted a brown-paper-bag lunch. Some of the moms, they sent really elaborate, over-the-top stuff. So yeah, I thought fluff was fancy. Something other moms could get that mine couldn’t.”

We walked a few more steps in silence, and then Callum looked over at me. His dark, heavy eyebrows were drawn together.

“If I can ask,” he said, watching me, “how old were you when your mum died?”

“Not much younger than I am now,” I said. He’d been picturing me as a motherless child, growing up alone, without her. The picture was so wrong—

she had been so present, every day, such an oversized part of my life—that I felt temporarily disoriented by it. “It was a year ago this month,” I said.

“So recent,” he said. “I’m sorry. You were very close?”

“We were. That’s partly why I left and came here. Home became just this place where she used to be.” My life had felt like a cleared-out house: just empty rooms to walk through, the corners swept clean, my voice echoing off the bare walls and sealed windows. You couldn’t stay in a place like that.

We were nearing the hilltop, more people appearing around us, climbing toward the view. Callum looked up ahead and made a funny sound to clear his throat. “I did mean it, about the trousers, you know. I’m happy to replace them.”

There was no way I could let him. He’d see the boutique label and know immediately they weren’t mine. “But they’re irreplaceable,” I said with mock gravity. “So much sentimental value.”

“Still,” he said, with a smile I couldn’t read. “Let me sort it.”

I tried to think what Tess would say, or Ginny, or Zara. How would they shrug him off? Probably they wouldn’t even notice one less pair of beautiful linen trousers in their closet. Maybe Faye wouldn’t. Maybe that would save me. “No, that’s really not necessary,” I said firmly. “I’ll take care of it.”

Callum didn’t look at me. He was watching John Major, out ahead of us on the end of his retractable leash. “They are likely to be a bit outside of your usual shopping budget,” he said flatly.

So he knew, then. Knew the extent of my deceit and wanted to make sure I knew he knew. My cheeks began to burn, and I let the resentment bubble up like a laugh, like a live thing in my chest, lungs, throat. No, I didn’t owe him anything. I didn’t have to make excuses. I didn’t have to litigate my bad behavior with him, much as he might feel entitled to an explanation.

“Are you going to tell on me?” I said acidly. “Is that what this is all about?”

He stopped abruptly and looked at me, but I just kept walking. John Major strained to follow, stuck at the end of the leash, looking back for the cause of the interruption.

Callum took large strides until he caught up with me. “Anna, you need help. I’m trying to help,” he said. “That’s honestly it.”

“I don’t need help,” I said. “I need a dry cleaner.”

He laughed, but the sound was only frustration. “It just feels a little unsustainable in the long run. I’m not sure it’s as important as you think it is—maintaining this act or whatever you want to call it.”

“I’m not acting,” I said, so furious I felt like baring my teeth. “Your friends, they are my friends, too. That’s real, okay? I can stay out of your way if that’s what you want, but I’m not going to stay home.”

His voice finally rose up to meet mine. “That’s not at all what I’m saying,” he snapped. “You really are infuriating.”

“Look,” I said. “Forget it. I’m fine, you’re fine, everything’s fine. Just go. I have to meet my friends.”

Almost as soon as I’d said it, Andre and Liv were there, waving excitedly, shouting my name from thirty feet away. I hadn’t realized we were at the top of the hill. Callum would just have to add my loud friends to the long list of things about me he disapproved of.

“Look at you,” Liv said exuberantly, gesturing at my new haircut and the navy peacoat. Then her eyes reached the muddy paw prints on my knees, and her voice sank. “Oh, Anna, look at you.”

Andre bent down to look at the little black dog. “Already captured the culprit? Who’s this?”

John Major kept his muddy paws to himself with Liv and Andre. Maybe he only had it in for really nice trousers. I should make introductions, I knew, but I was too drained to play polite. Callum did it for me—introduced John Major and himself. He joked about which qualities the dog and the former prime minister shared, and Andre made a crack about the general election debate, and the three of them were off to the races.

I watched my friends, watched Callum win them over instantly, easily. It was like seeing myself when I’d met him the first time, at dinner with Faye and Pippa. Like looking directly into the sun. But it had been months since that glow had shone on me. I had no idea why Andre and Liv were getting the full, blinding force of it, but they seemed to be enjoying it all the same.

So I stood back and let them talk, let the hostility drain out of me, leaching through my old, worn-in shoes into the old, worn-in grass of Hampstead Heath. Just standing here, just being near Liv and Andre, felt comforting and right. I wanted to go back to the house with them and lie on the couch and complain, and then get up and cook pasta together. But I couldn't. I needed to soak Faye's pants, get dressed for dinner with Tess and the party after. I'd have to smile and laugh and dance all night with Callum there. The only person who knew how much I had to lose.

I should have been working on my dissertation, but I was on the Savoy’s website, examining photos of well-dressed diners, trying to figure out what to wear. The site text promised I’d be sitting in an Art Deco dining room that had welcomed Winston Churchill, Oscar Wilde, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Queen Elizabeth—though, one assumed, not all at one time. What a table that would be! Mine would be tamer: the Wilders were back in their old suite at the hotel for Pippa’s Easter break, and they’d invited me to dinner.

Mrs. Wilder had called to arrange it: second week of April, a late dinner so we’d miss the theater crowd. Then she’d passed the phone to Faye, who I hadn’t spoken to in months, though I thought of her every time I went to her closet. Faye, who would also be joining for dinner. “Bring Theo, won’t you,” she said, not really a question.

Dressing from her closet was obviously out of the question. I reasoned that spending £150 on an outfit was okay—only two hours’ work with my cash-in-hand North London students. I ended up with a knee-length sweater dress from Marks & Spencer, soft olive green, the knit a subtle pattern of diamonds that nipped in flatteringly at the waist and hem. Bishop sleeves belled out around my arms, then buttoned snugly at the cuffs.

Theo said he was coming right from work, so I took the Tube to Charing Cross and walked five minutes in a drizzle up the Strand to the hotel. The moment I stepped in the Savoy’s revolving door, a doorman slipped a plastic

sleeve over my umbrella before it could even think about dripping on the marble floor.

The lobby was even more beautiful at night, soft yellow lights reflecting in the mirror shine of the checkerboard floors. The dinner crowd was impeccable. Not one umbrella among them. Someone would always be ready with one: hotel staff to take them out to the waiting car, a doorman rushing out at their destination. Rain could not touch them.

I cut through the glass-domed tearoom where Pippa and I had studied on her last day. At the restaurant, the hostess led me to a table in the back, overlooking the river. Pippa stood to hug me, a hug with real affection, which from a too-cool teenager was staggering. Mrs. Wilder kissed me on both cheeks and Mr. Wilder shook my hand. I'd forgotten what they were like. So warm and generous, so familial, so trusting. I wasn't lying to *them*, not at all—but I still felt a lump of guilt slip down my throat, catch at the top of my ribs.

There were three empty chairs and the hostess waited for me to pick one before handing me a menu. "Theo's just coming from work," I said. "I'm sure he'll be here any minute."

"Is he your *boyfriend*?" Pippa asked. "That's what Mum said."

"Yes, he is," I laughed. "Don't look so surprised."

"Fashionably late, that one," Mrs. Wilder said, dipping her eyes to the chair that would be Faye's. "I'm surprised she even made time for us."

"I'm honored," I joked. More accurately, I was terrifically nervous. Faye had opened every door for me in Saint-Tropez, but carefully collected my gratitude and humility in payment. How would she feel, seeing that Theo had done that for me in London with no such strings? Or that, in a way, I had done it for myself?

Mr. Wilder wanted to do the chef's tasting menu, several courses for the whole table, but Pippa wanted à la carte. She got her way, of course, and Mrs. Wilder ordered a round of poached oysters to start with. I took in the restaurant—modern, black and gold, centered around a glossy grand piano. I watched the tuxedoed pianist greet an older couple just arriving. He reached his right hand out to shake the man's hand, then raised the wife's gloved

fingers to his lips. All the while his left hand played on, dashing over the white keys, not even a tremor of hesitation. Something in the gesture rang through me. Here we were, the two of us: looking the part, playing the song, hoping no one noticed how hard we were working to keep it all going.

Faye arrived at the same time as Theo and the oysters. Everyone watched her cross the dining room, this sleek beauty in flowing silk trousers and an off-the-shoulder sweater.

Theo kissed me hello, tasting of champagne. I paused for a moment, looking at him, wondering why a man coming from work would taste like that. But then he was moving around the table, greeting the Wilders like old friends, like he was family. Even Pippa.

“Faye,” I said, “it’s so good to see you.”

She leaned in for a kiss, touching her cheeks to each of mine. “This is new,” she said, locking her hand around my wrist. She rubbed the soft knit sweater between her fingers. “Much more sophisticated.”

I laughed, hoping the low-lit restaurant would hide my nerves. “My clothes, before, they were mostly things I packed from home,” I said. “They didn’t really make sense here.”

“No, they really didn’t,” she agreed.

Theo threw an arm around me. “Cleans up well, doesn’t she? Nary a whiff of the working class on her now,” he teased, pressing a kiss on my cheek. “Blends right in.” I stiffened under his arm, bruised by the comment. But everyone was smiling, like he hadn’t said anything rude. And really, had he? Wasn’t I glad to blend in? Isn’t that why I’d bought the dress?

Faye turned to her family. “Sorry I’m late,” she said. “I couldn’t get a cab.”

“You didn’t walk?” Mrs. Wilder asked, handing round the oysters. “Isn’t Simon’s flat by Covent Garden?”

Faye sat next to Pippa, leaving Theo to take the chair by me. “Couldn’t leg it in the rain, could I?” she said. “It’s lashing down out there.”

The oysters were good, cooked in a creamy sauce—the way I’d learned I preferred them, though cold and raw was more in vogue. Theo asked the

waiter for a Manhattan while Faye ordered the haddock soufflé starter and a bottle of Provence rosé.

“That was your favorite, wasn’t it?” she said, nodding at my glass of red wine. “Or has Theo brought you over to the dark side in my absence?” She made a face at him as she said it, and he laughed in an odd, oversized way. I felt on the outside of some private joke.

I shrugged. “I’m still figuring out what I like.”

Mrs. Wilder nodded. “Just as you should. How’ve you been getting on in Highgate? Does it suit? I know it’s awfully quiet up there, for someone your age.”

“Snoozefest,” Pippa said, rolling her eyes. “A tranquilizer dart straight to the jugular.”

“Oh, Pippa, you were just a sprog when we lived there,” Mrs. Wilder scoffed. “I’m sorry the play park wasn’t up to your fastidious standards.” She turned back to me. “Horses for courses, my dear. I hope it suits you.”

“I love it,” I said. “It’s a beautiful area. The cemetery and the Heath right there, short walk to the village.” Pippa began to theatrically snore, and Mrs. Wilder had to hide her smile behind the menu.

I laughed. “It’s actually pretty lively, in the evenings. I have friends there, and we meet at the Gatehouse, or the Red Lion, or go out for dinner. They’re old friends of Faye’s, actually.” I looked to Faye, trying to judge how this had landed. I assumed Theo had already told her as much.

“Oh, isn’t that nice, Faye?” Mrs. Wilder said.

Faye shrugged. “I’m old friends with half of London. And all of Highgate, for better or worse. I just haven’t been around much since uni.”

The waiter arrived. As soon as everyone had ordered, Faye turned back to me. “Who’s about these days, then? Zara still?”

I started to name everyone, but Theo interrupted.

“Tess and Anna are best mates,” he said, gesturing to me with the Manhattan, sloshing a few drops onto the tablecloth.

Faye raised her penciled eyebrows at this news.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” I said, instinctively downplaying it. “But we both studied literature, so there’s lots to talk about.”

Faye looked between Theo and me, and the look was unreadable. Was she imagining that Tess dressed me up in her expensive clothes, too? “Why don’t I come back with you to Highgate, after dinner? See everyone?” she said. “It’s only just gone half eight.”

“Yes, you have to,” Theo said, sitting up in his chair, turning toward her like it was the best idea he’d heard all night.

I sat up, too, panic zinging through my body. What was he doing, encouraging her? If she said the wrong thing, I’d be instantly exposed. If she wanted to—did she?—Faye could snap her fingers and take it all away.

“Does everyone still drink at the Boogaloo?” she asked Theo. “It was always a bit naff for my taste, but you two’re making me nostalgic.”

“It sort of fell off, that place. Once Kate Moss stopped coming round.” Theo laughed as he said it, and the ease of him—leaning back in the chair, hand loosely cupping the rocks glass—sent a hot tongue of annoyance through me. He must know that this would expose me: Faye showing up in Highgate with us, calling me the family tutor. What was he playing at? I tried to catch his eye, but he was refilling her wineglass.

Mr. Wilder turned to Faye. “You’re off straightaway after dinner, are you?” he asked. “I’ve hardly seen you.”

She huffed. “With this ash-cloud thing, we’ll probably be stuck here another week.” An enormous volcanic eruption in Iceland had sent dense, hazy ash drifting over all of Western Europe. This week, airports and air travel had completely shut down. I’d been hoping the ash would stick around, keep Theo here for two more weeks, long enough to be here for my birthday at the end of the month. But if it kept Faye here, too—that changed the math.

“If it’s still that bad, we could always take the ferry and drive,” Mr. Wilder said.

Pippa grimaced. “Yeah, don’t put me down for that.”

Theo finally turned to me. Why did it feel like I was an afterthought to him tonight? “Anna,” he said, very seriously, swirling the cherries in his almost-empty glass, “why aren’t you bartending here? It’s so much nicer than that place on Highbury Corner.”

I shot him a *please shut up* look. The last thing I needed was Theo reminding everyone that I made more sense pouring drinks here than sipping wine.

Mrs. Wilder's eyebrows pinched together. "Not bartending, too, are you?" she said. "On top of your studies and teaching?"

I blushed, feeling everyone's eyes on me. "No, I quit that a while back. I'm only teaching now. I've recruited a bunch more students in the area. And after-school study groups, at the Highgate School and St. Aloysius'."

"Making the most of Highgate, aren't you, Anna?" Faye asked slyly, sipping her wine, not looking at me.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

Theo put his hand on my knee—cautionary, clammy with condensation from his glass. I crossed my legs, pulling out of his reach.

But Mrs. Wilder was nodding approvingly, oblivious. "You know, Pippa's college advisor said she might do some of the SAT subject tests this fall. I suppose you could come and help her with those? You haven't really seen Saint-Tropez till you've seen it in summer. Yachts for miles, actors everywhere you look, it's a skit."

Saint-Tropez had been a dream in December; I could only imagine what it would be like in summer: sun and sandals every day, the pool open, the harbor full of sailboats. Pocket money, no bills, no students but Pippa. No falsehoods—I wouldn't have to be like the pianist there, both hands working, the balancing act of pretense and practicality.

"I'd love to help with those," I said. "Kramer has workbooks for each subject test, we can buy them online."

"Six weeks maybe?" Mrs. Wilder said, beaming.

We were interrupted by the food; each dish was like art, thin lines of bright-colored sauces striped and swirled on the white plates. When the waiter put down my beef Wellington—a rosy red cut of beef encircled with pastry—he took pains to orient the plate just so in front of me, assuring me as he did that it was Aberdeen Angus. "That's perfect, thanks," I said, nodding like Scottish cows were the only ones I ever ate. Pippa grinned at me while the waiter shaved truffle over her wild mushroom linguine. She always saw

right through me. Like Callum—but in her case, it only made me love her more.

I didn't try to talk and eat, my focus locked on each perfect bite: buttery pastry, savory beef, garlicky pomme purée, with herby green accents of chimichurri. Theo, on the other hand, hardly ate. He was running the table, whipping up conversation whenever it lagged, like a half second of silence would kill him. He was always talkative, always performing his good manners, but this felt different. He got Mrs. Wilder going about the controversial Damien Hirst retrospective at the Tate Modern, and then Mr. Wilder about some iffy stock market indicators, and then Pippa about some celebrity gossip. Faye interrupted him often, adding her own thoughts, and Theo deferred to her each time, without resentment, even when they disagreed.

When the plates were cleared, Pippa voted to see the dessert menu, but Faye said it was time to go. Mrs. Wilder dismissed the three of us to our plans in Highgate. Imagining it—all of us at the Gatehouse, Faye talking about me with my new friends—my stomach began to twist. I hugged Pippa, long and sincere, and felt how much I wanted to stay here, with her. Have dessert.

But I went. And as we crossed back through the glass-domed tearoom, Faye let out a little cry of surprise. A young woman stopped short at the sound, and Faye all but leapt into her arms. “Eugenie!” she said. “Is Marta here, too?”

By the time Faye turned back to us, she was taking off her coat, leaning in for goodbye kisses. “You don't mind, do you?” she said, not waiting for an answer. “Some old mates, from Central Saint Martins, going to the Beaufort Bar. I really should stay. Give everyone up in N6 a kiss from me.” And then she was gone.

The doorman hailed Theo and me a black cab, his umbrella enormous, enough to shelter all three of us from the drenching rain. The car nosed out onto the Strand, and I put my head against the cold window and let myself feel the relief. It went to my head, like the moment you first stand up after a

strong drink. But it wasn't giddiness—it was a clear, unequivocal answer: I couldn't keep doing this.

I looked over at Theo, but he was texting intently, face washed blue with phone light. Inexplicably, I thought of Callum. What would he tell me to do, if I asked him? What had he called it on the Heath—*unsustainable*? He was right. I'd lucked out in that case—a dry cleaner in the village had, miraculously, managed to save the linen trousers John Major muddied—but I was tempting fate every time I went to Faye's closet. My income had increased considerably. I could afford to buy better-looking clothes, if that was important to me. Not designer, like Faye's, but nice enough to fit in.

If I could find a quiet moment alone with Tess, if I told her the truth, what would happen? She'd be shocked, of course, but she might understand. She'd told me how hard university had been, trying to fit in when she didn't. She might know what it feels like: to try too hard, to overstep.

Theo put his phone in his pocket and smiled up at me. "All right?" he asked, and I nodded and leaned into him. I had to solve this, but it didn't have to be tonight.

The cab was crawling up Charing Cross Road now, through the crowds pouring from every West End theater. Theo was tracing his fingertips over the diamond pattern of my dress, stretched over my thigh, climbing ever upward. The warmth and pressure and promise of his fingers were their own sort of strong drink, their own relief.

In terms of privacy, it wasn't as dark as I would've liked, every streetlamp and neon sign lighting us inside the cab. But the river of rain on the windows kaleidoscoped the light, and the drumming on the cab roof was hypnotic. I let Theo pull me into his lap, put his hands in my hair, hold my face to his, and kiss me until I forgot how strange he had been at dinner. Forgot the cab entirely, the crowds, the rain, the city humming with too much life.

LISBON, PORTUGAL
APRIL 25, 2010

Tess had told me weeks ago to clear my schedule for a birthday surprise. Thinking she meant a nice dinner, or a trip to Jane Austen's house, I'd assumed one day was enough.

It was not. My birthday surprise was a ticket: British Airways, Heathrow to Lisbon round-trip, a whole week. Hotel, too, and all courtesy of Tess.

"Isn't it brilliant?" Tess had said, hands clasped together to rein in her excitement. "Zara was talking about Monte Carlo, hitting the casinos and all that, but Callum jumped in and suggested Portugal."

"He did?"

"Said gambling wasn't your thing, but you'd mentioned wanting to see Lisbon." I had, of course, in passing, and now Callum had used it to rescue me from the high-roller tables of Monte Carlo. Thoughtful, and confusing, after the way we'd left things on the Heath.

I'd had to scramble to rearrange my tutoring students and study groups for the trip and postpone the start of classes at two new schools I'd lined up. One was the Lycée Français in South Kensington and the other was Muswell Hill Academy, an elite private school north of Highgate. The headmaster wasn't willing to pay my fee up front, only at the end of the course, so I felt comfortable negotiating a much higher fee—the most I'd ever asked for. He didn't bat an eye.

I'd barely had time to call Liv and Andre and apologize for missing the birthday we'd planned—going to see the new documentary on Banksy, and then a mini tour of London's best street art. "Got a better offer, is it?" Andre said. "I see how it is." He said it jokingly, but there was hurt in his voice. What could I do, though? The flight was already booked. We'd do the whole tour when I got back, I promised, movie tickets on me, but he only said, "Don't forget to come round the flat and pick up your mail before you fly off. You've got piles."

For a week, the trip seemed unlikely—flights still grounded by the cloud of volcanic ash—but airspace cleared just in time. And now here I was, in a baroque hotel room that adjoined with Tess and Ginny's, Zara across the hall, Hamza and Callum and Seb a few rooms down. Theo had been the only one to miss out, apologetically unable to leave Madrid, reshuffling all his volcano-canceled meetings.

We were staying in a hotel called the Pestana Palace, an actual nineteenth-century palace built by a marquis with coffee-plantation money. The staff would neither confirm nor deny that Prince was staying there, in the Marquis Suite, but Ginny had seen him getting into a car when she came back from grabbing cigarettes.

This hotel made the Savoy feel austere. Everything was ornate and antique, Regency style, bright colors and dark wood and vases. There was a Turkish spa, a rare-bird enclosure, and a two-story chapel with stained glass windows. Early this morning, I'd gone down to the chapel while the others slept off the food and wine. The windows cast red and yellow patterns on the floor mosaics, and it looked like something I would've shown Mom in the library a dozen years ago, her finger tracing the twin stone staircases, spiraling down the page. I wished she could see me here. I wished she knew how things had turned around for me, at last. She had always believed they would.

After, I returned to my room and drank espresso on my small stone terrace until the others woke up. I looked down the hill at the wide Tagus River and the huge red suspension bridge that spanned it—the Ponte 25 de

Abril, named after Portugal's Freedom Day, which was also my birthday, and also today.

I'd been nervous about the trip, at first. We'd only been friends three months, and suddenly I'd be with them 24/7 for a whole week. I'd have to spend for meals, drinks, incidentals. Buy a few new outfits, too, since I was determined not to dip into Faye's closet anymore.

But now, three days in, all my nerves were gone. We spent our days exploring Lisbon, Callum our tireless guide: ruins, churches, monasteries, the oldest operating bookstore in the world, an art district called LX Factory. Nights, we ate good food, drank wine, sampled dark, mysterious fado bars. I didn't even try to hide my excitement, to play it cool for the others, who traveled so often and so easily. I probably couldn't have, anyway. Callum recognized my elation, and it put us, for once, in agreement. Our guards lowered just a little; we laughed more.

Tonight would probably undo that. I'd been looking forward to my birthday dinner all week, but I knew Callum would be dreading it—just the kind of fancy night out he was sick of. The girls had required no less than two Michelin stars for the occasion. Their treat.

The restaurant was nondescript from the outside, easy to miss, but inside, high vaulted stone ceilings arched over us. The building looked very old, a contrast to the sharp white tables and modern light fixtures. "Used to be a monastery," Callum said, following my gaze.

Before I could reply, the host was leading us to our table. Someone was already sitting there.

Theo. He stood up, grinning at my confusion. His large hands spread open in front of him.

"What?" I said stupidly. "Why aren't you in Madrid?" He caught me up in a hug, and I could feel his chest jerking with laughter.

"The flight's hardly an hour, so thought I'd pop over. Just for the main event. And then I'm a pumpkin, first thing tomorrow morning."

"You came just for the night?" I said. What I thought was, *You came just for me?* Leaning into him, I let his length, his smell, his arms undo whatever

hesitations I'd had about the Michelin-starred evening. With Theo, I never felt out of place.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Callum frown and turn away. Probably Theo and I were making a scene, pressed together in the hushed restaurant. I stepped back. Theo pulled out a chair for me, next to his.

