

Gothic Revival

by Michael Mullin

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. If there was one thing he hated, it was narrative overkill. But that was all for later. Right now, he had to focus and get this done 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. The Tardorians weren't exactly known for showing mercy. 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. 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?"

"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 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 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 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 for not keeping up socially. Perhaps 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 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. Lauren Curtis, who became Lauren Curtis-Pritchard went to Academia outside of Chicago. Fiona Voss settled into 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 a shy, quiet 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 at the time, 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.

The book, which Chris recalled was mainly 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 he wasn’t going anywhere.

The sci-fi novels were his side hobby. He really 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 fine with that. He just liked finishing them and having them “out there” (whatever that meant). He often joked that his fame would come posthumously. He was fine with that, too.

He had planned to take his cocktail back to his own novel, but this unexpected correspondence from their old friend changed the course of the evening. He instead sat with Anna in the living room. "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 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 interview will come up?"

It took Chris a second to understand what she was talking about. "God, I hope not," he finally said. "Talk about water under the bridge." He looked at Eric's 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?”

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 called 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 they were done. She only did these paintings for money, so the assembly line mentality made sense, both the business and common kind. If she could focus on completing this stage and perhaps even the next, she could take her mind off the excruciating wait, and time would speed up for 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 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 SoHo 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 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 junior 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 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. She'd gotten good, 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 a few days. In her online business training, she learned about perceived value. Finishing too quickly made it seem not worth what her customers were paying. 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 got good news or not at 4:00, 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. 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 welcomed it while at the same time hoping everything was okay. 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.

It felt weird just jumping into 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 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 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?" 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 fly 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 still "Ginger" and "Brontë" because she never bothered to change them. She expected to hear her nickname 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?"

They both laughed. "Yes," said Anna. "Happy to report we are Chris and Anna 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 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 mashup of a memoir and a press release?" Fiona asked.

“Exactly!” said Anna.

Anna’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 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 in the background of a single phone call. What did she know?

After the call, she scrolled past all the pictures Anna 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 hike pictures. Anna 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 came without thinking now. 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.

The reunion did sound like fun, but the truth was, she needed to look at it from both sides: the fun and the perhaps not so fun. Her life since grad school had been a slow, steady plateau of a journey with a decent amount of her energy spent just staying on the rails. She got married and divorced within a span of three years. Her old friends never met him, but knew the sanitized, oversimplified version of the story that she told everyone.

Then there were the incidents. The first came not long after her thirtieth birthday, which she celebrated casually with teacher colleagues who were pretty much friends, too. She was walking home alone, not too late, when she fell into the distinct panic of being followed. She turned to see a man in a black jacket and beanie hat looking like he

was deliberately keeping a certain distance. To be safe she went into the convenience store on her corner. She was surprised not only that the man came in too, but that he had gained on her so much that he caught the door behind her before it closed.

Fiona discreetly told the man behind the counter her situation and fear, and he just turned his face in confusion and what looked surprisingly like disinterest. *Thanks for the help, jerk.* When a small group of teens came in, she ducked out and rushed home.

The next day she was so upset about not being helped that she returned to the store to complain. The woman working called the man from the night before who told her to watch the security camera tape. She did, and she showed Fiona the footage of her coming in. Alone. There was no one behind her. Seeing herself on the little screen open the door, come inside, and then watching the door close completely behind her and stay closed was more frightening than the idea of being followed.

About a month later, she heard two women right outside her apartment door. They were in some sort of disagreement over why someone else wasn't with them. Fiona checked the peephole in the door, but couldn't see anything, so she left it alone, only noticing that the discussion ended into silence with an abruptness that seemed unnatural. Then a half hour later, she heard them again, only it was the exact same conversation. This time she opened the door to a completely empty hallway. Even though there were no women there, she still heard them arguing.

