

# Chapter 1

Chris Quinn

Chris didn't realize he was killing Yi-Ling until it was too late. As much as he wanted to save her, he knew that once she made the decision to follow the traders, her fate was sealed. She was smart enough to plan and skilled enough to execute another escape, but not this time. He'd make sure her memory was kept alive and that her name was evoked at just the right times. Not too much. But that was all for later. Right now, he had to focus and create her death in the best, most interesting way possible.

The last thing Chris should have done in that moment was get up from his writing desk, but that's exactly what he did. He rationalized that he needed to walk around, maybe even outside, and think about all the ways one of his main characters could meet her end. Weigh all the options and decide. He liked the idea that anyone who was reading his book series would be shocked by this turn in the saga. The traders weren't bad; they were just opportunists whose culture was entirely different. Plus, they had no idea what they were walking into. Yi-Ling's team, those who knew and loved her, would arrive too late, making for a powerful scene. In the aftermath, her son Haim would set the wheels in motion for his revenge, and that's where this novel, book five in his series, would end. Good stuff.

He checked his watch. 4:43. Almost happy hour. Coming out from his study he saw Anne sitting at the dining room table with the mail. She looked particularly engrossed in one piece.

"Making a drink," he said. "You want something?"

"Sure," she said, her attention still on the paper in her hand.

He stopped and waited, then finally asked: "Martini? Negroni?"

She looked up at him. "Sorry. Martini is fine. Look at this. It's from Eric Asher."

"For real?" asked Chris as he sat with her and took the paper she was holding out to him. He noticed on the table in front of her two United Airlines envelopes, tickets obviously, and the larger torn envelope this all came in. "What in the world?" he muttered as he started to read the letter, which oddly had a big, boldfaced headline like a magazine article.

**Don't Ignore Opportunity. Do Accept This Invitation.**

Hello to my dear old friends Woodstock, Mowgli, Ginger, and Brontë ~

I hope all is well in your worlds. It has been far too long, and I have a proposition for you all. An offer you can't refuse (but not in any cinematic, life-threatening sense). My hope is that you would not see any reason to refuse it.

I've recently found myself reminiscing quite a bit about our time together. Our late-night discussions that touched upon virtually everything from the issues of the day to our personal lives to our headstrong and unapologetic adventures in fiction writing. In short, I miss your thoughts, your ideas, and your humor. These days I listen to people opine and pontificate about all sorts of things, and whether they are colleagues in conversation or strangers on Twitter, I find myself thinking what would *you* say? Especially now that we are all life-experienced adults.

I know far too little about what that experience has brought each of you. I know I'm to blame there, having become a bit of a social recluse. I'm sure you'd agree, however, that social media updates, however wonderful (and yes, I am updated on you there) are not really enough for those who were once so close like we were those unforgettable years.

Please find enclosed tickets to San Francisco. Note that the date is months away, which I hope will ease the planning on your end. Once there, the four of you will meet up and take a private plane to another location where I have secured a beautiful villa by a quiet lake. My plan is to host four days of fun, nostalgia, inspiration, creativity, and reward. All of us together again. Am I looking to escape my current, woefully superficial scene and ground myself in something I know is real? Yes, but I feel our reunion will be so much more than that. I sincerely hope you are looking forward to it as much as I am.

All My Best,  
Gregor

P.S. It's imperative that everyone be there. If for some reason you cannot attend on those dates, let me know ASAP, and I will reschedule.

“Wow,” Chris said. “We can go, right?” he asked having no idea what her answer might be.

“I guess,” she said. “I’m sure I can tag whatever the dates are.” She reached for the plane tickets and checked them.

Tagging dates was shorthand for requesting time off at Anne’s work. She was one of three women who founded a moderately successful event planning company. He was proud of what she had accomplished, but the truth was her work changed who she was. When they met in grad school he saw her as a highly imaginative creative writer. She once wrote a harrowing but hopeful short story from the point of view of a balloon that had been accidentally let loose by a child. He still remembered the bittersweet ending and the brilliance of the language cadence mimicking haphazard floating.

In the last several years, however, he’d witnessed the emergence of this astute, no-nonsense businesswoman. It wasn’t as if he no longer recognized her. That would be too simplistic and melodramatic. Planning events had a creative side to it, but he watched silently as she delegated more and more of that work to her partners. Anne always billed herself, truthfully so, as a private person. To succeed in business, she created a kind of “work persona” that allowed her to become the “face” of the company, the salesperson who closed the deals. She was also, for lack of a better term, their bookkeeper. It was impressive in a way, but also weird, given that he often felt married to the persona.

