

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. When it was all over, he'd make sure her memory was kept alive and that everyone remembered all her life had meant. All the good she'd done. But that was all for later. Right now, he had to focus and get this done in the best 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 fans of 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. Those who respected Yi-Ling and knew her worth would arrive too late, making for a powerful scene. In the aftermath, Yi-Ling's son Haim would set the wheels in motion for his revenge, and that's where this novel, book four in his series, would end. Good stuff.

He checked his watch. 5:43. Well within the range of a happy hour cocktail. Overdue by some accounts. Coming out from his study he saw Anna sitting at the dining room table with the mail. She looked particularly engrossed in one piece. "Making a drink," he said. "You want something?"

"Yeah," 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 friends 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 would 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 was shorthand for Anna’s work. She was one of three women who founded an event planning company. They enjoyed a decent level of success with a word-of-mouth reputation that allowed them to expand their mostly corporate client base farther than what was normal for a such a business. One of the upsides of their venture was that it offered flexibility. Any of them could take time for themselves by “tagging” dates on the calendar. The other two picked up the slack, and no one abused the privilege.

“It’ll be crazy to see everyone again,” Chris said, looking at the letter again. Eric seemed apologetic in his letter for not keeping up socially. Perhaps he thought the rest of the group was still tight, but the truth was, the Quinns’ contact with Melissa and Fiona was sparse at best, marked by little other than Facebook posts and Christmas Cards. Maybe Anna was a little better, 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. Melissa Curtis-Pritchard to Academia outside of Chicago, Fiona Voss to the art scene of New York City. Eric Asher ended up making movies in Los Angeles, while Chris and Anna married and remained in the Boston area.

Eric was the Golden Boy of their class, publishing a short story in a reputable journal while they were students, then his first novel (which was also his master’s thesis) less than a year after graduation. It was met with lukewarm reviews and modest sales, but who cares? He was published! The publisher pulled the plug on his second book months before 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 Eric had been unable to finish it.

But then, in an embodiment of “third time’s 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 group of soon-to-be fans.

When Hollywood called, Eric was hired to write the screenplay and got an Oscar nomination for his adaptation. 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.

Chris had planned to take his cocktail back to his own novel, but this unexpected correspondence from an old friend had changed the course of the evening. He instead sat with Anna in the living room, hoping the conversation would stay on grad school reminiscence. If it did, he could more easily avoid the bad news weighing on him. Earlier that day, one of his few copywriting clients (the side of his professional life that made more money than his novels) made it clear that there would be no new work for a while.

The news could wait, of course. There was no deadline for him to share it. He just disliked those awkward moments where he knew something was hanging over him, and as a result, between them as well. Losing this client around the same time he was finishing a novel made it all even more frustrating. They were long past celebrating his accomplishments in fiction. That aspect of his life had become a very personal process, a dream from his perspective, a hobby from hers. Nonetheless he clung to it, refusing to give up on the idea that a big break could happen for him. For them.

He knew how the conversation would go if he did tell her. She would be supportive and say all the right things. But it was the things she *wouldn't* say that would make him angry in a way she could easily argue was unjustified.

“Fiona never got married again, did she?” Chris asked.

“Not that I know of,” Anna 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 this reunion?” she asked him.

“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 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 a hint of 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. It’s been a while ... here.” She typed with her thumbs. “Definitely want their take.”

“I’ll admit,” Chris said, “I didn’t think anything odd until you pointed it out.”

“Just doing my job,” she said with a stretched smile.

“Funny.”

“Speaking of jobs,” she said. “How’s work going?”

He knew that when she said “work” she wasn’t referring to his fiction. “Fine,” he said. “The same.”

Chapter 2

Fiona Voss

Three 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 in what she dubbed stage four of six. These projects had become so routine that she compartmentalized everything in her mind and just moved from one stage to the next until it was done. She only did these paintings for money, so the assembly line mentality actually made sense. Business sense and common sense. If she could focus on completing this stage and perhaps even the next, she could take her mind off the wait, and time would speed up for sure. But focusing seemed unlikely with what could be life-changing information hanging just out of reach. At least for another two hours and fifty-eight minutes.

A little over 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 design on a canvas. The organization planned to post the names of the six artists on its website at 4pm.

It was 1:13.