Soon after that she got her fortune told at a party, and the hired medium took a strong liking to Fiona, recognizing a "gift" in her, something about her "aura." They talked for a long time and even met for coffee a few days later. During that chat, Fiona could remember one other strange episode in a restaurant bathroom. While washing her hands, another woman came out of a stall and walked toward the row of sinks. Fiona turned to get a paper towel, and when she turned back, the woman was gone. There simply wasn't enough time for her to leave, plus Fiona would have heard the door. The medium, whose name was Helen, was certain Fiona was a clairvoyant like

none she'd ever met. Because it explained the frightening experiences she'd had, the idea intrigued Fiona. She read everything she could on clairvoyance. The wealth of new knowledge allowed her to understand that the people she saw and heard were ghosts that only she could see.

The more she experienced her gift, the less she wanted anything to do with it. She found herself becoming more withdrawn from people to the point where her mother made her see their long-time family doctor. After that was a specialist. Fiona didn't see her gift as something doctors would believe, so she wasn't very forthcoming about the incidents. Because she readily admitted to bouts with depression, however, medication was prescribed.

Of course, no one outside of Fiona's family knew this aspect of her life. Certainly not her grad school friends whom she hadn't seen in over a decade. She thought about this reunion again. Her now infrequent encounters were often triggered by new environments, and this lake villa was certainly going to be that. She concluded, however, that everything would be fine. She would be fine. Since realizing her gift, she withdrew from social situations, so she decided to see the weekend reunion as a therapeutic opportunity. She could practice connecting by reconnecting with people she knew and trusted. She still trusted them, didn't she? She would have to wait and see.

All of this thinking and strategizing 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

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 Edward, she saw texts from Anna 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 in haste. 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 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. And no need for her to watch the nanny who didn't exist watching the baby who didn't exist. Lauren 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 at a boarding school in Connecticut.

Her worry about the validity of the story she'd tell the installation crew went away when she finally got up the nerve to research her plan online. All 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. 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 knew she didn't need 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 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 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 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 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.

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 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 their son Connor, but he was old enough to understand. She hoped.

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 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 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 to 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 even waved. 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 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?

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

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 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?" Wait, was she supposed to be wondering what "Gregor" had in store? Something told her they'd be back to using 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 summer after graduation, 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 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 played a movie star on a TV show, and by sharp contrast, Anna 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 clothing and other merchandise 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, Anna remembered the night Eric got his nickname. They were out at a favorite bar 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, Anna 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, Eric,” 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. Punches, a kick, maybe two. They actually heard the guy’s bones break twice. As the guy dropped to his knees. Anna saw his entire face was dark, covered in blood. Three or four seconds later, the guy was lying flat on his back on the pavement. Eric was crouched over him, perfectly balanced, with his knee on the man’s chest. His glasses weren’t even askew.

The guy's friends came out of their stupor and started to move in. 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. Eric leaned in close and said something into the man's ear then got up and joined his friends.

"Sorry you had to see that," Eric said as they all walked away.

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

As they walked away, they all looked back, except Eric. The two men were doing their best to help the beaten guy to his feet.

When they were 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?" Anna 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, Anna 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. Anna noted that 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 Lauren and Fiona from afar, 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, 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.

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. Anna 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 or even a stuffed animal. Her blond, curly locks were tied back, but Anna 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 loops that Anna 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 Edward and Connor, who was playing junior varsity soccer and lacrosse as a freshman at his prep school. Chris, a sports fan and athlete back in high school, was most impressed by this fact. Thankfully to Anna, 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 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 "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. Anna 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 Anna, 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, 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.

Anna 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 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 Lauren 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," Lauren said. "Anyone else feeling guilty?"

"I hear you," said Anna.

"I feel under-dressed," said Chris. "Does that count?" As they drove away, Anna watched her husband as he started poking 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 Anna 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!"

Anna felt a sudden need to give them a sly apologetic look, 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 and embracing Chris' boyish charm. One of the very things that made her fall in love with him all those years ago. It was as if Lauren and Fiona were silently expressing how much they missed it. Anna felt a bit sad as she realized she was easily relating to that part.

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 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.