“It’ll be wild to see everyone again,” he said, looking at the letter again. Eric seemed apologetic for not keeping in touch. Maybe he thought the rest of the group was still tight, but the truth was, their contact with Lauren and Fiona was sparse at best, marked by little other than Facebook interactions and Christmas cards. Maybe Anne was a little better with them, but Chris wasn’t sure about that. There was no falling out, but the graduate school friends, who met while earning their MFAs in Creative Writing, had simply gone their separate ways. Lauren Curtis, who became Lauren Curtis-Pritchard got more degrees and became a professor near Chicago. Fiona Voss was a teacher and painter in New York City. Eric Asher ended up making movies in Los Angeles, while Chris and Anne married and remained in the Boston area.

Eric was a shy, unassuming guy from Minnesota who answered Chris’ ad for a roommate. Chris had a few other bites of interest, but this Eric guy with his buzz cut, black-framed glasses,

and quick wit was, to Chris' surprise, starting the same writing program he was. That seemed like a good omen, and he was right. They became fast friends. Eric eventually became the Golden Boy of their class, publishing a short story in a reputable journal while they were still students, then his first novel (which was also his master's thesis) less than a year after graduation.

That book, which Chris recalled was set in a traveling carnival in the 1940s, was met with lukewarm reviews and modest sales, but who cared? He was published! A year later the publisher pulled the plug on his second book months before the scheduled release. There was never a clear story as to why. Eric talked about "creative differences," but the friends feared off the record to each other that he'd been unable to finish it.

But then, in an embodiment of the third time being a charm, he published *All That's Left to Know*, a poignant, beautifully written novel about a small-town tragedy that causes a family to crumble from within. The book was a hit, and Eric made the rounds on a multi-city signing tour. The friends all went to his event in their respective cities, each bringing a small group of soon-to-be fans.

When Hollywood called, Eric was hired to adapt his book into a screenplay and got an Oscar nomination for his work. He focused on screenwriting from then on, eventually producing and even directing indie films that were almost always critically acclaimed if not blockbuster popular. Eric was by no means a household name, but he had built a solid, respectable career in Hollywood. Fans of his novel clamored for him to write another, but he never did.

Although Chris was indeed writing novels, his career was much different. His real job was Communications Director at a financial investment company. He'd started years ago as a copywriter in their in-house creative department and worked his way up. It was fine, paid well, and everyone liked him. He was set.

The sci-fi novels were his side hobby. He enjoyed writing them but could never manage to make a living out of it. Traditional publishing didn't work out, so he self-published each book then moved on to the next one. He was terrible at the promotion part, giving it minimal effort, and as a result, not many people knew about his *Equinox* book series. He was resigned to the fact that his books would probably never be more than "out there." He sometimes joked that his fame would come posthumously.

He had planned to take his cocktail back to his writing desk, but this unexpected correspondence from their old friend changed the course of the evening. He sat with Anne in the living room. “Fiona never got married again, did she?” Chris asked.

“Not that I know of,” Anne replied, sipping her drink. She put her other hand palm up to mark the fact that there was indeed a small chance their old friend could have tied the knot a second time and not made a big deal out of it. “What do you make of that letter?” she asked.

“Sounds fun,” he said, “Why?”

“It seems contrived.”

The term surprised Chris. “How so?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “The elevated language. It just bugs me. And who writes a personal letter with a headline? Don’t ignore opportunity? What the hell does that even mean?”

“I think he’s just being dramatic,” Chris said with the hint of a shrug.

“That’s just it,” she said. “I don’t feel like an old friend receiving a letter. I feel like an audience member. That’s annoying.”

“I see what you’re saying,” said Chris.

She took out her phone and scrolled. “I have a text conversation here somewhere.” She kept scrolling and raised her eyebrows. “Yeesh, it has been a long time ... here.” She typed with her thumbs. “Definitely want their take.” Once she sent her text, she asked him: “Do you think the prank will come up?”

Chris hadn’t thought about that in years, and he’d long-since forgiven Eric for the trauma that unfortunate afternoon. “That’s water way under the bridge,” he told her. He hoped that comment was enough because the last thing he wanted was for that episode to be dug up with everyone. That was an embarrassment he could do without. Done with that topic, he looked at the letter again. “I’ll admit,” he said, “I didn’t think anything odd until you pointed it out.”

“It’s my job to point things out to you,” she said with an exaggerated, stretched smile. “That’s why we make such a good team.”

“Very funny.”

“Speaking of jobs,” she said looking at her phone. “How’s work going? You haven’t talked about it in a while.”

He wished “how’s work going?” referred to his latest novel. He wouldn’t mind updating her on the dramatic plot event. But he knew she was talking about the internal newsletters, sell sheets, and trade magazine ads he wrote for the investment company. “Fine,” he said. “The same.”