Getting this commission would change everything. She would have write-ups online and in magazines which could convince a downtown 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 cocker spaniel. Years ago she painted her publicist friend's corgi as a surprise birthday gift. The distinct, graphic style with thick outlines and bold color blocks 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 magazine 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 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 high 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 gave off 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 place, and of course, meet her subject.

Once paid her half upfront fee, Fiona would sketch on paper then block out the portrait on canvas. She'd gotten good, almost mechanically so, over time. It usually took less than a week to complete a portrait, but she still stretched it out to ten days. That just seemed right, even if she was just sitting on a finished piece for three or four days. Finishing too quickly made it seem not worth what her customers were paying. It was all about appearance and perception. She would say "ten days to two weeks" then look like a hero when she pretty much always delivered in ten days.

She walked away from the easel and made some coffee which she then proceeded not to drink beyond the first sip. Whether she made the cut or not, she could paint 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, but that didn't exactly stand out in her unfathomably competitive world.

She needed to stop thinking about it. She needed a real distraction. She thought about a walk or maybe updating her website when her phone beeped. A text from Ginger? That was odd. When was the last time they connected? She could see Brontë was on the text, too. An old, ongoing conversation that stopped going at 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.

This was weird. 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 4:00 when she got back to her apartment. The mailroom was empty. Sure enough, a 7 x 9 manilla envelope, not the bubble interior kind, from Eric Asher was waiting for her.

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

She called Anna. Too much to text.

"Hey!" came Anna's voice almost immediately, making Fiona smile. 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?" Anna asked.

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

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

“I mean,” Fiona joked. “I really just want to ride in a private plane, but it’ll be nice to see you guys, too.”

Anna burst out laughing and Fiona could hear Chris in the background. “I’m missing the jokes? Not fair!”

Anna 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 “Ginger” and “Brontë” because she never bothered to change them. She expected to hear her name from Chris and even Anna, 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?”

Anna and Chris both laughed. “Yes,” said Anna. “Happy to report that we are Chris and Anna here.”

“I have new nicknames now,” said Chris, “like Jackass and Idiot.”

Now Fiona was laughing. “Sounds intimate,” she said. “I’ll respect your privacy on those.”

“So seriously,” interjected Anna, “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 mix of a memoir and a press release?” Fiona asked.

“Exactly!” said Anna.

They had no answer, but ended up talking for a long time, 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. What did she know?

After the call, she scrolled past all the pictures Anna and Chris had posted on Facebook. Anna and Chris had no kids, so they mostly documented their travel, friend and family birthdays, and their high-culture activities: concerts, museums, festivals. That sort of thing. Anna looked the same in every picture, head turned slightly to her right, same smile that showed just a flash of teeth. She must have decided, consciously or otherwise, that this was her “good side,” and Fiona was sure the pose came without thinking now. Then she looked at Melissa’s

page. Her photos were mostly a chronicle of the life of her son, who was now fifteen and in high school.

The memory lane exercise proved to be an exceptional time-passage maneuver, and before she knew it, it was 4:05. 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

Melissa Curtis-Pritchard

Melissa prided herself at being able to neglect her phone for hours, and when she finally picked it up to touch base with Edward, she saw texts from Anna and Fiona. Normally hearing from them would be surprising, but not after getting that strange invitation letter from Eric. They obviously got one too. That was his whole point. She read the brief text conversation in haste. Seemed Fiona was supposed to text again when she read the letter, but she didn't. Melissa 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. Maybe.

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 distinct *are you sure you want to go through with this?* vibe.

When she first decided to go down this path, she envisioned a team of workers arriving at the house with tools and ladders, a full-on installation that she would have to pay for using the

credit card that was not on Edward's radar. She even imagined chatting with the installation crew, saying it was a nanny cam. That was generic 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, and that meant that there was no nanny to watch the baby that didn't exist. Melissa and Edward's only kid was a teenager, and even *he* didn't live there. At least not during the school year because he was off boarding at a prestigious prep school in Connecticut.

Her worry about the story she'd tell the workers went away when she finally got up the nerve to research online. What she needed was just 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, then she erased her browser history. She timed it so the package would come while Edward was away at his conference. Or symposium, whatever.

And now here it was, waiting to be opened. Would it even work? With Edward not coming home for two more days, she thought about waiting. But what would be the point of that?

