

O.E.B

Drinking the Ocean



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For Lucie



# DRINKING THE OCEAN

## Chapter One

### Nothing Out of the Ordinary

It was when I heard the sirens that I knew I had about four minutes to get home before it was too late. The wailing of the fire trucks echoed across the school field, reaching me like a warning cry, their drawling repetitions counting out loud the seconds I had left. But I couldn't move.

I steadied myself against the oak tree I was hiding behind with trembling hands, choking back more vomit. I didn't notice the deep burn in my palm, the cut on my legs, or the smoke that was caught in my hair. All I could do was watch as the flames stretched up, up, up, their pulsing arcs reflecting against the night sky like some kind of bizarre light show. And as the roof of the east wing finally collapsed, it sent a fireworks display of sparks and burning embers shooting out in all directions.

My trance was broken.

I turned around and bolted.

Half-sobbing, half-stumbling, I scurried along the fence line that bordered the school field and the first row of houses behind it. With my back to the fire, patches of orange light twisted and warped in front of

me, shifting like running water as the trees bent and swayed with the wind. My breath was coming out in ragged gasps. The vomit was pressing against my lips. My muscles begged me to stop. But the sirens were drawing closer. Lights in the houses beside me were turning on. At any moment - if they hadn't already - my family would be alerted to what was happening. It was inevitable.

The kissing gate came into focus and I ran at it with every ounce of strength I could summon. It was as though I was reaching the end of a brutal race, and should I just cross that line, everything would be okay. I set my eyes on the chipped paint of the metal bars and willed my legs to carry me the last few metres. And as I finally tumbled through it, out of the dark shadows of the field and into the bright light of the road beyond, the sheer normalcy of the scene around me was enough to provide even the faintest hope that my life wasn't about to be over.

I held my chest and allowed myself to power-walk across the road. My eyes darted from one end of the street to the other, looking for any sign of movement, any indication that I wasn't the only person out there. But I was alone. For those who were fast asleep in their beds, as I should have been at that very moment, the sighs of the sirens in the distance would not even

have punctured their dreams.

I finally stopped outside our tall ivy-covered gate and closed my eyes. I drew in a lungful of air. And then another. My throat was crying out for relief. But I could not cough. I could not make any sound at all. For ten whole seconds I stood there, just breathing into the night, listening to the sounds of the wind in the trees and the cars on the distant main road. Normal. Normal sounds. This was just a regular, normal, night. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing out of the ordinary.

I pushed open the gate. It rustled the ivy and squeaked at its hinges. The garden was almost pitch black, the only light to guide me coming from the bathroom on the ground floor, which was always on. They were still asleep. I could still make it.

I crept along the garden path. The little stones crunched under the weight of my trainers. With quivering hands I reached into my trouser pocket to retrieve the key to the back door. But when my fist closed around not one, but two keys, I stopped. Even in the darkness it was easy to tell which one belonged to the chapel. It had sharp pointed teeth and jagged bits of rust along one side. I didn't waste time examining it. I bent down next to Ant's vegetable garden and picked up one of the little rocks bordering



it. I put the key on the damp earth and placed the rock back in its position.

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.* It was the eighth rock from the corner.

And then, with the correct key in hand, I traversed the last few steps up to the house, kicked off my trainers, and quietly let myself inside.

The house was silent except for the hum of our ancient refrigerator. When I got to the foot of the stairs I stood suspended for a few moments. Every limb in my body was weighted with lead. My brain pulsed against my skull. The walls of the house pressed in on me, watching, like the audience of a film observing the silent transgressions of a villain. I quietly vowed I would never drink gin again. I would never smoke again. Hell, if my family stayed none the wiser about it all, I would never touch any substance for the rest of my life.

I began climbing the stairs, careful to avoid the creaky spots. I made it to the first landing. The door to my parents' room was closed. I could hear the little snores of my younger brother, Teddy, whose door was open wide. Alicia's was firmly shut.

I rounded the corner to the staircase that would take me to the second floor and up to my room. When I craned my neck I could see the outline of my door,

only visible from the dim light of the street lamps that had filtered through the open curtains of the office opposite my bedroom. I was almost there. I had almost made it.

Almost.

A shrill, metallic, deafening series of shrieks echoed through the house just as I was putting my foot on the third step. I stopped. A tiny fibre had connected where I had just been to where I was right in that moment. Light poured out from underneath mum and Ant's room and I spun around like a deer with a car speeding towards it on a quiet forest road.

"Hello? Mmnh... Hello?"

Ant's voice was muffled and strained. Alicia turned on her lamp and I heard her feet hit the floor. Ever the vigilante, she was probably doing exactly what I was: straining my ears to hear what was happening.

"Okay. Yes. Okay. Alright... yes, yes. On my way."

I heard the clink of the receiver and then the voices of my parents murmuring to each other. I distinctly heard the words "fire" and "school." I stumbled the last few steps up to the second floor landing and, desperately, went inside my room and closed the door. I tore off my clothes, stuffed them in my wardrobe, and then dived into bed. I put my head

under the pillow.  
And waited.

## Chapter Two

### Papers and Telephones

By the time I'd got out the shower, dried myself off and put three bandaids over the throbbing burn, Alicia was seated at the kitchen table with the Saturday copy of *The Emerald Post* spread out in front of her. She was peering down her nose through her glasses, leafing through the property section as though she were a middle-aged woman contemplating a holiday home on the Jurassic Coast. At the sound of me entering the kitchen she looked up.

"Is it in the paper?" I asked, attempting to keep my voice as measured as possible. I walked straight to the table and grabbed what I thought was the front section. Alicia protested with a noise of indignation as, in my haste, I pulled the whole thing apart.

"Here," she said angrily. "We're not on the front. We're on page three."

With ease she turned over the papers and ordered them correctly. I stood behind her gripping my hair in my fists, biting my lower lip. As she smoothed out page three I felt a wave of nausea at the sight of a giant black and white photograph depicting the smouldering east wing of our school chapel. A piece of

danger tape was visible in the lower corner of the image. Two firefighters could be seen examining the gaping black hole that was now exposed to the elements.

“Oh my god,” I whispered, pulling on my hair. “Oh my god.”

“Relax,” Alicia said with abandon. “Nobody was hurt. And look on the bright side. We won’t have to have any services for months.”

I ignored her and bent low over the page to scan the article. Particular phrases jumped out at me:

*...Suspected, but not confirmed, arson...*

*...No sign of forced entry...*

*...Spontaneous?...*

“Did Ant say anything?” I asked my sister once I had read the article. She turned the page over and went back to the property section.

“Ask him yourself,” she said, nodding towards the stairs.

Ant had appeared at the entrance to the kitchen with bloodshot eyes and wonky pyjamas. With a big yawn he went straight to the kettle and reached for the instant coffee.

“What happened, then?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. I kept my blistered and burnt hand wrapped up in the towel I’d used to dry my hair. I

could feel my body starting to sweat.

“Suspected arson,” Ant began, searching for cereal.

“But not confirmed?” I finished the thought for him, hovering by the fridge. “I saw the article in the paper.”

“Yeah. Not confirmed,” he echoed, yawning again. “Place was a right mess, though. Narrow corridors and all that. The fire guys really had a challenge on their hands.”

“But they put it out quickly? And nobody was hurt?”

“They managed to keep it contained to the east wing. But your sister is right. I’d say it’ll be a few months before anybody’s back in there. Your school might be slapped with a big fine, too.”

“Why?” I said quickly. I looked over at Alicia who was only watching us with vague interest. “Why would they get fined?”

“No smoke detectors and no sprinklers,” Ant said simply. “It’s the law. Granted the room that caught fire isn’t actively used, according to Reverend Rhys. But it was an accident waiting to happen. All those old synthetic choir robes. The books. Could’ve been mice in the wiring. Could’ve been punks messing around up there. But I doubt we’ll ever know for sure.”

The breath I'd been holding left my body in a rush.

"That's... that's good, then" I said, leaning against the wall of the kitchen. "I mean, it's bad. That's really bad. But it's good... nobody was hurt."

Alicia looked at me darkly. Ant rubbed his eyes.

\*

There was no such thing as a private telephone call in our house; the phone in the kitchen was bolted to the wall above the counter top. Anyone who might be in the kitchen at the moment of your call or in the living room watching television would be privy to your conversation.

The phone in Mum and Ant's room was the safest place to attempt to have a personal call, but was still subject to either of them walking in and out at their leisure. And with Ant often being on shift work it wasn't uncommon for him to sleep during the day or to go to bed right after dinner - prime call time.

Secret phone calls were like cautious dances carried out at an exact time negotiated with your friend, usually either very early in the morning or very late at night so that you could pick up the receiver after one ring. If you were really onto it - if you'd synced your watches to be ticking at exactly the same

time - you could pick up the call before it even rang out. This was something Piera and I had perfected by the time we were ten.

My family were all in the living room watching a film on VHS together. I had declined the invitation using the oldest excuse in the book: that I needed to study for my exams. After all, they were less than two months away.

Alicia and Teddy giggled at something in the film. Satisfied with their level of focus on the movie, I backed away slowly and went upstairs.

*She* had a phone in her bedroom. An old green one with a rotary dial covered in stickers. I didn't need my address book to know the number to call. The day Scott had given it to me was the day I had memorised it. Light on my feet I entered mum and Ant's room and took a seat at the edge of their bed. I picked up the entire telephone and rested it on my knees. The sound of the characters on the television downstairs chattered away in an indiscernible babble as I took a deep breath and started to dial.

Well, who *else* could I have called? I'd argued with myself in my head all morning, debating who to tell, whilst doing my best not to act out of the ordinary in front of my parents. I had eaten breakfast at the table, toast scraping the back of my throat like scalpel



blades, trying to picture telling Piera. I'd unpacked the dishwasher at the request of my mother, whilst imagining telling the truth to Reverend Rhys. I had sat down at the table and pretended to read the newspaper, as that was something I often did at weekends, having visions of just turning to Ant and telling him that it was me, that I did it, that I was the criminal he was looking for.

Obviously none of those options were viable course of action given the nature of my position. Two months out from final exams? Drunk on gin? Smoking pot? Alone in the school chapel in the middle of the night? Even if I had told my best friend, our Reverend, or my step-dad - I suspected they wouldn't have believed me. It was simply too outrageous.

I could hardly believe it myself.

I knew deep down that there was only one person I could call. There was only one person who would accept my actions as well within the realm of what I was capable of. There was only one person who would be just the right amount of dismissive, concerned, and impressed. And it was the one person who had, without knowing, encouraged me to be in the chapel in the first place.

And of course it was the one person I wanted to talk to more desperately than anyone else.

The phone rang.

And it rang.

I eyed the door to the bedroom - which I had left  
only slightly ajar - and felt my heart rate spike.

She picked up the phone.

## Chapter Three

### Tamora

Eldridge was Cambridge's less attractive, less academically renowned, and far less interesting, sister. Situated thirty kilometres south, Eldridge received the dregs of the illustrious canals that Cambridge was famed for. By the time they reached us they were somewhat less impressive. There were Eldridge University students who punted the canals for cash of course, but they didn't have quite the same reputation. Tourists came from far and wide to visit Cambridge and would stop off at Eldridge for a bathroom break. While waiting they'd take a quick photograph of the only defining feature of the small city: a clock at the top of a tall Gothic cathedral flanked by ugly gargoyles. The tourists never stayed long. I wouldn't if I were them, either.

A lot of people who lived in Eldridge commuted to Cambridge for work. This included my mother who was a professor at the university. Alicia and I had often wondered why she would want to be outside of her academic circle and live in a region on the periphery that wasn't known for anything interesting. She would give us practical reasons such as the cost of

housing, the benefit of having a bigger garden, Ant's job. But I always suspected there were deeper, slightly more philosophical reasons for us being distanced with Cambridge. Mum was not somebody who gave away her emotions freely. The only time I got a hint that I might be on to something was when I heard her on the phone saying some of her colleagues were "elitist prats", and that if it weren't for the quality of her research grants and the healthy pick of graduate students, that we'd be living on a beach in Spain.

Whatever the reason, Eldridge was where I had lived since I was about a year old, where I had subsequently grown up, and all I knew.

It was the middle of spring and the cherry trees on the banks of the canals bordering Eldridge University were in full bloom. The punters were out in force guiding duped tourists who thought Eldridge was a part of Cambridge, or who had been swindled by an advertisement, down the murky waterways pointing out mediocre architecture. A bright blue sky was drawing hoards of university students out to the water's edge. They were sprawled on the grass pretending to study, their folders and books lying face-down, pages flapping in the breeze. I walked along in a semi-dazed state marvelling at the world's tendency to just carry on as normal no matter what happened to

you.

The hanging leaves and drooping branches of the weeping willow came into view. It was the biggest tree along the canal and cast the widest shadow that was highly sought after in the peak of summer. In spring, at certain times of the day, the angle of the sun was just right, and the light would hit the leaves and dapple the ground creating the perfect little reading or study sanctuary. Not so bright that the white pages of text books hurt your eyes, but not so dark that you shivered as the breeze went by.

That familiar swoop in my stomach made me stop in my tracks.

There she was, sitting underneath the weeping willow leaning against the trunk. Her eyes were cast down. She was reading, her elbows propped up on her knees, her light denim jacket rolled up at the wrists. She mustn't have dyed her hair for a while. It was a soft shade of pink, almost completely faded.

That would have been the best time to turn around. To just leave her hanging and tell her something came up. She deserved that. But as though gravity was drawing me to her I carried on walking in the direction of the tree.

As if sensing my arrival, she looked up. Her eyes locked on to mine and she closed the book. She stood

and tossed it on top of her bag as I left the path of the canal and walked up the gentle slope to the tree, my body making the decision to keep moving forward before my brain could intervene and tell me otherwise.

“I’ve missed you,” she said, wrapping her arms around my waist. I breathed her in, in all her flowery, tobacco-scented glory, closing my eyes and feeling the warmth of her form.

“Yeah,” was all I could force from my mouth, the words getting lost in her hair. And when we separated she didn’t let go of my shoulders. Instead she held me at arms-length and surveyed me closely. I felt like a lab rat, or a bit of bacteria under a microscope.

“You’ve got really skinny,” she exclaimed, looking me up and down. I wriggled out of her grasp and took a seat next her bag, picking up the book as a distraction.

“Carl Jung,” I read aloud, turning the book over in my hands. It was dense. “‘*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.*’ Sounds heavy.”

“It is,” said Tamora, taking a seat opposite me and leaning back against the weeping willow. From her small brown leather bag she extracted a tin, identical to the one she had given me. Identical to the one that was probably a melted lump somewhere in the ashes of the chapel.

“I have to read it for one of my psychology classes. You know, I must have read about ten thousand books in my life. But when you *have* to do it, it’s suddenly this enormous burden, you know? I’ve read Jung before. But not like this.”

She lit the cigarette and took a deep breath. She held out the tin to me. I shook my head.

We looked at each other. It was as if no time had passed at all. If there was a moment to acknowledge how we had left things, that would have been the time to do it. But any words I had stopped short, hitting my teeth, clawing their way back down my burnt throat and into the pit of my stomach. I fumbled with my hands. They were sweaty, as they often were in her presence. One of the bandaids slipped off and exposed my burn. I tried to cover it up quickly but Tamora spotted it. She reached out and took my hand in hers.

“What did you do?” She asked concernedly, holding my palm up to her eye to look closer. “This is deep!”

“It’s not that bad,” I protested, pulling my hand away from her touch and slipping it delicately under my own jacket. “It was an accident.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Does this have something to do with what you said on the phone? You were very vague.”

“Kind of.”

“I’m not going to force anything out of you,” she said quietly. Could I detect a hint of guilt? Did she regret how we left things as much as I did?

Regardless, I wanted Tamora to be her usual, carefree, smiley self. I wanted her to shrug off what I was about to tell her. I wanted her to laugh, think it was funny, and say it was something she would do.

But the tone was set. I coughed.

“Before I tell you, you have to promise not to tell anyone. If anybody finds out what I did, I will be in a kind of trouble I can’t even properly explain. My life will be over.”

Tamora straightened her back. She looked cautiously either side of her.

“Lenore, you’re making me worried. Of course I won’t tell anyone. What happened?”

Heart thumping, I tried a couple of times to get the words out. But each time I faltered. It was as though speaking the words, saying it all out loud, would make it real. And the last time I had done that was the last time I had felt the world fall out from underneath my feet.

“It’s okay,” Tamora said, reaching out and putting her hand on my knee. “It’s okay.”

I coughed once more.



“Did you hear about what happened - what happened to our school chapel last night?”

“Um... yeah? I think I heard about it on the radio while I drove here. A fire? Something about an arson attack?”

I nodded. Tamora looked confused.

“What about it?”

I bit my lip and looked down at her bag. I fiddled with the corner of it.

“Did you have something to do with that?”

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. And then the look dawned on her face.

“Did you - did *you* set fire to your chapel?”

“It was an accident!” I said in a frantic voice, looking around to make sure nobody was listening. “I didn't mean to. I swear on my life. Things just got out of hand -”

“Woah,” Tamora said, looking up and leaning back. “*Woah.*”

“Please, please, don't tell anyone,” I begged. “If my family find out, I'm dead. Seriously.”

“Of course,” Tamora said smoothly. “I won't tell a soul. But Lenore, what were you doing?”

Where the words had been trapped inside me, they were now gushing out in a haste to clamber out of my body and be gone forever.

“I’ve been going there. On and off. A bit more than usual, actually, in the past three weeks. There’s this green room that’s got a really nice feel to it. Well, it had a nice feel. I had a key from Reverend Rhys. He lent it to Piera and me so we could practice our drama rehearsals after school two summers ago. I’m scared he’s going to remember he gave it to me and tell the police. Tell... Ant.”

“And you would, what? Just go there and smoke?”

“At first it was just smoking some of that pot you gave me. But last night I drank a little bit, too. Well. That’s a lie. I drank a lot.”

She stared at me and didn’t say anything.

“It’s not like I could smoke out my window, or ask Piera to join me,” I added hastily. “Ever since we - ever since - I’ve just felt really alone. There’s nobody I’ve been able to talk to about all of this. And... I’ve missed you.”

Tamora got up on her knees and moved forward, wrapping me in a hug. It was tight, urgent, and she put her hand on the back of my head. I felt my body go weak. I closed my eyes and wished it would go on and on and on.

“I’m glad you’re okay. That could have ended differently,” she said, right into my ear.

My eyes welled up.

"I'm fine," I lied, wiping my cheek with my sleeve. She let me go.

"You haven't told anyone else, then? Not Piera?"

I laughed.

"No. I haven't. And I won't."

"Sensible."

"So, what should I do?" I asked desperately. "Ant was called to the chapel in the middle of the night. He's already spoken to Reverend Rhys. I assume he's forgotten he lent me the key because obviously Ant had no idea. But what if he *remembers*? What if they find something that points to me?"

Tamora thought for a moment.

"We gotta ditch the key," she said simply, standing up all of a sudden. "Do you have it?"

"Yes."

I felt the outline in my pocket. It had been digging into my leg ever since I had retrieved it from the eighth rock in the garden. Tamora considered the situation for a moment.

"The canal," she said, nodding to the narrow bridge behind us that lead to the carpark opposite. I could see her and Ciro's van parked at the end, its little shaggy curtains drawn around the windows.

"Are you sure? What if they find it?"

"It's not a murder investigation," she chided,

taking me by the elbow. "There won't be divers and metal detectors and fingerprint scanning. Just toss it in and if anybody asks, you gave it back to your reverend ages ago."

"What if he gets in trouble for losing the key?"

Tamora lead me over to the railing of the little narrow bridge. We stopped in the middle of it.

"I'm sure God will forgive him," she said with a wink, a hint of her usual self peeking though.

I took the key out of my pocket. I held it in my fist, squeezing until its little teeth almost punctured my skin, as though if I gripped it tightly enough it might turn to powder and the whole night might never have happened. I looked down at the dirty water. It was easy enough, in theory. Just throw it in. Walk away. Pretend everything was fine.

"I can't do it," I said weakly.

"Do you want me to?"

"Can you?"

Tenderly, she placed her hand on mine. She loosened my fingers from the old key. And then she plucked it from my palm and tossed it immediately, rather nonchalant, so that it arced gracefully before it hit the surface. It made a small splash in the water below and then disappeared into the bleak green depths. We both watched where it entered the water,

holding onto the barrier. Our fingers were touching ever so slightly. I didn't make to move. And for a while, neither did she.

"Lenore?"

At the sound of the voice I spun around. My face burned red and I immediately dug my hands into my pockets. Scott was standing at the other end of the little bridge, arms laden with books. His car was behind him. And he was looking at us with a mixture of confusion and disdain.

"What are you doing here?" I asked quickly. How much had he just seen?

"I have an off-site lecture," he said defensively. And then, with a dark look at us both, he turned his back and walked away. I wanted to chase after him. Tackle him. Throw him into the canal after the key.

"Don't worry about him," Tamora said soothingly, putting her arm around my shoulders. I had gone from red to white.

"Do you have anywhere you need to be?"

"No," I said shakily. "I just said to my parents I was going out to study. They didn't question me."

"Good. Let's go back to my place. I'll help you take your mind off all this. Promise."

She smiled and lead me across the bridge and towards her van.

“What if Scott saw you throw the key?” I asked as we climbed in and closed the doors. Tamora pulled another cigarette out of her tin and lit it, rolling down the window.

“He didn’t,” she said, utterly convinced of herself.

## Chapter Four

### A Scene from the Future

Scott and I met in February when I was still sixteen. Piera's older brother, Luca, had thrown a party while home from Cambridge University to celebrate his nineteenth. He'd 'made it' - he had climbed up the rungs of a ladder that stretched between Eldridge and the distinguished campuses almost forty minutes away. He had been lauded by his friends at Eldridge College, his parents, and his sister. Luca was the kind of person who was very easy to admire. He was humble and modest, his shyness coming across as a quiet charm that bewitched teachers and, of course, plenty of girls. He had a wide smile with perfect teeth and was always dressed in a pair of jeans, boots, and a sharp jacket. He let his shoulder-length hair get in his green eyes which he'd awkwardly nod out of his vision in an endearing sort of way.

Piera started to joke that he fancied me and that I in turn, fancied him, when we were about thirteen. Whenever she said it I'd scoff. As if someone like Luca would be interested in a lanky kid, I'd protest. But I'd always found the concept of us being romantically

inclined to each other utterly strange. I'd known Luca for years. I'd seen him grow up and transform from a child to a teenager and then approach the brink of manhood. And similarly, he had always known me as his little sister's best friend. Always present, hanging around like a quiet shadow. I had come to the conclusion that puberty just utterly destroys innocent childhood friendships. It puts a big question mark by every relationship and interaction. It was as though overnight we all went from playing together outside in the garden with water guns, or playing Nintendo on the couch in the 'kids room', or playing football in the street, to hiding in our rooms and sticking together in little tight knit groups. The big divide that suddenly appeared and cut through the boundary between 'girls' and 'boys' was inescapable.

I think at a certain point a part of me actually convinced myself I *did* fancy Luca - after all, what kind of girl wouldn't? And I'd feign disappointment whenever he got a girlfriend, and then act relieved when they eventually split up. Piera and I would spend a large amount of time on weekends following him and his friends around in the hopes of getting attention. Somewhere along the way she had made it her mission for us to be together. And her personal mission, of course, was to snag his best friend,



Andrew, who had been equally as present as I had in the course of our growing up but whom I was never particularly close with.

Where Luca was modest and polite, Andrew was brash and bold; he had an arrogance that he probably thought came across as intellectual, but in effect I always thought he was hiding a deep insecurity about something. This was a thought I kept to myself. I often wondered why Luca spent so much time with Andrew but I knew that people must have said the same thing about Piera and me. Next to her I was quiet and conscientious; Piera was adventurous and hardly ever worried about consequences. But perhaps that dynamic difference was what kept us all in check, none of us given permission to go too far into an extreme.

There was some utility in Piera's claims about my feelings, though. Because whenever other boys asked me out or tried to impress me, Piera would matter-of-factly tell them on my behalf: "she's in love with someone else."

It was the easiest and most reliable way to be left alone.

Naturally Piera thought I was devastated that Luca had left Eldridge to go and live in Cambridge with his girlfriend Bonnie. I was supposed to be

tragically aggrieved with sadness and jealousy. As a result, on the night of Luca's birthday party, I found myself putting on a thick layer of black eyeliner with Piera at my side saying confidently that "we were going to find someone else for me". Andrew, on the other hand, had stayed in Eldridge. He was still living at home and was attending the local university. While he and Luca both still played football together in a social team, without Luca to anchor us all together on the day-to-day, Piera had been desperately awaiting the party so that she would have an opportunity to make something happen.

Alicia had watched us getting ready from the doorway with a scowl on her face. She had just turned fourteen and had begged mum and Ant to let her go to the party too. Of course they'd said no, but that didn't stop her from watching us with envy as we chose our outfits and awkwardly applied makeup.

Piera was already seventeen. And while my parents had never batted an eyelid about the amount of time I'd spent at their house over the years, the context of this particular social situation was different. With a mother whose entire job was to nurture students, she had seen first-hand the types of gatherings that would be put on by first-year students in particular, who were in the habit of flexing their

cool-factor by revelling in excessive alcohol, drugs and sex in their newfound freedom. It wasn't like the other parties we'd been to; it represented a taste of the next step in life.

Mum and Ant always had boundaries with very clear consequences if violated, and for Luca's party, it was no different. The rules were pretty simple and fair anyway: be driven home by a sober driver (in this case, Giulia, Piera's mum); be home no later than midnight; and under no circumstances come home drunk.

Piera joked that those were my rules, not hers, so she was free to behave as she pleased. But we would be coming back to my place to sleep. Piera had volunteered her room to a few of Luca's trusted friends from university. I stressed to her that if I broke my parents' simple rules then it was only going to be more complicated for us in the future. But she was unfazed. Her parents were just simply not as strict. And after all, she had her sights set on Andrew. She wasn't going to let parental meddling and silly rules get in her way.

"Well, well, well," mum had said, standing up from the dinner table as Piera and I descended the stairs, makeup on our faces and our party clothes on our backs. Piera had on flared jeans and wedges, big hoop

earrings, a silver belt, and a turquoise halter top that had little gemstones around the v-shaped neck. We both considered her outfit bold, as the halter finished just above her belly-button ("it's the fashion!" She'd chided her mother). Her hair was up, plastered to her scalp with hairspray, with the bulk of it spiked out the back. In her arm she held a long cardigan that she was determined not to wear, despite the fact that it was still winter.

We wore matching plastic choker necklaces and that was the extent of my commitment to jewellery. I had opted for a far less conspicuous outfit: baggy jeans held up by a simple leather belt, clompy black boots, and a *No Doubt* t-shirt underneath a black denim jacket. My hair - which I often struggled to decide what to do with - was just hanging down limply in its dark waves. Piera had wanted to do something with it - curl it with her mum's iron, or tie it up in a high ponytail - something I vehemently refused to do. I had accepted, after a lot of berating, to wear a plain black headband.

"You don't look like you're going to a party," Alicia smirked at me, skulking past us.

"Shut up," I hissed.

"You look lovely," mum said reassuringly as we moved towards the door. I think she was just relieved

that I wasn't exposing my midriff.

"Are you sure you don't want a ride?"

"No mum, it's fine. Thanks."

She gave me a swift kiss on the cheek and saw us out the door. I would have liked not to have walked, but Piera didn't want to be seen to be dropped off by a parent at a party, even though the party was at her own house.

I was surprised she didn't complain once, as she certainly struggled with the wedges as we walked the uneven urban paths to her street. I didn't have the heart to say that the difference between Andrew falling for her or not falling for her would unlikely ever come down to whether or not she walked the whole way to her own house in wedges with her bare arms exposed.

"Luca said there are more than fifty people going," she exclaimed, reaching out to me for the fifth time to help steady her. "And he didn't tell Mum about the keg, obviously," she added. "Dad knows, but they both agreed Mum wouldn't say yes. She just thinks there are some beers in a fridge outside."

"You've mentioned the keg about a thousand times."

"Sor-ry. It's just, I know our parents said a few drinks only, but what do they *expect*?"

“You don’t even like beer.”

“Yeah, but *Andrew* likes beer,” she said incredulously, as if there was nothing in the world more obvious.

“And it’s not like they’re going to be watching our every move. Mum and Dad promised Luca that they’d stay upstairs. We’re going to have free reign of the whole house.”

“What are you saying? That you *want* to get drunk?”

“Look, if we have a few drinks in the next couple of hours - it’s only six, if we stop drinking at, like, ten or eleven, we should be fine by the time we go back to your place.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” I said, knowing full-well that I was being a total buzzkill.

“Molly told me that if we alternate one drink with a glass of water we’ll be fine.”

“Molly? You’re taking advice from Molly, now?”

Molly was a girl in our year who was renowned for getting drunk every weekend and talking about it. She loved to brag about her older boyfriend who lived in London; that she would go and visit him on the weekend, stay over at his place and go out to clubs with a fake ID. Her closest friends who had similar interests would vouch for her. But other girls in the

year said that a lot of it was a lie, and that actually she'd just go and stay at her grandparents' place outside of Eldridge and sneak her granddad's scotch from his cabinet and then pour water into it to make it look like nothing had been taken.

"Well, she's the only one with advice," Piera murmured as we rounded the corner onto her street, which had a lot more cars parked outside than usual. My anxiety grew as we approached the house. There were going to be a lot of people attending that I didn't know. We were heading into a situation that Piera thrived in: noise, chatter, plenty of opportunity to captivate groups of people with her confidence. But I felt uneasy. I didn't really know what I would talk about with people. They'd probably wonder why a couple of college students were there in the first place. Or perhaps not - maybe everyone would be nice and friendly, which was likely if they were friends with Luca. But, as Piera and I had both submitted applications to the university not one month earlier, I was wary that any wrong move might not just get me in trouble with my family, but with a peer group who I would potentially encounter later on that year.

There was nobody outside to see us arrive, but Piera strode confidently through the front door to her own house. Maybe it was just enough for her to know

that we had walked and not been dropped off.

Sure enough, the house was already packed with drinking teenagers. We passed small groups of unfamiliar people leaning against walls and chatting idly, sipping out of plastic cups, the sound of a rhythmic beat coming from the living room. Piera grinned broadly as she walked down the hallway, pairs of eyes turning to watch her go past. The first person I recognised was Luca, who was standing by the stereo, talking in a low voice with Andrew. As we approached they both looked over. Luca smiled, and Andrew gave a little nod of his head to Piera with a cheesy smirk on his face.

Maybe I would need a drink or two.

“Happy birthday,” I said to Luca, giving him a hug.

“Thanks,” he said warmly. “I’m glad you could come. How are you getting on? Are we going to see you in a few months?”

He was looking particularly handsome in tapered jeans, polished brown leather boots, and a well-cut blazer. Next to Andrew, who was wearing Levi jeans and an *Eldridge U* jumper, he looked like he’d stepped out of a catalogue.

“We’ll see,” I said shyly. Piera fiddled with her hoop earrings and looked at Andrew coyly. “I applied



to so many different places. I couldn't really settle on one thing."

"I know the feeling," Luca said, sipping his beer. "It seems unfair to only be able to choose one thing, doesn't it?"

I nodded.

"Would you like a drink?" He asked, turning his body towards the door to the garden, no doubt where the infamous keg was kept.

"Yes, *a* drink," Giulia Trentino said with a wry smile, appearing suddenly and leaning in to give me a quick squeeze, her own glass of wine getting dangerously close to splashing down my jeans.

"Mum, seriously, you said you were going to be upstairs," Piera said frustratedly.

"I'm allowed to come down and wish my son a happy birthday," she said boldly. She gave Luca a kiss on each cheek and looked at him proudly.

"Our Luca, all grown up, a student at Cambridge University. You could be Prime Minister one day, you know," Giulia said, beaming. She gave a friendly nudge to Piera who rolled her eyes dramatically.

"An Italian Prime Minister of the UK... Mum really does dream," Luca murmured into my ear as Giulia disappeared back upstairs.

"Allow me," Andrew suddenly said, holding his

arm out to Piera as if it were sixteenth-century England. Piera looked as though he'd handed her a diamond ring and took it straight away. Then he steered my best friend outside into the garden without so much as a backwards glance at me. I followed awkwardly behind them, side-stepping vaguely familiar guys and girls all in conversation with beers and wines in their hands. I opened my mouth to say something to Luca but realised he wasn't there. Looking back, I saw he was exactly where we'd left him. Bonnie had appeared at his side and was speaking rapidly. I furrowed my brow as I took in her expression. She looked annoyed, or upset, or both. Luca, whose expression had also changed, took her by the arm and started to walk her in the direction of the kitchen, talking in low undertones.

I wanted to point out my observation to Piera but she was already standing beside the keg, taking from Andrew a large foaming cup of beer. And before I knew it I was having one thrust into my hands as well. With nobody else to talk to, I began sipping my beer quickly, my left arm folded across my chest as though it might shield me from the intense awkwardness I felt by simply being there. Piera and Andrew only had eyes for each other and were engaging in the most cringe-worthy smalltalk.

The garden had been decorated with colourful streamers strung around the fences that bordered the neighbouring properties. Even the trees at the back of their garden had been dressed; someone had hung Cambridge scarves around the trunk. Tall metal torches surrounded the concrete patio area that extended from the sliding glass doors which were only open a crack, to a row of hip-high bushes about half-way down the garden. Their house, a two-storied cottage sandwiched between a row of identical homes, was lit up against the night.

I looked down into my cup. I'd already drunk half the beer. A little haze was entering my brain, like a light mist on a winter morning. My anxiety was fading, ever so slightly.

"You must be Lenore," came a voice from near the rose bushes. A figure I hadn't noticed moved towards me, beer in hand. He was tall, smiling, and probably to most women, very handsome. He held out his hand to me. Startled by the sudden introduction I reached my own hand out and shook it.

"Sorry, you probably don't know who I am," the guy said. He almost seemed as uncomfortable as me. But he was smiling, all the same, and he came across friendly. I glanced at Piera. She and Andrew were still deep in their flirting. I guessed that I was just going to

have to handle this interaction alone.

“I’m Scott. I’m a friend of Luca’s,” he said warmly. “He talks about you and - is it, Piera? - quite a bit.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure what to say. “Um. How do you know him, then?”

“We play on the same football team. Just a silly social one at the university. I don’t really know anybody here, though, these are mostly people from his classes. But Luca said you had really beautiful long hair and that I’d notice you immediately. I guess he was right.”

I drank a large gulp of beer to hide my pink face and watched out the corner of my eye as Piera and Andrew moved over to the outdoor seating.

“Are you at Eldridge University?” He went on. “Luca never actually said.”

“No. I’m still in sixth form. And I doubt very much that I’ll be going to Eldridge.”

“Sixth form,” he said curiously. “Could’ve fooled me. Are you planning on coming to Cambridge in September, then?”

This was a question I was well used to getting but still not comfortable answering. A lot of people tended to assume that I wanted to go to Cambridge because of my mother and where we lived; it was certainly strongly encouraged by my teachers. But in a quest to

give myself as many options as possible without having to make any real decisions, I'd applied at five different universities across the UK. I had absolutely no preference. In fact, the whole notion that the landscape of my life would be completely unrecognisable in less than a year was so alien to me that I might as well have put in an application to the University of Mars.

"Er... I applied there, but I don't know if I'll get in," I said eventually.

"If you've been hanging around Luca long enough, I'm sure they'll just wave you right in without looking twice," he said, nodding towards the house. "That guy is seriously smart."

"Yeah. He is. Are you studying economics as well?"

"I am. I'm in second-year, though. But we did a group project earlier in the year together. Second years tutoring firsts, that sort of thing."

We both sipped our beers in unison. I couldn't for the life of me imagine anything that could possibly be more boring than studying economics. So much so, that I didn't even know an entry point into asking about it.

"What are you planning on doing?" He asked eventually.

I hated that question more than all of the others combined.

“Um,” I said, downing the rest of my beer.

“Science. I think.”

“Science,” Scott said with an air of being impressed. “Really. I wouldn’t have picked that from just looking at you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I shot back, offended.

“You just, I don’t know, look like maybe you’d be doing music. Or art. Something creative.”

“Oh,” I said quietly, embarrassed at my harsh reaction. I was used to getting raised eyebrows at the notion of wanting to study anything scientific. It was something I’d witnessed my whole life with my mother in a highly male-dominated sphere. She was questioned, a lot. She had raised eyebrows and confused expressions, a lot. For some people the idea that a woman might not only be interested in the domain of physics, but highly successful in it, was just too much to comprehend. But in our house science had been such a normal topic of conversation and was so deeply embedded in our family that I didn’t know any different. Theories had no gender. Results had no gender. People like Carl Sagan were nothing short of saints in our house. Naturally, my best subjects were

across the sciences, and the critical eye I had developed also meant I was particularly good at English and languages. And so it was assumed, widely by everyone and even myself, that I would go on to study science at university. It just made sense. I hadn't really had any reason, up until that point, to question it.

"Do you like music, though?" Scott pressed on.

"You must do if you're a fan of No Doubt."

I looked down at my t-shirt.

"Yeah. I do, actually."

"Do you play anything yourself?"

I would have hid my blushing face in my cup if it wasn't empty. I did love music, deeply. All kinds. But nobody in my immediate family was musical. Well - that wasn't entirely true - my biological father had been quite musical, I was told - but artistic creativity was a foreign concept amongst those closest to me. I knew a few people at school who played instruments, but they learned classically. It didn't interest me in the slightest to do musical examinations that focused on technical precision and reading complicated music. I just wanted to mess around and maybe write some songs. I hadn't even told Piera it was something I thought about. I had resigned the whole notion to the realm of fantasy and kept it there, because it seemed

so wildly out of my character. And besides, musicians didn't really make money, so what was the point in thinking about it? What was I going to do - be a rock star?

