'Tremendous. I loved it' Daily Mail

Me Before You

The Girl You Left Behind

JOJO MOYES

The Top Ten Bestseller

Penguin

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The Girl You Left Behind

PENGUIN BOOKS

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To Charles, as ever

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE GIRL YOU LEFT BEHIND

Praise for *Me Before You*

‘A heart-stopping read. Destined to be the novel that friends press upon each other more than any other next year. Moyes does a majestic job of conjuring a cast of characters who are charismatic, credible and utterly compelling. Lou and Will are a couple who readers will take to their hearts as they did *One Day*’s Emma and Dex’

Independent on Sunday

‘Romantic, thought-provoking tear-jerker that you won’t be able to put down’

Woman & Home

‘Funny, believable and heartbreaking, this is sure to be the weepy of 2012. 5*’

Woman’s Own

‘A timeless love story, and Moyes’s most emotional yet. This is a charming novel fizzing with quirky detail’

Red

‘This truly beautiful story made us laugh, smile and sob like a baby – you simply have to read it. 5*’

Closer

‘Poignant and beautifully written, this book will stay with you long after you’ve put it down. 5*’

Star Magazine

‘Compelling, moving and absorbing. It’s also a real weepie’

Daily Express

‘A perceptive and moving tale’

Independent

‘Beautifully written’

Sun

‘Another powerful love story. A deftly plotted narrative populated with likeable, engaging characters. A bittersweet story about love, learning and letting go. It’s a tremendous read and I loved it’

Daily Mail

‘Heartbreaking, soul-searching and utterly compelling’

Easy Living

‘Keep the tissues close as Jojo Moyes returns with *Me Before You*, a heartbreaking yet extremely uplifting tale’

Good Housekeeping

‘Jojo Moyes has done it again with this funny, touching tale that is impossible to put down. Make sure you have a box of tissues to hand’

Candis

‘At last, a new Moyes novel – and it’s a triumph. Her story of love blossoming in the most unlikely of ways packs such an emotional punch, you’ll need a box of tissues’

Elle

‘Jojo Moyes’s poignantly romantic tales have readers streaming their way through boxes of Kleenex. *Me Before You* is compelling reading. A profound, fundamental, thought-provoking conundrum lies at the heart of the story, a huge moral dilemma, explored with great fictional finesse’

Sunday Express

Reviews from online readers

‘What a gorgeous, glorious story, one that ripped me to shreds by the end and made me gulp and wipe my eyes repeatedly with my sleeve. I doubt I’ll ever forget it’

J. Earle ‘rainbowthetaste’

‘I loved, loved, loved this book. It had me laughing out loud, then minutes later sobbing into my bathwater (I couldn’t put it down, it went everywhere with me). Beautiful in every way. Ten sparkling stars from me’

Kindledays

‘Oh. My. Goodness. Just finished this. Sobbing – and I am not a wuss. Please read it’

J. Lord ‘Jan’

‘I laughed, I cried and I am pretty sure that I felt every other emotion possible. I would give it six stars if I could’

Mrs Julie Austin

‘A very modern love story that will make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. It has shot straight into my all-time top five novels. Simply perfect’

Mrs N. M. Ridings ‘nicolamary’

‘I can’t remember the last time a book made me sob. A few have made me cry but this made me sob to the point where I couldn’t catch my breath. Packs such a powerful punch’

Nickers 27

‘This book blew me away. It made me laugh and cry, and how I cried. Please read this book, it is amazing’

Ms Leona Coleman

‘I loved it more than anything I’ve read for some years (and I read a lot!). I will struggle to find another book that draws me in so completely’

Gill B

‘I have never felt the need to write a review before. But after reading this book and crying more than I have ever cried in my whole life I felt as though I should. I am an avid book reader and I have to say no other book has captured me quite like this. I will remember and carry this story around with me for a long, long time’

Romantic Book Lover

‘Quite simply, this is one of the best books I have ever read’

Wicky

‘Such a magnificent book that words fail me’

Hamster

‘Wow. I have laughed out loud over and over but predict I may need the tissues in the next couple of nights. Moyes, where have you been all my life?’

Aberdonian quine

‘I loved every minute of it! I feel emotionally exhausted and keep going back to read parts of it again’

Tonie

‘A truly beautiful and thought-provoking book. I balled my head off. I can honestly say I have never watched a film or read a book that made me cry like this did’

Nadia

‘Read it in one go into the wee small hours, laughed and cried. Woke up and read the last chapters again. And cried again!’

Lolls Wales

‘One of the very few books that made me laugh out loud just minutes before being moved to tears’

Helen P

‘I found this book touching, inspiring and also a heartbreaking love story. I really can’t recommend this book enough, it’s truly amazing:-)’

Joanne Louise

‘Truly the most thought-provoking and memorable book I have read to date. If you want to read a book that will have you laughing and crying all at the same time you MUST get this book!’

Steady

‘One of the most heart-wrenching and endearing stories I have read in a long time. I blubbered my way through the second half of this book, much to the alarm of my husband’

Kerrie

‘This book touches your soul, and when you have finished reading it you will ache for it not to be over and you will try and find a way to rationalize the ending in a way that doesn’t make you weep’

Lizzie Bennett ‘Bookworm’

‘This book is addictive, it took all my will power to go to work and stop reading’

Lola Jane

‘DO NOT READ THE LAST FEW CHAPTERS ON THE BUS. It will leave you a snivelling wreck’

Ms Tracy Williams

‘I know it will have a lasting impact for a long time to come, which is more than I could ask for from any book’

Neerav Vadera

‘Make sure you keep a big box of tissues beside you. I just couldn’t put it down and stayed up all night. Great book!’

LE

‘It made me laugh, cry and everything in between’

Pipilove

‘I have never spilled tears on a book as I did on this one. A must read’

Bon

‘I have never read a more moving or compelling book in all of my life, and, believe me, I read a lot’

Bliz

‘I have rarely wept so much over a book. Thank you for the laughs too, this will stay with me for a long time’

French Fran

‘I don’t think I’ve come across a book that evoked so many emotions. I don’t often write reviews, but I feel I have to tell everyone how wonderful this book is’

Marg ‘Margi’

‘Cried buckets reading it, and could not put it down’

Mumzie

‘Amazing! Could not put it down. HIGHLY recommended!’

Nearly 40

‘Best book I have ever read, I literally couldn’t put this book down’

Donna

‘I have never read a book that has given me such a range of emotions, to the point that I’m breaking my heart, with tears spilling down my face’

Mrs T.J. Thomas

‘This book was brilliant! I haven’t cried this much reading a book before’

Jardine

‘This ranks as one of the best books I have ever read. I am bereft now that I’ve finished it’

Caldergirl

‘Moyes forces her readers to think and feel every awful, beautiful, heart-rending and chest-constricting emotion. Sublime and powerful’

Dee 18, Australia

‘All I can say is: read it. It will make you think, laugh and cry, possibly all at the same time. I am glad I finished it in the privacy of my own home and no one could see me crying my eyes out. Well done, Ms Moyes, this was thoroughly believable and agonizingly real’

J. Starling

‘Could not put the book down, and being a big butch steel worker it had me sobbing my eyes out’

B. Ingram ‘Bazza’

‘A truly remarkable book, Jojo Moyes deserves an award for this’

Swifty

‘You may not want to read this on the train, especially towards the end – unless you enjoy howling in public!’

Mr T. Anderson

‘The last fifty pages I almost couldn’t read for tears streaming down my face’

Karen

‘OMIGOD, this book put me through the wringer. I giggled, sighed and cried, such clever writing. What a book!’

HJ

‘Life-affirming, sad and thought-provoking – it deserves to be right up there with *One Day* in terms of its popularity’

Book Worm, Surrey

‘This book is an emotional rollercoaster! You will laugh, cry and wish that you could put your whole life on pause while you read it!’

Dooster

‘WOW – this is one of the most moving books I’ve read in a long, long time. Buy it!’

Sukie

‘I’m a little bit speechless, which is not ideal for a review, but that’s what this book has done to me!’

Suzy Shipman

‘This is a brilliant book written with humour and great sadness. Probably one of the best books I have read this year’

Roses UK

‘If you aren’t moved by this book then you need help’

Mrs Y. S. Buckell

‘I’ve just finished this book and am finding it hard to type through the tears. What a fabulous, fabulous story’

KC ‘square eyes’

‘This book is completely eye-opening, and will change the way you see things’

Mrs C. A. Anderson

‘This book was absolutely amazing. It made me laugh, think about life and in the end – cry’

Millie R

‘This book is absolutely incredible. Honestly amazing. Loved every second. Couldn’t stop thinking about it for hours, and every time I tried to explain what happened I couldn’t stop crying all over again!’

TinyLittleKaren

‘It is a long time since a book has moved me so much. Bravo’

FLB England

PART ONE

1

St Péronne October 1916

I was dreaming of food. Crisp baguettes, the flesh of the bread a virginal white, still steaming from the oven, and ripe cheese, its borders creeping towards the edge of the plate. Grapes and plums, stacked high in bowls, dusky and fragrant, their scent filling the air. I was about to reach out and take one, when my sister stopped me. 'Get off,' I murmured. 'I'm hungry.'

'Sophie. Wake up.'

I could taste that cheese. I was going to have a mouthful of Reblochon, smear it on a hunk of that warm bread, then pop a grape into my mouth. I could already taste the intense sweetness, smell the rich aroma.

But there it was, my sister's hand on my wrist, stopping me. The plates were disappearing, the scents fading. I reached out to them but they began to pop, like soap bubbles.

'Sophie.'

'*What?*'

'They have Aurélien!'

I turned on to my side and blinked. My sister was wearing a cotton bonnet, as I was, to keep warm. Her face, even in the feeble light of her candle, was leached of colour, her eyes wide with shock. 'They have Aurélien. Downstairs.'

My mind began to clear. From below us came the sound of men shouting, their voices bouncing off the stone courtyard, the hens squawking in their coop. In the thick dark, the air vibrated with some terrible purpose. I sat upright in bed, dragging my gown around me, struggling to light the candle on my bedside table.

I stumbled past her to the window and stared down into the courtyard at the soldiers, illuminated by the headlights of their vehicle, and my younger brother, his arms around his head, trying to avoid the rifle butts that landed blows on him.

'What's happening?'

'They know about the pig.'

'What?'

'Monsieur Suel must have informed on us. I heard them shouting from my room. They say they'll take Aurélien if he doesn't tell them where it is.'

'He will say nothing,' I said.

We flinched as we heard our brother cry out. I hardly recognized my sister then: she looked twenty years older than her twenty-four years. I knew her fear was mirrored in my own face. This was what we had dreaded.

‘They have a *Kommandant* with them. If they find it,’ Hélène whispered, her voice cracking with panic, ‘they’ll arrest us all. You know what took place in Arras. They’ll make an example of us. What will happen to the children?’

My mind raced, fear that my brother might speak out making me stupid. I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders and tiptoed to the window, peering out at the courtyard. The presence of a *Kommandant* suggested these were not just drunken soldiers looking to take out their frustrations with a few threats and knocks: we were in trouble. His presence meant we had committed a crime that should be taken seriously.

‘They will find it, Sophie. It will take them minutes. And then …’ Hélène’s voice rose, lifted by panic.

My thoughts turned black. I closed my eyes. And then I opened them. ‘Go downstairs,’ I said. ‘Plead ignorance. Ask him what Aurélien has done wrong. Talk to him, distract him. Just give me some time before they come into the house.’

‘What are you going to do?’

I gripped my sister’s arm. ‘Go. But tell them nothing, you understand? Deny *everything*.’

My sister hesitated, then ran towards the corridor, her nightgown billowing behind her. I’m not sure I had ever felt as alone as I did in those few seconds, fear gripping my throat and the weight of my family’s fate upon me. I ran into Father’s study and scrabbled in the drawers of the great desk, hurling its contents – old pens, scraps of paper, pieces from broken clocks and ancient bills – on to the floor, thanking God when I finally found what I was searching for. Then I ran downstairs, opened the cellar door and skipped down the cold stone stairs, so sure-footed now in the dark that I barely needed the fluttering glow of the candle. I lifted the heavy latch to the back cellar, which had once been stacked to the roof with beer kegs and good wine, slid one of the empty barrels aside and opened the door of the old cast-iron bread oven.

The piglet, still only half grown, blinked sleepily. It lifted itself to its feet, peered out at me from its bed of straw and grunted. Surely I’ve told you about the pig? We liberated it during the requisition of Monsieur Girard’s farm. Like a gift from God, it had strayed in the chaos, meandering away from the piglets being loaded into the back of a German truck and was swiftly swallowed by the thick skirts of Grandma Poilâne. We’ve been fattening it on acorns and scraps for weeks, in the hope of raising it to a size great enough for us all to have some meat. The thought of that crisp skin, that moist pork, has kept the inhabitants of Le Coq Rouge going for the past month.

Outside I heard my brother yelp again, then my sister’s voice, rapid and urgent, cut short by the harsh tones of a German officer. The pig looked at me with intelligent, understanding eyes, as if it already knew its fate.

‘I’m so sorry, *mon petit*,’ I whispered, ‘but this really is the only way.’ And I brought down my hand.

I was outside in a matter of moments. I had woken Mimi, telling her only that she must come but to stay silent – the child has seen so much these last months that she obeys without question. She glanced up at me holding her baby brother, slid out of bed and placed a hand in mine.

The air was sharp with the approach of winter, the smell of woodsmoke lingering in the air from our brief fire earlier in the evening. I saw the *Kommandant* through the stone archway of the back door and hesitated. It was not Herr Becker, whom we knew and despised. This was a slimmer man, clean-shaven, impassive. Even in the dark I could see intelligence, not brutish ignorance, in his face, which made me afraid.

This new *Kommandant* was gazing speculatively up at our windows, perhaps considering whether this building might provide a more suitable billet than the Fourrier farm, where senior German officers slept. I suspect he knew that our elevated aspect would give him a vantage-point across the town. There were stables for horses and ten bedrooms, from the days when our home was the town's thriving hotel.

Hélène was on the cobbles, shielding Aurélien with her arms.

One of his men had raised his rifle, but the *Kommandant* lifted his hand. 'Stand up,' he ordered them. Hélène scrambled backwards, away from him. I glimpsed her face, taut with fear.

I felt Mimi's hand tighten round mine as she saw her mother, and I gave hers a squeeze, even though my heart was in my mouth. And I strode out. 'What, in God's name, is going on?' My voice rang out in the yard.

The *Kommandant* glanced towards me, surprised by my tone: a young woman walking through the arched entrance to the farmyard, a thumb-sucking child at her skirts, another swaddled and clutched to her chest. My night bonnet sat slightly askew, my white cotton nightgown so worn now that it barely registered as fabric against my skin. I prayed that he could not hear the almost audible thumping of my heart.

I addressed him directly: 'And for what supposed misdemeanour have your men come to punish us now?'

I guessed he had not heard a woman speak to him in this way since his last leave home. The silence that fell upon the courtyard was steeped in shock. My brother and sister, on the ground, twisted round, the better to see me, only too aware of where such insubordination might leave us all.

'You are?'

'Madame Lefèvre.'

I could see he was checking for the presence of my wedding ring. He needn't have bothered: like most women in our area, I had long since sold it for food.

'Madame. We have information that you are harbouring illegal livestock.' His French was passable, suggesting previous postings in the occupied territory, his voice calm. This was not a man who felt threatened by the unexpected.

'Livestock?'

'A reliable source tells us that you are keeping a pig on the premises. You will be aware that, under the directive, the penalty for withholding livestock from the administration is imprisonment.'

I held his gaze. 'And I know exactly who would inform you of such a thing. It's Monsieur Suel, *non*?' My cheeks were flushed with colour; my hair, twisted into a long plait that hung over my shoulder, felt electrified. It prickled at the nape of my neck.

The *Kommandant* turned to one of his minions. The man's glance sideways told him this was true.

'Monsieur Suel, Herr Kommandant, comes here at least twice a month attempting to persuade us that in the absence of our husbands we are in need of his particular brand of comfort. Because we have chosen not to avail ourselves of his supposed kindness, he repays us with rumours and a threat to our lives.'

'The authorities would not act unless the source were credible.'

'I would argue, Herr Kommandant, that this visit suggests otherwise.'

The look he gave me was impenetrable. He turned on his heel and walked towards the house door. I followed him, half tripping over my skirts in my attempt to keep up. I knew the mere act of speaking so

boldly to him might be considered a crime. And yet, at that moment, I was no longer afraid.

'Look at us, Kommandant. Do we look as though we are feasting on beef, on roast lamb, on fillet of pork?' He turned, his eyes flicking towards my bony wrists, just visible at the sleeves of my gown. I had lost two inches from my waist in the last year alone. 'Are we grotesquely plump with the bounty of our hotel? We have three hens left of two dozen. Three hens that we have the pleasure of keeping and feeding so that your men might take the eggs. We, meanwhile, live on what the German authorities deem to be a diet – decreasing rations of meat and flour, and bread made from grit and bran so poor we would not use it to feed livestock.'

He was in the back hallway, his heels echoing on the flagstones. He hesitated, then walked through to the bar and barked an order. A soldier appeared from nowhere and handed him a lamp.

'We have no milk to feed our babies, our children weep with hunger, we become ill from lack of nutrition. And still you come here in the middle of the night to terrify two women and brutalize an innocent boy, to beat us and threaten us, because you heard a rumour from an immoral man that we were *feasting*?'

My hands were shaking. He saw the baby squirm, and I realized I was so tense that I was holding it too tightly. I stepped back, adjusted the shawl, crooned to it. Then I lifted my head. I could not hide the bitterness and anger in my voice.

'Search our home, then, Kommandant. Turn it upside down and destroy what little has not already been destroyed. Search all the outbuildings too, those that your men have not already stripped for their own wants. When you find this mythical pig, I hope your men dine well on it.'

I held his gaze for just a moment longer than he might have expected. Through the window I could make out my sister wiping Aurélien's wounds with her skirts, trying to stem the blood. Three German soldiers stood over them.

My eyes were used to the dark now, and I saw that the *Kommandant* was wrong-footed. His men, their eyes uncertain, were waiting for him to give the orders. He could instruct them to strip our house to the beams and arrest us all to pay for my extraordinary outburst. But I knew he was thinking of Suel, whether he might have been misled. He did not look the kind of man to relish the possibility of being seen to be wrong.

When Édouard and I used to play poker, he had laughed and said I was an impossible opponent as my face never revealed my true feelings. I told myself to remember those words now: this was the most important game I would ever play. We stared at each other, the *Kommandant* and I. I felt, briefly, the whole world still around us: I could hear the distant rumble of the guns at the Front, my sister's coughing, the scrabbling of our poor, scrawny hens disturbed in their coop. It faded until just he and I faced one another, each gambling on the truth. I swear I could hear my very heart beating.

'What is this?'

'What?'

He held up the lamp, and it was dimly illuminated in pale gold light: the portrait Édouard had painted of me when we were first married. There I was, in that first year, my hair thick and lustrous around my shoulders, my skin clear and blooming, gazing out with the self-possession of the adored. I had brought it down from its hiding place several weeks before, telling my sister I was damned if the Germans would decide what I should look at in my own home.

He lifted the lamp a little higher so that he could see it more clearly. *Do not put it there, Sophie*, Hélène had warned. *It will invite trouble*.

When he finally turned to me, it was as if he had had to tear his eyes from it. He looked at my face, then back at the painting. 'My husband painted it.' I don't know why I felt the need to tell him that.

Perhaps it was the certainty of my righteous indignation. Perhaps it was the obvious difference between the girl in the picture and the girl who stood before him. Perhaps it was the weeping blonde child who stood at my feet. It is possible that even *Kommandants*, two years into this occupation, have become weary of harassing us for petty misdemeanours.

He looked at the painting a moment longer, then at his feet.

'I think we have made ourselves clear, Madame. Our conversation is not finished. But I will not disturb you further tonight.'

He caught the flash of surprise on my face, barely suppressed, and I saw that it satisfied something in him. It was perhaps enough for him to know I had believed myself doomed. He was smart, this man, and subtle. I would have to be wary.

'Men.'

His soldiers turned, blindly obedient as ever, and walked out towards their vehicle, their uniforms silhouetted against the headlights. I followed him and stood just outside the door. The last I heard of his voice was the order to the driver to make for the town.

We waited as the military vehicle travelled back down the road, its headlights feeling their way along the pitted surface. Hélène had begun to shake. She scrambled to her feet, her hand white-knuckled at her brow, her eyes tightly shut. Aurélien stood awkwardly beside me, holding Mimi's hand, embarrassed by his childish tears. I waited for the last sounds of the engine to die away. It whined over the hill, as if it, too, were acting under protest.

'Are you hurt, Aurélien?' I touched his head. Flesh wounds. And bruises. What kind of men attacked an unarmed boy?

He flinched. 'It didn't hurt,' he said. 'They didn't frighten me.'

'I thought he would arrest you,' my sister said. 'I thought he would arrest us all.' I was afraid when she looked like that: as if she were teetering on the edge of some vast abyss. She wiped her eyes and forced a smile as she crouched to hug her daughter. 'Silly Germans. They gave us all a fright, didn't they? Silly Maman for being frightened.'

The child watched her mother, silent and solemn. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever see Mimi laugh again.

'I'm sorry. I'm all right now,' she went on. 'Let's all go inside. Mimi, we have a little milk I will warm for you.' She wiped her hands on her bloodied gown, and held her hands towards me for the baby. 'You want me to take Jean?'

I had started to tremble convulsively, as if I had only just realized how afraid I should have been. My legs felt watery, their strength seeping into the cobblestones. I felt a desperate urge to sit down. 'Yes,' I said. 'I suppose you should.'

My sister reached out, then gave a small cry. Nestling in the blankets, swaddled neatly so that it was barely exposed to the night air, was the pink, hairy snout of the piglet.

'Jean is asleep upstairs,' I said. I thrust a hand at the wall to keep myself upright.

Aurélien looked over her shoulder. They all stared at it.

'*Mon Dieu*.'

'Is it dead?'

'Chloroformed. I remembered Papa had a bottle in his study, from his butterfly-collecting days. I think it will wake up. But we're going to have to find somewhere else to keep it for when they return. And you know they will return.'

Aurélien smiled then, a rare, slow smile of delight. Hélène stooped to show Mimi the comatose little pig, and they grinned. Hélène kept touching its snout, clamping a hand over her face, as if she couldn't believe what she was holding.

'You held the pig before them? They came here and you held it out in front of their noses? And then you told them off for *coming here*?' Her voice was incredulous.

'In front of their snouts,' said Aurélien, who seemed suddenly to have recovered some of his swagger. 'Hah! You held it in front of their snouts!'

I sat down on the cobbles and began to laugh. I laughed until my skin grew chilled and I didn't know whether I was laughing or weeping. My brother, perhaps afraid I was becoming hysterical, took my hand and rested against me. He was fourteen, sometimes bristling like a man, sometimes childlike in his need for reassurance.

Hélène was still deep in thought. 'If I had known …' she said. 'How did you become so brave, Sophie? My little sister! Who made you like this? You were a mouse when we were children. A mouse!'

I wasn't sure I knew the answer.

And then, as we finally walked back into the house, as Hélène busied herself with the milk pan and Aurélien began to wash his poor, battered face, I stood before the portrait.

That girl, the girl Édouard had married, looked back with an expression I no longer recognized. He had seen it in me long before anyone else did: it speaks of knowledge, that smile, of satisfaction gained and given. It speaks of pride. When his Parisian friends had found his love of me – a shop girl – inexplicable, he had just smiled because he could already see this in me.

I never knew if he understood that it was only there because of him.

I stood and gazed at her and, for a few seconds, I remembered how it had felt to be that girl, free of hunger, of fear, consumed only by idle thoughts of what private moments I might spend with Édouard. She reminded me that the world is capable of beauty, and that there were once things – art, joy, love – that filled my world, instead of fear and nettle soup and curfews. I saw him in my expression. And then I realized what I had just done. He had reminded me of my own strength, of how much I had left in me with which to fight.

When you return, Édouard, I swear I will once again be the girl you painted.

2

The story of the pig-baby had reached most of St Péronne by lunchtime. The bar of Le Coq Rouge saw a constant stream of customers, even though we had little to offer other than chicory coffee; beer supplies were sporadic, and we had only a few ruinously expensive bottles of wine. It was astonishing how many people called just to wish us good day.

'And you tore a strip off him? Told him to go away?' Old René, chuckling into his moustache, was clutching the back of a chair and weeping tears of laughter. He had asked to hear the story four times now, and with every telling Aurélien had embellished it a little more, until he was fighting off the *Kommandant* with a sabre, while I cried '*Der Kaiser ist Scheiss!*'

I exchanged a small smile with Hélène, who was sweeping the floor of the café. I didn't mind. There had been little enough to celebrate in our town lately.

'We must be careful,' Hélène said, as René left, lifting his hat in salute. We watched him, convulsed with renewed mirth as he passed the post office, pausing to wipe his eyes. 'This story is spreading too far.'

'Nobody will say anything. Everyone hates the Boche.' I shrugged. 'Besides, they all want a piece of pork. They're hardly going to inform on us before their food arrives.'

The pig had been moved discreetly next door in the early hours of the morning. Some months ago Aurélien, chopping up old beer barrels for firewood, had discovered that the only thing separating the labyrinthine wine cellar from that of the neighbours, the Fouberts, was a single-skin brick wall. We had carefully removed several of the bricks, with the Fouberts' co-operation, and this had become an escape route of last resort. When the Fouberts had harboured a young Englishman, and the Germans had arrived unannounced at their door at dusk, Madame Foubert had pleaded incomprehension at the officer's instructions, giving the young man just enough time to sneak down to the cellar and through into our side. They had taken her house to pieces, even looked around the cellar, but in the dim light, not one had noticed that the mortar in the wall was suspiciously gappy.

This was the story of our lives: minor insurrections, tiny victories, a brief chance to ridicule our oppressors, little floating vessels of hope amid a great sea of uncertainty, deprivation and fear.

'You met the new *Kommandant*, then?' The mayor was seated at one of the tables near the window. As I brought him some coffee, he motioned to me to sit down. More than anyone else's, his life, I often thought, had been intolerable since the occupation: he had spent his time in a constant state of negotiation with the Germans to grant the town what it needed, but periodically they had taken him hostage to force recalcitrant townspeople to do their bidding.

'It was not a formal introduction,' I said, placing the cup in front of him.

He tilted his head towards me, his voice low. 'Herr Becker has been sent back to Germany to run one of the reprisal camps. Apparently there were inconsistencies in his book-keeping.'

‘That’s no surprise. He is the only man in Occupied France who has doubled in weight in two years.’ I was joking, but my feelings at his departure were mixed. On the one hand Becker had been harsh, his punishments excessive, born out of insecurity and a fear that his men would not think him strong enough. But he had been too stupid – blind to many of the town’s acts of resistance – to cultivate any relationships that might have helped his cause.

‘So, what do you think?’

‘Of the new *Kommandant*? I don’t know. He could have been worse, I suppose. He didn’t pull the house apart, where Becker might have, just to show his strength. But …’ I wrinkled my nose ‘… he’s clever. We might have to be extra careful.’

‘As ever, Madame Lefèvre, your thoughts are in harmony with my own.’ He smiled at me, but not with his eyes. I remembered when the mayor had been a jolly, blustering man, famous for his bonhomie: he’d had the loudest voice at any town gathering.

‘Anything coming in this week?’

‘I believe there will be some bacon. And coffee. Very little butter. I hope to have the exact rations later today.’

We gazed out of the window. Old René had reached the church. He stopped to talk to the priest. It was not hard to guess what they were discussing. When the priest began to laugh, and René bent double for the fourth time, I couldn’t suppress a giggle.

‘Any news from your husband?’

I turned back to the mayor. ‘Not since August, when I had a postcard. He was near Amiens. He didn’t say much.’ *I think of you day and night*, the postcard had said, in his beautiful loopy scrawl. *You are my lodestar in this world of madness*. I had lain awake for two nights worrying after I had received it, until Hélène had pointed out that ‘this world of madness’ might equally apply to a world in which one lived on black bread so hard it required a billhook to cut it, and kept pigs in a bread oven.

‘The last I received from my eldest son came nearly three months ago. They were pushing forward towards Cambrai. Spirits good, he said.’

‘I hope they are still good. How is Louisa?’

‘Not too bad, thank you.’ His youngest daughter had been born with a palsy; she failed to thrive, could eat only certain foods and, at eleven, was frequently ill. Keeping her well was a preoccupation of our little town. If there was milk or any dried vegetable to be had, a little spare usually found its way to the mayor’s house.

‘When she is strong again, tell her Mimi was asking after her. Hélène is sewing a doll for her that is to be the exact twin of Mimi’s own. She asked that they might be sisters.’

The mayor patted her hand. ‘You girls are too kind. I thank God that you returned here when you could have stayed in the safety of Paris.’

‘Pah. There is no guarantee that the Boche won’t be marching down the Champs-Élysées before long. And besides, I could not leave Hélène alone here.’

‘She would not have survived this without you. You have grown into such a fine young woman. Paris was good for you.’

‘My husband is good for me.’

‘Then God save him. God save us all.’ The mayor smiled, placed his hat on his head and stood up to leave.

St Péronne, where the Bessette family had run Le Coq Rouge for generations, had been among the first towns to fall to the Germans in the autumn of 1914. Hélène and I, our parents long dead and our husbands at the Front, had determined to keep the hotel going. We were not alone in taking on men’s work: the shops, the local farms, the school were almost entirely run by women, aided by old men and boys. By 1915 there were barely any men left in the town.

We did good business in the early months, with French soldiers passing through and the British not far behind. Food was still plentiful, music and cheering accompanied the marching troops, and most of us still believed the war would be over within months, at worst. There were a few hints of the horrors taking place a hundred miles away: we gave food to the Belgian refugees who traipsed past, their belongings teetering on wagons; some were still clad in slippers and the clothes they had worn when they had left their homes. Occasionally, if the wind blew from the east, we could just make out the distant boom of the guns. But although we knew that the war was close by, few believed St Péronne, our proud little town, could possibly join those that had fallen under German rule.

Proof of how wrong we had been had come accompanied by the sound of gunfire on a still, cold, autumn morning, when Madame Fougère and Madame Dérin had set out for their daily six forty-five a.m. stroll to the *boulangerie*, and were shot dead as they crossed the square.

I had pulled back the curtains at the noise and it had taken me several moments to comprehend what I saw: the bodies of those two women, widows and friends for most of their seventy-odd years, sprawled on the pavement, headscarves askew, their empty baskets upended at their feet. A sticky red pool spread around them in an almost perfect circle, as if it had come from one entity.

The German officers claimed afterwards that snipers had shot at them and that they had acted in retaliation. (Apparently they said the same of every village they took.) If they had wanted to prompt insurrection in the town, they could not have done better than their killing of those old women. But the outrage did not stop there. They set fire to barns and shot down the statue of Mayor Leclerc. Twenty-four hours later they marched in formation down our main street, their *Pickelhaube* helmets shining in the wintry sunlight, as we stood outside our homes and shops and watched in shocked silence. They ordered the few remaining men outside so that they could count them.

The shopkeepers and stallholders simply shut their shops and stalls and refused to serve them. Most of us had stockpiled food; we knew we could survive. I think we believed they might give up, faced with such intransigence, and march on to another village. But then Kommandant Becker had decreed that any shopkeeper who failed to open during normal working hours would be shot. One by one, the *boulangerie*, the *boucherie*, the market stalls and even Le Coq Rouge reopened. Reluctantly, our little town was prodded back into sullen, mutinous life.

Eighteen months on, there was little left to buy. St Péronne was cut off from its neighbours, deprived of news and dependent on the irregular delivery of aid, supplemented by costly black-market provisions when they were available. Sometimes it was hard to believe that Free France knew what we were suffering. The Germans were the only ones who ate well; their horses (our horses) were sleek and fat, and ate the crushed wheat that should have been used to make our bread. They raided our wine cellars, and took the food produced by our farms.

And it wasn't just food. Every week someone would get the dreaded knock on the door, and a new list of items would be requisitioned: teaspoons, curtains, dinner plates, saucepans, blankets. Occasionally an officer would inspect first, note what was desirable, and return with a list specifying exactly that. They would write promissory notes, which could supposedly be exchanged for money. Not a single person in St Péronne knew anyone who had actually been paid.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm moving this.' I took the portrait and moved it to a quiet corner, less in public gaze.

'Who is it?' Aurélien asked as I re-hung it, adjusting it on the wall until it was straight.

'It's me!' I turned to him. 'Can you not tell?'

'Oh.' He squinted. He wasn't trying to insult me: the girl in the painting was very different from the thin, severe woman, grey of complexion, with wary, tired eyes, who stared back at me daily from the looking-glass. I tried not to glimpse her too often.

'Did Édouard do it?'

'Yes. When we were married.'

'I've never seen his paintings. It's … not what I expected.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well – it's strange. The colours are strange. He has put green and blue in your skin. People don't have green and blue skin! And look – it's messy. He has not kept within the lines.'

'Aurélien, come here.' I walked to the window. 'Look at my face. What do you see?'

'A gargoyle.'

I cuffed him. 'No. Look – really look. At the colours of my skin.'

'You're just pale.'

'Look harder – under my eyes, in the hollows of my throat. Don't tell me what you expect to see. Really look. And then tell me what colours you actually see.'

My brother stared at my throat. His gaze travelled slowly around my face. 'I see blue,' he said, 'under your eyes. Blue and purple. And, yes, green running down your neck. And orange. *Alors* – call the doctor! Your face is a million different colours. You are a clown!'

'We are all clowns,' I said. 'Édouard just sees it more clearly than everyone else.'

Aurélien raced upstairs to inspect himself in the looking-glass and torment himself about the blues and purples he would no doubt find. Not that he needed much excuse, these days. He was sweet on at least two girls and spent much time shaving his soft, juvenile skin with our father's blunt old cut-throat razor in a vain attempt to hasten the process of ageing.

'It's lovely,' Hélène said, standing back to look at it.

'But …'

'But what?'

'It is a risk to have it up at all. When the Germans went through Lille, they burned art they considered subversive. Édouard's painting is … very different. How do you know they won't destroy it?'

She worried, Hélène. She worried about Édouard's paintings and our brother's temper; she worried about the letters and diary entries I wrote on scraps of paper and stuffed into holes in the beams. 'I want it down here, where I can see it. Don't worry – the rest are safe in Paris.'

She didn't look convinced.

‘I want colour, Hélène. I want *life*. I don’t want to look at Napoleon or Papa’s stupid pictures of mournful dogs. And I won’t let *them* –’ I nodded outside to where off-duty German soldiers were smoking by the town fountain ‘– decide what I may look at in my own home.’

Hélène shook her head, as if I were a fool she might have to indulge. And then she went to serve Madame Louvier and Madame Durant who, although they had often observed that my chicory coffee tasted as if it had come from the sewer, had arrived to hear the story of the pig-baby.

Hélène and I shared a bed that night, flanking Mimi and Jean. Sometimes it was so cold, even in October, that we feared we would find them frozen solid in their nightclothes, so we all huddled up together. It was late, but I knew my sister was awake. The moonlight shone through the gap in the curtains, and I could just see her eyes, wide open, fixed on a distant point. I guessed that she was wondering where her husband was at that very moment, whether he was warm, billeted somewhere like our home, or freezing in a trench, gazing up at the same moon.

In the far distance a muffled boom told of some far-off battle.

‘Sophie?’

‘Yes?’ We spoke in the quietest of whispers.

‘Do you ever wonder what it will be like … if they do not come back?’

I lay there in the darkness.

‘No,’ I lied. ‘Because I know they will come back. And I do not want the Germans to have gleaned even one more minute of fear from me.’

‘I do,’ she said. ‘Sometimes I forget what he looks like. I gaze at his photograph, and I can’t remember anything.’

‘It’s because you look at it so often. Sometimes I think we wear our photographs out by looking at them.’

‘But I can’t remember anything – how he smells, how his voice sounds. I can’t remember how he feels beside me. It’s as if he never existed. And then I think, What if this is it? What if he never comes back? What if we are to spend the rest of our lives like this, our every move determined by men who hate us? And I’m not sure … I’m not sure I can …’

I propped myself up on one elbow and reached over Mimi and Jean to take my sister’s hand. ‘Yes, you can,’ I said. ‘Of course you can. Jean-Michel will come home, and your life will be good. France will be free, and life will be as it was. Better than it was.’

She lay there in silence. I was shivering now, out from under the blankets, but I dared not move. My sister frightened me when she spoke like this. It was as if there was a whole world of terrors inside her head that she had to battle against twice as hard as the rest of us.

Her voice was small, tremulous, as if she were fighting back tears. ‘Do you know, after I married Jean-Michel, I was so happy. I was free for the first time in my life.’

I knew what she meant: our father had been quick with his belt and sharp with his fists. The town believed him to be the most benign of landlords, a pillar of the community, *good old François Bessette*, always ready with a joke and a glass. But we knew the ferocity of his temper. Our only regret was that our mother had gone before him, so that she could have enjoyed a few years out of its shadow.

‘It feels … it feels like we have exchanged one bully for another. Sometimes I suspect I will spend my whole life bent to somebody else’s will. You, Sophie, I see you laughing. I see you determined, so brave,

putting up paintings, shouting at Germans, and I don't understand where it comes from. I can't remember what it was like not to be afraid.'

We lay there in silence. I could hear my heart thumping. She believed me fearless. But nothing frightened me as much as my sister's fears. There was a new fragility about her, these last months, a new strain around her eyes. I squeezed her hand. She did not squeeze back.

Between us, Mimi stirred, throwing an arm over her head. Hélène relinquished my hand, and I could just make out her shape as she moved on to her side, and gently tucked her daughter's arm back under the covers. Oddly reassured by this gesture, I lay down again, pulling the blankets up to my chin to stop myself shivering.

'Pork,' I said, into the silence.

'What?'

'Just think about it. Roast pork, the skin rubbed with salt and oil, cooked until it snaps between your teeth. Think of the soft folds of warm white fat, the pink meat shredding softly between your fingers, perhaps with *compôte* of apple. That is what we will eat in a matter of weeks, Hélène. Think of how good it will taste.'

'Pork?'

'Yes. Pork. When I feel myself waver, I think of that pig, and its big fat belly. I think of its crisp little ears, its moist haunches.' I almost heard her smile.

'Sophie, you're mad.'

'But think of it, Hélène. Won't it be good? Can you imagine Mimi's face, with pork fat dribbling down her chin? How it will feel in her little tummy? Can you imagine her pleasure as she tries to remove bits of crackling from between her teeth?'

She laughed, despite herself. 'I'm not sure she remembers how pork tastes.'

'It won't take much to remind her,' I said. 'Just like it won't take much to remind you of Jean-Michel. One of these days he will walk through the doors, and you will throw your arms around him, and the smell of him, the feel of him holding you around your waist, will be as familiar to you as your own body.'

I could almost hear her thoughts travelling back upwards then. I had pulled her back. Little victories.

'Sophie,' she said, after a while. 'Do you miss sex?'

'Every single day,' I said. 'Twice as often as I think about that pig.' There was a brief silence, and we broke into giggles. Then, I don't know why, we were laughing so hard we had to clamp our hands over our faces to stop ourselves waking the children.

I knew the *Kommandant* would return. In the event it was four days before he did so. It was raining hard, a deluge, so that our few customers sat over empty cups gazing unseeing through the steamed windows. In the snug, old René and Monsieur Pellier played dominoes; Monsieur Pellier's dog – he had to pay the Germans a tariff for the privilege of owning it – between their feet. Many people sat here daily so that they did not have to be alone with their fear.

I was just admiring Madame Arnault's hair, newly pinned by my sister, when the glass doors opened and he stepped into the bar, flanked by two officers. The room, which had been a warm fug of chatty companionability, fell abruptly silent. I stepped out from behind the counter and wiped my hands on my apron.

Germans did not visit our bar, except for requisitioning. They used the Bar Blanc, at the top of the town, which was larger and possibly friendlier. We had always made it very clear that we were not a convivial space for the occupying force. I wondered what they were going to take from us now. If we had any fewer cups and plates we would have to ask customers to share.

'Madame Lefèvre.'

I nodded at him. I could feel my customers' eyes on me.

'It has been decided you will provide meals for some of our officers. There is not enough room in the Bar Blanc for our incoming men to eat comfortably.'

I could see him clearly for the first time now. He was older than I had thought, in his late forties perhaps, although with fighting men it was hard to tell. They all looked older than they were.

'I'm afraid that will be impossible, Herr Kommandant,' I said. 'We have not served meals at this hotel for more than eighteen months. We have barely enough provisions to feed our small family. We cannot possibly provide meals to the standard that your men will require.'

'I am well aware of that. There will be sufficient supplies delivered from early next week. I will expect you to turn out meals suitable for officers. I understand this hotel was once a fine establishment. I'm sure it lies within your capabilities.'

I heard my sister's intake of breath behind me, and I knew she felt as I did. The visceral dread of having Germans in our little hotel was tempered by the thought that for months had overridden all others: *food*. There would be leftovers, bones with which to make stock. There would be cooking smells, stolen mouthfuls, extra rations, slices of meat and cheese to be secretly pared off.

But still. 'I am not sure our bar will be suitable for you, Herr Kommandant. We are stripped of comforts here.'

'I will be the judge of where my men will be comfortable. I would like to see your rooms also. I may billet some of my men up here.'

I heard old René mutter, '*Sacre bleu!*'

'You are welcome to see the rooms, Herr Kommandant. But you will find that your predecessors have left us with little. The beds, the blankets, the curtains, even the copper piping that fed the basins, they are already in German possession.'

I knew I risked angering him: I had made clear in a packed bar that the *Kommandant* was ignorant of the actions of his own men, that his intelligence, as far as it stretched to our town, was faulty. But it was vital that my own townspeople saw me as obstinate and mulish. To have Germans in our bar would make Hélène and me the target of gossip, of malicious rumour. It was important that we were seen to do all we could to deter them.

'Again, Madame, I will be the judge of whether your rooms are suitable. Please show me.' He motioned to his men to remain in the bar. It would be completely silent until after they had left.

I straightened my shoulders and walked slowly out into the hallway, reaching for the keys as I did so. I felt the eyes of the whole room on me as I left, my skirts swishing around my legs, the heavy steps of the German behind me. I unlocked the door to the main corridor (I kept everything locked: it was not unknown for French thieves to steal what had not already been requisitioned by the Germans).

This part of the building smelt musty and damp; it was months since I had been here. We walked up the stairs in silence. I was grateful that he remained several steps behind me. I paused at the top, waiting for

him to step into the corridor, then unlocked the first room.

There had been a time when merely to see our hotel like this had reduced me to tears. The Red Room had once been the pride of Le Coq Rouge; the bedroom where my sister and I had spent our wedding nights, the room where the mayor would put up visiting dignitaries. It had housed a vast four-poster bed, draped in blood-red tapestries, and its generous window overlooked our formal gardens. The carpet was from Italy, the furniture from a château in Gascogne, the coverlet a deep red silk from China. It had held a gilt chandelier and a huge marble fireplace, where the fire was lit each morning by a chambermaid and kept alight until night.

I opened the door, standing back so that the German might enter. The room was empty, but for a chair that stood on three legs in the corner. The floorboards had been stripped of their carpet and were grey, thick with dust. The bed was long gone, with the curtains, among the first things stolen when the Germans had taken our town. The marble fireplace had been ripped from the wall. For what reason, I do not know: it was not as if it could be used elsewhere. I think Becker had simply wanted to demoralize us, to remove all things of beauty.

He took a step into the room.

'Be careful where you walk,' I said. He glanced down, then saw it: the corner of the room where they had attempted to remove the floorboards for firewood last spring. The house had been too well built, its boards nailed too securely, and they had given up after several hours when they had removed just three long planks. The hole, a gaping O of protest, exposed the beams beneath.

The *Kommandant* stood for a minute, staring at the floor. He lifted his head and gazed around him. I had never been alone in a room with a German, and my heart was thumping. I could smell the faint hint of tobacco on him, see the rain splashes on his uniform. I watched the back of his neck, and eased my keys between my fingers, ready to hit him with my armoured fist should he suddenly attack me. I would not be the first woman who had had to fight for her honour.

But he turned back to me. 'Are they all as bad?' he said.

'No,' I replied. 'The others are worse.'

He looked at me for such a long time that I almost coloured. But I refused to let that man intimidate me. I stared back at him, at his cropped greying hair, his translucent blue eyes, studying me from under his peaked cap. My chin remained lifted, my expression blank.

Finally he turned and walked past me, down the stairs and into the back hallway. He stopped abruptly, peered up at my portrait and blinked twice, as if he were only now registering that I had moved it.

'I will have someone inform you of when to expect the first delivery of food,' he said. He went briskly through the doorway and back to the bar.

3

‘You should have said no.’ Madame Durant poked a bony finger into my shoulder. I jumped. She wore a white frilled bonnet, and a faded blue crocheted cape was pinned around her shoulders. Those who complained about lack of news now that we were not allowed newspapers had evidently never crossed my neighbour’s path.

‘What?’

‘Feeding the Germans. You should have said no.’

It was a freezing morning, and I had wrapped my scarf high around my face. I tugged it down to respond to her. ‘I should have said no? And you will say no, when they decide to occupy your house, will you, Madame?’

‘You and your sister are younger than I am. You have the strength to fight them.’

‘Unfortunately I lack the firearms of a battalion. What do you suggest I do? Barricade us all in? Throw cups and saucers at them?’

She continued to berate me as I opened the door for her. The bakery no longer smelt like a bakery. It was still warm inside, but the scent of baguettes and croissants had long since disappeared. This small fact made me sad every time I crossed the threshold.

‘I swear I do not know what this country is coming to. If your father could have seen Germans in his hotel …’ Madame Louvier had evidently been well briefed. She shook her head in disapproval as I approached the counter.

‘He would have done exactly the same thing.’

Monsieur Armand, the baker, shushed them. ‘You cannot criticize Madame Lefèvre! We are all their puppets now. Madame Durant, do you criticize me for baking their bread?’

‘I just think it’s unpatriotic to do their bidding.’

‘Easy to say when you’re not the one facing a bullet.’

‘So, more of them are coming here? More of them pushing their way into our storerooms, eating our food, stealing our animals. I swear I do not know how we will survive this winter.’

‘As we always have, Madame Durant. With stoicism and good humour, praying that Our Lord, if not our brave boys, will give the Boche a royal kick up their backsides.’ Monsieur Armand winked at me. ‘Now, ladies, what would you like? We have week-old black bread, five-day-old black bread, and some black bread of indeterminate age, guaranteed free of weevils.’

‘There are days I would consider a weevil a welcome hors d’oeuvre,’ Madame Louvier said mournfully.

‘Then I will save a jam jar full for you, my dear Madame. Believe me, there are many days in which we receive generous helpings in our flour. Weevil cake, weevil pie, weevil profiteroles: thanks to German generosity, we can supply them all.’ We laughed. It was impossible not to. Monsieur Armand managed to raise a smile even on the direst of days.

Madame Louvier took her bread and put it into her basket with distaste. Monsieur Armand took no offence: he saw that expression a hundred times a day. The bread was black, square and sticky. It gave off a musty smell, as if it were mouldering from the moment it left the oven. It was so solid that the older women frequently had to request the help of the young simply to cut it. 'Did you hear,' she said, tucking her coat around her, 'that they have renamed all the streets in Le Nouvion?'

'Renamed the streets?'

'German names for French ones. Monsieur Dinan got word from his son. You know what they call Avenue de la Gare?'

We all shook our heads. Madame Louvier closed her eyes for a moment, as if to make sure she had got it right. 'Bahnhofstrasse,' she said finally.

'Bahnhof-what?'

'Can you believe it?'

'They will not be renaming my shop.' Monsieur Armand harrumphed. 'I'll be renaming their backsides. *Brot* this and *Brot* that. This is a *boulangerie*. In rue des Bastides. Always has been, always will. Bahnhof-whatsit. Ridiculous.'

'But this is terrible!' Madame Durant was panic-stricken.

'I don't speak any German!'

We all stared at her.

'Well, how am I supposed to find my way around my own town if I can't tell the street names?'

We were so busy laughing that for a moment we did not notice the door open. But then the shop fell abruptly silent. I turned to see Liliane Béthune walk in, her head up, but failing to meet a single person's eye. Her face was fuller than most, her clear skin rouged and powdered. She uttered a general '*Bonjour*,' and reached into her bag. 'Two loaves, please.'

She smelt of expensive scent, and her hair was swept up in curls. In a town where most women were too exhausted or too empty-handed to do anything but the minimum of personal grooming, she stood out like a glittering jewel. But it was her coat that drew my eye. I could not stop staring at it. It was jet black, made of the finest astrakhan lambskin and as thick as a fur rug. It had the soft sheen of something new and expensive, and the collar rose around her face as if her long neck were emerging from black treacle. I saw the older women register it, their expressions hardening as their gaze travelled down its length.

'One for you, one for your German?' Madame Durant muttered.

'I said two loaves, please.' She turned to Madame Durant. 'One for me. One for my *daughter*.'

For once, Monsieur Armand did not smile. He reached under the counter, his eyes never leaving her face, and with his two meaty fists he slammed two loaves on to its surface. He did not wrap them.

Liliane held out a note, but he didn't take it from her hand. He waited the few seconds it took her to place it on the counter, and then he picked it up gingerly, as if it might infect him. He reached into his till and threw two coins down in change, even as she held out her hand.

She looked at him, and then at the counter where the coins lay. 'Keep them,' she said. And, with a furious glance at us, she snatched up the bread, and swept out of the shop.

'How she has the nerve …' Madame Durant was never happier than when she was outraged by somebody else's behaviour. Luckily for her, Liliane Béthune had granted her ample opportunity to exercise her fury over the past few months.

‘I suppose she has to eat, like everyone else,’ I said.

‘Every night she goes to the Fourrier farm. Every night. You see her cross the town, scuttling like a thief.’

‘She has two new coats,’ Madame Louvier said. ‘The other one is green. A brand new green wool coat. From Paris.’

‘And shoes. Of kid leather. Of course she dare not wear them out in the day. She knows she would get lynched.’

‘She won’t, that one. Not with the Germans looking out for her.’

‘Still, when they leave, it’ll be another story, eh?’

‘I wouldn’t want to be in her shoes, kid leather or not.’

‘I do hate to see her strutting about, rubbing her good fortune in everybody’s faces. Who does she think she is?’

Monsieur Armand watched the young woman crossing the square. Suddenly he smiled. ‘I wouldn’t worry, ladies. Not everything goes her way.’

We looked at him.

‘Can you keep a secret?’

I don’t know why he bothered asking. Those two old women could barely stay silent for ten seconds at a time.

‘What?’

‘Let’s just say some of us make sure Miss Fancy Pants gets special treatment she wasn’t expecting.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Her loaves live under the counter by themselves. They contain some special ingredients. Ingredients that I promise you go into none of my other loaves.’

The old women’s eyes widened. I dared not ask what the baker meant, but the glint in his eye suggested several possibilities, none of which I wanted to dwell upon.

‘*Non!*’

‘Monsieur Armand!’ They were scandalized, but they began to cackle.

I felt sick then. I didn’t like Liliane Béthune, or what she was doing, but this revolted me. ‘I’ve – I’ve got to go. Hélène needs … ’ I reached for my bread. Their laughter still ringing in my ears, I ran for the relative safety of the hotel.

The food came the following Friday. First the eggs, two dozen, delivered by a young German corporal, who brought them in covered with a white sheet, as if he were delivering contraband. Then bread, white and fresh, in three baskets. I had gone off bread a little since that day in the *boulangerie*, but to hold fresh loaves, crusty and warm, left me almost drunk with desire. I had to send Aurélien upstairs, I was so afraid he would be unable to resist the temptation to break off a mouthful.

Next, six hens, their feathers still on, and a crate containing cabbage, onions, carrots and wild garlic. After this came jars of preserved tomatoes, rice and apples. Milk, coffee, three fat pats of butter, flour, sugar. Bottles and bottles of wine from the south. Hélène and I accepted each delivery in silence. The Germans handed us forms, upon which each amount had been carefully noted. There would be no easy stealing: a form requested that we note the exact amounts used for each recipe. They also asked that we place any scraps in a pail for collection to feed livestock. When I saw that I wanted to spit.

‘We are doing this for tonight?’ I asked the last corporal.

He shrugged. I pointed at the clock. ‘Today?’ I gestured at the food. ‘*Kuchen?*’

‘*Ja*,’ he said, nodding enthusiastically. ‘*Sie kommen. Acht Uhr*.’

‘Eight o’clock,’ Hélène said, from behind me. ‘They want to eat at eight o’clock.’

Our own supper had been a slice of black bread, spread thinly with jam and accompanied by some boiled beetroot. To have to roast chickens, to fill our kitchen with the scents of garlic and tomato, with apple tart, felt like a form of torture. I was afraid, that first evening, even to lick my fingers, although the sight of them, dripping with tomato juice or sticky with apple, was sorely tempting. There were several times, as I rolled pastry, or peeled apples, that I almost fainted with longing. We had to shoo Mimi, Aurélien and little Jean upstairs, from where we heard occasional howls of protest.

I did not want to cook the Germans a fine meal. But I was too afraid not to. At some point, I told myself, as I pulled the roasting chickens from the oven, basting them with sizzling juice, perhaps I might enjoy the sight of this food. Perhaps I might relish the chance to see it again, to smell it. But that night I could not. By the time the doorbell rang, notifying us of the officers’ arrival, my stomach clawed and my skin sweated with hunger. I hated the Germans with an intensity I have never felt before or since.

‘Madame.’ The *Kommandant* was the first to enter. He removed his rain-spattered cap and motioned to his officers to do the same.

I stood, wiping my hands on my apron, unsure how to react. ‘Herr Kommandant.’ My face was expressionless.

The room was warm: the Germans had sent three baskets of logs so that we might make up a fire. The men were divesting themselves of scarves and hats, sniffing the air, already grinning with anticipation. The scent of the chicken, roasted in a garlic and tomato sauce, had thoroughly infused the air. ‘I think we will eat immediately,’ he said, glancing towards the kitchen.

‘As you wish,’ I said. ‘I will fetch the wine.’

Aurélien had opened several bottles in the kitchen. He came out scowling now, two in his hands. The torture this evening had inflicted on us had upset him in particular. I was afraid, given the recent beating, his youth and impulsive nature, that he would get himself into trouble. I swept the bottles from his hands. ‘Go and tell Hélène she must serve the dinner.’

‘But –’

‘Go!’ I scolded him. I walked around the bar, pouring wine. I did not look at any of them as I placed the glasses on the tables, even though I felt their eyes on me. Yes, look at me, I told them silently. Another scrawny Frenchwoman, starved into submission by you. I hope my appearance rots your appetites.

My sister brought out the first plates to murmurs of appreciation. Within minutes the men were tucking in, their cutlery clattering against the china, exclaiming in their own language. I walked backwards and forwards with loaded plates, trying not to breathe in the delicious scents, trying not to look at the roasted meat, glistening besides the bright vegetables.

At last, they were all served. Hélène and I stood together behind the bar, as the *Kommandant* made some lengthy toast in German. I cannot tell you how it felt then to hear those voices in our home; to see them eating the food we had so carefully prepared, relaxing and laughing and drinking. I am strengthening these men, I thought miserably, while my beloved Édouard may be weak with hunger. And this thought,

perhaps with my own hunger and exhaustion, made me feel a brief despair. A small sob escaped my throat. Hélène's hand reached for mine. She squeezed it. 'Go to the kitchen,' she murmured.

'I –'

'Go to the kitchen. I will join you when I have refilled their glasses.'

Just this once, I did as my sister said.

They ate for an hour. She and I sat in silence in the kitchen, lost in exhaustion and the confusion of our thoughts. Every time we heard a swell of laughter or a hearty exclamation, we looked up. It was so hard to know what any of it meant.

'Mesdames.' The *Kommandant* appeared at the kitchen door. We scrambled to our feet. 'The meal was excellent. I hope you can maintain this standard.'

I looked at the floor.

'Madame Lefèvre.'

Reluctantly, I raised my eyes.

'You are pale. Are you ill?'

'We are quite well.' I swallowed. I felt his eyes on me like a burn. Beside me, Hélène's fingers twisted together, reddened from the unaccustomed hot water.

'Madame, have you and your sister eaten?'

I thought it was a test. I thought he was checking that we had followed those infernal forms to the letter. I thought he might weigh the leftovers, to ensure we had not sneaked a piece of apple peel into our mouths.

'We have not touched one grain of rice, Herr Kommandant.' I almost spat it at him. Hunger will do that to you.

He blinked. 'Then you should. You cannot cook well if you do not eat. What is left?'

I couldn't move. Hélène motioned to the roasting tray on the stove. There were four quarters of a chicken there, keeping warm in case the men wanted second helpings.

'Then sit down. Eat here.'

I could not believe this wasn't a trap.

'That is an order,' he said. He was almost smiling, but I didn't think it was funny. 'Really. Go on.'

'Would … would it be possible to feed something to the children? It is a long time since they had any meat.'

He frowned a little, as if in incomprehension. I hated him. I hated the sound of my voice, begging a German for scraps of food. Oh, Édouard, I thought silently. If you could hear me now.

'Feed your children and yourselves,' he said shortly. And he turned and left the room.

We sat there in silence, his words ringing in our ears. Then Hélène grabbed her skirts and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I hadn't seen her move so fast in months.

Seconds later, she reappeared, with Jean in her arms, still in his nightshirt, Aurélien and Mimi before her.

'Is it true?' Aurélien said. He was staring at the chicken, his mouth hanging open.

I could only nod.

We fell upon that unlucky bird. I wish I could tell you that my sister and I were ladylike, that we picked delicately, as the Parisians do, that we paused to chat and wipe our mouths between bites. But we were like savages. We tore at the flesh, scooped handfuls of rice, ate with our mouths open, picking wildly at

the bits that fell on to the table. I no longer cared whether this was some trick on the *Kommandant*'s part. I have never tasted anything as good as that chicken. The garlic and tomatoes filled my mouth with long-forgotten pleasure, my nostrils with scents I could have inhaled for ever. We emitted little sounds of delight as we ate, primal and uninhibited, each locked into our own private world of satisfaction. Baby Jean laughed and covered his face with juice. Mimi chewed pieces of chicken skin, sucking the grease from her fingers with noisy relish. Hélène and I ate without speaking, always ensuring the little ones had enough.

When there was nothing left, when every bone had been sucked of its meat, the trays emptied of each last grain of rice, we sat and stared at each other. From the bar, we could hear the chatter of the Germans becoming noisier, as they consumed their wine, and occasional bursts of their laughter. I wiped my mouth with my hands.

'We must tell no one,' I said, rinsing them. I felt like a drunk who had suddenly become sober. 'This may never happen again. And we must behave as if it did not happen once. If anyone finds out that we ate the Germans' food, we will be considered traitors.'

We gazed at Mimi and Aurélien then, trying to impart to them the seriousness of what we were saying. Aurélien nodded. Mimi too. I think they would have agreed to speak German for ever in those moments. Hélène grabbed a dishcloth, wetted it, and set about removing traces of the meal from the faces of the two youngest. 'Aurélien,' she said, 'take them to bed. We will clear up.'

He was not infected by my misgivings. He was smiling. His thin, adolescent shoulders had dropped for the first time in months, and as he picked up Jean, I swear he would have whistled if he could. 'No one,' I warned him.

'I know,' he said, in the tone of a fourteen-year-old who knows everything. Little Jean was already slumping heavy-lidded on his shoulder, his first full meal in months exhausting him. They disappeared back up the stairs. The sound of their laughter as they reached the top made my heart ache.

It was past eleven o'clock when the Germans left. We had been under a curfew for almost a year; when the nights drew in, if we had no candles or acetylene lamps, Hélène and I had acquired the habit of going to bed. The bar shut at six, had done since the occupation, and we hadn't been up so late for months. We were exhausted. Our stomachs gurgled with the shock of rich food after months of near-starvation. I saw my sister slump as she scrubbed the roasting pans. I did not feel quite as tired, and my brain flickered with the memory of the chicken: it was as if long-dead nerves had been sparked into life. I could still taste and smell it. It burned in my mind like a tiny, glowing treasure.

Some time before the kitchen was clean again I sent Hélène upstairs. She pushed her hair back from her face. She had been so beautiful, my sister. When I looked at how the war had aged her, I thought of my own face, and wondered what my husband would make of me.

'I don't like to leave you alone with them,' she said.

I shook my head. I wasn't afraid: the mood was peaceable. It is hard to rouse men who have eaten well. They had been drinking, but the bottles allowed for maybe three glasses each; not enough to provoke them to misbehaviour. My father had given us precious little, God knew, but he had taught us when to be afraid. I could watch a stranger and know from a tightening of their jaw, a faint narrowing of the eyes, the exact point at which internal tension would lead to a flash of violence. Besides, I suspected the *Kommandant* would not tolerate such.

I stayed in the kitchen, clearing up, until the sound of chairs being pushed back alerted me to the fact that they were leaving. I walked through to the bar.

'You may close up now,' the *Kommandant* said. I tried not to bristle visibly. 'My men wish to convey to you their gratitude for an excellent meal.'

I glanced at them. I gave a slight nod. I did not wish to be seen as grateful for the compliments of Germans.

He did not seem to expect a response. He placed his cap on his head, and I reached into my pocket and handed him the chits from the food. He glanced at them and thrust them back at me, a little irritably. 'I do not handle such things. Give them to the men who deliver the food tomorrow.'

'*Désolée*,' I said, but I had known this full well. Some mischievous part of me had wished to reduce him, if only briefly, to the status of support corps.

I stood there as they gathered their coats and hats, some of them replacing chairs, with a vestige of gentlemanly behaviour, others careless, as if it were their right to treat any place as if it were their home. So this was it, I thought. We were to spend the rest of the war cooking for Germans.

I wondered briefly if we should have cooked badly, taken less trouble. But Maman had always impressed on us that to cook poorly was a kind of sin in itself. And however immoral we had been, however traitorous, I knew that we would all remember the night of the roasted chicken. The thought that there might be more made me feel a little giddy.

It was then that I realized he was looking at the painting.

I was gripped by a sudden fear, remembering my sister's words. The painting did look subversive, its colours too bright in the faded little bar, the glowing girl wilful in her confidence. She looked, I saw now, almost as if she were mocking them.

He kept staring at it. Behind him, his men had begun to leave, their voices loud and harsh, bouncing across the empty square. I shivered a little every time the door opened.

'It looks so like you.'

I was shocked that he could see it. I didn't want to agree. It implied a kind of intimacy, that he could see me in the girl. I swallowed. My knuckles were white where my hands pressed together.

'Yes. Well, it was a long time ago.'

'It's a little like … Matisse.'

I was so surprised by this that I spoke before I thought. 'Édouard studied under him, at the Académie Matisse in Paris.'

'I know of it. Have you come across an artist called Hans Purrmann?' I must have started – I saw his gaze flick towards me. 'I am a great admirer of his work.'

Hans Purrmann. The Académie Matisse. To hear these words from the mouth of a German *Kommandant* made me feel almost dizzy.

I wanted him gone then. I didn't want him to mention those names. Those memories were mine, little gifts that I could bring out to comfort myself on the days when I felt overwhelmed by life as it was; I did not want my happiest days polluted by the casual observations of a German.

'Herr Kommandant, I must clear up. If you will excuse me.' I began stacking plates, collecting the glasses. But he didn't move. I felt his eyes rest on the painting as if they rested on me.

‘It is a long time since I had any discussion about art.’ He spoke as if to the painting. Finally he placed his hands behind his back, and turned away from it to me. ‘We will see you tomorrow.’

I couldn’t look at him as he passed. ‘Herr Kommandant,’ I said, my hands full.

‘Good night, Madame.’

When I finally made it upstairs, Hélène was asleep face down on top of our coverlet, still wearing the clothes she had cooked in. I loosened her corset, took off her shoes and pulled the covers over her. Then I climbed into bed, my thoughts humming and spinning towards the dawn.

4

Paris, 1912

‘Mademoiselle!’

I glanced up from the display of gloves, and closed the glass case over them, the sound swallowed by the huge atrium that made up La Femme Marché’s central shopping area.

‘Mademoiselle! Here! Can you help me?’

I would have noticed him even if he hadn’t been shouting. He was tall and heavy set, with wavy hair that fell around his ears, at odds with the clipped styles of most of the gentlemen who came through our doors. His features were thick and generous, the kind my father would have dismissed as *paysan*. The man looked, I thought, like a cross between a Roman emperor and a Russian bear.

As I walked over to him, he gestured towards the scarves. But his eyes remained on me. In fact, they stayed on me so long that I glanced behind me, concerned that Madame Bourdain, my supervisor, might have noticed. ‘I need you to choose me a scarf,’ he said.

‘What kind of scarf, Monsieur?’

‘A woman’s scarf.’

‘May I ask her colouring? Or whether she prefers a particular fabric?’

He was still staring. Madame Bourdain was busy serving a woman in a peacock-feather hat. If she had looked up from her position at the face creams, she would have noticed that my ears had turned pink. ‘Whatever suits you,’ he said, adding, ‘She has your colouring.’

I sorted carefully through the silk scarves, my skin growing ever warmer, and freed one of my favourites: a fine, feather-light length of fabric in a deep opalescent blue. ‘This colour suits nearly everybody,’ I said.

‘Yes … yes. Hold it up,’ he demanded. ‘Against you. Here.’ He gestured towards his collarbone. I glanced at Madame Bourdain. There were strict guidelines as to the level of familiarity for such exchanges, and I wasn’t sure whether holding a scarf to my exposed neck fell within them. But the man was waiting. I hesitated, then brought it up to my cheek. He studied me for so long that the whole of the ground floor seemed to disappear.

‘That’s the one. Beautiful. There!’ he exclaimed, reaching into his coat for his wallet. ‘You have made my purchase easy.’

He grinned, and I found myself smiling back. Perhaps it was simply relief that he had stopped staring at me.

‘I’m not sure I –’ I was folding the scarf in tissue paper, then ducked my head as my supervisor approached.

‘Your assistant has done sterling work, Madame,’ he boomed. I glanced sideways at her, watching as she tried to reconcile this man’s rather scruffy exterior with the command of language that usually came with extreme wealth. ‘You should promote her. She has an eye!’

‘We try to ensure that our assistants always offer professional satisfaction, Monsieur,’ she said smoothly. ‘But we hope that the quality of our goods makes every purchase satisfactory. That will be two francs forty.’

I handed him his parcel, then watched him make his way slowly across the packed floor of Paris’s greatest department store. He sniffed the bottled scents, surveyed the brightly coloured hats, commented to those serving or even just passing. What would it be like to be married to such a man, I thought absently, someone for whom every moment apparently contained some sensory pleasure? But – I reminded myself – a man who also felt at liberty to stare at shop girls until they blushed. When he reached the great glass doors, he turned and looked directly at me. He lifted his hat for a full three seconds, then disappeared into the Paris morning.

I had come to Paris in the summer of 1910, a year after the death of my mother and a month after my sister had married Jean-Michel Montpellier, a book-keeper from the neighbouring village. I had taken a job at La Femme Marché, Paris’s largest department store, and had worked my way up from storeroom assistant to shop-floor assistant, lodging within the store’s own large boarding house.

I was content in Paris, once I had recovered from my initial loneliness, and earned enough money to wear shoes other than the clogs that marked me out as provincial. I loved the business of it, being there at eight forty-five a.m. as the doors opened and the fine Parisian women strolled in, their hats high, their waists painfully narrow, their faces framed by fur or feathers. I loved being free of the shadow my father’s temper had cast over my whole childhood. The drunks and reprobates of the 9th *arrondissement* held no fears for me. And I loved the store: a vast, teeming cornucopia of beautiful things. Its scents and sights were intoxicating, its ever-changing stock bringing new and beautiful things from the four corners of the world: Italian shoes, English tweeds, Scottish cashmeres, Chinese silks, fashions from America and London. Downstairs, its new food halls offered chocolates from Switzerland, glistening smoked fish, robust, creamy cheeses. A day spent within La Femme Marché’s bustling walls meant being privy to a daily glimpse of a wider, more exotic world.

I had no wish to marry (I did not want to end up like my mother) and the thought of remaining where I was, like Madame Arteuil, the seamstress, or my supervisor, Madame Bourdain, suited me very well indeed.

Two days later, I heard his voice again: ‘Shop girl! Mademoiselle!’

I was serving a young woman with a pair of fine kid gloves. I nodded at him, and continued my careful wrapping of her purchase.

But he didn’t wait. ‘I have urgent need of another scarf,’ he announced. The woman took her gloves from me with an audible *tut*. If he heard he didn’t show it. ‘I thought something red. Something vibrant, fiery. What have you got?’

I was a little annoyed. Madame Bourdain had impressed on me that this store was a little piece of paradise: the customer must always leave feeling they had found a haven of respite from the busy streets (if one that had elegantly stripped them of their money). I was afraid my lady customer might complain. She swept away with her chin raised.

‘No no no, not those,’ he said, as I began sorting through my display. ‘Those.’ He pointed down, within the glass cabinet, to where the expensive ones lay. ‘That one.’

I brought out the scarf. The deep ruby red of fresh blood, it glowed against my pale hands, like a wound.

He smiled to see it. ‘Your neck, Mademoiselle. Lift your head a little. Yes. Like that.’

I felt self-conscious holding up the scarf this time. I knew my supervisor was watching me. ‘You have beautiful colouring,’ he murmured, reaching into his pockets for the money as I swiftly removed the scarf and began wrapping it in tissue.

‘I’m sure your wife will be delighted with her gifts,’ I said. My skin burned where his gaze had landed.

He looked at me then, the skin around his eyes crinkling. ‘Where are your family from, you with that skin? The north? Lille? Belgium?’

I pretended I hadn’t heard him. We were not allowed to discuss personal matters with customers, especially male customers.

‘You know my favourite meal? *Moules marinière* with Normandy cream. Some onions. A little *pastis*. Mmm.’ He pressed his lips to his fingers, and held up the parcel that I handed him. ‘*À bientôt*, Mademoiselle!’

This time I dared not watch his progress through the store. But from the flush at the back of my neck, I knew he had stopped again to look at me. I felt briefly infuriated. In St Péronne, such behaviour would have been unthinkable. In Paris, some days, I felt as if I were walking the streets in my undergarments, given how Parisian men felt at liberty to stare.

Two weeks before Bastille Day there was great excitement in the store; the chanteuse Mistinguett had entered the ground floor. Surrounded by a coterie of acolytes and assistants, she stood out with her dazzling smile and rose-covered headdress, as if she had been more brilliantly drawn than anyone else. She bought things without caring to examine them, pointing gaily at the displays and leaving assistants to gather items in her wake. We gazed at her from the sidelines as if she were an exotic bird, and we merely grey Parisian pigeons. I sold her two scarves: one of cream silk, the other a plush thing from dyed blue feathers. I could see it draped around her neck, and felt as if I had been dusted with a little of her glamour.

For days afterwards I felt a little unbalanced, as if the excess of her beauty, her style, had made me aware of its lack in myself.

Bear Man, meanwhile, came in three more times. Each time he bought a scarf, each time somehow ensuring that it was I who served him.

‘You have an admirer,’ remarked Paulette (Perfumes).

‘Monsieur Lefèvre? Be careful,’ sniffed Loulou (Bags and Wallets). ‘Marcel in the post room has seen him in Pigalle, chatting to street girls. Hmph. Talk of the devil.’ She turned back to her counter.

‘Mademoiselle.’

I flinched, and spun around.

‘I’m sorry.’ He leaned over the counter, his big hands spanning the glass. ‘I didn’t mean to frighten you.’

‘I am far from frightened, Monsieur.’

His brown eyes scanned my face with such intensity – he seemed to be having an internal conversation to which I could not be privy.

‘Would you like to look at some more scarves?’

‘Not today. I wanted … to ask you something.’

My hand went to my collar.

‘I would like to paint you.’

‘What?’

‘My name is Édouard Lefèvre. I am an artist. I would very much like to paint you, if you could spare me an hour or two.’

I thought he was teasing me. I glanced to where Loulou and Paulette were serving, wondering if they were listening. ‘Why … why would you want to paint *me*?’

It was the first time I ever saw him look even mildly disconcerted. ‘You really want me to answer that?’

I had sounded, I realized, as if I were hoping for compliments.

‘Mademoiselle, there is nothing untoward in what I ask of you. You may bring a chaperone if you choose. I merely want … Your face fascinates me. It remains in my mind long after I leave La Femme Marché. I wish to commit it to paper.’

I fought the urge to touch my chin. *My face? Fascinating?* ‘Will … will your wife be there?’

‘I have no wife.’ He reached into a pocket, and scribbled on a piece of paper. ‘But I do have a lot of scarves.’ He held it out to me, and I found myself glancing sideways, like a felon, before I accepted it.

I didn’t tell anybody. I wasn’t even sure what I would have said. I put on my best gown and took it off again. Twice. I spent an unusual amount of time pinning my hair. I sat by my bedroom door for twenty minutes and recited all the reasons why I should not go.

The landlady raised an eyebrow as I finally left. I had shed my good shoes and slipped my clogs back on to allay her suspicions. As I walked, I debated with myself.

If your supervisors hear that you modelled for an artist, they will cast doubt on your morality. You could lose your job!

He wants to paint me! Me, Sophie from St Péronne. The plain foil to Hélène’s beauty.

Perhaps there is something cheap in my appearance that made him confident I could not refuse. He consorts with girls in Pigalle …

But what is there in my life other than work and sleep? Would it be so bad to allow myself this one experience?

The address he had given me was two streets from the Panthéon. I walked along the narrow cobbled lane, paused at the doorway, checked the number and knocked. Nobody answered. From above I could hear music. The door was slightly ajar, so I pushed it open and went in. I made my way quietly up the narrow staircase until I reached a door. From behind it I could hear a gramophone, a woman singing of love and despair, a man singing over her, the rich, rasping bass unmistakably his. I stood for a moment, listening, smiling despite myself. I pushed open the door.

A vast room was flooded with light. One wall was bare brick, another almost entirely of glass, its windows running shoulder to shoulder along its length. The first thing that struck me was the astonishing chaos. Canvases lay stacked against each wall; jars of congealing paintbrushes stood on every surface, fighting for space with boxes of charcoal and easels, with hardening blobs of glowing colour. There were canvas sheets, pencils, a ladder, plates of half-finished food. And everywhere the pervasive smell of

turpentine, mixed with oil paint, echoes of tobacco and the vinegary whisper of old wine; dark green bottles stood in every corner, some stuffed with candles, others clearly the detritus of some celebration. A great pile of money lay on a wooden stool, the coins and notes in a chaotic heap. And there, in the centre of it all, walking slowly backwards and forwards with a jar of brushes, lost in thought, was Monsieur Lefèvre, dressed in a smock and peasant trousers, as if he were a hundred miles from the centre of Paris.

'Monsieur?'

He blinked at me twice, as if trying to recall who I was, then put his jar of brushes slowly on a table beside him. 'It's you!'

'Well. Yes.'

'Marvellous!' He shook his head, as if he were still having trouble registering my presence. 'Marvellous. Come in, come in. Let me find you somewhere to sit.'

He seemed bigger, his body clearly visible through the fine fabric of his shirt. I stood clutching my bag awkwardly as he began clearing piles of newspapers from an old *chaise longue* until there was a space.

'Please, sit. Would you like a drink?'

'Just some water, thank you.'

I had not felt uncomfortable on the way there, despite the precariousness of my position. I hadn't minded the dinginess of the area, the strange studio. But now I felt slighted, and a little foolish, and this made me stiff and awkward. 'You were not expecting me, Monsieur.'

'Forgive me. I simply didn't believe you would come. But I'm very glad you did. Very glad.' He stepped back and looked at me.

I could feel his eyes running over my cheekbones, my neck, my hair. I sat before him as rigid as a starched collar. He gave off a slightly unwashed scent. It was not unpleasant, but almost overpowering in the circumstances.

'Are you sure you wouldn't like a glass of wine? Something to relax you a little?'

'No, thank you. I'd just like to get on. I … I can only spare an hour.' Where had that come from? I think half of me already wanted to leave.

He tried to position me, to get me to put down my bag, to lean a little against the arm of the *chaise longue*. But I couldn't. I felt humiliated without being able to say why. And as Monsieur Lefèvre worked, glancing to and from his easel, barely speaking, it slowly dawned on me that I did not feel admired and important, as I had secretly thought I might, but as if he saw straight through me. I had, it seemed, become a *thing*, a subject, of no more significance than the green bottle or the apples in the still-life canvas by the door.

It was evident that he didn't like it either. As the hour wore on, he seemed more and more dismayed, emitting little sounds of frustration. I sat as still as a statue, afraid that I was doing something wrong, but finally he said, 'Mademoiselle, let's finish. I'm not sure the charcoal gods are with me today.'

I straightened with some relief, twisting my neck on my shoulders. 'May I see?'

The girl in the picture was me, all right, but I winced. She appeared as lifeless as a porcelain doll. She bore an expression of grim fortitude and the stiff-backed primness of a maiden aunt. I tried not to show how crushed I felt. 'I suspect I am not the model you hoped for.'

'No. It's not you, Mademoiselle.' He shrugged. 'I am … I am frustrated with myself.'

‘I could come again on Sunday, if you liked.’ I don’t know why I said it. It wasn’t as if I had enjoyed the experience.

He smiled at me then. He had the kindest eyes. ‘That would be … very generous. I’m sure I’ll be able to do you justice on another occasion.’

But Sunday was no better. I tried, I really did. I lay with my arm across the *chaise longue*, my body twisted like the reclining Aphrodite he showed me in a book, my skirt gathered in folds over my legs. I tried to relax and let my expression soften, but in that position my corset bit into my waist and a strand of hair kept slipping out of its pin so that the temptation to reach for it was almost overwhelming. It was a long and arduous couple of hours. Even before I saw the picture, I knew from Monsieur Lefèvre’s face that he was, once again, disappointed.

This is me? I thought, staring at the grim-faced girl who was less Venus than a sour housekeeper checking the surfaces of her soft furnishings for dust.

This time I think he even felt sorry for me. I suspect I was the plainest model he had ever had. ‘It is not you, Mademoiselle,’ he insisted. ‘Sometimes … it takes a while to get the true essence of a person.’

But that was the thing that upset me most. I was afraid he had already got it.

It was Bastille Day when I saw him again. I was making my way through the packed streets of the Latin Quarter, passing under the huge red, white and blue flags and fragrant wreaths that hung from the windows, weaving in and out of the crowds that stood to watch the soldiers marching past, their rifles cocked over their shoulders.

The whole of Paris was celebrating. I am usually content with my own company, but that day I was restless, oddly lonely. When I reached the Panthéon I stopped: before me rue Soufflot had become a whirling mass of bodies, its normally grey length now packed with people dancing, the women in their long skirts and broad-brimmed hats, the band outside the Café Léon. They moved in graceful circles, stood at the edge of the pavement observing each other and chatting, as if the street were a ballroom.

And then there he was, sitting in the middle of it all, a brightly coloured scarf around his neck. Mistinguett, her associates hovering around her, rested a hand possessively on his shoulder as she said something that made him roar with laughter.

I stared at them in astonishment. And then, perhaps compelled by the intensity of my gaze, he looked round and saw me. I ducked swiftly into a doorway and set off in the opposite direction, my cheeks flaming. I dived in and out of the dancing couples, my clogs clattering on the cobbles. But within seconds his voice was booming behind me.

‘Mademoiselle!’

I could not ignore him. I turned. He looked for a moment as if he were about to embrace me, but something in my demeanour must have stopped him. Instead he touched my arm lightly, and motioned me towards the throng of people. ‘How wonderful to bump into you,’ he said. I began to make my excuses, stumbling over my words, but he held up a great hand. ‘Come, Mademoiselle, it is a public holiday. Even the most diligent must enjoy themselves occasionally.’

Around us the flags fluttered in the late-afternoon breeze. I could hear them flapping, like the erratic pounding of my heart. I struggled to think of a polite way to extricate myself, but he broke in again.

‘I realize, Mademoiselle, that shamefully, despite our acquaintance, I do not know your name.’

‘Bessette,’ I said. ‘Sophie Bessette.’

‘Then please allow me to buy you a drink, Mademoiselle Bessette.’

I shook my head. I felt sick, as if in the mere act of coming here I had given away too much of myself. I glanced behind him to where Mistinguett was still standing amid her group of friends.

‘Shall we?’ He held out his arm.

And at that moment the great Mistinguett looked straight at me.

It was, if I’m honest, something in her expression, the brief flash of annoyance when he held out his arm. This man, this Édouard Lefèvre, had the power to make one of Paris’s brightest stars feel dull and invisible. And he had chosen me over her.

I peeped up at him. ‘Just some water, then, thank you.’

We walked back to the table. ‘Misty, my darling, this is Sophie Bessette.’ Her smile remained, but there was ice in her gaze as it ran the length of me. I wondered if she remembered me serving her at the department store. ‘Clogs,’ one of her gentlemen said from behind her. ‘How very … quaint.’

The murmur of laughter made my skin prickle. I took a breath.

‘The emporium will be full of them for the spring season,’ I replied calmly. ‘They are the very latest thing. It’s *la mode paysanne*.’

I felt Édouard’s fingertips touch my back.

‘With the finest ankles in all Paris, I think Mademoiselle Bessette may wear what she likes.’