A soft-spoken waiter came to ask which of the tasting menus our table would be having; we all had to get the same thing, all eleven courses. Seb wanted the avant-garde "evolution" menu, but Callum suggested the classic menu, a modern, upscale take on traditional Portuguese dishes. Theo wanted me to decide, and I wanted very much not to, but eventually we settled on the classic menu, with the wine pairing. The per-person price, in tiny font, was €350. Roughly \$460, more than I spent on food in a month, though no one would let the birthday girl pay. A hot thread of acid nudged gently up my esophagus, and I reached for my water glass. This was what I'd wanted, wasn't it? But still, the number clanged in my head, echoing like a rung bell.

"All right?" Theo asked, shrugging an arm over my shoulders.

I lowered my voice so only he could hear. "It's just a bit overwhelming," I said.

He squeezed me into him for just a moment. "It's meant to be, that's sort of the magic," he said. "Just relax, I know you'll like it."

The first course arrived with a flurry of servers; eight of them came together and, in a perfectly timed and choreographed flourish, deposited small plates in front of us. Each plate held a thimble of frothy liquid and a marble-sized white something topped with a dollop of black and a tiny pink flower. "Your first *taste moment*," the waiter began, in his hushed voice, "is a trout liver cream topped with trout roe, alongside an elderflower lemonade foam. The chef suggests that you eat one bite, sip the foam"—he mimed sipping from the tiny cup—"then finish with the second bite, and the foam again."

I glanced around to see if anyone else thought these instructions were funny, but they were looking expectantly at a thin, attractive, birdlike man who had arrived with a bottle of wine. He poured a small amount into each glass, elegant and unhurried, and then stood between me and Tess, holding

the bottle out, describing for the table the provenance and character of the wine. He did so in a voice so low and soft that it was actually impossible to hear him; he went on for a full minute, and I caught “Algarve” and “grape,” and nothing more. It felt like a *Saturday Night Live* skit.

“Could you hear anything that fellow said?” Theo asked when the wine man had gone.

“He said it was from the Algarve,” Tess said. “That’s all I got.”

We all ate as instructed—bite, sip, bite, sip, and the food was gone in less time than it had taken the flock of servers to set it down. It was tasty, of course—the fish savory and rich, the lemonade foam sharp and light. Our plates were instantly gone, and we hurried to drink our small pour of wine, as the servers gathered ranks to ambush us with the next tiny course.

The next “taste moment” was the chef’s take on a traditional Algarve carrot salad: thin slices of carrots in sweetened cashew milk with green olives. The “olives” were actually just liquidy orbs, squeezed green olive juice that had been somehow, bafflingly, coached back into the shape of the original fruit. The birdlike man came by again and spoke in his silent way about the next wine. I wondered if we could get him to do it in mime.

The next few courses were a blur. Then, with much fanfare, the waiter announced the chef’s most famous dish—a runny egg, the yolk covered in delicate gold leaf.

I was beginning to feel a bit queasy, and not just from the food. I felt like I was in some kind of ritual of wealth. And it wasn’t the kind of ritual you could exit. The theme here was supposed to be traditional dishes, but this food bore no likeness to anything I’d eaten in Lisbon so far.

All over the city, at every meal, Callum had been passing us Portuguese foods to try—custard tarts, sardines, salt cod with potatoes and eggs. I looked up at him now, and we made eye contact across the table. Was he used to this kind of rite? The others were egg-focused, so I risked a tiny, ambiguous shrug in his direction. His lips quirked up to one side, and he nodded minutely.

It didn’t make me feel any better. It just meant there were two of us here, going through the motions. And those motions cost enough to buy dozens of

insulin vials. Hundreds, thousands of test strips.

Theo put his arm around me in my chair, asked how I liked the food. I told him it was great. I didn't want to disappoint him, after he'd come all this way just for my birthday. Or Tess, who'd been so generous, arranging the meal for me. It wasn't her fault—I'd been sure I would like it. At this table, only Callum had recognized my discomfort. But I'd never shown the others a true version of me, so how would they know?

This meal was meant to be the grand finale to what had been, to me, a perfect day. We'd spent it wandering Lisbon—hilly mazelike streets, peaks and valleys, hundreds of stairs—enjoying the endless street parties for Freedom Day, which celebrated the 1974 military coup that overthrew the dictatorship. Almost no shots were fired, and elated civilians put red carnations in the barrels of the soldiers' guns. Today, the flowers were all over the city, wherever we went.

We ended up in a wide-open plaza by the river, where people were beginning to gather for the sunset. A helicopter came overhead: hovering, deafening. We covered our ears and looked at each other. Suddenly, red carnations were raining down on us, scattered from the helicopter. I was so overwhelmed—the magnificent noise of it, the red flowers falling headfirst through the sky, top-heavy, spinning end on end. The happiness felt like a heaviness in my body, like gravity pressing me into this beautiful spot, holding me here until I understood that everything, in that moment, was perfect. Whatever I'd come here for—left home for—it had all been worth it.

I should've known that dinner would be a disappointment, in comparison. Callum caught my eye over the next course and gave me another encouraging smile, and I wondered what he was thinking. In that moment, all I wanted was to be on Parliament Hill with Liv and Andre, eating baklava with my fingers from a Styrofoam tray.

When the wine man returned and began his soundless, noiseless explanation of the bottle, while everyone listened politely as if they could hear, I couldn't help it—I felt the absurdity building inside me, in the shape of a laugh, and that laugh wanted very much to come out. I pressed my lips together tightly, but I could feel them turning up into a smile, so I pressed my

fingers to them. The wine man was over my shoulder, so he couldn't see, but Callum was watching me, and his dark eyes were smiling, too, and then his mouth was quivering. I held my napkin to my mouth and made the laugh into a strangled sort of cough. Theo patted my back absently, like I was a baby in need of burping.

Just as I was getting a handle on myself, the lead waiter came over with a small cast iron pot in his hands. "Before you have your moment with the squab," he said, as solemnly as a priest, "the chef wanted you to see how the squab is smoked, here, on a bed of hay." Grasping the lid on the pot, he marched around the table, opening it ceremoniously for each of us to smell and see. I wondered how many times a night he performed this squab-smelling ritual.

When I was a kid, every few months, Mom would get out the pancake mix and announce breakfast for dinner. She'd make it fun and silly, like she was confused whether it was morning or night. I got to shape the pancakes into faces or animal shapes. Probably I was thirteen or fourteen by the time I figured out that pancakes were a meal she made when the groceries ran out before the paycheck came in. Just add water.

Something was humming behind my ribs again. Maybe a laugh, but it also felt possible, in this moment, that it could be a scream or a sob. I had wanted this. Now I just wanted it to be over.

I stood up. Before I could even push my chair back, a server was at my side. "*Senhorita?*" he asked.

Flustered, I said, "I'm just going to the bathroom." I needed a few minutes of stillness. Silence.

"Ah, of course, we will take you," he said, motioning for a server to escort me. "The chef will hold the next course for the table."

"Oh, that's not necessary."

The waiter looked at me blankly. Of course it was necessary. They couldn't serve the next course, every plate hitting the tablecloth at the same millisecond, if I was not there. And probably the food would be ruined if they held it until I returned. I sat back down.

“I’ll wait till later,” I said. Theo patted my leg, kissed me, reminded me not to forget my wine.

Since I’d moved to Highgate, I’d been telling myself that this was it: I’d made it. I’d transformed my life, transformed myself. I’d even believed it, after a while, when I saw that the people sitting around this table believed it, too. I’d lost myself, but hadn’t I wanted to?

Here I was, living the kind of life my father had told me I would never have. I had succeeded, if that was the goal—showing him he’d been wrong to doubt me, showing Mom she’d been right to encourage me. I was doing it. And it was nice here, at the top. It really was. But it was just gold leaf on a runny egg.

My parents hadn’t urged me to succeed and do well so I could have nicer things than them, or eat at nicer restaurants, or have more impressive friends. They had only wanted me to live without the strangling weight of worry. My mother wanted me not to have to balance my checkbook. To just know the money was there when it was needed. She didn’t want me to feel the exhaustion of it, every day, the way she had, draining the years from her life.

My parents had just wanted me to be free, but I did not feel free; I felt like I was suffocating under a different weight. And I didn’t know how to get out from under it, now that I’d worked so hard to leave myself behind.

Our last full day in Lisbon, the group split up—Hamza and Seb took the train to a beachy town called Cascais, and Callum had promised to visit family. We all agreed to meet for dinner at a restaurant on the Miradouro de Santa Catarina, where we’d eaten the night we arrived. There were miradouros all around Lisbon, each a hillside plaza with stunning views of the city or the river, or both. I wrote *Santa Catarina*, and the directions Callum gave us, in a note on my phone.

Tess, Ginny, Zara, and I started our day at the Lisbon Cathedral, and then wandered up into the historic Alfama neighborhood, the part of the city that had survived the earthquake. The old buildings had beautiful tiles, and I took photos of them while we walked.

Eventually, Zara called for shopping. We went down the hill, and she led us up Avenida da Liberdade. After a few designer boutiques, Tess and Ginny declared they were too peckish to go on without a snack.

“What about seafood?” I asked. “And this one’s my treat, since you all got my birthday dinner.” The restaurants in this area wouldn’t be cheap, but I could afford to get a few bites for my friends. I didn’t know what would happen—with me, with us, with my Highgate charade—once we got back to London, but I was grateful to be here with them now, and this was one way I could show it. I was proud, even. This was a good use of my hard-earned tutoring money, even if my father wouldn’t have thought so.

Zara wanted to keep shopping; the rest of us went into a restaurant with low lighting, gold accents, and tiny tables. The hostess put us at the only table

that could fit three, right next to a pianist playing loud American jazz standards. The waiter was young, handsome, curly-haired, and spoke crisp, fluent English. Over the piano, we ordered the salt cod ceviche, a basket of bread, and a half dozen of Portugal's famous Setúbal oysters—two for each of us.

Tess turned to me once the waiter was gone. "Sorry," she said. "I can tell we're boring you, with all the shopping."

I shook my head. "Not at all. I just like wandering around, seeing different parts of the city. It feels so romantic, doesn't it?"

She positively beamed at me. "I'm so glad you're loving it!" she said. "I hoped you would, but I wasn't sure."

"She really agonized about it." Ginny nodded.

"Tess, I've had such an amazing time," I said, leaning over in my chair, squeezing her into a one-armed hug. "Thank you. No one's ever done anything like this for me."

When our waiter returned, he brought the bread and ceviche first. Then he returned with a tray on his arm, and on the tray were three separate plates of oysters on ice. My stomach sank as he bent to put them all on our little table.

"Oh," I said, "I'm sorry, that's too many. We only ordered a half dozen oysters."

"Half dozen, yes, that's right," he said, gesturing at the six on the plate in front of me.

"No, sorry—we only wanted a half dozen to share. This is too much."

Obviously, he'd misheard us, which was no surprise with the piano so loud. A small mistake. But his eyes had suddenly gone very round.

"You want me to take this back," he said, pointing at the plate in front of Ginny.

Tess nudged her plate forward. "And these, too," she said kindly. "Sorry."

At this the waiter turned his wide, fearful eyes to the swinging doors of the kitchen. When he looked back at us, his face was drawn, pinched with worry. He looked decades older.

I stood, so we were eye to eye. "You can't take them back, is that right?" I asked, my voice as low as the piano would allow. "You'll have to pay for

them?”

He looked back at the kitchen again, and nodded, only to me.

“Well, we can’t eat them,” Ginny said, surprised. “It’s too many. And they’re huge!”

Ignoring Ginny, I said to the waiter, “Okay, that’s fine. We’ll be fine.” I watched him swell with instant relief; he looked so young again. Like someone’s baby brother. I would have to pay for all of it, of course. Three times what I’d thought the bill would be. Better me than him, of course, but still, it would be a lot.

When he’d gone, I sat down again. Tess picked up a lemon wedge to squeeze over her plate.

“I don’t get it, it’s not our fault he brought too many,” Ginny said. “We can’t eat them all.”

I smoothed my hands down my pants, feeling the little pricks of sweat there. Just seeing his fear had made me nervous, in the old familiar way. Money in, money out, never enough. “We don’t have to,” I said.



AFTER, OUTSIDE ON THE AVENIDA, Tess and Ginny wanted to go meet Zara at the mall. I told them I was going to explore on my own a little—I’d seen a castle ruin high up on the hill as we walked through Baixa, and it was only a short walk, if you didn’t mind that it was basically straight uphill, back up to the Alfama.

“I’ll meet you for dinner, at the miradouro,” I promised, and we hugged and went our separate ways.

I could see the castle from Rossio Square, so it was easy to head in the right direction, up stairs and steep, narrow streets, until I found the line of people waiting to enter the ruins, Castelo de São Jorge. It was long, long enough that I thought I might be late to dinner if I waited in it. I took some photos of the weathered exterior, then wandered a bit. I found an old, deserted church a few streets away and spent twenty minutes exploring inside. Wrought iron pedestals in each chapel held dozens of half-burned tea

lights. For a euro dropped in the collection tin, you could light one candle in prayer. I had never prayed in my life, but I found the coin in my pocket, lit a candle, and told Mom under my breath that I was here, in a beautiful empty church in Portugal, thinking of her.

When I got outside and turned west, the way I'd come, I could see Lisbon's famous golden light falling across the streets, a sign of the sunset beginning; I should probably hurry for dinner. My phone mapped a quicker route to the miradouro, more direct than the way I'd come up the hill. *Few minutes late but on my way*, I texted the girls. An expensive international text. I watched it send, and then my phone screen flashed a small battery icon before blinking out.

I could not wake it. Theo had warned me the old iPhone had a shoddy battery, but it hadn't even been low. Maybe international roaming drained the battery, or all the photos I'd taken?

I knew vaguely where our meeting place was—just at the base of the noisy nightlife area, Bairro Alto. I just needed to get back down to Baixa, the little shopping valley, and then head up the next hill. I'd recognize something once I got there.

It worked for a while. I kept heading downhill until I reached the bottom, full of tourists and shops, men trying to hustle me into their restaurants. It was starting to get dark, clouds rolling in thick and heavy. I followed the flow of tourists to the Santa Justa Lift, a freestanding gothic iron elevator that Callum had brought us to.

I turned up the hill behind the elevator, following the cobbled street I remembered. It started to rain lightly, a cold rain that slid down my scalp and inside the collar of my useless coat. The street right-angled with a long curving flight of stone stairs. Callum had definitely brought us down some stairs, so I began to climb. It was dark now, and brightly lit restaurants were setting out chairs and tables under awnings, on little covered terraces along the stairs. I arrived, out of breath, at a large square, and stopped to look around. The plaza I needed bordered an ancient convent ruin, destroyed in the earthquake. It should have been here, and it wasn't. While I stood there, three men called to me from a bench. Pretending not to hear them, I hurried on.

The streets pitched uphill on my right and down on my left, and I cut across them, across the hill, and that at least felt right. In the next square I came to, people were standing around drinking, and a band played samba under an awning. A few couples danced in the rain, laughing, spinning, wet hair whipping, and I felt how wet and cold I was, and how alone. I didn't remember the name of the miradouro we were meeting at, so I couldn't even ask for directions.

I let myself cry just a little bit, just a minute, then mopped it up with my sleeve and went on. The streets were narrow here, lined by noisy bars, their crowds filling the streets. Men called to me, reaching their hands out as I passed, brushing my coat with their fingertips, saying *linda, bonita, senhorita*. There wasn't even space to pull away from them.

And then suddenly the bars were behind me, and I was in dark, quiet streets, a few lines of forgotten laundry flapping over my head, soaking in the rain. Shivering, I let myself cry some more, since no one could see me. Down the dark steep streets, I slipped on the wet cobbles. I tried to keep one hand on the wall, on whatever building was next to me. I slipped again, and I stopped to gather myself. I had to calm down. I leaned against the wall behind me and took deep breaths. I could hear someone climbing up the stairs toward me, but I didn't look over. I didn't want to give them a reason to call to me.

The footsteps on the stairs stopped. Silence, heavy, threatening. I looked up and saw a man in the shadow of the building. I started to turn away. Then a voice. "Anna? Anna, wait!"

After all the voices that had called to me that night, I knew this one. It was Callum's. And it was full of worry; it held the same panic that I held inside me, that I'd gripped tight for hours. Before I could even turn to him, I felt my body sagging with relief, and then he was racing up the last stairs, saying thank god, saying my name again. He hugged me against him. I didn't say anything. I put my head against his chest and breathed there until the tears stopped.

Callum made me take off my soaked coat and put on his, warm and waterproof. He made me wait under the eaves of the building while he called Tess to say he'd found me and that I was okay. When he hung up, he studied me for a moment, and I realized I must look terrible—straggly wet hair, mascara all over my face, eyes and nose red from crying.

"My aunt and uncle live just around the corner from here. You can use the bathroom there, clean up and dry off, okay?"

I tried to imagine it: me, being delivered to Callum's fancy family. How I would stand there, the lost idiot American, dripping on their expensive carpets. But the appeal of a bathroom full of fluffy towels had begun to percolate in my brain. Maybe a hot drink. It was very persuasive.

Callum took my hand, and I let him pull me back down the hill and up the next street. He knocked on a red door and it opened a moment later.

"Callum!" a small woman exclaimed. "*O que aconteceu? Entre, entre.*" She stood back and waved us inside, and I followed Callum into a small, cozy living room.

He spoke quickly in Portuguese, and then the woman turned to me, her face softening with concern.

"Good that you have come here," she said, in English. "Let me get you settled."

Callum nodded to me. "Anna, this is my aunt, Lena."

"*Boa noite,*" I said. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your evening. I just need a moment."

“No, no, you’ll stay until you warm up!” Then, to Callum, she said, “Go and tell your uncle to set two more plates, yes? He should be almost finished. Arroz de marisco.”

I took off my wet shoes, and Lena led me down a narrow hallway. The floor and all the walls were pale stone, and the bedrooms we passed were modest, small and lightly furnished. I had assumed that all of Callum’s family was wealthy, but this house felt like just a normal family home. I knew that Callum’s cousins were grown and moved out, but I could imagine this place stuffed full of kids, almost overcrowded.

In the bathroom, Lena handed me a dark towel and a comb, and turned on the hot-water tap—“You have to let it heat up,” she said—then disappeared back up the hallway. She returned with some folded clothes.

“Oh no, that’s okay,” I said, embarrassed.

“I need to hang your wet things by the fire,” she said, putting the clothes in my hands. “I’ll wait here.”

She closed the door, and I obediently put on the clothes she’d given me—loose linen pants, a soft tan sweater, cotton socks. I handed back my wet clothes and she left again.

The mirror showed me even worse than I’d imagined, but I scrubbed my face with hot water until all my ruined makeup was gone. My eyes were still red and puffy from crying, but that couldn’t be helped. I pulled the comb through my knotted hair, in small sections, until it looked like I had just stepped out of the shower.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I could smell dinner cooking. I knew the Portuguese ate late, after nine, which meant I’d been wandering the streets even longer than I’d thought. How long had Callum been out there, looking for me?

I followed my nose to the dine-in kitchen and found him leaning against the counter, talking to his uncle, who was stirring a pan on the stove. I felt foolish, joining them in my baggy borrowed clothes. But Callum waved me in.

“Anna, this is my uncle, Martim.”

The older man passed the spoon he was stirring with to his left hand so he could shake mine without pausing.

“You picked a good night to visit,” he said. “My seafood rice is unmatched. It is a very traditional dish here.”

Callum gave me a crooked smile. “What do you say, Anna—are you ready for this ‘taste moment’?” The sound of our laughter echoed off the stone.

Lena came into the kitchen then, and wordlessly Martim held out the wooden spoon for her to taste. She stood still and let it steam for just a moment, then tried it and nodded.

“*Está pronto*,” she said. Then, to us, “Sit! Sit!”

I sat at the table on the far end of the kitchen. Callum sat next to me and Martim ladled our bowls full. I had expected something like paella, but it looked more stew-like—rice, fish, shrimp, mussels, peppers, and onions surrounded by a bright orangey-red broth. Callum passed me a small bowl of chopped coriander to sprinkle on top. It was salty garlicky perfection.

“Delicious,” I said. “I can’t believe I almost left without trying this.”

“You leave tomorrow, too? With Cal?” Martim asked.

I nodded. “Back to real life.”

“Did Callum take you to all the good places here?” Lena asked.

Callum and I laughed. He shook his head. “We went to one place a few nights ago—you should have seen it, Tia. Each course a bite of fish, a drop of broth, a single clam.”

“Oh dear. *Muito caro*?” Lena asked, rubbing her fingers together.

“*Sim, muito*. Everyone wanted Anna to have the best meal, for her birthday.”

“You should have just brought me here,” I said.

Martim smiled. “Well, we’d better be your first stop next time.”

“And next time, I’ll bring a map,” I joked.

Everyone laughed. “Maybe an umbrella?” Callum added. He was smiling, but I felt the finest line of tension there. We’d both heard it, his uncle’s implication. The misunderstanding that we would be back visiting together again. That we were a couple.

“There never used to be restaurants like that here,” Lena said. With her fingers, she tore the end off a baguette, then passed the baguette to me. I ripped off my own hunk and dipped it into the broth.

“This is a little more my speed,” I said. “In my family, we almost never ate out. And definitely not at fancy places.”

“Not a big food family?” Martim asked. His brows knit together as if this was a tragedy. “Why not?”

“Don’t be nosy, Tio,” Callum said lightly. Protecting me from having to talk about my complicated family, if I didn’t want to. In case it hurt to do so. So thoughtful of him, but the truth was that I’d been glad to talk about it, with him. It had felt better to say it.

I answered Martim honestly. “We only went out to eat for really special occasions,” I said. “Maybe once a year? It was too expensive.”

“*Sim, sim,*” Lena said, nodding. “It adds up.”

“Probably the last time we went out was for my high school graduation.” It hadn’t gone great; Mom always had to worry so much about what she ate. Too many carbs meant too much insulin. So even if we went out, she wouldn’t eat much, or she could only eat one thing. Dad would get grumpy and refuse to say why, even though we all knew it was because we’d spent all that money to go out and she had hardly eaten. And I would just try to make everyone laugh. I wanted them to pretend we were having a good time so that I wouldn’t have to pretend so hard for all of us.

“But for birthdays and things like that, my mom would always bake a cake,” I said. “She was a really good cook.” The past tense landed heavily on the table, as if I’d said, *My mother was a really good cook, and then she died.*

“That sounds better anyway, a good homemade cake,” Lena said kindly. “My mother baked every day, I miss it so much. The smells, *o deus*, delicious smells.”

Martim turned to Callum. “Avó still keeps you loaded up with *pasteis*, I hear. I don’t know how you stay so trim.”

Callum shrugged. “We have a deal. I walk the dog, she gives me a custard tart fresh from the oven, plus a few to take home.”

I caught his eye. “What, no gold leaf on top?” I said. “How many Michelin stars does your grandmother have?”

Callum laughed hard, a thing I hadn’t seen before: his head tipping back, lips parted, all his perfect teeth showing. This didn’t even seem like the same Callum I’d met in France, the same one I’d spent so many hours with in Highgate. I wanted to stay here with this Callum, or bring this one back to London with me.

“Well, your bowls are empty,” Lena said. “Why don’t you two go sit in the living room, the fire’s going,” Lena said. “Unless you want seconds?”

I shook my head. “I can’t eat another bite.”

“We could make you up some to take with you?” Martim asked.