The living room was easy. There was an outlet about shoulder height housed in a 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 venture, she concluded, was about evidence, and her original idea for the spot would have to suffice. The matching nightstands had a lower shelf but no back, so the plug on her side, closest to the room's entrance, 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 some formulaic women's book club novel. But here she was living a life with 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 the whole thing was subtle enough, but it wasn't. She found the whole situation two parts infuriating and one part embarrassing.

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 Edward would immediately get to put his intellectual superiority on display. He'd point out that whoever left them on the table was now spying on them in their house via their phone. She would act shocked, then embarrassed. They would throw the items away. He would comfort her in ways designed to re-emphasize his street smarts. 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 missteps were 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 their son Connor, but he was old enough to understand.

She sat at the kitchen table and opened the app, marveling at how simple it 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 to 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 anticipation. 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. Where? Where should she be focusing her attention?

She walked to the living room and stood by the bookshelf, watching the camera feed and the actual room at the same time. So weird. She thought of that scary movie she saw a while back, the one she only watched because Eric Asher wrote it. There was camera footage like this in it. Some supernatural entity terrorizing a family. She had nightmares for weeks. Thanks, Eric.

Suddenly 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 Edward 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?

No, she had to wait until she left. Two months seemed like a long time, but this was about getting it right. And if she did go away for that time, and there wasn't anything on video, wouldn't that be a decent argument for his innocence? Plus, if she did it now, she'd spend every day, every moment in the house worrying about being discovered. She hadn't even thought of constant the stress and anxiety of that. She couldn't help but smile at the irony. Isn't that what someone having an affair felt? Or was at least supposed to feel?

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

Anna 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. Anna watched two forgettable movies. One and a half, actually. After the eye-rolling 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?" Or was it Gregor? Something told her they'd be back to those names.

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 one immediately after, their real names were virtually never used within the group. Anna was Ginger because her maiden name was Grant and the *Gilligan's Island* reference seemed to fit what the others called 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, almost black, and she wore it in the same blunt cut with bangs that she did back then.

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 it because Snoopy's little yellow bird friend soon became a kind of mascot for her on clothing and other merchandise items. Melissa was Brontë, a nod to her love for Victorian literature and her commendable attempts to imitate the rich, descriptive style in her own writing. She went on to get another master's degree then 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, Anna remembered the night Eric got his nickname. It came from Melissa when the group was out at a favorite bar. Eric got angry with another, considerably larger, patron. Aided (or perhaps guided) by several drinks, Eric seemed to become an entirely different person, raising his voice in a threatening way that surprised his friends.

Chris was able to step in and de-escalate the situation, preventing what was shaping up to be a near-certain ass kicking of Eric by this stranger and quite possibly his two friends as well.

When things settled, they all questioned Eric. “What the hell was that?” “*Who* the hell was that?” He dismissively blamed the booze, and the conversation didn’t go much deeper than that. The incident led Melissa to suggest they start calling their unpredictably combustible friend Gregor, after the protagonist in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Although Eric kept such transformations in check after that night, the name stuck.

After a bumpy landing, they eventually got to stand, stretch, and grab their bags from the overhead compartment. They had no intention of checking a bag, but Eric sent a text a few days ago to make sure none of them would. He also instructed them to meet at SF Uncork’d, a wine bar in Terminal 3. It was mid-afternoon, so a drink was not out of the question.

Chris was looking at his phone as they walked through the crowded terminal. As they approached the bar, Anna could see Melissa and Fiona from afar, seated at a four-person table. The years had been good to them. Their appearances were so starkly different, Anna thought passing strangers might wonder what brought these two women together. Perhaps they were sisters who took vastly different paths in life and were now traveling to see their parents. Anna laughed to herself thinking this. Something about being back with these friends brought out the fiction writer in her.

Melissa 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. Anna could even get Chris to admit that.

Fiona was more cute, like a favorite doll or even a stuffed animal. Her blond, curly locks were tied back, but Anna knew how wild they could look when set free. They seemed to be the same length, maybe a little shorter, as they were 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 loops that Anna discovered were peace signs once they got close enough.

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, it instantly became a non-factor. Melissa updated them on Edward and

their son Connor, who was playing varsity soccer and lacrosse at his prep school. Chris, a sports fan and athlete in high school, was most impressed by that fact. Thankfully to Anna, it didn't become a conversation topic.

