

'I don't remember where I was or what I was doing when I heard my father had died.'

'Okay. Do you want to explore that?'

I stared at Theresa, sitting in her leather wingback chair. She reminded me of the sleepy dormouse at Alice in Wonderland's tea party, or one of his ratty friends. She blinked a lot behind her little round glasses and her lips were permanently pursed. She had great legs under the knee-length tweed skirt she was wearing, and good hair too. I decided she could be pretty if she wanted to be, but I knew she wasn't interested in anything but looking intelligent.

'Electra? I'm losing you again.'

'Yeah, sorry, I was miles away.'

'Were you thinking about how you felt when your father died?'

As I couldn't exactly tell her what I *had* been thinking, I nodded earnestly. 'Yeah, I was.'

'And?'

'I really can't remember. Sorry.'

'You seem angry about his death, Electra. Why were you angry?'

'I'm not . . . I wasn't. I mean, I honestly can't remember.'

'You can't remember how you felt at that moment?'

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‘No.’

‘Okay.’

I watched her scribble something onto her notepad, which probably went along the lines of ‘refusing to deal with father’s death.’ It was what the last shrink had said to me, and I was so totally dealing with it. As I’d learnt over the years, they liked to find a reason for me being a screw-up and then they’d take hold of it, just like a mouse with a piece of cheese, and nibble away at me until I agreed with them and talked shit just to keep them happy.

‘So, how are you feeling about Mitch?’

The phrases that came to mind to describe my ex would probably have Theresa reaching for her cell to warn the cops that there was a crazy woman on the loose, who wanted to blast away the balls of one of the world’s most famous rock stars. Instead, I smiled sweetly.

‘I’m good. I’ve moved on now.’

‘You were very angry with him the last time you came to see me, Electra.’

‘Yeah, but I’m fine now. Really.’

‘Well, that’s good news. And how about the drinking? Under control a little more?’

‘Yes,’ I lied again. ‘Listen, I’m gonna have to run to a meeting.’

‘But we’re only halfway through the session, Electra.’

‘I know, it’s a shame, but hey, that’s life.’ I stood up and walked towards the door.

‘Maybe I can fit you in again later this week? Speak to Marcia on your way out.’

‘I will, thanks.’ I was already closing the door behind me. I walked straight past Marcia, the receptionist, and headed for the elevator. It came almost immediately and as I was whooshed downwards, I closed my eyes – I hated any con-

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lined spaces – and laid my hot forehead against the cool marble interior.

Jeez, I thought, what is it with me? I'm so messed up that I can't even tell my therapist the truth!

You're too ashamed to tell anyone the truth . . . and how could she understand even if you did? I argued back to myself. *She probably lives in a neat brownstone with her lawyer husband, has two kids and a refrigerator covered in cute magnets showing off their artwork. Oh, I added to myself as I climbed into the back of my limo, and one of those vomit-inducing photos of Mom and Dad with the kids, all wearing matching denim shirts, that they've blown up huge and hung behind their couch.*

'Where to, ma'am?' the driver asked me over the intercom.

'Home,' I barked, before grabbing a bottle of water from the mini fridge, shutting it fast before I was tempted to explore the alcoholic options. I had the mother of all headaches, which no amount of painkillers had eased, and it was past five in the evening. It had been a great party the night before, though, from what I could remember anyway. Maurice, my new best designer friend, had been in town and had dropped by for a few drinks with some of his New York playmates, who had then called others . . . I couldn't remember going to bed, and had been surprised to find a stranger in it with me when I'd woken up this morning. He was a beautiful stranger at least, and after we'd gotten to know each other physically again, I'd asked him his name. Fernando had been a delivery driver for Walmart in Philly up until a few months back, when one of the fashion buyers had noticed him and told him to call a friend at a New York modelling agency. He said he'd be happy to walk me down a red carpet sometime soon – I'd learnt the hard way that a shot of me on his arm would send Mister Walmart's career skyrocketing – so I'd gotten rid of him as soon as I could.

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So what if you had told Mrs Dormouse the truth, Electra? So what if you'd admitted that last night you were so off your face with liquor and coke that you could have slept with Santa and you wouldn't have known about it? That the reason you couldn't even begin to think about your father wasn't because of his death, but because you knew how ashamed he'd be of you . . . how ashamed he'd been of you?

At least when Pa Salt had been alive, I'd known he couldn't see what I was doing, but now he was dead, he'd somehow become omnipresent; he could have been in the bedroom with me last night, or even here in the limo right now . . .

I cracked and reached for a mini vodka, then poured it down my throat, trying to forget the look of disappointment on Pa's face the last time I'd seen him before he'd died. He'd come to New York to visit me, saying he had something to tell me. I'd avoided him until the last possible evening, when I had reluctantly agreed to have dinner with him. I'd arrived at Asiate, a restaurant just across Central Park, already tanked on vodka and uppers. I'd sat numbly opposite him throughout the meal, excusing myself to go to the ladies' room to do a few bumps of coke whenever he tried to start conversations I didn't want to pursue.

Once dessert had arrived, Pa had crossed his arms and regarded me calmly. 'I'm extremely worried for you, Electra. You seem to be completely absent.'

'Well, you don't understand the kind of pressure I'm under,' I'd snapped at him. 'What it takes to be me!' To my shame, I only had vague memories of what happened next or what he'd said but I knew I'd stood up and walked out on him. So now I'd never even know what it was he'd wanted to tell me . . .

'Why do you give a shit, Electra?' I asked myself as I wiped my mouth and stuck the empty bottle in a pocket – my driver

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was new and all I needed was a story in a newspaper saying I'd drunk the mini bar dry. 'He's not even your real father anyway.'

Besides, there was nothing I could do about it now. Pa was gone – like everyone else I'd loved in my life – and I had to get on with it. I didn't need him, I didn't need anybody . . .

'We're here, ma'am,' said the driver through the intercom.

'Thanks. I'll jump out,' I added, then did so, closing the limo door behind me. It was best to make my arrival at any place as inconspicuous as possible; other celebrities could wear disguises and get away with going to a local diner, but I was over six feet tall and pretty hard to miss in a crowd, even if I hadn't been famous.

'Hi there, Electra!'

'Tommy,' I said, managing a smile as I walked beneath the canopy towards the entrance to my apartment building, 'how are you today?'

'All the better for seeing you, ma'am. Did you have a good day?'

'Yeah, great, thank you,' I nodded as I looked down – and I mean *down* – at my number one fan. 'See you tomorrow, Tommy.'

'You sure will, Electra. Not going out tonight?'

'No, it's a quiet one in. Bye now,' I said as I gave him a wave and walked inside.

At least he loves me, I mused as I collected my mail from the concierge and headed for the elevator. As the porter rode up with me simply because it was his job (I considered offering him my keys to hold as that was all I was carrying), I thought about Tommy. He stood sentinel outside the building most days and had done so for the past few months. At first it had freaked me out and I'd asked the concierge to get rid of him. Tommy had stood his ground – literally – and said

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that he had every right to stand on the sidewalk, that he wasn't bothering anyone, and that all he wanted to do was to protect me. The concierge had encouraged me to call the cops and have him charged with stalking, but one morning I'd asked him his full name, then gone to do a bit of internet stalking myself. I'd discovered on Facebook that he was an army vet who'd won medals for bravery out in Afghanistan, and that he had a wife and daughter in Queens. Now, rather than feeling threatened, Tommy made me feel safe. Besides that, he was always respectful and polite, so I'd told the concierge to back off.

The porter stepped out of the elevator and let me pass. Then we did a kind of dance in which I needed to step back so that he could go ahead and lead the way to my penthouse apartment to open the door for me with his own master key.

'There we go, Miss D'Aplièse. Have a nice day now.'

He nodded at me and I saw zero warmth in his eyes. I knew that the staff here wished that I would disappear in a puff of smoke up a non-existent chimney. Most of the other residents had been here since they were foetuses in their mothers' stomachs, back when a woman of colour, like me, would have been 'privileged' to be their maid. They were all owner-occupiers, whereas I was a peasant: a tenant, albeit a rich one, allowed in on a lease because the old lady who'd lived here had died and her son had renovated the place, then tried to sell it at an exorbitant price. Due to something called the sub-prime crisis, he'd apparently failed to do so. Instead, he'd been reduced to selling the lease to the highest bidder – me. The price was crazy, but then so was the apartment, stuffed with modern artwork and every kind of electronic gadget you could imagine (I didn't know how to work most of them) and the view from the terrace over Central Park was stunning.

If I needed a reminder of my success, this apartment was

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it. *But what it reminds me of more than anything*, I thought as I sank down into the couch that could provide a comfortable bed for at least two full-grown guys, *is how lonely I am*. Its size made even me feel small and delicate . . . and up here, right at the top of the building, very, very isolated.

My cell phone piped up from somewhere in the apartment, playing the song that had made Mitch a worldwide superstar; I'd tried to change the ringtone but it hadn't worked. *If CeCe is dyslexic with words, then I sure am dyslexic with electronics*, I thought as I went into the bedroom to grab it. I was relieved to see that the maid had changed the sheets on the enormous bed and everything was hotel-room perfect again. I liked the new maid my PA had found me; she'd signed a non-disclosure agreement like all the others to stop her blabbing to the media about any of my nastier habits. Even so, I shuddered to think what she – was it Lisbet? – had thought when she'd walked into my apartment this morning.

I sat on the bed and listened to my voicemails. Five were from my agent asking me to call her back urgently about tomorrow's shoot for *Vanity Fair*, and the last message was from Amy, my new PA. She'd only been with me for three months, but I liked her.

'Hi, Electra, it's Amy. I . . . well, I just wanted to say that I've really enjoyed working for you, but I don't think it's gonna work out long-term. I've handed my resignation letter in today to your agent and I wish you luck in the future, and . . .'

'SHIT!' I screamed as I pressed delete and threw the cell across the room. 'What the hell did I do to her?!' I asked the ceiling, wondering why I felt so upset that a two-bit nobody, who had gone down on bended knee and begged me to give her a chance, had walked out on me three months later.

"It's been my dream to be in the fashion business since

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I was a little kid. Please, Miss D'Aplière, I'll work for you night and day, your life will be mine and I swear I'll never let you down." I mimicked Amy's whiny Brooklyn accent as I dialled my agent. There were only three things I couldn't live without: vodka, cocaine and a PA.

'Hi, Susie, I just heard Amy's resigned.'

'Yes, it's not great. She was shaping up well.' Susie's British accent sounded crisp and business-like.

'Yeah, I thought she was too. Do you know why she's gone?'

There was a pause on the line before she replied. 'No. Anyway, I'll get Rebekah on the case and I'm sure we'll have you a new one by the end of the week. Did you get my messages?'

'Yup, I did.'

'Well, don't be late tomorrow. They want to shoot as the sun is coming up. A car will pick you up at four a.m., okay?'