A brief silence fell over the group, as the significance of Édouard’s words sank in. Mistinguett’s eyes slid away from me. ‘*Enchantée*,’ she said, her smile dazzling. ‘Édouard, darling, I must go. So, so busy. Call on me very soon, yes?’ She held out her gloved hand and he kissed it. I had to drag my eyes from his lips. And then she was gone, a ripple passing through the crowd, as if she were parting water.

So, we sat. Édouard Lefèvre stretched out in his chair as if he were surveying a beach while I was still rigid with awkwardness. Without saying anything, he handed me a drink and there was just the faintest apology in his expression as he did so, with – was it really? – a hint of suppressed laughter. As if it – they – were all so ridiculous that I could not feel slighted.

Surrounded by the joyful people dancing, the laughter and the bright blue skies, I began to relax. Édouard spoke to me with the utmost politeness, asking about my life before Paris, the politics within the shop, breaking off occasionally to put his cigarette into the corner of his mouth and shout, ‘*Bravo!*’ at the band, clapping his great hands high in the air. He knew almost everybody. I lost track of the number of people who stopped to say hello or to buy him a drink; artists, shopkeepers, speculative women. It was like being with royalty. Except I could see their gaze flickering towards me, while they wondered what a man who could have had Mistinguett was doing with a girl like me.

‘The girls at the store say you talk to *les putains* of Pigalle.’ I couldn’t help myself: I was curious.

‘I do. And many of them are excellent company.’

‘Do you paint them?’

‘When I can afford their time.’ He nodded at a man who tipped his hat to us. ‘They make excellent models. They are generally utterly unselfconscious about their bodies.’

‘Unlike me.’

He saw my blush. After a brief hesitation, he placed his hand over mine, as if in apology. It made me colour even more. ‘Mademoiselle,’ he said softly. ‘Those pictures were my failure, not yours. I have …’ He changed tack. ‘You have other qualities. You fascinate me. You are not intimidated by much.’

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘I don’t believe I am.’

We ate bread, cheese and olives, and they were the best olives I had ever tasted. He drank *pastis*, knocking back each glass with noisy relish. The afternoon crept on. The laughter grew louder, the drinks came faster. I allowed myself two small glasses of wine, and began to enjoy myself. Here, in the street, on this balmy day, I was not the provincial outsider, the shop girl on the lowest-but-one rung of the ladder. I was just another reveller, enjoying the Bastille celebrations.

And then Édouard pushed back the table and stood in front of me. ‘Shall we dance?’

I could not think of a reason to refuse him. I took his hand, and he swung me out into the sea of bodies. I had not danced since I had left St Péronne. Now I felt the breeze whirling around my ears, the weight of his hand on the small of my back, my clogs unusually light on my feet. He carried the scents of tobacco, aniseed, and something male that left me a little short of breath.

I don’t know what it was. I had drunk little, so I could not blame the wine. It’s not as if he were particularly handsome, or that I had felt my life lacking for the absence of a man.

‘Draw me again,’ I said.

He stopped and looked at me, puzzled. I couldn’t blame him: I was confused myself.

‘Draw me again. Today. Now.’

He said nothing, but walked back to the table, gathered up his tobacco, and we filed through the crowd and along the teeming streets to his studio.

We went up the narrow wooden stairs, unlocked the door into the bright studio, and I waited while he shed his jacket, put a record on the gramophone and began to mix the paint on his palette. And then, as he hummed to himself, I began to unbutton my blouse. I removed my shoes and my stockings. I peeled off my skirts until I was wearing only my chemise and my white cotton petticoat. I sat there, undressed to my very corset, and unpinned my hair so that it fell about my shoulders. When he turned back to me I heard him gasp.

He blinked.

‘Like this?’ I said.

Anxiety flashed across his face. He was, perhaps, afraid that his paintbrush would yet again betray me. I kept my gaze steady, my head high. I looked at him as if it were a challenge. And then some artistic impulse took over and he was already lost in contemplation of the unexpected milkiness of my skin, the russet of my loosened hair, and all semblance of concern for probity was forgotten. ‘Yes, yes. Move your head, a little to the left, please.’ he said. ‘And your hand. There. Open your palm a little. Perfect.’

As he began to paint, I watched him. He scanned every inch of my body with intense concentration, as if it would be unbearable to get it wrong. I watched as satisfaction inked itself on his face, and I felt it mirror my own. I had no inhibitions now. I was Mistinguett, or a street-walker from Pigalle, unafraid, unselfconscious. I wanted him to examine my skin, the hollows of my throat, the secret glowing underside of my hair. I wanted him to see every part of me.

As he painted I took in his features, the way he murmured to himself while mixing colours on his palette. I watched him shamble around, as if he were older than he was. It was an affectation – he was younger and stronger than most of the men who came into the store. I recalled how he ate: with obvious, greedy pleasure. He sang along with the gramophone, painted when he liked, spoke to whom he wished

and said what he thought. I wanted to live as Édouard did, joyfully, sucking the marrow out of every moment and singing because it tasted so good.

And then it was dark. He stopped to clean his brushes and gazed around him, as if he were only just noticing it. He lit candles and a gaslight, placing them around me, then sighed when he realized the dusk had defeated him.

'Are you cold?' he said.

I shook my head, but he walked over to a dresser, pulling from it a bright red woollen shawl, which he carefully placed around my shoulders. 'The light has gone for today. Would you like to see?'

I pulled the shawl around me, and walked over to the easel, my feet bare on the wooden boards. I felt as if I were in a dream, as if real life had evaporated in the hours I had sat there. I was afraid to look and break the spell.

'Come.' He beckoned me forwards.

On the canvas I saw a girl I did not recognize. She gazed back at me defiantly, her hair glinting copper in the half-light, her skin as pale as alabaster, a girl with the imperious confidence of an aristocrat.

She was strange and proud and beautiful. It was as if I had been shown a magic looking-glass.

'I knew it,' he said, his voice soft. 'I knew you were in there.'

His eyes were tired and strained now, but he was satisfied. I stared at her a moment longer. Then, without knowing why, I stepped forward, reached up slowly and took his face into my hands so that he had to look at me again. I held his face inches from my own and I made him keep looking at me, as if I could somehow absorb what he could see.

I had never wanted intimacy with a man. The animalistic sounds and cries that had leaked from my parents' room – usually when my father was drunk – had appalled me, and I had pitied my mother for her bruised face and her careful walk the following day. But what I felt for Édouard overwhelmed me. I could not take my eyes from his mouth.

'Sophie …'

I barely heard him. I drew his face closer to mine. The world evaporated around us. I felt the rasp of his bristles under my palms, the warmth of his breath on my skin. His eyes studied my own, so seriously. I swear even then it was as if he had only just seen me.

I leaned forwards, just a few inches, my breath stilled, and I placed my lips on his. His hands came to rest on my waist, and tightened reflexively. His mouth met mine, and I inhaled his breath, its traces of tobacco, of wine, the warm, wet taste of him. *Oh, God, I wanted him to devour me.* My eyes closed, my body sparked and stuttered. His hands tangled themselves in my hair, his mouth dropped to my neck.

The revellers in the street outside burst into noisy laughter, and as flags flew in the night breeze, something in me was altered for ever. 'Oh, Sophie. I could paint you every day of my life,' he murmured into my skin. At least I think he said 'paint'. By that stage it was really too late to care.

5

René Grenier's grandfather clock had begun to chime. This, it was agreed, was a disaster. For months, the clock had been buried underneath the vegetable patch that ran alongside his house, along with his silver teapot, four gold coins and the watch his grandfather had worn on his waistcoat, to prevent it disappearing into the hands of the Germans.

The plan had worked well – indeed, the town crunched underfoot with valuables that had been hastily buried under gardens and pathways – until Madame Poilâne hurried into the bar one brisk November morning and interrupted his daily game of dominoes with the news that a muffled chime was coming every quarter of an hour from underneath what remained of his carrots.

'I can hear it, even with my ears,' she whispered. 'And if I can hear it, you can be sure that they will.'

'Are you sure that's what you heard?' I said. 'It's so long since it was last wound.'

'Perhaps it is the sound of Madame Grenier turning in her grave,' said Monsieur Lafarge.

'I would not have buried my wife under my vegetables,' René muttered. 'She would have made them even more bitter and wizened than they are.'

I stooped to empty the ashtray, lowering my voice. 'You will have to dig it up under cover of night, René, and pack it with sacking. Tonight should be safe – they have delivered extra food for their meal. With most of them in here, there will be few men on duty.'

It had been a month since the Germans had started to eat at Le Coq Rouge, and an uneasy truce had settled over its shared territory. From ten in the morning until half past five, the bar was French, filled with its usual mixture of the elderly and lonely. Hélène and I would clear up, then cook for the Germans, who arrived shortly before seven, expecting their food to be on the tables almost as they walked through the door. There were benefits: when there were leftovers, several times a week, we shared them (although now there tended to be the odd scraps of meat or vegetables, rather than a feast of chicken). As the weather turned colder, the Germans got hungrier, and Hélène and I were not brave enough to keep some back for ourselves. Still, even those odd mouthfuls of extra food made a difference. Jean was ill less often, our skin began to clear, and a couple of times we managed to sneak a small jar of stock, brewed from the bones, to the mayor's house for the ailing Louisa.

There were other advantages. The moment the Germans left in the evenings, Hélène and I would race to the fire, extinguishing the logs then leaving them in the cellar to dry out. A few days' collections of the half-burned oddments could mean a small fire in the daytime when it was particularly cold. On the days we did that, the bar was often full to bursting, even if few of our customers bought anything to drink.

But there was, predictably, a negative side. Mesdames Durant and Louvier had decided that, even if I did not talk to the officers, or smile at them, or behave as if they were anything but a gross imposition in my house, I must be receiving German largesse. I could feel their eyes on me as I took in the regular supplies of food, wine and fuel. I knew we were the subject of heated discussion around the square. My

one consolation was that the nightly curfew meant they could not see the glorious food we cooked for the men, or how the hotel became a place of lively sound and debate during those dark evening hours.

Hélène and I had learned to live with the sound of foreign accents in our home. We recognized a few of the men – there was the tall thin one with the huge ears, who always attempted to thank us in our own language. There was the grumpy one with the salt-and-pepper moustache, who usually managed to find fault with something, demanding salt, pepper or extra meat. There was little Holger, who drank too much and stared out of the window as if his mind was only half on whatever was going on around him. Hélène and I would nod civilly at their comments, taking care to be polite but not friendly. Some nights, if I'm honest, there was almost a pleasure in having them there. Not Germans, but human beings. Men, company, the smell of cooking. We had been starved of male contact, of life, for so long. But there were other nights when evidently something had gone wrong, when they did not talk, when faces were tight and severe, and the conversation was conducted in rapid-fire bursts of whispering. They glanced sideways at us then, as if remembering that we were the enemy. As if we could understand almost anything they said.

Aurélien was learning. He had taken to lying on the floor of Room Three, his face pressed to the gap in the floorboards, hoping that one day he might catch sight of a map or some instruction that would grant us military advantage. He had become astonishingly proficient at German: when they were gone he would mimic their accent or say things that made us laugh. Occasionally he even understood snatches of conversation; which officer was in *der Krankenhaus* (hospital), how many men were *tot*. I worried for him, but I was proud too. It made me feel that our feeding the Germans might have some hidden purpose yet.

The *Kommandant*, meanwhile, was unfailingly polite. He greeted me, if not with warmth, then a kind of increasingly familiar civility. He praised the food, without attempting to flatter, and kept a tight hand on his men, who were not allowed to drink to excess or to behave in a forward manner.

Several times he sought me out to discuss art. I was not quite comfortable with one-to-one conversation, but there was a small pleasure in being reminded of my husband. The *Kommandant* talked of his admiration for Purrmann, of the artist's German roots, of paintings he had seen by Matisse that had made him long to travel to Moscow and Morocco.

At first I was reluctant to talk, and then I found I could not stop. It was like being reminded of another life, another world. He was fascinated by the dynamics of the Académie Matisse, whether there was rivalry between the artists or genuine love. He had a lawyer's way of speaking: quick, intelligent, impatient towards those who could not immediately grasp his point. I think he liked to talk to me because I was not discomfited by him. It was something in my character, I think, that I refused to appear cowed, even if I secretly felt it. It had stood me in good stead in the haughty environs of the Parisian department store, and it worked equally well for me now.

He had a particular liking for the portrait of me in the bar, and would look at it for so long and discuss the technical merits of Édouard's use of colour, his brushstroke, that I was briefly able to forget my awkwardness that I was its subject.

His own parents, he confided, were 'not cultured', but had inspired in him a passion for learning. He hoped, he said, to further his intellectual studies after the war, to travel, to read, to learn. His wife was called Liesl. He had a child, too, he revealed, one evening. A boy of two that he had not yet seen. (When I

told Hélène this I had expected her face to cloud with sympathy, but she had said briskly that he should spend less time invading other people's countries.)

He told me all this as if in passing, without attempting to solicit any personal information in return. This did not stem from egoism; it was more an understanding that in inhabiting my home he had already invaded my life; to seek anything further would be too much of an imposition. He was, I realized, something of a gentleman.

That first month I found it increasingly difficult to dismiss Herr Kommandant as a beast, a Boche, as I could with the others. I suppose I had come to believe all Germans were barbaric so it was hard to picture them with wives, mothers, babies. There he was, eating in front of me, night after night, talking, discussing colour and form and the skills of other artists as my husband might. Occasionally he smiled, his bright blue eyes suddenly framed by deep crows' feet, as if happiness had been a far more familiar emotion to him than his features let on.

I neither defended nor talked about the *Kommandant* in front of the other townspeople. If someone tried to engage me in conversation about the travails of having Germans at Le Coq Rouge, I would reply simply that, God willing, the day would come soon when our husbands returned and all this could be a distant memory.

And I would pray that nobody had noticed there had been not a single requisition order on our home since the Germans had moved in.

Shortly before midday I left the fuggy interior of the bar and stepped outside on the pretext of beating a rug. A light frost still lay upon the ground where it stood in shadow, its surface crystalline and glittering. I shivered as I carried it the few yards down the side street to René's garden, and there I heard it: a muffled chime, signalling a quarter to twelve.

When I returned, a raggle-taggle gathering of elders were making their way out of the bar. 'We will sing,' Madame Poilâne announced.

'What?'

'We will sing. It will drown the chimes until this evening. We will tell them it is a French custom. Songs from the Auvergne. Anything we can remember. What do they know?'

'You are going to sing all day?'

'No, no. On the hour. Just if there are Germans around.'

I looked at her in disbelief.

'If they dig up René's clock, Sophie, they will dig up this whole town. I will not lose my mother's pearls to some German *Hausfrau*.' Her mouth pursed in a *moue* of disgust.

'Well, you'd better get going. When the clock strikes midday half of St Péronne will hear it.'

It was almost funny. I hovered on the front step as the group of elders gathered at the mouth of the alleyway, facing the Germans, who were still standing in the square, and began to sing. They sang the nursery rhymes of my youth, as well as 'La Pastourelle', 'Bailero', 'Lorsque J'étais petit', all in their tuneless rasping voices. They sang with their heads high, shoulder to shoulder, occasionally glancing sideways at each other. René looked alternately grumpy and anxious. Madame Poilâne held her hands in front of her, as pious as a Sunday-school teacher.

As I stood, dishcloth in hand, trying not to smile, the *Kommandant* crossed the street. 'What are these people doing?'

‘Good morning, Herr Kommandant.’

‘You know there are to be no gatherings on the street.’

‘They are hardly a gathering. It’s a festival, Herr Kommandant. A French tradition. On the hour, in November, the elderly of St Péronne sing folk songs to ward off the approach of winter.’ I said this with utter conviction. The *Kommandant* frowned, then peered round me at the old people. Their voices lifted in unison and I guessed that, behind them, the chiming had begun.

‘But they are terrible,’ he said, lowering his voice. ‘It is the worst singing I have ever heard.’

‘Please … don’t stop them. They are innocent peasant songs, as you can hear. It gives the old people a little pleasure to sing the songs of their homeland, just for one day. Surely you would understand that.’

‘They are going to sing like this all day?’

It wasn’t the gathering itself that troubled him. He was like my husband: physically pained by any art that was not beautiful. ‘It’s possible.’

The *Kommandant* stood very still, his senses trained on the sound. I was suddenly anxious: if his ear for music was as good as his eye for painting, he might yet detect the chiming beneath it.

‘I was wondering what you wanted to eat tonight,’ I said abruptly.

‘What?’

‘Whether you had any favourites. I mean, our ingredients are limited, yes, but there are various things I might be able to make for you.’ I could see Madame Poilâne urging the others to sing louder, her hands gesturing surreptitiously upwards.

The *Kommandant* seemed briefly puzzled. I smiled, and for a moment his face softened.

‘That’s very –’ He broke off.

Thierry Arteuil was running up the road, his woollen scarf flying as he pointed behind him. ‘*Prisoners of war!*’

The *Kommandant* whipped round towards his men, already gathering in the square, and I was forgotten. I waited for him to go, then hurried across to the group of singing elders. Hélène and the customers inside Le Coq Rouge, perhaps hearing the growing commotion, were peering through the windows, some edging out on to the pavement.

There was a brief hush. Then up the main street they came, around a hundred men, organized into a small convoy. Beside me, the old people kept singing, their voices at first faltering as they realized what they were witnessing, then growing in strength and determination.

There was hardly a man or woman who did not anxiously scan the stumbling soldiers for a well-known face. But there was no relief to be had from the absence of familiarity. Were these really Frenchmen? They looked so shrunken, so grey and defeated, their clothes hanging from malnourished bodies, their wounds dressed with filthy old bandages. They passed a few feet before us, their heads lowered, Germans at their front and rear, and we were powerless to do anything but stare.

I heard the old people’s chorus lifting determinedly around me, suddenly more tuneful and harmonic: ‘*I stand in wind and rain and sing bailero lero …*’

A great lump rose in my throat at the thought that somewhere, many miles away, this might be Édouard. I felt Hélène’s hand grip mine, and knew she was thinking the same.

Here all the grass is greener,
Sing bailero lero …
I shall come down and fetch you o’er …

We scanned their faces, our own frozen. Madame Louvier appeared beside us. As quick as a mouse, she forced her way through our little group and thrust the black bread that she had just collected from the *boulangerie* into the hands of one of the skeletal men, her woollen shawl flying around her face in the brisk wind. He glanced up, unsure of what had arrived in his hands. And then, with a shout, a German soldier was in front of them, his rifle butt thrashing it from the man's hand even as he registered what he had been given. The loaf toppled to the gutter like a brick. The singing stopped.

Madame Louvier stared at the bread, then lifted her head and shrieked, her voice piercing the still air, 'You animal! You Germans! You would starve these men like dogs! What is wrong with you? You are all bastards! Sons of whores!' I had never heard her use language like it. It was as if some fine thread had snapped, leaving her loose, untethered. 'You want to beat someone? Beat me! Go on, you bastard thug. Beat me!' Her voice cut through the still, cold air.

I felt Hélène's hand grip my arm. I willed the old woman to be quiet, but she kept shrieking, her thin old finger pointing and jabbing at the young soldier's face. I was suddenly afraid for her. The German glanced at her with an expression of barely suppressed fury. His knuckles whitened on his rifle butt and I feared he would strike her. She was so frail: her old bones would shatter if he did.

But as we held our breath he reached down, picked the loaf out of the gutter and thrust it back at her.

She looked at him as if she had been stung. 'You think I would eat this knowing that you knocked it from the hand of a starving brother? You think this is not my brother? They are all my brothers! All my sons! *Vive la France!*' she spat, her old eyes glistening. '*Vive la France!*' As if compelled to do so, the old people behind me broke into an echoing murmur, the singing briefly forgotten. '*Vive la France!*'

The young soldier glanced behind him, perhaps for instruction from his superior, but was distracted by a shout further down the line. A prisoner had taken advantage of the commotion to break for freedom. The young man, his arm in a makeshift sling, had slipped from the ranks and was now fleeing across the square.

The *Kommandant*, standing with two of his officers by the broken statue of Mayor Leclerc, was the first to see him. 'Halt!' he shouted. The young man ran faster, his oversized shoes slipping from his feet. '*HALT!*'

The prisoner dropped his backpack and appeared briefly to pick up speed. He stumbled as he lost his second shoe, but somehow righted himself. He was about to disappear around the corner. The *Kommandant* whipped a pistol from his jacket. Almost before I had registered what he was doing, he lifted his arm, aimed and fired. The boy went down with an audible crack.

The world stopped. The birds fell silent. We stared at the motionless body on the cobbles and Hélène let out a low moan. She made as if to go to him, but the *Kommandant* ordered us all to stay back. He shouted something in German, and his men raised their rifles, pointing them at the remaining prisoners.

Nobody moved. The captives stared at the ground. They seemed unsurprised by this turn of events. Hélène's hands had gone to her mouth, and she trembled, muttering something I could not hear. I slid my arm around her waist. I could hear my own ragged breathing.

The *Kommandant* walked briskly away from us towards the prisoner. When he reached him, he dropped to his haunches, and pressed his fingers to the young man's jaw. A dark red puddle already stained his threadbare jacket, and I could see his eyes, staring blankly across the square. The *Kommandant* squatted there for a minute, then stood again. Two German officers moved towards him, but

he motioned them into formation. He walked back across the square, tucking his pistol into his jacket. He stopped briefly when he passed in front of the mayor.

'You will make the necessary arrangements,' he said.

The mayor nodded. I saw the faint tic to his jaw.

With a shout, the column moved on up the road, the prisoners with their heads bowed, the women of St Péronne now weeping openly into their handkerchiefs. The body lay in a crumpled heap a short distance across from rue des Bastides.

Less than a minute after the Germans had marched away, René Grenier's clock chimed a mournful quarter past the hour into the silence.

That night the mood in Le Coq Rouge was sober. The *Kommandant* did not attempt to make conversation; neither did I give the slightest impression that I wished for it. Hélène and I served the meal, washed the cooking pots, and remained in the kitchen as far as we could. I had no appetite. I could not escape the image of that poor young man, his ragged clothes flying out behind him, his oversized shoes falling from his feet as he fled to his death.

More than that, I could not believe that the officer who had whipped out his pistol and shot him so pitilessly was the same man who had sat at my tables, looking wistful about the child he had not seen, exclaiming about the art that he had. I felt foolish, as if the *Kommandant* had concealed his true self. This was what the Germans were here for, not discussions about art and delicious food. They were here to shoot our sons and husbands. They were here to destroy us.

I missed my husband at that moment with a physical pain. It was now nearly three months since I had last received word from him. I had no idea of what he endured. While we existed in this strange bubble of isolation, I could convince myself that he was fine and robust, that he was out there in the real world, sharing a flask of cognac with his comrades, or perhaps sketching on a scrap of paper in some idle hours. When I closed my eyes I saw the Édouard I remembered from Paris. But seeing those pitiful Frenchmen marched through the streets made it harder for me to hold on to my fantasy. Édouard might be captured, injured, starving. He might be suffering as those men suffered. He might be dead.

I leaned on the sink and closed my eyes.

At that moment I heard the crash. Jerked away from my thoughts, I ran out of the kitchen. Hélène stood with her back to me, her hands raised, a tray of broken glasses at her feet. Against the wall, the *Kommandant* had a young man by the throat. He was shouting something at him in German, his face contorted, inches from the man's own. His victim's hands were up in a gesture of submission.

'Hélène?'

She was ashen. 'He put his hand on me as I went past. But … but Herr Kommandant has gone *mad*.'

The other men were around them now, pleading with the *Kommandant*, trying to pull him off, their chairs overturning, shouting over each other in an attempt to be heard. The whole place was briefly in uproar. Eventually the *Kommandant* seemed to hear them and loosened his grip on the younger man's throat. I thought his eyes met mine, briefly, but then, as he took a step back, his fist shot out and he punched the man hard in the side of the head, so that his face ricocheted off the wall. '*Sie können nicht berühren die Frauen*,' he yelled.

'The kitchen.' I pushed my sister towards the door, not even stopping to scoop up the broken glass. I heard the raised voices, the slam of a door, and I hurried after her down the hallway.

‘Madame Lefèvre.’

I was washing the last of the glasses. Hélène had gone to bed; the day’s events had exhausted her even more than they had me.

‘Madame?’

‘Herr Kommandant.’ I turned to him, drying my hands on the cloth. We were down to one candle in the kitchen, a wick set in some fat in a sardine tin; I could barely make out his face.

He stood in front of me, his cap in his hands. ‘I’m sorry about your glasses. I will make sure they are replaced.’

‘Please don’t bother. We have enough to get by.’ I knew any glasses would simply be requisitioned from my neighbours.

‘I’m sorry about … the young officer. Please assure your sister it will not happen again.’

I didn’t doubt it. Through the back window I had seen the man being helped back to his billet by one of his friends, a wet cloth pressed to the side of his head.

I thought the *Kommandant* might leave then, but he just stood there. I felt him staring at me. His eyes were unquiet, anguished almost.

‘The food tonight was … excellent. What was the name of the dish?’

‘*Chou farci*.’

He waited, and when the pause grew uncomfortably long, I added, ‘It’s sausage-meat, some vegetables and herbs, wrapped in cabbage leaves and poached in stock.’

He looked down at his feet. He took a few steps around the kitchen, then stopped, fingering a jar of utensils. I wondered, absently, if he were about to take them.

‘It was very good. Everyone said so. You asked me today what I would like to eat. Well … we would like to have that dish again before too long, if it is not too much trouble.’

‘As you wish.’

There was something different about him this evening, some subtle air of agitation that rose off him in waves. I wondered how it felt to have killed a man, whether it felt any more unusual to a German *Kommandant* than taking a second cup of coffee.

He glanced at me as if he were about to say something else, but I turned back to my pans. Behind him I could hear the drag of chair legs on the floor as the other officers prepared to leave. It was raining, a fine, mean spit that hit the windows almost horizontally.

‘You must be tired,’ he said. ‘I will leave you in peace.’

I picked up a tray of glasses and followed him towards the door. As he reached it, he turned and put on his cap, so that I had to stop. ‘I have been meaning to ask. How is the baby?’

‘Jean? He is fine, thank you, if a little –’

‘No. The other baby.’

I nearly dropped the tray. I hesitated for a moment, collecting myself, but I felt the blood rush to my neck. I knew he saw it.

When I spoke again, my voice was thick. I kept my eyes on the glasses in front of me. ‘I believe we are all … as well as we can be, given the circumstances.’

He thought about this. ‘Keep him safe,’ he said quietly. ‘Best he doesn’t come out in the night air too often.’ He looked at me a moment longer, then turned and was gone.

6

I lay awake that night, despite my exhaustion. I watched Hélène sleep fitfully, murmuring, her hand reaching across unconsciously to check that her children were beside her. At five, while it was still dark, I climbed out of bed, wrapping myself in several blankets, and tiptoed downstairs to boil water for coffee. The dining room was still infused with the scents of the previous evening: wood from the grate and a faint hint of sausage-meat that caused my stomach to rumble. I made myself a hot drink and sat behind the bar, gazing out across the empty square as the sun came up. As the blue light became streaked with orange, it was just possible to distinguish a faint shadow in the far right-hand corner where the prisoner had fallen. Had that young man had a wife, a child? Were they sitting at this moment composing letters to him or praying for his safe return? I took a sip of my drink and forced myself to look away.

I was about to go back to my room to dress when there was a rap at the door. I flinched, seeing a shadow behind the cotton screen. I pulled my blanket around me, staring at the silhouette, trying to work out who would be calling on us at such an hour, whether it was the *Kommandant*, come to torment me about what he knew. I walked silently towards the door. I lifted the screen and there, on the other side, was Liliane Béthune. Her hair was piled up in pin curls, she was wearing the black astrakhan coat, and her eyes were shadowed. She glanced behind her as I unlocked the top and bottom bolts and opened the door.

'Liliane? Are you … do you need something?' I said.

She reached into her coat and pulled out an envelope, which she thrust at me. 'For you,' she said.

I glanced at it. 'But … how did you –'

She held up a pale hand, shook her head.

It had been months since any of us had received a letter. The Germans had long kept us in a communications vacuum. I held it, disbelieving, then recovered my manners. 'Would you like to come in? Have some coffee? I have a little real coffee put by.'

She gave me the smallest of smiles. 'No. Thank you. I have to go home to my daughter.' Before I could even thank her, she was trotting up the street in her high heels, her back hunched against the cold.

I shut the screen and re-bolted the door. Then I sat down and tore open the envelope. His voice, so long absent, filled my ears.

Dearest Sophie

It is so long since I heard from you. I pray you are safe. I tell myself in darker moments that some part of me would feel it, like the vibrations of a distant bell, if you were not.

I have so little to impart. For once I have no desire to translate into colour the world I see around me. Words seem wholly inadequate. Know only that, precious wife, I am sound of mind and body, and that my spirit is kept whole by the thought of you.

The men here clutch photographs of their loved ones like talismans, protection against the dark – crumpled, dirty images endowed with the properties of treasure. I need no photograph to conjure you before me, Sophie: I need only to close my eyes to recall your face, your voice, your scent, and you cannot know how much you comfort me.

Know, my darling, that I mark each day not, like my fellow soldiers, as one that I am grateful to survive, but thanking God that each means I must surely be twenty-four hours closer to returning to you.

Your Édouard

It was dated two months previously.

I don't know if it was exhaustion, or perhaps shock from the previous day's events – I am not someone who cries easily, if at all – but I put the letter carefully back into its envelope, then rested my head on my hands and, in the cold, empty kitchen, I sobbed.

I could not tell the other villagers why it was time to eat the pig but the approach of Christmas gave me the perfect excuse. The officers were to have their dinner on Christmas Eve in Le Coq Rouge, a larger gathering than normal, and it was agreed that while they were here Madame Poilâne would hold a secret *réveillon* at her home, two streets down from the square. For as long as I could keep the German officers occupied, our little band of townspeople would be safe to roast and eat the pig in the bread oven that Madame Poilâne had in her cellar. Hélène would help me serve the Germans their dinner, then sneak through the hole in the cellar wall and out down the alley to join the children at Madame Poilâne's house. Those villagers who lived too far from her to walk through the town unnoticed would remain in her home after curfew, hiding if any Germans came checking.

'But that isn't fair,' Hélène remarked, when I outlined the plan to the mayor in front of her two days later. 'If you remain here you will be the one person to miss it. That's not right, given all you did to safeguard the pig.'

'One of us has to stay,' I pointed out. 'You know it's far safer if we can be sure that the officers are all in one place.'

'But it won't be the same.'

'Well, nothing *is* the same,' I said curtly. 'And you know as well as I do that Herr Kommandant will notice if I am gone.'

I saw her exchange glances with the mayor.

'Hélène, don't fuss. I am *la patronne*. He expects to see me here every evening. He will know something is going on if I am missing.'

I sounded, even to my own ears, as if I was protesting too much. 'Look,' I continued, forcing myself to sound conciliatory. 'Save me some meat. Bring it back in a napkin. I can promise you that, if the Germans are given rations enough to feast on, I will make sure I help myself to a share. I will not suffer. I promise.'

They appeared mollified, but I couldn't tell them the truth. Ever since I had discovered that the *Kommandant* knew about the pig, I had lost my appetite for it. That he had not revealed his knowledge of its existence, let alone punished us, didn't make me joyous with relief, but deeply uneasy.

Now when I saw him staring at my portrait, I no longer felt gratified that even a German could recognize my husband's talent. When he walked into the kitchen to make casual conversation, I became stiff and tense, afraid he might mention it.

'Yet again,' the mayor said, 'I suspect we find ourselves in your debt.' He looked beaten down. His daughter had been ill for a week; his wife had once told me that every time Louisa fell ill he barely slept for anxiety.

'Don't be ridiculous,' I said briskly. 'Compared to what our men are doing, this is just another day's work.'

My sister knew me too well. She didn't ask questions directly; that was not Hélène's style. But I could feel her watching me, could hear the faint edge to her voice whenever the question of the *réveillon* was raised. Finally, a week before Christmas, I confided in her. She had been sitting on the side of her bed, doing her hair. The brush stilled in her hand. 'Why do you think he has not told anyone?' I asked, when I finished.

She stared at the bedspread. When she looked at me it was with a kind of dread. 'I think he likes you,' she said.

The week before Christmas was busy, even though we had little with which to prepare for the festivities. Hélène and a couple of the older women had been sewing rag dolls for the children. They were primitive, their skirts made of sacking, their faces embroidered stockings. But it was important that the children who remained in St Péronne had a little magic in that bleak Christmas.

I grew a little bolder in my own efforts. Twice I stole potatoes from the German rations, mashing what was left to disguise the smaller amounts, and ferried them in my pockets to those who seemed particularly frail. I stole the smaller carrots and fed them into the hem of my skirt so that even when I was stopped and searched, they found nothing. To the mayor I took two jars of chicken stock, so that his wife could make Louisa a little broth. The child was pale and feverish; his wife told me she kept little down and seemed to be retreating into herself. Looking at her, swallowed by the vast old bed with its threadbare blankets, listless and coughing intermittently, I thought briefly that I could hardly blame her. What life was this for children?

We tried to hide the worst of it from them as best we could, but they found themselves in a world where men were shot in the street, where strangers hauled their mothers from their beds by their hair for some trivial offence, like walking in a banned wood or failing to show a German officer sufficient respect. Mimi viewed our world with silent, suspicious eyes, which broke Hélène's heart. Aurélien grew angry: I could see it building in him, like a volcanic force, and I prayed daily that when he finally erupted, it would not come at huge cost to himself.

But the biggest news that week was the arrival through my door of a newspaper, roughly printed, and entitled *Journal des Occupés*. The only newspaper allowed in St Péronne was the German-controlled *Bulletin de Lille*, which was so obviously German propaganda that few of us did more with it than use it for kindling. But this one gave military information, naming the towns and villages under occupation. It commented on official communiqués, and contained humorous articles about the occupation, limericks about the black bread and cartoonish sketches of the officers in charge. It begged its readers not to enquire where it had come from, and to destroy it when it had been read.

It also contained a list it called Von Heinrich's Ten Commandments that ridiculed the many petty rules imposed upon us.

I cannot tell you the boost that four-page scrap gave to our little town. In the few days up to the *réveillon*, a steady stream of townspeople came into the bar and either thumbed through its pages in the lavatory (during the day we kept it at the bottom of a basket of old paper) or passed on its news and better jokes face to face. We spent so long in the lavatory that the Germans asked if some sickness were going round.

From the newspaper we discovered that other nearby towns had suffered our fate. We heard of the dreaded reprisal camps, where men were starved and worked half to death. We discovered that Paris

knew little of our plight, and that four hundred women and children had been evacuated from Roubaix, where food supplies were even lower than they were in St Péronne. It was not that these pieces of information in themselves constituted anything useful. But it reminded us that we were still part of France, that our little town was not alone in its travails. More importantly, the newspaper itself was a matter of some pride: the French were still capable of subverting the will of the Germans.

There were feverish discussions as to how this might have reached us. That it had been delivered to Le Coq Rouge went some way to alleviating the growing discontent caused by our cooking for the Germans. I watched Liliane Béthune hurry past to fetch her bread in her astrakhan coat and had my own ideas.

The *Kommandant* had insisted that we eat. It was the cooks' privilege, he said, on Christmas Eve. We had believed ourselves preparing for eighteen, only to discover that the final two were Hélène and me. We spent hours running around the kitchen, our exhaustion outweighed by our silent, unspoken pleasure in what we knew to be going on two streets from ours: the prospect of a clandestine celebration and proper meat for our children. To be given two whole meals as well seemed almost too much.

And yet not too much. I could never have turned down a meal again. The food was delicious: duck roasted with orange slices and preserved ginger, potatoes *dauphinoise* with green beans, all followed by a plate of cheeses. Hélène ate hers, marvelling that she would be eating two suppers. 'I can give someone else my portion of pork,' she said, sucking a bone. 'I might keep a little bit of the crackling. What do you think?'

It was so good to see her cheerful. Our kitchen, that night, seemed a happy place. There were extra candles, giving us a little more precious light. There were the familiar smells of Christmas – Hélène had studded one of the oranges with cloves and hung it over the stove so that the scent infused the whole room. If you didn't think too hard, you could listen to the glasses clinking, the laughter and conversation, and forget that the next room was occupied by Germans.

At around half past nine, I wrapped my sister up and helped her downstairs so that she could climb through to our neighbours' cellar and then out through their coal hatch. She would run down the unlit back alleys to Madame Poilâne's house where she would join Aurélien and the children, whom we had taken there earlier in the afternoon. We had moved the pig the day before. It was quite large by then, and Aurélien had had to hold it still while I fed it an apple to stop it squealing and, with a clean swipe of his knife, Monsieur Baudin, the butcher, slaughtered it.

I replaced the bricks in the gap behind her, all the while listening to the men in the bar above me. I realized, with some satisfaction, that for the first time in months I wasn't cold. To be hungry is to be almost permanently cold too; it was a lesson I was sure I would never forget.

'Édouard, I hope you're warm,' I whispered, into the empty cellar, as my sister's footsteps faded on the other side of the wall. 'I hope you eat as well as we have done this night.'

When I re-emerged into the hallway I jumped. The *Kommandant* was gazing at my portrait.

'I couldn't find you,' he said. 'I thought you would be in the kitchen.'

'I – I just went for some air,' I stammered.

'I see something different in this picture every time I look at it. She has something enigmatic about her. I mean you.' He half smiled at his own mistake. 'You have something enigmatic about you.'

I said nothing.

‘I hope I do not embarrass you, but I have to tell you. I have thought for some time that this is the most beautiful painting I have ever seen.’

‘It is a lovely work of art, yes.’

‘You exclude its subject?’

I didn’t answer.

He swilled the wine in his glass. When he spoke next it was with his eyes on the ruby liquid. ‘Do you honestly believe yourself plain, Madame?’

‘I believe beauty is in the eye of the beholder. When my husband tells me I am beautiful, I believe it because I know in his eyes I am.’

He looked up then. His eyes locked on to mine and would not let them go. He held my gaze for so long that I felt my breathing start to quicken.

Édouard’s eyes were the windows to his soul; his very self was laid bare in them. The *Kommandant*’s were intense, shrewd and yet somehow veiled, as if to hide his true feelings. I was afraid that he might be able to see my own crumbling composure, that he might see through my lies if I allowed him in. I was the first to look away.

He reached across the table to the crate that the Germans had delivered earlier and pulled out a bottle of cognac. ‘Have a drink with me, Madame.’

‘No, thank you, Herr Kommandant.’ I glanced towards the door to the dining room, where the officers would be finishing their dessert.

‘One. It’s Christmas.’

I knew an order when I heard it. I thought of the others, eating the roast pork a few doors away from where we sat. I thought of Mimi, with pork fat dribbling down her chin, of Aurélien, smiling and joking as he boasted of their great deception. He needed some happiness: twice that week he had been sent home from school for fighting, but had refused to tell me what it had been about. I needed them all to have one good meal. ‘Then … very well.’ I accepted a glass, and sipped. The cognac was like fire trickling down my throat. It felt restorative, a sharp kick.

He downed his own glass, watched me drink mine, then pushed the bottle towards me, signalling that I should refill it.

We sat in silence. I wondered how many people had come to eat the pig. Hélène had thought it would be fourteen. Two of the older people had been afraid to break their curfew. The priest had promised to take leftovers to those stuck in their homes after Christmas mass.

As we drank, I watched him. His jaw was set, suggesting someone unbending, but without his military cap, his almost shaven hair gave his head an air of vulnerability. I tried to picture him out of uniform, a normal human being, going about his daily business, buying a newspaper, taking a holiday. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t see past his uniform.

‘It’s a lonely business, war, isn’t it?’

I took a sip of my drink. ‘You have your men. I have my family. We are neither of us exactly alone.’

‘It’s not the same, though, is it?’

‘We all get by as best as we can.’

‘Do we? I’m not sure whether anyone can describe this as “best”.’

The cognac made me blunt. ‘You are the one sitting in my kitchen, Herr Kommandant. I suggest, with respect, that only one of us has a choice in the matter.’

A cloud passed across his face. He was unused to being challenged. Faint colour rose to his cheeks, and I saw him with his arm raised, his gun aimed at a running prisoner.

‘You really think any of us has a choice?’ he said quietly. ‘You really think this is how any of us would choose to live? Surrounded by devastation? The perpetrators of it? Were you to witness what we see at the Front, you would think yourself …’ He tailed off, shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Madame. It’s this time of year. It’s enough to make a man maudlin. And we all know that there is nothing worse than a maudlin soldier.’

He smiled then, an apology, and I relaxed a little. We sat there on either side of the kitchen table, sipping from our glasses, surrounded by the detritus of the meal. In the other room the officers had begun to sing. I heard their voices lifting, the tune familiar, the words incomprehensible. The *Kommandant* tilted his head to listen. Then he put down his glass. ‘You hate us being here, don’t you?’

I blinked. ‘I have always tried –’

‘You think your face betrays nothing. But I’ve watched you. Years in this job have taught me a lot about people and their secrets. Well. Can we call a truce, Madame? Just for these few hours?’

‘A truce?’

‘You shall forget that I am part of an enemy army, I shall forget that you are a woman who spends much of her time working out how to subvert that army, and we shall just … be two people?’

His face, just briefly, had softened. He held his glass towards mine. Almost reluctantly, I lifted my own.

‘Let us avoid the subject of Christmas, lonely or otherwise. I would like you to tell me about the other artists at the Académie. Tell me how you came to meet them.’

I am not sure how long we sat there. If I am honest, the hours evaporated in conversation and the warm glow of alcohol. The *Kommandant* wanted to know everything about an artist’s life in Paris. What kind of man was Matisse? Was his life as scandalous as his art?

‘Oh, no. He was the most intellectually rigorous of men. Quite stern. And very conservative, in both his work and his domestic habits. But somehow …’ I thought for a moment of the bespectacled professor, how he would glance over to check that you had grasped each point before he showed you the next piece ‘… joyous. I think he gets great joy from what he does.’

The *Kommandant* thought about this, as if my answer had satisfied him. ‘I once wanted to be a painter. I was no good, of course. I had to confront the truth of the matter very early on.’ He fingered the stem of his glass. ‘I often think that the ability to earn a living by doing the thing one loves must be one of life’s greatest gifts.’

I thought of Édouard then, his face lost in concentration, peering at me from behind an easel. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel the warmth of the log fire on my right leg, the faint chill on the left where my skin was bare. I could see him lift an eyebrow, and the exact point at which his thoughts left his painting. ‘I think that too.’

‘The first time I saw you,’ he had told me on our first Christmas Eve together, ‘I watched you standing in the middle of that bustling store and I thought you were the most self-contained woman I had ever seen. You looked as if the world could explode into fragments around you and there you would be, your chin

lifted, gazing out at it imperiously from under that magnificent hair.' He lifted my hand to his mouth, and kissed it tenderly.

'I thought you were a Russian bear,' I told him.

He had raised an eyebrow. We were in a packed brasserie off rue de Turbigo. 'GRRRRRRRR,' he growled, until I was helpless with laughter. He had crushed me to him, right there, in the middle of the banquette, covering my neck with kisses, oblivious to the people eating around us. 'GRRRRR.'

They had stopped singing in the other room. I felt suddenly self-conscious and stood, as if to clear the table.

'Please,' said the *Kommandant*, motioning me to sit down. 'Just sit a while longer. It's Christmas Eve, after all.'

'Your men will be expecting you to join them.'

'On the contrary, they enjoy themselves far more if their *Kommandant* is absent. It is not fair to impose myself on them all evening.'

But quite fair to impose yourself on me, I thought. It was then that he asked, 'Where is your sister?'

'I told her to go to bed,' I said. 'She is a little under the weather, and she was very tired after cooking tonight. I wanted her to be quite well for tomorrow.'

'And what will you do? To celebrate?'

'Is there much for us to celebrate?'

'Truce, Madame?'

I shrugged. 'We will go to church. Perhaps visit some of our older neighbours. It is a hard day for them to be alone.'

'You look after everyone, don't you?'

'It is no crime to be a good neighbour.'

'The basket of logs I had delivered for your own use. I know you took them to the mayor's house.'

'His daughter is sick. She needs the extra warmth more than we do.'

'You should know, Madame, that nothing escapes me in this little town. Nothing.'

I couldn't meet his eyes. I was afraid that this time my face, the rapid beating of my heart, would betray me. I wished I could wipe from my mind all knowledge of the feast that was taking place a few hundred yards from here. I wished I could escape the feeling that the *Kommandant* was playing a game of cat and mouse with me.

I took another sip of my cognac. The men were singing again. I knew this carol. I could almost make out the words.

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht.
Alles schläft; einsam wacht.

Why did he keep looking at me? I was afraid to speak, afraid to get up again in case he asked awkward questions. Yet just to sit and let him stare at me seemed to make me complicit in something. Finally I took a small breath and looked up. He was still watching me. 'Madame, will you dance with me? Just one dance? For Christmas's sake?'

'Dance?'

‘Just one dance. I would like … I would like to be reminded of humanity’s better side, just once this year.’

‘I don’t … I don’t think …’ I thought of Hélène and the others, down the road, free, for one evening. I thought of Liliane Béthune. I studied the *Kommandant*’s face. His request seemed genuine. *We shall just … be two people …*

And then I thought of my husband. Would I wish him to have a sympathetic pair of arms to dance in? Just for one evening? Did I not hope that somewhere, many miles away, some good-hearted woman might remind him in a quiet bar that the world could be a place of beauty?

‘I will dance with you, Herr Kommandant,’ I said. ‘But only in the kitchen.’

He stood, held out his hand and, after a slight hesitation, I took it. His palm was surprisingly rough. I moved a few steps closer, not looking at his face and then he rested his other hand on my waist. As the men in the next room sang, we began to move slowly around the table, me acutely aware of his body only inches from my own, the pressure of his hand on my corset. I felt the rough serge of his uniform against my bare arm, and the soft vibration of his humming through his chest. I felt as if I were almost alight with tension, every sense monitoring my fingers, my arms, trying to ensure that I did not get too close, fearful that at any point he might pull me to him.

And all the while a voice repeated in my head, *I am dancing with a German.*

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht …

But he didn’t do anything. He hummed, and he held me lightly, and he moved steadily in circles around the kitchen table. And just for a few minutes I closed my eyes and was a girl, alive, free from hunger and cold, dancing on the night before Christmas, my head a little giddy from good cognac, breathing in the scent of spices and delicious food. I lived as Édouard lived, relishing each small pleasure, allowing myself to see beauty in all of it. It was two years since a man had held me. I closed my eyes, relaxed and let myself feel all of it, allowing my partner to swing me round, his voice still humming into my ear.

Christ, in deiner Geburt!
Christ, in deiner Geburt!

The singing stopped and after a moment, almost reluctantly, he stepped back, releasing me. ‘Thank you, Madame. Thank you very much.’

When I finally dared to look up there were tears in his eyes.

The next morning a small crate arrived on our doorstep. It contained three eggs, a small *poussin*, an onion and a carrot. On the side, in careful script, was marked: *Fröhliche Weihnachten.* ‘It means “Merry Christmas”,’ Aurélien said. For some reason he refused to look at me.

7

As the temperatures dropped, the Germans tightened their control over St Péronne. The town became uneasy, greater numbers of troops coming through daily; the officers' conversations in the bar took on a new urgency, so that Hélène and I spent most of our time in the kitchen. The *Kommandant* barely spoke to me; he spent much of his time huddled with a few trusted men. He looked exhausted, and when I heard his voice in the dining room it was often raised in anger.

Several times that January French prisoners of war were marched up the main street and past the hotel, but we were no longer allowed to stand on the pavement to watch them. Food became ever scarcer, our official rations dropped, and I was expected to conjure feasts out of ever shrinking amounts of meat and vegetables. Trouble was edging closer.

The *Journal des Occupés*, when it came, spoke of villages we knew. At night it was not unusual for the distant boom of the guns to cause faint ripples in the glasses on our tables. It was some days before I realized that the missing sound was that of birdsong. We had received word that all girls from the age of sixteen and all boys from fifteen would now be required to work for the Germans, pulling sugar beet or tending potatoes, or sent further afield to work in factories. With Aurélien only months from his fifteenth birthday, Hélène and I became increasingly tense. Rumours were rife as to what happened to the young, with stories of girls billeted with gangs of criminal men or, worse, instructed to 'entertain' German soldiers. Boys were starved or beaten, moved around constantly so that they remained disoriented and obedient. Despite our ages Hélène and I were exempt, we were informed, because we were considered 'essential to German welfare' at the hotel. That alone would be enough to stir resentment among the rest of our village when it became known.

There was something else. It was a subtle change, but I was conscious of it. Fewer people were coming to Le Coq Rouge in the daytime. From our usual twenty-odd faces, we were down to around eight. At first I thought the cold was keeping people indoors. Then I became worried, and called on old René to see if he was ill. But he met me at the door and said gruffly that he preferred to stay at home. He did not look at me as he spoke. The same happened when I went to call on Madame Foubert and the wife of the mayor. I was left feeling strangely unbalanced. I told myself that it was all in my imagination, but one lunchtime I happened to walk past Le Bar Blanc on my way to the pharmacy, and saw René and Madame Foubert sitting inside at a table, playing draughts. I was convinced my eyes had deceived me. When it became clear that they hadn't, I put my head down and hurried past.

Only Liliane Béthune spared me a friendly smile. I caught her, shortly before dawn one morning, as she slid an envelope under my door. She jumped as I undid the bolts. 'Oh, *mon Dieu* – thank heaven it's you,' she said, her hand at her mouth.

'Is this what I think it is?' I said, glancing down at the oversized envelope, addressed to nobody.

'Who knows?' she said, already turning back towards the square. 'I see nothing there.'

But Liliane Béthune was in a minority of one. As the days crept on I noticed other things: if I walked into our bar from the kitchen, the conversation would quieten a little, as if whoever was talking were determined that I should not overhear. If I spoke up during a conversation, it was as if I had said nothing. Twice I offered a little jar of stock or soup to the mayor's wife, only to be told that they had plenty, thank you. She had developed a peculiar way of talking to me, not unfriendly exactly but as though it were something of a relief when I gave up trying. I would never have admitted it, but it was almost a comfort when night fell and the restaurant was full of voices again, even if they did happen to be German.

It was Aurélien who enlightened me.

'Sophie?'

'Yes?' I was making the pastry for a rabbit and vegetable pie. My hands and apron were covered with flour, and I was wondering whether I could safely bake the off-cuts into little biscuits for the children.

'Can I ask you something?'

'Of course.' I dusted my hands on my apron. My little brother was looking at me with a peculiar expression, as if he were trying to work something out.

'Do you … do you like the Germans?'

'Do I *like* them?'

'Yes.'

'What a ridiculous question. Of course not. I wish they would all be gone and that we could return to our lives as before.'

'But you like Herr Kommandant.'

I stopped, my hands on my rolling pin and spun round. 'You know this is dangerous talk, the kind of talk that could get us all into terrible trouble.'

'It is not my talk that is getting us into trouble.'

Outside, in the bar, I could hear the townspeople talking. I walked over and closed the kitchen door, so that it was just the two of us in the kitchen. When I spoke again I kept my voice low and measured. 'Say what you wish to say, Aurélien.'

'They say you are no better than Liliane Béthune.'

'What?'

'Monsieur Suel saw you dancing with Herr Kommandant on Christmas Eve. Close to him, your eyes shut, your bodies pressed together, as if you loved him.'

Shock made me feel almost faint. '*What?*'

'They say that is the real reason you wanted to be away from *le réveillon*, to be alone with him. They say that is why we are getting extra supplies. You are the German's favourite.'

'Is this why you have been fighting at school?' I thought back to his black eye, his sullen refusal to speak when I asked him how he had come to receive it.

'Is it true?'

'No, it is *not* true.' I slammed my rolling pin down on the side. 'He asked … he asked if we might dance, just once, as it was Christmas, and I thought it better if he were thinking about dancing and being here, rather than risk him wondering what was going on at Madame Poilâne's. There was nothing more to it than that – your sister trying to protect you for that one evening. That dance won you a pork supper, Aurélien.'

‘But I have seen him. I have seen the way he admires you.’

‘He admires my portrait. There is a huge difference.’

‘I have heard the way he talks to you.’

I frowned at him, and he raised his eyes to the ceiling. Of course: his hours spent peering through the floorboards of Room Three. Aurélien must have heard and seen everything.

‘You can’t deny he likes you. He says “*tu*”, not “*vous*” when he talks to you, and you let him.’

‘He is a German *Kommandant*, Aurélien. I don’t have much say in how he chooses to address me.’

‘They are all talking about you, Sophie. I sit upstairs and I hear the names they call you and I don’t know what to believe.’ His eyes burned with anger and confusion.

I walked over to him and grasped his shoulders. ‘Then believe this. I have done nothing, *nothing*, to shame myself or my husband. Every day I seek new ways to keep our family well, to keep our neighbours and friends in food, comfort and hope. I have no feelings for the *Kommandant*. I try to remember that he is a human being, just as we are. But if you think, Aurélien, that I would ever betray my husband, you are a fool. I love Édouard with every part of me. Every day he is gone I feel his absence as if it were an actual pain. At night I lie awake fearing what might befall him. And now I do not ever want to hear you speak like this again. Do you hear me?’

He shook off my hand.

‘Do you hear me?’

He nodded sullenly.

‘Oh,’ I added. Perhaps I should not have said it, but my blood was up. ‘And do not be too swift to condemn Liliane Béthune. You may find you owe her more than you think.’

My brother glared at me, then stalked out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. I stared at the pastry for several minutes before I remembered I was meant to be making a pie.

Later that morning I took a walk across the square. Normally Hélène fetched the bread – *Kriegsbrot* – but I needed to clear my head, and the atmosphere in the bar had become oppressive. The air was so cold that January that it hurt my lungs, sheathing the bare twigs of the trees in an icy film, and I pulled my bonnet low over my head, my scarf up around my mouth. There were few people on the streets, but even then only one person, old Madame Bonnard, nodded to me. I told myself this was simply because, under so many layers, it was hard to tell who I was.

I walked to rue des Bastides, which had been renamed Schieler Platz (we refused to refer to it as such). The door of the *boulangerie* was closed and I pushed at it. Inside Madame Louvier and Madame Durant were in animated conversation with Monsieur Armand. They stopped the moment the door closed behind me.

‘Good morning,’ I said, adjusting my pannier under my arm.

The two women, muffled under layers of wool, nodded vaguely in my direction. Monsieur Armand simply stood, his hands on the counter in front of him.

I waited, then turned to the old women. ‘Are you well, Madame Louvier? We have not seen you at Le Coq Rouge for several weeks now. I was afraid you had been taken ill.’ My voice seemed unnaturally loud and high in the little shop.

‘No,’ the old woman said. ‘I prefer to stay at home just now.’ She didn’t meet my eye as she spoke.

‘Did you get the potato I left for you last week?’

‘I did.’ Her gaze slid sideways at Monsieur Armand. ‘I gave it to Madame Grenouille. She is … less particular about the provenance of her food.’

I stood quite still. So this was how it was. The unfairness of it tasted like bitter ashes in my mouth. ‘Then I hope she enjoyed it. Monsieur Armand, I would like some bread, please. My loaf and Hélène’s, if you would be so kind.’ Oh, how I wished for one of his jokes, then. Some bawdy snippet or eye-rolling pun. But the baker just looked at me, his gaze steady and unfriendly. He didn’t walk into the back room, as I’d expected. In fact, he didn’t move. Just as I was about to repeat my request he reached under the counter and placed two loaves of black bread on its surface.

I stared at them.

The temperature in the little *boulangerie* seemed to drop, but I felt the eyes of the three other people like a burn. The loaves sat on the counter, squat and dark.

I lifted my eyes and swallowed. ‘Actually, I have made a mistake. We are not in need of bread today,’ I said quietly, and placed my purse back in my basket.

‘I don’t suppose you’re in need of much at the moment,’ Madame Durant muttered.

I turned and we stared at each other, the old woman and I. Then, my head high, I left the shop. The shame of it! The injustice! I saw the mocking looks of those two old ladies and realized I had been a fool. How could it have taken me so long to see what was going on under my nose? I strode back towards the hotel, my cheeks flushed, my mind racing. The ringing in my ears was so loud that I didn’t hear the voice at first.

‘*Halt!*’

I stopped, and glanced around me.

‘*Halt!*’

A German officer was marching towards me, his hand raised. I waited just under the ruined statue of Monsieur Leclerc, my cheeks still flushed. He walked right up to me. ‘You ignored me!’

‘I apologize, Officer. I did not hear you.’

‘It is an offence to ignore a German officer.’

‘As I said, I did not hear you. My apologies.’

I unwound my scarf a little from my face. And then I saw who it was: the young officer who had drunkenly grabbed at Hélène in the bar, and whose head had been smashed against the wall for his pains. I saw the little scar on his temple, and I also saw he had recognized me too.

‘Your identity card.’

It was not in my pocket. I had been so preoccupied with Aurélien’s words that I had left it on the hall table at the hotel.

‘I have forgotten it.’

‘It is an offence to leave your home without your identity card.’

‘It is just there.’ I pointed at the hotel. ‘If you walk over with me, I can get it –’

‘I’m not going anywhere. What is your business?’

‘I was just … going to the *boulangerie*.’

He peered at my empty basket. ‘To buy invisible bread?’

‘I changed my mind.’

‘You must be eating well at the hotel, these days. Everybody else is keen to get their rations.’

‘I eat no better than anyone else.’

‘Empty your pockets.’

‘What?’

He jabbed towards me with his rifle. ‘Empty your pockets. And remove some of those layers so I can see what you are carrying.’

It was minus one in the daylight. The icy wind numbed every inch of exposed skin. I put down my pannier and slowly shed the first of my shawls. ‘Drop it. On the ground,’ he said. ‘And the next one.’

I glanced around me. Across the square the customers in Le Coq Rouge would be watching. I slowly shed my second shawl, and then my heavy coat. I felt the blank windows of the square watching me.

‘Empty the pockets.’ He jabbed at my coat with his bayonet, so that it rubbed against the ice and mud. ‘Turn them inside out.’

I bent down and put my hands into the pockets. I was shivering now, and my fingers, which were mauve, refused to obey me. In several attempts, I pulled from my jacket my ration book, two five-franc notes and a scrap of paper.

He snatched at it. ‘What is this?’

‘Nothing of importance, Officer. Just … just a gift from my husband. Please let me have it.’

I heard the panic in my voice, and even as I said the words, I knew it had been a mistake. He opened Édouard’s little sketch of us; he the bear in his uniform, me serious in my starched blue dress. ‘This is confiscated,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘You are not entitled to carry likenesses of French Army uniform. I will dispose of it.’

‘But …’ I was incredulous. ‘It’s just a silly sketch of a bear.’

‘A bear in French uniform. It could be a code.’

‘But – but it’s just a joke … a trifle between me and my husband. Please do not destroy it.’ I reached out my hand but he batted it away. ‘Please – I have so little to remind me …’ As I stood, shivering, he looked me in the eye and tore it in two. Then he tore the two pieces into shreds, watching my face as they fell like confetti on to the wet ground.

‘Next time remember your papers, whore,’ he said, and walked off to join his comrades.

Hélène met me as I walked through the door, clutching my freezing, sodden shawls to me. I felt the eyes of the customers as I pushed my way inside, but I had nothing to say to them. I walked through the bar and back into the little hallway, struggling with frozen hands to hang my shawls on the wooden pegs.

‘What happened?’ My sister was behind me.

I was so upset I could barely speak. ‘The officer who grabbed you that time. He destroyed Édouard’s sketch. He ripped it into pieces, to get revenge on us after the *Kommandant* hit him. And there is no bread because Monsieur Armand apparently also thinks I am a whore.’ My face was numb and I could barely make myself understood, but I was livid and my voice carried.

‘Ssh!’

‘Why? Why should I be quiet? What have *I* done wrong? This place is alive with people hissing and whispering and *nobody* tells the truth.’ I shook with rage and despair.

Hélène closed the bar door and hauled me up the stairs to the empty bedrooms, one of the few places we might not be heard.

‘Calm down and talk to me. What happened?’

I told her then. I told her what Aurélien had said, and how the ladies in the *boulangerie* had spoken to me and about Monsieur Armand and his bread, which we could not now risk eating. Hélène listened to all of it, placing her arms around me, resting her head against mine, and making sounds of sympathy as I talked. Until: ‘You *danced* with him?’

I wiped my eyes.

‘Well, yes.’

‘You *danced* with Herr Kommandant?’

‘Don’t you look at me like that. You know what I was doing that night. You know I would have done anything to keep the Germans away from *le réveillon*. Keeping him here meant that you all enjoyed a proper feast. You told me it was the best day you’d had since Jean-Michel left.’

She looked at me.

‘Well, didn’t you say that? Didn’t you use those exact words?’

Still she said nothing.

‘What? Are you going to call me a whore too?’

Hélène looked at her feet. Finally she said, ‘I would not have danced with a German, Sophie.’

I let the significance of her words sink in. Then I stood and, without a word, I went back down the stairs. I heard her calling my name, and noted, somewhere deep in a dark place within me, that it came just a little too late.

Hélène and I worked around each other in silence that evening. We communicated as little as possible, speaking only to confirm that, yes, the pie would be ready for seven thirty and, yes, the wine was uncorked, and that indeed there were four fewer bottles than the previous week. Aurélien stayed upstairs with the babies. Only Mimi came down and hugged me. I hugged her back fiercely, breathing in her sweet, childlike smell, feeling her soft skin against my own. ‘I love you, little Mi,’ I whispered.

She smiled at me from under her long blonde hair. ‘I love you too, Auntie Sophie,’ she said.

I put my hand into my apron and quickly popped into her mouth a little strip of cooked pastry I had saved for her earlier. Then, as she grinned at me, Hélène shepherded her up the stairs to bed.

In contrast to my sister’s and my mood, the German soldiers seemed curiously cheerful that evening. Nobody complained about the reduced rations; they seemed not to mind about the reduction in wine. The *Kommandant* alone seemed preoccupied and sombre. He sat alone as the other officers toasted something and all cheered. I wondered whether Aurélien was upstairs listening and whether he understood what they were saying.

‘Let’s not argue,’ Hélène said, when we crawled into bed later. ‘I do find it exhausting.’ She reached out a hand for mine, and in the near dark I took it. But we both knew something had changed.

It was Hélène who went to the market the following morning. Only a few stalls were out, these days, some preserved meats, some fearsomely expensive eggs and a few vegetables, and an elderly man from La Vendée who made new undergarments from old fabric. I stayed in the hotel bar, serving the few customers we had left and trying not to mind that I was evidently still the subject of some unfriendly discussion.

At about half past ten we became aware of a commotion outside. I wondered briefly whether it was more prisoners, but Hélène came rushing in, her hair loose and her eyes wide.

‘You’ll never guess,’ she said. ‘It’s Liliane.’

My heart began to thump. I dropped the ashtrays I was cleaning and ran for the door, flanked by the other customers who had risen as one from their seats. Up the road came Liliane Béthune. She was wearing her astrakhan coat, but she no longer looked like a Parisian model. She had on nothing else. Her legs were mottled blue with a mixture of cold and bruising. Her feet were bare and bloodied, her left eye half closed with swelling. Her hair lay unpinned around her face and she limped, as if every step were a Sisyphean effort. On each side of her stood two goading German officers, a group of soldiers following close behind. For once, they seemed not to mind when we came out to stare.

That beautiful astrakhan coat was grey with dirt. On the back of it were not just sticky patches of blood but the unmistakable smears of phlegm.

As I stared at it, I heard a sob. ‘*Maman! Maman!*’ Behind her, held back by other soldiers, I now saw Édith, Liliane’s seven-year-old daughter. She sobbed and writhed, trying to reach past them to her mother, her face contorted. One gripped her arm, not letting her anywhere close. Another smirked, as if it were amusing. Liliane walked on as if oblivious, in a private world of pain, her head lowered. As she came past the hotel a low jeering broke out.

‘See the proud whore now!’

‘Do you think the Germans will still want you, Liliane?’

‘They’ve tired of her. And good riddance.’

I could not believe these were my own countrymen. I gazed around me at the hate-filled faces, the scornful smiles, and when I could bear it no longer, I pushed through them and ran towards Édith. ‘Give me the child,’ I demanded. I saw now that the whole town seemed to have come to watch this spectacle. They were catcalling at Liliane from upstairs windows, from across the marketplace.

Édith sobbed, her voice pleading. ‘*Maman!*’

‘Give me the child!’ I cried. ‘Or are Germans persecuting little children now too?’

The officer holding her looked behind him and I saw Herr Kommandant standing by the post office. He said something to the officer beside him, and after a moment the child was released to me. I swept her into my arms. ‘It’s all right, Édith. You come with me.’ She buried her face in my shoulder, crying inconsolably, one arm still reaching vainly in the direction of her mother. I thought I saw Liliane’s face turn slightly towards me, but at this distance it was impossible to say.

I carried Édith quickly into the bar, away from the eyes of the town, away from the sound of the jeering as it picked up again, away into the back of the hotel where she would hear nothing. The child was hysterical, and who could blame her? I took her to our bedroom, gave her some water, then held her in my arms and rocked her. I told her again and again that it would be all right, we would make it all right, even though I knew we could do nothing of the sort. She cried until she was exhausted. From her swollen face I guessed she had been crying much of the night. God only knew what she had seen. Finally she became limp in my arms and I laid her carefully in my bed, covering her with blankets. Then I made my way downstairs.

As I walked into the bar, there was silence. Le Coq Rouge was busier than it had been in weeks, Hélène rushing between the tables with a loaded tray. I saw the mayor in the doorway, then stared at the faces before me and realized I no longer knew any of them.

‘Are you satisfied?’ I said, my voice breaking as I spoke. ‘A child lies upstairs having watched you spit and jeer at her brutalized mother. People she thought were her friends. Are you proud?’

My sister’s hand landed on my shoulder. ‘Sophie –’

I shrugged her off. ‘Don’t Sophie me. You have no idea what you have all done. You think you know everything about Liliane Béthune. Well, you know nothing. NOTHING!’ I was crying now, tears of rage. ‘You are all so quick to judge, but just as quick to take what she offers when it suits you.’

The mayor walked towards me. ‘Sophie, we should talk.’

‘Oh. You will talk to me now! For weeks you have looked at me as if I were a bad smell because Monsieur Suel supposedly believes me to be a traitor and a whore. Me! Who risked everything to bring your daughter food. You would all believe him rather than me! Well, perhaps I do not want to talk to you, Monsieur. Knowing what I know, perhaps I would rather talk to Liliane Béthune!’

I was raging now. I felt unhinged, a madwoman, as if I gave off sparks. I looked at their stupid faces, their open mouths, and I shook the restraining hand from my shoulder.

‘Where do you think the *Journal des Occupés* came from? Do you think the birds dropped it? Do you think it came by magic carpet?’

Hélène began to bundle me out now. ‘I don’t care! Who do they think was helping them? Liliane helped you! All of you! Even when you were shitting in her bread, she was helping you!’

I was in the hallway. Hélène’s face was white, the mayor behind her, pushing me forwards, away from them.

‘What?’ I protested. ‘Does the truth make you too uncomfortable? Am I forbidden to speak?’

‘Sit down, Sophie. For God’s sake, just sit down and shut up.’

‘I don’t know this town any more. How can you all stand there and yell at her? Even if she had slept with the Germans, how can you treat another human being so? They spat on her, Hélène, didn’t you see? They spat all over her. As if she were not human.’

‘I am very sorry for Madame Béthune,’ the mayor said quietly. ‘But I am not here to discuss her. I came to talk to you.’

‘I have nothing to say to you,’ I said, wiping at my face with my palms.

The mayor took a deep breath. ‘Sophie. I have news of your husband.’

It took me a moment to register what he had said.

He sat down heavily on the stairs beside me. Hélène still held my hand.

‘It’s not good news, I’m afraid. When the last prisoners came through this morning, one dropped a message as he passed the post office. A scrap of paper. My clerk picked it up. It says that Édouard Lefèvre was among five men sent to the reprisal camp at Ardennes last month. I’m so sorry, Sophie.’

8

Édouard Lefèvre, imprisoned, had been charged with handing a fist-sized piece of bread to a prisoner. He had fought back fiercely when beaten for it. I almost laughed when I heard: how typical of Édouard.

But my laughter was short-lived. Every piece of information that came my way served to increase my fears. The reprisal camp where he was held was said to be one of the worst: the men slept two hundred to a shed on bare boards; they lived on watery soup with a few husks of barley and the occasional dead mouse. They were sent to work stone-breaking or building railways, forced to carry heavy iron girders on their shoulders for miles. Those who dropped from exhaustion were punished, beaten or denied rations. Disease was rife and men were shot for the pettiest misdemeanours.

I took it all in and each of these images haunted my dreams. 'He will be all right, won't he?' I said to the mayor.

He patted my hand. 'We will all pray for him,' he said. He sighed deeply as he stood to leave, and his sigh was like a death sentence.

The mayor visited most days after the parading of Liliane Béthune. As the truth about her filtered around the town, she became slowly redrawn in the collective imagination. Lips no longer pursed automatically at the mention of her name. Someone scrawled the word '*héroïne*' on the market square in chalk under cover of darkness, and although it was swiftly removed, we all knew to whom it referred. A few precious things that had been looted from her house when she was first arrested mysteriously found their way back.

Of course, there were those who, like Mesdames Louvier and Durant, would not have believed well of her if she had been seen throttling Germans with her bare hands. But there were some vague admissions of regret in our little bar, small kindnesses shown to Édith, in the arrival at Le Coq Rouge of outgrown clothes or odd pieces of food. Liliane had apparently been sent to a holding camp at some distance south of our town. She was lucky, the mayor confided, not to have been shot immediately. He suspected it was only special pleading by one of the officers that had saved her from a swift execution. 'But there's no point in trying to intervene, Sophie,' he said. 'She was caught spying for the French, and I don't suppose she'll be saved for long.'

As for me, I was no longer *persona non grata*. Not that I particularly cared. I found it hard to feel the same about my neighbours. Édith stayed glued to my side, like a pale shadow. She ate little and asked after her mother constantly. I told her truthfully that I didn't know what would happen to Liliane, but that she, Édith, would be safe with us. I had taken to sleeping with her in my old room, to stop her shrieking nightmares waking the two younger ones. In the evenings, she would creep down to the fourth stair, the nearest point from which she could see into the kitchen, and we would find her there late at night when we had finished clearing the kitchen, fast asleep with her thin arms holding her knees.

My fears for her mother mixed with my fears for my husband. I spent my days in a silent vortex of worry and exhaustion. Little news came into the town, and none went out. Somewhere out there he might

be starving, lying sick with fever or being beaten. The mayor received official news of three deaths, two at the Front, one at a camp near Mons, and heard there was an outbreak of typhoid near Lille. I took each of these snippets personally.

Perversely, Hélène seemed to thrive in this atmosphere of grim foreboding. I think that watching me crumble had made her believe that the worst must have happened. If Édouard, with all his strength and vitality, faced death, there could be no hope for Jean-Michel, a gentle, bookish man. He could not have survived, her reasoning went, so she might as well get on with it. She seemed to grow in strength, urging me to get up when she found me in secret tears in the beer cellar, forcing me to eat, or singing lullabies to Édith, Mimi and Jean in a strange, jaunty tone. I was grateful for her strength. I lay at night with my arms around another woman's child and wished I never had to think again.

Late in January, Louisa died. That we had all known it was coming did not make it any easier. Overnight, the mayor and his wife seemed to age ten years. 'I tell myself it is a blessing that she will not have to see the world as it is,' he said to me, and I nodded. Neither of us believed it.

The funeral was to take place five days later. I decided it was not fair to take the children, so I told Hélène she should go for me; I would take the little ones to the woods behind the old fire station. Given the severity of the cold, the Germans had granted the villagers two hours a day in which to forage in local woods for kindling. I wasn't convinced that we would find much: under cover of darkness the trees had long been stripped of any useful branches. But I needed to be away from the town, away from grief and fear and the constant scrutiny of either the Germans or my neighbours.

It was a crisp, silent afternoon, and the sun shone weakly through the skeletal silhouettes of those trees that remained, seemingly too exhausted to rise more than a few feet from the horizon. It was easy to look at our landscape, as I did that afternoon, and wonder if the very world was coming to an end. I walked, conducting a silent conversation with my husband, as I often did, these days. *Be strong, Édouard. Hold on. Just stay alive and I know we will be together again.* Édith and Mimi walked in silence at first, flanking me, their feet crunching on the icy leaves, but then, as we reached the woods, some childish impulse overtook them and I stopped briefly to watch as they ran towards a rotting tree-trunk, jumping on and off it, holding hands and giggling. Their shoes would be scuffed, and their skirts muddied, but I would not deny them that simple consolation.

I stooped and put a few handfuls of twigs into my basket, hoping their voices might drown the constant hum of dread in my mind. And then, as I straightened, I saw him: in the clearing, a gun to his shoulder, talking to one of his men. He heard the girls' voices and swung round. Édith shrieked, looked about wildly for me and bolted for my arms, her eyes wide with terror. Mimi, confused, stumbled along behind, trying to work out why her friend should be so shaken by the man who came each night to the restaurant.

'Don't cry, Édith, he's not going to hurt us. Please don't cry.' I saw him watching us, and prised the child from my legs. I crouched down to talk to her. 'That's Herr Kommandant. I'm going to talk to him now about his supper. You stay here and play with Mimi. I'm fine. Look, see?'

She trembled as I handed her to Mimi. 'Go and play over there for a moment. I'm just going to talk to Herr Kommandant. Here, take my basket and see if you can find me some twigs. I promise you nothing bad will happen.'

When I could finally prise her from my skirts, I walked over to him. The officer who was with him said something in a low voice, and I pulled my shawls around me, crossing my arms in front of my chest,

waiting as the *Kommandant* dismissed him.

'We thought we might go shooting,' he said, peering up at the empty skies. 'Birds,' he added.

'There are no birds left here,' I said. 'They are all long gone.'

'Probably quite sensible.' In the distance we could hear the faint boom of the big guns. It seemed to make the air contract briefly around us.

'Is that the whore's child?' He cocked his gun over his arm and lit a cigarette. I glanced behind me to where the girls were standing by the rotten trunk.

'Liliane's child? Yes. She will stay with us.'

He watched her closely, and I could not work out what he was thinking. 'She is a little girl,' I said. 'She understood nothing of what was going on.'

'Ah,' he said, and puffed his cigarette. 'An innocent.'

'Yes. They do exist.'

He looked at me sharply and I had to force myself not to lower my eyes.

'Herr Kommandant. I need to ask you a favour.'

'A favour?'

'My husband has been taken to a reprisal camp in Ardennes.'

'And I am not to ask you how you came upon this information.'

There was nothing in how he looked at me. No clue at all.

I took a breath. 'I wondered … I'm asking if you can help him. He is a good man. He's an artist, as you know, not a soldier.'

'And you want me to get a message to him.'

'I want you to get him out.'

He raised an eyebrow.

'Herr Kommandant. You act as if we are friends. So, I'm begging you. Please help my husband. I know what goes on in those places, that he has little chance of coming out alive.'

He didn't speak, so I seized my chance and continued. These were words I had said a thousand times in my head over the past hours. 'You know that he has spent his whole life in the pursuit of art, of beauty. He's a peaceful man, a gentle man. He cares about painting, about dancing, eating and drinking. You know it makes no difference to the German cause whether he is dead or alive.'

He glanced around us, through the denuded woods, as if to monitor where the other officers had gone, then took another puff at his cigarette. 'You take a considerable risk in asking me something like this. You saw how your townspeople treat a woman they think is collaborating with Germans.'

'They already believe me to be collaborating. The fact of you being in our hotel apparently made me guilty without a trial.'

'That, and dancing with the enemy.'

Now it was my turn to look surprised.

'I have told you before, Madame. There is nothing that goes on in this town that I don't hear about.'

We stood in silence, gazing at the horizon. In the distance a low boom caused the earth to vibrate very slightly under our feet. The girls felt it: I could see them gazing down at their shoes. He took a final puff from his cigarette, then crushed it under his boot.

‘Here is the thing. You are an intelligent woman. I think you are probably a good judge of human nature. And yet you behave in ways that would entitle me, as an enemy soldier, to shoot you without even a trial. Despite this, you come here and expect me not just to ignore that fact but to help you. My enemy.’

I swallowed. ‘That … that is because I don’t just see you as … an enemy.’

He waited.

‘You were the one who said … that sometimes we are just … two people.’

His silence made me bolder. I lowered my voice. ‘I know you are a powerful man. I know you have influence. If you say he should be released, he will be released. Please.’

‘You don’t know what you’re asking.’

‘I know that if he has to stay there he will die.’

The faintest flicker behind his eyes.

‘I know you are a gentleman. A scholar. I know you care about art. Surely to save an artist you admire would be –’ My words faltered. I took a step forward. I put a hand out and touched his arm. ‘Herr Kommandant. Please. You know I would not ask you for anything but I beg you for this. Please, please, help me.’

He looked so grave. And then he did something unexpected. He lifted a hand and lightly moved a strand of my hair from my face. He did it gently, meditatively, as if this was something he had imagined for some time. I hid my shock and kept perfectly still.

‘Sophie …’

‘I will give you the painting,’ I said. ‘The one you like so much.’

He dropped his hand. He let out a sigh, and turned away.

‘It is the most precious thing I have.’

‘Go home, Madame Lefèvre.’

A small knot of panic began to form in my chest.

‘What must I do?’

‘Go home. Take the children and go home.’

‘Anything. If you can free my husband, I’ll do anything.’ My voice echoed across the woodland. I felt Édouard’s only chance slipping away from me. He kept walking. ‘Did you hear what I said, Herr Kommandant?’

He swung back then, his expression suddenly furious. He strode towards me and only stopped when his face was inches from mine. I could feel his breath on my face. I could see the girls from the corner of my eye, rigid with anxiety. I would not show fear.

He gazed at me, and then he lowered his voice. ‘Sophie …’ He glanced behind him at them. ‘Sophie, I – I have not seen my wife in almost three years.’

‘I have not seen my husband for two.’

‘You must know … you must know that what you ask of me …’ He turned away from me, as if he were determined not to look at my face.

I swallowed. ‘I am offering you a painting, Herr Kommandant.’

A small tic had begun in his jaw. He stared at a point somewhere past my right shoulder, and then he began to walk away again. ‘Madame. You are either very foolish or very … ’

‘Will it buy my husband his freedom? Will … will I buy my husband his freedom?’

He turned back, his face anguished, as if I was forcing him to do something he didn't want to do. He stared fixedly at his boots. Finally he took two paces back towards me, just close enough that he could speak without being overheard.

'Tomorrow night. Come to me at the barracks. After you have finished at the hotel.'

We walked hand in hand back round the paths, to avoid going through the square, and by the time we reached Le Coq Rouge our skirts were covered with mud. The girls were silent, even though I attempted to reassure them that the German man had just been upset because he had no pigeons to shoot. I made them a warm drink, then went to my room and closed the door.

I lay down on my bed and put my hands over my eyes to block out the light. I stayed there for perhaps half an hour. Then I rose, pulled my blue wool dress from the wardrobe, and laid it across the bed. Édouard had always said I looked like a schoolmistress in it. He said it as though being a schoolmistress might be a rather wonderful thing. I removed my muddy grey dress, leaving it to fall on to the floor. I took off my thick underskirt, the hem of which was also spattered with mud, so that I was wearing only my petticoat and chemise. I removed my corset, then my undergarments. The room was cold, but I was oblivious to it.

I stood before the looking-glass.

I had not looked at my body for months; I had had no reason to. Now the shape that stood before me in the mottled glass seemed to be that of a stranger. I appeared to be half the width I had been; my breasts had fallen and grown smaller, no longer great ripe orbs of pale flesh. My bottom too. And I was thin, my skin now hinting at the bones underneath: collar bone, shoulder and rib all forced their way to prominence. Even my hair, once bright with colour, seemed dull.

I stepped closer and examined my face: the shadows under my eyes, the faint frown line between my brows. I shivered, but not from the cold. I thought of the girl Édouard had left behind two years ago. I thought of the feel of his hands on my waist, his soft lips on my neck. And I closed my eyes.

He had been in a foul mood for days. He was working on a picture of three women seated around a table and he could not get it right. I had posed for him in each position and watched silently as he huffed and grimaced, even threw down his palette at one point, rubbing his hands through his hair and cursing himself.

'Let's take some air,' I said, uncurling myself. I was sore from holding the position, but I wouldn't let him know that.

'I don't want to take some air.'

'Édouard, you will achieve nothing in this mood. Take twenty minutes' air with me. Come.' I reached for my coat, wrapped a scarf around my neck, and stood in the doorway.

'I don't like being interrupted,' he grumbled, reaching for his own coat.

I didn't mind his ill-temper. I was used to him by then. When Édouard's work was going well, he was the sweetest of men, joyful, keen to see beauty in everything. When it went badly, it was as if our little home lay under a dark cloud. In the early months of our marriage I had been afraid that this was somehow my fault, that I should be able to cheer him. But listening to the other artists talk at La Ruche, or in the bars of the Latin Quarter, I grew to see such rhythms in all of them: the highs of a work successfully completed,

or sold; the lows when they had stalled, or overworked a piece, or received some stinging criticism. These moods were simply weather fronts to be borne and adapted to.

I was not always so saintly.