The idea was laughable.

"No. I don't, unfortunately."

"If you could play anything in the whole world, what would it be?"

"Electric guitar," I said without a beat, surprising myself with my sudden honesty. It was probably the beer. In fact, it must have definitely been the beer, because there I was, having a proper conversation with a full-on university student about music, and telling him something quite personal. Just as Scott opened his mouth to reply, I side-stepped him and walked the few feet separating us from the keg. Someone was already there pouring himself one, and I held out my cup. He filled it without saying a word and then he filled Scott's, who had appeared at my side.

"Cheers, buddy," Scott said to the unfamiliar guy, who merely raised his cup. He was good looking. Electric blue eyes. Slicked back blonde hair. A shirt buttoned all the way up and a thick, navy blue woollen coat.

"Have you seen Luca?" He asked us. He had a soft



London accent.

“Sorry, no,” Scott said. “I haven’t actually seen him since I got here, come to think of it.”

“Me either,” I added.

“Hm. Perhaps I’ll go and have a look for him. Thank you,” he said politely. And then he disappeared.

“So,” Scott went on, persistently. “Electric guitar, huh?”

“Er... yeah,” I murmured, gulping back the beer. “Electric.”

“I used to play,” Scott said nostalgically. “For years. But... I stopped.”

“Why?”

“Just wasn’t really into it, in the end. Didn’t practice enough. You know what - why don’t you borrow my guitar? I actually know a guy who gives lessons. He’s brilliant. Played all his life.”

“Lessons,” I echoed, visions of me playing coming to life in my head. “I’d love to have lessons.”

“I’ll have a talk to him about it. You know... you actually remind me a bit of his girlfriend. You’ve got a similar vibe. I’ll have to introduce you.”

“Okay,” I said awkwardly, unable to hide my smile. “Let’s do it.”

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The night had well and truly descended upon the cottage garden. Drinking teenagers were left completely undisturbed by Marco and Giulia who, like Luca, I hadn't seen at all since I arrived. While I found it easy enough to talk to Scott I had become increasingly worried about Piera. She had moved from the outdoor furniture, Andrew in her wake, and disappeared inside some time ago. By the time I'd almost finished my second beer and the fog in my brain had taken up residence, I announced to Scott that I needed to go and find her. Expecting him to latch on to another group or find someone else to talk to, he followed me through the garden. I was a little irritated by this as I knew that if Piera had seen us together outside, and saw us walking together inside, that she would draw some hefty conclusions and I would never hear the end of it.

But I needn't have worried about what Piera was going to think of me. As soon as Scott and I walked through the patio door she passed in front of me making a beeline for the kitchen, swerving, a beer in one hand and a bottle of spirit in the other. A dopy-eyed Andrew was behind her with a stupid grin on his face.

I grabbed him by the forearm. He looked at me,

surprised, as though he had only just realised I was at the party in the first place.

“Lenore,” he said, a little frustratedly, as Piera marched a crowd into the kitchen with the bottle of spirit held aloft. “What’s up?”

“How much has she had to drink?”

“I dunno. A bit, I guess,” he said agitatedly, pulling his arm out of my hand and making his way towards the kitchen after the others.

I put my own beer down on the coffee table and followed him. Most of the partygoers were now congregating in the kitchen; the music had been turned up, the lights had almost all been turned off, and Piera was seated at the head of the dining room table. With what looked like intense focus she took the lid off the bottle, then struggled to pour liquid into a line of mismatched shot glasses.

“Piera,” I said into her ear, trying not to bring attention to myself. “Is this a good idea?”

“Is what a good idea?” She said loudly, not taking her eyes off the table.

“The shots. We said we weren’t going to get drunk.”

“No, you said *you* weren’t going to get drunk.”

“My - my parents, we’re staying at my place - we can’t go home wasted.”

“Lenore,” she said, stopping mid-way through pouring and turning to look at me. “You need to relax. I’m not drunk. I’ve had three beers. Just... calm down.”

Even after my almost-two beers, I was feeling considerably light-headed. And judging by her unfocused eyes, her lop-sided hair, and smudged lipstick, she was, most certainly, drunk.

But her patronising tone had stung me. I backed away from the table as the party gathered around. They started chanting.

“Luca! Luca!”

“Luca! Luca!”

They were beating their fists on the table making a tremendous amount of noise. The guy who had poured us the beer, who was on his own, looked concerned. I went over to him.

“Did you find Luca?”

“I think he’s upstairs with his parents. But the doors were all closed. I didn’t want to intrude.”

“Weird,” I said.

Just when I was thinking I would go and try and find him myself, a smiling Luca appeared in the door frame, illuminated from behind by the blue and white light of the television in the living room. At the sight of him the partygoers went wild. They rushed over and

started clapping him on the back, continuing to chant his name. Piera began a chorus of happy birthday in Italian and soon the whole kitchen was shout-singing the terribly discordant tune in his face. He didn't notice Piera's intoxication as she passed him a shot, which he drank immediately. He took another, and another, and another. Soon, other guests were picking up shots and yelling out hip-hip-hoorays. I was surprised that Giulia and Marco hadn't come downstairs to participate. And I was surprised that they didn't care that there were thirty-odd teenagers crammed into their kitchen getting absolutely hammered.

As Luca passed me I caught a glimpse of his face up closer in the dim light. His cheeks were wet. His eyes were glassy. And his smile didn't look like one of happiness. It looked pained, forced, a grimace. The boy with the electric blue eyes had gone over to him. In the midst of the chaos of the bottle of spirit being passed around, nobody paid attention to the two of them having what looked like a passionate argument. The exchange didn't last long. The blonde boy turned on his heel and left the kitchen, going in the direction of the front door. Through the noise I could have sworn I heard the door slam. And then, after another two shots, I watched Luca slip out of sight too.

I would have spent more time ruminating over the strange situation had I not turned around and seen Piera sitting with her legs wrapped around Andrew, locked in a passionate, public, and extremely messy looking kiss. It was like watching a car crash. I couldn't look away as my best friend, whom I had known since kindergarten, knock on the door of some strange new universe, asking to be let in. Scott appeared at my side, saw the scene in front of him, and made a quiet noise of revulsion. I echoed this sentiment and then, against my better judgment, picked up one of the last shots on the table and downed it.

\*

The rest of the night passed with me incessantly checking my watch. I was counting down the hours until it was time to go home. Annoyingly, Scott was the only person I could talk to without the uncomfortable act of introducing myself to others. Andrew and Piera had moved to the outdoor furniture so that they could kiss under a blanket in 'peace'; Luca and Bonnie were still missing; and Piera's parents had still not shown themselves. I had stopped drinking alcohol in anticipation of going home, and Scott had

followed my lead and was drinking lemonade. He would be driving.

I had given up trying to ply Piera with non-alcohol drinks. I had given up trying to whisper common sense into her ear. She didn't want to listen. And every time I tried, Andrew looked at me like I was a fly, or a mosquito, or some other annoying insect with an unwelcome presence.

On the couches in the living room I learned a lot about Scott in my quest to pass time.

He had one younger sister. His parents had divorced when he was very young; his dad had moved away and not been very present in his life. But Scott defied a lot of the odds in his small, northern town, not just by getting into Cambridge University but also by getting a full scholarship. He spoke highly of his sister, of his mother, and had ambitious plans to finish studying, take on a masters programme, and then move to London to work. His plan was remarkably well thought out. He had plotted with precision the year he would move to the city, the year he would want to finish a graduate programme, where he was interested in living - somewhere north, maybe Finchley, where it would be easy for him to take trains up to visit his family - and he even knew how old he wanted to be when he bought his first house. I was

impressed at his certainty. I was jealous of how clearly he could picture his future and what he wanted for it. And I was careful to ask as many questions as possible, thinking of the next one before he had the opportunity to turn the focus of the conversation to me. I didn't want to have to explain that not only did I have no idea about where I wanted to study, but I also didn't have the foggiest impression of what life might look like on the other side of graduating. Where Scott was sailing across the ocean, his sights set on the horizon, I was barely climbing into a dinghy that might take me out of the harbour.

When my watch finally read eleven o'clock, I told Scott I needed to go and speak to Giulia about my ride home. Thankfully he didn't follow me on that occasion.

Darting between groups of drunken students I went upstairs, my hand on the rail, passing the photographs of the Trentino family watching them morph backwards in time. There were dozens and dozens of photos stretching all the way up to the first landing. There were even photos of me up there, faded and grainy. Not unlike the memories of them being taken.

As I got to the top of the landing I slowed down. I could hear muffled voices coming from the end of the



hallway. It was impossible to make out who was speaking and what was being said over the ruckus downstairs. But I crept forward, slowly, caught in a bit of a conundrum. My parents would have surely already started their clock watching, waiting for Piera and I to come home. I could hardly call them and ask to be picked up - they'd find Piera plastered to a nineteen-year-old, absolutely off her rocker, and see the dismal state that the totally unsupervised house was in.

I did not want the aggravation.

The voices were coming from Giulia and Marco's bedroom. I began to be able to discern them as I reached the outside of their door. It was unmistakably Luca and his parents... and they were arguing.

I stood, hovering for a moment, then made the snap decision to enter the bathroom just off their room, not turning the light on. With the door open ever so slightly I resolved to listen, only until I found a gap where it would be appropriate for me to knock and ask about going home. But I had an uneasy feeling. Luca had been gone for most of the party. If he had been up there arguing the entire time - whatever it was must have been serious. And when I heard the gruff, callous tone of Marco Trentino, any hint of non-sobriety that was left over within me

evaporated.

“...But how can you be sure?” I heard him shout through his accent. “How could you possibly know?”

“I just do, Dad. I just do. Please. Please don’t do this.”

Luca’s voice was strained. It was shaking. Desperate. I stood rooted to the spot, knowing that I was witnessing a deeply private and deeply personal interaction. But I stayed exactly where I was.

“Me, don’t do this? Me? This is all you, boy! Bringing shame to this family!”

“What do you want me to do, then? What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know! How are we supposed to know? Look what you’ve done to your mother. Look at her. *Look at her!*”

“Please, Dad. Please,” Luca begged.

“How are we supposed to tell everyone our son is a - a - a *Finocchio!*”

The word cut through me like a blade of ice. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t in English. I knew exactly what it meant. A buzzing filled my ears. Vomit bubbled from the pit of my stomach, all the way up my oesophagus and then pushed against my lips. I clamped my hand over my mouth.

The sound of the door to the bedroom opened. I

stayed as still as possible, hidden in the darkness of the bathroom, as Luca appeared for a flash and then disappeared down the stairs. In the distance I heard the sound of the front door being slammed.

There was silence from the bedroom for a few moments. Then I heard the click of the bedroom door being closed and the voices behind it faded to murmurs being spoken in rapid Italian.

I stared at a spot on the carpet I'd seen Luca occupy for a split second. The word *Finocchio* echoed in my head over the music thumping from downstairs. I pushed the bathroom door closed, plunging myself into complete darkness, and locked it. I lifted up the cover on the toilet seat and heaved the contents of my stomach into it. The beer, the liquor, the handfuls of crisps I'd eaten throughout the night, the dinner I'd eaten at home, all came tumbling out of me as I realised I had just witnessed a scene from the future of my own life. As clearly as Scott had talked about the certainty of his, I suddenly had a picture of a chapter of mine that was as inevitable as the clock striking midnight in less than an hour.

\*

“Piera,” I said forcefully. “We have to go. Now.”

“Wha...?”

She looked up at me, resurfacing from the depths of Andrew, and stared at me with a look of utter confusion. “Why?”

“Because it’s almost midnight.”

“I don’t care,” Piera slurred, turning back to Andrew and planting her mouth on his.

“I do,” I said loudly, tapping her on the shoulder until she looked up again.

“Seriously?” Piera groaned. “Fine. Okay. *Okay.*”

She untangled herself from him and stood. She swayed dangerously.

“I don’t feel good,” she murmured as I wrapped her cardigan over her shoulders. “Like... I really don’t.”

“There will be water in the car. Scott’s going to drive us home.”

“Who’s Scott? Is that your new boyfriend?”

“No. It isn’t. Now, hurry up. He’s bringing the car around the front now.”

“Lenore... I really don’t feel good.”

“Say goodbye to Andrew. We’re leaving. *Now.*”

As I turned to lead her away she bent double. And with the most sickening sound she wretched all over the patio, a torrent of vomit pooling at Andrew’s feet, who immediately jumped up, disgusted, cursing

something fierce. When Piera stood back up she was as white as a sheet and what was left of her makeup was smudged in black tracks down her cheeks.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her along.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Andrew demanded, looking at me with his arms spread wide, standing over the pool of vomit in revulsion. “You can’t leave me with this!”

“Watch me,” I snapped, not even bothering to look back at his face as I dragged a heavy, sloppy, and absolutely intoxicated Piera behind me. We rounded the corner of her house and I navigated her along a narrow path leading from the garden to the driveway. And sure enough Scott was parked there, the back door to his car open, holding up a bottle of water. I shunted Piera along and guided her into the back seat. Scott handed me a bowl which I immediately placed under her face.

By the time we got home Piera had vomited twice more. I apologised profusely to Scott the entire journey. But he was gracious, telling me he had done the same thing for numerous friends on many occasions. I knew he was just being polite but I didn’t care. All that I wanted - all that I needed - was to be home, in my bed, alone, with all the sounds of the world muted to nothingness. I didn’t care if my

parents were angry about Piera. I didn't care if they forbade me from ever going out ever again. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

"Just make sure she eats something," Scott said, emptying the bowl of vomit into the drain a couple of doors down from our place and rinsing it with the remaining water. "And drinks water. Loads of water."

"Sure," I said, scooping Piera under her arm and holding her steady. She was groaning softly. Her head was lolling about on her shoulders.

"I'm really, really sorry, Scott."

"Don't apologise. We've all been there," Scott said comfortingly, directing a pitying gaze to my best friend. He handed me the bowl which I tucked under my other arm.

I looked up at him as he smiled reassuringly.

"Well... it was nice to meet you," I said.

"You too. I'll get you that guitar, yeah? And speak to Ciro about the lessons."

"Sure. Thanks. I appreciate that."

He bent forward and low and gave me a swift kiss on the cheek. I blushed, bade him goodnight, and then heaved Piera to our front door. The light was already on.

## Chapter Five

### The Edge of Seventeen

I emerged from the water, dragging my heavy limbs across the dense wet sand. The sound of my desperate breaths were silenced by the almighty crash of the waves behind me. The beach shuddered under their power and, on my hands and knees, I scrambled forward. The grip of an icy wave extended its fingers across my body in an attempt to pull me back. But I was far enough up the shore to resist its beckoning, and when I sensed I was at a safe distance, collapsed in a heap.

It was dark. Almost completely. The only light source came from a distant moon hidden behind storm clouds and the intermittent flashes of sheet lightning. Rolls of thunder blended into the sound of the ocean to create an unending, deafening, dangerous roar that filled my body with a primal fear.

I wiped my mouth. The sea tasted strange. Bitter, not salty. But that was the least of my concerns. How the hell was I supposed to get out of there?

I clambered to my feet.

Up the beach behind me I could make out the silhouettes of palm trees being beaten by a ferocious

wind. Either side of me they stretched on and on, as far as my eye could see, disappearing around misty corners into the unknown. They rose up a slope, a mountain perhaps, and into the storm clouds above.

And in front of me were the waves. Their white caps churned and frothed against the blackness of the endless night. I had no escape. No way out. No way to silence the storm, the sea, or the knowledge that I was completely and utterly alone.

A flash of light illuminated the heaving ocean and something caught my eye. A tall mast - a white sheet - a sailboat! I could see it rise up on the forming waves, tipping and tilting against the fury of the currents, only to drop behind a crest and disappear out of sight.

I did not hesitate.

I ran at full-speed back down the beach.

I had only one drive: get in the boat. Within seconds the water I had just escaped was at my waist. Then at my chest. And then I was swimming, the floor gone out from underneath me, the currents acting in my favour and pulling me towards the boat. With each flash of lightning I was able to see my target bouncing on the waterline. I got mouthfuls of the strange, bitter ocean, swallowing it accidentally as I swam furiously, choking on it as it went up my nose and down the back of my throat. But I was getting closer to the



wooden hull. It was only metres away.

My hands made contact with the small boat. It was the kind for cruising around harbours or lakes, certainly not designed to withstand the force of an ocean storm. I heaved myself up the side and let out a strangled cry.

“No!”

It was waterlogged. There was a deep split down the starboard side that was letting in the sea at an alarming rate. The sail was torn, whipping in the wind, and the mast was creaking and groaning. Even though I knew it was hopeless I tried to pull myself fully aboard. But the boat was disintegrating before my eyes. Pieces of the hull were breaking away, getting swept off with the churning waves, disappearing beneath the surface.

When I heard the crack of the mast breaking at its base I knew I had to move. Finding my footing I stood for the briefest of moments before I dived, head-first, back into the sea. I swam against the almighty currents that wanted me to meet the same fate as my boat. I kicked, dragged, hauled myself, back onto the beach.

By the time I had made it to the shore I knew exactly what the water was. And the knowledge made me stay on my feet and try to wipe it away, scrub it

from my body: for I was stained. My pyjamas were the same colour as my skin. A deep, rich burgundy. And I could taste it. It was in every pore of my skin. It was sticking to the back of my throat, even though I tried to cough and spit it out.

The lightning lit up the sky once more and it began to rain.



It was because of Ant that I never asked too much about my biological father. I didn't want to upset him, didn't want him to think I didn't love him, or that I wasn't grateful for everything he'd done for me over the years. I had a memory of the first time we met but I doubted its veracity. It was more like a shadow, foggy and patchy, an oil painting constructed by my own brain. Just one sequence that played over and over: Ant putting wood on the crackling fire in the living room and dusting his hands off. That's it. And from that point on he was always there, always putting wood on the fire, always on the couch with Mum reading a book, or putting on his clunky work boots by the front door. Ant, Mum and I didn't have the longest time that it was just the three of us. I couldn't remember life without Alicia. Of course she'd always

called him 'Dad', and looking back, when she came along that probably would have been the best time to start doing it. But Ant had stuck. I referred to him as 'Dad' to my friends at school, my teachers, and strangers - it was easier.

But we never really talked about it.

The few things about my biological dad that I knew I'd collected in various conversations over my life. His name was Reid Wiley. He was twenty-six when he died. Mum met him out in Vancouver when she was completing her PhD. Reid was in a band, apparently, but worked odd jobs with his sister, my aunt June, to pay rent. I knew I must have come along relatively quickly and accidentally. I'd wondered all my life how someone studying a physics PhD ended up involved with someone in a band. But maybe 'ended up with' was the wrong expression. They didn't end up together in any sense of the word. He died just after my first birthday so I had no memories of him at all. Just those foggy abstracts that I think I invented. If Ant was a blurry figure by the fireplace, then Reid was a shadow behind a mirror.

Ant was never the disciplinarian in the family. He was soft, even though his job ought to have made him tough. He was the one that let me use the phone even after I'd hit my time limit for the week. Ant was the

one who would take Alicia and I out for ice-cream for absolutely no reason, other than that it was Tuesday after school. He never shouted to keep our rooms tidy, never told us off for watching too much TV. He didn't need to.

Mum, on the other hand, was very assertive. She was the youngest of four. She had three older brothers, Gary, Dean, and Robert. I think she was made tough because of them. If Mum had a motto it would be, "just get on with it." For her the world was a matter of black and white. There were right answers and there were wrong answers. And sometimes that was deeply comforting; her consistency, her stability, was rock solid. With Mum we always knew what we were going to get. But it also meant that she had a profound unwillingness to bend. Getting my mother to change her mind on a subject was almost impossible because you could guarantee that she'd spent more time than anyone else thinking about her position on it. If you wanted to change her mind you couldn't just give an emotional argument. You had to approach her like a scientist: use fact, logic, reason, and criticisms of your own position in order to strengthen your case. Sometimes I believed she just liked to disagree to watch us defend ourselves, as though in doing so we might be creating our own armour to use later in life.

There was a particular picture of my biological dad and mum together and it was perhaps one of my most prized possessions. It was Reid on stage with his guitar and the profile of my young mother looking up at him. He was mid-song, his dark hair wet with sweat, his face crumpled up with emotion. His arms were muscly, his t-shirt filthy, and his guitar was covered with faded and scratched stickers. I couldn't make out the faces of the band in the background; the picture was too old, too grainy, and they were too far out of the lights. But whoever was taking the photo was clearly trying to capture something special. A moment wherein my mother - who was looking at him with a type of vulnerable admiration I'd never seen on her face before - was the subject of the photo, and my father, the subject of the whole scene. The photo came from an album that Mum kept in her wardrobe that I requested to look at usually around my birthday. It was the one occasion she was likely to budge with some information. In the summer of '78, the year before I was born, Mum had gone on a road trip across the United States with Reid, June, and the rest of the band. But that was pretty much all I knew about anyone in the photos. When Mum left Canada she severed ties with that crowd. Even June, who had supposedly had a daughter not long after me.

The curiosity I had about Mum's life and how I came to be was much more potent at a younger age. But as I grew up, my own life and its own struggles took over, and Canada existed in the back of my mind as some kind of strange abstraction of an alternate reality. I didn't dwell on it.

It was Saturday, two weeks after Luca's party. I had managed to avoid making plans with anyone. Mum, Ant and Alicia were all at Teddy's football game in Cambridge and were going to be stopping by Ant's parents on the way home. That meant I was free to get up when I pleased, stare solemnly out into the garden for as long as I pleased, and avoid all social contact with the outside world under the guise that I was studying.

I had escaped persecution from my parents the night of the party - just. Mum had been there to greet us and was, as to be expected, unimpressed at Piera's level of intoxication. But I was sober. I explained that I had tried to look after her but ultimately she had refused to listen to me. I didn't need to say anything more than that. Mum pursed her lips, brought Piera inside, and made her a sandwich and gave her a giant glass of water.

"Where were Giulia and Marco?" Was all she'd asked.

“Upstairs,” I said, not giving any more information than that.

Mum scowled. But she kissed me on the head, told me I was a good friend, and for the sake of Piera not keeping me awake all night, set up the pull-out couch in the living room so that she might be close to a bathroom. And thankfully I was able to be alone to cry about Luca, and myself, unheard.

Piera had no memory of anything after pouring the shots at the party. She’d brushed off the fact that Scott, Mum and I had needed to look after her, stating that she had merely had a good time, and that she was right about the fact I wasn’t going to get in trouble. When I quizzed her at school about how her own parents had reacted to her behaviour she shrugged and said they hadn’t said anything about it at all. And when I asked if everything was alright with Luca, she looked confused - of course, he was fine. He’d gone back up to Cambridge on Sunday with a hangover. Why was I asking that? Especially as I had Scott to focus on now (she hadn’t forgotten that much). And her tone suggested she didn’t want to talk about something as pedestrian as her brother. After all, she had a *boyfriend* now. She and Andrew were an official couple. Our friends at school had breathed a collective sigh of relief when she announced it to them on

Monday while eating lunch on the tennis courts. It had been a long time coming for us all. And thanks to their new union I was able to get away with looking out into space at lunchtime, or in class, without anyone noticing. Piera was the centre of attention and she relished it.

Marco's slur at his son was still playing loudly, over and over, in my head. I was finding it hard to concentrate on anything related to school. Indeed, on that Saturday two weeks after the party, I was trying to study without success. Piera and I were supposed to meet at the Eldridge Library but she had made plans to see Andrew instead. I didn't protest, and I didn't accept her obligatory offer to join their lunch. I had absolutely no interest in witnessing their interactions. I was in my bedroom laying on my bed, staring at the ceiling, my textbooks surrounding me, when I heard the doorbell ring. I ignored it. It was probably just door-to-door salespeople or Jehovah's Witness. If they really needed to speak to me they'd ring it more than once.

I sighed when the bell echoed through the house a second time. Heaving myself off the bed, I opened the window that looked out above our driveway. I saw his car parked on the street. When the bell rang for a third time, I pushed open the window and poked my



head out.

“Hey, Scott. Sorry, I was - napping. I’ll be down in a sec.”

“Okay!”

Quickly, I pulled on a pair of jeans and a hoodie over the top of my pyjamas. I caught my reflection in the mirror. My hair was unkempt and I had dark circles under my eyes. Well, if he doesn’t like my face for what it is, then I know I don’t even need to bother, I thought to myself. When I opened the door I’d forgotten how tall he was. I wasn’t wearing my clompy boots after all, but he must have been taller than six foot at least. He was holding a small bunch of flowers in his hand and had a guitar-shaped bag slung over his shoulder. My face burned a bright shade of red.

“Hi. Wow. Oh. Thanks,” I said awkwardly, taking the flowers from Scott.

“I’m sorry for just springing these on you, I hope you don’t mind,” he said shyly. “I went by the Trentino’s to see if Luca was there and they... said you should be home.”

“No, no. That’s - that’s fine. Do you want to come in for tea?” I asked, holding open the door for him, figuring that was the polite thing to do. He nodded and stepped over the threshold, immediately taking off his shoes. It took me a moment to register what he had

just said.

“What do you mean... to see if Luca was there? Is he not in Cambridge?”

Scott paused in mid-motion as he removed his jacket.

“Oh - I thought you must have known already.”

“Known what?”

He suddenly looked very uncomfortable. He leaned the guitar bag against the wall. Then he buried his hands in his trouser pockets.

“I don’t know if it’s my place to say. The Trentino’s are pretty upset. I just figured you’d have known already because of Piera. I mean, it’s pretty shocking, to say the least.”

My heart started racing.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said quickly, and in an effort to hide my face walked into the kitchen to put on the kettle. Scott followed me slowly.

“I think... maybe you should talk to Piera. She’d probably want to be the one to tell you.”

“Please,” I said, a pair of mugs in my hands. I had to separate them so they didn’t clink together because of my trembling fingers. “Just tell me. I’m sure whatever it is Piera would just want me to know.”

He took a deep breath.

“Fine. But please don’t shoot the messenger.”

“I won’t. Just tell me.”

“Luca’s gone to San Francisco. He’s... dropped out of Cambridge University. Apparently he got some kind of, I don’t know, arts scholarship to a school there. Nobody knew. Not Bonnie. Not even his family. And, I mean, fine - if he wants to go, he’s free to go - but he didn’t say goodbye. One day I was talking to him at training. Then he wasn’t there at the next session. I figured he was sick, or maybe on a holiday. But I had no idea that he had left the country.”

*“What?”*

The hum from the refrigerator matched the white noise in my head. Luca? *Gone?* I had been gearing up to respond to a completely different admission. But I was not prepared for the answer he had given me.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Piera told me he was fine, that he’d gone back up to Cambridge and...”

Scott shook his head.

“He left. Last week. When we realised we hadn’t seen him around the campus in a few days, I thought I’d be safe and come and check with his parents. I didn’t have their phone number. I wanted to see you, too, so it wasn’t like this big search party or anything. When I got to their house just before, it was... well, you can imagine what his parents are like right now.

Luca called them yesterday morning to say he was staying at a hotel in the city and isn't coming back."

"And... he didn't... he didn't say why?"

"Apparently not. Maybe he was worried about how people would react to him quitting Cambridge. I don't know. But there are going to be a lot of people really sad about him going that way."

I sat down at the dining room table, the empty mugs still in my hands. The kettle was almost boiled. When it was apparent I wasn't moving, Scott slowly came and took the mugs and began to prepare the tea himself to give me time to process what he'd said. He went about the kitchen, finding the teabags and getting the milk, while I sat there completely stunned.

"Was Piera there? At their house?" I asked.

"No," Scott replied, pouring the hot water. "Giulia said she was out with Andrew. They were both pretty devastated, as I'm sure you can imagine."

A new, surprising, but extremely powerful feeling cut through me like a white-hot dagger. Piera had known - arguably since the morning before - and hadn't told me? She'd just, what, disappeared off with Andrew to have a cry about it? Was she going to tell me on Monday at school, which happened to be my birthday, and drop it like a bomb on the tennis courts? When she had believed - for years - that I was in love

with him? Even though I wasn't, he was still my friend. We still had a history. And Piera... she was supposed to be my *best* friend. What I could only discern as a vibrating anger pumped through my body. I didn't even care that Scott had all but made himself at home, placing two steaming mugs of tea on coasters and joining me at the table.

"I just... I can't believe..."

"I know," Scott said solemnly. "I know. The boys are going to be gutted when I tell them."

My eyes had gone misty. I struggled to keep the tears at bay.

Scott reached across the table and placed his warm hands on top of mine.

"I'm just relieved," he said quietly, "that... even though he did go, I still got the opportunity to meet you."

My intestines tied themselves up in a knot. I instinctively wanted to pull my hands away but they were completely held in his grip. After a few painful seconds of staring at each other, he released me, and I picked up the tea and scolded my tongue.

"Now," Scott said, leaning back. "Are you free next Saturday? The guy who's going to give you the guitar lessons is having a party at his place. If you're up for it, and if your friends are up for it too, maybe

we could all go together? I can pick you up.”

\*

I turned seventeen on Monday and it passed without fanfare. I didn't have a giant party like Luca, or drag it out with many events with family and friends like Piera usually did. I had already decided to have a simple dinner on the day at home. It was tradition: Piera would come over, Ant would cook, we'd have chocolate ice-cream, and then the two of us would go up to my room and watch movies. Ant would set up the television at the end of my bed for the night so she and I could watch horrors, sometimes not even sleeping if it was a weekend. I had figured we would do the same thing.

But Piera still hadn't told me about Luca even though she'd had plenty of opportunity to do it. She could have said it on our walk to school together, before P.E, even in maths. But she acted like everything was fine. She even gave me my present at our lockers: the latest CD by Alice in Chains, my favourite band, wrapped up in a t-shirt with the album cover featuring a three-legged dog. In order to avoid unnecessary confrontation I didn't remind Piera I had a signed copy of the CD already. I had bought it the

day it came out, having waited in line with Mum outside the store for hours. There were no decent music shops in Eldridge so we'd woken up early to drive to Cambridge and get one of the limited edition signed copies. Piera thought my music taste left a lot to be desired so I wasn't surprised she'd blocked out the conversations we'd had the previous year. But there was a part of me that believed she had only bought it at the weekend last-minute. With all of this simmering away under the surface, I had developed a prickly agitation which I did my best to suppress.

The night started off as usual. Piera and I walked home across the field after school, through the kissing gate, and onwards to my house. We talked about neutral subjects. Exams, our friends, the prospect of hearing back from universities. She didn't give any indication that she was upset in the slightest. And I played along to the best of my ability.

Ant cooked a nice dinner, as always. To my surprise Mum brought a bottle of the wine to the table. She wordlessly opened it with the corkscrew, and as if it weren't a big deal at all, poured a decent amount into the glass in front of me. When I stared at her with widened eyes she shrugged.

"Well, you're on the brink of adulthood now," she said grimly, pouring a slightly smaller amount into

Piera's glass. This was her subtle way of showing that she disagreed with her behaviour the previous weekend. But the act was lost on my best friend who carried on chatting with Alicia, picking up her glass as though it had been there all along, and that she was simply so accustomed to drinking that my mother's passive aggressive attempt couldn't possibly be realised.

"Can I have some?" Alicia asked, holding up her water glass to Mum hopefully as she went to put the bottle down. Mum paused, considering. And to everyone's surprise she actually poured about two inches of the dark red liquid into my little sister's glass. Alicia looked positively thrilled.

I wanted to complain - as if I would have been given wine at the table when I was fourteen - but I choked on my words at Ant's next question, which he projected loudly and broadly to the table like a bloody town crier.

"So, when are we going to meet this Scott?"

Everyone at the table turned to look at me. Their eyes burned my skin and I slid down my chair.

"Scott?" Piera said emphatically, wine glass at her lips. "You told your parents about Scott *already*?"

"It's not a big deal," I said quickly into a mouthful of food. "He just came over the other day and dropped



off a guitar for me. I'm going to be having lessons with his friend."

*"A guitar? Lessons?"*

"An electric one!" Teddy said excitedly. "Lenore can already tune it. It's black. It's really cool."

"Lenore," Piera said coolly. "What's got into you?"

"Dunno. Just thought it might be fun," I said quietly, swallowing my food, then taking a large gulp of wine. "Like I said. Not a big deal."

It was a simple enough question. To be expected, even. But with every word I felt as though a piece of my clothing was being removed. I didn't like being the subject of conversation when it concerned such matters. I didn't want my family getting excited over me and a boy. I was visibly bristling but everyone seemed to be delighting in it.

"You should have invited him tonight," Alicia smirked. "Especially since you're going to that party with him on Saturday."

"Party? What party?" Piera said, turning her head rapidly back and forth, looking from one end of the table to the other, as if the answer was going to jump up behind one of us. "You didn't tell me about a party."

"Well maybe we're in the habit of not telling each other stuff now," I shot back at volume, the steam

under my skin having built up to boiling point. The pressure of the atmosphere in the room dropped instantly. The tone of my voice and the sharpness of my words breathed a cold front across the table. And the cheeky grins, the playful jibes, slid off the faces of my family and best friend to be replaced with awkward, confused, and uncomfortable glances as I sat there trembling with anger. And then - gone as quickly as it had arrived - embarrassment took its place. I had over-reacted and everyone knew it.

Piera put down her fork. With her napkin, she lightly dabbed her lips, and then she excused herself from the table. She went into the bathroom off the living room and closed the door.

“Lenore,” Mum said in a low voice. “What’s going on?”

“It’s fine,” I said curtly, putting down my own cutlery. “Thanks for dinner, Ant. I think I’m just going to skip dessert tonight and go upstairs if that’s okay.”

He straightened himself up in his chair, throwing the briefest of looks at my mother, who was frowning at my wine.

“Oh. Okay,” he said gruffly. “Well, the ice-cream is in the freezer whenever you want it. And the TV is already in your room. You’ll need to grab the spare mattress from the office, though.”

“Thanks,” I said shortly, taking my half-eaten plate of food and placing it on the kitchen counter. “But I think I’m full.”

Without another word I stalked upstairs. The eyes of my family burnt through my back as I retreated to the safety of my bedroom, closing the door and laying in the foetal position on my bed. I stared at a spot on the wall until the door was opened and Piera’s voice, hushed but harsh, shot at me.

“What was that about?”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. Too many emotions were battling to be expressed: I was angry, hurt, disappointed, confused, ashamed. So I lay there facing the wall with my arms folded like a small child throwing a tantrum in a grocery store. I wanted her to console me, but I also wanted to throw everything in my presence.

“I’m guessing that Scott told you about Luca, then.”

I nodded.

“Lenore,” Piera said impatiently, taking a seat at the foot of my bed. “Is this why you freaked out at me just then? Is this why you’ve been acting all - I don’t know - distant?”

“Me? Distant? You didn’t tell me,” I snapped back, turning over to look at her. “*You* didn’t tell me. I

had to find out from a practical stranger.”

“I was in shock,” Piera said defensively, her voice rising. “I still am. He’s my brother, and Andrew’s best friend. I went round to his house after I found out because that’s what felt right. My parents were going mad and I couldn’t stand it. I’m sorry I didn’t come right over here to tell you. Honestly, that just wasn’t the first thought in my mind.”

“But you had all day today to tell me. And you just... acted like everything was fine.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Piera said exasperatedly. Her eyes welled up with tears. “He just left. He didn’t say goodbye. Nothing. No letter. No phone call. I didn’t even see him after the party! Do you think I wanted to get into that at school? On your birthday?”

“I... no...”

“I saw you with Scott at the party and I figured it had been months since Luca had gone to Cambridge, and that you... that you’d understand if I told you after I’d had a few days to process it. And after your birthday so that it wouldn’t become... this big deal.”

I hung my head.

“I’m sorry. I guess it’s just a massive shock.”

“It is. Nobody knows why he just up and went. I still haven’t spoken to him, you know. And I don’t

even know if I want to.”

“And you... you have no idea at all why? Your parents haven't hinted at anything?”

“No. Nothing.”

Piera leaned against the wall behind my bed. She looked at me solemnly and I returned the expression. That time a year ago we would have been watching *Poltergeist* and eating popcorn. If we could have looked into a crystal ball at that moment to see our future, we never would have believed that we'd be sitting there on my seventeenth arguing. We never argued.

“Why did you ask me if he was okay?” Piera said a while later. “At school?”

“Did - did I? I don't remember that -”

“I do. Because I remember thinking the way you asked me was weird. Do you know something I don't?”

Her question was more on the curious side than anything accusatory. But the truth was buried so far down inside me there was no way it was escaping. Because his truth was my truth, and it needed to be protected, hidden, held close so that it might be controlled.

But I was a terrible liar. My hands fidgeted with loose threads on my jeans. I was going to have to say

something, anything, that would divert suspicion. At least for now.

“I just remember he looked upset at the party. But, you know, I wasn’t really paying that much attention. I thought maybe he and Bonnie had had a fight or something. Have you spoken to her?”

“Bonnie doesn’t want anything to do with us. She’s too upset.”

We sat there in silence.

“Do you... do you want to watch something?” I asked quietly. “Take your mind off it all?”

Piera turned to face me with sad eyes and a limp smile.

“Would you mind if I went to Andrew’s now? I don’t really feel like watching anything. I know you’re annoyed at me for not telling you, and I’m sorry for that. But I think I’d rather just go to his and go to sleep.”