“Crazy,” was all Anna 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* 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. He wore roughed-up jeans and white Oxford shirt rolled halfway up his forearm. As he extended his right hand 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. Anna 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 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.” 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. She scolded herself for finding pretension in all of this. The reunion was real. He needed them, and they came.

Chapter 5

Chris

Just inside the house, they stood in a circle of sorts. Eric advised that they leave their bags at the bottom of the stairs. They could take them up in a bit if the housekeeper didn't beat them to it. Chris looked to the others who had their eyebrows raised just as he did. *There's a staff?* Eric smiled and shook his head to show it was not a big deal. "Just an older woman who keeps the place clean and tidy. She lives with her husband in the cottage house out back. I think he does the landscaping maybe. Not sure. If you ask me, her presence, if we see her at all, will be less about servicing us and more making sure we don't break things or steal towels." They laughed at this. "We're the first to stay here in some time." Eric went on to say that he had to "pull strings" to secure it, and Chris was impressed. He wondered if the women were, too.

"I'll give you the quick tour," Eric said, his eyes lighting up as he spoke. He was suddenly no longer the serious man from outside, the one who was almost somber in his gratitude. Now he was an excited schoolboy who scurried to the entryway of a room ahead of them then turned back beckoning them with both hands. The almost cartoonish transformation made Chris chuckle to himself. Gregor.

After proudly reiterating that this villa was "not open to the public," he showed them the dining room, kitchen, living room, and ended the tour in a beautiful, lavishly furnished room he called the parlor. Or maybe that's what it was called. The sizable room, which offered French-door access to a large stone terrace, was split into two sections, divided visually in a way by a large, luxurious couch. Each section had 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 and the lavender-colored, velvet couch cushions were matched on two chairs. The polished-wood coffee table

completed the sitting scene which faced a fireplace with a huge, ornately framed mirror over the mantelpiece. The other half of the room, behind the couch, was mainly empty except for a large, old-fashioned desk and a wide array of big, leafy potted plants on shelves.

Eric extended his arms to suggest the tour was finished. "Sorry if I'm a little scattered," he said. "Was that a bit too whirlwind? Please, ask any questions you like. I'll show you your rooms, and you can freshen up, whatever you like, and we'll meet back down here. The truth is, I'm just anxious to get started."

As they made their way upstairs, Chris tried to guess what Eric meant by "get started." Drinking, maybe? That would be harkening back to their youth for sure. The bar looked first-rate. The whole place was crazy nice. It was going to be a fantastic few days. His and Anna's room was first at the top of the stairs. Eric told them that each room had its own bathroom and small balcony, which Chris remembered seeing from the driveway.

Eric, Fiona, and Lauren left them. Anna started to unpack, putting their small amount of clothes and such into the drawers of the dresser. Chris would never do that. He'd be fine spending a few days pulling things out of the suitcase, but not Anna. She called the habit "avoiding haphazard transience." The phrase always reminded him that she really was a good writer back in her day. He certainly didn't object to seeing his clothes neatly placed in a drawer. Much to the contrary, he appreciated it. He just never did that on the rare occasion he traveled alone.

The thought of travel made him look at the bed. Since they got married, they had a thing. A tradition. Whenever they slept in a new bed for the first time, sex was involved. Even after seventeen years, they always stuck to it. Every hotel, bed and breakfast, friend visit. Chris had no reason to believe tonight would be any different. "Nice bed," he said.

"It is nice," Anna replied. "This whole place is amazing."

“Not sure I’ve ever slept in it before,” he mused.

“Alright, Funny Guy.”

“I gotta say,” he told her. “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m gonna suggest we wait until actual bedtime.”

Anna unbuttoned the top button of her shirt. “You sure?”

“I was a few seconds ago!” he said, pulling her into a hug. He knew she was joking, but still.