'Sure.'

'I heard you had quite a party last night.'

'It was fun, yeah.'

'Well, no partying tonight, Electra. You need to be fresh for tomorrow. It's the cover shot.'

'Don't worry, I'll be in bed by nine like a good little girl.'

'Okay. Sorry, I've got Lagerfeld on the other line. Rebekah will be in touch with a list of suitable PAs. Ciao.'

'Ciao,' I mimicked into the cell as the line went dead. Susie was one of the only people on the planet who would dare hang up on me. She was the most powerful modelling agent in New York and ran all the big names in the industry. She'd spotted me when I was sixteen. At the time, I'd been working in Paris as a waitress, having been expelled from my third school in about as many years. I'd told Pa that it was pointless him trying to find me another school because I'd only end up

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getting expelled from there too. To my surprise, he hadn't made a fuss.

I remembered how astonished I'd been that he hadn't been angrier at yet another of my failures. Just kind of disappointed, I suppose, which had taken the wind out of my sails.

'I thought I'd go travelling or something,' I'd suggested to him. 'Learn through life experience.'

'I agree that most of what you need to know to be a success in life doesn't necessarily come through the academic process,' he'd said, 'but because you're so bright, I'd hoped you'd at least get some qualifications. You're a little young to be off by yourself. It's a big wide world out there, Electra.'

'I can take care of myself, Pa,' I'd said firmly.

'I'm sure you can, but what will you do to fund your travels?'

'I'll get a job, of course,' I'd said with a shrug. 'I thought I'd head for Paris first.'

'Excellent choice,' Pa had nodded. 'It's an incredible city.'

As I'd watched him across his big desk in the study, I'd thought he'd looked almost dreamy and sad. Yup, definitely sad.

'Well now,' he'd continued, 'why don't we compromise? You want to leave school, which I understand, but I'm concerned about my youngest daughter heading off into the world at such a tender age. Marina has some contacts in Paris. I'm sure she could help you sort out a safe place to stay. Take the summer there, then we'll regroup and decide where you go next.'

'Okay, sounds like a plan,' I'd agreed, still amazed that he hadn't fought harder for me to finish my education. As I'd stood up to leave, I'd decided that he'd either washed his hands of me, or was giving me just enough rope to hang myself with. Anyway, Ma had called some contacts, and I'd

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ended up in a sweet little studio overlooking the rooftops of Montmartre. It had been miniscule and I'd had to share the bathroom with a load of foreign exchange kids who were in town to improve their French, but it had been *mine*.

I remembered that first delicious taste of independence as I'd stood in my tiny room the night I arrived and realised there was no one to tell me what to do. There was also no one to cook for me, so I'd taken myself off to a café just along the street, sat down at a table outside and lit up a cigarette as I studied the menu. I'd ordered French onion soup and a glass of wine and the waiter hadn't even batted an eyelid at me smoking or ordering alcohol. Three glasses of wine later, I'd had the confidence to go up to the manager and ask him if he had any vacancies for a waitress. Twenty minutes after that, I'd walked the few hundred yards back to my studio with a job. One of my proudest moments had been the call to Pa on the pay phone along the hall the next morning. To give him credit, he'd sounded just as thrilled as when my sister Maia had won a place at the Sorbonne.

Four weeks later, I'd served Susie, now my modelling agent, a *croque monsieur* and the rest was history . . .

Why am I looking back all the time? I asked myself as I retrieved my cell to listen to the rest of my messages. *And why do I keep thinking about Pa . . . ?*

'Mitch . . . Pa . . .' I muttered as I waited for the voicemail to spill its beans. 'They're gone, Electra, along with Amy as of today, and you just have to move on.'

'My dearest Electra! How are you? I am back in New York again . . . What are you doing tonight? Fancy sharing a bottle of Cristal and some chow mein dans ton lit avec moi? I'm yearning for you. Give me a call back as soon as you can.'

Despite my low mood, I couldn't help but smile. Zed Eszu was an enigma in my life. He was hugely wealthy, well con-

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nected and – despite his lack of height and the fact that he wasn't my usual type at all – incredible in bed; we'd been hooking up regularly for three years. It had all stopped when I had gotten serious with Mitch, but I'd reinstated him a few weeks ago and there was no doubt he'd given my ego the boost it had needed.

Were we in love? It was a total no, for me anyway, but we ran with the same crowd in New York and, best of all, when we were alone together we spoke in French. Like Mitch, he wasn't impressed by who I was, which was rare these days, and somehow comforting.

I stared at the phone, debating whether to ignore Zed and follow Susie's instructions for an early night, or whether to call him and enjoy some company. It was a no-brainer, so I called Zed and told him to come on over. While I was waiting for him, I took a shower then dressed in my favourite silk kimono, which had been designed especially for me by an up-and-coming Japanese atelier. I then drank what felt like a gallon of water to counteract any drinking or bad stuff I might do when he arrived.

The concierge phone beeped to announce Zed's presence and I told them to send him right up. He arrived at my door with a giant bouquet of my favourite white roses and the promised bottle of Cristal champagne.

'*Bonsoir, ma belle Electra,*' he said in his strange clipped French as he unloaded the flowers and champagne and kissed me on both cheeks. '*Comment tu va?*'

'I'm good,' I answered as I eyed the champagne greedily. 'Shall I open it?'

'I think that is my job. Can I take my jacket off first?'

'Of course.'

'But before that,' he said, dipping into his jacket pocket and handing me a velvet box. 'I saw this and thought of you.'

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‘Thanks,’ I said, sitting down on the couch and tucking my irritatingly long legs underneath me as I stared at the box in my hands like an excited child. Zed often bought me presents; ironically, given his vast wealth, they were rarely flashy, but always something thoughtful and interesting. I lifted the lid and saw a ring nestling inside. The stone was oval-shaped and of a soft buttery-yellow hue.

‘It is amber,’ he said as he watched me studying the way it caught the light of the chandelier above us. ‘Try it on.’

‘Which finger should I put it on?’ I teased as I looked up at him.

‘Whichever you prefer, *ma chère*, but if I was going to make you my wife, I think I might do a little better than that. I am sure that you know your Greek namesake has an association with amber.’

‘Really? No, I don’t.’ I watched him as he popped the cork on the champagne. ‘Like what?’

‘Well, the Greek word for amber was “electron”, and legend has it that the sun’s rays were trapped within the stone. A Greek philosopher noticed that if two pieces were rubbed together, they created friction, which created an energy . . . Your name couldn’t suit you better,’ he smiled as he placed a glass of champagne in front of me.

‘Are you saying I create friction?’ I smiled back. ‘The question is, did I grow into my name, or did it grow into me? *Santé*.’

‘*Santé*.’ We clinked our glasses and he sat down next to me.

‘Um . . .’

‘You are thinking to yourself, did I bring another gift?’

‘Yup.’

‘Then look underneath the lining of the box.’

I did so, and sure enough, tucked underneath the slim slice of velvet that had held the ring was a small plastic packet.

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‘Thanks, Zed,’ I said as I pulled the packet open, then dipped a finger into its contents like a child with a honey pot and rubbed some on my gums.

‘Good, eh?’ he asked as I tipped a little out onto the table, detached the short straw from the packet and took up a noseful.

‘Mmm, very,’ I agreed. ‘Want some?’

‘You know I don’t. So, how have you been?’

‘Oh . . . okay.’

‘You do not sound sure, Electra, and you look tired.’

‘It’s been busy,’ I said as I took a large gulp of my champagne. ‘I was on a shoot in Fiji last week and I’m flying to Paris next week.’

‘Maybe you need to slow down a little. Take a break.’

‘Says the guy who told me he spends more nights sleeping on his private jet than he does in his bed,’ I teased him.

‘Then maybe we should both slow down. Can I tempt you to a week on my yacht? It’s moored in St Lucia for the next couple of months before I have it sailed to the Med for the summer.’

‘I wish,’ I sighed. ‘I have a packed schedule until June.’

‘June then. We can sail around the Greek islands.’

‘Maybe,’ I shrugged, not taking him seriously. He often discussed plans when we were together that never came to anything, and more to the point, nor would I want them to. Zed was just great for a night’s company and some physical action, but any more than that and he’d begin to irritate me with his fastidiousness and unbelievable arrogance.

The concierge phone beeped again and Zed stood up to answer it. ‘Send it up immediately, thank you.’ He poured us both some more champagne. ‘We are having Chinese and I promise you, it will be the best chow mein you have ever tasted,’ he smiled. ‘So how are your sisters?’

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‘I don’t know. I’ve been too busy lately to call them. Ally did have a baby, though – a little boy. She’s named him Bear, which is really cute. Come to think of it, I’m meant to be seeing them all in June back at Atlantis; we’re taking Pa’s boat out to the Greek islands to lay a wreath where Ally thinks his coffin was dropped into the sea. Your dad was found on a beach close by, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes, but like you, I do not want to think of my father’s death because it upsets me,’ Zed replied sharply. ‘I only think to the future.’

‘I know, but it is a coincidence—’

The buzzer rang and Zed went to answer the door.

‘Now, Electra,’ he said as he carried two boxes through to the kitchen. ‘Come and help me with these.’

2

I arrived home from the shoot the following day, took a hot shower and got into bed with a vodka. I felt utterly wrecked – anyone who thought models just floated around in pretty clothes and got paid a fortune for it should try a day being me. A four a.m. start, with six changes of hair, clothes and make-up in a freezing warehouse somewhere downtown was *not* easy. I never complained publicly – I mean, I was hardly working in a sweatshop in China and I got paid a ton for doing it – but everyone had their own reality and occasionally, even if it was a first-world problem, people were allowed to complain to themselves, weren't they?

Enjoying feeling warm for the first time that day, I lay back on my pillows and checked my voicemails. Rebekah, Susie's PA, had left me four, telling me she'd emailed across some résumés of suitable PAs and that I should look at them as soon as I could. I was scrolling through them on my laptop when my cell rang and I saw it was Rebekah again.

'I'm looking at them right now,' I said before she could speak.

'Great, thanks, Electra. I was actually calling because there's a girl I think would be the perfect fit for you, but she's been offered another position and has to give her answer by

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tomorrow. Would it be okay if she swung by early evening and you two had a chat?’

‘I’ve just got in from the *Vanity Fair* shoot, Rebekah, and—’

‘I really think you should see her, Electra. She comes with great references. She used to work as PA to Bardin and you know how difficult he is. I mean,’ Rebekah continued hurriedly, ‘that she’s used to working under pressure for high-profile fashion clients. Can I send her round?’

‘Okay,’ I sighed, not wanting to sound as ‘difficult’ as she obviously thought I was.

‘Great, I’ll tell her. I know she’ll be thrilled – she’s one of your biggest fans.’

‘Right. Good. Tell her to come by at six.’