## Chapter 2

Fiona Voss

Two hours was a long time to wait. Fiona looked at the canvas on the easel in front of her. The portrait she was working on was coming together in the same haphazard way they always did. She had a fantasy in which she was so organized and methodical that these paintings, which she only did for money, became a mechanized routine. She dreamed of being able to compartmentalize each project into stages and simply move from one to the next. The assembly line mentality made sense, both the business and common kind. If only her mind worked that way and not in the scattered, stop-start-stop of an antique car with a faulty engine. If she could just focus on pushing this one forward she could take her mind off the excruciating wait, and time would speed up for sure. Was this work fun enough to make time fly? She wasn’t sure. Establishing any sort of work focus, however, seemed unlikely with what could be life-changing information hanging just out of reach. At least for another hour and fifty-eight minutes.

About four months back, the Board of Directors at a new children’s center in Binghamton had put out a call to New York artists to submit concepts for a wall mural that would ultimately live in the newly renovated lobby. With over two thousand entries, Fiona was proud (and a little shocked) to be selected as one of twenty finalists. Today that number was being cut down to six, each of whom would receive a small grant to produce a scaled-down version of their mural on a canvas. The organization planned to post the names of the six lucky artists on its website at 6pm.

It was 4:05.

Getting this commission would change everything. She would have write-ups online and in magazines which could convince a Chelsea gallery, maybe more than one, to finally show her work. She had enough pieces to fill two decent sized shows, one with her collage work and the other with paintings.

Not the portrait in front of her. That featured a six-year-old French bulldog named Betsy. Years ago she painted her publicist friend's Welsh Corgi as a surprise birthday gift. The distinct, graphic style with thick outlines and bold color-block background was such a hit hanging in her friend's apartment that word got out, and Fiona landed several commissions. Once those were done, her friend got her a feature story in a local arts & culture paper, and before she knew it, her pet portraits had become a bona fide business. Thanks to the reputation established from the media article, she was able to charge anywhere from \$2,500 to \$5,000 per painting depending on the size and the complexity of the request. Needless to say, there were plenty of New York City pet owners who had that kind of disposable income. The new revenue windfall allowed her to move into a bigger, nicer apartment closer to the middle school where she taught art.

It didn't take her long to try painting people in the same style, but that work never took off like the dogs and cats. Mostly dogs, and a ferret once, and a rabbit. The process was always the same. She would ask for about twenty photos of the pet, ones that really showed his or her personality. She'd look at the photos then talk with the owner. This was the easy part. Knowing that most people thought the same positive, cliché things about their pets, she would infer personality traits from the photos. This virtually always impressed the pet owner and moved the project forward. If the owner knew where the picture would hang, she asked for a photo of the room to choose a complementary palette. On some occasions, she was invited over to see the space, and of course, meet her subject.

Once paid her half upfront fee, Fiona would sketch on paper then block out the portrait on canvas. Even though they were all similar, there was no telling how long any one project would take. She'd go days without thinking about them and even lost her source photos a number of times. She did her best to deliver within two weeks, but didn't always hit that mark. Even the late arrivals were forgiven because the finished pictures were always so loved.

She walked away from the easel and made some coffee which she then proceeded not to drink beyond the first sip. Whether she got good news or not at 6:00, she could get back to Betsy

once she knew. She pleaded with herself not to get too deflated if she wasn't chosen. She knew she could market herself as one of the twenty finalists, even though that didn't exactly stand out in her unfathomably competitive world.

She needed to stop thinking about it. As a real, time-consuming distraction, she decided to update her website. Not long after she started, her phone beeped. A text from Ginger? That was odd. When was the last time they connected? She welcomed it, hoping everything was okay. She could see Brontë was on the text, too. An old, ongoing conversation that stopped going out some point.

Did you guys get the letter from Eric yet?

Fiona replied:

No, is he ok?

Yes, he's fine. Sorry if that sounded bad.

What is it?

He's planned a reunion.

Oh. Haven't gone to mailbox. Yesterday either. I'll check.

It felt weird jumping into such a specific conversation. She typed again.

How are you guys?

Good! Busy. How about you?

Same. Crazy times!

Text back when you read it. Curious.

Ok. Stay tuned.

Fiona stepped into her clogs and pulled a button shirt over her tank top. Presentable enough for the building's mailroom, a marble and bronze space off the lobby the size of a walk-in closet. She passed the elevator and walked down the three flights, noting the extra time would mean she'd be closer to 6:00 when she got back to her apartment. The mailroom was empty. Sure enough, a 7 x 9 manilla envelope from Eric Asher was waiting for her.