She laughed. Her laugh had special meaning to him. On the second day of grad school, he was reading, sipping coffee in the campus center lobby when he heard a nearby woman laugh. It was crazy cute, like a child’s giggle, but it also had a sweet, endearing fullness to it. He turned to investigate where it had come from and spotted two women sitting at one of the many bistro tables. One, who turned out to be Fiona, had this wild mane of blond, curly hair. The other, Anna, had big brown eyes, and her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail which seemed to perfectly balance the drop of her bangs. She was just about the prettiest girl he’d ever seen, and he remembered thinking they were probably undergraduates. He hoped they were at least seniors, but the more dominant hope in that moment was that the ponytailed angel was the one with the irresistible laugh. He turned in his seat to improve his peripheral view and soon got the confirmation with her next laugh. He took it as a sign they should meet.

It was a small enough school. He was fairly confident they’d cross paths again, so he couldn’t believe his good fortune when he arrived at his first short story workshop to find her already seated in the semi-circle of desks. They soon met, talked, became friends, and fell in love. Months into that final stage, he finally told her the story of how he established a bona fide crush on her before he even saw her.

He also liked the fact that she never shied away from or tried to repress a chance to laugh. That told him she sought and recognized enjoyment in her life. After her take on Eric’s invitation letter and some comments she made during the trip out here, he was

afraid she was going to be too judgmental and not let herself enjoy the weekend. Her laugh as they stood in their embrace made him think (hope) he might be wrong on that front. He credited seeing Fiona and Lauren for what seemed like a positive turn in her. As soon as they all met in that wine bar, he predicted to himself that Anna was going to be swept up in not only the nostalgia, but the possibility of rekindling old friendships in some real way.

She took her cosmetic bag and his shaving kit into the bathroom, saying she'd be "back in a few." He took the opportunity to check out the balcony. The space was small but quaint. Two Adirondack chairs faced each other with a small table in between. He looked out at the lake, but even at this height well above the driveway, the trees still dominated, playing (and mostly winning) peekaboo with what he could only imagine as the full scene.

Looking out at the glimpse of water, he took some meditative breaths and suddenly had an idea that seemed to come out of nowhere. (It was actually somewhere. The sunset shimmer on the lake looked very reminiscent of a scene he'd written years before. He just didn't make the connection.) The first book in his series featured a rogue explorer character named Borjin. Chris always liked that guy, saw him as a Han Solo type, but the saga never allowed for him to get a real spotlight.

Until now. Chris sat slowly in one of the chairs as the idea took shape. Borjin didn't die in that watery spaceship crash. He would return in Book Six to guide young Haim on his revenge mission. Yes! This was good. He'll be perfect, now older and wiser, but still a real badass. Usually when an idea hit him, Chris would scamper to write it down so he wouldn't forget it. But something about this idea – and maybe being in this place with his old writer friends – made him quite confident he wouldn't forget it.

Of course, he had no plans to write this weekend, but maybe he could poke out a rough outline late at night. Or better yet, early morning. He knew that any stolen time

to write should be focused on finishing Book Five, but that will come. The new outline will inspire him to get there. Plus, knowing Haim and Borjin's upcoming plot meant he could plant all the right seeds at the end of his current book. That's how it worked. At least for him.

Anna joined him on the balcony. "You ready to go downstairs?" she asked.

"I was thinking of a quick shower."

Anna knew that Chris was indeed capable of a full shower and dressed again in a matter of minutes. "Hey," she said. "Do you remember the last time we were all together?" she asked.

He remembered the night well but simply answered: "In Boston."

"Wow," she said. "Look out Sherlock Holmes. There's a new kid in town."

Chris couldn't help but laugh. The group had met and gone to school together in Boston. It was the only place they were ever all together, so not an impressive recollective response. They graduated, and that summer he and Anna stayed in their apartment. Fiona stayed with them for a few weeks before leaving for her teaching job in New York, Eric finished his lease and went home to Minnesota.

"Brontë," he finished his memory aloud. "She left first for Chicago. We had dinner and hung out at our place the night before her flight." *Eric was too drunk, so I walked Lauren home and ... nevermind.* All things being normal, the last reunion should have been their wedding a year later, but Lauren was in a relatively minor car accident, was hospitalized with a broken leg, then got an infection during treatment that stretched her stay a couple of weeks.