Promptly at six, the concierge phone beeped to indicate that my guest had arrived.

‘Send her up,’ I said wearily. I wasn’t looking forward to this – since Susie had suggested I needed help organising my life, I’d seen a stream of eager young women arrive, full of enthusiasm, only to leave weeks later.

‘Am I difficult?’ I asked my reflection in the mirror as I made sure I didn’t have anything stuck between my teeth. ‘Maybe. But it’s nothing new, is it?’ I added as I finished off my vodka then smoothed down my hair. Stefano, my hair stylist, had only recently braided it tightly against my scalp in order to stitch in long extensions. My whole head always ached after a new weave had been put in.

There was a knock and I went to answer the door, wondering what was waiting for me on the other side of it. Whatever I’d been expecting, it was certainly not the small, trim figure dressed in a plain brown suit with a skirt that fell at an unfashionable length to just below her knees. My eyes wandered down to her feet, which were enclosed in a pair of what

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Ma would call ‘sensible’ brown brogues. The most surprising thing about her was that she was wearing a headscarf wrapped tightly across her forehead and around her neck. I saw that she had an exquisite face: tiny nose, high cheekbones, full pink lips and a clear latte-coloured complexion.

‘Hello.’ She smiled at me and her lovely deep brown eyes lit up as she did so. ‘My name is Mariam Kazemi, and I am very pleased to meet you, Miss D’Aplièse.’

I loved the tone of her voice – in fact, if it was for sale, I’d buy it because it was deep and modulated, pouring gently like honey from her throat.

‘Hi, Mariam, come in.’

‘Thank you.’

As I took long strides towards the couch, Mariam Kazemi took her time. She paused to look at the expensive splashes and squiggles on canvas and I could just tell from her expression that she thought as much of them as I did.

‘They’re not mine, they’re the landlord’s choice,’ I felt inexplicably bound to explain. ‘Can I get you anything? Water, coffee, tea – something stronger?’

‘Oh no, I don’t drink. I mean, I do, but not alcohol. I’d love some water if it’s not too much trouble.’

‘Sure,’ I said as I changed direction and headed for the kitchen. I was just pulling a bottle of Evian out of the refrigerator when she appeared beside me.

‘I would have thought you had staff to do that kind of thing?’

‘I have a maid, but it’s just little ol’ me here most of the time. Here.’ I handed her the water then she walked to the window and gazed out of it.

‘You’re a long way up.’

‘I am, yes,’ I said, realising I was completely blindsided by this woman, who exuded calm like a perfume and seemed

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totally unimpressed by meeting me, or by the grand apartment I lived in. Normally, possible candidates were bouncing off the walls with excitement and promises.

‘Shall we go sit down?’ I suggested.

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘So,’ I said when we were settled in the living room, ‘I hear you worked for Bardin?’

‘I did, yes.’

‘Why did you leave?’

‘I’ve been offered a position that might suit me better.’

‘Not because he was difficult?’

‘Oh no,’ Mariam chuckled. ‘He wasn’t difficult at all, but he recently moved back to Paris full-time and I am still based here. We remain the best of friends.’

‘Good. Well, that’s great. So, why are you interested in working for me?’

‘Because I’ve always admired your work.’

Wow, I thought. *It isn’t often I hear someone calling my job ‘work’.*

‘Thanks.’

‘It is a real gift to be able to create a personality that complements the products one is advertising, I think.’

I watched as she opened her plain brown satchel, which was definitely more ‘school’ than it was ‘designer’, and handed me her résumé.

‘I guessed you wouldn’t have had time to glance through it before I arrived.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ I agreed as I skimmed the details of her life, which were unusually brief and to the point. ‘So you didn’t go to college?’

‘No, my family didn’t have the funds. Or more truthfully’ – one of her small delicate hands reached towards her face and a finger rubbed her nose – ‘they probably did, but there

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are six of us and it wouldn't have been fair on the rest if I'd have gone and the others couldn't.'

'I'm one of six too! And I didn't go to college or university.'

'Well, we have something in common at least.'

'I was the youngest.'

'And I am the eldest,' Mariam smiled.

'You're twenty-six?'

'Yes.'

'Then we're the same age,' I said, for some unknown reason feeling pleased to find parallels with this unusual human being. 'So what did you do when you left school?'

'I worked in a florist's during the day and went to business school at night. I can obtain a copy of my qualification certificate if you need it. I'm fully computer literate, can produce spreadsheets and my typing is . . . well, I'm not sure of the exact speed actually, but it's fast.'

'That's not really one of the main requirements and neither are spreadsheets. My accountant looks after all the financials.'

'Oh, but they can be very useful in an organisational role too. I could plan in detail your entire month for you at a glance.'

'If you did that, I think I might run away,' I joked. 'I go on a day-to-day basis. It's the only way I can cope.'

'I completely understand, Miss D'Aplièse, but it's my job to organise beyond that. With Bardin, I even had a spreadsheet for his dry cleaning and we'd work out what he'd wear to each event, right down to the colour of his socks – which were often deliberately mismatched.' Mariam let out a small giggle and I joined her.

'You say he's a nice person?'

'He is wonderful, yes.'

Whether he was or he wasn't, this girl had integrity. So many times I'd had prospective PAs dishing the dirt to me on

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former employers. Maybe they thought it was cool to explain in depth why they'd left, but I just thought of the fact that it could be me they were talking about in the future.

'Before you ask, I am very discreet.' Mariam had obviously read my mind. 'I have often found the stories that circulate about celebrities in our business to be untrue. It's interesting . . .'

'What?'

'No, it's nothing.'

'Please, say it.'

'Well, I find it fascinating that so much of the world craves fame, yet in my experience, it often brings only misery. People believe that it will grant them the right to do or be anything they choose, but in fact they lose the most precious commodity we humans have, and that is their freedom. *Your* freedom,' she added.

I looked at her in surprise. I got the feeling that, despite everything I had, she felt sorry for me. Not in a patronising way, but sympathetic and warm.

'Yup, I've lost my freedom. In fact,' I declared to this total stranger, 'I'm beyond paranoid that someone will see me doing the simplest thing and twist it into a story to sell more of their newspapers.'

'It is not a good way to live, Miss D'Aplièse.' Mariam shook her head solemnly. 'Now, I am afraid I must go. I swore to my mother I would babysit my little brother while she and Papa go out.'

'Right. This babysitting . . . I mean, is it a regular thing you do?'

'Oh no, not at all, which is why it is important I am there on time tonight. It is Mama's birthday, you see, and the family joke is that the last time Papa took her out to dinner was when he proposed to her twenty-eight years ago! I understand

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that if you employ me, you will need me twenty-four hours a day.'

'And that there will be a lot of overseas travel?'

'Yes, that is no problem. I have no romantic commitments either. Now, if you'll excuse me . . .'

She stood up. 'It has been a pleasure to meet you, Miss D'Aplière, even if we do not end up working together.'

I watched her as she turned and walked towards the door. Even in her ugly clothes, she had a natural grace and what a photographer would call a 'presence'. Despite the fact that the interview had been about fifteen minutes flat and I hadn't asked her a tenth of the questions I should have done, I really, *really* wanted Mariam Kazemi and her wonderful sense of calm in my life.

'Listen, if I offer you the role now, would you consider taking it? I mean,' I said as I jumped off the couch to follow her to the door, 'I know you've been offered another position and need to answer by tomorrow.'

She paused for a few moments, then turned to face me and smiled. 'Why, of course I would consider it. I think you are a lovely person, with a good soul.'

'When can you start?'

'Next week, if you wish.'

'Done!' I put out my hand towards her, and after only a couple of seconds' hesitation, she offered me hers.

'Done,' she repeated. 'Now I really must go.'

'Of course.'

She opened the door and I followed her to the elevator. 'You already know the package, but I'll have Rebekah write up a formal offer of employment and bike it to you in the morning.'

'Very good,' she said as the elevator doors slid open.

'By the way, what is that scent you're wearing? It's gorgeous.'

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‘Actually, it’s body oil and I make it myself. Goodbye, Miss D’Aplièse.’

The elevator doors closed and Mariam Kazemi was gone.



All Mariam’s references didn’t just check out, they couldn’t sing her praises highly enough, so the following Thursday, the two of us boarded a private jet from Teterboro Airport in New Jersey and headed for Paris. The only nod she made to the fact we were travelling, in terms of her ‘uniform’, was that she had replaced the skirt with a pair of beige pants. I watched her as she took her seat in the cabin, then got her laptop out of her satchel.

‘Have you flown by private jet before?’ I asked her.

‘Oh yes, Bardin used nothing else. Now, Miss D’Aplièse—’
‘Electra, please.’

‘Electra,’ she corrected herself. ‘I must ask you whether you would prefer to take some rest during the flight or would like to use the time to go through a few things with me?’

Given the fact that Zed had been my playmate up until four a.m. that morning, I chose the former and as soon as we were airborne, I pressed the button that turned my seat into a bed, donned my eye mask and fell asleep.

I woke three hours later, feeling refreshed – I’d had plenty of practice at sleeping on planes – and peeped out of a corner of the eye mask to see what my new PA was up to. She wasn’t in her seat, so I supposed she must be in the bathroom. Pulling off my mask, I sat up, and to my surprise saw Mariam’s rear end lifted towards me in the narrow aisle between the seats. *Maybe she’s practising yoga*, I thought, as she was kneeling on all fours with her head bent to the floor in what looked like a variation of the child’s pose. Then I heard her muttering to

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herself and as she raised her hands and head slightly, I realised she was praying. Feeling uncomfortable that I was observing her in such a private act, I averted my eyes and went off to use the facilities. When I came back out, Mariam was in her seat, tapping away on her laptop.

‘Sleep well?’ she smiled at me.

‘Yeah, and now I’m hungry.’

‘I asked them to ensure there was some sushi on board – Susie said it was your favourite when you were travelling.’

‘Thanks. It is.’

The cabin attendant was already by my side. ‘Can I help you, Miss D’Aplièse?’

I put in my order – fresh fruit, sushi and a half-bottle of champagne – then turned to Mariam. ‘Are you eating?’

‘I already did, thank you.’

‘Are you a nervous flyer?’

She frowned at me. ‘No, not at all. Why?’

‘Because when I woke up, I saw you were praying.’

‘Oh,’ she laughed, ‘that is not because I am nervous, it is because it is midday in New York, which is when I always pray.’

‘Right, wow, I didn’t realise you had to.’

‘Please don’t worry, Electra, it is not often that you will see me in prayer – I usually find a discreet private space, but up here . . .’ She gestured around the cramped cabin. ‘I could not fit into the toilet.’

‘You have to pray every day?’

‘Oh yes, five times actually.’

‘Wow, doesn’t that cramp your style?’