Callum chuckled as he pushed his chair back. “Not sure they’ll let us take shellfish through airport security.”

The living room had one small couch facing the fireplace, where my jeans and shirt and coat hung drying on a rack. There was one armchair, but it was already occupied—a fluffy cream-colored cat that blinked at us and went back to sleep. Callum and I sat on the couch, and a moment later, Lena brought us cups of tea.

“Tess was so relieved that I’d found you,” Callum said. “She was so worried when you didn’t come. She’s really fond of you, you know?”

“I know,” I said. “I’m crazy about her, too.”

“She was worried about something that happened at the restaurant? Oysters?”

I explained the mix-up to Callum, the waiter not hearing us over the piano. Tess and Ginny not understanding why we couldn’t just send the oysters back, when I’d needed little more than the waiter’s panicked expression. I leaned back, sinking into the couch cushions next to him.

“To be honest, I’m not sure I would’ve grasped that, in the moment,” he said. “It’s lucky you’re perceptive about those things, and also that you’re generous.”

“You all would’ve done the same,” I said. Hoping it was true as I said it.

“Were they good, at least?” Callum asked.

“Very good, though I’m no expert.”

He grinned. “Yes, as I recall, you’re still rather new to oysters.” Thinking, obviously, about passing me the tiny oyster fork in Bar Sube. Five months ago, somehow.

Callum picked up a photo album from the coffee table, next to our steaming mugs. “Some world-class embarrassing baby photos in here,” he said, “if you’re looking for blackmail. Tia Lena got it out for me earlier.”

“Show me the goods.”

He opened the album on our laps. “My grandparents lived in London from when they were young and raised my father and Martim there. And my aunt, who lives in Manchester now.” He pointed to a discolored photo: two boys and a girl, sitting on the steps of a skinny brick row house.

I nodded. “In Lambeth, you said. I remember. Little Portugal. When did Martim move back here?”

“In his twenties, just for a summer, he said. But then he met Lena.”

“And he stayed. That’s sweet.” I smiled, thinking of Martim holding the spoon out for her to taste in the kitchen. It looked like a moment that had happened every night for twenty years. It made me miss my parents. Both of them.

Callum turned a page in the album. The top photo showed a forty-something couple, both in aprons, smiling in front of a restaurant. The sign read *O GALO*, with a brightly painted rooster on each end.

“This isn’t really the family I imagined you having,” I said. I was too warm and full and relaxed to be embarrassed about all the assumptions I’d had.

Callum chuckled. “You thought I was *old money*, did you? My dad’d be well chuffed to hear that.” He tapped the photo of the couple. “This was the day my grandparents bought the restaurant they worked at. My *avó* is an amazing cook. When they decided to retire, they sold it for a good price and moved to a house in South Hampstead. It’s nothing fancy, but it has a back garden, and that’s what they wanted more than anything in the world.”

“Your grandparents must have wanted their kids to join the business? To take over when they retired, I mean.”

“Yes,” Callum said. He looked at me for just a moment, a little surprised. I liked that I was surprising him. I had been wrong about him, in at least a few ways. Maybe he would see that he’d been wrong about me? “I do think that was their hope,” he said. “But Martim had a family here, and my father and aunt went into academia, after uni. My dad taught economics, finance, and then he did consulting. Now he advises hedge funds,” he said, with a sheepish smile. “Hence the Highgate address. We didn’t start out there.”

“And they were the first in the family to go, I assume? To uni?”

Callum nodded. “I think it was hard for my grandparents. When I see them with my dad, there’s a distance there. They don’t understand his life, and he didn’t want theirs.”

I couldn’t keep the sadness out of my voice. “Yes, that’s how it was for me.”

“You left on bad terms? With your father?”

“I just left. It wasn’t only about him; I felt so trapped there, so locked into the way I’d always lived. Coming here—this was my chance to start new, to be new.”

Callum turned the next page, a slow, distracted gesture. “And it worked? Everything is different here?”

“No.” I felt my throat tense, a sign that tears might be on their way. I felt raw, worn thin from the exhausting night. “I love London, but I’m still me. Still the same, still scrambling to keep my head above water, still out of place everywhere.”

Callum was nodding; I could see him putting it all together. “That’s why you like everyone to think you don’t work, that you’re just a student.”

“It’s been so nice, being this other version of myself. Being the person things work out for, for once.”

“Is that really what’s happening, though? Or is that just what it looks like?”

“I know it’s terrible. I know. Selfish and superficial.” I had to stop again, clear the sound of tears from my throat. “But even this sort of half-true happiness feels a hundred times better than anything I’ve had since my mom died.”

“Your mum,” he said, very quietly, pausing to give me a chance to rebuff him. “She was sick?”

“Diabetic,” I said. “When your glucose levels are high, for years, you get ‘complications.’ Organ damage, eyes, heart, circulation. She saw a lot of specialists, and then”—I paused, shaking my head—“she just got the flu.” It still didn’t make any sense to me. That a person could die from something as simple as the flu. That my mother could be alive, the heart and center of my life, and then gone the next day.

“I’m sorry, that’s awful,” Callum said.

“It still seems so strange to me. A couple times a day, I remember, and I have to kind of explain it to myself all over again. That it happened.” That I had kept living, and my father had, too, and the world had barely paused, barely noticed. “It’s not so strange, of course. People die all the time. Even from the flu. But there’s something about that—it’s so mundane—that doesn’t fit what it’s actually like.”

“Suffering isn’t mundane,” Callum said gently.

“I don’t know, I think it is. Mourning is pretty much a universal thing, right? We all have to do it, at some point. Everyone on the planet is doing it, will do it, but when you’re going through it, it’s only yours.”

I tipped my head to one side, my eyes on the fireplace. I had never told anyone this. “Someone told me, when she died, that the grief would be proportional to how much I’d loved her. Like a balance. They meant it as a good thing—like my pain was a sign of how much we’d loved each other—but it sort of haunted me. Any day where I actually got through work and did all the things I needed to do, got groceries, washed my hair, any day where I felt half normal, I’d feel terrible, like it meant I didn’t love her enough. But I also didn’t have a choice; I had to keep going, keep working.”

That’s what happens: each day has newer, smaller disasters for you, and they rise up and claim you—train tickets, taxes, dissertations—and even you forget for a little while. Forget that you once held your sleeping mother’s hand in a hospital bed and told her you didn’t want her to go, but she didn’t have to stay if it was too hard. You would figure out how to get through it.

“I’m just trying to find a way to be okay,” I said, looking up at Callum. “I know I’ve made a mess of it—I know you don’t agree with how I’ve done it—but that’s why.”

Callum nodded. “Well, I’m glad you told me. But you know,” he said after a thoughtful pause, “you don’t have to be this specific, just-right person for everyone to like you. You don’t have to wear the fancy clothes. You don’t have to show them just the good parts of you. I know they’ll like you with all the complicated parts. You should give them the chance to.”

I put my hands into my hair, brushing it back out of my face. The fire was warm, almost too warm. It made me feel drowsy, loose, open. “It’s not just about being liked,” I said. I tried to take a moment, to decide how much to say, but I was too tired to think through all the permutations, what to hide and what to share. “I don’t always want to *be* the person who has those messy parts. Sometimes I just want to be like you guys. Everything is simpler for you. Safer. I want to feel that.”

“I think you might be able to have it both ways.”

“Do you think they’ll understand? Will they even listen?”

“Tell Tess. She will, I think.”

“And then?”

He laughed, nudging his shoulder into mine on the couch cushions. “Then she and I will tell everyone else to get on board and get over it.”

I smiled up at Callum. He was being so kind to me. Kind enough to pretend he didn’t judge me for being so dishonest. Kind enough to pretend he liked me anyway. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll do it when we get home.”

Callum looked down at me, but he didn’t smile back. His brow was furrowed, almost a scowl; he didn’t seem happy, like I thought he’d be. Happy that I’d agreed. Unsure, I started to pull back slightly—I’d been sitting too close to him—but in that same moment he shifted closer, leaned down. He put his fingers on my chin, tipped my face up to his, and brushed his lips over mine. Lightly, so lightly.

I shivered against him, my body reacting before my mind could. I pressed closer, pushing into him, pushing his lips open with mine. Felt dizzy, felt his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me in.

“More tea, you two?”

Callum sprang back from me, grabbing at the album as it slid off his lap. Lena was there, at the edge of the room, holding the kettle in one hand.

“No, we’d better get back and get packing,” Callum said breathlessly. Standing, he took several steps away from me, shaking his head. Saying no to Lena’s question, but also, clearly, no to me. Without even glancing in my direction, he followed his aunt into the kitchen.

I took my hot clothes from where they hung by the fire, went to the bathroom, and changed. They were too warm, a little damp, and I felt smothered by them. What had just happened? It had felt like surrender: natural, inevitable.

When I opened the bathroom door, Lena’s clothes folded in my arms, Callum was there in the dark hallway. “It was a mistake,” he whispered. “That’s all.”

The heat from the clothes seemed to creep up my neck, into my face. I was hot with embarrassment. “That’s all?” I said, unable to keep the hurt from my voice.

“What about Theo?” he said harshly. “You may not have a problem with lying to people, but I do, Anna.”

I stepped back, away from him, and the light from the bathroom fell across Callum’s face. His expression was hard, almost a scowl. Like this was somehow my fault. “*You kissed me*,” I hissed. “Don’t pretend you’re some fucking saint.”

“A mistake,” he said again.

We all sat by the window, talking and watching the planes taxi and take off outside our gate. An hour till our flight, half an hour till boarding. Callum sat a few seats down, silent, his long, slender fingers curved around a coffee, eyes on the departures screen or on the window. Anywhere but on me.

The golden Portuguese light stretched over the runway, reaching for us. It already seemed unlikely that Callum and I had ever sat side by side, legs touching, on his aunt and uncle's couch. That we had kissed, intensely, for just a moment, seemed impossible. Callum had erased it. Pressed himself against the door in the silent cab that took us back to the hotel, as if he couldn't be far enough away from me.

In my hotel room, I'd plugged in my phone and called Theo. He apologized that his old junk phone had stranded me, promised a brand-new one would be waiting for me in Highgate. "I don't need a new phone," I told him, feeling the shame of the whole night crowding around me in the stuffy, overdecorated room. "I need you."

He promised he'd be in London by the end of the week and try to take a few days off—I'd have his undivided attention. I promised myself that it was the truth, that Theo really was all I needed. He'd been so good to me, for months, and surprised me on my birthday, and I never felt easier, safer, or more relaxed than when I was with him. He took care of me, took care of everything. That was what I wanted. Once Theo was back, I'd be able to shake off Callum for good. Shake off the soft, enticing, questioning feel of his lips, brushing over mine.

Tess returned to her seat beside me, unwrapping a croissant from wax paper. Before she could slip back into the conversation around us, I leaned toward her.

“I don’t know how to thank you for this, Tess. Really. Being here was an absolute dream,” I said.

“We’ll do it again!” Tess said. “Have you been to Ibiza yet? Those are the best parties. But Barcelona has the best food, I think.”

But it was only my birthday, the fact that she’d surprised me and treated me, that had made this trip possible. “It’ll be all dissertation for me, all summer,” I said. That was true, not just an excuse. The semester ended next week (with two more course essays due two weeks following), and then the third term started—no classes, just time to write and research, with a few advisor meetings. Dissertations were due by the end of August. And I’d be tutoring Pippa, too, in Saint-Tropez.

“Well, let’s plan a celebratory trip,” Tess said. “When you’ve finished.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I took it out, Andre’s name was on the screen. I held up my phone to show everyone I was going off to answer it and walked twenty feet away.

“Hi,” I said. “What’s up?”

Andre’s voice was lower than I’d heard it before, missing all his usual inflection and humor. “Well,” he said, “the bailiffs have just been here. So that’s fun.”

“Bailiffs?”

“Normal bailiff stuff, you know. A courtesy call—they wanted to tell us the date they’d be back, to take our stuff. Evict us.”

That was when I realized that Andre was angry, and for some reason, it was me that he was angry at. My chest tightened, like a huge hand was squeezing my ribs. I looked back to my friends, to see if they’d noticed anything, and turned my back to them.

“Andre, please,” I said. “Go back, explain. You’ve been paying rent, right? The subletter, he’s been paying rent?”

“It’s not the landlord we owe, Anna. It’s the council tax. Every month. They came with a court order. Your last payment was *November*.”

I closed my eyes and swallowed, trying to force down the panic throbbing in my throat. When I lived there, I had paid the council tax for our flat. We'd arranged it—Tom and Andre paid more of the rent, and in exchange I covered the council tax, paid every month to the Borough of Camden.

"Wait," I said. "What are you saying? Has the subletter not been paying it?"

"Why would he? You never said a word to him about it. He's just been covering your rent."

As Andre said it, I knew that it was true. I'd left in such a hurry, gathering all my things for Highgate. The renter was an acquaintance of Liv's, definitely trustworthy, not someone I needed to check out, so I hadn't spent more than a few minutes talking to him in the changeover. I'd forgotten to mention the council tax. And I certainly hadn't paid it myself from Highgate. Had I forgotten December, too, when I was in Saint-Tropez? I put my hand out, steadying myself on the glass windowpane.

"Oh my god, Andre, I'm so sorry. You're right, I didn't tell him." I could hear how breathless my voice was. "I'll take care of everything. When's the court date?" Councils were notoriously strict about collecting and enforcing council tax. No grace periods, no deferments, no delays. On the website where I paid, it was very explicit what would happen: they'd send you one past-due notice, and the next would be a court date, and then, if you didn't pay, you went in front of a judge. They'd always get their money.

"March," Andre said, almost a whisper.

Stupidly, I said, "But it's April."

"Almost May, some might say. You never came by for your mail. It's a pile now. Do you think maybe our court date's in that pile?"

I'd never heard Andre so furious. "I'll pay it right away. Send me a photo of the bill, right now. I'll do it right now."

"There's late fees," he said, his voice softening a fraction. "And court fees now, too. I'm not sure you have it. It's a lot, Anna."

There was something in his tone that I feared much more than anger. The panic dropped into my stomach, becoming a hot, violent wave of nausea. I

put my forehead against the cool glass and breathed slowly through my nose. “How much is a lot?”



WHEN I HUNG UP THE call, I remembered that my friends could still see me. I straightened up, brushed back my hair, and leaned against the window, looking down at my phone as anyone might. I opened the browser, waited for my bank’s website to load. The airport Wi-Fi was miserably slow.

I logged in; a spinning wheel promised my account view in a moment, but it just kept spinning.

“Everything okay?”

Callum was standing in front of me, his eyebrows knit together.

The first words he’d said to me all day. The first time he’d even looked at me. My face felt stiff. “Yes, all okay,” I said icily. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Was it from home?” He gestured to the phone in my hand. I thought about every vulnerable thing I’d told him last night: about my mother, my father, my life. Before he’d completely shut me down. We’d had no wine with dinner, but I felt like I had—like something had loosened in me that I usually kept tightly bound. I wanted to close it. To seal it shut forever.

“It wasn’t,” I said, hearing my voice sharp and cold. “You don’t have to pretend you understand all my problems.”

I looked down at my phone. My account had loaded, the balance in bold at the top. Andre was right; I didn’t have it. I wasn’t even close. At the top of the recent transactions was the large payment at the seafood restaurant, for all the oysters. I’d been so glad, even proud, that I could cover it. That I could take care of the mistake. It felt laughable now.

With my head already tipped down, I had no hope of hiding the tears. They were fast, and I couldn’t even wipe them, because our friends might see. This would only confirm the worst Callum thought of me—silly, unserious social climber. Scammer, fake, liar, mess. He put a hand on my

arm, and I jerked away, turning as I did so no one watching would see the movement. He backed away, hands up to show he was done trying.

I fled to the bathroom, where I breathed and looked again at the account balance. I'd been working so hard with the new study groups and classes, on top of my current Kramer students; it was a good balance on any other day. A great balance, compared to my first months here. But it wouldn't save me. I couldn't ask my father to save me. More tears ran down my cheeks. There was no one to help me, not here, not at home.

Clumsily, eyes blurry, I tried to log out of the website. Instead, it took me to a new page. The header said *Pending Transactions*. There was only one listed there, and it was a large deposit. Coming in on the first of the month: my last student loan installment, from my lender. The lump sum I needed to pay for my last term of grad school.

LONDON
MAY 2010

In the two weeks we'd been home from Lisbon, the girls texted often—inviting me out, asking where I was hiding. My excuse was my course essays, which were due soon, but the truth was that I couldn't believe the mess I'd made. Couldn't see a way out of it.

There was no other choice; I'd had to do it: I paid off the council tax and court fees for Andre's flat with my student loan. I sent Queen Mary what I had left, the rest of the loan and all the money I'd saved up over the past four months. All the money I'd made in Saint-Tropez. Nowhere near enough, of course, and now I was penniless. I had money coming—the class at Muswell Hill Academy had finished—but the secretary had been vague on when I could expect payment.

I lived in constant, breathless fear of the phone call from Queen Mary. The voice on the line saying they'd dropped me from the course. Then I'd lose my student visa and any chance of getting the work visa to stay after. What then? Go home? It was unthinkable.

When I sent Andre the payment receipt, he had only replied, *Thanks*. Nothing since. I was too ashamed to reach out, to him or Liv. Though Theo didn't know the details (we never talked about my finances, and I certainly wasn't going to start now), he knew I was having a hard time, and had been trying on the phone to cheer me up. But he didn't understand. When I said

one thing, he heard another. It wasn't that he couldn't relate (though of course he couldn't); it was this divide between us, some filmy layer of disruption when we spoke. Had it always been there, and I'd just been having too much fun to notice it? Or was the disruption Callum?

I couldn't pretend what had happened between us was nothing. Not the kiss—though of course it was the kiss that lingered in my body, his mouth a memory that constantly flickered through me—but the way we'd understood each other, that night on the couch. His rejection hurt worse for it. He had heard me, heard all of me, understood, and then turned away from it. Declared me a mistake. Whatever he had seen in the sad girl on Parliament Hill last summer, he didn't see it anymore.

My only hope was that Theo would feel right, once we were together again in person. That proximity, history, and chemistry would steamroll my hesitations, and Callum, into oblivion. That was the only reason I said yes when Theo called and declared that he was coming to surprise me, that very night. "But why warn me?" I said, laughing. "Why not just show up, if it's a surprise?"

"Because we're going to the party to end all parties," he said, like he was offering me the thrill of my life, the cure to all my problems. "You'll need a dress."

I'd already heard about the party, since Tess and Ginny had been begging me to come all week. It was at their father's house, not too far from here, on the Bishops Avenue—affectionately termed "Billionaires' Row" for reasons I suspected would be pretty obvious the moment I stepped in the door.

I wasn't tempted to end my self-imposed exile for a party, but Theo said it was the only chance for us to see each other, since he was off the next day to visit his parents in the Cotswolds. I was so desperate for him to settle this thing inside me, this fluttering, panicked thing. And maybe Callum would be there, cold and remote, and Theo's warmth and charm would erase him completely, letting me sleep again. I told Theo I knew where I could get a dress.

I hadn't borrowed Faye's clothes since seeing her at the Savoy. But what choice did I have, a few hours before the party? The silk dress was Elie Saab,

strapless, cobalt blue, and fell just below my knees. The shape of it was like an upside-down tulip, the skirt falling like petals from a very fitted waist, accentuating the curve of my hips and thighs. I'd first noticed it months ago because it was so unlike Faye's usual style. But that was probably a good thing: less chance of anyone recognizing it as hers. I picked navy pumps and a seal-gray suede coat to wear with it.



"YOU'RE HERE," TESS SAID, STANDING back to let me into the flat she and Ginny shared. "I thought my hair was going to have to curl itself!"

"I'm here," I said, trying to put some festivity into my voice.

"Feels like it's been ages," she said, waving me to follow her.

Getting ready with Tess was another reason to say yes to the party—the moment I'd been hoping for, just the two of us, my chance to tell her the truth, like I'd promised Callum I would. Not that I owed him a damn thing. It was a promise I wanted to keep for myself.

Tess's room had an enormous dark wood vanity and mirror, big enough for both of us to sit at. I could hear Ginny getting ready in her own room down the hall, blasting the new Sugababes album.

"Is it hot?" I asked, pointing at the curling iron.

"Piping!" Tess sat facing the mirror. I moved behind her and began to section off the hair with clips.

"Is this Hamza thing going to blow up tonight, do you think?" I asked. There'd been a move toward détente in Lisbon, but since then I'd seen Facebook photos of the pretty Scandinavian boy who Ginny was using to make Hamza jealous. Also the pocket-sized Sussex girl who had emerged as Hamza's weapon of choice. Both were likely to be in attendance tonight.

"Oh no, he's not bringing that girl," Tess said as I released the first coil of hair. "What're you reading? I saw you brought something in your bag?"

"It's just something I'm rereading for my dissertation, Forster's *A Room with a View*. You've read it?"

She shook her head, which was awkward since I had her hair wrapped around the curling iron.

“It’s about a girl traveling for the first time, to Italy, where she feels sort of unlocked by the romance of the place, but also scared of it, how it shakes up manners and class divides. Being in Lisbon made me think of it.”

“I’m sure you’re tired of all the reading and research. But you know, I do envy you a bit.”

I looked up from her hair in my hands, trying to read Tess’s expression in the mirror. There was something melancholy in it that didn’t match her upbeat tone.

“You could be doing a master’s. What’s stopping you?” I asked. It certainly wasn’t the money, or the free time. “You could do it, it’s just a year. In the States, it’s two.”

“You know uni didn’t go that well for me.” I watched Tess’s shoulders rise and sag in a defeated shrug. “It’d just be more of the same.”

“You don’t know that it would be. You’re older now, things might be different. I mean, look at me—I don’t fit in with my classmates, but I’m learning so much,” I said. “I don’t need them to make it worthwhile. It just is, because I love the work I’m doing.” It wasn’t something I’d noticed, until I was saying it, but it was true: I enjoyed what I was working on for class, and for my dissertation. I was getting somewhere. So what if I didn’t say much in class? I hadn’t come here for grad school friends; I’d come here to study what I loved, and maybe, hopefully, make some kind of life from it after.

When I let the last perfect curl fall, Tess reached up over her shoulder and took my free hand. “I’m glad you’re here, Anna,” she said. Then, with a little laugh, “I guess I owe Theo for bringing you round.”

My stomach tightened. “I think I owe him more,” I said. Now was my chance—to tell her why I owed him and the Wilders, even Faye. Why I was here in her Highgate, but not *of* her Highgate.

“The thing is, when Theo first introduced us,” I began.

“At the Gatehouse.” She nodded, fluffing her hair in the mirror. “Your first mulled wine, right?”

I nodded. “Yes. But what I mean is, when he said I was a friend of Faye’s —”

A howl of rage came from down the hall, and we both turned to look. Ginny stormed in, phone held out in front of her to show us: a Facebook photo of Hamza with the doll-like Sussex girl, both clearly dressed for tonight’s party.

Zara arrived just in time for the ensuing drama, and they both stayed while Tess did my hair, pinning up each curl until it cooled. They stayed as she brushed the curls out carefully, in slow zigzags, so they fell together in one long, swaying curtain, until I looked like a fifties Hollywood actress. And then it was time to get dressed, and my chance to tell Tess was gone, and I’d been so scared to say it, so scared of what her reaction would be, that I was breathless with relief.

Tess and Ginny and Zara went downstairs to the kitchen to do a shot before we left, and I told them I’d be down in a minute. In the mirror, I took the hair on the left side of my face and pinned it back at the crown, so the curtain of perfect Hollywood waves hung only on one side. I looked like a different person. The girl in the mirror had never seen the bottom of her bank account. She had never been heartbroken, never scooped ice cream or cleaned toilets or washed dishes. She had never been disappointed.