Back in her apartment, her eyebrows shot up when she saw the plane ticket. She read the letter. Twice. It made sense, but also it didn't.

She called Anne. Too much to text.

"Hey!" came Anne's voice after just the first ring, making Fiona smile. The intensity of the smile surprised her, and in that moment, she was suddenly Team Eric. He was right. It had been too long, and it was stupid – inexcusable – that they didn't see each other more often.

"Hi!"

"So you read it?" Anne asked.

"Yeah. Let me start by saying I'm going."

"Same here," Anne said. "We're definitely going."

"I mean," Fiona joked. "I really just want to fly in a private plane, but it'll be nice to see you guys, too."

Anne burst out laughing and Fiona could hear Chris in the background. "I'm missing the jokes? Not fair!"

Anne put herself on speaker and Chris jumped in. "Woodstock! How the hell are you?"

It felt strange to be called that out loud. Her phone contacts were still "Ginger" and "Brontë" because she never bothered to change them. She expected to hear her nickname from Chris and even Anne, but strange, nonetheless. Like going back in time. "I'm good," she told them. "Keeping busy and relatively happy."

"That puts you ahead of the curve, I think," Chris said.

"I have to ask," said Fiona. "You guys use your real names with each other, right?"

They both laughed. "Yes," said Anne. "Happy to report we are Chris and Anne here."

"I have new nicknames now," said Chris. "There's Jackass, Idiot ... what else?"

Now Fiona was laughing. "Sounds intimate," she said. "I'll respect your privacy on those."

"So seriously," interjected Anne, "what's the deal with that letter?"

"I gotta say I'm not entirely sure," Fiona replied. "I mean, why does it read like a mashup of a memoir and a press release?" Fiona asked.

"Exactly!" said Anne.

Anne's tone made Fiona imagine her friend smacking Chris, like she had unsuccessfully tried to convince him of that take. They had no answer regarding the tone of the letter, but ended up talking for a while, updating on their lives, reminiscing, laughing. Chris didn't stay on the whole time, but Fiona was happy to connect with him, too. Mowgli didn't seem all that wild anymore, and that was probably a good thing. He was a good guy, and she was happy to see that their marriage was going strong. At least it seemed to be in the background of a single phone call. What did she know?

After the call, she scrolled past all the pictures Anne had posted on Facebook. They had no kids, so they mostly documented their travel and their high-culture activities: concerts, museums, festivals. That sort of thing. And hikes. Lots of hiking pictures. Anne looked the same in every shot, head turned slightly to her right, same smile that showed just a flash of teeth. She must have decided, consciously in front of mirror one day or otherwise, that this was her "good side," and Fiona figured the pose probably came without thinking. Then she looked at Lauren's page. Her photos were mostly a chronicle of the life of her son, who was now fourteen and at some fancy prep school in Connecticut.

The reunion did sound like fun, but the truth was, she needed to look at it from both sides: the fun and the potentially not so fun. Her life in the past several years had been a slow, steady plateau of a journey with a decent amount of her energy spent just staying on the rails. This new, strange environment would be a test. She hoped everyone would be able to fall back into their friendship, allowing her insecurities to stay in check. What she hoped most, however, was that it would just be the five of them at this villa.

Thinking about all this proved to be an exceptional time-passage maneuver, and before she knew it, it was 6:10. A bit of panic set in. No, not panic. Anxiety. Nervousness. She got her laptop and went to the children's center site. The homepage was, of course, slow to load, making her bounce in her chair. When it finally did, she saw the now-familiar artist's rendering of the new building, which filled the large, top banner. Under that was a headline. "Mural Finalists Chosen." She took a deep breath, clicked the link, waited for that page to load, then scanned the names.

Hers was not one of them.

## Chapter 3

Lauren Curtis-Pritchard

Lauren prided herself on being able to neglect her phone for hours, and when she finally picked it up to touch base with Jonathan, she saw texts from Anne and Fiona. Normally hearing from them would be surprising because it had been so long, but not after getting that strange invitation letter from Eric. They obviously got it, too. That was his whole point. She read the brief text conversation. Seemed Fiona was supposed to text again when she read the letter, but she didn't. Lauren knew she should chime in, at least say that she was planning to attend the reunion, but she couldn't deal with any of that right now. She would later tonight.