‘I’ve never thought about it like that, because it is what I have done every day since I was a child. And I always feel better for it afterwards. It is just who I am.’

‘You mean what your religion is?’

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‘No, who *I* am. Now, here is your sushi. It looks delicious.’

‘Why don’t you join me while I eat? I don’t like drinking alone,’ I quipped as the attendant poured champagne into a flute.

‘Would you like anything, ma’am?’ she asked Mariam, who had slipped into the seat opposite me.

‘Some water, please.’

‘Cheers,’ I toasted her. ‘Here’s to a successful working relationship.’

‘Yes. I am sure it will be.’

‘I’m sorry if I’m ignorant of your ways.’

‘Please don’t be,’ Mariam comforted me. ‘If I were you, I would not have known anything about them either.’

‘Do you come from a strict family?’

‘Not really, no. Or at least, compared to others, I don’t. I was born in New York, as were my siblings, so we are Americans. As my father always says, the nation gave my parents safe harbour when they needed it and we must honour their ways as well as the old ways.’

‘Where were your parents born?’ I asked her.

‘In Iran . . . or Persia, as we all prefer to call it at home. It is a much prettier name, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, I do. So your parents had to leave their country against their will?’

‘Yes. They both came to America as children with their parents after the fall of the Shah.’

‘The Shah?’

‘He was the king of Iran and very Western in his ideals. The extremists in our country didn’t like this, so anyone who was related to him had to flee for their lives.’

‘So if he was a king, does that make you, like, royalty?’

‘Well,’ Mariam smiled, ‘technically, yes, but it is not like European royalty – there are many hundreds of us related to

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him . . . cousins, second, third or fourth by marriage. I suppose you would say in the West that my family was high-born.'

'Jeez! I have a princess working for me!'

'Who knows, if things had been different? I may well have become one if I had married the right man.'

I didn't like to say that I'd been joking, but as I looked at Mariam, things fell into place. Her air of containment, her self-assurance, her perfect manners . . . maybe these were things that only hundreds of years of aristocratic breeding could provide.

'What about you, Electra? Where is your family from?'

'I have no idea,' I answered, draining my champagne. 'I was adopted when I was a baby.'

'And you've never thought to investigate your past?'

'No. What is the point in looking back when you can't change the past? I only ever look forward.'

'Then you'd better not meet my father.' Mariam's eyes danced with mirth. 'He is always telling stories of the life he led with my grandparents in Iran. And the stories of our forebears who lived many hundreds of years ago. They are very beautiful and I loved listening to them as a child.'

'Yeah, well, all I got were *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and the stories always had a scary witch or a troll and frightened me senseless.'

'Our stories have those too, but they are called *djinn*s. They do terrible things to people.' Mariam sipped her water, eyeing me over the rim of the glass. 'Papa always says that our history provides the carpet on which we stand and from which we can fly. Maybe one day you will want to find out your own history. Now, would you be up to listening while I go through the Paris schedule?'

An hour later, Mariam went back to her own seat to type up the notes she'd taken during our chat. I reclined my seat

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and watched as the sky began to darken outside, heralding the European night. Somewhere under that darkness lay my family home – or at least, the home of us disparate kids who Pa had collected from around the world.

I'd never really minded that we weren't blood-related, but listening to Mariam talk about her roots – and watching her continue a centuries-old culture that she still celebrated on a private jet bound for Paris – made me almost envious.

I thought of the letter from Pa sitting somewhere in my New York apartment . . . I didn't even know where it was. As I hadn't opened it and it was most likely lost, I'd probably never get the chance to find out about my past. Maybe 'The Hoff' – as I'd privately nicknamed Pa's lawyer – could shed some light on it . . . And I remembered that there were also those numbers on the armillary sphere that Ally said could pinpoint where we had originally come from. Suddenly, it felt like the most important thing in the world to find Pa's letter, almost important enough to ask the pilot to turn back just so I could rifle through my drawers in search of it. At the time, when I'd arrived back in New York after the quasi-memorial that had been arranged because Pa had apparently decided to get himself buried at sea before we arrived at Atlantis, I'd been so angry I hadn't wanted to know.

Why were you angry, Electra?

The therapist's words rang in my ears. The truth was, I didn't know the answer. I seemed to have been angry ever since I could walk and talk, and probably before that too. All my sisters loved to tell me how I'd screamed the place down as a baby and things hadn't gotten much better as I'd grown up. I certainly couldn't blame it on my upbringing, which had been pretty perfect, although odd, given the fact we were all adopted and the family pics looked spookily like a Gap ad due to our different ethnicities. If I ever questioned it, Pa's

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answer was always that he'd chosen us especially to be his daughters and that had seemed to pacify my sisters, but not me. I wanted to know *why*. The chances were, now he was dead, I'd never find out.

'An hour to landing, Miss D'Aplière,' the attendant said as she refilled my glass. 'Can I get you anything else?'

'No thanks.' I closed my eyes and hoped that my contact in Paris had been as good as his word and delivered what I needed to my hotel, because I was desperate for a line. When I was clean, my brain began to work, and I started to think about Pa, about my sisters, my life . . . and I just wasn't comfortable doing that. Not right now anyway.



For a change, I actually enjoyed the shoot. Spring in Paris – when the sun was out anyway – was crazily beautiful and if I felt I belonged in any city, it was right here. We were in the Jardin des Plantes, which was awash with cherry blossom, irises and peonies, and everything felt new and fresh. It also helped that I liked the photographer. We finished way ahead of schedule and continued the chemistry in my hotel room that afternoon.

'What are you doing living in New York?' Maxime asked me in French as we drank tea from delicate china cups in bed then used the tray to do a line. 'You have a European soul.'

'You know, I'm not really sure,' I sighed. 'That's where Susie, my agent, is and it made sense to be near her.'

'Your modelling "*maman*", you mean?' he teased me. 'You're a big girl now, Electra, and can make your own decisions. Live here, then we can do this more often,' he said as he clambered out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom to take a shower.

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As I gazed out of the window across the Place Vendôme, which was packed with people sightseeing or browsing the elegant shops, I thought about what Maxime had said. He was right, I could live anywhere; it hardly mattered because I spent so much of my life travelling anyway.

‘Where is home?’ I whispered, suddenly feeling deflated at the thought of returning to New York and my soulless, echoing apartment. On a whim, I reached for my cell and called Mariam.

‘Am I doing anything in New York tomorrow?’

‘You have a dinner at seven p.m. with Thomas Allebach, the head of marketing for your fragrance contract,’ Mariam responded immediately.

‘Right.’ Thomas and I had shared some pleasant downtime over the past few months since Mitch had left me, but I wasn’t enamoured. ‘And Sunday?’

‘There’s nothing in the diary.’

‘Great. Cancel the dinner – tell Thomas the shoot here has run over or something – then move the flight back to Sunday evening, and extend my hotel booking for another couple of nights. I want to stay in Paris a little longer.’

‘Perfect. It is a wonderful city. I will confirm everything as soon as it’s done.’

‘Thank you, Mariam.’

‘No problem.’

‘I’m staying on longer,’ I said to Maxime as he emerged from the shower.

‘That’s a shame, because I’m out of town for the weekend. If I’d have known . . .’

‘Oh.’ I tried not to let my disappointment show. ‘Well, I’ll be back again sometime soon.’

‘Let me know when, won’t you?’ he said as he dressed. ‘I’d cancel if I could, but it’s a friend’s wedding. Sorry, Electra.’

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'I'm staying for the city, not you,' I said as I forced a smile.

'And the city loves you, as do I.' He dropped a kiss on my forehead. 'Have a wonderful weekend and keep in touch.'

'I will.'

Once he'd left, I did a line to cheer myself up, and thought about what it was I wanted to do in Paris. But just like in other big cities, the moment I stepped out of the front entrance of the Ritz, I would get recognised and then within a few minutes, someone would have alerted the press and I'd have an unwanted entourage following me.

My hand hovered over my cell to call Mariam and have her revert to plan A when, as if by magic, it rang.

'Electra? It's Mariam. Just to let you know that the flight back to New York is changed to Sunday night and your hotel suite booking extended.'

'Thanks.'

'Do you wish me to make you any restaurant reservations?'

'No, I . . .' For some reason, tears came to my eyes.

'Are you okay, Electra?'

'Yeah, I'm fine.'

'Are you . . . busy right now?'

'No, not at all.'

'Then can I come and see you? There are a couple of contracts Susie's sent through today that you need to sign.'

'Sure, fine.'

A few minutes later, Mariam arrived, wafting her lovely scent into the room with her. I signed the contracts, then stared moodily out of the window at the approaching dusk of the Paris evening.

'So, what are your plans for tonight?' she asked me.

'I don't have any. You?'

'Nothing but bath, bed and a good book,' she replied.

'I mean, I'd like to go out – visit the café I used to work in

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as a waitress and just eat normal food like a normal person – but I'm not in the mood to be recognised.'

'I understand.' She stared at me for a few seconds, then stood up. 'I have an idea. Wait there.'

She disappeared from the room but was back within minutes holding a scarf.

'May I try it on you? See how it looks?'

'You mean, round my shoulders?'

'No, Electra, around your head like mine. People tend to keep their distance from a woman in a hijab, which is part of the reason why many women of our faith choose to wear one. Shall we give it a go?'

'Okay. It's maybe the only look I've never tried,' I added with a giggle.

I sat on the end of the bed as Mariam wound the scarf deftly around my head, draped the ends over my shoulders, then pinned it in place.

'There, take a look.' She indicated the mirror.

I did and could hardly believe the change. Even *I* didn't recognise me.

'It's good, real good, but there's not a lot we can do about the rest of me, is there?'

'Do you have any dark-coloured pants or leggings with you?'

'Only the black sweatpants I travelled over in.'

'They will do. Put them on while I go and get something else.'

I did so, and soon Mariam was back with a garment over her arm. She shook it out and I saw it was a cheap flower-printed cotton smock with long sleeves.

'I brought this in case we were going anywhere smart. I save it for special occasions, but you can borrow it.'

'I doubt that it'll fit.'

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‘I don’t think we’re that different up top. And although I wear it as a dress, I think it would work on you as a shift. Try it on,’ she urged me.

I did so, and saw that Mariam had been right. The dress fitted me fine up top and fell to my mid-thighs.

‘There! No one will recognise you now. You are a Muslim woman.’

‘What about my feet? I only have my Louboutins or my Chanel pumps.’

‘Wear the sneakers you had on to fly here,’ she suggested, heading for my suitcase. ‘May I?’

‘Go ahead,’ I said, staring at the new me in the mirror. With the headscarf and the simple cotton dress masquerading as a top, it would take a pair of eagle eyes to spot who I was.

‘There,’ Mariam said as I slipped on my sneakers. ‘The transformation is complete. Just one more thing . . . may I look in your make-up bag?’

‘Okay.’