Édouard grumbled all the way along rue Soufflot. He was irritable. He could not see why we had to walk. He could not see why he could not be left alone. I didn't understand. I didn't know the pressure he was under. Why, Weber and Purrmann were already being pursued by galleries near the Palais Royale, offered shows of their own. It was rumoured that Monsieur Matisse preferred their work to his. When I tried to reassure him that this was not the case he waved a hand dismissively, as if my view was of no account. His choleric rant went on and on until we reached the Left Bank, and I finally lost patience.

'Very well,' I said, unhooking my arm from his. 'I am an ignorant shop girl. How could I be expected to understand the artistic pressures of your life? I am simply the one who washes your clothes and sits for hours, my body aching, while you fiddle with charcoal, and collects money from people to whom you do not want to seem ungenerous. Well, Édouard, I will leave you to it. Perhaps my absence will bring you some contentment.'

I stalked off down the bank of the Seine, bristling. He caught up with me in minutes. 'I'm sorry.'

I kept walking, my face set.

'Don't be cross, Sophie. I'm simply out of sorts.'

'But you don't have to make me out of sorts because of it. I'm only trying to help you.'

'I know. I know. Look, slow down. Please. Slow down and walk with your ungracious husband.' He held out his arm. His face was soft and pleading. He knew I could not resist him.

I glared at him, then took his arm and we walked some distance in silence. He put his hand over mine, and found that it was cold. 'Your gloves!'

'I forgot them.'

'Then where is your hat?' he said. 'You are freezing.'

'You know very well I have no winter hat. My velvet walking hat has moth, and I haven't had time to patch it.'

He stopped. 'You cannot wear a walking hat with patches.'

'It is a perfectly good hat. I just haven't had time to see to it.' I didn't add that that was because I was running around the Left Bank trying to find his materials and collect the money he was owed to pay for them.

We were outside one of the grandest hat shops in Paris. He saw it, and pulled us both to a standstill. 'Come,' he said.

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Don't disobey me, wife. You know I am easily tipped into the worst of moods.' He took my arm, and before I could protest further, we had stepped into the shop. The door closed behind us, the bell ringing, and I gazed around in awe. On shelves or stands around the walls, reflected in huge gilded looking-glasses, were the most beautiful hats I had ever seen: enormous, intricate creations in jet black or flashy scarlet, wide brims trimmed with fur or lace. Marabou shivered in the disturbed air. The room smelt of dried roses. The woman who emerged from the back was wearing a satin hobble skirt; the most fashionable garment on the streets of Paris.

'Can I help you?' Her eyes travelled over my three-year-old coat and windblown hair.

‘My wife needs a hat.’

I wanted to stop him then. I wanted to tell him that if he insisted on buying me a hat we could go to La Femme Marché, that I might even be able to get a discount. He had no idea that this place was a couturier’s salon, beyond the realms of women like me.

‘Édouard, I –’

‘A really special hat.’

‘Certainly, sir. Did you have anything in mind?’

‘Something like this one.’ He pointed at a huge, dark red wide-brimmed Directoire-styled hat trimmed with black marabou. Dyed black peacock feathers arced in a spray across its brim.

‘Édouard, you cannot be serious,’ I murmured. But she had already lifted it reverently from its place, and as I stood gaping at him, she placed it carefully on my head, tucking my hair behind my collar.

‘I think it would look better if Madame removed her scarf.’ She positioned me in front of the mirror and unwound my scarf with such care that it might have been made of spun gold. I barely felt her. The hat changed my face completely. I looked, for the first time in my life, like one of the women I used to serve.

‘Your husband has a good eye,’ the woman said.

‘That’s the one,’ Édouard said happily.

‘Édouard.’ I pulled him to one side, my voice low and alarmed. ‘Look at the label. It is the price of three of your paintings.’

‘I don’t care. I want you to have the hat.’

‘But you will resent it. You will resent me. You should spend the money on materials, on canvases. This is – it’s not me.’

He cut me off. He motioned to the woman. ‘I’ll take it.’

And then, as she instructed her assistant to fetch a box, he turned back to my reflection. He ran his hand lightly down the side of my neck, bent my head gently to one side, and met my eye in the mirror. Then, the hat tilting, he dropped his head and kissed my neck where it met my shoulder. His mouth stayed there long enough for me to colour, and for the two women to look away in shock and pretend to busy themselves. When I lifted my head again, my gaze a little unfocused, he was still watching me in the mirror.

‘It is you, Sophie,’ he said, softly. ‘It is always you …’

That hat was still in our apartment in Paris. A million miles out of reach.

I set my jaw, walked away from the mirror and began to dress myself in the blue wool.

I told Hélène after the last German officer had left that evening. We were sweeping the floor of the restaurant, dusting the last of the crumbs from the tables. Not that there were many: even the Germans tended to pick up any strays, these days – the rations seemed to leave everyone wishing for more. I stood, my broom in my hand, and asked her quietly to stop for a moment. Then I told her about my walk in the wood, what I had asked of the *Kommandant* and what he had asked in return.

She blanched. ‘You did not agree to it?’

‘I said nothing.’

‘Oh, thank God.’ She shook her head, her hand against her cheek. ‘Thank God he cannot hold you to anything.’

‘But … that does not mean I won’t go.’

My sister sat down abruptly at a table, and after a moment I slid into the seat opposite her. She thought briefly, then took my hands. ‘Sophie, I know you are panicked but you must think about what you are saying. Think of what they did to Liliane. You would really give yourself to a German?’

‘I … have not promised as much.’

She stared at me.

‘I think … the *Kommandant* is honourable in his way. And, besides, he may not even want me to … He didn’t say that in so many words.’

‘Oh, you cannot be so naïve!’ She raised her hands heavenwards. ‘The *Kommandant* shot an innocent man dead! You watched him smash the head of one of his own men into a wall for the most minor misdemeanour! And you would go alone into his quarters? You cannot do this! Think!’

‘I have thought about little else. The *Kommandant* likes me. I think he respects me, in his way. And if I do not do this Édouard will surely die. You know what happens in those places. The mayor believes him as good as dead already.’

She leaned over the table, her voice urgent. ‘Sophie – there is no guarantee that Herr Kommandant will act honourably. He is a German! Why on earth should you trust a word that he says? You could lie down with him and it would all be for nothing!’

I had never seen my sister so angry. ‘I have to go and speak with him. There is no other way.’

‘If this gets out, Édouard won’t want you.’

We stared at each other.

‘You think you can keep it from him? You can’t. You are too honest. And even if you tried, do you think this town wouldn’t let him know?’

She was right.

She looked down at her hands. Then she got up and poured herself a glass of water. She drank it slowly, glancing up at me twice, and as the silence lengthened, I began to feel her disapproval, the veiled question within it, and it made me angry. ‘You think I would do this lightly?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I don’t know you at all these days.’

It was like a slap. My sister and I glared at each other and I felt as though I were teetering on the edge of something. Nobody fights you like your own sister; nobody else knows the most vulnerable parts of you and will aim for them without mercy. The spectre of my dance with the *Kommandant* edged around us, and I had a sudden feeling that we were without boundaries.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘Answer me this, Hélène. If it were your only chance to save Jean-Michel, what would you do?’

At last I saw her waver.

‘Life or death. What would you do to save him? I know there are no limits to what you feel for him.’

She bit her lip and turned to the black window. ‘This could all go so wrong.’

‘It won’t.’

‘You may well believe that. But you are impulsive by nature. And it is not only your future in the balance.’

I stood then. I wanted to walk round the table to my sister. I wanted to crouch at her side and hold her and be told that it would all be all right, that we would all be safe. But her expression told me there was nothing more to say, so I brushed down my skirts and, broom in hand, walked towards the kitchen door.

I slept fitfully that night. I dreamed of Édouard, of his face contorted with disgust. I dreamed of us arguing, of myself trying again and again to convince him that I had only done what was right, while he turned away. In one dream, he pushed the chair back from the table at which we sat arguing, and when I looked he had no lower body: his legs and half of his torso were missing. *There*, he said to me. *Are you satisfied now?*

I woke sobbing, to find Édith gazing down at me, her eyes black, unfathomable. She reached out a hand and gently touched my wet cheek, as if in sympathy. I reached out and held her to me and we lay there in silence, wrapped around each other as the dawn broke.

I went through the day as if in a dream. I prepared breakfast for the children while Hélène went to the market, and watched as Aurélien, who was in one of his moods, took Édith to school. I opened the doors at ten o'clock and served the few people who came in at that time. Old René was laughing about some German military vehicle that had gone into a ditch down by the barracks, and could not be pulled out. This mishap caused merriment in the bar for a while. I smiled vaguely, and nodded that, yes, indeed, that would show them, yes, that was indeed fine German steering. I saw and heard it all as if from the inside of a bubble.

At lunchtime Aurélien and Édith came in for a piece of bread and a small knob of cheese, and while they sat in the kitchen we received a notice from the mayor, requesting blankets and several sets of cutlery to go to a new billet a mile down the road. There was much grumbling as our customers observed the piece of paper and recalled that they, too, would return home to similar notices. Some small part of me was glad to be seen as part of the requisitioning.

At three o'clock we paused to watch a German medical convoy pass, the line of vehicles and horses making our road vibrate. The bar was silent for some minutes afterwards. At four o'clock the mayor's wife came in and thanked everyone for their kind letters and thoughts, and we asked her to stay for a cup of coffee but she refused. She was not good company, she said apologetically. She made her way unsteadily back across the square, her husband supporting her by the elbow.

At half past four the last customers left for the day, and I knew, with dusk falling, that there would be no more, even though we were open for another half-hour. I walked along the dining-room windows, pulling down each blind so that our interior was again obscured. In the kitchen Hélène was checking spellings with Édith, and occasionally breaking off to sing songs with Mimi and Jean. Édith had taken a fancy to little Jean, and Hélène had remarked several times what a help the little girl was, playing with him so much. Hélène had never once questioned my decision to bring her into our home; it would not have occurred to her to turn a child away, even though it meant less food for each of us.

When I went upstairs, I pulled down my journal from the rafters. I made as if to write, then realized I had nothing to say. Nothing that would not incriminate me. I tucked the journal back into its hiding place, and wondered whether I would ever have anything to say to my husband again.

The Germans came, without the *Kommandant*, and we fed them. They were subdued; I found myself hoping, as I often did, that this meant some terrible news on their side. Hélène kept glancing at me as we worked; I could see her trying to decide what I was going to do. I served, poured wine, washed up, and accepted with a curt nod the thanks of those men who congratulated us on the meal. Then, as the last of them left, I scooped up Édith, who was asleep on the stairs again, and took her to my room. I laid her in

the bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. I gazed at her for a moment, gently moving a strand of hair away from her cheek. She stirred, her face troubled even in sleep.

I watched to make sure she wouldn't wake. Then I brushed my hair and pinned it, my movements slow and considered. As I stared at my reflection in the candlelight, something caught my eye. I turned and picked up a note that had been pushed under the door. I stared at the words, at Hélène's handwriting.

Once it is done, it cannot be undone.

And then I thought of the dead boy prisoner in his oversized shoes, the raggle-taggle men who had made their way up the road even that afternoon. And it was suddenly very simple: there was no choice.

I placed the note in my hiding place, then made my way silently down the stairs. At the bottom, I gazed at the portrait on the wall, then lifted it carefully from its hook and wrapped it in a shawl, so that none of it was exposed. I covered myself with another two shawls and stepped out into the dark. As I closed the door behind me, I heard my sister whisper from upstairs, her voice a warning bell.

Sophie.

9

After so many months spent inside under curfew it felt strange to be walking in the dark. The icy streets of the little town were deserted, the windows blank, the curtains unmoving. I walked along briskly in the shadows, a shawl pulled high over my head in the hope that even if someone happened to look out they would see only an unidentifiable shape hurrying through the backstreets.

It was bitterly cold, but I barely felt it. I was numb. As I made the fifteen-minute journey to the outskirts of town, to the Fourrier farm where the Germans had billeted themselves almost a year earlier, I lost the ability to think. I became a thing, walking. I was afraid that if I let myself think about where I was going, I would not be able to make my legs move, one foot placing itself in front of the other. If I thought, I would hear my sister's warnings, the unforgiving voices of the other townspeople if it were to emerge that I had been seen visiting Herr Kommandant under cover of night. I might hear my own fear.

Instead I muttered my husband's name like a mantra: *Édouard. I will free Édouard. I can do this.* I held the painting tight under my arm.

I had reached the outskirts of the town. I turned left where the dirt road became rough and rutted, the lane's already pocked surface further destroyed by the military vehicles that passed up and down. My father's old horse had broken a leg in one of these ruts the previous year: he had been ridden too hard by some German who hadn't been looking where he was going. Aurélien had wept when he heard the news. Just another blameless casualty of the occupation. These days, nobody wept for horses.

I will bring Édouard home.

The moon disappeared behind a cloud and I stumbled down the farm track, my feet several times disappearing into ruts of icy water so that my shoes and stockings were drenched and my cold fingers tightened round the painting for fear that I would drop it. I could just make out the distant lights within the house, and I kept walking towards them. Dim shapes moved ahead of me on the verges, rabbits perhaps, and the outline of a fox crept across the road, pausing briefly to stare at me, insolent and unafraid. Moments later I heard the terrified squeal of a rabbit and had to force down the bile it brought to my throat.

The farm loomed ahead now, its lights blazing. I heard the rumble of a truck and my breath quickened. I leaped backwards into a hedge, ducking out of the beam of the headlights as a military vehicle bounced and whined its way past. In the rear, under a flap of canvas, I could just make out the faces of women, seated beside each other. I stared as they disappeared, then pulled myself out of the hedge, my shawls catching on the twigs. There were rumours that the Germans brought in girls from outside the town; until now I had believed them to be just that. I thought of Liliane again and offered up a silent prayer.

I was at the entrance to the farm. A hundred feet ahead of me I saw the truck stop, the shadowy forms of women walking in silence to a door on the left, as if this were a route they had taken many times before. I heard men's voices, the distant sound of singing.

'*Halt.*'

The soldier stepped out in front of me. I jumped. He lifted his rifle, then peered more closely. He gestured towards the other women.

'No … no. I am here to see Herr Kommandant.'

He gestured again, impatiently.

'*Nein*,' I said, louder. 'Herr Kommandant. I have … an appointment.'

'Herr Kommandant?'

I could not see his face. But the silhouette appeared to study me, then strode across the yard to where I could just make out a door. He rapped on it, and I heard a muttered conversation. I waited, my heart thumping, my skin prickling with anxiety.

'*Wie heist?*' he said, when he returned.

'I am Madame Lefèvre,' I whispered.

He gestured to my shawl, which I pulled briefly from my head, exposing my face. He waved towards a door across the courtyard. '*Diese Tur. Obergeschosse. Grune Tur auf der rechten Seite.*'

'What?' I said. 'I don't understand.'

He grew impatient again. '*Da, da*.' He gestured, taking my elbow and propelling me forwards roughly. I was shocked that he would treat a visitor to the *Kommandant* in such a way. And then it dawned on me: my protestations that I was married were meaningless. I was simply another woman, calling on Germans after dark. I was glad that he could not see the colour that sprang to my cheeks. I wrenched my elbow from his grasp and walked stiffly towards the small building on the right.

It was not hard to see which room was his: light crept from under only one door. I hesitated outside, then knocked and said quietly, 'Herr Kommandant?'

The sound of footsteps, the door opened, and I took a small step back. He was out of his uniform, dressed in a striped, collarless shirt and braces, a book dangling from one hand, as if I had interrupted him. He looked at me, half smiled, as if in greeting, and stepped back to allow me in.

The room was large, thick with beams, and its floorboards covered with rugs, several of which I thought I recognized from the homes of my neighbours. There was a small table and chairs, a military chest, its brass corners glowing in the light of two acetylene lamps, a coat hook, from which hung his uniform, and a large easy chair by a generously stacked fire. Its warmth was evident even from the other side of the room. In the corner was a bed, with two thick quilts. I glanced at it and looked away.

'Here.' He was standing behind me, lifting the shawls from my back. 'Let me take these.'

I allowed him to remove them and hang them on the coat hook, still clutching the painting to my chest. Even as I stood almost paralysed, I felt ashamed of my shabby clothing. We could not wash clothes often in this cold: wool took weeks to dry, or simply froze into rigid shapes outside.

'It's bitter out,' he observed. 'I can feel it on your clothes.'

'Yes.' My voice, when it emerged, sounded unlike my own.

'This is a hard winter. And I think we have some months of it to come yet. Would you like a drink?' He moved to a small table, and poured two glasses of wine from a carafe. I took one from him wordlessly. I was still shivering from my walk.

'You can put the package down,' he said.

I had forgotten I was holding it. I lowered it to the floor, still standing.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Please sit.’ He seemed almost irritated when I hesitated, as if my nervousness were an insult.

I sat on one of the wooden chairs, one hand resting against the frame of the painting. I don’t know why I found it a comfort.

‘I did not come to eat at the hotel tonight. I thought about what you said, that you are already considered a traitor for our presence in your home.’

I took a sip of my wine.

‘I do not wish to cause you more problems, Sophie … more than we already cause you by our occupation.’

I didn’t know what to say to this. I took another sip. His eyes kept darting to mine, as if he were waiting for some response.

From across the courtyard we could hear singing. I wondered whether the girls were with the men, then who they were, which villages they had come from. Would they, too, be paraded through the streets as criminals afterwards for what they had done? Did they know the fate of Liliane Béthune?

‘Are you hungry?’ He gestured towards a small tray of bread and cheese. I shook my head. I had had no appetite all day.

‘It’s not quite up to the normal standards of your cooking, I admit. I was thinking the other day of that duck dish you made last month. With the orange. Perhaps you would do that for us again.’ He kept talking. ‘But our supplies are dwindling. I found myself dreaming of a Christmas cake called *Stollen*. Do you have it in France?’

I shook my head again.

We sat on each side of the fire. I felt electrified, as if each part of me were fizzing, transparent. I felt as if he could see through my skin. He knew everything. He held everything. I listened to the distant voices, and every now and then my presence there hit me. *I am alone with a* Kommandant, *in the German barracks. In a room with a bed.*

‘Did you think about what I said?’ I blurted out.

He stared at me for a minute. ‘You would not allow us the pleasure of a small conversation?’

I swallowed. ‘I’m sorry. But I must know.’

He took a sip of wine. ‘I have thought of little else.’

‘Then …’ My breath stalled in my chest. I leaned over, put my glass down and unwrapped the painting. I placed it against the chair, lit by the fire, so that he could see it in its finest aspect. ‘Will you take it? Will you take it in exchange for my husband’s freedom?’

The air in the room grew still. He didn’t look at the picture. His eyes stayed on mine, unblinking, unreadable.

‘If I could convey to you what this painting means to me … if you knew how it had kept me going in the darkest of days … you would know I could not offer it lightly. But I … would not mind the painting going to you, Herr Kommandant.’

‘Friedrich. Call me Friedrich.’

‘Friedrich. I … have long known that you understood my husband’s work. You understand beauty. You understand what an artist puts of himself into a piece of work, and why it is a thing of infinite value. So while it will break my heart to lose it, I give it willingly. To you.’

He was still staring at me. I did not look away. Everything depended on this moment. I saw an old scar running several inches from his left ear down his neck, a lightly silvered ridge. I saw that his bright blue eyes were rimmed with black, as if someone had drawn around each iris for emphasis.

'It was never about the painting, Sophie.'

And there it was: confirmation of my fate.

I closed my eyes briefly and let myself absorb this knowledge.

The *Kommandant* began to talk about art. He spoke of an art teacher he had known as a young man, a teacher who had opened his eyes to work far from the classicism of his upbringing. He spoke of how he had tried to explain this rougher, more elemental way of painting to his father, and his disappointment at the older man's incomprehension. 'He told me it looked "unfinished",' he said sadly. 'He believed that veering from the traditional was an act of rebellion in itself. I think my wife is much the same.'

I barely heard him. I lifted my glass and took a long draught. 'May I have some more?' I said. I emptied it, then asked for it to be refilled again. I have never drunk like that, before or since. I didn't care if I appeared rude. The *Kommandant* continued to talk, his voice a low monotone. He didn't ask anything of me in return: it was as if he wanted me only to listen. He wanted me to know that there was someone else behind the uniform and the peaked cap. But I barely heard him. I wished to blur the world around me, for this decision not to be mine.

'Do you think we would have been friends, if we had met in other circumstances? I like to think we would.'

I tried to forget that I was there, in that room, with a German's eyes upon me. I wanted to be a thing, unfeeling, unknowing.

'Perhaps.'

'Will you dance with me, Sophie?'

The way he kept saying my name, as if he were entitled to.

I put down my glass and stood, my arms useless at my sides as he walked over to the gramophone and put on a slow waltz. He moved towards me and hesitated just a minute before putting his arms around me. As the music crackled into life, we began to dance. I moved slowly around the room, my hand in his, my fingers light against the soft cotton of his shirt. I danced, my mind blank, vaguely conscious of his head as it came to rest against mine. I smelt soap and tobacco, felt his trousers brush against my skirt. He held me, not pulling me to him, but carefully, as one might hold something fragile. I closed my eyes, allowing myself to sink into a haze, trying to train my mind to follow the music, to put myself somewhere else. Several times I tried to imagine he was Édouard, but my mind wouldn't let me. Everything about this man was too different: his feel, his size against mine, the scent of his skin.

'Sometimes,' he said softly, 'it seems there is so little beauty left in this world. So little joy. You think life is harsh in your little town. But if you saw what we see outside it … Nobody wins. Nobody wins in a war like this.'

It was as if he was speaking to himself. My fingers rested on his shoulder. I could feel the muscles move beneath his shirt as he breathed.

'I am a good man, Sophie,' he murmured. 'It is important to me that you understand that. That we understand each other.'

And then the music stopped. He released me reluctantly, and went to reset the needle. He waited for the music to start again, and then, instead of dancing, he gazed for a moment at my portrait. I felt a glimmer of hope – perhaps he would still change his mind? – but then, after the slightest hesitation, he reached up and gently pulled one of the pins from my hair. As I stood, frozen, he removed the remaining pins carefully, one by one, placing them on the table, letting my hair fall softly around my face. He had drunk almost nothing but there was a glazed quality to his expression, as he watched, melancholy. His eyes searched mine, asking a question. My own gaze was unblinking, like that of a porcelain doll. But I did not look away.

As the last of my hair was released, he lifted a hand and allowed the lock to trail through his fingers. His stillness was that of a man afraid to move, a hunter unwilling to startle his prey. And then he took my face gently between his hands and kissed me. I felt momentary panic; I couldn't bring myself to kiss him back. But I allowed my lips to part for his, closed my eyes. Shock made my body alien to me. I felt his hands tighten around my waist, felt him propelling me backwards towards the bed. And all the while a silent voice reminded me that this was a trade. I was buying my husband his freedom. All I had to do was breathe. I kept my eyes closed, lay down against the impossible softness of the quilts. I felt his hands on my feet, pulling my shoes off, and then they were on my legs, sliding slowly up under my skirt. I could feel his eyes on my flesh as they rose higher.

Édouard.

He kissed me. He kissed my mouth, my chest, my bare stomach, his breathing audible, lost in a world of his own imaginings. He kissed my knees, my stockinged thighs, letting his mouth rest against bare skin as if its proximity were a source of unbearable pleasure. 'Sophie,' he murmured. 'Oh, Sophie …'

And as his hands reached the innermost part of my thighs, some treacherous part of me sparked into life, a warmth that was nothing to do with the fire. Some part of me divorced itself from my heart, and let slip its hunger for touch, for the weight of a body against my own. As his lips traced my skin, I shifted slightly and out of nowhere a moan escaped my mouth. But the urgency of his response, the quickening of his breath on my face, quelled it as fast as it was born. My skirts were pushed up, my blouse pulled from my chest, and as I felt his mouth on my breast, I found myself turning, like some mythical figure, to stone.

German lips. German hands.

He was on top of me now, his weight pinning me to the bed. I could feel his hands tugging at my underclothes, desperate to get inside them. He pushed my knee to one side, half collapsing on my chest in his desperation. I felt him hard, unyielding, against my leg. Something ripped. And then, with a little gasp, he was inside me, and my eyes were tight shut, my jaw clenched to stop myself crying out in protest.

In. In. In. I could hear the hoarseness of his breathing in my ear, feel the faint sheen of his sweat against my skin, the buckle of his belt against my thigh. My body moved, propelled by the urgency of his. *Oh, God, what have I done? In. In. In.* My fists closed around two handfuls of quilt, my thoughts jumbled and transient. Some distant part of me resented their soft, heavy warmth more than almost anything. Stolen from someone. Like they stole everything. Occupied. I was occupied. I disappeared. I was in a street in Paris, rue Soufflot. The sun was shining, and around me, as I walked, I could see Parisian women in their finery, the pigeons strutting through the dappled shadows of the trees. My husband's arm was linked through mine. I wanted to say something to him but instead I let out a small sob. The scene stilled, and evaporated. And then I was aware dimly that it had stopped. The pushing slowed, then stopped.

Everything had stopped. The thing. His thing was no longer inside me but soft, curling apologetically against my groin. I opened my eyes, and found myself looking straight into his.

The *Kommandant*'s face, inches from my own, was flushed, his expression agonized. I stopped breathing as I grasped his predicament. I didn't know what to do. But his eyes locked on mine and he knew that I knew. He pushed himself roughly backwards so that his weight was off me.

'You –' he began.

'What?' I was conscious of my exposed breasts, my skirt bunched around my waist.

'Your expression … so …'

He stood, and I averted my eyes while I heard him pull up his trousers and fasten them. He stared rigidly away from me, one hand on the top of his head.

'I – I'm sorry,' I began. I wasn't sure what I was apologizing for. 'What did I do?'

'You – you – I didn't want that!' He gestured towards me. 'Your face …'

'I don't understand.' I was almost angry then, accosted by the unfairness of it. Did he have any idea what I had endured? Did he know what it had cost me to let him touch me? 'I did what you wanted!'

'I didn't want you like that! I wanted …' he said, his hand lifted in frustration. 'I wanted *this*! I wanted the girl in the painting!'

We both stared in silence at the portrait. The girl gazed steadily back at us, her hair around her neck, her expression challenging, glorious, sexually replete. My face.

I pulled my skirts over my legs, clutched my blouse around my neck. When I spoke, my voice was thick, tremulous. 'I gave you … Herr Kommandant … everything I was capable of giving.'

His eyes became opaque, a sea that had frozen. The tic jumped in his jaw, a juddering pulse. 'Get out,' he said quietly.

I blinked.

'I'm sorry,' I stammered, when I realized I had heard him correctly. 'If … I can … '

'GET OUT!' he roared. He grabbed my shoulder, his fingers digging into my flesh, and wrenched me across the room.

'My shoes … my shawls!'

'OUT, DAMN YOU!' I had time only to grab my painting, and then I was propelled out of the door, stumbling to my knees at the top of the stairs, my mind still struggling to grasp what was happening. There was the sound of a tremendous crash behind the door. And then another, this time accompanied by the sound of splintering glass. I glanced behind me. Then, barefoot, I ran down the stairs, across the courtyard and fled.

It took me almost an hour to walk home. I lost the feeling in my feet after a quarter of a mile. By the time I reached the town they were so frozen that I was not aware of the cuts and grazes I had collected on the long walk up the flinted farm track. I walked on, stumbling through the dark, the painting under my arm, shivering in my thin blouse, and I felt nothing. As I walked, my shock gave way to understanding of what I had done, and what I had lost. My mind spun with it. I walked through the deserted streets of my home town, no longer caring if anyone saw me.

I reached Le Coq Rouge shortly before one o'clock. I heard the clock chime a solitary note as I stood outside, and wondered briefly whether it would be better for everyone if I failed to let myself in at all. And then, as I stood there, a tiny glow appeared behind the gauze curtain and the bolts were drawn back

on the other side. Hélène appeared, her night bonnet on, her white shawl around her. She must have waited up for me.

I looked up at her, my sister, and I knew then that she had been right all along. I knew that what I had done had put our entire family at risk. I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I wanted to tell her I understood the depth of my mistake, and that my love for Édouard, my desperation for our life together to continue, had made me blind to everything else. But I couldn't speak. I just stood in the doorway, mute.

Her eyes widened as she took in my bare shoulders, my naked feet. She reached out a hand and pulled me in, closing the door behind her. She placed her shawl around my shoulders, smoothed my hair back from my face. Wordlessly, she led me to the kitchen, closed the door and lit the range. She heated a cup of milk, and as I held it (I couldn't drink it), she unhooked our tin bath from its place on the wall and put it on the floor, in front of the range. She filled copper pot after copper pot with water, which she boiled, wrenched from the stove and poured into the bath. When it was full enough, she walked around me and carefully removed the shawl. She unlaced my blouse, then lifted my chemise over my head, as she might with a child. She unbuttoned my skirts at the back, loosened my corset, then unhooked my petticoats, laying them all on the kitchen table until I was naked. As I began to shake, she took my hand and helped me step into the bath.

The water was scalding, but I barely felt it. I lowered myself so that most of me, except my knees and shoulders, was under the water, ignoring the stinging of the cuts on my feet. And then my sister rolled up her sleeves, took a washcloth, and began to soap me, from my hair to my shoulders, from my back to my feet. She bathed me in silence, her hands tender as she worked, lifting each limb, gently wiping between each finger, carefully ensuring that there was no part of me not cleansed. She bathed the soles of my feet, delicately removing the small pieces of stone that had embedded themselves in the cuts. She washed my hair, rinsing it with a bowl until the water ran clear, then combed it out, strand by strand. She took the washcloth, and wiped at the tears that rolled silently down my cheeks. All the while she said nothing. Finally, as the water began to cool and I started to shake again, from cold or exhaustion or something else entirely, she took a large towel and wrapped me in it. Then she held me, put me into a nightgown and led me upstairs to my bed.

'Oh, Sophie,' I heard her murmur, as I drifted into sleep. And I think I knew even then what I had brought down upon us all.

'What have you done?'

10

Days passed. Hélène and I went about our daily business like two actors. From afar perhaps we looked as we always had, but each of us floundered in a growing unease. Neither of us talked about what had happened. I slept little, sometimes only two hours a night. I struggled to eat. My stomach coiled itself tightly around my fear even as the rest of me threatened to unravel.

I returned compulsively to the events of that fateful evening, berating myself for my naïvety, my stupidity, my pride. For it must have been pride that had brought me to this. If I had pretended to enjoy the *Kommandant*'s attentions, if I had imitated my own portrait, I might have won his admiration. I might have saved my husband. Would that have been such a terrible thing to do? Instead I had held on to this ridiculous notion that by allowing myself to become a thing, a vessel, I was somehow lessening my infidelity. I was somehow being true to us. As if that could make any difference to Édouard.

Each day I waited, heart in mouth, and watched silently as the officers filed in and the *Kommandant* wasn't with them. I was afraid to see him, but I was more afraid of his absence and what it might mean. One night, Hélène plucked up the courage to ask the officer with the salt-and-pepper moustache where he was, but he just waved a hand and said he was 'too busy'. My sister's eyes met mine and I knew that was no comfort to either of us.

I watched Hélène and felt cowed by the weight of my guilt. Every time she glanced at the children I knew she was wondering what would become of them. Once, I saw her talking quietly to the mayor, and I thought I heard her asking him to take them, if anything happened to her. I say this because he looked appalled, as if he were astonished that she should even think such a thing. I saw the new lines of strain as they threaded their way around her eyes and jaw, and knew that they were my doing.

The smaller children seemed oblivious to our private fears. Jean and Mimi played as they always had, whining and complaining of cold or each other's minor transgressions. Hunger made them fractious. I dared not take the smallest scrap from the German supplies now, but it was hard telling them no. Aurélien was again locked in his own unhappiness. He ate silently, and spoke to neither of us. I wondered if he had been fighting again at school, but I was too preoccupied to give it further thought. Édith knew, though. She had the sensitivity of a divining rod. She stuck to my side at all times. At night she slept with my nightgown clenched in her right hand, and when I woke her big dark eyes would be fixed on my face. When I caught sight of my reflection, my face was haggard, unrecognizable even to myself.

News filtered through of two more towns taken by the Germans to the north-east. Our rations grew smaller. Each day seemed longer than the last. I served and cleaned and cooked but my thoughts were chaotic with exhaustion. Perhaps the *Kommandant* simply wouldn't appear. Perhaps his shame at what had happened between us meant he couldn't face seeing me. Perhaps he, too, felt guilt. Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps Édouard would walk through the door. Perhaps the war would end tomorrow. At this point I would usually have to sit down and take a breath.

‘Go upstairs and get some sleep,’ Hélène would murmur. I wondered if she hated me. I would have found it hard not to, if I were her.

Twice I returned to my hidden letters, from the months before we had become a German territory. I read Édouard’s words, about the friends he had made, their paltry rations, their good spirits, and it was like listening to a ghost. I read his words of tenderness to me, his promise that he would be with me soon, that I occupied his every waking thought.

I do this for France but, more selfishly, I do it for us, so that I may travel back across a Free France to my wife. The comforts of home; our studio, coffee in the Bar du Lyons, our afternoons curled up in bed, you passing me pieces of peeled orange … Things that were domestic mundanity have now taken on the glowing hues of treasure. Do you know how much I long to bring you coffee? To watch you brush your hair? Do you know how I long to watch you laughing on the other side of the table, and know that I am the cause of your happiness? I bring out these memories to console myself, to remind me why I am here. Stay safe for me. Know that I remain

Your devoted husband.

I read his words and now there was an extra reason to wonder whether I would ever hear them again.

I was down in the cellar, changing one of the casks of ale, when I heard footsteps on the flagstones. Hélène’s silhouette appeared in the doorway, blocking out the light.

‘The mayor is here. He says the Germans are coming for you.’

My heart stopped.

She ran to the dividing wall, and began pulling the loose bricks from their placements. ‘Go on – you can get out through next door if you hurry.’ She pulled them out, her hands scrabbling in her haste. When she had created a hole about the width of a small barrel, she turned to me. She glanced down at her hands, wrenched off her wedding ring and handed it to me, before pulling her shawl from her shoulders. ‘Take this. Go now. I’ll hold them up. But hurry, Sophie, they’re coming across the square.’

I looked down at the ring in my palm. ‘I can’t,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

‘What if he keeps his side of the deal?’

‘Herr Kommandant? Deal? How on earth can he be keeping his side of the deal? They are coming for you, Sophie! They are coming to punish you, to imprison you in a camp. You have gravely offended him! They are coming to send you away!’

‘But think about it, Hélène. If he wanted to punish me, he would have had me shot or paraded through the streets. He would have done to me what he did to Liliane Béthune.’

‘And risk revealing what he was punishing you for? Have you taken leave of your senses?’

‘No.’ My thoughts had begun to clear. ‘He has had time to consider his temper and he is sending me to Édouard. I know it.’

She pushed me towards the hole. ‘This is not you talking, Sophie. It is lack of sleep, your fears, a mania … You will come to your senses soon. But you need to go now. The mayor says to go to Madame Poilâne so that you can stay in the barn with the false floor tonight. I’ll try and send word to you later.’

I shook off her arm. ‘No … no. Don’t you see? The *Kommandant* cannot possibly bring Édouard back here, not without making it obvious what he has done. But if he sends me away, with Édouard, he can free us both.’

‘Sophie! Enough talking now!’

‘I kept my side of the deal.’

‘GO!’

‘No.’ We stared at each other in the near dark. ‘I’m not going.’

I reached for her hand and placed the ring in it, closing her fingers around it. I repeated quietly, ‘I’m not going.’

Hélène’s face crumpled. ‘You cannot let them take you, Sophie. This is insanity. They are sending you to a prison camp! Do you hear me? A camp! The very thing you said would kill Édouard!’

But I barely heard her. I straightened up, and let out a breath. I felt strangely relieved. If they were coming only for me, Hélène was safe, the children too.

‘I was right about him all along, I am sure. He has thought about it all, in the light of day, and he knows I tried, despite everything, to keep to my side of things. He is an honourable man. He said we were friends.’

My sister was crying now. ‘Please, Sophie, please don’t do this. You don’t know your own mind. You still have time –’ She tried to block my path, but I pushed past her and began to walk up the stairs.

They were already in the entrance to the bar when I emerged, two of them in uniform. The bar was silent and twenty pairs of eyes landed on me. I could see old René, his hand trembling on the edge of the table, Mesdames Louvier and Durant talking in hushed voices. The mayor was with one of the officers, gesticulating wildly, trying to convince him to change his mind, that there must have been some mistake.

‘It is the orders of the *Kommandant*,’ the officer said.

‘But she has done nothing! This is a travesty!’

‘*Courage*, Sophie,’ someone shouted.

I felt as if I were in a dream. Time seemed to slow, the voices fading around me.

One of the officers beckoned me forwards and I stepped outside. The sun’s watery light flooded the square. There were people standing on the street, waiting to see the cause of the commotion in the bar. I stopped for a moment and gazed around me, blinking in the daylight after the gloom of the cellar. Everything seemed suddenly crystalline, redrawn in a finer, brighter image, as if it were imprinting itself on my memory. The priest was standing outside the post office, and he crossed himself when he saw the vehicle they had sent to take me away. It was, I realized, the one that had transported those women to the barracks. That night seemed an age ago.

The mayor was shouting: ‘We will not allow this! I want to register an official complaint! This is the limit! I will not let you take this girl without speaking to the *Kommandant* first!’

‘These are his orders.’

A small group of older people were beginning to surround the men, as if to form a barrier.

‘You cannot persecute innocent women!’ Madame Louvier was declaiming. ‘You take over her home, make her your servant, and now you would imprison her? For no reason?’

‘Sophie. Here.’ My sister reappeared at my shoulder. ‘At least take your things.’ She thrust a canvas bag at me. It overflowed with belongings she had hurriedly stuffed into it. ‘Just stay safe. Do you hear me? Stay safe and come back to us.’

The crowd was murmuring its protest. It had become a febrile, angry thing, growing in size. I glanced sideways and saw Aurélien, his face furious and flushed, standing on the pavement with Monsieur Suel. I didn’t want him to get involved. If he turned on the Germans now it would be a disaster. And it was

important that Hélène had an ally these next few months. I pushed my way towards him. 'Aurélien, you are the man of the house. You must take care of everyone when I am gone,' I began, but he stopped me.

'It is your own fault!' he blurted out. 'I know what you did! I know what you did with the German!'

Everything stopped. I looked at my brother, the mixture of anguish and fury on his face.

'I heard you and Hélène talking. I saw you come back that night!'

I registered the exchanges of glances around me. *Did Aurélien Bessette just say what I think he did?*

'It's not what –' I began. But he turned and bolted back into the bar.

A new silence fell. Aurélien's accusation was repeated in murmurs to those who hadn't heard it. I registered the shock on the faces around me, and Hélène's fearful glance sideways. I was Liliane Béthune now. But without the mitigating factor of resistance. The atmosphere hardened around me tangibly.

Hélène's hand reached for mine. 'You should have gone,' she was whispering, her voice breaking. 'You should have gone, Sophie …' She made as if to take hold of me, but she was pulled away.

One of the Germans grabbed my arm, pushing me towards the back of the truck. Someone shouted something from the distance, but I couldn't make out whether it was a protest at the Germans or some term of abuse aimed at me. Then I heard, '*Putain! Putain!*' and flinched. *He is sending me to Édouard*, I told myself, when my heart felt as if it would break out of my chest. *I know he is. I must have faith.*

And then I heard her, her voice breaking into the silence. '*Sophie!*' A child's voice, piercing and anguished. '*Sophie! Sophie!*' Édith burst through the crowd that had gathered and hurled herself at me and clutched my leg. 'Don't leave. You said you wouldn't leave.'

It was the most she had said aloud since she had come to us. I swallowed, my eyes filling with tears. I stooped and put my arms around her. *How can I leave her?* My thoughts blurred, my senses narrowing to the feel of her little hands.

And then I glanced up and saw how the German soldiers watched her, something speculative in their gaze. I reached up and smoothed her hair. 'Édith, you must stay with Hélène and be brave. Your *maman* and I will come back for you. I promise.'

She didn't believe me. Her eyes were wide with fear.

'Nothing bad is going to happen to me. I promise. I am going to see my husband.' I tried to make her believe me, to fill my voice with certainty.

'No,' she said, her grip tightening. 'No. Please don't leave me.'

My heart broke. I pleaded silently with my sister. *Take her away from here. Don't let her see.* Hélène prised her fingers from me. She was sobbing now. 'Please don't take my sister,' she said to the soldiers, as she pulled Édith away. 'She does not know her mind. Please don't take my sister. She does not deserve this.' The mayor put his arm around her shoulders, his expression confused, the fight knocked out of him by Aurélien's words.

'I will be all right, Édith. Be strong,' I called to her, above the noise. Then someone spat at me, and I saw it, a thin, vile trail, upon my sleeve. The crowd jeered. Panic filled me. 'Hélène?' I called. 'Hélène?'

German hands propelled me roughly into the back of the truck. I found myself in a dark interior, seated on a wooden bench. A soldier took his place opposite me, his rifle resting in the crook of his elbow. The canvas flap dropped down, and the engine fired into life. The noise swelled, and so did the sound of the crowd, as if this action had unleashed those who wished to abuse me. I wondered briefly if I could throw myself through the small gap, but then I heard, '*Whore!*' followed by Édith's thin wail, and the sharp crack

of a stone as it hit the side of the truck, causing the soldier to bark out a warning. I flinched as another struck, behind where I was sitting. The German looked at me steadily. The slight smirk in his expression told me of my terrible mistake.

I sat, my hands pressed together on my bag, and began to shake. As the truck pulled away, I did not try to lift the canvas flap to see out. I did not want to feel the eyes of the town upon me. I did not want to hear their verdict. I sat on the arch of the wheel, and slowly dropped my head into my hands, murmuring, '*Édouard, Édouard, Édouard,*' to myself. And: '*I'm sorry.*' I'm not sure who I was apologizing to.

Only when I reached the outskirts of the town did I dare to look up. Through the flapping gap in the canvas, I could just see the red sign of Le Coq Rouge glinting in the winter sun, and the bright blue of Édith's dress on the edge of the crowd. It grew smaller and smaller until finally, like the town, it disappeared.

PART TWO

11

London, 2006

Liv runs along the river, her bag wedged under her arm, her phone pressed between ear and shoulder. Somewhere around Embankment, the loaded grey skies over London have opened, dumping a near-tropical rainstorm across the centre of the capital, and the traffic sits stationary, the taxis' exhaust pipes steaming, their windows obscured by the breath of their passengers.

'I know,' she says, for the fifteenth time, her jacket darkened and her hair plastered to her head. 'I know … Yes, I'm well aware of the terms. I'm just waiting on a couple of payments that –' She ducks into a doorway, pulls a pair of high heels from her handbag and slips them on, staring at her wet pumps as she realizes she has nowhere to put them. 'Yes. Yes, I am … No, my circumstances haven't changed. Not recently.'

She ducks out of the doorway and heads back on to the pavement, crossing the road and heading up towards Aldwych, the wet pumps in one hand. A car sends a spray of water over her feet and she stops, staring at its departing wheels in disbelief. '*Are you kidding me?*' she yells. And then, 'No, not you, Mr … Dean. Not you, Dean … Yes, I do appreciate you're just doing your job. Look,' she says. 'I'll have the payment by Monday. Okay? It's not like I've been late paying before. Okay, once.'

Another taxi approaches and this time she ducks neatly back into a doorway. 'Yes. I understand, Dean … I know. It must be very hard for you. Look – I promise you'll have it on Monday … Yes. Yes, definitely. And I'm sorry about the whole shouting thing … I hope you get the new job too, Dean.'

She snaps shut her phone, stuffs it into her handbag, and looks up at the restaurant hoarding. She dips to check her reflection in a car mirror and despairs. There's nothing to be done. She's already forty minutes late.

Liv smoothes her wet hair from her face, and glances longingly back down the street. Then she takes a breath, pushes open the door of the restaurant and walks in.

'There she is!' Kristen Solberg stands up from her chair in the middle of the long table and opens her arms to greet her, air-kissing Liv noisily some inches from each side of her face. 'Oh, my goodness, you're drenched!' Her hair is, of course, an immaculate chestnut sheet.

'Yes. I walked. Not my best decision.'

'Everybody, this is Liv Halston. She does wonderful things for our charity. And she lives in *the* most amazing house in London.' Kristen smiles beneficently, then lowers her voice. 'I'll consider myself to have failed if she hasn't been snapped up by some lovely man before Christmas.'

There is a murmur of greeting. Liv prickles with embarrassment. She forces a smile, deliberately not meeting the eye of any of the people seated around her. Sven looks at her steadily, in his eyes an apology

for what is about to come.

'I saved you a seat,' Kristen says. 'Next to Roger. He's lovely.' She gives Liv a meaningful look as she directs her towards the empty chair. 'You'll love him.'

They are all couples. Of course they are. Eight of them. And Roger. She feels the women surveying her surreptitiously from behind polite smiles, trying to ascertain whether, as the only single woman there, she is likely to be a threat. It is an expression with which she has become wearyingly familiar. The men glance sideways, checking her out for a different reason. She feels the warm, garlicky blast of Roger's breath as he leans in and pats the chair beside him.

He holds out a hand. 'Rog. You're very wet.' He manages to make it sound faintly lascivious; the kind of ex-public-schoolboy who finds it impossible to talk to women without introducing a sexual undertow.

She pulls her jacket across her. 'Yes. Yes, I am.'

They smile vaguely at each other. He has sparse sandy hair, and the ruddy complexion of someone who spends a lot of time in the country. He pours her a glass of wine. 'So. What do you do then, *Liv*?' He says her name as if she may have invented it and he is humouring her.

'Copywriting mainly.'

'Well. Copywriting.' They both pause. 'Any children?'

'No. You?'

'Two. Boys. Both at boarding school. Best place for them, frankly. So … no children, eh? And no man in the wings. What are you, thirty-something?'

She swallows, tries to ignore the faint stab of his words. 'Thirty.'

'You don't want to hang around. Or are you one of those …' he holds up his fingers to make inverted commas '… career women?'

'Yes,' she says, and smiles. 'I had my ovaries removed when I last updated my CV. Just to be on the safe side.'

He gawps at her, then barks a laugh. 'Oh! Funny! Yes. A woman with a sense of humour. Very good … ovaries … hah.' His voice tails away. He takes a swig of wine. 'My wife left when she was thirty-nine. Apparently it's a tricky age for the girls.' He downs the rest of his glass and reaches for the bottle to refill it. 'Not too tricky for her, obviously, seeing as she got away with a Puerto Rican called Viktor, the house in France and half my bloody pension. Women …' He turns to her. 'Can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em, eh?' He lifts his arms and fires off an imaginary round of bullets into the restaurant ceiling.

It's going to be a long night. Liv keeps smiling, pours herself a second glass of wine, and buries herself in the menu, promising herself that, no matter how persuasive Kristen is next time, she will chew off her own arm rather than agree to go to any kind of dinner party ever again.

The evening stretches, the couples bitch about people she has never met, the courses come agonizingly slowly. Kristen sends her main back to be redone to her exact specifications. She lets out a weary little sigh, as if the kitchen's failure to put the spinach *on the side* is the most awful imposition. Sven gazes at her indulgently. Liv sits trapped between the broad back of a man called Martin, whose wife's friend seems determined to monopolize him, and Roger.

'Bitch,' he says, at one point.

'I'm sorry?'

‘First it was my nostril hair putting her off. Then my toenails. Always a reason why we couldn’t do the old … you know.’ He forms his thumb and finger into an O and slides his other index finger through it. ‘Or a headache. No such headaches with old Viktor, eh? Oh, no. I bet she doesn’t care how long his ruddy toenails are.’ He swigs from his glass. ‘Bet they’re at it like bloody rabbits.’

The lamb is congealing on her plate. She puts her knife and fork neatly together.

‘What happened to you, then?’

She glances up at him, hoping he doesn’t mean – but of course he does.

‘Kristen said you were married before. To Sven’s business partner.’

‘I was.’

‘Left you, did he?’

She swallows. Composes her face into a blank. ‘In a manner of speaking.’

Roger shakes his head. ‘I don’t know. What’s wrong with people, these days? Why can’t they just be satisfied with what they’re given?’ He takes a toothpick and digs vigorously into a back molar, pausing to examine his pickings with grim relish.

Liv looks down the table and meets Kristen’s eye. Kristen lifts both brows suggestively, and gives her a surreptitious thumbs-up. *Big hit!* she mouths.

‘Will you excuse me?’ Liv says, pushing back her chair. ‘I really need to visit the Ladies.’

Liv sits in the silent cubicle for as long as she can without someone staging an intervention, listening as several women come in and perform ablutions. She checks for non-existent email and plays Scrabble on her phone. Finally, after scoring ‘flux’, she gets up, flushes the loo and washes her hands, staring at her reflection with a kind of perverse satisfaction. Her makeup has smudged beneath one eye. She fixes this in the mirror, wondering why she bothers, given that she is about to sit next to Roger again.

She checks her watch. When can she beg an early-morning meeting and head for home? With luck, Roger will be so drunk by the time she goes back out that he will have forgotten she was even there.

Liv takes one last look at her reflection, pushes her hair off her face and grimaces at her appearance. *What’s the point?* And then she opens the door.

‘Liv! Liv, come here! I want to tell you something!’ Roger is standing, gesticulating wildly. His face is even redder and his hair is standing upright on one side. It’s possible that he is, she thinks, half man, half ostrich. She feels a momentary panic at the prospect of having to spend another half-hour in his company. She’s used to this: an almost overwhelming physical desire to remove herself, to be out on the dark streets alone; not having to be anyone at all.

She sits gingerly, like someone prepared to sprint, and drinks another half-glass of wine. ‘I really should go,’ she says, and there is a wave of protest from the other occupants of the table, as if this is some kind of personal affront. She stays. Her smile is a rictus. She finds herself watching the couples, the domestic cracks becoming visible with each glass of wine. That one dislikes her husband. She rolls her eyes with every second comment he makes. This man is bored with everyone, possibly with his wife. He checks his mobile compulsively beneath the rim of the table. She gazes up at the clock, nods dully at Roger’s breathy litany of marital unfairness. She plays a silent game of Dinner Party Bingo. She scores a School Fees and a House Prices. She is on the verge of a Last Year’s Holiday In Europe Full House when someone taps her on the shoulder.

‘Excuse me. You have a phone call.’

Liv spins round. The waitress has pale skin and long dark hair, which opens around her face like a pair of half-drawn curtains. She is beckoning with her notepad. Liv is conscious of a flicker of familiarity.

'What?'

'Urgent phone call. I think it's family.'

Liv hesitates. *Family?* But it's a sliver of light in a tunnel. 'Oh,' she says. 'Oh, right.'

'Would you like me to show you the phone?'

'Urgent phone call,' she mouths at Kristen, and points at the waitress, who points towards the kitchens.

Kristen's face arranges itself into an expression of exaggerated concern. She stoops to say something to Roger, who glances behind him and reaches out a hand as if to stop her. And then Liv is gone, following the short dark girl through the half-empty restaurant, past the bar and down the wood-panelled corridor.

After the gloom of the seating area the glare of the kitchen is blinding, the dulled sheen of steel surfaces bouncing light across the room. Two men in white ignore her, passing pans towards a washing-up station. Something is frying, hissing and spitting in a corner; someone speaks rapid-fire Spanish. The girl gestures through a set of swing doors, and suddenly she is in another back lobby, a cloakroom.

'Where's the phone?' Liv says, when they come to a halt.

The girl pulls a packet of cigarettes from her apron and lights one. 'What phone?' she says blankly.

'You said I had a call?'

'Oh. That. There isn't a phone. You just looked like you needed rescuing.' She inhales, lets out a long sliver of smoke and waits for a moment. 'You don't recognize me, do you? Mo. Mo Stewart.' She sighs, when Liv frowns. 'I was in your course at uni. Renaissance and Italian Painting. And Life Drawing.'

Liv thinks back to her degree. And suddenly she can see her: the little Goth girl in the corner, near silent in every class, her expression a careful blank, her nails painted a violent, glittering purple. 'Wow. You haven't changed a bit.' This is not a lie. As she says it, she is not entirely sure it's a compliment.

'You have,' says Mo, examining her. 'You look … I don't know. Geeky …'

'Geeky.'

'Maybe not geeky. Different. Tired. Mind you, I don't suppose being sat next to Tim Nice But Dim there is a barrel of laughs. What is it? Some kind of singles night?'

'Just for me, apparently.'

'Christ. Here.' She hands Liv a cigarette. 'Spark that up, and I'll go out and tell them you've had to leave. Great-aunt with a violent palsy. Or something darker? Aids? Ebola? Any preferences as to the degree of suffering?' She hands Liv the lighter.

'I don't smoke.'

'It's not for you. This way I can get two in before Dino notices. Will she want your share of the bill?'

'Oh. Good point.' Liv scrabbles in her bag for her purse. She feels suddenly light-headed at the prospect of freedom.

Mo takes the notes, counts them carefully. 'My tip?' she says, straight-faced. She does not appear to be joking.

Liv blinks, then peels off an extra five-pound note and hands it to her. 'Ta,' says Mo, tucking it into the pocket of her apron. 'Do I look tragic?' She pulls a face of mild disinterest and then, as if accepting that she doesn't have the appropriate facial muscles for concern, disappears back down the corridor.

Liv is unsure whether to leave or whether she should wait for the girl to return. She gazes around her at the back lobby, at the cheap coats on the rack, the grubby bucket and mop underneath them, and finally sits down on a wooden stool, the cigarette useless in her hand. When she hears footsteps, she stands, but it's a Mediterranean-skinned man, his skull shining in the dim light. The owner? He is holding a glass of amber liquid. 'Here,' he says, offering it to her. And when she protests, he adds, 'For the shock.' He winks and is gone.

Liv sits and sips the drink. In the distance, through the clatter of the kitchen, she can hear Roger's voice lifting in protest, the scraping of chairs. She checks her watch. It is a quarter past eleven. The chefs emerge from the kitchen, pull their coats from the rack and disappear, giving her a faint nod as they pass, as if it's not unusual for a customer to spend twenty minutes nursing a brandy in the staff corridor.

When Mo reappears she is no longer wearing an apron. She is holding a set of keys, walks past Liv and locks the fire door. 'They've gone,' she says, pulling her black hair back into a knot. 'Your Hot Date said something about wanting to console you. I'd turn your mobile off for a bit.'

'Thank you,' said Liv. 'That was really very kind.'

'Not at all. Coffee?'

The restaurant is empty. Liv stares at the table where she had sat, as the waiter sweeps efficiently around the chairs, then distributes cutlery with the unthinking, metronomic efficiency of someone who has done this a thousand times. Mo primes the coffee machine, and gestures to her to sit. Liv would really rather go home, but understands there is a price to be paid for her freedom, and a brief, slightly stilted conversation about the Good Old Days is probably it.

'I can't believe they all left so suddenly,' she says, as Mo lights another cigarette.

'Oh. Someone saw a message on a BlackBerry that she shouldn't have. It all kicked off a bit,' Mo says. 'I don't think business lunches usually involve nipple clamps.'

'You heard that?'

'You hear everything in here. Most customers don't stop talking when waiters are around.' She switches on the milk-frother, adding, 'An apron gives you superpowers. It actually makes you pretty much invisible.'

Liv had not registered Mo's appearance at her table, she thinks uncomfortably. Mo is looking at her with a small smile, as if she can hear her thoughts. 'It's okay. I'm used to being the Great Unnoticed.'

'So,' says Liv, accepting a coffee. 'What have you been doing?'

'In the last nearly ten years? Um, this and that. Waitressing suits me. I don't have the ambition for bar work.' She says this deadpan. 'You?'

'Oh, just some freelance stuff. I work for myself. I don't have the personality for office work.' Liv smiles.

Mo takes a long drag of her cigarette. 'I'm surprised,' she says. 'You were always one of the Golden Girls.'

'Golden Girls?'

'Oh, you and your tawny crew, all legs and hair and men around you, like satellites. Like something out of Scott Fitzgerald. I thought you'd be … I don't know. On telly. Or in the media, or acting or something.'

If Liv had read these words on a page, she might have detected an edge to them. But there is no rancour in Mo's voice. 'No,' she says, and looks at the hem of her shirt.

Liv finishes her coffee. The remaining waiter has gone. And Mo's cup is empty. It is a quarter to twelve. 'Do you need to lock up? Which way are you walking?'

'Nowhere. I'm staying here.'

'You have a flat here?'

'No, but Dino doesn't mind.' Mo stubs out her cigarette, gets up and empties the ashtray. 'Actually, Dino doesn't know. He just thinks I'm really conscientious. The last to leave every evening. "Why can't the others be more like you?"' She jerks a thumb behind her. 'I have a sleeping-bag in my locker and I set my alarm for five thirty. Little bit of a housing issue at the moment. As in, I can't afford any.'

Liv stares.

'Don't look so shocked. That banquette is more comfortable than some of the rental accommodation I've been in, I promise you.'

Afterwards she isn't sure what makes her say it. Liv rarely lets anyone into the house, let alone people she hasn't seen for years. But almost before she knows what she's doing, her mouth is opening and the words 'You can stay at mine,' are emerging. 'Just for tonight,' she adds, when she realizes what she has said. 'But I have a spare room. With a power shower.' Conscious that this may have sounded patronizing, she adds, 'We can catch up. It'll be fun.'

Mo's face is blank. Then she grimaces, as if it is she who is doing Liv the favour. 'If you say so,' she says, and goes to get her coat.

She can see her house long before she gets there: its pale blue glass walls stand out above the old sugar warehouse as if something extra-terrestrial has landed on the roof. David liked this; he liked to be able to point it out if they were walking home with friends or potential clients. He liked its incongruity against the dark brown brick of the Victorian warehouses, the way it caught the light, or carried the reflection of the water below. He liked the fact that the structure had become a feature of London's riverside landscape. It was, he said, a constant advertisement for his work.

When it was built, almost ten years ago, glass had been his construction material of choice, its components made sophisticated with thermal abilities, eco-friendliness. His work is distinctive across London; transparency is the key, he would say. Buildings should reveal their purpose, and their structure. The only rooms that are obscured are bathrooms, and even then he often had to be persuaded not to fit one-way glass. It was typical of David that he didn't believe it was unnerving to see out when you were on the loo, even if you were assured that nobody else could see in.

Her friends had envied her this house, its location, and its occasional appearances in the better sort of interiors magazine – but she knew they added, privately, to each other, that such minimalism would have driven them mad. It was in David's bones, the drive to purify, to clear out what was not needed. Everything in the house had to withstand his William Morris test: is it functional, and is it beautiful? And then: is it absolutely necessary? When they had first got together, she had found it exhausting. David had bitten his lip as she left trails of clothes across the bedroom floor, filled the kitchen with bunches of cheap flowers, trinkets from the market. Now, she is grateful for her home's blankness; its spare asceticism.

'So. Freaking. Cool.' They emerge from the rickety lift into the Glass House, and Mo's face is uncharacteristically animated. 'This is your house? Seriously? How the hell did you get to live somewhere like this?'

‘My husband built it.’ She walks through the atrium, hanging her keys carefully on the single silver peg, flicking on the internal lights as she passes.

‘Your ex? Jeez. And he let you keep it?’

‘Not exactly.’ Liv presses a button and watches as the roof shutters ease back silently, exposing the kitchen to the starlit sky. ‘He died.’ She stands there, her face turned firmly upwards, bracing herself for the flurry of awkward sympathy. It never gets any easier, the explanation. Four years on, and the words still cause a reflexive twinge, as if David’s absence is a wound still located deep within her body.

But Mo is silent. When she finally speaks she says simply, ‘Bummer.’ Her face is pale, impassive.

‘Yup,’ Liv says, and lets out a small breath. ‘Yup, it really is.’

Liv listens to the one o’clock news on the radio, distantly aware of the sounds from the guest bathroom, the vague prickle of disquiet that she feels whenever someone else is in the house. She wipes the granite work surfaces and buffs them with a soft cloth. She sweeps non-existent crumbs from the floor. Finally she walks through the glass and wood hallway, then up the suspended wood and Perspex stairs to her bedroom. The stretch of unmarked cupboard doors gleams, giving no clue to the few clothes behind it. The bed sits vast and empty in the middle of the room, two Final Reminders on the covers, where she left them this morning. She sits down, folding them neatly back into their envelopes, and she stares straight ahead of her at the portrait of *The Girl You Left Behind*, vivid in its gilded frame among the muted eau de Nil and grey of the rest of the room, and allows herself to drift.

She looks like you.

She looks nothing like me.

She had laughed at him giddily, still flush with new love. Still prepared to believe in his vision of her.

You look just like that when you –

The Girl You Left Behind smiles.

Liv begins to undress, folding her clothes before she places them, neatly, on the chair near the end of the bed. She closes her eyes before she turns off the light so that she does not have to look at the painting again.

12

Some lives work better with routines, and Liv Halston's is one of them. Every weekday morning she rises at seven thirty a.m., pulls on her trainers, grabs her iPod, and before she can think about what she is doing, she heads down, bleary-eyed, in the rackety lift, and out for a half-hour run along the river. At some point, threading her way through the grimly determined commuters, swerving round reversing delivery vans, she comes fully awake, her brain slowly wrapping itself around the musical rhythms in her ears, the soft thud-thud-thud of her feet hitting the pavements. Most importantly, she has steered herself away again from a time she still fears: those initial waking minutes, when vulnerability means that loss can still strike her, unheralded and venal, sending her thoughts into a toxic black fug. She had begun running after she had realized that she could use the world outside, the noise in her earphones, her own motion, as a kind of deflector. Now it has become habit, an insurance policy. *I do not have to think. I do not have to think. I do not have to think.*

Especially today.

She slows to a brisk walk, buys a coffee, and rides the lift back up to the Glass House, her eyes stinging with sweat, unsightly damp patches on her T-shirt. She showers, dresses, drinks her coffee and eats two slices of toast with marmalade. She keeps almost no food in the house, having concluded that the sight of a full fridge is oddly overwhelming; a reminder that she should be cooking and eating, not living on crackers and cheese. A fridge full of food is a silent rebuke to her solitary state.

Then she sits at her desk and checks her email for whatever work has come in overnight from copywritersperhour.com. Or, as seems to have been the case recently, not.

'Mo? I'm leaving a coffee outside your door.' She stands, her head cocked, waiting for some sound suggesting life within. It's a quarter past eight: too early to wake a guest? It has been so long since she had anyone to stay that she no longer knows the right things to do. She waits awkwardly, half expecting some bleary response, an irritable grunt, even, then decides that Mo is asleep. She had worked all evening, after all. Liv places the polystyrene cup silently outside the door, just in case, and heads off to her shower.

There are four messages in her inbox.

Dear Ms Halston

I got your email from copywritersperhour.com. I run a personalized stationery business and have a brochure that needs rewriting. I notice your rates are £100 per 1000 words. Would you consider dropping that price at all? We are working on a very tight budget. The brochure copy currently stands at around 1250 words.

Yours sincerely
Mr Terence Blank

Livvy darling

This is your father. Caroline has left me. I am bereft. I have decided to have nothing more to do with women. Call me if you can spare the time.

Hi Liv

Everything okay for Thursday? The kids are really looking forward to it. We're looking at around 20 at the moment, but as you know this figure is always fluid. Let me know if you need anything.

Best regards
Abiola

Dear Ms Halston

We've tried several times to reach you by phone without success. Please could you contact us to arrange a time whereby we can discuss your overdraft situation. If you fail to make contact we will have to impose additional charges.

Please can you also ensure that we have your up-to-date contact details.

Yours sincerely
Damian Watts,
Personal accounts manager, NatWest Bank

She types a response to the first.

Dear Mr Blank. I would love to drop my prices to accommodate you. Unfortunately my biological make-up means I also have to eat. Good luck with your brochure.

She knows there will be somebody out there who will do it more cheaply, someone who doesn't care too much about grammar or punctuation, and will not notice that the brochure copy contains 'their' for 'there' twenty-two times. But she is tired of having her already meagre rates pushed down further.

Dad, I will call round later. If Caroline happens to have returned between now and then, please make sure you are dressed. Mrs Patel said you were watering the Japanese anemones naked again last week and you know what the police said about that.

Liv x

The last time she had arrived to comfort her father after one of Caroline's disappearances, he had opened the door wearing a woman's Oriental silk robe, gaping at the front, and wrapped her in an expansive hug before she could protest. 'I'm your father, for goodness' sake,' he would mutter, when she scolded him afterwards. Although he hadn't had a decent acting job in almost a decade, Michael Worthing had never lost his childlike lack of inhibition, or his irritation with what he called 'wrappings'. In childhood she had stopped bringing friends home after Samantha Howcroft had gone home and told her mother that Mr Worthing walked around 'with all his bits swinging'. (She had also told everyone at school that Liv's dad had a willy like a giant sausage. Her father had seemed oddly untroubled by that one.)

Caroline, his flame-haired girlfriend of almost fifteen years, was untroubled by his nakedness. In fact, she was quite happy to walk around semi-naked herself. Liv sometimes thought she was more familiar with the sight of those two pale, pendulous old bodies than she was with her own.

Caroline was his great passion, and would walk out in a giant strop every couple of months, citing his impossibility, his lack of earnings, and his brief, fervent affairs with other women. What they saw in him, Liv could never quite imagine.

'Lust for life, my darling!' he would exclaim. 'Passion! If you have none you're a dead thing.' Liv, she suspects privately, is something of a disappointment to her father.

She swigs the last of her coffee, and pens an email to Abiola.

Hi Abiola

I'll meet you outside the Conaghy building at 2 p.m. All cleared this end. They are a little nervous but definitely up for it. Hope all good with you.

Regards
Liv

She sends it then stares at the one from her bank manager. Her fingers stall on the keyboard. Then she reaches across and presses *delete*.

She knows, with some sensible part of her, that this cannot continue. She hears the distant, threatening clamour of the neatly folded final demands in their envelopes, like the drumbeat of an invading army. At some point she will no longer be able to contain them, to fob them off, to slide, unnoticed, away from them. She lives like a church mouse, buys little, socializes rarely, and still it is not enough. Her cash cards and credit cards are prone to spit themselves back at her from cashpoints. The council had arrived at her door last year, part of a local reassessment of council taxpayers. The woman had walked around the Glass House, then had looked at Liv as if she had somehow tried to cheat them of something. As if it were an insult that she, a virtual girl, lived in this house alone. Liv could barely blame her: since David's death she has felt a fraud living here. She's like a curator, protecting David's memory, keeping the place as he would have wanted it.

Liv now pays the maximum council tax chargeable, the same rate as the bankers with their million-pound wage packets, the financiers with their swollen bonuses. It eats up more than half of what she earns in some months.

She no longer opens bank statements. There is no point. She knows exactly what they will say.

'It's my own fault.' Her father drops his head to his hands theatrically. From between his fingers, sparse grey hair sticks up in tufts. Around him the kitchen is scattered with pots and pans that tell of an evening meal interrupted: half a lump of Parmesan, a bowl of congealed pasta, a *Mary Celeste* of domestic disharmony. 'I knew I shouldn't go anywhere near her. But, oh! I was like a moth to a flame. And what a flame! The heat! The *heat*!' He sounds bewildered.

Liv nods understandingly. She is attempting, privately, to reconcile this tale of epic sexual misadventure with Jean, the fifty-something woman who runs the local flower shop, smokes forty a day and whose grey ankles emerge from too-short trousers like slices of tripe.

'We knew it was wrong. And I tried, oh, God, I tried to be good. But I was in there one afternoon, looking for spring bulbs, and she came up behind me smelling of freesias, and before I knew it there I was, as tumescent as a new bud …'

'Okay, Dad. Too much information.' Liv puts the kettle on. As she begins clearing up the work surfaces, her father downs the rest of his glass. 'It's too early for wine.'

'It's never too early for wine. Nectar of the gods. My one consolation.'

'Your life is one long consolation.'

'How did I raise a woman of such will, such fearsome boundaries?'

'Because you didn't raise me. Mum did.'

He shakes his head with some melancholy, apparently forgetting the times he had cursed her for leaving him when Liv was a child, or called down the wrath of the gods upon her disloyal head. Liv thought sometimes that the day her mother had died, six years ago, her parents' short, fractured marriage had somehow been redrawn in her father's mind so that this intolerant woman, this hussy, this harridan who had poisoned his only child against him now resembled a kind of virgin Madonna. She didn't mind. She did it herself. When you lost your mother, she gradually recast herself in the imagination as perfect. A series of soft kisses, loving words, a comforting embrace. A few years back she had listened to her

friends' litany of irritation about their own interfering mothers with the same lack of comprehension as if they had been speaking Korean.

'Loss has hardened you.'

'I just don't fall in love with every person of the opposite sex who happens to sell me a pot of tomato food.'

She had opened the drawers, searching for coffee filters. Her father's house was as cluttered and chaotic as hers was tidy.

'I saw Jasmine in the Pig's Foot the other night.' He brightens. 'What a gorgeous girl she is. She asked after you.'

Liv finds the filter papers, deftly opens one and scoops in coffee.

'Really?'

'She's marrying a Spaniard. He looks like Errol Flynn. Couldn't take his eyes off her. Mind you, neither could I. She has a sway to her walk that is positively hypnotic. He's taking on her and the baby. Some other chap's, I believe. They're going to live in Madrid.'

Liv pours a mug of coffee, hands it to her father.

'Why don't you see her any more? You two were such good friends?' he wonders.

She shrugs. 'People grow apart.' She cannot tell him this is only half of the reason. These are the things that they do not tell you about losing your husband: that as well as the exhaustion you will sleep and sleep, and some days even the act of waking up will force your eyelids back down and that merely getting through each day will feel like a Herculean effort – you will hate your friends, irrationally: each time someone arrives at your door or crosses the street and hugs you and tells you they are so, so desperately sorry, you look at her, her husband and their tiny children and are shocked at the ferocity of your envy. How did they get to live and David to die? How did boring, lumpen Richard with his City friends and his weekend golfing trips and his total lack of interest in anything outside his tiny complacent world get to live, when David, brilliant, loving, generous, passionate David, had to die? How did hangdog Tim get to reproduce, to bring further generations of little unimaginative Tims into this world, when David's unexpected mind, his kindness, his kisses, had been extinguished for ever?

Liv can remember screaming silently in bathrooms, bolting without explanation from crowded rooms, conscious of her own apparent rudeness but unable to stop herself. It had been years before she could view anybody else's happiness without mourning the loss of her own.

These days, the anger has gone, but she prefers to view domestic satisfaction at a distance, and in people she doesn't know well, as if happiness were a scientific concept that she is merely pleased to see proven.

She no longer sees the friends she had back then, the Cherrys, the Jasmines. The women who would remember the girl she had been. It was too complicated to explain. And she didn't particularly like what it said about her.

'Well, I think you should meet her before she goes. I used to love watching the two of you head out together, pair of young goddesses that you were.'

'When are you going to call Caroline?' she says, wiping crumbs from the stripped-pine kitchen table and scrubbing at a ring of red wine.

'She won't talk to me. I left fourteen messages on her mobile phone last night.'

‘You need to stop sleeping with other people, Dad.’

‘I know.’

‘And you need to earn some money.’

‘I know.’

‘And you need to get dressed. If I were her and came home and saw you like this I’d turn around and walk straight out again.’

‘I’m wearing her dressing-gown.’

‘I guessed.’

‘It still carries her scent.’ He inhales Caroline’s sleeve, an expression of deep tragedy across his face, and his eyes fill with tears. ‘What am I supposed to do if she doesn’t come back?’

Liv stills, her expression hardening momentarily. She wonders if her father has any idea what day it is today. Then she looks at the battered man in his women’s dressing-gown, the way his blue veins stand proud on his crêpy skin, and turns away to the washing-up. ‘You know what, Dad? I’m not really the person to ask.’

13

The old man lowers himself gingerly into the chair and lets out a sigh, as if crossing the room has been some effort. His son, standing with his hand under his elbow, watches anxiously.

Paul McCafferty waits, then glances at Miriam, his secretary. 'Would you like tea or coffee?' she asks.

The old man gives a small shake of his head. 'No, thank you.' The way he looks up says, *Let's just get on, shall we?*

'I'll leave you to it.' Miriam backs out of the little office.

Paul opens his folder. He lays his hands on the desk, feeling Mr Nowicki's eyes on him. 'Well, I asked you here today because I have some news. When you initially approached me I warned you that I thought this case would be tricky because of the lack of provenance on your side. As you know, many galleries are reluctant to hand over work without the most solid proof of –'

'I remember the painting clearly.' The old man lifts a hand.

'I know. And you know that the gallery in question was very reluctant to engage with us, despite the holes in their own provenance. This case was complicated by the sharp increase in value of the work in question. And it was particularly hard, given that you had no image we could go on.'

'How am I meant to describe such a drawing perfectly? I was ten when we were forced from our house – ten years old. Could you tell me what was on your parents' walls when you were ten?'

'No, Mr Nowicki, I couldn't.'

'Were we meant to know then we would never be allowed to go back to our own home? It is ridiculous, this system. Why should I have to prove that something was stolen from us? After all we have been through …'

'Dad, we've been over this …' The son, Jason, places a hand on his father's forearm, and the old man's lips press together reluctantly, as if he is used to being quelled.

'This is what I wanted to talk to you about,' Paul says. 'I did warn you that we didn't have the strongest case. When we had our meeting in January, you said something to me about your mother's friendship with a neighbour, Artur Bohmann, who moved to America.'

'Yes. They were good neighbours. I know he had seen the painting in our house. He visited us many times. I played ball with his daughter … but he died. I told you he died.'

'Well, I managed to track down his surviving family, in Des Moines. And his granddaughter, Anne-Marie, went through the family albums and tucked away in one of them she found this.' Paul pulls a sheet of paper from his folder and slides it across the desk to Mr Nowicki.

It is not a perfect copy, but the black-and-white image is clearly visible. A family sits in the stiff embrace of a tightly upholstered sofa. A woman smiles cautiously, holding a button-eyed baby firmly on her lap. A man with a vast moustache reclines, his arm running along the back. A boy grins broadly, a missing tooth clearly visible. Behind them, on the wall, hangs a painting of a young girl dancing.

'That's it,' Mr Nowicki says quietly, an arthritic hand rising to his mouth. 'The Degas.'

‘I checked it against the image bank, then with the Edgar Degas Foundation. I sent this picture to their lawyers, along with a statement from Artur Bohmann’s daughter, saying that she, too, remembered seeing this painting in your parents’ house, and hearing your father discuss how he bought it.’

He pauses. ‘But that’s not all Anne-Marie remembers. She says that after your parents fled, Artur Bohmann had gone one night to the apartment to try to collect your family’s remaining valuables. He told his wife, Anne-Marie’s grandmother, that when he arrived he believed he’d got there in time as the apartment seemed undisturbed. It was only as he was leaving that he saw the painting was missing.

‘She says that because nothing else was disturbed he had always assumed your family had taken it with them. And then, of course, because you only corresponded with each other some years later, the matter never arose.’

‘No,’ the old man says, staring at the image. ‘No. We had nothing. Just my mother’s wedding and engagement rings.’ His eyes fill with tears.

‘It is possible that the Nazis had earmarked the painting. There is evidence of systematic removal of important works of art during the Nazi period.’

‘It was Mr Dreschler. He told them. I always knew he told them. And he called my father his friend!’ His hands tremble on his knees. It is not an unusual response, despite the more than sixty years that have elapsed. Many of the claimants Paul sees can recall images and events from the 1940s far more clearly than they can remember how they arrived at his office.

‘Yes, well, we’ve looked into Mr Dreschler’s records, and there are a number of unexplained trades with the Germans – one that refers simply to a Degas. It’s not clear which Degas but the dates and the fact that there can’t have been many in your area at the time does add weight to your argument.’

He turns slowly to face his son. *You see?* his expression says.

‘Well, Mr Nowicki, last night I had a response from the gallery. Do you want me to read it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dear Mr McCafferty,

In light of the new evidence provided, and our own gaps in provenance, as well as our discovery of the extent of the suffering endured by Mr Nowicki’s family, we have decided not to contest the claim for “Femme, dansant” by Degas. The trustees of the gallery have instructed their lawyers not to proceed further, and we await your instructions with regards the transfer of the physical item.’

Paul waits.

The old man seems lost in thought. Finally he looks up. ‘They are giving it back?’

He nods. He cannot keep the smile from his face. It has been a long and testing case, and its resolution has been gratifyingly swift.

‘They are really giving it back to us? They agree that it was stolen from us?’

‘You have only to let them know where you want it sent.’

There is a long silence. Jason Nowicki tears his gaze from his father. He lifts the heels of his hands and wipes tears from his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘I don’t know why …’

‘It’s not unusual.’ Paul pulls a box of tissues from under his desk and hands it to him. ‘These cases are always emotional. It’s never just a painting.’

‘It’s been such a long time coming. The loss of that Degas has been like a constant reminder of what my father, my grandparents suffered in the war. And I wasn’t sure you …’ He blows out his cheeks. ‘It’s

amazing. Tracking down that man's family. They said you were good, but –'

Paul shakes his head. 'Just doing my job.'

He and Jason look at the old man, who is still staring at the image of the painting. He seems to have diminished in size, as if the weight of the events of several decades ago have come crushing down on him. The same thought seems to cross both their minds at once.

'Are you okay, Dad?'

'Mr Nowicki?'

He straightens a little, as if only just remembering that they are there. His hand is resting on the photograph.

Paul sits back in his chair, his pen a bridge between his hands. 'So. Returning the painting. I can recommend a specialist art-transport company. You need a vehicle that is high security, climate controlled and has air-ride suspension. And I would also suggest you insure it before it comes to you. I don't need to tell you that a painting such as this is –'

'Do you have contacts at the auction house?'

'I'm sorry?'

Mr Nowicki has regained his colour. 'Do you have contacts at any auction houses? I spoke to one a while back but they wanted too much money. Twenty per cent, I think it was. Plus tax. It's too much.'

'You … want to get it valued for insurance?'

'No. I want to sell it.' He opens his battered leather wallet without looking up and slides the photograph inside. 'Apparently this is a very good time to sell. Foreigners are buying everything …' He waves a hand dismissively.

Jason is staring at him. 'But, Dad …'

'This has all been expensive. We have bills to pay.'

'But you said –'

Mr Nowicki turns away from his son. 'Can you look into it for me? I'm assuming you will invoice me your fee.'

Outside, a door slams in the street; the sound reverberates off the frontages of the buildings. In the next office Paul can hear Miriam's muffled telephone conversation. He swallows. Keeps his voice level. 'I'll do that.'

There is a long silence. Finally the old man rises from his seat.

'Well, that is very good news,' he says finally, and gives him a tight smile. 'Very good news indeed. Thank you very much, Mr McCafferty.'

'No problem,' he says. He stands and holds out his hand.

When they leave, Paul McCafferty sits down in his chair. He closes the file, then his eyes.

'You can't take it personally,' Janey says.

'I know. It's just –'

'It's not our business. We're just here for recovery.'

'I know. It's just that Mr Nowicki had gone on and on about how personal this painting was to the family and how it represented everything they'd lost and –'

'Let it go, Paul.'

‘This never happened in the Squad.’ He stands up and paces around Janey’s cramped office. He stops by the window and gazes out. ‘You got people their stuff back and they were just happy.’

‘You don’t want to go back to the police.’

‘I know. I’m just saying. It gets me every time with these restitution cases.’

‘Well, you earned our fee on a case where I wasn’t sure you’d be able to. And it’s all money towards your house move, yes? So we should both be happy. Here.’ Janey pushes a folder across her desk. ‘This should cheer you up. Came in last night. It looks pretty straightforward.’

Paul takes the papers out of the folder. A portrait of a woman, missing since 1916, its theft only discovered a decade ago during an audit of the artist’s work by his surviving family. And there, on the next sheet of paper, an image of the painting in question, now hanging boldly on a minimalist wall. Published in a glossy magazine several years ago.

‘First World War?’

‘Statute of limitations doesn’t apply, apparently. It seems pretty clear cut. They say they have evidence that Germans stole the painting during the war, and it was never seen again. A few years ago some family member opens an old glossy magazine and what do you think is sitting there in the centre spread?’

‘They’re sure it’s the original?’

‘It’s never been reproduced.’

Paul shakes his head, the morning’s events briefly forgotten, conscious of that brief, reflexive twinge of excitement. ‘And there it is. Nearly a hundred years later. Just hanging on some rich couple’s wall.’

‘The feature just says central London. All those *Ideal Home* type features do. They don’t want to encourage burglars by giving the exact address. But I’m guessing it shouldn’t be too hard to trace them – it names the couple after all.’

Paul shuts the folder. He keeps seeing Mr Nowicki’s tight mouth, the way the son had looked at his father as if he’d never seen him before. ‘You’re American, yes?’ the old man had said to him, as they stood at his office door. ‘You cannot possibly understand.’

Janey’s hand is resting lightly on his arm. ‘How’s the house hunting going?’

‘Not great. Everything good seems to get snapped up by cash buyers.’

‘Well, if you want cheering up, we could go and get a bite to eat. I’m not doing anything tonight.’

Paul raises a smile. He tries not to notice the way Janey’s hand moves to her hair, the painfully hopeful slant to her smile. He steps away. ‘I’m working late. Got a couple of cases I want to get on top of. But thanks. I’ll get on to the new file first thing in the morning.’

Liv arrives home at five, having cooked her father a meal and vacuumed the ground floor of his house. Caroline rarely vacuums, and the colours of the faded Persian runners had been noticeably more vivid when she finished. Around her, the city seethes on a warm late summer day, the traffic noises filtering up, with the smell of diesel rising from the tarmac.