## Chapter Six

### 1a Brighton Road, Cambridge

One of the only items that gave evidence of my mother's previous life in Vancouver was a suede leather jacket. It was beautifully made; the satin label sewn inside indicated it was handmade in France, and the washing instructions were written entirely in French. It was in impressive condition despite the fact that the jacket could be seen in almost every single photo in the yellow album, rain or shine. It lived in Mum's giant oak armoire, right at the end of the rail, remarkably out of place against her muted pantsuits and Ant's sports gear. I'd tried it on when I was a young kid, back when I didn't think twice about plucking it from its home and dancing around the house in it. But as I got older it was like the jacket had taken on some kind of precious identity that was far too special for me. When I'd viewed myself wearing it in the mirror at around Alicia's age I thought I looked ridiculous. The arms were too long. The shoulders too broad. The sheepskin too itchy. But when Mum appeared outside the bathroom holding it in her arms the night of the Cambridge party, suggesting I try it on, I was surprised at the ease with which it slid over

my body as an almost-adult. I looked at myself from multiple angles. It was the perfect fit.

“Wonderful,” my mum said softly as I craned my neck trying to look at the back. “Absolutely wonderful. It’s high time that jacket saw the light of day again.”

“You aren’t worried about me ruining it?”

“Not a chance. It’s survived more than you can imagine,” she said, adjusting the collar for me and smoothing it down. Then in a surprisingly affectionate act Mum lightly placed her hands at the side of my head. She delicately picked up the curtains of hair that were hanging either side of my face and twisted them around her fist, so that it looked like I had short hair flattened to my scalp.

“There,” she said, holding her hand in place. “Now you look exactly like him.”

I didn’t have anything to say. It was always a heavy moment whenever mum mentioned Reid and this was no exception. We stood there staring into the mirror, and for the briefest of seconds all three of us were reunited. Mum, me, and Reid, shining through in the features of my face that echoed who he once was.

Mum let go of my hair.

“I’ll let you finish getting ready,” she said, back to her usual tone and demeanour. She kissed me on the



head and left the bathroom.

After she'd gone I continued to look in the mirror. I pulled my hair back with my right hand, creating the same effect. I'd never had short hair. It had always been long and straight, dark and heavy. With it off my face I could see the sharp ridge of my jawline and my cheekbones were more pronounced. Was it because I had grown taller? Or was my whole face looking a little bit more narrow than usual?

"Alicia," I called out. "Alicia!"

"What?" She said moodily, appearing almost straight away.

"Will you cut my hair for me?"

"Um... Why?"

"I don't have time to go to a salon," I said, continuing to look at my face from side to side.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Just cut it. To whatever length you think. But I want it shorter."

"Are you kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

She left the bathroom and I heard her mutter, "... not my fault if you hate it."

A minute later Alicia returned holding a big pair of silver sewing scissors and her desk chair. She ordered me to sit down and proceeded to brush my hair for a

solid three minutes, eyeing it from every direction. Any time I tried to speak she held up her fingers to her lips to shush me.

“Alright,” she said. “I think I’ve figured out an optimal length.”

“Where?”

“You’re just going to have to trust me.”

I scowled at my little sister. While she certainly liked to poke fun at me, and seemed to relish any situation in which I was highly uncomfortable, I knew there was no chance she would mess with me. If she gave me a hideous haircut she would no doubt feel the backlash from her friends. Having a sister with ugly hair and bad style was not in her interest. And so, when I gave her the go-ahead, she took my hair in her hands and within what felt like four or five snips of the scissors, had left a circle of dark hair around us like a shadow. I was impressed with the seriousness at which she approached the task. She didn’t talk throughout the process, didn’t comment, and when I opened my mouth to express how much I liked what she had done, she told me to be quiet - that she hadn’t finished. She needed to make the edges not so blunt and then apply a hefty amount of Teddy’s hair wax to give it volume.

When I was allowed to stand up and look at my

new locks properly, Alicia grinned smugly from the corner of the bathroom, swinging the scissors around her fingers. I gawped at myself.

“Why didn’t I do this years ago?” I asked her quizzically, admiring the newfound space between my hair and my shoulders. “And why aren’t you considering a career in hair styling?”

“I haven’t ruled it out. Now - you’re not seriously going out with your eyeliner like that, are you?”

“What do you mean? It’s -”

“- Terrible,” she said, finishing my sentence. “You can’t go out with makeup like that and a hairdo like what I’ve just given you. Sit down again.”

She fixed my eyeliner, gave me a dusting of dark eye shadow, and even put a thin layer of lipstick on me. Not something I would have done myself in a million years, but she had chosen just the right shade that seemed to compliment the whole look. And when I slipped the jacket over my t-shirt - the one Piera had given me - and pulled on my clumpy black boots, Alicia was nodding in agreement.

“You know,” she said tellingly, leaning in the doorway. “Not that I’d be seen dead looking like this, but it suits you. Now you actually look like the kind of person who listens to Alice in Chains.”

I didn’t say it, but I happened to agree with her.

“Mum!” Alicia called out the bathroom door.  
“Come and see what I did with your daughter.”

\*

“Thanks for coming to get me, Scott,” I said quietly, attempting to slide out the door past my family, who had arranged themselves like a bunch of tourists at the zoo to get a good look at the boy. “I guess I’ll see you at midnight, then?”

“Wow!” Scott exclaimed. “Your hair - it looks incredible!”

“Thanks,” I said shyly, stepping into the night and out of the way of everyone’s watchful looks. But Scott, to my horror, was reaching out and shaking the hands of both my parents and introducing himself like a character out of *Pride and Prejudice*. It seemed to work. Ant’s eyes indicated immediately that he liked and trusted my ‘selection’ as they firmly gripped hands. For any policeman this type of quick acceptance was rare. And Mum’s smile went all the way up to her eyes as he told them it was lovely to meet them both.

“I’m more than happy to give Lenore a ride home after the party to save you the trouble. But I understand it’s important for you to know she’s safe,”

Scott said, striking the perfect balance between concern and politeness.

“Perhaps next time,” Mum said. “I’m sure it won’t be a problem. But as this is Lenore’s first party experience outside of Eldridge, we just feel more comfortable coming to get her.”

“I completely understand,” Scott said genially. “And you must be Alicia, and - Teddy, is it?”

Teddy stood awkwardly behind Alicia, poking his little curious face out. He nodded vigorously.

“Great. I hear you like football. We’ll have to kick around the yard sometime.”

Teddy beamed.

I was already at Scott’s car, gripping the handle to the door. He gave Ant the address - 1a, Brighton Road - said goodnight, and jogged over to me.

“See you at midnight,” Ant called out.

“Be safe!” Mum shouted.

I gave them a little wave as Scott kicked the engine into life and we began our journey towards Piera’s.

“Your hair really does look great,” Scott said. He bibbed the horn as we rounded the corner from my house.

“My parents seem to like you. Sorry about the whole meet and greet thing... they’re kind of strict.”

“I think it’s sweet. You can tell they really care

about you. And your sister, especially... she must really look up to you.”

I didn't say anything to that comment. I didn't think Alicia looked up to me at all. It was really the other way around. I admired her confidence, her ability to articulate, the speed at which she could keep up in conversations with our mother when it concerned anything scientific. Not to mention her social ability. Even though she was a highly academic student she was remarkably popular. Liked by all groups - those who would be identified as 'cool', and even those who were a bit more on the geeky side - they all valued her presence. She was always elected to any position of leadership, whether or not she sought it. Even some teachers seemed to want her validation. Her social standing had such an impact that often when I met someone new, a dawning look of recognition would play across their face when I said my name, to be followed by an, “oh. You're Alicia's sister.”

Scott, of course, didn't see any of that. He only saw the girl with the cropped hair and the leather jacket, which wasn't even mine.

“Oh my GOD! Lenore! What did you do to your hair!?”

We'd just arrived at Piera's and she and Andrew

had clambered into the back seat. I had been instructed not to talk about Luca under any circumstances, as it was simply too emotional for them both, so had made a pointed effort to not express too much emotion about anything. But as she reached over the front seat and turned my head towards her, mouth agape, I felt the same sizzling rage ignite under my skin. I wrenched myself out of her grasp, holding my hands up to protect myself.

“So I take it that’s a no from you,” I grunted.

“It’s - it’s so... short! I’ve never seen you with short hair.”

“I think it looks cool,” Andrew said. “It’s very... Chrissie Hynde.”

“Shut up, Andrew! Her hair was nice as it was!”

I kept my eyes on the road, ignoring my hot face. Scott turned the radio on and twiddled it to a volume that might drown Piera out. But she didn’t give up her critique and, as we turned out onto the main road, she slid right forward so that her seatbelt was strained against her chest so she could speak right into my ear.

“When did you do this? Why didn’t you tell me you were planning on doing something so drastic?”

“Alicia did it. Tonight. I didn’t tell you because I only just decided.”

“Bloody hell.”

“I think that’s totally badass,” Scott said. “And the jacket... you look awesome, Lenore. I feel lucky to be showing up at this party with you.”

Piera settled back into her seat and huffed her disapproval. Scott gave me a sideways look and a wink.

“You look great,” he mouthed.

Where the hell was Luca right at that moment? He was the missing piece in that car ride out to Cambridge. Without his calming and equalising presence Piera was able to get at me without any kind of shield. Not that I needed Luca to protect me, but when he was around she tended not to be so harsh. And it was easier for him to disagree with her. He never took offence. He never raised his voice. And siblings have that unique ability to say whatever they damn well please to each other and it not dent the relationship. Well, perhaps that was all within reason, as Luca had done the one thing that might violate that unspoken contract. As I sat there at the front of the car, with Scott singing along to the music, Andrew drinking a can of beer in the back, Piera draped over him complaining about everything, I wished desperately for him to come home. I felt like he was the only person who would have even remotely understood what was going on inside my head.



“It’s - it’s down *there?*” Piera asked incredulously half an hour later, followed by a hiccup. She was already on her second can of beer.

We had pulled up on a leafy, wide, residential road on the fringes of Cambridge. There were only a few street lights that illuminated the sleepy Victorian houses. It didn’t look like the scene of some raging house party; it looked more like a typical, boring, suburban road. But when I got over to the footpath where Piera was standing and pointing, I felt my heartbeat quicken as I saw what she was talking about.

In front of us stood an old stone house. It had its windows boarded up. The grass from the front garden was as high as our knees. Tiles on the roof were missing. Empty and broken bottles were littered all over the entrance. Graffiti had been sprayed over most of the front door and boards; the house was derelict and looked dangerous. It stood next to a long, dark, unsealed driveway that had tufts of grass growing in-between the tire tracks that lead from the road down to who-knew where. Beyond, the sound of a booming, pulsing, thudding bass travelled all the way to us.

“The house is owned by a church,” Scott said, locking his car and leaning against it, a box of beer under his arm. “You can’t see it but it’s over the back,

kind of bordering the next street. There were three properties originally. They're all listed buildings so they aren't allowed to be demolished. The church is just letting them rot in the hopes that they fall down and they can use the space for parking. The houses were too expensive to maintain, or something like that. One's already down - the one closest to the church - this is the next one that's likely to go."

He nodded his head towards the house. It certainly didn't look like it belonged in that area.

"But *Ciro* and *Tamora's* place is still being rented out," he went on, beginning to walk towards the entrance to the driveway. "To students and travellers, mostly. It's kind of famous on the campus. You hear about these legendary parties that took place in these houses in the fifties and sixties. This one was apparently gutted after a fire. And now, the only one that's left... well, you're about to see it."

*Piera* looked incredibly uncomfortable. She gripped *Andrew's* arm and stayed where she was. *Andrew*, in an attempt not to look fearful, gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder and then nudged her forward.

I wanted to stay there to stare at that house for longer; its chipped front door, the aggressive spray paint. In its hey-day it must have been truly majestic. I

had a sudden sense of longing come over me. I wanted to know who had lived there, where they were now, what kind of music they'd listened to when they'd had their events. And even before that - who were the religious people that occupied it? But my group was already making their way down the driveway. I bumbled along after them, the sound of the music getting louder and the distinct chatter of voices becoming recognisable. On our left a tall wooden fence covered in ivy and nettles shielded the neighbours from the unsightly ruins of the house to our right. Weeds poked through the gravel under our feet. In the distance pools of yellow light were being spilled on tall trees bending slightly in the light wind.

The driveway turned onto an open grassy area that had been well maintained by comparison. A couple of cars were parked in front of us; one had its boot open and this was where the sound of the music we'd heard was coming from. A mixture of oak, pine and various shrubbery bordered the house, obscuring any others nearby - even the abandoned one we'd just walked past. This gave the impression that the house could have been in the middle of nowhere. In the country, or in a tiny village... it seemed strange that such an unusual place could be found in a city like Cambridge.

The house itself was indeed crumbling like its

neighbour, but unlike the abandoned abode, this one stood with pride and was very much alive. The grey stone that the three-storied house was built of had been jammed with bright spots of putty where it had chipped away, giving the impression of colourful sprinkles on a cake. On the first and second floors small balconies had their doors open wide to the night, with cigarette smoke pouring out as though the very house was inhaling and exhaling the night air. In fact, all the windows to the house were open, and in every single one, I could make out the form of partygoers; laughing, talking, drinking, smoking.

The people spilled out of the open front door and took up space on the patio that wrapped around the ground floor, resting against the railings between stone pillars, sitting on mismatched deck chairs on the grassy area, warming themselves at a brazier by the trees, or near a fridge that was standing by a detached garage, grabbing beers and laughing into the night.

I wasn't listening to the conversation taking place between the group I'd arrived with. I was looking at the scene in front of me with a kind of awe; every face I looked at, every circle of chatting young adults, looked interesting. They seemed different to the kids from my school. And maybe that was it - maybe these weren't kids. Maybe these were adults, people who

had actually lived in their new universes for some time, and were comfortable. Everyone looked at ease. And nobody was really paying attention to the fact we had arrived. We were just... other guests.

As we followed the little beaten path up towards a few steps that led to the patio, I noticed a garden. It spread out either side of the steps and seemed to disappear around the corners of the house and beyond. Planted in it were herbs, vegetables, flowers... even in the dark it was an impressive sight, so I could only imagine what it looked like when summer was in full swing.

On the patio the crowd became a little more dense. A few people nodded to Scott as we approached, but most people just glanced over before returning to their conversations. As we made our way towards the door I noticed, strung above the window to the left of the front door, a bunch of red, blue, white, yellow and green faded flags. And above the window to the right of the door someone had hung up brightly coloured Chinese lanterns. There was no theme.

“This place is weird,” Piera exclaimed, puncturing my little thought bubble. “Who would want to live here?” She muttered to Andrew, who was also looking around nervously.

“I think it’s awesome,” I said more to myself than

anyone else.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” Scott suggested, raising his voice over the furore of the party. “That’s where they probably are.”

We stepped over the threshold and into the entrance hallway. The walls were pulsing with new music, the source of which must have been located in the belly of the house, for it was deep and rattling and made my bones vibrate.

Through the crowd we pushed, and through the bodies, I saw something that made my stomach knot up: Scott held out his hand for me to take so he could guide me through the throng. Not wanting to be rude I reached out and took it, looking back at Piera who had her arms around Andrew’s waist. Her outfit didn’t stand out at all. In fact, she looked positively pedestrian by comparison. Most people were wearing clothes that were so casual they were borderline filthy - hoodies and baggy trousers, backwards caps, plain oversized t-shirts. There were even people with facial piercings. And, to my amusement, others were almost the complete opposite. One guy we passed was wearing a full suit complete with suspenders and a top-hat, smoking a pipe. There was no consistency. There was no overriding look. And at this fact, I grinned broadly.

I continued to be seduced by the house; the floor underneath us was solid wood. And the walls either side of us were made of torn wallpaper, but almost every few inches had a different piece of art hung up on top of it; old paintings of countrysides were next to abstract splashes of paint. It was a mish-mash of colour and sound and I was drinking it all up. We passed doorways that were open with different music coming out, creating a discordant confusion for a couple of moments before it passed to return to that ultimate loud music coming from the middle of the house.

We seemed to reach the end of the entrance hallway and pushed through a large wall of partygoers before reaching an open area. A rather old and cluttered kitchen stood immediately to our left, and to the right, a huge living room with couches lined the walls. Mismatched tables were in the middle covered in drinks and snacks, and above, there were more lanterns and fairy lights criss-crossing the ceiling. Two doors at the back were wide open and the garden could be seen heaving with people.

“They’re not here,” Scott said, scanning the perimeter of the room, then looking quickly outside. “They must be upstairs.”

And so began our push back into the hallway. We

turned immediately left from the door we had just entered and went up a staircase. As we climbed, the music got ever louder. People were dancing. A couple at the top of the landing were kissing deeply. And still, the walls were lined with the paintings. I tried to look at each one but it was futile. It would have taken days to study them all.

Scott directed us towards the music. Down a narrow hallway, the light changed from standard dim house lights to purple. Green and red flickered beyond us. The music was painfully loud. A thoroughly distressed looking Piera had found my other hand and was squeezing it tightly.

“This is pretty intense,” she shouted in my ear. “Like... I really didn’t expect this.”

“Me either!”

Scott turned to face us. He didn’t let go of my hand.

“So - I’m gonna take you guys into The Lounge.”

“Why do you say it with that look on your face?” Piera asked.

“It’s the dance room of the house. There’s a DJ and everything. There might be a few people here who look a little bit out of it, but don’t worry, they’re fine. You okay?”

Scott looked at me.



“I’m more than okay. This place is amazing,” I said.

A grin broke across his face.

“I knew you’d love it.”

And then he lead us into The Lounge, and I thought my ear drums were going to cave in and my skeleton might turn to dust.

The curtains in this room were closed - if you could call them curtains. Big sheets with prints on them had been pinned over the windows to keep any natural light out. Black lights had been put up in all corners of the room, and above the DJ who was set up at the back, was a box emitting lasers. The green and purple pinpricks were absorbed by our skin as they fanned over us. Scott peered around, looking for his group; Andrew began bobbing his head along to the beat, looking out of place; and Piera took a big gulp of her beer and eyed up a group of people dancing as though they had personally offended her.

“There!” Scott said. He pointed.

I turned around and saw her first.

Her eyes were closed. She was dancing. She was wearing a simple white t-shirt with acid-wash jeans held up with a brown belt. Slung loosely over her shoulders was a thin jacket with a colourful pattern on it. She had a smile on her face as the music coursed

through her body like a river. I stared at her for a few moments, unable to say or do anything. I'd never seen anyone like her in my whole life.

I didn't see the guy she was dancing with. I didn't notice Scott's face as he went over to tap her on the shoulder. When she opened her eyes she looked startled, as if woken up by a loud noise.

"Tamora! Ciro!" He called out. "This is who I was telling you about!"

At the mention of the name Ciro, my eyes darted to the guy I had ignored.

I hated him immediately.

He looked effortlessly beautiful. His hair was silky and styled immaculately, and he was wearing a tight top that exposed muscles I didn't even know it was possible to have. He was a lot shorter than Scott, who towered over everybody, but even in the fluorescent lights of The Lounge I could tell that his goddamn eyes sparkled like water on a summer's day.

"Hi!" The girl called Tamora said. Then to my horror she came right up to me and planted a kiss on each of my cheeks, resting her hands on my shoulders as she did it. We were almost exactly the same height.

"Nice to meet you!" She said into my ear. She didn't shout it. She didn't need to. She was the perfect distance from me, and as her words spoken in a

London accent reached my brain, I felt my body strike some kind of new vibration at its core.

“You too,” I said, grateful it was dark.

Tamora repeated the kisses and the introduction to Piera and Andrew, just as Ciro came towards me and kissed over the same places Tamora had.

“I hear you want to learn guitar,” he shouted in my ear through a Spanish accent.

I nodded.

“You’ve come to the right place! We’ll have you shredding in no time,” Ciro said brightly, raising his glass. He wasn’t drinking beer but had a small amount of amber liquid in a short vessel.

“I’m out,” Tamora said, wiping her forehead. “And it looks like you are too,” she added, nodding at my empty hands. “Wanna go get something to drink?”

Piera wasn’t even looking. She was saying something into Andrew’s ear with her hand cupped over it. And Scott had begun shouting down at Ciro, making him stand on his tip-toes to hear him, our shared box of beer still under his arm. Not stopping to consider the situation I immediately nodded and followed her out of The Lounge.

In the dim light of the hallway her pink hair stood out against partygoers who raised their glasses or shouted her name as she walked past. Everybody

seemed to know who she was. We weaved in and out and down the stairs into the kitchen. Tamora went straight to the sink, grabbed a glass that was already sitting by the tap, and downed two pints before turning to me. At that moment we were the only two people in the kitchen area; everyone else was either draped over couches smoking, or sitting on the table stuffing crisps into their mouths, or passing us to go out into the garden.

“Sorry,” she said, wiping her mouth. “I needed that. Badly!”

“No worries,” I said, standing awkwardly by the counter.

“I like your look,” she commented, reaching forward and taking the jacket in her fingers. She ran them over the sheepskin. “This is beautiful.”

“Thanks. It was my mum’s. She got it when she lived in Canada.”

“You know Hec’s from Canada, right?”

“Who?”

“Oh, a friend of mine and Ciro, I’ll introduce you. He lives here too. Are you Canadian, then?” She asked, pouring another glass of water. “You don’t sound Canadian.”

“I’m not. Mum just lived out there for a bit. I mean, I was born in Vancouver. But we left when I

was about a year old, though. I don't have any memories of it."

"So you are Canadian," she said, tilting her head sideways, considering me. She was looking with a kind of intensity, as if studying every feature on my face in profound detail.

"Curious," Tamora said, a little smile creasing her lips. "You know, Scott told me about you. He said a lot of nice things. And it takes a *lot* for Scott to be so nice about a girl. But I can see why he likes you."

With that, she walked over to the fridge. And that was the first statement of many that caused a collision of sorts inside me: as though two waves in an ocean were crashing together and stirring up one hell of a whitewash.

"He said you and me were similar or something," I said as casually as I could, coming over the part of the counter that was beside the fridge and leaning against it. "But I'd never have the guts to have pink hair."

"Well, I'd never have the badassery to pull off a suede jacket and an Alice in Chains t-shirt."

"Oh no, you hate them?" I said, stretching the t-shirt out so that the dog's face wasn't warped.

"Are you kidding?" She said, outraged. "I fucking love them. I've seen them more times than I can count."

“You have? I’ve never seen them before. Not even once.”

I bit back the statement, “because my parents wouldn’t let me.”

“You haven’t? Oh, we have to go sometime! I grew up in London so I saw them every time they toured. I saw them when they were nobodies.”

“You’re so lucky. Nobody good ever came to *Eldridge*.”

“You’re from Eldridge, then?”

“I’m kind of embarrassed to say yes.”

“Why? Eldridge is cuter than Cambridge. It’s way less pretentious. Shit - I’m so useless. I haven’t even got you a drink yet. What do you want?”

I hadn’t realised it either. As she rummaged at the back of the fridge for some beer, I was surprised at how easy it was to talk to Tamora. As in - that she was easy to *talk* to, for sure. But my body wasn’t convinced; in the time we’d been chatting my palms had become sweaty and my shoulders so tense that I physically had to tell myself to relax.

“Beer okay?” She asked. I nodded.

“Ciro and Hec brew their own whiskey in the garage. They think it’s amazing, but honestly, it’s revolting.”

I giggled.

*I giggled?*

“I’ve never tried whiskey before,” I said, regretting the words immediately. Anything that made me sound like the dorky teenager I was would have to be omitted from thereon out.

“You’re not missing out. So... are you coming to Cambridge, or what? Scott said you’re into science. That’s awesome. So many of the guys I know at Cambridge who study science are such assholes. You’re needed.”

I resisted the natural reaction to reply saying something about my mum.

“I don’t know. I haven’t actually decided.”

“Take your time. Once you’re there... you get sucked in to whatever bullshit ideology your particular institution peddles, and it’s quite hard to get out of it. Everyone says you can change your mind... but only if Mummy and Daddy are paying, of course.”

“What particular ideology are you peddling, then?” I asked, gulping down the beer quickly.

Tamora laughed. Not just a small, obligatory laugh. She tilted her head back with her eyes closed and laughed at the ceiling. I could see the inside of her mouth.

“Philosophy,” she said with a hint of a groan. “Brilliant, in theory, but let’s be real... it’s pretty much

*all theory.*”

“Where is it going to take you?”

“Great question,” she said, raising her beer hand and pointing at me. “No fucking idea. Hey - do you wanna sit down over there for a bit? I’m enjoying this. We can dance later. Besides, you need some alcohol in your system before you tackle The Lounge, I think.”

She pointed to one of the empty couches just past the open doors. Through a cloud of smoke I followed her without hesitation and sank into one end of a squishy tartan couch with mismatched pillows. From a pocket in her jeans Tamora produced a little black tin. She withdrew two pre-rolled cigarettes and a pink lighter.

“Want one?”

“Can I tell you something?” I said, continuing on my path of being honest with a girl I had just met and didn’t know anything about.

“Sure.”

“It’s not just whiskey. I’ve actually never smoked in my entire life.”

“What!” She said, genuinely shocked. “Am I going to take your smoking virginity?”

I laughed awkwardly.

“Er... I guess?”

“That’s presuming you’re going to say yes, but you



don't seem like the kind of person who wouldn't try something once just for the hell of it."

She was looking at me dead in the eye and I felt all my insides curl up on themselves. It was as though the very edge of me was being burned, like a flame eating into a piece of paper. I gave a nervous laugh.

"Not that I should be pressuring you to smoke, of course," she said, suddenly serious. "That wouldn't be very cool of me."

"Better you than some stranger I'd just met at a party," I said with a grin, reaching out for the cigarette.

"She has a wit on her," Tamora said coyly, holding out the lighter to me.

"So what do I do - just like - breathe it in?"

"Oh, you're cute," she said. "You kind of suck it into your lungs. Not - not that fast, you'll -"

I coughed as the back of my throat was irritated beyond belief.

"You need to breathe in some air at the same time. Especially at first. Just little breaths."

I did my best to listen. And by the fourth puff, I didn't cough.

"Success!" Tamora cried, throwing her hands up. "Oh, but don't let Scott see you," she added quickly. "He doesn't like smoking."

“If my parents could see me,” I lamented, leaning back into the couch. Tamora proceeded to lift her legs up off the floor, kicking her Converse trainers off in the process, and extended them down the couch. They came to rest right up against mine, which were folded to my chest.

“Do your parents know you smoke?” I asked.

“Yeah. They don’t like it, obviously. I was fifteen when I started. Not much they could do, really,” she said, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the door.

“Besides. Not their fucking lungs, are they?”

\*

By the time Piera found me I was drunk. Tamora and I had had three beers each, and that was pretty much my record for the timeframe we had consumed them. We’d been sitting there, talking mostly nonsense, and I’d been allowing myself to unravel in front of her without having consciously decided to do so. I was generous with my gestures, emphatic with my voice, cheeky whenever I could be. And Tamora was even more so. There was something about the music and how it flowed through the walls of the house, connecting everyone to the same frequency. The dim lights only showed just enough of the scene

so that everybody looked good, happy, and relaxed. I blended into the surroundings seamlessly.

When Piera showed up at our couch looking brazen and ready to bite, I wasn't pleased.

"*There* you are," she said in a tone that rivalled her mother's with an uncanny similarity. "I've been looking for you for about fifteen minutes."

"Ya found me, inspector," I said, saluting her. Tamora and I burst into a fit of laughter. She now had her legs completely draped over me. My hands were resting on her ankles, holding them softly. Piera's eyes scanned our rather intimate position and raised her eyebrows.

It was the jolt I needed to come back to reality. The room came back into focus and I leapt up from the couch.

"Sorry," I said, steadying myself as the beer tried to topple me over. "Got distracted."

"I can see that," Piera said coolly, as Tamora also got to her feet. She reached for her shoes.

"Have you been here the whole time? You do realise you came here with Scott, right?"

"Yeah," I said defensively, taking a sip of my drink. "So? Am I not allowed to make friends?"

Tamora draped her arm around my neck.

"Sorry for keeping your pal," she said. "But she's

just brilliant. I wanted her to myself for a bit. Let's go back upstairs and find the boys, then, shall we?"

I grinned. Piera scowled.

She turned on her heel and lead us through the thickening crowd in the hallway and up toward The Lounge. As if it were an automatic move I held out my hand to Tamora. She took it promptly and we linked fingers, weaving through the crowd that was much more dense than it had been when we arrived.

"Here," Tamora said, slipping me a fourth beer and opening one for herself. She'd stored the two spare in her jacket pockets.

"I'm just gonna nip to the bathroom. I'll meet you in The Lounge in a sec," she said with a wink. As soon as Piera registered Tamora had gone, she pulled me aside and hissed into my face.

"You left me alone with your boyfriend and that Spanish guy - and their weird Canadian friend showed up!"

"Oh, Hec?"

"I don't care who he is. You left me alone."

"I didn't leave you alone," I said defensively.

"You're here with Andrew."

The alcohol had taken the lid off my filter. I knew I looked visibly annoyed. We were poised at the top of the first floor landing, the pulsing from The Lounge

making my ears ache.

“And,” I added, “Scott is not my boyfriend.”

“That’s plain to see!” She snapped back. “Look, I get it, you’re upset about Luca leaving and you’re still angry at me for not telling you about it - but seriously, you don’t need to take it out on me and Andrew.”

“*How*, exactly, am I taking it out on you and *Andrew*?”

“Oh, come on,” Piera said, rolling her eyes. Then she paused and looked me dead in the eye. The alcohol had chipped away at her filter too.

“You’re down there with that Tamora girl just to piss me off. It’s so obvious.”

My mouth dropped open.

“I was down there - to piss you - you’re joking, right?”

“Come off it, Lenore,” she said, throwing away any attempt at trying to be tactful. “You’re jealous that I’m not spending as much time with you. And I get it, it’s probably hard to see me with Andrew all the time, but you’ve got a great guy in there who’s waiting for you -”

“I’m *not* jealous,” I said, taking a step backwards from her. “Far from it.”

“What’s your problem, then?”

“You’re the one who dragged me away from a

conversation I was genuinely enjoying, to what? Lecture me at a party because I was talking to someone who isn't you? I've accepted it's *'you and Andrew'*," (I may have gone overboard by doing the inverted commas in mid-air sarcastic gesture), "but maybe you should accept the fact that I want to, I don't know, diversify my friendships."

"Diversify your friendships? What's that supposed to mean? We came to this party as a group, I just don't appreciate being ditched -"

I felt the white hot flash inside me. Before I could stop myself, the words were out of my mouth with a surprising streak of malice.

"You're the one who ditched me on my birthday for your stupid boyfriend."

Piera stared at me, wide-eyed, taken aback by my harsh candour.

"See," she stammered. "I - I told you that you were annoyed."

"So what if I am?"

We'd reached a junction. Piera bit her lip, a scowl creasing up her face.

"Everything is always on your terms," I said, feeling my hand crinkle the beer can in my drunken frustration. "Always. Just let me fucking enjoy this party."

And with that I turned my back on her and started climbing the stairs to the second floor landing.

My blood was boiling and I felt like I was leaving a trail of fire behind me. But the partygoers hanging out on the stairs let me pass without paying much attention. Apparently even our rather public argument hadn't caused a stir at all. I downed at least half the can of beer as I climbed, cursing Piera to high hell and back. When I got to the landing I carried on down a wide hallway without looking behind me. I chose a door arbitrarily and entered.

It was one of the rooms with a balcony overlooking the driveway and the little garden below. It was someone's bedroom; an unmade bed without a headboard was at one wall, and the other contained an old fireplace that had been filled with candles. They had been stacked on top of each other over time as their wicks had run out, with teardrops of wax forming white pools on the wooden floor, and tall, lumpy structures. Long flickering shadows licked up the wall and a stereo playing some kind of rock music made me feel like I'd just walked into a strange club. Groups of people were sprawled all around. On the bed, on the floor, spilling out onto the balcony. As if I knew everyone, and as if I knew exactly where I was, I walked confidently out onto the balcony and took a

place leaning against the railing. I found myself next to a guy wearing a denim jacket that was about four sizes too big for him and a mustard coloured beanie covering most of his black hair. He had a ring in his eyebrow and he was smoking, wordlessly, and as I looked up at him he nodded his head in acknowledgment then got back to blowing smoke.

Who did Piera think she was?

*She* was the one who had smugly abandoned me on my seventeenth. But now I was some kind of villain for talking to Tamora at a party? Someone who I found interesting? Someone who appeared to enjoy talking to me, and who - after just one conversation - I had already felt comfortable enough to open up to? *Piera* was the one who needed to look up the meaning of jealousy in the dictionary, not me.

Glaring out over the garden, I silently drank the beer. It felt good to be drunk. It felt good to just say exactly what I wanted right in the moment. It felt good to feel like I was actually in the moment, instead of watching it, like some kind of third party spectator. Alcohol had brought me right into the present. And I liked that.

“Want one?”

The guy next to me with the mustard beanie was holding an open box of cigarettes. He pulled one out



with his teeth and then tilted the box in my direction. I paused.

“Sure,” I said. He handed me the lighter and with difficulty I managed to get the tip glowing orange.

“Nice jacket,” he said, tucking the lighter back into his jeans.

“Thanks. Do you live here?” I asked, coughing through my first couple of inhales.

“Nah,” the boy said, bending down to lean his forearms on the rail. “Girlfriend used to. That was about five years ago.”

“Is she here?”

I turned around, scanning the groups to see if anyone was paying attention to us. They weren't.

“Nah,” he said again. “We broke up... about four years ago. I don't even live in Cambridge. Fuck this city, man. It's this house.”

“The house?”

“The house. The parties. If you talk to any of these jokers, hardly any of them live around here. You don't, do you? You don't look like you're from Cambridge.”

“I'm not.”

“See,” he said. “This house... it's different.”

I wanted to ask him what he meant by that. I wanted to ask him where he was from, what he did for a living, how he came to find himself on that balcony.

He had the beginnings of tiny creases around his eyes that told me a fair few years separated us. But a familiar voice disturbed our conversation.

“There you are.”

“Hi Scott,” I said, turning around to face him. I reached out and plucked the beer from his hand and took a drink, the cigarette hanging from my other hand. His eyes travelled along my arm to what was left of the smouldering stick. He looked concerned.

“Are... you okay? Piera said you were upset and came up here.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m totally fine.”

“How much did Tamora give you to drink?”

“Only like... three beers. Maybe four.”

“Maybe we should get you some water.”

“Okay.”

I agreed with him. My stomach was churning and I was starting to feel a little sick. I had felt fine until the cigarette, which I stubbed out on the railing and then placed in the little ashtray next to the guy in the beanie.

“Bye,” I said to him. He smiled at me.

“Who was that?” Scott asked as we left the bedroom.

“I don’t know. Just some guy.”

Scott paused in the hallway. He turned to face me,

placing his hand on my arm.

“Lenore... Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Do you like me, Scott?” I said, completely ignoring his question.

“What makes you ask that?”

“You drove all the way to Eldridge to give me a guitar. You picked me up and took me out here tonight. Why?”

“I guess I do like you,” he said with a shrug.

“But why?”

Scott was not drunk. But he wasn’t completely sober, either. He stepped forward and took hold of my hands.

“You have... a quality. About you.”

“A quality?”

“Yeah. It’s endearing, or something. I don’t know.”

Scott was misinterpreting my motives for asking the question.

“I can’t put my finger on it just yet... all I know, is that I want to.”

His eyes were bright. He was looking down at me, and I knew that if I didn’t make a move quickly, he was going to kiss me.

I took my other hand and gave his arm a squeeze. And then I stepped out of his grip and lead him downstairs.

\*

The Lounge was heaving. It was wall-to-wall with sweaty partygoers, dancing, moving, getting lost in themselves and in each other. The music that the DJ was playing was unlike anything I'd heard before; it had a deep, electronic beat, furious high hats, and a synth that was bubbling high and low like waves on the sea. The lasers and the smoke were creating a world of strange colours and mystery. My drunkenness warped my perception of everything around me. I was Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole; I was Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, spinning in the tornado that took her out of her own world and into somewhere new.

Scott was beside me, his head in the clouds of the smoke. Piera and Andrew, who had ignored my return and were paying no interest to anyone else except each other, were kissing. Hec - who I hadn't spoken to properly but was a presence to be sure - was dressed in an oversized floral button-up shirt that was tucked into the tightest jeans I had ever seen. His thick black hair was flying in every direction as he moved with the beat, dancing with Ciro in front of him, who was responding in turn to his wild moves. And Tamora,

who had her eyes closed, was moving next to me and sending my body into a frenzy it had never known before.

The music was starting to peak towards some kind of techno crescendo. Scott had turned me to face him so we were dancing as together as well as a pair could in the masses. I kept trying to keep distance between us, the result of which had me bumping into Tamora's chest every few beats. And every so often, she put her hands on my waist to steady herself.

Even though Scott was dancing in front of me - his jacket and knitted sweatshirt long gone to give way to a plain black t-shirt - I couldn't concentrate on him. As the music was intensifying, so too was the feeling in my body that took over every time she touched me instead.

I didn't know he was going to kiss me. It was sudden. His lips met mine as the music was peaking. I felt Tamora bump into me one more time and it was like an atom being split in two. Scott's kiss made me jump once, and Tamora, once more. And then I was standing there like an idiot looking up at him, likely once again giving him a false representation of how I was really feeling. He was smiling down at me, and I must have had a look of shock on my face - but he didn't seem perturbed - and he proceeded to put his

arms around my waist and held me close.

“That was amazing,” Scott breathed down into my hair.

“I - I gotta run to the bathroom,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I wriggled from his grasp, turning around and finding myself face to face with Tamora, who was, surprisingly, unsmiling. For the most fleeting of moments I wanted to lean forward and show as much assumption and boldness as Scott had and just kiss her. We looked at each other for several seconds before I turned towards the door.

I all but ran from The Lounge, back up the stairs to the second floor. When I reached the end of the hallway - I didn’t want to return to the room with the candles and the balcony - I stopped. A narrow staircase went up towards what I could only assume was some kind of attic or loft. Looking over my shoulder to make sure nobody saw me, I promptly climbed the stairs and opened the closed door at the top.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

This room was empty.