‘Here, we just need to put some kohl around your eyes. Close, please.’

I did as I was told, my mind skidding back to when us sisters were on Pa’s boat during our annual summer cruise and going out for dinner wherever we’d docked. Deemed too young at the time for make-up myself, I’d sit on the bed and watch Maia help Ally with hers.

‘Your skin is so beautiful,’ sighed Mariam. ‘It literally glows. Now, I am convinced that you will not be bothered by anyone tonight.’

‘You think so?’

‘I know so, but test out your disguise downstairs when we walk through reception. Ready to go?’

‘Yeah, why not?’ I made to pick up my Louis Vuitton shopper, but Mariam stopped me.

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‘Put whatever you need into my bag,’ she said as she proffered her cheap faux-leather brown shoulder bag. ‘Ready?’

‘Ready.’

In the elevator, even though three people got in with us, no one batted an eyelid at me. We walked through the lobby and the concierge glanced at us, then turned his attention back to his computer.

‘Wow, Christophe has known me for years,’ I whispered as we walked outside and Mariam called over the doorman.

‘We need a cab to Montmartre,’ she told him in very passable French.

‘*D’accord, mademoiselle*, but there is a queue so it may be as long as ten minutes.’

‘Okay, we can wait.’

‘I haven’t queued for a cab in years,’ I muttered.

‘Welcome to the real world, Electra,’ Mariam smiled. ‘Look, here we go.’

Twenty minutes later, we settled ourselves at a table in the café I used to work in. It wasn’t a very good table – we were squashed tightly between two others and I could hear every word of our neighbours’ conversations. I kept looking up at George, who’d given me the job as a waitress ten years ago, standing behind the bar, but his head never turned towards me.

‘So, how does it feel to be invisible again?’ Mariam asked me after I’d ordered half a carafe of house wine.

‘I’m not sure. Weird, definitely.’

‘But freeing?’

‘Yeah, I mean, I enjoyed walking down the street unnoticed, but there are pros and cons to everything, aren’t there?’

‘There are, yes, but I imagine that even before you became famous, you used to get stared at.’

‘I suppose I did, yeah, but I could never work out whether

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it was friendly staring or more because, well, I resemble a black giraffe!’

‘I’d guess it was because you are very beautiful, Electra. Whereas for me, especially since 9/11, I get treated with a degree of suspicion everywhere I go. Every Muslim is a terrorist, you know.’ She smiled sadly as she sipped her water.

‘Of course, it must be difficult for you.’

‘It is. In any political or religious regime, all the *real* people on the streets just want to live in peace. Sadly, I’m often judged before I’ve even opened my mouth because of my style of dress.’

‘Do you ever go out without it?’

‘No, although my father said I should remove my hijab when I was looking for work. He thought it might hinder my chances.’

‘Maybe you should try it, become someone else for a few hours, just like I have tonight. It might be freeing for you too.’

‘It might, but I’m happy as I am. Now, shall we order?’

Mariam proceeded to do so in French.

‘So many hidden skills,’ I teased her. ‘Where did you learn to speak French so well?’

‘I learnt it at school, then picked up more when I was working for Bardin – I find it is a necessity in the high-fashion world. And I suppose I have an ear for languages. I noticed that you sound quite different in French than you do in English, almost like another person.’

‘How do you mean?’ I bristled.

‘Not in a bad way,’ she continued hurriedly. ‘You’re more casual in English – perhaps because your accent has an American tone to it. You sound more . . . serious in French somehow.’

‘My sisters would laugh so hard if they heard you say that,’ I said with a grin.

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Over *moules marinières* and fresh crisp bread that only the French know how to bake, I encouraged Mariam to talk about her family. She obviously adored her brothers and sisters and I felt jealous of the love that shone out of her eyes.

‘I can hardly believe that my little sister is getting married next year. My parents keep calling me an old maid,’ she smiled as we both tucked into *tarte Tatin* for dessert. I’d already agreed with myself that I’d run off the extra calories in the hotel gym tomorrow morning.

‘Do you think you will ever get married?’ I asked her.

‘I don’t know. I’m certainly not ready to settle down yet. Or maybe I just haven’t found “the one”. If you don’t mind me asking, what about you? Have you ever been in love?’

For a change, I didn’t mind someone asking. Tonight, we were just two young women out for supper and a gossip.

‘Yup, and I don’t think I ever want to be again.’

‘It ended badly?’

‘It sure did,’ I breathed. ‘He broke my heart. It messed me up, but hey, shit happens, doesn’t it?’

‘There will be someone else for you, Electra, I know there will.’

‘You sound like my sister Tiggy. She’s very spiritual and always saying things like that.’

‘Well, maybe she is right, and so am I. There is someone for everyone, I truly believe that.’

‘But the question is, will we ever find them? The world’s a big place, you know.’

‘True,’ Mariam agreed then stifled a yawn. ‘Excuse me, I did not sleep well last night. I am not good with jet lag.’

‘I’ll get the check.’ I waved an arm to signal for the waiter to come over. He totally ignored me.

‘How rude can you get?’ I said angrily as five minutes later he was still ignoring us.

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‘He is busy, Electra, he will come to us when he has time. Patience is a virtue, you know.’

‘And one that I’ve never had,’ I muttered, trying to keep my anger under control.

‘Well,’ she said as we finally left the restaurant after the waiter had decided to grace us with his presence, ‘tonight I have learnt that you don’t like being ignored.’

‘Too right. In a family of six girls, you had to shout the loudest to be heard. And I did,’ I chuckled.

‘Let us try to find a cab back to the hotel . . .’

I hardly caught what she was saying, for my attention had fallen on a man sitting alone at one of the outside tables, drinking a cognac.

‘Oh my God . . .’ I whispered.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s that guy there. I know him. He works for my family.’ I walked towards the table and was virtually on top of him before he looked up at me.

‘Christian?’

He stared at me and I read the confusion on his face. ‘*Pardon, mademoiselle*, do I know you?’ he asked me in French.

I bent down to whisper in his ear. ‘Of course you do, you idiot! It’s me, Electra!’

‘*Mon dieu!* Of course it is you, Electra! My—’

‘Shh! I’m in disguise!’

‘Well, it is a most excellent one, but now of course I can see that it is you.’

I realised Mariam was hovering behind me.

‘Mariam, this is Christian, and he is . . . well, family, I suppose,’ I smiled down at him. ‘Would we be disturbing you if we sat down and had a drink? It is *such* a coincidence to see you here.’

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‘If you will excuse me, I will go back to the hotel,’ said Mariam. ‘Otherwise I will fall asleep where I stand. It is a pleasure to meet you, Christian. *Bonne soirée,*’ she nodded before turning and fading into the mass walking along the busy Montmartre street.

‘Can I join you?’ I said.

‘Of course, please, sit down. I will order you a cognac.’

I watched Christian as he signalled to the young waitress on duty for the outside tables. I’d had a huge crush on him as a young girl – after all, he was the only guy under the age of thirty that I’d come into contact with at Atlantis. Ten years on, he didn’t seem to have changed and it struck me that I had absolutely no idea how old he actually was. Or, I realised guiltily, *who* he was.

‘So,’ I said, ‘what are you doing here?’

‘I . . . well, I was visiting an old friend of mine.’

‘Right,’ I nodded, getting the strongest vibe that he was lying. ‘You know, it was Ma who found me a place to stay just a few doors down from here when I first came to Paris. I used to work at this very café. It seems a long time ago now.’

‘It is, Electra, almost ten years. Ah, here is the cognac. *Santé.*’

‘*Santé.*’ I toasted with him and we both took a large gulp.

‘And may I ask what you are doing in disguise out on the streets of Montmartre?’

‘Mariam – the girl you just met – is my PA and I was complaining that I couldn’t go anywhere without being recognised. So she dressed me up and we came out for dinner together.’

‘And did you enjoy not being you?’

‘I’m not sure, to be honest. I mean, it certainly has its advantages – you and I couldn’t be sitting here chatting without being disturbed if I wasn’t in disguise, but equally it’s irritating to be ignored.’

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‘Yes, I’m sure it must be. So’ – Christian took another sip of his cognac – ‘how are you?’

‘I’m okay,’ I shrugged. ‘How is Ma? And Claudia?’

‘They are well, yes. They are both in good health.’

‘I often wonder what they do with themselves these days, now that we’re gone and so is Pa.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that, Electra. They keep very busy.’

‘And what about you?’

‘There is always a lot to do on the estate and it is rare for a month to go by without a visit from one or more of your sisters. Ally is at Atlantis now with her beautiful son, Bear.’

‘Ma must be in heaven.’

‘I think she is, yes.’ Christian gave me a rare smile. ‘He is the first of the next generation. Marina feels needed again and it is good to see her happy.’

‘How is Bear? My nephew,’ I added, surprised by the word.

‘He is as perfect as all newborn babies are.’

‘Does he cry, scream sometimes?’ I probed. Christian was another person whom I, along with my sisters, technically employed, yet tonight his deference irked me.

‘Oh, he does sometimes, yes, but what baby does not?’

‘Do you remember when I was at home?’

‘Of course I do, yes.’

‘I mean, when I was a baby?’

‘When you were a baby, I was only nine, Electra.’

Ah! So Christian must be about thirty-five . . .

‘But I’m sure I remember you driving the boat when I was very young.’

‘Yes, but your father was always there to make sure I was proficient before he let me skipper it alone.’

‘Oh my God!’ I put a hand to my mouth as a memory came flooding back to me. ‘Do you remember when I was about thirteen and ran away from school to Atlantis? And then Pa

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told me I had to go back and at least try again because I hadn't given it a chance? And I *so* didn't want to go, so I jumped off the boat in the middle of Lake Geneva and tried to swim to the shore.'

Christian's warm brown eyes showed me he did. 'How could I forget? You nearly drowned – you hadn't thought to take off your coat before you jumped and you'd gone underwater. For a short time I couldn't find you . . .' He shook his head. 'It was one of the worst moments of my life. If I'd have lost you . . .'

'Pa would have been mad, all right,' I agreed, trying to lighten the atmosphere because Christian looked like he was about to cry.

'I would never have forgiven myself, Electra.'

'Well, at least the stunt partially worked. He didn't make me go back to school for another few days.'

'No.'

'So how long are you in Paris for?'

'I leave tomorrow. You?'

'Sunday evening. I just changed my flight this afternoon, but then my date stood me up,' I shrugged.

'Then you should come back with me to Atlantis and meet your nephew. I have the car here so I could drive you. Everyone would be very happy to see you.'

'You think so?' I shook my head. 'I don't.'

'Why do you say that? Marina and Claudia are always talking about you. They keep a scrapbook with all your modelling shoots in it.'

'Do they? That's cute. Well, maybe some other time.'

'If you change your mind, you have my number.'