‘Hey, Fran,’ she says, as she reaches the main door.

The woman, woollen hat rammed low over her head despite the heat, nods a greeting. She is digging around in a plastic bag. She has an endless collection of them, tied with twine or stuffed inside each other, which she endlessly sorts and rearranges. Today she has moved her two boxes, covered with a blue tarpaulin, to the relative shelter of the caretaker’s door. The previous caretaker tolerated Fran for years, even using her as an unofficial parcel stop. The new one, she says, when Liv brings her down a coffee,

keeps threatening to move her. Some residents have complained that she is lowering the tone. 'You had a visitor.'

'What? Oh. What time did she go?' Liv had not left out either a note or a key. She wonders whether she should stop by the restaurant later to make sure Mo is okay. Even as she thinks it, she knows she won't. She feels vaguely relieved at the prospect of a silent, empty house.

Fran shrugs.

'You want a drink?' Liv says, as she opens the door.

'Tea would be lovely,' Fran says, adding, 'Three sugars, please,' as if Liv has never made her one before. And then, with the preoccupied air of someone who has far too much to do to stand around talking, she goes back to her bags.

She smells the smoke even as she opens the door. Mo is sitting cross-legged on the floor by the glass coffee-table, one hand around a paperback book, the other resting a cigarette against a white saucer.

'Hi,' she says, not looking up.

Liv stares at her, her key in her hand. 'I – I thought you'd left. Fran said you'd gone.'

'Oh. The lady downstairs? Yeah. I just got back.'

'Back from where?'

'My day shift.'

'You work a day shift?'

'At a care home. Hope I didn't disturb you this morning. I tried to leave quietly. I thought the whole desk-drawer thing might wake you. Getting up at six kind of kills the whole "welcome houseguest" vibe.'

'Desk-drawer thing?'

'You didn't leave a key.'

Liv frowns. She feels as if she is two steps behind in this conversation. Mo puts her book down and speaks slowly. 'I had to have a little dig around till I found the spare key in your desk drawer.'

'You went in my desk drawer?'

'It seemed like the most obvious place.' She turns a page. 'It's okay. I put it back.' She adds, under her breath, 'Man, you like stuff tidy.'

She returns to her book. David's book, Liv sees, checking out the spine. It is a battered Penguin *Introduction to Modern Architecture*, one of his favourites. She can still picture him reading it, stretched out on the sofa. Seeing it in someone else's hands makes her stomach tighten with anxiety. Liv puts her bag down, and walks through to the kitchen.

The granite worktops are covered with toast crumbs. Two mugs sit on the table, brown rings bisecting their insides. By the toaster, a bag of sliced white bread sits collapsed and half open. A used teabag squats on the side of the sink and a knife emerges from a pat of unsalted butter, like the chest of a murder victim.

Liv stands there for a moment, then begins to tidy, sweeping the detritus into the kitchen bin, loading cups and plates into the dishwasher. She presses the button to draw back the ceiling shutters, and when they are fully open, she presses the button that will open the glass roof, waving her hands to get rid of the lingering smell of smoke.

She turns to find Mo standing in the doorway. 'You can't smoke in here. You just can't,' she says. There is a weird edge of panic to her voice.

‘Oh. Sure. I didn’t realize you had a deck.’

‘No. Not on the deck either. Please. Just don’t smoke here.’

Mo glances at the work surface, at Liv’s frantic tidying. ‘Hey – I’ll do that before I leave. Really.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘It obviously isn’t, or you wouldn’t be having a heart attack. Look. Stop. I’ll clean up my own mess. Really.’

Liv stops. She knows she is overreacting, but she can’t help it. She just wants Mo gone. ‘I’ve got to take Fran a cup of tea,’ she says.

Her blood thumps in her ears the whole way down to the ground floor.

When she gets back the kitchen is tidy. Mo moves quietly around the space. ‘I’m probably a bit lazy when it comes to clearing up straight away,’ she says, as Liv walks back in. ‘It’s the whole clearing-up-at-work thing. Old people, guests at restaurants … You do so much of it in the day, you kind of rebel against it at home.’

Liv tries not to bristle at her use of the word. It is then she becomes aware of the other smell, under the smoke. And the oven light is on.

She bends down to peer inside it and sees her Le Creuset dish, its surface bubbling with something cheesy.

‘I made some supper. Pasta bake. I just threw together what I could get from the corner shop. It’ll be ready in about ten minutes. I was going to have mine later, but seeing as you’re here …’

Liv cannot remember the last time she even turned the oven on.

‘Oh,’ says Mo, reaching for the oven gloves. ‘And someone rang from the council.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah. Something about council tax.’

Liv’s insides turn briefly to water.

‘I said I was you, so he told me how much you owe. It’s quite a lot.’ She hands her a piece of paper with a figure scribbled on it.

As Liv’s mouth opens to protest, she says, ‘Well, I had to make sure he had the right person. I thought he must have made a mistake.’

She had known roughly how much it would be, but seeing it in print is still a shock. She feels Mo’s eyes on her and, in her uncharacteristically long silence, she knows that Mo has guessed the truth.

‘Hey. Sit down. Everything looks better on a full stomach.’ She feels herself being steered into a chair. Mo flips open the oven door, allowing the kitchen to flood with the unfamiliar smell of home-cooked food. ‘And if not, well, I know of a really comfortable banquette.’

The food is good. Liv eats a plateful and sits with her hands on her stomach afterwards, wondering why she is so surprised that Mo can actually cook. ‘Thanks,’ she says, as Mo mops up the last of hers. ‘It was really good. I can’t remember the last time I ate that much.’

‘No problem.’

And now you have to leave. The words that have been on her lips for the past twenty hours do not come. She does not want Mo to go just yet. She does not want to be alone with the council-tax people and the final demands and her own uncontrollable thoughts; she feels suddenly grateful that tonight she will have somebody to talk to – a human defence against the date.

‘So. Liv Worthing. The whole husband-dying thing –’

Liv puts her knife and fork together. ‘I’d rather not talk about it.’

She feels Mo’s eyes on her. ‘Okay. No dead husbands. So – what about boyfriends?’

‘Boyfriends?’

‘Since … the One We Must Not Mention. Anyone serious?’

‘No.’

Mo picks a piece of cheese from the side of the baking dish.

‘Ill-advised shags?’

‘Nope.’

Mo’s head shoots up. ‘Not one? In how long?’

‘Four years,’ Liv mumbles.

She is lying. There was one, three years ago, after well-meaning friends had insisted she had to ‘move on’. As if David had been some kind of obstacle. She had drunk herself halfway to oblivion to go through with it and then wept afterwards, huge, snotty sobs of grief and guilt and self-disgust. The man – she can’t even remember his name – had barely been able to contain his relief when she had said she was going home. Even now when she thinks about it she feels cold shame.

‘Nothing in four years? And you’re … what? Thirty? What is this, some kind of sexual suttee? What are you doing, Worthing? Saving yourself for Mr Dead Husband in the hereafter?’

‘I’m Halston. Liv Halston. And … I just … haven’t met anyone I wanted to …’ Liv decides to change the direction of this conversation. ‘Okay, how about you? Some nice self-harming Emo in the wings?’ Defensiveness has made her spiky.

Mo’s fingers creep towards her cigarettes and retreat again.

‘I do okay.’

Liv waits.

‘I have an arrangement.’

‘An arrangement?’

‘With Ranic, the wine waiter. Every couple of weeks we hook up for a technically proficient but ultimately soulless coupling. He was pretty rubbish when we started but he’s getting the hang of it.’ She eats another stray piece of cheese. ‘Still watches too much porn, though. You can tell.’

‘Nobody serious?’

‘My parents stopped talking about grandchildren some time around the turn of the century.’

‘Oh, God. That reminds me: I promised I’d ring my dad.’ Liv has a sudden thought. She stands and reaches for her bag. ‘Hey, how about I nip down to the shop and get a bottle of wine?’ This is going to be fine, she tells herself. We’ll talk about parents and people I don’t remember, and college, and Mo’s jobs, and I’ll steer her away from the whole sex thing, and before I know it tomorrow will be here and my house will feel normal and today’s date will be a whole year away again.

Mo pushes her chair back from the table. ‘Not for me,’ she says, scooping up her plate. ‘I’ve got to get changed and shoot.’

‘Shoot?’

‘Work.’

Liv’s hand is on her purse. ‘But – you said you’d just finished.’

‘My day shift. Now I start my evening shift. Well, in about twenty minutes.’ She pulls her hair up and clips it into place. ‘You okay to wash up? And all right if I take that key again?’

The brief sense of wellbeing that had arrived with the meal evaporates, like the popping of a soap bubble. She sits at the half-cleared table, listening to Mo’s tuneless humming, the sound of her washing and scrubbing her teeth in the spare-room bathroom, the soft closing of the bedroom door.

She calls up the stairs. ‘Do you think they need anyone else tonight? I mean – I could help out. Maybe. I’m sure I could do waitressing.’

There is no reply.

‘I did work in a bar once.’

‘Me too. It made me want to stab people in the eye. Even more so than waiting tables.’

Mo is back in the hallway, dressed in a black shirt and bomber jacket, an apron under her arm. ‘See you later, dude,’ she calls. ‘Unless I get lucky with Ranic, obvs.’

She is gone, downstairs, drawn back into the world of living. And as the echo of her voice dies away, the stillness of the Glass House becomes a solid, weighty thing and Liv realizes, with a growing sense of panic, that her house, her haven, is preparing to betray her.

She knows that she cannot spend this evening here alone.

14

These are the places it is not a good idea to drink alone if you're female.

1. Bazookas: this used to be the White Horse, a quiet pub on the corner opposite the coffee shop, stuffed with sagging plush velvet benches and the occasional horse brass, its sign half obscured by age-related paint loss. Now it is a neon-clad titty bar, where businessmen go late, and taut-faced girls with too much makeup leave in platform shoes some time in the small hours, smoking furiously and moaning about their tips.
2. Dino's: the local wine bar, packed throughout the nineties, has reinvented itself as a spit-and-sawdust eatery for yummy mummies in the daylight hours. After eight o'clock in the evening it now runs occasional speed-dating sessions. The rest of the time, apart from Fridays, its floor-to-ceiling windows reveal it to be conspicuously and painfully empty.
3. Any of the older pubs in the backstreets beyond the river, which draw small groups of resentful locals, men who smoke roll-ups with dead-eyed pit bulls and who will stare at a woman alone in a pub as a mullah would at a woman taking a stroll in a bikini.
4. Any of the new cheerfully packed drinking places near the river that are packed with people younger than you, mostly groups of laughing friends with Apple Mac satchels and thick black glasses, all of whom will make you feel more lonely than if you had just sat indoors.

Liv toys with the idea of buying a bottle of wine and taking it home. But every time she pictures sitting in that empty white space alone, she is filled with an unusual dread. She does not want to watch television: the last three years have shown her that this is the evening of cosmic jokes, where normally mundane comedy dramas will suddenly, poignantly, kill off a husband, or substitute a wildlife programme with another about sudden death. She doesn't want to find herself standing in front of *The Girl You Left Behind*, recalling the day they had bought it together, seeing in that woman's expression the love and fulfilment she used to feel. She doesn't want to find herself digging out the photographs of her and David together, knowing with weary certainty that she will never love anybody like that again, and that while she can recall the exact way his eyes crinkled, or his fingers held a mug, she can no longer bring to mind how these elements fitted together.

She does not want to feel even the faintest temptation to call his mobile number, as she had done obsessively for the first year after his death so she could hear his voice on the answering service. Most days now his loss is a part of her, an awkward weight she carries around, invisible to everyone else, subtly altering the way she moves through the day. But today, the anniversary of the day he died, is a day when all bets are off.

And then she remembers something one of the women had said at dinner the previous night. *When my sister wants to go out without being hassled, she heads for a gay bar. So funny.* There is a gay bar not ten minutes' walk from here. She has passed it a hundred times without ever wondering what lies behind the protective wire grilles on the windows. Nobody will hassle her in a gay bar. Liv reaches for her jacket, bag and keys. If nothing else, she has a plan.

'Well, that's awkward.'

'It was once. Months ago. But I get the feeling she's never quite forgotten it.'

'Because you are SO GOOD.' Greg wipes another pint glass, grinning, and puts it on the shelf.

‘No … Well, okay, obviously,’ Paul says. ‘Seriously, Greg, I just feel guilty whenever she looks at me. Like … like I promised something I can’t deliver.’

‘What’s the golden rule, bro? Never shit on your own doorstep.’

‘I was drunk. It was the night Leonie told me she and Jake were moving in with Mitch. I was …’

‘You let your defences down.’ Greg does his daytime-television voice. ‘Your boss got you when you were vulnerable. Plied you with drink. And now you just feel used. Hang on …’ He disappears to serve a customer. The bar is busy for a Thursday night, all the tables taken, a steady stream of people at the bar, a low hum of cheerful conversation rising above the music. He had meant to go home after he finished at the office, but he rarely gets a chance to catch up with his brother, and it’s good to get a few drinks in now and then. Even if you do have to spend your time avoiding eye contact with 70 per cent of the customers.

Greg rings up some money and arrives back in front of Paul.

‘Look, I know how it sounds. But she’s a nice woman. And it’s just horrible having to fend her off all the time.’

‘Sucks to be you.’

‘Like you’d understand.’

‘Because nobody ever hits on you when you’re with someone. Not in a gay bar. Oh, no.’ Greg puts another glass on the shelf. ‘Look, why don’t you just sit her down, tell her that she’s a really lovely person, *yada yada yada*, but you’re not interested in her that way?’

‘Because it’s awkward. Us working so closely together and all.’

‘And this isn’t? The whole “Oh, well, if you ever fancy a quickie when you’ve finished this case, Paul” thing.’ Greg’s attention shifts to the other end of the bar. ‘Uh-oh. I think we’ve got a live one.’

Paul has been dimly aware of the girl all evening. She had arrived looking perfectly composed and he had assumed she was waiting for someone. Now she is trying to climb back on to her bar stool. She makes two attempts, the second sending her stumbling clumsily backwards. She pushes her hair out of her eyes and peers at the bar as if it’s the summit of Everest. She propels herself upwards. When she lands on the stool she reaches out both hands to steady herself and blinks hard, as if it takes her a couple of seconds to believe she has actually made it. She lifts her face towards Greg. ‘Excuse me? Can I have another wine?’ She holds up an empty glass.

Greg’s gaze, amused and weary, travels to Paul and away. ‘We’re closing in ten minutes,’ he says, flicking his tea-towel over his shoulder. He’s good with drunks. Paul has never seen Greg lose his cool. They were, their mother would remark, chalk and cheese like that.

‘So that leaves me ten minutes to drink it?’ she says, her smile wavering slightly.

She doesn’t look like a lesbian. But, then, few of them do, these days. He doesn’t say this to his brother, who would laugh at him and tell him he had spent too much time in the police.

‘Sweetheart, I mean this in the nicest way, but if you have another drink I’ll worry about you. And I really, really hate ending my shift worrying about customers.’

‘A small one,’ she says. Her smile is heartbreaking. ‘I don’t even usually drink.’

‘Yeah. You’re the ones I worry about.’

‘This …’ Her eyes are strained. ‘This is a difficult day. A really difficult day. Please can I just have one more drink? And then you can call me a nice respectable taxi from a nice respectable firm and I’ll go home and pass out and you can go home without worrying about me.’

He looks back at Paul and sighs. *See what I have to put up with?* 'A small one,' he says. 'A very small one.'

Her smile falls away, her eyes half close, and she reaches down to her feet, swaying, for her bag. Paul turns back to the bar, checking his phone for messages. It is his turn to have Jake tomorrow night, and although the thing with him and Leonie is now amicable, some part of him still worries that she will find a reason to cancel.

'My bag!'

He glances up.

'My bag's gone!' The woman has slid from the stool and is gazing around at the floor, one hand clutching the bar. When she looks up, her face is leached of colour.

'Did you take it to the Ladies?' Greg leans across the bar.

'No,' she says, her gaze darting around the bar. 'It was tucked under my stool.'

'You left your bag under the stool?' Greg tuts. 'Didn't you read the signs?'

There are signs all over the bar. *Do not leave your bag unattended: pickpockets operate in this area*. Paul can count three of them just from where he sits.

She has not read them.

'I'm really sorry. But it's not good around here.' The woman's gaze flickers between them and, drunk as she is, he can see that she guesses what they're thinking. *Silly drunk girl*.

Paul reaches for his phone. 'I'll call the cops.'

'And tell them I was stupid enough to leave my bag under a stool?' She puts her face into her hands. 'Oh, God. I'd just withdrawn two hundred pounds for the council tax. I don't believe it. Two. Hundred. Pounds.'

'We've had two already this week,' says Greg. 'We're waiting for CCTV to be installed. But it's an epidemic. I'm really sorry.'

She looks up and wipes her face. She lets out a long, unsteady breath. She is plainly trying not to burst into tears. The glass of wine sits untouched on the bar. 'I'm really sorry. But I don't think I'm going to be able to pay for that.'

'Don't give it a thought,' says Greg. 'Here, Paul, you call the cops. I'll go get her a coffee. Right. Time, ladies and gentlemen, please …'

The police around here do not come out for vanished handbags. They give the woman, whose name is Liv, a crime number and promise a letter about victim support, and tell her they'll be in touch if they find anything. It's clear to everyone that they do not expect to be in touch.

By the time she's off the phone the bar is long empty. Greg unlocks the door to let them out, and Liv reaches for her jacket. 'I've a guest staying. She's got a spare key.'

'You want to call her?' Paul proffers his phone.

She looks blankly at him. 'I don't know her number. But I know where she works.'

Paul waits.

'It's a restaurant about ten minutes' walk from here. Towards Blackfriars.'

It's midnight. Paul gazes at the clock. He is tired and his son is being dropped off at seven thirty tomorrow morning. But he cannot leave a drunk woman, who has plainly spent the best part of an hour trying not to cry, to walk the backstreets of the South Bank at midnight.

‘I’ll walk with you,’ he says.

He catches her look of wariness, the way she prepares to decline. Greg touches her arm. ‘You’re okay, sweetheart. He’s an ex-cop.’

Paul feels himself being reassessed. The woman’s makeup has smudged beneath one eye and he has to fight the urge to wipe it.

‘I can vouch for his good character. He’s genetically wired to do this, kind of like a St Bernard in human form.’

‘Yeah. Thanks, Greg.’

She puts on her jacket. ‘If you’re sure you don’t mind, that would be really kind of you.’

‘I’ll call you tomorrow, Paul. And good luck, Miss Liv. Hope it all gets sorted.’ Greg waits until they are some way down the road, then closes and locks the door.

They walk briskly, their feet echoing in the empty cobbled streets, the sound bouncing off the silent buildings around them. It has begun to rain, and Paul rams his hands deep into his pockets, his neck hunched into his collar. They pass two young men in hoodies and he is conscious of her moving slightly closer to him.

‘Did you cancel your cards?’ he says.

‘Oh. No.’ The fresh air is hitting her hard. She looks despondent, and every now and then she stumbles a little. He would offer his arm but he doesn’t think she would take it. ‘I didn’t think of that.’

‘Can you remember what you have?’

‘One Mastercard, one Barclays.’

‘Hold on. I know someone who can help.’ He dials a number. ‘Sherrie? … Hi. It’s McCafferty … Yeah, fine, thanks. All good. You?’ He waits. ‘Listen – could you do me a favour? Text me the numbers for stolen bank cards? Mastercard and a Barclays. Friend’s just had her bag nicked … Yeah. Thanks, Sherrie. Say hi to the guys for me. And, yeah, see you soon.’

He dials the texted numbers, hands her the phone. ‘Cops,’ he says. ‘Small world.’ And then walks silently as she explains the situation to the operator.

‘Thank you,’ she says, handing the phone back.

‘No problem.’

‘I’d be surprised if they manage to get any money out on them anyway.’ Liv smiles ruefully.

They are at the restaurant, a Spanish place. The lights are off and the doors locked. He ducks into the doorway and she peers in through the window, as if willing it to show some distant sign of life.

Paul consults his watch. ‘It’s a quarter past twelve. They’re probably done for the night.’

Liv stands and bites her lip. She turns back to him. ‘Perhaps she’s at mine. Please can I borrow your phone again?’ He hands it over, and she holds it up in the sodium light better to see the screen. He watches as she taps a number, then turns away, one hand rifling unconsciously through her hair. She glances behind her and gives him a brief, uncertain smile, then turns back. She types in another number, and a third.

‘Anyone else you can call?’

‘My dad. I just tried him. Nobody’s answering there either. Although it’s entirely possible he’s asleep. He sleeps like the dead.’ She looks completely lost.

‘Look – why don’t I book you a room in a hotel? You can pay me back when you get your cards.’

She stands there, biting her lip. *Two hundred pounds*. He remembers the way she had said it, despairing. This was not someone who could afford a central London hotel room.

The rain is falling more heavily now, splashing up their legs, water gurgling along the gutters in front of them. He speaks almost before he thinks: 'You know what? It's getting late. I live about twenty minutes' walk away. You want to think about it and decide when we get to mine? We can sort it all out from there if you like.'

She hands him his phone. He watches some brief, internal struggle take place. Then she smiles, a little warily, and steps forward beside him. 'Thank you. And sorry. I – I really didn't set out to mess up someone else's night too.'

Liv grows progressively quieter as they approach his flat, and he guesses that she is sobering up: some sensible part of her is wondering what she has just agreed to. He wonders if there is some girlfriend waiting for her somewhere. She's pretty, but in the way that women are when they don't want to draw male attention to themselves: free of makeup, hair scraped back into a ponytail. Is this a gay thing? Her skin is too good for her to be a regular drinker. She has taut legs and a long stride that speak of regular exercise. But she walks defensively, with her arms crossed over her chest.

They reach his flat, a second-floor maisonette above a café on the outskirts of Theatreland, and he stands well back from her as he opens the door.

Paul switches on the lights and goes straight to the coffee-table. He sweeps up the newspapers and that morning's mug, seeing the flat through a stranger's eyes: too small, overstuffed with reference books, photographs and furniture. Luckily, no stray socks or washing. He walks into the kitchen area and puts the kettle on, fetches her a towel to dry her hair, and watches as she walks tentatively around the room, apparently reassured by the packed bookshelves, the photographs on the sideboard: him in uniform, him and Jake grinning, their arms around each other. 'Is this your son?'

'Yup.'

'He looks like you.' She picks up a photograph of him, Jake and Leonie, taken when Jake was four. Her other arm is still wrapped around her stomach. He would offer her a T-shirt, but he doesn't want her to think he's trying to get her to remove her clothes.

'Is this his mother?'

'Yes.'

'You're … not gay, then?'

Paul is briefly lost for words, then says, 'No! Oh. No, that's my brother's bar.'

'Oh.'

He gestures towards the photograph of him in uniform. 'That's not, like, me doing a Village People routine. I really was a cop.'

She starts to laugh, the kind of laughter that comes when the only alternative is tears. Then she wipes her eyes and flashes him an embarrassed smile. 'I'm sorry. It's a bad day today. And that was before my bag got stolen.'

She's really pretty, he thinks suddenly. She has an air of vulnerability, like someone's stripped her of a layer of skin. She turns to face him and he looks away abruptly. 'Paul, have you got a drink? As in not coffee. I know you probably think I'm a complete soak but I could really, really do with one right now.'

He flicks the kettle off, pours them both a glass of wine and comes into the living area. She is sitting on the edge of the sofa, her elbows thrust between her knees.

'You want to talk about it? Ex-cops have generally heard a lot of stuff.' He hands her the glass of wine. 'Much worse stuff than yours. I'd put money on it.'

'Not really.' She takes an audible gulp of her wine. Then, abruptly, she turns to him. 'Actually, yes. My husband died four years ago today. He died. Most people couldn't even say the word when he did, and now they keep telling me I should have moved on. I have no idea how to move on. There's a Goth living in my house and I can't even remember her surname. I owe money to everyone. And I went to a gay bar tonight because I couldn't face being in my house alone, and my bag got nicked with the two hundred pounds I'd borrowed from my credit card to pay my council tax. And when you asked if there was anyone else I could call, the only person I could think of who might offer me a bed was Fran, the woman who lives in cardboard boxes at the bottom of my block.'

He is so busy digesting the word 'husband' that he barely hears the rest. 'Well, I can offer you a bed.'

That wary glance again.

'My son's bed. It's not the world's most comfortable. I mean, my brother slept in it on and off when he broke up with his last boyfriend, and he says he's had to see an osteopath ever since, but it's a bed.'

He pauses. 'It's probably better than cardboard boxes.'

She looks sideways at him.

'Okay. Marginally better.'

She smiles wryly into her glass. 'I couldn't ask Fran anyway. She never bloody invites me in.'

'Well, that's just rude. I wouldn't want to go to her house anyway. Stay there. I'll sort you out a toothbrush.'

Sometimes, Liv thinks, it is possible to fall into a parallel universe. You think you know what you're in for – a bad night in front of the television, drinking in a bar, hiding from your history – and suddenly you veer off the track to a whole destination you never even knew was there. It is all, on the surface, a disaster: the stolen bag, the lost cash, the dead husband, the life gone awry. And then you're sitting in the tiny flat of an American with bright blue eyes and hair like a grizzled pelt, and it's almost three o'clock in the morning and he's making you laugh, properly laugh, as if you have nothing to worry about in the whole world.

She has drunk a lot. There have been at least three glasses since she got here, and there were many more back at the bar. But she has reached that rare, pleasant state of alcoholic equilibrium. She is not drunk enough to feel sick or woozy. She is just merry enough to be suspended, floating in this pleasurable moment, with the man and the laughter, and the crowded little flat that carries no memories. They have talked and talked and talked, their voices getting louder and more insistent. And she has told him everything, liberated by shock and alcohol, and the fact that he is a stranger and she will probably never see him again. He has told her of the horrors of divorce, the politics of policing and why he was unsuited to them, and why he misses New York but cannot return until his son is grown-up. She wants to tell him everything, because he seems to understand everything. She has told him of her grief and her anger, and how she looks at other couples and simply cannot see the point in trying again. Because none of them seem really, properly, happy. Not one.

‘Okay. Devil’s advocate here.’ Paul puts down his glass. ‘And this comes from one who totally fucked up his own relationship. But you were married four years, right?’

‘Right.’

‘I don’t want to sound cynical or anything, but don’t you think that one of the reasons it’s all perfect in your head is that he died? Things are always more perfect if they’re cut short. An industry of dead movie icons proves that.’

‘So you’re saying that if he had lived we would have got as grumpy and fed up with each other as everyone else?’

‘Not necessarily. But familiarity and having kids, work and the stresses of everyday life can take the edge off romance, for sure.’

‘The voice of experience.’

‘Yeah. Probably.’

‘Well, it didn’t.’ She shakes her head emphatically. The room spins a little.

‘Oh, come on, you must have had times when you got a bit fed up with him. Everyone does. You know – when he moaned about you spending money or farted in bed or left the toothbrush cap off …’

Liv shakes her head again. ‘Why does everyone do this? Why is everyone so determined to diminish what we had? You know what? We were just happy. We didn’t fight. Not about toothpaste or farting or anything. We just liked each other. We really liked each other. We were … happy.’ She is biting back tears and turns her head towards the window, forcing them away. She will not cry tonight. She will not.

There is a long silence. *Bugger*, she thinks.

‘Then you were one of the lucky ones,’ says the voice behind her.

She turns and Paul McCafferty is offering the last of the bottle.

‘Lucky?’

‘Not many people get that. Even four years of it. You should be grateful.’

Grateful. It makes perfect sense when he says it like that. ‘Yes,’ she says, after a moment. ‘Yes, I should.’

‘Actually, stories like yours give me hope.’

She smiles. ‘That’s a lovely thing to say.’

‘Well, it’s true. To … What’s his name?’ Paul holds up a glass.

‘David.’

‘To David. One of the good guys.’

She is smiling – wide and unexpected. She notes his vague look of surprise. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘To David.’

Paul takes a sip of his drink. ‘You know, this is the first time I’ve invited a girl back to my place and ended up toasting her husband.’

And there it is again: laughter, bubbling up inside her, an unexpected visitor.

He turns to her. ‘You know, I’ve been wanting to do this all night.’ He leans forward and, before she has time to freeze, he reaches out a thumb and wipes gently under her left eye. ‘Your makeup,’ he says, holding his thumb aloft. ‘I wasn’t sure you knew.’

Liv stares at him, and something unexpected and electric jolts through her. She looks at his strong, freckled hands, the way his collar meets his neck, and her mind becomes blank. She puts down her glass,

leans forward and, before he can say anything, she does the only thing she can think of and places her lips against his. There is the brief shock of physical contact, then she feels his breath on her skin, a hand rising to meet her waist and he is kissing her back, his lips soft and warm and tasting faintly of tannin. She lets herself melt into him, her breath quickening, floating up on alcohol and sensation and the sweetness of simply being held. Oh, God, but *this man*. Her eyes are closed, her head spinning, his kisses soft and delicious.

And then he pulls back. It takes her a second to realize. She pulls back too, just a few inches, her breath stalled in her chest. *Who are you?*

He looks straight into her eyes. Blinks. 'You know … I think you're absolutely lovely. But I have rules about this sort of thing.'

Her lips feel swollen. 'Are you … with someone?'

'No. I just …' He runs a hand over his hair. Clenches his jaw. 'Liv, you don't seem …'

'I'm drunk.'

'Yes, yes, you are.'

She sighs. 'I used to have great drunk sex.'

'You need to stop talking now. I'm trying to be really, really good here.'

She throws herself back against the sofa cushions. 'Really. Some women are rubbish when they're drunk. I wasn't.'

'Liv –'

'And you are … delicious.'

His chin is stubbled, as if already alerting them to the fact that morning is approaching. She wants to run her fingers along those tiny bristles, to feel them rough against her skin. She reaches out a hand and he shifts away from her.

'*Aaand* I'm gone. Okay, yup, I'm gone.' He stands, takes a breath. He does not look at her. 'Uh, that's my son's bedroom there. If you need a drink of water or anything, there's a tap. It, uh, it does water.'

He picks up a magazine and puts it down again. And then does the same with a second. 'And there are magazines. If you want something to read. Lots of …'

It cannot stop here. She wants him so badly it's as if her whole body radiates it. She could actually beg, right now. She can still feel the heat of his hand on her waist, the taste of his lips. They stare at each other for a moment. *Can't you feel this? Don't walk away,* she wills him silently. *Please don't walk away from me.*

'Good night, Liv,' he says.

He gazes at her for a moment longer, then pads down the corridor and closes his bedroom door silently behind him.

Four hours later Liv wakes in a box room with an Arsenal duvet cover and a head that thumps so hard she has to reach up a hand to check she isn't being assaulted. She blinks, stares blearily at the little Japanese cartoon creatures on the wall opposite and lets her mind slowly bring together the pieces of information from the previous night.

Stolen bag. She closes her eyes. Oh, no.

Strange bed. She has no keys. Oh, God, she has no keys. And no money. She attempts to move, and pain slices through her head so that she almost yelps.

And then she remembers the man. *Pete? Paul?* She sees herself walking through deserted streets in the early hours. And then she sees herself lurching forward to kiss him, his own polite retreat. *You are … delicious.* 'Oh, no,' she says softly, then puts her hands over her eyes. 'Oh, I didn't …'

She sits up and moves to the side of the bed, noticing a small yellow plastic car near her right foot. Then, when she hears the sound of a door opening, the shower starting up next door, Liv grabs her shoes and her jacket and lets herself out of the flat into the cacophonous daylight.

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‘It feels a little like we’ve been invaded.’ The CEO stands back, his shirt-sleeved arms across his chest, and laughs nervously. ‘Does … everyone feel like that?’

‘Oh, yes.’ she says. It is not an unusual response.

Around her, fifteen or so teenagers move swiftly through the vast foyer of Conaghy Securities. Two – Edun and Cam – are vaulting over the rails that run alongside the glass wall, backwards and forwards, their broad hands expertly propelling their weight, their glowing white trainers squeaking as they lift from the limestone floor. A handful of others have already shot through into the central atrium, teetering and shrieking with laughter on the edge of the perfectly aligned walkways, pointing down as they see the huge koi carp that swim placidly among the angular pools.

‘Are they always … this noisy?’ the CEO asks.

Abiola, the youth worker, stands beside Liv. ‘Yup. We usually give them ten minutes just to adapt to the space. Then you find they settle surprisingly quickly.’

‘And … nothing ever gets damaged?’

‘Not once.’ Liv watches Cam run lightly along a raised wooden rail, jumping on to his toes at the end of it. ‘Of the list of previous companies I gave you, we’ve not had so much as a dislodged carpet tile.’ She sees his disbelieving expression. ‘You have to remember that the average British child lives in a home with floor space less than seventy-six square metres.’ She nods. ‘And these will probably have grown up in far less than that. It’s inevitable that when they’re let loose in a new place they get itchy feet for a bit. But you watch. The space will work around them.’

Once a month the David Halston Foundation, part of Solberg Halston Architects, organizes a trip for underprivileged kids to visit a building of special architectural interest. David had believed that young people should not just be taught about their built environment but let loose in it, to utilize the space in their own way, to understand what it did. He had wanted them to enjoy it. She still remembers the first time she had watched him talking it through with a group of Bengali kids from Whitechapel. ‘What does this doorway say when you walk in?’ he had asked, pointing up at the huge frame.

‘Money,’ says one, and they had all laughed.

‘That,’ David had said, smiling, ‘is exactly what it’s supposed to say. This is a stockbroking firm. This doorway, with its huge marble pillars and its gold lettering, is saying to you, “Give us your money. And we will make you MORE MONEY.” It says, in the most blatant way possible, “We Know About Money.”’

‘That’s why, Nikhil, your doorway is three foot tall, man.’ One of the boys had shoved another and both had fallen about laughing.

But it worked. She had seen even then that it worked. David had made them think about the space around them, whether it made them feel free or angry or sad. He had shown them how light and space moved, almost as if it were alive, around the oddest buildings. ‘They’ve got to see that there is an

alternative to the little boxes they live in,' he said. 'They've got to understand that their environment affects how they feel.'

Since he had died, she had, with Sven's blessing, taken over David's role, meeting company directors, persuading them of the benefits of the scheme and to let them in. It had helped get her through the early months, when she had felt that there was little point in her existence. Now it was the one thing she did each month that she actively looked forward to.

'Miss? Can we touch the fish?'

'No. No touching, I'm afraid. Have we got everyone?' She waited as Abiola did a quick head count.

'Okay. We'll start here. I just want you all to stand still for ten seconds and tell me how this space makes you feel.'

'Peaceful,' said one, after the laughter stopped.

'Why?'

'Dunno. It's the water. And the sound of that waterfall thing. It's peaceful.'

'What else makes you feel peaceful?'

'The sky. It's got no roof, innit?'

'That's right. Why do you think this bit has no roof?'

'They run out of money.' More laughter.

'And when you get outside, what's the first thing you do? No, Dean, I know what you're about to say. And not that.'

'Take a deep breath. Breathe.'

'Except our air is full of shit. This air they probably pump through a filter and stuff.'

'It's open. They can't filter this.'

'I do breathe, though. Like a big breath. I hate being shut in small places. My room's got no windows and I have to sleep with the door open or I feel like I'm in a coffin.'

'My brother's room's got no windows so my mum got him this poster with a window on it.'

They begin comparing bedrooms. She likes them, these kids, and she fears for them, the casual deprivations they toss into her path, the way they reveal that 99 per cent of their lives are spent within a square mile or two, locked in by physical constraints or the genuine fear of rival gangs and illegal trespass.

It's a small thing, this charity. A chance to make her feel as if David's life was not wasted; that his ideas continue. Sometimes a really bright kid emerges – one who immediately locks on to David's ideas – and she tries to help them in some way, to talk to their teachers or organize scholarships. A couple of times she has even met their parents. One of David's early *protégés* is now doing an architecture degree, his fees paid by the foundation.

But for most of them it's just a brief window on to a different world, an hour or two in which to practise their *parkour* skills on someone else's stairs and rails and marble foyers, a chance to see inside Mammon, albeit under the bemused eye of the rich people she has persuaded to let them in.

'There was a study done a few years back, which showed that if you reduce the amount of space per child from twenty-five to fifteen square feet, they become more aggressive and less inclined to interact with each other. What do you think of that?'

Cam is swinging around an end rail. ‘I have to share a bedroom with my brother and I want to batter him half the time. He’s always putting his stuff over my side.’

‘So what places make you feel good? Does this place make you feel good?’

‘It makes me feel like I got no worries.’

‘I like the plants. Them with the big leaves.’

‘Oh, man. I’d just sit here and stare at the fish. This place is restful.’

There is a murmur of agreement.

‘And then I’d catch one and make my mum cook some chips for it, innit?’

They all laugh. Liv looks at Abiola and, despite herself, she starts to laugh too.

‘Did it go well?’ Sven rises from his desk to meet her. She kisses his cheek, puts down her bag and sits in the white leather Eames chair opposite. It is routine now that she will come to Solberg Halston Associates after each outing, to drink coffee and report back. She is always more tired than she expects.

‘Great. Once Mr Conaghy realized they weren’t about to dive into his atrium pools, he was quite inspired, I think. He stuck around to speak to them. I think I might even be able to persuade him to provide some sponsorship.’

‘Good. That’s good news. Sit down, and I’ll get some coffee. How are you? How’s your dangerously ill relative?’

She looks blankly at him.

‘Your aunt?’

The blush creeps above her collar. ‘Oh. Oh, yes, not too bad, thanks. Better.’

Sven hands her a coffee and his eyes rest on hers just a moment too long. His chair squeaks softly as he sits down. ‘You’ll have to forgive Kristen. She just gets carried away. I did tell her I thought that man was an idiot.’

‘Oh.’ She winces. ‘Was it that transparent?’

‘Not to Kristen. She doesn’t know that Ebola isn’t generally fixed by surgery.’ And then, as Liv groans, he smiles. ‘Don’t give it a thought. Roger Folds is an ass. And, if nothing else, it was just nice to see you out and about again.’ He takes off his glasses. ‘Really. You should do it more often.’

‘Well, um, I have a bit lately.’

She blushes, thinking of her night with Paul McCafferty. She has found herself returning to it relentlessly over the days since, worrying at the night’s events, like a tongue at a loose tooth. What had made her behave in that way? What had he thought of her? And then, the mercurial shiver, the imprint of that kiss. She is cold with embarrassment, yet burns gently, the residue of it on her lips. She feels as if some long-distant part of her has been sparked back to life. It’s a little disconcerting.

‘So, how’s Goldstein?’

‘Not far off now. We had some problems with the new building regs, but we’re nearly there. The Goldsteins are happy, anyway.’

‘Do you have any pictures?’

The Goldstein Building had been David’s dream commission: a vast organic glass structure stretching halfway around a square on the edge of the City. He had been working on it for two years of their marriage, persuading the wealthy Goldstein brothers to share his bold vision, to create something far from the angular concrete castles around them, and he had still been working on it when he died. Sven had

taken over the blueprint and overseen it through the planning stages, and was now managing its actual construction. It had been a problematic build, the materials delayed in their shipping from China, the wrong glass, the foundations proving inadequate in London's clay. But now, finally, it is rising exactly as planned, each glass panel shining like the scales of some giant serpent.

Sven rifles through some documents on his desk, picks out a photograph and hands it over. She gazes at the vast structure, surrounded by blue hoardings, but somehow, indefinably, David's work. 'It's going to be glorious.' She can't help but smile.

'I wanted to tell you – they've agreed to put a little plaque in the foyer in his memory.'

'Really?' Her throat constricts.

'Yes. Jerry Goldstein told me last week – they thought it would be nice to commemorate David in some way. They were very fond of him.'

She lets this thought settle. 'That's … that's great.'

'I thought so. You'll be coming to the opening?'

'I'd love to.'

'Good. And how's the other stuff?'

She sips her coffee. She always feels faintly self-conscious talking about her life to Sven. It is as if the lack of dimensions in it cannot help but disappoint. 'Well, I seem to have acquired a housemate. Which is … interesting. I'm still running. Work is a bit quiet.'

'How bad is it?'

She tries to smile. 'Honestly? I'd probably be earning more in a Bangladeshi sweatshop.'

Sven looks down at his hands. 'You … haven't thought it might be time to start doing something else?'

'I'm not really equipped for anything else.' She has long known that it had not been the wisest move to give up work and follow David around during their marriage. As her friends built careers, put in twelve-hour days at the office, she had simply travelled with him, to Paris, Sydney, Barcelona. He hadn't needed her to work. It seemed stupid, being away from him all the time. And afterwards she hadn't been good for much at all. Not for a long time.

'I had to take out a mortgage on the house last year. And now I can't keep up with the payments.' She blurts out this last bit, like a sinner at confession.

But Sven looks unsurprised. 'You know … if you ever wanted to sell it, I could easily find you a buyer.'

'Sell?'

'It's a big house to be rattling around in. And … I don't know. You're so isolated up there, Liv. It was a marvellous thing for David to cut his teeth on, and a lovely retreat for the two of you, but don't you think you should be in the thick of things again? Somewhere a bit livelier? A nice flat in the middle of Notting Hill or Clerkenwell, maybe?'

'I can't sell David's house.'

'Why not?'

'Because it would just be wrong.'

He doesn't say the obvious. He doesn't have to: it's there in the way he leans back in his chair, closes his mouth over his words.

'Well,' he says, leaning forwards over his desk. 'I'm just putting the thought out there.'

Behind him a huge crane is moving, iron girders slicing through the sky as they travel towards a cavernous roof space on the other side of the road. When Solberg Halston Architects had moved here, five years previously, the view had been a row of dilapidated shops – bookmaker, launderette, second-hand clothes – their bricks sludge brown, their windows obscured by years of accumulated lead and dirt. Now there is just a hole. It is possible that the next time she comes here she will not recognize the view at all.

'How are the kids?' she says abruptly. And Sven, with the tact of someone who has known her for years, changes the subject.

It is halfway through the monthly meeting when Paul notices that Miriam, his and Janey's shared secretary, is perched not on a chair but on two large boxes of files. She sits awkwardly, her legs angled in an attempt to keep her skirt at a modest length, her back propped against more boxes.

At some point in the mid-nineties, the recovery of stolen artwork had become big business. Nobody at the Trace and Return Partnership seemed to have anticipated this, so, fifteen years on, meetings are held in Janey's increasingly cramped office, elbows brushing against the teetering piles of folders, or boxes of faxes and photocopies, or, if clients are involved, downstairs in the local coffee shop. He has said often that they should look at new premises. Each time Janey looks at him as if it's the first time she has heard this, and says, yes, yes, good idea. And then does nothing about it.

'Miriam?' Paul stands, offers her his chair, but she refuses.

'Really,' she says. 'I'm fine.' She keeps nodding, as if to confirm this to herself.

'You're falling into Unresolved Disputes 1996,' he says. He wants to add: *And I can see halfway up your skirt*.

'Really, I'm quite comfortable.'

'Miriam. Honestly, I can just –'

'Miriam's fine, Paul. Really.' Janey adjusts her spectacles on her nose.

'Oh, yes. I'm very comfortable here.' She keeps nodding until he looks away. It makes him feel bad.

'So that's where we are, as far as the staffing and office issues stand. Where are we all at?'

Sean, the lawyer, begins to run through his upcoming schedule; an approach to the Spanish government to return a looted Velázquez to a private collector, two outstanding sculpture recoveries, a possible legal change to restitution claims. Paul leans back in his chair and rests his ballpoint against his pad.

And she's there again, smiling ruefully. Her burst of unexpected laughter. The sadness in tiny lines around her eyes. *I was great at drunk sex. Really. I was.*

He doesn't want to admit to himself how disappointed he had been when he emerged from the bathroom that morning to find she'd simply let herself out. His son's duvet had been straightened, and there was just an absence where the girl had been. No scribbled message. No phone number. Nothing.

'Is she a regular?' he had asked Greg, casually, on the phone that evening.

'Nope. Not seen her before. Sorry to land you with her like that, bro.'

'No problem,' he had said. He hadn't bothered to tell Greg to watch out in case she came back. Something told him she wouldn't.

'Paul?'

He drags his thoughts back to the A4 pad in front of him. 'Um … Well, as you know, we got the Nowicki painting returned. That's headed for auction. Which is obviously – um – rewarding.' He ignores

Janey's warning glance. 'And coming up this month I've got a meeting about the statuette collection from Bonhams, a trace on a Lowry that's been stolen from a stately home in Ayrshire and …' He leafs through his papers. 'This French work that was looted in the First World War and turned up in some architect's house in London. I'm guessing, given the value, they won't give it up without a bit of a fight. But it looks fairly clear cut, if we can establish it really was stolen initially. Sean, you might want to dig out any legal precedent on First World War stuff, just in case.'

Sean scribbles a note.

'Apart from that, I've just got the other cases from last month that I'm carrying forward, and I'm talking to some insurers about whether we want to get involved with a new fine art register.'

'Another?' says Janey.

'It's the scaling down of the Art and Antiques Squad,' Paul said. 'The insurers are getting nervous.'

'Might be good news for us, though. Where are we on the Stubbs?'

He clicks the end of his pen. 'Deadlock.'

'Sean?'

'It's a tricky one. I've been looking up precedent, but it may well go to trial.'

Janey nods, then glances up as Paul's mobile phone rings. 'Sorry,' he says, and wrenches it from his pocket. He stares at the name. 'Actually, if you'll excuse me, I think I should take this. Sherrie. Hi.'

He feels Janey's eyes burning into his back as he steps carefully over his colleagues' legs and into his office. He closes the door behind him. 'You did? … Her name? Liv. Nope, that's all I got … There is? Can you describe it? … Yup – that sounds like her. Mid-brown hair, maybe blonde, shoulder length. Wearing it in a ponytail? … Phone, wallet – don't know what else. No address? … No, I don't. Sure – Sherrie, do me a favour? Can I pick it up?'

He stares out of the window.

'Yeah. Yeah, I do. I just realized – I think I've worked out how to get it back to her.'

'Hello?'

'Is that Liv?'

'No.'

He pauses. 'Um … is she there?'

'Are you a bailiff?'

'No.'

'Well, she's not here.'

'Do you know when she'll be back?'

'Are you sure you're not a bailiff?'

'I am definitely not a bailiff. I have her handbag.'

'Are you a bag thief? Because if you're trying to blackmail her, you're wasting your time.'

'I am not a bag thief. Or a bailiff. I am a man who has found her bag and is trying to get it back to her.' He pulls at his collar.

There is a long pause.

'How did you get this number?'

'It's on my phone. She borrowed it when she tried to ring home.'

'You were with her?'

He feels a little germ of pleasure. He hesitates, tries not to sound too keen. ‘Why? Did she mention me?’

‘No.’ The sound of a kettle boiling. ‘I was just being nosy. Look – she’s just on her annual trip out of the house. If you drop by around four-ish she should be back by then. If not I’ll take it for her.’

‘And you are?’

A long, suspicious pause.

‘I’m the woman who takes in stolen handbags for Liv.’

‘Right. So what’s the address?’

‘You don’t know?’ There’s another silence. ‘Hmm. I tell you what, come to the corner of Audley Street and Packers Lane, and someone will meet you down there –’

‘I’m not a bag thief.’

‘So you keep saying. Ring when you’re there.’ He can hear her thinking. ‘If nobody answers, just hand it to the woman in the cardboard boxes by the back door. Her name’s Fran. And if we do decide to meet you, no funny business. We have a gun.’

Before he can say anything else, she has rung off. He sits at his desk, staring at his phone.

Janey walks into his office without knocking. It has started to annoy him, the way she does this. It makes him think she’s trying to catch him in the middle of something. ‘The Lefèvre painting. Have we actually sent off the opening letter yet?’

‘No. I’m still doing checks on whether it has been exhibited.’

‘Did we get the current owners’ address?’

‘The magazine didn’t keep a record of it. But it’s fine – I’ll send it via his workplace. If he’s an architect he shouldn’t be hard to find. The company will probably be in his name.’

‘Good. I just got a message saying the claimants are coming to London in a few weeks and want a meeting. It would be great if we could get an initial response before then. Can you throw some dates at me?’

‘Will do.’

He stares at his computer screen very hard, even though only the screensaver is in front of him, until Janey takes the hint and leaves.

Mo is at home. She is a strangely unobtrusive presence, even given the startling inky black of her hair and clothing. Occasionally Liv half wakes at six and hears her padding around, preparing to leave for her morning shift at the care home. She finds the presence of another person in the house oddly comforting.

Mo cooks every day, or brings back food from the restaurant, leaving foil-covered dishes in the fridge and scrawled instructions on the kitchen table. ‘Heat up for 40 mins at 180. That would mean SWITCHING ON THE OVEN’ and ‘FINISH THIS AS BY TOMORROW IT WILL CLIMB OUT OF ITS CONTAINER AND KILL US.’ The house no longer smells of cigarette smoke. Liv suspects Mo sneaks the odd one out on the deck, but she doesn’t ask.

They have settled into a routine of sorts. Liv rises as before, heading out on to the concrete walkways, her feet pounding, her head filled with noise. She has stopped buying coffee, so she makes tea for Fran, eats her toast and sits in front of her desk trying not to worry about her lack of work. But now she finds she half looks forward to the sound of the key in the lock at three o’clock, Mo’s arrival home. Mo has not offered to pay rent – and she is not sure that either of them wants to feel this is a formal arrangement – but

the day after she heard about Liv's bag, a pile of crumpled cash had appeared on the kitchen table. '*Emergency council tax,' the note with it read. 'Don't start being all weird about it.*'

Liv didn't get even remotely weird about it. She didn't have a choice.

They are drinking tea and reading a London free-sheet when the phone rings. Mo looks up, like a gundog scenting the air, checks the clock and says, 'Oh. I know who this is.' Liv turns back to the newspaper. 'It's the man with your handbag.'

Liv's mug stalls in mid-air. 'What?'

'I forgot to tell you. He rang up earlier. I told him to wait on the corner and we'd come down.'

'What kind of man?'

'Dunno. I just checked that he wasn't a bailiff.'

'Oh, God. He definitely has it? Do you think he'll want a reward?' She casts around in her pockets. She has four pounds in coins and some coppers, which she holds out in front of her.

'It doesn't seem like a lot, does it?'

'Short of sexual favours, it's pretty much all you have.'

'Four pounds it is.'

They head into the lift, Liv clutching the money. Mo is smirking.

'What?'

'I was just thinking. It would be funny if we stole *his* bag. You know, mugged him. Girl muggers.' She sniggers. 'I once stole some chalk from a post office. I have form.'

Liv is scandalized.

'What?' Mo's face is sombre. 'I was seven.'

They stand in silence as the lift reaches the bottom. As the doors open, Mo says, 'We could make a clean getaway. He doesn't actually know your address.'

'Mo –' Liv begins, but as she steps out of the main doorway she sees the man on the corner, the colour of his hair, the way he runs his hand over the top of his head, and whips round, her cheeks burning.

'What? Where are you going?'

'I can't go out there.'

'Why? I can see your bag. He looks okay. I don't think he's a mugger. He's wearing shoes. No mugger wears shoes.'

'Will you get it for me? Really – I can't talk to him.'

'Why?' Mo scrutinizes her. 'Why have you gone so pink?'

'Look, I stayed at his house. And it's just embarrassing.'

'Oh, my God. You did the nasty with that man.'

'No, I did not.'

'You did.' Mo squints at her. 'Or you wanted to. YOU WANTED TO. You are so busted.'

'Mo – can you just get my bag for me, please? Just tell him I'm not in. Please?' Before Mo can say anything else, she is back in the lift and jabbing at the button to take her to the top floor, her thoughts spinning. When she reaches the Glass House she rests her forehead against the door and listens to her heart beating in her ears.

I am thirty years old, she says to herself.

Behind her the lift door opens.

‘Oh, God, thanks, Mo, I –’

Paul McCafferty is in front of her.

‘Where’s Mo?’ she says, stupidly.

‘Is that your flatmate? She’s … interesting.’

She cannot speak. Her tongue has swollen to fill her mouth. Her hand reaches up to her hair – she’s conscious that she hasn’t washed it.

‘Anyway,’ he says. ‘Hey.’

‘Hello.’

He holds out a hand. ‘Your bag. It is your bag, right?’

‘I can’t believe you found it.’

‘I’m good at finding stuff. It’s my job.’

‘Oh. Yes. The ex-cop thing. Well, thanks. Really.’

‘It was in a bin, if you’re interested. With two others. Outside University College Library. The caretaker found them and handed them all in. I’m afraid your cards and your phone are gone … The good news is that the cash was still there.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah. Amazing. Two hundred pounds. I checked it.’

Relief floods her, like a warm bath. ‘Really? They left the cash? I don’t understand.’

‘Nor me. I can only think it fell out of your purse as they opened it.’

She takes her bag and rummages through it. Two hundred pounds is floating around in the bottom, along with her hairbrush, the paperback she’d been reading that morning and a stray lipstick.

‘Never heard of that happening before. Still, it’ll help, eh? One less thing to worry about.’

He is smiling. Not a sympathetic oh-you-poor-drunken-woman-who-made-a-pass-at-me kind of smile, but the smile of someone who is just really pleased about something.

She finds she is smiling back. ‘This is just … amazing.’

‘So do I get my four-pound reward?’ She blinks at him. ‘Mo told me. Joke. Really.’ He laughs. ‘But …’ He studies his feet for a moment. ‘Liv – would you like to go out some time?’ When she doesn’t respond immediately, he adds, ‘It doesn’t have to be a big deal. We could not get drunk. And not go to a gay bar. We could even just walk around holding our own door-keys and not letting our bags get stolen.’

‘Okay,’ she says slowly, and finds she is smiling again. ‘I’d like that.’

Paul McCafferty whistles to himself the whole way down in the noisy, juddering lift. When he gets to the bottom he takes the cashpoint receipt from his pocket, crumples it into a little ball, and throws it into the nearest bin.

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They go out four times. The first time they have a pizza and she sticks to mineral water until she's sure he doesn't really think she's a soak, at which point she allows herself one gin and tonic. It's the most delicious gin and tonic she has ever had. He walks her back to her house and looks like he's about to leave, then after a slightly awkward moment he kisses her cheek and they both laugh as if they know this is all a bit embarrassing. Without thinking, she leans forward and kisses him properly, a short one, but with intent. One that suggests something of herself. It leaves her a bit breathless. He walks into the lift backwards and is still grinning as the doors close on him.

She likes him.

The second time they go to see a live band his brother recommended and it's awful. After twenty minutes, she realizes, with some relief, that he thinks it's awful too, and when he says does she want to leave, they find themselves holding hands so they don't lose each other as they fight their way out through the crowded bar. Somehow they don't let go until they reach his flat. There they talk about their childhoods and bands they like and types of dog and the horror of courgettes, then kiss on the sofa until her legs go a bit weak. Her chin stays bright pink for two whole days afterwards.

A couple of days after this he rings her at lunchtime to say he happens to be passing a nearby café and does she fancy a quick coffee? 'Were you really passing by?' she says, after they have stretched their coffee and cake as far as his lunch hour can reasonably allow.

'Sure,' he says, and then, to her delight, his ears go pink. He sees her looking and reaches a hand up to his left lobe. 'Ah. Man. I'm a really bad liar.'

The fourth time they go to a restaurant. Her father calls just before pudding arrives to say that Caroline has left him again. He wails so loudly down the telephone that Paul actually jumps at the other side of the table. 'I have to go,' she says, and declines his offer of help. She is not ready for the two men to meet, especially where the possibility exists that her father may not be wearing trousers.

When she arrives at his house half an hour later, Caroline is already home.

'I forgot it was her night for life drawing,' he says sheepishly.

Paul does not attempt to push things further. She wonders briefly if she talks too much about David; whether somehow she has made herself off limits. But then she thinks it might just be him being gentlemanly. Other times she thinks, almost indignantly, that David is part of who she is, and if Paul wants to be with her, well, he'll have to accept that. She has several imaginary conversations with him and two imaginary arguments.

She wakes up thinking about him, about the way he leans forward when he listens, as if determined not to miss a single thing she says, the way his hair has greyed prematurely at the temples, his blue, blue eyes. She has forgotten what it's like to wake up thinking about someone, to want to be physically close to them, to feel a little giddy at the remembered scent of their skin. She still doesn't have enough work but it

bothers her less. Sometimes he sends her a text message in the middle of the day and she hears it spoken in an American accent.

She is afraid of showing Paul McCafferty how much she likes him. She is afraid of getting it wrong: the rules seem to have changed in the nine years since she last dated. She listens to Mo and her dispassionate observations about Internet dating, of 'friends with benefits', of the dos and don'ts of sex – how she should wax and trim and have 'techniques' – and it's as if she's listening to someone speaking Polish.

She finds it hard to tally Paul McCafferty with Mo's assertions about men: sleazy, chancing, self-serving, porn-obsessed slackers. He is quietly straightforward, a seemingly open book. It was why climbing the ranks of his specialist unit in the NYPD didn't suit him, he says. 'All the blacks and whites get pretty grey the higher up you get.' The only time he looks even remotely uncertain, his speech becoming hesitant, is when discussing his son. 'It's crap, divorce,' he says. 'We all tell ourselves the kids are fine, that it's better this way than two unhappy people shouting at each other, but we never dare ask them the truth.'

'The truth?'

'What they want. Because we know the answer. And it would break our hearts.' He had gazed off into the middle distance, and then, seconds later, recovered his smile. 'Still, Jake is good. He's really good. Better than we both deserve.'

She likes his Americanness, the way it makes him slightly alien, and completely removed from David. He has an innate sense of courtesy, the kind of man who will instinctively open a door for a woman, not because he's making some kind of chivalrous gesture but because it wouldn't occur to him not to open the door if someone needed to go through it. He carries a kind of subtle authority: people actually move out of the way when he walks along the street. He does not seem to be aware of this.

'Oh, my God, you've got it so bad,' says Mo.

'What? I'm just saying. It's nice to spend time with someone who seems …'

Mo snorts. 'He is *so* getting laid this week.'

But she has not invited him back to the Glass House. Mo senses her hesitation. 'Okay, Rapunzel. If you're going to stick around in this tower of yours, you're going to have to let the odd prince run his fingers through your hair.'

'I don't know …'

'So I've been thinking,' says Mo. 'We should move your room around. Change the house a bit. Otherwise you're always going to feel like you're bringing someone back to David's house.'

Liv suspects it will feel like that however the furniture is arranged. But on Tuesday afternoon, when Mo is off work, they move the bed to the other side of the room, pushing it against the alabaster-coloured concrete wall that runs like an architectural backbone through the centre of the house. It is not a natural place for it, if you were going to be really picky, but she has to admit there is something invigorating about it all looking so different.

'Now,' says Mo, gazing up at *The Girl You Left Behind*. 'You want to hang that painting somewhere else.'

'No. It stays.'

'But you said David bought it for you. And that means –'

‘I don’t care. She stays. Besides …’ Liv narrows her eyes at the woman within the frame. ‘I think she’d look odd in a living room. She’s too … intimate.’

‘Intimate?’

‘She’s … sexy. Don’t you think?’

Mo squints at the portrait. ‘Can’t see it myself. Personally, if it were my room I’d have a massive flat-screen telly there.’

Mo leaves, and Liv keeps gazing at the painting, and just for once she doesn’t feel the clench of grief. *What do you think?* she asks the girl. *Is it finally time to move on?*

It starts to go wrong on Friday morning.

‘So, you have a hot date!’ Her father steps forward and envelops her in a huge bear hug. He is full of *joie de vivre*, expansive and wise. He is, once again, speaking in exclamation marks. He is also dressed.

‘He’s just … I don’t want to make a big deal of it, Dad.’

‘But it’s wonderful! You’re a beautiful young woman! This is as nature intended – you should be out there, fluttering your feathers, strutting your stuff!’

‘I don’t have feathers, Dad.’ She sips her tea. ‘And I’m not entirely convinced about the stuff.’

‘What are you going to wear? Something a bit brighter? Caroline, what should she wear?’

Caroline walks into the kitchen, pinning up her long red hair. She has been working on her tapestries and smells vaguely of sheep. ‘She’s thirty years old, Michael. She can pick her own wardrobe.’

‘But look at the way she covers herself up! She’s still got David’s aesthetic – all blacks and greys and shapeless things. You should take a leaf out of Caroline’s book, darling. Look at the colours she wears! A woman like that draws the eye …’

‘A woman dressed as a yak would draw your eye,’ says Caroline, plugging in the kettle. But it is said without rancour. Her father stands behind her and moulds himself around her back. His eyes close in ecstasy. ‘We men … we’re primal creatures. Our eyes are inevitably drawn to the bright and the beautiful.’ He opens one eye, studying Liv. ‘Perhaps … you could wear something a bit less masculine at least.’

‘Masculine?’

He stands back. ‘Big black pullover. Black jeans. No makeup. It’s not exactly a siren call.’

‘You wear whatever you’re comfortable in, Liv. Take no notice of him.’

‘You think I look masculine?’

‘Mind you, you said you met him in a gay bar. Perhaps he likes women who look a bit … boyish.’

‘You are such an old fool,’ says Caroline, and departs the room bearing her mug of tea aloft.

‘So I look like a butch lesbian.’

‘I’m just saying I think you could play up your best features a little more. A wave in your hair, perhaps. A belt to show off your waist …’

Caroline puts her head back around the door. ‘It doesn’t matter what you wear, darling. Just make sure the underwear is good. Lingerie is ultimately all that matters.’

Her father watches Caroline disappear and blows a mute kiss. ‘Lingerie!’ he says reverently.

Liv looks down at her clothes. ‘Well, thanks, Dad. I feel great now. Just … great.’

‘Pleasure. Any time.’ He bangs the flat of his hand down on the pine table. ‘And let me know how it goes! A date! Exciting!’

Liv stares at herself in the mirror. It is three years since a man saw her body, and four since a man saw her body while she was sober enough to care. She has done what Mo suggested: depilated all but the neatest amounts of body hair, scrubbed her face, put a conditioning treatment on her hair. She has sorted through her underwear drawer until she found something that might qualify as vaguely seductive and not greyed with old age. She has painted her toenails and filed her fingernails rather than just attacking them with clippers.

David never cared about this stuff. But David isn't here any more.

She has gone through her wardrobe, sorting through rails of black and grey, of unobtrusive black trousers and jumpers. It is, she has to admit, utilitarian. She finally settles on a black pencil skirt and a V-necked jumper. She teams these with a pair of red high heels with butterflies on the toes that she bought and wore once to a wedding but has never thrown out. They may not be exactly on trend, but they could not be mistaken for the footwear of a butch lesbian.

'Whoa! Look at you!' Mo stands in the doorway, her jacket on, a rucksack over her shoulder, ready to head off for her shift.

'Is it too much?' She holds out an ankle doubtfully.

'You look great. You're not wearing granny knickers, right?'

Liv takes a breath. 'No, I am not wearing granny knickers. Not that I really feel obliged to keep everyone in the postcode up to speed with my underwear choices.'

'Then go forth and try not to multiply. I've left you the chicken thing I promised, and there's a salad bowl in the fridge. Just add the dressing. I'll be staying at Ranic's tonight, so I'm not under your feet. It's all yours.' She grins meaningfully at Liv, then heads down the stairs.

Liv turns back to the mirror. An over made-up woman in a skirt stares back at her. She walks around the room, a little unsteady in the unfamiliar shoes, trying to work out what is making her feel so unbalanced. The skirt fits perfectly. Running has given her legs an attractive, sculpted outline. The shoes are a good dash of colour against the rest of the outfit. The underwear is pretty without being tarty. She crosses her arms and sits on the side of the bed. He is due here in an hour.

She looks up at *The Girl You Left Behind*. I want to look how you look, she tells her silently.

For once, that smile offers her nothing. It seems almost to mock her.

It says, *Not a chance*.

Liv shuts her eyes for some time. Then she reaches for her phone and texts Paul.

> Change of plan. Would you mind if we met somewhere for a drink instead?

'So … sick of cooking? Because I would have brought a takeaway.'

Paul leans back in his chair, his eyes darting to a group of shrieking office workers, who seem to have been there all afternoon, judging by the general air of drunken flirtatiousness. He has been quietly amused by them, by the lurching women, the dozing accountant in the corner.

'I … just needed to get out of the house.'

'Ah, yeah. The working-from-home thing. I forget how that can drive you crazy. When my brother first moved over here he spent weeks at mine writing job applications, and when I used to get in from work he would literally talk at me non-stop for an hour.'

'You came over from America together?'

‘He came to support me when I got divorced. I was a bit of a mess. And then he just never left.’ Paul had come to England ten years ago. His English wife had been miserable, had missed home, especially when Jake was a baby, and he had left the NYPD to keep her happy.

‘When we got here we found it was us, not the location, that was all wrong. Hey, look. Blue Suit Man is going to make a move on the girl with the great hair.’

Liv sips her drink. ‘That’s not real hair.’

He squints. ‘What? You’re kidding me. It’s a wig?’

‘Extensions. You can tell.’

‘I can’t. You’re going to tell me the chest is fake too now, right?’

‘No, they’re real. She has quadroboob.’

‘Quadroboob?’

‘Bra’s too small. It makes her look like she’s got four.’

Paul laughs so hard he starts to choke. He can’t remember the last time he kept laughing like this. She smiles back at him, almost reluctantly. She has been a little strange tonight, as if all her responses are slowed by some separate internal conversation.

He manages to control himself. ‘So what do we think?’ he says, trying to make her relax. ‘Is Quadroboob Girl going to go for it?’

‘Maybe with one more drink inside her. I’m not convinced she really likes him.’

‘Yeah. She keeps looking over his shoulder as she talks to him. I think she likes grey shoes.’

‘No woman likes grey shoes. Trust me.’

He lifts an eyebrow, puts down his drink. ‘Now this, you see, is why men find it easier to split molecules and invade countries than to work out what goes on in women’s heads.’

‘Pfft. If you’re lucky one day I’ll sneak you a look at the rule book.’ He looks at her and she blushes, as if she’s said too much. There is a sudden inexplicably awkward silence. She stares at her drink. ‘Do you miss New York?’

‘I like visiting. When I go home now they all make fun of my accent.’

She seems to be only half listening.

‘You don’t have to look so anxious,’ he says. ‘Really. I’m happy here.’

‘Oh. No. Sorry. I didn’t mean …’ Her words die on her lips. There is a long silence. And then she looks up at him and speaks, her finger resting on the rim of her glass. ‘Paul … I wanted to ask you to come home with me tonight. I wanted us to … But I – I just … It’s too soon. I can’t. I can’t do it. That’s why I cancelled dinner.’ The words spill out into the air. She flushes to the roots of her hair.

He opens, then closes his mouth. He leans forward, and says, quietly. ‘“I’m not very hungry” would have been fine.’

Her eyes widen, then she slumps a little over the table. ‘Oh, God. I’m a nightmare date, aren’t I?’

‘Maybe a little more honest than you need to be.’

She groans. ‘I’m sorry. I have no idea what I’m –’

He leans forward, touches her hand lightly. He wants her to stop looking anxious. ‘Liv,’ he says evenly, ‘I like you. I think you’re great. But I totally get that you’ve been in your own space for a long time. And I’m not … I don’t …’ Words fail him too. It seems too soon for a conversation like this. And underneath it

all, despite himself, he fights disappointment. ‘Ah, hell, you want to grab a pizza? Because I’m starving. Let’s go get a bite and make each other feel awkward somewhere else.’

He can feel her knee against his.

‘You know, I do have food at home.’

He laughs. And stops. ‘Okay. Well, now I don’t know what to say.’

‘Say “That would be great.” And then you can add, “Please shut up now, Liv, before you make things even more complicated.”’

‘That would be great, then,’ says Paul. He holds up her coat for her to shrug her way into, then they head out of the pub.

This time when they walk it is not in silence. Something has unlocked between them, perhaps through his words or her sudden feeling of relief. She laughs at almost everything he says. They weave in and out of the tourists, pile breathlessly into a taxi, and when he sits down in the back seat, holding out his arm for her to tuck into, she leans into him and breathes in his clean, male smell and feels a little giddy with her own sudden good fortune.

They reach her block, and he laughs about their meeting. About Mo and her apparent belief that he was a bag thief. ‘I’m holding you to that four-pound reward,’ he says, straight-faced. ‘Mo said I was entitled to it.’

‘Mo also thinks it’s perfectly acceptable to put washing-up liquid in the drinks of customers you don’t like.’

‘Washing-up liquid?’

‘Apparently it makes them wee all night. It’s how she plays God with the romantic chances of her diners. You do not want to know what she does to the coffees of people who really upset her.’

He shakes his head admiringly. ‘Mo is wasted in that job. There’s a place in organized crime for that girl.’

They climb out of the taxi and go into the warehouse. The air is crisp with the approach of autumn; it seems to bite her skin. They hurry into the fuggy warmth of the foyer. She feels a bit silly now. Somehow she can see that in the previous forty-eight hours Paul McCafferty had stopped being a person and started to become an idea, a thing. The symbol of her moving-on. It was too much weight for something so new.

She hears Mo’s voice in her ear: *Whoa, missus. You think too much.*

And then, as he tugs the lift door shut behind them, they fall silent. It ascends slowly, rattling and echoing, the lights flickering, as they always do. It heads past the first floor, and they can hear the distant concrete echo of someone taking the stairs, a few bars of cello music from another apartment.

Liv is acutely conscious of him in the enclosed space, the citrus tang of his aftershave, the imprint of his arm around her shoulders. She looks down and wishes, suddenly, that she had not changed into this frumpy skirt, the flat heels. She wishes she had worn the butterfly shoes.

She looks up and he is watching her. He is not laughing. He holds out his hand, and as she takes it, he draws her slowly the two steps across the lift, and lowers his face to hers so that they are inches apart. But he does not kiss her.

His blue eyes travel slowly over her face: eyes, eyelashes, brows, lips, until she feels curiously exposed. She can feel his breath on her skin, his mouth so close to hers that she could tip forwards and bite it gently.

Still he does not kiss her.

It makes her shiver with longing.

'I can't stop thinking about you,' he murmurs.

'Good.'

He rests his nose against hers. The very tops of their lips are touching. She can feel the weight of him against her. She thinks her legs may have begun to tremble. 'Yes, it's fine. I mean, no, I'm terrified. But in a good way. I – I think I …'

'Stop talking,' he murmurs. She feels his words against her lips, his fingertips tracing the side of her neck, and she cannot speak.

And then they are at the top floor, kissing. He wrenches open the lift door and they stumble out, still pressed against each other, need spiralling between them. She has one hand inside the back of his shirt, absorbing the heat of his skin. She reaches behind her with the other, fumbling until she opens the door.

They fall into the house. She does not turn on the light. She staggers backwards, dazed now by his mouth on hers, his hands on her waist. She wants him so badly her legs turn liquid. She crashes against the wall, hears him swear under his breath.

'Here,' she whispers. 'Now.'

His body, solid against hers. They are in the kitchen. The moon hangs above the skylight, casting the room in a cold blue light. Something dangerous has entered the room, something dark and alive and delicious. She hesitates, just a moment, and pulls her jumper over her head. She is someone she knew a long time ago, unafraid, greedy. She reaches up, her eyes locked on his, and unbuttons her shirt. One, two, three, the buttons fall away. The shirt slides from her shoulders, so that she is exposed to her waist. Her bare skin tightens in the cool air. His eyes travel down her torso and her breath quickens. Everything stops.

The room is silent apart from their breathing. She feels magnetized. She leans forward, something building, intense and gorgeous in this brief hiatus, and they are kissing, a kiss she feels she has waited years to complete, a kiss that does not already have a full stop in mind. She breathes in his aftershave, her mind spins, goes blank. She forgets where they are. He pulls away gently, and he is smiling.

'What?' She is glazed, breathless.

'You.' He's lost for words. Her smile spreads across her face, then she kisses him through it until she is lost, dizzy, until reason seeps out through her ears and she can hear only the growing, insistent hum of her own need. *Here. Now.* His arms tighten around her, his lips on her collarbone. She reaches for him, her breath coming in shallow bursts, her heart racing, over-sensitized so that she shivers as his fingers trail her skin. She wants to laugh with the joy of it. He tears his shirt over his head. Their kisses deepen, become punishing. He lifts her clumsily on to the worktop and she wraps her legs around him. He stoops, pushing her skirt up around her waist, and she arches back, lets her skin meet the cold granite so that she is gazing up at the glass ceiling, her hands entwined in his hair. Around her the shutters are open, the glass walls a window to the night sky. She stares up into the punctured darkness and thinks, almost triumphantly, with some still functioning part of her: *I am still alive*.

And then she closes her eyes and refuses to think at all.

His voice rumbles through her. 'Liv?'

He is holding her. She can hear her own breath.

‘Liv?’

A residual shudder escapes her.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Sorry. Yes. It’s … it’s been a long time.’

His arms tighten around her, a silent answer. Another silence.

‘Are you cold?’

She steadies her breathing before she answers. ‘Freezing.’

He lifts her down and reaches for his shirt on the floor, wrapping it around her slowly. They gaze at each other in the near-dark.

‘Well … that was …’ She wants to say something witty, carefree. But she can’t speak. She feels numbed. She is afraid to let go of him, as if only he is anchoring her to the earth.

The real world is encroaching. She is aware of the sound of the traffic downstairs, somehow too loud, the feel of the cold limestone floor under her bare foot. She seems to have lost a shoe. ‘I think we left the front door open,’ she says, glancing down the corridor.

‘Um … forget the shoe. Did you know that your roof is missing?’

She glances up. She cannot remember opening it. She must have hit the button accidentally as they fell into the kitchen. Autumnal air sinks around them, raising goose-bumps across her bare skin, as if it, too, had only just realized what had happened. Mo’s black sweater hangs over the back of a chair, like the open wings of a settling vulture.

‘Hold on,’ she says. She pads across the kitchen and presses the button, listening to the hum as the roof closes over. Paul stares up at the oversized skylight, then back down at her, and then he turns slowly, 360 degrees, as his eyes adjust to the dim light, taking in his surroundings. ‘Well, this – It’s not what I was expecting.’

‘Why? What were you expecting?’

‘I don’t know … The whole thing about your council tax …’ He glances back up at the open ceiling. ‘Some chaotic little place. Somewhere like mine. This is …’

‘David’s house. He built it.’

His expression flickers.

‘Oh. Too much?’

‘No.’ Paul peers around into the living room and blows out his cheeks. ‘You’re allowed. He … uh … sounds like quite a guy.’

She pours them both a glass of water, tries not to feel self-conscious as they dress. He holds out her shirt for her to slide into. They look at each other and half laugh, suddenly perversely shy in clothes.

‘So … what happens now? You need some space?’ He adds, ‘I have to warn you – if you want me to leave I may need to wait until my legs stop shaking.’

She looks at Paul McCafferty, at the shape of him, already familiar to her very bones. She does not want him to leave. She wants to lie down beside him, his arms around her, her head nestled into his chest. She wants to wake without the instant, terrible urge to run away from her own thoughts. She is conscious of an echoing doubt – *David* – but she pushes it away. It is time to live in the present. She is more than the girl David left behind.

She does not turn on the light. She reaches for Paul's hand and leads him through the dark house, up the stairs and to her bed.

They do not sleep. The hours become a glorious, hazy miasma of tangled limbs and murmured voices. She has forgotten the utter joy of being wrapped around a body you can't leave alone. She feels as if she has been recharged, as if she occupies a new space in the atmosphere.

It is six a.m. when the cold electric spark of dawn finally begins to leach into the room.

'This place is amazing,' he murmurs, gazing out through the window. Their legs are entwined, his kisses imprinted all over her skin. She feels drugged with happiness.

'It is. I can't really afford to stay here, though.' She peers at him through the half-dark. 'I'm in a bit of a mess, financially. I've been told I should sell.'

'But you don't want to.'

'It feels … like a betrayal.'

'Well, I can see why you wouldn't want to leave,' he says. 'It's beautiful. So quiet.' He looks up again. 'Wow. Just to be able to peel your roof off whenever you feel like it …' She wriggles out of his arms a little, so that she can turn towards the long window, her head in the crook of his arm. 'Some mornings I like to watch the barges head up towards Tower Bridge. Look. If the light is right it turns the river into a trickle of gold.'

'A trickle of gold, huh?'

They fall silent, and as they watch, the room begins to glow obligingly. She gazes down at the river, watching it illuminate by degrees, like a thread to her future. *Is this okay?* she asks. *Am I allowed to be this happy again?*

Paul is so quiet she wonders if he has finally drifted off to sleep. But when she turns he is looking at the wall opposite the bed. He is staring at *The Girl You Left Behind*, now just visible in the dawn. She shifts on to her side and watches him. He is transfixed, his eyes not leaving the image as the light grows stronger. *He gets her*, she thinks. She feels a stab of something that might actually be pure joy.

'You like her?'

He doesn't seem to hear.

She nestles back into him, rests her face on his shoulder. 'You'll see her colours more clearly in a few minutes. She's called *The Girl You Left Behind*. Or at least we – I – think she is. It's inked on the back of the frame. She's … my favourite thing in this house. Actually, she's my favourite thing in the whole world.' She pauses. 'David gave her to me on our honeymoon.'

Paul is silent. She trails a finger up his arm. 'I know it sounds daft, but after he died, I just didn't want to be part of anything. I sat up here for weeks. I – I didn't want to see other human beings. And even when it was really bad, there was something about her expression … Hers was the only face I could cope with. She was like this reminder that I would survive.' She lets out a deep sigh. 'And then when you came along I realized she was reminding me of something else. Of the girl I used to be. Who didn't worry all the time. And knew how to have fun, who just … *did* stuff. The girl I want to be again.'

He is still silent.

She has said too much. What she wants is for Paul to lower his face to hers, to feel his weight upon her.

But he doesn't speak. She waits for a moment and then says, just to break the silence, 'I suppose it sounds silly … to be so attached to a painting …'

When he turns to her his face looks odd: taut and drawn. Even in the half-light she can see it. He swallows. ‘Liv … what’s your name?’

She pulls a face.

‘Liv. You know th–’

‘No. Your surname.’

She blinks. ‘Halston. My surname is Halston. Oh. I suppose we never …’ She can’t work out where this is going. She wants him to stop looking at the painting. She grasps suddenly that the relaxed mood has evaporated and something strange has taken its place. They lie there in an increasingly uncomfortable silence.

He lifts a hand to his head. ‘Um … Liv? Do you mind if I head off? I’m … I’ve got some work stuff to see to.’

It’s as if she has been winded. It takes her a moment to speak, and when she does her voice is too high, not her own. ‘At six a.m.?’

‘Yeah. Sorry.’

‘Oh.’ She blinks. ‘Oh. Right.’

He is out of bed and dressing. Dazed, she watches him hauling on and fastening his trousers, the fierce swiftness with which he pulls on his shirt. Dressed, he turns, hesitates, then leans forward and drops a kiss on her cheek. Unconsciously she pulls the duvet up to her chin.

‘Are you sure you don’t want any breakfast?’

‘No. I … I’m sorry.’ He doesn’t smile.

‘It’s fine.’

He cannot leave fast enough. Mortification begins to steal through her, like poison in her blood.

By the time he reaches the bedroom door he can barely meet her eye. He shakes his head, like someone trying to dislodge a fly. ‘Um … Look. I’ll – I’ll call you.’

‘Okay.’ She tries to sound light. ‘Whatever.’

As the door shuts behind him, she leans forward, ‘Hope the work thing goes …’

Liv stares in disbelief at the space where he has been, her fake cheery words echoing around the silent house. Emptiness creeps into the space that Paul McCafferty has somehow opened inside her.

17

The office is empty, as he had known it would be. He launches himself through the door, the old fluorescent bulbs stuttering into life overhead, and makes straight for his office. Once inside, he rummages through the piles of files and folders on his desk, not caring as the papers spew out across the floor, until he finds what he is looking for. Then he flicks on his desk lamp, and lays the photocopied article in front of him, smoothing it with his palms.

'Let me be wrong,' he mutters. 'Just let me have got this wrong.'

The wall of the Glass House is only partly visible, as the image of the painting has been enlarged to fill the A4 space. But the painting is unmistakably *The Girl You Left Behind*. And to the right of her, the floor-to-ceiling window that Liv had shown him, the view that extended out towards Tilbury.

He scans the extract of text.

Halston designed this room so that its occupants would be woken by the morning sun. 'I originally set out to put some kind of screening system up for summer daylight hours,' he says. 'But actually you find that if you're woken naturally, you're less tired. So I never bothered putting them in.'

Just off the master bedroom is a Japanese style

It ends, cut short by the photocopy. Paul stares at it for a moment, then turns on his computer and types DAVID HALSTON into a search engine. His fingers thrum on the desk as he waits for it to load.

Tributes were paid yesterday to the modernist architect David Halston, who has died suddenly in Lisbon at the age of 38. Initial reports suggest his death was as a result of undiagnosed heart failure. Local police are not said to be treating his death as suspicious.

His wife of four years, Olivia Halston, 26, who was with him at the time, is being comforted by family members. A member of the British consulate in Lisbon appealed for the family to be allowed to grieve in private.

Halston's death cuts short a stellar career, notable for its innovative use of glass, and fellow architects yesterday lined up to pay tribute to the

Paul lowers himself slowly into his chair. He flicks through the rest of the paperwork, then re-reads the letter from the lawyers of the Lefèvre family.

a clear-cut case, which is unlikely to be time-barred given the circumstances … stolen from an hotel in St Péronne circa 1917, shortly after the artist's wife was taken prisoner by the occupying German forces …

We hope that TARP can bring this case to a swift and satisfactory conclusion. There is some leeway in the budget for compensation to the current owners, but it is unlikely to be anything near the estimated auction value.

