

GOTHIC REVIVAL

by

MICHAEL MULLIN

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MICHAEL MULLIN

For my family. All who qualify.

“These wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings. Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike.”

“Nothing is more painful to the human mind than, after the feelings have been worked up by a quick succession of events, the dead calmness of inaction and certainty which follows and deprives the soul both of hope and fear.”

“We are fashioned creatures, but half made up.”

~ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley
Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus

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. But that was all for later. Right now, he had to focus and create her death in the best, most interesting way possible.

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

He checked his watch. 4:43. Almost happy hour. Coming out from

his study he saw Anne sitting at the dining room table with the mail. She looked particularly engrossed in one piece. "Making a drink," he said. "You want something?"

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

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

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

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

**DON'T IGNORE OPPORTUNITY.
DO ACCEPT THIS INVITATION.**

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

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

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

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

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

All My Best,
Gregor

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

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

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

Tagging dates was shorthand for requesting time off at Anne's work. She was one of three women who founded a moderately successful event planning company. He was proud of what she had accomplished, but the truth was her work changed who she was. When they met in grad school he saw her as a highly imaginative creative writer. She once wrote a harrowing but

hopeful short story from the point of view of a balloon that had been accidentally let loose by a child. He still remembered the bittersweet ending and the brilliance of the language cadence mimicking haphazard floating.

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

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

Eric was a shy, unassuming guy from Minnesota who answered Chris' ad for a roommate. Chris had a few other bites of interest, but this Eric guy with his buzz cut, black-framed glasses, and quick wit was, to Chris' surprise, starting the same writing program he was. That seemed like a good omen, and he was right. They became fast friends. Eric eventually became the Golden Boy of their class, publishing a short story in a reputable journal while they were still students, then his first novel (which was also his master's thesis) less than a year after graduation.

That book, which Chris recalled was set in a traveling carnival in the 1940s, was met with lukewarm reviews and modest sales, but who cared? He was published! A year later the publisher pulled the plug on his second book months before the scheduled release. There was never a clear story as

to why. Eric talked about “creative differences,” but the friends feared off the record to each other that he’d been unable to finish it.

But then, in an embodiment of the third time being a charm, he published *All That’s Left to Know*, a poignant, beautifully written novel about a small-town tragedy that causes a family to crumble from within. The main character, Alvin Skinner, became a kind of cultural icon, representing such things as grief, a guilty conscience, and false hope.

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

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

But most likely it wouldn’t come at all. Certainly not like it did for Eric. Chris was amazed that his old friend had achieved what he did. To create a character whose name virtually everyone knows. Even people who never read his book. Or any book. Alvin Skinner was like Atticus Finch or Jay Gatsby, or even Ebenezer Scrooge. Chris often tried to imagine what that would be like, but he had no idea.

He had planned to take his cocktail back to his writing desk, but this unexpected correspondence from their old friend changed the course of

the evening. He sat with Anne in the living room. “Fiona never got married again, did she?” Chris asked.

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

“Sounds fun,” he said, “Why?”

“It seems contrived.”

The term surprised Chris. “How so?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Very funny.”

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

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

Chapter 2

Fiona Voss

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

About four months back, the Board of Directors at a new children's center in Binghamton put out a call to New York artists to submit concepts for a wall mural that would ultimately live in their newly renovated lobby. With over two thousand entries, Fiona was proud (and a little shocked) to be selected as one of twenty finalists. Today that number was being cut down to six, each of whom would receive a small grant to produce a

scaled-down version of their mural on a canvas. The organization planned to post the names of the six lucky artists on its website at 6pm.

It was 4:05.

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

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

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

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

mark. Even the late arrivals were forgiven because the finished pictures were always so loved.

She walked away from the easel and made some coffee which she then proceeded not to drink beyond the first sip. Whether she got good news or not at 6:00, she could get back to Betsy once she knew. She pleaded with herself not to get too deflated if she wasn't chosen. She knew she could market herself as one of the twenty finalists, even though that didn't exactly stand out in her unfathomably competitive world.