'I certainly do,' I smiled. 'It's inked onto my brain. When things got bad at school, I knew you'd soon be there to rescue me.'

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'I should be heading back. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning.' Christian signalled for the bill.

'Where are you staying?' I asked him.

'In the same building where you stayed. Marina's friend owns it.'

'Really? I didn't know that.' A fleeting memory of my Parisian landlady – an ancient woman whose face bore the hallmarks of a lifetime of absinthe and cigarettes – floated back to me.

'Anyway.' Christian stood up. 'If you change your mind, let me know. I'm leaving at seven a.m. Now, let me find you a taxi.'

As we walked, I enjoyed the fact that Christian was at least as tall as I was. He was also in crazily good shape, his muscled torso outlined beneath his white shirt. As he flagged down a cab, for some ridiculous reason, I felt like I had each time he'd left me at school and I'd watched him drive off, only wishing that I was in the car with him.

'Where are you staying, Electra?'

'The Ritz,' I said as I climbed into the back of the cab.

'Well, it's been good to see you. Take care of yourself, won't you?'

'I will,' I called through the window as the taxi sped off.

As I sank into bed half an hour later, I suddenly realised I hadn't done a line since that afternoon with Maxime and that made me feel very good indeed.



Irritatingly, I woke the next morning at five a.m. and even though I took a sleeping pill, my brain refused to switch off. So I lay there contemplating an empty weekend in Paris while scrolling through the contacts list on my cell to find some

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playmates to keep me occupied. I realised that there was no one I really wanted to see, because I would have to make the effort to be Electra the Supermodel, and I wanted some downtime.

But not by-myself downtime . . . I reflected as I watched the luminous numbers on the bedside clock move agonisingly slowly towards six a.m.

Then I thought about Atlantis, with Ma and Claudia, and how I could roam the house and grounds in the old sweatpants that I kept in the bottom drawer in my bedroom, and how I wouldn't need to make any effort to be anyone other than me . . .

Before I could change my mind, I dialled Christian's cell phone number.

'Electra, good morning.'

'Hi, Christian. I was thinking that, actually, I will drive back with you to Atlantis.'

'That is good news! Marina and Claudia will be very happy. Shall I collect you at The Ritz in one hour?'

'Great, thanks.'

I then texted Mariam.

Are you awake?

Yes. What do you need?

Call me.

She did and I explained that I needed to fly back to the States from Geneva rather than Paris.

'Not a problem, Electra. Do you need me to book you a hotel?'

'No, I'm going home to see my family.'

'Wonderful!' she replied with such warmth that I could

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totally imagine her smiling. ‘I will get back to you with all the confirmations.’

‘What about you, Mariam?’ I said, suddenly aware that I was leaving her to fend for herself. ‘Will you be okay in Paris? You’re welcome to charge a flight home today on the credit card if you’d prefer?’

‘No, Electra, I am quite happy here. I was planning to see Bardin this afternoon, if it was convenient for you, so I will make my arrangements and meet you at the airport in Geneva tomorrow night.’

I did a line from the packet Maxime had left me, then threw everything into my suitcase and holdall before ordering a selection of French pastries with a side of fruit to make me feel better about the carb overload. After breakfast, I called for the bellhop to take my bags down. Donning my big black sunglasses (CeCe had once said I looked like a bluebottle in them), I followed my bags out to Christian and the comfortable Mercedes saloon. As he greeted me and opened the rear door, I shook my head.

‘I’ll ride up front if you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all,’ Christian said as he moved to open the passenger door for me.

As I settled myself in the front seat, I smelt that initial comforting aroma of leather, air freshener and Pa’s unmistakable lemony scent. I’d been climbing into our family’s cars since I was a child, and the smell had never changed, even though Pa was now gone. It indicated home and safety and if I could bottle it, I would.

‘Do you have everything you need, Electra?’ Christian asked me as he started the engine.

‘I do, thanks.’

‘The journey usually takes approximately five hours,’ Christian told me as we glided away from The Ritz.

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‘Have you told Ma I’m coming?’

‘I have, yes. She asked if you had any special dietary requirements?’

‘I . . .’

I realised that last time I was home, I was on a detox, drinking green tea by the bucketful. I’d been with Mitch, who was so clean he’d squeaked, but I’d taken an emergency bottle of vodka with me in case I lapsed. Which I had, but that was understandable because it was Atlantis without Pa for the first time – a wake without the funeral.

‘Are you okay, Electra?’

‘Great, thank you. Christian?’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you drive Pa to many places?’

‘Not really, no. Mostly to Geneva airport to board his private jet.’

‘Did you ever know where he was going?’

‘Sometimes, yes.’

‘And where was it?’

‘Oh, many destinations around the world.’

‘Do you know what he actually did?’

‘I have no idea, Electra. He was a very private man.’

‘And then some,’ I sighed. ‘Don’t you think it’s weird that none of us knew? Like, most kids are able to say their dad is a shopkeeper or a lawyer, but I couldn’t say anything because I didn’t have a clue.’

Christian remained silent, keeping his eyes on the road. As the family chauffeur both by car and boat, it was impossible not to imagine that he knew more than he was saying.

‘You know what?’

‘Not until you tell me, Electra.’ Christian offered me a glimmer of a smile.

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‘When I was in all that trouble at school, and you’d come and collect me, you and your car became my safe space.’

‘And what is a safe space?’

‘Oh, it’s therapy-speak for somewhere you can be in your imagination or in a remembered reality that makes you happy. I often dreamt about you arriving outside to take me away.’

‘Then I am honoured.’ Christian gave me a genuine smile this time.

‘Did you just apply for the job with Pa?’ I probed again.

‘Your father knew me from when I was a young boy. I lived . . . locally, and he helped me – and my mother – a lot.’

‘You mean he was a father figure to you?’

‘Yes,’ Christian agreed after a pause. ‘He was.’

‘Then maybe you are the mysterious seventh sister!’ I chuckled.

‘Your father was a very kind man and his loss is deep for all of us.’

Was Pa kind or controlling? Or was he both? I pondered as we hit the outskirts of Paris and joined the autoroute to Geneva. I reclined my seat and closed my eyes.

3

‘Electra, we are at the jetty,’ whispered a soft voice into my ear.

I came to and blinked in the bright light, which I then realised was the reflection of the sun on the glassy surface of Lake Geneva.

‘I slept for four hours solid,’ I said in surprise as I got out of the car. ‘Told you you were my safe place,’ I grinned at him as he opened the trunk. ‘I just need the holdall – you can leave the rest in there until tomorrow.’

Christian locked the car then walked ahead of me to the pontoon where the speedboat was moored. He offered me his hand to help me aboard then went about doing whatever he needed to before we could set off and I settled myself on the soft leather bench at the stern. I thought how, on the way to Atlantis, I always felt excited at the prospect of arriving. And then on the way back, how I normally felt relief that I was leaving.

Maybe this time it’ll be different, I told myself, then sighed because that was *also* something I always felt.

Christian fired up the engine and we began the short journey to my childhood home. For a late March day, it was warm and I enjoyed the feeling of sun on my face, and my hair streaming behind me.

As we approached the peninsula on which Atlantis stood,

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I craned my neck for an early view through the trees. It was a spectacular house – a little like a Disney chateau because it was so pretty. *And very unlike Pa*, I thought to myself. He'd had a minimal wardrobe; to my knowledge he'd only ever worn the same three jackets: a linen one for the summer, a tweed one for the winter, and another of indeterminate fabric that he wore in between seasons. His bedroom was so sparsely furnished it looked like something a priest would inhabit. I'd wondered whether he was secretly doing penance for some crime he'd committed in the past, but whatever . . . As we approached the jetty by Atlantis, I reflected that his wardrobe and bedroom sure were a paradox when compared to the rest of the house.

Ma was already standing waiting for me, waving excitedly. She was dressed immaculately as always, and I noticed her bouclé skirt was one from Chanel that I'd managed to sneak from a sample rack because I knew she would love it.

'Electra! *Chérie*, what an unexpected surprise!' she said as she reached up on tiptoe and I bent down so she could kiss me on both cheeks and put her arms around my shoulders. Then she stepped back and appraised me. 'You look as beautiful as always, but I think you are too thin. Never mind, Claudia has the ingredients ready to make you your favourite blueberry pancakes, should you wish. Did you know that Ally is here with her new baby?'

'Yes, Christian said. I can't wait to meet my nephew,' I said as I followed her up the path and through the gardens that fronted the house and led down to the lake. The smell of the grass and the newly budding plants was so fresh in comparison to the stench of New York. I sucked a deep breath of the pure air into my lungs.

'Come through to the kitchen,' said Ma. 'Claudia is already preparing brunch.'

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I saw Christian bringing up the rear. As he deposited my holdall at the bottom of the stairs, I walked towards him.

‘Thank you for driving me here. I’m glad I came.’

‘You are welcome, Electra. What time do we leave for the airport tomorrow?’

‘Around ten in the evening. My PA has booked the jet for midnight.’

‘Okay. If anything changes, just tell Marina and she will inform me.’

‘I will. Have a nice weekend.’

‘And you.’ He nodded at me, then disappeared out of the front door.

‘Electra!’

I turned and saw Ally coming towards me from the kitchen, her arms open wide to embrace me.

‘Hi there, new mom,’ I said as she hugged me. ‘Congratulations.’

‘Thanks. I still can’t believe I am one.’

I thought, with a hint of jealousy, that she looked amazing. Her angular face had been softened by a few pregnancy pounds, and her fabulous red-gold hair shone like a halo against her porcelain skin.

‘You look great,’ I said.

‘No I don’t. I’ve put on eight kilos, which don’t seem to be disappearing, and I’m getting about two hours’ sleep a night. I have a very hungry man in my bed,’ she laughed.

‘Where is he?’

‘Sleeping off the night before, of course.’ Ally raised an eyebrow in mock frustration, but I thought I’d never seen her look happier. ‘At least it’ll give us a chance to talk for a bit,’ she added as we walked through to the kitchen. ‘I was thinking today that I haven’t seen you since last June when we were all here after Pa died.’

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‘No, well, I’ve been busy.’

‘I try and keep up with you and your life in the papers and magazines but—’

‘Hello, Electra,’ said Claudia in the French she spoke with a strong German accent. ‘How are you?’ She was in the process of pouring pancake mixture into a frying pan and I heard an enticing sizzle.

‘I’m well, thanks.’

‘Come and sit down and tell me everything that’s happened since I last saw you.’ Ally indicated a chair at the long table.

‘I will, but before I do, I’m just going upstairs to freshen up.’ I turned and walked out of the kitchen, suddenly feeling panicky. I knew how Ally liked to interrogate us all and I wasn’t sure I was up to it just now.