"I was just thinking about that night," Anna said. "It seems like a lifetime ago or last week. I can't decide."

"Let it be both," he told her, taking her shoulders and kissing her forehead then her nose. "Especially for the next few days."

"Just feeling kind of weird," she said.

“How so?”

“I’m hoping things just fall back into fun, but it’s been a long time. We’ve all changed. I know I have.”

Chris knew his wife was a Champion Overthinker. Like, Hall of Fame credentials. “No one cares about that interview from like ten years ago.”

“I know,” she said. “I know. It was stupid and a long time ago. His explanation was fine, but it bugged me, and it changed my opinion on him. I don’t know why it still bugs me, but it does.”

When he got his Oscar nomination, Eric did a magazine interview in which he said he was a loner all through college and his graduate writing program. Something to the effect of he didn’t have time to socialize. He was there to work. This was of course, not at all true, and his friends called him on it. Eric apologized, saying it was bad advice he got from his agent to put out that “persona.” Not for the public, who didn’t know or care about screenwriters enough to read such interviews, but for the industry folks who would determine what kind of career he had.

“If you want to ask Brontë and Woodstock about it,” he said, “you should. Whatever puts your mind at ease.” Chris didn’t know if it was a good or bad idea to bring it up at all. If the women said: “Who cares?” or better yet, didn’t even remember, that would show Anna it was no longer a thing, and that she should let it go.

She shrugged, then asked with a kind of scowl: “Are we doing nicknames?”

He laughed. “I don’t know, but I’ll admit, those came out without thinking. That’s who they are to me. It’s kind of like you’re saying. They grew out of those names over the years, but we weren’t there.”

“True.”

Chapter 6

Fiona

Enamored by the gorgeous patchwork quilt that lay pristinely across the foot of her bed, Fiona couldn't help but think *Forget the towels, Housekeeper Lady. I'm stealing this*. Everything about the room was elegant yet comfortable. A classic four-poster bed, matching mahogany dresser and nightstand, a quaint built-in bookcase nook with reading chair in one corner, and a full-length mirror, oval with a black, wooden frame hung on the wall in the other. French doors led out to the small balcony that overlooked the driveway fountain. Several years ago, she had flirted with the idea of getting into interior design. The push never amounted to anything professionally, but she met some interesting people and enjoyed developing what she considered her decent eye for it.

She had been teaching junior high since getting her MFA. She was at her third New York City school, this one's tenure of seven years being the longest. She enjoyed most of the students and faculty, and the schedule allowed her to keep her art career going. The truth was, she was good at teaching. She'd received a special merit award a few years ago, and the school had a tradition in which each yearbook is dedicated to teacher. Last year it was her, and she cried when the eighth-grade committee told her.

She was anxious to talk with Lauren about teaching. Of course, there was the "How's work?" chat in the airport wine bar, but Fiona was looking to maybe bond over the philosophy of it all and how methods and kids have changed so much. She was curious to get a college professor's take. Was it the same with older students? What was that even like, teaching kids who, for the most part, actually wanted to be there? She only hoped Lauren would be up for such a conversation. Maybe work was the last thing she wanted to talk about. She'd have to throw the topic out there and see.

When she looked at her career through the lens she assumed others used, Fiona wasn't very successful. She hoped to keep any self-consciousness about her career in check for the weekend. She couldn't imagine her old friends being judgmental, but it had been quite a few years, and her work life was what they might see as stagnant. The rest of the group seemed to be in some other, further along, upwardly mobile, adult chapter of their lives that she never reached. She was just an older person doing basically the same thing she left to do when they last saw each other however many years ago.

The typewriter ding alert on her phone startled her. She saw it was a text from Patrick and felt a pang of guilt for not replying to the one he sent yesterday. This one just said: "Crazy Coincidence! Hope you're doing well." Attached was a link to an article on animal sentience.