And then Theo was there to drive us, and the girls were calling up to me. I put the suede coat over my arm and went downstairs.



WHEN WE GOT TO THE house—in a long line of Range Rovers, Aston Martins, Jaguars—the girls went right inside. I waited with Theo for the valet to take his keys. I was glad to have a moment to process the house we’d arrived at. It was massive, all white stone and carved edifices, carefully illuminated with garden lights. “It’s beautiful,” I said. The understatement of the century.

“You’re beautiful. That color is brilliant on you,” Theo said, pulling me in for a slow kiss. I leaned into him, lingered, drew it out, searching for that

magic fix I'd been sure I'd feel. But all I felt was nerves—nerves that Callum might be here tonight. Or that he might not be.

Theo offered me his arm for the stairs and nodded ahead of us. “This is one of the good houses here. The president of Kazakhstan has a mansion two doors down. A fellow doesn't like to slag off world leaders, but it's downright garish.”

I took the offered arm, stepping carefully in my very high heels. “Shouldn't the president of Kazakhstan be *in* Kazakhstan?”

Theo laughed. “Only a few people actually *live* on this street. Mostly they visit. Saudi royals, shell companies, oligarchs, international schemers.”

“Which category do Tess's parents fall under?” Probably I didn't want to know. The idea of all of it—these empty mansions—curdled in my stomach. If we were litigating morality, there were plenty at this party more questionable than me in my borrowed dress.

“Just old money, in their case. Grandfather was an MP, I think her father's some kind of kingmaker behind the scenes. Busy week for him.” No need to ask which party, then.

After last week's election, the Conservatives had gained control through a baffling coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Things would change now—*austerity measures, cuts to the NHS and social services, stricter visa caps to keep out people like me.* Probably plenty of those Tory voters were here tonight.

We walked through open double doors into the enormous foyer. Two staircases swept out and along the curved walls, leading upstairs. I had to admit, it looked like Downton Abbey on steroids. Anywhere there was a chair, it was velvet. Anywhere there was a lamp or chandelier, it was festooned with glowing glass beads, or thin metallic netting like floss. “Over-the-top” didn't begin to cover it.

I whispered to him, “Tess grew up here, in this house?” I supposed she had a nanny? Several? I honestly couldn't believe she'd turned out so normal, if this was where she'd spent her childhood.

“Yes,” he laughed. “But don't hold it against her.” Of course I couldn't, even if I wanted to. I loved Tess. But wasn't I supposed to dislike her, on

principle? My father would have.

I let Theo lead me toward the music and the light. His arm reminded me of all the other nights, all the other times he'd put the flat of his hand on my back or draped an arm around my waist. All the other times I'd been able to go where once I had not belonged, under his protection. I tried to relax into it, to remind myself I was happy to be here, with him. I was, wasn't I?

Probably I would've made the tasteless faux pas of calling the room we entered a ballroom, but earlier I'd heard Tess call it "the atrium." The ceilings were absurdly high, long chandeliers dripping over the crowd of beautiful, twinkling people. They flowed in and out through two sets of double doors to a long stone terrace for smoking. A string quartet played on a dais. There was no DJ at the moment, but all the sound equipment made it clear that there would be, later. Would Sir Paul McCartney show up and start spinning? What, really, would surprise me here?

I found a glass of champagne and caught up with Ginny and Tess by the raw bar, tipping oysters back like vodka shots. There were a few other girls there, too, and I quickly realized they were debating whether Callum would come. Tess said she didn't think he would—hadn't we hardly seen him lately?—and when Ginny agreed, the other girls didn't hide their disappointment. So mysterious, they said. Like he was a nut they'd been hoping to crack open with their long fingernails.

"He's got some new gig, a volunteer thing," Ginny said.

"Doing what?" I asked.

"Giving legal advice? Doing paperwork?" Ginny said, fluttering her hands vaguely. "A nonprofit that helps immigrants, I think."

Two of the girls rolled their eyes openly at this, like it was a joke, and I felt my hand tighten on the glass.

"That's really important work," I said emphatically, not hiding my irritation.

Half of the crowd was young, twenties and thirties, and I recognized many of them: acquaintances I'd met at dinners and bars and nightclubs, posh boys Tess knew from Westminster, girls Zara knew from St. Swithun's. Cambridge alums Theo had introduced me to at the Gatehouse or

Hawksmoor. The other half of the crowd was older and gathered more along the walls, as if they were keeping out of our way. Considering Tess's father's work, I suspected that many of the older men were the kind of people who had money in offshore tax havens but went on the BBC and insisted that what British families really needed was a little belt-tightening.

After some canapés and more champagne, Tess grabbed my phone and took photos of Theo and me, mugging to make us laugh. The photos were like a flip book when I swiped through them. I had the sensation that I was watching a stop-motion animation, a film clip someone had made of this unreal life. And instead of loving that feeling, as I usually did, I felt a tremor of misgiving in my stomach. A premonition? I turned to Theo, uncertain, but he bent down to kiss me and then put his arm around me, and I felt like myself again, like nothing strange had happened.

After an hour or two, Tess's father got on the dais in front of the string quartet and took up a microphone, and everyone hushed to listen to him speak. Once he started, the people out on the terrace crowded in to hear, and our end of the room began to feel claustrophobically tight.

A few minutes in, a sort of hiss caught my attention. Someone calling, but trying not to be heard, trying not to break the quiet. I looked around, twisting slightly in the circle of Theo's arm.

Callum, dark and dashing in a charcoal suit. My heart did a guilty hiccup of excitement. I hadn't seen him since we'd all landed at Heathrow.

He was far from me, but he raised a hand and waved me toward him. In the crush, I couldn't get to him without causing a disturbance, pushing through, stepping on mirror-shined shoes. I shook my head at him, confused, the few glasses of champagne muddying things. Callum tipped his head back in frustration. This irritated me; what right had he to be frustrated with me? But he cupped his hands around his mouth, quietly calling something, over all these heads. One word, repeated, but I couldn't hear it, and he couldn't say it louder without the whole room hearing it.

A shout of laughter went up around me, followed by a cheer, and the speech was over. Theo excused himself to the bathroom, and I stood crowded in with Tess and Zara, while Ginny made fun of her father's speech. Hamza

and Seb were trying to keep their laughter discreet, since the room was still fairly quiet. “Oh, hey,” Zara said, looking over her shoulder. “Look who’s here!”

I didn’t turn, knowing it would be Callum. Coming to tell me whatever he’d been trying to whisper-shout, coming to complicate a night I was trying to keep simple.

But the voice I heard was not Callum’s; it was a voice from my memory. Long vowels from deep in the throat, the R’s rolling in that particularly French way. For a moment all I could hear in my head was the first time I’d heard him speak: *I can’t stand London anymore*. I could see it, too, the scene: in the palace-hotel garden, his posture in the white chair as haughty as his voice, his arm slung casually around the chair next to him. The chair she sat in, the chair next to me. Because she had brought me there.

I watched that tall, broad Frenchman coming toward us. I knew there was only one reason Simon would be here, only one person who would bring him. But I couldn’t move, my feet in her borrowed heels fixed to the floor, that nightmare when you’re staring down the freight train but can’t move from the tracks. I wanted to close my eyes, brace for impact. I wanted to wake up. But I couldn’t even blink. When he finally arrived, when he leaned to the side to shake Hamza’s hand, I saw her there, behind him. Faye, her dark, long-lashed eyes sweeping the room, appraising the guests, the catlike smile already on her lips. And then someone said her name, and she looked at us, all of us, and me in the cobalt dress, and the smile faltered.

The string quartet hadn't resumed; conversations were just barely starting up after the speech. When my champagne glass shattered, everyone turned toward the sound, looking for the excitement. My friends stepped back, avoiding the splintered glass. Making a little arena for me and Faye.

"Is that my dress?"

My hands went to the dress unconsciously, to the soft folds of silk blooming down from the bodice. "Faye," I said, as if I was about to begin some explanation. But I had no explanation. My mouth was too dry to form words.

"I guess all your gowns were at the dry cleaner?" she said, puzzled, almost playful. Playful like we were friends, so she'd let it slide? Or playful like a cat, tossing her mouse around?

Tess laughed, a little nervously, turning to Faye. "Doesn't she look amazing?" she said. "You know, Anna always puts together a good outfit, but I said earlier, that color was *made* for her."

"Except that it wasn't," Faye laughed, turning back to me. "So where are you cadging all these good outfits from? New Bond Street? And you've got Theo just paying for *all* of it?" She scanned the crowd for him, eyes narrowed. "Is he that whipped?"

Tess looked at me, brows pinched with confusion. "Theo buys all your clothes?"

"No, he doesn't," I managed. "That's not—"

“Are those my shoes?” Faye said, her eyes narrowing in recognition. The playfulness was gone. “So what, you just helped yourself to my whole wardrobe?”

She turned first to Tess, and then looked at Zara, Hamza, Seb. Their blank faces seemed to provoke her. “Are you playing dress-up with her or something?”

“Faye, just cool it for a minute,” Hamza said, keeping his voice low as more people began to notice the disturbance. “None of us have any idea what you’re talking about.”

Faye did not keep her voice low. “I’m talking about her. That dress is mine, those shoes are mine.” She turned to me, and said snippily, “Couldn’t one of your new *friends* lend you something?”

Tess stepped closer, stepping in to defend me. “What are you on about? Anna doesn’t need our clothes.”

Faye’s eyes widened, and she looked back and forth between us in disbelief. An awful, strangled laugh left her mouth. “You must be taking the piss,” she said. “She always dresses like this? Always?” She turned to me. “Do they *know*?”

“Faye—” I began. I could see Tess’s face, the absolute incomprehension there. The hope that there might be some mistake. The last generous thought she might ever have for me, and I was watching it pass, here, now, and there was nothing I could do to keep it. I didn’t even deserve it.

I made myself speak. “Faye, let’s go outside,” I said. “I can explain.”

I couldn’t look away from her: her perfect face, its perfect rage. The freight train bearing down on me. But in the periphery around us, I could see more and more people turning toward us, craning necks, looking over their shoulders. The music still hadn’t started up. We were rapidly becoming the entertainment. My whole face was burning, and I could feel the hot flush creeping up my chest. Where was Theo? Faye was his friend. His oldest friend, he always said.

She shook her head, smirking gleefully. “Yes, I’m sure you’d love to take this conversation elsewhere. Keep up whatever little charade you’ve got going.” She clasped her hands in front of her, then tucked them under her

chin. “Sweet little American ingenue. That shit might work on Theo, but I promise you, it won’t work on me.”

Tess shook her head. “Seriously, Faye, is this how you treat your friends?”

My eyes were hot now, tears moments away. “Please, Tess—”

“Anna and I aren’t *friends*,” Faye said juicily, chewing on each word like it was delicious, making sure that everyone around her could hear. “She works for my family. She’s *staff*.”

She turned back to me. “The only reason she’s even here, in Highgate, is because she’s looking after my house. Rent-free, because we felt sorry for her. And now, apparently, she’s been raiding my clothes.”

“You don’t really live in Highgate?” Tess said, her face falling, real hurt starting to rise to the surface.

The tears were warm on my cheeks now, crawling slowly downward. Sweat prickled on my scalp and on the back of my neck. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t breathe, I could only feel my legs trembling, my whole body beginning to shake. I looked up at Tess, waiting for my answer. Slowly, each millimeter agony, I shook my head no.

Callum appeared then, stepping around the broken glass. “Listen, Faye, you’re out of order,” he said. “You lent her clothes all the time in France. Shoes, everything.”

In my panic, I could see and hear every detail of the wider scene. Everyone huddled around us, watching me, watching Faye. Every friend and acquaintance, a few dozen strangers. A few people with cameras. I was so embarrassed, and Callum was just making it all worse. Making it sound like I’d shown up in Saint-Tropez naked and desperate, looking for a rich family to latch onto. It hadn’t been like that. It had been a thousand small moments, small decisions. Small shifts toward something that felt like it would fix me, when nothing else could.

Faye gave Callum a bitter little smile that showed off the sharp points of her teeth. “That was different. She wasn’t lying about everything then. Everyone knew where she stood.”

He exhaled in frustration. “You mean, everyone knew you liked dressing her up, talking down to her? So, it’s fine as long as you get the credit for your charity case?”

“Oh, fuck off, you’re *defending* her?” She turned to the others. “You’re all just *mad* about sweet little Anna? Appeared out of nowhere, looking the part, saying we’re friends? She’s a con artist.”

“That’s not what happened,” I said, my voice thick and shaking through the tears. “I wasn’t trying to steal or anything. I just wanted—”

“You just wanted my things, my house, my friends? You’re a sneaky fucking liar.”

Callum stepped in front of me. “That’s enough, Faye.”

Faye laughed. “Oh, I see it now—she’s been working both of you. You *and* Theo. Honestly, that’s amazing. That’s some next-level gold-digging.” She leaned around Callum, and stage-whispered to me, “I’d stick with Theo, if I were you. *Much* deeper pockets. Sprawling country home, if you cling on long enough for him to inherit. Got your claws in that deep?”

The idea was so disgusting, I stepped back, away from Callum. Did she really think that? Would Callum? Tess’s eyes moved between us, disbelieving.

“I’m not a gold digger,” I said through tears.

I shut my eyes because I could hardly see anyway. Someone put their hand on my arm and moved me sideways, through the crowd that had formed around us. “Let’s go,” Callum said to me, stern and urgent. “Move your feet.”

In the background I could hear Faye calling after us, “Don’t let her take my fucking jacket from the coat check.”

My teeth were chattering, inexplicably. I was hot, not cold. Sweat stuck my hair to my back, the long perfect curls that Tess had unwound, one by one, making me beautiful, making me like her. Probably this was the last time I would see her. I put my free hand over my mouth so that my crying wouldn’t make a sound. My other arm shook in Callum’s hand as he moved me forward, silent, unrelenting.

My high heels slipped on the polished floor. He caught me against him, but didn’t stop. I wanted to stop. I wanted to disintegrate. I wanted him to

hold me so I could cry without falling. But I couldn't stop thinking of how it would look: like I was working Callum, the gold digger Faye had said I was.

"Let me go," I said.

He didn't, just kept marching me to the door. "You have to get out of here," he said. I tried to pull my arm away.

"Let go of me." My voice sounded terrible—shaky with panic, wet with tears.

Callum didn't say anything. He wouldn't even look at me. Just like in the cab in Lisbon, at the airport. He'd shut me out. I guess this was what he always thought would happen, what he'd warned me about. I guess he thought I was finally getting what I deserved.

"Go on, say it," I said. I wanted him to say something, anything. "Say *I told you so*."

"Shush, Anna," he said, exasperated.

"Say it."

"You've got to get out of here before it gets worse."

I planted my feet and twisted away, out of Callum's grip, bumping into some partygoers as I moved to get away from him. "I'm leaving," I said fiercely. "You don't have to fucking bounce me. I'm going."

I thought he would argue with me. I thought he would say something. But he just looked at me. In my head I heard his voice, saying to Faye, *charity case*.

I turned and walked the last twenty feet of the foyer myself. I didn't look back at him. I didn't stop at the coat check in the hall, just continued down the front stairs and the paved path and fell into the first black cab waiting there.

"Where to, darling?" the driver said.

That night, I slept at the Wilders' house on Makepeace Avenue, as I had every night since the end of January. But I didn't really sleep; I lay in my bed, waiting to hear Faye's fists on the massive front door, her shouting for me to get out, to give back her things.

I gave up on sleep and started packing at five a.m., the sky still inky black outside the sweeping windows. Lying in bed, I'd dreaded this, but now that I was doing it, it felt right. I wouldn't miss these floor-to-ceiling windows, their push-button electric shades, the overstuffed furniture, the sherbet-orange koi fish in the decorative pond. I wouldn't miss that other, glossier person it seemed like I could be, or could become, living in a place like this. That wasn't me, and this wasn't home.

Not that a couch at Liv's would be, either—my only hope was that she would let me stay with her for a few nights, even though I'd been a truly dismal friend lately. There was still a subletter in my bedroom in Andre's flat, and I couldn't afford the rent for that room anyway.

Almost every day since I met Pippa at the Savoy, I had thought of my mother and wished she could see me. Eating my first fig from a silver tray, kissing a handsome man at midnight on New Year's, standing under a rain of red carnations in Lisbon. I knew she'd worried about me, worried that I would end up stuck, like her and Dad. I thought these things would mean I'd succeeded, escaped. And last night at that absurd party, long before Faye arrived, I'd realized that none of it was worth it. That wasn't success.

But of course, if Mom were here now, she would only see the truth: that I had come to this new place and tried to bury the life I'd had, a life and a family I was ashamed of. I had tried to prove to everyone, and myself, that I was not that person anymore. But I was. And in the process of trying, of wallpapering over my hurt with nicer things, I had only succeeded in spreading it around to all the people who had been good, caring, generous friends to me. Liv and Andre first, and then everyone else. Just because I hadn't meant any harm didn't mean that I hadn't caused any.

I'd never see Pippa again. The Wilders would find her a new tutor this summer.

And Tess: I could still see her face in the ballroom, drawn with disbelief, as Callum steered me toward the door. When she woke up this morning, when everything I'd done was visible in the sunlight, what would she think of me?

All the things I'd brought with me fit into two suitcases. A couple of oversized shopping bags were enough for the things I'd bought since moving here. I had always taken fastidious care of Faye's clothes, followed every label, steamed out every last wrinkle before hanging them back where they came from. So there was nothing left to do in her closet but turn off the light and slide the door closed. I left the Elie Saab dress hanging from a hook on the door. It needed to be dry-cleaned, but someone else would have to do that. I needed to leave.

But first, I spent two hours cleaning the house top to bottom as the sky outside slowly lightened to an irresolute gray. I had always enjoyed cleaning the house—every room was so elegant, so meticulously designed and decorated—but these hours felt like penance, like the only small start I could make on turning back all my mistakes. Because in reality, I couldn't fix any of it.

I was starting to mop the dining room when someone knocked. My first thought was Faye, of course, but surely she wouldn't be polite enough to knock? Then the door nudged open on its own, and Theo was calling to me.

I put the mop down and went to meet him. He was standing in the hall, sliding off his shoes, and he had a bag of pastries in one hand. I was so happy

to see him, to see one friendly face, but the tears did their own thing.

“Sorry,” I said, wiping at them with my sleeve. “I’m just glad to see you. It was a long night.” Longer because I’d thought he might leave the party, come to comfort me. I didn’t know what to do with the fact that he hadn’t. But in this moment, that seemed only a minor detail in the context of the larger disaster.

Theo hugged me tightly, wrapping me up in his long arms, the pastries in their bag warm against my back. I sagged against him, feeling the comfort and safety only he could give me. “I’m sorry, sweets, how are you doing?” he said, putting his lips against my hair. “Did you sleep?”

“Not a lot,” I said. “I’ve been packing up, mostly.”

He released me a little, leaning back to look at me. “What? Why? That seems a bit much, don’t you think?”

I blotted my damp eyes. “It doesn’t feel right for me to stay here. I don’t want to put the Wilders in an awkward position. I don’t want them arguing about what to do with me. It’s my mess, you know?” I owed Faye that much. She’d been horrible last night, but she’d been right, too. I’d put both of us in that position.

He followed me to the kitchen and took a plate from the cupboard. He poured the pastries out onto it and set out a pile of napkins. “Eat,” he commanded. “I’ll make coffee.”

“No, please don’t, I just cleaned the espresso machine. I’m heading out soon.”

Theo put his hand on my back and guided me to one of the tall stools at the marble kitchen island. “Just sit,” he said. “Eat something. You’re rushing this, I think. Just give me a moment.”

I didn’t want to, but I sat anyway. I took a few bites of a croissant and watched him move around the kitchen, warming up the espresso machine, measuring out the grounds. It did feel nice to have someone else in charge, even if it was just for a few minutes. I could trust him. Theo understood this world better than I did; he’d grown up in it. He knew Faye. He knew her well, and had for years. He would tell me what could be done, if anything.

When he set down two mugs of coffee with cream and sat beside me, he seemed far too relaxed. Instead of calming me, it put me on edge.

“Look,” he said, putting a hand on my forearm. “Faye will calm down. She’s a bit of a drama person, you know that. I think she was just surprised that you’d assimilated so well here. Without her.”

I grimaced. “Callum read that right. She only liked me when I was her little polish-up project.”

“I don’t think this will be such a big thing, once it settles down.” He nudged my coffee toward me, reminding me to drink. “I mean, sure, it was a big surprise last night—when I got there, everyone was comparing notes, what they knew about you. But they were just shaken up.”

I looked down at my coffee, its pretty walnut color, and took a long sip. I took another, let it flow warmth into my body, which had been shivery since last night. Clearly, Theo had heard right away about what happened to me and then continued the rest of his evening at the party. Chatting, eating canapés, clinking glasses.

He leaned forward to catch my eye. “But it’s not like you were trying to take their firstborn child, scam them for money. You were just a friend.”

“Just a friend,” I said with a little laugh. It sounded so fucked-up when he said it like that. That I’d done all this so I could be just-a-friend to these people. Was I that desperate to fit in? Stupidly, it had felt like I was proving something. If I could make a life here, with these people, maybe I could let go of the one I’d lived before, marked by disappointments. Maybe I could shed the years like a skin, be new and untouched. Get my visa to stay forever, and never look back at the places that hurt to see, the version of me it hurt to be.

I took a napkin from the pile and held it to my face, breathing, reaching for calm. The house would never be clean if I had to keep stopping to cry.

Theo’s arm went around my back. “No, don’t cry,” he said. “Please don’t. In a few weeks, if you apologize, they’ll accept it, I’m sure. Really they will.”

I stood up, shaking my head. “You’re wrong,” I said. “This is it.” I had to leave. I’d have to clean the espresso machine again, and take out the trash, and then I could go.

I noticed then that Theo wasn't looking at me. He was looking at his phone, the frown lines pinched together between his eyes. "Oh, really," he said. "That's a bit much."

I moved to stand behind him, to see his phone screen. It was open to Facebook, which wasn't unusual. But I could see the post he was looking at, and it was from Faye.

I took the phone from Theo; I didn't read the post, but my name was in it, and a photo of Faye and me together on New Year's Eve. My fingers shook as I clicked through the comments and replies. Disbelief, outrage, indignity on her behalf. They called me a scammer. They called me a grifter, thief, poser, pleb, desperate wannabe, shameless social climber, American trash. People I'd met, friends of my friends, said they hoped never to see me out again. I'd better not show up places, or they'd have words for me. Had she called the police yet? Because she should.

Theo pulled up Twitter and let out a groan, but I didn't see the rest. I put my forehead down on the counter and cried. At least now he had to believe me. It was over.

"I'll talk to her, I'll get her to come around," he said, rubbing my back, and it almost sounded like he was trying to convince himself, not me. "She'll listen to me. She always has."

I pushed his hand off me. Why was he pretending that she would ever be reasonable? Why was he so sure he could talk her down?

"Where were you last night when Faye got there?" I asked. "You were there when the speech ended, but you never came back."

Theo made a face. "Well, to be honest, I went to have a word with Callum. I could see that he was bothering you, during the speech. Trying to get you to come over to him. In front of everyone."

"He was trying to warn me."

Theo nodded. "Yes, he said as much."

"And then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he told you then. He told you Faye was there, he told you what was going to happen. But you didn't come back, you didn't help me."