He would put money on it that she has no idea who the painting is by. He hears her voice, shy and oddly proprietorial: 'She's my favourite thing in this house. Actually, she's my favourite thing in the whole world.'

Paul lets his head drop into his hands. He stays there until the office phone starts ringing.

The sun rises across the flatlands east of London, flooding the bedroom a pale gold. The walls glow briefly, the almost phosphorescent light bouncing off the white surfaces so that on another occasion Liv might have groaned, screwed her eyes shut and buried her head under her duvet. But she lies very still in

the oversized bed, a large pillow behind her neck, and stares out at the morning, her eyes fixed blankly on the sky.

She'd got it all wrong.

She keeps seeing his face, hearing his scrupulously polite dismissal of her. *Do you mind if I head off*?

She has lain there for almost two hours, her mobile phone in her hand, wondering whether to text him a small message.

Are we okay? You seemed suddenly …

Sorry if I talked too much about David. It's hard for me to remember that not everyone …

Really lovely to see you last night. Hope your work eases up soon. If you're free on Sunday I'd …

What did I do wrong?

She sends none of them. She traces and retraces the stages of the conversation, going over each phrase, each sentence, meticulously, like an archaeologist sifting through bones. Was it at this point that he had changed his mind? Was there something she had done? Some sexual foible she hadn't been aware of? Was it just being in the Glass House? A house that, while it had no longer held any of his belongings, was so palpably David that it might as well have had his image shot through it like lettering through a stick of rock? Had she misread Paul completely? Each time she considers these potential blunders, her stomach clenches with anxiety.

I liked him, she thinks. I really liked him.

Then, knowing sleep will not come, she climbs out of bed and pads downstairs to the kitchen. Her eyes are gritty with tiredness, the rest of her just hollowed out. She brews coffee and is sitting at the kitchen table, blowing on it, when the front door opens.

'Forgot my security card. Can't get into the care home without it at this time. Sorry – I was going to creep in so that I wouldn't disturb you.' Mo stops and peers past her, as if looking for someone. 'So … What? Did you eat him?'

'He went home.'

Mo reaches into the cupboard and starts fishing around in her spare jacket pocket. She finds her security card and pockets it.

'You're going to have to get past this, you know. Four years is too long to not –'

'I didn't want him to leave.' Liv swallows. 'He bolted.'

Mo laughs and stops abruptly as she realizes that Liv is serious.

'He actually ran out of the bedroom.' She doesn't care that she's making herself sound tragic: she couldn't feel any worse than she does already.

'Before or after you jumped his bones?'

Liv sips her coffee. 'Guess.'

'Oh, ouch. Was it that bad?'

'No, it was great. Well, I thought it was. Admittedly I haven't had much to go by recently.'

Mo gazes around her, as if looking for clues. 'You put your pictures of David away, right?'

'Of course I did.'

'And you didn't, like, say David's name at the crucial moment?'

'No.' She remembers the way Paul had held her. 'I told him he had changed the way I felt about myself.'

Mo shakes her head sadly. ‘Aw Liv. Bad hand. You’ve just been dealt a Toxic Bachelor.’

‘What?’

‘He’s the perfect man. He’s straightforward, caring, attentive. He comes on super-strong until he realizes you like him too. And then he runs a mile. Kryptonite to a certain kind of needy, vulnerable woman. That would be you.’ Mo frowns. ‘You do surprise me, though. I honestly didn’t think he was the type.’

Liv glances down at her mug. Then she says, with just a hint of defensiveness, ‘It’s possible I might have talked about David a bit. When I was showing him the painting.’

Mo’s eyes widen, then lift to the heavens.

‘Well, I thought I could just be straightforward about everything. He knows where I’m coming from. I thought he was okay with it.’

She can hear her voice: chippy. ‘He said he was.’

Mo stands and goes to the breadbin. She reaches in for a slice, folds it in half and takes a bite. ‘Liv – you can’t be straightforward about other men. No man wants to hear about how fantastic the one before was, even if he is dead. You might as well just do a whole spiel on Enormous Penises I Have Known.’

‘I can’t pretend David isn’t part of my past.’

‘No, but he doesn’t have to be your whole present too.’ As Liv glares at her, Mo says, ‘Honestly? It’s like you’re on a loop. I feel like even when you’re not talking about him you’re thinking about talking about him.’

That might have been true even a few weeks ago. But not now. Liv wants to move on. She had wanted to move on with Paul. ‘Well. It doesn’t really matter, does it? I blew it. I don’t think he’ll be coming back.’ She sips her coffee. It burns her tongue. ‘It was stupid of me to get my hopes up.’

Mo puts a hand on her shoulder. ‘Men are weird. It’s not like it wasn’t obvious that you were a mess. Oh, shit – the time. Look, you go out for one of your insane runs. I’ll be back at three o’clock and I’ll call in sick to the restaurant and we can swear a lot and think up medieval punishments for fuckwit men who blow hot and cold. I’ve got some modelling clay upstairs that I use for voodoo dolls. Can you get some cocktail sticks ready? Or some skewers? I’m all out.’

Mo grabs the spare key, salutes her with the folded bread, and is gone before Liv can respond.

In the previous five years TARP has returned more than two hundred and forty works of art to owners, or descendants of owners, who had believed they might never see them again. Paul has heard stories of wartime brutality more appalling than anything he encountered while working in the NYPD; they are repeated with a clarity of recall that suggests they might have happened yesterday, rather than sixty years ago. He has seen pain, borne like a precious inheritance through the ages and writ large on the faces of those left behind.

He has held the hands of old women who have wept bittersweet tears at having been in the same room as a little portrait that was stolen from their murdered parents, the silent awe of younger members of a family seeing a long-missed painting for the first time. He has had stand-up arguments with the heads of major national art galleries, and bitten his lip when long-fought-over sculptures were returned to families, then immediately put up for sale. But for the most part this job, in the five years he has done it, has allowed him to feel he is on the side of some basic right. Hearing the stories of horror and betrayal, of families murdered and displaced by the Second World War, as if those crimes were committed yesterday,

and knowing that those victims still lived with the injustices every day, he has relished being part of some small degree of recompense.

He has never had to deal with anything like this.

'Shit,' says Greg. 'That's tough.'

They are out walking Greg's dogs, two hyperactive terriers. The morning is unseasonably cold and Paul wishes he had worn an extra jumper.

'I couldn't believe it. The actual painting. Staring me in the face.'

'What did you say?'

Paul pulls his scarf up around his neck. 'I didn't say anything. I couldn't think what to say. I just … left.'

'You ran?'

'I needed time to think about it.'

Pirate, the smaller of Greg's dogs, has shot across the heath like a guided missile. The two men stop to watch, waiting to determine his eventual target.

'Please don't let it be a cat, please don't let it be a cat. Oh, it's okay. It's Ginger.' In the far distance Pirate hurls himself joyously at a springer spaniel and the two dogs chase each other manically in ever-widening circles in the long grass. 'And this was when? Last night?'

'Two nights ago. I know I should ring her. I just can't work out what I'm going to say.'

'I guess "Give me your damn painting" isn't your best line.' Greg calls his older dog to heel, and lifts his hand to his brow, trying to track Pirate's progress. 'Bro, I think you may have to accept that Fate has just blown this particular date out of the water.'

Paul shoves his hands deep in his pockets. 'I liked her.'

Greg glances sideways at him. 'What? As in really liked her?'

'Yeah. She … she got under my skin.'

His brother studies his face. 'Okay. Well, this has just gotten interesting … *Pirate. Here!* Oh, man. There's the Vizsla. I hate that dog. Did you speak to your boss about it?'

'Yeah. Because Janey would definitely want to talk to me about some other woman. No. I just checked with our lawyer about the strength of the case. He seems to think we would win.'

There's no time bar on these cases, Paul, Sean had said, barely looking up from his papers. *You know that*.

'So what are you going to do?' Greg clips his dog back on to the lead and stands there, waiting.

'Not a lot I can do. The picture has to go back to its rightful owners. I'm not sure how well she's going to take that.'

'She might be okay. You never know.' Greg strides over the grass towards where Pirate is running around, yapping dementedly at the sky, warning it to come no closer. 'Hey, if she's broke and there's proper money involved, you may actually be doing her a favour.' He starts to run and his last words fly over his shoulder on the breeze. 'And she might feel the same way about you and just not give a shit about anything else. You've got to keep in mind, bro, that ultimately, it's just a painting.'

Paul stares at his brother's back. It's never just a painting, he thinks.

Jake is at a friend's house. Paul arrives to pick him up at three thirty, as arranged, and Jake slopes out of the friend's front door, his hair mussed, his jacket hanging over his shoulders in apparent preparation for

his adolescent years. It never ceases to shock him, the familiar jolt, the umbilical nature, of parental love. Some days he struggles not to embarrass his son with the depth of his love for him. He wraps an elbow around the boy's neck, hooks him towards him and drops a casual kiss on his head as they set off for the tube station. 'Hey, fella.'

'Hi, Dad.'

Jake is cheerful, pointing out the various permutations of a new electronic game. Paul nods and smiles in the right places, but even as he does so, he finds he's conducting a parallel argument in his head. He keeps working it over silently. What should he say to her? Should he tell her the truth? Will she understand if he explains it to her? Should he just steer clear? The job is everything, after all. He learned that a long time ago.

But as he sits beside his son, watching his thumbs flicking on the controls, his total absorption in the pixelated game, his mind drifts. He feels Liv, soft and yielding against him afterwards, sees the drowsy way she lifted her eyes to his, as if she were dazed by the depth of her feelings.

'Did you get a new house yet?'

'Nope. Not yet.'

I can't stop thinking about you.

'Can we go for a pizza tonight?'

'Sure.'

'Really?'

'Mm.' He nods. The hurt on her face as he had turned to leave. She was so transparent, every emotion registering on her face as if, like her house, she had never known what she should conceal.

'And ice cream?'

'Sure.'

I'm terrified. But in a good way.

And he had run. Without a word of explanation.

'Will you buy me Super Mario Smash Bros for my Nintendo?'

'Don't push your luck,' he says.

The weekend stretches, is weighed down by silence. Mo comes and goes. Her new verdict on Paul: 'Divorced Toxic Bachelor. Worst variety of species.' She makes Liv a little clay model of him, and urges her to stick things in it.

Liv has to admit that Mini Paul's hair is alarmingly accurate. 'You think this will give him stomach ache?'

'I can't guarantee it. But it'll make you feel better.'

Liv picks up a cocktail stick and tentatively gives Mini Paul a belly button, then feels immediately guilty and smoothes it over with her thumb. She can't quite reconcile this version of Paul with what she knows, but she is smart enough to grasp that some things are not worth dwelling on, so she has taken Mo's advice and run until she has given herself shin splints. She has cleaned the Glass House from top to bottom. She has binned the shoes with butterflies. She has checked her phone four times, then turned it off, hating herself for caring.

'That's feeble. You haven't even broken his toes. You want me to have a go for you?' says Mo, inspecting the little model on Monday morning.

‘No. It’s fine. Really.’

‘You’re too soft. Tell you what, when I get home we’ll ball him up and turn him into an ashtray.’ When Liv returns to the kitchen Mo has stuck fifteen matches into the top of his head.

Two pieces of work come in on Monday. One, some catalogue copy for a direct-marketing company, is littered with grammatical and spelling errors. By six o’clock Liv has altered so much of it that she has pretty much written the whole thing. The word rate is terrible. She doesn’t care. She is so relieved to be working instead of thinking that she might well write Forbex Solutions a whole extra catalogue for free.

The doorbell rings. Mo will have left her keys at work. She unfolds herself from the desk, stretches, and heads for the entryphone.

‘You left them on the side.’

‘It’s Paul.’

She freezes. ‘Oh. Hi.’

‘Can I come up?’

‘You really don’t have to. I –’

‘Please? We need to talk.’

There is no time to check her face or brush her hair. She stands, one finger on the door button, hesitating. She depresses it, then moves back, like someone bracing themselves for an explosion.

The lift rattles its way up, and she feels her stomach constrict as the sound grows louder. And then there he is, gazing straight at her through the railings of the lift. He is wearing a soft brown jacket and his eyes are uncharacteristically wary. He looks exhausted.

‘Hey.’

He steps out of the lift, and waits in the hallway. She stands, her arms folded defensively.

‘Hello.’

‘Can I … come in?’

She steps back. ‘Do you want a drink? I mean … are you stopping?’

He catches the edge in her voice. ‘That would be great, thank you.’

She walks through the house to the kitchen, her back rigid, and he follows. As she makes two mugs of tea, she is conscious of his eyes on her. When she hands one to him he is rubbing meditatively at his temple. When he catches her eye he seems almost apologetic. ‘Headache.’

Liv glances up at the little modelling-clay figure on the fridge and flushes with guilt. As she passes she deliberately knocks it down the back of the fridge.

Paul places his mug on the table. ‘Okay. This is really difficult. I would have come over sooner but I had my son and I needed to think what I was going to do. Look, I’m just going to come out and explain the whole thing. But I think maybe you should sit down first.’

She stares at him. ‘Oh, God. You’re married.’

‘I’m not married. That would … almost be simpler. Please, Liv. Just sit.’

She remains standing. He pulls a letter from his jacket and hands it to her.

‘What’s this?’

‘Just read it. And then I’ll do my best to explain.’

15 October 2006

Dear Mrs Halston

We act for an organization called the Trace and Return Partnership, created to return works of art to those who suffered losses due to looting or the forced sale of personal artefacts during wartime.

We understand that you are the owner of a painting by the French artist Édouard Lefèvre, entitled The Girl You Left Behind. *We have received written confirmation from descendants of Mr Lefèvre that this was a work in the personal possession of the artist's wife and the subject of a forced or coercive sale. The claimants, who are also of French nationality, wish to have the work returned to the artist's family, and under the Geneva Convention and the terms of the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, we wish to inform you that we will be pursuing such a claim on their behalf.*

In many cases such works can be restored to their rightful owners with the minimum legal intervention. We therefore invite you to contact us to arrange a meeting between yourselves and representatives of the Lefèvre family in order that we may commence this process.

We appreciate that such notice may come as something of a shock. But we would remind you that there is a strong legal precedent for the return of works of art obtained as the result of wartime transgressions, and I would add that there may also be some discretionary funding to compensate for your loss.

We hope very much that, as with other works of this nature, the satisfaction of knowing a work is finally being returned to its rightful owners will grant those affected some additional satisfaction.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you wish to discuss this further.

Paul McCafferty
Janey Dickinson
Directors, TARP

She stares at the name at the bottom of the page and the room recedes. She re-reads the words, thinking this must be a joke. No, this is another Paul McCafferty, an entirely different Paul McCafferty. There must be hundreds of them. It's a common enough name. And then she remembers the peculiar way he had looked at the painting three days earlier, the way he had been unable to meet her eye afterwards. She sits down heavily in her chair.

'Is this some kind of a joke?'

'I wish it was.'

'What the hell is TARP?'

'We trace missing works of art and oversee their restoration to their original owners.'

'We?' She stares at the letter. 'What … what does this have to do with me?'

'*The Girl You Left Behind* is the subject of a restitution request. The painting is by an artist called Édouard Lefèvre. His family want it back.'

'But … this is ridiculous. I've had it for years. Years. The best part of a decade.'

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out another letter, with a photocopied image. 'This came to the office a couple of weeks ago. It was sitting in my in-tray. I was busy with other stuff so I didn't put the two things together. Then, when you invited me up the other night, I recognized it immediately.'

She scans it, glances at the photocopied page. Her own painting stares back at her from the coloured page, its colours muddied through reproduction. 'The *Architectural Digest*.'

'Yeah. I think that was it.'

'They came here to do a piece on the Glass House when we were first married.' Her hand lifts to her mouth. 'David thought it would be good publicity for his practice.'

‘The Lefèvre family have been conducting an audit into all Édouard Lefèvre’s works, and during the course of it they discovered several were missing. One is *The Girl You Left Behind*. There is no documented history for it after 1917. Can you tell me where you got it?’

‘This is crazy. It was … David bought it from an American woman. In Barcelona.’

‘A gallery owner? Have you got a receipt for it?’

‘Of sorts. But it’s not worth anything. She was going to throw it away. It was out on the street.’

Paul runs a hand over his face. ‘Do you know who this woman was?’

Liv shakes her head. ‘It was years ago.’

‘Liv, you have to remember. This is important.’

She explodes: ‘I can’t remember! You can’t come in here and tell me I have to justify ownership of my own painting just because someone somewhere has decided it once belonged to them a million years ago! I mean, what is this?’ She walks around the kitchen table. ‘I – I can’t get my head round it.’

Paul rests his face in his hands. He lifts his head and looks at her. ‘Liv, I’m really sorry. This is the worst case I’ve ever dealt with.’

‘Case?’

‘This is what I do. I look for stolen works of art and I return them to their owners.’

She hears the strange implacability in his voice. ‘But this isn’t stolen. David bought it, fair and square. And then he gave it to me. It’s mine.’

‘It was stolen, Liv. Nearly a hundred years ago, yes, but it was stolen. Look, the good news is that they’re willing to offer some financial compensation.’

‘Compensation? You think this is about money?’

‘I’m just saying –’

She stands, lifts her hand to her brow. ‘You know what, Paul? I think you’d better leave.’

‘I know the painting means a lot to you but you have to understand –’

‘Really. I’d like you to go now.’

They stare at each other. She feels radioactive. She is not sure she has ever been so angry.

‘Look, I’ll try to think of a way we can settle this to suit –’

‘Goodbye, Paul.’

She follows him out. When she slams the door behind him it reverberates so loudly that she can feel the whole warehouse shake below her.

18

Their honeymoon. A honeymoon of sorts. David had been working on a new conference centre in Barcelona, a monolithic thing, built to reflect the blue skies, the shimmering seas. She remembers her faint surprise at his fluent Spanish and being awed both by the things he knew and by the things she did not yet know about him. Each afternoon they would lie in bed in their hotel, then stroll the medieval streets of the Gothic Quarter and Born, seeking refuge in the shade, stopping to drink mojitos and rest lazily against each other, their skin sticking in the heat. She still remembers how his hand looked resting on her thigh. He had a craftsman's hands. He would rest them slightly splayed, as if they were always holding down invisible plans.

They had been walking around the back of Plaça de Catalunya when they heard the American woman's voice. She had been shouting at a trio of impassive men, close to tears as they emerged through a panelled doorway, dumping furniture, household objects and trinkets in front of the apartment block. 'You can't do this!' she had exclaimed.

David had released Liv's hand and stepped forwards. The woman – an angular woman in early middle age with bright blonde hair – had let out a little *oh oh oh* of frustration as a chair was dumped in front of the house. A small crowd of tourists had stopped to watch.

'Are you okay?' he had said, his hand at her elbow.

'It's the landlord. He's clearing out all my mother's stuff. I keep telling him I have nowhere to put these things.'

'Where is your mother?'

'She died. I came over here to sort through it all and he says it has to be out by today. These men are just dumping it on the street and I have no idea what I'm going to do with it.'

She remembers how David had taken charge, how he had told Liv to take the woman to the café across the road, how he had remonstrated with the men in Spanish as the American woman, whose name was Marianne Johnson, sat and drank a glass of iced water and gazed anxiously across the street. She had only flown in that morning, she confided. She swore she did not know whether she was coming or going.

'I'm so sorry. When did your mother die?'

'Oh, three months ago. I know I should have done something sooner. But it's so hard when you don't speak Spanish. And I had to get her body flown home for the funeral … and I just got divorced so there's only me doing everything …' She had huge white knuckles beneath which she had crammed a dizzying array of plastic rings. Her hairband was turquoise paisley. She kept reaching up to touch it, as if for reassurance.

David was talking to a man who might have been the landlord. He had appeared defensive initially, but now, ten minutes later, they were shaking hands warmly. He reappeared at their table. She should sort out which things she wanted to keep, David said, and he had a number for a shipping company that could pack those items and fly them home for her. The landlord had agreed to let them remain in the apartment until

tomorrow. The rest could be taken and disposed of by the removal men for a small fee. ‘Are you okay for money?’ he had said quietly. The kind of man he was.

Marianne Johnson had nearly wept with gratitude. They had helped her move things, stacking objects right or left depending on what should be kept. As they had stood there, the woman pointing at things, moving them carefully to one side, Liv had looked more closely at the items on the pavement. There was a Corona typewriter, huge leather-bound albums of fading newsprint. ‘Mom was a journalist,’ said the woman, placing them carefully on a stone step. ‘Her name was Louanne Baker. I remember her using this when I was a little girl.’

‘What is that?’ Liv pointed at a small brown object. Even though she was unable to make it out without stepping closer, some visceral part of her shuddered. She could see what looked like teeth.

‘Oh. Those. Those are Mom’s shrunken heads. She used to collect all sorts. There’s a Nazi helmet somewhere too. D’you think a museum might want them?’

‘You’ll have fun getting them through Customs.’

‘Oh, God. I might just leave it on the street and run.’ She paused to wipe her forehead. ‘This heat! I’m dying.’

And then Liv had seen the painting. Propped up against an easy chair, the face was somehow compelling even among the noise and the chaos. She had stooped and turned it carefully towards her. A girl looked out from within the battered gilt frame, a faint note of challenge in her eyes. A great swathe of red-gold hair fell to her shoulders; a faint smile spoke of a kind of pride, and something more intimate. Something sexual.

‘She looks like you,’ David had murmured, under his breath, from beside her. ‘That’s just how you look.’ Liv’s hair was blonde, not red, and short. But she had known immediately. The look they exchanged made the street fade.

David had turned to Marianne Johnson. ‘Don’t you want to keep this?’

She had straightened up, squinted at him. ‘Oh – no. I don’t think so.’

David had lowered his voice. ‘Would you let me buy it from you?’

‘Buy it? You can have it. It’s the least I can do, given you’ve saved my darned life.’

But he had refused. They had stood there on the pavement, engaged in a bizarre reverse haggling, David insisting on giving her more money than she was comfortable with. Finally, as Liv continued to sort through a rail of clothes, she turned to see them shaking on a price.

‘I would gladly have let you have it,’ she said, as David counted out the notes. ‘To tell you the truth, I never much liked that painting. When I was a kid I used to think she was mocking me. She always seemed a little snooty.’

They had left her at dusk with his mobile number, the pavement clear in front of the empty apartment, Marianne Johnson gathering her belongings to go back to her hotel. They had walked away in the thick heat, him beaming as if he had acquired some great treasure, holding the painting as reverently as he would hold Liv later that evening. ‘This should be your wedding present,’ he had said. ‘Seeing as I never gave you anything.’

‘I thought you didn’t want anything interrupting the clean lines of your walls,’ she had teased.

They had stopped in the busy street, and held it up to view it again. She remembers the taut, sunburned skin at the back of her neck, the fine dusty sheen on her arms. The hot Barcelona streets, the afternoon sun

reflected in his eyes. ‘I think we can break the rules for something we love.’

‘So you and David bought that painting in good faith, yes?’ says Kristen. She pauses to swat the hand of a teenager scrabbling among the contents of the fridge. ‘No. No chocolate mousse. You won’t eat supper.’

‘Yes. I even managed to dig out the receipt.’ She had it in her handbag: a piece of tattered paper, torn from the back of a journal. *Received with thanks for portrait, poss called The Girl You Left Behind. 300 francs – Marianne Baker (Ms).*

‘So it’s yours. You bought it, you have the receipt. Surely that’s the end of it. Tasmin? Will you tell George it’s supper in ten minutes?’

‘You’d think. And the woman we got it from said her mother’d had it for half a century. She wasn’t even going to sell it to us – she was going to give it to us. David insisted on paying her.’

‘Well, the whole thing is frankly ridiculous.’ Kristen stops mixing the salad and throws up her hands. ‘I mean, where does it end? If you bought a house and someone stole the land in the land grabs of the Middle Ages, does that mean some day someone’s going to claim your house back too? Do we have to give back my diamond ring because it might have been taken from the wrong bit of Africa? It was the First World War, for goodness’ sake. Nearly a hundred years ago. The legal system is going too far.’

Liv sits back in her chair. She had called Sven that afternoon, trembling with shock, and he had told her to come over that evening. He had been reassuringly calm when she had told him about the letter, had actually shrugged as he read it. ‘It’s probably a new variation on the ambulance-chasing thing. It all sounds very unlikely. I’ll check it out – but I wouldn’t worry. You’ve got a receipt, you bought it legally, so I’m guessing there’s no way this could stand up in a court of law.’

Kristen deposits the bowl of salad on the table. ‘Who is this artist anyway? Do you like olives?’

‘His name is Édouard Lefèvre, apparently. But it’s not signed. And yes. Thank you.’

‘I meant to tell you … after the last time we spoke.’ Kristen looks up at her daughter, shepherds her towards the door. ‘Go on, Tasmin. I need some mummy time.’

Liv waits as, with a disgruntled backwards look, Tasmin slopes out of the room. ‘It’s Rog.’

‘Who?’

‘I have bad news.’ She winces, leans forward over the table. Takes a deep, theatrical breath. ‘I wanted to tell you last week but I couldn’t work out what to say. You see, he did think you were terribly nice, but I’m afraid you’re not … well … he says you’re not his type.’

‘Oh?’

‘He really wants someone … younger. I’m so sorry. I just thought you should know the truth. I couldn’t bear the idea of you sitting there waiting for him to call.’

Liv is trying to straighten her face when Sven enters the room. He is holding a page of scribbled notes. ‘I just got off the phone with a friend of mine at Sotheby’s. So … the bad news is that TARP is a well-respected organization. They trace works that have been stolen, but increasingly they’re doing the tougher stuff, works that disappeared during wartime. They’ve returned some quite high-profile pieces in the last few years, some from national collections. It appears to be a growth area.’

‘But *The Girl* isn’t a high-profile work of art. She’s just a little oil painting we picked up on our honeymoon.’

‘Well … that’s true to an extent. Liv, did you look up this Lefèvre chap after you got the letter?’

It was the first thing she had done. A minor member of the Impressionist school at the turn of the last century. There was one sepia-tinted photograph of a big man with dark brown eyes and hair that reached down to his collar. Worked briefly under Matisse.

'I'm starting to understand why his work – if it *is* his work – might be the subject of a restitution request.'

'Go on.' Liv pops an olive into her mouth. Kristen stands beside her, dishcloth in hand.

'I didn't tell him about the claim, obviously, and he can't value it without seeing it, but on the basis of the last sale they held for Lefèvre, and its provenance, they reckon it could easily be worth between two and three million pounds.'

'What?' she says weakly.

'Yes. David's little wedding gift has turned out to be a rather good investment. Two million pounds *minimum* were his exact words. In fact, he recommended you get an insurance valuation done immediately. Apparently our Lefèvre has become quite the man in the art market. The Russians have a thing for him and it's pushed prices sky high.'

She swallows the olive whole and begins to choke. Kristen thumps her on the back and pours her a glass of water. She sips it, hearing his words going round in her head. They don't seem to make any sense.

'So, I suppose it should actually come as no great surprise that there are people suddenly coming out of the woodwork to try to get a piece of the action. I asked Shirley at the office to dig out a few case studies and email them over – these claimants, they dig around a little in the family history, claim the painting, saying it was so precious to their grandparents, how heartbroken they were to lose it … Then they get it back, and what do you know?'

'What do we know?' says Kristen.

'They sell it. And they're richer than their wildest dreams.'

The kitchen falls silent.

'Two to three million pounds? But – but we paid two hundred euros for her.'

'It's like *Antiques Roadshow*,' says Kristen, happily.

'That's David. Always did have the Midas touch.' Sven pours himself a glass of wine. 'It's a shame they knew it was in your house. I think, without a warrant or proof of any kind, they might not have been able to prove you had it. Do they know for sure it's in there?'

She thinks of Paul. And the pit of her stomach drops. 'Yes,' she says. 'They know I have it.'

'Okay. Well, either way,' he sits down beside her and puts a hand on her shoulder, 'we need to get you some serious legal representation. And fast.'

Liv sleepwalks through the next two days, her mind humming, her heart racing. She visits the dentist, buys bread and milk, delivers work to deadline, takes mugs of tea downstairs to Fran and brings them back up when Fran complains she has forgotten the sugar. She barely registers any of it. She is thinking of the way Paul had kissed her, that accidental first meeting, his unusually generous offer of help. Had he planned this from the start? Given the value of the painting, had she actually been the subject of a complicated sting? She Googles Paul McCafferty, reads testimonials about his time in the Art Squad of the NYPD, his 'brilliant criminal mind', his 'strategic thinking'. Everything she has believed about him evaporates. Her thoughts spin and collide, veer off in new, terrible directions. Twice she has felt so sick that she has had

to leave the table and splash her face with cold water, resting it against the cool porcelain of the cloakroom.

Last November TARP helped return a small Cézanne to a Russian Jewish family. The value of the painting was said to be in the region of fifteen million pounds. TARP, its website states in the section *About Us*, works on a commission basis.

He texts her three times: *Can we talk? I know this is difficult, but please – can we just discuss it?* He makes himself sound so reasonable. Like someone almost trustworthy. She sleeps sporadically, and struggles to eat.

Mo watches all this and, for once, says nothing.

Liv runs. Every morning, and some evenings too. Running has taken the place of thinking, of eating, sometimes of sleeping. She runs until her shins burn and her lungs feel as if they will explode. She runs new routes: around the back-streets of Southwark, across the bridge into the gleaming outdoor corridors of the City, ducking the besuited bankers and the coffee-bearing secretaries as she goes.

She is headed out on Friday evening at six o'clock. It is a beautiful crisp evening, the kind where the whole of London looks like the backdrop to some romantic movie. Her breath is visible in the still air, and she has pulled a woollen beanie low over her head, which she will shed some time before Waterloo Bridge. In the distance the lights of the Square Mile glint across the skyline; the buses crawl along the Embankment; the streets hum. She plugs in her iPod earphones, closes the door of the block, rams her keys into the pocket of her shorts, and sets off at a pace. She lets her mind flood with the deafening thumping beat, dance music so relentless that it leaves no room for thought.

'Liv.'

He steps into her path and she stumbles, thrusting out a hand and withdrawing it, as if she's been burned, when she realizes who it is.

'Liv – we have to talk.'

He is wearing the brown jacket, his collar turned up against the cold, a folder of papers under his arm. Their eyes lock, and she whips round before she can register any kind of feeling and sets off, her heart racing.

He is behind her. She does not look round but she can just make out his voice above the volume of her music. She turns it up louder, can almost feel the vibration of his footsteps on the paving behind her.

'*Liv*.' His hand reaches for her arm and, almost instinctively, she launches her right hand round and whacks him, ferociously, in the face. The shock of impact is so great that they both stumble backwards, his palm pressed against his nose.

She pulls out her earphones. 'Leave me alone!' she yells, recovering her balance. 'Just *piss off*.'

'I want to talk to you.' Blood trickles through his fingers. He glances down and sees it. 'Jesus.' He drops his files, struggles to get his spare hand into his pocket, pulling out a large cotton handkerchief, which he presses to his nose. The other hand he holds up in a gesture of peace. 'Liv, I know you're mad at me right now but you –'

'Mad at you? Mad at you? That doesn't *begin* to cover what I feel about you right now. You trick your way into my home, give me some bullshit about finding my bag, smooth-talk your way into my bed, and then – oh, wow, what a surprise – there is the painting you just happen to be employed to recover for a great big fat commission.'

‘What?’ His voice is muffled through the handkerchief. ‘What? You think I stole your bag? You think I *made* this thing happen? Are you crazy?’

‘Stay away from me.’ Her voice is shaking, her ears ringing. She is walking backwards down the road away from him. People have stopped to watch them.

He starts after her. ‘*No*. You listen. For one minute. I am an ex-cop. I’m not in the business of stealing bags, or even, frankly, returning them. I met you and I liked you and then I discovered that, by some shitty twist of Fate, you happen to hold the painting that I’m employed to recover. If I could have given that particular job to anyone else, believe me, I would have done. I’m sorry. But you have to listen.’

He pulls the handkerchief away from his face. There is blood on his lip.

‘That painting was stolen, Liv. I’ve been through the paperwork a million times. It’s a picture of Sophie Lefèvre, the artist’s wife. She was taken by the Germans, and the painting disappeared straight afterwards. It was stolen.’

‘That was *a hundred years ago*.’

‘You think that makes it right? You know what it’s like to have the thing you love ripped away from you?’

‘Funnily enough,’ she spits, ‘I do.’

‘Liv – I know you’re a good person. I know this has come as a shock, but if you think about it you’ll do the right thing. Time doesn’t make a wrong right. And your painting was stolen from the family of that poor girl. It was the last they had of her and it belongs with them. The right thing is for it to go back.’ His voice is soft, almost convincing. ‘When you know the truth about what happened to her I think you’re going to look at Sophie Lefevre quite differently.’

‘Oh, save me your sanctimonious bullshit.’

‘What?’

‘You think I don’t know what it’s worth?’

He stares at her.

‘You think I didn’t check out you and your company? How you operate? I know what this is about, Paul, and it’s got nothing to do with your rights and wrongs.’ She grimaces. ‘God, you must think I’m such a pushover. The stupid girl in her empty house, still grieving for her husband, sitting up there knowing nothing about what’s under her own nose. It’s about *money*, Paul. You and whoever else is behind this wants her because she’s worth a fortune. Well, it’s not about money for me. I can’t be bought – and neither can she. Now leave me alone.’

She spins round and runs on before he can say another word, the deafening noise of her heartbeat in her ears drowning all other sound. She only slows when she reaches the South Bank Centre and turns. He has gone, swallowed among the thousands of people crossing the London streets on their way home. By the time she makes it back to her door she is holding back tears. Her head is full of Sophie Lefèvre. *It was the last they had of her. The right thing is for it to go back.* ‘Damn you,’ she repeats under her breath, as she tries to shake off his words. *Damn you damn you damn you.*

‘Liv!’

She jumps as the man steps out from her doorway. But it’s her father, a black beret rammed on his head, a rainbow scarf around his neck, and his old tweed coat down to his knees. His face glows gold under the

sodium light. He holds open his arms to hug her, revealing a faded Sex Pistols T-shirt underneath. ‘There you are! We didn’t hear back from you after the Great Hot Date. I thought I’d pop by and see how it went!’

19

‘Would you like some coffee?’

Liv glances up at the secretary. ‘Thank you.’ She sits very still in the plush leather seat, gazing unseeing at the newspaper she has pretended to read for the last fifteen minutes.

She is wearing a suit, the only one she owns. It is probably an unfashionable cut, but she needed to feel held in today; structured. She has felt out of her depth since her first visit to the lawyers’ offices. Now she needs to feel that something more than her nerve is holding her up.

‘Henry’s gone down to wait for them in Reception. Won’t be long now.’ With a professional smile, the woman turns on her high heels and walks away.

It’s proper coffee. So it should be, given the amount she’s paying per hour. There was no point in her fighting this case, Sven had insisted, without the proper firepower. He had consulted his friends at the auction houses, his contacts at the bar, as to who might best see off the restitution claim. Unfortunately, he added, big guns cost big money. Whenever she looks at Henry Phillips, at his good haircut, his beautiful handmade shoes, the expensive-holiday sheen on his plump face, all she can think is, *You are rich because of people like me*.

She hears footsteps and voices outside the lobby. She stands, straightening her skirt, composing her face. And there he is, wearing the blue wool scarf, a folder under his arm, just visible behind Henry, and two people she does not recognize. He catches her eye, and she turns away swiftly, feeling the small hairs on her neck prickle.

‘Liv? We’re all here. Would you like to come through to the boardroom? I’ll arrange for your coffee to be brought in.’

She gazes fixedly at Henry, who passes her and holds open the door for the other woman to enter. She feels Paul’s presence, as if he actually gives off heat. He is there, beside her. He is wearing jeans, as if this sort of meeting is of so little consequence to him that he might as well be out for a walk.

‘Conned any other women out of their valuables lately?’ she says quietly, so quietly that only he will hear it.

‘Nope. I’ve been too busy stealing handbags and seducing the vulnerable.’

Her head shoots up and his eyes lock on hers. He is, she sees with some shock, as furious as she is.

The boardroom is wood-panelled, its seats heavy and covered with leather. One wall is lined with leather-bound books. It suggests years of reasonable legal accommodation, is infused with stately wisdom. She follows Henry, and within seconds they are seated, lined up on each side of the table. She looks at her pad of paper, her hands, her coffee, anything but Paul.

‘So.’ Henry waits for coffee to be poured, then places his fingertips together. ‘We are here to discuss, without prejudice, the claim made against Mrs Halston through the organization TARP, and to try to identify whether there is any way we might reach some kind of accommodation without recourse to legal measures.’

She gazes at the people sitting opposite. The woman is in her mid-thirties. She has dark hair that falls in corkscrews around her face and an intense expression. She is scribbling something on a notepad. The man beside her is French and bears the heavy features of a middle-aged Serge Gainsbourg. Liv often thought it was possible to tell the faces of different nationalities, even without hearing them speak. This man is so Gallic he might as well have been smoking a Gauloise and wearing a string of onions.

And then there is Paul.

'I think it would be a good idea if first we made some introductions. My name is Henry Phillips, and I'm acting for Mrs Halston. This is Sean Flaherty, acting for TARP, Paul McCafferty and Janey Dickinson, its directors. This is Monsieur André Lefèvre, of the Lefèvre family, who is making the claim in conjunction with TARP. Mrs Halston, TARP is an organization that specializes in the seeking out and recovery of –'

'I know what it is,' she says.

Oh, but he's so close to her. Directly across the table, she can see the individual veins on his hands, the way his cuffs slide from within his sleeves. He is wearing the shirt he wore the night they met. If she stretched out her feet under the table, they would touch his. She folds them neatly under her chair and reaches for her coffee.

'Paul, perhaps you would like to explain to Mrs Halston how this claim has come about.'

'Yes,' she says, and her voice is icy. 'I'd like to hear.'

She slowly lifts her face, and Paul is looking straight at her. She wonders if he can detect how hard she is vibrating. She feels it must be obvious to everyone; her every breath betrays her.

'Well … I'd like to start with an apology,' he says. 'I am conscious that this will have come as a shock. That is unfortunate. The sad fact is that there is no way of going about these things nicely.'

He is looking directly at her. She can feel him waiting for her to acknowledge him, some sign. Under the desk, she grips her knees, digging her fingernails into the skin to give her something to focus on.

'Nobody wants to take something that legitimately belongs to someone else. And that is not what we're about. But the fact exists that, way back during wartime, a wrong was done. A painting, *The Girl You Left Behind*, by Édouard Lefèvre, owned and loved by his wife, was taken and passed into German possession.'

'You don't know that,' she says.

'Liv.' Henry's voice contains a warning.

'We have obtained documentary evidence, a diary owned by a neighbour of Madame Lefèvre, that suggests a portrait of the artist's wife was stolen or obtained coercively by a German *Kommandant* living in the area at the time. Now, this case is unusual in that most of the work we do is based on losses suffered in the Second World War, and we believe the initial theft took place during the First World War. But the Hague Convention still applies.'

'So why now?' she says. 'Nearly a hundred years after you say it was stolen. Convenient that Monsieur Lefèvre just happens to be worth a whole lot more money now, wouldn't you say?'

'The value is immaterial.'

'Fine. if the value is immaterial, I'll compensate you. Right now. You want me to give you what we paid for it? Because I still have the receipt. Will you take that amount and leave me alone?'

The room falls silent.

Henry reaches across and touches her arm. Her knuckles are white where they clutch her pen. ‘If I may interject,’ he says smoothly. ‘The purpose of this meeting is to offer a number of solutions to the issue, and see whether any of them may be acceptable.’

Janey Dickinson exchanges a few whispered words with André Lefèvre. She wears the studied calm of the primary-school teacher. ‘I have to say here that as far as the Lefèvre family are concerned, the only thing that would be acceptable is the return of their painting,’ she says.

‘Except it’s not their painting,’ says Liv.

‘Under the Hague Convention it is,’ she says calmly.

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘It’s the law.’

Liv glances up and Paul is staring at her. His expression doesn’t change, but in his eyes there is the hint of an apology. For what? This yelling across a varnished mahogany table? A stolen night? A stolen painting? She is not sure. *Don’t look at me*, she tells him silently.

‘Perhaps …’ Sean Flaherty says. ‘Perhaps, as Henry says, we could at least outline some of the possible solutions.’

‘Oh, you can outline them,’ says Liv.

‘There are a number of precedents in such cases. One is that Mrs Halston is free to extinguish the claim. This means, Mrs Halston, that you would pay the Lefèvre family the value of the painting and retain it.’

Janey Dickinson doesn’t look up from her pad. ‘As I have already stated, the family is not interested in money. They want the painting.’

‘Oh, right,’ says Liv. ‘You think I’ve never negotiated anything before? That I don’t know an opening salvo?’

‘Liv,’ Henry says again, ‘if we could …’

‘I know what’s going on here. “Oh, no, we don’t want money.” Until we reach a figure that equals a lottery win. Then, somehow, everyone manages to get over their hurt feelings.’

‘Liv …’ Henry says, quietly.

She lets out a breath. Under the table her hands are shaking.

‘There are occasions on which an agreement has been reached to share the painting. In the case of what we call indivisible assets, such as this, it is, admittedly, complicated. But there have been cases where parties have agreed to, if you like, timeshare a work of art, or have agreed that they will own it jointly but allow it to be shown in a major gallery. This would, of course, be accompanied by notices informing visitors both of its looted past and the generosity of its previous owners.’

Liv shakes her head mutely.

‘There is the possibility of sale and division, where we –’

‘No,’ say Liv and Lefèvre in unison.

‘Ms Halston.’

‘Mrs Halston,’ she says.

‘Mrs Halston.’ Paul’s tone has hardened. ‘I am obliged to inform you that our case is very strong. We have a good deal of evidence supporting restitution, and a body of precedent that lends weight to our cause. In your own interests, I suggest you think quite carefully about the issue of settlement.’

The room falls silent. ‘Is that meant to frighten me?’ Liv asks.

‘No,’ he says slowly. ‘But it is, I would remind you, in everyone’s best interests for this to be settled amicably. It’s not going to go away. I – we are not going to go away.’

She sees him suddenly, his arm slung across her naked waist, his mop of brown hair resting against her left breast. She sees his eyes, smiling, in the half-light.

She lifts her chin a little. ‘She’s not yours to take,’ she says. ‘I’ll see you in court.’

They are in Henry’s office. She has drunk a large whisky. She has never in her life drunk whisky in daytime, but Henry has poured her one, as if it is totally expected. He waits a few minutes as she takes a couple of sips.

‘I should warn you, it will be an expensive case,’ he says, leaning back in his chair.

‘How expensive?’

‘Well, in many cases the artwork has had to be sold after the case simply to pay the legal fees. There was a claimant in Connecticut recently who recovered stolen works worth twenty-two million dollars. But they owed more than ten million in legal fees to one lawyer alone. We will need to pay experts, especially French legal experts, given the painting’s history. And these cases can drag on, Liv.’

‘But they have to pay our costs if we win, yes?’

‘Not necessarily.’

She digests this. ‘Well, what are we talking – five figures?’

‘I would bank on six. It depends on their firepower. But they do have precedent on their side.’ Henry shrugs. ‘We can prove that you have good title. But there do seem to be gaps in this painting’s history, as it stands, and if they have evidence that it was removed in wartime, then …’

‘Six figures?’ she says, standing and pacing around the room. ‘I can’t believe this. I can’t believe someone can just walk into my life and demand to take something that belongs to me. Something I’ve owned for ever.’

‘Their case is far from watertight. But I have to point out that the political climate is in favour of claimants at the moment. Sotheby’s sold thirty-eight such works last year. It sold none a decade earlier.’

She feels electrified, her nerve endings still jangling from the encounter. ‘He’s – they’re not having her,’ she says.

‘But the money. You implied you were stretched already.’

‘I’ll remortgage,’ she says. ‘Is there anything I can do to keep the costs down?’

Henry leans over his desk. ‘If you choose to fight this, there’s a lot you can do. Most importantly, the more you can find out about the painting’s provenance, the stronger position we’ll be in. Otherwise I have to put someone here on to it, and charge you an hourly rate, and that’s without the cost of expert witnesses once we go to court. I suggest that if you can do that we’ll see where we are and I’ll look into instructing a barrister.’

‘I’ll start the search.’

She keeps hearing the certainty of their voices. *Our case is very strong. We have a body of precedent that lends weight to our cause.* She sees Paul’s face, his fake concern: *It is in everybody’s interests for this to be settled amicably.*

She sips the whisky, and deflates a little. She feels suddenly very alone. ‘Henry, what would you do? If it were you, I mean.’

He presses his fingertips together and rests them against his nose. ‘I think this is a terribly unfair situation. But, Liv, I would personally be cautious about proceeding to court. These cases can get … ugly. It might be worth your while just thinking further about whether there is any way you could settle.’

She keeps seeing Paul’s face. ‘No,’ she says baldly. ‘He is not having her.’

‘Even if –’

‘No.’

She feels his eyes on her as she gathers up her things and leaves the room.

Paul dials the number for the fourth time, rests his finger above the *dial* button, then changes his mind and sticks his telephone in his back pocket. Across the road a man in a suit is arguing with a traffic warden, gesticulating wildly as the warden gazes at him impassively.

‘Are you coming for lunch?’ Janey appears at the door. ‘The table is booked for one thirty.’

She must have just applied perfume. It punctures the air, even on his side of his desk. ‘You really need me there?’ He is not in the mood for small talk. He doesn’t want to be charming, to detail the company’s astonishing track record in recovery. He doesn’t want to find himself seated beside Janey, to feel her leaning against him as she laughs, her knee gravitating towards his. More pertinently, he does not like André Lefèvre, with his suspicious eyes and his downturned mouth. He has rarely taken such an instant dislike to a client.

‘Can I ask when you first realized the painting was missing?’ he had asked.

‘We discover it through an audit.’

‘So you didn’t miss it personally?’

‘Personally?’ He had shrugged at the use of the word. ‘Why should someone else benefit financially from a work that should be in our possession?’

‘You don’t want to come? Why?’ says Janey. ‘What else have you got on?’

‘I thought I’d catch up with some paperwork.’

Janey lets her gaze rest on him. She is wearing lipstick. And heels. She does have good legs, he thinks absently.

‘We need this case, Paul. And we need to give André the confidence that we’re going to win.’

‘In that case I think my time would be better spent doing background than having lunch with him.’ He doesn’t look at her. His jaw seems to have set at a mulish angle. He’s been sour with everyone all week. ‘Take Miriam,’ he says. ‘She deserves a nice lunch.’

‘I don’t think our budget stretches to treating secretaries as and when we feel like it.’

‘I don’t see why not. And Lefèvre might like her. Miriam? Miriam?’ He keeps his gaze steadily on Janey’s, leans back in his chair.

She pokes her head around the door, her mouth half full of tuna sandwich. ‘Yes?’

‘Would you like to take my place at a lunch with Monsieur Lefèvre?’

‘Paul, we –’ Janey’s jaw clenches.

Miriam glances between the two of them. She swallows her mouthful. ‘That’s very kind. But …’

‘But Miriam has a sandwich. And contracts to type up. Thank you, Miriam.’ She waits until the door closes, purses her lips in thought. ‘Is everything all right, Paul?’

‘Everything’s fine.’

‘Well.’ She cannot keep the edge from her voice. ‘I see I can’t persuade you. I’ll look forward to hearing what you’ve turned up on the case. I’m sure it’ll be conclusive.’

She stands there a moment longer and then she leaves. He can hear her talking in French with Lefèvre as they head out of the office.

Paul sits and stares ahead of him. ‘Hey, Miriam?’

She reappears, holding a piece of sandwich.

‘Sorry. That was –’

‘It’s fine.’ She smiles, pops a bit of escaping bread back into her mouth, and adds something he cannot decipher. It is not clear whether she heard anything of the previous conversation.

‘Any calls?’

She swallows noisily. ‘Only the head of the Museums Association, like I said before. Do you want me to call him back for you?’

His smile is small and doesn’t stretch as far as his eyes. ‘No, don’t worry.’ He lets her close the door and his sigh, although soft and low, fills the silence.

Liv takes the painting off the wall. She runs her fingers lightly over the oil surface, feeling the graduated whorls and strokes, wondering at the fact that they were placed there by the artist’s own hand, and gazes at the woman on the canvas. The gilded frame is chipped in places, but she has always found it charming; has enjoyed the contrast between what was old and shabbily ornate, and the crisp, clean lines around her. She has liked the fact that *The Girl You Left Behind* is the only colourful thing in the room, antique and precious, glowing like a little jewel at the end of her bed.

Except now she is not just *The Girl*, a shared piece of history, an intimate joke between husband and wife. She is now the wife of a famous artist, missing, possibly murdered. She is the last link to a husband in a concentration camp. She is a missing painting, the subject of a lawsuit, the future focus of investigations. She does not know how to feel about this new version: she only knows that she has lost some part of her already.

The painting … was taken and passed into German possession.

André Lefèvre, his face blankly belligerent, barely even bothering to glance at Sophie’s image. And McCafferty. Every time she remembers Paul McCafferty in that meeting room her brain hums with anger. Sometimes she feels as if she is burning with it, as if she is permanently overheating. How can she just hand over Sophie?

Liv pulls out her running shoes from the box under the bed, changes into sweatpants and, shoving her key and phone into her pocket, sets off at a run.

She passes Fran, sitting on her upturned crate, watching silently as she heads off along the river, and lifts a hand in greeting. She doesn’t want to talk.

It is early afternoon, and the edges of the Thames are mottled with stray meandering office workers going back after long lunches, groups of schoolchildren, bossed and herded by harassed teachers, bored young mothers with ignored babies, texting distractedly as they push buggies. She runs, ducking in and out of them, slowed only by her own tight lungs and the occasional stitch, running until she is just another body in the crowd, invisible, indistinguishable. She pushes through it. She runs until her shins burn, until sweat forms a dark T across her back, until her face glistens. She runs until it hurts, until she can think of nothing but the simple, physical pain.

She is finally walking back alongside Somerset House when her phone signals a text message. She stops and pulls it from her pocket, wiping away the sweat that stings her eyes.

Liv. Call me.

Liv half walks, half runs to the edge of the water, and then, before she can think about it, she swings her arm in a fluid motion and hurls her phone into the Thames. It is gone without sound, without anybody even noticing, into the slate-grey swirling waters that rush towards the centre.

20

February 1917

Dearest sister

It is three weeks and four days since you left. I don't know if this letter will find you or, indeed, if the others did; the mayor has set up a new line of communication and promises he will send this on once he gets word that it is secure. So I wait, and I pray.

It has rained for fourteen days, turning what remained of the roads to mud that sucks at our legs and pulls the horses' shoes from their hoofs. We have rarely ventured out beyond the square: it is too cold and too difficult, and in truth I no longer wish to leave the children, even if just for a few minutes. Édith sat by the window for three days after you left, refusing to move, until I feared she would be ill and physically forced her to come to the table and, later, to bed. She no longer speaks, her face set in hollow-eyed watchfulness, her hands permanently attached to my skirts as if she is fully expecting someone to come and snatch me away too. I'm afraid I have barely had time to comfort her. There are fewer Germans coming in the evenings now, but enough that I have to work every night until midnight just to feed and clear up after them.

Aurélien disappeared. He left shortly after you did. I hear from Madame Louvier that he is still in St Péronne, staying with Jacques Arriège above the tabac, *but in truth I have no appetite to see him. He is no better than Kommandant Hencken in his betrayal of you. For all your faith in people's goodness, I cannot believe that if Herr Kommandant genuinely wished you well he would have torn you from our embrace in such a manner, so that the whole town might become aware of your alleged sins. I cannot see any evidence of humanity in either of their actions. I simply cannot.*

I pray for you, Sophie. I see your face when I wake in the morning, and when I turn over some part of me startles that you are not there on the other pillow, your hair tied in a fat plait, making me laugh and conjuring food from your imagination. I turn to call for you at the bar and there is just a silence where you should be. Mimi climbs up to your bedroom and peers in as if she, too, expects to find you, seated before your bureau, writing or gazing into the middle distance, your head full of dreams. Do you remember when we used to stand at that window and imagine what lay beyond it? When we dreamed of fairies and princesses and those noblemen who might come to rescue us? I wonder what our childish selves would have made of this place now, with its pocked roads, its men like wraiths in rags, and its starving children.

The town has been so quiet since you left. It is as if its very spirit left with you. Madame Louvier comes in, perverse to the last, and insists that your name must still be heard. She harangues anyone who will listen. Herr Kommandant is not among the handful of Germans who arrive for their meal in the evening. I truly believe he cannot meet my gaze. Or perhaps he knows I should like to run him through with my good paring knife and has decided to stay away.

Little snippets of information still find their way through: a scrap of paper under my door told of another outbreak of influenza near Lille, a convoy of Allied soldiers captured near Douai, horses killed for meat on the Belgian border. No word from Jean-Michel. No word from you.

Some days I feel as if I am buried in a mine and can hear only the echoes of voices at some distance. All those I love, aside from the children, have been taken away from me and I no longer know whether any of you are alive or dead. Sometimes my fear for you grows so great that I find myself paralysed, and I will be in the middle of stirring some soup or laying a table and I have to force myself to breathe, to tell myself I must be strong for the children. Most of all, I must have faith. What would Sophie do? I ask myself firmly, and the answer is always clear.

Please, beloved sister, take care. Do not inflame the Germans further, even if they are your captors. Do not take risks, no matter how great the impulse. All that matters is that you return to us safely; you and Jean-Michel and your beloved Édouard. I tell myself that this letter will reach you. I tell myself that perhaps, just perhaps, the two of you are together, and not in the way that I fear most. I tell myself God must be just, however He chooses to toy with our futures this dark day.

Stay safe, Sophie.

Your loving sister
Hélène

21

Paul puts down the letter, obtained from a cache of correspondence stockpiled by resistance operatives during the First World War. It is the only piece of evidence he has found of Sophie Lefèvre's family and it, like the others, appears not to have reached her.

The Girl You Left Behind is now Paul's priority case. He ploughs through his usual sources: museums, archivists, auction houses, experts in international art cases. Off the record, he speaks to less benign sources: old acquaintances at Scotland Yard, contacts from the world of art crime, a Romanian known for recording almost mathematically the underground movement of a whole swathe of stolen European art.

He discovers these facts: that Édouard Lefèvre had, until recently, been the least famous artist of the Académie Matisse. There are only two academics who specialize in his work, and neither of them knows any more than he does about *The Girl You Left Behind*.

A photograph and some written journals obtained by the Lefèvre family have turned up the fact that the painting hung in full view in the hotel known as Le Coq Rouge in St Péronne, a town occupied by Germans during the First World War. It disappeared without trace some time after Sophie Lefèvre was arrested.

And then there is a gap of some thirty years before the painting reappears, in the possession of one Louanne Baker, who kept it in her home in the US for thirty years until she moved to Spain, where she died, and David Halston bought it.

What happened to it between those dates? If it really was looted, where was it taken? What happened to Sophie Lefèvre, who seems to have simply vanished from history? The facts exist, like the dots in a join-the-dots puzzle but one in which the picture never becomes clear. There is more written about Sophie Lefèvre's painting than there is about her.

During the Second World War, looted treasures were kept in secure vaults in Germany, underground, protected. These artworks, millions of them, had been targeted with military efficiency, aided by unscrupulous dealers and experts. This was not the random plunder of soldiers in battle: this looting was systematic, controlled, regulated and documented.

But there is little surviving documentation from the First World War, regarding looted property, especially in northern France. It means, Janey says, that this is something of a test case. She says it with some pride. For the truth is, this case is vital to their company. There are increasing numbers of organizations like theirs springing up, all sourcing provenance, listing works that relatives of the dead have spent decades trying to trace. Now there are no-win no-fee firms undercutting them, promising the earth to people who are willing to believe anything to get their beloved object back.

Sean reports that Liv's lawyer has tried various legal means to get the case struck out. He claims that it falls beyond the statute of limitations, that the sale to David from Marianne Baker had been 'innocent'. For a variety of complicated reasons, these have all failed. They are, says Sean, cheerfully, headed to

court. ‘Looks like next week. We have Justice Berger. He’s only ever found for the claimant in these cases. Looking good!’

‘Great,’ says Paul.

There is an A4 photocopy of *The Girl You Left Behind* pinned up in his office, among other paintings missing or subject to restitution requests. Paul looks up periodically and wishes that every time he did so Liv Halston wasn’t looking back at him. Paul switches his attention to the papers in front of him. ‘This image is such as one would not expect to find in a humble provincial hotel,’ the *Kommandant* writes to his wife at one point. ‘In truth I cannot take my eyes from it.’

It? Paul wonders. Or her?

Several miles away, Liv is also working. She rises at seven, pulls on her running shoes and heads off, sprinting alongside the river, music in her ears, her heartbeat thumping along with her footsteps. She gets home after Mo leaves for work, showers, makes herself breakfast, drops a tea in with Fran, but now she leaves the Glass House, spending her days in specialist art libraries, in the fuggy archives of galleries, on the Internet, chasing leads. She is in daily contact with Henry, popping in whenever he asks to hold a conference, explaining the importance of French legal testimony, the difficulty of finding expert witnesses. ‘So basically,’ she says, ‘you want me to come up with concrete evidence on a painting about which nothing has been recorded of a woman who doesn’t seem to exist.’

Henry smiles nervously at her. He does this a lot.

She lives and breathes the painting. She is blind to the approach of Christmas, her father’s plaintive calls. She cannot see beyond her determination that Paul should not take it. Henry has given her all the disclosure files from the other side – copies of letters between Sophie and her husband, references to the painting and the little town where they lived.

She reads through hundreds of academic and political papers, newspaper reports about restitution: about families destroyed in Dachau, their surviving grandchildren borrowing money to recover a Titian; a Polish family, whose only surviving member died happy two months after the return of her father’s little Rodin sculpture. Nearly all these articles are written from the point of view of the claimant, the family who lost everything and found the grandmother’s painting against the odds. The reader is invited to rejoice with them when they win it back. The word ‘injustice’ appears in almost every paragraph. The articles rarely offer the opinion of the person who had bought it in good faith and lost it.

And everywhere she goes she detects Paul’s footprints, as if she is asking the wrong questions, looking in the wrong places, as if she is simply processing information that he has already acquired.

She stands up and stretches, walking around the study. She has moved *The Girl You Left Behind* on to a bookshelf while she works, as if she might give her inspiration. She finds herself looking at her all the time now, as if she is conscious that their time together may be limited. And the court date draws ever closer, always there, like the drumbeat of a distant battle. *Give me the answers, Sophie. At the bloody least, give me a clue.*

‘Hey.’

Mo appears at the door, eating a pot of yoghurt. Six weeks on, she is still living in the Glass House. Liv is grateful for her presence. She stretches and checks her watch. ‘Is it three o’clock already? God. I’ve got almost nowhere today.’

‘You might want to take a look at this.’ Mo pulls a copy of the London evening paper from under her arm and hands it over. ‘Page three.’

Liv opens it.

Award-winning Architect’s Widow In Million-pound Battle For Nazi-looted Art, the headline says. Underneath is a half-page picture of David and her at a charity event several years previously. She is wearing an electric blue dress and is holding up a champagne glass, as if toasting the camera. Nearby is a small inset picture of *The Girl You Left Behind* with a caption: ‘Impressionist painting worth millions was “stolen by German”.’

‘Nice dress,’ says Mo.

The blood drains from Liv’s face. She does not recognize the smiling partygoer in the picture, a woman from a different life. ‘Oh, my God …’ She feels as if someone has thrown open the doors of her house, her bedroom.

‘I guess it’s in their interests to make you look like some kind of high-society witch. That way they can spin their poor-French-victim line.’

Liv closes her eyes. If she keeps them closed, perhaps it will just go away.

‘It’s historically wrong, obviously. I mean, there were no Nazis in the First World War. So I doubt if anyone will take any notice. I mean, I wouldn’t worry or anything.’ There is a long silence. ‘And I don’t think anyone will recognize you. You look quite different these days. Much …’ she struggles for words ‘… poorer. And kind of older.’

Liv opens her eyes. There she is, standing beside David, like some wealthy, carefree version of herself.

Mo pulls the spoon from her mouth and inspects it. ‘Just don’t look at the online version, okay? Some of the reader comments are a bit … strong.’

Liv looks up.

‘Oh, you know. Everyone has an opinion these days. It’s all bullshit.’ Mo puts the kettle on. ‘Hey, are you okay if Ranic comes over this weekend? He shares his place with, like, fifteen other people. It’s quite nice to be able to stick your legs out in front of the telly without accidentally kicking someone’s arse.’

Liv works all evening, trying to quell her growing anxiety. She keeps seeing that newspaper report: the headline, the society wife with her raised glass of champagne. She calls Henry, who tells her to ignore it, that it’s par for the course. She finds herself listening almost forensically to his tone, trying to assess whether he is as confident as he sounds.

‘Listen, Liv. It’s a big case. They’re going to play dirty. You need to brace yourself.’ He has briefed a barrister. He tells her the man’s name as if she should have heard of him. She asks how much he costs and hears Henry shuffling papers. When he tells her the sum, she feels as if the air has been punched clean out of her lungs.

The phone rings three times; once it is her father, telling her he has a job in a small touring production of *Run for Your Wife*. She tells him absently that she’s pleased for him, urges him not to run after anyone else’s. ‘That is *exactly* what Caroline said!’ he exclaims, and rings off.

The second call is Kristen. ‘Oh, my God,’ she says, breaking in without even a hello. ‘I just saw the paper.’

‘Yes. Not the best afternoon’s reading.’

She hears Kristen's hand sliding over the receiver, a muffled conversation. 'Sven says don't speak to anyone again. Just don't say a word.'

'I didn't.'

'Then where did they get all that awful stuff?'

'Henry says it probably came out of TARP. It's in their interests to leak information that makes the case sound as bad as possible.'

'Shall I come over? I'm not doing much at the moment.'

'It's sweet of you, Kristen, but I'm fine.' She doesn't want to talk to anyone.

'Well, I can come to court with you, if you like. Or if you wanted me to put your side of it, I'm sure I have contacts. Perhaps something in *Hello!*?'

'That – no. Thanks.' Liv puts down the phone. It will be everywhere now. Kristen is a far more effective disseminator of information than the evening paper. Liv is anticipating having to explain herself to friends, acquaintances. The painting is already somehow no longer hers. It is a matter of public record, a focus for discussion, a symbol of a wrong.

As she puts the phone down it rings immediately, making her jump.

'Kristen, I –'

'Is that Olivia Halston?'

A man's voice.

She hesitates. 'Yes?'

'My name is Robert Schiller. I'm the arts correspondent for *The Times*. I'm sorry if I'm calling at an inopportune time, but I'm putting together a background piece on this painting of yours and I was wondering if you –'

'No. No, thank you.' She slams the phone down. She stares at it suspiciously, then removes the receiver from its cradle, afraid that it will ring again. Three times she places the receiver back on the telephone and each time it rings straight away. Journalists leave their names and numbers. They sound friendly, ingratiating. They promise fairness, apologize for taking up her time. She sits in the empty house, listening to her heart thumping.

Mo arrives back shortly after one a.m. and finds her in front of the computer, the phone off the hook. She is emailing every living expert on French turn-of-the-twentieth-century art. *I was wondering if you knew anything about … ; I am trying to fill in the history of … ; … anything you have, or know – anything at all … century art.*

'You want tea?' Mo says, shedding her coat.

'Thanks.' Liv doesn't look up. Her eyes are sore. She knows she has reached the point where she is merely flicking blindly between websites, checking and rechecking her email, but she can't stop herself. Feeling as if she is doing something, no matter how pointless, is better than the alternative.

Mo sits down opposite her in the kitchen and pushes a mug towards her. 'You look terrible.'

'Thanks.'

Mo watches her type listlessly, takes a sip of her tea, and then pulls her chair closer to Liv. 'Okay. So let's look at this with my History of Art, BA Hons, head on. You've been through the museum archives? Auction catalogues? Dealers?'

Liv shuts her computer. 'I've done them all.'

‘You said David got the painting from an American woman. Could you not ask her where her mother got it from?’

She shuffles through the papers. ‘The … other side have already asked her. She doesn’t know. Louanne Baker had it, and then we bought it. That’s all she knows. That’s all she ever bloody needed to know.’

She stares at the copy of the evening paper, its intimations that she and David were somehow wrong, somehow morally deficient to have owned the painting at all. She sees Paul’s face, his eyes on her at the lawyer’s office.

Mo’s voice is uncharacteristically quiet. ‘You okay?’

‘Yes. No. I love this painting, Mo. I really love it. I know it sounds stupid, but the thought of losing her is … It’s like losing part of myself.’

Mo’s eyebrows lift a quarter of an inch.

‘I’m sorry. It’s just … Finding yourself in the newspapers as public enemy number one, it’s … Oh, bloody hell, Mo, I don’t know what on earth I’m doing. I’m fighting a man who does this for a living and I’m scrabbling around for scraps and I haven’t a bloody clue.’ She realizes, humiliated, that she is about to cry.

Mo pulls the folders towards her. ‘Go outside,’ she says. ‘Go out on to the deck and stare at the sky for ten minutes and remind yourself that ultimately ours is a meaningless and futile existence and that our little planet will probably be swallowed by a black hole so that none of this will have any point anyway. And I’ll see if I can help.’

Liv sniffs. ‘But you must be exhausted.’

‘Nah. I need to wind down after a shift. This’ll put me to sleep nicely. Go on.’ She begins to flick through the folders on the table.

Liv wipes her eyes, pulls on a sweater and steps outside on to the deck. Out here she feels curiously weightless, in the endless black of night. She gazes down at the vast city spread beneath her, and breathes in the cold air. She stretches, feeling the tightness in her shoulders, the tension in her neck. And always, somewhere underneath, the sense that she is missing something; secrets that float just out of sight.

When she walks into the kitchen ten minutes later, Mo is scribbling notes on her legal pad. ‘Do you remember Mr Chambers?’

‘Chambers?’

‘Medieval painting. I’m sure you did that course. I keep thinking about something he said that stuck with me – it’s about the only thing that did. He said that sometimes the history of a painting is not just about a painting. It’s also the history of a family, with all its secrets and transgressions.’ Mo taps her pen on the table. ‘Well, I’m totally out of my depth here, but I’m curious, given that she was living with them when the painting disappeared, when *she* disappeared, and they all seemed pretty close, why there is no evidence anywhere of Sophie’s family.’

Liv sits up into the night, going through the thick files of papers, checking and double-checking. She scans the Internet, her glasses perched on her nose. When she finally finds what she is looking for, shortly after five o’clock, she thanks God for the meticulousness of French civic record-keeping. Then she sits back and waits for Mo to wake up.

‘Is there any way I can tear you away from Ranic this weekend?’ she says, as Mo appears in the doorway, bleary-eyed, her hair a black crow settling on her shoulders. Without the thick black eyeliner,

her face seems curiously pink and vulnerable.

'I don't want to go running, thank you. No. Or anything sweaty.'

'You used to speak fluent French, right? Do you want to come to Paris with me?'

Mo makes for the kettle. 'Is this your way of telling me you've swung to the other side? Because while I love Paris, I'm so not up for lady bits.'

'No. It's my way of telling you that I need your superior abilities as a French speaker to chat up an eighty-year-old man.'

'My favourite kind of weekend.'

'And I can throw in a crap one-star hotel. And maybe a day's shopping at Galeries Lafayette. Window-shopping.'

Mo turns and squints at her. 'How can I refuse? What time are we leaving?'

22

She meets Mo at St Pancras at five thirty p.m., and at the sight of her, waving laconically, cigarette in hand outside a café, she realizes she's almost shamefully relieved at the prospect of two days away. Two days away from the deathly hush of the Glass House. Two days away from the telephone, which she has come to view as virtually radioactive: fourteen different journalists have left messages of varying friendliness on her answer-phone. Two days away from Paul, whose very existence reminds her of everything she has got wrong.

The previous night she had told Sven her plan, and he had said immediately, 'Can you afford it?'

'I can't afford anything. I've remortgaged the house.'

Sven's silence was poignant.

'I had to. The law firm wanted guarantees.'

The legal costs are eating everything. The barrister alone costs five hundred pounds an hour and he hasn't yet stood up in court. 'It'll be fine once the painting is mine again,' she says briskly.

Outside, London is bathed in an evening mist; the sunset shoots orange flares across the dirty-violet sky. 'I hope I didn't tear you away from anything,' she says, as they settle into their seats.

'Only the Comfort Lodge Monthly Sing-a-long.' Mo places a pile of glossy magazines and some chocolate in front of them. 'And the chord changes of "We're Going To Hang Out The Washing On The Siegfried Line" hold no surprises for me. So who's this man we're going to meet, and how does he relate to your case?'

Philippe Bessette is the son of Aurélien Bessette, younger brother of Sophie Lefèvre. It was Aurélien, Liv explains, who lived in Le Coq Rouge during the years of the occupation. He had been there when Sophie was taken away, and had stayed in the town for several years afterwards. 'He of all people might know how the painting disappeared. I spoke to the matron of the care home where he lives, and she said he should be up to a conversation as he's still quite sharp, but that I had to come in person as he's pretty deaf and can't do it by phone.'

'Well, glad to help.'

'Thank you.'

'But you do know I don't really speak French.'

Liv's head whips round. Mo is pouring a small bottle of red wine into two plastic glasses. 'What?'

'I don't speak French. I'm good at understanding general old person's babble, though. I might be able to get something.'

Liv slumps in her seat.

'I'm *joking*. Jesus, you're gullible.' Mo hands her the wine, and takes a long sip. 'I worry about you sometimes. I really do.'

Afterwards she remembers little of the actual train journey. They drink the wine, and two more little bottles, and they talk. It's the closest thing she's had to a night out for weeks. Mo talks about her alienation

from her parents, who cannot understand her lack of ambition or the care home, which she loves. 'Oh, I know we're the lowest of the low, care assistants, but the olds are good. Some of them are really smart, and others are funny. I like them more than most people our age.' Liv waits for 'present company excepted' and tries not to take offence when it doesn't come.

She tells Mo, finally, about Paul. And Mo is temporarily silenced. 'You slept with him without Googling him?' she says, when she recovers the power of speech. 'Oh, my God, when you said you were out of the dating loop I never thought for a minute … You don't sleep with someone without doing *background*. Jesus.'

She sits back and refills her glass. Just briefly, she looks oddly cheerful. 'Whoa. I just realized something: you, Liv Halston, may actually turn out to have had the Most Expensive Shag In History.'

They spend the night in a budget hotel in a Paris suburb, where the bathroom is moulded from one piece of yellow plastic and the shampoo is the exact colour and scent of washing-up liquid. After a stiff, greasy croissant and a cup of coffee, they call the residential home. Liv packs their stuff, her stomach already a knot of nervous anticipation.

'Well, that's torn it,' says Mo, when she puts down the phone.

'What?'

'He's not well. He's not seeing visitors today.'

Liv, putting on her makeup, stares at her in shock. 'Did you tell them we'd come all the way from London?'

'I told her we'd come from Sydney. But the woman said he was weak and he'd only be asleep if we came. I've given her my mobile number and she's promised to ring if he picks up.'

'What if he dies?'

'It's a cold, Liv.'

'But he's old.'

'Come on. Let's go drink in bars and stare at clothes we can't afford. If she rings we can be in a taxi before you can say Gérard Depardieu.'

They spend the morning wandering around the endless departments at Galeries Lafayette, which are festooned with baubles and packed with Christmas shoppers. Liv tries to distract herself, to enjoy the change, but she is acutely conscious of the price of everything. Since when had two hundred pounds become an acceptable price for a pair of jeans? Did a hundred-pound moisturizer really eradicate wrinkles? She finds herself dropping hangers as quickly as she picks them up.

'Are things really that bad?'

'The barrister is five hundred quid an hour.'

Mo waits a minute for a punchline that doesn't come. 'Ouch. I hope this painting's worth it.'

'Henry seems to think we've got a good defence. He says they talk the talk.'

'Then stop worrying, Liv, for God's sake. Enjoy yourself a little. Come on – this is the weekend you're going to turn it all around.'

But she can't enjoy herself. She's here to pick the brains of an eighty-year-old man, who may or may not be up to speaking to her. The court case is due to start on Monday and she needs greater firepower to go in with than she already has.

'Mo.'

‘Mm?’ Mo is holding up a black silk dress. She keeps looking up at the security cameras in a faintly unnerving manner.

‘Can I suggest somewhere else?’

‘Sure. Where do you want to go? Palais Royale? Le Marais? We could probably find a bar for you to dance on, if you’re doing the whole finding-yourself-again thing.’

She pulls the road map from her handbag and begins to unfold it. ‘No. I want to go to St Péronne.’

They hire a car and drive north from Paris. Mo does not drive, so Liv takes the wheel, forcing herself to remember to stay on the right-hand side of the road. It is years since she drove. She feels the approach of St Péronne like the beat of a distant drum. The suburbs give way to farmland, huge industrial estates, and then, finally, almost two hours later, the flatlands of the north-east. They follow signs, get briefly lost, double back on themselves and then, shortly before four o’clock, they are driving slowly down the town’s high street. It is quiet, the few market stalls already packing up and only a few people in the grey stone square.

‘I’m gasping. Do you know where the nearest bar is?’

They pull over, glancing up at the hotel on the square. Liv lowers the window and stares up at the brick frontage. ‘That’s it.’

‘That’s what?’

‘Le Coq Rouge. That’s the hotel where they all lived.’

She climbs out of the car slowly, squinting up at the sign. It looks as it might have done back in the early part of the last century. The windows are brightly painted, the flower boxes full of Christmas cyclamen. A sign swings from a wrought-iron bracket. Through an archway into a gravelled courtyard, she sees several expensive cars. Something inside her tightens with nerves or anticipation, she is not sure which.

‘It’s Michelin-starred. Excellent.’

Liv stares at her.

‘Duh. Everyone knows Michelin-starred restaurants have the best-looking staff.’

‘And … Ranic?’

‘Foreign rules. Everyone knows it doesn’t count if you’re in another country.’

Mo is through the door and standing at the bar. A young, impossibly handsome man in a starched apron greets her. Liv stands to the side as Mo chats away to him in French.

Liv breathes in the scents of food cooking, beeswax, perfumed roses in vases, and gazes at the walls. Her painting lived here. Almost a hundred years ago *The Girl You Left Behind* lived here, along with its subject. Some strange part of her half expects the painting to appear on a wall as if it belongs here.

She turns to Mo. ‘Ask him if the Bessettes still own this place.’

‘Bessette? *Non*.’

‘No. It belongs to a Latvian, apparently. He has a chain of hotels.’

She’s disappointed. She pictures this bar, full of Germans, the red-haired girl busying herself behind the bar, her eyes flashing resentment.

‘Does he know about the bar’s history?’ She pulls the photocopied picture from her bag, unrolls it. Mo repeats this, in rapid French. The barman leans over, shrugs. ‘He’s only worked here since August. He says he knows nothing about it.’

The barman speaks again, and Mo adds: ‘He says she’s a pretty girl.’ She raises her eyes to heaven.

‘And he says you’re the second person to ask these questions.’

‘What?’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘Ask him what the man looked like?’

He barely needed to say. Late thirties or so, about six foot tall, sprinkling of early grey in his short hair. ‘*Comme un gendarme*. He leave his card,’ the waiter says, and hands it to Liv.

Paul McCafferty
Director, TARP

It is as if she has combusted internally. *Again?* You even got *here* before me? She feels as if he is taunting her. ‘Can I keep this?’ she says.

‘*Mais bien sûr*.’ The waiter shrugs. ‘Shall I find you a table, *Mesdames*?’

Liv flushes. *We can’t afford it*.

But Mo nods, studying the menu. ‘Yeah. It’s Christmas. Let’s have one amazing meal.’

‘But –’

‘My treat. I spend my life serving food to other people. If I’m going to have one blow-out, I’m going to have it here, in a Michelin-starred restaurant, surrounded by good-looking Jean-Pierres. I’ve earned it. And, come on, I owe you one.’

They eat in the restaurant. Mo is garrulous, flirts with the waiting staff, exclaims uncharacteristically over each course, ceremonially burns Paul’s business card in the tall white candle.

Liv struggles to stay engaged. The food is delicious, yes. The waiters are attentive, knowledgeable. It is food Nirvana, as Mo keeps saying. But as she sits in the crowded restaurant something strange happens: she cannot see it as just a dining room. She sees Sophie Lefèvre at the bar, hears the echoing thump of German boots on the old elm floorboards. She sees the log fire in the grate, hears the marching troops, the distant boom of guns. She sees the pavement outside, a woman dragged into an army truck, a weeping sister, her head bent over this very bar, prostrate with grief.

‘It’s just a painting,’ Mo says a little impatiently, when Liv turns down the chocolate fondant and confesses.

‘I know,’ Liv says.

When they finally get back to their hotel, she takes the file of documents into the plastic bathroom and, as Mo sleeps, she reads and reads by the harsh strip-light, trying to work out what she has missed.

On Sunday morning, when Liv has chewed away all but one of her nails, the matron calls. She gives them an address in the north-east of the city, and they drive there in the little hire car, wrestling with the unfamiliar streets, the clogged Périphérique. Mo, who had drunk almost two bottles of wine the evening before, is subdued and tetchy. Liv is silent too, exhausted from lack of sleep, her brain racing with questions.

She had been half expecting something depressing; some 1970s box in liverish brick with uPVC windows and an orderly car park. But the building they pull up outside is a four-storey house, its elegant windows framed with shutters, its frontage covered with ivy. It is surrounded by neatly tended gardens, with a pair of tall wrought-iron gates and paved paths that lead into separate closeted areas.

Liv buzzes the door and waits while Mo reapplies her lipstick – 'Who are you?' Liv says, watching her. 'Anna Nicole Smith?' Mo cackles, and the tension clears.

They stand in Reception for several minutes before anybody pays them any attention. Through glass doors to the left, quavering voices are raised in song, as a short-haired young woman plays an electric organ. In a small office, two middle-aged women are working through a chart.

Finally one turns around. '*Bonjour*.'

'*Bonjour*,' says Mo. 'Who are we here for again?'

'Monsieur Bessette.'

Mo speaks to the woman in perfect French.

She nods. 'English?'

'Yes.'

'Please. Sign in. Clean your hands. Then come this way.'

They write their names in a book, then she points them towards an antibacterial-liquid dispenser and they make a show of rubbing it thoroughly over their fingers. 'Nice place,' Mo murmurs, with the air of a connoisseur. Then they follow the woman's brisk walk through a labyrinth of corridors until she reaches a half-open door.

'*Monsieur? Vous avez des visiteurs*.'

They wait awkwardly by the door as the woman walks in and holds a rapid-fire discussion with what looks like the back of a chair. And then she emerges. 'You can go in,' she says. And then: 'I hope you have something for him.'

'The matron said I should bring him some *macarons*.'

She glances at the expensively wrapped box Liv pulls from her bag.

'*Ah, oui*,' she says, and gives a small smile. 'These he likes.'

'They'll be in the staffroom before five o'clock,' Mo murmurs, as she leaves.

Philippe Bessette sits in a wing-backed chair, gazing out at a small courtyard with a fountain; an oxygen tank on a trolley is linked to a small tube taped to his nostril. His face is grey, crumpled, as if it has collapsed in on itself; his skin, translucent in places, reveals the delicate tracings of veins underneath. He has a thick shock of white hair, and the movement of his eyes suggests something sharper than their surroundings.

They walk around the chair until they are facing him, and Mo stoops, minimizing the height differential. She looks immediately at home, Liv thinks. As if these are her people.

'*Bonjour*,' she says, and introduces them. They shake hands and Liv offers the macaroons. He studies them for a minute, then taps the lid of the box. Liv opens them and offers him the tray. He gestures to her first, and when she declines, he slowly chooses one and waits.

'He might need you to put it in his mouth,' Mo murmurs.

Liv hesitates, then proffers it. Bessette opens his mouth like a baby bird, then closes it, shutting his eyes as he allows himself to relish the flavour.

'Tell him we would like to ask him some questions about the family of Édouard Lefèvre.'

Bessette listens, and sighs audibly.

'Did you know Édouard Lefèvre?' She gets Mo to translate, waiting.

'I never met him.' His voice is slow, as if the words themselves are an effort.

‘But your father, Aurélien, knew him?’

‘My father met him on several occasions.’

‘Your father lived in St Péronne?’

‘My whole family lived in St Péronne, until I was eleven. My aunt Hélène lived in the hotel, my father above the *tabac*.’

‘We were at the hotel last night,’ Liv says. But he doesn’t seem to register. She unrolls a photocopy. ‘Did your father ever mention this painting?’

He gazes at the girl.

‘Apparently it was in Le Coq Rouge but it disappeared. We are trying to find out more about its history.’

‘Sophie,’ he says finally.

‘Yes,’ says Liv, nodding vigorously. ‘Sophie.’ She feels a faint flicker of excitement.

His gaze settles on the image, his eyes sunken and rheumy, impenetrable, as if they carry the joys and sorrows of the ages. He blinks, his wrinkled eyelids closing at half-speed, and it is like watching some strange prehistoric creature. Finally he lifts his head. ‘I cannot tell you. We were not encouraged to speak of her.’

Liv glances at Mo.

‘What?’

‘Sophie’s name … was not spoken in our house.’