I grabbed my holdall, then climbed the stairs up to the attic – which really wasn’t an attic at all, but a spacious floor where us girls had our bedrooms – and opened the door to mine. Everything looked exactly as it had when I’d left home for Paris as a teenager. I stared at the walls, painted in the soft cream colour they’d always been, and sat down on my bed. Compared to the other girls’ rooms, whose walls seemed to embody their occupants’ personalities, mine was bare. There wasn’t a clue about the person who had lived in here for the first sixteen years of her life. No posters of models or pop stars or ballet dancers or sports stars . . . nothing to indicate who I was.

Reaching down into my holdall, I grabbed the bottle of vodka wrapped up in my cashmere sweatpants and took a deep swig. This bedroom seemed to express all there was to say about me – that I was just an empty husk. I didn’t have – and never had had – a passion for anything. *And*, I thought as I stowed the bottle back in its cashmere nest, then reached for the small packet tucked into the front pocket of my holdall to

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do a line, *I didn't know who I was back then, and I don't know who I am now.*



By the time I made my way back downstairs, the vodka had calmed me and the coke had cheered me up. As Ma, Ally and I sat down to enjoy Claudia's famous brunch, I did as they wanted me to do and told them all about the glamorous parties I'd attended and the celebrities I'd met, giving them some innocuous inside gossip as I went.

'And what about you and Mitch? I read in the papers that you'd gone your separate ways. Is that true?'

I'd been waiting for that; Ally was the high priestess of getting straight to the point.

'Yeah, a few months back.'

'What happened?'

'Oh, you know,' I shrugged as I drank some hot strong coffee and wished it was laced with bourbon. 'He was based in LA, I was in New York, we were both travelling . . .'

'So he wasn't "the one"?' Ally pursued.

There was a sudden screeching sound from somewhere in the kitchen and I looked round to find where it was coming from.

'That's the baby monitor. Bear's awake,' Ally sighed.

'I'll go and see to him,' offered Ma, but Ally was already on her feet and pressed Ma gently back down into her chair.

'You were on duty from five this morning, darling Ma, so it's my turn.'

I hadn't even met my new nephew yet, but boy did I like him already. He'd gotten me out of the Grand Ally Inquisition.

'So how is your new apartment?' asked Ma, changing the subject. If tact had a physical form, it would look like my surrogate mom.

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‘It’s okay,’ I replied, ‘but it’s only a year’s rental, so I’ll probably look for someplace else soon.’

‘I suppose you’re not there that often, with all the traveling you do.’

‘Too right I’m not, but at least it gives me somewhere to put my wardrobe. Oh wow, look who’s here.’

Ally was approaching the table holding a baby who had an enormous pair of quizzical brown eyes. His dark red hair was already starting to curl tightly on top of his head.

‘This is Bear,’ Ally said, that proud mom look shining in her eyes. And why shouldn’t it? Anyone brave enough to give birth was a heroine in my book.

‘Oh my God! He is . . . edible! How old is he now?’ I asked as Ally sat down and cradled him in her lap.

‘Seven weeks.’

‘Wow, he looks huge!’

‘That’s because he has such a good appetite,’ Ally smiled as she unbuttoned her shirt and positioned the baby in the right place. Bear began to suckle noisily and I winced.

‘Doesn’t it hurt when he’s feeding?’

‘It did at first, but we got into the swing of it, didn’t we, darling?’ she said, looking down at him like I guessed I’d sometimes looked at Mitch. In other words, with love.

‘Well now, we will leave you two girls to chat and see you later,’ Claudia said as, the clearing-up done, she followed Ma out of the kitchen.

‘I’m real sorry about Bear’s dad, Ally.’

‘Thanks, Electra.’

‘Did he . . . did the father—’

‘His name was Theo.’

‘Did Theo know about Bear?’

‘No, and nor did I until a few weeks after he died. At the time I thought the roof had fallen in on my world, but now —’

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Ally smiled at me and I read genuine contentment in her clear blue eyes – ‘I wouldn’t be without him.’

‘Did you consider . . . ?’

‘An abortion? The thought did run briefly through my head, yes. I mean, I had my sailing career, Bear’s dad was dead, and I had no home at the time either. I could never have gone through with it, though. I feel Bear was a gift. Sometimes, when I’m up feeding him in the small hours, I really sense Theo around me.’

‘You mean, his spirit?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought that you believed in all that shit,’ I said with a frown.

‘Nor would I, but something amazing happened the night before Bear was born.’

‘Like what?’

‘I flew over to Spain in search of Tiggy, who’d just been diagnosed with a heart condition, but had run off to find her birth family. And she told me something, Electra, something that only Theo could have known.’

I watched Ally’s pale hand go to the necklace she was wearing.

‘What was it?’

‘Theo bought me this.’ Ally held up the tiny turquoise eye that sat on a chain. ‘The chain had broken a few weeks before and Tiggy said that Theo wanted to know why I wasn’t wearing it. Then she said he liked the name Bear, and you know what, Electra? He did!’

Tears appeared in Ally’s eyes.

‘Anyway, having been a cynic, I’m afraid I’m now a convert. And I just know Theo is watching over us.’ She shrugged and gave me a misty smile.

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'I sure wish I had a belief like that. Trouble is, I don't believe much in anything. So, how is Tiggy's heart now?'

'Much better apparently. She's back in the Scottish Highlands and very happily ensconced with the doctor who looked after her when she was sick. He also happens to be the owner of the estate she works on.'

'It could be wedding bells for her soon then?'

'I doubt it; Charlie's still technically married and going through a pretty ugly divorce from what Tiggy's told me.'

'And the other sisters?'

'Maia's still in Brazil with her lovely man, Floriano, and his daughter, Star is in Kent in England helping her boyfriend – who for some reason is known as Mouse – renovate his house, and CeCe's in Australia living with her grandfather and her friend Chrissie in the Outback. I've seen some photos of her paintings and they're just amazing. She's so talented.'

'So all the sisters have found a new life?' I said.

'Yes, it seems like it.'

'And they each found it through searching for their past?'

'They did, yes. And I did too. I emailed you to tell you I had a twin brother, didn't I?'

'Um . . .'

'Oh Electra, I did, really. And a biological father who is a musical genius, but a total drunkard to boot.' I watched Ally smile fondly at the thought of him as she deftly moved the baby from one breast to the other.

'So,' she continued, 'have you done anything about your letter from Pa?'

'I've never even opened the envelope, and to be honest, I can't remember where I put it. It may be lost.'

'Oh Electra!' Ally gave me her best disapproving look. 'You can't be serious?'

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‘Hey, it must be somewhere, I just haven’t bothered to find it.’

‘You really don’t want to know where you came from?’

‘No, I just can’t see the point. What does it matter? I’m who I am now.’

‘Well, it certainly helped me. And even if you don’t want to pursue what the letter contains, Pa’s written words were his last gift to all of us.’

‘Jesus Christ!’ I’d had enough. ‘You and our other sisters treat Pa as though he was some freakin’ god! He was just a guy who adopted us – for some weird reason that none of us actually knows!’

‘Please don’t shout, Electra, it upsets the baby, but I’m sorry if I—’

‘I’m going out for a walk.’

I stood up from the table, marched to the front door and pulled it open. Slamming it behind me, I walked across the lawns towards the jetty, wishing, as I always did after a few hours at Atlantis, that I’d never decided to come back here in the first place.

‘What is it with my sisters and Pa? He’s not even our biological father, for Chrissake!’

I continued to complain to myself as I sat down, feet dangling over the jetty, and tried to take some deep breaths. They didn’t work. Maybe another line would. I stood up and retraced my footsteps back to the house, tiptoeing inside and up the stairs so no one would hear me. In my room, I locked the door and took out what I needed.

A few minutes later, I was feeling far calmer. I lay back on my bed and pictured all my sisters in turn. For some reason, they appeared as Disney princesses, which was quite fun. They weren’t irritating at all when they looked like that, and I did love them, all except CeCe (she appeared suddenly as the witch

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in *Snow White*). I giggled and decided that was cruel, even for CeCe. I knew people said you couldn't choose your family, only your friends, but Pa *had* chosen us and we were stuck with each other. Maybe the reason CeCe and I didn't get on was because she wouldn't put up with my crap like the others did. And she could shout louder than me too. The others would do anything to keep the peace, but she didn't care. A bit like me . . .

My four older sisters had probably never thought about the fact that they all had each other – Ally and Maia, Star and CeCe – which had left me with Tiggy. It was she who I'd been bunched with as we were growing up – there were only a few months between us – and even though I really loved her, we couldn't have been more different. It didn't help that all my older sisters made it clear that their favourite younger sibling to play with was Tiggy, not me. Tiggy didn't holler and scream and have tantrums all the time. She just sat on a lap, sucking her thumb and being perfect. As we'd grown up, I'd tried to bond with her because I was lonely, but all her spiritual shit drove me up the wall.

As the coke wore off, my sisters stopped being Disney princesses and became themselves again. What did it matter anyway? Now Pa was gone, we were just a bunch of disparate women who had been thrown together as kids, but were now going our separate ways. I took some breaths and tried to do as all my therapists had told me to, which was to analyse why I'd gotten so angry. And for a change, I thought I knew the reason: Ally had told me that all my sisters were happy – they had found lives with people who loved them. Even CeCe, who I'd always thought was as unlovable as me, had somehow managed to get over her weird obsession with Star and move on. More to the point, she had found her passion in art, something she had always loved.

And here was I, as usual the odd one out. Since Pa had

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died, I'd managed to find nothing except a new and more reliable dealer. Even though I was by far the most financially successful sister – from what my accountant said, I could stop work today and never worry about money again – what was the point when I hadn't a clue what else I wanted to do?

There was a knock on my door.

'Electra? Are you in there?'

It was Ally. 'Yeah, come in.'

She did, with Bear in the crook of her arm.

'I'm so sorry if I said something to upset you, Electra,' she said, hovering in the doorway.

'Listen, don't worry about it. It's not you, it's me.'

'Well, whatever, I am sorry. It's so good to see you and I'm really glad you came. Do you mind if I sit down? He weighs a ton.'

'Sure,' I said with a sigh. The last thing I needed was to be trapped in my bedroom being interviewed by Ally.

'I just wanted to share something with you, Electra. Something that Tiggy told me we should investigate.'

'Oh yeah, what?'

'Apparently, when she was here last month, she found a cellar with a secret lift that accessed it.'

'Er . . . right. So?'

'She said it was used to store wine, but she noticed there was a door hidden behind one of the racks. Maybe we should find out where it leads to.'

'Okay. Why don't we just ask Ma?'

'We can, yes, but Tiggy got the feeling that she didn't want to talk about it.'

'Jeez, Ally! This is *our* house and Ma works for us! We can ask what we want and do as we please here, surely?'

'Yes, we can, but, well,' Ally breathed, 'maybe we just have to tread gently out of respect. Ma's been here a long time –

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she's run the house with Claudia and looked after us, and I don't want her to feel we're stepping on her toes now things are . . . different.'