Theo reached for his croissant on the counter, paused to take a bite. “I needed the bathroom,” he said finally. “You remember, after the speech, I told you.”

Obviously a lie. I wanted to slap the pastry out of his hand. “You just left me to the dogs. Callum came, but you didn’t. He was there, he tried to help.”

“Yes, I’m sure he did,” Theo said sourly. “Your knight in shining armor.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Theo had a retort, but I wasn’t listening. It was too late; finally, I was coming to it, putting together all the little things I’d noticed for months. The way Theo knew his way around this house, the way he’d always known where the coffee was, and the button next to the bed for the electric shades, and the weird backwards lock at the top of the front door. How he’d shown up at the Savoy the same time as Faye, tasting of champagne. How he’d made himself scarce last night when she arrived.

“You and Faye, you aren’t just friends,” I said.

Theo stiffened, infinitesimally, but I felt it. “What makes you say that?” he said, his voice warily neutral. It was all the answer I needed.

“When? How long? All this time?” I demanded, turning fully to face him. The first wave of righteous anger felt like air, like gulping straight oxygen. Here, at least, at last, I wasn’t the one who’d done wrong. They were liars, too. The scene with Faye last night made so much more sense now: her vindictiveness, the way she kept dropping Theo’s name. I was, in some weird sector of her weird brain, a rival.

I watched Theo’s chest expand and contract, two long, thoughtful, calculating breaths. “At school, we dated a little. University, I’d see her sometimes when I was down from Cambridge. All a long time ago. It wasn’t a serious thing, Anna. Not even worth mentioning. She’d tell you the same.”

“But she didn’t. She never told me,” I said. Then, incredulously, remembering: “She *encouraged* me. She said you were a good guy.” I bet it had been like the clothes, for her. Like she was offering me Theo for occasional use. Her power, orchestrating all of us to suit her.

Theo’s eyebrows went up. “Am I not?”

I only laughed.

“Anna,” he said, taking my hand, “I promise, nothing’s going on with Faye.”

“Don’t!” I said. “Don’t lie to me. I know you’ve been sneaking around. I knew something was up. You were so weird at the Savoy. Both of you. And I fucking ignored it.”

Theo looked at me, weighing his next move: truth or lie. He started to speak, and I just shook my head. “The way I trusted you. Such an idiot. I thought you were the one person here looking out for me.”

I stood up, but he reached to pull me back in. “Anna, please. You’re just upset.”

Why yes, I was a touch upset. Incredible powers of observation. I pointed at the door. “Go.”

Theo protested, told me to calm down. I was physically pushing his enormous frame toward the exit when the doorbell chimed.

It was Faye, probably. Good, she could have him. And I would go upstairs and get my bags and call a cab and leave all of this behind. She could clean the stupid espresso machine. I was done.

Theo followed me to the door. I took a deep breath, bracing for another tirade, and opened it.

A small man in a suit stood in front of me, no one I’d ever seen. “Anna Byrne?” he said.

I nodded.

“Mr. Raleigh,” he said, touching his tie with a diminutive hand. “I’m the Wilder family’s solicitor. They’ve asked me to come and let you know that you have until five p.m. today to vacate the property. You’re to take all your things, but to leave anything that you found here, anything that has not been expressly given to you as a gift.”

It hurt to hear, but none of it was a surprise. Well, hearing it from a lawyer was a surprise. That was a nice touch. Better than sending Faye. “Yes, I understand,” I said. “I’m planning to be gone in an hour, at most.”

He nodded. “It is also their wish that you should refrain from contacting the family in any way. This extends to Pippa Wilder, with whom I understand you are in regular contact.”

“It’s not like I’m initiating it,” I said, irritation rippling under my skin. “She texts me sometimes, about TV shows and stuff. She’s just a kid.”

Mr. Raleigh leaned forward, extending his business card. “Any further contact should be made through my office. We’ll be handling the next steps.”

“Next steps?”

“Possible legal action. We’re considering all options.”

Theo made a sound of disbelief. “What are you playing at? She borrowed some clothes. Nothing’s been stolen, everything’s here.”

I felt the room darkening around me, the sky blotting out above quiet, peaceful, moneyed Makepeace Avenue. I swayed and Theo put an arm around my waist, pulling me against him. I wanted to shove him away, but in the moment I couldn’t even remember why. I only knew I wanted to be gone.

“Anything else?” Theo said acidly. “High treason? Espionage?”

Mr. Raleigh shook his head and started to say goodbye. I felt rather than saw Theo slam the door in his face.

Liv's place was a whole house just off Stroud Green Road. Messy and overcrowded, each room occupied by a twenty-something British man, and the hallway occupied by their fixed-gear bikes. No one ever picked up the mail that came through the slot, so you entered on a carpet of mailers and takeout menus and postcard threats about paying the TV license. Whenever I had visited last year, I'd liked it, despite the mess. This was a house where everyone was friendly and warm, where the kettle was always on the boil, where Liv and I were treated like locals, not Americans.

Of course it was a little different when I arrived with my suitcases and bags. Theo's father's Range Rover idling in the street behind me, far too fancy for this not-yet-gentrified neighborhood. I couldn't afford a cab, and Theo owed me a ride, at least, after all his bullshit.

I wasn't even sure I had a right to feel betrayed, though of course I did. He had shown me, the first day he'd introduced me around to his Highgate friends, that he didn't have a problem with smoothing over inconvenient truths. I hadn't minded it then, when it benefitted me.

Liv was not exactly happy to see me, but she took pity on my tearful, homeless state. Andre had told her about the council tax, so she knew about my dire finances. "When he told me how much it was, I knew you'd be in for a time," she said. Pitying but not absolving me.

Her roommates would be out for the night. I asked if she thought Andre would come to dinner, if we invited him. I'd cook for all of us and even clean

the kitchen, which was a disaster zone. “I know he’s furious with me about the council tax. But I really want to see him,” I said.

“He’s not angry, Anna,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s hurt. We both are. You just ditched us, that’s what it felt like. I had to look on Facebook just to see how you were doing.”

“I know. That’s why I need to do this.”

“I’ll invite him,” Liv said. “But are you sure you want to make dinner? Should you be spending your money buying stuff to cook for us?”

“I can cover it. This is more important,” I said. I couldn’t tackle anything else in my life—my tuition, my dissertation, my homelessness, my near-empty bank account—until I’d really made amends with Liv and Andre. I owed them that.

I put my bags upstairs in Liv’s little bedroom, next to the living room with the tawdry tiger-striped couch I’d probably be sleeping on tonight. I sat on her bed and called Muswell Hill Academy. They still owed me the whole fee I’d negotiated hard for—maybe even enough to placate Queen Mary for a while. The secretary said the headmaster hadn’t authorized my payment, and was now out of town, so I’d have to try again next week. I promised I would, in person. This was the third excuse I’d had from her, for the delay.

The gray day had cleared. I walked on the sunny side of the street down to a pawnshop on Seven Sisters Road, where I traded in the brand-new iPhone Theo had given me. I got far less cash than it was worth, but it was something, and my old phone still worked for essentials. Then back up Stroud Green Road to Woody’s, the Turkish grocer a block from Liv’s flat. I got only what I needed, and a pack of sponges. From his stool, the clerk put a small tray of handmade baklava on the belt with my ingredients, just like Liv had said he would, but I shook my head. “I can’t pay for that,” I said, surprised by how little it embarrassed me to admit this. “I’m sorry. It looks delicious.”

He nodded and packed up the rest of my groceries, then dropped the baklava into my bag anyway. “On the house,” he said, then nodded at the total on the register. I thanked him, paid, and left. Hopefully my dinner guests

would be feeling as charitable as him tonight. I was in need of forgiveness, but baklava would help. It always did.



I WAS IN THE KITCHEN, so I could see down the hall to the door when Liv let Andre in. “Have you had a cleaner round?” he said. I’d cleared up all the mailers and vacuumed, then moved onto my big project: the kitchen, where every surface seemed to be somehow both sticky with sugar *and* slick with spattered cooking grease. But after Smith, I practically had a four-year degree in cleaning houses and washing dishes, so I was uniquely qualified for the filth excavation.

“What’re you making us?” Liv asked, coming into the kitchen with Andre behind her. I didn’t know if I should hug him or not, but I wanted to. I stood at the stove, pushing butter around the hot frying pan.

“I thought it was time we made Andre try American pancakes,” I said. “Since he made us the British ones.”

“You’re going to win me over with *pancakes*?” Andre said. He stood in the doorway. Waiting for something.

“I’ve got lots of groveling planned, too,” I said. My cheeks had been burning since he buzzed at the door. “Maybe some begging, if there’s time.”

He came into the kitchen and gave me a small, quick hug. “We’ll make time,” he said. A teasing smile, but not his usual, relaxed one. Liv was right; I’d really hurt him, hurt our friendship.

“Liv told you I’m homeless?” I asked him.

He pulled out a chair at the kitchen table. “Yeah, sorry to hear it. Pretty rough fall from grace, Highgate house to tiger couch.”

“That’s not even the half of it,” I said, pouring the first pancake batter into the pan. “Let me get these going, and then I’ll tell you the whole mess.”

I made them just like Mom used to—thick, fluffy, golden brown. The key, she’d told me, was to always flip them right when the bubbles in the batter start to pop. Had she known that I’d be here, someday? Poor enough

that pancakes were the best dinner I could muster for the people I loved most in the world?

I was lucky; Liv already had a jug of real, imported maple syrup (in the fridge, fiercely labeled *LIV ONLY*). I would never have been able to afford it here. I put the jug on the table with the stack of pancakes and the butter and sat down. Liv and Andre were talking about things at UCL, their common link apart from me. Andre had another year of research there, and Liv was hoping to be approved to start her PhD this summer.

When I sat, they turned to me expectantly. I took a deep breath. "I wish I could take you all out to a nice dinner, or somewhere fun. A big grand gesture, movie stuff. But this is all I've got to say sorry." I gestured at the stack of pancakes and shook my head. "I know it's not much, not a very impressive apology, but I'm just glad you're both here."

"Go on then, let's hear it," Andre said, spearing a pancake for his plate.

"Would you like the groveling or the begging first?" I said with a shy smile. Hoping he wasn't too angry to banter with me in our old way.

"Oh, save that for dessert," he said, waving me off. "I want the story first. How'd you cock up your free house?"

I put butter on my own pancake, but my stomach was tightening into a hard fist, just below my ribs. "I think I just got in a little over my head, you know? I thought I *had* to make this Highgate thing work for me. But it sort of blew up. Right in my face."

I was being too vague. Liv and Andre exchanged a look of apprehension. "Did you amass some enormous gambling debt or something?" Andre said. "Mortgage a kidney?"

I smiled, but I could feel my eyes getting wet again, my throat squeezing shut. So I gave them the quick version, the one I could do without crying.

When I was done, Andre whistled admiringly at the size of my fuckup. Liv shot him a look, but I could tell she was just as shocked.

I shook my head, trying to make it make more sense than it did. "You know, when we watch *Chelsea Made*, it's not the fancy parties and beautiful clothes that make it fantasy, for me. It's how untouchable they are." I

gestured around the table. “The things we worry about here—the things my parents worried about back home—they don’t exist in that world.”

“But that’s not what it was like for you in Highgate,” Andre said. “You just gave yourself *more* to worry about.”

I laughed. He was right.

“But why did it matter?” Liv said. Her voice was quiet, sad. Sad for me. Probably she’d seen it—the size of the hole I must have in me, if these were the lengths I’d go to to fill it up.

“No background, no budgets, no mess, no problems. When I was with them, I could be that version of myself.” I laughed and wiped my eyes. “I think that’s why I sort of bailed on you. I could never be that version with you guys. You know I’m at least seventy-five percent problems.”

“Call it eighty,” Andre said, but his smile was sympathetic. “So what happens with them now?”

I’d texted Tess a few hours ago, to see if we could talk, but no reply. I’d heard nothing from any of them. That’s not to say it was radio silence, though: my Facebook inbox was full of people telling me I should be ashamed of myself, that I was a slag, a filthy little thief, a classless poser chav who should fuck off back to America.

“Ugh, don’t even look at that shit,” Liv said. “Those people don’t know you.”

“Still, my friends—I guess I can’t call them that anymore—they’ll think the same, won’t they? Probably worse.”

“You were a dick, sure,” Andre said. “But so were they, if they cared about the designer clothes you wore or which postcode you lived in.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure they would have cared,” I said. It felt like the saddest thing I’d said all night. “I was too scared to find out.” I looked down at my now-cold pancake. “I’m really sorry I’ve been such a shit friend the past few months.”

“A *shite* friend, Anna,” Andre corrected me, his mouth quirking up, irresistibly moving toward the old smile I knew. “You were *bang out of order*, darling,” he said, mimicking the low, lazy vocal fry of the *Chelsea Made* kids. I giggled, despite myself, but he wasn’t done. “You ditched us for

greener pastures,” he said, “and now the greener pastures have ditched you. It really is some reality show shit, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Andre,” Liv admonished. “Don’t you think she’s suffered enough?”

He laughed. “As far as I can tell, she’s only been suffering for about twenty-four hours.”

I looked at my watch. “Less than that. Twenty maybe?”

“I guess that’ll do, then,” he said, grinning at me. He waved at my untouched plate. “You gonna reheat that? Or is eating cold pancakes part of your penance?”



LIV PUT THE KETTLE ON and made tea, and we sat at the table with our mugs, catching up long after the food was gone. It wasn’t like old times, of course, and I wasn’t fully forgiven, but it felt so good, just to be there, with them. How long had it been since I’d sat at a table with friends, being completely myself? Where I hadn’t had to censor what I said, or how I acted, or what I revealed? It was a different kind of freedom than the one I’d had in Highgate.

My old phone buzzed, shimmying across the table. Pippa’s name was on the screen. “Oh,” I said, frowning at it. “The lawyer said I can’t talk to her. But I—”

“What lawyer?” Liv said. “You have a lawyer?”

I was still staring at the phone; it was still buzzing. I really wanted to answer it. “The Wilders’ lawyer who turned me out of the house.”

Andre whistled again. “You left that bit out.”

“Fuck ’em,” Liv said. “Answer it.”

I sighed and pressed the green button, put the phone up to my ear. “Pippa?”

“Yeah, hey. Where are you?”

I shook my head, confused by the question. “I’m at my friend’s house.”

“Oh, good,” she said. “I just didn’t know, when they said they’d made you leave. I didn’t know if you had a place you could go.”

My eyes were instantly damp again, ready for another round. Her worry was so much more than I deserved. “I’m okay, thanks,” I said. “I’m sorry for getting you involved in all this. Obviously, I didn’t mean for things to go this way.”

Pippa laughed. “Oh, don’t waste that shit on me. I couldn’t care less what you did with Faye’s old togs. If she cared about them, she wouldn’t have left them in a cupboard in another country for literally years.”

“Well, sure, but—”

“You know she just got jealous. All good fun until she realized Theo might actually like you. Really, now that I’m saying it, it sounds very *Gossip Girl*, doesn’t it? Classic Blair.”

“Yeah, actually, it does.”

“I’m just sorry she got Mum and Dad all whipped up about it. But you know how she is. She’s a master manipulator. Always working people. That’s sort of why I called.” She paused. I had never once heard Pippa consider her words like this. “I wanted to warn you. They’re going to press charges.”

I looked up at Liv and Andre, who’d been watching me and, obviously, listening to Pippa’s voice through the phone. Their faces were as stricken as mine. “For—for theft?” I asked. I would never be approved for a visa to stay if I was charged with a crime. “I didn’t steal anything.”

Pippa huffed. “Faye convinced Mum it’s actually fraud, you pretending and everything. The solicitor just went along with it. Paid by the hour, isn’t he? He said in the UK you can be charged with fraud even if you didn’t take anything. Just the deception itself is grounds enough, if they can show intent.”

I took the phone away from my ear and looked at it, as if it might show me something that made sense of what Pippa was saying. Peripherally, I saw Liv and Andre look at each other in horror.

“Anna?” Pippa’s voice came as if from a great distance. “Did you get all that?”

I put the phone back to my ear. “Yeah, thanks, Pippa. Thanks for the heads-up. It’s a big help.” It wasn’t, actually—what could I do, get a lawyer


of my own?—but she'd been kind to call. To put me on alert.

"I've got to run," she said. "I'm not supposed to talk to you. You know the bullshit. Text me if you want, though, no one will know."

"Okay," I said. But that was impossible. If there were going to be charges, there would likely be phone records, text messages. It would only look worse if I was staying in contact with Pippa, a minor, against her parents' wishes. The best thing she could do was forget about me. "Thank you, Pippa." I said. "Enjoy your summer holidays."

It had started slowly. A drip that became a deluge. The first email was from one of my Highgate mothers, saying her son didn't need tutoring anymore. Then, two weeks ago, a Hampstead student texted to say her parents had found her a different tutor, no more explanation than that. The third email, last week, was from the counselor at the Highgate School. She said the headmistress had reevaluated after-school programming, and they no longer had funding for my SAT study group. When I reminded her that the students paid cash for the study group, not the school, I got no reply.

Rumors about me had obviously found their way to the headmistress. I slammed my laptop shut, thinking again of Faye's Facebook blast. There were only a handful of years between the Highgate friends I'd had and the Highgate students I tutored. This place was small; people had always talked. Probably, I was the talk now.



LIV'S ROOMMATES HAD AGREED THAT I could stay on their living room couch, with the understanding that it would be temporary, and that I would keep all my things in her room. Being gone during the day was my own rule. If I was hardly there, if I was just someone who dragged wrinkled bedding into the living room every night, maybe they wouldn't notice that it had already been six weeks.

Every day I woke in the dark to shower, so I wouldn't interrupt anyone's morning routine. Liv said I was vastly overestimating their personal hygiene,

but I knew she was glad I tried to be scarce. She liked her house and her roommates, and I didn't want to endanger that for her.

I tried to leave by eight at the latest, and I always came home late. My manager at the Garage had graciously taken me back, so I was bartending nights again, on top of teaching and tutoring my remaining students.

In between jobs, my daytime home was the British Library—where I was today, where Tess had taken me, all those months ago. My dissertation advisor, Professor Randolph, had helped me get approved to use the reading rooms: large, white, glass-walled, monitored by an attendant who would allow in nothing but books, pencils, laptop, and water, all in a clear plastic bag. Everything else, your regular life, had to be left in a locker room in the basement. I could be nothing but a scholar and a reader here. I loved it. I would've slept here if they let me.

I was done with research, just writing now. Distilling the thoughts and quotes and connections I'd put together from months of slow, methodical reading: all of Austen's novels, and then the much-later authors who'd also used that plot of a young woman traveling or transplanted as a lens to examine class, money, and belonging in society. Whenever I had a quote or reference that felt incomplete or out of context, a quick search in the library's online catalog would offer up a biography, criticism, or social history. I could request it, and within the hour, the book would be delivered to my reading room. I could close that open loop right away. Like the library itself was part of my process, an active assistant whenever I needed it.

Every day, when I came and went, I envied the library staff; I envied their permanence here. My dissertation was due at the end of August, just two months from now. If I succeeded, got my visa to stay, I might stop by here occasionally to see a new exhibit, but my time as a small cell in this beating heart would be over.

Whenever I thought about this, it was Tess I wanted to tell. She would understand: the spirit of the place, the depth of the work, the desire to make a life in it, somehow. It hadn't been hard to see how dearly she wanted back into that world, when we talked. Was it a wound I'd reopened, or, maybe, had helped to heal? She had never replied to my text, or to the apology letter I'd

sent a few weeks ago, but I understood that. I hadn't expected her to. That wasn't why I'd written.

At two, I got my things from the locker room and went out onto the library's brick plaza to eat the crumpled sandwich I'd made at home. It had rained that morning, but the sun was out now, and it was warm, so I found a dry spot to sit on the low wall. The sun felt healing. End of June, a year since I'd arrived. At least I was still here.

My phone vibrated—Professor Randolph. We'd only emailed.

"Anna, I've just had a call from the bursar's office," he said. "About your tuition."

My stomach plummeted. I put the sandwich back in my bag.

"I've been sending them money," I said, the dry edge of panic obvious in my voice. "Every week. As much as I can."

Silence on the line.

I stood, started to pace. Every paycheck I got went straight to Queen Mary. It had been the only thing I could think to do—a way to show them I was committed to paying, committed to staying. And Professor Randolph was calling to tell me it wasn't enough.

Finally, he said, "They say they'll drop you from the program unless you pay the whole of your balance this month."

All the air left my lungs. I could not answer.

"Am I correct in thinking that will not be possible?"

He suspected, then, how dire my situation was. He'd given me high marks on an essay for his class on writing from the East End—the historically working-class, immigrant part of London. Books and stories of people struggling and striving. Now he knew for certain why those books had resonated with me. I'd had to ask him for an extension, back in May, admit I'd lost my housing suddenly.

I scraped together the air to speak. "I work as a tutor and a teacher. I have regular, good income. I just can't make one large payment. It's impossible."

"Can your parents help?"

"My mother's dead," I said, too tired to put any spin on it. "My father can't support me financially. Or in any other way. I'm on my own here."

“I was afraid that might be the case,” Professor Randolph said with another heavy sigh. This was all far outside his job description. “Is there anyone who would lend you the money? If you could just make one big payment—even if it wasn’t the whole balance—I think that might help.”

Theo would do it, of course. Even though I wasn’t speaking to him, he would. Gladly. I would never ask him.

“Maybe I could if— There’s a private school in North London. They owe me thousands of pounds.” I couldn’t keep the anger out of my voice. “But they’ve been giving me the runaround for months. I’m not sure they’ll ever pay me.” I laughed harshly. “Actually, I’m not sure they ever intended to.” No wonder they’d been happy to grant such a high fee for my class. I’d emailed and called endlessly, stopped by every week to try to corner the headmaster. Last week I’d had a particularly chilly brush-off from the secretary; she said I was taking up too much of her time. I told her they’d been wasting *my* time for months.

Professor Randolph hummed into the mouthpiece, weighing our options. “Well, that doesn’t sound terribly promising, but I know you’re a smart young woman. You see what you can do about that school, and I’ll see what I can do about this one.”

“Is there a process for something like this?”

“Well, no, but I can make some calls around the department, make some noise up the ladder, provost and so on. Make clear that the English department believes you should be allowed to continue in the program, as long as you’re keeping up with a regular payment plan. They’ll have some sway with the bursar.”

I knew I should say thank you, profusely, many times, but those weren’t the words that came out. “You would do all that?”

I was not his best student, not the hardest working, nor the smartest, nor the most insightful in class. Apart from that East End essay, which had hit close to home, I hadn’t excelled beyond my classmates.

Randolph paused, and I could picture him as he was in class—gathering his thoughts, carefully, for a solemn pronouncement. “Anna, your recent work has been a reminder to me. How important it is to have a broad mix of

students in a classroom like mine, where people arrive with their own individual readings of texts, readings impacted so powerfully by their backgrounds and experiences.” Another thoughtful pause. “Not having your voice in those conversations harms all of us, not just you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you. I appreciate whatever you can do. I won’t miss a payment.”

“Good. That’s essential. Now, am I right in assuming you hope to stay in the UK after you graduate? You’re hoping for the post-study work visa?”

Maybe I wasn’t the first desperate international student he’d helped. “That was my plan, yes.”

“Then you’d better make sure this dissertation of yours is solid stuff. That visa requires a degree in good standing,” he said gravely. “And we won’t be able to talk our way out of that one.”