Liv blinks. ‘But – but she was your aunt, yes? She was married to a great artist.’

‘My father never spoke of it.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Not everything that happens in a family is explicable.’

The room falls silent. Mo looks awkward. Liv tries to shift the subject. ‘So … do you know much about Monsieur Lefèvre?’

‘No. But I did acquire two of his works. After Sophie disappeared some paintings were sent to the hotel from a dealer in Paris; this was some time before I was born. As Sophie was not there, Hélène kept two, and gave two to my father. He told her he didn’t want them, but after he died, I found them in our attic. It was quite a surprise when I discovered what they were worth. One I gave to my daughter, who lives in Nantes. The other I sold some years ago. It pays for me to live here. This … is a nice place to live. So – maybe I think my relationship with my aunt Sophie was a good one, despite everything.’

His expression softens briefly.

Liv leans forward. ‘Despite everything?’

The old man’s expression is unreadable. She wonders, briefly, whether he has nodded off. But then he starts to speak. ‘There was talk … gossip … in St Péronne that my aunt was a collaborator. This was why my father said we must not discuss her. Easier to act as if she did not exist. Neither my aunt nor my father ever spoke of her when I was growing up.’

‘Collaborator? Like a spy?’

He waits a moment before answering. ‘No. That her relationship with the German occupiers was not … correct.’ He looks up at the two women. ‘It was very painful for our family. If you did not live through these times, if your family did not come from a small town, you cannot understand how it was for

us. No letters, no pictures, no photographs. From the moment she was taken away, my aunt ceased to exist for my father. He was …' he sighs '… an unforgiving man. Unfortunately the rest of her family decided to wipe her from our history too.'

'Even her sister?'

'Even Hélène.'

Liv is stunned. For so long, she has thought of Sophie as one of life's survivors, her expression triumphant, her adoration of her husband written on her face. She struggles to reconcile her Sophie with the image of this unloved, discarded woman.

There is a world of pain in the old man's long, weary breath. Liv feels suddenly guilty for having made him revisit it. 'I'm so sorry,' she says, not knowing what else to say. She sees now they will get nothing here. No wonder Paul McCafferty had not bothered to come.

The silence stretches. Mo surreptitiously eats a macaroon. When Liv looks up, Philippe Bessette is gazing at her. 'Thank you for seeing us, Monsieur.' She touches his arm. 'I find it hard to associate the woman you describe with the woman I see. I … have her portrait. I have always loved it.'

He lifts his head a few degrees. He looks at her steadily as Mo translates.

'I honestly thought she looked like someone who knew she was loved. She seemed to have spirit.'

The nursing staff appear in the doorway, watching. Behind her a woman with a trolley looks in impatiently. The smell of food seeps through the doorway.

She stands to leave. But as she does so, Bessette holds up a hand. 'Wait,' he says, gesturing towards a bookshelf with an index finger. 'The one with the red cover.'

Liv runs her fingers along the spines until he nods. She pulls a battered folder from the bookshelf.

'These are my aunt Sophie's papers, her correspondence. There is a little about her relationship with Édouard Lefèvre, things they discovered hidden around her room. Nothing about your painting, as I recall. But it may give you a clearer picture of her. At a time when her name was being blackened, it revealed my aunt to me … as human. A wonderful human being.'

Liv opens the folder carefully. Postcards, fragile letters, little drawings are tucked within it. She sees looping handwriting on a brittle piece of paper, the signature *Sophie*. Her breath catches in her throat.

'I found it in my father's things after he died. He told Hélène he had burned it, burned everything. She went to her grave thinking everything of Sophie was destroyed. That was the kind of man he was.'

She can barely tear her eyes from them. 'I will copy them and send this straight back to you,' she stammers.

He gives a dismissive wave of his hand. 'What use do I have for them? I can no longer read.'

'Monsieur – I have to ask. I don't understand. Surely the Lefèvre family would have wanted to see all of this.'

'Yes.'

She and Mo exchange looks. 'Then why did you not give it to them?'

A veil seems to lower itself over his eyes. 'It was the first time they visited me. What did I know about the painting? Did I have anything to help them? Questions, questions …' He shakes his head, his voice lifting. 'They cared nothing for Sophie before. Why should they profit at her expense now? Édouard's family care for nobody but themselves. It is all money, money, money. I would be glad if they lost their case.'

His expression is mulish. The conversation is apparently closed. The nurse hovers at the door, signalling mutely with her watch. Liv knows they are on the point of outstaying their welcome, but she has to ask one more thing. She reaches for her coat.

'Monsieur – do you know anything about what happened to your aunt Sophie after she left the hotel? Did you ever find out?'

He glances down at her picture and rests his hand there. His sigh emanates from somewhere deep within him.

'She was arrested and taken by the Germans to the reprisal camps. And, like so many others, from the day she left, my family never saw or heard of her again.'

23

1917

The cattle truck whined and jolted its way along roads pocked with holes, occasionally veering on to the grassy verges to avoid those that were too large to cross. A fine rain muffled sound, making the wheels spin in the loose earth, the engine roaring its protest and sending up clods of mud as the wheels struggled for purchase.

After two years in the quiet confines of our little town, I was shocked to see what life – and destruction – lay beyond it. Just a few miles from St Péronne, whole villages and towns were unrecognizable, shelled into oblivion, the shops and houses just piles of grey stone and rubble. Great craters sat in their midst, filled with water, their green algae and plant life hinting at their long standing, the townspeople mute as they watched us pass. I went through three towns without being able to identify where we were, and slowly I grasped the scale of what had been taking place around us.

I stared out through the swaying tarpaulin flap, watching the columns of mounted soldiers pass on skeletal horses, the grey-faced men hauling stretchers, their uniforms dark and wet, the swaying trucks from which wary faces looked out, with blank, fathomless stares. Occasionally the driver stopped the truck and exchanged a few words with another driver, and I wished I knew some German so that I might have some idea of where I was going. The shadows were faint, given the rain, but we seemed to be moving south-east. The direction of Ardennes, I told myself, struggling to keep my breathing under control. I had decided the only way to control the visceral fear that kept threatening to choke me was to reassure myself I was heading towards Édouard.

In truth, I felt numb. Those first few hours in the back of the truck I could not have formed a sentence if you had asked me. I sat, the harsh voices of my townspeople still ringing in my ears, my brother's expression of disgust in my mind, and my mouth dried to dust with the truth of what had just taken place. I saw my sister, her face contorted with grief, felt the fierce grip of Édith's little arms as she attempted to hang on to me. My fear in those moments was so intense that I thought I might disgrace myself. It came in waves, making my legs shake, my teeth chatter. And then, staring out at the ruined towns, I saw that for many the worst had already happened, and I told myself to be calm: this was merely a necessary stage in my return to Édouard. This was what I had asked for. I had to believe that.

An hour outside St Péronne the guard opposite me had folded his arms, tilted his head back against the wall of the truck and slept. He had evidently decided I was no threat, or perhaps he was so exhausted that he could not fight the rocking motion of the vehicle enough to stay awake. As the fear crept up on me again, like some predatory beast, I closed my eyes, pressed my hands together on my bag, and thought of my husband …

Édouard was chuckling to himself.

'What?' I entwined my arms around his neck, letting his words fall softly against my skin.

'I am thinking of you last night, chasing Monsieur Farage around his own counter.'

Our debts had grown too great. I had dragged Édouard round the bars of Pigalle, demanding money from those who owed him, refusing to leave until we were paid. Farage had refused and then insulted me, so Édouard, usually slow to anger, had shot out a huge fist and hit him. He had been out cold even before he struck the floor. We had left the bar in uproar, tables overturned, glasses flying about our ears. I had refused to run, but picked up my skirt and walked out in an orderly fashion, pausing to take the exact amount Édouard was owed from the till.

'You are fearless, little wife.'

'With you beside me, I am.'

I must have dozed off, and woke as the truck jolted to a halt, my head smacking against the roof brace. The guard was outside the vehicle, talking to another soldier. I peered out, rubbing my head, stretching my cold, stiff limbs. We were in a town, but the railway station had a new German name that was unrecognizable to me. The shadows had lengthened and the light dimmed, suggesting that evening was not far away. The tarpaulin lifted, and a German soldier's face appeared. He seemed surprised to find only me inside. He shouted, and gestured that I should get out. When I didn't move swiftly enough, he hauled at my arm so that I stumbled, my bag falling to the wet ground.

It had been two years since I had seen so many people in one place. The station, which comprised two platforms, was a teeming mass, mostly soldiers and prisoners as far as I could see. Their armbands and striped, grubby clothing marked out the prisoners. They kept their heads down. I found myself scanning their faces, as I was thrust through them, looking for Édouard, but I was pushed too quickly and they became a blur.

'*Hier! Hier!*' A door slid sideways and I was shoved into a freight carriage, its boarded sides revealing a shadowy mass of bodies inside. I fought to keep hold of my bag and heard the door slam behind me as my eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Inside there were two narrow wooden benches along each side, nearly every inch covered with bodies. More occupied the floor. At the edges some lay, their heads resting on small bundles of what might have been clothing. Everything was so filthy it was hard to tell. The air was thick with the foul smells of those who had not been able to wash, or worse, for some time.

'*Français?*' I said, into the silence. Several faces looked blankly at me. I tried again.

'*Ici*,' said a voice near the back. I began to make my way carefully down the length of the carriage, trying not to disturb those who were sleeping. I heard a voice that might have been Russian. I trod on someone's hair, and was cursed. Finally I reached the rear of the carriage. A shaven-headed man was looking at me. His face was scarred, as if with some recent pox, and his cheekbones jutted from his face like those of a skull.

'*Français?*' he said.

'Yes,' I replied. 'What is this? Where are we going?'

'Where are we going?' He regarded me with astonishment, and then, when he grasped that my question was serious, laughed mirthlessly.

‘Tours, Amiens, Lille. How would I know? They keep us on some endless cross-country chase so that none of us knows where we are.’

I was about to speak again when I saw the shape on the floor. A black coat so familiar that at first I dared not look closer. I stepped forward, past the man, and knelt down. ‘Liliane?’ I could see her face, still bruised, under what remained of her hair. She opened one eye, as if she did not trust her ears. ‘Liliane! It’s Sophie.’

She gazed at me. ‘Sophie,’ she whispered. Then she lifted a hand and touched mine. ‘Édith?’ Even in her frail state I could hear the fear in her voice.

‘She is with Hélène. She is safe.’

The eye closed.

‘Are you sick?’ It was then I saw the blood, dried, around her skirt. Her deathly pallor.

‘Has she been like this for long?’

The Frenchman shrugged, as if he had seen too many bodies like Liliane’s to feel anything as distinct as compassion now. ‘She was here some hours ago when we came aboard.’

Her lips were chapped, her eyes sunken. ‘Does anyone have water?’ I called. A few faces turned to me.

The Frenchman said pityingly, ‘You think this is a buffet car?’

I tried again, my voice lifting. ‘Does anyone have a sip of water?’ I could see faces turning to each other.

‘This woman risked her life to bring information to our town. If anyone has water, please, just a few drops.’ A murmur went through the carriage. ‘Please! For the love of God!’ And then, astonishingly, minutes later, an enamel bowl was passed along. It had a half-inch of what might have been rainwater in the bottom. I called out my thanks and lifted Liliane’s head gently, tipping the precious drops into her mouth.

The Frenchman seemed briefly animated. ‘We should hold cups, bowls, anything out of the carriage if possible, while it rains. We do not know when we will next receive food or water.’

Liliane swallowed painfully. I positioned myself on the floor so that she could rest against me. With a squeal and the harsh grinding of metal on rails, the train moved off into the countryside.

I could not tell you how long we stayed on that train. It moved slowly, stopping frequently and without obvious reason. I stared out through the gap in the splintered boards, watching the endless movement of troops, prisoners and civilians through my battered country, holding the dozing Liliane in my arms. The rain grew heavier, and there were murmurs of satisfaction as the occupants passed round water they had gleaned. I was cold, but glad of the rain and the low temperature: I could not imagine how hellish this carriage might become in the heat when the odours would worsen.

As the hours stretched, the Frenchman and I talked. I asked about the number-plate on his cap, the red stripe on his jacket, and he told me he had come from the ZAB – the *Zivilarbeiter Battalione*, prisoners who were used for the very worst of jobs, shipped to the front, exposed to Allied fire. He told me of the trains he saw each week, packed with boys, women and young girls, criss-crossing the country to the Somme, to Escaut and Ardennes, to work as slave labour for the Germans. Tonight, he said, we would lodge in ruined barracks, factories or schools in evacuated villages. He did not know whether we would be taken to a prison camp or a work battalion.

‘They keep us weak through lack of food, so that we will not try to escape. Most are now grateful merely to stay alive.’ He asked if I had food in my bag and was disappointed when I had to say no. I gave him a handkerchief that Hélène had packed, feeling obliged to give him something. He looked at its laundered cotton freshness as if he were holding spun silk. Then he handed it back. ‘Keep it,’ he said, and his face closed. ‘Use it for your friend. What did she do?’

When I told him of her bravery, the lifeline of information she had brought to our town, he looked at her anew, as if he were no longer seeing a body but a human being. I told him I was seeking news of my husband, and that he had been sent to Ardennes. The Frenchman’s face was grave. ‘I spent several weeks there. You know that there has been typhoid? I will pray for you that your husband has survived.’ I swallowed back a lump of fear.

‘Where are the rest of your battalion?’ I asked him, trying to change the subject. The train slowed and we passed another column of trudging prisoners. Not a man looked up at the passing train, as if they were each too ashamed of their enforced slavery. I scanned the face of each one, fearful that Édouard might be among them.

It was a moment before he spoke. ‘I am the only one left.’

Several hours after dark we drew into a siding. The doors slid open noisily and German voices yelled at us to get out. Bodies unfolded themselves wearily from the floor, clutching enamel bowls, and made their way along a disused track. Our path was lined with German infantry, prodding us into line with their guns. I felt like an animal to be herded so, as if I were no longer human. I recalled the desperate escape of the young prisoner in St Péronne, and suddenly had an inkling of what had made him run, despite the knowledge that he was almost certain to fail.

I held Liliane close to me, supporting her under the arms. She walked slowly, too slowly. A German stepped behind us and kicked at her.

‘Leave her!’ I protested, and his rifle butt shot out and cracked my head so that I stumbled briefly to the ground. I felt hands pulling me up, and then I was moving forward again, dazed, my sight blurred. When I put my hand to my temple, it came away sticky with blood.

We were shepherded into a huge, empty factory. The floor crunched with broken glass, and a stiff night breeze whistled through the windows. In the distance, we could hear the boom of the big guns, even see the odd flash of an explosion. I peered out, wondering where we were, but our surroundings were blanketed in the black of night.

‘Here,’ a voice said, and the Frenchman was between us, supporting us, moving us towards a corner. ‘Look, there is food.’

Soup, served by other prisoners from a long table with two huge urns. I had not eaten since early that morning. It was watery, filled with indistinct shapes, but my stomach constricted with anticipation. The Frenchman filled his enamel bowl, and a cup that Hélène had put into my bag, and with three pieces of black bread, we sat in a corner and ate, giving sips to Liliane (the fingers of one hand were broken so she could not use them), wiping the bowl with our fingers to retrieve every last trace.

‘There is not always food. Perhaps our luck is changing,’ the Frenchman said, but without conviction. He disappeared towards the table with the urns where a crowd was already congregating in the hope of more, and I cursed myself for not being swift enough to go. I was afraid to leave Liliane, even for a

moment. Minutes later he returned, the bowl filled. He stood beside us, then handed it to me and pointed at Liliane. 'Here,' he said. 'She needs strength.'

Liliane lifted her head. She looked at him as if she could not remember what it was to be treated with kindness, and my eyes filled with tears. The Frenchman nodded at us, as if we were in another world and he was courteously bidding us good night, then withdrew to where the men slept. I sat and I fed Liliane Béthune, sip by sip, as I would have done a child. When she had consumed the second bowl, she gave a shaky sigh, rested her head against me and fell asleep. I sat there in the dark, surrounded by quietly moving bodies, some coughing, some weeping, hearing the accents of lost Russians, Englishmen and Poles. Through the floor I felt the occasional vibration as some distant shell hit home, a vibration that nobody else seemed to find remarkable. I listened to the distant guns, and the murmuring of the other prisoners, and as the temperature dropped I began to shiver. I pictured my home, Hélène sleeping beside me, little Édith, her hands wound into my hair. And I wept silently in the darkness, until finally, overcome by exhaustion, I, too, fell asleep.

I woke, and for several seconds I did not know where I was. Édouard's arm was around me, his weight against me. There was a tiny crack in time, through which relief flooded – *he was here!* – before I realized that it was not my husband pressing against me. A man's hand, furtive and insistent, was snaking its way inside my skirt, shielded by the dark, perhaps by his belief in my fear and exhaustion. I lay rigid, my mind turning to cold, hard fury as I understood what this intruder felt he could take from me. Should I scream? Would anyone care if I did? Would the Germans take it as another excuse to punish me? As I moved my arm slowly from its position half underneath me, my hand brushed against a shard of glass, cold and sharp, where it had been blasted from the windows. I closed my fingers around it and then, almost before I could consider what I was doing, I had spun on to my side and had its jagged edge pressed against the throat of my unknown assailant.

'Touch me again and I will run this through you,' I whispered. I could smell his stale breath and feel his shock. He had not expected resistance. I was not even sure he understood my words. But he understood that sharp edge. He lifted his hands, a gesture of surrender, perhaps of apology. I kept the glass pressed where it was for a moment longer, a message of my intent. In the near pitch dark my gaze briefly met his and I saw that he was afraid. He, too, had found himself in a world where there were no rules, no order. If it was a world where he might assault a stranger, it was also a world where she might slit his throat. The moment I released the pressure he scrambled to his feet. I could just make out his shape as it stumbled across the sleeping bodies to the other side of the factory.

I tucked the glass fragment into my skirt pocket, sat upright, my arms shielding Liliane's sleeping form, and waited.

It seemed I had been asleep a matter of minutes when we were woken by shouting. German guards were moving through the middle of the room, hitting sleepers with the butts of their rifles to rouse them, kicking with their boots. I pushed myself upright. Pain shot through my head, and I stifled a cry. Through blurred vision I saw the soldiers moving towards us and pulled at Liliane, trying to get her upright before they could hit us.

In the harsh blue light of dawn, I could see our surroundings clearly. The factory was enormous and semi-derelict, a gaping, splintered hole at the centre of the roof, beams and windows scattered across the

floor. At the far end the trestle tables were serving something that might have been coffee, and a hunk of black bread. I lifted Liliane – I had to get her across that vast space before the food ran out. 'Where are we?' she said, peering out of the shattered window. A distant boom told us we must be near the Front.

'I have no idea,' I said, filled with relief that she felt well enough to engage in some small conversation with me.

We got the cup filled with coffee, and some in the Frenchman's bowl. I looked for him, anxious that we might be depriving him, but a German officer was already dividing the men into groups, and some of them were filing away from the factory. Liliane and I were ordered into a separate group of mainly women, and directed towards a communal water closet. In daylight, I could see the dirt ingrained in the other women's skin, the grey lice that crawled freely upon their heads. I itched, and looked down to see one on my skirt. I brushed it off with a sense of futility. I would not escape them, I knew. It was impossible to spend so much time in close contact with others and avoid them.

There must have been three hundred women trying to wash and use the lavatory in a space designed for twelve people. By the time I could get Liliane anywhere close to the cubicles, we both retched at what we found. We cleaned ourselves at the cold-water pump as best we could, following the lead of the other women: they barely removed their clothes to wash, and glanced about warily, as if waiting for some subterfuge by the Germans. 'Sometimes they burst in,' Liliane said. 'It is easier – and safer – to stay clothed.'

While the Germans were busy with the men, I scouted around outside in the rubble for twigs and pieces of string, then sat with Liliane. In the watery sunlight, I bound the broken fingers of her left hand to splints. She was so brave, barely wincing even when I knew I must be hurting her. She had stopped bleeding, but still walked gingerly, as if she were in pain. I dared not ask what had happened to her.

'It is good to see you, Sophie,' she said, examining her hand.

Somewhere in there, I thought, there might still be a shadow of the woman I knew in St Péronne. 'I never was so glad to see another human being,' I said, wiping her face with my clean handkerchief, and I meant it.

The men were sent on a work task. We could see them in the distance, queuing for shovels and pickaxes, formed into columns to march towards the infernal noise on the horizon. I said a silent prayer that our charitable Frenchman would stay safe, then offered up another, as I always did, for Édouard. The women, meanwhile, were directed towards a railway carriage. My heart sank at the thought of the next lengthy, stinking journey, but then I scolded myself. I may be only hours from Édouard, I thought. This may be the train that takes me to him.

I climbed aboard without complaint. This carriage was smaller, yet they seemed to expect all three hundred women to get into it. There was some swearing and a few muffled arguments as we attempted to sit. Liliane and I found a small space on the bench, me sitting at her feet, and I stuffed my bag underneath it, jamming it in. I regarded that bag with jealous propriety, as if it were a baby. Someone yelped as a shell burst close enough to make the train rattle.

'Tell me about Édith,' she said, as the train pulled off.

'She's in good spirits.' I put as much reassurance into my voice as possible. 'She eats well, sleeps peacefully, and she and Mimi are now inseparable. She adores the baby, and he adores her too.' As I

talked, painting a picture of her daughter's life in St Péronne, her eyes closed. I could not tell if it was with relief or grief.

'Is she happy?'

I answered carefully: 'She is a child. She wants her *maman*. But she knows she is safe at Le Coq Rouge.' I could not tell her more, but that seemed to be enough. I did not tell her about Édith's nightmares, about the nights she had sobbed for her mother. Liliane was not stupid: I suspected she knew those things in her heart already. When I had finished, she stared out of the window for a long time, lost in thought.

'And, Sophie, what brought you to this?' she asked, eventually turning back to me.

There was probably nobody else in the world who would understand better than Liliane. I searched her face, fearful even now. But the prospect of being able to share my burden with another human being was too great a lure.

I told her. I told her about the *Kommandant*, the night I had gone to his barracks, and the deal I had offered him. She looked at me for a long time. She didn't tell me I was a fool, or that I should not have believed him, or that my failure to do as the *Kommandant* had wished had been likely to bring about my death, if not that of those I loved.

She didn't say anything at all.

'I do believe he will keep his side of things. I do believe he will bring me to Édouard,' I said, with as much conviction as I could muster. She reached out her good hand and squeezed mine.

At dusk, in a small forest, the train ground to a juddering halt. We waited for it to move off again, but this time the sliding doors opened at the rear, and the occupants, many of whom had only just fallen asleep, muttered complaints. I was half dozing and woke to Liliane's voice in my ear. 'Sophie. Wake up. Wake up.'

A German guard stood in the doorway. It took me a moment to realize he was calling my name. I jumped up, remembering to grab my bag, and motioned for Liliane to come with me.

'*Karten*,' he demanded. Liliane and I presented our identity cards. He checked our names on a list, and pointed towards a truck. We heard the disappointed hiss of the other women as the doors slammed behind us.

Liliane and I were pushed towards the truck. I felt her lag a little. 'What?' I said. Her expression was clouded with distrust.

'I don't like this,' she said, glancing behind her, as the train began to move away.

'It's good,' I insisted. 'I think this means we are being singled out. I think this is the *Kommandant*'s doing.'

'That is what I don't like,' she said.

'Also – listen – I cannot hear the guns. We must be moving away from the Front. This is good, surely?'

We limped to the back of the truck, and I helped her aboard, scratching the back of my neck. I had begun to itch, detected lice beneath my clothing. I tried to ignore them. It had to be a good sign that we had been removed from the train. 'Have faith,' I said, and squeezed her arm. 'If nothing else we have room to move our legs at last.'

A young guard climbed in at the back, and glared at us. I tried to smile, to reassure him that I was unlikely to attempt to escape, but he looked at me with disgust, and placed his rifle between us like a warning. I realized then that I, too, probably smelt unwashed, that forced into such close proximity my

own hair might soon be crawling with insects, and I busied myself with searching my clothing and picking out those I found.

The truck pulled away and Liliane winced at every jolt. Within a few miles she had fallen asleep again, exhausted by pain. My own head throbbed, and I was grateful that the guns seemed to have stopped. *Have faith,* I willed us both silently.

We were almost an hour on the open road, the winter sun slowly dipping behind the distant mountains, the verges glinting with ice crystals, when the tarpaulin flipped up, revealing a flash of road sign. I must have been mistaken, I thought. I leaned forward, lifting the edge of the flap so that I might not miss the next, squinting against the light. And there it was.

Mannheim.

The world seemed to stop around me.

'Liliane?' I whispered, and shook her awake. 'Liliane. Look out. What do you see?' The truck had slowed to make its way around some craters, so as she peered out I knew she must see it.

'We are meant to be going south,' I said. 'South to Ardennes.' Now I could see that the shadows were behind us. We were driving east, and had been for some time. 'But Édouard is in Ardennes.' I couldn't keep the panic from my voice. 'I had word that he was there. We were meant to be going south to Ardennes. South.'

Liliane let the flap drop. When she spoke, she didn't look at me. Her face had leached of the little colour it had had left. 'Sophie, we can no longer hear the guns because we have crossed the Front,' she said dully. 'We are going into Germany.'

24

The train hums with good cheer. A group of women at the far end of Carriage Fourteen bursts into peals of noisy laughter. A middle-aged couple in the seats opposite, perhaps on the way home from some celebratory Christmas trip, have bedecked themselves in tinsel. The racks are bulging with purchases, the air thick with the scents of seasonal food – ripe cheeses, wine, expensive chocolate. But for Mo and Liv the journey back to England is subdued. They sit in the carriage in near silence; Mo's hangover has lasted all day, and must apparently be remedied with more small, overpriced bottles of wine. Liv reads and re-reads her notes, translating word by word with her little English–French dictionary balanced on her tray-table.

The plight of Sophie Lefèvre has cast a long shadow over the trip. She feels haunted by the fate of the girl she had always thought of as glowingly triumphant. Had she really been a collaborator? What had become of her?

A steward pushes a trolley down the aisle, offering more drinks and sugary snacks. She is so lost in Sophie's life that she barely looks up. The world of absent husbands, of longing, of near starvation and fear of the Germans seems suddenly more real to her than this one. She smells the woodsmoke in Le Coq Rouge, hears the sound of feet on the floor. Every time she closes her eyes, her painting morphs into the terrified face of Sophie Lefèvre, hauled by soldiers into a waiting truck, disowned by the family she loved.

The pages are brown, fragile and draw moisture from her fingertips. There are early letters from Édouard to Sophie, when he joins the Régiment d'Infanterie and she moves to St Péronne to be with her sister. Édouard misses her so much, he writes, that some nights he can barely breathe. He tells her that he conjures her in his head, paints pictures of her in the cold air. In her writings, Sophie envies her imaginary self, prays for her husband, scolds him. She calls him *poilu*. The image of them prompted by her words is so strong, so intimate that, even struggling with her French translation, Liv feels almost breathless. She runs her finger along the faded script, marvelling that the girl in the portrait was responsible for these words. Sophie Lefèvre is no longer a seductive image in a chipped gilded frame: she has become a person, a living, breathing, three-dimensional being. A woman who talks about laundry, shortages of food, the fit of her husband's uniform, her fears and frustrations. She realizes, again, that she cannot let Sophie's painting go.

Liv flicks through two sheets. Here the text is more dense, and interrupted by a formal sepia-tinted photograph of Édouard Lefèvre, gazing into the middle distance.

October 1914

The Gare du Nord was heaving, a boiling sea of soldiers and weeping women, the air thick with smoke and steam and the anguished sounds of goodbye. I knew Édouard wouldn't want me to cry. Besides, this would only be a short separation; all the newspapers said as much.

'I want to know everything you're doing,' I said. 'Make lots of sketches for me. And be sure to eat properly. And don't do anything stupid, like getting drunk and fighting and getting yourself arrested. I want you home as quickly as possible.'

He made me promise that Hélène and I would be careful. 'If you get wind that the enemy line is moving anywhere towards you, promise me you will come straight back to Paris.'

When I nodded, he said, 'Don't give me that sphinx face, Sophie. Promise me you will think of yourself first. I will not be able to fight if I believe you might be in danger.'

'You know I'm made of strong stuff.'

He glanced behind him at the clock. Somewhere in the distance a train let out a piercing whistle. Steam, the stench of burned oil, rose around us, briefly obscuring the crowds on the platform. I reached up to adjust his blue serge kepi. Then I stood back to look at him. What a man my husband is! A giant among men. His shoulders so broad in his uniform, half a head taller than anyone else there. He is such a huge physical presence; to look at him made my heart swell. I don't think I believed even then that he was actually leaving.

He had finished a little gouache painting of me the week before. He patted his top pocket now. 'I will carry you with me.'

I touched my heart with my hand. 'And you with me.' I was secretly envious that I hadn't one of him.

I glanced around me. Carriage doors were opening and closing, hands reaching past us, fingers entwining for the last time.

'I'm not going to watch you go, Édouard,' I told him. 'I shall close my eyes and keep the image of you as you stand before me.'

He nodded. He understood. 'Before you go,' he said suddenly. And then he swept me to him and kissed me, his mouth pressed against mine, his big arms pulling me tight, tight to him. I held him, my eyes squeezed shut, and I breathed him in, absorbing the scent of him, as if I could make that trace of him last for his entire absence. It was as if only then I believed he was actually going. My husband was going. And then, when it became too much, I pushed myself away, my face rigidly composed.

I kept my eyes closed, and gripped his hand, not wanting to see whatever was on his face, and then I turned swiftly, straight-backed, and pushed my way through the crowds, away from him.

I don't know why I didn't want to see him actually get on the train. I have regretted it every day since.

It was only when I got home that I reached into my pocket. I found a piece of paper he must have slipped in there while he held me: a little caricature of the two of us, him a huge bear in his uniform, grinning, his arm around me, petite and narrow-waisted, my face straight and solemn, my hair pulled neatly behind my head. Underneath it he had written, in his looping, cursive script: 'I never knew real happiness until you.'

Liv blinks. She places the papers neatly in the folder. She sits, thinking. Then she unrolls the picture of Sophie Lefèvre, that smiling, complicit face. How could Monsieur Bessette be right? How could a woman who adored her husband like that betray him, not just with another man but with an enemy? It seems incomprehensible. Liv rolls up the photocopy and places her notes back inside her bag.

Mo pulls off her earphones. 'So. Half an hour to St Pancras. Do you think you got what you wanted?'

She shrugs. She cannot speak past the huge lump that has risen in her throat.

Mo's hair is scraped back into jet-black furrows from her face, her cheeks milk pale. 'You nervous about tomorrow?'

Liv swallows and flashes a weak smile. She has thought about almost nothing else for the past six weeks.

'For what it's worth,' Mo says, as if she has been thinking about it for some time, 'I don't think McCafferty set you up.'

'What?'

'I know loads of crappy, mendacious people. He's not one of them.' She picks at a piece of skin on her thumb, then says, 'I think Fate just decided to play a really sick joke and dump you both on opposing sides.'

'But he didn't have to come after my painting.'

Mo lifts an eyebrow. 'Really?'

Liv stares out of the window as the train rolls towards London, fighting a new lump in her throat.

Across the table, the couple bedecked in tinsel are leaning against each other. They have fallen asleep, their hands entwined.

Later she is not entirely sure what makes her do it. Mo announces at St Pancras that she is heading over to Ranic's house, leaving Liv with instructions not to stay on the Internet all night looking up obscure restitution cases, and to please stick that Camembert in the fridge before it escapes and poisons the whole house. Liv stands in the teeming concourse, holding a plastic bag of stinking cheese and watching the little dark figure as she heads towards the Underground, a bag slung nonchalantly over her shoulder. There is something both jaunty and solid in the way Mo talks about Ranic; a sense that something has shifted for both of them.

She waits until Mo has vanished into the crowd. The commuters wash around and past her, a stepping-stone in a stream of people. They are all in pairs, arms linked, chatting, casting fond, excited looks at each other, or if alone, head down, determinedly heading home to the person they love. She sees wedding bands, engagement rings, hears snatches of murmured conversations about train times, last-minute pints of milk, and *Can you pick me up from the station?* Afterwards she will think sensibly about the many people who dread the partner they return to, look for excuses not to board the train, hide in bars. But for now the bored people, the miserable people, the other lonely people are invisible. She reads the crowd as if it can only be an affront to her single state. I was one of you once, she thinks, and can't quite imagine what it would be like to be one of them again.

I never knew real happiness until you.

The departure board flickers its new destinations, the glass-fronted shops packed with late Christmas shoppers. Is it ever possible to be the person you once were? she wonders. And before she can be completely paralysed by the answer, Liv takes hold of her suitcase and half walks, half runs to the Underground station.

There is a peculiar quality to the silence in the flat when Jake has gone back to his mother. It is a solid, weighty thing, entirely different from the quiet that occurs when he goes to a friend's for a few hours. The acute stillness of his home in those hours is, he sometimes thinks, tinged with guilt; a sense of failure. It is weighed down by the knowledge that there is no chance his son will come back for at least four days. Paul finishes clearing up the kitchen (Jake had been making chocolate Krispie cakes – puffed rice is scattered under every kitchen appliance) – then sits, staring at the Sunday paper he picks up each week out of habit and invariably fails to read.

In the early days after Leonie left, he dreaded the early mornings most. He hadn't known how much he loved the irregular pad of little Jake's bare feet and the sight of him, his hair standing on end, his eyes half closed, appearing in their bedroom to demand to climb in between them. The exquisite icy chill of his feet; the warm, yeasty scent of his skin. That visceral sense, once his son had burrowed into the middle of their bed, that all was well with the world. And then, after they'd gone, those early months of waking up alone, feeling as if each morning simply heralded another day he would miss of his son's life. Another series of little adventures or accidents, the mosaic of unremarkable events that would help turn him into who he would become – and that Paul would have no part of.

Paul was better at mornings now (not least because, at nine, Jake rarely woke up before he did) but the first few hours after he'd gone back to Leonie still had the power to disarm.

He'll iron some shirts. Maybe go to the gym, then take a shower and eat. Those few things will give the evening a shape. A couple of hours of television, maybe a flick through his files, just to make sure everything's shipshape for the case, and then he'll sleep.

He's just finishing the shirts when the telephone rings.

'Hey,' says Janey.

'Who is this?' he says, even though he knows exactly who it is.

'It's me,' she says, trying to keep the slight affront from her voice. 'Janey. Just thought I'd check in and see how we're fixed for tomorrow.'

'We're good,' he says. 'Sean has been through all the paperwork. The barrister is prepped. We're as good as we can be.'

'Did we get any more on the initial disappearance?'

'Not much. But we have enough third-party correspondence to hang a pretty large question mark over it.'

There is a short silence at the other end of the line.

'Brigg and Sawston's are setting up their own tracing agency,' she says.

'Who?'

'The auction house. Another string to their bow, apparently. They have big backers too.'

'Damn.' Paul gazes at the pile of paperwork on his desk.

'They've already started speaking to other agencies about staff. They're picking off ex-members of the Art and Antiques Squad apparently.' He hears the hidden question. 'Anyone with a background in detective work.'

'Well, they haven't approached me.'

There is a brief silence. He wonders if she believes him.

'We have to win this case, Paul. We need to make sure we're out there in front. That we're the go-to people for finding and returning lost treasures.'

'I get it,' he says.

'I just … I want you to know how important you are. To the company, I mean.'

'Like I said, Janey, nobody's approached me.'

Another brief silence.

'Okay.' She talks on for a bit, telling him about her weekend, the trip to her parents', a wedding she's been invited to in Devon. She talks about the wedding for so long that he wonders if she's plucking up the courage to invite him, and he changes the subject firmly. Finally she rings off.

Paul puts on some music, turns up the volume in an attempt to drown the noise of the street below. He has always loved the buzz, the vitality of living in the West End, but he has learned over the years that, if he's not in the right frame of mind, its in-your-face revelry serves only to heighten the inherent melancholy of Sunday night. He presses the volume button. He knows why it is, but he won't acknowledge it. There's little point in thinking about something you can't change.

He has just finished washing his hair when he becomes dimly aware of the door buzzer. He swears, fumbles for a towel and wipes his face. He would go downstairs in a towel but he has a feeling it's Janey.

He doesn't want her to think this is an invitation.

He is already rehearsing his excuses as he heads down the stairs, his T-shirt sticking to his damp skin.

Sorry, Janey, I'm just on my way out.

Yeah. We must discuss this at work. We should call a meeting, get everyone involved.

Janey. I think you're great. But this really isn't a good idea. I'm sorry.

He opens the front door with this last one almost on his lips. But it isn't Janey.

Liv Halston stands in the middle of the pavement, clutching a weekend bag. Above her, strings of festive lights bejewel the night sky. She drops her holdall at her feet, and her pale, serious face gazes up at him as if she has briefly forgotten what she had wanted to say.

'The case starts tomorrow,' he says, when she still doesn't speak. He can't stop looking at her.

'I know.'

'We're not meant to talk to each other.'

'No.'

'We could both get in a lot of trouble.'

He stands there, waiting. Her expression is so tense, framed by the collar of her thick black coat, her eyes flickering as if a million conversations are taking place inside her that he cannot know. He begins an apology. But she speaks first.

'Look. I know this probably doesn't make any sense, but could we possibly forget about the case? Just for one evening?' Her voice is too vulnerable. 'Could we just be two people again?'

It is the slight catch in her voice that breaks him. Paul McCafferty makes as if to speak, then leans forward and picks up her suitcase, dragging it into the hallway. Before either of them can change their mind, he pulls her to him, wraps his arms tightly around her and stays there until the outside world goes away.

'Hey, sleepyhead.'

She pushes herself upright, slowly registering where she is. Paul is sitting on the bed, pouring coffee into a mug. He hands it to her. He seems astonishingly awake. The clock says 6:32 a.m. 'I brought you some toast too. I thought you might want time to go home before …'

Before …

The case. She takes a moment to let this thought penetrate. He waits while she rubs her eyes, then leans over and kisses her lightly. He has brushed his teeth, she notes, and feels briefly self-conscious that she hasn't.

'I didn't know what you wanted on your toast. I hope jam's okay.' He picks it off the tray. 'Jake's choice. Ninety-eight per cent sugar or something.'

'Thank you.' She blinks at the plate on her lap. She cannot remember the last time anybody brought her breakfast in bed.

They gaze at each other. Oh, my, she thinks, remembering the previous night. All other thoughts disappear. And, as if he can read her mind, Paul's eyes crinkle at the corners.

'Are you … coming back in?' she says.

He shifts over to her, so that his legs, warm and solid, are entwined in hers. She moves so that he can place his arm around her shoulders, then leans into him and closes her eyes, just relishing the feel of it. He smells warm and sleepy. She just wants to rest her face against his skin and stay there, breathing him in

until her lungs are entirely full of tiny molecules of Paul. She has a sudden recollection of a boy she dated as a teenager; she had adored him. When they had finally kissed, she had been shocked to find that his skin, his hair, all of him, had smelt wrong. It was as if some fundamental part of him was chemically composed to repel her. Paul's skin – she could just lie there and inhale it, like really good scent.

'You okay?'

'Better than okay,' she says. She takes a sip of coffee.

'I have a new love for Sunday evenings. I can't imagine why.'

'Sunday evenings are definitely underrated.'

'As are unexpected visitors. I was a little worried you were Jehovah's Witnesses.' He thinks. 'Although if Jehovah's Witnesses did what you did last night I'm guessing they'd get a lot better reception.'

'You should tell them.'

'I may just do that.'

There is a long silence. They listen to the dustcart reversing outside, the muffled clash of the bins, eating toast in companionable silence.

'I missed you, Liv,' he says.

She tilts her head and rests against him. Outside, two people are talking loudly in Italian. Her muscles ache pleasurably, as if she has let go of some long-held tension that she had barely been aware of. She feels like someone she had forgotten. She wonders what Mo would say about this, then smiles when she realizes she knows the answer.

And then Paul's voice breaks into the silence: 'Liv – I'm afraid this case is going to bankrupt you.'

She stares at her mug of coffee.

'Liv?'

'I don't want to talk about the case.'

'I'm not going to talk about it in any … detail. I just have to tell you I'm worried.'

She tries to smile. 'Well, don't be. You haven't won yet.'

'Even if you win. It's a lot of money on legal fees. I've been here a few times so I have a good idea what it's costing you.' He puts down his mug, takes her hand in his. 'Look. Last week I talked to the Lefèvre family in private. My fellow director, Janey, doesn't even know about it. I explained a little of your situation, told them how much you love the painting, how unwilling you are to let her go. And I got them to agree to offer you a proper settlement. A serious settlement, a good six figures. It would cover your legal fees so far and then some.'

Liv stares at their hands, her own enfolded in his. Her mood evaporates. 'Are you … trying to persuade me to back down?'

'Not for the reasons you think.'

'What does that mean?'

He gazes ahead of him. 'I found stuff.'

Some part of her grows very still. 'In France?'

He compresses his mouth as if trying to work out how much to tell her. 'I found an old newspaper article, written by the American journalist who owned your painting. She talks about how she was given your painting from a store of stolen artwork near Dachau.'

‘So?’

‘So these works were all stolen. Which would lend weight to our case that the painting was obtained illegally and taken into German possession.’

‘That’s a big assumption.’

‘It taints any later acquisition.’

‘So you say.’

‘I’m good at my job, Liv. We’re halfway there. And if there’s further evidence, you know I’m going to find it.’

She feels herself growing rigid. ‘I think the important word there is “if”.’ She removes her hand from his.

He shifts round to face her. ‘Okay. This is what I don’t get. Aside from what is morally right and wrong here, I don’t get why a really smart woman who is in possession of a painting that cost almost nothing, and now knows that it has a dubious past, wouldn’t agree to hand it back in return for a lot of money. A hell of a lot more money than she paid for it.’

‘It’s not about the money.’

‘Oh, come *on*, Liv. I’m pointing out the obvious, here. Which is that if you go ahead with this case and you lose, you stand to lose hundreds of thousands of pounds. Maybe even your home. All your security. For a painting? Really?’

‘Sophie doesn’t belong with them. They don’t … they don’t care about her.’

‘Sophie Lefèvre has been dead for eighty-odd years. I’m pretty sure it’s not going to make any difference to her one way or the other.’

Liv slides out of the bed, casts around for her trousers. ‘You really don’t understand, do you?’ She hauls them on, zipping them up furiously. ‘God. You are so not the man I thought you were.’

‘No. I’m a man who, surprisingly, doesn’t want to see you lose your house for nothing.’

‘Oh, no. I forgot. You’re the man who brought this crap into my house in the first place.’

‘You think someone else wouldn’t have done this job? It’s a straightforward case, Liv. There are organizations like ours all over the place who would have run with it.’

‘Are we finished?’ She fastens her bra, pulls her jumper over her head.

‘Ah, hell. Look. I just want you to think about it. I – I just don’t want you to lose everything on a matter of principle.’

‘Oh. So all this is about looking out for me. Right.’

He rubs his forehead, as if he’s trying to keep his temper. And then he shakes his head. ‘You know what? I don’t think this is about the painting at all. I think this is about your inability to move on. Giving up the painting means leaving David in the past. And you can’t do that.’

‘I’ve moved on! You know I moved on! What the hell do you think last night was about?’

He stares at her. ‘You know what? I don’t know. I really don’t know.’

When she pushes past him to leave he doesn’t try to stop her.

25

Two hours later, Liv sits in the taxi watching Henry demolish a coffee and a Danish pastry, her stomach in knots. 'Got to get the kids to school,' he says, spraying crumbs through his legs. 'Never have time for breakfast.'

She is in a dark grey tailored jacket, a flash of bright blue shirt underneath it. She wears these clothes like armour. She wants to say something but her jaw appears to have wired itself shut. She no longer has nerves: she is one giant nerve. If someone touched her she might twang.

'Guaranteed that just as you sit down with a mug of coffee one of them will come in demanding toast or porridge or whatnot.'

She nods mutely. She keeps hearing Paul's voice. *These works were all stolen.*

'I think for about a year I ate whatever I could grab from the bread bin on the way out. Got quite fond of raw crumpets, actually.'

There are people outside the court. A small crowd is milling in front of the main steps. At first she thinks it must be a group of sightseers – but Henry reaches for her arm as she steps out of the taxi. 'Oh, Christ. Keep your head down,' he says.

'What?'

As her foot meets the pavement, the air is filled with blinding flashes. She is briefly paralysed. Then Henry's arm is propelling her forward, past the jostling men's elbows, her own name shouted in her ear. Someone thrusts a piece of paper into her free hand and she can hear Henry's voice, the faint tone of panic as the crowd seems to close around her. She is surrounded by a jumble of jackets, and the dark, fathomless reflection of huge lenses. 'Stand back, everybody, please. Stand back.' She glimpses the flash of brass on a policeman's uniform, shuts her eyes and feels herself shoved sideways, Henry's grip tightening on her arm.

Then they are in the silent courts, heading through Security, and she is on the other side, blinking at him in shock.

'What the hell was that?' She is breathing hard.

Henry smoothes his hair, and turns to peer out through the doors. 'The newspapers. I'm afraid the case seems to have attracted an awful lot of attention.'

She straightens her jacket, then looks round, just in time to see Paul striding in through the Security. He is wearing a pale blue shirt and dark trousers and looks utterly unruffled. Nobody has bothered him. As their eyes meet she gives him a look of mute fury. His stride slows, just a fraction, but his expression does not alter. He glances behind him, his papers tucked under his arm, and continues in the direction of Court Two.

It is then that she sees the piece of paper in her hand. She unfolds it carefully.

The possession of that which the Germans took is a CRIME. End the suffering of the Jewish people. Return what is rightfully theirs. Bring justice before it is TOO LATE.

‘What’s that?’ Henry peers over her shoulder.

‘Why did they give me this? The claimants aren’t even Jewish!’ she exclaims.

‘I did warn you that wartime looting is a very inflammatory subject. I’m afraid you may find all sorts of interest groups latching on to it, whether they’re directly affected or not.’

‘But this is ridiculous. We didn’t steal the damn painting. It’s been ours for over a decade!’

‘Come on, Liv. Let’s head over to Court Two. I’ll get someone to fetch you some water.’

The press area is packed. She sees the reporters, wedged in beside each other, muttering and joking, flipping through the day’s newspapers before the judge arrives; a herd of predators, relaxed but intent, watching for their prey. She scans the benches for anybody she recognizes from the scrum. She wants to stand up and shout at them. *This is a game to you, isn’t it? Just tomorrow’s fish-and-chip paper.* Her heart is racing.

The judge, Henry says, settling into his seat, has experience in such cases and is scrupulously fair. He is uncharacteristically vague when she asks him how many times he has ruled in favour of the current owners.

Each side is weighed down with fat files of documentation, lists of expert witnesses, statements on obscure legal points of French law. Henry, jokingly, has said that Liv now knows so much about specialist litigation that he might offer her a job afterwards. ‘I may need it,’ she says grimly.

‘All rise.’

‘Here we go.’ Henry touches her elbow, gives her a reassuring smile.

The Lefèvres, two elderly men, are already seated along the bench with Sean Flaherty, watching the proceedings in silence as their barrister, Christopher Jenks, outlines their case. She stares at them, taking in their dour expressions, the way they cross their arms over their chests, as if predisposed to dissatisfaction. Maurice and André Lefèvre are the trustees of the remaining works and legacy of Édouard Lefèvre, he explains to the court. Their interest, he says, is in safeguarding his work, and protecting his legacy for the future.

‘And lining their pockets,’ she mutters. Henry shakes his head.

Jenks strolls up and down the courtroom, only occasionally referring to notes, his comments directed at the judge. As Lefèvre’s popularity had increased in recent years, his descendants had conducted an audit of his remaining works, which uncovered references to a portrait entitled *The Girl You Left Behind*, which had once been in the possession of the artist’s wife, Sophie Lefèvre.

A photograph and some written journals have turned up the fact that the painting hung in full view in the hotel known as Le Coq Rouge in St Péronne, a town occupied by the Germans during the First World War.

The *Kommandant* in charge of the town, one Friedrich Hencken, is recorded as having admired the work on several occasions. Le Coq Rouge was requisitioned by the Germans for their personal use. Sophie Lefèvre had been vocal in her resistance to their occupation.

Sophie Lefèvre had been arrested and removed from St Péronne in early 1917. At around the same time, the painting had disappeared.

These, Jenks claims, are suggestive enough of coercion, of a ‘tainted’ acquisition of a much-loved painting. But this, he says emphatically, is not the only suggestion that the painting was obtained illegally.

Evidence just obtained records its appearance during the Second World War in Germany, at Berchtesgaden, at a storage facility known as the Collection Point, used for stolen and looted works of art

that had fallen into German possession. He says the words ‘stolen and looted works of art’ twice, as if to emphasize his point. Here, Jenks says, the painting mysteriously arrived in the possession of an American journalist, Louanne Baker, who spent a day at the Collection Point and wrote about it for an American newspaper. Her reports of the time mention that she received a ‘gift’ or ‘memento’ from the event. She kept the painting at her home, a fact confirmed by her family, until it was sold ten years ago to David Halston, who, in turn, gave it as a wedding present to his wife.

This is not new to Liv, who has seen all of the evidence under full disclosure. But she listens to the history of her painting read aloud in court and finds it hard to associate her portrait, the little painting that has hung serenely on her bedroom wall, with such trauma, such globally significant events.

She glances at the press bench. The reporters appear rapt, as does the judge. She thinks, absently, that if her whole future did not depend on this, she would probably be rapt too. Along the bench, Paul is leaning back, his arms crossed combatively.

Liv lets her gaze travel sideways, and he looks straight back at her. She flushes slightly, turns away. She wonders if he will be here for every day of the case, and if it is possible to kill a man in a packed courtroom.

Christopher Jenks is standing before them. ‘Your Honour, it is deeply unfortunate that Mrs Halston has unwittingly been drawn into a series of historic wrongs, but wrongs they are. It is our contention that this painting has been stolen twice: once from the home of Sophie Lefèvre, and then, during the Second World War, from her descendants by its illegal gifting from the Collection Point, during a period in Europe so chaotic that the misdemeanour went unrecorded, and, until now, undiscovered.

‘But the law, both under the Geneva Convention and current restitution legislation, says that these wrongs must be put right. It is our case that this painting should be restored to its rightful owners, the Lefèvre family. Thank you.’

Henry’s face, beside her, is expressionless.

Liv gazes towards the corner of the room where a printed image of *The Girl You Left Behind*, reproduced to actual size, sits on a small stand. Flaherty had asked for the painting to be placed in protective holding while its fate was decided, but Henry had told her that she was under no obligation to agree to that.

Still, it is unnerving to see *The Girl* here, out of place, her gaze somehow seeming to mock the proceedings before her. At home, Liv finds herself walking into the bedroom simply to look at her, the intensity of her gaze heightened by the possibility that soon she will never be able to look at her again.

The afternoon stretches. The air in the courtroom slows and expands with the central heating. Christopher Jenks takes apart their attempt to time-bar the claim with the forensic efficiency of a bored surgeon dissecting a frog. Occasionally she looks up to hear phrases like ‘transfer of title’ and ‘incomplete provenance’. The judge coughs and examines his notes. Paul murmurs to the woman director from his company. Whenever he does, she smiles, showing perfect, tiny white teeth.

Now Christopher Jenks begins to read:

‘15 January 1917

Today they took Sophie Lefèvre. Such a sight you never saw. She was minding her own business down in the cellars of Le Coq Rouge when two Germans came across the square and dragged her up the steps and hauled her out, as if she were a criminal. Her sister begged and cried, as did the orphaned child of Liliane Béthune, a whole crowd rose up and protested, but they simply brushed them aside like flies. Two elderly people were actually knocked to the floor in the commotion. I swear, mon Dieu, *if there are to be just rewards in our next life the Germans will pay dearly.*

They carted the girl off in a cattle truck. The mayor tried to stop them, but he is a feeble character, these days, weakened by the death of his daughter, and too prone to lying down with the Boche. They fail to take him seriously. When the vehicle finally disappeared he walked into the bar of Le Coq Rouge and announced with great pomposity that he would take it up at the highest possible level. None of us listened. Her poor sister, Hélène, wept, her head on the counter, her brother Aurélien ran off, like a scalded dog, and the child that Sophie had seen fit to take in – the child of Liliane Béthune – stood in the corner like a little pale ghost.

'Eh, Hélène will look after you,' I told her. I bent down and pressed a coin into her hand, but she looked at it as if she didn't know what it was. When she stared at me her eyes were like saucers. 'You must not fear, child. Hélène is a good woman. She will take care of you.'

I know there was some commotion with Sophie Lefèvre's brother before she left, but my ears are not good, and in the noise and chaos I missed the heart of it. Still, I fear she has been ill-used by the Germans. I knew that once they decided to take over Le Coq Rouge the girl was done for, but she never would listen to me. She must have offended them in some way; she always was the more impetuous one. I cannot condemn her for it: I suspect if the Germans were in my house I would offend them too.

Yes, I had my differences with Sophie Lefèvre, but my heart is heavy tonight. To see her shoved on to that cattle truck as if she were already a carcass, to imagine her future … These are dark days. To think I should have lived to see such sights. Some nights it is hard not to believe our little town is become a place of madness.'

In his low, sonorous voice, Christopher Jenks ends his reading. The courtroom is still, only the sound of the stenographer audible in the silence. Overhead a fan whirs lazily, failing to displace the air.

'"I knew that once they decided to take over Le Coq Rouge the girl was done for."' Ladies and gentlemen, I think this diary entry tells us pretty conclusively that any relationship Sophie Lefèvre had with the Germans in St Péronne was not a particularly happy one.'

He strolls through the courtroom like someone taking the air on a beachfront, casually studying the photocopied pages.

'But this is not the only reference. The same local resident, Vivienne Louvier, has proven to be a remarkable documenter of life in the little town. And if we go back several months, she writes the following:

'The Germans are taking their meals at Le Coq Rouge. They have the Bessette sisters cooking them food so rich that the smell drifts around the square and drives us all half mad with longing. I told Sophie Bessette – or Lefèvre as she now is – in the boulangerie that her father would not have stood for it, but she says there is nothing she can do.'

He lifts his head. '"Nothing she can do". The Germans have invaded the artist's wife's hotel, forced her to cook for them. She has the enemy actually in her home, and she is utterly powerless. All compelling stuff. But this is not the only evidence. A search of the Lefèvre archive unearthed a letter written by Sophie Lefèvre to her husband. It apparently never reached him, but I believe that will prove irrelevant.'

He holds up the paper, as if struggling to see it in the light.

'Herr Kommandant is not as foolish as Beckenbauer but unnerves me more. He stares at your portrait of me and I want to tell him he has no right. That painting, above all others, belongs to you and me. Do you know the most peculiar thing, Édouard? He actually admires your work. He knows of it, knows that of the Matisse School, of Weber and Purrmann. How strange it has been to find myself defending your superior brushwork to a German Kommandant!

But I refuse to take it down, no matter what Hélène says. It reminds me of you, and of a time when we were happy together. It reminds me that humankind is capable of love and beauty as well as destruction.

I pray for your safe and swift return, my dearest.

Yours ever, Sophie'

'"That painting, above all others, belongs to you and me."'

Jenks lets that hang in the air. 'So, this letter, found long after her death, tells us that the painting meant an awful lot to the artist's wife. It also tells us pretty conclusively that a German *Kommandant* had his eye

on it. Not only that, but that he had a good idea of the market as a whole. He was, if you like, an *aficionado*.' He rolls out the word, emphasizing each syllable, as if it were the first time he had used it.

'And here, the looting of the First World War would seem to be a precursor to that of the Second. Here we have educated German officers, knowing what they want, knowing what may hold value, and earmarking it –'

'Objection.' Angela Silver, Liv's QC, is on her feet. 'There is a vast difference between somebody admiring a painting and having knowledge of the artist, and actually taking it. My learned friend has not provided any evidence whatsoever that the *Kommandant* took the painting, simply that he admired it, and that he ate his meals in the hotel where Madame Lefèvre lived. All of these things are circumstantial.'

The judge mutters, 'Sustained.'

Christopher Jenks wipes his brow. 'I am simply attempting to paint a picture, if you like, of life within the town of St Péronne in 1916. It's impossible to understand how a painting might be taken into somebody's custody without understanding the climate of the time, and how the Germans had *carte blanche* to *requisition*, or take what they liked, from any house that they chose.'

'Objection.' Angela Silver studies her notes. 'Irrelevant. There is no evidence to suggest that this painting was requisitioned.'

'Sustained. Keep to the point, Mr Jenks.'

'Merely trying, again, to … paint a picture, my lord.'

'Leave the painting to Lefèvre, if you will, Mr Jenks.' There is a low murmur of laughter around the courtroom.

'I mean to demonstrate that there were many valuable items requisitioned by German troops that went unrecorded, just as they were not "paid for", as promised by the German leaders of the time. I mention the general climate for such behaviour because it is our contention that *The Girl You Left Behind* was one such item.'

'"He stares at your portrait of me and I want to tell him he has no right."' Well, it is our case, Your Honour, that Kommandant Friedrich Hencken felt he had every right indeed. And that this painting did not leave German possession for another thirty years.'

Paul looks at Liv. She looks away.

She concentrates on the image of Sophie Lefèvre. *Fools*, she seems to say, her impenetrable gaze appearing to take in every person there.

Yes, thinks Liv. *Yes, we are.*

They adjourn at half past three. Angela Silver is eating a sandwich in her chambers. Her wig lies on the table beside her, and a mug of tea stands on her desk. Henry sits opposite.

They tell her that the first day had gone as they had expected. But the tang of tension hangs in the atmosphere, like salt in the air miles from the coast. Liv shuffles her photocopied pile of translations as Henry turns to Angela.

'Liv, didn't you say that when you spoke to Sophie's nephew, he mentioned something about her being disgraced? I wondered whether it would be worth pursuing that line.'

'I don't understand,' she says. They are both looking at her expectantly.

Silver finishes her mouthful before she speaks. 'Well, if she was disgraced, doesn't that suggest her relationship with the *Kommandant* might have been consensual? The thing is, if we can prove that it was,

if we can suggest that she was having an extra-marital affair with a German soldier, we can also claim the portrait might have been a gift. It wouldn't be beyond the realms of possibility that someone in the throes of a love affair would give her lover a portrait of herself.'

'But Sophie wouldn't,' Liv says.

'We don't know that,' says Henry. 'You told me that after her disappearance the family never spoke of her again. Surely if she was blameless, they would have wanted to remember her. Instead she seems to be cloaked in some sort of shame.'

'I don't think she could have had a consensual relationship with the *Kommandant*. Look at this postcard.' Liv reopens her file. '"You are my lodestar in this world of madness." That's three months before she is supposed to have had this "collaboration". It hardly sounds like a husband and wife who don't love each other, does it?'

'That's certainly a husband who loves his wife, yes,' says Henry. 'But we have no idea whether she returned that love. She could have been madly in love with a German soldier at this time. She could have been lonely or misguided. Just because she loved her husband, it doesn't mean she wasn't capable of falling in love with someone else once he'd gone away.'

Liv pushes her hair back from her face. 'It feels horrible,' she says, 'like blackening her name.'

'Her name is already blackened. Her family don't have a decent word to say about her.'

'I don't want to use her nephew's words against her,' she says. 'He's the only one who seems to care about her. I'm just – I'm just not convinced we've got the full story.'

'The full story is unimportant.' Angela Silver screws up her sandwich box and throws it neatly into the wastepaper bin. 'Look, Mrs Halston, if you can prove that she and the *Kommandant* had an affair it will wholly improve your chances of retaining the painting. As long as the other side can suggest the painting was stolen, or obtained coercively, it weakens your case.' She wipes her hands, and replaces the wig on her head. 'This is hardball. And you can bet the other side are playing that way. Ultimately, it's about this: how badly do you want to keep this painting?'

Liv sits at the table, her own sandwich untouched as the two lawyers get up to leave. She stares at the notes in front of her. She cannot tarnish Sophie's memory. But she cannot let her painting go. More importantly, she cannot let Paul win. 'I'll take another look,' she says.

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I am not afraid, although it is strange to have them here, eating and talking, under our very roof. They are largely polite, solicitous almost. And I do believe Herr Kommandant will not tolerate any misdemeanors on the men's part. So our uneasy truce has begun …

The odd thing is that Herr Kommandant is a cultured man. He knows of Matisse! Of Weber and Purrmann! Can you imagine how strange it is to discuss the finer points of your brushwork with a German?

We have eaten well tonight. Herr Kommandant came into the kitchen and instructed us to eat the leftover fish. Little Jean cried when it was finished. I pray that you have food enough, wherever you are …

Liv reads and re-reads these fragments, trying to fill in the spaces between her words. It is hard to find a chronology – Sophie's writings are on stray scraps of paper, and in places the ink has faded – but there is a definite thawing in her relationship with Friedrich Hencken. She hints at long discussions, random kindnesses, that he keeps giving them food. Surely Sophie would not have discussed art or accepted meals from someone she considered a beast.

The more she reads, the closer she feels to the author of these scraps. She reads the tale of the pig-baby, translating it twice to make sure she has read it right, and wants to cheer at its outcome. She refers back to her court copies, Madame Louvier's sniffy descriptions of the girl's disobedience, her courage, her good heart. Her spirit seems to leap from the page. She wishes, briefly, she could talk to Paul about it.

She closes the folder carefully. And then she looks guiltily to the side of her desk, where she keeps the papers she did not show Henry.

The Kommandant's eyes are intense, shrewd, and yet somehow veiled, as if designed to hide his true feelings. I was afraid that he might be able to see my own crumbling composure.

The rest of the paper is missing, ripped away, or perhaps broken off with age.

'I will dance with you, Herr Kommandant,' I said. 'But only in the kitchen.'

And then there is the scrap of paper, in handwriting that is not Sophie's. 'Once it is done,' it reads, simply, 'it cannot be undone.' The first time she read it, Liv's heart had dropped somewhere to her feet.

She reads and re-reads the words, pictures a woman locked in a secretive embrace with a man supposed to be her enemy. And then she closes the folder and tucks it carefully back under her pile of papers.

'How many today?'

'Four,' she says, handing over the day's haul of poison-pen letters. Henry has told her not to open anything with handwriting she does not recognize. His staff will do it, and report any that are threatening. She tries to be sanguine about this new development, but secretly she flinches every time she sees an unfamiliar letter now; the idea that all this unfocused hate is out there, just waiting for a target. She can no longer type 'The Girl You Left Behind' into a search engine. There were once two historical references but now there are web versions of newspaper reports from across the globe, reproduced by interest

groups, and Internet chat-rooms discussing her and Paul's apparent selfishness, their inherent disregard for what is right. The words spring out like blows*: Looted. Stolen. Robbed. Bitch.*

Twice, someone has posted dog excrement through the letterbox in the lobby.

There was only one protester this morning, a dishevelled middle-aged woman in a blue mackintosh, who insisted on handing her another home-made leaflet about the Holocaust. 'This is really nothing to do with me or this case,' Liv had said, thrusting it back at her.

'If you do nothing you are complicit.' The woman's face was hewn by fury.

Henry had pulled her away. 'There's no point in engaging,' he had said. Oddly, that hadn't lessened her vague sense of guilt.

Those are the overt signs of disapproval. There are less obvious outcomes from the ongoing court case. The neighbours no longer say a cheery hello, but nod and look at their shoes as they pass. There have been no invitations through her door since the case was revealed in the newspapers. Not to dinner, a private view, or one of the architectural events that she was habitually invited to, even if she usually refused. At first she thought all this was coincidence; now she is starting to wonder.

The newspapers report her outfit each day, describing her as 'sombre', sometimes 'understated' and always 'blonde'. Their appetite for all aspects of the case seems endless. She does not know if anyone has tried to reach her for comment: her telephone has been unplugged for days.

She gazes along the packed benches at the Lefèvres, their faces closed and seemingly set in expressions of resigned belligerence, just as they were on the first day. She wonders what they feel when they hear how Sophie was cast out from her family, alone, unloved. Do they feel differently about her now? Or do they not register her presence at the heart of this, just seeing the pound signs?

Paul sits each day at the far end of the bench. She doesn't look at him but she feels his presence like an electrical pulse.

Christopher Jenks takes the floor. He will, he tells the court, outline the latest piece of evidence that *The Girl You Left Behind* is, in fact, looted art. It is an unusual case, he says, in that investigations suggest the portrait was obtained by tainted means, not once but twice. The word 'tainted' never fails to make her wince.

'The current owners of the painting, the Halstons, purchased it from the estate of one Louanne Baker. "The Fearless Miss Baker", as she was known, was a war reporter in 1945, one of a select few such women. There are newspaper cuttings from the *New York Register* that detail her presence at Dachau at the end of the Second World War. They provide a vivid record of her presence as Allied troops liberated the camp.'

Liv watches the male reporters scribbling intently. 'Second World War stuff,' Henry had murmured, as they sat down. 'The press love a Nazi.' Two days previously she had sworn two of them were playing Hangman.

'One cutting in particular tells how Ms Baker spent one day around the time of the liberation at a vast warehouse known as the Collection Point, housed in former Nazi offices near Munich in which US troops stored displaced works of art.' He tells the story of another reporter, who was given a painting to thank her for helping the Allies at this time. It had been the subject of a separate legal challenge, and had since gone back to its original owners.

Henry shakes his head, a tiny gesture.

‘M’lord, I will now hand round copies of this newspaper article, dated the sixth of November 1945, entitled “How I became the Governor of Berchtesgaden”, which, we contend, demonstrates how Louanne Baker, a humble reporter, came, by extremely unorthodox means, to own a modern masterpiece.’

The court hushes and the journalists lean forwards, pens readied against their notebooks. Christopher Jenks begins to read:

‘Wartime prepares you for a lot of things. But little prepared me for the day I found myself Governor of Berchtesgaden, and of Goering’s haul of some one hundred million dollars’ worth of stolen art.’

The young reporter’s voice echoes across the years, plucky, capable. She comes ashore with the Screaming Eagles on Omaha Beach. She is stationed with them near Munich. She records the thoughts of young soldiers who have never before spent time from home, the smoking, the bravado, the surreptitious wistfulness. And then one morning she watches the troops go out, headed for a prisoner-of-war camp some miles away, and finds herself in charge of two marines and a fire truck. ‘“The US Army could not allow even the possibility of an accident while such treasures were in its custody.”’ She tells of Goering’s apparent passion for art, the evidence of years of systematic looting within the building’s walls, her relief when the US Army came back and she could relinquish responsibility for its haul.

And then Christopher Jenks pauses.

‘When I left, the sergeant told me I could take with me a souvenir, as a thank-you for what he said was my “patriotic duty”. I did, and I still have it today – a little memento of the strangest day of my life.’

He stands, raising his eyebrows. ‘Some souvenir.’

Angela Silver is on her feet. ‘Objection. There is nothing in that article that says the memento was *The Girl You Left Behind*.’

‘It is an extraordinary coincidence that she mentions being allowed to remove an item from the warehouse.’

‘The article does not at any point state that the item was a painting. Let alone this particular painting.’

‘Sustained.’

Angela Silver is at the bench. ‘My lord, we have examined the records from Berchtesgaden and there is no written record of this painting having come from the Collection Point storage facility. It appears on none of the lists or inventories from that time. It is therefore specious for my colleague here to make the association.’

‘It has already been documented here that during wartime there are always things that go unrecorded. We have heard expert testimony that there are works of art that were never recorded as having been stolen during wartime that have later turned out to be so.’

‘My lord, if my learned friend is stating that *The Girl You Left Behind* was a looted painting at Berchtesgaden, then the burden of proof still falls on the claimants to establish beyond doubt that this painting was actually there in the first place. There is no hard evidence that it formed part of that collection.’

Jenks shakes his head. ‘In his *own statement* David Halston said that when he bought it Louanne Baker’s daughter told him she had acquired the painting in 1945 in Germany. She could offer no provenance and he didn’t know enough about the art market to be aware that he should have demanded it.

‘It seems extraordinary that a painting that had disappeared from France during a time of German occupation, that was recorded as having been coveted by a German *Kommandant*, should then reappear in

the home of a woman who had just returned from Germany, was on record as saying she had brought home with her a precious memento from that trip and would never go there again.'

The courtroom is silent. Along the bench, a dark-haired woman in lime green is alert, leaning forwards, her big, gnarled hands resting on the back of the bench in front of her. Liv wonders where she has seen her before. The woman shakes her head emphatically. There are lots of older people in the public benches: how many of them remember this war personally? How many lost paintings of their own?

Angela Silver addresses the judge. 'Again, m' lord, this is all circumstantial. There are no specific references in this article to a painting. A memento, as it is referred to here, could have been simply a soldier's badge or a pebble. This court must make its judgment solely on evidence. In not one piece of this evidence does she specifically refer to this painting.'

Angela Silver sits.

'Can we call Marianne Andrews?'

The woman in lime green stands heavily, makes her way to the stand and, after being sworn in, gazes around her, blinking slightly. Her grip on her handbag turns her oversized knuckles white. Liv starts when she remembers where she has seen her before: a sun-baked back-street in Barcelona, nearly a decade previously, her hair blonde instead of today's raven black. *Marianne Johnson.*

'Mrs Andrews. You are the only daughter of Louanne Baker.'

'Ms Andrews. I am a widow. And, yes, I am.' Liv recalls that strong American accent.

Angela Silver points to the painting. 'Ms Andrews. Do you recognize the painting – the copy of the painting – that sits in the court before you?'

'I certainly do. That painting sat in our drawing room my whole childhood. It's called *The Girl You Left Behind*, and it's by Édouard Lefèvre.' She pronounces it 'Le Fever'.

'Ms Andrews, did your mother ever tell you about the souvenir she refers to in her article?'

'No, ma'am.'

'She never said it was a painting?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Did she ever mention where the painting came from?'

'Not to me, no. But I'd just like to say there is no way Mom would have taken that painting if she'd thought it belonged to a victim of those camps. She just wasn't like that.'

The judge leans forward. 'Ms Andrews, we have to stay within the boundaries of what is known. We cannot ascribe motives to your mother.'

'Well, you all seem to be.' She huffs. 'You didn't know her. She believed in fair play. The souvenirs she kept were things like shrunken heads or old guns or car number-plates. Things that nobody would have cared for.' She thinks for a minute. 'Well, okay, the shrunken heads might have belonged to someone once, but you can bet they didn't want them back, right?'

There is a ripple of laughter around the courtroom.

'She was really very upset by what happened in Dachau. She could barely talk about it for years afterwards. I know she would not have taken anything if she thought it might be hurting one of those poor souls further.'

'So you do not believe that your mother took this painting from Berchtesgaden?'

'My mother never took a thing from anyone. She paid her way. That was how she was.'

Jenks stands. ‘This is all very well, Ms Andrews, but as you’ve said, you have no idea how your mother got this painting, do you?’

‘Like I said, I know she wasn’t a thief.’

Liv watches the judge as he scribbles in his notes. She looks at Marianne Andrews, grimacing as her mother’s reputation is destroyed in front of her. She looks at Janey Dickinson, smiling with barely concealed triumph at the Lefèvre brothers. She looks at Paul, who is leaning forward, his hands clasped over his knees, as if he is praying.

Liv turns away from the image of her painting, and feels a new weight, like a blanket, settle over her, shutting out the light.

‘Hey,’ she calls, as she lets herself in. It is half past four but there is no sign of Mo. She walks through to the kitchen and picks up the note on the kitchen table: ‘Gone to Ranic’s. Back tomorrow. Mo’.

Liv lets the note fall and releases a small sigh. She has become used to Mo pottering around the house – the sound of her footsteps, distant humming, a bath running, the smell of food warming in the oven. The house feels empty now. It hadn’t felt empty before Mo came.

Mo has been a little distant for days. Liv wonders if she has guessed what happened after Paris. Which brings her, like everything, back to Paul.

But there is little point in thinking about Paul.

There is no post, except a mail-shot for fitted kitchens, and two bills.

She takes off her coat and makes herself a mug of tea. She rings her father, who is out. His booming answer-phone message urges her to leave her name and number. ‘You must! We’d LOVE to hear from you!’ She flicks on the radio, but the music is too irritating, the news too depressing. She doesn’t want to go online: there are unlikely to be any emails offering work and she is afraid to see something about the court case. She doesn’t want the pixelated fury of a million people who don’t know her to slide across her computer and into her head.

She doesn’t want to go out.

Come on, she scolds herself. *You’re stronger than this. Think what Sophie had to cope with.*

Liv puts on some music, just to take the edge off the silence. She loads some laundry into the machine, to give a semblance of domestic normality. And then she picks up the pile of envelopes and papers she has ignored for the last two weeks, pulls up a chair and starts to plough through them.

The bills she puts in the middle; the final demands to the right. On the left she puts anything that is not urgent. Bank statements she ignores. Statements from her lawyers go in a pile by themselves.

She has a large notepad on which she enters a column of figures. She works her way methodically through the list, adding sums and subtracting them, scoring through and putting her workings on the edge of the page. She sits back in her chair, surrounded by the black sky, and stares at the figures for a long time.

Eventually she leans back, gazing up through the skylight. It is as dark as if it were midnight, but when she checks her watch, it’s not yet six o’clock. She gazes at the straight, blameless lines of David’s creation, the way they frame a huge expanse of glittering sky, whichever angle she chooses to look from. She gazes at the walls, at the thermic glass interlaid with special sheets of impossibly thin insulating material that he had sourced from California and China so that the house would be quiet and warm. She gazes at the alabaster concrete wall on which she had once scrawled ‘WHY DON’T YOU BUGGER OFF?’ in marker pen when she and David had argued about her untidiness in the early days of their

marriage. Despite the attentions of several specialist removers, you can still make out the ghostly outline of those words if the atmospheric conditions are right. She gazes out at the sky, visible through at least one clear wall in every room, so that the Glass House would always feel as if it were suspended in space, high above the teeming streets.

She walks through to her bedroom and gazes at the portrait of Sophie Lefèvre. As ever, Sophie's eyes meets hers with that direct stare. Today, however, she does not appear impassive, imperious. Today Liv thinks she can detect new knowledge behind her expression.

What happened to you, Sophie?

She has known she will have to make this decision for days. She has probably always known it. And yet it still feels like a betrayal.

She flicks through the telephone book, picks up the receiver and dials. 'Hello? Is that the estate agent?'

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‘So your painting disappeared when?’

‘1941. Maybe 1942. It’s difficult, because everyone involved is, you know, dead.’ The blonde woman laughs mirthlessly.

‘Yeah, so you said. And can you give me a full description?’

The woman pushes a folder across the table. ‘This is everything we have. Most of the facts were in the letter I sent you in November.’

Paul flicks through the folder, trying to recall the details. ‘So you located it in a gallery in Amsterdam. And you’ve made an initial approach …’

Miriam knocks on the door and enters, bearing coffee. He waits as she distributes the two cups and nods apologetically, backing out again, as if she has done something amiss. He mouths a thank-you, and she winces.

‘Yes, I wrote them a letter. What do you think it’s worth?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘What do you think it’s worth?’

Paul looks up from his notes. The woman is leaning back in her chair. Her face is beautiful, clear-skinned and defined, not yet revealing the first signs of age. But it is also, he notices now, expressionless, as if she has grown used to hiding her feelings. Or perhaps it’s Botox. He steals a glance at her thick hair, knowing that Liv could detect immediately if it was entirely her own.

‘Because a Kandinsky would fetch a lot of money, right? That’s what my husband says.’

Paul picks his words carefully. ‘Well, yes, if the work can be proven to be yours. But that’s all some way off. Can we just get back to the issue of ownership? Do you have any proof of where the painting was obtained?’

‘Well, my grandfather was friends with Kandinsky.’

‘Okay.’ He takes a sip of his coffee. ‘Do you have any documentary evidence?’

She looks blank.

‘Photographs? Letters? References to the two of them being friends?’

‘Oh, no. But my grandmother talked about it often.’

‘Is she still alive?’

‘No. I said so in the letter.’

‘Forgive me. What was your grandfather’s name?’

‘Anton Perovsky.’ She spells out his surname, pointing at his notes as she does so.

‘Any surviving members of the family who might know about it?’

‘No.’

‘Do you know if the work has ever been exhibited?’

‘No.’

He'd known it would be a mistake to start advertising, that it would lead to flaky cases like this. But Janey had insisted. 'We need to be proactive,' she had said, her vocabulary skewed by management-speak. 'We need to stabilize our market share, consolidate our reputation. We need to be all over this market like a bad suit.' She had compiled a list of all the other tracing and recovery companies and suggested they send Miriam to their competitors as a fake client, to see their methods. She had appeared completely unmoved when he had told her this was crazy.

'You've done any basic searches on its history? Google? Art books?'

'No. I assumed that was what I'd be paying you for. You're the best in the business, yes? You found this Lefèvre painting.' She crosses her legs, glances at her watch. 'How long do these cases take?'

'Well, it's a piece-of-string question. Some we can resolve fairly swiftly, if we have the documented history and provenance. Others can take years. I'm sure you've heard that the legal process itself can be quite expensive. It's not something I would urge you to embark upon lightly.'

'And you work on commission?'

'It varies, but we take a small percentage of the final settlement, yes. And we have an in-house legal department here.' He flicks through the folder. There is nothing in it other than a few pictures of the painting, a signed affidavit from Anton Perovsky saying that Kandinsky had given him a painting in 1938. They were driven from their home in 1941 and never saw it again. There is a letter from the German government acknowledging the claim. There is a letter from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam gently denying that it's in its possession. It's a pretty thin skeleton to hang a claim on.

He is trying to calculate whether it has any merit at all when she speaks again: 'I went to see the new firm. Brigg and Sawston's? They said they'd charge one per cent less than you.'

Paul's hand stills on the paper. 'I'm sorry?'

'Commission. They said they'd charge one per cent less than you to recover the painting.'

Paul waits a moment before he speaks. 'Miss Harcourt, we operate a reputable business. If you want us to use our years of skill, experience and contacts to trace and potentially recover your family's beloved work of art, I will certainly consider that and give you my best advice as to whether it will be possible. But I'm not going to sit here and haggle with you.'

'Well, it's a lot of money. If this Kandinsky is worth millions, it's in our interests to get the best deal possible.'

Paul feels a tightening in his jaw. 'I think, given that you didn't even know you had a link to this painting eighteen months ago, if we do recover it, you're likely to get a very good deal indeed.'

'Is this your way of saying you won't consider a more … competitive fee?' She looks at him blankly. Her face is immobile, but her legs cross elegantly, a slingback dangling from her foot. A woman used to getting what she wants, and doing so without engaging a shred of feeling or emotion.

Paul puts down his pen. He closes the file and pushes it towards her. 'Miss Harcourt. It was nice to meet you. But I think we're done here.'

There is a pause. She blinks. 'I'm sorry?'

'I don't think you and I have anything more to say to each other.'

Janey is crossing the office, holding up a box of Christmas chocolates when she stops at the commotion.

'You are the rudest man I have ever met,' Miss Harcourt is hissing at him. Her expensive handbag is tucked under her left arm, and he is thrusting her folder of letters at her as he shepherds her towards the

door.

'I very much doubt that.'

'If you think this is any way to run a business then you're more of a fool than I thought you were.'

'Then it's just as well you're not entrusting me with the epic search for the painting you clearly love so much,' he says tonelessly. He pulls open the door, and in a cloud of expensive perfume, Miss Harcourt is gone, shouting something unintelligible as she reaches the stairs.

'What the hell was that?' says Janey, as he strides past her on his way back to his office.

'Don't. Just don't, okay?' he says. He slams his door behind him and sits down at his desk. When he finally lifts his head from his hands, the first thing he sees is the portrait of *The Girl You Left Behind*.

He dials her number standing on the corner of Goodge Street, outside the Underground station. He has walked all the way up Marylebone Road thinking about what he will say, and when she answers, it all falls away.

'Liv?'

The faint pause before she answers tells him she knows who it is. 'What do you want, Paul?' Her tone is clipped, wary. 'Because if this is about Sophie –'

'No. It's nothing to do with … I just –' He lifts a hand to his head, gazes around him at the bustling street. 'I just wanted to know … if you were okay.'

Another long pause. 'Well. I'm still here.'

'I was thinking … maybe when this is over, that we … could meet …' He hears his voice, tepid and feeble, unlike himself. His words, he realizes suddenly, are inadequate, no match for the chaos he has unleashed in her life. What had she done to deserve this, after all?

So her answer, when it finally comes, is not really a surprise.

'I – I can't really think beyond the next court date right now. This is just … too complicated.'

There is another silence. A bus roars past, squealing and accelerating in an impotent rage, drowning sound, and he presses the phone to his ear. He closes his eyes. She does not attempt to fill the silence. 'So … are you going away for Christmas?'

'No.'

Because this court case has eaten all my money, he hears her silent response. *Because you did this to me.*

'Me neither. Well, I'll go over to Greg's. But it's –'

'Like you said before, Paul, we probably shouldn't even be speaking to each other.'

'Right. Well, I'm – I'm glad you're okay. I guess that's all I wanted to say.'

'I'm fine.'

This time the silence is excruciating.

''Bye, then.'

'Goodbye, Paul.' She hangs up.

Paul stands at the junction of Tottenham Court Road, the phone limp in his hand, the tinny sound of Christmas carols in his ears, then shoves it into his pocket and walks slowly back towards the office.

28

‘So this is the kitchen. As you can see, there are spectacular views on three sides over the river and the city itself. To the right you can see Tower Bridge, down there is the London Eye, and on sunny days you can press a button here – is that right, Mrs Halston? – and simply open the roof.’