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

Did you guys get the letter from Eric yet?

No, is he ok?

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

What is it?

He's planned a reunion.

Oh. Haven't gone to mailbox.

Yesterday either. I'll check.

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

How are you guys?

Good! Busy. How about you?

Same. Crazy times!

Text back when you read it. Curious.

Ok. Stay tuned.

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

for her.

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

She called Anne. Too much to text.

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

"Hi!"

"So you read it?" Anne asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Exactly!" said Anne.

Anne's tone made Fiona imagine her friend smacking Chris, like she

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

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

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

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

Hers was not one of them.

Chapter 3

Lauren Curtis-Pritchard

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

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

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

was common enough, wasn't it? They probably heard that all the time.

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

The worry about her cover story went away when she finally got up the nerve to research her plan online. All she needed was an actual, working USB adapter plug, the little cube kind, that went into the regular outlet. Plug it in, sync the phone app, and you're done. She bought a two-pack using that forgotten card. She figured it was probably available on Amazon for cheaper but had no idea how to delete the item in her order history. She also didn't want this purchase in her algorithm. *You may also like this do-it-yourself phone tapping kit and GPS tracker.* She could even imagine the advertising. *Simple! Discreet! He'll never know you know!* She timed the purchase so the package would arrive while Jonathan was away at his conference. Or symposium, whatever.

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

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

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

How had her life come to this? Suspecting her husband of having an affair, like the frenzied protagonist in a Lifetime movie. But here she was witnessing too many soft, brief, and abruptly ended phone calls. Too many

lame excuses to explain time unaccounted for. Too many texts sent that ended with the distinctive swipe left, clearly deleting the entire conversation. Who does that? He of course had no idea she was only pretending to read and was actually watching his movements, deducing their intent. She was sure he assumed his demeanor and gestures were subtle enough, but they weren't. She found the whole situation two parts infuriating and one part embarrassing.

Suppressing thoughts that he may be with her in some hotel at that very moment, she downloaded the spy cam app and synced it up. She had already weighed the risk of all this and had worked out a story should he happen to discover one of the cameras. She planned to tell him she found the two adapters on a table in a Starbucks. No one was around, and they were always losing and looking for things like that, so she just took them. She switched them out in those two places because the original ones were loose, and she thought that was a fire hazard.

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

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

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

for a while, but she imagined the professional opinion would be she was looking for a reason for her unhappiness, someone to blame. She shook her head at yet another cliché.

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

She walked into the living room and stood by the bookshelf, watching the camera feed and the actual room at the same time. Then she sat on the couch and watched herself. She couldn't resist the urge to wave. Yep, it was her. So weird. She thought of that scary movie she saw a while back, the one she only watched because Eric Asher wrote the script. There was camera footage like this in it. Some supernatural entity terrorizing a family. She did not sleep well that night. Thanks, Eric.

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

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

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

Chapter 4

Anne Quinn two months later ...

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

All the nicknames were bestowed by Eric (except his), and to say they stuck would be an understatement. During their years at school and the summer after graduation, their real names were virtually never used within the group. Anne was Ginger because her maiden name was Grant and the *Gilligan's Island* reference seemed to fit what the others saw as her soft-spoken and sometimes sultry nature. People outside the group, especially younger people, didn't get it because she wasn't a redhead. Her hair was dark brown, and she wore it in the same blunt cut with bangs that she did back then. The irony was that Ginger Grant was a movie star on a TV

show, and by sharp contrast, Anne was the most private person any of them had ever met. One of her childhood stories was her intentional misspelling of a word in the classroom spelling bee every year so that she wouldn't win and have to go on to the schoolwide round, let alone the town finals.

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

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

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

"What did you say?" asked Chris.

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

"Thank you," said Lauren.