Right now she had a package to open. The box sat innocently enough on the dining room table, a small, white cardboard rectangle about the size of a chalkboard eraser. Its return address read TechTools, a company that sounded generic enough, probably on purpose. She just stared at the box, trying to deflect its judgmental vibe which seemed to be asking her: *Are you sure you want to go through with this?*

When she first decided to go down this path and purchase what was in the box, she envisioned a team of workers arriving at the house with power tools and ladders, a full-on installation that she would have to pay for using the credit card that was not on Jonathan's radar. She even imagined chatting with the installation crew, saying it was a nanny cam. That was common enough, wasn't it? They probably heard that all the time.

Of course there were no signs that a baby lived in the house. And for good reason: there was no baby which meant no nanny and no need to keep an electronic watchful eye on anything. Lauren and Jonathan's only kid, Connor, was a teenager, and even *he* didn't live there. At least not during the school year because he was at boarding school.

The worry about her cover story went away when she finally got up the nerve to research her plan online. All she needed was an actual, working USB adapter plug, the little cube kind, that went into the regular outlet. Plug it in, sync the phone app, and you're done. She bought a two-pack using that forgotten card. She figured it was probably available on Amazon for cheaper but had no idea how to delete the item in her order history. She also didn't want this purchase in

her algorithm. *You may also like this do-it-yourself phone tapping kit and GPS tracker.* She could even imagine the advertising. *Simple! Discreet! He'll never know you know!* She timed the purchase so the package would arrive while Jonathan was away at his conference. Or symposium, whatever.

And now here it was, waiting to be opened. Would it even work? With Jonathan not coming home until tomorrow, she thought about waiting. But what would be the point of that? Now was obviously the time to test it.

The living room was easy. There was an outlet about shoulder height housed in a built-in bookcase. On that shelf they kept a Bluetooth speaker plugged in, so all she had to do was switch the adapter cube. It was even the same black color. Piece of cake.

The bedroom was trickier. So much so that she wondered if the living room was enough. What exactly did she want to see, anyway? But this unfortunate mission, she concluded, was about evidence, and her idea for the bedroom spot would have to suffice. Their matching nightstands had a lower shelf but no back, so the plug on her side, closest to the door, was visible. Again, there was already an adapter cube there with a cord running up to charge her phone at night. He had a fancy wireless charging stand on his side, so again, fate worked with her. This one switched from white to black, but she couldn't imagine he would ever notice that.

How had her life come to this? Suspecting her husband of having an affair, like the frenzied protagonist in a Lifetime movie. But here she was witnessing too many soft, brief, and abruptly ended phone calls. Too many lame excuses to explain time unaccounted for. Too many texts sent that ended with the distinctive swipe left, clearly deleting the entire conversation. Who does that? He of course had no idea she was only pretending to read and was actually watching his movements, deducing their intent. She was sure he assumed his demeanor and gestures were subtle enough, but they weren't. She found the whole situation two parts infuriating and one part embarrassing.

Suppressing thoughts that he may be with her in some hotel at that very moment, she downloaded the spy cam app and synced it up. She had already weighed the risk of all this and had worked out a story should he happen to discover one of the cameras. She planned to tell him she found the two adapters on a table in a Starbucks. No one was around, and they were always

losing and looking for things like that, so she just took them. She switched them out in those two places because the original ones were loose, and she thought that was a fire hazard.

The story was perfect because Jonathan would suspect nothing and immediately get to put what he felt was his intellectual superiority on display. He'd point out that whoever left the adapters on the table was now using his phone to spy on them in their house. She would act shocked, then embarrassed. They would throw the items away. He would comfort her in ways designed to re-emphasize both his street smarts and her mistake. She would tear up, making him promise not to tell the story socially. He would promise, then tell it whenever she wasn't there, swearing his listeners to secrecy as they snickered and shook their heads about her gullibility.

But she knew the true mistake was his. Probably some fawning graduate student. How unoriginal. Once she was able to secure the evidence, she would confront him and divorce him. And nothing about it would be nice. She would feel bad for Connor, but she hoped he was old enough to understand.

She sat at the kitchen table and opened the app, truly blown away by how simple it all was. The living room feed pointed directly at the couch at a near perfect angle. The bedroom one showed only the open door at knee-height with the edge of the bed just visible on the left. That would have to be enough. And wouldn't it be? How would he explain footage of two people entering their bedroom? In truth, she sincerely hoped that none of this was true, that she was mistaken. She hadn't been in therapy for a while, but she imagined the professional opinion would be she was looking for a reason for her unhappiness, someone to blame. She shook her head at yet another cliché.

The camera footage was oddly mesmerizing. It was entirely anticipatory. Every moment you saw didn't matter because it was always about the *next* moment. But each next moment instantly became the meaningless present one. There was something unnerving about that endless psychological repetition. It reminded her of those TV shows in which an intruder or a ghost would appear any second. But when? Where should she be focusing her attention?