'So, what you're saying is that you want us to sneak down in this elevator in the middle of the night and find out where this door leads to?' I raised an eyebrow. 'But I still don't get why we have to do this cloak and dagger shit when we could just ask her?'

'Come on, Electra, stop being so brittle. This secret lift and cellar are *there*, and Pa put them there for a reason. Whatever you think or feel about him, he was a practical man. Anyway, I'm always awake during the night because of Bear so I'm going to investigate. I just wondered if you fancied coming with me? Tiggy said it would take a couple of us to move the rack in front of the hidden door. She also told me where the key was. Now, would you mind holding Bear for a few minutes while I use the bathroom?' Ally got up and dumped Bear on my lap. To stop him falling backwards, I had to grab him with both hands. He gave a large burp in retaliation.

'Brilliant!' said Ally as she stood in the doorway. 'I've been trying to get that out of him for the past hour!'

The door closed behind her and Bear and I were left alone. I looked down at him and he looked up at me.

'Hi,' I said, praying he wouldn't pee on me or something. It was the first time I'd ever held a baby.

He gave me a hiccup, and continued to stare at me.

'What are you thinking, little guy? Are you wondering why, even though I'm your auntie, I'm, like, a totally different colour to your mom? You never met him, but you had a seriously weird grandfather,' I continued, because he seemed to be enjoying the chat. 'I mean, he was amazing, like, real clever and stuff, but I think he kept a lot of secrets from all of us. What do you think?'

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I suddenly felt his little body relax in my arms and by the time Ally came back, Bear had closed his eyes and was fast asleep.

‘Wow, you’ve got the touch,’ Ally smiled at me. ‘I normally have to rock him for hours before he’ll give in.’

‘I guess he was bored,’ I shrugged as Ally gently took him from my arms.

‘I’m going to put him in his cot and catch some rest while I can,’ she whispered. ‘See you later.’



Before dinner, I made sure that I’d taken enough precautionary vodka to keep calm, then fixed myself another large one from the pantry when I got downstairs. Thankfully, the conversation didn’t go much past how phenomenal Claudia’s cooking was (it was her famous schnitzel, and I ate up every scrap) and the plans for our boat trip to Greece to lay a wreath on the anniversary of Pa’s death.

‘I thought we girls should go on the actual cruise alone, but Maia is flying over the week before with Floriano, who I can’t wait to meet, and his daughter Valentina,’ Ally informed me. ‘Star, Mouse and his son Rory will be flying in, as well as Tiggy, her boyfriend Charlie and his daughter Zara . . .’

‘Wow!’ I cut in. ‘So Maia, Star and Tiggy are all surrogate mothers to their partners’ children?’

‘Yes, they are,’ Ally agreed.

‘And as your surrogate mother, I know my girls will love the children in their care no less because they are not blood,’ said Ma firmly.

‘Is CeCe coming?’

‘She said she will, yes. She hopes her grandfather and her friend Chrissie might come with her too.’

‘Her “friend” Chrissie?’

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Both Ma and Ally stared at me and I wondered why I had to be the only one in the family to actually voice the truth.

‘They’re in a relationship, right?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ally said, ‘but she sounds very happy, which is the most important thing.’

‘But it was obvious from the get-go that CeCe was gay, right? That she was in love with Star?’

‘Electra, it is not our place to pry into other people’s private lives,’ interrupted Ma.

‘But CeCe isn’t “other people”, is she? And besides, what’s the problem? I’m happy for her if she’s found someone she cares for.’

‘We really will be struggling for room,’ Ma continued relentlessly.

‘Well, as the rest of you guys have all found families and it’s just little ol’ me by myself, if there isn’t room, maybe I just shouldn’t come.’

‘Oh Electra, don’t say that! You have to come, you promised.’ Ally looked genuinely upset.

‘Yeah, well, maybe I can sleep in the secret basement Tiggy found when she was here,’ I replied, turning to Ma.

Ally’s expression threw daggers at me across the table, but I was too drunk to care.

‘Ah, the basement.’ Ma regarded both of us. ‘Yes, I did tell Tiggy it is there and there is no mystery to it. Once we have finished Claudia’s wonderful apple strudel, I shall take you down myself to see it.’

I threw back a ‘so there!’ look to Ally, who raised her eyebrows in exasperation, and once the dessert was finished, Ma rose and took out a key from the box on the wall.

‘Right, shall we go down?’

There was no need for an answer, as she was already walking out of the kitchen and Ally and I filed after her. In the

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corridor, Ma took hold of a brass loop and pulled back a mahogany panel to reveal a miniature elevator.

‘Why was this put in?’ I asked.

‘As I explained to Tiggy, your father wasn’t getting any younger and wanted easy access to all parts of the house.’ Ma opened the door and the three of us crammed inside. I immediately felt claustrophobic and took some deep breaths as she pressed a brass button and the door closed behind us.

‘Yeah, I get that, but why did he hide it?’ I asked as the elevator began to move.

‘Electra, shut up, will you?’ Ally hissed, by now beyond irritated with me. ‘I’m sure Ma will explain everything.’

It was a four-second ride, and I felt the bounce as we reached the bottom. The door slid open and we all stepped into a very plain basement which, as Ally had said, was bounded on all sides by wine racks.

‘And here you are.’ Ma stepped out and swung her arms around the room. ‘Your father’s wine cellar.’ She turned to me and smiled. ‘I am sorry, Electra, that there is no great mystery.’

‘But . . .’

Behind Ma, Ally’s eyes sent me a message that even I realised I couldn’t ignore.

‘I . . . well, it’s very nice.’ I began to wander round the shelves, looking at what Pa had stashed down here. I pulled a bottle out. ‘Wow, Château Margaux, 1957. This sells for over two thousand dollars in the best restaurants in New York. Pity I’m more of a vodka fan.’

‘Can we go back up? I need to check on Bear,’ said Ally, shooting me another warning glance.

‘Just give me a couple more minutes,’ I replied, continuing to browse the racks, pulling out the odd bottle and pretending to study its label, while all the time keeping my eyes peeled for the hidden door Ally had talked about. On the right-hand side

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of the room, I peered at a 1972 Rothschild Burgundy and spotted the almost invisible lines of an opening in the plaster behind the racks. ‘Right,’ I said, walking back to them both. ‘Let’s go.’

As we made our way towards the elevator, I noticed it had a solid steel surround.

‘What’s this for, Ma?’ I pointed at it.

‘If you press that button’ – Ma indicated one side of the surround – ‘it shuts the steel doors in front of the elevator.’

‘So you mean if we pressed it now, we’d be trapped down here?’ I asked, panic rising instinctively inside me.

‘No, of course you wouldn’t, Electra, but anyone trying to get into the cellar from the elevator would not be able to access it. It is a strongroom,’ she explained as we squeezed back into the tiny space. ‘Nothing unusual in the house of a rich family living in an isolated spot. If, God forbid, Atlantis was under attack from burglars or worse, we could seal ourselves in and call for help. And yes, *chérie*’ – Ma gave me a thin smile as we ascended the one floor upwards – ‘it does have a Wi-Fi signal down there. Now,’ she said as we all exited the elevator and trooped back into the kitchen, and I noted where she hung the key in the box, ‘please forgive me, but I am weary tonight and must go to my bed.’

‘That’s Bear’s fault – you’ve been up since five, Ma. I’ll see to him tomorrow morning.’

‘No, Ally. If I sleep now, I will be fine. I wake early anyway these days. Goodnight.’ She nodded at both of us and left the kitchen.

‘I’m going up to check on Bear,’ said Ally, about to follow Ma before I tapped her on the shoulder.

‘Then why don’t you take the elevator?’ I picked the key back off the hook and dangled it in front of her. ‘It goes up to the attic floor. There was a button for it in the lift.’

‘No, Electra, I’ll be fine, thanks.’

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‘Suit yourself,’ I shrugged as she left to go upstairs. I fixed myself another vodka and Coke, then wandered through to the hall and pushed open the door to Pa’s study. It was like a living museum; it felt as though Pa had just popped out for a while and would be back soon. His pen and notepad were still sitting centrally on his desk, everything immaculate as always – *Unlike his youngest daughter*, I thought with a smirk, sitting down in his old leather-seated captain’s chair. I studied the shelves of books lined up along one wall, stood up and went to take out the big Oxford English Dictionary that I’d used so often when I was a girl. One day, I’d come in to find Pa sitting in his chair and doing a crossword in an English newspaper.

‘Hello, Electra,’ he’d smiled as he’d looked up at me. ‘I’m struggling with this one.’

I’d read the clue – *They go down for a sleep (7)* – and mulled it over.

‘Maybe your eyelids?’

‘Yes, of course, you are right! What a clever girl you are.’

From then on, during school vacations and if he was home, he’d beckon me into his study and we’d sit together and do a crossword. I’d found the pastime soothing – I still often grabbed a newspaper from a departure lounge while I was waiting to catch a flight. It had also given me a very good English vocabulary, which I knew surprised journalists who interviewed me – they all presumed that I was as thick as the make-up that was piled regularly on my skin.

Putting the dictionary back, I was about to leave the room when I was stopped in my tracks by the strongest smell of Pa’s cologne. I’d know its fresh lemony scent anywhere. A shiver went up my spine as I thought of what Ally had said earlier about feeling that Theo was there with her . . .

With a shudder, I hastily left the study, slamming the door behind me.

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Ally was back in the kitchen, doing stuff with bottles.

‘Why is that milk in a jug?’ I asked. ‘I thought you breast-fed Bear.’

‘I do, but I expressed this earlier so Ma can feed Bear when he wakes tomorrow morning.’

‘Ugh.’ I shuddered again as I watched her pour the milk into a bottle. ‘If I ever have a kid, which is doubtful to begin with, I couldn’t go through all that.’

‘Never say never,’ Ally smiled at me. ‘By the way, I saw a photo of you in some magazine a few weeks ago with Zed Eszu. Are you and he an item?’

‘Christ, no,’ I said, dipping my fingers into the biscuit tin and taking out a piece of shortbread. ‘We go out to play together in New York sometimes. Or to be more accurate, we stay in.’

‘You mean you and Zed Eszu are lovers?’

‘Yeah, why? Do you have a problem with that?’

‘No, not at all, I mean . . .’ Ally turned to me, looking nervous. ‘I . . .’

‘What, Ally?’

‘Oh, nothing. Anyway, I’m off to bed to try and sleep while I can. You?’

‘Yeah, I’m gonna join you,’ I said.

It was only when I’d downed a tooth mug of neat vodka from my holdall and clambered into my childhood bed, feeling nicely woozy, that I remembered the outline of the door behind the wine rack down in the basement. Maybe I should go now and investigate . . .

‘Tomorrow,’ I promised myself as my eyes fell shut.