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

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

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

"We'll see," said Eric, then he moved into what looked like some martial

arts ready stance.

All three guys started laughing. “What are you? The Karate Kid?” mocked the profer. He then stood on one foot and put his hands up, imitating the iconic crane pose from the end of the movie.

Eric didn’t move. He just said: “Last chance.”

“Fuck you,” the guy said and charged at Eric.

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

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

“Sorry you had to see that,” Eric told them.

“Um,” said Chris, wide-eyed. “I’m not! Holy shit!”

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

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

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

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

“My roommate the black belt,” mused Chris. “I feel a short story coming on.”

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

“That’s between me and him,” was all Eric ever told them about that.

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

After a bumpy landing in San Francisco, Anne and Chris eventually got

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

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

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

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

That made Anne smile. Woodstock.

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

Whenever she was asked if she had children, Fiona’s rehearsed response was “I had a child, but I divorced him.” She repeated the line then without being asked, and they all laughed even though they’d heard the joke before. She updated everyone on her work, joked about the “lucrative absurdity” of the pet portrait business, and said she was waiting to find out about a

commission for a children's center mural. She was a finalist and would know in a week or so. They all agreed that was amazing and wished her luck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I hear you," said Anne.

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

glasses. “Dang,” he said.

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

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

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

The limo ride was another twenty-five minutes, most of which took them through a dense forest area on a winding, two-lane road. They eventually pulled off that road onto a smaller one, then turned again through an iron gate with stone pillars. They went up a hill, then one last turn revealed a striking stone manor, two stories high, featuring single-room balconies across the second floor façade. Ivy crept up and amassed itself across the entire left front corner of the building. In an odd coincidence of nature, the ivy mass was shaped like a hand, albeit with only three fingers and a thumb. Not only did the immovable foliage advertise that the villa had indeed seen better days, it also gave the distinct impression that the entire structure was in the process of being pulled underground.

Nonetheless, Anne found the villa beautiful. Its mere size spoke to the wealth of past generations, and its stature was captivating, like an undiscovered relic she somehow knew would be full of vibrance and perhaps even a little mystery.

The limo pulled around the circular drive to the front door, past a stone fountain sculpted with cherubs that looked like it hadn’t turned water in some time. The four of them got out and silently took in the wondrous

scene. Directly from the front door to the other side of the fountain was the head of a path that led into the woods. Beyond that, through breaks in the trees, they caught a glimpse of a lake so serene it looked painted.

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.

“This place looks cool,” said Chris, finally.

“Wow,” was all Anne could manage as she craned her neck in every direction.

“I guess I’ll ring the doorbell?” Lauren offered.

Anne noticed the slate stone steps were cracked and crumbling at the corners. Lauren stepped up the first of two, then they all heard a loud *clack* from just inside. A moment later the door swung open, and their old friend, their host for the next four days, emerged. At first, he just stared at them, drinking them in the same way they were doing with the villa and the scenery. He drew a deep breath in through his nose. Its exhale was accompanied with a soft, sincere “Welcome.”

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

Chris

Just inside the house, they stood in a circle. 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 rushed 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 usually open to renters," he showed them the conservatory with its large windows, and what was obviously a piano covered with a large white sheet. Next was a study

or library room that was all maroon and mahogany with ceiling-high bookshelves on three of its four walls. The books looked old and interesting. Chris made a mental note to poke around in here at some point.

The next door on the tour was locked. Eric tried the knob to illustrate the point, explaining that the owners were avid art collectors and kept treasures stored away here. He shrugged, and they all silently agreed it was pointless to buy art and lock it away.

Then came the stately dining room, modern-updated kitchen, and he 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 across the middle 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 cushions of the couch were matched on two chairs, which sat on opposite sides of a polished-wood coffee table. The sitting area faced a fireplace with a huge, ornately framed mirror over the carved-marble 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 too whirlwind? Please, ask any questions if you have them. 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 exceedingly nice. It was going to be a fantastic few days. His and Anne'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. Anne 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 Anne. 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 fifteen 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," Anne replied. "This whole place is amazing."