I walked over to the one of the two dormer windows directly opposite the door and stuck my head out, breathing the night air. It was the side of the

house that looked out over the tall oak and pine trees, and in the distance, I could indeed make out the roof of a church.

What the bloody hell was I doing?

I'd gone too far. I'd had too much to drink. I had let Scott get too close. I had shouted at Piera.

In my stomach, all these facts churned up together in that whitewash of conflicting thought, and I felt a big surge of nausea. I pulled my head back inside, desperate to sit down.

The room was a mismatch of furnitures and art pieces. In the corner furthest from the door was a double mattress simply laying on the floor. It was a tangle of bedsheets, of bright square pillows, with a patchwork quilted blanket spilled across the floorboards. Beside the mattress was an upturned crate with a lamp which was the only source of light in the room, some photo frames, an old green rotary phone with stickers, and a few trinkets. Next to the crate was a hanging rack bolted to the ceiling by chains at either end. An impressive amount of clothes were suspended above an equally large collection of shoes. Boots, trainers, flip-flops, more boots, more trainers, heels. And on the wall between the dormer windows there was a floor-to-ceiling piece of art which looked liked it had been painted directly onto the

wooden panelled walls. I approached it and looked up close. Indeed it had been. I ran my fingers over the grainy surface. It was an abstract form of a naked woman.

I turned my attention to the rug I was standing on. It was thickly weaved, a light blue, with white tassels at either end and embroidered shapes spread out across it. It was quite beautiful. One side of it was obscured under a small couch, also covered in swathes of blankets and pillows, and it was here that I flopped down and brought my knees up to my chest. I wrapped my arms around my legs and stared at the rug, the thud from the bass below rattling the house.

I closed my eyes.

\*

“I had a funny feeling I might find you here, somehow.”

“Wha -?”

I opened my eyes, disoriented, and saw Tamora standing there with her arms folded. She didn't look angry. Rather, she looked a little tired, sweaty, but was smiling dolefully down at me.

“Sorry,” I said immediately, leaping to my feet. “I didn't realise - is this your room? How long was I



gone for?”

I checked my watch. It was coming up to eleven o'clock. I didn't have long to go before Ant would be pulling up at the end of the driveway. In that moment I wished I could fit a whole year into one hour, as Tamora pulled off her bright jacket and exposed her arms. She looked strong, fit, and as she dropped down into the spot I had just been sitting, her collar bones stood out for a second against the necklace resting on her chest. It was a long black cord with a plain silver disc on it, sort of like a coin.

“Don't worry,” Tamora said. “You've only been gone about half an hour. Everyone's pretty buzzed. Scott was worried about you, though.”

“I'm fine. I... just needed a moment by myself. This was the only place I could find that wasn't filled with people.”

“I understand that. It can get a little crazy at these parties. Which I think might have been the case for your friends.”

“Who? Piera and Andrew?”

“Yeah. They left already.”

“What?” I said with dread. “You mean - they left the house? Did they say where they were going?”

She shook her head. I groaned and sat down beside her.

“Is that a problem?” Tamora asked, taking out her little tin. She pushed the window open letting in a small light breeze. She began rolling.

“We were supposed to go home together,” I murmured, not wanting to admit I was being picked up by a parent. “But I’m sure she’s fine if she’s with Andrew.”

I feigned concern but a part of me was panicking. If Ant was supposed to be picking the three of us up, and the other two weren’t there - that was going to be a problem. But what could I do about it right in that moment? Run outside? Chase them down the driveway?

“Did - er - where’s Scott?”

“He’s with Hec, down in the kitchen. They’re having a breather. I said I’d come find you.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I looked sideways at her, trying to read her face. How did it feel like I’d known her for ages already? These were conversations, experiences, that were reserved for better friends than we were. People like Piera - who, at that very moment, I was cursing in my head. Ditching... how rich.

“It took me by surprise,” I said quietly. “I mean, he caught me off guard when he kissed me. I just needed a moment. Is he angry?”

“He’s not mad, he’s just worried he came on too strong. Scott can be... well, let’s just say when Scott likes a girl, he can get a little fixated.”

“We’ve only met twice, you know.”

“Not feeling it?”

She had got me up against the border of a rather conflicting position. The alcohol had worn off a bit. I was looking at Tamora, as she licked along the paper edge of her cigarette, and she was in full-focus. If I told her I liked Scott, then she would just see me as ‘the girl from the party who liked Scott’. She would believe that my attention was all on him. She would think that I was interested in people *like* Scott. And there was one half of me that wanted this stranger I had just met, to not think that I liked him *at all*. I wanted this perfect stranger to see me as available.

But at the same time, to not like Scott made me a girl who wasn’t interested in handsome tall men with guitars. And who was that girl? What kind of girl didn’t like tall handsome men with guitars, and bright futures? What place did a girl who didn’t like Scott have at parties like these, where she didn’t know anybody, and would have hardly any real reason to see girls like Tamora outside of said parties? If I told her I didn’t like Scott - then I would have to tell Scott I didn’t like him. And that would be the end of my

invitations to these gatherings. And sure, Tamora had suggested we go to a gig - but what if that was just a drunken comment? What if I was just some other person she met at a party and never thought of again? And how old was Tamora, anyway - was she twenty? Twenty-five? Why on Earth would she want to hang out with me in any context? *At all?* And why was I even thinking about it?

"I... I just need to get to know him better," I said finally, as Tamora twisted the end of her cigarette into a little point. "Yeah. Maybe he did come on a little strong. I don't - I don't tend to rush these kinds of things."

"I'm the same," Tamora said. "With *Ciro*, he tried to win me over for the longest time. But he got there in the end."

Suddenly that little nest in the corner, the mattress on the floor, took on a whole new dimension. I had to restrain myself from visibly eyeing it with contempt.

"Scott is pretty patient, though. So if you're honest with him and just tell him that you need a bit more time, he'll understand."

"Okay. Good."

"Now - smoking is one thing, and this is another. I'm certainly not going to pressure you into this," she said, holding up the cigarette in front of me.

My quizzical expression made her grin.

“You are just too much,” she said, clicking her lighter a couple of times. “This is a joint. I’ve rolled a bit of pot into it. I’m gonna smoke it, because I want to start winding down. We had a big trip to Spain recently and I’m shattered. If you don’t want me to smoke it in front of you, I won’t. But if you also want a couple of tokes... who am I to stop you.”

My heart started thumping.

Pot?

“You - you go ahead and smoke it. It’s fine. Honestly.”

“You sure? Because I won’t -”

“It’s fine,” I repeated.

She grinned, placing the joint between her teeth. She fired up the lighter and held it at the tip. I watched it glow orange, the heat burning into the paper and producing ash almost immediately. She drew a powerful breath, filling her lungs, then leaned her head back so her eyes were facing the ceiling. She let out the smoke in a cloud of pure white. It dispersed over her face so it looked like she was disappearing into the couch. By the time she sat up, I think my heart had broken a rib.

“That... is good,” she breathed. “So good.”

And she took two more drags.

“Can I?” I asked, quietly.

She surveyed me for a while.

“Are you sure? I feel like a bad influence on you.”

“Like I said,” attempting to smile. “Better you than some stranger I just met at a party.”

She returned my smile as a grin, and handed me the glowing joint.

“Now. You just want to breathe this in slowly,” she said. “Same kind of technique with the cigarette, but there’s no filter so it might burn a little.”

I followed what she said. And I coughed anyway. She laughed, then stopped herself.

“It’s okay. Nobody gets it on their first go.”

“I’m determined,” I said, drawing in another breath. I let the smoke out in three coughs.

“Oh,” I said, almost immediately. “*Oh*. Woah... I can see why you like this so much.”

“Right,” Tamora agreed, taking the joint back from me. “It’s the best. *Ciro*’s friend grows it himself. No chemicals or any of that bad stuff. The pot in London is terrible. I’m not even kidding, this weed is one of the best selling points of the greater Cambridge and Eldridge area, I promise you.”

I didn’t even care that she mentioned *Ciro*.

The pot was unfurling my brain... it was smoothing it out. It was smoothing *me* out, so that only

a few words of a sentence in my head could trickle through at a time. And that, I concluded, was a glorious feeling.

Tamora and I finished the joint. And then we lay on the couch, throwing a blanket over each other, and giggled intermittently.

“I’m so glad I met you,” I said, looking out her window at the stars. “I’ve never met anyone like you before in my whole life.”

“The feeling’s mutual, man. The feeling’s mutual.”

\*

“Shit.”

“What?”

“It’s ten minutes to midnight.”

“So?”

“My ride is going to be here any minute and I have no idea where Piera is.”

“You can just sleep here if you want.”

“I would. Believe me, I would. But I can’t on this occasion.”

I untangled myself from the blankets on the couch and stumbled to my feet, picking up my mum’s jacket that was laying on the floor. Crisp packets and chocolate wrappers tumbled down behind me. I felt a

deep, nauseating whirlpool in my stomach.

“Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

“I... I feel sick, if I’m being honest.”

“There’s an expression,” Tamora said, unmoving.

“Beer after grass, you’re on your ass. Grass after beer, you’re in the clear. You’ll be okay. Just make sure you drink a lot of water.”

But I didn’t feel okay. I was feeling a headache coming on, and I was definitely still stoned. My limbs felt heavy. I could have slept for weeks. I could have eaten everything in the house. And my thoughts were still simple and short, but each of them rippled a wave of fear through me; Piera. Ant. Mum. Piera. Ant. Mum. Tamora. *Trouble*.

“I’d better go. But, um - thanks. For everything. Truly.”

“You’re most welcome,” Tamora said dreamily. She held out her arms so that I might bend down and hug her goodbye. I leaned down and embraced her. We stayed there, suspended for a few moments, and I felt her lips on my cheek.

“It was lovely to meet you, Lenore.”

“You too.”

I turned around and made to leave.

“Hey, before you go,” she said, heaving herself up. She walked over to the crate by the mattress and



rummaged around in a wooden box beside it. She returned holding an identical tin to hers in one hand, and in the other, a tiny plastic zip-lock bag about the size of a two pound coin. Inside it were several green lumps.

“You seemed to really enjoy it. Here, you can take some with you.”

“Oh, I shouldn't -”

But my hands were already reaching out in front of me.

From her own tin she pulled out a few papers and three arcade tokens.

“You can use these as filters. Just rip them in half, and roll them into the joint.”

“I - thank you.”

I placed the tiny bag into the tin along with the papers and snapped it shut. Then I slid it into the inside pocket of the jacket. And with one more fleeting hug, I said goodbye to Tamora and left her room.

I went down the three flights of stairs as fast as I could go. I pushed through the crowd until I got to the kitchen. Sure enough, Scott was standing at the counter talking to Hec. When he saw me his expression didn't change.

“Scott,” I said, walking forward. “Can I - can I borrow him for a moment?”

Hec nodded, pouring himself a drink from an unlabelled bottle of amber liquid.

We were standing by the fridge. Scott was looking at me with a rather sombre expression.

“I’ve got to run, Ant is probably already here waiting for me. I just... wanted to say I’m sorry for taking off earlier. Your kiss took me by surprise. I need a little more time before we... before we get physical. Is that okay?”

“Lenore, of course it is. I appreciate you being honest with me. I understand.”

“You do?”

“I do. I just want to make sure you’re comfortable. I don’t want to do anything to upset you or make you feel pressured. Let’s take it slow. There’s no rush at all.”

“Okay,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Are you - are you high? Your eyes are really bloodshot.”

“What? Oh, only a little bit, I just had some with Tamora, we were talking, and...”

“Of course you did. I knew the two of you were going to get along. But don’t let her corrupt you.”

“Corrupt -”

“I’m just joking. I’m glad you got to know Tamora

better. Don't worry. Go on, I know you need to meet Anthony. Call me whenever. We still need to arrange your guitar lessons."

"Sure. Okay - bye."

We hugged awkwardly, and then I gave a little wave to Hec.

By the time I made it out onto the patio through the front door of the house, I was in a full state of panic. It was after twelve. I was high. My friends were missing. I jogged down the steps and then onward along the driveway, churning the contents of my stomach. Sure enough, Ant's car was parked a few doors down on the opposite side of the road.

And, through the back windscreen, I could make out the unmistakable silhouettes of my best friend and her boyfriend, resting their heads on each other.

## Chapter Seven

### Gargoyles and Hangovers

I shivered. The wind was picking up, sending particles of sand ricocheting across the shore and colliding with my naked legs. There was no hope of finding a way back out to sea and then beyond to safety. My boat was gone, no doubt resting quietly on the sea floor undisturbed, completely away from all of the chaos raging above. I turned my attention to the palm trees instead in the hopes they might offer some respite. But the blackness beyond them was just as frightening as the power of the ocean behind me. I didn't need to step inside the jungle to know what lived within it: creatures of all sorts who wanted to eat me, devour me, peel my skin back from my body, chew my bones, and rip me limb from limb. No - the safest place, I knew, was right there on the border between both worlds. And so I began trudging along the sand, scanning the shoreline for something - anything - that might offer me protection from the threat of the storm above.

I saw the outline of their bodies before I saw the shack. At first I thought they were statues. But against the storm clouds, lit by the light of the hidden moon,

their wings stretched wide, unfolding to shake off rain water, before bending back into position. The wings weren't that of birds. There were no feathers. When the lightning flashed I could see their scaly skin was like that of a bat and their claws as long as a tiger's, held tight to a pair of tall wooden posts. Their pronounced muzzles were locked in a permanent snare with fangs resting against their chins.

Tentatively, delicately, I approached the gargoyles guarding the shack, moving low to the ground. Upon seeing me they both began flapping their wings. A scream somewhere between a high-pitched cry and a strangled roar made me clap my hands over my ears and fall to my knees. When I didn't run at them, didn't try and attack, they lowered their cries. But they didn't retract their wings, instead leaving them open in a threatening and intimidating pose.

"Girl," the one on the left spoke in a deep, husky voice. "Why are you here?"

I trembled.

"Please let me inside."

"Why should we let *you* inside?" The other one said menacingly.

"Because if you don't, I'll drown. Or freeze to death."

"How is that our problem?" The first gargoyle

laughed, tipping its head back so that his scaly chest was exposed.

“Please. Just... let me get through.”

“You’re going to have to try harder than that, I’m afraid.”

The second gargoyle extended itself up on its hind legs and began furiously flapping its wings. Behind me, the sound of the waves crashing on the shore grew even louder. And when I turned to look, the fifty-or-so metres that had stretched between myself and the water had closed. Either the tide had suddenly come in, or the gargoyle had brought the whole ocean towards me - how, it didn’t matter - because a particularly large wave had hit the sand and was sprinting up the shore, stopping only a few feet from me. The gargoyles laughed as I stumbled backwards, my back colliding with the shack door in fright.

“Why would we let a stupid little girl like you inside?” The first gargoyle spat. “Go away.”

“No!” I shouted, closing my hands around the lock and pulling. It was old. And a bit flimsy. If I could just find a rock, or something heavy -

“You heard us,” the second gargoyle shouted warningly. “Go away.”

I ignored their voices. Scanning the sand around me, I looked desperately for any object that might help

me in my quest. There were only a few small rocks scattered around at the base of the palm trees. I darted forward, grabbed one, and then collected a stick about as long as my forearm. Without looking at the gargoyles I began to beat the lock with the rock. This action sent my only companions into a frenzy. Their cries chilled my blood, and I contemplated running into the jungle, but the door - if I could apply enough force - was going to open. I would *make it*.

“Stop that! Stop that right now!”

My fingers were bleeding. My hand was raw. They were flapping their wings so furiously that I could feel the disturbed wind move my hair in the opposite direction of the wind. When they saw that I had successfully put the rock through the door to create a small hole near the lock, the first gargoyle descended from its perch and swooped at me. I held out the stick. It was a useless weapon, but it gave me the half-second I needed; jabbing at the gargoyle’s eye, I forced my fist through the hole I’d made, and unlocked the door from the inside. Seeing what I had done the second gargoyle swooped down and flew at me with speed. But I had already stepped backwards through the door and was pushing it closed when its heavy body collided with power.

“Girl!” It bellowed, snapping and snarling, its

snout trying to force its way in. "GIRL!"

I felt the weight of the other gargoyle make impact with the door.

Using all my strength, my own voice coming out in a long, blood-curdling scream, I pushed the door closed with all my might. And as soon as it snapped shut, and I had folded an iron bar down to lock them out, all sounds of their cries and of the ocean and of the wind were muted to nothing. It was completely silent. I was on my knees again, resting my palms against the ancient wood of the shack door, nothing but the fading sound of my own voice shimmering into nothingness. Slowly, slowly, I stood and turned around.

A chill swept over and through my body.

It wasn't a shack. It was anything but a shack.

It was a great Gothic cathedral, and it was standing tall - at least five hundred feet tall - and it wasn't dark and terrifying like the weather outside. Bright sunlight streamed in through stained glass windows that dazzled the floor and the pews with the most stunning array of colourful light. For a moment I was captured in a state of breathless awe; the contrast between the terror and panic I had just been experiencing outside, compared to the beauty and calmness of the cathedral, could not have been more



extreme. Above me, a painting moved across the most magnificent vaulted ceiling. Sliding over the arcs and pillars were angels and cherubs and clouds, and women with long hair slinging bows and arrows into space. Magnificent blues and whites, all swirling slowly, locked in a perpetual, two-dimensional loop. Their lips moved wordlessly as if singing a silent song in unison. And for a while I was distracted by their gentle dances. How I longed to be up there with them, experiencing the peace and the bliss that they so gracefully enjoyed. I watched them, following their delicate movements from above my head, along the ceiling, towards the other end of the cathedral, and then down towards the altar.

I gasped, the air getting caught in my chest, as though I had been plunged into freezing water.

Standing in front of the altar less than a hundred feet away from me, silently, unmoving, expressionless, was every single person I had ever properly known, loved, or loathed. And they were all looking at me.

There was my Mum, next to Ant. Alicia and Teddy stood in front of them, holding hands.

There were my aunts and uncles, my cousins, and my grandparents - both those who were still alive, and those who had already passed.

Friends from school.

Teachers.

Even my headmistress.

And there was Piera, standing between Luca and Andrew, next to the choir pews. Close to them was Scott and Hec. And there, standing beside the grand piano at the foot of the pulpit, was Tamora.

I took a single step forward. But the scene in front of me was so unnerving, so overwhelming, so exposing, that I couldn't get any further. I continued to scan the faces of the crowd, trying to find one that might display some movement, some ability to talk, but all of my companions were completely still and silent.

Almost completely obscured by the lectern, were not one, but two figures, that had their backs to me. They were further away from the others. One was definitely a man, with unkempt black, shoulder-length hair, and one was a woman. I couldn't make out any detail on her at all except for her hair. It was long, and a deep, dark red. But the two figures were hazier than the others, out of focus. The rest of the group were sharp and bright.

I took a deep breath.

"Why is the ocean made of wine?"

My voice echoed around the space, bouncing off the walls and rising up, up, up, until it reflected off the

roof and came back to me. I took two steps and immediately felt a drip of cold, wet rain on the top of my head.

Confused, I looked up.

The painting was slowly, slowly, beginning to slide off the roof. And the stained glass windows were growing dim with their light. The pools of colour disappeared, and as though someone was turning up a the volume dial on a stereo, the sound of rain outside began to drum on the roof. The door I had come through began to rattle.

I took another step forward, a feeling of fear and urgency starting to grow inside of me.

Flecks of burgundy coloured rain splashed onto the marble floor. I heard thunder in the distance. I heard the roar of the ocean. The painting on the ceiling was slipping down the walls, warped and melted, creating puddles of paint on the floor. The faces of the angels and cherubs became distorted and indistinguishable.

Suddenly, all the windows blew in. The glass rained down onto the pews, onto the marble, onto me.

And the crowd, for the first time, moved. They all opened their mouths and let out an ear-splitting, terrifying, scream. And I was so afraid that I screamed with them. Their mouths opened wider, wider, and

their eyes turned black.

I put my hands over my ears and knelt on the floor just as the roof cracked right down the middle, letting in the torrents of rain, turning the whole scene from the brightest sunlit day to the darkest of dark nights.

\*

I woke up gasping for breath completely drenched in sweat. I sat up and wiped my forehead, throwing back the covers and reaching for a glass of water beside my bed. I gulped it down gratefully and waited for my heart to return to a normal pace. It was as though I had indeed been running from a storm. My limbs felt shaky and my breath was coming out in short, sharp bursts. The vividness of the dream was disorienting. To steady myself I tried to focus on something real. There was a slit of orange light streaking across my bedroom floor, illuminating a corner of my desk. I focused on it as reality slowly realigned itself with me. Then I slumped back down on my pillow.

It was the morning after the party. I had a throbbing headache and a dry mouth. I rubbed my temples. Details of the night - before the dream - were hazy. I mentally retraced the steps I'd taken before we

had arrived at Tamora's.

*Tamora.*

At the mere thought of her name, an injection of adrenalin shot from my brain into my bloodstream. As if I might shield myself, I brought my duvet up to my eyes, murmuring no, no, no, as details of the night started coming back to me in pieces.

How obvious had I been with Tamora? I replayed the scene of the two of us on the couch, where Piera had found us. What was the look on her face - was it disgust? Frustration? Annoyance? Was she questioning the closeness?

Had people seen Piera and me arguing on the landing, in full-view of everyone at the party? I tried to picture the scene around us but all I could see was her angry face. The inability for me to completely piece the night back together - the inability for me to see the gaps between the pictures of the clear memories - was deeply unsettling. I had the strongest desire to pick up the phone and call everyone I had spoken to, just to tell them that the behaviour they'd seen of me was not me. I was not normally so open, so loud, so... free.

I remembered running down the driveway at midnight, stumbling, inventing stories as to why I wasn't with Piera and Andrew. They'd gone to a hotel.

They had vanished without explanation. They were still in the house, and I'd need time to go back and find them.

But Piera and Andrew had been waiting at the end of the driveway for Ant to arrive. By the time I'd got to the car, all three of them were in it, listening to late-night talk hosts on the radio. The two of them were quietly sitting in the backseat beside each other with their eyes closed, and they didn't say a word as I'd clambered into Ant's car smelling like an ashtray. Ant didn't really say anything either - he just asked about the party, and suggested I dry clean Mum's jacket to get the smoke out.

But that was it.

But *was* that it?

No.

Scott and I had *kissed*. And then I had run away. To Tamora's room, no less...

Tamora.

Tamora.

Tamora.

Tamora.

Tamora.

Her name, her face, her laugh, her hair, her eyes. As I thought of her, my whole body prickled with electricity, and for a delicious few minutes, I didn't

care about the rest of my behaviour. Who cared if I'd fought with Piera? Who cared if Ant wondered if I was drunk? What did it matter that I'd tried smoking? Tamora had sought me out. She had chosen *me* to spend time with at the party.

And I had to find some way to see her again.

Unable to go back to sleep, I got up, quietly crept down the stairs and took a shower, washing the smoke out of my newly short hair. Back up in my room, clean and dressed, I stared at the jacket on the floor. It was laying there, crumpled up where I had left it. I had every intention of fulfilling Ant's suggestion. The dry cleaners were open until midday on a Sunday. Remembering what was concealed in the inside pocket I quickly went to retrieve it. My hand closed around the cold metal of the black tin, but my fingers had grazed something else that didn't feel like anything I would expect to be there. A piece of card, or something similar.

I withdrew both the tin and the other object.

It was a photograph, folded in half.

I had wanted to study the tin in detail, and then of course, hide it somewhere impossibly difficult to ever be located. But the photograph had grabbed my attention. I opened my curtain to let in the natural light of the early morning, then sat down at my desk,

studying the picture right up to my face, the tin placed momentarily to the side.

It was a picture of my mother and another woman. They were standing, arm in arm, smiling. The other woman looked vaguely familiar. And, strangely, she was wearing the very jacket I was holding.

“The road trip,” I murmured to myself.

The other woman had dark red hair that went almost down to her waist. She had full features and intense dark eyes.

I turned over the picture.

*Mari and Rhea.*

*1978.*

Curious. Why wasn't that picture in the album with all the others? I placed the photo beside my bed, then stuffed Tamora's tin inside a pair of socks and wedged them at the very back of my chest of drawers. Then I left a note on the dining room table explaining I was going into town and would be back later. Everyone was still asleep.

I grabbed Teddy's bike from the garden shed and rode quickly through Eldridge, the cool air a relief on my face. I felt horrendously unwell. I dropped off the jacket at the dry cleaners, agreeing to pick it up in a



couple of days. And then, slowly, I wheeled the bike along the widest canal that snaked through the city centre back towards home. I needed time to think properly, rationally, and clearly - something that was not going to happen in my bed.

A few dedicated early risers were out and about taking care of errands or attending church services. As I passed their voices of hymn songs floated up and out towards me. I thought of my recent dream about the cathedral, frowning as I pictured the ugly faces of the gargoyles and their sheer determination not to let me pass through the shack door.

I would have hardly identified myself as religious, so the cathedral dream made no sense to me. Religion wasn't something my family gave time or energy to. A scientist for a mother and grandfather, talks of God or gods were kept exclusively in the realm of mythology. An interesting discussion at the dinner table for sure, and every once and a while we attended a service out of respect for Ant's elderly Anglican parents, but at home, that world wasn't ours. My school, however, was religious, so I racked my brain for any symbolic meaning that could be captured from it. I had always taken the sermons with a pinch of salt owing to my mother's thoughts regularly expressed about religious schools. She had some strong opinions about the

mixture of church and state and found it ludicrous that she even had to consider religious schools in selecting places for us to go. But by the time she and Ant factored in distance, school reputation, and even cost, the local girls' Anglican high school was the best option for Alicia and I. It took a while for Mum to be comfortable with the bi-weekly morning chapel services. But when I assured her it was just a dithery old reverend, Reverend Rhys, standing up and preaching about love and forgiveness, friendship and charity, along with some analysis of ancient stories in the Bible... she would admit that it all sounded rather benign but ultimately it was still insipid evangelising.

I got to a fork in the path and a split in the canals. To my left it turned out towards the northern residential part of Eldridge, which would take me more in the direction of Piera's place. If I carried on along the main canal I could take the back way directly home. I stood there in contemplation, visualising various scenarios: mum asking questions about the party, probing me about Scott, Alicia and Teddy making noise. The thought of being grilled about the evening was as palatable as cracking open another beer canal-side and drinking it in one go. I decided to take the path towards Piera's house. At least she would be able to reassure me that everything

was fine - even if she was angry, I just needed to know that all my worrying was for nothing.

When I wheeled my bike up the driveway, Marco Trentino was in swimming shorts and a sopping wet t-shirt, washing his car.

“Lo there, Lenore,” he said, spotting me and making sure the hose wasn’t pointing in my direction. “Looking for my daughter?”

“I am,” I said awkwardly, as he swirled around bubbly foam on the windshield.

“Think she’s asleep. But the door’s open, you can go on in.”

“Thanks.”

I leaned the bike near the front door.

Giulia was nowhere to be seen. I kicked off my shoes and went straight upstairs. I hovered outside Piera’s bedroom door for a moment, practicing what I wanted to say. I took a deep breath and knocked.

“Dad, I’m trying to sleep.”

“It’s not your dad, it’s me.”

There was silence on the other side of the door for a couple of moments. And then it was wrenched open with force and a make-up smeared, lopsided-haired Piera was standing there with a thunderous look on her face.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to apologise for how I spoke to you last night. I shouldn’t have shouted and I shouldn’t have sworn at you.”

She pursed her lips.

“But I stand by my message,” I continued, speaking what I had rehearsed in my head. “You were being hypocritical.”

Piera didn’t say anything. She folded her arms. After a fair amount of glaring, she finally spoke, her tone less harsh.

“I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have demanded your attention at the party. You seemed to be really hitting it off with Tamara.”

“Tamora.”

“Whatever.”

“Are you... okay? Why did you leave the party?”

I felt a great sense of relief at her words, even though I found her tone infuriating.

“Wasn’t my scene,” she said, sighing, retreating back into her bedroom and gesturing for me to come in. She closed the door and opened the curtains to let in the light. She flopped onto her bed and I took a seat at her desk chair.

“Where’s your mum?”

Piera looked suddenly uncomfortable. She shifted, pulling the duvet over her legs, arranging her pillows

so they propped her up against the wall.

“Mum’s gone to San Fransisco.”

“To see Luca?”

“Yes.”

“How come? He’s only been there, what, two?  
Three weeks?”

“She... she went to see if he was okay.”

“What do you mean?”

She hesitated. This conversation was clearly causing a considerable amount of internal conflict to Piera. She was struggling to look me in the eye. She fiddled with the corner of one of her pillows.

“He’s not speaking to Mum and Dad. He hasn’t, actually, since he called to say he had left.”

“Oh.”

“They told me something about him,” Piera said quickly, the words coming out in a jumble. “And it makes sense as to why we haven’t heard from him. And it might have contributed to why I was extra, um, sensitive last night.”

My stomach dropped. But I did my best to compose my face into an expression that looked like one of moderate concern.

“What is it?”

“This is going to come as a shock to you. And I don’t want to have to tell you this, because I know

how much you've been suffering already with him leaving. But... Lenore, Luca - Luca is gay."

And with that, she burst into tears. She sobbed into her hands. Very real tears seeped out the corners of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. I got up and approached the bed, taking a seat next to her. I put my arm around her shoulders. It felt like my own heart was trying to drown itself in my stomach acid.

"What do you mean?" I said through gritted teeth.

"I mean, Luca is fucking *gay*! Bonnie, like - figured it out or something on the night of his birthday and freaked out, and told Mum who obviously told Dad! Did you even realise he was hardly at his own party? I hadn't even thought about it until they told me they'd been arguing with him most of the night upstairs!"

"So... that's why he went to San Fransisco?"

"Yes!"

She sobbed harder.

I was confused.

Why was *she* crying?

"Are you - are you upset because he didn't tell you?" I tried. She looked up at me, her tear-stained face red, incredulous.

"Well of course I'm annoyed he didn't tell me," she sobbed. "But - but - who wants a *gay brother*?"

I was taken aback. I had expected her to be

surprised, but not positively disgusted. I moved away from her on the bed.

“It’s not Luca’s fault,” I said quietly.

“But he doesn’t *seem* gay! He doesn’t act it,” she went on dramatically. “He plays football. He’s... masculine! He’s had girlfriends. He doesn’t speak in a camp voice. And what about... *AIDS*?” she said, her voice quivering. “You remember everything in the news, don’t you? For years they’ve been going on about it. Who would want that life?”

“Things have changed since then... I’m sure he’ll be safe.”

“Safe!” She sobbed.

“And who says all gay people speak camp and aren’t masculine?”

“How many gay guys do you know who are like Luca? Or - or lesbians, who don’t look exactly like Sinead O’Connor?”

I gritted my teeth even harder. My fists curled Piera’s duvet up in silent fury but she didn’t notice.

“Well - technically I don’t know any other gay people, but this is Eldridge. It must be really different in big cities like London or San Fransisco. You can’t expect everyone to be like what you see on television. Maybe you just don’t notice gay people who look like you, because you don’t expect it.”

“Please stop defending him, Lenore,” she groaned, tipping over onto her side and holding her forehead.

“Well, however hard it is for you,” I said quietly, “it’s probably a million times harder for him. What did your parents say when they found out?”

“Mum just keeps crying all the time. And all Dad does is wash his car and paint the fence and not say anything.”

“Why does he refuse to talk to you all?”

Piera sighed.

“Dad’s really upset. He’s ashamed. And Mum thinks she’s not going to get any grandchildren from him. I think... I think Dad made out that he didn’t want anyone to know, and that he should just go and live in San Fransisco and never come back unless he changes his mind.”

No wonder Luca had gone to San Fransisco. I was surprised he hadn't gone further. Jupiter didn't even seem far enough.

“Don’t you miss him, though? Don’t you think your parents are being... a little too harsh?”

“What would I say now if he called? How’s SFU? Do you have a *boyfriend*? I mean, seriously, Lenore. Do you have any idea how much pressure this puts on me now?”

“Pressure? On *you*?”



“I have to be the perfect child now! If I do anything bad, or wrong... it’ll ruin Mum and Dad. You should see them.”

“Luca isn’t dead, Piera. He’s not a murderer. He hasn’t hurt anyone. I don’t understand why your parents aren’t... being a little bit more... understanding. He’s exactly the same person as he was before you found out.”

She sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

“You just don’t get it.”

I stood up.

“I see why you’re defending him. You’ve had feelings for him for so long. But I’m surprised you’re not more hurt.”

“I am hurt,” I said.

But I wasn’t talking about Luca.

I made an excuse about needing to be home before lunch and then said goodbye to Piera, who made me swear not to tell anyone, and left her moping in her bed. But when I got to the foot of the stairs a thought occurred to me.

From where I was standing I could just see Marco’s outline through the frosted glass of the front door. He was still washing the car.

I quickly ducked into the kitchen and walked straight to the telephone bolted to the kitchen wall. I

started rifling through papers in a pile underneath it. Nothing. I pulled open the junk drawer. It had to be there somewhere. But where?

Aha! A small address book was partially obscured by vanilla tea light candles and a phone book in the drawer below. I flicked through it, quickly, keeping acutely aware of any changes to the sound of Marco washing his car or footsteps on the stairs. And sure enough, scrawled in pencil under *L*, was an international number and the words *Dictionary Hotel* scrawled underneath it. Grabbing the first pen I could find, I tore a tiny corner off an old newspaper that was folded up on the kitchen counter. And I wrote down the number and buried it deep in the pocket of my jeans.

I retrieved my bike from just outside the house. I wheeled it past Marco, who called out to me.

“She awake, then?”

“Yes,” I said shortly. “See you later.”

“Bye, now.”

But when I got past the letterbox I stopped. I turned around and wheeled my bike to face Piera’s dad, a man whom I’d always liked and found, up until learning Luca’s truth, to be entirely friendly and reasonable.

“How’s Luca?” I asked.

“Huh?” He said, straining to turn around to see me. He narrowed his eyes.

“Luca,” I said, loudly and clearly. “How’s he doing?”

“Oh. Yes, yes, he’s doing well,” he said gruffly, turning back to the windscreen and giving it an extra hard scrub.

“You must be so proud of him.”

Marco didn’t say anything. He just kept scrubbing.

“You know,” I went on, taking a step toward him. “My biological dad used to love San Fransisco,” I said, equally loudly. This caused Marco to snap his head around and face me, pausing his rapid motions.

“Your...” he looked confused, as if his brain was searching through old files in his head, looking for the right one. “Oh,” he said, relaxing his face a bit. “Yes. Your biological father.”

It wasn’t true, of course. I had no idea whether or not Reid had even been to San Fransisco. But I would have liked to believe he wouldn’t have minded I was using him to illustrate a point.

“Yeah, he loved the city. Used to play his music there. He was in a band, you know.”

“He was?”

“Yeah. But his parents were extremely disapproving of him. They didn’t like that he pursued

music, and they didn't like the way he lived."

"That's... a shame," Marco said, starting to make slow circular motions with his sponge.

"But he played it anyway because that's who he was."

"I see. And... did he, did he put out an album or anything like that?"

"Yes. But then he died," I said flatly. "And his parents never got to tell him that they loved him, because they were too busy being disapproving."

And then I stared at Marco, unblinkingly, and he looked back at me, his forehead creased up in the same way Piera's would when she was thinking hard.

"I'm... sorry to hear that."

"And what's more," I went on, "after he died, they listened to his music. And they loved it."

Then I turned around and walked away, leaving a bewildered looking Marco standing there holding the garden hose as the water formed a pool on the grass.

## Chapter Eight

### All the Facts

How long I stared at the wall opposite my bed, imagining every kind of terrible fate possible for myself, I wasn't sure. But when Mum knocked on my door and came in the position of the sun had shifted. It was late afternoon. My hangover had subsided considerably, especially after a sandwich and a lot of water. But I still looked rough. Dark circles under my eyes. Limp hair.

"Sorry," I murmured, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. I had told everyone was going upstairs to study. But my books were still on my desk, closed, and my backpack with my pencil case in it was zipped shut.

"No need to apologise," Mum said, walking over to my desk to adjust the curtains. She immediately noticed the photograph on my desk that I had found earlier that morning. She picked it up, gingerly, and looked at it closely.

"Where did you get this?" She asked quizzically.

"I found it," I said quietly. "In the jacket pocket."

"I... goodness, I haven't seen this photo in... well, would be about eighteen years," she said nostalgically, taking a seat at the foot of my bed, her eyes still glued

to the image.

“Who’s the other woman?” I asked. “Why is she wearing your jacket?”

“It was hers. She gave it to me.”

“Why?”

Mum didn’t say anything. She just handed me the photo.

“Her name was Mari. Short for Marilyn, which she detested.”

“Mari...”

“She was on the road trip with us. She was a photographer, actually. I think she became quite famous in the art world later on in her life. She’s the one who put together that yellow album for me.”

“But why did she give you the jacket?”

Mum paused.

“It was a gift. For a favour I did for her.”

“What kind of favour?”

“That’s a long story. Not one for today. Because I wanted to have a talk about last night, if you’re feeling well enough.”

“Last night?” I garbled, pulling my knees up to my chest. “What about it?”

“Ant didn’t want to get you into trouble. And I’m not here to tell you off, either, contrary to what you might think.”

I hesitated.

“But he told me you got into the car last night smelling like pot smoke -”

“I’ve taken your jacket to the dry cleaners,” I said quickly, but still feeling a great walloping of shame descend upon me. “The jacket is fine, I promise, and I only tried a little bit -”

“I knew this day would come, eventually,” Mum said, more to the sky than to me. “Lenore, stop. Like I said. I am not here to tell you off.”

“You’re not?”