She walked into the living room and stood by the bookshelf, watching the camera feed and the actual room at the same time. Then she sat on the couch and watched herself. She couldn't resist the urge to wave. Yep, it was her. So weird. She thought of that scary movie she saw a while back, the one she only watched because Eric Asher wrote the script. There was

camera footage like this in it. Some supernatural entity terrorizing a family. She did not sleep well that night. Thanks, Eric.

Then something occurred to her. The reunion with her old friends would take her out of the house for four days. That's when she should use these cameras, not now. Doing it now didn't make much sense. She was home far more than Jonathan and had no real set schedule aside from teaching. She ran through a typical week in her mind. They had classes at pretty much the same times on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. She had Thursday morning and he didn't. Did she really think she'd be capturing a brunch quickie?

She had to wait until she left. Two months seemed like a long time, but this was about getting it irrefutably right. And if she returned without capturing anything on video, wouldn't that be a decent argument for his innocence? Plus, if she did it now, she'd spend every moment of every day in the house worrying about being discovered. She hadn't even thought of the constant stress and anxiety of that. She couldn't help but smirk at the irony. Isn't the person having the affair supposed to be the one constantly battling those feelings? The fear of getting caught?

She switched the adapters back to the original ones and hid the camera ones in her desk drawer. She even put them inside a felt bag she found in her make-up vanity. They'd be safe there until she left to see her old friends.

## Chapter 4

Anne Quinn

*Two months later ...*

The flight to San Francisco was long but uneventful. Chris talked about getting a lot of writing done but slept a good deal of the way. Anne watched two forgettable movies. One and a half, actually. After the silly, formulaic romantic comedy, she tried a documentary about creativity. The topic was interesting, but the people selected to make the case throughout the film were jaw-droppingly not. She gave up on it and started thinking about the weekend ahead. She couldn't help but wonder what Eric had in store. What was this "opportunity" they were advised not to "ignore?" Then it dawned on her that maybe she supposed to be wondering what "Gregor" had in store? She hoped they'd be using real names this weekend, but wouldn't bet on it.

All the nicknames were bestowed by Eric (except his), and to say they stuck would be an understatement. During their years at school and the summer after graduation, their real names were virtually never used within the group. Anne was Ginger because her maiden name was Grant and the *Gilligan's Island* reference seemed to fit what the others saw as her soft-spoken and sometimes sultry nature. People outside the group, especially younger people, didn't get it because she wasn't a redhead. Her hair was dark brown, and she wore it in the same blunt cut with bangs that she did back then. The irony was that Ginger Grant was a movie star on a TV show, and by sharp contrast, Anne was the most private person any of them had ever met. One of her childhood stories was her intentional misspelling of a word in the classroom spelling bee every year so that she wouldn't win and go on to the schoolwide round, let alone the town finals.

What Eric called Chris' "wild side" earned him the nickname Mowgli, the star of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Fiona had an endearing, hippie vibe that started them calling her Woodstock. They all knew she liked the name because Snoopy's little yellow bird friend soon became a kind of mascot for her on items like her keychain and coffee mug. Lauren was Brontë, a nod to her love for Victorian literature and her commendable attempts to imitate the rich, descriptive style in her own writing. After her MFA she went on to get a PhD in Victorian

History, an accomplishment Eric liked to jokingly take credit for, claiming the nickname started her on that path.

As she sat on the plane, bored, Anne remembered the night Eric got his nickname. They were out at a local bar, a regular haunt that wasn't quite a dive, but almost, when Lauren returned from the bathroom grossed out and wanting to leave. Everyone obliged and as they left, she pointed to a group of three large guys. They were all leering at her, and when the friends got to the door, Lauren told them the one in the jean jacket had groped her.

"Meet you outside," Eric immediately said, and he surprised all of them by turning back and walking over to the men. They all watched as Eric said something to the groper, who was a whole head taller than Eric. As Eric came back to them at the door, Anne saw the three men laughing behind him.

"What did you say?" asked Chris.

"I told him he was making a big mistake, and that he should keep his hands to himself and stop disrespecting women."

"Thank you," said Lauren.

They were outside only a few seconds, before the three men came out, too. "Hey, punk!" the jean-jacketed man called.

Eric stopped and turned around, again surprising his friends. "Maybe we just keep going," Chris suggested. Instead, Eric walked the twenty feet back to where the man had stepped out in front of his buddies.

"I think *you* made the mistake," the man told Eric. "Not minding your own fucking business."

"I disagree," said Eric, then he slowly moved into what looked like some martial arts ready stance.

The guy started laughing. "What are you? The Karate Kid?" He then mockingly stood on one foot and put his hands up, imitating the iconic crane pose from the end of the movie.