Whenever she was asked if she had children, Fiona's rehearsed response was "I had a child, but I divorced him." She repeated it 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 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 suit approached the table, and Anna picked up the small menu, glancing at it and asking Chris: "Are you getting something?" The man smiled. "I'm not a waiter," he said. "Mr. Asher sent me to take you to your plane."

"Oh!" said Anna. "Sorry." They were all laughing.

"I can indeed make sure you get a drink," the man said. "It just won't be here." With that he winked at her. Nothing flirty, just a now-you're-in-on-the-secret type thing. The secret being, Anna 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.

"They say," said Chris, "that chartering private planes isn't as expensive as people think." Fiona and Melissa looked at Anna, who suppressed a chuckle and turned to her husband. "Really?" she said, making a show of sipping her free white wine. "Seems expensive to me. Granted, my experience is limited."

"No," said Chris, realizing his comment was silly. "I mean most people guess way too high."

"If you have to ask," said Melissa.

"Or guess," added Fiona.

Anna looked out the window, then turned back to the group. "Is it weird that Eric didn't meet us here?"

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

"Yeah," said Anna. "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 Anna and Melissa started teasing Fiona with shoulder bumps and elbow nudges. Perhaps she wanted to stay here, and they could come back for her on Monday. Fiona blushed and playfully shoved them.

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

"I hear you," said Anna.

"I feel under-dressed," said Chris. "Does that count?" As they drove away, he started poking around at the controls like a child. He opened a compartment to reveal liquor bottles and cocktail glasses. "I remember him saying a while back that there's a lot of barter in Hollywood."

"Meaning what?" asked Anna.

"Meaning this, and maybe even the plane, could be someone returning a favor they owe him. Or doing it to get some favor from him in return." Chris wasn't sure he made his point, so he added: "Meaning our travel might not have cost him any money."

"Got it," said Anna.

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 soon 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, past a non-working stone fountain sculpted with cherubs and such, to the front doors. The four of them got out and silently took in the marvelous 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.

"Crazy," was all Anna could utter as she craned her neck in every direction.

“I guess I’ll ring the doorbell?” Melissa offered, but as soon as she took the first of the two concrete steps, there was a loud clack just inside the door. A moment later it 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 house and the scenery. He drew a deep breath in through his nose. Its exhale was accompanied with a soft, sincere “Welcome.”

He looked good, Anna 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.

Melissa, who was out in front of the others, continued up steps and hugged him. Anna watched as Eric held the embrace, his eyes closed. When they separated, Melissa walked into the large foyer area they could see from the driveway. Fiona followed, then Chris. The impromptu receiving line gave Anna 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.” It was there 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, as if she were witnessing in that moment, the sadness being defeated in some way. Or at least challenged. She scolded herself for finding pretension in all of this. The reunion was real. He needed them, and they came.

Inside the house they stood in a circle of sorts. Eric advised that they leave their bags at the bottom of the stairs. There was a valet who would take them up. Anna looked to the others who had their eyebrows raised just as she did. *There’s a staff?* Eric read their minds and told them the valet and housekeeper come with the house to anyone who rents. There was also a groundskeeper, but chances are they wouldn’t even see him.

“I’ll give you the quick tour,” Eric said. His eyes lit up as he spoke. He was no longer the serious man from outside, the one who was almost somber in his gratitude. Now he was an excited schoolboy who scurried toward the entryway to a room ahead of them then turned back beckoning them with both hands. The sudden transformation made Anna chuckle to herself. Gregor.

He proudly let them know that he pulled some strings, and they were the first people to ever rent and stay in this place, letting them know “it’s not open to the public.” He showed them the dining room, kitchen, living room, the back terrace, and ended in a beautiful, lavishly furnished room he called the parlor. Or maybe that’s what it was called. The room was kind of split into two sections, each with a doorway that led out into the hallway. The door closest to the dining room presented the parlor’s sitting area. There was a full bar in one corner, a lavender-colored, velvet-cushioned couch with two matching chairs, and a fireplace with a huge, ornately framed mirror over the mantelpiece. The other half of the room was mainly empty except for a large, old-fashioned desk and some big, leafy potted plants. Eric motioned for everyone to sit. “Sorry if I’m a little scattered,” he said. “Was that a bit too whirlwind? Please, ask any questions you like. We’ll see the upstairs and your rooms soon enough. The truth is, I’m just anxious to get started.”