“How do you feel today? In yourself. In your body.”

I was confused. Mum knew I’d smoked pot, why did she care about how I felt today? Why wasn’t she grounding me, declaring that I was going to be confined to my bedroom until exams were finished? Why was her voice so... level?

“I’m... well, I had a few beers too, so I guess it made me feel a bit sick. And I feel... maybe I feel a bit lower than usual.”

Mum smoothed out the creases in her trousers. She looked nervous. She turned to face me, and with an expression that was tender rather than tough, she continued.

“Lenore, now that you’re old enough, I think it’s

time I gave you a bit more context - a bit more information - about how Reid came to pass away.”

“Reid - I don’t -”

“I know I’ve told you bits and pieces over the years. And I’m aware that I’ve been scarce with the details. But a lot of it, in truth, wasn’t appropriate, or fair, of me to share with you. But you’re almost an adult now. And you’re navigating this new part of your life without me. That’s how it should be. But I want to arm you with facts and reality so that you might make the best choices for yourself, when they undoubtedly present themselves to you.”

“Hang on... so you aren’t mad that I smoked the joint?”

“I would be a hypocrite and a liar if I sat here and pretended that I didn’t smoke my fair share of pot in my youth. That’s not to say I condone it, at all, but one has to put these things in perspective. Arguably alcohol is a lot worse than marijuana. No, I’m not angry about that. But it does have... wider implications than perhaps you fully understand right now.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, confused. “What does... what does smoking pot have to do with Reid?”

Mum took a deep breath. And then an expression appeared on her face that I had rarely seen in my life:



uncertainty. She was clasping her own hands together tightly. Her knuckles were white. Her eyes were wide. It was a rare moment indeed to see my mother without words. Finally, she began to speak slowly, and carefully.

“What do you remember about what I told you about how your father died?”

The words ‘your father’ took me by surprise. He had always been referred to as ‘Reid’ by mum. *Father* seemed like a term reserved for people doing the parenting. And as Ant had been that figure for me, my first instinct was actually to protect Ant - *he* was my father, for all intents and purposes. Mum referring to Reid as ‘father’ suddenly called into question my own relationship with the word. And it also, terrifyingly, opened up a new interpretation of their relationship. That at one point in my life, Mum really did refer to Reid as my father.

“I remember,” I said quietly, “that you told me... he got sick. When I was about a year old. That it was sudden. I kind of just assumed it was a... a heart attack.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I realised I had been stupid. Who dies of a heart attack at twenty-six? I mean, it must have happened to people, certainly, but Mum had never indicated that

Reid's health was anything other than normal. This juvenile assumption I had come to at a young age had just sat with me, unchallenged, because to a five-year-old that is a logical conclusion to come to if a person dies suddenly. But how had I not really questioned it over the years? Why had I just taken that as face value for so long?

*Perhaps*, I heard myself think, in the dark recess of my mind, *it's because you knew that it wasn't that simple.*

"It was sudden," Mum said, looking away from me, into space. "But not altogether unexpected."

"What does that mean?"

"It means," Mum said, taking a sharp intake of breath, "that Reid was unwell. He battled demons throughout his life. And they became impossible for him to overcome."

Her eyes had filled with tears.

My eyes were welling up, too. The seam of my new Universe was slowly tearing wide open. It felt a bit like I was falling. Pieces of the old world and the new were colliding against each other, shattering concepts and ideas that I'd held aloft my whole life. And the idea of who I was, was at the very centre of it. Who I was, who I would become, and who I *could* be... it was, in a sense, collapsing, and all I could do was stare at my mother and wonder what new planetary-sized

piece of information was going to continue to transform and destroy this landscape.

“Reid... well, Reid was an artist. In every sense of the word. He saw life as this... tapestry. Of feelings to be felt, of experiences to be had, and pain to be... realised. He did nothing by half-measure. He played his music with everything he had. He loved people with everything he had. But he also felt things, negative things, in a way that... I suppose, the force with which he lived in the world was the same force he felt inside. And he slid up and down that spectrum higher and lower than anyone I ever knew.”

I was gobsmacked for three reasons. Firstly, to hear my own mother speaking in an almost poetic way was nothing short of astonishing. Secondly, that was the most detailed piece of information about Reid I had ever received in my life. And thirdly - I felt relief. Relief, for a moment. Relief which morphed into fear.

“What happened to him?” I asked, my voice croaking.

Mum stood up. She wiped her eyes. She folded her arms and walked to the window overlooking the garden and peered out into the distance.

“Reid used alcohol and drugs to numb himself to the darker side of his psychology,” she said, returning a bit more to her usual clinical self. “It was his vice.

And being surrounded by other musicians, and living a life that didn't have a lot of structure and order, he was able to engage in self-destructive behaviours without a lot of questioning. I -"

She hesitated.

"I - I tried to intervene. Especially when you were born. In fact, when you were born, I thought he might better see the consequences of his choices. But I didn't understand."

"What didn't you understand?"

She sighed.

"I didn't understand the gravity that mental health can play when it comes to having the power to say no. To say no to something that gives relief, however temporary, however damaging. Saying no, when you're in inner turmoil. For Reid it was practically impossible. The help he needed was beyond what I could offer."

She turned back to face me. Tears had made little tracks down her cheeks.

"And it was too late, anyway."

"You're saying... that's what killed him? His... vices?"

Mum nodded.

"And that's why you're telling me? Because you want me to be careful?"

She nodded again.

“Lenore, I’m not telling you this to make you afraid, or to guilt you into not enjoying your teenage years,” she added, returning to the foot of my bed. She placed her hand on my arm and gave it a squeeze.

“I am certainly not going to try and stop you from experimenting, from exploring all sides of yourself. It’s just important that you do understand from a purely biological perspective that you’re going to be pre-disposed to dependency and perhaps, even depression.”

“But you must cancel a lot of that out, right? I mean, you’re the opposite,” I said, sitting up a little bit straighter. “You’re the most... healthy and rational and logical person I know. So... nothing in me should be as severe as it was in Reid, right?”

Mum smiled a sad smile.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that,” she said sadly. “Indeed, you have a mother who is more stable. A mother who makes decisions that are in your ultimate best interests. But it is important for me to arm you with this knowledge so that you have... so that you have a clearer picture of who you are.”

I stared at her.

“I should have had this conversation with you sooner,” she said, her voice strained. ““I shouldn’t have

waited to tell you until after you started going out. But perhaps I was in denial myself.”

## Chapter Nine

### Green and Yellow Melancholy

I was relieved to be back at school the next day. A sense of normality and routine was what I needed after the bombshells dropped on me by my mother and my best friend. I carried around their conversations as though they were heavy bags strapped to my back. They weighed me down, they made my body ache, and my head buzzed as though I were standing next to a power station. But being back in class and being made to sit in silence and stare at a whiteboard gave me a framework against which I could pin myself without having to make excuses for my own desperate need for quiet. I could drift from class to class and write in my books as instructed. Being in class meant that I couldn't break down on the floor and scream, as I had felt like doing on more than one occasion. Walking to class with text books and folders gave my arms something to do, because I had overwhelming urges to break everything fragile in my presence.

On Monday at lunch time a group of us sat down on the tennis courts to eat our lunch and talk about the weekend. Piera sat next to our mutual friend, Fiona, and I saw them speaking in quiet, serious

undertones with each other. I sat down and unwrapped my sandwich made by Ant that morning, and proceeded to stare at cracks in the tennis court, imagining I was small enough so that I might walk inside them unseen.

Our other friends talked about their weekends idly. I acted like I was paying attention to their conversation, with my body slightly angled toward them and away from Fiona and Piera. When probed about my own weekend, I didn't mention the party. There was a smattering of approval about my new haircut, but conversation quickly moved on. No doubt if I'd even said Scott's name I would have been subjected to squeals of delight and endless questions about him for the whole week, until I produced a picture, or gave them some other kind of details to satisfy their thirst for knowledge about a boy I'd met *three times*.

When I'd finished eating my sandwich, I stood up.

"I'm just going to..." I said at large to the group. But nobody paid any attention. Conversation had broken up into pairs and threes so I just walked away, back in the direction of my locker. I probably only had a window of twenty-or-so minutes before the chances of me being caught and questioned increased significantly.



After Mum's revelation to me there was no way I was keeping any form of drugs in the house. In fact the small green buds, which had exhilarated me when I had first seen them, might as well have been grenades. I wanted them out of my room and out of my sight.

The solution had come to me in the dead of night. I knew exactly where I would keep Tamora's little tin. A place where it could remain undisturbed, until either another student found it years in the future by chance, or, a place that I could return alone, should I feel so inclined. But as I fished the tin out the bottom of my backpack I believed it impossible that I would ever smoke it. I thought I was as good as destroying something, putting away a tiny part of me, so that the rest of myself could carry on as usual. And the usual me would never have entertained the idea of smoking pot at all, least of all *alone* on school grounds.

As I walked through the quad and past the tennis courts, my friends in exactly the same place I had left them, I clasped the tin tightly inside my pocket. What would they have said, if they knew?

The entrance to the east wing of the chapel was hidden in shadow behind an assisted learning building. Approaching the door, my heart started thumping. Sure enough, the handle looked exactly the same.

The little keyhole was just as I remembered it from two summers ago. Swiftly, without stopping, I opened the unlocked door and stepped into the chapel.

It was empty. Reverend Rhys was likely up in the staff room with the other teachers for lunch. Sunlight streamed through the windows on the opposite wall. Dust motes quietly swirled, disturbed by my sudden presence.

Even during the light of day the chapel was eerie. It didn't have the splendour and majesty of the cathedral in my dreams, but it had a similar layout, with the pews facing the pulpit, a lectern, and a little raised platform for the chapel band. Not wanting to drag it out any longer than I needed to, I quietly walked along one of the side aisles that lead to the altar. The door to the green room was behind it, obscured by an ancient, heavy curtain that hadn't been replaced in the renovations a decade ago. And sure enough, it was there, waiting for me to discover it once again: the old wooden door that lead up into the disused choir green room.

It was almost pitch black up the stairs. Piera knew about the space because she had, in fact, been in the choir our first two years at the school - something she didn't like me to remind her of. On occasion we'd had private lunches with each other up there, until

Reverend Rhys caught us sneaking behind the curtain one day and told us off. That would have been a good time to hand back the key. The key, which he had given to me almost without a second thought. The key that was now kept in the drawer right beside my bed.

The green room was just the same. Dusty, musty, the air of an old library. Aged bibles lined shelves on the walls. Moth-eaten robes were hanging on a rack that stretched the length of the room. An out of tune piano stood covered in old jars, burnt-out candles, and sheet music. There were a couple of armchairs - comfy ones, from memory - that were facing each other, as though perhaps this had been the sanctuary of numerous students, maybe even teachers, for little periods over the years. But overall, it appeared disused, forgotten. There was only one window and it was hidden behind thick and dirty beige curtains. The window was old and heavy, the kind that lifts up from the bottom and makes a resounding *clunk* when it locks into place. It opened onto a tiny metal platform that was flimsily bolted to the brick of the chapel. From the platform, a skinny ladder descended below to serve as a rather rudimentary fire escape that was no doubt added after a change in government regulations decades before.

I went over to the armchairs. Between them was

an old cupboard on top of which more religious books were stacked. I opened it. It was empty. I grabbed the stack of books from the top of the cupboard and placed them inside, pushing them almost to the back of it. In the gap I slid Tamora's little black tin.

And then I left the green room and returned to my friends on the tennis courts, none of them the wiser. I, however, felt as though I had just resolutely taken one foot out of my old world and carefully, quietly, secretly, placed it into the next.



On the outside nobody would have suspected that I was suffering some sort of intense internal malfunction. From the moment of hiding the tin I went about tasks at hand on a kind of autopilot. I was physically present, but my mind, or my consciousness, whatever you want to call it, occupied some other space high above me. It was warping, stretching, twisting, folding, fragmenting, sticking to itself, and all I could do was place one foot in front of the other and just try to make it to the next moment in one piece.

There was school, which I muddled through, making notes in class in the vain attempt at preparing for exams that were on the horizon. I chipped in

during conversations at lunch just enough so as not have anyone ask me what was wrong. And I tentatively avoided Piera, who, since our conversation about Luca, had equally distanced herself. Her words about her brother had stung me, confused me, silenced me, and enraged me, all at once. I feared that if I spoke to her I might find my voice returning to the tone and volume I had used at the party. And who knows what would have come out of my mouth in front of everyone on the tennis courts. I just didn't trust myself.

At home, I became equally distant with my family. I only came out of my room in the morning with just enough time to eat a piece of toast, grab my lunch box, and put my shoes on. And when I got home from school I went straight to my room, mumbling about 'needing to study'. Once or twice I saw mum and Ant exchanging nervous glances when I walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water or a snack. I wondered if Mum had told Ant what she'd told me? That my father was so self-destructive that it killed him? Were we all wondering exactly the same thing?

Even in sleep I couldn't escape from the stress. I continued to have the nightmares about the beach and the cathedral, stuck in some kind of repetitive loop. Each night I woke up on the sand again, each night I

managed to make it inside past the gargoyles, and each night the paint slid off the roof as the chorus of my friends and family screamed into an eternal night. I would wake up, sweating, terrified and exhausted.

By the time it got to last period on Friday I was barely keeping it together. I had dark circles under my eyes and my uniform was hanging unusually loose off my shoulders. Piera had asked me if I was okay, once, but I had shrugged and said I was fine. By the time we got to the last class of the week, English, I was well aware I was only operating on energy that came from residual thoughts of two sources that fired a shot of adrenalin into my bloodstream: the thought of Tamora, and the memory of what Mum had told me about Reid.

We were supposed to be quietly analysing a Shakespearian text. The words on the page were heavy and difficult to understand. Normally I enjoyed Shakespeare. I liked the characters, the drama, and translating the stories from the old language they had been written in to something more modern. But I couldn't get past the first stanza that I read when I'd sat down and started:

*She pined in thought,  
And with a green and yellow melancholy  
She sat like patience on a monument,*

*Smiling at grief.*

I closed my copy of *The Twelfth Night* and resolved that there was no way I was going to do anything constructively related to my class.

Smiling at grief indeed, I thought bitterly, curling my hair around my fists and pulling it tight.

There were things I needed to do, and I had to do them by the end of the day. Somehow my desire to see Tamora's face again managed to transcend all those other twisted, dark feelings, and I tore a piece of paper out of my notebook. My pen hovered above the page.

*Call Scott. Confirm first lesson time with Ciro. Call Luca. Tell him everything.*

They were two very simple, very easy things to do. In theory.

"Do you - do you want to walk together?" Piera asked when the bell rang, gathering up her things. I hadn't noticed her sidling up to me. I was at the back of the room next to an empty desk.

"Andrew not picking you up today?" I said curtly, not meeting her eyes. He'd been there to meet her every day after school to take her home and do who knew what before her parents got home from work.

"No. He's got class late and then he's going out with some friends from his football team."

I detected a hint of animosity in her voice. I shrugged.

“Sure.”

We made a pit stop at our lockers, bade our other friends goodbye, and then began our walk past the chapel, through the little patch of trees, and onward across the field to my house one street over. We had made the journey hundreds of times before. Most days after school, before Andrew came on the scene, we would walk to my place and she would hang out until just before dinner, then carry on home. Sometimes we would still walk the route and decide to go to her place instead. It all depended on who had the best snacks, whose parents were getting home the latest, and whether or not Andrew and Luca were going to be about. But on that walk home, it was as though years had spanned between the last time we’d done it, not days. And school felt juvenile. Our uniforms made us caricatures of children.

“You’ve... been quiet this week,” Piera said as we cleared the patch of trees. Students had already taken up residence on the field participating in various sport practice. We walked along the fence line, slowly.

“Have I?” I said softly. I was in no mood to argue.

“Yeah. And I know why.”

*Of course you do*, I thought, biting my lip. *Piera the*



*oracle. Ready to tell me what's what and who's who.*

"We don't normally fight. But... I guess, we had a big fight at the party, and then I told you about Luca. And that must have been hard for you."

I looked at her sideways.

"Yeah."

"And I know you love Luca, a lot. He was important to you. And I was... I was saying hurtful things. But you have to understand, Len, that it was a real shock. For all of us."

I clenched my fists in my pockets.

"What's your point?"

"My point," she said frustratedly, stopping and putting her hands on her hips, "is that I need my best friend back now. I know I've been talking to Fiona more, because I've been trying to give you space, but she's just not like you. You actually listen."

I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted, desperately, to just tell her about Tamora. I needed to talk to someone about how I was feeling. I wished with my whole heart that I could have told Piera I thought I might be in love without her batting an eyelid that it was a girl. I wanted to talk about Tamora as a person, as someone who I might want to be with. I didn't want to talk about being gay, or confused, and have it be this big dirty secret. And perhaps, perhaps if Luca hadn't

recently done it, and it hadn't just blown up in his face - perhaps if I hadn't known how homophobic Piera and her family were, then I'd have just *told* her, and I'd be the one who got on a plane and flew away. To where... who knew? Vancouver? But knowing the gnashing teeth I would face, the slamming doors, the rejection, I swallowed my desperate thoughts and stood there on the field looking gormless.

"Okay," I finally managed to say, beginning to walk again. "I'm here."

"Good," Piera huffed. "Now, are you going to tell me what's happening with Scott, or what?"

"I'm calling him tonight," I said flatly, looking at the rucked up grass. We were approaching the end of the field.

"You are?" She said excitedly. "Can I come back to yours and be there while you make the call?"

"No way," I said. "I just - I just need to do it alone."

"But I could help you with what to say," she protested.

"I know what to say," I said defensively. "I'm just asking about the guitar lessons."

She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, but you've got to have stuff to talk about."

"Look," I said. We passed through the kissing gate.

The footpath that would take Piera home stretched off to the left and disappeared around the corner.

“I’ve got to start doing this stuff on my own, like you. Right?”

Piera sighed.

“I suppose. But can’t you tell me how it went afterwards?”

“Maybe,” I said, walking towards my house.

“And, like, come over this weekend. Or something. Whenever,” she called out, waving as I walked down my street.

I had the place to myself. Mum and Ant were still at work, Alicia had plans with a friend, and Teddy was at football practice. Determined for it to be over, I dropped my bag on my bedroom floor and didn’t even get changed out of my uniform. I retrieved Scott’s number he’d given me the day he’d dropped the guitar off and went back down to the kitchen. As though I was a boxer preparing for a match, I stood next to the phone and stared it down so I might intimidate it, taking a few deep breaths and loosening my shoulders.

I dialled.

Someone picked it up on the third ring.

I had expected to have to ask a flatmate to speak to Scott - or better yet, he wouldn’t have been home and I could have just done it in the morning - but sure

enough, it was Scott himself who answered. I hoped that he hadn't been waiting.

"Lenore!" He said excitedly. "Great to hear from you. How's your week been?"

"Oh, you know. Fine. Kind of boring."

"Me too. We're already studying for exams. Our tutors are getting really full-on"

"Yeah. Ours are coming up, too."

"I suppose you want to organise lessons with Ciro?"

"I should have just done it at the party. I didn't think."

Scott laughed.

"Even if you had, he wouldn't have remembered what he agreed with you. But don't worry. I've already sorted it out, I was just waiting for you to call. I can pick you up tomorrow and take you there for three o'clock. And then, if you're up for it, we can go and see a film?"

"Er - sure. Great. Okay, let's do it."

## Chapter Ten

### The Craft

It was quiet out in Cambridge. The sky was a clear blue. Tiny sandflies whirled around in glittery clouds as the sun hit their wings. I looked up at the abandoned house, shielding my eyes from the glare. I noticed black trails of soot up two windows on the second floor, the charred frames, the missing glass, weeds growing out from cracks. The house looked hollow and diseased, absent of love or attention for decades gone. I contemplated finding an entry point and having a look around. But I was conscious of the time and didn't like the idea of being caught in a dangerous house by a local resident.

The drive to Tamora's house was less uncomfortable than I expected. Scott had acquired a cassette tape of Alice in Chains which he played the whole journey. Maybe it was the familiarity of the songs, or because Scott had a particular knack of knowing exactly when to talk and when to be quiet, but the only nerves I felt were related to the prospect of seeing Tamora again.

And, thankfully, I was making my little journey down the driveway alone. Scott had to go to the

library to work on a group assignment for one of his classes. But he'd come back and pick me up later in the afternoon so that the two of us could see *Space Jam* together, something I tried not to think too much about. Being alone in a dark room with Scott made me nervous. But, I reasoned with myself, it was only a movie. People go to movies all the time on dates.

*Dates.*

It sounded so American.

I rounded the corner. Tamora's house stood out proudly against the trees. It was a strange sight seeing it without dozens of partygoers milling about. It could have been a large country house inhabited by a wealthy family, if it weren't for the the mismatched tiles on the roof, the rather long uncut grass, and the visible tape that was holding some of the lower windows in place. There were no cars parked by the garage, but the rolling door was half-way up. The sound of a scratchy radio met my ears and a male voice was singing along to a song. I suspected it might have been Hec mid-brew.

I carried on up the little steps to the patio and through the wide open front door. Not unlike a tourist, I stopped in the entrance hall and gazed up just as I had at the party. I felt like a small child discovering the wonders of a museum or an art gallery. I could

have wandered the halls for hours, looking at every piece of the house in detail, finding hidden quirks and secrets of its past. And for the briefest of moments I hoped I would be accepted into Cambridge university just so that I might have had an excuse to live there.

“Are you looking for someone?”

Startled, I almost dropped the guitar, spinning around and looking to see where the strong French accent had come from. I blushed.

A pretty girl was sticking her head out from behind the door that lead into the kitchen. She had a grin on her face. She must have been watching me gaze around like an idiot.

“Er, yeah. I am. I’ve got a... lesson with Ciro. Guitar.”

“They’re out,” she said simply, retreating from her bird-like post towards the kitchen. “What time did he tell you?”

I followed her tentatively. The girl poured herself a glass of water at the sink. From where I was standing, I could see out into the garden where she must have come from. A big crumpled blanket was spread out on the grass in a patch of sun. I could just make out a little radio, a sketch book, and long pencils scattered around. It looked very inviting.

“Want one?” She asked me.

“Um, no thanks. I’m okay.”

With her water in hand she observed me thoughtfully.

“Do you know when they’re going to be back?”

“No idea,” she said, taking a sip. “Ciro and Tamora are the least organised people I have ever met in my entire life. They might be back in an hour, or it could be three days.”

“Oh... well, he said three.”

The girl looked at her watch.

“You’re on time, too. I wouldn’t recommend that.”

She started walking towards the open doors that lead out to the garden. For a house that occupied many young people the grounds were in a remarkably good state. I could see roses, lavender, herbs, trellises with ivy. Path stone edges that didn’t have weeds. A BBQ. And it seemed to stretch on and on, out towards the church, whose steeple I could just make out beyond the taller trees.

She got as far as the steps at the edge of the back patio before turning around.

“You can come out here, if you want. Til they get back.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

I placed the guitar on one of the tables that had been laden with snacks at the party, careful not to



knock the pegs that I'd tuned that morning with difficulty. Then I went after the French girl who was already sitting back at her place on the blanket. She was flipping thorough pages in her sketchbook. Quiet classical music was playing from the radio beside her. As I approached I could see some of her work. She was talented, to say the least. Page after page of charcoal sketches of landscapes, flowers... she found the one she was looking for. A half-completed sketch of the tree line in front of us filled the thick page.

I wasn't sure if she had wanted me to sit with her on the blanket, or to have stayed up on the decking and sat on one of the chairs. So I directed my attention to the flowers, going up close to examine them.

"I saw you at the party last weekend," the girl suddenly said, without looking at me. Her hand was moving delicately across the page.

"You did?"

"Yeah. You were arguing with some girl."

She looked up at me with a half-smile, a little dimple appearing on her left cheek.

"Oh. Yeah. Piera."

"It looked like a passionate exchange."

"She's my best friend. We just had a... difference of opinion," I said, bending down to smell some lavender.

“I see. I’m Elodie, by the way.”

The girl looked up at me and smiled fully, squinting in the bright light.

“I’m Lenore.”

Elodie was very pretty indeed. She wore a flowing, floral skirt held up by a brown weaved leather belt. She had on a white button-up blouse with fine detailing along the collar. Her hair was light blonde and styled in a short cut that swept across her eyes, which were dark brown. And she was barefoot.

I felt slightly disappointed I hadn’t had the opportunity to talk to her at the party. And I hoped, desperately, that she hadn’t heard any of the details of the argument Piera and I were having. But Elodie didn’t comment on anything else to do with the party and simply carried on sketching. I racked my brains - had I seen her that night? If I had, I reasoned with myself, I surely would have remembered.

We fell into silence and I wandered around the garden. The music blended into the environment as though nature itself were composing it. As though the trees were an orchestra, the spring birds a choir, and the scratching of Elodie’s pencils the tap of a percussionist. As the minutes wore on my anxiety subsided, and I could have laid down and closed my eyes and grown roots into the soil myself. The house,

the garden, had a magic to it. It was almost otherworldly.

A voice punctured the tranquility. As though a dragon had set foot into the place of paradise, I felt my heart skip a beat and all of my nervous system shuddered into life, tingling at every fibre.

“Lenore! You’re here. So sorry we’re late.”

Tamora descended the steps to the garden. She rushed forward to me, placed her hands on my shoulders, and kissed both my cheeks.

“Hi,” I said breathlessly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I see you’ve met Elo?”

“I have.”

“Best artist you’ll ever come across,” Tamora said boldly, whipping out her tin and producing a pre-rolled cigarette.

“You flatter me, Mora. But don’t you dare bring that thing over here.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Tamora said, rolling her eyes and giving me a surreptitious wink. Then in an undertone murmured, “honestly, I’ve never met a French person who hates smoking as much as Elodie.”

She gestured at the tin but I shook my head. Elodie glared up at Tamora, who didn’t notice.

“We had to walk to the shops,” Tamora said loudly, pacing in front of the lavender, a cloud of smoke

following her shadow. "Our van is being repaired at the moment. It's got something dodgy going on with some part I can't pronounce. Ciro's just gone upstairs to grab his guitar. Perfect weather for a lesson, if you ask me!"

A wide grin spreading across her face, she knocked her sunglasses from their position of resting on top of her head, to her nose. I could see my look of horror reflected right back at me.

"What? Out here? In front of -"

"Oh, don't worry about us," Tamora said dismissively, leading me back towards the patio. She promptly dragged a chair into the sun and sank into it. She put her feet up on the railing so she was stretched out like a model in a vintage magazine. Her soft pink hair against the blue sky, the orange and yellow thin striped camisole underneath a denim jacket, black jeans, dirty shoes. How she could move so effortlessly, so comfortably in her own body and the space she occupied, was nothing short of incredible to me. Every movement I made was deliberate, practically rehearsed. I was completely unsure of what to do with myself and resolved to sit on the steps. I was neither in the garden with Elodie, nor on the patio with Tamora. I was right between them.

I heard Ciro's loud footsteps before I saw him.

“Let’s get going, then!” He said eagerly, appearing in front of us with a slender, sexy looking light blue electric guitar in one hand, and Scott’s simple black one in the other. He handed it to me and I took it, feeling not unlike a small child holding an expensive toy. I watched as Ciro bounded back inside, his own guitar propped against the railing next to me, and returned with two amplifiers. They must have been plugged into an outlet just beside the open doors for he carried them both down the steps, their cables trailing behind, his lean muscles flexing as he placed them on the grass below. He took two leads that he’d looped over his shoulder and proceeded to plug them into our guitars. Elodie switched off her radio. Ciro took a seat on the step above me, and as though it was an extension of his body, he began to pick and strum and twiddle the dials on his guitar. A light, clean sound came out of his amp. No wonder Tamora loved him. He looked like some kind of Greek god as he sat there playing notes and riffs with ease until he was happy with the sound. Then he did the same with my guitar. Tamora watched us from her perch, inhaling and exhaling smoke, and Elodie’s hand continued to slide across the page.

“Okay,” Ciro said, looking at me with intensity, handing me back my guitar. “What would you

describe your current level as?"

"Um. Absolute beginner."

"Okay. And... what style are you most attracted to?"

"As in - musically?"

"Yes. Tamora said you like Alice in Chains a lot. Are you into rock music, then?"

Out the corner of my eye, I saw Elodie look around at us.

"I suppose. Nothing too heavy, but I do like rock. Probably rock the most."

"Okay. Good to know. Alright, we're going to start with the strings first. You need to be able to name them, and just practice plucking up and down each one. Can you repeat after me? E, B, G, D, A, E."

He slowly demonstrated the movement. I watched him do it and then attempted it myself, repeating the names of the strings as I went. He made it look like the easiest thing in the world. His fingers were nimble and quick, his timing as if he had a metronome inside his skull. I was able to repeat it back, just, but without any modicum of technique.

"Not bad," he said, nodding. "Keep doing that for a minute or two."

He watched my fingers intently.

Actually, I was impressed by Ciro. I had expected

him to be unfocused and scattered, perhaps because of the lateness and his general lack of organisation, but he was patient and very articulate with his instructions. We spent the next however many minutes practicing a simple scale, and two chords, A and D. A was simple; D, not so much.

I tried as best as I could not to look over at Tamora, who had at some point put her head in a book, and at Elodie, who had abandoned her art and was lying down and looking at a few clouds that were starting to creep across the sky. The longer Ciro and I went on, the less nervous I became. Little impressions of lines from the strings started to leave painful marks across my fingertips every time I pressed down.

I liked it.

When Scott arrived, I realised I hadn't thought about him once since he had dropped me off.

"Oh. Time to go already, no?" Ciro said, pausing his strumming.

"Sorry, I got held up. You don't need to stop on my account."

"No, good timing. I think that's good for our first day," Ciro said brightly, leaning his guitar on the railing so he could stand up and clap Scott on the shoulder. I kept hold of my guitar and stood too. The blood rushed to my fingertips. They were red raw and

throbbing.

“You’re a natural,” *Ciro* exclaimed. “You have a good ear and good rhythm. If you practice every day for the next, say, six months, you’ll have the basics completely down.”

I smiled.

“Do you come from a musical family?” He asked, unplugging the amps and winding the cables around his arm. I noticed that *Elodie* had turned over and was watching our conversation. *Tamora* was draped over the chair with her book resting on her chest. And *Scott* was leaning against the wall of the house, his arms loosely folded, a little smile on his face. All eyes were on me. They were curious - about *me*.

“Not really,” I said, reaching out and playing with a leaf on a bit of ivy wound around one of the decking pillars. “I mean, my dad was in a band, but... he passed away when I was little so I never saw him play.”

“Oh,” *Ciro* said, quietly. “I’m sorry to hear that. Do you have any tapes?”

“Tapes?”

“Yeah,” he said, tossing the coiled-up cables onto the deck. “Tapes. Did he record anything? What was his band called?”

“I... don’t know, actually. I’d have to ask my



mum.”

“I’ve been in a couple of bands. Nothing serious, though, we’ve moved around too much.”

By ‘we’, I guessed he meant him and Tamora.

“Maybe when you’ve got the chords down, we can start one up,” he said with a wink. Then he took the seat next to Tamora and rested his arm on her shoulder. They looked like they had been sculpted from the same batch of clay. Magic fucking clay.

“Can I be the drummer?” Tamora asked. “I want to be the drummer.”

Ciro laughed.

“Yes, my love, of course.”

Tamora looked over at me.

“I’m about as musical as a fish. What he just taught you would have taken me three months to manage. I’ll just be the groupie.”

“She’s not lying,” Giro joked.

“I hate to break up the next Rolling Stones first meeting, but our movie’s going to start in half an hour,” Scott said, looking at me.

“What are you going to see?” Elodie called out from her place on the blanket.

“Yeah, anything good on?” Tamora probed.

“Space Jam,” Scott said, pulling a programme from his back pocket. “Either that... or The Craft.”

“Let’s go and see that!” Elodie shouted, standing up. “I saw it advertised. Neve Campbell is so beautiful. We have to go.”

“Yeah I’d rather see that than some, what is it, a basketball movie?” Tamora exclaimed.

“It’s a comedy -” Scott tried, but the girls had already stood up and were moving towards the door to the house. Ciro shrugged his shoulders and followed after them. While Elodie tidied up her art materials, and Tamora dashed upstairs to get some cash, Scott pulled me aside.

“Sorry, I thought it was just going to be us. I hope you don’t mind they’re coming along.”

I could tell by the look on his face he was highly disappointed it wasn’t just going to be the two of us.

But I couldn’t be more thrilled, or relieved.

When everyone was ready, and when Elodie had found her shoes, we all went outside the front of the house towards Scott’s car.

“What about Hec?” Tamora asked. Ciro took that as his queue. He jogged ahead to the garage that I had passed. He pulled up the roller door and the rest of us gathered around outside to look in on the scene.

I was right. It was Hec, in a loud, oversized t-shirt, shorts, skate shoes, with his hair casting a black halo around his head, standing amongst a dozen yellow

buckets, glassware, and bottles of unmarked liquid. He was sweaty and looked tired, but when he saw us he turned down his music and looked pleased at the sudden company.

“What’s up?” He asked, wiping his forehead.

“Wanna come to the movies?” Ciro said, reaching out and taking a swig of one of the bottles. “We’re going in Scott’s car.”

Hec tossed the bucket he was holding and, checking he had his wallet in his back pocket, followed us over to the car with a resounding, “hell yes.”

I counted us all up in my head. There were six. And Scott’s car was small, with space for only five people. I quickly worked out the car logic.

Obviously, Scott was driving. And I there because of him. Did that relegate me to the front passenger seat? There was one other couple: Ciro and Tamora. And ordinarily, it would make sense for the two of them to share a seat as the only two people who could safely cross that boundary without any opportunity for it being weird, but the front seat wouldn’t fit two people. Not to mention it would have been easy to spot if we passed a traffic officer.

That demoted me to the back seat, and Hec to the front - as, obviously, me sitting on his lap would be out

of the question. It meant that Elodie, me, Ciro and Tamora had to somehow squeeze into the back.

“Shotgun!” Hec shouted, diving into the seat next to Scott.

It seemed everyone had inherently known the natural order. Ciro took the seat immediately behind Scott, with Tamora half sitting on him, half on the middle seat so as not to have her head jammed against the ceiling... leaving Elodie and myself standing awkwardly by the door next to the empty seat.

“Do you - do you want to sit, or shall I -”

“I guess it makes sense for me to... sit on the seat. I’m taller than you.”

“Yeah. That’s logical.”

I slid into the seat next to Tamora. And then, without giving me the time to fully appreciate what was happening, Elodie clambered in and sat on my lap.

I held my breath.

Tamora was pressed up against the whole left side of my body. Wherever her skin met mine, it burned a thousand degrees. I could smell the mixture of her cigarette smoke and the soft aroma of flowers from her shampoo.

I didn’t know what to do with my hands. The one closest to Tamora was resting between my leg and

hers. That seemed completely reasonable, and in truth, there was nowhere else to put it. But my right hand - the one that was closest to the door - was holding the handle with such intensity that I thought my knuckles might puncture my skin.

Elodie was light, and warm, and her skirt flowed over me like some kind of spring waterfall. She was careful not to lean too far back into my chest, instead holding on to the headrest in front of her. Hec took control of the radio and turned it up as loud as it could go, and we rattled in Scott's old car through the town to the cinema.

"Hey," Tamora shouted over the ruckus. "Alice in Chains on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. Who's in?"

There was a chorus of loud agreement.

My heart swelled.

\*

By the time we were finally in the screening room the lights had already been dimmed. We were subjected to numerous glares by other moviegoers as our group walked in front of the screen, trying to find our row of seats, as Tamora handed us, without any kind of discretion, cans of beer that had been argued over at length (much to Scott's dismay, who kept

trying to tell her we were going to miss the beginning of the film). The last time I had been in that cinema was the year before with Piera, Luca, and Andrew. We had seen Jumanji. As the previews rolled I wondered what Piera would have made of the fact that I didn't invite her.

Any thoughts of my best friend dissolved as soon as Tamora leaned over in her seat and whispered right into my ear. I could feel her breath, wisps of her hair grazing my face. I thanked the gods of every dimension for putting us next to each other.

"Don't you just wish you were a witch for real?" she said. "How much fun would it be to have a girl gang and go around fucking shit up just for fun?"

"Totally," I replied, turning my head to face her. Her eyes caught the light of the screen. Without moving, she reached her hand over into my lap and grabbed a handful of popcorn. She stuffed it into her mouth without a hint of elegance and I stifled a giggle.

"Elodie's right," she added quietly, looking back at the screen. "Neve is beautiful. Actually, I think she's hot. Really hot. What do you think?"

I melted into the chair a little bit. What was the proper response to a question like that? My mouth opened and closed a couple of times as my brain strained like a slow computer to calculate the answer.

But I was saved by Scott, who tapped me on the shoulder and handed me his cup of Coke.

Then the previews finished and the movie started. Tamora didn't appear to be waiting for an answer, so I just directed my focus at the screen. But it was almost impossible to pay attention to the storyline. I was so highly conscious of every tiny movement she made that I lost track of the narrative within the first twenty minutes. Like when she crossed her legs. When she reached over for my popcorn. When she finished her first beer and cracked open the second before anyone else. When she slid down her seat and put her feet up on the back of the one in front of her.

I felt the beer start to lower my threshold for constraining myself. I was beginning to understand why alcohol was present at so many meals for adults, the subject of songs, the social glue that stuck people together after work. If this is what drinking was, then I liked it. I liked it very much. I liked that it seemed to peel back the hardest, most rigid layer of my being to expose a little more of the person I felt like I was. Or, at least, who I wanted to be. Brave.

I kept thoughts of Mum's disclosure about Reid at the back of my mind. This wasn't like that. This was different. I was drinking with friends. We were having fun.