I TRIED TO EAT MY sandwich on the Tube, but it just caught in my throat. I was humming with nerves, going to shake down the secretary at Muswell Hill Academy one last time. I could not leave there without a check. I had an after-school class to teach at St. Aloysius’ in two hours, but that wasn’t far from Muswell Hill.

The Academy was conspicuously exclusive, surrounded by a high, century-old stone wall. A moss-covered archway formed the entrance, complete with an imposing gate that opened if you were staff, or if your name was on the gateman’s list. At the guardhouse, I handed over my ID and he ran it down the page, once and then twice.

“I know you’re on here somewhere,” he said. “Seen you before.”

“I taught here a few months ago.” I nodded. *And stopped by every week for a month asking to be paid for it.*

“Let me make a call then, who knows. Back in a mo,” he said, disappearing inside the stone guardhouse.

After a minute, I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. Hoping it was Randolph with good news already, I answered without looking.

It was not Randolph. It was not good news.

It was Grant, my supervisor at Kramer, calling to fire me.

He'd received a tip from a school—probably Highgate—warning that I'd been involved in some kind of con. Grant, I knew, couldn't care less about morality. But the call revealed that I'd been teaching on my own, poaching clients that could have been Kramer's, in violation of their noncompete clause. In order to collect damages, they'd be "retaining" my final paycheck.

I ended the call, but my mouth hung open, ready to retort, my anger hot and liquid and pulsing through each limb. I knew I'd broken my contract by taking on my own students. What choice had I had, though, living on what Kramer paid me? I could still feel the pinpricks of nervous sweat on the train to Brighton, desperately hoping my trick with the train ticket would get me to my class at Roedean. It felt like all of this, everything that had happened, had started that morning.

I was still shaking when the man returned and handed me my ID. "I'm very sorry, miss," he said. "Can't let you in."

"But you know me."

"Secretary says you're barred."

"I'm *barred*?" I couldn't believe I was hearing this. "Why?"

He shook his head apologetically. "It's all above my paygrade, you know. What they do in the headmaster's office."

I thought I would burst into tears, but a harsh laugh was all that came out. "Above my paygrade, too, I guess, since they won't pay me anything at all."

"Still, best you go on now, before they make trouble. Good afternoon, miss." He ducked back into his guardhouse, shutting the door with a click.

In a sort of daze, I turned and walked to the end of the street. A bus stop; I sat. Dropped my book bag on the bench next to me. My body felt strange. I wasn't flesh and blood and bone; I was fury and indignation and desperate, all-consuming panic.

This was not a clerical error. I was being disposed of. This, just like my Kramer firing, was punitive, for my hubris: the system cleansing itself of me. I'd been writing about it earlier, in my dissertation. Henry James. So many of

his fish-out-of-water women ended belly-up, punished for stepping outside the order of things, or thinking the order might not apply to them.

This was how the world worked. There was a hierarchy. I'd served my purpose to the system, used up my usefulness. Kramer would keep my paycheck; Muswell Hill Academy would not pay me. I'd need a miracle to get what I was owed here. They knew I had no power. They knew I sat miles below them, down here at rock bottom.

I'd never be able to pay my tuition without my Kramer students, without this payment. Bartending barely covered food and Tube fare. The dissertation I was so proud of would not be read. I would not get my degree. My visa expired in four months.

Things had gone badly here. There was no denying it. Probably it would be smart to leave, settle somewhere less expensive, less disastrous. That's what my father would say. Probably Henry James would agree. It's what I'd done last year—left when I couldn't see a way forward.

With a low rumble of complaint, a bus crested the hill and pulled up to my stop. Two people got off at the back, but the driver slid the front door open anyway and looked at me.

The bell rang back at the Academy, faintly, and I turned toward the sound. It was profoundly familiar to me, after a year of classes, of teaching the hundreds of teenagers who had passed into and out of my days—bright-eyed or bored, doing what they had to do to escape to America. But I couldn't imagine leaving behind this beautiful, brutal, manic city that had printed itself on the inside of my soul from my first day up on Parliament Hill, the whole of it unfurled below me like a road map.

"Well, are you going?" the driver called out.

And I laughed. What else could I do? Even in terms of metaphors, it was a little heavy-handed. "No," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not going." The bus was off in a gush of exhaust before I could finish my sentence.

London was mine, and I wasn't going to give it up. Not because I couldn't go home, but because I couldn't give in. Not to this system designed to use me up, then throw me out like yesterday's *Evening Standard*.

I wanted to wake up here every day, even if it was on Liv's tiger-striped couch. Descend the grimy stairs of Finsbury Park station, down into the airless tunnels, while the fruit seller outside sang the day's inventory to an invented tune. I wanted to finish out my long, exhausting, wonderful days at the British Library. And then come home and pay the man at Woody's for his mandatory baklava. And on Sundays, sit on the damp grass with my friends, warmed by the setting sun and the canned gin and tonics.

If I wanted to stay, I needed help. I needed that payment. I couldn't afford a lawyer, and I also couldn't afford to wait for a lengthy civil process, but maybe there were other ways. Maybe I knew someone who could tell me what my options were. Not a lawyer yet, but close to it.

It wasn't a miracle I needed. It was Callum.

The library was quiet when I arrived, barely eight thirty. I went down to the lockers on the lower level to stow everything but my laptop and notes. Part of my ritual, leaving everything behind here, leaving nothing but my dissertation.

A long bulletin board ran along the wall outside the locker room, and this was the next part of the ritual: letting my eyes slide optimistically over the job postings there. Today, my eye caught on something unusual—a flyer with the British Library logo. The header said *Apprenticeships*. I stepped closer—this was not part of the ritual—and saw that it wasn’t just one posted flyer; there were five or six pushpinned to the wall. I tore one off and carried it to the locker with me.

I skimmed down the page. *Full-time, full pay, full training.* That had my attention. *An apprenticeship is 23 months. It is an opportunity to learn, and we recognise that it may be a completely new working environment for you. We don’t expect you to have previous work experience in the sector or any formal qualifications.*

Four possible apprenticeship tracks: customer service; business administration; accounting; and last, the most appealing, library, information, and archive services. It said you would learn to manage and care for the library’s extensive collection—170 million books, newspapers, items, artifacts—and share it with visitors to the library.

A dream, in other words. I imagined myself coming to work here every morning, taking my lunch breaks out on the plaza if it wasn’t raining. Part of

the fabric of this place.

But for now, I stuffed the flyer into the locker with my book bag and closed it. Better to focus on what I could control: making my payments, finishing my dissertation. Part of the ritual was believing, every day, that it would be enough.



CALLUM HAD SUGGESTED KING'S CROSS as a mutually convenient meeting place, in his reply to my email. Getting my things from the locker, walking a block to the station, I took all the nerves vibrating through me and assigned them to my fear that he might not be able to help me, or even willing to. But the nerves that came from seeing Callum himself, from remembering his lips brushing over mine in Lisbon—those I could barely swallow down.

I was early, but Callum was already waiting, handsome in a soft button-down shirt, dark hair brushed back perfectly. Inside the glass dome of King's Cross, the café was crowded, almost every table full, but he was unmissable.

He stood when I arrived, keeping the table between us—answering my silent question of whether we would kiss on the cheek in the old way.

"I really appreciate you meeting me," I said. "And you're early, too."

He laughed and looked down at the table. "So are you."

We queued for croissants and coffees, which Callum insisted on paying for. I let him. I hadn't bought anything from a café since returning from Lisbon. That was a luxury now.

When we sat down, I felt the nerves surging again, tugging at my stomach. Better to stick to business. I pulled out the folder with all my notes and printed emails. "This is everything," I said. "All my communications with the school. I have emails that confirm the fee and the agreement, class logs that show I taught every hour I was meant to."

Callum's eyes were down, scanning the papers. "I'd say they're betting you'll just give up. No company or organization behind you. American, no friends or connections here to get things moving."

I grimaced. "Sounds about right."

He looked up at me, those fine dark eyes under long lashes. “And yet here I am.” He pointed to the amount in the email. “This is the price you agreed on? That’s a good fee,” he said. “You must be good at your job.”

I shook my head. “Pretty easy to agree to an expensive fee when you have no intention of paying it.”

His lips lifted into a sympathetic smile. “I recognize that this is an important sum of money for you, Anna,” he said gently. “But with the time and effort and expense it would take to go through the court systems, it probably wouldn’t be worthwhile.”

I looked down at my cup. The white plastic lid, the beads of light brown coffee gathered on it. It was enough money to ruin the payment plan Queen Mary had begrudgingly agreed to, enough to derail my degree, send me home penniless, but not enough to trouble a court with. The system was working just as it was designed to.

I tried to say, “I’m sorry I wasted your time,” but it came out as just a whisper. I had no breath for speech, every inch of my body tensed to hold back tears.

Callum noticed—of course he did—right away. Looking around at the packed café, the tables crowding ours, he reached across the table. I thought for a moment he would take my hand. But he just grabbed the wax paper envelope with our croissants in it. Put it into a shoulder bag.

“Time for a walk,” he said.



THE SIGN SAID *ST. PANCRA'S Gardens*, but it was clearly a very old cemetery. Grassy, dotted with thick trees, a handful of large, mossed-over tombs and memorials, and one small, weather-beaten stone church. Not overcrowded with headstones, like Highgate Cemetery had been when Theo had taken me there.

“No one will hear us in here,” Callum said with a sly smile.

I laughed, despite myself. “No, doesn’t look like a lively crowd.”

But it wasn't actually very quiet. We were only a few minutes' walk from King's Cross. The ground tremored as we entered the cemetery, trains picking up speed on the tracks just behind the gardens, hidden by a tall stone wall.

The first bench we came to, Callum handed me my croissant from his bag. "You eat, and I'll talk."

I hadn't eaten all morning; I was too hungry and resigned to argue. I sat.

"I looked up this school you taught at, did a little digging around. It's a charity, actually."

"A charity?"

"Well, not-for-profit. It has tax-free status. It means they have to stay in good standing with the government, keep their paperwork in order, balance the books."

"That's good news?"

"Even if your claim isn't so compelling, a place that operates like this—reneging on contracts, dodging people—they might have other reasons to not want anyone poking around. Board of directors probably wouldn't love that." He was pacing in front of the bench, looking every bit the lawyer.

Following where he led, I said, "They were so smooth, so good at lying to me. Who knows what shady shit they have to hide."

"Exactly my thinking."

"You want to shift the math, so it's easier for them to pay me than to deal with the fallout. Will that really work?" I asked, taking a buttery bite of pastry. Maybe it was this shred of hope, but I'd forgotten how good a croissant could taste.

"We'll need a letter, laying it all out, threatening legal action. Something that will ruffle feathers. I'm not qualified yet, of course, but last summer I interned with a high-profile firm that handles a lot of contract stuff. If I put together a good letter, and if I can show them the evidence behind it"—he tapped the folder of emails in his hand—"I think the senior partner might put it on his letterhead, send it for us. As a favor."

"You really think he'd do that for me?"

Callum laughed. "I think he'd do it for me." And then, with a charming, sheepish smile, "He's my uncle, Mum's side."

"Ah, nepotism," I said, laughing, too. "Never thought I might benefit from it."

"I think it's worth a try."

"I appreciate you trying," I said. "Really, thank you." They were such banal, overused words—the same I'd said to the barista at the station. But what else could I say? His help meant more because I was so desperate, but it also meant more because his help was the only help I wanted. I wanted it to mean something. For us.

But there was no hope of that now. He'd had a front-row seat to every mistake I'd made in the last six months, and then the resulting explosion, and here I was, dragging him into the cleanup. I stood up to go.

"I'm sure you're busy," I said. "Thanks for making the time."

"No, don't go," Callum said. "I wanted to show you something." He indicated the path ahead of us.

"Sure," I said, unable to disguise my smile. "Lead on." Like I needed an excuse to stay near him, stand near him.

We shouldered our bags and walked again, following the path. "I've got a good lawyer joke for you," I said, forcing a light tone. "Have you heard the one about the girl who's going to be charged with fraud?"

Callum shook his head. "I did hear," he said. "I'm sorry. Have you received any notices or anything?"

"No, but it's not like I left them a forwarding address. Do you think—I'm worried it could ruin my chances of getting a visa to stay. Or they might revoke my student one."

"Whatever happens, it'll take months to get going," he said. "I wouldn't make it the first of your worries right now. It sounds like you already have plenty."

"Wouldn't they need to prove I'd done them some harm?"

Callum looked over at me, his thick brows rising slightly. "Do you think you didn't?"

"What?"

“Do you think you didn’t harm anyone.”

“I think I mostly hurt myself,” I said honestly. “The Wilders have better things to worry about. They probably have a house on every continent. I’m barely a bug on their windshield.”

“You can still hurt them, even if they have more money than God. They’re still people. They trusted you.”

“I know that. But at the time, it just—” I paused to try to sort the experience into words. “It didn’t really feel like I could touch them. The Wilders, or any of you. It felt like a fantasyland. Like stepping into the pages of a book, or a scene from a movie.”

“Well, it wasn’t like that. Everyone at the party was really upset. And, you know”—he hesitated—“upset I hadn’t told them the truth about you myself.”

I’d forgotten it, in the chaos—trying to defend me against Faye, Callum had revealed that he knew I was pretending, wearing her clothes. That he’d known since Saint-Tropez.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s really unfair,” I said, putting my hand on his arm, slowing his steps. “First you having to lie for me, then defend my lies. Will they get over it, do you think? Will you stay friends?”

He sighed. “We go back a long way. We’ll be okay. They just don’t get why I helped you keep the secret, all that time.”

“Why—” I began, then stopped, momentarily losing my nerve. “Why did you?”

He smiled but didn’t look over at me. His elegant profile, next to me, as indecipherable as ever. “I didn’t want to stand in your way,” he said. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “And I think, a little, I wanted to see you do it. Release all that hurt and history you had, everything holding you back. This was the wrong way to do it, of course, but,” he laughed lightly, “I was still sort of rooting for you.”

I couldn’t resist touching him again, feeling for his body next to mine on the path. Reaching out with my elbow, I gave him a playful nudge. “Well, thanks,” I said. “It’s nice to have someone on my team. Especially now the whole of North London hates me.”

“They don’t *all* hate you. They’re just done.” He paused, directing me down a side path. “Tess told me you wrote her a nice letter.”

“I did. I couldn’t really explain, but I tried to, and apologized.”

He nodded. “She’s applied to a master’s program. Maybe she’ll even do a PhD, if she likes it. She told me it was you who inspired her.”

“What? That’s amazing,” I said, grinning hugely. “Will she be back at UCL?”

“No, down at King’s.”

“Oh, wow,” I laughed. The two universities had a fierce rivalry. Once, having drinks with Andre at the UCL student union, I’d heard a team of rugby players sing the UCL fight song, including a hilariously crude section taunting King’s. “I really hope it goes well for her,” I said.

“It’s funny, that’s what she said about you.”

I shrugged sadly. “I’m trying to be different, and better, and do things the right way now. But that’s all I can do. I can’t undo it.”

“I know,” he said. His voice had softened. “I know it’s done. We don’t have to keep talking about it. I just had to know—I had to know how you felt about it.”

“I’m paying for my crimes, don’t worry about that,” I said with a grim smile. “I live on my friend’s roommates’ tiger-print couch.” I gestured back up the path, where we’d come from. “That croissant back there was lunch. For dinner, I’ll be bartending, and if I’m lucky, I’ll get a shift meal. I’ll run between the library and my jobs, trying to make tuition, even though I probably can’t, since I got fired from my tutoring company. I just keep going.”

“And where is it you’re going?” he said. “If our little letter works?”

It was a question I could answer easily. My rosary, an invocation I said every morning when I woke on the couch. “I’m going to get my degree, and then get the two-year work visa. Another two years, to do it right this time. As myself.” I’d spent my first year here diving into dead ends, trying all the wrong ways to shake off the past. These next years would be something different.

I was focused on Callum, not watching where we were going, so it surprised me when he said, “Here, this is what I wanted to show you.”

To the side of the path ahead was a huge old tree, partially buried, the earth rising up around the trunk. But no, it wasn’t earth. They were headstones. Dozens and dozens of them: small and curved, worn perfectly smooth, lightly mossed. They radiated out from the thick trunk, green ivy twisting over the tops, tree roots climbing between and around them. The roots looked like long fingers, clasping the graves close, so they wouldn’t escape.

Callum put his hand on my lower back, nudged me toward the small black sign in front. *HARDY TREE, 1860S.*

The sign said that Thomas Hardy, the famous Victorian author, had worked for an architect before he wrote books—an architect tasked with exhuming over ten thousand graves here, to make way for the train tracks. A task he happily handed off to his junior employee, who gathered a fraction of the misplaced gravestones around a small, young ash tree.

I left my bag and my coffee cup on the bench next to the sign and moved closer to the tree. I had never really liked Hardy’s work. But this tree, these graves, there was something deeply, darkly poetic about them.

“You said you liked it,” Callum said. “Seeing the seams of London, the spots where the different eras of the city clash together.”

I looked back; he was still standing by the bench, watching me. How had he remembered that? We’d been talking about Highgate Cemetery, the day after Theo first showed me around it. It felt like a hundred years had passed, between that cemetery and this one.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, waving him up to stand beside me. I could still feel his hand on the small of my back, warm through my shirt.

“Some people find it very creepy.”

“All the other girls you bring here?” I teased, turning to look up at him next to me, watching the way the diffuse, leafy light shifted over his cheekbones when he smiled. “I don’t think it’s creepy. There’s something nice about it.”

“Nice?”

“Yes.” Nicest of all to be standing here with Callum, the person who always seemed to understand me, even if we didn’t always get along. The person I could say this to. “A grave can be a lonely thing.” I waved at the stones, crowded together. “This isn’t lonely.”

He was looking at me, not the headstones. “No, I guess it’s not. And not too quiet, either.” He nodded at the stone wall, hiding another train rattling north from King’s Cross. “I think I’d hate it, if it was too quiet.”

It was a silly thing, of course—to imagine it might matter, when you’re dead, how noisy the trains are. But I felt that silly thing in my bones, too.

“I brought my mom’s ashes with me. To London.” I hesitated. “She used to— She always wanted to travel. I brought her with me.”

“Of course,” Callum said. Simply, kindly.

I looked down at my hands in front of me. And at Callum’s, hanging at his sides. “I brought her with me to Lisbon when we went. And Saint-Tropez, too. I thought she would be proud of me. That I was finally living the kind of life my parents wanted for me.”

Callum looked down at me. “What kind of life do *you* want?” he said.

Unbidden, I saw again the library apprenticeship flyer I’d pulled from the bulletin board. Shyly, studying Callum’s face for a reaction, I said, “They’re hiring at the library. I really love it there.” I shook my head. “But I mean, it’s the British Library. I’m not even British.”

“Don’t be stupid, Anna,” Callum said, a little roughly. “They’d be crazy not to want you. It’s not some stuffy old academic library. It’s for tourists and travelers and students and kids.” He frowned at me, a very disappointed-teacher look. “Just don’t blow your interview by trying to be just like their other candidates. Trying to blend in. It’s a waste.”

“Do you think I should lead with being an undercover car mechanic?” I said, waiting, wanting to see his lips twitch up into that irresistible smile.

He did smile, but he was shaking his head, refusing to let me shrug it off. “Tell them you’re the kind of person who loves helping students do their best work, who’s used to working hard, putting in long hours. The kind of person who’ll stay with a friend and his broken-down car and pay for oysters she didn’t order. Who’ll stand in front of this creepy overgrown grave-tree and

find it beautiful.” He ducked his head, making sure to catch my eyes, making sure I was listening and understanding. “Tell them the truth. Tell them you belong there.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “Okay. I will.”

In Highgate, I’d told myself that Callum was too hard on me, too judgmental. I’d read so much into every look, every word between us. But hearing him say these things, I knew I’d been reading it wrong all along. Really, I just cared too much what he thought of me. His had been the only judgment that mattered to me.

We stood there for a moment, very still, and then the bells in the church tower began to play their familiar tune. Westminster Quarters, the melody all clock towers played all over London. I turned toward it slightly, listening to see how much it would play: half the tune, so half past the hour. I should head back to King’s Cross if I wanted to make it to the new job I’d picked up. It wasn’t much, just marking assignments in an after-school program, but I could go right from there to my bartending shift every evening. No time for dinner or a break, but, changing trains at Victoria, I got to hear a mustachioed old man sing soul-rattling opera arias, busking on the stairs to the Circle and District line platform. A microdose of London magic, just enough to remind me what the hustle was for.

“I guess you have to get going,” Callum said, following my eyes to the clock tower. “I’ll get the legal letter together today and send it to my uncle. I’ll let you know when there’s anything to know.”

“I’m very grateful,” I said. “It’s a lot of work. Thank you.” I forced myself to look into his eyes. “I wasn’t even sure you’d answer my email. I know I don’t deserve all this help.”

I’d made a soft sort of peace with my fall from grace, my lowered life. Most days I could tell myself I hadn’t lost anything truly worth having. Standing here, with Callum, that felt untrue. But could he tell?

Probably this was the last time I’d see him; nothing more to discuss in person. And so, even though it wasn’t our custom, I leaned in quickly for a real hug—American style, tight, no phony air-kisses. His arms on my back felt warm, and I wanted to disappear into him. To keep my body pressed here

against his, keep his breath in my hair. But then, too soon, there was cool cemetery air between us again. A breeze from the train tracks shuffled through us, through the ash tree, and I thanked him again. Then I turned, shouldered my bag, reached out for the empty coffee cup I'd left on the bench.

Callum put his arm out, catching my hand as I stretched for the cup. He said nothing, but used the hand to tug me closer, until I stood in front of him, close, face-to-face. I could smell the sweetness of the coffee on his breath.

He held my hand, looking down at it between us, like he was mustering courage. I wanted him to put his fingers on my chin, tip my face up to his, kiss me again, like he had in Lisbon. Pull me closer, close the inches between our bodies.

Finally, he said, as if he'd been trying to find the right words, "Anna, if you need a loan, you know I'd be glad to do that."

He was watching for my reaction. Probably to see if I was offended, which I wasn't. I was sick. I was sinking into the ground. Here I stood, thinking he might want me, but all he felt for me was pity.

He seemed to take my crushed silence as a positive sign. "It'd just be until we see if the letter works," he said, nodding encouragingly. "So you can make your payments."

I extracted my hand from his. "Thank you," I said. "It's very kind. But I can't do that."

"It's just a loan," he said quietly. "Just money."

I wanted so much more from him than that.

I shook my head and stepped back. "I know what everyone says about me. That I'm a scammer. A grifter." I tried to smile. "Saying no is the only thing that makes that not true. I need it to be not true." I had grifted, but it wasn't for money. It was simpler, the thing I'd needed since the day my mother died. A place to be loved.

Three weeks after meeting with Callum, I was almost done: sitting in my favorite reading room on the third floor of the British Library, working on the conclusion for my dissertation. In two hours, I would go downstairs, put on the blazer hanging in my locker, and interview with the director of HR here. Convince him that what he needed wasn't someone who fit the part, but someone who had never quite fit the part, anywhere, ever.

My dissertation had come together well, after many long hours. I'd started with an in-depth look at Jane Austen's novels, and then explored the later novels I'd identified as relevant, alike at least in a spiritual sense: E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*; Edith Wharton's *The Buccaneers* and, to a lesser extent, *The Custom of the Country*; Henry James's *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. But I still felt something was missing—something to bring it all back together again, unite Austen and these authors and, in some way, myself—so I took a day off I could not afford, and shelled out for a train ticket from Waterloo to Alton.

From there, I walked two miles to the house where Jane Austen had lived, a sort of museum-shrine to her life and work. Tess and I had always talked about going together.