Liv watches as the couple gaze upwards. The man, a businessman in his fifties, wears the kind of spectacles that broadcast his designer individuality. Poker-faced since he arrived, it’s possible he assumes that any faint expression of enthusiasm might disadvantage him should he decide to make an offer.

But even he cannot hide his surprise at the receding glass ceiling. With a barely audible hum the roof slides back and they gaze up into the infinite blue. Wintry air sinks gently into the kitchen, lifting the top sheets from the pile of paperwork on the table.

‘Don’t think we’ll leave it open too long, eh?’ The young estate agent, who has not tired of this mechanism in the three viewings so far this morning, shivers theatrically, then watches with barely concealed satisfaction as the roof closes neatly. The woman, petite and Japanese, her neck secured by an intricately knotted scarf, nudges her husband and murmurs something into his ear. He nods and looks up again.

‘And the roof, as with much of the house, is made of special glass, which retains heat to the same degree as your average insulated wall. It’s actually more eco-friendly than a normal terraced house.’

These two don’t look as if they have ever set foot in a normal terraced house. The Japanese woman walks around the kitchen, opening and closing the drawers and cupboards, studying the interiors with the intensity of a surgeon about to dive into an open wound.

Liv, standing mute by the fridge, finds she is chewing the inside of her cheek. She had known this would never be easy, but she had not realized she would feel quite so uncomfortable, so guilty about these people trailing through, inspecting her belongings with unfeeling, acquisitive eyes. She watches them touching the glass surfaces, running their fingers along the shelving, talking in low voices about putting pictures up and ‘softening it all a bit’, and wants to push them out of the front door.

‘All the appliances are top of the range and included with the sale,’ the estate agent says, opening her fridge door.

‘The oven, in particular, is almost unused,’ a voice adds, from the doorway. Mo is wearing glittery purple eye-shadow, and her parka over the Comfort Lodge Care Home tunic.

The estate agent is a little startled.

‘I’m Mrs Halston’s personal assistant,’ she says. ‘You’ll have to excuse us. It’s almost time for her meds.’

The estate agent smiles awkwardly, and hurries the couple towards the atrium. Mo pulls Liv to one side. ‘Let’s get a coffee,’ she says.

‘I need to be here.’

‘No, you don’t. This is masochism. Come on, grab your coat.’

It's the first time she has seen Mo in days. Liv feels unexpected relief at her presence. She realizes she has craved the vague impression of normality that now comes with a five-foot Goth in purple eye-shadow and a wipe-clean tunic. Her life has become strange and dislocated, fixated on a courtroom with its two duelling barristers, its suggestions and refutations, its wars and looting *Kommandant*s. Her old life and her own routines have been replaced by a kind of house arrest, her new world centred around the water fountain on the second floor of the High Court, the unforgiving bench seats, the judge's peculiar habit of stroking his nose before he speaks. The image of her portrait on its stand.

Paul. A million miles away on the claimants' bench.

'You really okay about selling up?' Mo nods in the direction of the house.

Liv opens her mouth to speak, then decides that if she begins to talk about how she really feels she'll never stop. She'll be here, burbling and railing, until next Christmas. She wants to tell Mo that there are pieces about the case in the newspapers every day, her name bandied about within them until it has become almost meaningless to see it. The words *theft* and *fairness* and *crime* appear in them all. She wants to tell her that she no longer runs: a man had waited outside the block just to spit at her. She wants to tell her the doctor has given her sleeping pills that she's afraid to use. When she explained her situation in his consultation room she wondered if she saw disapproval in his expression too.

'I'm fine,' she says.

Mo's eyes narrow.

'Really. It's just bricks and mortar, after all. Well, glass and concrete.'

'I had a flat once,' Mo says, still stirring her coffee. 'The day I sold it, I sat on the floor and cried like a baby.'

Liv's mug stills halfway to her lips.

'I was married. It didn't work out.' Mo shrugs. And begins to talk about the weather.

There is something different about Mo. It's not that her manner is evasive exactly, but there is some kind of invisible barrier, a glass wall, between them. Perhaps it's my fault, Liv thinks. I've been so preoccupied with money and the court case that I've hardly asked anything about Mo's life.

'You know, I was thinking about Christmas,' she begins, after a pause. 'I was wondering if Ranic wanted to stay over the night before. Selfish reasons, really.' She smiles. 'I thought you two might help me with the food. I've never actually cooked a Christmas dinner before, and Dad and Caroline are actually pretty good cooks so I don't want to mess it up.' She hears herself babbling. *I just need something to look forward to,* she wants to say. *I just want to smile without having to think about which muscles to use.*

Mo looks down at her hand. A telephone number in blue biro trawls its way along her left thumb. 'Yeah. About that …'

'I know what you said about it being crowded at his place. So if he wants to stay Christmas night too it's totally fine. It'll be a nightmare trying to get a taxi home.' She forces a bright smile. 'I think it'll be fun. I think … I think we all could do with some fun.'

'Liv, he's not coming.'

'What?'

'He's not coming.' Mo purses her lips.

'I don't understand.'

When Mo speaks, the words emerge carefully, as if she's considering the ramifications of each one. 'Ranic is Bosnian. His parents lost everything in the Balkans. Your court case – this shit is real to him. He – he doesn't want to come and celebrate in your house. I'm sorry.'

Liv stares at her, then snorts, and pushes the sugar bowl across the table. 'Yeah. Right. You forget, Mo. I've lived with you too long.'

'What?'

'Mrs Gullible. Well, you're not getting me this time.'

But Mo doesn't laugh. She doesn't even meet her eyes. As Liv waits, she adds, 'Okay, well, if we're doing this …' she takes a breath '… I'm not saying I agree with Ranic but I do sort of think you should hand the painting back too.'

'What?'

'Look, I couldn't give a monkey's who it belongs to, but you're going to lose, Liv. Everyone else can see it, even if you can't.'

Liv stares at her.

'I read the papers. The evidence is stacking up against you. If you keep fighting you're going to lose everything. And for what? Some old blobs of oil on canvas?'

'I can't just hand her over.'

'Why the hell not?'

'Those people don't care about Sophie. They just see pound signs.'

'For Chrissakes, Liv, it's a painting.'

'It's not just a painting! She was betrayed by everyone around her. She had nobody at the end! And she's … she's all I've got left.'

Mo looks at her steadily. 'Really? I'd like a whole heap of your nothing then.'

Their eyes lock, and slide away. A rush of blood prickles around Liv's neck.

Mo takes a long breath, leans forward. 'I get that you have trust issues right now because of the whole Paul thing, but you need to take a step back from it all. And honestly? It's not like there's anyone else around who's going to say this to you.'

'Well, thanks. I'll remember that the next time I'm opening up the morning bundle of hate mail, or showing another stranger around my home.'

The look that passes between the two women is unexpectedly cold. It settles into the silence between them. Mo's mouth compresses, holding back a burst dam of words.

'Right,' she says finally. 'Well, then, I might as well tell you, seeing as this probably couldn't get any more awkward. I'm moving out.' She leans down and fiddles with her shoe so that her voice emerges, muffled, from near the tabletop. 'I'm going to stay with Ranic. It's not the court case. As you said, me staying at yours was never going to be a long-term thing.'

'That's what you want?'

'I think it's best.'

Liv is glued to her chair. Two men sit at the next table, not breaking off their conversation. One registers the atmosphere: his eyes slide over and away again.

'I'm, you know, grateful for the … that you let me stay so long.'

Liv blinks hard, looks away. Her stomach hurts. The conversation at the next table dies to an awkward silence.

Mo takes a last swig of coffee and pushes her cup away. 'Well. I guess that's it, then.'

'Right.'

'I'll head off tomorrow, if that's okay. I've got a late shift tonight.'

'Fine.' She tries to keep her tone even. 'It's been … enlightening.' She doesn't mean it to sound as sarcastic as it does.

Mo waits just a moment longer before she stands, hauls her jacket on and pulls the strap of her rucksack over her shoulder.

'Just a thought, Liv. And I know it's not like I even knew him or anything. But you talked so much about him. Here's the thing. I keep wondering: what would David have done?'

His name hits the silence like a small explosion.

'Seriously. If your David had still been alive, and this had all blown up then – all the stuff about the painting's history, where it might have come from, what that girl and her family might have suffered – what do you think he would have done?'

Leaving that thought suspended in the still air, Mo turns and walks out of the café.

Sven rings as she leaves the café. His voice is strained. 'Can you stop by the office?'

'It's not a great time, Sven.' She rubs at her eyes, gazes up at the Glass House. Her hands are still trembling.

'It's important.' He puts down the phone before she can say anything else.

Liv turns away from her home and heads towards the office. She walks everywhere now, her head down, a hat pulled low over her ears, avoiding the eyes of strangers. Twice on the way she has to wipe tears surreptitiously from the corners of her eyes.

There are only a couple of people left in the offices of Solberg Halston when she arrives: Nisha, a young woman with a geometric bob, and a man whose name she cannot remember. They look preoccupied so Liv walks through the gleaming lobby to Sven's office without saying hello. The door is open, and as she goes in, he stands to close it behind her. He kisses her cheek but he doesn't offer her coffee.

'How's the case going?'

'Not great,' she says. She is irritated by the perfunctory way in which he has summoned her. Her mind still hums with Mo's final comment: *what would David have done?*

And then she notices how grey Sven looks, almost hollowed out, and the slightly fixed way in which he is staring at the notepad in front of him. 'Is everything okay?' she says. She has a moment of panic. *Please say that Kristen is okay, that the children are all fine.*

'Liv, I have a problem.'

She sits, her bag on her knee.

'The Goldstein brothers have pulled out.'

'What?'

'They've pulled the contract. Because of your case. Simon Goldstein rang me this morning. They've been following the newspapers. He says … he says his family lost everything to the Nazis, and he and his brother can't be linked to someone who thinks that's okay.'

The world stills around them. She looks up at him. ‘But – but he can’t do that. I’m not – I’m not part of the company, surely?’

‘You’re still an honorary director, Liv, and David’s name is very much part of your defence case. Simon is activating a clause in the small print. By fighting this case against all reasonable evidence, you are apparently bringing the company name into disrepute. I told him it was grossly unreasonable, and he says we can contest it, but he has very deep pockets. I quote: “You can fight me, Sven, but I will win.” They’re going to ask another team to finish the job.’

She is stunned. The Goldstein building had been the apotheosis of David’s life’s work: the thing that would commemorate him.

She stares at Sven’s profile, so resolutely unmoving. He looks as if he has been carved from stone. ‘He and his brother … appear to have very strong views on the issue of restitution.’

‘But – but this isn’t fair. We don’t even know the whole truth about the painting yet.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘But we –’

‘Liv, I’ve been on this all day. The only way in which they are prepared to continue working with our company is if …’ he takes a breath ‘… is if the Halston name is no longer associated with it. That would mean you relinquishing your honorary directorship. And a change of name for the company.’

She repeats the words silently in her head before she speaks, trying to make sense of them. ‘You want David’s name erased from the practice.’

‘Yes.’

She stares at her knees.

‘I’m sorry. I realize this has come as a shock. But it has to us too.’

A thought occurs to her. ‘And what would happen to my work with the kids?’

He shakes his head. ‘I’m sorry.’

It is as if the very core of her has frozen. There is a long silence, and when she speaks she does so slowly, her voice unnaturally loud in the silent office. ‘So you all decided that because I don’t want to just hand over our painting, the painting David bought legitimately years ago, we must be dishonest somehow. And then you want to erase us from his charity and his business. You erase David’s name from the building he created.’

‘That’s a rather melodramatic way of putting it.’ For the first time Sven looks awkward. ‘Liv, this is an incredibly difficult situation. But if I side with your case everyone in this company stands to lose their jobs. You know how much we have tied up in the Goldstein building. Solberg Halston cannot survive if they pull out now.’

He leans forward over the desk. ‘Billionaire clients are not exactly thick on the ground. And I have to think about our people.’

Outside his office someone is saying goodbye. There is a brief burst of laughter. Inside the office the silence is stifling.

‘So if I handed her over, would they keep David’s name on the building?’

‘That’s something I haven’t discussed. Possibly.’

‘Possibly.’ Liv digests this. ‘And if I say no?’

Sven taps his pen on the desk.

‘We will dissolve the company and set up a new one.’

‘And the Goldsteins would go with that.’

‘It’s possible, yes.’

‘So it doesn’t actually matter what I say. This is basically a courtesy call.’

‘I’m sorry, Liv. It’s an impossible situation. I’m in an impossible situation.’

Liv sits there for a moment longer. Then, without a word, she gets up and walks out of Sven’s office.

It is one in the morning. Liv stares at the ceiling, listening to Mo moving around in the spare room, the zipping of a holdall, the heavy thump as it’s stacked beside a door. She hears a lavatory flushing, the soft pad of footsteps, then the silence that tells of sleep. She has lain there considering whether to head across the corridor, to try to persuade Mo not to leave, but the words that shuffle themselves in her head refuse to fall into any kind of useful order. She thinks of a half-finished glass building several miles away, the name of whose architect will be buried as deeply as its foundations.

She reaches over and picks up the mobile phone by her bed. She stares at the little screen in the half-light.

There are no new messages.

Loneliness hits her with an almost physical force. The walls around her feel insubstantial, offer no protection against an unfriendly world beyond. This house is not transparent and pure as David had wished: its empty spaces are cold and unfeeling, its clean lines knotted with history, its glass surfaces obscured by the tangled entrails of lives.

She tries to quell the waves of vague panic. She thinks about Sophie’s papers, about a prisoner loaded on to a train. If she shows them to the court, she knows, she might still be able to save the painting for herself.

And if I do, she thinks, Sophie will be on record for ever as a woman who slept with a German, who betrayed her country as well as her husband. And I will be no better than the townspeople who hung her out to dry.

Once it is done, it cannot be undone.

29

1917

I no longer wept for home. I could not say how long we had been travelling, for the days and nights merged, and sleep had become a fleeting, sporadic visitor. Some miles outside Mannheim my head had begun to ache, swiftly followed by a fever that left me alternately shivering and fighting the urge to shed what few clothes remained. Liliane sat beside me, wiping my forehead with her skirt, helping me when we stopped. Her face was drawn with tension. 'I'll be better soon,' I kept telling her, forcing myself to believe that this was just a passing cold, the inevitable outcome of the past few days, the chill air, the shock.

The truck bucked and wheeled around the potholes, the canvas billowed, allowing in spatters of ice-cold rain, and the young soldier's head bobbed, his eyes opening with the bigger jolts and fixing on us with a sudden glare as if to warn us to remain where we should be.

I dozed against Liliane, and woke periodically, watching the little triangle of canvas that exposed briefly the landscape we had left behind. I watched the bombed and pitted borders give way to more orderly towns, where whole rows of houses existed without visible damage, their black beams strident against white render, their gardens filled with pruned shrubs and well-tended vegetable patches. We passed vast lakes, bustling towns, wound our way through deep forests of fir trees, where the vehicle whined and its tyres struggled for purchase in mud tracks. Liliane and I were given little: cups of water and hunks of black bread, thrown into the back as one would hurl scraps to pigs.

And then as I grew more feverish I cared less about the lack of food. The pain in my stomach was smothered by other pains; my head, my joints, the back of my neck. My appetite disappeared and Liliane had to urge me to swallow water over my sore throat, reminding me that I must eat while there was food, that I had to stay strong. Everything she said had an edge, as if she always knew far more than she chose to let on about what awaited us. With each stop her eyes widened with anxiety, and even as my thoughts clouded with illness, her fear became infectious.

When Liliane slept, her face twitched with nightmares. Sometimes she woke clawing at the air and making indistinguishable sounds of anguish. If I could, I reached across to touch her arm, trying to bring her back gently to the land of the waking. Sometimes, staring out at the German landscape, I wondered why I did.

Since I had discovered we were no longer heading for Ardennes my own faith had begun to desert me. The *Kommandant* and his deals now seemed a million miles away; my life at the hotel, with its gleaming mahogany bar, my sister and the village where I had grown up, had become dreamlike, as if I had imagined it a long time ago. Our reality was discomfort, cold, pain, ever-present fear, like a buzzing in my head. I tried to focus, to remember Édouard's face, his voice, but even he failed me. I could conjure little

pieces of him: the curl of his soft brown hair on his collar, his strong hands, but I could no longer bring them together into a comforting whole. I was more familiar now with Liliane's broken hand resting in my own. I stared at it, with my home-made splints on her bruised fingers, and tried to remind myself that there was a purpose to all this: that the very point of faith was that it must be tested. It became harder, with every mile, to believe this.

The rain cleared. We stopped in a small village and the young soldier unfolded his long limbs stiffly and climbed out. The engine stalled and we heard Germans talking outside. I wondered, briefly, if I might ask them for some water. My lips were parched, and my limbs feeble.

Liliane, across from me, sat very still, like a rabbit scenting the air for danger. I tried to think past my throbbing head and gradually became aware of the sounds of a market: the jovial call of traders, the soft-spoken negotiations of women and stallholders. Just for a moment I closed my eyes and tried to imagine that the German accents were French, and that these were the sounds of St Péronne, the backdrop to my childhood. I could picture my sister, her pannier under her arm, picking up tomatoes and aubergines, feeling their weight and gently putting them back. I could almost feel the sun on my face, smell the *saucisson*, the *fromagerie*, see myself walking slowly through the stalls. Then the flap lifted and a woman's face appeared.

It was so startling that I let out an involuntary gasp. She stared at me and for a second I thought she was going to offer us food – but she turned, her pale hand still holding up the canvas – and shouted something in German. Liliane scrambled across the back of the truck and pulled me with her. 'Cover your head,' she whispered.

'What?'

Before she could say anything else, a stone shot through the back and landed a stinging blow on my arm. I glanced down, confused, and another landed, cracking the side of my head. I blinked, and three, four more women appeared, their faces twisted with hate, their fists loaded with stones, rotting potatoes, pieces of wood, whatever missiles came to hand.

'*Huren!*'

Liliane and I huddled in the corner, trying to cover our heads as the armaments rained down on us, my head, my hands stinging at the impact. I was about to shout back at them: *why would you do this? What have we done to you?* But the hatred in their faces and voices chilled me. These women truly despised us. They would rip us apart, given a chance. Fear rose like bile in my throat. Until that moment I had not felt it as a physical thing, a creature that could shake my sense of who I was, blast my thoughts, loosen my bowel with terror. I prayed – I prayed for them to go, for it all to stop. And then when I dared to glance up I glimpsed the young soldier who had sat in the back. He was standing off to the side and lighting a cigarette, calmly surveying the market square. Then I felt fury.

The bombardment continued for what was probably minutes but felt like hours. A fragment of brick struck my mouth and I tasted the iron slime of blood on my lip. Liliane didn't cry out, but she flinched in my arms as each missile made contact. I held on to her as if there were nothing else solid in my universe.

Then suddenly, abruptly, it stopped. My ears ceased ringing and a warm trickle of blood eased into the corner of my eye. I could just make out a conversation outside. Then the engine charged, the young soldier climbed nonchalantly into the back and the vehicle lurched forwards.

A sob of relief filled my chest. ‘Sons of whores,’ I whispered in French. Liliane squeezed my hand with her good one. Hearts thumping, we moved, trembling, back on to our benches. As we finally pulled out of the little town, the adrenalin slowly drained from my body and I found myself almost bone-dead with exhaustion. I was afraid to sleep then, afraid of what might come next, but Liliane, her eyes rigidly open, was scanning the tiny patch of landscape visible through the canvas. Some selfish part of me knew she would look out for me, that she would not sleep again. I laid my head on the bench, and as my heartbeat finally returned to normal I closed my eyes and allowed myself to sink into nothingness.

There was snow at the next stop: a bleak plain with only a small copse and a derelict shed to break the flat landscape. We were hauled out into the dusk and shoved towards the trees, mutely instructed, with the wave of a gun, as to what we should do. There was nothing left in me. Shivering and feverish, I could barely stand. Liliane limped off to the relative privacy of the shed, and as I watched her, the landscape swayed around me. I sank down into the snow, vaguely aware of the men stamping their feet by the truck. Part of me relished the icy cool against my hot legs. I let the cold air settle on my skin, the blood cool in my veins, enjoying the brief sensation of being anchored again to the earth. I looked up at the infinite sky, through which tiny glittering stars were emerging, until I felt dizzy. I made myself recall the nights, so many months ago, when I had believed he might be out there, looking at the same stars. And then, with my finger, I reached down into the crystalline surface and wrote: ÉDOUARD.

After a moment, I wrote it again on the other side of me, as if to persuade myself that he was real, somewhere, and that he – and we – had existed. I wrote it, my blue-tinged fingers pressing into the snow, until I had surrounded myself with it. *Édouard. Édouard. Édouard*. I wrote his name ten, twenty times. It was all I could see. I was in a great ring of Édouards, all dancing up at me. It would be so easy to tip over here, to sit in my Palace of Édouard and let it all go. I leaned back a little and began to laugh.

Liliane came out from behind the shed and stopped. I saw her staring at me and in her face I saw suddenly the same expression that Hélène had once worn, a kind of exhaustion, not from within but from weariness with the world, a fleeting indecision as to whether this was a battle she still had the energy to fight. And something pulled me back.

‘I – I – my skirt is wet,’ I said. It was the only sensible thing I could think of to say.

‘It’s just snow.’ She pulled me up by my arm, brushed off the snow and, with her limping and me swaying, we made our way back past the incurious soldiers and their guns and climbed into the truck.

Light. Liliane was looking into my eyes, her hand over my mouth. I blinked and involuntarily bucked against her, but she lifted her finger to her lips. She waited until I nodded, to show I understood, and as she removed her hand I realized that the truck had stopped again. We were in a forest. Snow blanketed the ground in piebald patches, stilling movement and stifling sound.

She pointed at the guard. He was fast asleep, lying across the bench, his head resting on his kit bag. He was snoring, completely vulnerable, his holster visible, several inches of neck bare above his collar. I found my hand reaching involuntarily into my pocket, fingering the shard of glass.

‘Jump,’ whispered Liliane.

‘What?’

‘Jump. If we keep to that dip, there, where there is no snow, we will leave no footprints. We can be hours away by the time they wake up.’

‘But we are in Germany.’

‘I speak a little German. We will find our way out.’

She was animated, filled with conviction. I don’t think I had seen her so alive since St Péronne. I blinked at the sleeping soldier, then back at Liliane, who was now carefully lifting the flap, peering out at the blue light.

‘But they will shoot us if they catch us.’

‘They will shoot us if we stay. And if they don’t shoot us it will be worse. Come. This is our chance.’ She mouthed the word, motioning silently for me to pick up my bag.

I stood. Peered out at the woods. And stopped. ‘I can’t.’

She turned to me. She still carried her broken hand close to her chest, as if fearful anything would brush against it. I could see now in daylight the scratches and bruises on her face where the missiles had caught her the previous day.

I swallowed. ‘What if they are taking me to Édouard?’

Liliane stared at me. ‘Are you insane?’ she whispered. ‘Come, Sophie. Come. This is our chance.’

‘I can’t.’

She ducked in again, glancing nervously at the sleeping soldier, then grabbed my wrist with her good hand. Her expression was fierce and she spoke as one would to a particularly stupid child. ‘Sophie. They are not taking you to Édouard.’

‘The *Kommandant* said –’

‘He’s a German, Sophie! You humiliated him. You revealed him as less of a man! You think he will repay that with kindness?’

‘It’s a faint hope, I know. But it’s … all I have left.’ As she stared at me, I pulled my bag towards me. ‘Look, you go. Take this. Take everything. You can do it.’

Liliane grabbed the bag and peered out of the rear, thinking. She readied herself as if working out where best to go. I watched the guard nervously, fearful that he would wake.

‘*Go*.’

I couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t move. She turned towards me slowly, in anguish. ‘If I escape, they will kill you.’

‘What?’

‘For aiding my escape. They will kill you.’

‘But you can’t stay. You were caught distributing resistance material. My position is different.’

‘Sophie. You were the only person who treated me as a human. I cannot have your death on my conscience.’

‘I’ll be fine. I always am.’

Liliane Béthune stared at my dirty clothes, my thin, feverish body, now shivering in the chill morning air. She stood there for the longest time, then sat down heavily, dropping the bag as if she no longer cared who heard it. I looked at her but she averted her eyes. We both jumped as the truck’s engine jolted into life. I heard a shout. The truck moved off slowly, bumping over a pothole so that we both banged heavily against the side. The soldier let out a guttural snore, but he did not stir.

I reached for her arm, hissing, ‘Liliane, go. While you can. You still have time. They will not hear you.’

But she ignored me. She pushed the bag towards me with her foot and sat down beside the slumbering soldier. She leaned back against the side of the truck and stared into nothing.

The truck emerged from the forest on to an open road and we travelled the next few miles in silence. In the distance we heard shots, saw other military vehicles. We slowed as we passed a column of men, trudging along in grey, ragged clothes. Their heads were down. They were like spectres, not even like real people. I watched Liliane watching them and felt her presence in the truck like a dead weight. She might have made it, if it were not for me. We might have made it together. As my thoughts gained clarity, I realized I had probably destroyed her last chance to be reunited with her daughter.

'Liliane –'

She shook her head, as if she did not want to hear it.

We drove on. The skies darkened and it began to rain again, a freezing sleet, which bit my skin in droplets as it sliced through the gaps in the roof. My shivering became violent, and with every bump, pain shot through my body as if from a bolt. I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I wanted to tell her I knew I had done something terrible and selfish. I should have granted her her chance. She was right: I had been fooling myself to think the *Kommandant* would reward me for what I had done.

Finally she spoke. 'Sophie?'

'Yes?' I was so desperate for her to talk to me. I must have sounded pathetically eager.

She swallowed, her gaze fixed on her shoes. 'If … if anything happens to me, do you think Hélène will look after Édith? I mean, really look after her? Love her?'

'Of course. Hélène could no more fail to love a child than she could … I don't know – join the Boche.' I tried to smile. I was determined to make myself appear less ill than I felt, to try to reassure her that good might still happen. I shifted on my seat, trying to force myself upright. Every bone in my body hurt as I did so. 'But you mustn't think like that. We will survive this, Liliane, and then you will go home to your daughter. Maybe even within months.'

Liliane's good hand lifted to the side of her face, tracing a livid red scar that ran from the corner of her eyebrow along her cheek. She seemed deep in thought, a long way from me. I prayed that my certainty had reassured her a little.

'We have survived so far, haven't we?' I continued. 'We are no longer in that hellish cattle truck. And we have been brought together. Surely the fates must have looked kindly upon us to do that.'

She reminded me, suddenly, of Hélène in the darker days. I wanted to reach across to her, touch her arm, but I was too weak. I could barely stay upright on the wooden bench as it was. 'You have to keep faith. Things can be good again. I know it.'

'You really think we can go home? To St Péronne? After what we each did?'

The soldier began to push himself upright, wiping his eyes. He seemed irritated, as if our conversation had woken him.

'Well … maybe not straight away,' I stammered. 'But we can return to France. One day. Things will be –'

'We are in no man's land now, you and I, Sophie. There is no home left for us.'

Liliane lifted her head then. Her eyes were huge and dark. She was, I saw now, completely unrecognizable as the glossy creature I had seen strutting past the hotel. But it was not just the scars and bruises that altered her appearance: something deep in her soul had been corrupted, blackened.

‘You really think prisoners who end up in Germany ever come out again?’

‘Liliane, please don’t talk like that. Please. You just need …’ My voice tailed away.

‘Dearest Sophie, with your faith, your blind optimism in human nature.’ She half smiled at me, and it was a terrible, bleak thing. ‘You have no idea what they will do to us.’

And with that, before I could say another word, she whipped the gun from the soldier’s holster, pointed it to the side of her head and pulled the trigger.

30

‘So we thought we might take in a movie this afternoon. And this morning Jakey’s going to help me walk the dogs.’ Greg drives badly, dipping his foot on and off the accelerator, apparently in time with the music, so that Paul’s upper body lurches forward at odd intervals all the way down Fleet Street.

‘Can I bring my Nintendo?’

‘No, you cannot bring your Nintendo, Screen-boy. You’ll walk into a tree like you did last time.’

‘I’m training to walk up them, like Super Mario.’

‘Nice try, Small Fry.’

‘What time are you coming back, Dad?’

‘Mm?’

In the passenger seat, Paul is scanning the newspapers. There are four accounts of the previous day’s events in court. The headlines suggest an impending victory for TARP and the Lefèvres. He cannot remember the last time he felt less elated by a winning verdict.

‘Dad?’

‘Damn. The news.’ He checks his watch, leans forward, fiddles with the dial.

‘Survivors of German concentration camps have called on the government to fast-track legislation that would aid the return of works of art looted during wartime …

‘Seven survivors have died this year alone while waiting for legal processes to return their families’ possessions, according to legal sources, a situation that has been described as “a tragedy”.

‘The call comes as the case of a painting allegedly looted during the First World War continues at the High Court –’

Paul leans forward. ‘How do I turn this up?’ *Where are they getting this stuff?*

‘You want to try Pac-man. Now there was a computer game.’

‘What?’

‘Dad? What time?’

‘Hold on, Jake. I need to listen to this.’

‘– Halston, who claims her late husband bought the painting in good faith. The controversial case illustrates the difficulties for a legal system facing an increasing number of complex restitution cases over the past decade. The Lefèvre case has attracted attention across the globe, with survivors’ groups …’

‘Jesus. Poor Miss Liv.’ Greg shakes his head.

‘What?’

‘I wouldn’t want to be in her shoes.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Well, all that stuff in the papers, on the radio – it’s getting pretty hardcore.’

‘It’s just business.’

Greg gives him the look he turns on customers who ask to run a tab.

‘It’s complicated.’

‘Yeah? I thought you said these things were always black and white.’

‘You want to back off, Greg? Or maybe I should stop by later and tell you how to run your bar. See how that goes.’

Greg and Jake raise their eyebrows at each other. It’s surprisingly irritating.

Paul swivels in his seat. ‘Jake, I’ll call you once we’re out of court, okay? We’ll go to the pictures or something tonight.’

‘But we’re doing that this afternoon. Greg just told you.’

‘High Court’s coming up on the right. You want me to do a U-turn?’ Greg signals left and pulls up so dramatically that they all lurch forwards. A taxi swerves past them, blaring its disapproval. ‘I’m not sure I should be stopping here. If I get a ticket you’ll pay it, right? Hey – isn’t that her?’

‘Who?’ Jake leans forward.

Paul looks across the road at the crowd outside the High Court. The open area to the front of the steps is packed with people. The throng has grown over the past days, but even shrouded in mist he can detect something different about it today: a choleric atmosphere, its participants’ faces set in expressions of barely concealed antipathy.

‘Uh-oh,’ says Greg, and Paul follows the direction of his gaze.

Across the road, Liv is approaching the court entrance, her hands tight around her bag, her head down as if she is deep in thought. She glances up, and as she understands the nature of the demonstration before her, apprehension crosses her face. Someone shouts her name: *Halston*. The crowd takes a second to register, and she picks up speed, tries to hurry past, but her name is repeated, a low murmur, which swells, becomes an accusation.

Henry, just visible on the other side of the entrance, walks briskly across the paving towards her as if he can already see what is happening. Liv’s stride falters and he leaps forward, but the crowd surges and shifts, splitting briefly, and swallows her, like some giant organism.

‘Christ.’

‘What the –’

Paul drops his files and leaps out of the car, sprinting across the road. He hurls himself into the mass and fights his way to the centre. It is a maelstrom of hands and banners, the sound deafening. The word ‘THEFT’ flashes in front of him on a falling banner. He sees a camera flash, glimpses Liv’s hair, grabs for her arm and hears her shout out in fright. The crowd surges forward and almost knocks him off his feet. He spots Henry on the other side of her, pushes towards him, swearing at a man who grabs at his coat. Uniformed officers in neon tabards appear, pulling the protesters away. ‘*Break it up. GET BACK. GET BACK.*’ His breath catches in his chest, someone thumps him hard in the kidneys, and then they are free, moving swiftly up the steps, Liv between them like a doll. With the crackle and whistle of a police radio, they are ushered in by burly officers, through the security barriers and into the muted peace and safety of the other side. The crowd, denied, yells its protest from outside, the sound echoing off the walls.

Liv’s features are bleached white. She stands mute, one hand lifted in front of her face, her cheek scratched, her hair half out of its ponytail.

‘Jesus. Where were you?’ Henry straightens his jacket angrily, shouting at the officers. ‘Where was Security? You should have foreseen this!’

The officer is nodding at him distractedly, one hand raised, the other holding his radio in front of his mouth as he issues instructions.

'This is simply not acceptable!'

'Are you okay?' Paul releases her. She nods, steps blindly away from him, as if she has only just realized he is there. Her hands are shaking.

'Thank you, Mr McCafferty,' Henry says, adjusting his collar. 'Thank you for diving in. That was …' He trails off.

'Can we get Liv a drink? Somewhere to sit down?'

'Oh, God,' says Liv, quietly, peering at her sleeve. 'Somebody spat on me.'

'Here. Take it off. Just take it off.' Paul lifts her coat from her shoulders. She appears suddenly smaller, her shoulders bowed as if by the weight of hatred outside.

Henry takes it from him. 'Don't worry about it, Liv. I'll tell one of my staff to get it cleaned. And we'll make sure you can leave via the back entrance.'

'Yes, madam. We'll get you out the back later,' the policeman says.

'Like a criminal,' she says dully.

'I won't let that happen to you again,' Paul says, taking a step towards her. 'Really. I'm – I'm so sorry.'

She glances up at him, her eyes narrow and she takes a step backwards.

'What?'

'Why should I trust you?'

Before he can reply Henry is at her elbow and she is gone, shepherded down the corridor and into the court by her legal team, somehow too small in her dark jacket, blind to the fact that her ponytail is still half out of its band.

Paul walks slowly across the road, straightening his shoulders in his jacket. Greg is standing by his car, holding out his scattered files and leather briefcase. It has started to rain.

'You okay?'

He nods.

'Is she?'

'Uh …' Paul glances back towards the court, rubs at his hair. 'Sort of. Look. I've got to go in. I'll see you both later.'

Greg looks at him, then at the crowd, which is now a loose, tame thing, people milling around and chatting as if the last ten minutes hadn't happened. His expression is uncharacteristically cold. 'So,' he says, as he climbs back into the car, 'that whole I'm-on-the-side-of-the-angels thing, how's it working out for you?'

He doesn't look at Paul as he drives away. Jake's face, pale against the back windscreen, gazes impassively at him until the car disappears from view.

Janey is at his side as he walks up the steps towards the courtroom. Her hair is neatly pinned, and she is wearing bright red lipstick. 'Touching,' she says.

He pretends he hasn't heard her.

Sean Flaherty dumps his folders on a bench and prepares to go through Security. 'This is getting a bit out of hand. Never seen anything like it.'

‘Yeah,’ says Paul, rubbing his jaw. ‘It’s almost like … Oh, I don’t know. Like all this inflammatory crap being fed to the media is having an effect.’ He turns to Janey.

‘Meaning?’ says Janey, coolly.

‘Meaning that whoever is briefing journalists and winding up interest groups obviously couldn’t give a flying fuck how unpleasant this is going to get.’

‘Whereas you are all chivalry.’ Janey looks back at him steadily.

‘Janey? Did you have anything to do with that protest?’

The pause is just a nanosecond too long.

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

Sean’s gaze flickers between them, as if he is only just registering that a whole separate conversation is taking place before him. He excuses himself, muttering about briefing the barrister. And it is just Paul and Janey in the long stone corridor.

He runs a hand through his hair, gazes back towards the courtroom. ‘I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all.’

‘It’s business. And you never minded before.’ She glances at her watch, then out of the window. The Strand is not visible from back here, but the chanting of the protesters can still be heard, barely muffled by the buildings. Her arms are folded across her chest.

‘Anyway, I don’t think you can exactly play the innocent.’

‘Meaning?’

‘You want to tell me what’s going on? With you and Mrs Halston?’

‘Nothing’s going on.’

‘Don’t insult my intelligence.’

‘Okay. Nothing that’s any of your business.’

‘If you’re having a relationship with the subject of our claim, I think that’s very much my business.’

‘I am not in a relationship with her.’

Janey moves closer to him. ‘Don’t fuck me around, Paul. You approached the Lefèvres behind my back, trying to negotiate a settlement.’

‘Yeah. I was going to talk to you about –’

‘I saw that little display out there. And you try to cut a deal for her, days before the ruling?’

‘Okay.’ Paul removes his jacket and sits down heavily on a bench. ‘Okay.’

She waits.

‘I had a brief relationship with her before I realized who she was. It ended when we discovered we were on opposing sides. That’s it.’

Janey studies something high up in the vaulted ceiling. When she speaks again her words are casual. ‘Are you planning on getting together with her again? After this is over?’

‘That’s nobody’s business.’

‘The hell it is. I need to know that you’ve been working as hard as you can for me. That this case hasn’t been compromised.’

His voice explodes into the empty space. ‘We’re winning, aren’t we? What more do you want?’

The last of the legal team is going into court. Sean's face appears around the heavy oak door, and he mouths at them to come in.

Paul takes a deep breath. He makes his voice conciliatory. 'Look. Personal stuff aside, I do think it would be the right thing to settle. We'd still be –'

Janey reaches for her folders. 'We are not going to settle.'

'But –'

'Why on earth would we? We're about to win the most high-profile case this company has ever handled.'

'We're destroying someone's life.'

'She destroyed her own life the day she decided to fight us.'

'We were taking what she believed was hers. Of course she was going to fight us. Come on, Janey, this is about fairness.'

'This isn't about fairness. Nothing's about fairness. Don't be ridiculous.' She blows her nose. When she turns to him, her eyes glitter. 'This case is scheduled for two more days in court. Provided nothing untoward happens, Sophie Lefèvre will go back after that to her rightful place.'

'And you're so sure you know where that is.'

'Yes, I am. As should you be. And now I suggest we go in before the Lefèvres wonder what on earth we're still doing out here.'

He walks into the courtroom, his head buzzing, ignoring the glare of the clerk. He sits and takes a few deep breaths, trying to clear his thoughts. Janey is distracted, deep in conversation with Sean. As his heart rate steadies, he remembers a retired detective he used to talk to when he was first in London, a man whose face had set in wry folds of amusement at the ways of the world. 'All that counts is the truth, McCafferty,' he would say, just before the beer turned his conversation to blather. 'Without it you're basically just juggling people's daft ideas.'

He pulls his notepad from his jacket and scribbles a few words, before folding the paper carefully in half. He glances sideways, then taps the man in front of him. 'Can you pass this to that solicitor please?' He watches as the scrap of white paper makes its way down to the front, along the bench to the junior solicitor, then to Henry, who glances at it and passes it to Liv.

She gazes at it warily, as if reluctant to open it. And then he watches as she does so, her sudden, intense stillness as she digests what it says.

I WILL FIX THIS.

She turns and her eyes seek him out. When she finds him her chin lifts slightly. *Why should I trust you?*

Time seems to stop. She looks away.

'Tell Janey I had to go. Urgent meeting,' he says, to Sean. Paul stands and begins to fight his way out.

Afterwards, he is unsure what leads him there. The flat, in a mansion block behind Marylebone Road, is lined with salmon-pink wallpaper to which pearlescent swirls add a faint peachy glitter. The curtains are pink. The sofas are a deep rose. The walls are covered with shelves, upon which little china animals jostle for space with tinsel and Christmas cards. A good number are pink. And there, standing before him in a pair of slacks and a cardigan, is Marianne Andrews. In head-to-toe lime green.

‘You’re one of Mr Flaherty’s people.’ She stoops a little, as if she is too big for the doorframe. She has what Paul’s mother would have called ‘big bones’: they jut from her joints like a camel’s.

‘I’m sorry to land on your doorstep like this. I wanted to talk to you. About the case.’

She looks as if she is about to turn him away, and then she raises a large hand. ‘Oh, you might as well come in. But I warn you, I’m as mad as a cut snake at how you all talked about Mom, like she was some kind of criminal. The newspapers are no better. I’ve had calls these last few days from friends back home who’ve seen the story and they’re trying to imply she did something terrible. I just got off the phone to my old friend Myra from high school and I had to tell her that Mom did more useful things in six months than that darned woman’s husband did sitting on his fat old backside in his thirty years at the Bank of America.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Oh, I bet you are, honey.’ She beckons him inside, her gait stiff and shuffling. ‘Mom was a social progressive. She wrote about the plight of workers, displaced children. She was horrified by war. She would no more steal something than she would have asked Goering out for a date. Now, I suppose you’re going to want a drink?’

Paul accepts a diet cola and settles in one of the low-slung sofas. Through the window the sound of distant rush-hour traffic drifts in on the overheated air. A large cat that he had initially mistaken for a cushion unfurls itself and jumps into his lap, where it kneads his thighs in silent ecstasy.

Marianne Andrews sits back and lights a cigarette. She takes a theatrical breath. ‘Is that accent Brooklyn?’

‘New Jersey.’

‘Hmph.’ She asks him his old address, nods as if to affirm her familiarity with it. ‘You been here long?’

‘Seven years.’

‘Six. Came over with my best husband, Donald. He passed over last July.’ And then, her voice softening slightly, she says, ‘Well, anyway, how can I help you? I’m not sure I have much more than what I said in court.’

‘I don’t know. I guess I’m just wondering if there’s anything, anything at all, we might have missed.’

‘Nope. Like I told Mr Flaherty, I have no idea where the painting came from. To be honest, when Mom reminisced about her reporting days she preferred to talk about the time she got locked in an aircraft lavatory with JFK. And, you know, Pop and I weren’t much interested. Believe me, you hear one old reporter’s tales, you’ve heard them all.’

Paul glances around the apartment. When he looks back, her eyes are still on him. She regards him carefully, blows a smoke ring into the still air. ‘Mr McCafferty. Are your clients going to come after me for compensation if the court decides the painting was stolen?’

‘No. They just want the painting.’

Marianne Andrews shakes her head. ‘I bet they do.’ She uncrosses her knees, wincing as if it causes her discomfort. ‘I think this whole case stinks. I don’t like the way my mom’s name is being dragged through the mud. Or Mr Halston’s. He loved that painting.’

Paul looks down at the cat. ‘It is just possible Mr Halston had a good idea of what it was really worth.’

‘With respect, Mr McCafferty, you weren’t there. If you’re trying to imply that I should feel cheated, you’re talking to the wrong woman.’

‘You really don’t care about its value?’

‘I suspect you and I have different definitions of the word “value”.’

The cat looks up at him, its eyes greedy and faintly antagonistic at the same time.

Marianne Andrews stubs out her cigarette. ‘And I feel plain sick about poor Olivia Halston.’

He hesitates, and then he says softly, ‘Yeah. Me too.’

She raises an eyebrow.

He sighs. ‘This case is … tricky.’

‘Not too tricky to chase the poor girl to bankruptcy?’

‘Just doing my job, Ms Andrews.’

‘Yeah. I think Mom heard that phrase a few times too.’

It is said gently, but it brings colour to his cheeks.

She looks at him, for a minute, then suddenly lets out a great *hah!*, frightening the cat, which leaps off his lap. ‘Oh, for goodness’ sakes. Do you want something a bit stronger? Because I could do with a real drink. I’m sure that sun is somewhere near the yardarm.’ She gets up and walks over to a cocktail cabinet. ‘Bourbon?’

‘Thanks.’

He tells her then, the bourbon in his hand, the accent of his homeland in his ears, his words coming out in fits and starts, as if they had not expected to break the silence. His story starts with a stolen handbag and ends with an all-too-abrupt goodbye outside a courtroom. New parts of it emerge, without his awareness. His unexpected happiness around her, his guilt, this permanent bad temper that seems to have grown around him, like bark. He doesn’t know why he should unburden himself to this woman. He doesn’t know why he expects her, of all people, to understand.

But Marianne Andrews listens, her generous features grimacing in sympathy. ‘Well, that’s some mess you’ve got yourself into, Mr McCafferty.’

‘Yeah. I get that.’

She lights another cigarette, scolds the cat, which is yowling plaintively for food in the open-plan kitchen. ‘Honey, I have no answers for you. Either you’re going to break her heart by taking that painting or she’s going to break yours by losing you your job.’

‘Or we forget the whole thing.’

‘And break both your hearts.’

Her words lay it bare. They sit there in silence. Outside the air is thick with the sound of barely moving traffic.

Paul sips his drink, thinking. ‘Ms Andrews, did your mother keep her notebooks? Her reporting notebooks?’

Marianne Andrews looks up. ‘I did bring them back from Barcelona but I’m afraid I had to throw a lot out. They’d been eaten to nothing by termites. One of the shrunken heads too. Perils of a brief marriage in Florida. Although …’ She stands up, using her long arms for leverage. ‘You’ve made me think of something. I may still have a bunch of her old journals in the hall cupboards.’

‘Journals?’

‘Diaries. Whatever. Oh, I had a crazy idea that someone might want to write her biography one day. She did so many interesting things. Maybe one of my grandchildren. I’m almost sure there’s a box of her

cuttings and some journals out there. Let me get the key and we'll go have a look.'

Paul follows Marianne Andrews out into the communal hallway. Breathing laboriously, she leads him down two flights to where the stairs are no longer carpeted, and a tranche of bicycles lines the walls.

'Our apartments are pretty small,' Marianne Andrews says, waiting as Paul pulls open a heavy fire door, 'so some of us rent spare caretaker's cupboards. They're like gold dust. Mr Chua next door offered me four thousand pounds to take over the lease for this one last year. Four thousand! I told him he'd have to treble it, and then some.'

They come to a tall blue door. She checks through her ring of keys, muttering to herself until she finds the one she wants. 'Here,' she says, flicking a switch. Inside the dim light bulb reveals a long dark cupboard. One side is lined with metal garage shelves, and the floor is thick with cardboard boxes, piles of books, an old lamp. It smells of old newspapers and jars of beeswax.

'I should really clear it all out.' Marianne sighs, wrinkling her nose. 'But somehow there's always something more interesting to do.'

'You want me to get anything down?'

Marianne hugs herself. 'You know what, honey? Would you mind very much if I left you to dig around? All the dust aggravates my asthma. There's nothing there of any value. You just lock up and give me a shout if you find anything. Oh, and if you find a teal blue handbag with a gold clasp, bring that up. I'd love to know where it disappeared to.'

Paul spends an hour in the cramped cupboard, moving boxes out into the dimly lit hallway when he suspects they might be useful, piling them up against the wall. There are newspapers dating back to 1941, their pages yellowed and corners missing. The tiny windowless room is like a Tardis. Its contents pile up in the hallway as it empties – suitcases full of old maps, a globe, hatboxes, moth-eaten fur coats, another leathery shrunken head, grimacing at him with its four oversized teeth. He stacks them all against the wall, covering the head with a tapestry cushion cover. Dust coats his hands, settles into the creases of his face. There are magazines with New Look skirts, pictures of the Coronation, reel-to-reel tapes. He takes them out, placing them on the floor beside him. His clothes become grey with dirt, his eyes gritty. He finds a handful of notebooks, helpfully dated on the front covers: 1968, Nov. 1969, 1971. He reads about the plight of striking firemen in New Jersey, the trials of the President. Occasionally there are notes scrawled in the margins: 'Dean! Dance Friday 7 p.m.' or 'Tell Mike that Frankie called'. There is nothing relevant to wartime, or to the painting.

He works methodically through each box, checking between the leaves of every book, scanning the contents of every folder. He opens every box and crate, piling its contents up and then replacing them neatly. An old stereo, two boxes of old books, a hatbox of souvenirs. It is eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, half past. He looks down at his watch, realizing it's hopeless.

Paul straightens, dusting his hands on his trousers, keen to escape the airless, cluttered space. He longs suddenly for the bare whiteness of Liv's house, its clean lines, its airiness.

He has emptied the whole thing. Wherever the truth is to be found, it's not in this overstuffed cupboard just north of the A40. And then, near the back, he spies the strap of an old leather satchel, dried out and snapped in two, like a thin slice of beef jerky.

He reaches under the shelving system and pulls at it.

He sneezes twice, wipes his eyes, then lifts the flap. Inside are six hardbound A4 exercise books. He opens one, and sees the intricate copperplate handwriting on the first page. His eyes flick up to the date. 1941. He opens another: 1944. He races through them, dropping each in his haste to find it – and there it is, the second to last: 1945.

He stumbles out into the hall, where the light is brighter, and leafs through the pages under the neon strip-light.

30 April 1945

Well, today sure didn't turn out like I expected. Four days ago, Lt Col Danes had told me I could go into Konzentrationslager Dachau …

Paul reads on for a few more lines, and curses twice, with increasing vehemence. He stands immobile, the weight of what he is holding becoming more significant with every second. He flicks through the pages and curses again.

His mind races. He could stuff this back into the far corner of the cupboard, go back to Marianne Andrews right now, tell her he had found nothing. He could win his case, collect his bonus. He could give Sophie Lefèvre to her legal owners.

Or …

He sees Liv, head down, battered by a tide of public opinion, the harsh words of strangers, impending financial ruin. He sees her bracing her shoulders, her ponytail askew, as she walks into another day in court.

He sees her slow smile of pleasure the first time they had kissed.

If you do this, you cannot go back.

Paul McCafferty drops the book and the satchel beside his jacket and starts stacking the boxes inside the cupboard.

She appears at the doorway as he clears the last of the boxes away, sweating and dusty after his exertions. She is smoking a cigarette in a long holder, like a 1920s flapper. 'Goodness – I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you.'

He straightens, wipes his brow. 'I found this.' He lifts the teal blue handbag.

'You did? Oh, you're a darling!' She claps her hands together, takes it from him and smoothes it lovingly. 'I was so afraid I'd left it somewhere. I'm such a clutterbrain. Thank you. Thank you so much. Heaven knows how you found it in all this chaos.'

'I found something else too.'

Her gaze slides upwards.

'You mind if I borrow these?' He holds up the satchel with the journals in it.

'Is that what I think it is? What do they say?'

'They say …' he takes a breath, exhales '… that the painting was indeed gifted to your mother.'

'I told you all!' Marianne Andrews exclaims. 'I told you my mother wasn't a thief! I told you all along.'

There is a long silence.

'And you're going to give them to Mrs Halston,' she says slowly.

'I'm not sure that would be wise. This journal will effectively lose us our case.'

Her expression clouds. 'What are you saying? That you're not going to give them to her?'

‘That’s exactly what I’m saying.’

He reaches into his pocket for a pen. ‘But if I leave them here, there’s nothing to stop you giving them to her, right?’ He scribbles a number and hands it to her. ‘That’s her cell.’

They gaze at each other for a minute. She beams, as if something has been reasserted. ‘I’ll do that, Mr McCafferty.’

‘Ms Andrews?’

‘Marianne. For goodness’ sakes.’

‘Marianne. Best keep this to ourselves. I don’t think it would go down well in certain quarters.’

She nods firmly. ‘You were never here, young man.’ She’s seemingly struck by a thought. ‘You don’t even want me to tell Mrs Halston? That it was you who …’

He shakes his head, pops his pen back in his pocket. ‘I think that ship may have sailed. Seeing her win will be enough.’ He stoops and kisses her cheek. ‘The important one is April 1945. The journal with the bent corner.’

‘April 1945.’

He feels almost dizzy with the enormity of what he has done. TARP, the Lefèvres, will now lose the case. They have to, based on what he has seen. *Is it still a betrayal if you’re doing it for the right reasons?* He needs a drink. He needs some air. Something. *Have I gone crazy here?* All he can see is Liv’s face, her relief. He wants to see that smile breaking out again, slow and wide, as if surprised by its own arrival.

He picks up his jacket to leave, holds out the cupboard keys. Marianne touches his elbow, halting him. ‘You know, I’ll tell you something about being married five times. Or married five times and still friends with my surviving ex-husbands.’ She counts them on gnarled fingers. ‘That would be three.’

He waits.

‘It teaches you damn all about love.’

Paul begins to smile, but she hasn’t finished. Her grip on his arm is surprisingly strong. ‘What it does teach you, Mr McCafferty, is that there’s a whole lot more to life than winning.’

31

Henry meets her at the rear gate of the courts. He is speaking through a cloud of *pain au chocolat* crumbs. His face is pink, and he is almost incomprehensible. ‘She won’t give it to anyone else.’

‘What? Who won’t?’

‘She’s at the front entrance. Come. *Come*.’

Before she can ask any more, Henry is propelling her through the back of the courts, through a network of corridors and flights of stone stairs, out to the security area at the top of the main entrance. Marianne Andrews is waiting by the barriers, dressed in a purple coat and a wide tartan hairband. She sees Liv and lets out a theatrical sigh of relief. ‘*Lord*, you’re a hard woman to get hold of,’ she scolds, as she holds out a musty-smelling satchel. ‘I’ve been calling and calling you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Liv says, blinking. ‘I don’t answer my phone any more.’

‘It’s in there.’ Marianne points to the journal. ‘Everything you need. April 1945.’

Liv stares at the old books in her hand. And looks up in disbelief. ‘Everything I need?’

‘The painting,’ the older woman says, exasperated. ‘For goodness’ sakes, child. It’s not a recipe for prawn gumbo.’

Events move at some speed. Henry runs to the judge’s chambers and requests a brief adjournment. The journals are photocopied, highlighted, their contents sent to the Lefèvres’ lawyers under the rule of disclosure. Liv and Henry sit in a corner of the office, scanning the bookmarked pages, while Marianne talks non-stop with some pride of how she had always known her mom was not a thief and how that darned Mr Jenks could go boil his head.

A junior lawyer brings coffee and sandwiches. Liv’s stomach is too taut to eat. They sit untouched in their cardboard packet. She keeps staring at the journal, unable to believe that this dog-eared book might hold the answer to her problems.

‘What do you think?’ she says, when Angela Silver and Henry have finished talking.

‘I think it could be good news,’ he says. His smile belies his cautious words.

‘It seems fairly straightforward,’ Angela says. ‘If we can prove that the last two exchanges were innocent, and there is inconclusive evidence for the first exchange, then we are, as they say, back in the game.’

‘Thank you so much,’ Liv says, not daring to believe this turn of events. ‘Thank you, Ms Andrews.’

‘Oh, I could not be more delighted,’ Marianne says, waving a cigarette in the air. Nobody has bothered to tell her not to smoke. She leans forward, places a bony hand on Liv’s knee. ‘*And* he found my favourite handbag.’

‘I’m sorry?’

The old woman’s smile falters. She busies herself with refixing a brooch. ‘Oh, nothing. Take no notice of me.’

Liv keeps staring at her, as the faint flush of colour dies down. 'Don't you want these sandwiches?' Marianne says briskly.

The phone rings. 'Right,' says Henry, when he puts down the receiver. 'Is everyone okay? Ms Andrews – are you ready to read some of this evidence to the court?'

'I have my best reading glasses in my bag.'

'Right.' Henry takes a deep breath. 'Then it's time to go in.'

30 April 1945

Well, today sure didn't turn out like I expected. Four days ago, Lt Col Danes had told me I could go into Konzentrationslager Dachau with them. He's not a bad guy, Danes. A little sniffy at first about hacks, as most of them are, but since I came ashore with the Screaming Eagles at Omaha Beach, and he's worked out I'm not some green housewife who's going to press him for cookie recipes, he's backed off a little. The 102nd Airborne call me an honorary fellow now, say that when I have my armband on, I'm just one of them. So, the deal was, I was going to follow them into the camp, write my piece about the folks inside, maybe get a few interviews with some of the prisoners about the conditions, and then file. WRGS radio wanted a short piece too, so I had my tape all wound up and ready.

Well, there I was, ready at 6 a.m., armband on and almost shipshape, and darned if he didn't knock on my door. 'Why, Lieutenant,' I joked. I was still fixing my hair. 'You never told me you cared.' It's a running joke with us. He says he's got pairs of marching boots older than I am.

'Change of plan, Toots,' he says. He was smoking, which was unlike him. 'I can't take you.'

My hands stilled on my head. 'You are kidding me, right?' The Register*'s editor was all lined up for this piece. They'd cleared me two pages and no ads.*

'Louanne, it's … it's beyond what we thought we'd find. I'm under orders to let nobody through till tomorrow.'

'Oh, come on.'

'Seriously.' He lowered his voice. 'You know I'd have you in there with me. But, well, you wouldn't believe what we saw in there yesterday … I've been up all night, me and the boys. There are old ladies, kids walking round in there, like … I mean, little kids …' He shook his head and looked away from me. He's a big man, Danes, and I swear he was about to sob like a baby. 'There was a train outside, and the bodies were just … thousands of them … It ain't human. That's for sure.'

If he was trying to put me off it had the opposite effect. 'You gotta get me in there, Lieutenant.'

'I'm sorry. Strictest orders. Look, one more day, Louanne. Then I'll give you all the access you need. You'll be the only reporter in there, I promise.'

'Yeah. And you'll still love me afterwards. Oh, come on …'

'Louanne, nobody but the military and the Red Cross is going in or coming out today. I need every man I have to help out.'

'Help out with what?'

'Taking the Nazis into custody. Helping the prisoners. Stopping our men killing those SS bastards for what they seen. Young Maslowicz, when he saw what they done to the Poles, he was like a madman, crying, going crazy. I had to put a non-com on his gun. So I gotta have an airtight guard. And –' he gulped '– we gotta work out what to do with the bodies.'

'Bodies?'

He shook his head. 'Yeah, bodies. Thousands of them. They made bonfires. Bonfires! You wouldn't believe …' He blew out his cheeks. 'Anyway, Toots. This is where I need to ask you a favour.'

'You need to ask me a favour?'

'I need to leave you in charge of the storage facility.'

I stared at him.

'There's a warehouse, out on the edge of Berchtesgaden. We opened it up last night and it's pretty much stacked to the gills with works of art. The Nazis, Goering, have looted stuff like you wouldn't believe. The top brass reckons there's a hundred million dollars' worth of stuff in there, most of it stolen.'

'What has this got to do with me?'

'I need someone I can trust to watch over it, just for today. You'll have a fire crew at your disposal, and two marines. It's chaos in the town, and I need to make sure nobody goes in there and nobody goes out. There's some serious haul in there,

Toots. I don't know much about art, but it's like – I don't know – the Mona Lisa or something.'

Do you know how disappointment tastes? Like iron filings in cold coffee. That's what I tasted when old Danes drove me down to the facility. And that was before I found out that Marguerite Higgins had got into the camps the previous day, with Brigadier General Linden.

It wasn't a warehouse as such, more a huge grey slab of a municipal building, like a huge school or town hall. He pointed me towards his two marines, who saluted me, and then the office near the main door where I was to sit. I have to say, I couldn't say no to him, but I took it all with bad grace. It was so obvious to me that the real story was going on down the road. The boys, normally cheerful and full of life, were in huddles, smoking and whey-faced. Their superiors talked quietly with shocked, serious expressions. I wanted to know what they'd found there, horrific as it might be. I needed to be in there, bringing the story out. And I was afraid: every day that slipped by made it easier for the top brass to decline my request. Every day that passed gave my competitors a chance.

'So, Krabowski here will get you anything you need, and Rogerson will contact me if you have any trouble. You okay?'

'Sure.' I put my feet up on the desk and sighed theatrically.

'It's a deal. You do this for me, and I'll get you in there tomorrow, Toots. I promise.'

'I bet you say that to all the girls,' I said. But, for once, he didn't even crack a smile.

I sat there for two hours, watching through the office window. It was a warm day, the sun bouncing off the stone sidewalks, but there was a strange feel to it that seemed to drop the temperature. Military vehicles whined up and down the main street, packed with soldiers. German soldiers, their hands on their heads, were marched in the opposite direction. Small huddles of German women and children stood stock still on street corners, apparently wondering what was to become of them. (Later I heard they were called in to help bury the dead.) And all the while, in the distance, the shrill siren of ambulances told of unseen horrors. Horrors I was missing.

I don't know why Danes was so worried: nobody seemed to give this building a second look. I began a piece, screwed up the paper, drank two cups of coffee and smoked half a pack of cigarettes, and my mood grew darker and darker. I began to wonder if this wasn't all a ruse just to keep me away from the action.

'Come on then, Krabowski,' I said, finally. 'Show me around this joint.'

'Ma'am, I don't know if we –' he began.

'You heard the lieutenant colonel, Krabowski. The lady's in charge today. And she's telling you to show her around.'

He gave me the kind of look my dog used to give me when he thought I was going to kick him up the you-know-what. But he exchanged a word with Rogerson and off we went.

It didn't look like much at first. Just rows and rows of wooden stacking systems, a load of grey, military-issue blankets slung over the contents. But then I went closer and pulled a painting out of one of the racks: a modern piece of a horse against an abstract landscape, in a heavily gilded frame. Its colours, even in the dim light of the vast room, glowed like treasure. I turned it over in my hands. It was a Braque. I stared at it for a moment, then placed it carefully back in its rack and kept walking. I began to pull things out at random: medieval icons, Impressionist works, huge Renaissance canvases, the frames delicate, in some cases supported by specially built crates. I ran my fingers over a Picasso, astonished at my own freedom to physically touch art I had previously seen only in magazines or on the walls of galleries.

'Oh, my God, Krabowski. You seen this?'

He looked at it. 'Um … yes, ma'am.'

'You know what it is? It's a Picasso.'

He was completely blank.

'A Picasso? The famous artist?'

'I don't really know much about art, ma'am.'

'And you reckon your kid sister could have done better, right?'

He shot me a relieved smile. 'Yes, ma'am.'

I put it back, and pulled out another. It was a portrait of a little girl, her hands folded neatly in her skirts. On the back, it read: 'Kira, 1922'.

'Are all the rooms here like this?'

'There are two rooms upstairs with statues and models and stuff instead of paintings. But, basically, yes. Thirteen rooms of paintings, ma'am. This is one of the smallest.'

'Oh, my good Lord.' I gazed around me at the dusty shelves, stacked in neat lines back into the distance, and then down at the portrait in my hands. The little girl stared solemnly back at me. You know, it only really hit me then that every one of these paintings had belonged to someone. Every one had hung on someone's wall, been admired by someone. A real live person had sat for it, or saved money for it, or painted it, or hoped to hand it down to their children. Then I thought of what Danes had said about disposing of the bodies a few miles away. I thought of his haunted, craggy face, and I shuddered.

I placed the picture of the little girl carefully back on the rack, and covered it with a blanket. 'Come on, Krabowski, let's go back downstairs. You can find me a decent cup of coffee.'

The morning stretched across lunch and then into the afternoon. The temperature rose, and the air around the warehouse grew still. I wrote a feature for the Register *on the warehouse, and I interviewed Krabowski and Rogerson for a little* Woman's Home Companion *piece on young soldiers' hopes for their return home. Then I stepped outside to stretch my legs and smoke a cigarette. I climbed up on the bonnet of the army Jeep and sat there, the metal warm beneath my cotton slacks. The roads were almost completely silent. There were no birds, no voices. Even the sirens seemed to have stopped. And then I looked up and squinted against the sun as a woman came walking up the road towards me.*

She moved like it required some effort, with a pronounced limp, even though she couldn't have been more than sixty. She wore a headscarf, despite the warm day, and had a bundle under her arm. When she saw me she stopped and glanced around. She saw my armband, which I had forgotten to take off when my trip out got cancelled.

'Englische?'

'American.'

She nodded, as if this were acceptable to her. 'Hier ist where the paintings are stored, ja?'

I said nothing. She didn't look like a spy, but I wasn't sure how much information I should give out. Strange times, and all.

She pulled the bundle from under her arm. 'Please. Take this.'

I stepped back.

She stared at me for a moment, then removed the coverings. It was a painting, a portrait of a woman from the brief glimpse I got.

'Please. Take this. Put in there.'

'Lady, why would you want to put your painting in there?'

She glanced behind her, as if she were embarrassed to be there.

'Please. Just take it. I don't want it in my house.'

I took the painting from her. It was a girl, about my age, with long reddish hair. She wasn't the most beautiful, but there was something about her that meant you couldn't tear your darned eyes away.

'Is this yours?'

'It was my husband's.' I saw then she should have had one of those powder-puff grandmother faces, all cushions and kindness, but when she looked at the painting her mouth just set in this thin old line, like she was full of bitterness.

'But this is beautiful. Why do you want to give such a pretty thing away?'

'I never wanted her in my house,' the woman said. 'My husband made me. For thirty years I have had to have that woman's face in my house. When I am cooking, cleaning, when I am sitting with my husband, I have had to look at her.'

'It's only a painting,' I told her. 'You can't be jealous of a painting.'

She barely heard me. 'She has mocked me for nearly thirty years. My husband and I were once happy, but she destroyed him. And I have had to endure that face haunting me every single day of our marriage. Now he is dead I don't have to have her staring at me. She can finally go back to wherever she belongs.'

As I looked, she wiped at her eyes with the back of a hand. 'If you don't want to take it,' she spat. 'Then burn it.'

I took it. What else could I have done?

Well, I'm back at my desk now. Danes has been in, ghostly white, promising I'll go with him tomorrow. 'You sure you want to see this, though, Toots?' he said. 'It's not pretty. I'm not sure it's a sight for a lady.'

'Since when did you start calling me a lady?' I joked, but he was all out of jokes. Danes sat down heavily on the edge of my bunk and sank his head into his hands. And as I stared at him, his big old shoulders began to shake. I stood there, not knowing what to do. Finally I pulled a cigarette from my bag, lit it and handed it to him. He took it, signalled his thanks with a palm, and wiped at his eyes, his head still down.

I felt a little nervous then, and believe me, I never get nervous.

'Just … thanks for today, that's all. The boys said you did a fine job.'

I don't know why I didn't tell him about the painting. I suppose I should have done, but it didn't belong in the darn warehouse, after all. It wasn't anything to do with the darn warehouse. That old German woman couldn't give two hoots what happened to it as long as it wasn't looking at her any more.

Because you know what? I secretly like the idea that you could have a painting so powerful it could shake up a whole marriage. And she's kind of pretty. I can't stop looking at her. Given everything else that seems to be going on around here, it's nice to have something beautiful to look at.

The courtroom is in complete silence as Marianne Andrews closes the journal in front of her. Liv has been concentrating so hard that she feels almost faint. She steals a look sideways down the bench and sees Paul, his elbows on his knees, his head tipped forward. Beside him Janey Dickinson is scribbling furiously into a notepad.

A handbag.

Angela Silver is on her feet. 'So let us get this straight, Ms Andrews. The painting you know as *The Girl You Left Behind* was not inside, and never had been inside, the storage facility when your mother was given it.'

'No, ma'am.'

'And just to reiterate, while the storage facility was full of looted works of art, stolen works of art, this particular painting was given to your mother, not even within the facility.'

'Yes, ma'am. By a German lady. Like her journal says.'

'Your Honour, this journal, in Louanne Baker's own hand, proves beyond doubt that this painting was never in the Collection Point. The painting was simply given away by a woman who had never wanted it. *Given away*. For whatever reason – a bizarre sexual jealousy, an historic resentment, we will never know. The salient point here, however, is that this painting, which, as we hear, was almost destroyed, was a *gift*.

'Your Honour, it has become very clear these last two weeks that the provenance of this painting is incomplete, as it is for many paintings that have existed for the best part of a turbulent century. What can now be proven beyond doubt, however, is that the painting's last two transfers were untainted. David Halston bought it legitimately for his wife in 1997, and she has the receipt to prove it. Louanne Baker, who owned it before him, was given it in 1945, and we have her written word, the word of a woman renowned for honesty and accuracy, to prove it. For this reason, we contend that *The Girl You Left Behind* must remain with its current owner. To remove it surely makes a mockery of the law.'

Angela Silver sits. Paul looks up at her. In the brief moment that he catches her eye, Liv is sure she can detect a faint smile.

The court adjourns for lunch. Marianne is smoking on the back steps, her blue handbag looped over her elbow, gazing out on to the grey street. 'Wasn't that marvellous?' she says conspiratorially, when she sees Liv approaching.

'You were brilliant.'

'Oh, my, I have to confess – I did enjoy it. They'll have to eat their words about my mother now. I knew she would never have taken a thing that didn't belong to her.' She nods, taps the ash off her cigarette. 'They called her "The Fearless Miss Baker", you know.'

Liv leans over the rail in silence. She pulls up her collar against the cold. Marianne smokes the rest of her cigarette in long, hungry gulps.

‘It was him, wasn’t it?’ Liv says finally, looking straight ahead.

‘Oh, honey, I promised I wouldn’t say a word.’ Marianne turns to her and pulls a face. ‘I could have kicked myself this morning. But of course it was. The poor man is nuts about you.’

Christopher Jenks stands. ‘Ms Andrews. A simple question. Did your mother ask this astonishingly generous old woman her name?’

Marianne Andrews blinks. ‘I have no idea.’

Liv cannot take her eyes off Paul. *You did this for me?* she asks him silently. Oddly, he no longer meets her gaze. He sits beside Janey Dickinson looking uncomfortable, checking his watch, and glancing towards the door. She cannot think what she will say to him.

‘It’s an extraordinary gift to accept without knowing who you are getting it from.’

‘Well, crazy gift, crazy times. I guess you had to be there.’

There is a low ripple of laughter in the courtroom. Marianne Andrews shimmies slightly. Liv detects unfulfilled stage ambitions.

‘Indeed. Have you read all your mother’s journals?’

‘Oh, good God, no,’ she says. ‘There’s thirty years’ worth of stuff in there. We – I – only found them last night.’ Her gaze briefly flickers towards the bench. ‘But we found the important bit. The bit where Mom was given the painting. That’s what I brought in here.’ She places great emphasis on the word ‘given’, glancing sideways at Liv, and nodding to herself as she says it.

‘Then you haven’t yet read Louanne Baker’s 1948 journal?’

There is a short silence. Liv is aware of Henry reaching for his own files.

Jenks holds out his hand and the solicitor hands him a piece of paper. ‘My lord, may I ask you to turn to the journal entry for the eleventh of May 1948, entitled “House Moves”?’

‘What are they doing?’ Liv’s attention is finally drawn back to the case. She leans in towards Henry, who is scanning the pages.

‘I’m looking,’ he whispers.

‘In it Louanne Baker discusses her household move from Newark, in Essex County, to Saddle River.’

‘That’s right,’ says Marianne. ‘Saddle River. That’s where I grew up.’

‘Yes … You’ll see here that she discusses the move in some detail. She talks of trying to find her saucepans, the nightmare of being surrounded by unpacked boxes. I think we can all identify with that. But, perhaps most pertinently, she walks around the new house trying …’ he pauses, as if ensuring he reads the words verbatim ‘… “*trying to find the perfect spot to hang Liesl’s painting*”.’

Liesl.

Liv watches the journalists rifle through their notes. But she realizes with a sickening feeling that she already knows the name.

‘Bollocks,’ says Henry.

Jenks knows the name too. Sean Flaherty’s people are way ahead of them. They must have had a whole team reading the journals through lunchtime.

‘I would now like to draw Your Honour’s attention to records kept by the German Army during the First World War. The *Kommandant* who was stationed at St Péronne from 1916, the man who brought his troops in to Le Coq Rouge, was a man called Friedrich Hencken.’ He pauses to let that sink in. ‘The

records state that the *Kommandant* stationed there at the time, the *Kommandant* who so admired the painting of Édouard Lefèvre's wife, was one Friedrich Hencken.

'And now I would like to show to the court the 1945 census records of the area around Berchtesgaden. Former Kommandant Friedrich Hencken and his wife, Liesl, settled there after his retirement. Just streets away from the Collection Point storage facility. She was also recorded as walking with a pronounced limp, given a childhood bout of polio.'

Their QC is on her feet. 'Again, this is circumstantial.'

'Mr and Mrs Friedrich Hencken. My Lord, it is our contention that Kommandant Friedrich Hencken took the painting from Le Coq Rouge in 1917. He removed it to his home, seemingly against the will of his wife, who might reasonably have objected to such a – a potent image of another woman. It stayed there until his death, upon which Mrs Hencken was so keen to dispose of it that she took it a few streets away to the place she knew held a million pieces of artwork, a place where it would be swallowed up and never be seen again.'

Angela Silver sits down.

Jenks continues – there is a new energy about him now: 'Ms Andrews. Let's go back to your mother's memories of this time. Could you read the following paragraph, please? This, for the record, comes from the same journal entry. In it, Louanne Baker apparently finds what she believes is the perfect spot for *The Girl*, as she calls the painting.'

'As soon as I put her in that front parlour, she looked comfortable. She's not in direct sunlight there, but the south-facing window, with its warm light, makes her colours glow. She seems happy enough, anyhow!'

Marianne reads slowly now, unfamiliar with these words of her mother's. She glances up at Liv, and her eyes hold an apology, as if she can already see where this is going.

'I banged the nails in myself – Howard always does knock out a fist-sized chunk of plaster when he does it – but as I was about to hang her, something made me turn the painting over and take another look at the back of it. And it made me think of that poor woman, and her sad, embittered old face. And I remembered something I'd forgotten since the war.

'I always assumed it was something out of nothing. But as Liesl handed over the painting, she briefly snatched it back, as if she'd changed her mind. Then she rubbed at something on the back, like she was trying to rub something off. She rubbed it and rubbed it, like a crazy woman. She rubbed so hard I thought she actually hurt her fingers.'

The courtroom is still, listening.

'Well, I looked at the back of it just now, just as I looked at it then. And it was the one thing that really made me wonder whether that poor woman had been in her right mind when she handed it over. Because it doesn't matter how long you stare at the back of that painting – aside from the title – there is truly nothing there, just a smudge of chalk.

'Is it wrong to take something from someone not in their right mind? I still haven't worked it out. Truthfully, the world seemed so insane back then – with what was going on in the camps, and grown men weeping, and me in charge of a billion dollars' worth of other people's things – that old Liesl and her bleeding knuckles scrubbing away at nothing seemed actually pretty normal.'

'Your Honour, we would suggest that this – and Liesl's failure to give her last name – is pretty clear evidence of somebody trying to disguise or even destroy any sign of where the painting had come from. Well, she certainly succeeded.'

As he pauses, a member of his legal team crosses the court and hands him a piece of paper. He reads it and takes a breath. His eyes scan the courtroom.

'German census records we have just obtained show that Sophie Lefèvre contracted Spanish influenza shortly after she arrived at the camps at Ströhen. She died there shortly afterwards.'

Liv hears his words through a buzzing in her ears. They vibrate within her, like the aftershock of a physical blow.

'Your Honour, as we have heard in this court, a great injustice was done to Sophie. And a great injustice has been done to her descendants. Her husband, her dignity, her freedom and ultimately her life were taken from her. Stolen. What remained – her image – was, according to all the evidence, taken from her family by the very man who had done her the greatest wrong.

'There is only one way to redress this wrong, belated as it might be – the painting must be returned to the Lefèvre family.'

She barely takes in the rest of his words. Paul sits with his forehead in his palms. She looks over at Janey Dickinson, and when the woman meets her eye, she realizes with a faint shock that for some other participants, too, this case is no longer just about a painting.

Even Henry is downcast when they leave the court. Liv feels as if they have all been run over by a juggernaut.

Sophie died in the camps. Sick and alone. Never seeing her husband again.

She looks at the smiling Lefèvres across the court, wanting to feel generous towards them. Wanting to feel as if some great wrong is about to be righted. But she recalls Philippe Bessette's words, the fact that the family had banned even the mention of her name. She feels as if, for a second time, Sophie is about to be handed over to the enemy. She feels, weirdly, bereaved.

'Look, who knows what the judge will decide,' Henry says, as he sees her to the rear security area. 'Try not to dwell on it too much over the weekend. There's nothing more we can do now.'

She tries to smile at him. 'Thanks, Henry,' she says. 'I'll – call you.'

It feels strange out here, in the wintry sunlight, as if they have spent much longer than an afternoon in the confines of the court. She feels as if she has come here straight from 1945. Henry hails a taxi for her, then leaves, nodding farewell. It is then that she sees him, standing at the security gate. He looks as if he has been waiting there for her, and walks straight over.

'I'm sorry,' he says, his face grim.

'Paul, don't –'

'I really thought – I'm sorry for everything.'

His eyes meet hers, one final time, and he walks away, blind to the customers exiting the Seven Stars pub, the legal assistants dragging their trolleys of files. She sees the stoop to his shoulders, the uncharacteristic dip of his head and it is this, on top of everything else that has happened today, that finally settles something for her.

'Paul!' She has to yell twice to be heard over the sound of the traffic. 'Paul!'

He turns. She can see the points of his irises even from here.

'I know.' He stands very still for a minute, a tall man, a little broken, in a good suit. 'I know. Thank you … for trying.'

Sometimes life is a series of obstacles, a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. Sometimes, she realizes suddenly, it is simply a matter of blind faith. 'Would you … would you like to go for that drink some time?' She swallows. 'Now, even?'

He glances at his shoes, thinking, then up at her again. 'Would you give me one minute?'

He walks back up the steps of the court. She sees Janey Dickinson deep in conversation with her lawyer. Paul touches her elbow, and there is a brief exchange of words. She feels anxious – a little voice nagging: *What is he telling her now?* – and she turns away, climbing into the taxi, trying to quell it. When she looks up again through the window, he is walking briskly back down the steps, winding a scarf around his neck. Janey Dickinson is staring at the taxi, her files limp in her arms.

He opens the door, and climbs in, slamming it shut. 'I quit,' he says. He lets out a breath, reaches over for her hand. 'Right. Where are we going?'

32

Greg's face betrays nothing as he answers the door. 'Hello again, Miss Liv,' he says, as if her appearance on the doorstep is entirely to be expected. He steps back into the hallway as Paul peels her coat from her shoulders, shushing the dogs, which rush to greet her. 'I've ruined the risotto, but Jake says it doesn't matter as he doesn't like mushrooms anyway. So we're thinking maybe pizza.'

'Pizza sounds great. And my treat,' says Paul. 'It may be our last for a while.'

They had held hands in stunned silence halfway down Fleet Street. 'I lost you your job,' she'd said finally. 'And your big bonus. And your chance to buy a bigger flat for your son.'

He had gazed straight ahead of him. 'You didn't lose me any of it. I walked.'

Greg raises an eyebrow. 'A bottle of red has been open in the kitchen since around half past four. This has nothing whatsoever to do with me looking after my nephew for the day. Does it, Jake?'

'Greg says it's always wine o'clock in this house,' a boy's voice calls from the other room.

'Tattle-tale,' Greg calls back. And then he says to Liv, 'Oh, no. I can't let you drink. Look what happened last time you got drunk in our company. You turned my sensible big brother into a tragic, mooning adolescent.'

'And this is where I remind you yet again that mooning means something quite different in this country,' Paul says, steering her towards the kitchen. 'Liv, you'd better acclimatize for a minute. Greg's idea of interior decorating is basically Too Much Is Not Enough. He doesn't do minimalist.'

'I stamp my personality on my little house, and, no, it is not a *tabula rasa*.'

'It's beautiful,' she says, of the colourful walls, the bold prints and tiny photographs that surround her. She feels oddly at ease in this little railwayman's cottage, with its blaring music, incalculable numbers of loved things on every shelf and crammed into every wall-space, and a child who lies on a rug in front of the television.

'Hey,' says Paul, going into the living room, where the boy flips on to his back like a puppy.

'Dad.' He glances at her and she fights the urge to drop Paul's hand when he sees him registering it. 'Are you the girl from this morning?' he says, after a minute.

'I hope so. Unless there was another one.'

'I don't think so,' says Jake. 'I thought they were going to squash you.'

'Yes, I sort of did too.'

He studies her for a minute. 'My dad put on perfume the last time he saw you.'

'Aftershave,' says Paul, and stoops to kiss him. 'Tattle-tale.'

So this is Mini Paul, she thinks, and the idea is pleasing.

'This is Liv. Liv, this is Jake.'

She lifts a hand. 'I don't know many people your age, so I'll probably say horribly uncool things, but it's very good to meet you.'

'That's okay. I'm used to it.'

Greg appears and hands her a glass of red wine. His eyes dart between them. ‘So what does this mean? Is there an *entente cordiale* between our warring factions? Are you two now … secret collaborators?’

Liv blinks at his choice of words. She turns to look at Paul.

‘I don’t care about the job,’ he had said quietly, his hand closing around hers. ‘I only know that when I’m not with you I’m mean and mad at everything.’

‘No,’ she says, and she finds she’s grinning. ‘He just realized he was on the wrong side all along.’

When Andy, Greg’s boyfriend, arrives at Elwin Street there are five of them squashed into the little house, but it never feels crowded. Liv, seated around a small tower of pizza slices, thinks of the cold Glass House on top of the warehouse and it seems suddenly so linked to the court case, to her own unhappiness, that she does not want to go home.

She does not want to look at Sophie’s face, knowing what is about to happen. She sits in the midst of these near-strangers, playing games or laughing at their family jokes, and grasps that her sense of constant surprise comes from the discovery that, despite it all, she is happy; happy in a way that she cannot remember being for years.

And there is Paul. Paul, who looks physically battered by the day’s events, as if he, not her, has lost everything. Whenever he turns to look at her something realigns itself, as if her body has to attune itself to the possibility of being happy again.

You okay? his look asks.

Yes, hers says, and she means it.

‘So what happens on Monday?’ Greg says, as they sit around the table. He has been showing them swatches of fabric for a new colour scheme in the bar. The table is strewn with crumbs and half-empty glasses of wine. ‘You have to hand over the painting? Are you definitely going to lose?’