When Tamora's legs were crossed so that they were more on my side than Ciro's, I casually unfolded mine, so that we were merely an inch apart. That tiny act made all the hairs on my body stand up. It made my heart start to thump in my chest. How was that even possible, I wondered, that somebody whom I'd met twice was having such a physical effect on me?

It was Tamora that closed the gap between us. I chanced a look out the corner of my eye at her face. She didn't give anything away. And so we stayed like that for a while, our knees making contact, with me feeling as though she was channelling pure electric energy from her bones to mine. I would have been quite content to stay in that moment for the rest of the day. But then, just as quickly as my body had prickled with excitement at her being close, my burning desire was replaced with a lick of fire that made me jerk my knee away as though she had indeed burned me. Ciro had reached over and put his arm around her, and she had leaned over and given him a quick kiss.

And before I knew what I was doing, I had reached over into Scott's lap. I had taken his hand in mine and was squeezing it resolutely. I could feel three pairs of eyes on me but I didn't care. I stared at the screen and stuffed popcorn in my mouth with the other hand. I felt Scott's breathing change. And a



moment later, he adjusted himself in his seat so that his shoulder was up against mine.

I stayed like this until Tamora handed me another beer.

By the time the film had finished, I was a tad drunk, confused, and actually quite desperate to be alone.

“That was fucking brilliant,” Tamora said as we stepped out into the light of the cinema hallway. She slurred her words. She’d had more beer than anyone else. She pulled a cigarette out from her tin and then remembered where she was, and tucked it behind her ear for later.

“You girls need the loo?” She asked Elodie and me. Elodie, who had kept rather quiet since we’d got out the car, nodded. I desperately did. And so the three of us separated from the boys and found the bathroom.

When we were all at the sinks washing our hands, Tamora turned to me. She had a sly smile on her face. She pulled out some paper towels from the dispenser and, slowly, wiped the water off while watching me.

“So,” she said, provocatively. “You and Scott, huh?”

“Er...” I said awkwardly.

“I saw you,” she said, tossing her towels into the bin and folding her arms. She leaned against the wall

and, in one swift movement, retrieved the last beer from her pocket and started drinking. "So, you are into him, then?"

The alcohol brought the words "*no way*" to my lips, but I swallowed them. I couldn't tell if her tone was curious, or accusatory. But her smile suggested her question was all in good fun. I looked at Elodie, who was drying her own hands, looking down at her feet.

"I don't really know him," I said awkwardly.  
"It's... early days."

"Oh, come on," Tamora said. "You can tell us."

"I mean it," I said defensively. "He's nice. He's a nice guy. He's... tall. Good teeth."

"Good teeth," Tamora echoed, laughing. "Tall. Yes, he is."

"Give her a rest," Elodie suddenly said, folding her arms.

"What?" Tamora retorted. "What did I say?"

"Have you even *told* her your history?"

"History?" Tamora and I said at the same time.

"What do you mean, 'history'?" I asked, confused, looking between the both of them. Elodie and Tamora were eyeing each other with intensity.

"It wasn't a big deal," Tamora said in a tone seeped with warning.

"Well, it wasn't a small deal," Elodie retorted.

“Sienna stopped hanging out with us altogether because of what happened.”

“Who’s Sienna?” I asked, thoroughly confused. Scott? Tamora? History? What on Earth was Elodie talking about?

“Sienna is Scott’s ex-girlfriend,” Elodie said before Tamora could argue. “They broke up because she claimed that Scott was in love with Tamora. She used to live with us. But she moved out.”

“Far out, Elodie, that’s all in the past. Everyone’s moved on now. It doesn’t matter. And Sienna was annoying, you even said so yourself.”

“She still has the right to know,” Elodie said stubbornly. “I would want to know.”

“Why do you have to stir the pot?”

“I’m not, I’m just being honest!”

“Guys, please,” I said, taking a step back towards the stalls. “I don’t want to cause any trouble. I had no idea about... Sienna. And I didn’t know Scott had feelings for you. But - are you sure it’s over? How do you know that he still doesn’t?”

Tamora let out a long sigh.

“Because we talked about it. On numerous occasions. Elo’s making it a bigger deal than it needs to be.”

Elodie looked like she was about to open her

mouth to argue again, but Tamora bet her to the punch.

“Fine. *Fine*, Elodie, if you want me to make it awkward, I will. Lenore -”

She turned to face me. The dim light of the bathroom was casting shadows in different directions across her face. She looked drunk. And I certainly felt so too. I was swaying a little bit. Or the room was. It was hard to tell.

“Sienna did used to live with us. Scott met her at one of our parties, after Hec invited him, and that’s actually how he got involved in our friendship circle in the first place. Sienna and Scott dated for, what, a year? And then one day, Sienna got wasted and started shouting and crying saying that the only reason he was with her was to get to me. And he didn’t deny it. It fucked everything up for months. Ciro almost beat Scott up because of it. It’s only been in the last month or so that things have gone back to normal. And I assume he’s over it, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

I put the back of my head against one of the stalls, taking in what Tamora had just said.

“I’m gonna go smoke. I’m sorry, Lenore. I genuinely didn’t think it was the right time to have this conversation. And I genuinely didn’t think it would be

an issue.”

And with that - one last glare at Elodie, and an apologetic nod to me - she left the bathroom.

Elodie looked extremely uncomfortable as the door closed behind her.

“Sorry,” she said apologetically. “I know I’ve only just met you. And that was probably too much. But you seem like a really nice person. Tamora doesn’t want to make a big deal about it, but we all saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“Scott’s infatuation.”

“With... Tamora?”

“Yes. Everyone falls in love with her at some point. But...”

She held my gaze.

“... But they realise, sooner or later.”

“Realise what?”

“Tamora has a kind of, how do I put this... *gravity*. And so does *Ciro*. It’s why people like that end up together.”

“Gravity,” I repeated.

“I would just, if I were you, take things extra slow with Scott.”

I nodded.

That, I thought to myself, was not something I needed to be told by anyone.

## Chapter Eleven

### Alice in Chains

I slammed the door closed on the snarling muzzles of the gargoyles. Falling to my knees to catch my breath, I let go of the stick and rock I had used to fight my way in, and they rolled across the warm marble floor. I was weak. My body was tired, wet, and my efforts to scrub off the burgundy stains with my fingernails were futile. As a way to calm myself I tilted my head back to watch the angels, cherubs, and arrow-bearing women swim quietly in their blue sky. Their peaceful pirouettes and delicate two-dimensional dancing did indeed keep me still. I observed their graceful bodies against the silence of the Gothic power for some time, as light from a dusky sunset stretched rich colours across the pews through the magnificent stained glass windows.

When I was ready to face the congregation of my friends and family, I slowly got to my feet.

My heart skipped a beat.

Instead of the dozens of people standing at the altar that I had expected to see, on this occasion, there was only one lone figure in the pulpit. She had her back to me. She was looking up, hands clasped behind

her back, watching something I couldn't see. It unnerved me deeply.

"Hello?" I called out tentatively. My voice echoed off the high walls and ceiling. When each reflection collided with itself, a harmony rang out, so that one would have assumed it wasn't a lone girl crying but a chorus of singers.

The person slowly turned around.

It was Tamora.

She smiled a broad smile, one that reached me even at my place by the door, and I was overcome with the urge to run right to her. But my feet were held fast to the floor. I couldn't move.

"Tamora," I shouted. And again, the reflections of my own voice harmonised her name. She slowly started walking towards me. She descended the steps of the pulpit, her eyes locked onto mine, taking deliberate steps down the aisle. Colourful shadows dappled her face in pink, yellow and blue light. All I could do was watch her approach until she was so close that I could see every detail of her face. The arc in her lips. The very few freckles scattered over her nose and cheeks. Individual strands of soft pink hair. Eyes, so grey and so bright, that were hiding a great secret.

"Why is the ocean made of wine?" I whispered.

“You know,” she replied softly.

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

As the windows darkened, and as the sound of the raging ocean met my ears, Tamora closed the space between us. And she kissed me. Tenderly, at first, but when her hands came to rest on my waist it began to intensify with a passion that could only rival the force of the waves meeting the shore outside.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered between kisses, as the roof of the cathedral cracked open, and the red rain began to soak us, and the painting slid down the walls and pooled at our feet.

“Don’t stop.”

\*

The phone chirped. And it chirped. And it chirped. Until finally there was a little click, and then a strong American accent met my ears.

“Hello, this is Cindy at The Dictionary Hotel. How may I direct your call?”

Her voice was sharp, twangy, like something right out of a movie.

“Um. Hello. Could I please speak to Luca Trentino?”



“Room number?”

“I - I’m not sure.”

“Mmm. M’am, we need to know the room number in order to connect you.”

“I don’t know it, I’m sorry. Is - is there a guest under the name of Luca Trentino?”

The woman named Cindy sighed. I imagined her behind a big desk, holding a lukewarm coffee in her hand, eyes dreary and tired from her long shift.

“I do have a guest under that name, yes. But it’s not normally our policy to connect without a room number.”

I moved the phone to my other ear. Luca was right there. The thought of being one button-push away from talking to him was too much to keep my voice from quivering.

“He’s my friend,” I said. “I’ve been trying to find him. I’m worried about him. If you could please connect me anyway, just this one time, I’d really appreciate it. I’m calling from the UK and I can only talk for a minute or two. As it is, my parents are going to flip when they see the charge for this call.”

Silence, and then another sigh.

“One moment, please.”

Distorted hold music began to play. I coiled the phone cord around my thumb and forefinger. I pulled

it tight, let it go, and then began the process again until the music stopped and there were a series of metallic clunks.

“Hello?” Said a tentative voice on the other side.

“Oh my god, Luca,” I croaked, gripping the phone with both hands. Before I could help it, tears sprang into my eyes and I began to softly cry into the receiver.

“Lenore, is that you?”

“Yes,” I choked. “Yes, it’s me.”

“Oh, I’m so happy to hear your voice.”

His voice was so familiar. It was comforting. It was the only voice in the whole world that could possibly understand anything that I was about to say. And it was so far away, thousands of miles away. I wanted to evaporate so that I might be consumed by the receiver and travel along the wires, coming out on the other side, to Luca’s hotel room, to a place where it might not have been such a terrifying prospect to be myself.

“Hey, why are you so upset? I’m sorry, please don’t cry -”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s not you. It’s - I just - why didn’t you *tell* me?”

“I didn’t tell anyone about SFU, Len, not even my parents. I just knew I couldn’t stay in Eldridge any longer -”

“No! Not that you were going to leave. Why didn’t

you tell me that you're *gay*?"

I was met with silence on the other end of the phone.

I had, like I did with most important conversations, rehearsed what I had wanted to say, what I wanted to convey, but that was all gone. I was at the whim of my unstable and unpredictable emotions. And I stood, the phone unit held tightly to my body, my chest rising and falling as I dragged one world just a little bit closer to another.

"I... I'm sorry. I was afraid."

"Luca, *I'm gay too!*" I practically shrieked into the receiver. Then I clamped my hand over my wet face. It was the first time I'd said it. The first time I had said it aloud. And for the briefest of moments it was like I had let out a breath I'd been holding for years. But at the sound of his silence, I felt the air fill up inside me again like a balloon pressing on all my organs.

"Please," I begged him. "Please tell me everything is going to be okay. Please tell me what to do."

"Lenore... I..."

He switched ears with his receiver.

"Thank you for telling me," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you at the time. I'm sorry I ran away. You have every right to be upset with me. Especially as... well, you're brave to admit it to me. I

couldn't admit it to anyone."

"We could have been there for each other," I said quickly. "We could have done this together."

"I would like to think that. But I couldn't keep living the lie."

"How long did you know?"

He sighed, a long, sad, sigh.

"For years. Since... since we were kids. I built my whole identity on lies. I knew how my parents were going to react so there was no way I could even think about being honest. But ultimately it was out of my hands anyway," he said darkly. "When did you?"

I bit my lip.

"I don't know. It's like I've always known, in some way, but never had the language to even understand it myself. You never expect it to be you, you know? The only stuff I've ever known about gay people are the stereotypes. And I don't relate to them. So... it never occurred to me it might be the explanation as to why I've never been interested in boys. I just thought I was too young. Or they were too weird. Or... that it was a case of waiting for the right one to come along. But then the right person does come along... and... and then..."

"And then it all makes sense," Luca finished my garbled sentence for me. "You spend so long passing

your feelings off as something else, right? Lenore, you are speaking my language.”

“Luca, I’m going insane. You’re the only person in the whole world I feel like I can talk to.”

“Who’s the girl, then?”

I looked towards the bedroom door. Of course the house was empty, but I was convinced someone was going to walk in at any moment and catch me. I swallowed, my head swimming, my palms sweating.

“Tamora,” I said. “I met her through your friend, Scott. Who I... am unofficially dating. I think.”

“Scott Wilton?” He said, surprised.

“Yes.”

“Hang on - Tamora? As in, Ciro and Tamora?”

“You know them?”

“I do. Superficially. I’ve been to a couple of their infamous parties at that... house.”

“So you know her, then?”

“I wouldn’t say I know her. But I can see why you like her. She’s beautiful. And charming.”

*Like her.* I resisted the urge to tell Luca that I felt like I could move mountains for her.

“But from memory,” he said, and I could picture his forehead creasing, in the same way that Piera and their dad’s would. “She’s a bit wild. Her boyfriend, too. They don’t really have a lot of boundaries.”

“Why do you say that? In what way?” I stammered.

“She’s a bit all over the place. I think... didn’t Scott have feelings for her, or something? I remember he came to football really down after he and his ex broke up.”

“Apparently. Elodie told me. But Tamora said it’s not an issue anymore.”

“Oh yeah. Elodie. I remember her. She’s nice.”

“Yeah,” I said, dismissively. “But do you know if Tamora has ever been with girls before? Because - because I swear there’s some kind of connection between us. I can’t explain it.”

“I don’t know if she has, no,” Luca said slowly. “But I will say this: be careful.”

“I’m not going to tell everyone, if that’s what you mean.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. If you’re feeling vulnerable, and if she’s the kind of person who has a boyfriend - any partner, for that matter - and is prepared to play with your feelings, stay away from her. You don’t have a support network to help you if it doesn’t go your way.”

*Stay away?* I felt a prickle of anger. That was easy for him to say now that he was on the other side of the world.

“But I think maybe she feels the same way as me,” I said, a hint of desperation in my voice.

“How do you know? Has she told you?”

“Well - not exactly, no...”

“Lenore, I knew someone just like Tamora. And we played mind games for years. He was charming and compelling and flirted with me like mad, even though he had a girlfriend most of the time. Ultimately he broke my heart and really contributed to me wanting to leave. If I can help you avoid that temptation to get too close to someone who has the power to hurt -”

“She’s not hurting me,” I said defensively. “And I’m sorry it didn’t work out with whoever it was, but I think this is different.”

“I would have said the same thing at the time. Love is blind, Lenore, and when you can’t talk to your friends about it, then it can really get away on you.”

“What am I supposed to do, then? I’m trapped here, in this mess, I can’t talk to *anyone* -”

“Would you consider telling your mum? I always thought your mum was reasonable. She’s smart. She’s the queen of logic. My parents are so bloody closed-minded it’s unbelievable.”

“Are you kidding?” I shot back. “I thought your parents were kind and reasonable, and look how they

treated you! I heard them, you know, on the night of your party. I came to find your mum because she was supposed to drive Piera and me home. I heard the way your dad spoke to you. And I thought they were *nice* -"

"You heard that? Did anyone else?" He asked quickly.

"I didn't mean to. And... no. I don't think so."

He sighed.

"Look. I'm going to tell you the smart thing to do, and you're going to do the opposite. Because let's be honest. The world is full of Tamoras and they are seductive as hell. I hope for your sake that maybe it is different. But if it isn't, just be prepared. And my advice to you about coming out... just get the flying fuck out of Eldridge. Choose a city. Any big city. And go. Even if it's London. The world is changing, but it's not changing fast enough in places like Eldridge for people like you and me. Being in San Fransisco has opened my eyes. There are people here who don't even bat an eyelid. Lenore - I can go to clubs here! There's a community. There's support. And of course I'm upset about how my family has reacted. I'm devastated. I can only hope they come around eventually. Because what's the alternative? Keep lying? See a conversion therapist like they want me to? Be with women so my parents can just go on with



their lives as if everything is fine? Well, I tried that, and it's just so unfair. I feel terrible about how I lied to Bonnie. It was unfair on her and it was also unfair on me. How can people expect me to live a life without love just so they don't have to feel uncomfortable? Because, really... what does who we love have to do with anyone else?"

The tears were flowing thick and fast down my cheeks.

We both stayed on the line for almost a full minute, listening to nothing but the sound of the soft hum from the phone line. I felt more alone than ever. I felt older than ever. I was now head and shoulders into that new Universe, and the only thing keeping me from falling in completely was that I still had to get up in the morning and do what I'd always done: go to school, sit exams, and eat lunch on the tennis courts. But everything else had changed. I had changed. And so had Luca.

"Look, I gotta go," Luca said gently. "I'm moving into an apartment tomorrow and need to get organised. It's going to be me and three others. There's a girl too, actually, and she's gay - you'd really like her. Her name's Emilia."

"Didn't your mum come out to see you? Did she meet them?"

“Yes, she came out here. But no. It didn’t go well. She doesn’t get it. She wanted me to come home, go back to Cambridge, and see a conversion therapist and a priest. She refused to meet my new friends.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. But I’m not going to stop living my life for my parents’ sake. And you shouldn’t, either.”

\*

It was like flipping a coin every morning I woke up over the next two weeks. Would I be pumped with adrenalin, my energy stores coming from the thought of seeing Tamora again? Or would I be sedated with sadness at the reality of the situation: that I was harbouring the weight of a secret that had the potential and the power to obliterate relationships across every area of my life?

Some mornings I’d come down bright and early for breakfast, charged by perhaps another dream with Tamora in it, or having spent hours fantasising about what kissing her in real life would feel like. Other days Alicia would have to come and wake me and I would climb out of bed and I’d move as if traveling through thick, heavy syrup. And I would struggle just to make it down the stairs.

My family never knew which version of me they were going to get. They asked me regularly what was going on but I used the same reasons over and over: I was worried about exams, about university, about the prospect of the future. I made few plans outside the house and spent most of my time in my room, ruminating over various fantasies and realities.

When I told Mum and Ant about the concert they were relieved. They weren't bothered Piera wasn't going - they were just happy that I would be getting out of the house. It didn't faze them that I'd be staying the night in London at a hostel. Scott had left such a strong, positive impression on them, and the knowledge that we were going in a group seemed to deter them from any sort of worry. Mum had even met him once more since the night he drove us out to the party. They'd bumped into each other on campus and had a long chat. It was Mum who had invited him to dinner on the Sunday after the gig. I wanted to protest at her for making plans on my behalf. But then I thought I'd just leave it. It was probably going to be the last time I'd see her get excited about me bringing someone home.

I had decided I was going to call things off with Scott after the gig. After the conversation in the bathroom at the cinema, and with everything Luca

said on the phone, the idea of continuing to see Scott when I knew I didn't have feelings for him just wasn't right. And what's more, the mere idea that he had been infatuated with Tamora made me feel icky. I ran scenarios in my head about what must have gone down when everybody found out. I tried to picture what Sienna looked like. I tried to imagine what kinds of things would have lead her - and the others - to become aware of his infatuation. Indeed, I felt nauseous when I pictured the group whispering behind hands as they worked out that *I*, clearly, had feelings for her too.

But we still had the gig planned. And I wanted to see everyone. If I called it off before then - would I even be welcome? Would I be asked back to the house ever again? Probably not. I would just fade into the background of all their lives, someone of very little importance... "*Scott's Lenore*," they'd say, remembering with difficulty details about anything to do with me, referring to my time in the house as a blip on Scott's dating history. They would forget about me, but I would remember every single moment with them in bright detail forever. I would be nothing, but they would all be the most interesting part of my life up until that point. I hoped that by at least making that trip to London with them, that I might earn a place as

an individual in their group, and not be there simply because of Scott.

The O2 Brixton Academy was on a busy corner, all lit up. People of all ages, shapes and sizes were hanging about outside, smoking, drinking, laughing. It was noisy and dirty and I was glad I was with a decent sized group so that I could keep well hidden amongst them. It was the first time I'd been to London with a group of friends that didn't contain Piera, and it was the first concert I'd seen without Ant or my mum with me. Needless to say I had to remind myself to relax every few minutes on the train to London, my anxiety only reducing after a couple of beers.

I had told Piera about the concert, of course. I knew she was waiting for me to ask her outright so that she could decline on the spot. But I wasn't going to. In truth, I didn't want her coming with us, and I didn't want to take the chance that she might say yes just to spite me. If she came I would regress to the timid and juvenile version of who I'd always been when I was with her. Not to mention, I was still angry. Fury bubbled under my skin whenever she was near me and I was looking for any reason to have a go at her. Her words about Luca had been getting louder in my head since we'd spoken. They'd start ringing out in my head spontaneously, without provocation; when I

was in the shower, when I was walking to school, when I was getting books from my locker. This anger ensured I did everything I could to avoid her at school. And every time she went to address it, I invented a reason to leave whatever situation we were in.

“Let’s go down that alley,” Tamora said to the group, grabbing *Ciro* by the sleeve and dragging him towards a narrow cut between two brick buildings. In her other hand she was holding her little black tin.

“A sentence that never lead to anything good,” *Elodie* said sarcastically, and our group broke away from the crowd outside the *O2* and followed her.

*Tamora* lit up one of two joints and took an almighty inhale. The only direct light source came from a neon sign above a narrow door at the other end of the alley; the bright electric blue turned her into a fire-breathing silhouette, and I watched her with a simmering mix of admiration and desire.

She handed it to *Ciro*, who inhaled just as deeply, then lit the second joint and passed it the other way around the circle. We all stood without speaking, letting the sounds of the night get absorbed into our skin. London was like the beating heart of the whole world. Even the underground looked like a network of veins and arteries, forming a spider’s web beneath the

busy roads, spanning out in its network that supplied lifeblood to the rest of the country. And I was there, standing in the gateway of its right atrium, standing at the doorway to limitless possibilities.

Tamora lifted a flask to her mouth. She kept her eyes on me as she tilted her head back. When she licked her lips I felt all the blood rush through my body.

When the joint got to me, Scott paused with his hand held aloft.

“Are you sure?”

“What do you mean, am I sure?” I snapped, angrily jolted from my trance, reaching up and taking the glowing remains of the joint. Scott looked sheepish at my remark and Hec snorted. I ignored them.

I remembered Tamora’s words about the oxygen and I did my best to do as she said. The beer and the pot quietly met each other in my brain, swirling together like milk into coffee. The ends of the joints were tossed into the drain and we left the shadows of the alley, all red-eyed with grins on our faces.

We joined the line leading into the venue. When we got to the front a man dressed in black holding a clipboard saw Ciro. His face split into a smile and the two clapped each other on the back and started speaking in rapid Italian. Tamora greeted this

unknown man with a kiss on each cheek, then looked over at me, pointing. Scott handed the guy a stack of tickets.

The man gestured through a side door leading up a staircase and before I had time to register what was happening we were being ushered towards the separate entrance.

“Where are we going?” I nervously asked Tamora.

She winked at me.

“You’re gonna like it.”

“How do you know that guy?”

“He’s a friend of Ciro’s. We used to spend a lot of time here,” she said, taking my hand and leading us through a snaking, brightly-lit hallway. There wasn’t another opportunity to ask any more questions. The sound of deep bass and loud voices started to fill our ears and we approached open double-doors. It was dark beyond them, something like the entry to cave. When we reached the threshold I paused. From where we stood we could almost see the whole venue; the tiers that held people with seated tickets; the dense crowd at the foot of the stage heaving as a single body. The energy coming off the masses was palpable.

We descended the steps down a narrow aisle together, passing the crowds on our left. We went all the way to the bottom and then, to my utmost



surprise, turned at the foot of the stage. There was a near-empty fenced off section that contained about two-dozen people leaning against the balustrade. Only security guards patrolling their post and a couple of photographers stood between us and where the acts would be.

“We’re VIP, baby!” Tamora shouted, putting her arm around my neck. I felt the weight of her body on mine and she shunted me forward.

“Did you know about this?” I demanded of Scott, who was looking mightily proud of himself. He nodded sheepishly.

Unable to adequately express my shock and excitement I placed my hands on the cold metal of the balustrade next to Tamora and Elodie. Scott stood directly behind me. Hec and Ciro had stopped at the corner of the stage to talk to more men dressed entirely in black with coiled wires running into their ears. I was dying to know how they had made contacts at the venue - who had she met? What acts had she seen? But my thoughts were drowned out by the sound of the crowd and the loud rock music playing overhead.

Tamora handed me the hip-flask.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“It’s just whiskey. Don’t worry, it’s not the stuff

that Hec brews.”

I took a swig and then handed it to Scott who also obliged.

“Seriously,” I said into her ear as the intensity of the crowd grew by the minute. “Thank you. This is amazing.”

“Well, when you said how much you loved them, there was no way we were gonna be all the way at the back!”

She slipped her arm around my waist and gave me a tight squeeze.

By the time the band came onto the stage my voice was hoarse and my hair was wet with sweat. I was alive; the energy from the crowd, the power of the music, the way the musicians dominated the stage. They were so close I could make out every pained expression on their faces. I could see the individual strings on their guitars. When they tipped water over their heads and threw the bottles into the crowd, I could see the little puddles that formed as it ran off their bodies. I forgot about every single one of my worries as I sang and danced and screamed the lyrics to my favourite songs.

“I need the bathroom,” Tamora said into my ear after the first six or seven songs. “Do you?”

“Yeah,” I lied.

“Where are you going?” Scott asked as Tamora grabbed my hand and started to lead me away.

“Bathroom,” I shouted. Both Scott and Elodie narrowed their eyes as we disappeared, but then turned back to the stage.

She didn’t let go of my hand as we weaved down the hallway. I gripped her tightly. We took a different turn up a flight of stairs, and soon we were on a mezzanine outside bathrooms. There were lines out the doors.

Out of breath we joined our queue and leaned against the wall.

“This is truly brilliant,” I gushed. “I didn’t expect to be so close.”

“If we’re lucky we might even see them around afterward.”

“Who - the band?”

“I’m not making any promises,” Tamora said, moving a few steps forward into the busy bathroom as people left. “But it’s happened before. Just depends on what they’re like.”

I could feel it. I was gripping the seams of the new Universe with both hands. I was tearing it open wider. I was ready to fall into it. I was ready to leave that old place behind - the place where Piera lived, the place where I was awkward and unsure and determined to

do everything right. I wanted to be exactly where I was. I wanted to be at a concert, dancing, with people who had stories and who were already living life, not just preparing for it. And as Tamora took me by the hand into the tiny bathroom stall I was barely a shadow of the person people would have recognised me as.

She sat down. I didn't really know where to look so I put my foot up on the wall of the stall and re-tied my shoelaces, the sound of Alice in Chains thudding in the atmosphere around us, the dim light of the dingy bathroom flickering intermittently. When she was finished she stood up, flushed the chain, and faced me.

I turned towards her.

And without making any effort to allow for personal space, we slid past each other. Our bodies made full contact and I felt the entire weight of the world pushing against me. When I was facing the door we didn't separate. We just stood there, breathing, looking into the depths of each other. Tamora's hands were pressing the walls of the stalls as if to stop her from falling forward. And mine were holding onto the waistband of my jeans.

I think time stopped. I think my heart stopped.

I don't know how long we were in that position for. It could have been seconds, or minutes, or even

days.

I was aware of every blood cell in my whole body and exactly where it was.

Was she leaning in? Was it just an illusion, a trick of the light, or were her eyes focusing on my lips? Was she slowly moving towards me, like a wave about to collide with the shore? Even if she wasn't, I was, and we were but an inch from each other's mouths -

There was a bang on the door and we sprang apart.

"Hurry the fuck up, or share!" Came an angry voice. It was as though a stranger had slid a fine needle into our bubble and pierced it. Tamora immediately plunged her hand into her jacket and finished the whiskey in the hip-flask and I had to try and go to the toilet. I couldn't. Every muscle south of my waist was locked up in a tense, rigid, unbending pose. Luckily it was so noisy that it didn't matter.

We left the stall to a barrage of eye-rolling. I washed my hands, feeling a dull pulse surging through all my tissues.

We didn't say anything as we walked back to the others. I resumed my place in front of Scott who placed his hands on my shoulders, and next to Elodie, who acted as if I wasn't there at all.

And Tamora went to Ciro. And I had to pretend

for the next two hours that I gave a single fuck about Alice in Chains.

\*

By the time we got to the hostel I was drunk. Perhaps the most drunk I had ever been. I'd taken whatever had come my way: Tamora's whiskey, Hec's whiskey, swigs of Scott's beer. When we left the venue - Alice in Chains nowhere in sight - Scott had to support me with his arm under mine. As we walked the streets of Brixton late at night, I sang slurred words of the songs. Scott took another joint out of my fingers as one was passed around.

"You're going to be sick enough as it is," he said worriedly, but I scowled at him.

I couldn't look at Tamora.

I didn't want to look at her face. She was hand-in-hand with Ciro as if everything was normal. How could she think everything was normal? If I didn't look at her face, I reasoned drunkenly, then I could still imagine she was looking at me with desire in her eyes. I could still act as though she was in turmoil over me; because to look at her face and to see her eyes on Ciro violated that whole prospect.

The hostel looked rather grimy and small. It was

close to a railway underpass and as we pushed through the door the sound of a train rattling overhead made the walls vibrate. I wanted to be asleep. I wanted to be in a silent, black landscape. We retrieved our key to the room and trudged up the stairs, everyone talking nonsense, commenting on the show. I nodded along, chipping in where appropriate, but mostly holding back vomit.

The only light in the room came from a single dirty bulb suspended from the ceiling. It was dim, and the dark maroon walls made the place look danker than it probably was. There were three iron-framed bunks with chipped red paint. The bottom beds were small doubles and the tops were narrow singles. At the back of the room was a rickety door that lead to a tiny bathroom.

Elodie went to the bunk closest to the far corner of the room and climbed up the metal ladder and flopped down. She pulled the covers over her head without even taking off any of her clothes. Hec did the same thing on the bunk bed closest to the door, only he pulled off his very sweaty shirt and tossed it on the floor first. Out the corner of my eye I saw Ciro remove his shirt, shoes and jeans, and climb into one of the bottom bunks. Tamora, to my absolute horror, pulled off her t-shirt to reveal a cropped and completely see-

through bra. I noticed a small tattoo on the right side of her ribs before she dived into the bed beside Ciro.

I did not take off my shirt. I didn't even take off my jeans. I went straight into the tiny bathroom and slammed the door and began heaving the contents of my stomach into the toilet bowl.

"Are you okay?" Scott said, his concerned voice meeting my ears outside the bathroom. I wretched again.

"Let me," I heard Elodie say at a distance. "She needs a girl."

The door opened a minute later and she emerged, a steely look of determination on her face. She closed the door behind her. With one hand she turned on the sink tap and with the other she scrunched my hair into a knot so that it didn't stick to my cheeks.

Her fingers were delicate and soft.

"It's okay," she said quietly. "Just let it out."

I couldn't have not let it out even if I'd tried. Kneeling over the toilet I emptied the contents of my stomach right down to the first beer I'd had on the train. When I was finished, I put the lid down and sat, my mouth all shades of awful. Elodie handed me her bottle of water.

"Just take little sips," she said. I nodded.

"You're so nice," I said. "The nicest."



“Ha. You are sweet. And drunk.”

“No, you are. I’m awful.”

“You’re not awful, Lenore. At all.”

“And you’re so pretty.”

Elodie’s face flushed.

“We need to get you into bed,” she said after I finished the water, reaching out for my hand and leading me gently out the door and into the room. I felt eyes on me but I ignored them.

“Are you okay?” Scott asked, coming forward.

“Do you need anything?”

“Just sleep,” I murmured to Scott. The world was rocking under my feet. I didn’t know what I was doing. But I didn’t let go of Elodie’s hand. I pulled her down onto the bed with me, closing my eyes, immediately falling asleep as my head hit the pillow.

\*

I awoke some hours later stone-cold sober. My mouth was on fire. I desperately needed the loo. I was conscious that my left arm was numb; I turned my head to the side and felt my stomach drop. Elodie was asleep next to me.

From my vantage point, and from the dark blue light that was filtering through the tatty curtains

covering the only window in the room, I could make out Hec's form on the bunk opposite with Tamora and Ciro wound around each other on the bed underneath. The little curve in the slats above told me that Scott had resigned himself to the small single bed on top of us.

I sat up slowly. My head pounded. With difficulty and with as much grace as I could muster I wriggled out from under Elodie's neck and went into the bathroom. She didn't rouse.

I looked revolting. My hair was sticking up on all ends. My makeup was smudged around my eyes. My lips were bright red and dry. Once I'd made some kind of effort to tidy myself up, and relieved my bladder, I tiptoed back into the room. The smell was awful. Judging by the light it must have been just before sunrise. Retrieving my jacket from the floor and slinging it over my shoulders I looked down at Tamora and Ciro.

They were sleeping peacefully. The duvet was all scrunched up at their waists. Their bodies were on display, the perfect compliment of masculine and feminine, of dark and light. I noticed Ciro had tattoos too. One on his shoulder and one on his stomach. His arm was draped around Tamora and she was nuzzled into his neck. It was like watching some kind of horror

film in real time as she opened her eyes and looked up at me.

I looked back.

It was different from the night before. Where at the concert it was hungry, desperate, longing and lustful... this look in the morning was anxious, almost fearful. She stayed stock-still. I blinked a couple of times, unsmiling. And then I turned around and slipped out the bedroom door, down the stairs past reception, and made my way outside into the chilly morning.

I walked slowly. I walked the most obvious way. My arms were folded across my chest. I looked back, twice, to see if she was following me.

She wasn't.

## Chapter Twelve

### Benthos

“Hello, hello,” Scott said warmly as we stepped over the threshold into the entrance way of our house. He was holding a fresh cut of flowers he’d bought on the way home and handed them to my mother, who smiled amiably and thanked him. He and Ant shook hands vigorously.

“I’m so glad we’re finally doing this,” Scott exclaimed as my parents lead us into the dining area.

“Us too,” my mum said, giving me a quick hug. Ant went straight into the kitchen and started dishing up the meal he’d prepared for our arrival: a teriyaki stir-fry with home-made summer rolls. One of his specialties.

Alicia eyed Scott cautiously from the couch in the lounge. Scott gave her a little wave and she murmured a quiet, “hi”. Teddy sat next to her, beaming.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Mum asked Scott, opening up the liquor cabinet and poking her head around the archway that lead into the living room. “Whiskey? Gin? Or do you prefer beer? Or... are you feeling a bit worse for wear after the show and your day in London?”

“You know what, I’d love a whiskey,” Scott said, removing his jacket and draping it over the back of one of the dining chairs. “Just with a bit of ice, thanks. I didn’t go too crazy last night.”

“Sensible. Lenore?” Mum asked.

“Um. Could I... could I have a red wine instead, please?”

“Suit yourself,” she said, bringing a bottle over to the table. She proceeded to open it and pour one for me, herself, and Ant, who at that moment was placing the steaming hot food on the table.

“Can I have some?” Alicia asked, pulling out her chair and sitting down.

“Yeah, and me?” Teddy added. Alicia scowled at him.

“You’re only ten.”

“So. You’re only four years older than me.”

“I think for tonight you two can stick to ginger beer,” Mum said. Alicia opened her mouth to protest but closed it again. She knew better than to get mum riled up in front of a stranger.

We all sat down.

The first part of the meal passed with a relative banality; small-talk about the concert (all details of my drunkenness omitted), and our day in London wandering around Brixton, Camden, and Kings Cross.

Conversation moved to Scott and his family, Teddy's football team, Alicia's affinity with science and the likelihood she'd follow in Mum's footsteps. We talked about Ant's work, with Scott expressing interest in some of his more dramatic cases on the job. I hoped I was going to get away with having almost no spotlight on myself. But when we had finished the stir-fry, everyone in good spirits after a tasty meal, Scott turned to me, rested his hand on my shoulder, and asked loudly and clearly:

"Has Lenore showed you her impressive skills on the guitar yet?"

"No, she hasn't. We're waiting for her to dazzle us," Mum said.

"I've only had one lesson," I said defensively. "I can't play anything."

I'd practiced every day in my room after school with the amp off. I'd got much faster at tuning and perhaps a touch more dextrous at the simple scale. But I certainly wasn't ready to dazzle anyone, least of all my parents.

"Oh, come on," Scott said jovially. "Ciro said she's a natural."

"Who's Giro?"

"He's the guy giving me the lessons," I said quickly. "He's really good."

“He is. I’m a little envious of him, to be honest,” Scott said, finishing his whiskey. “But I think in no time you’ll be slashing away even better than he can.”

“I doubt it,” I said almost inaudibly, my brain prickling at his declaration of envy for Ciro.

“Lenore tells me her dad used to be in a band?”

The atmospheric pressure in the living room dropped like a stone. I immediately brought the wine up to my mouth and finished the glass. Alicia’s eyes widened, and Mum and Ant both stopped moving like lizards trying to camouflage into their surroundings.

“I’m sorry,” Scott said quickly, reading the room. “Did I use the wrong language? Please forgive me, Lenore only mentioned it in passing, I certainly don’t want to bring up something sensitive.”

I was impressed by his delicate backtracking.

Mum cleared her throat.

“Of course not, Scott, don’t apologise. I’m - I’m glad Lenore felt comfortable enough to share that information with you.”

She made it sound as though I had tenderly told him over a candlelit dinner. Is that what Mum had expected I do? I felt a little shameful at the idea.