Austen had landed at the house after five years of feeling just as out of place as her heroines: when she was twenty-five, her father had moved the family to Bath, a place she hadn't warmed to. After his death, Austen and her mother and sister made do with a severely reduced income, forced to live

with friends or family (I could relate), until her eldest brother gifted them the cottage I visited.

I had imagined that being there—seeing the clothes, the quilts, the exact wallpaper reproduced, the letters thin and pressed under glass like dried flowers, the tiny twelve-sided table she wrote at (under the window, for light, because of her poor eyesight)—I might feel something like the magic I’d first felt at the British Library. But it was different, less otherworldly. Austen’s work had always been about escape, for me, but now I could approach it academically as well, pull on the strings that connected it to other work, to the parts of her life I’d learned about, even the parts that I related to.

On the train ride home, I wrestled again with the issue of my conclusion. The difficulty was that I couldn’t neatly pull it all together. With their various heroines, these books had no uniform lesson on how to negotiate a world when you were new to it. Some of the young women—Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Lilia Herriton, Nan St. George—had their high hopes disappointed. A comeuppance for their presumption or their idealism, their feeling that the established wisdom might not apply to them. But others—Fanny Price, Lucy Honeychurch, Catherine Morland—were rewarded in the end. Not with their original aim, which was almost always a disaster, but with the thing that had been right for them all along. Austen seemed happy to critique these heroines, but it was so plain that she admired them, too. Their checkered histories and their hubris—those things appealed to her. As they did to me.

At home that night, on Liv’s couch, I turned this all over and over while sleep reached out its long fingers for me. What had these books taught me about stepping into another life?

Today, finally, I was writing the conclusion I’d decided on: a conclusion that allowed for everything. Every shade of complication, no neat answer for what the authors were trying to show about the world and how to navigate it. It was something I’d learned from Professor Randolph; it was very American, he said, to focus so hard on making a single cohesive argument that you try to squeeze everything into one line. It would be a waste, after all my research and reading, to force one answer on a question that had many. Probably all of us would be both punished and rewarded for our hubris, eventually.

At quarter to three, I packed up and went downstairs to the lockers, where I put on the black blazer Liv had lent me. It took me another three minutes to find the HR director's office. When I got there, a forty-something man shook my hand and introduced himself as Stephen. He led me back to his desk and sat. In front of him was a list of questions, with space for note-taking. I had to give noteworthy answers, then.

Stephen was warm and chatty, once we got into the standard interview questions. He seemed genuinely interested in my answers and asked good follow-ups.

"I know you mentioned doing dissertation research in the reading rooms upstairs, which is great," Stephen said, nodding at my cover letter. "But I suspect you know, you're a little further along than the other applicants. They're mostly just out of school. It's more of a starting-out point for them. I do wonder if it might be hard for you, being in a different phase of your life. You've taken your time finding your way to us, and they've come here directly. Express train, if you will."

I laughed. "I haven't taken the express train anywhere, that's for sure," I said. "But experience is a good thing, right? I've proved I can work hard. I've been working since I was fourteen. It's time for me to work somewhere I'm really passionate about."

Stephen nodded, evaluating this answer, making his notes. "You've read up on the program, I assume? Apprentices often help us spearhead new initiatives and projects. Lately they've been digitizing some of our rarer materials for online. We'd love to hear if you have anything in mind?"

I didn't, of course. Why hadn't I prepared something? Scrambling, I reached back for what Callum had said, in the cemetery. What could I offer Stephen that the rest of his candidates couldn't? Something uniquely me?

"I know you don't have an education track, in the apprenticeship program," I said, not quite sure where this would lead me. "But as you've probably seen on my CV, that's my background. I've found that my difficult experiences as a student—I've always felt a little out of place, wherever I studied, a little outclassed—helped me be a better teacher for my students."

Stephen shifted in his chair, drumming his fingertips on the arms, studying me. “The current tracks reflect our largest needs, of course. But they’re not set in stone. What are you thinking?”

I’d lived my life in books for so long; in London, I’d had to shift that energy to teaching. But all of my students, from the absolute nightmares to my favorite (Pippa), had taught me something about what we need to learn outside our comfort zone. To reach for what might not be readily available to us.

“You mentioned that apprentices have been helping to put more materials online. That’s something that teachers could really use, if they can’t get here. Or for students, who maybe can’t afford to come to London. But it would need to be more than just the materials themselves. It’s not just a matter of scanning documents.”

“What else, then?” Stephen asked, leaning back in his chair as if he had all the time in the world.

I took a deep breath, collecting my thoughts. He already knew I wasn’t his typical candidate. Time to convince him that was good news.

“I didn’t grow up with a lot of money, or a lot of opportunities to travel. University was the first time I really had the chance to branch out, try things, see what I liked. Then, as a student here, having such a different background from my classmates was challenging. Everyone else immediately understood the history behind a piece of writing, the world that author had grown up in, the works their work was in conversation with. It made me feel so excluded, like the material wasn’t meant for me.”

“Yes, I can see how that would be a challenge,” Stephen said, nodding me on.

“You have this amazing collection, and you could have teachers teaching those materials from all over the world, bringing them to students who wouldn’t have any access to them otherwise. You might have students seeking them out, but there should be an infrastructure built around that. Ideally, the materials would be contextualized for people who might be encountering them for the first time. Timelines, supporting materials,

historical notes. So anyone can explore them. So no one feels the collection here is not meant for them.”

Stephen smiled. “As it happens, you’re echoing some of the conversations we’ve been having lately, behind the scenes. Things are changing so quickly online, but we want to enter that space thoughtfully. For so long, we’ve catered just to the kind of people who can make it here for a visit.”

I risked a smile. “The kind of people who can afford a ten-pound slice of cake at the library café?”

He laughed and nodded. “Yes, of course. That’s always been our audience. It’s complex, certainly,” he said. “Again, that kind of work isn’t currently part of the apprenticeship program, but maybe...”

“Just to be clear, I’d love to do any work here that helps the library,” I said. “That’s just where I feel like I’d be most useful to you all.”

“Yes, of course, that’s great to hear,” Stephen said, jotting down a note on his sheet. “You’ve given us loads to think about.”

He walked me to the door and we shook hands again. “Should be making decisions in the next few weeks. We’ll ring you.” Stephen held the door open for me as I left the office, but as soon as I was in the hall, he called, “Astrid Cavendish-Fitzroy?”

A statuesque girl of maybe nineteen or twenty pushed off the wall and came toward us. With that name and her crisp pantsuit, I didn’t even need to hear her aristocratic accent. I nodded politely when she passed me, but she was already giving Stephen her winningest smile, her full attention.

Back at the lockers, I folded Liv’s blazer carefully into my bag. I took out the ugly gray polo shirt I wore for bartending and went to the bathroom to change.

In the mirror, pulling my hair back into a ponytail, I looked like the Anna of last fall: tired, overworked, sprinting from one job to another. I could even see, underneath, the Anna who’d first arrived here: washed out into a world that no longer had her mother in it, fleeing with a student loan and a plane ticket. And way, way back through the years, the Anna of my little hometown library: folded up in a sun-bleached armchair, waiting for Mom, reading

Sense and Sensibility. A few copies of *National Geographic* at her feet, ready to take both of them away for a few pages.

I had tried so hard to leave all these Annas behind, to prove that they weren't really me. That they didn't have to be part of my future. But they did. And here we all were, together, in the bathroom of the British Library, in the ugly gray shirt, and I was okay. I didn't mind it. Stephen and his colleagues would have to decide if they did.

I turned in my dissertation a day before it was due, August 31. Just a week later, Professor Randolph emailed a few lines to end my suffering. He and the other grader still had to put together their final marks, he wrote, but I'd done well. Certainly enough to get my degree.

That meant I could start preparing the visa application now and submit it the minute my diploma came through. Queen Mary wouldn't release it until I'd paid the rest of my tuition, so it would be a race: Could I file my visa paperwork to stay before the Wilders filed their legal paperwork to press charges? If not, my application would be flagged for sure, possibly denied.

But I was trying not to think about that tonight—on my way to meet Liv and Andre for drinks at a bar called Detroit. Fancy, not the kind of bar we could normally afford, but happy hour meant half-price. It was a few blocks north of Covent Garden, where we had a dinner reservation after. A proper but modest celebration of my first good news in a very long time.

When I got off the Tube at Tottenham Court Road, a fifty-foot-high solid-gold Freddie Mercury greeted me, fist raised above the theater where the Queen musical, *We Will Rock You*, had been running all year. From Freddie I walked south to Earlham Street, the first of the wheel-spoke streets of Seven Dials—each cobbled street leading into the center of the wheel, where slow cars and window-shopping pedestrians nosed around each other. Seven Dials had been laid out in the late seventeenth century. It was classic and beautiful: old buildings, the cobbles worn smooth, everything lit yellow with soft light from upscale boutiques and bars.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. A London number I didn't know, but I answered anyway, habit from a year of giving my number to random parents and teachers and students.

"Is this Anna? It's Stephen Findley from the library. Have I got you at a bad time?"

A little bubble of panic swelled under my sternum. "Stephen, hi. It's a good time," I said, diving down an alley for quiet.

"I wanted to follow up on the conversation we had," he said. "I know it's been a lot longer than I told you it would be, and I apologize for that. We had quite a lot of you to speak with."

"No, I completely understand," I said. "I'm sure it's quite a process."

He laughed. "It certainly is, and yours was sort of a special case. Ultimately, we decided it didn't make sense for you to be part of the apprenticeship program."

I let myself lean back on the alley's brick wall, the disappointment too heavy to hold. "Of course, I understand," I managed.

Stephen chuckled. "Wait, wait, there's good news, too. I was waiting for a chance to chat with my colleague Shari. She's out on maternity leave, and I didn't want to pester her—I'm not *allowed* to pester her—but I wonder, are you free for a chat on Thursday afternoon? Shari will be in for just the afternoon, taking care of a few things. She runs our education programs."

A second interview? But why? "I'd be happy to talk with her," I said.

"Well, actually, we're hoping you'll be happy to *work* with her. Once she's back from leave. Frankly, I don't know how she's been doing it all on her own."

The panic bubble in my chest split into a flurry of bubbles. Was I hearing this right? "So, I'll—I'll be working in education, with her, once I start?"

"Shari loved your thoughts about creating teacher resources from the archives, tailoring our online educational content more for students from all backgrounds, from around the world. It will be a lot of work, building that up, but you're exactly the right person for that role."

I laughed, and it sounded only a little crazy. "You have no idea how great it is to hear that," I said, shaking my head alone in the dark alley.

“A much better fit for your skills than the apprentice role. Better pay, too, and no two-year expiration date.” I could hear Stephen shuffling papers. “Let’s say one o’clock on Thursday, for your chat with Shari. She’ll be back from leave mid-month. You could start first of October?”

When I got to Detroit, the bar had its blue Art Deco doors propped open to the summer air, and Andre was there waiting. I couldn’t help it, I had to be a loud American. I screamed my good news at him when I was still twenty feet away. I felt like solid-gold Freddie Mercury, fist in the air.

Andre hugged me, squeezed me in little pulses, punctuating each word: “You did it!”

When Liv appeared, he leaned back enough to say, “She got the job!” And instead of waiting a turn, Liv jumped on top of our in-progress hug, sending us staggering. People on the street gave us a wide berth.

The bar was a basement, low-lit and low-ceilinged. The tables and floors and booths were a hand-molded gray faux stone, a gesture at rugged modern minimalism, but really, we all agreed, it just looked like the Flintstones lived here. Stone Age chic.

“You know,” Andre said, after a waitress took our orders, “good things always come in threes. Dissertation, new job, what’s next tonight?”

“I win the lottery?” I laughed. “They forget to charge us for dinner?”

When our cocktails arrived, we all tried each other’s. “Yeck,” Liv said, making a face and sliding the Negroni back across the table to me. “It’s like cough syrup.”

I passed her gimlet back. “I like the bitterness.”

“Yes, well, you would be bitter, wouldn’t you,” Andre said, nodding toward me. “Been through the wars, this one.”

I laughed, looking down into my drink. “There’s still a lot that could go wrong. This legal shit could still blow up my visa.”

We sipped our drinks, and Liv told us about her PhD program, which would be ramping up next week. When she and Andre started comparing notes on UCL professors, I excused myself to the bathroom.

In the mirror, I brushed my fingers through my hair, then pulled it behind my shoulders and tried to sort out how I was feeling. Maybe it was just that

old urge to call my mother, tell her my good news? And it was—it always was—but it was something else, too: I wanted to tell Callum.

Normally, this would've been a perfect excuse to email him. I could tell him the news, then offer to buy dinner or drinks to show my gratitude for his help with Muswell Hill Academy, even though nothing had come of it. Wait for him to reply, as nervously as I'd waited for the British Library to call.

But late last night, scrolling on Facebook, I'd seen a photo that was still sitting in my stomach like a stone. Callum and a few people I vaguely recognized, in a location I precisely recognized: that turmeric-yellow palace-hotel in Saint-Tropez.

Faye wasn't in the photo, but I felt like she was. I felt like if Callum was there, he would definitely see her, probably already had. Maybe he was like Theo, and Faye could reel him back in whenever she wanted to. He didn't owe me any loyalty, after all.

Back at the table, Liv and Andre had another round of cocktails waiting. "The waitress said she'd comp us a drink if we paid cash," Andre said, thumbing through his wallet. "So let's be good tippers."

"I'll be right back," Liv said. "There's a cashpoint just outside."

I followed her out, since I only had a five. While I waited my turn at the ATM, I wondered what my new job would pay. Maybe I could really treat my friends, next time: drinks on me at the Flintstone house.

When it was my turn, I did a balance check before withdrawing, as I always did. The number on the bluish screen was high, higher than it should have been. Thousands. Had my most recent tuition payment to Queen Mary somehow failed, or been rejected? That would be disastrous. As soon as I got the cash, I pulled out my phone.

"What's up, can we go back in?" Liv asked.

"I just need to check my online banking," I said, waiting for the glacially slow page to load. I waved back at the door to the basement bar. "No cell phone service down in the Stone Age."

But then the page did load—that too-high number again. I shook my head.

"What is it?" Liv asked, watching me.

“Just a minute.” The individual transactions were loading, one by one.

And there it was: a deposit, the exact amount I’d agreed on with Muswell Hill Academy. Enough to pay off the entire remaining balance of my grad school tuition, and then some. I didn’t notice putting my hand over my mouth, but there it was, covering what was both a smile of relief and also the trembling lip that preceded a crying fit.

Liv grabbed my wrist. “Anna, what the hell?”

“The money’s here, that school finally paid me,” I said, gulping down breaths until I was sure I wouldn’t cry. “It’s a lot. Enough to pay off everything.”



I GOT THE WHOLE BILL, for all of us, proudly. Once we’d properly celebrated (an appropriate American clamor for the level of good news, but inappropriate for the volume level of such a self-serious cocktail bar), we emerged back on street level. It was getting dark, and a fine mist of rain hung in the air, glowing halos around each streetlamp. We backtracked up Earlham Street to the center of Seven Dials, to the sundial pillar, so Liv could take photos.

“It’s so pretty with everything lit up,” she said, turning in a slow circle, all the cobbled streets spinning off from this spot, all the Londoners swirling around us. One of them stopped, suddenly, and called out to me.

He said my name like he always used to, like it was a surprise bit of news he’d just heard and couldn’t believe. “Anna!” Theo strode toward us across Monmouth Street, people stopping to let him pass, to admire him as he did.

He was in front of me before I could decide if I was happy to see him, or angry, or indifferent. “Great luck to run into you here!” he said, bending to kiss my cheek, as if we were friends. As if it hadn’t been almost four months.

“Theo,” I said noncommittally.

Andre had already recognized Theo from our reality show viewings, but Liv’s face dropped into a scowl when she heard the name. “We’ve got to get

going,” she said to me, clearly intending Theo to hear the dismissal. “They won’t hold our table.”

Theo introduced himself to Liv and Andre, pumped their hands. He was as handsome as ever, of course, but now it all seemed a bit over the top. A face like that could hide anything. And had.

I stepped back. “Liv’s right, we’ve got a reservation in Covent Garden.”

“Well, that’s lucky, too,” Theo said. Delighted, impervious to my stony greeting. “I’m due at the theater on Long Acre—I can walk you. I want to hear how you’re doing.” He bent, trying to bring his face down to my eye level, trying to make sure I saw his sincerity. And, surprisingly, I did. I said he could walk me.

When Liv and Andre started up Mercer Street, Theo and I followed at a slower pace, letting a short distance lapse.

“So, tell me what’s happening with you,” he said. “Dissertation done? Where did you land?”

Lucky for him that I was in a good mood, that I’d had so much good news today. I felt myself thawing, just enough to enjoy this.

“Actually, I just got a call this afternoon that I’ll be starting at the British Library on October 1. Working on their education programs. It hasn’t really sunk in.”

Theo’s eyes widened, cartoonishly excited. “That’s brilliant! Oh, Anna, you must be so chuffed. I know you loved that place when Tess took you.”

I nodded. “So much that I practically lived there the last few months, writing my dissertation. And now I’ll be staff!” I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d tell Tess. If she’d be happy for me. “Do you still see Tess?” I asked.

“Of course! I just came from drinks at the Hawksmoor, with Ginny and Hamza.” I guess it was on again, with those two?

“How is everyone?” I asked. I couldn’t resist. I had wondered so often, for so long—how life in Highgate continued on without me.

“Oh, you know, just the same really,” he said. “The girls just got back from Ibiza, shockingly tan. And already planning the next holiday.” I could picture Tess, lightly freckled, her auburn hair lightened from the sun. Her easy laugh.

I forced a smile. “Just the same, then. No one ever has to grow up here.” Neverland.

“What, in London?”

I looked up at him. “In your London, yes. In *my* London, everyone has to grow up.”

Theo nodded thoughtfully. “I have a hard time imagining that you were ever young,” he said. “You’ve always seemed so mature. Like you knew too much. And we knew too little.”

But all Theo had were the vaguest outlines of me. As far as he was concerned, I’d just popped into existence the night we met at the palace-hotel, and then winked out again the day he dropped me and my bags at Liv’s.

“Is that why you introduced me just as Faye’s friend when I got to Highgate?”

We were waiting on the corner of Long Acre now, waiting to cross, looking for a break in the stream of black cabs. I watched Liv and Andre ahead of us, already turning left up the street, but Theo was looking down at me.

“You can imagine how much I regret it now,” he said, his voice low, just loud enough to hear over the traffic. “It seemed harmless, at the time. I thought—I thought maybe you could just enjoy it. That I could give that to you.”

There was a break in the traffic, and people around us streamed forward, down toward the main square and covered market of Covent Garden. “It would’ve crashed down at some point,” I said. “Faye just made sure there were some very big fireworks.”

“I’m afraid she hasn’t let up much, though I’ll spare you the details. It’s a side of her—well, I guess we’ve all known her so long, we forget. It’s been, ah, eye-opening, to say the least.”

I laughed. It was no surprise to me that she was still grinding that axe. “Bet she can’t wait to have her day in court, finally hold me to account,” I said. “You know she already has the outfit picked out, pressed and steamed.”

“Well, who knows if that’s going to happen.”

Before I could say anything, a cab honked; it was waiting for us to go. Theo took my hand and pulled me across the street.

I couldn't believe him. He was defending her, to me. "You can't be serious," I said, yanking my hand away. "She's not just going to let it go."

Theo only looked confused. "Well, *she* won't, no, but that might not matter. It's really just about getting her parents to see sense. I thought he told you? He said—"

"Who said?"

"Callum. He's been working on the Wilders for a few months, trying to talk them down," Theo said. "Not Faye, of course—no telling her anything—but you know her parents are reasonable people."

Seeing my stunned face, he steered us into the doorway of a shuttered luggage store, out of the fast-flowing theater crowds. Looking at me closely, Theo said hesitantly, "It's just, I was sure you knew because— You mean Callum really never said anything about it?"

I was too shocked to process what Theo was saying. "We don't really keep in touch," I said. "He just helped me get payment from a school that had stiffed me."

Theo tilted his head. "Oh, I guess that's not the impression I had, from talking to him. But probably that's my fault, imagining something more there."

"Something *where*?"

"Well, never mind all that."

"Explain," I said, fixing him with my full attention. "When did this happen?"

Theo shrugged. "Well, it's been months, as I said. But he went out to Saint-Tropez—was it two weeks back? Put together all sorts of notes for them—how a criminal court would need to prove your deception was expressly for financial gain. And there'd be no point in suing you, since you don't have any funds or assets—sorry, forgive me, that's crass—well, they don't have anything to gain there. Just some embarrassing gossip in the *Ham & High*, a lot of fuss for nothing."

The rain had picked up, a heavy drizzle now, outside our covered alcove. So Callum hadn't been to see Faye. Or if he had seen her, it was as my advocate.

"I don't understand, why wouldn't he tell me this?" I said, more to myself than to Theo. My voice was smaller and shakier than I expected. Callum doing all that, just to help me—even if it didn't work, it opened something inside me, just a crack, something I'd been trying to slam shut since that night in Lisbon. Did it mean what I wanted it to? Or was it more of his pity? I still hadn't shaken the embarrassment of that last moment in the St. Pancras cemetery.

Theo looked down, a guilty smile. "I mean, I did tell him that I was still hoping to see you. That I wanted to reach out to you."

"So?"

He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "Well, maybe I did warn him off, a little."

"Warn him off *me*?"

Theo grabbed my hands. "I've wanted to tell you, I'm sorry for how things ended between us."

"It's okay," I said, preoccupied. Still trying to puzzle out what this meant, for Callum, for me.

"No, I'm trying to say I'm sorry *that* things ended between us." Theo squeezed my hands. "I didn't know how to handle it when everything went bad."

I shook my head. "I told you to leave me alone. You don't have to apologize for following instructions."

Theo stepped closer in the shadowy doorway, closing the space between us. "I'd still like to see you, you know. Just because we can't go out with everyone anymore doesn't mean we can't still enjoy ourselves just like we used to. We had so much fun, you and I, we really did."

Sure, when he wasn't having fun with Faye. I laughed. "You told Callum not to talk to me so that *you* could keep me as your secret girlfriend?"

"We'd have to keep it quiet, naturally, but isn't that nicer anyway?" he said, bending, trying to look into my eyes. "And I promise, you wouldn't

have to scramble so much, Anna, I'd be happy to help you. A new apartment, whatever you need. It wouldn't be like before."

"Please stop talking," I said.

Theo tipped his head down and pressed an urgent, insistent kiss on my lips. My body remembered; his touch rippled through me, the way it used to, urgent and physical. But I didn't have any space for it. All I could think of was Callum. The pull I'd felt toward him, an invisible thread between us since the night we'd kissed in Lisbon. Anchored.

I stepped back, then out onto the shining sidewalk. The streetlights and the rain found me again. "That's all over, Theo."

He reached for my hands again. "No, don't say that."

"You're going to be late to the theater."

And I watched him then, in the doorway: shutting down his disappointment, pulling up the old Theo I knew, like a costume, like a character. Charm, good looks, a good show, if nothing else. "And you're going to be late to your dinner," he said, bowing gallantly to kiss my hand. "Goodbye, Anna."

On a crowded Victoria line train, I vibrated with nerves the whole way to King's Cross. But they were good nerves—anticipation, not dread. I was starting my new job at last. When I walked through the library's revolving door, I couldn't hold back my smile while the security guard did his usual cursory bag check.