Patrick was an investment banker, the brother of one of the teachers Fiona worked with. She'd met him at a school function and after some lighthearted urging from her colleague, agreed to have dinner with him. During the date the topic of animal sentience somehow came up. She suspected he was agreeing with her to seem more compatible, but looking back, that didn't seem fair. Her opinions on the matter were hardly far-fetched. Patrick was cute and funny, obviously smart, most likely rich, and truth be told, she had a really nice time. So why did she give a subtle not-interested vibe when he tried to make a second date?

She sometimes thought she divorced Diego in haste, that maybe her "nip it in the bud" angle was really just a way of saying she wasn't willing to put in the effort to make it work. Either way, once she discovered his drug habits went beyond weed, the writing was on the wall. Add to that his absent-mindedness, lack of conviction, and overall immaturity (which stopped being "cute" in a hurry), and she couldn't see them growing anything but further apart. And besides, was three-and-a-half years really still the bud?

When she was honest with herself, she was feeling more self-conscious about being single than she was about still being just an art teacher for kids. Yes, Eric was single, but he probably had a wannabe actress starlet of the month. Anna and Lauren seemed to be doing things the right, traditional way, and despite being a “free spirit,” a term with which she had a palpable love/hate relationship, Fiona longed for that stability. Even when she thought she had found it, it turned out to be something quite different and undesirable.

She just couldn't see herself with an investment banker. How would that even work? She was an artist. She was supposed to be with someone like Diego, a bartender who played drums in a band that was never quite popular enough. She laughed to herself as she heard what she remembered to be one of Lauren's signature phrases ringing in her head: *How'd that work out?* It was all so superficial and silly. If asked about her love life this weekend, she would talk up Patrick as her boyfriend.

Ugh. Why did she feel the need to embellish her life with lies? She felt bad lying at the airport about the children's center art contest, but she rationalized it was a cool conversational life update and that the truth would have been a downer. Like she only brought it up to garner sympathy. That was way worse than a trivial fib. It wasn't like her friends were going to look it up and cross-reference the dates.

She texted Patrick back: *Thanks! Can't wait to read. Away this weekend but let's get together when I get back.* There, now he practically was her boyfriend, so it wasn't as much of a lie.

She made choices every day to minimize contact with others as much as possible., although she was nice whenever interacting. She would be surprised if anyone described her as “cold.” Distant, maybe. Reserved? The truth was, her clairvoyance was a curse as much as it was a gift. She felt she need to keep it a secret from everyone. One of her biggest fears was an endless flood of people asking her to contact dead relatives. Or that she might end up telling fortunes at a dinner party.

Since she'd found her gift, she had pretty much become the "loner" that Eric claimed he was in that stupid interview way back when. That annoyed the whole group when they read it. Fiona remembered the angry text conversation and feeling disappointed in him. But she also understood when he said he had no idea how to navigate this new Hollywood-type attention. His book tour was apparently much different and easy to manage.

She went into the bathroom and set up her stuff, including her bottle of antidepressants, which got a central location behind the sink's faucet handles. She didn't think she would need the visual reminder to take them but thought it best to be safe. She checked her hair and noticed the mirror over the sink looked like a mini version of the one that stood in her room. Same black, wooden frame. She shrugged and smiled at seeing pretty much exactly what she expected. That was her entire "freshening up" routine. As she turned to leave the bathroom, she heard a whisper. As much as she wished for silence, the voice fell somewhere between unsurprising and expected. The voice, that of a young girl, came from nowhere in particular and everywhere in the small, rectangular space of the bathroom. Not so much enveloping her, but rather hanging in the air close to her, accessible but respectfully distant.

I'm so glad you're here.

And so it began. She knew right away that whatever encounters she had here this weekend would have to be hers alone. She'd be surprised if any ghosts showed themselves to anyone but her. That was a fundamental tenet of her gift/curse. She said nothing aloud but thought hard on her reply. *We'll connect later. Be good.* Then she went out into the hall and was surprised to see Anna at the fourth, closed door at the far end of the hall, the room not being used by anyone.