“Me too,” he said, looking at me and smiling. I got up, grabbed the bottle of wine, and poured the remainder of the bottle into my glass.

“Lenore’s father was indeed in a band,” my mum went on, getting up to retrieve another bottle from the cabinet. “He was very talented. I don’t doubt that if she puts her mind to it, she could be just as good as he was.”

“What was his band called?” I asked.

Mum looked at me, taking her seat again and removing the cork. She swallowed.

“Benthos.”

“Benthos?” We all said in unison. Teddy giggled at the accidental chorus.

“Yes, Benthos. It was actually me who helped him come up with the name.”

“What does it mean?” Alicia asked. She was listening intently, looking between me and Mum and Scott and Ant.

“Well, Reid - Lenore’s father - had a particular song about feeling like he lived on the seabed. It was quite a catchy tune. The band had some other terrible name, I can’t even remember it, but I told him one day that it reminded me of something I’d studied briefly in biology.”

“Benthos,” I said, letting the word roll off my tongue and teeth.

“Benthos is the name given to certain ocean creatures. They live in an area called the benthic zone.



Tidal pools by the sea, right up to the continental shelf of the ocean... even right down at the very bottom, at the lowest depths. He liked the imagery and convinced the rest of the band to go by that name from then on.”

“Did he have an album?” Scott asked. “I’d love to hear that song.”

Mum hesitated.

“He did.”

“He did?” I said immediately. “Where is it?”

“I don’t have it,” she said softly. “Your aunt has all of Reid’s music.”

“As in... June?”

Mum nodded.

“June... who’s in Canada? Who we haven’t had contact with in, what, ten years?”

She nodded again.

“How do I get hold of them?”

I knew I was putting Mum on the spot but I was overcome with desperation to listen to the music. Simultaneously, a deep and resounding anger blossomed at her for keeping that information to herself for so long. With Scott at the table perhaps I had a unique opportunity to bargain with her. And I was more prepared to bargain; the wine had taken effect.

“I suppose... we’d have to ask June.”

“Do you still have her number? Can we call her?”

Ant placed his hand on Mum’s. He didn’t look at her but the act was an open demonstration that the conversation was venturing into territory that was too provocative. That may have been the case but I wasn’t about to pass up a chance at getting something more tangible than an old jacket.

“I can have a look,” she said, her voice a little strained. “I’m sure it’s around somewhere. But I don’t know if she’s moved or if she’s in the same house.”

“It’d be a start,” I said snappily.

Scott seemed to recognise that we were on the border of tipping from polite discussion into uncomfortable family drama. He looked between my mum and me.

“May I use your bathroom?”

“Of course,” Mum said. “It’s just off the laundry.”

“Excuse me,” Scott whispered, getting up from the table.

I stared at my wine glass with determination. My body was stiff. I wanted to be alone.

“Lenore, I was going to talk to you about that in due course,” Mum said in an undertone. “I’m sorry. You probably have a lot of questions.”

“It’s fine,” I said shortly. “It’s fine. I’m sure you have your reasons for cutting out June.”

“Are you going to be in a band, too?” Teddy asked, the subtext of the conversation going entirely over his head.

“I doubt it,” I said before I could help myself.

When Scott returned, the topic of conversation shifted to his studies at Cambridge University. I tried to listen as best as I could but all I could think of was that somewhere, in an attic or a basement in Canada, a relic of my father was cold and untouched. And as I kept a part of my identity hidden from everyone seated around the table from me, so too was a part of my identity held aloft out of my reach.

\*

I didn't risk turning the light on. I parted the curtains ever so slightly to allow a sliver of moon to illuminate my bedroom in a soft silver glow. It was just after two o'clock in the morning. I packed a spare torch, an extra jumper, a book, a lighter, and slung my backpack over my shoulders. As they did in the movies I arranged my pillows to look like a person under the covers. And with my boots in one hand I crept down the stairs as quietly as I possibly could. All the doors to my family's bedrooms were closed.

I made my way through the laundry and to the

side door that lead to the garden. I quickly put on my boots and laced them tight before placing my fingers on the key that was in the lock. Then I stepped outside.

The only light to guide me was that of the moon. It hung low in the sky, thin clouds streaking across it. I was traversing the underworld. This scene played out every night without me and I felt like I was witnessing something that was normally kept a secret; the swaying and creaking of the old trees. The wind rushing through leaves as though the world was sighing. All sounds had been magnified and all shadows had their own hidden dimensions. Against my will I constructed visions about what was concealed behind them. I had to force myself not to picture the hidden man, or the ghost, or even my mother, from stepping out to stop me and scold me. Every night this world existed while I slept, and I was completely ignorant to it.

But not anymore.

When I made it to the school field I didn't bother turning on the torch that I'd been gripping in my left hand the whole journey. I didn't need it. I could see the silhouette of the school border in the distance, the steeple of the chapel poking out from behind the trees. It made me shudder in terror. On the field, in the

moonlight, I was exposed - I was vulnerable - but my body carried me forward despite every reason I had to turn around and go back to bed. I started jogging. And the night bore down on me, watching this strange newcomer interrupting the underworld, wondering what to do with me.

By the time I made it to the door of the east wing of the chapel my heart was in my throat. The only sound was that of my breathing. With my hands shaking so violently it took several attempts to get the key into the lock; the door finally opened with a resounding creak that echoed through the wide space. My skin erupted in goosebumps as I looked into the darkness of the chapel. The parallel between the dreams and my current reality was not lost on me. But this was no Gothic cathedral. I was not running from a physical storm, but a mental one, and perhaps it was the dream that had given me the idea in the first place.

As in the dream, I had gone there not to find God, but to find myself.

I took one step inside the chapel and closed the door behind me, sealing the ultimate silence and creating the ultimate stillness. I walked slowly, turning my head back and forth, expecting Reverend Rhys to appear. Or worse. Chapels and their old and ceremonial architecture were not designed for comfort

or for warmth. They were supposed to inspire fear. Or greatness. They reminded you that you were small and that God, whoever or whatever that was, was big.

When I made it to the raised pulpit I looked behind me at the empty rows of pews. I couldn't even imagine the feeling of standing up in front of over a thousand pairs of eyes. My respect for Reverend Rhys increased. I had always thought of him a rather a doddering old codger, but it would have still taken a decent amount of bravery to get up and command the attention of a thousand students.

I slipped behind the curtain and went up the stairs to the green room. It was at this time I turned on the torch. And when I found the lamp and a soft, yellow light filled the space, I breathed my first full proper breath since leaving the comfort and safety of my home. The silent green room looked as it always did: like a messy old lounge.

I collapsed down into one of the armchairs and closed my eyes and felt an enormous sense of relief.

I'd made it. I had successfully distracted myself, from myself. The fear of running through the night had stopped me from thinking about Tamora, about Scott, or about my future. I had only focused - for a full twenty-minutes since I started getting ready - on the challenge ahead of me. And I felt gloriously

anonymous in the green room. There, I could be anyone. I could explore the thoughts and feelings that were plaguing me with such intensity I scarcely had room for anything else.

I extracted the tin from the cabinet and began trying to roll a joint. It was hard work. My fingers were still shaking.

When I had managed to roll something that resembled a rather poor version of one of Tamora's sleek and tight creations, I pulled out the lighter and lit it. I was a spluttering mess of coughs and even a couple of dry heaves, but I relished the feeling that descended upon me not long after. I began to indulge myself, to indulge the thoughts that were half-formed but not fully expressed for fear of being walked in on and interrupted.

What was Tamora playing at? What was she *doing* with me in the bathroom at the concert? And how could she walk around London all day, hand-in-hand with Ciro, acting as though it hadn't happened? I wanted to talk to Piera. How desperately I needed her rational voice. I needed her to tell me I was crazy. Not for having feelings for a woman in the first place, but for emotionally investing in a person who did indeed have a partner. Was Luca right about everything? Was Tamora some kind of trap? And Elodie - what she said

about Tamora and Ciro's gravity - was this just something everyone knew and accepted about them?

I felt a pang of guilt as I pictured Scott's face at the end of our family dinner.

We'd stood outside on the driveway, my parents having tactfully given us some privacy to say our goodnights. Mum had offered him the pull-out couch but Scott had declined politely, stating he had an early lecture in the morning and didn't want to disturb our school routine. He knew exactly what parents wanted to hear.

At the end of a long day of exploring London, and after a milestone event of having a dinner date, the words faltered at my lips. I wanted to tell him the truth. I wanted to explain that it wasn't his fault - that he was a perfectly nice, perfectly handsome man - but the truth was too painful to acknowledge in that moment. And so I kissed him goodnight and watched his car drive out of sight, knowing I had made everything worse. Every additional day with him, memory, experience, was just tangling me up further in my web of untruths. I wanted to like Scott. I wanted to want him.

But I simply couldn't.

I relit the joint and breathed deeply.



## Chapter Thirteen

### These Sort of Intensities

I went to the green room twice that week; I was becoming less afraid of the darkness and more comfortable with the sounds of the night and the shadows between the trees. In an effort to be left alone I had been continuing to tell Mum and Ant, as well as Scott, that study was my highest priority. And I did sit at the desk in my room surrounded by text books and screeds of notes scribbled on paper so that whenever Mum came in to check on me it looked like I was working. But in reality I was alternating between study and writing long letters to myself. I was making lists. I was drawing up 'life plans'. I was creating for myself profiles of lives that I could live - ones where I did what others expected of me, and indeed, what I had been planning for up until then. But I also drew up fantasies of buying a van and driving around Europe; one where I changed my name, got a Canadian passport and moved to Vancouver; one where I wrote some songs and busked my way around the world; one where I learned about Greek mythology and worked in a library. But each of the lives I fleshed out in front of me didn't look like mine.

They looked like someone else's.

My preference for solitude and introspection exacerbated the distance between Piera and me following the week of the concert. My head was cloudy and I was tired, my late nights smoking pot in the chapel making me irritable. I simply hadn't noticed or welcomed her attempts to draw me closer and by Friday we had returned to hollow dialogue. We had quietly packed up our books and made our way in the direction of the field without speaking. The bright light from the grey afternoon day was a reminder that summer was just around the corner. I looked down at my feet on the rucked grass. There were really only a handful of these walks left, I told myself. I only had a handful of these walks left with Piera in which we could talk about our days and speculate about the future. But strangely this didn't make me sad. It didn't make me happy, either. I searched myself for a feeling of any kind but nothing was there. In an attempt to overcome that weird phenomenon I decided I'd try and start a conversation.

"What are you up to this weekend?" I asked quietly as we cleared the trees.

"Just study. Nothing really. What about you?"

"I've got a guitar lesson with Ciro tomorrow."

"Yeah? How's that going?"

“Fine, I guess. Don’t know how many more there’ll be though.”

“Why’s that? Not your thing?”

“I’m going to break up with Scott in the morning. I’d planned to do it the night after the gig. But I couldn’t.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“Not your type?”

“No chemistry.”

“That’s fair, then.”

We passed through the kissing gate and stopped.

“Do you think he’ll see it coming?” She asked, squinting in the bright light.

“I don’t think so. He wants to have coffee before the lesson tomorrow. Just the two of us. So I figured I’d just do it then.”

“Public. That’s good. He won’t be able to get too upset.”

“I hope not.”

“Have you been seeing him quite a bit, then?”

“I guess.”

“That’s nice.”

Her tone and the words did not match; it was quite plain that in no way did Piera think it was ‘nice’ that we’d seen each other at all. The air between us shifted

to thick and tense. Piera adjusted her backpack. She looked in the direction of her home, then back at me. She pursed her lips.

“You know, I wish you’d invited me to the concert,” she said in a low voice.

“What?”

“The concert. Alice in Chains. You didn’t even... you didn’t even ask me. And you didn’t tell me about... you’ve hardly told me anything about you and Scott. You hardly talked to me at all this week. I’ve tried to let it go and give you the space you obviously want but it’s just getting ridiculous. How long are you going to punish me for this whole Luca thing?”

“Punish you? I’m not punishing you -”

“- Yes you are. Stop denying it -”

“- You don’t even like Alice in Chains, you’ve always hated them -”

“- That’s not the point and you know it -”

“- You don’t get to talk to me about not telling stuff -”

“- Ever since that stupid party in Cambridge you’ve had this goddamn wall up -”

“- Maybe I’ve had a wall up because you’re so self-centred -”

“- *Me* self-centred?”

“- Everything in our entire friendship has been

about you!”

“It’s not my fault your life has been boring up until now!”

Piera shouted the last sentence with vehemence. As soon as the words were out of her mouth she covered it tightly.

“I didn’t mean that.”

I turned around and began walking towards home.

“Lenore, I didn’t - I didn’t mean that.”

“Go away,” I said over my shoulder.

“Please, I’m sorry - we only have a few weeks left of school - I don’t want it to be like this!”

I jogged the last stretch of road that separated me from our ivy-covered gate. And I didn’t look back as I slammed it shut behind me.

\*

It was the next morning. Thick, heavy, dark storm clouds hung low in the sky. I’d tossed and turned for most of the night and I had deep lines under my eyes that didn’t go away even with a layer of makeup. I’d eaten breakfast with my family, not contributing to the conversation; I was rehearsing a speech to Scott in my head. It was hard enough trying to fathom executing a ‘break up’ that I hadn’t even thought about how to

give the news to my parents.

Scott was his usual bright and cheery self when I walked to his car with the guitar bag over my shoulder, the sound of Alice in Chains playing quietly from his radio. I put the guitar into the boot and climbed into the seat next to him.

“You look great,” he said, leaning over to kiss me. I closed my eyes and felt his lips on mine. I pulled away almost instantaneously. But Scott was grinning.

“Thanks for coming to get me,” I said shortly. “I’ve got some money for you for gas.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“It’s not from me. It’s from Mum. She knows you’re driving me and she says that I should contribute.”

“Put it towards the coffee,” he said with a wink.

“Take it, please, she’ll be angry at me if I don’t.”

“Lenore... it’s fine. Seriously,” he said, turning out onto the main road. “I appreciate the gesture.”

I rolled up the cash and put it into my jeans.

We made it to the café in about half an hour. It had started raining on our journey and when we got there, Scott jogged around to my side of the car to meet me with an umbrella. He lead me inside with his arm around my waist.

We ordered. He insisted on paying. And then he

chose a table by a foggy window and the two of us sat down and looked across at each other. He was very handsome, I conceded, even to an objective observer. He was dressed in a black knitted jumper that was a little on the tighter side, showing off his well-toned arms. His hair, thick and dark, was styled perfectly above his shoulders. Scott was the picture of what I imagined most girls looked for in a man. And I could almost imagine every teenage girl looking at me and shaking their heads in unison; how could I be turning down someone like him? I wondered the same thing. And even though I had practiced my speech word for word for most of the evening and morning - indeed, I had been thinking about versions of it for some time - my careful preparation had gone out the window once I was there facing him. I searched my brain for the opening sentence.

“So,” he said tenderly into the silence, bringing his coffee to his mouth.

“So,” I repeated, also bringing up my tea mug to my face. I was reminded of the scene in *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice is swimming in her own tears and gets sucked through a keyhole. I imagined myself swimming in my own mug and being poured down the sink and into the drain. Preferable, I thought darkly, to my current situation.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Scott said suddenly, beating me to the punch. He wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Okay,” I said, gripping my mug. “What’s up?”

“You - well, from the moment I met you - I like you, Lenore. A lot. And I know you want me to give you time, and for us to take things slowly, and I’m on board with that. But I need to know if... you do see this relationship going somewhere. That you see - well, this - you and me - as a relationship. Because... I can’t help but notice it’s me doing all the reaching out. Pretty much.”

I felt my face go bright red.

“Scott, I...”

“I understand,” he said quickly. He leaned forward. “This is your first proper relationship. And I hope you don’t mind, but before he left, Luca had told me that you sort of... fancied him. So I’ve kept that in mind as you’re probably still upset that he left the way he did.”

I saw the curious looks from customers at tables near us, their ears pricking up at the sound of an interesting conversation. He let out a big rush of air as though he had been wanting to get all that off his chest for a while.

“I’m not upset about Luca,” I said slowly. His face



softened a bit. "And... I'm glad you brought this up because I... wanted to talk to you about it too."

"Our relationship?"

"Er - yeah."

"I'm all ears."

I cleared my throat. It was hot in that stuffy little cafe. I pulled my shirt away from my neck.

"This has all been new territory for me. As you say."

He nodded.

"And I know I might have come across... well, it's been me that's wanted to... take things slow. I've just been... trying to work out... how I've... felt."

My words came out disjointed and fragmented, not at all articulate and smooth like I'd rehearsed. Scott frowned and leaned in over the table.

"You don't know how you feel about me?"

"Yes. No. I mean - I do know how I feel now. It's taken me some time to... properly get there. But I want to be honest with you now that I can make sense of everything. Well... some things, at least."

"Is this a roundabout way of saying you don't want to be with me?"

It was a direct question. He looked me dead in the eye. There was no wriggling out of it.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

He flopped back in his chair, his face crestfallen. I thought I almost saw tears in his eyes but they were gone by the time he opened his mouth again.

“Does this have something to do with Luca?”

“No,” I said immediately. “It isn’t Luca.”

“Do you fancy someone else, then?”

He hadn’t made an effort to keep his voice low with that question. I felt the burning eyes of the cafe patrons and wanted to get up and leave. But I stayed at my seat in the corner. I wanted to shout at him. I wanted to shout, “*didn’t you fancy someone else?*” But the hypocrisy of the retort and the complicated truth buried under all of it was not something I wanted to explore in the broad daylight of a posh cafe in Cambridge.

“I don’t think that’s important,” I said eventually.

“Of course it is,” he snapped back. “So you do?”

“Scott -”

“Who is it? Is it *Ciro*? *Hec*? Is that why you’re doing the lessons?”

“Of course not. I promise. I do not, have not, and will not, ever fancy *Ciro* or *Hec*.”

He wasn’t satisfied with my answer. His lips were pursed tightly together. He took a long drink of his coffee. He even closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

“Scott,” I said, leaning across the table and putting my hand on his. “I’m sorry. I just... we can still be friends.”

He pulled his hand away.

“Don’t insult me.”

“Please,” I said, lowering my voice. More people had turned around to look at us. “I hoped you’d understand.”

“It’s not you, it’s me, right?” He said sarcastically. It was a big change from his usual polite and gentlemanly disposition. I was taken aback by his aggressive tone. I prickled, feeling metaphorically and physically boxed into the corner of the cafe. I felt small.

“I’m not doing this to upset you,” I said shakily. “I can’t... force my feelings.”

“Force your feelings? Gee, Lenore, thanks a million.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. I was on the verge of tears.

Scott looked darkly at the people watching us then straightened his back.

“Look. It is what it is,” he said stiffly. “Let’s just go. I’ll drop you off at *Ciro’s*. But I’m afraid you’ll have to find your own way home.”



When we got to Tamora's house it was bucketing down. The trees were obscured in a thick grey mist and there were track marks in the grass where mud had been kicked up by vehicles. Scott cut the engine so that we were just sitting with nothing but the sound of the rain drumming on the roof.

"I'll take you to the door," he said shortly.

When he walked me down the driveway there were no hands on waists. The wind whipped the heavy rain around our legs and ankles and by the time we got to the front door I was almost completely wet from the knee down.

The front door was firmly closed. Scott and I stood under the safety of the floor above, the rain thundering down in sheets. If it wasn't so tragic, and if I wasn't so gay, it probably would have been an important scene in a romantic drama.

"I guess I'll... see you around," Scott said solemnly. "Tell your family goodbye from me."

"I meant what I said. We can still be friends."

"That won't work for me," Scott said resolutely, putting the umbrella back up. "I'll see you around, Lenore. Enjoy your lesson."

I watched him disappear into the mist, with every

step he took increasing the level of relief I felt. And when he was gone I breathed a tremendous sigh. The guilt was there, and it was strong, but it was dwarfed by the lightness that had come over my body.

I had survived my first 'break-up'.

I wondered, darkly, how people reacted when they'd actually had a proper relationship with each other. One that lasted years and years and was filled with physical and emotional intimacy. That, I thought, would likely not go down in a cafe over a cup of tea.

I turned around and faced my next challenge. I pushed open the front door to the house.

The sound of the rain was echoing throughout with a rich timbre. I walked on through to the kitchen. I didn't have a watch on. I didn't know if I was early or late.

"Hello," Elodie said quietly, her voice barely audible over the rain. She was seated at the end of the long mish-mash of tables, paper and pencils and charcoal spread about her. She was wearing an old plaid top, covered in flecks of paint, and she'd tied the hair up off her face with a little scarf. Her brown eyes smiled at me. She didn't get up.

"Hi," I said. "I'm... is *Ciro* around?"

"I don't know. I haven't really seen anyone today. When it rains like this everyone tends to stay in their

rooms.”

“Oh. Okay. How are you getting on?”

“Fine, thanks. Recovered from your hangover?”

“Just,” I said, sheepishly. “Well... I better go and...” I lifted the amp and nodded towards it. “See you after, maybe?”

“Yes. Maybe.”

Up the stairs the rain got louder and louder. The bedroom doors were indeed all closed. Under some I could hear the faint crackle of a radio, or a thud of a bass, but I didn't encounter anyone else on my journey up the stairs. When I made it to the narrow staircase that would take me to their bedroom I gazed up and took some deep breaths.

I knocked.

“Hello?”

“It's me. Lenore. I'm here to see Ciro for the lesson.”

A couple of footsteps and then the door flew open, and Tamora was standing there, her hair a faded shade of its usual pink, a cigarette in one hand and a book in the other.

“Lenore,” she said, through a cloud of smoke. “My love. Come in.”

She closed the door behind me.

The rain was pummelling the roof with

tremendous force. Outside the windows the treetops that were parallel with us bent and shook under the high wind. Droplets were splashed across the glass so that the scene looked like a blurry, moving painting. She went back over to her squishy couch and collapsed into its tangle of blankets and cushions. I noticed that on almost every surface, incense or lavender candles were burning. Her whole room was shrouded in a dusky haze.

“Where’s *Ciro*?” I asked. She was stubbing out the cigarette and rolling a new one.

“I don’t know. He’s out.”

Her tone was curt. I stood awkwardly by the door, not knowing whether to put the guitar down or just go back downstairs.

“Sorry,” Tamora apologised, giving her head a little shake at the silence, acknowledging her terse reply. “I’m scattered today. Come sit.”

I obliged, resting the guitar next to *Ciro*’s.

“Is everything okay?” I asked cautiously, making a pointed effort to sit as far away from her on the couch as possible.

“Yeah. It’s fine. I just don’t know when he’s going to be back. It could be a while. We had a bit of an argument this morning.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. He just... He doesn’t like to talk. If stuff gets heavy, he just... goes.”

She directed her gaze back down to her tin. I saw her add ground up bits of pot to the paper.

“Do you... should I go back downstairs, or...?”

“Oh, honey, no,” she said, licking along the edge of the paper and rolling it tight in one swift movement.

“Sorry. I’ll be easier to talk to once I’ve had this.”

I watched her as she lit the joint and inhaled, leaning her head back so that she was enveloped in a cloud of smoke. From that position she stretched out her arm and handed it to me.

I took it from her and breathed deeply.

“No coughing this time, huh?” She remarked.

“Nope. I’ve been practicing.”

“Smoked all the stuff I gave you, then?”

“Yeah. I was wondering if I could get some more. I have cash this time. You always give it to me, so. Here.”

I fished the money out of my pocket that Mum had given me.

“I don’t know how much it even costs. But there’s... I think there’s £30.”

Tamora got up, went over to the crate by the bed, and returned with three bags identical to the last one.

“Here,” she said, tossing them to me. “One’s on



me.”

“Thanks,” I said with a half-smile. I stuffed them into the pocket of my jacket.

“How’s tricks?” Tamora said into the drum of the rain, stretching her legs out so that they rested on me. Taking up the same position as the night we had met, I extended my own legs out towards her. And then, delicately, I rested my arms so that they were laying across her feet.

“Fine,” I said, resolving to wait a bit before I started talking about Scott. “Exams are coming up, though. I’m trying to study but it’s hard to concentrate. Piera and I are kind of fighting.”

“The girl you brought to the party?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. I’ll be honest. I didn’t really like her. She seemed snooty.”

“She can be a little bit... judgmental,” I agreed. “But we’ve been friends for so long. It’s hard to imagine not having her in my life. I just don’t know how we can reconnect when there are these really fundamental things we disagree on.”

“This happens,” Tamora said wisely, reaching up and over and throwing open the window. A cold air immediately permeated the room. She picked up one of the blankets and tossed it over the both of us and

nestled down into the folds of the couch.

“The older you get the more the cracks start to appear. You two are both clearly really different.”

“I know,” I said grimly. “But I’m used to being able to tell her everything. And now we barely talk.”

“You can tell me instead,” Tamora said with a half-shrug and a smile. “I’m here. I’m not gonna judge you for anything.”

I felt my face contort into a mixture of expressions. She relit the joint and handed it to me. I watched her as she looked from me to the scene outside. I saw her eyes become unfocused and cloudy. It looked like she had a problem staying anchored to the moment. While we were talking she was there, but as soon as she was thinking about something else, she disappeared. I wanted to ask her about *Ciro*. Was it too invasive? Or was that something not entirely off-limits for us? The joint taking effect, I melted into the couch.

“Is everything okay between you guys?” I eventually asked.

“Between *Ciro* and me?” She said, not taking her eyes off the trees outside.

“Yeah.”

“He’s... well. You know. Men.”

She stubbed out the joint and brought the blanket up to her chin.

I didn't know. At all.

"I should just... start dating women, or something," she said. It sounded casual and like a throwaway remark, but it hit me in the stomach like a sack of bricks. As though the air truly had been knocked out of me, I instinctively took my hand off her leg.

"Have you?" I said quietly.

"Have I what?"

"Dated women before?"

She leaned back. The splatters of the rain on the windows were creating long, thin, moving shadows down her face. I wished I hadn't smoked so much. I needed my brain to be able to work quickly enough to know how to respond. But I was left with this sticky, slow thought trickle and a dull thud just above my eyebrows.

"Not really," she said, finally.

"How do you mean, not really?"

"Well... you know. You get into these sort of... intensities. And I've explored them before, absolutely. But they weren't under any kind of label. I was young I suppose."

I sat up a little straighter. I could feel my blood pulsing in my head. Any feelings I had while sitting at the table with Scott not long before - anxiety,

nervousness, guilt, relief - were shattered into nothingness by the power of Tamora, whose one off-handed comment had sent me into a whirling, adrenalin-soaked state that I tried very hard to suppress.

“Intensities?”

“Yeah. You know,” she said. She kept saying, ‘*you know*’ in a way that sounded like she really did think that I knew. Then she locked onto my gaze. She didn’t break away. She penetrated me with that same energy she had the night we met and the night in the bathroom at the Alice in Chains concert.

“A kind of... magnetic undertow,” she added. And I felt her hand gently close over my ankle. And she began to make tiny circles, and I felt my entire body erupt in goosebumps. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I could have closed my eyes and died.

I wanted to say something powerful. I wanted her to say what she truly meant. Different words, phrases, thoughts and feelings jostled into position at the back of my throat. We kept looking at each other. Her little strokes on my ankle - the way she was talking to me - it hadn’t all been in my head, had it?

There was a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder. We both looked out the window at the storm that was now in full power over the house.

A great wave rose up in front of me. I could feel its energy, its power, the force that was captured in the weight of the water. I was standing under it and it was about to crush me, so that I would become one with the sand. I would crumble into a billion pieces and there would be no chance of ever being put back together. The wave would rush over me and then it would be gone. And I would be nothing, nothing but a path for the waves to run on.

"I... should go," I said quietly. I pulled my ankle out of her grip and made to stand up.

"What, why? You just got here," Tamora said, lifting herself up on her hands as I untangled myself from the blankets and stumbled out onto the rug.

"You have a boyfriend," I said, half-laughing. I felt the tears in my eyes only a split second before one of them rolled down my cheek. "I shouldn't be here like this."

"Like what?" Tamora said incredulously, apparently completely ignorant to the scene that had just played out on her couch.

"So it is in my head, then?" I asked, picking up the guitar and placing my hand on the doorknob. She didn't say anything. She just sat there on the couch, her chest rising and falling.

"I'll see you around," I said, pulling the door open.

She leapt up, crossed the room, and pushed it closed. She was inches from me. Another flash of light and a boom of thunder. The windows rattled.

"It's not in your head, Lenore," she whispered to me.

"Then... what are we doing?" I said. "The way we - in the bathroom - and... now I'm in your bedroom. That you share with someone else. You... the way you... and I..."

"I know, I know," Tamora breathed, reaching out and resting on the door for support. "I've been too... open, in my attraction to you."

"You're attracted to me?"

"Of course I am."

"So why are you with *Ciro*?"

She bit her lip. She blinked a few times.

"Because I love him."

I grabbed the handle and pulled.

"Lenore, wait -"

"No," I said firmly. "Luca was right. You just want to play with me."

She pushed the door closed again, her voice rising.

"I don't want to play with you! I genuinely like you - this is complicated -"

"What's so complicated about it? You know how I feel. How could you not? You sit there, and you touch

me -"

"You're young. You're too young," she said loudly, cutting me off. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... maybe if you were out of school, and you'd had some experience -"

*"Experience?"*

" - I don't mean it like that. I mean that you're just starting out in life. You're what, seventeen? I'm twenty-two. I've got five years on you. There's someone out there who's better for you, right now. And I've got a whole world of shit that you don't even know the half of."

I dropped the guitar off my shoulder and let it fall to the floor.

"Then why do you act like this?" I demanded. The tears were coming fast. "If *Ciro* came up here and you were doing that - thing - with another guy, he'd lose it, and you know it. So I don't get why it should be any different with me."

She took a deep breath. She reached out, and took my hands in hers.

"Because I'm human."

"That's not good enough," I said, pulling away. Leaving the guitar, I stepped out of her grasp and ran down the stairs.

"Lenore, wait!" Tamora cried, running after me. I

ran down the two flights of stairs and stumbled through the entrance hall toward the front door. I saw Elodie emerge from her post in the living room at the noise, a confused expression on her face, as Tamora dashed out onto the front patio after me. I ran into the rain, my feet colliding with the mud and dirty puddles, careering down the driveway. My breath came in strangled sobs. I was soaked head to toe within seconds. I heard her calling from the patio and I thought I could make out a second person shouting. But I didn't look back. I just ran all the way to the front of the abandoned house and up onto its rotten deck. When I was under the protection of the overhang, which was draped in ivy and cobwebs and dirt, I sat down and cried into my hands.

That was it, then. It was over. It hadn't all been in my head. But perhaps that was worse.

The abandoned house cried with me. Its rusty drain pipes overflowed with rain water and splashed down near my feet. It muted my cries, the pummelling of my fists on the boards. I rubbed my eyes hard so that I might dissolve the picture of Tamora's face in my mind. But nothing would erase it. I leaned against the boarded-up front door and stared blankly out into the storm. I was indeed Alice in her little bottle, bobbing on the ocean of her own creation, ready to



disappear into the depths of the unknown.

Some time later Elodie appeared in front of me under a big umbrella. She was wearing a sombre expression.

“I thought I might find you here,” she said through the rain. Without another word she put the umbrella to the side and took a seat next to me, and together, we looked out at the growing puddles. Her presence was comforting.

“I’m sorry,” I said finally.

“Why are you apologising to me? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

I looked down at my hands.

“I can drive you home,” she said tenderly. “I have the keys to Hec’s car. He said I can use it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I can’t imagine you want to walk back to Eldridge in this weather,” she said, looking up. She reached out her hand and I took it. I accompanied her underneath the umbrella slowly back to the house. She had her arm around my back. I stared at the ground.

“I put your guitar in the back already,” she said, climbing into the driver’s seat and adjusting it so that she could see over the steering wheel. I hopped into the passenger’s side.

“Thanks,” I said, putting on my seatbelt.

“Although I doubt I’m going to have it much longer.”

“Why not?” She asked, kicking the car into life and turning it around. The wipers were on full-speed but the windscreen was still a blurry mess.

“I broke up with Scott,” I said flatly.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

She looked at me sideways with a sad smile.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Real Reason

I opened my eyes, the palms of my hands buried in the rough, damp sand. I was laying on my stomach and the edge of the water was coming right up to my feet and tickling my toes. I lay there for a couple of moments taking in the sounds around me that indicated I wasn't, for the first time, gaining consciousness in the midst of a raging storm. I could hear the rush of the trees. The sound of the wind picking up sand and ferrying it along the shoreline. The rhythmic crash of the waves. Slowly I stood up and looked around; I could see all the way up and down the beach. A deep, rich orange smudged the clouds as they shielded the last rays of the sun. It wouldn't be long before they dipped down below the horizon and darkness would take hold of the scene around me.

I wiped the sand and the burgundy stains from my hands on my pyjama pants. There might not have been a storm at that moment but I could feel the electric presence of a charged atmosphere weighing down on me. I didn't want to hang around.

One step at a time, I trudged up the shore in the

direction of the shack. It was a gentle slope towards the palm trees which were tilting and swaying, beckoning me closer. I bent down and picked up a large stick at my feet. A weapon I could use against the gargoyles, I thought, who no doubt would pounce once they spotted me. But when I made it to the entrance of the shack their perches were just empty posts. They were nowhere to be seen. I gazed up for a few moments, looking from pillar to pillar; I was almost disappointed that their ugly, scaly faces weren't there. I had a few questions for them. And I had some pent up rage that I was more than happy to use on them, should they bar my entry.

"Curious," I muttered, opening the door to the shack. It was unlocked. And the cathedral was there in all of its glory, and for the first time the weather outside matched the light that was coming inside. I marvelled at the painted roof as I locked myself in, dropping the stick on the floor, my face tilted up at the gliding angels. I still longed to be among their ranks, wielding a bow and arrow and aiming at the clouds.

Accepting my place down on the firm, three-dimensional ground, I brought my eyes back to reality. I was expecting to see the faces of my friends and family, or at the very least, Tamora. But as the posts of the gargoyles had stood empty, the altar at the end of

the cathedral was exposed like a tomb. Nobody was there. I was alone.

The wind whistled through a crack under the door. It echoed around the vast space and I shivered. Without the presence of another soul, the cathedral was overwhelming. It was unnerving. I looked up at the roof so I might be provided relief by the soaring angels. But I was taken aback. Their attention, for the first time, was not directed at unknown objects on their horizon; a hundred pairs of tiny eyes were looking down at me, knowing something I didn't. I watched as they started to arrange themselves into a coordinated position. As if they had already planned their moves, they began forming a procession in the sky. The cherubs fell into line with the angels and as though an invisible wind was guiding them forward, my painted companions floated and flew in the direction of the altar.

I took a step forward. The speed at which they travelled across the ceiling quickened. I kept my eyes on them - on one angel in particular with long, red hair, and a golden bow - and she guided me all the way to the front of the cathedral. I climbed the steps up to the pulpit and came before the imposing, carved marble altar in front of me. It did indeed look like a tomb. It was perfectly rectangular, with sharp angles

and deep carvings etched into the sides. A rich purple cloth was draped over it. And right in the middle was a marble basin filled with wine.

I looked back over the journey I had just taken down the aisle and almost tipped over sideways in fright. The pews that had just been empty were now filled. Every single available space was taken up by somebody. And, like the angels and the cherubs, they were all staring at me like they knew something. I couldn't move. Their gazes penetrated my skin as though a thousand spotlights were shining on me at once. I scanned the unmoving, unblinking faces, searching for one I recognised. But none of these people were my friends or family. They were strangers.

I spun back around at the sound of a candelabra tipping over and hitting the floor. It let out an almighty clang. The angels and cherubs were still in their procession and in utter chaos. They were starting to collide with each other in their haste to make it to the front of the cathedral. They began overlapping and crossing each other, little silent frowns putting pained expressions on their faces. Their mouths were open wide, screaming silently. They seemed to want me to do something.

I peered over the edge of the basin. This sent my

painted friends into an even deeper frenzy. I hovered there for a moment, waiting for something to happen. I looked down into the unmoving burgundy liquid. All I could see was the bottom of the basin.

I gasped and pulled my head away.

There was something wrong. Something wasn't right. Maybe it was a trick of the light?

Slowly, I leaned back over the basin.

But sure enough, my reflection was missing.

"Where am I?" I shouted, looking up at the strangers in the pews. They were now standing. And the colour of the painted skyline above me wasn't a pale blue anymore. It was changing, before my eyes, to a colour that matched the wine in the basin and the sunset outside. I felt my heart start to pound as the sound of the rain on the cathedral roof began to ring out. Desperate, I plunged my hand into the wine in front of me.

Everything went dark.

\*

I was jolted back to reality by the sudden end of the dream. It took me a few seconds to remember where I was. And then a few more to remember what had happened just the day before. I flopped back

down, my head hitting the pillow with a thud, my heart sinking. Flecks of rain hit the windows. The storm hadn't quite finished blowing itself out.

It was three in the morning. I had come straight up to my room after Elodie had dropped me home, made an excuse about why I was soaking wet and earlier than expected, and refused to come down for dinner. My family had made the sensible decision to leave me alone and not be too persistent.

Quietly, I scrounged around in the kitchen for leftovers, but I didn't find any. Settling for a glass of water I returned to my room and turned the light on.

I had left as a child and walked back in as an adult. I suddenly saw it as a juvenile space fit for embarrassment. It did not reflect who I felt like I was, in any way. And it took everything in my power to not start ripping the wallpaper down and toss everything out the window. It looked like a teenager had taken over a kid's room and hadn't bothered to get rid of all the relics of the previous owner. A few stuffed toys sat gathering dust on a shelf above my desk next to a stereo system and stacks of CD's. A couple of posters were pinned to the walls. One of Alice in Chains, which I had added that year, and one of a herd of zebras from when I went through an animal phase at about age nine. There was a large bookcase by the



wardrobe that contained all the novels I'd ever loved. A lot of science-related books, of course, thanks to Mum. But I could see the titles of children's series with their bright spines directed at me, a reminder that I wasn't reading distinguished authors like Jung. My bed, which I had never had a problem with until that moment, was a ridiculous *single*. It was small.