But of course, there's nothing like a morning of IT credentialing and HR paperwork and unflattering employee ID mug shots to bring you down to earth. I went where I was told, signed and initialed and dated. By lunchtime, I had everything I needed and, as a bonus, knew the full layout of the internal office maze. This secret part of the library I'd never been allowed to see.

Shari was very busy, always in and out of our shared open-plan office. She disappeared at regular intervals to pump, and people were always stopping by to see her, since she'd just returned from maternity leave.

Shari and I had really hit it off at our first meeting. She'd asked me about my dissertation, and we ended up talking at length about E. M. Forster, since *Howards End* was one of her favorite books.

When I got back from lunch, Shari waved me over to her desk and picked up that conversation like we'd had it that morning. "People generally feel that Forster is Austen's natural heir, don't you think? I wonder what we have in the collection of them, what we could get on loan. You know for Austen we have the *Persuasion* manuscript, two volumes of juvenilia, some notes."

"Forster's papers are all at Cambridge," I offered.

“Yes, but they’ll loan a few things. I think you could start to put something together,” Shari said. “What did you call them? Fish-out-of-water stories? Clashes of class and culture? See what’s in the collection that feels relevant.”

“For a series online?”

She shrugged. “Just to start with. The apprentices can digitize the materials for it. Gather some historical pieces for context, write the connective tissue, put it all together. But I think it could work for the main gallery, too. Don’t you think?”

“An exhibit? Here?” I said, trying to play it cool and completely failing. And then someone was knocking on the office doorframe, looking for Shari, and she was off again.



I’D MADE PLANS TO MEET Andre and Liv for after-work drinks, to celebrate my first day. The library was just a ten-minute walk from them at UCL, and the student union there had two cozy pubs and dirt-cheap drinks.

I was putting on my scarf when I came down the stone steps onto the library plaza, thinking about telling my two best friends about the possible exhibit I was, somehow, already working on for the gallery. That’s when I saw him pacing by the outdoor café. Callum.

My confusion was so complete that I stopped in my tracks. It was all too much—him, inexplicably here in front of me, this face I had imagined too often, and now his thick hair perfectly tousled by the Euston Road wind tunnel, like a romance-novel cover god—I could not be expected to make sense of it. Finally, he looked up, saw me, grimaced.

“Not exactly what I had in mind,” he said, laughing almost to himself when we met in the middle. “But how was your first day?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Sorry, what are you doing here?”

Callum looked down at his hands. “Theo told me about your job here. First of October, right?” He shrugged his shoulders and the perfect dun-colored coat he wore shifted up and down with them. I remembered these

clothes: these beautiful people, their beautiful things, their beautiful homes. I had exited their world, and the separation had been a good one, for me. It had helped me to land here.

But there it was again, the burn I'd felt in front of the Hardy ash, hoping he'd kiss me: this time, a slow blush climbing up my neck, under the scarf. Of course I wanted him to be here, but I didn't want to be crushed again. I put both hands in my pockets. "I can't stay, I have plans with my friends," I said, barely above a whisper.

"Wait," he said, reaching out with both hands. Reaching for mine, which were in my pockets. And so, he hooked his long delicate fingers into my coat pockets. He wasn't pulling me toward him; he was anchoring me there. "I have something to tell you. Can we sit for a minute?" He tugged lightly on the pockets.

The feeling of his fingers there, the light pressure on my coat, the hook and pull that was connecting us—it was familiar. A tug inside my chest, a knot of need I'd been pushing away since Lisbon. Maybe even since that first night at Bar Sube, his warm hand putting the cold oyster fork in my palm, under the table.

Callum followed me across the plaza to a low granite wall, encircling a cluster of shrubs. We sat on the wall, side by side. The sun was behind the buildings now, a cold fall breeze replacing it.

"Look, I'm sorry," Callum said, leaning forward slightly, trying to catch my eye. "I know I've been sort of silent. I didn't want to see you until I had good news. And I have it now."

"No," I said, disbelief erasing every other feeling.

He beamed. "They're not going to press charges."

My face felt frozen. My last hurdle, finally gone. The real relief would come later, I knew—a deep physical letting-go in my lungs, ribs, when I lay down tonight to sleep—but right now I wanted to jump up and dance around and scream. Instead, I threw my arms around Callum, hugging him to me. "Thank you," I said into the shoulder of his beautiful coat. "You're amazing."

Inside the hug, he laughed against me, his voice drifting over my head. "It was always fairly weak tea, their case—Faye got them started, but their

solicitor whipped them up to think it was solid. Blagged the whole thing. I just made them see sense. Though it took a while.”

We separated, shifted back to our side-by-side places on the cold stone. “But why couldn’t you tell me you were going to Saint-Tropez?” I asked. “That you’d been talking to the Wilders?” It was all very *Pride and Prejudice*: Darcy working behind the scenes in London, saving Elizabeth’s family from ruin, but never telling her about it.

He shook his head apologetically. “If I gave you updates every week, you’d never stop thinking about it, you’d be worrying nonstop. I knew you had enough to worry about. And then Theo said he’d told you.” Callum looked down at me with a funny sideways smile. “He said you were absolutely, officially, completely done with all of us.”

“I was done with *him*, that’s what I said.”

“Yes, he said you’d been pretty definitive on that point. Though I might add, he wasn’t immediately forthcoming with that information. He held onto it until last week.”

Callum paused, looking down at me, looking for something. But for what? I watched his hesitation, a physical tension: a nervous hand reaching up, smoothing across the back of his hair. Finally, he said, “I think he knew it would make me hope.”

“For what?” I asked, breathless now.

His smile quirked to the side. “I think you know.”

It was all the invitation I needed. I leaned in, tipped my face up, and brushed my lips against his, lightly, just as he’d done to me in Lisbon. Instantly it was electric—his lips pushing back, parting slightly, easing open. I pressed into him and put my arms around his neck, pulling his face down to me. Closer, more. His arms went around my back, squeezing out the cold evening air between our bodies. My whole being hummed with him, his warmth, his arms, his mouth soft and opening to me. Finally, finally.

When Callum pulled back, even his eyes were smiling. “I’ve wanted that for a long time,” he said with a nervous laugh.

“Me too,” I said.

He put his arm around my shoulders, his coat flapping open. I tucked myself into his side, sliding into the warmth there. It felt incredible to be close to him, after resisting the urge for so long. “I suppose you had to wait till I stopped being a complete idiot.”

“No, I just got in my own way,” he said. “The first few times we met—and you were so great, that day the car overheated—but then, well, let’s just say girls who like Theo, I’m not generally their type. Or, really, they’re not my type. So, when I came back that day and saw you two hitting it off, I tried to just let it go.” He shook his head. “Tried not to be a jealous arsehole. Mixed results there.”

“To be fair, I didn’t make it easy for you.”

“But you know, when no one else was around, I could tell you were still the same, the girl who’d stayed with me on the side of the road, helped fix my car. Or even”—he smiled, raising his eyebrows like a question—“the girl I’d seen on Parliament Hill, last summer.”

“Wait, you still haven’t explained that,” I said, nudging him with my shoulder, feeling the minute pleasure of being able to touch him. “Or do you just have a photographic memory?”

He grinned and put a hand in my hair. “For really beautiful girls, yes, maybe I do.”

“No, that can’t be it,” I said. Glowing with the compliment, of course, but beautiful girls were everywhere in London.

“Well, it was a big part of it. The dog and I were up there, just people-watching. And you were so lovely, windblown, maybe a little sad, just soaking up the view. Or trying to—tourists kept asking you to take their photos. You know, with the skyline behind them.”

“Was I very annoyed with them?”

“You were so nice,” he said. “Excited for them, giving them recommendations on what to see on their trip. So genuine. And obviously American.”

“Never been able to hide it, have I?”

He leaned over and kissed me slowly. “And apparently John Major remembered you, too. Went straight for you with those muddy paws, didn’t

he.”

I laughed, and the feeling opened up my ribs, making space for all the grateful, joyful possibility I had now, pumping through me. “I’m not sorry he did.”

“I wasn’t sure if I should come today. Whether it might be better to just let you have a fresh start. Leave all the Highgate mess in the rearview mirror. I’d only just decided when you caught me on the plaza.”

“What made you stick around?”

“Selfishness,” he said with a laugh. “Curiosity, I guess. To see if there might be something here.”

“I think there is,” I said, suddenly shy. “If I get a vote.”

“You do,” he said, pulling me closer.

“Well, I’m glad you came. Couldn’t have caught me on a better day.” I told him about Shari, about the project I’d be working on, right out of the gate. My cheeks hurt from smiling.

“Your mum would be so proud of you,” he said when I’d finished. “You’re here, finally happy, finally where you belong.”

I didn’t need to say anything; Callum was right. I did belong here. I heard myself laughing, almost tipsy. “Is it that obvious?”

“It suits you,” he said, bending down to kiss me again, slowly. “You’re glowing.”

I snuggled back into his side, under his arm. “That’s just hypothermia setting in.”

We sat another minute like that, both inside his coat, no one talking. I could’ve stayed like that forever. But one of the local churches began to toll the Westminster chimes—half past. I leaned back, pulling out of the coat, feeling the hard rush of cold air.

“And now I have to let you get on to your friends,” Callum said.

“Come have drinks with us,” I said, not willing to give him up. “Liv and Andre won’t care.”

“Are you sure? They won’t mind me crashing?”

“Oh no, they really liked you that day on the Heath.”

“Well, I’m glad someone did,” Callum laughed. With two fingers, he brushed my hair back where the wind had thrown it forward, lingering there on my face. There was a certainty to his touch: like this was a sure thing. I leaned in, trusting the growing twilight to hide us. His face was cold when we kissed, but his mouth felt just right, warm and curious, just the right amount of hard and soft.

His fingertips ran, cold and intoxicating, up my neck, under my hair. “I hoped you might let me cook you dinner. Maybe after drinks?” he said. I could feel the shape of his smile against my lips. It felt like just what I deserved and also more than anyone, anywhere, had ever deserved.

I shook my head. “If anyone’s cooking dinner, it’s me. You’ve already done so much.”

“Sure, then. But I did get you something special.” His eyes were full of laughter as he said this, but I couldn’t find the joke. “A real delicacy.”

“I think I’ve had enough taste moments for a lifetime.”

“Not this one.”

Callum took his book bag from his shoulder, lifted the flap, and held it out to me. I could see what was inside: a bright red lid, a huge white plastic tub. Marshmallow fluff, the real American thing. The thing I’d told him my free-lunch child-brain had deemed the height of luxury.

“Where did you even *find* that?” I gasped.

He was beaming. “Selfridges has a little section of American food. They were out for a long time, but I kept checking back till I got it.”

“Wait, how long have you been planning this?”

“Longer than I’d admit to Theo. Do you like it? Should we find you a spoon?”

How had we spent so long not doing this? Not sitting up close to each other, laughing, running our fingers absently over each other’s hands, wrists, arms. I was laughing again, though nothing was funny. I couldn’t explain, so I just said, “This really isn’t how I thought my first day of work would end.”

“This is exactly how I hoped your first day of work would end,” Callum said, pulling my face back to his. I felt like dissolving, like I would melt there if he weren’t holding me up, holding me against him. Like everything I’d

suspected had been true, all along, and this was the best right thing, after so many wrong people, wrong places, wrong turns.

Liv grew up in New York, and Andre in London, so I was the only one among us with a driver's license, even if it was an American one and not strictly legal. Liv's set designer flatmate lent us his work van for the move and made me promise to drive on the left side of the road. He helped Liv and me carry our bags and boxes down the stairs from her room. There really wasn't that much. No furniture—most flats on the low end of the London price range came furnished—and not a lot of personal effects, since I'd been living out of suitcases for so long.

Our new flat was only a short drive from the house in Finsbury Park, in the same borough but a little farther north, farther from the city center. I'd found the listing online, a week before I started at the British Library, and printed out two color copies at an internet café. I picked out two cheesy, touristy greeting cards at the library gift shop and wrote one to Andre, one to Liv. I put in it how grateful I was that they'd been there, willing to pick me up after everything fell apart. And then I folded up the listing, Sharpied a question mark on the final fold, and tucked one into each card.

Andre pulled up in a minicab two minutes after Liv and I arrived at the new place. "Give me a hand, will you?" he called to us, nodding back at the cab full of boxes. "He'll charge for making him wait around."

Liv unlocked the door, and we carried everything down the hall to a small white dine-in kitchen. Andre took out the electric kettle, filled it at the sink, and plugged it in. "First things first," he said.

It was a three-bedroom ground-floor flat in what locals called the Harringay Ladder, because the streets made that shape: two long north-south roads with small residential streets like rungs between them. Liv's flatmates had described the area as "only a bit dodgy," but our rung was quiet, the brick houses crowded together.

While the water in the kettle considered boiling, we explored. Every room smelled like fresh paint, sharp and clean. Like most London houses, the living room was in the front, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out on the street. All three bedrooms branched off a hallway beyond the kitchen, each furnished with mismatched essentials: bookshelf, desk, wardrobe, dresser, double bed. No closets, but also no bedbugs.

We brought in the bags from the van, dropped them in our rooms, and returned to the kitchen. This wasn't a pristine, glistening granite-and-marble kitchen like I'd seen in Highgate, or France. It was just a normal one—bare white cupboards and counters, a small table under the window, four wobbly chairs—but I liked it more than any kitchen I'd ever been in. I could imagine Andre at the stove, making his paper-thin pancakes, or Liv steaming the red bean bao buns from Chinatown she was obsessed with. Endless cups of tea.

"We'll have to do a big shop to get the kitchen outfitted properly," Liv said. "Milk for tea, cooking oil, cleaning supplies."

"Disco ball, bead curtains, leopard-skin carpet," Andre said deadpan, nodding thoughtfully. "Just the essentials." He dropped three tea bags into three mugs and poured the water in. "But first, we have to have a proper housewarming toast."

Andre raised his mug, and Liv and I mirrored him.

"What should we toast to?" I asked him.

"Our beautiful new flat, you numpty."

I wanted to laugh, but my throat was doing something funny to the sound. Squeezing it into a thin nothing. "To a real home," I managed. Andre and Liv laughed at me for being a huge sap, of course, and then we were all laughing.

We separated to our rooms to get settled. I stood for a while, wondering where I should put the jam jar of Mom's ashes. Where would feel right. Finally, I tried it on the bookshelf. It was good, but a little lonely, so I put my

old favorites on either side, the dog-eared ones that had come in the suitcase from Massachusetts: the Jane Austen novels I'd read and reread since middle school, the ones that had taught me that girls who tried their luck sometimes did get their happy endings. Then I added the stack of maps and brochures I had from every touristy stop I'd made: every church and cathedral, museum, bell tower, castle, restored historic home. I would keep adding to the pile. Whatever these next years would be, wherever I traveled, Mom would still be part of it. Running her scarred fingertips over the rivers and roads and flight paths of my future.

I longed to call her. And what would she say, if I could? I knew: she'd want me to call my father. Let him know I would be okay, housed and steadily employed. Staying.

I could do that. Even if he didn't say much, even if we were never going to be that kind of family again, I knew him. I knew that for him, the strain of money incoming and outgoing was a constant, churning storm cloud over everything. It shrouded good days, blackened bad ones. And I knew that even here, whether we kept in touch or not, I was still somewhere within that cloud for him, gray and unresolved and worrying. I couldn't settle all his worry, I never would, but I could alleviate the small part of it that was for me.



THE BUZZER RANG, AND I ran to get it. On the way, little flurries of happy nerves—the feeling I got anytime I was about to see Callum. Thinking of how his dark eyes would smile, then flutter closed when he tipped his head down to kiss me.

“How're you settling in?” he said after the kiss, after I'd stepped back to let him in.

“Unpacked a little. Ready for a walk, I think.” I looked out at the street before shutting the door, assessing the November weather. Dry, miraculously, and not too cold, the sun in and out behind clouds.

I followed him into the kitchen. “They've been asking me all week what you're cooking for us. I told them it's a surprise but Portuguese was a good

bet.”

Callum laughed. “So predictable, aren’t I? Piri-piri chicken,” he said, unpacking a shopping bag onto the bare fridge shelves. “Martim’s recipe, you’ll love it.”

We’d been taking turns cooking dinners for each other on Saturdays, usually after a day of exploring around London. Last weekend we’d gone to Brick Lane, a street often mentioned in my East End writing class. The mosque there used to be a synagogue, and the synagogue used to be a church, which the Huguenots built when they fled France. My favorite thing: the seams of London’s history, overlapping. Then I’d made us cheeseburgers with proper American bacon. And, of course, pancakes in the morning.

“You’ll spoil us, Chef,” Andre said, coming into the kitchen. He and Callum hugged in greeting, and I pretended the sight of it—this man and my friends, now friends themselves—didn’t completely delight me.

I stuck my head into Liv’s room and told her it was time to go up the hill, if we wanted to catch the sunset.

Alexandra Palace Park was our new local green space with a view, complete with a pond and paddle boats, sprawled over the top of Muswell Hill. The crowning jewel was the palace itself, affectionately known as Ally Pally, a giant, cavernous brick-and-glass building and pavilion built in the late 1800s as a public center of recreation.

It was a half-hour walk. When we turned onto the path, off Turnpike Lane, the slope began to steepen. My bag tapped against my hip as we climbed. Finally, we emerged from the wooded path, breathless, onto the top of the hill. I resisted the urge to look back behind us. At what I knew must be a very beautiful view of my city, spreading below, south.

The palace was enormous, almost as big as a city block. Andre steered us past the skating rink to a pair of benches, just below the pavilion. We sat, and I opened my bag and took out the four cans of gin and tonic I’d grabbed from the fridge, purchased just for this moment.

“Least I can do,” I said.

Liv shook her head. “You’ve done plenty.” I’d made them both let me cover the apartment security deposit. I owed Andre at least that for the stress

of the council tax disaster, and Liv for the months I'd spent on her couch, my bags stacked along the wall of her shoebox bedroom.

Callum put his arm out, around my shoulders, and I leaned into him on the bench. Liv and Andre did the same, making fun of us, giggling into each other. The city spread out below us, stretching, disappearing into a hazy horizon as the sun set. We were farther east here, so the banking district dominated the skyline, glass towers silver and reflective. And past them, the newer and sharper skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, trying to establish itself as the new financial district. There was even another tower going up across the river, by London Bridge, designed to look like a shard of glass. Right now it just looked like scaffolding and cranes. Between us and them stretched a sloping green park, and then all of Central London—a million homes, apartment blocks, parks, schools, universities. Libraries, museums, mosques, pubs, stadiums, cathedrals, theaters, department stores, kebab shops. Every shade of brick and stone, every stripe of rich and poor.

“How does it compare to your spot on Parliament Hill?” Callum said to us, nodding at the view.

I tipped my head onto his shoulder, looking up at him with a teasing smile. “Fewer creepy blokes watching me, making plans to sweep me off my feet with legal advice twelve to fourteen months down the road.”

Everyone laughed. Callum squeezed me into his side. “Can you blame me?”

“You have to respect the long game, seriously,” Liv said.

I nodded. “I needed that time to settle in here, anyway.”

“Don't think you're assimilated yet,” Andre said. “I've heard you and Liv talking. You still say Bucking-*ham* Palace like it's made of deli meat.”

Liv elbowed him. “We do not, you troll.”

I just laughed. “We don't have to be British to be Londoners.”

“How long's it been?” Callum asked. “Since you got here?”

“Coming up to a year and a half now.” I took a sip from my can. “You could say it's been eventful, if you wanted to put it kindly.”

Andre waved this away. “Nah, it's like *Chelsea Made*, isn't it? Just good TV. You gave us a few twists and turns, some double crosses, a few big

blowout party scenes to chew on.”

I smiled, thinking of how much Pippa and Andre would get along. Their sardonic, cheeky humor. She and I had started texting again, now that everything was settled, now that she was working on her early-decision application to NYU and was full of questions for me. It made me happy that I could still help her, even from a distance.

“Well, all in all,” I said, finishing the last sip of my drink, “I think I’d be pretty happy if my life made for boring TV for a long while, after all this.”

“Probably it will,” Liv said, smiling over at me and Callum. “That’s what being happy looks like.”

It was something I’d been thinking about at work, putting together an exhibit on my favorite authors: not just what a happy ending looked like, but what made you deserving of it. Later, at home, I found myself flipping through the journal I’d kept since the day I arrived, where I wrote down all the new and exciting London things I’d seen and done. These days, I didn’t always have much to report. But I also didn’t feel the need to fill the pages, as I once had. No one was keeping score; no one was going to check to see what kind of life I’d made for myself here. Whether it was good enough, exciting enough, glamorous enough.

The air was starting to get cold, now that the sun had dipped behind the horizon of West London. But its pearly pink flares still lit that corner of sky, mirrored in the glass ceilings and windows of Alexandra Palace. To the east and south, our direction homeward, the sky was a darker blue, the clouds there reflecting the glow of the city lights below.

Liv stood and stretched and nodded to the path. “Shall we?”

I didn’t want to leave—warm against Callum, enjoying the scene, enjoying being in it with them. But I also wanted to see if piri-piri chicken was as good as everything else Callum had cooked for me.

Andre collected the empty cans for me and shouldered the bag himself. “Thanks for bringing the drinks. But next time, maybe some baklava, too?”

I laughed. “Hey, I didn’t want to ruin dinner. For all we know, Chef’s making dessert, too.” I grinned up at Callum.

“Oh no, you never said anything about dessert. I don’t do sweets.”

I stood up and took his hand, pulling him off the bench. “That’s okay,” I said cheerfully. “I have just the thing. Made sure to pack it.”

He groaned audibly, and Andre and Liv laughed. They’d already heard all about my huge tub of marshmallow fluff. And been made to try it. Andre had never heard of it, and it certainly hadn’t been a staple food in Liv’s South Indian family. But neither was a fan, we could now officially say. I still hadn’t persuaded Callum to try it, but I knew he would. I knew we had time, for everything. For meals and dancing and fireworks and traveling, but also for staying home and lying in bed and reheating leftovers. We’d have time for all of it.

Two by two, we headed down the hill into the growing dark. As we went, we talked again about the loose plan we’d been forming: to go to Vienna for the Christmas markets in December, as soon as Andre, Liv, and Callum were on break from their programs. We were going to look at the lights, and eat all the food, and drink hot glühwein. Slip into the back of glowing churches and cathedrals to hear the choir sing, and not understand a single word of it. I couldn’t wait. Even Callum had never been. The low-cost airlines flew there, Ryanair and EasyJet, so we could all afford to go, together. You just had to travel light, since they’d charge you more for a bag than for the seat itself. I could do that; I’d been learning how to travel light all year. What could a person really need? I needed nothing.

Acknowledgments

When my favorite poet, Frank O'Hara, wrote to his publisher about a long-delayed manuscript, he claimed "various doubt-seasons" had hindered his progress. I never forgot the phrase, and I never outgrew my own doubt-seasons, either. I only learned to weather them—head down, grinding forward—and what follows is a very, very incomplete accounting of the people who made that possible.

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About the Author

Emily Everett is an editor and writer from western Massachusetts. Her short fiction appears in *The Kenyon Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Tin House*, and *Mississippi Review*. She is a Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellow in Fiction. Everett grew up on a small family dairy farm, studied English and music at Smith College, and studied abroad for a year at University College London. After graduating, she returned to London to do an M.A. in literature at Queen Mary University of London. She lived and worked in the UK from 2009 to 2013. Everett has been managing editor of *The Common*, a literary magazine based at Amherst College, since 2016. At *The Common*, she edits fiction, manages print and online production, and hosts the magazine's podcast. *All That Life Can Afford* is her debut novel.



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