Eric didn't move. He just said: "Last chance."

"Fuck you," the guy said and charged at Eric.

Eric became a blur of punches and kicks. They actually heard the guy's bones break twice. As the jerk dropped to his knees, Anne saw his entire face was covered in dark blood. A second later, he fell face down on the pavement.

The guy's friends came out of their shocked stupor and started to move in, but Eric stopped them in their tracks with a firm warning. "Your play is to come *toward* me right now? Are you fucking serious?" They stopped, and Eric flipped the beaten man onto his back. The move made him groan loudly in pain, but Eric didn't care. He crouched over him, perfectly balanced, with his knee on the man's chest. His glasses weren't even askew. Then he leaned in close and said something into the fallen man's ear, got up, and joined his friends.

"Sorry you had to see that," Eric said.

"Um," said Chris. "I'm not! Holy shit!"

As they walked away, they all looked back, except Eric. The two bystanders were doing their best to help their friend to his feet.

Once back on campus, they all questioned Eric. "What the hell was that?" "*Who* the hell was that?" Eric just shrugged, humble to point of embarrassment, telling them he had trained since he was six years old.

"So you have like a belt?" Chris asked. "What color?"

Eric just looked at him with raised eyebrows. *Since I was six. Duh.*

"My roommate the blackbelt," mused Chris. "I feel a short story coming on."

"What did you say to the guy at the end?" Anne asked.

"That's between me and him," was all Eric ever told them about that.

The incident led Lauren to suggest they start calling their unpredictably combustible, dual-natured friend Gregor, after the protagonist in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Although Eric never kicked anyone's ass in front of them again, the name stuck as the friends would always notice his sudden changes in mood: excited to exhausted, gloomy to joking, wistful to focused.

After a bumpy landing in San Francisco, Anne and Chris eventually got to stand, stretch, and grab their bags from the overhead compartment. Eric had instructed everyone to meet at SF Uncork'd, a wine bar in Terminal 3. Anne noted that it was mid-afternoon, so a drink was not out of the question.

Chris looked at his phone as they walked through the crowded terminal. When the bar came into view, Anne could see Lauren and Fiona seated at a four-person table, each with a glass of white wine. The years had been good to them. Their appearances were so starkly different, Anne thought people passing might wonder what brought these two women together. Perhaps they were strangers, one offering a seat to other because the rest were taken. Both being congenial, they struck up a conversation. Anne laughed to herself thinking this. Something about being back with these friends brought out the fiction writer in her.

Lauren had adeptly cultivated her refined look with short hair, clean, simple jewelry, and a smart, stylish jeans-and-blazer ensemble that said she earned a salary. She was striking. She always was. Anne remembered a story Lauren told about trying modeling as an undergrad. She only did it a few times, concluding she liked the money but hated the experience.

Fiona was more cute, like a favorite doll from childhood. Her dark curly locks were tied back, but Anne knew how wildly they could flow when set free. Her hair seemed to be the same length, maybe a little shorter, as it was in grad school. She wore a loose-fitting burgundy sweater with the sleeves pushed up, revealing a beaded, spangled variety of at least ten bracelets on her right forearm. Her earrings were giant hoops that Anne discovered, when she got close enough, were peace signs.

That made her smile. Woodstock.

The meeting was all hugs and warmth. Because all four of them shared the “it’s been too long” embarrassment, the topic instantly became a non-factor. Lauren updated them on Jonathan and Connor, who was playing junior varsity soccer and lacrosse as a freshman at his school. Chris, a sports fan and athlete back in high school, was most impressed by this fact. Thankfully to Anne, it didn’t turn into a conversation.

Whenever she was asked if she had children, Fiona’s rehearsed response was “I had a child, but I divorced him.” She repeated the line then without being asked, and they all laughed even though they’d heard the joke before. She updated everyone on her work, joked about the “lucrative absurdity” of the pet portrait business, and said she was waiting to find out about a commission for a children’s center mural. She was a finalist and would know in a week or so. They all agreed that was amazing and wished her luck.

A man in a dark suit approached the table. Anne glanced at the small menu and said: "I'll have a Chardonnay." She turned to Chris: "Are you getting something?" The suited man smiled. "I'm not a waiter," he said. "Mr. Asher sent me to take you to your plane."

"Oh!" said Anne, embarrassed. "Sorry." They were all laughing.

"I can make sure you get that drink," the man said. "It just won't be here." With that he winked at her. Nothing flirty, just an indication that she was now in on a secret. The secret being, Anne assumed, what it's like to be someone who flies on private planes.