"Not sure I've ever slept in it before," he mused, stroking his chin.

"Alright, Funny Guy."

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way," he said, "but I'm gonna suggest we wait until actual bedtime."

Anne 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 strikingly 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 black, curly hair. The other, Anne, had big brown eyes, and her brunette hair was pulled back in a ponytail which seemed to perfectly balance the drop of her bangs. She was just about the prettiest woman 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 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 legitimate crush on her before he even saw her.

He knew things were so different now. He was quite certain he still loved her, but it was getting harder and harder to line up and sync the trajectories of their individual lives. Although she never said it, and he had no real evidence it was true, he felt the thing he most liked to do, write his books, was to her some quaint symbol of the past. Some phase she was waiting (with varying degrees of patience) for him to grow out of.

After her take on Eric's invitation letter and some comments she made during the trip out here, he was afraid she might be too judgmental and not let herself enjoy the weekend. Her laugh as they stood in their embrace allowed him to 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 Anne 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 little, round table in between. He looked out at the lake, but even at this height well above the driveway, the trees still dominated, offering just fragmented glimpses of what he could only imagine as the full scene.

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 water 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 hurry to write it down so he wouldn't forget it. But something about this one – and maybe being in this place with his old writer friends – made him quite confident he'd remember.

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.

Anne joined him on the balcony. "You ready to go downstairs?" she asked. "I was thinking of a quick shower."

Anne knew that Chris was indeed capable of a full shower and getting 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 Anne 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 ... well ... 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 for a week.

"I was just thinking about that night," Anne 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 with Hall of Fame credentials. She wasn't exactly looking for ways to make the weekend less enjoyable, but she made a habit of being on her guard for the potential worst case scenario. He didn't know if she was still thinking about what Eric did to him shortly before graduation, but bringing that up would be a

mistake. She saw what happened as horrible when it was really just unfortunate. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t bring up the prank.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” she said, then corrected herself to the more definitive: “I mean I won’t.”

He thanked her with a single nod of his head and trusted she was telling the truth. “Is it just me?” he asked. “Or is Eric like a different person?”

“Seriously” she said.

“Like next level Gregor metamorphosis.”

“The hair and the scruff and no glasses.”

“Can’t say he had that leading man/action hero vibe back in school. Woodstock and Brontë look the same, I swear. I don’t know what I expected, but I was kinda surprised. In a good way, of course.”

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

He laughed. “I don’t know. 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.”

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll keep quiet on that topic, too.”

“Good thinking.”

Chapter 6

Fiona

Enamored by the gorgeous patchwork quilt that lay pristinely across the foot of her bed, with its alternating floral and geometric designs and its exquisite, complex stitching, 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 dark-stained dresser and nightstand, a quaint built-in bookcase nook with reading chair in one corner. A full-length mirror, oval with a black, wooden frame hung on the wall opposite the bed. 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 furniture and décor.

She had been teaching middle school 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 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 the same thing she left to do when they last saw each other all those years ago.

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 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, she heard a whisper. The voice 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 distant.

Strangers in my house.

Fiona took a deep breath and whispered. “We mean no harm. We’ll be gone soon.” She heard nothing after that, but the one phrase was enough to know that this weekend was going to be more of a challenge than she’d like. She’d be surprised if any ghosts showed themselves to anyone but her. She’d have to decide if she could and should share her experiences based on whatever occurred.

Her first encounter with the paranormal came on her thirty-third birthday, which she celebrated with teacher friends. She was walking home alone, not too late, when she went into alert mode, feeling she was being

followed. She turned to see a man in a black jacket and beanie hat looking like he was deliberately keeping a certain distance. Instead of going into her building and showing him where she lived, she went into the bodega 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.* She didn't see where the man went in the store, and when a 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 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.