Liv looks at Paul. ‘I guess so,’ she says. ‘I just have to get my head around the idea of … letting her go.’ An unexpected lump rises to her throat, and she smiles, willing it to go away.

Greg reaches out a hand to her. ‘Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to upset you.’

She shrugs. ‘I’m fine. Really. She’s not mine any more. I should have understood that ages ago. I suppose I … didn’t want to see what was in front of my face.’

‘At least you still have your house,’ Greg says. ‘Paul told me it’s amazing.’ He catches Paul’s warning glance. ‘What? She’s not meant to know you’ve been talking about her? What are we? Fifth-graders?’

Paul looks briefly sheepish.

‘Ah,’ she says. ‘Not really. No, I don’t.’

‘What?’

‘It’s under offer.’

Paul goes very still.

‘I have to sell it to meet the legal fees.’

‘You’ll have enough over to buy somewhere else, right?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘But that house –’

‘– was already mortgaged to the hilt. And needs work, apparently. I haven’t done anything to it since David died. Apparently amazing imported glass with thermic qualities doesn’t last for ever, even though David thought it would.’

Paul's jaw tightens. He pushes back his chair abruptly and leaves the table.

Liv looks at Greg and Andy, then at the door.

'Garden, probably,' says Greg, raising an eyebrow. 'It's the size of a pocket handkerchief. You won't lose him.' And then, as she stands, he murmurs, 'It's terribly sweet how you keep demolishing my big brother. I wish I'd had your skills when I was fourteen.'

He is standing on the little patio, which is crammed with terracotta pots of straggly plants, made spindly in the winter frosts. He is turned away from her, his hands rammed into his pockets. He looks crushed.

'So you did lose everything. Because of me.'

'Like you said, if it hadn't been you it would have been someone else.'

'What was I thinking? What the fuck was I thinking?'

'You were just doing your job.'

He lifts a hand to his jaw. 'You know what? You really do not have to make me feel better.'

'I'm fine. Really.'

'How can you be? I wouldn't be. I'd be mad as … Ah, *Jesus*.' His voice explodes with frustration.

She waits, then takes his hand, pulls him to the little table. The ironwork is chilly, even through her clothes, and she scrapes her chair forward, places her knees between his, waiting until she is sure he is listening.

'Paul.'

His face is rigid.

'Paul. Look at me. You need to understand this. The worst thing that could have happened to me already happened.'

He looks up.

She swallows, knowing that these are the words that stall; that may simply refuse to emerge. 'Four years ago David and I went to bed like it was any other night, brushing our teeth, reading our books, chatting about a restaurant we were going to the next day … and when I woke up the next morning he was there beside me, cold. Blue. I didn't … I didn't feel him go. I didn't even get to say … '

There is a short silence.

'Can you imagine knowing you slept through the person you love most dying next to you? Knowing that there might have been something you could have done to help him? To save him? Not knowing if he was looking at you, silently begging you to –' The words fail, her breath catches, a familiar tide threatens to wash over her. He reaches out his hands slowly, enfolds hers within them until she can speak again.

'I thought the world had actually ended. I thought nothing good could ever happen again. I thought anything might happen if I wasn't vigilant. I didn't eat. I didn't go out. I didn't want to see anyone. But I survived, Paul. Much to my own surprise, I got through it. And life … well, life gradually became liveable again.'

She leans closer to him. 'So this … the painting, the house … It hit me when I heard what happened to Sophie. It's just *stuff*. They could take all of it, frankly. The only thing that matters is people.' She looks down at his hands, and her voice cracks. 'All that really matters is who you love.'

He doesn't speak, but dips his head so that it comes to rest against hers. They sit there in the wintry garden, breathing in the inky air, listening to the muffled sound of his son's laughter coming from the house. Down the street she can hear the acoustics of early evening in the city, the clatter of pans in distant

kitchens, televisions firing up, a car door slamming, a dog barking at some unseen outrage. Life in its messy, vital entirety.

'I'll make it up to you,' he says quietly.

'You already have.'

'No. I will.'

There are tears on her cheeks. She has no idea how they got there. His blue eyes are suddenly calm. He takes her face in his hands and kisses her, kisses the tears away, his lips soft against her skin, promising a future. He kisses her until they are both smiling and she has lost all feeling in her feet.

'I should go home. The buyers are coming tomorrow,' she says, reluctantly unwinding from him.

Across town the Glass House stands empty. The thought of returning to it is still unappealing. She half waits for him to protest. 'Do you … do you want to come with me? Jake could sleep in the spare room. I could open and shut the roof for him. Might win me a few points.'

He looks away. 'I can't,' he says baldly. And then: 'I mean I'd love to. But it's …'

'Will I see you over the weekend?'

'I've got Jake, but … sure. We'll work something out.'

He seems oddly distracted. She sees the doubt that shadows his face. Will we really be able to forgive what we have cost each other? she thinks, fleetingly, and feels a chill that has nothing to do with the cold.

'I'll drive you home,' he says. And the moment passes.

The house is silent when she lets herself in. She locks the door, puts her keys on the side and walks into the kitchen, her footsteps echoing across the limestone floor. She finds it hard to believe she only left here this morning: it feels as if a whole lifetime has passed.

She presses the button on her answer-phone. A message from the estate agent, puffed with self-importance, announcing that the buyers are to send in their architect the following day. He hopes she is well.

A feature writer from an obscure arts magazine, wanting an interview about the Lefèvre case.

The bank manager. Reassuringly oblivious to the media frenzy. Please can she call at her earliest convenience to discuss her overdraft situation? This is his third attempt to contact her, he adds pointedly.

One from her father, sending big kisses. *Caroline says fuck the lot of them.*

Liv can just make out a distant thumping bass from the apartment below, the slamming front doors and laughter that are the acoustics of an ordinary Friday night out. It is a reminder that elsewhere the world turns regardless; that there is life beyond this strange hiatus.

The evening stretches. She puts on the television, but there is nothing she wants to watch, so instead she showers and washes her hair. She lays out clothes for the next day, and eats some crackers and cheese.

But her emotions do not settle: they jangle, like a rail of empty coat hangers. She is exhausted, but paces the house, unable to sit still. She keeps tasting Paul on her lips, his words in her ears. She considers calling him, briefly, but when she pulls out her phone, her fingers stall on the buttons. What would she say, after all? *I just wanted to hear your voice.*

She walks through to the spare room, which is immaculate, empty, as if nobody had ever stayed there. She walks around it, lightly touching the tops of the chair, the chest of drawers as she passes. She no longer feels comforted by silence and emptiness. She pictures Mo, curled up with Ranic in an overcrowded house full of noise, like the one she has just left.

Finally she makes herself a mug of tea and walks through to her bedroom. She sits in the middle of her bed, leans back against the pillows and studies Sophie in her gilded frame.

I secretly like the idea that you could have a painting so powerful it could shake up a whole marriage.

Well, Sophie, she thinks, you shook up a whole lot more than that. She gazes at the painting she has loved for almost a decade and finally she allows herself to think about the day she and David had bought it, the way they had held her aloft in the Spanish sunshine, her colours bouncing in the white light, reflecting the future they believed they had together. She remembers them hanging it in this room on their homecoming; the way she had gazed at *The Girl*, wondering what David saw in herself that mirrored the image and feeling somehow more beautiful for what he had seen.

You look like she does when you –

She remembers a day, in the early weeks after his death, when she had raised her head dully from her damp pillow and Sophie had seemed to be looking straight at her. This, too, is bearable, her expression had said. You may not know it now. But you will survive.

Except Sophie hadn't.

Liv fights the sudden lump in her throat. 'I'm so sorry for what happened to you,' she says, into the silent room. 'I wish it could have been different.'

Suddenly overwhelmed with sadness, she stands, walks over to the painting and turns it round so that she can no longer see it. Perhaps it's a good thing she's leaving this house: the space on the wall would have been a constant reminder of her failure. It already feels oddly symbolic of the way Sophie herself was effectively rubbed out.

And just as she is about to release it, she stops.

The study, over these past weeks, has grown messy and chaotic, piles of papers spilling over every surface. She moves around it with new purpose, placing them in neat piles, in folders, securing each with an elastic band. She doesn't know what she will do with them once the case is over. Finally, she seeks out the red folder that Philippe Bessette gave her. She flicks through the delicate sheets of paper until she finds the two pieces she is looking for.

She checks them, then takes them into the kitchen. She lights a candle, and holds the pieces, one at a time, over the flickering flame, until there is nothing left but ashes.

'There, Sophie,' she says. 'If nothing else, you can have that one on me.'

And now, she thinks, for David.

33

'I thought you'd be headed off by now. Jake's asleep in front of *America's Funniest Home Videos*.' Greg walks into the kitchen bare-foot and yawning. 'You want me to put up the camp bed? It's kind of late to be dragging him home.'

'That would be great.' Paul barely looks up from his files. His laptop is propped open in front of him.

'What are you doing going over those again? The verdict is due Monday, surely? And – um – didn't you just quit your job?'

'There's something I've missed. I know it.' Paul runs his finger down the page, flicking impatiently to the next. 'I have to check through the evidence.'

'Paul.' Greg pulls up a chair. 'Paul,' he says, a little louder

'What?'

'It's done, bro. And it's okay. She's forgiven you. You've made your big gesture. I think you should just leave it now.'

Paul leans back, drags his hands over his eyes. 'You think so?'

'Seriously? You look kind of manic.'

Paul takes a swig of his coffee. It is cold. 'It will destroy us.'

'What?'

'Liv loved that painting, Greg. And it will eat away at her, the fact that I'm … responsible for taking it from her. Maybe not now, maybe not even in a year or two. But it will happen.'

Greg leans back against the kitchen unit. 'She could say the same about your job.'

'I'm okay about the job. It was time I got out of that place.'

'And Liv said she was okay with the painting.'

'Yeah. But she's backed into a corner.' When Greg shakes his head in frustration, he leans forward over his files. 'I know how things can change, Greg, how the things you swear won't bother you at the start can eat away at the good stuff.'

'But –'

'And I know how losing the things you love can haunt people. I don't want Liv to look at me one day and be fighting the thought: *You're the guy who ruined my life*.'

Greg pads across the kitchen and puts the kettle on. He makes three cups of coffee, and hands one to Paul. He puts his hand on his brother's shoulder as he prepares to take the other two through to the living room. 'I know you like to fix stuff, big brother of mine. But honestly? In this case you're just going to have to hope to God it all works out.'

Paul doesn't hear him. 'List of owners,' he is muttering to himself. 'List of current owners of Lefèvre's work.'

Eight hours later Greg wakes to find a small boy's face looming over him. 'I'm hungry,' it says, and rubs its nose vigorously. 'You said you had Coco Pops but I can't find them.'

'Bottom cupboard,' he says groggily. There is no light between the curtains, he notes distantly.

'And you don't have any milk.'

'What's the time?'

'Quarter to seven.'

'Ugh.' Greg burrows down under the duvet. 'Even the dogs don't get up this early. Ask your dad to do it.'

'He's not here.'

Greg's eyes open slowly, fix on the curtains. 'What do you mean he's not here?'

'He's gone. The sleeping-bag's still rolled up so I don't think he slept on the sofa. Can we get croissants from that place down the road? The chocolate ones?'

'I'm getting up. I'm getting up. I'm up.' He hauls himself into an upright position, rubs his head.

'And Pirate has weed on the floor.'

'Oh. Good. Saturday's off to a flying start.'

Paul is indeed not there but he has left a note on the kitchen table: it is scribbled on the back of a list of court evidence, and placed on top of a scattered pile of papers.

Had to go. Pls can you hang on to Jake. Will call.

'Is everything okay?' Jake says, studying his face.

The mug on the table is ringed with black coffee. The remaining papers look as if they have suffered a small explosion.

'It's all fine, Small Fry,' Greg says, ruffling his hair. He folds the note, puts it into his pocket, and begins dragging the files and papers into some sort of order. 'I tell you what, I vote we make pancakes for breakfast. What do you say we pull our coats on over these pyjamas and head down to the corner shop for some eggs?'

When Jake leaves the room, he grabs his mobile phone and stabs out a text.

If you are over there getting laid right this minute,
you owe me BIG TIME.

He waits a few minutes before stuffing it into his pocket, but there is no reply.

Saturday is, thankfully, busy. Liv waits in for the buyers to come and measure up, then for their builders and architect to examine the apparently endless work that needs doing. She moves around these strangers in her home, trying to strike the right balance between accommodating and friendly, as befits the seller of the house, and not reflecting her true feelings, which would involve shouting, 'GO AWAY,' and making childish hand gestures at them. She distracts herself by packing and cleaning, deploys the consolations of small domestic tasks. She throws out two bin-bags of old clothes. She rings several rental agents, and when she tells them the amount she can afford there is a lengthy, scornful silence.

'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?' says the architect, as she places the phone back in its cradle.

'No,' she says hurriedly. 'I don't think so.'

Paul does not call.

That afternoon she heads over to her father's. 'Caroline has thrown you *the* most spectacular pot for Christmas,' he announces. 'You're going to love it.'

'Oh, good,' she says.

They eat salad and a Mexican dish for lunch. Caroline hums to herself while eating. Liv's father is up for a car-insurance advert. 'Apparently I have to imitate a chicken. A chicken with a no-claims bonus.'

She tries to focus on what he is saying, but she keeps thinking about Paul, replaying the previous day in her head. She is secretly surprised that he hasn't rung. Oh, God. I'm turning into one of those clingy girlfriends. And we've not even been officially together for twenty-four hours. She has to laugh at 'officially'.

Reluctant to go back to the Glass House, she stays at her father's for much longer than usual. He seems delighted, drinks too much, pulls out black-and-white pictures of her that he found while sorting through a drawer. There is something oddly grounding about going through them: the reminder that there was a whole life before this case, before Sophie Lefèvre and a house she cannot afford and an awful, final day looming in court.

'Such a beautiful child.'

The open, smiling face in the picture makes her want to cry. Her father puts his arm around her. 'Don't be too upset on Monday. I know it's been tough. But we're terribly proud of you, you know.'

'For what?' she says, blowing her nose. 'I failed, Dad. Most people think I shouldn't have even tried.'

Her father pulls her to him. He smells of red wine and a part of her life that seems a million years ago. 'Just for carrying on, really. Sometimes, my darling girl, that's heroic in itself.'

It's almost four thirty when she calls him. It's been almost twenty-four hours, she rationalizes. And surely the normal rules for dating don't apply if someone has just given up half their life for you. Her heart quickens a little as she dials: she's already anticipating the sound of his voice. She pictures them, later that evening, curled up on his sofa in the crowded little flat, maybe playing cards with Jake on the rug. But the answer-phone cuts in after three rings. Liv hangs up quickly, oddly unsettled, then curses herself for being childish.

She goes for a run, showers, makes tea for Fran ('The last one only had two sugars'), sits by the phone and finally dials his number again at six thirty. Again it goes straight to the answer-phone. She doesn't have a landline number for his flat. Should she just go there? He could be at Greg's. But, she realizes, she doesn't have a number for Greg's either. She had been so disoriented by Friday's events when they had arrived there that she's not even sure of the exact address.

This is ridiculous, she tells herself. He'll call.

He doesn't.

At eight thirty, knowing she can't face spending the rest of the evening in the house, she gets up, pulls on her coat and grabs her keys.

It's a short walk to Greg's bar, even shorter if you half run in your trainers. She pushes open the door and is hit by a wall of noise. On the small stage to the left a man dressed as a woman is singing raucously to a disco beat, accompanied by loud catcalls from a rapt crowd. At the other end, the tables are packed, the spaces between them thick with taut, tightly clad bodies.

It takes her a few minutes to spot him, moving swiftly along the bar, a tea-towel slung over his shoulder. She squeezes through to the front, half wedged under somebody's armpit, and shouts his name.

It takes several goes for him to hear her. Then he turns. Her smile freezes: his expression is oddly unwelcoming.

'Well, this is a fine time to turn up.'

She blinks. 'I'm sorry?'

'Nearly nine o'clock? Are you guys kidding me?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I've had him all day. Andy was meant to go out tonight. Instead he's had to cancel just to stay home and babysit. I can tell you he's not happy.'

Liv struggles to hear him over the noise in the bar. Greg holds up a hand, and leans forward to take someone's order.

'I mean, you know we love him, right?' he says, when he returns. 'We love him to death. But treating us like some kind of default babysitter is –'

'I'm looking for Paul,' she says.

'He's not with you?'

'No. And he's not answering his phone.'

'I know he's not answering his phone. I thought that was because he was with – Oh, this is crazy. Come through the bar.' He lifts the hatch so that she can squeeze in, holds his hands up to the roar of complaint from those waiting. 'Two minutes, guys. Two minutes.'

In the tiny corridor to the kitchen, the beat thumps through the walls, making Liv's feet vibrate. 'But where has he gone?' she says.

'I don't know.' Greg's anger has evaporated. 'We woke up to a note this morning saying he'd had to go. That was it. He was kind of weird last night after you left.'

'What do you mean, weird?'

He looks shifty, as if he's already said too much.

'What?'

'Not himself. He takes this stuff pretty seriously.' He bites his lip.

'What?'

Greg looks awkward. 'Well, he – he said he thought this painting was going to ruin any chance the two of you had of having a relationship.'

Liv stares at him. 'You think he's …'

'I'm sure he didn't mean –'

But Liv is already pushing her way out through the bar.

Empty of anything, Sunday lasts for ever. Liv sits in her still house, her phone silent, her thoughts spinning and humming, and waits for the end of the world.

She rings his mobile number one more time, then ends the call abruptly when the answer-phone kicks in.

He's gone cold.

Of course he hasn't.

He's had time to think about everything he's throwing away by siding with me.

You have to trust him.

She wishes Mo were there.

The night creeps in, the skies thickening, smothering the city in a dense fog. She fails to watch television, sleeps in weird, disjointed snatches, and wakes at four with her thoughts congealing in a toxic tangle. At half past five she gives up, runs a bath and lies in it for some time, staring up through the skylight at the oblivious dark. She blow-dries her hair carefully, and puts on a grey blouse and pinstriped skirt that David had once said he loved on her. They made her look like a secretary, he'd observed, as if that might be a good thing. She adds some fake pearls and her wedding ring. She does her makeup carefully. She is grateful for the means to conceal the shadows under her eyes, her sallow, exhausted skin.

He will come, she tells herself. *You have to have faith in something.*

Around her, the world wakes up slowly. The Glass House is shrouded in mist, emphasizing her sense of isolation from the rest of the city. Beneath it, queues of traffic, visible only as tiny illuminated dots of red brake lights, move slowly, like blood in clogged arteries. She drinks some coffee, and eats half a piece of toast. The radio tells of traffic jams in Hammersmith, and a plot to poison a politician in Ukraine. When she has finished, she tidies and wipes the kitchen so that it gleams.

Then she pulls an old blanket from the airing cupboard and wraps it carefully around *The Girl You Left Behind*. She folds it as if she were wrapping a present, keeping the picture turned away from her so that she doesn't have to see Sophie's face.

Fran is not in her box. She's sitting on an upturned bucket, gazing out across the cobbles to the river, untangling a piece of twine that is wrapped several hundred times around a huge clump of supermarket carrier bags.

She looks up as Liv approaches, with two mugs, then at the sky. It has sunk around them in thick droplets, muffling sound, ending the world at the river's edge.

'Not running?'

'Nope.'

'Not like you.'

'Nothing's like me, apparently.'

Liv hands over a coffee. Fran takes a sip, grunts with pleasure, then looks at her. 'Don't stand there like a lemon, then. Take a seat.'

Liv glances around before she realizes that Fran is pointing towards a small milk crate. She pulls it over and sits down. A pigeon walks across the cobbles towards her. Fran reaches into a crumpled paper bag and throws it a crust. It's oddly peaceful out here, hearing the Thames lap gently at the shore, the distant sounds of traffic. Liv thinks wryly of what the newspapers would say if they could see the society widow's breakfast companion. A barge emerges through the mist and floats silently past, its lights disappearing into the grey dawn.

'Your friend left, then.'

'How do you know?'

'Sit here long enough you get to know everything. You listen, see?' She taps the side of her head. 'Nobody listens any more. Everyone knows what they want to hear, but nobody actually listens.'

She stops for a minute, as if remembering something. 'I saw you in the newspaper.'

Liv blows on her coffee. 'I think the whole of London has seen me in the newspaper.'

‘I’ve got it. In my box.’ She gestures towards the doorway. ‘Is that it?’ She points to the bundle Liv is holding under her arm.

‘Yes.’ She takes a sip. ‘Yes, it is.’ She waits for Fran to add her own take on Liv’s crime, to list the reasons why she should never have attempted to keep the painting, but it doesn’t come. Instead she sniffs, looks out at the river.

‘That’s why I don’t like having too much stuff. When I was in the shelter people was always nicking it. Didn’t matter where you left it – under your bed, in your locker – they’d wait till you was going out, and then they’d just take it. It got so’s you didn’t want to go out, just for fear of losing your stuff. Imagine that.’

‘Imagine what?’

‘What you lose. Just trying to hang on to a few bits.’

Liv looks at Fran’s craggy, weathered face, suddenly suffused with pleasure as she considers the life she is no longer missing out on.

‘It’s a kind of madness,’ Fran says.

Liv stares along the grey river, and her eyes fill unexpectedly with tears.

34

Henry is waiting for her by the rear entrance. There are television cameras, as well as the protesters at the front of the High Court for the last day. He had warned her there would be. She emerges from the taxi, and when he sees what she is carrying, his smile turns into a grimace. 'Is that what I … You didn't have to do that! If it goes against us we'd have made them send a security van. Jesus Christ, Liv! You can't just carry a multi-million-pound work of art around like a loaf of bread.'

Liv's hands are tight around it. 'Is Paul here?'

'Paul?' He's hurrying her towards the courts, like a doctor ferrying a sick child into a hospital.

'McCafferty.'

'McCafferty? Not a clue.' He glances again at the bundle. 'Bloody hell, Liv. You could have warned me.'

She follows him through Security and into the corridor. He calls the guard over and motions to the painting. The guard looks startled, nods, and says something into his radio. Extra security is apparently on its way. Only when they actually enter the courtroom does Henry begin to relax. He sits, lets out a long breath, rubs at his face with both palms. Then he turns to Liv. 'You know, it's not over yet,' he says, smiling ruefully at the painting. 'Hardly a vote of confidence.'

She says nothing. She scans the courtroom, which is fast filling around them. Above her in the public gallery the faces peer down at her, speculative and impassive, as if she herself is on trial. She tries not to meet anyone's eye. She spies Marianne in tangerine, her plastic earrings a matching shade, and the old woman gives a little wave and an encouraging thumbs-up; a friendly face in a sea of blank stares. She sees Janey Dickinson settle into a seat further along the bench, exchanging a few words with Flaherty. The room fills with the sound of shuffling feet, polite conversation, scraping chairs and dropped bags. The reporters chat companionably to each other, swigging at polystyrene cups of coffee and sharing notes. Someone hands someone else a spare pen. She's trying to quell a rising sense of panic. It's nine forty. Her eyes stray towards the doors again and again, watching for Paul. *Have faith*, she thinks. *He will come.*

She tells herself the same thing at nine fifty, and nine fifty-two. And then at nine fifty-eight. Just before ten o'clock, the judge enters. The courtroom rises. Liv feels a sudden panic. *He's not coming. After all this, he's not coming. Oh, God, I can't do this if he's not here.* She forces herself to breathe deeply and closes her eyes, trying to calm herself.

Henry is paging through his files. 'You okay?'

Her mouth appears to have filled with powder. 'Henry,' she whispers, 'can I say something?'

'What?'

'Can I say something? To the court? It's important.'

'Now? The judge is about to announce his verdict.'

'This is important.'

'What do you want to say?'

‘Just ask him. Please.’

His face shows incredulity, but something in her expression convinces him. He leans forward, muttering to Angela Silver. She glances behind her at Liv, frowning, and after a short exchange, she stands and asks for permission to approach the bench. Christopher Jenks is invited to join them.

As barristers and judge consult quietly, Liv feels her palms beginning to sweat. Her skin prickles. She glances around her at the packed courtroom. The air of quiet antagonism is almost palpable. Her hands tighten on the painting. *Imagine you are Sophie*, she tells herself. *She would have done it*.

Finally the judge speaks.

‘Apparently Mrs Olivia Halston would like to address the court.’ He glances at her from over the top of his spectacles. ‘Go ahead, Mrs Halston.’

She stands, and makes her way to the front of the court, still clutching the painting. She hears each footstep on the wooden floor, is acutely aware of all the eyes upon her. Henry, perhaps still fearful about the painting, stands a few feet from her.

She takes a deep breath. ‘I would like to say a few words about *The Girl You Left Behind*.’ She pauses for a second, registering the surprise on the faces around her, and continues, her voice thin, wavering slightly in the silence. It seems to belong to someone else.

‘Sophie Lefèvre was a brave, honourable woman. I think – I hope this has become clear through what’s been heard in court.’ She is vaguely aware of Janey Dickinson’s face, scratching something in her notebook, the muttered boredom of the barristers. She closes her fingers around the frame, and forces herself to keep going.

‘My late husband, David Halston, was also a good man. A really good man. I believe now that, had he known Sophie’s portrait, the painting he loved, had this – this history, he would have given it back long ago. My contesting this case has caused his good name to be removed from the building that was his life and his dream, and that is a source of immense regret to me, because that building – the Goldstein – should have been his memorial.’

She sees the reporters look up, the ripple of interest that passes over their bench. Several of them consult, start scribbling.

‘This case – this painting – has pretty much destroyed what should have been his legacy, just as it destroyed Sophie’s. In this way they have both been wronged.’ Her voice begins to break. She glances around her. ‘For that reason I would like it on record that the decision to fight was mine alone. If I have been mistaken, I’m so very sorry. That’s all. Thank you.’

She takes two awkward steps to the side. She sees the reporters scribbling furiously, one checking the spelling of *Goldstein*. Two solicitors on the bench are talking urgently. ‘Nice move,’ says Henry, softly, leaning in to her. ‘You’d have made a good lawyer.’

I did it, she tells herself silently. David is publicly linked to his building now, whatever the Goldsteins do.

The judge asks for silence. ‘Mrs Halston. Have you finished pre-empting my verdict?’ he says wearily.

Liv nods. Her throat has dried. Janey is whispering to her lawyer.

‘And this is the painting in question, is it?’

‘Yes.’ She is still holding it tightly to her, like a shield.

He turns to the court clerk. ‘Can someone arrange for it to be placed in safe custody? I’m not entirely sure it should be sitting out here. Mrs Halston?’

Liv holds out the painting to the court clerk. Just for a moment her fingers seem oddly reluctant to release it, as if her inner self has decided to ignore the instruction. When she finally lets go, the clerk stands there, briefly frozen, as if she has handed him something radioactive.

I’m sorry, Sophie, she says, and, suddenly exposed, the girl’s image stares back at her.

Liv walks unsteadily back to her seat, the empty blanket balled under her arm, barely hearing the growing commotion around her. The judge is in conversation with both barristers. Several people make for the doors, evening-paper reporters perhaps, and above them the public gallery is alive with discussion. Henry touches her arm, muttering something about how she has done a good thing.

She sits, and gazes down at her lap, at the wedding ring she twists round and round her finger, and wonders how it is possible to feel so empty.

And then she hears it.

‘Excuse me?’

It is repeated twice before it can be heard over the mêlée. She looks up, following the swivelling gaze of the people around her, and there, in the doorway, is Paul McCafferty.

He is wearing a blue shirt and his chin is grey with stubble, his expression unreadable. He wedges the door open, and slowly pulls a wheelchair into the courtroom. He looks around, seeking her out, and suddenly it is just the two of them. *You okay?* he mouths, and she nods, letting out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

He calls again, just audible above the noise. ‘Excuse me? Your Honour?’

The gavel cracks against the desk like a gunshot. The court falls silent. Janey Dickinson stands and turns to see what is happening. Paul is pushing an elderly woman in a wheelchair down the central aisle of the court. She is impossibly ancient, hunched over like a shepherd’s crook, her hands resting on a small bag.

Another woman, neatly dressed in navy, hurries in behind Paul, consults with him in whispers. He gestures towards the judge.

‘My grandmother has some important information regarding this case,’ the woman says. She speaks with a strong French accent, and as she walks down the centre aisle, she glances awkwardly to the people on either side.

The judge throws up his hands. ‘Why not?’ he mutters audibly. ‘Everyone else seems to want to have a say. Let’s see if the cleaner would like to express her view, why don’t we?’

The woman waits, and he says, exasperated, ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, Madame. Do approach the bench.’

They exchange a few words. The judge calls over the two barristers, and the conversation extends.

‘What is this?’ Henry keeps saying, beside Liv. ‘What on earth is going on?’

A hush settles over the court.

‘It appears we should hear what this woman has to say,’ the judge says. He picks up his pen and leafs through his notes. ‘I’m wondering if anybody here is going to be interested in something as mundane as an actual verdict.’

The old woman's chair is wheeled round and positioned near the front of the court. She speaks her first words in French, and her granddaughter translates.

'Before the future of the painting is decided, there is something you must know. This case is based on a false premise.' She pauses, stooping to hear the old woman's words, then straightens up again. '*The Girl You Left Behind* was never stolen.'

The judge leans forward a little. 'And how would you know this, Madame?'

Liv lifts her face to look up at Paul. His gaze is direct, steady and oddly triumphant.

The older woman lifts a hand, as if to dismiss her granddaughter. She clears her throat and speaks slowly and clearly, this time in English. 'Because I am the person who gave it to Kommandant Hencken. My name is Édith Béthune.'

35

1917

I was unloaded some time after dawn. I don't know how long we had been on the road: fever had invaded me so my days and my dreams had become jumbled and I could no longer be sure whether I still existed, or whether, like a spectre, I flitted in and out of some other reality. When I closed my eyes, I saw my sister pulling up the blinds of the bar window, turning to me with a smile, the sun illuminating her hair. I saw Mimi laughing. I saw Édouard, his face, his hands, heard his voice in my ear, soft and intimate. I would reach out to touch him, but he would vanish, and I would wake on the floor of the truck, my eyes level with a soldier's boots, my head thumping painfully as we passed over every rut in the road.

I saw Liliane.

Her body was out there, somewhere on the Hannover road, where they had tossed it, cursing, as if she were a sandbag. I had spent the hours since speckled with her blood and worse. My clothes were coloured with it. I tasted it on my lips. It lay congealed and sticky on the floor from which I no longer had the energy to raise myself. I no longer felt the lice that ate me. I was numb. I felt no more alive than Liliane's corpse.

The soldier opposite sat as far away from me as possible, furious at the staining of his uniform, at the dressing-down he had received from his superior for Liliane's theft of his gun, his face turned to the canvas sheeting that let in air from outside. I saw his look: it spoke of revulsion. I was no longer a human being to him. I tried to remember when I had been more than a thing, when even in a town full of Germans I had possessed dignity, commanded some respect, but it was hard. My whole world seemed to have become this truck. This hard metal floor. This woollen sleeve, with its dark red stain.

The truck rumbled and lurched through the night, stopping briefly. I drifted in and out of consciousness, woken only by pain or the ferocity of my fever. I breathed in the cold air, cigarette smoke, heard the men speak in the front of the cab and wondered if I would ever hear a French voice again.

And then, at dawn, it juddered to a halt. I opened my sore eyes, unable to move, listening to the young soldier scrambling out of the truck. I heard him stretch with a groan, the click of a cigarette lighter, German voices in low conversation. I heard the vigorous, indelicate sound of men relieving themselves, birdsong, and the rustle of leaves.

I knew then that I would die there, and in truth I no longer cared.

My whole body glowed with pain; my skin prickling with fever, my joints aching, my head thick. The canvas flap at the rear was lifted and the back opened. A guard ordered me out. I could barely move, but he pulled at my arm, as one would a recalcitrant child. My body was so light that I almost flew across the back of the truck.

The morning was hung with mist, and through it I could see a barbed-wire fence, the vast gates. Above them, it said: 'STRÖHEN'. I knew what it was.

Another guard motioned at me to stay where I was, and walked over to a sentry box. There was a discussion, and one of them leaned out and looked at me. Beyond the gates I could see row upon row of long factory sheds. It was a bleak, featureless place with an air of misery and futility that was almost palpable. A watchtower with a crow's nest stood at each corner, to prevent escape. They needn't have worried.

Do you know how it feels to resign yourself to your fate? It is almost welcome. There was to be no more pain, no more fear, no more longing. It is the death of hope that comes as the greatest relief. Soon, I could hold Édouard to me. We would be joined in the next life, because I knew surely that if God was good He would not be so cruel as to deprive us of this consolation.

I became dimly aware of a fierce discussion in the sentry box. A man emerged and demanded my papers. I was so weak it took me three attempts to pull them from my pocket. He motioned to me to hold up my identity card. As I was crawling with lice, he did not want to touch me.

He ticked something on his list and barked in German to the guard holding me. They had a short conversation. It faded in and out and I was no longer sure whether it was them lowering their voices or my mind betraying me. I was as mild and obedient as a lamb now; a thing, ready to go where they instructed me. I no longer wished to think. I no longer wished to imagine what new horrors lay ahead. Fever buzzed in my head and my eyes burned. I was so weary. I heard Liliane's voice and knew distantly that while I lived I should still be afraid: *You have no idea what they will do to us*. But somehow I could not rouse myself to fear. If the guard had not been beside me, holding my arm, I might just have dropped to the ground.

The gates opened to let a vehicle out, and closed again. I drifted in and out of time. My eyes closed and I had a brief vision of sitting in a café in Paris, my head tilted back, feeling the sun on my face. My husband was seated beside me, his roar of laughter filling my ears, his huge hand reaching for mine on the table.

Oh, Édouard, I wept silently, as I shivered in the chill dawn air. I pray you escaped this pain. I pray it was easy for you.

I was pulled forward again. Someone was shouting at me. I stumbled on my skirts, somehow still clutching my bag. The gates opened again and I was shoved roughly forwards into the camp. As I reached the second sentry post, the guard stopped me again.

Just put me in the shed. Just let me lie down.

I was so tired. I saw Liliane's hand, the precise, premeditated way she had lifted the gun to the side of her head. Her eyes, locked on mine in the last seconds of her life. They were limitless black holes, windows on an abyss. *She feels nothing now*, I told myself, and some still functioning part of me acknowledged that what I felt was envy.

As I put my card back into my pocket my hand brushed against the jagged edge of the glass fragment, and I felt a flicker of recognition. I could bring that point up to my throat. I knew the vein, just how much pressure to apply. I remembered how the pig had buckled in St Péronne: one brisk swipe and his eyes had closed in what seemed like a quiet ecstasy. I stood there and let the thought solidify in my head. I could do it before they even realized what I had done. I could free myself.

You have no idea what they will do to us.

My fingers closed. And then I heard it.

Sophie.

And then I knew that release was coming. I let the shard fall from my fingers. So this was it, the sweet voice of my husband leading me home. I almost smiled then, so great was my relief. I swayed a little as I let it echo through me.

Sophie.

A German hand spun me round and pushed me back towards the gate. Confused, I stumbled and glanced behind me. And then I saw the guard coming through the mist. In front of him was a tall, stooped man, clutching a bundle to his stomach. I squinted, aware there was something familiar about him. But the light was behind him and I could not see.

Sophie.

I tried to focus, and suddenly the world grew still, everything silent around me. The Germans were mute, the engines stopped, the trees themselves ceased whispering. And I could see that the prisoner was limping towards me, his silhouette strange, his shoulders skin and bone, but his stride determined, as if a magnet were pulling him to me. And I began to tremble convulsively, as if my body knew before I did. 'Édouard?' My voice emerged as a croak. I could not believe it. I dared not believe it.

'Edouard?'

And he was shuffling, half running towards me now, the guard quickening his stride behind him. And I stood frozen, still afraid that this was some terrible trick, that I would wake and find myself in the back of the truck, a boot beside my head. *Please, God, You could not be so cruel*.

And he stopped, a few feet from me. So thin, his face haggard, his beautiful hair shaven, scars upon his face. But, oh, God, his face. *His face*. *My Édouard*. It was too much. My face tilted heavenwards, my bag fell from my hands, and I sank towards the ground. And as I did, I felt his arms close around me.

'Sophie. My Sophie. What have they done to you?'

Édith Béthune leans back in her wheelchair in the silent courtroom. A clerk brings her some water, and she nods her thanks. Even the reporters have stopped writing: they sit there, pens stilled, mouths half open.

'We knew nothing of what had happened to her. I believed her dead. A new information network sprang up several months after my mother was taken away, and we received news that she was among a number of people to have died in the camps. Hélène cried for a week at the news.

'And then one morning I happened to come down in the dawn, ready to start preparing for the day – I helped Hélène in the kitchen – and I saw a letter, pushed under the door of Le Coq Rouge. I was about to pick it up, but Hélène was behind me and snatched it away first.

'"You didn't see this," she said, and I was shocked, because she had never been so sharp with me before. Her face had gone completely white. "Do you hear me? You didn't see this, Édith. You are not to tell anyone. Not even Aurélien. Especially not Aurélien."

'I nodded, but I refused to move. I wanted to know what was in it. Hélène's hands shook when she opened the letter. She stood against the bar, her face illuminated by the morning light, and her hands trembled so hard I was not sure how she could possibly read the words. And then she drooped, her hand pressed to her mouth, and she began to sob softly. "Oh, thank God, oh, thank God."

‘They were in Switzerland. They had false identity cards, given in lieu of “services to the German state”, and were taken to a forest near the Swiss border. Sophie was so sick by then that Édouard had carried her the last fifteen miles to the checkpoint. They were informed by the guard who drove them that they were not to contact anybody in France, or risk exposure of those who had helped them. The letter was signed “Marie Leville”.’

She looked around her at the court.

‘They remained in Switzerland. We knew that she could never return to St Péronne, so high was feeling about the German occupation. If she had turned up, questions would have been asked. And, of course, by then I had grasped who had helped them escape together.’

‘Who was this, Madame?’

She purses her lips, as if even now it costs her to say it. ‘Kommandant Friedrich Hencken.’

‘Forgive me,’ says the judge. ‘It is an extraordinary tale. But I don’t understand how this relates to the loss of the painting.’

Édith Béthune composes herself. ‘Hélène did not show me the letter, but I knew it preoccupied her. She was jumpy when Aurélien was near, although he spent barely any time at Le Coq Rouge after Sophie left. It was as if he could not bear to be there. But then two days later, when he had gone out, and as the little ones slept in the next room, she called me into her bedroom. “Édith, I need you to do something for me.”

‘She was seated on the floor, Sophie’s portrait supported by one hand. She stared at the letter in her hand, as if checking something, shook her head slightly, and then, with chalk, she inscribed several words on the back. She sat back on her heels, as if confirming that she had got it right. She wrapped it carefully in a blanket and handed it over to me. “Herr Kommandant is shooting in the woods this afternoon. I need you to take this to him.”

‘“Never.” I hated that man with a passion. He had been responsible for the loss of my mother.

‘“Do as I say. I need you to take this to Herr Kommandant.”

‘“No.” I was not afraid of him then – he had already done the worst thing imaginable to me – but I would not spend a moment in his company.

‘Hélène stared at me, and I think she could see how serious I was. She pulled me to her, and I have never seen her look more determined. “Édith, the *Kommandant* is to have this painting. You and I may wish him dead, but we must observe …” she hesitated “… Sophie’s wishes.”

‘“You take it.”

‘“I cannot. If I do the town will talk, and we cannot risk my own name being destroyed as my sister’s was. Besides, Aurélien will guess something is going on. And he must not know the truth. Nobody must know, for her safety and ours. Will you do it?”

‘I had no choice. That afternoon, when Hélène gave me the signal, I took the painting under my arm and I walked down the alleyway, through the wasteland and to the woods. It was heavy and the frame dug into my underarm. He was there with another officer. The sight of them with their guns in their hands made my knees knock with fear. When he saw me, he ordered the other man away. I walked through the trees slowly, my feet cold on the icy forest floor. He looked a little unsettled as I approached, and I remember thinking, Good. I hope I unsettle you for ever.

‘“Did you wish to speak with me?” he said.

‘I didn’t want to hand it over. I didn’t want him to have a single thing. He had already taken the two most precious things in my life. I hated that man. And I think that was when I got the idea. “Aunt Hélène says I’m to give this to you.’

‘He took the picture from me, and unwrapped it. He glanced at it, uncertain, and then he turned it over. When he saw what was written on the back, something strange happened to his face. It softened, just for a moment, and his pale blue eyes appeared moist, as if he would cry with gladness.

‘“*Danke*,” he said softly. “*Dankeschön*.”’

‘He turned it over to gaze upon Sophie’s face, then reversed it again, reading the words to himself. “*Danke*,” he said softly, to her or me, I wasn’t sure.

‘I couldn’t bear to see his happiness, his utter relief, when he had ruined any chance of happiness for me. I hated that man more than anyone. He had destroyed everything. And I heard my voice, clear as a bell in the still air. “Sophie died,” I said. “She died after we received her instruction to give you the painting. She died of the Spanish flu in the camps.”

‘He actually jolted with shock. “What?”

‘I don’t know where it came from. I spoke fluently, without fear of what might result. “She died. Because of being taken away. Just after she sent the message to give this to you.”

‘“Are you sure?” His voice cracked. “I mean there may have been reports –”

‘“Quite sure. I should probably not have told you. It’s a secret.”

‘I stood there, my heart like a stone, and I watched him staring at the painting, his face actually ageing, physically sagging with grief, before me.

‘“I hope you like the painting,” I said, and then I walked slowly back through the woods towards Le Coq Rouge. I don’t believe I was ever afraid of anything again.

‘Herr Kommandant spent another nine months in our town. But he never came to Le Coq Rouge again. I felt it like a victory.’

The courtroom is silent. The reporters are gazing at Édith Béthune. It is as if history has suddenly come to life here, in this small chamber. The judge’s voice, this time, is gentle.

‘Madame. Could you tell us what was written on the back of the painting? It appears to be quite a salient point in this matter. Can you remember it clearly?’

Édith Béthune looks around her at the packed benches. ‘Oh, yes. I remember it very clearly. I remember it because I couldn’t work out what it meant. It said, in chalk: ‘*Pour Herr Kommandant, qui comprendra: pas pris, mais donné*.’ She pauses. ‘To Herr Kommandant, who will understand: not taken, but given.’

36

Liv hears the noise rise up, like a cloud of birds, around her. She sees the journalists crowding round the old lady, their pens waving like antennae, the judge talking urgently with the lawyers, banging his gavel in vain. She stares up at the public gallery, at the animated faces, and hears the strange trickle of applause that might be for the old woman or for the truth: she isn't sure.

Paul is fighting his way through the crowd. When he gets to her he pulls her to him, his head dipped against hers, his voice in her ear. 'She's yours, Liv,' he says, and his voice is thick with relief. 'She's yours.'

'She lived,' she says, and she is laughing and crying at the same time. 'They found each other.' From his arms, she gazes around her at the chaos, and she is no longer afraid of the crowd. People are smiling, as if this has been a good result; as if she is no longer the enemy. She sees the Lefèvre brothers stand to leave, their faces as sombre as coffin-bearers, and is flooded with relief that Sophie will not be returning to France with them. She sees Janey, gathering her things slowly, her face frozen, as if she cannot believe what has just taken place.

'How about that?' Henry claps a hand on her shoulder, his face wreathed in smiles. 'How about that? No one's even listening to poor old Berger's verdict.'

'C'mon,' says Paul, placing a protective arm around her shoulders. 'Let's get you out of here.'

The clerk appears, pushing his way through the sea of people. He stands in front of her, blocking her path, slightly breathless with the effort of his short journey. 'Here, madam,' he says, and hands her the painting. 'I believe this is yours.'

Liv's fingers close around the gilded frame. She glances down at Sophie, her hair vibrant in the dull light of the court, her smile as inscrutable as ever. 'I think it would be best if we took you out the back way,' the clerk adds, and a security guard appears beside him, propelling them towards the door, already speaking into his walkie-talkie.

Paul makes as if to step forward, but she puts a hand on his arm, stopping him. 'No,' says Liv. She takes a breath and straightens her shoulders, so that she seems just a little bit taller. 'Not this time. We're going out through the front.'

Epilogue

Between 1917 and 1922 Anton and Marie Leville lived in a small house close to the edge of a lake in the Swiss town of Montreux. They were a quiet couple, not fond of entertaining, but apparently most content in each other's company. Madame Leville worked as a waitress in a local restaurant. She is remembered as efficient and friendly but as someone who did not volunteer conversation ('A rare quality in a woman,' the proprietor would remark, with a sideways look at his wife).

Every evening at a quarter past nine, Anton Leville, a tall, dark-haired man with an oddly shambolic gait, could be seen walking the fifteen minutes to the restaurant, where he would tip his hat through the open door to the manager, then wait outside until his wife emerged. He would hold out his arm, she would take it, and they would walk back together, slowing occasionally to admire the sunset on the lake or a particularly decorative shop window. This, according to their neighbours, was the routine for their every working day and they rarely deviated from it. Occasionally Madame Leville would post parcels, little gifts, to an address in northern France, but apart from that they seemed to have little interest in the wider world.

At weekends the couple tended to remain at home, emerging occasionally to go to a local café where, if it were sunny enough, they would spend several hours playing cards or sitting beside each other in companionable silence, his large hand over her smaller one.

'My father would joke to Monsieur Leville that Madame would not blow away on the breeze if he were to release her just for a minute,' said Anna Baertschi, who had grown up next door. 'My father used to tell my mother that he thought it was a little improper, to be hanging on to your wife in public so.'

Little was known of Monsieur Leville's own affairs, other than that he appeared to suffer from poor health. He was assumed to have some kind of private income. He once offered to paint portraits of two of the neighbours' children, but given his strange choice of colours and unconventional brushwork, they were not terribly well received.

Most townspeople agreed privately that they preferred the neater brushwork and more lifelike images of Monsieur Blum down by the watchmaker's.

The email arrives on Christmas Eve.

> Okay. So I officially suck at predictions. And possibly friendship. But I would really like to see you, if you haven't been using my handed-down skills to build voodoo dolls of me (this is entirely possible, I have had some serious headaches lately. If it was you, I offer my grudging admiration).
>
> The thing with Ranic isn't really working out. Turns out sharing a two-bedroom flat with fifteen male Eastern European hotel workers isn't such a blast. Who knew? I got a new place through Gumtree with an accountant who has a vampire thing going on and seems to think that living with someone like me will give him street cred. I think he's a little disappointed that I haven't filled his fridge with roadkill and offered him a home-grown tattoo. But it's okay. He has satellite telly and it's two minutes' walk from the care home so I no longer have an excuse to miss Mrs Vincent's bag change (don't ask).

Anyway. I'm really glad you got to keep your picture. Truly. And I'm sorry I don't have a diplomacy button. I miss you.

Mo

'Invite her,' says Paul, peering over her shoulder. 'Life's too short, right?'

She dials the number before she even thinks about it.

'So, what are you doing tomorrow?' she says, before Mo can speak.

'Is this a trick question?'

'Do you want to come over?'

'And miss the annual bitchfest that is my parents, a faulty remote control and the Christmas edition of the *Radio Times*? Are you kidding me?'

'You're expected at ten. I'm cooking for five thousand, apparently. I need potato-based help.'

'I'll be there.' Mo can't hide her delight. 'I may even have got you a present. One that I actually bought. Oh. But I have to slope off around six-ish just to do some singing stuff for the olds.'

'You *do* have a heart.'

'Yeah. Your last skewer must have missed.'

Baby Jean Montpellier died from influenza in the last months of the war. Hélène Montpellier went into shock, crying neither when the undertaker came to take his little body nor when it was laid in the earth. She continued to behave with a semblance of normality, opening the bar of Le Coq Rouge at the allotted hours and dismissing all offers of help, but she was, the mayor recalled, in his journals of the time, 'a woman frozen'.

Édith Béthune, who had silently taken over many of Hélène's responsibilities, describes an afternoon several months later when a lean, tired-looking man in uniform arrived at the door, his left arm in a sling. Édith was drying glasses, and waited for him to enter, but he just stood on the step, gazing in with a strange expression. She offered him a glass of water, and then, when he still did not step inside, she had asked, 'Should I fetch Madame Montpellier?'

'Yes, child,' he had replied, bowing his head. His voice had broken slightly as he spoke. 'Yes. Please.'

She tells of Hélène's faltering steps into the bar, her disbelieving face, and how she had dropped her broom, gathered her skirts and hurled herself at him, like a missile, her cries loud enough to echo through the open door and down the streets of St Péronne, causing even those neighbours hardened by their own losses to look up from whatever they were doing and dab their eyes.

She remembers sitting on the stairs outside their bedroom, listening to their muffled sobs as they wept for their lost son. She remarks, without self-pity, that despite her fondness for Jean, she herself remained dry-eyed. After the death of her mother, she says, she never cried again.

History records that in all the years that Le Coq Rouge was owned and run by the Montpellier family, it closed its doors only once: for a three-week period during 1925. Townspeople remember that Hélène, Jean-Michel, Mimi and Édith told nobody that they were going away but simply pulled down the shutters, locked the doors and disappeared, leaving an '*en vacances*' sign on the door. This had led to no small degree of consternation within the little town, two letters of complaint to the local paper, and a good deal of extra custom for Le Bar Blanc. On the family's return, when asked where she had been, Hélène had replied that they had travelled to Switzerland.

'We consider the air there to be particularly good for Hélène's health,' Monsieur Montpellier said.

'Oh, it certainly is,' Hélène replied, with a small smile. 'Most … restorative.'

Madame Louvier is recorded as remarking in her diary that it was one thing for hoteliers to disappear on a whim to foreign countries, without so much as a by-your-leave, but quite another for them to come back looking quite so pleased with themselves about having done so.

I never knew what happened to Sophie and Édouard. I know they were in Montreux up to 1926 but Hélène was the only one in regular contact and she died suddenly in 1934. After that my letters came back marked Return to Sender.

Édith Béthune and Liv have exchanged four letters, trading long-hidden information, filling in the gaps. Liv has begun writing a book about Sophie, having been approached by two publishers. It is, frankly, terrifying, but Paul asks her who is more qualified to write it.

The older woman's handwriting is firm for someone of her advanced years, the copperplate evenly spaced and forward-slanting. Liv shifts closer to the bedside light to read it.

I wrote to a neighbour, who said she had heard Édouard had fallen ill, but could offer no evidence. Over the years other such communications led me to believe the worst; some remembered him becoming ill, some remembered Sophie as the one whose health failed. Someone said they had just disappeared. Mimi thought she heard her mother say they had gone somewhere warmer. I had moved so many times by then that Sophie would have had no way of contacting me herself.

I know what good sense would have me believe of two frail people whose bodies had been so punished by starvation and imprisonment. But I have always preferred to think that seven, eight years after the war, free of responsibility for anybody else, perhaps they finally felt safe enough to move on, and simply packed up and did so. I prefer to imagine that they were out there, perhaps in sunnier climes, as happy as they had been on our holiday, content in their own company.

Around her the bedroom is even emptier than usual, ready for her move the following week. She will stay in Paul's little flat. She may get her own place, but neither of them seems to be in any hurry to pursue that conversation.

She gazes down at him sleeping beside her, still struck by how handsome he is, the shape of him, the simple joy of having him there. She thinks of something her father had said when he came for Christmas, seeking her out in the kitchen and drying dishes as she washed, while the others played noisy board games in the front room. She had looked up, struck by his uncharacteristic silence.

'You know, I think David would have rather liked him.' He didn't look at her, but continued with his drying.

She wipes her eyes, as she does often when she thinks about this (she is giddily emotional at the moment), and turns back to the letter.

I am an old woman now, so it may not happen in my lifetime, but I believe that one day a whole series of paintings will emerge with unknown provenance, beautiful and strange, their colours unexpected and rich. They will feature a red-haired woman in the shade of a palm tree, or perhaps gazing out into a yellow sun, her face a little older, that hair perhaps streaked with grey, but her smile wide and her eyes full of love.

Liv looks up at the portrait opposite her bed, and the young Sophie gazes back at her, washed with the pale gold of the lamplight. She reads the letter a second time, studying the words, the spaces between them. She thinks back to Édith Béthune's gaze: steady and knowing. And then she reads it again.

'Hey.' Paul rolls over sleepily towards her. He reaches out an arm and pulls her to him. His skin is warm, his breath sweet. 'What you doing?'

'Thinking.'

'That sounds dangerous.'

Liv puts the letter down, and burrows under the duvet until she is facing him.

'Paul.'

'Liv.'

She smiles. She smiles every time she looks at him. And she takes a little breath. ‘You know how good you are at finding stuff …’

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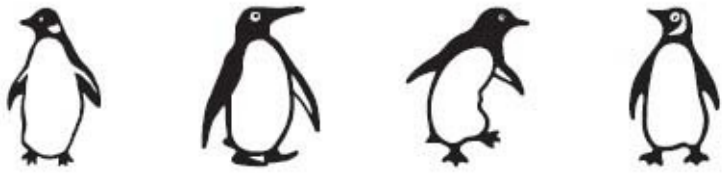

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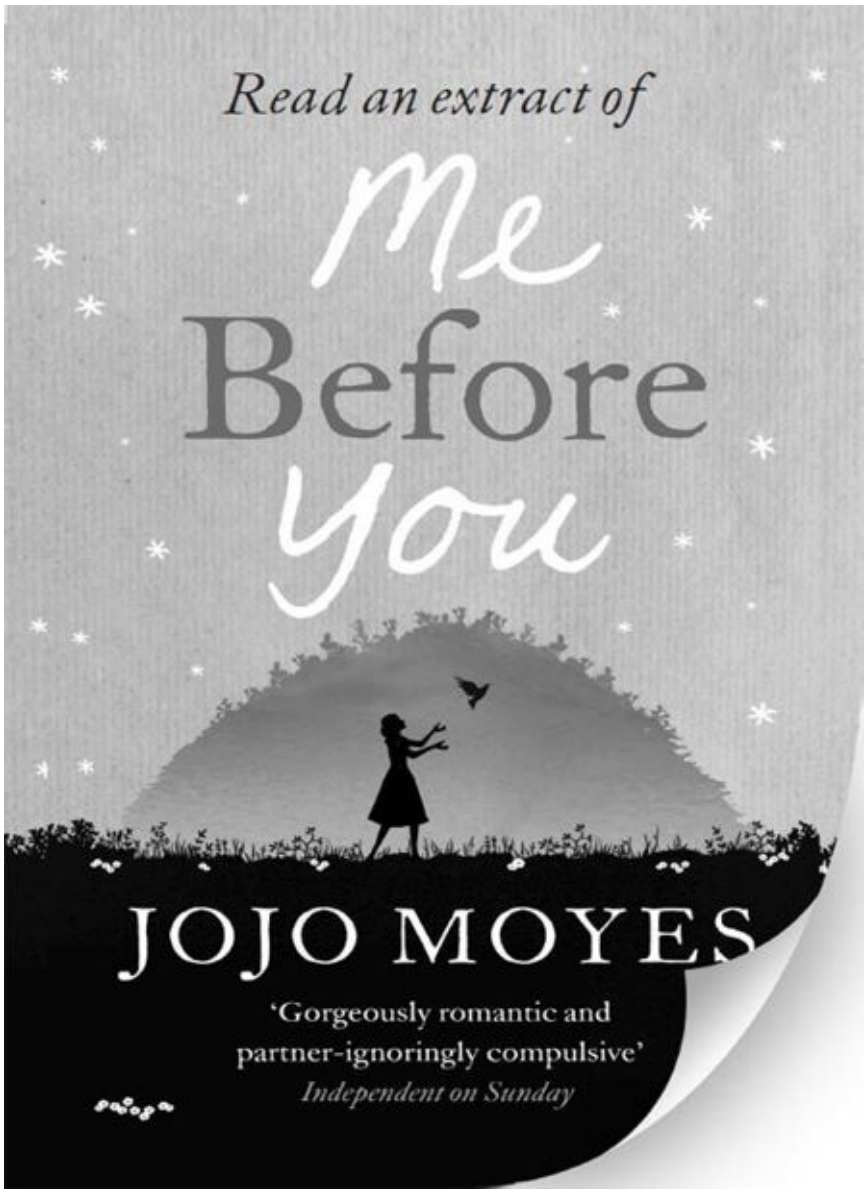
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Independent on Sunday

PROLOGUE

2007

When he emerges from the bathroom she is awake, propped up against the pillows and flicking through the travel brochures that were beside his bed. She is wearing one of his T-shirts, and her long hair is tousled in a way that prompts reflexive thoughts of the previous night. He stands there, enjoying the brief flashback, rubbing the water from his hair with a towel.

She looks up from a brochure and pouts. She is probably slightly too old to pout, but they've been going out a short enough time for it still to be cute.

'Do we really *have* to do something that involves trekking up mountains, or hanging over ravines? It's our first proper holiday together, and there is literally not one single trip in these that doesn't involve either throwing yourself off something or –' she pretends to shudder '– wearing *fleece*.'

She throws them down on the bed, stretches her caramel-coloured arms above her head. Her voice is husky, testament to their missed hours of sleep. 'How about a luxury spa in Bali? We could lie around on the sand … spend hours being pampered … long relaxing nights … '

'I can't do those sorts of holidays. I need to be doing something.'

'Like throwing yourself out of aeroplanes.'

'Don't knock it till you've tried it.'

She pulls a face. 'If it's all the same to you, I think I'll stick with knocking it.'

His shirt is faintly damp against his skin. He runs a comb through his hair and switches on his mobile phone, wincing at the list of messages that immediately pushes its way through on to the little screen.

'Right,' he says. 'Got to go. Help yourself to breakfast.' He leans over the bed to kiss her. She smells warm and perfumed and deeply sexy. He inhales the scent from the back of her hair, and briefly loses his train of thought as she wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him down towards the bed.

'Are we still going away this weekend?'

He extricates himself reluctantly. 'Depends what happens on this deal. It's all a bit up in the air at the moment. There's still a possibility I might have to be in New York. Nice dinner somewhere Thursday, either way? Your choice of restaurant.' His motorbike leathers are on the back of the door, and he reaches for them.

She narrows her eyes. 'Dinner. With or without Mr BlackBerry?'

'What?'

‘Mr BlackBerry makes me feel like Miss Gooseberry.’ The pout again. ‘I feel like there’s always a third person vying for your attention.’

‘I’ll turn it on to silent.’

‘Will Traynor!’ she scolds. ‘You must have some time when you can switch off.’

‘I turned it off last night, didn’t I?’

‘Only under extreme duress.’

He grins. ‘Is that what we’re calling it now?’ He pulls on his leathers. And Lissa’s hold on his imagination is finally broken. He throws his motorbike jacket over his arm, and blows her a kiss as he leaves.

There are twenty-two messages on his BlackBerry, the first of which came in from New York at 3.42am. Some legal problem. He takes the lift down to the underground car park, trying to update himself with the night’s events.

‘Morning, Mr Traynor.’

The security guard steps out of his cubicle. It’s weatherproof, even though down here there is no weather to be protected from. Will sometimes wonders what he does down here in the small hours, staring at the closed-circuit television and the glossy bumpers of £60,000 cars that never get dirty.

He shoulders his way into his leather jacket. ‘What’s it like out there, Mick?’

‘Terrible. Raining cats and dogs.’

Will stops. ‘Really? Not weather for the bike?’

Mick shakes his head. ‘No, sir. Not unless you’ve got an inflatable attachment. Or a death wish.’

Will stares at his bike, then peels himself out of his leathers. No matter what Lissa thinks, he is not a man who believes in taking unnecessary risks. He unlocks the top box of his bike and places the leathers inside, locking it and throwing the keys at Mick, who catches them neatly with one hand. ‘Stick those through my door, will you?’

‘No problem. You want me to call a taxi for you?’

‘No. No point both of us getting wet.’

Mick presses the button to open the automatic grille and Will steps out, lifting a hand in thanks. The early morning is dark and thunderous around him, the Central London traffic already dense and slow despite the fact that it is barely half past seven. He pulls his collar up around his neck and strides down the street towards the junction, from where he is most likely to hail a taxi. The roads are slick with water, the grey light shining on the mirrored pavement.

He curses inwardly as he spies the other suited people standing on the edge of the kerb. Since when did the whole of London begin getting up so early? Everyone has had the same idea.

He is wondering where best to position himself when his phone rings. It is Rupert.

‘I’m on my way in. Just trying to get a cab.’ He catches sight of a taxi with an orange light approaching on the other side of the road, and begins to stride towards it, hoping nobody else has seen. A bus roars past, followed by a lorry whose brakes squeal, deafening him to Rupert’s words. ‘Can’t hear you, Rupe,’ he yells against the noise of the traffic. ‘You’ll have to say that again.’ Briefly marooned on the island, the traffic flowing past him like a current, he can see the orange light glowing, holds up his free hand, hoping that the driver can see him through the heavy rain.

‘You need to call Jeff in New York. He’s still up, waiting for you. We were trying to get you last night.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘Legal hitch. Two clauses they’re stalling on under section … signature … papers … ’ His voice is drowned out by a passing car, its tyres hissing in the wet.

‘I didn’t catch that.’

The taxi has seen him. It is slowing, sending a fine spray of water as it slows on the opposite side of the road. He spies the man further along whose brief sprint slows in disappointment as he sees Will must get there before him. He feels a sneaking sense of triumph. ‘Look, get Cally to have the paperwork on my desk,’ he yells. ‘I’ll be there in ten minutes.’

He glances both ways then ducks his head as he runs the last few steps across the road towards the cab, the word ‘Blackfriars’ already on his lips. The rain is seeping down the gap between his collar and his shirt. He will be soaked by the time he reaches the office, even walking this short distance. He may have to send his secretary out for another shirt.

‘And we need to get this due diligence thing worked out before Martin gets in –’

He glances up at the screeching sound, the rude blare of a horn. He sees the side of the glossy black taxi in front of him, the driver already winding down his window, and at the edge of his field of vision something he can’t quite make out, something coming towards him at an impossible speed.

He turns towards it, and in that split second he realizes that he is in its path, that there is no way he is going to be able to get out of its way. His hand opens in surprise, letting the BlackBerry fall to the ground. He hears a shout, which may be his own. The last thing he sees is a leather glove, a face under a helmet, the shock in the man’s eyes mirroring his own. There is an explosion as everything fragments.

And then there is nothing.

1

2009

There are 158 footsteps between the bus stop and home, but it can stretch to 180 if you aren't in a hurry, like maybe if you're wearing platform shoes. Or shoes you bought from a charity shop that have butterflies on the toes but never quite grip the heel at the back, thereby explaining why they were a knock-down £1.99. I turned the corner into our street (68 steps), and could just see the house – a four-bedroomed semi in a row of other three- and four-bedroomed semis. Dad's car was outside, which meant he had not yet left for work.

Behind me, the sun was setting behind Stortfold Castle, its dark shadow sliding down the hill like melting wax to overtake me. When I was a child we used to make our elongated shadows have gun battles, our street the O. K. Corral. On a different sort of day, I could have told you all the things that had happened to me on this route: where Dad taught me to ride a bike without stabilizers; where Mrs Doherty with the lopsided wig used to make us Welsh cakes; where Treena stuck her hand into a hedge when she was eleven and disturbed a wasp's nest and we ran screaming all the way back to the castle.

Thomas's tricycle was upturned on the path and, closing the gate behind me, I dragged it under the porch and opened the door. The warmth hit me with the force of an air bag; Mum is a martyr to the cold and keeps the heating on all year round. Dad is always opening windows, complaining that she'd bankrupt the lot of us. He says our heating bills are larger than the GDP of a small African country.

'That you, love?'

'Yup.' I hung my jacket on the peg, where it fought for space amongst the others.

'Which you? Lou? Treena?'

'Lou.'

I peered round the living-room door. Dad was face down on the sofa, his arm thrust deep between the cushions, as if they had swallowed his limb whole. Thomas, my five-year-old nephew, was on his haunches, watching him intently.

'Lego.' Dad turned his face towards me, puce from exertion. 'Why they have to make the damned pieces so small I don't know. Have you seen Obi-Wan Kenobi's left arm?'

'It was on top of the DVD player. I think he swapped Obi's arms with Indiana Jones's.'

'Well, apparently now Obi can't possibly have beige arms. We have to have the black arms.'

‘I wouldn’t worry. Doesn’t Darth Vader chop his arm off in episode two?’ I pointed at my cheek so that Thomas would kiss it. ‘Where’s Mum?’

‘Upstairs. How about that? A two-pound piece!’

I looked up, just able to hear the familiar creak of the ironing board. Josie Clark, my mother, never sat down. It was a point of honour. She had been known to stand on an outside ladder painting the windows, occasionally pausing to wave, while the rest of us ate a roast dinner.

‘Will you have a go at finding this bloody arm for me? He’s had me looking for half an hour and I’ve got to get ready for work.’

‘Are you on nights?’

‘Yeah. It’s half five.’

I glanced at the clock. ‘Actually, it’s half four.’

He extracted his arm from the cushions and squinted at his watch. ‘Then what are you doing home so early?’

I shook my head vaguely, as if I might have misunderstood the question, and walked into the kitchen.

Granddad was sitting in his chair by the kitchen window, studying a sudoku. The health visitor had told us it would be good for his concentration, help his focus after the strokes. I suspected I was the only one to notice he simply filled out all the boxes with whatever number came to mind.

‘Hey, Granddad.’

He looked up and smiled.

‘You want a cup of tea?’

He shook his head, and partially opened his mouth.

‘Cold drink?’

He nodded.

I opened the fridge door. ‘There’s no apple juice.’ Apple juice, I remembered now, was too expensive. ‘Ribena?’

He shook his head.

‘Water?’

He nodded, murmured something that could have been a thank you as I handed him the glass.

My mother walked into the room, bearing a huge basket of neatly folded laundry. ‘Are these yours?’ She brandished a pair of socks.

‘Treena’s, I think.’

‘I thought so. Odd colour. I think they must have got in with Daddy’s plum pyjamas. You’re back early. Are you going somewhere?’

‘No.’ I filled a glass with tap water and drank it.

‘Is Patrick coming round later? He rang here earlier. Did you have your mobile off?’

‘Mm.’

‘He said he’s after booking your holiday. Your father says he saw something on the television about it. Where is it you liked? Ipsos? Kalypsos?’

‘Skiathos.’

‘That’s the one. You want to check your hotel very carefully. Do it on the internet. He and Daddy watched something on the news at lunchtime. Apparently they’re building sites, half of those budget deals,

and you wouldn't know until you got there. Daddy, would you like a cup of tea? Did Lou not offer you one?' She put the kettle on then glanced up at me. It's possible she had finally noticed I wasn't saying anything. 'Are you all right, love? You look awfully pale.'

She reached out a hand and felt my forehead, as if I were much younger than twenty-six.

'I don't think we're going on holiday.'

My mother's hand stilled. Her gaze had that X-ray thing that it had held since I was a kid. 'Are you and Pat having some problems?'

'Mum, I –'

'I'm not trying to interfere. It's just, you've been together an awful long time. It's only natural if things get a bit sticky every now and then. I mean, me and your father we –'

'I lost my job.'

My voice cut into the silence. The words hung there, searing themselves on the little room long after the sound had died away.

'You what?'

'Frank's shutting down the cafe. From tomorrow.' I held out a hand with the slightly damp envelope I had gripped in shock the entire journey home. All 180 steps from the bus stop. 'He's given me my three months' money.'

The day had started like any other day. Everyone I knew hated Monday mornings, but I never minded them. I liked arriving early at The Buttered Bun, firing up the huge tea urn in the corner, bringing in the crates of milk and bread from the backyard and chatting to Frank as we prepared to open.

I liked the fuggy bacon-scented warmth of the cafe, the little bursts of cool air as the door opened and closed, the low murmur of conversation and, when quiet, Frank's radio singing tinnily to itself in the corner. It wasn't a fashionable place – its walls were covered in scenes from the castle up on the hill, the tables still sported Formica tops, and the menu hadn't altered since I started, apart from a few changes to the chocolate bar selection and the addition of chocolate brownies and muffins to the iced bun tray.

But most of all I liked the customers. I liked Kev and Angelo, the plumbers, who came in most mornings and teased Frank about where his meat might have come from. I liked the Dandelion Lady, nicknamed for her shock of white hair, who ate one egg and chips from Monday to Thursday and sat reading the complimentary newspapers and drinking her way through two cups of tea. I always made an effort to chat with her. I suspected it might be the only conversation the old woman got all day.

I liked the tourists, who stopped on their walk up and down from the castle, the shrieking schoolchildren, who stopped by after school, the regulars from the offices across the road, and Nina and Cherie, the hairdressers, who knew the calorie count of every single item The Buttered Bun had to offer. Even the annoying customers, like the red-haired woman who ran the toyshop and disputed her change at least once a week, didn't trouble me.

I watched relationships begin and end across those tables, children transferred between divorcees, the guilty relief of those parents who couldn't face cooking, and the secret pleasure of pensioners at a fried breakfast. All human life came through, and most of them shared a few words with me, trading jokes or comments over the mugs of steaming tea. Dad always said he never knew what was going to come out of my mouth next, but in the cafe it didn't matter.

Frank liked me. He was quiet by nature, and said having me there kept the place lively. It was a bit like being a barmaid, but without the hassle of drunks.

And then that afternoon, after the lunchtime rush had ended, and with the place briefly empty, Frank, wiping his hands on his apron, had come out from behind the hotplate and turned the little Closed sign to face the street.

'Now now, Frank, I've told you before. Extras are not included in the minimum wage.' Frank was, as Dad put it, as queer as a blue gnu. I looked up.

He wasn't smiling.

'Uh-oh. I didn't put salt in the sugar cellars again, did I?'

He was twisting a tea towel between his two hands and looked more uncomfortable than I had ever seen him. I wondered, briefly, whether someone had complained about me. And then he motioned to me to sit down.

'Sorry, Louisa,' he said, after he had told me. 'But I'm going back to Australia. My Dad's not too good, and it looks like the castle is definitely going to start doing its own refreshments. The writing's on the wall.'

I think I sat there with my mouth actually hanging open. And then Frank had handed me the envelope, and answered my next question before it left my lips. 'I know we never had, you know, a formal contract or anything, but I wanted to look after you. There's three months' money in there. We close tomorrow.'

'Three months!' Dad exploded, as my mother thrust a cup of sweet tea into my hands. 'Well, that's big of him, given she's worked like a ruddy Trojan in that place for the last six years.'

'Bernard.' Mum shot him a warning look, nodding towards Thomas. My parents minded him after school every day until Treena finished work.

'What the hell is she supposed to do now? He could have given her more than a day's bloody notice.'

'Well … she'll just have to get another job.'

'There are no bloody jobs, Josie. You know that as well as I do. We're in the middle of a bloody recession.'

Mum shut her eyes for a moment, as if composing herself before she spoke. 'She's a bright girl. She'll find herself something. She's got a solid employment record, hasn't she? Frank will give her a good reference.'

'Oh, fecking marvellous … "Louisa Clark is very good at buttering toast, and a dab hand with the old teapot."'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad.'

'I'm just saying.'

I knew the real reason for Dad's anxiety. They relied on my wages. Treena earned next to nothing at the flower shop. Mum couldn't work, as she had to look after Granddad, and Granddad's pension amounted to almost nothing. Dad lived in a constant state of anxiety about his job at the furniture factory. His boss had been muttering about possible redundancies for months. There were murmurings at home about debts and the juggling of credit cards. Dad had had his car written off by an uninsured driver two years previously, and somehow this had been enough for the whole teetering edifice that was my parents' finances to finally collapse. My modest wages had been a little bedrock of housekeeping money, enough to help see the family through from week to week.

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. She can head down to the Job Centre tomorrow and see what’s on offer. She’s got enough to get by for now.’ They spoke as if I weren’t there. ‘And she’s smart. You’re smart, aren’t you, love? Perhaps she could do a typing course. Go into office work.’

I sat there, as my parents discussed what other jobs my limited qualifications might entitle me to. Factory work, machinist, roll butterer. For the first time that afternoon I wanted to cry. Thomas watched me with big, round eyes, and silently handed me half a soggy biscuit.

‘Thanks, Tommo,’ I mouthed silently, and ate it.

He was down at the athletics club, as I had known he would be. Mondays to Thursdays, regular as a station timetable, Patrick was there in the gym or running in circles around the floodlit track. I made my way down the steps, hugging myself against the cold, and walked slowly out on to the track, waving as he came close enough to see who it was.

‘Run with me,’ he puffed, as he got closer. His breath came in pale clouds. ‘I’ve got four laps to go.’

I hesitated just a moment, and then began to run alongside him. It was the only way I was going to get any kind of conversation out of him. I was wearing my pink trainers with the turquoise laces, the only shoes I could possibly run in.

I had spent the day at home, trying to be useful. I’m guessing it was about an hour before I started to get under my mother’s feet. Mum and Granddad had their routines, and having me there interrupted them. Dad was asleep, as he was on nights this month, and not to be disturbed. I tidied my room, then sat and watched television with the sound down and when I remembered, periodically, why I was at home in the middle of the day I had felt an actual brief pain in my chest.

‘I wasn’t expecting you.’

‘I got fed up at home. I thought maybe we could do something.’

He looked sideways at me. There was a fine film of sweat on his face. ‘The sooner you get another job, babe, the better.’

‘It’s all of twenty-four hours since I lost the last one. Am I allowed to just be a bit miserable and floppy? You know, just for today?’

‘But you’ve got to look at the positive side. You knew you couldn’t stay at that place forever. You want to move upwards, onwards.’ Patrick had been named Stortfold Young Entrepreneur of the Year two years previously, and had not yet quite recovered from the honour. He had since acquired a business partner, Ginger Pete, offering personal training to clients over a 40-mile area, and two liveried vans on the HP. He also had a whiteboard in his office, on which he liked to scrawl his projected turnover with thick black markers, working and reworking the figures until they met with his satisfaction. I was never entirely sure that they bore any resemblance to real life.

‘Being made redundant can change people’s lives, Lou.’ He glanced at his watch, checking his lap time. ‘What do you want to do? You could retrain. I’m sure they do a grant for people like you.’

‘People like me?’

‘People looking for a new opportunity. What do you want to be? You could be a beautician. You’re pretty enough.’ He nudged me as we ran, as if I should be grateful for the compliment.

‘You know my beauty routine. Soap, water, the odd paper bag.’

Patrick was beginning to look exasperated.

I was starting to lag behind. I hate running. I hated him for not slowing down.

‘Look … shop assistant. Secretary. Estate agent. I don’t know … there must be something you want to do.’

But there wasn’t. I had liked it in the cafe. I liked knowing everything there was to know about The Buttered Bun, and hearing about the lives of the people who came through it. I had felt comfortable there.

‘You can’t mope around, babe. Got to get over it. All the best entrepreneurs fight their way back from rock bottom. Jeffrey Archer did it. So did Richard Branson.’ He tapped my arm, trying to get me to keep up.

‘I doubt if Jeffrey Archer ever got made redundant from toasting teacakes.’ I was out of breath. And I was wearing the wrong bra. I slowed, dropped my hands down on to my knees.

He turned, running backwards, his voice carrying on the still, cold air. ‘But if he had … I’m just saying. Sleep on it, put on a smart suit and head down to the Job Centre. Or I’ll train you up to work with me, if you like. You know there’s money in it. And don’t worry about the holiday. I’ll pay.’

I smiled at him.

He blew a kiss and his voice echoed across the empty stadium. ‘You can pay me back when you’re back on your feet.’

I made my first claim for Jobseeker’s Allowance. I attended a 45-minute interview, and a group interview, where I sat with a group of twenty or so mismatched men and women, half of whom wore the same slightly stunned expression I suspected I did, and the other half the blank, uninterested faces of people who had been here too many times before. I wore what my Dad deemed my ‘civilian’ clothes.

As a result of these efforts, I had endured a brief stint filling in on a night shift at a chicken processing factory (it had given me nightmares for weeks), and two days at a training session as a Home Energy Adviser. I had realized pretty quickly that I was essentially being instructed to befuddle old people into switching energy suppliers, and told Syed, my personal ‘adviser’ that I couldn’t do it. He had been insistent that I continue, so I had listed some of the practices that they had asked me to employ, at which point he had gone a bit quiet and suggested we (it was always ‘we’ even though it was pretty obvious that one of us *had* a job) try something else.

I did two weeks at a fast food chain. The hours were okay, I could cope with the fact that the uniform made my hair static, but I found it impossible to stick to the ‘appropriate responses’ script, with its ‘How can I help you today?’ and its ‘Would you like large fries with that?’ I had been let go after one of the doughnut girls caught me debating the varying merits of the free toys with a four-year-old. What can I say? She was a smart four-year-old. I also thought the Sleeping Beauties were sappy.

Now I sat at my fourth interview as Syed scanned through the touch screen for further employment ‘opportunities’. Even Syed, who wore the grimly cheerful demeanour of someone who had shoehorned the most unlikely candidates into a job, was starting to sound a little weary.

‘Um … Have you ever considered joining the entertainment industry?’

‘What, as in pantomime dame?’

‘Actually, no. But there is an opening for a pole dancer. Several, in fact.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘Please tell me you are kidding.’

‘It’s thirty hours a week on a self-employed basis. I believe the tips are good.’

‘Please, please tell me you have not just advised me to get a job that involves parading around in front of strangers in my underwear.’

‘You said you were good with people. And you seem to like … theatrical … clothing.’ He glanced at my tights, which were green and glittery. I had thought they would cheer me up. Thomas had hummed the theme tune from *The Little Mermaid* at me for almost the whole of breakfast.

Syed tapped something into his keyboard. ‘How about “adult chat line supervisor”?’

I stared at him.

He shrugged. ‘You said you liked talking to people.’

‘No. And no to semi-nude bar staff. Or masseuse. Or webcam operator. Come on, Syed. There must be something I can do that wouldn’t actually give my dad a heart attack.’

This appeared to stump him. ‘There’s not much left outside flexi-hour retail opportunities.’

‘Night-time shelf stacking?’ I had been here enough times now to speak their language.

‘There’s a waiting list. Parents tend to go for it, because it suits the school hours,’ he said apologetically. He studied the screen again. ‘So we’re really left with care assistant.’

‘Wiping old people’s bottoms.’

‘I’m afraid, Louisa, you’re not qualified for much else. If you wanted to retrain, I’d be happy to point you in the right direction. There are plenty of courses at the adult education centre.’

‘But we’ve been through this, Syed. If I do that, I lose my Jobseeker money, right?’

‘If you’re not available for work, yes.’

We sat there in silence for a moment. I gazed at the doors, where two burly security men stood. I wondered if they had got the job through the Job Centre.

‘I’m not good with old people, Syed. My granddad lives at home since he had his strokes, and I can’t cope with him.’

‘Ah. So you have some experience of caring.’

‘Not really. My mum does everything for him.’

‘Would your mum like a job?’

‘Funny.’

‘I’m not being funny.’

‘And leave me looking after my granddad? No thanks. That’s from him, as well as me, by the way. Haven’t you got anything in any cafes?’

‘I don’t think there are enough cafes left to guarantee you employment, Louisa. We could try Kentucky Fried Chicken. You might get on better there.’

‘Because I’d get so much more out of offering a Bargain Bucket than a Chicken McNugget? I don’t think so.’

‘Well, then perhaps we’ll have to look further afield.’

‘There are only four buses to and from our town. You know that. And I know you said I should look into the tourist bus, but I rang the station and it stops at 5pm. Plus it’s twice as expensive as the normal bus.’

Syed sat back in his seat. ‘At this point in proceedings, Louisa, I really need to make the point that as a fit and able person, in order to continue qualifying for your allowance, you need –’

‘– to show that I’m trying to get a job. I know.’

How could I explain to this man how much I wanted to work? Did he have the slightest idea how much I missed my old job? Unemployment had been a concept, something droningly referred to on the news in relation to shipyards or car factories. I had never considered that you might miss a job like you missed a

limb – a constant, reflexive thing. I hadn't thought that as well as the obvious fears about money, and your future, losing your job would make you feel inadequate, and a bit useless. That it would be harder to get up in the morning than when you were rudely shocked into consciousness by the alarm. That you might miss the people you worked with, no matter how little you had in common with them. Or even that you might find yourself searching for familiar faces as you walked the high street. The first time I had seen the Dandelion Lady wandering past the shops, looking as aimless as I felt, I had fought the urge to go and give her a hug.

Syed's voice broke into my reverie. 'Aha. Now this might work.'

I tried to peer round at the screen.

'Just come in. This very minute. Care assistant position.'

'I told you I was no good with –'

'It's not old people. It's a … a private position. To help in someone's house, and the address is less than two miles from your home. "Care and companionship for a disabled man." Can you drive?'

'Yes. But would I have to wipe his –'

'No bottom wiping required, as far as I can tell.' He scanned the screen. 'He's a … a quadriplegic. He needs someone in the daylight hours to help feed and assist. Often in these jobs it's a case of being there when they want to go out somewhere, helping with basic stuff that they can't do themselves. Oh. It's good money. Quite a lot more than the minimum wage.'

'That's probably because it involves bottom wiping.'

'I'll ring them to confirm the absence of bottom wiping. But if that's the case, you'll go along for the interview?'

He said it like it was a question.

But we both knew the answer.

I sighed, and gathered up my bag ready for the trip home.

'Jesus Christ,' said my father. 'Can you imagine? If it wasn't punishment enough ending up in a ruddy wheelchair, then you get our Lou turning up to keep you company.'

'Bernard!' my mother scolded.

Behind me, Granddad was laughing into his mug of tea.