They were soon sitting in ridiculously luxurious leather seats, a pod of four that faced each other. "I would say," Fiona remarked, "that I could get used to this, but that would betray the fact that I'm already used to it." They laughed.

Anne looked out the window and watched a commercial plane take off in the distance. She realized she hadn't thought about work once since leaving the house. That was definitely a good thing. She turned back to the group and asked: "Is it weird that Eric didn't meet us here?"

Lauren took a moment to consider the question then shook her head. "I don't think so. He's hosting us at this house. Or villa. He arranged for us to get there."

"Yeah," said Anne. "I guess you're right."

"He's gonna come out the front door like Willy Wonka," said Chris, making them laugh.

The flight was only about twenty minutes, and as they disembarked, the pilot politely declined Fiona's request to "go again." He was objectively handsome, and Anne and Lauren started teasing Fiona with shoulder bumps and elbow nudges. Perhaps she wanted to stay here, and they could come back for her on Sunday. Fiona blushed and playfully shoved them.

They descended the exterior stairs right into a waiting limousine. "This seems excessive," Lauren said. "Anyone else feeling guilty?"

"I hear you," said Anne.

"I feel under-dressed," said Chris. "Does that count?" As they drove away, Anne watched her husband as he poked around at the controls like a child. He opened a compartment to reveal liquor bottles and cocktail glasses. "Dang," he said.

Again, they sat facing each other, and Chris surprised Anne by leaning forward and gently smacking Lauren and Fiona's knees. "You guys look great," he told them. "Just like I remember. This is going to be great!"

Anne felt a sudden need to give them a sly, apologetic look, as if to say *sorry my husband never fully embraced adulthood*, but she watched as they smiled, thanked him, and returned the compliment. They both then turned their smiles to her, and she gave a simple one in return. She could see the women, practically *feel* them, remembering Chris' boyish charm. One of the very things that made her fall in love with him all those years ago. Lauren and Fiona silently expressing how much they missed it made Anne feel a bit sad as she thought of the things she missed. Mainly their connection.

Part of her wanted to tell Chris that she agreed to this reunion, she even got herself in a frame of mind in which she was looking forward to it, because she felt being back with these people could be the best possible reminder of why they decided to share their life. She wasn't sure how she could actually say such a thing without it sounding either corny or offensive to indicate the need for such a reminder. But they did need it, and she hoped they could rediscover and get back the things they'd lost.

The limo ride was another twenty-five minutes, most of which took them through a dense forest area on a winding, two-lane road. They eventually pulled off that road onto a smaller one, then turned again through an iron gate with stone pillars. They went up a hill, then one last turn revealed a beautiful stone manor, two stories high and overlooking a lake so serene it looked painted.

The car pulled around the circular drive to the front door, past a non-working stone fountain sculpted with cherubs. The four of them got out and silently took in the wonderful, late-summer scene. The driver got their bags and lined them up at the bottom of the front steps. After doing that, he tipped his cap, wished them an enjoyable stay, and drove off.

"Not too shabby," said Chris, finally.

"Beautiful," was all Anne could utter as she craned her neck in every direction.

"I guess I'll ring the doorbell?" Lauren offered, but as soon as she took the first of the two concrete steps, there was a loud *clack* from just inside. A moment later the door swung open, and their old friend, their host for the next four days, emerged. At first, he just stared at them, drinking them in the same way they were doing with the villa and the scenery. He drew a deep breath in through his nose. Its exhale was accompanied with a soft, sincere "Welcome."

He looked good, Anne thought. Fit. He'd let his hair grow out quite a bit in a wild, yet manicured, Los Angeles kind of way. He had a couple of days stubble, and she wondered if he always kept it like that. He wore roughed-up jeans and white Oxford shirt, sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. As he extended his hands to them, she saw a leather braided bracelet wrapped snug to his wrist.

Lauren, who was out in front of the others, continued up the steps and hugged him. Anne watched as Eric held the embrace, his eyes closed. When they separated, Lauren walked into the large foyer area they could see from the driveway. Fiona followed, then Chris. The impromptu receiving line gave Anne the same pang of annoyance she felt reading his strange, showy letter. When it was her turn, she made a point not to be short or cold, to hug him the way the others had. Even Chris.

The hug was actually nice and quite genuine. When he pulled away, he looked right at her and said in a stage whisper: "I'm so glad you're here." She saw in his big blue eyes a kind of sadness. It caught her a bit by surprise, but she held his stare. There was some mystery to it, too, as if she were witnessing in that moment, the sadness being defeated in some way. Or at least challenged.

"I'm glad to be here," she told him then scolded herself for finding pretension in all of this. The reunion was real. He needed them, and they came.