Designed for one person only. It wasn't a large queen mattress, covered in mismatched blankets and pillows; it was an orderly bed with a wooden frame dressed in a matching set of muted bedclothes. There was no way a second person was getting in there. And they weren't supposed to. On the window by my bed, little cat stickers framed the border, to make it look like a group of them were walking from the latch up to the curtain rod. I'd put them there during a time I couldn't even remember. But they laughed at me now, painfully tying me to the youth that had been the basis for my rejection.

I stood there seething, loathing myself, cursing that I had been born in the year that I had. Hungry and defeated, I collapsed into my pathetic bed and cried into the pillow until I fell asleep again.

\*

“Woah,” Alicia murmured as I appeared in the dining area. “What happened to you?”

“Shut up.”

I knew I looked rough. I hadn’t showered after my ordeal in the rain. Remnants of my makeup were smudged down my face. I had on a baggy t-shirt and old pyjama pants that dragged along the floor behind me.

Ant, Mum, Alicia and Teddy were at the dining table eating breakfast. They’d divided up the newspaper amongst each other with the exception of Teddy, who was flipping through a comic. I felt as though I were a dirty traveller who was inconveniently sleeping in the basement and had just made my presence known after clogging the toilet.

“Lenore, are you alright?” Ant asked, concernedly. “You look... a bit tired.”

“I’m fine,” I snapped, putting on a couple of pieces of toast. When I saw the coffee pot was empty I let out a dramatic sigh.

Mum looked at me with concern etched into every corner of her face. I was ready to argue. I was ready for someone to test me so I could unleash a tirade of hurt and frustration out on anyone who was close to me. But my family knew better. They returned to their reading, Ant suggesting a solution to Alicia’s

crossword.

But Mum, who hadn't taken her eyes off me, got up and came over to where I was making breakfast.

"Is everything okay?" She asked softly, reaching out and putting my hair behind my ear.

"Sorry," I said shortly. "I just had a bit of a stressful day yesterday. It's fine. I don't want to talk about it. I think I need some space."

Mum hesitated.

"If you want space, that's absolutely fine. But I thought you might want to know that I got in touch with your aunt June last night while you were sleeping. Her number's in the phonebook. You can call her whenever you like."

Her eyes were glassy. She looked nervous. I was completely taken aback.

"And you know," Mum added, taking another step towards me. "If you... if you wanted to go out there I wouldn't stop you. In fact, maybe it's something we could talk about. When you're ready. When you're not so... upset."

"What?" I said, bewildered. I could see Alicia straining to hear our conversation but Ant was trying to redirect her back to the crossword.

"Whenever you're ready. I know you've got a lot on your plate with exams and - and making a decision

about your future. But I want you to have all the options.”

There were a kaleidoscope of emotions tumbling over each other inside me. Tamora, for the first time in what felt like weeks, was shunted to the back of my mind as visions of being in Canada started blossoming in my mind’s eye.

“Thanks for doing that,” I said, pushing down the toaster lever and turning on the kettle. “That’s... going to give me a lot to think about.”

“We can talk more when you’re ready.”

She smiled sadly and made to walk back over to the table. But I took a step forward and squeezed her in a hug. Tears leeches out the corners of my eyes.

“Thank you,” I whispered into her hair.

“Well, it’s about time,” she murmured. “Oh. And before I forget. Piera came over yesterday looking for you while you were having your lesson. She seemed a bit stressed.”

\*

It was an overcast and patchy day. The storm had finally died and left no signs of its presence other than a few bent trees and leaves spread out across the roads. When I got to Piera’s I found her sitting out at

the garden table alone surrounded by her school books. She was slouched down in the chair, tapping her pen on a blank sheet of paper, and was staring out into the distance. She looked bored.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly. She spun around and saw me standing there uncomfortably and immediately leapt to her feet and pulled me into a tight hug.

“I’m sorry,” she said frantically. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said. I was annoyed about the concert but you were right. I shouldn’t have spited you.”

She held me at arms length and looked me up and down, taking in the dark circles under my eyes and my matted hair.

“I’m sorry too,” I said, looking down at the ground. “I’ve been in a weird place. I should have just asked you to come. I was being petty.”

“Let’s just let it go. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Her expression changed to one of concern.

“What’s wrong? You look like someone killed your cat.”

“Nothing,” I said automatically. But she raised her eyebrows at me. She let me go and I took a step back and ran my fingers through my unclean hair.

“I broke up with Scott yesterday. And... I had a fight. With someone.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Should we go upstairs and talk about it?”

I wanted to burst into tears. But I kept it together as Piera packed up her textbooks and we went to her room. She tossed the books onto her desk and shut the door behind us, climbing onto her bed.

“I’m gonna fucking fail everything,” she groaned into her hands, rubbing her eyes. “Literally everything.”

“No you’re not,” I said, taking a seat at her desk chair. “You’re not going to fail.”

“I’ve only pretended to study so far. I’m just... there’s too much going on. How do teachers expect us to study for everything when we’ve got real life to worry about? How are you managing it?”

I hesitated.

“Not particularly well, to be honest.”

“What have you got to worry about, though? You’ve got everything in the bag. You get good grades for everything. The teachers love you. Your parents aren’t hounding you all the time. I swear - ever since Luca left, the expectation for me to be perfect is so high I’ll never be able to reach it.”

“I’ve got it all in the *bag*?” I said, traces of the attitude of that morning flickering back into my voice. “Are you kidding?”

“I don’t mean that in a bad way,” Piera said defensively. “It’s just... I would kill for your brain.”

“I’ll trade you any day,” I replied darkly.

We chuckled, and I felt my spirit lift ever so slightly.

“So... how did Scott take it?”

“Not well. He kept asking if I fancied someone else.”

“Do you?”

I bristled at the question. I didn’t want to lie but there wasn’t really a simple answer.

“There was just no spark,” I said with a shrug, hoping that it would be enough of a response. I’d heard that statement expressed in many films, heard it referenced by plenty of my friends, to know that that was a completely sufficient answer. Piera nodded reassuringly.

“You can’t force it if there’s no spark,” she said wisely.

Wanting to swerve away from Scott, I thought I would wade into safer territory and direct the focus off me.

“What’s going on with Andrew, then?”

Piera rolled her eyes. She grabbed a pillow and pulled it close to her chest, resting her chin on it. She looked into the distance.

“We had sex,” she muttered.

I regretted asking immediately. Her words were like a pick axe to my bones.

“Oh,” I said, awkwardly. “Okay.”

“And we’ve done it a few times. But... things have got weird between us since then. And I don’t know what to do.”

“Weird in... in what way?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “But we don't talk about it. I don’t know if he likes it or not. And it makes me feel really self-conscious.”

“Er... do you like it?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“The, um, sex.”

She looked at me quizzically, as if it only occurred to her that she was at liberty to enjoy it as well.

“It’s... I mean, it’s...”

Her voice trailed off.

“I can see it getting better. But it kind of... it’s kind of over before it really starts.”

“You should just talk to him about it,” I said, shifting in her desk chair, instinctively picking up one of the textbooks and hugging it to my body as if it might shield me from the imagery that was unwillingly populating my brain. “Surely if you feel comfortable enough to be getting naked in front of him, you can



talk to him?"

Piera squirmed.

"It's not that simple."

"What does Fiona say?"

"Buy some nice underwear."

A single, cutting spike of laughter rang out my mouth.

"Are you joking? Please tell me you didn't take that advice."

Judging by her silence, I could only assume she had.

"It's not funny," Piera snapped. "It's not as simple as you're making out. You don't understand."

"I guess I don't," I said back, equally as cold.

Piera glared at me. Her breathing started to get heavier.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It was mean of me."

"Yeah, it fucking was."

"What's going on between us?" I asked sadly.

"We've been at each other's throats for weeks."

"I don't know. But I hate it."

"I hate it too."

She fiddled with the corner of her duvet cover. I tossed the textbook back onto her desk.

"I suppose I have been jealous."

Piera looked at me incredulously as I spoke.

“Jealous? Of me?”

“Of your relationship with Andrew. For a few reasons. You actually like him, for starters. And he likes you. And... you’re actually getting to have a real relationship. One that’s two ways. It’s not like one of you is madly in love with the other, and the other isn’t. And... you haven’t spent as much time with me since you two started going out. But I’ve needed you, more, in these past couple of months than ever before.”

“Lenore,” Piera said, coming to the edge of the bed. She leaned forward and took my hands in hers.

“It might not look like it from the outside but most days I feel like I love Andrew a thousand times more than he loves me. He’s always out at university parties and meeting new girls. I feel like a kid compared to him. A real relationship? We don’t talk about anything real. You think sex is going to bring you closer to someone, make them feel the same way... but it doesn’t. It just makes everything harder. I’ve been here the whole time. But you’ve acted like you don’t want anything to do with me. I’ve needed you, too. Without Luca here the house is so quiet. I miss him so much and I can’t accept that he’s gone.”

I hadn’t planned it.

I hadn’t rehearsed it.

But the words started to form in my mouth.

“Piera,” I said slowly. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

My voice trembled. My hands started shaking.

“What? What is it?” She replied.

“Can I tell you the real reason I broke up with Scott?”

“Wait... you do fancy someone else?” She said bracingly.

It was hard not to be seduced by the idea that everything could, and would, be just fine. As Piera held my hands with the care and attention she’d had for me since we were children, I wanted the words to tumble out of my mouth and for everything to just go on the way it was.

But through her features, I saw Luca looking back at me.

And I swallowed.

“Never mind.”

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Fire

Three weeks passed by as though the previous two months had never happened. The only indication that Tamora and Scott had been real was the guitar that stood propped up at the end of my bed. Scott had never called to ask for it back, and on the one occasion I tried to call his flat to arrange its return, his roommate gruffly told me he'd take a message. But I never received a call following my attempt. The instrument stood there as the only surviving relic of a life I had briefly known.

I thought about calling Elodie to thank her for driving me home. Her tenderness and care, her genuine concern for me, showed a type of loyalty and character that none of the others in the house had expressed. But by the time I'd built up the courage to do it a week had already passed, and the only number I had that might get through to her was Tamora's. Even at the thought of her name my heart would flutter and sink. Calling her up was out of the question.

I still longed for Tamora even though I knew it was wrong. I still fell asleep thinking of her and woke

up wondering what she was doing. It was like her stupid face was pinned to the inside of my skull and it didn't matter what direction I looked in, she was there. And sometimes she was looking at me with those eyes full of desire. And other times she was sneering at me with pity and condescension. I was, as Luca had rightly pointed out, someone worth playing with, but not someone who could be her equal. I wanted to prove her *wrong*.

But that was wasn't going to happen, I thought bitterly.

At least I had Piera. She and I had returned to something that resembled our friendship from before which was comforting. I had resolved to keep my secret until after exams. In fact, I had resolved to do everything after my exams: come out to Piera, maybe even my parents, and even call June. I'd told Mum I wanted to wait and she applauded my sensibility. I didn't tell her that I was procrastinating because I was utterly terrified about what I might learn.

It was Friday afternoon. I was gearing up for a weekend of hard study. Piera and I had agreed to do a bit of revision at my place and I was gathering my books to take home when she appeared at our lockers wide-eyed.

"Lenore," she said forcefully. "We need to talk. In

private.”

“Huh? Can’t we just talk on the way home?”

“No. It can’t wait.”

She grabbed my arm and marched me into a nearby empty English classroom. She closed the door so that the voices of the students leaving for the weekend were reduced to indistinguishable murmurs. Walking quickly over to the half-open blinds on the other side of the room, she turned the little plastic wand so that they closed. If anyone else behaved in such a fashion I would have been terrified, but Piera’s tendency to gravitate towards the realm of theatrics was expected from time to time.

“This seems a little bit extreme,” I said, zipping up my heavy backpack. “Did something happen with Andrew?”

“No,” she said, turning to face me, her expression still intense. “Well - not exactly. It’s to do with Scott.”

“Scott? What about him?”

“Don’t freak out. I know it’s not true, obviously, and Andrew told him to shut up - but you should know what he’s saying.”

“I don’t understand... what’s he saying? I haven’t spoken to him since we broke up.”

“He was talking about you at football. And apparently it’s getting around at Cambridge.”

“What is?”

Piera took a deep breath and then spoke the next words so rapidly it was as though they were fighting over each other to get out her mouth.

“Scott’s telling everyone he broke up with you because you’re a frigid lesbian.”

My body went cold. My vision went strange, as if the world was twisting into a single point, right at Piera’s face.

“I - I -”

“Look, he’s obviously a colossal dick. And obviously it isn’t true. But he’s telling everyone he broke up with *you*, which is just so ridiculous -”

“He’s saying... *what?*” I stammered disbelievingly, finding my voice. I dropped my bag and started pacing in front of the whiteboard.

“A frigid les -”

“Yes I know what you said,” I snapped back, feeling my palms start to sweat. I sat down and put my face in my hands.

“Relax,” Piera said, sitting beside me and putting her hand on my back. “He’s obviously just upset that you dumped him.”

“But of *all the things to say*,” I spluttered. “He chooses that? Why? Did he say anything else?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But Andrew

thought you'd want to know. Probably Scott's way of trying to mess with you right before graduation."

"Can we study together tomorrow?" I asked distractedly, swinging my bag back over my back. I wanted to get home. And fast. It was like the lid of a boiling pot had fallen off and clouds of steam were billowing out around me.

"Are you sure? Don't you want to - I don't know, talk about this?"

"It's fine," I said, making a beeline for the door. "I'll call you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Um... alright? You don't want to walk home together?"

"I'll call you."

"I'll take that as a no... bye, then!"

And I left her standing there, rather bewildered, as I ran out the English block towards the school field.

\*

The phone rang. And it rang. I called him once, twice, three times, four times. On the fifth call somebody finally picked up.

"Scott?" I demanded. "Scott, are you there?"

"Who's this?"

"You know exactly who it is."



“Oh. Lenore. Hello.”

I held the phone in the kitchen with both hands. I was shaking. None of my family were home but that could change any second.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” I said into the receiver, trying but failing to keep my voice from rising.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are you calling here?”

“My mother is a professor at your university. If that kind of stuff you’re saying about me gets back to her -”

“I don’t,” Scott repeated coldly, “know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play dumb,” I hissed. “Piera told me what you were saying to your football team and god knows who else. What’s wrong with you? I thought you were a nice person. I thought you respected me.”

“You want to talk about respect?” Scott said angrily. “Breaking up with me after I get us those VIP tickets to that concert? After I gave you my guitar? Drove you all over England?”

“So, what, that gives you license to tell lies about me?”

“Are they lies, though?” Scott spat. “Are they?”

“For starters, I broke up with you, not the other

way around -"

"What difference does that make?"

"It's not true! And you know it!"

The other end of the line went quiet.

"I'm sorry you're upset. And you're probably only saying all of this to make yourself look better in front of your friends. But those lies, they have consequences you couldn't possibly understand. So just stop it. Please. And you can have your guitar back."

"I don't want it back," Scott scoffed. "Keep the damn thing."

"I thought you were a nice person," I repeated. "I thought you were kind. I don't how you put on such an act... I guess this just shows me exactly who you really are."

"Well," Scott replied darkly. "You certainly acted as though you liked me. So maybe that makes us both good actors."

And he slammed the phone down with an almighty clunk.

I held the phone in my hand, staring at it, long after he had hung up on me. Who had he told? What if it got back to my mother before I had the chance to explain everything to her? He had planted the seed in people's minds. I felt like I was kneeling on a stage in front of everyone, my internal organs all spilling out

into my hands, desperately trying to stuff them back inside me.

I hung up the phone. Then I went into the living room and extracted an unopened bottle of gin from the back of the liquor cabinet. I was just slipping it inside my backpack when the front door to the house was opened wide and I heard the voices of my siblings.

“Hey Lenore,” Ant said, hanging his jacket up on the hook. “How was school?”

“Fine,” I said distractedly, dodging him and climbing the stairs, holding my backpack gingerly. “I’m just going to go and start studying. I’ll be down for dinner later.”

“Okay,” he said brightly. “I’m making lasagne.”

“Great,” I said, closing my bedroom door behind me. “Just bloody great.”

\*

After everyone had gone to bed I gathered up my supplies: my thick jumper, lighter, torch, boots, and of course, the bottle of gin. I took my now familiar path to the school chapel just as the clock was striking two. I ran almost the whole way, quiet and agile like a fox, each shadow and silhouette now expected and familiar. When I finally closed the door to the green

room behind me I let out a strangled roar in the safety of my private sanctuary. I kicked at the ancient robes. I shoved piles of books over. I beat my fist on the keys of the old piano and I smashed an old jar on the floor. I collapsed into the armchair and put my face in my hands.

I extracted the bottle of gin from my bag. I unscrewed the lid immediately and threw it across the room. It bounced across the wooden floor and landed somewhere far out of sight. And I took one, two, three, hearty swigs of the clear liquid. It burned a path down the back of my throat and mixed with the lasagne that I'd eaten earlier. And after repeating this a few more times, and feeling only a small amount of relief, I collected Tamora's tin from the cabinet and rolled a very large joint.

"Well," I said to the empty room, "I suppose that's that, then."

And I took out my lighter.

\*

This time I woke up inside the cathedral. It was utterly silent. Silver moonlight cast dim shafts of light onto the pews while flickers of candlelight quivered up the walls. The ceiling held no angels. No cherubs.

Only the intricate carved arches that were plunged in shadow high above. There was nobody, painted or real, known or strange.

I got to my feet.

I didn't like this version of the cathedral. It was cold. The marbled floor wasn't warm and welcoming. There was no comforting protection of the angels above me. I suddenly wished I was back outside on the beach. Perhaps I could make a raft? Was it impossible to try and escape this place altogether? Just be done with it?

I turned around and made a beeline for the door. But I stopped short.

It wasn't the shack door anymore. It was a vast wooden and iron structure that stretched all the way up to the ceiling. I rushed over to it and started to pull on the big iron handle. It wouldn't budge. All it did was send out a clunky rattle that echoed throughout the hollow space, provoking a feeling of fear deep in my bones. A dark sense of foreboding came over me.

"It won't open," came the voice.

Startled, I looked around to see who had spoken. The voice was strangely familiar. And at the far end of the cathedral by the tomb-shaped altar was a figure.

"Hello?" I said. My voice rose up, up, up, and came back down in a chorus of discordant cries.

The figure didn't say anything. Her face, like the ceiling, was hidden in shadows.

I started to walk down the aisle.

"Who are you?" I asked into the space.

No reply.

"Hello?" I repeated again. I was about ten metres away from her now. I paused, my lungs tight. And then she stepped forward. And all the air was knocked out of my body.

It was me.

My dark hair and eyes. My narrow frame. The other me slipped into the candlelight swiftly and calmly, looking out over the invisible congregation with confidence and power.

"Why is the ocean made of wine?" I asked her desperately.

The figure, me, came right down to where I was. She reached out her hand. She wasn't smiling. Her face was set, her eyes reflecting the light from the candles. I took her hand and she led me over to the basin at the altar. The burgundy liquid inside was deep and rich, too dark to see the bottom.

"Why is the ocean made of wine?" I repeated against her silence.

She produced a silver goblet. And slowly, she lowered it into the basin.

“Drink,” she said simply.

“No,” I replied firmly, stepping backwards.

“Do it.”

“Will you tell me why, if I drink this?”

“Lenore,” she said wisely. “Why do you think you are here?”

“How am I supposed to know why I’m here?”

“No. That’s not the question. Why do you *think* you are here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You have asked me quite plainly many times already.”

“I’m... I’m here to find out why the ocean is made of wine?”

“And how will you find out if you don’t become it?”

We looked at each other.

Slowly, I reached over and took the goblet in my hand. It was heavy. It weighed my arm down. But I lifted it to my lips. And, in one breath, I tipped my head back and let it run through me. It flowed through my mouth and into my stomach. It crossed into my bloodstream so that it pumped through my heart. It was absorbed by my bones so that I could feel it holding me upright. And it ignited my nervous system so that my brain was alive with electricity.

I brought my eyes back down. I rested the goblet back on the altar and wiped my mouth.

The version of myself who had all the answers was walking away. She was retreating to the very edge of the pulpit where tall candles were standing by the choir pews. Unspeaking, she reached out her hand. She looked me in the eye.

“Now you know,” she said quietly.

Then she pushed it.

“No!” I shouted.

But the candle tipped over. And its flame came to rest on the purple cloth that covered the altar. And suddenly it was ablaze, the heat from it hitting my body almost instantly.

“Wait!” I cried. “Where are you going?”

The flames spread and obscured my companion from sight. The whole altar was burning. The marble started to melt, turning into a pool of molten stone which flowed down the steps. The fire moved like a river along the floor, burning everything in its wake. I could taste the smoke. I fell backwards, scrambling away from the flames as they chased me down the aisle.

I opened my eyes.

The green room was ablaze. I gasped and pulled my knees up to my chest: flames were at my feet. The



rack of choir robes in front of me were billowing smoke, the fire stretching high up to the roof. For a few terrifying moments all I could do was stare at the scene in front of me, completely and utterly frozen. When I heard the window explode from the heat I jumped to attention. Coughing, spluttering, I scrambled over the back of the arm chair towards the curtain that covered the exit. I saw, fleetingly, my bottle of gin tipped over on its side. Wrenching the curtain down, I flung myself through the broken window, cutting my leg on a shard of glass on the way out. I steadied myself on the teetering platform that held the rickety fire escape up. Without hesitation I dived towards the edge of the platform, half sobbing, half choking, dropping down the rungs. I fell the last few steps down the ladder and hit the grass at the bottom with a thud. On my hands and knees I stumbled, trying and failing to get to my feet half a dozen times, before I finally managed to make it upright. I didn't look back until I made it to the trees that bordered the school field. And when I did, I steadied myself on the trunk of one, and vomited immediately at the sight of what I saw. The roof of the east wing was ablaze. Smoke was coiling high into the sky, illuminated by the scale of the orange light that I too was standing in.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Truth

“Don’t panic,” Tamora said reassuringly. “There’s nothing that can lead everything back to you.”

“How can you know that?”

She changed the gears of the van and it shunted forward at the set of traffic lights we were paused at, the exhaust no doubt expelling a dark cloud of fumes behind us. Then she reached over and put her hand on mine. I counted to five before I pulled it away and buried it in my pockets and slid down the seat further.

“There’s no chance in hell your parents think you’re an arsonist. They saw you this morning, right? And they didn’t suspect anything?”

“Yeah.”

“There you go. Seriously. Don’t worry.”

I looked out the window at the passing landscape and coughed deeply. There was black on my fingertips that I couldn’t get off even though I’d scrubbed them in the shower for what felt like an hour. The cut on my leg was stinging something fierce. My palm throbbed. But my injuries felt like a small price to pay for what I had done. Guilt and panic were ravaging my insides like flesh-eating bacteria and there was nothing I

could do to keep my brain from picturing the potential results of my late-night actions, however wild and improbable they might have been.

I imagined scientists in a lab running the butt of my joint through some kind of machine with my face popping up on a computer screen. I pictured police coming to the front door and cuffing me, Alicia and Teddy crying as I was thrown behind bars. I saw a news reader announcing that a teenager with her whole future ahead of her had set a school building alight for no discernible reason. But that upon deeper investigation into her life it appeared that Lenore Wiley Biron - whose father had died due to drug and alcohol abuse - was possibly a homosexual. And that once those details came to light it wasn't surprising at all.

"Lenore," Tamora said quietly, tenderly, as we pulled up outside of her house and she turned off the engine. Tears were running down my cheeks. I turned towards her, my heart a heavy lump in my burning throat.

"Let's just go inside and try to forget about everything."

She smiled at me. I wished she wouldn't. But I also wished she'd just stomp her foot on the gas and drive us away, far away, so that the two of us could just live

in her van forever. But she didn't, and I didn't say anything else, merely followed her slowly and heavily into the house. Grey clouds lined the horizon threatening rain. My hands still buried in my jumper, I couldn't even find it in myself to appreciate the wonder of Tamora's house as I usually did.

Tamora took me into the kitchen. I skulked with my head bowed forward as she retrieved two glasses from the cupboard. I didn't know what to expect from this encounter at her home. I didn't have the ability to question it.

"Lenore," came a voice from behind me in the living room. It was Elodie. She was sitting at one of the tables and was looking between Tamora and me, a look of dark confusion on her face. She had a pencil suspended in her hand and was surrounded by papers covered in rough sketches, as always. At the sight of me she gathered them all up, going slightly pink, and turned them over in a stack.

"Hi," I said awkwardly, taking my hand out of my pocket to give her a little wave.

I saw her look me up and down. She stood and came towards me; her expression turned from confusion into worry.

"Are you okay?" She asked as Tamora handed me a glass of water. I took it and gratefully gulped down

half of it in one go. “You... why are you crying? What happened?”

She looked accusingly at Tamora who put her hands up as if to say, *I’m innocent*.

“I... got into a bit of trouble,” I said quietly. “I didn’t know who else to call.”

I finished the rest of the water and coughed a few more times.

“What kind of trouble?”

I paused. I trusted Elodie. I supposed there was no harm in telling her.

“I don’t know if you saw the news,” I said softly.

“I didn’t,” she replied, looking between Tamora and I rapidly.

“I... accidentally started a fire in my school chapel. It was a complete mistake. But I only got out just in time. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“What?” Elodie said, dumbstruck. She reached out and grabbed my hands and surveyed each of my blackened fingers delicately.

“Lenore,” she said quietly through her accent. “I’m so glad you’re okay. That sounds absolutely terrifying. How on Earth did it happen?”

Tamora went over to the fridge and opened it loudly. She began rummaging about, making a fair bit of noise as she hunted for something.

"I'd been drinking. And then I smoked some of Tamora's pot. And then I fell asleep."

"In your school *chapel*?"

I nodded and coughed.

"We should take you to the hospital," Elodie said suddenly. She hadn't let go of my hands. "We should go now."

"Are you joking?" Tamora scoffed, emerging from the fridge with cold pizza in hand. "They'll ask questions."

"And rightly so," Elodie exclaimed. "You know smoke inhalation can kill, right? Days later?"

"It can?" I asked anxiously, rubbing my throat.

"How long were you asleep for? Was it the smoke that woke you up?"

"I was having this dream, and it -"

"She's probably only coughing because of the weed," Tamora said loudly, interrupting me, her mouth full of pizza. "It was on the radio. They put it out in five minutes. There's nothing to worry about."

"There's plenty to worry about," Elodie said angrily, glaring at Tamora. "First of all - why were you in your school alone, drinking and smoking?"

I didn't say anything. Elodie was looking wilder by the second. I looked at Tamora, half-hoping she would answer for me. But Elodie pressed on.

“Is it because of - of what happened here, a few weeks ago?”

“Come on, Elodie,” Tamora said dismissively, tossing the pizza on the counter. “Give it a rest. You’re making this a bigger deal than it needs to be. Just leave the poor girl alone.”

“No, Tamora. You’re not making it a big enough deal.”

“Please,” I said, holding up my hands, reminded immediately of our altercation in the bathroom after the cinema. “Please don’t. It’s fine. I fucked up. But I’m fine, Elodie, really.”

“See,” Tamora said, coming right over to me. She reached out with one arm and pulled me into her tightly. “All she needs is a smoke to take the edge off, and a proper meal. She’ll be fine.”

Elodie looked at the two of us sandwiched together. Then something strange happened. She began to turn a bright shade of pink before our very eyes. She started trembling. It was like watching a kettle boil as her chest rose and fell.

“She,” Elodie said quietly, taking a deep breath between and looking at Tamora with a laser death stare, “almost got killed smoking your fucking weed. What’s wrong with you?”

“Woah,” Tamora said, letting me go. “You need to

relax, El.”

“Relax? How can you say that?”

“By looking at the situation and seeing that it doesn’t call for this, I don’t know, panic! And accusations, might I add.”

“How can you suggest smoking to her after she passed out from drinking and taking your stupid drugs? Can’t you see she’s in pain?”

Elodie’s voice had risen. She might have been small but her energy made her seem bigger than Tamora and I combined.

“In pain? She’s a damn sight healthier than you and me!”

“Oh, and why is that?”

I looked between the two women locked in a confrontational exchange. It dawned on me that perhaps there was a context to this discussion that I wasn’t fully aware of. Elodie took a step towards Tamora, who had folded her arms and clamped them to her body, her eyes wide and wild.

“You didn’t tell me what happened a few weeks ago but you didn’t need to.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tamora bit back. She had extended herself up to her full height like Scott had done, as though preparing for battle.



“You were the only person who knew about Pascale,” Elodie shot at her. Tears had properly formed in her eyes. She wasn’t paying attention to me anymore. In fact, neither of them were. I took half a step back from them both as though I might be swallowed by the wall behind me.

“Yeah, so? I kept your secret. Like you wanted me to!”

“But you used it against me! You knew I was vulnerable. And you’ve done the same thing to Lenore. I can see it. I knew it was true the day she ran out of this house. She deserves better than you.”

“You’ve got some nerve,” she spat at Elodie. “And you’re full of shit. Come on, Lenore, let’s go.”

Tamora turned around and made a beeline for the stairs. When she got to the foot of them and saw that I hadn’t moved, she put her head back and laughed.

“You’re not staying down here with this lunatic, are you? I just drove all the way to Eldridge to get you! She’s making out as though I don’t care about you. Or her. And that’s just unfair. You know that isn’t true.”

“I think... I think I should see a doctor,” I said quietly. “I breathed in a lot of smoke. And I cut myself on the window.”

She looked between the both of us.

“Suit yourself,” Tamora said bitterly. She dug her hands into her jeans pocket and fished out the keys to her van. She threw them on the floor at my feet. Then she turned around and walked the whole way up to her room without looking back. She slammed the door behind her and the sound of muffled music reached Elodie and I, who were standing, side by side, unspeaking, unmoving.

After a few moments Elodie bent down and picked up the keys.

“Shall I take you?” She said quietly. I nodded. Together we went outside and got into the van.

We drove to the nearest clinic in complete silence. Elodie parked opposite a canal. A punter with a boat full of tourists sailed by, pointing out the buildings. Little flashes from their cameras dazzled my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Elodie said, turning off the engine. She unbuckled her seatbelt and it slithered up behind her. I did the same and we turned towards each other.

“For what?” I replied. “You stood up for me. And yourself.”

“Tamora and I should have had that conversation a long time ago. And not in front of you. But,” she said, running her hands through her blonde hair. “I’m not sorry that you saw it.”

“No?”

“No. Lenore... I do care about you. A lot, actually.”

She was struggling to look me in the eye.

“When you started hanging out with us... it was obviously through Scott. So... I couldn't think too much.”

“You couldn't...”

“But there were moments. I saw you, the way you looked at her. I recognised it.”

“Recognised what?”

“She kept trying to make out that you and Scott were a solid couple. But, forgive me, I don't want to overstep, but the way you looked at him wasn't the way lovers look.”

I lost the power to speak. All I could do was grip the door with my left hand and the edge of the seat with my burnt right. Elodie continued.

“I told her I thought you might be like me. But she said with certainty that you weren't.”

Outside another boat of punters went by. The whole world was moving, spinning, carrying on as though nothing had changed. But I was making contact with the floor of my new world.

“I told her I thought you were beautiful. And smart. And sensitive. And weird. But she said I was just missing Pascale.”

“Pascale,” I stammered.

“And then she dragged you away. You got pulled into her gravity. I saw it in your eyes at the cinema. And at the concert. And the day I drove you home and all you could do was look out the window and not see what was sitting right beside you.”

“What... what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I like you.”

“You like me. You *like* me...”

“Or, as the English say, I fancy you. And I hope, maybe, when you’re up to it, when all the crazy shit has gone away... if you will let me take you out for dinner?”

## Chapter Seventeen

### An Unexpected Visitor

A soft rain fell over the house. We listened to the sound of it rolling off the roof, trickling down into the drains, nourishing the garden below. The alarm clock beside my bed read midday. Below us the house was perfectly quiet.

“Do you want a tea?” Elodie asked, resting her book on her chest. She planted a kiss on my forehead and smiled as I closed my own book and turned towards her so that we were nose to nose.

I had never been so grateful for such a tiny bed.

“I could go for a tea,” I said, returning her affection with a light kiss on the lips. She reached her arm over and pulled me in close so that there was no room between us at all.

“And then,” she whispered. “You need to finish your passport application.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. “It’s almost finished.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“It is,” I protested.

She opened her mouth to argue but I kissed her again. It was an easy way to win a playful argument:

just swoop in with a kiss, and anything we had been talking about just faded away into unimportance.

It had been more than two months since Elodie had confessed her liking for me in Tamora's van. Not long after that conversation she had moved out of the giant Cambridge house and into something smaller, with nice flatmates and a pleasant room that had a little door to a garden. She could sit out there and sketch and draw to her heart's content. And she had moved from her job at a cafe to a sales assistant at an art shop in the centre of Cambridge.

We had gone on numerous dates, starting with fairly public and day-lit walks around Cambridge and Eldridge in between my study breaks. We progressed to dinner at her place a couple of times so that I could meet her flatmates. We'd even had dinner at my house - introduced for the time being as a new friend I had made through a tutoring programme at school. This was half-true; Elodie had been 'helping' me study French. Mum and Ant didn't ask too many questions but welcomed Elodie to the table all the same. I suspected they knew the nature of our relationship the first moment she had crossed the threshold. I had spent all evening coming down the stairs wearing different outfits emphatically asking if I looked okay. I had instructed mum and Ant what questions were and

weren't topics of conversation I wanted brought up. I asked Ant to walk me through, step by step, what he was planning on making for dinner so that I could be sure she would like it. And when Mum asked how Elodie would be getting home that night she went so far as to suggest the guest pull-out sofa in the living room. It was the exact same 'suggestion' she had made for Scott, whom she had not mentioned for some time, and I knew that it wasn't a suggestion at all but the requirements for anyone in the house who was in an adult relationship.

It was on that day, laying with Elodie listening to the sound of the rain, relishing some alone-time before my parents and siblings came back, that I thought I had found stability. A bit of peace. A path that had illuminated itself for me at least a few metres ahead. The promise of maybe being able to be honest with my parents - at least, able to have the conversation with them that I knew they wanted me to have - and perhaps, even Piera.

But the most defining moments in life often come unexpectedly, without warning, jarring you from one world into another with cruel and unforgiving surprise. They create a split in time without your consent and serve as a marker for a fork in the road. Everything from that point on can be separated from

what *was* into what *is*.

There were a lot of moments I could think of that I spent too long anticipating and inadvertently gave too much meaning. They came and went without any kind of internal transformation as I might have expected. But the moments that I hadn't anticipated were the catalysts for deep shifts within. And I'll admit, those were the moments that were the most terrifying. Wandering around knowing that at any point an entire life could change with just the click of a lighter, a phone call, a kiss from someone unexpected, or even the ringing of a doorbell.

Because when the doorbell rang, stirring Elodie and I out of our starry-eyed state on my tiny bed, I didn't think anything of it. I couldn't have known that I was only just at the beginning of my journey. That the swift kiss on Elodie's lips before I went downstairs to open the door was not the first page of a book I thought had just begun, but the end of a chapter I had really been writing for years.

Through the frosted glass I could make out a figure in a bright yellow coat. I pulled open the door.

"Hi," I said brightly, the sound of the rain hitting her coat with fervour. The woman turned her head to look me right in the eye.

"I didn't expect it to be raining here like it is at



home," she said through an accent. "But luckily I don't travel without my coat."

"I'm sorry... who are...?"

But I needn't have asked. The woman's deep brown eyes stared straight into me and I knew I was looking at the only relative of my father's I had ever met.

"Lenore," Aunt June said. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. But I couldn't leave it a moment longer. We need to talk."

## Epilogue



## Drinking the Ocean

How quietly I approach you  
In the hour of my despair  
I've washed up on the sands of my mind  
to commit to my repair

Winged gargoyles stand as sentinels  
And watch as I come close  
They do not say a word to me  
They know I am a ghost

"Please," I beg the guardians  
"Let me go inside right now -  
If I stay out in this storm tonight,  
You know that I will drown."

The gargoyles, they ignore my plea  
And nod toward the ocean  
Which is frothing red on the sea bed  
Its colours newly awoken

"Why is the ocean made of wine?"  
I ask but above a whisper  
From their perches they look down at me  
And I quietly start to whimper

Watchers of their Gothic house  
Cathedral on an island beach  
It's my only source of shelter  
And they put it out of reach

But when the creatures turn their heads  
To watch my ship sink in the wine  
I run forward to their wooden door:  
I must make this cathedral mine.

They see me run for cover  
And they descend from their holy perch  
They command that lightning strikes the spire  
So that my only home might burn

But I run past their flapping wings,  
And dive right out of sight  
And I force the door closed on their beaks;  
I push with all my might

A silence falls upon me  
As I take in the heavy truth  
Angels glide and cherubs twirl  
Across a painted roof

I approach the altar slowly  
To a figure all alone  
And I whisper to her softly:  
“What happened to your island home?”

She turns around to face me  
And my heart jumps in my mouth  
For the girl who’s staring back at me,  
Is me - without a doubt

She doesn’t say a word

But leads me over to the altar  
And to a basin filled with wine -  
I'm curious but I falter

"Why is the ocean made of wine?"  
I repeat my question fast  
She hands me a goblet of the sea  
To reveal the truth at last:

"You already have the answer,"  
Then she turns her back on me.  
And I have a choice, to drink the wine -  
Or to go back out to sea.