A week 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." The medium 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 the ability, the less she wanted anything to do with it. She became so anxious and on edge that her mother made her see their long-time family doctor. After that was some psych specialist. Fiona figured she wouldn't be believed, so she wasn't forthcoming about

the encounters. Because she readily admitted to bouts with depression, however, medication was prescribed.

Unpacking her clothes, Fiona concluded that everything would be fine here at the villa. She would be fine. This reunion could be a therapeutic opportunity. These were close friends from an important time in her life, before all the unwanted, paranormal disruptions. 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.

When it came to social interactions, she did find herself being more hesitant lately. She would be surprised if anyone described her as cold. Sometimes distant, maybe? Reserved? The truth was, her clairvoyance was a curse as much as it was a gift. She felt she needed 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.

She sometimes thought she divorced Diego in haste, that maybe her "nip it in the bud" strategy 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 the weed they often shared, the writing was on the wall. Add to that his absent-mindedness and overt skepticism about her encounters, and she couldn't see them growing anything but further apart. And besides, was three 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. Anne 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 it, the situation turned out to be something quite different and undesirable.

With hope and curiosity about the next few days taking root in her mind, she went out into the hall and was surprised to see Anne at the fourth, closed door at the far end of the hall, the room not being used by anyone.

Chapter 7

Lauren

Alone in her room, Lauren thought her theory about this whole reunion might be wrong. Once she figured it out, it seemed obvious, but maybe she was giving Eric too much credit? After a few moments of reflection, she concluded no, she was right. She knew why they were here. She was also quite certain she was the only one who knew. She thought about telling the others in the plane or limo but decided against it. It was just like the Eric she once knew to come up with an idea like this and plan it all this way. Who knows? She might surprise herself and actually have fun.

Being back with this group of friends had a strange, surreal quality that the academic in her wanted to define, examine, and analyze. It was like a time machine that somehow malfunctioned. They were back, but not really back. It was obvious Eric wanted to dive back in and continue some conversation they were having seventeen years ago. If it meant distance from her current home situation for a few days, she'd consider that. Embrace the strangeness. But what were the parameters? The guidelines? Was there an etiquette? She knew she wasn't that same person anymore, and she was quite sure the others would say the same about themselves. How could they not?

She'd already spent about a half hour alone with Fiona (or was it Woodstock?) at the airport bar. It was nice to catch up, and although her

old friend was obviously different and grown up, the joy of their interaction came in those moments of remembrance and familiarity, particularly Fiona's overall kookiness. Her funny stories and her scattered, sometimes incoherent way of telling them.

The last time they were all together was the summer after graduation. She'd seen each of them separately a handful of times in the few years after that, but then even those meetings soon dwindled and disappeared. It really was astounding that a reunion with all five of them had never happened before. Even if she had been able to make Chris and Anne's wedding, that was only the next summer.

She was first to leave. The "perpetual student," as her parents called her, she was headed to Loyola in Chicago to begin work on another master's degree. Her fiction reading and writing had sparked a new academic interest in her, so like always, she dove right in. Coming from California, she remembered being apprehensive about the Midwest, a place she couldn't even recall ever visiting. She was pleased to discover the unflattering parts of its reputation were exaggerated, and building a life and family there came without reservation.

Their last year in school they mostly hung out at Chris and Anne's whose living room was biggest by far. After some deliberation over where to go out for their final dinner, Lauren confessed that she really wanted Lombardi's, their favorite pizza, delivered. She was more interested in a familiar, signature night than a "special" one. Plus, she was already lamenting, unsure if she'd ever be able to convert to Chicago deep dish. Chris took the phone ordering very seriously so that everything would be just right, a gesture Lauren found sweet.

They ate pizza and drank Coronas well into the night with a healthy mix of reminiscing and talking about future plans. They were all excited to visit Lauren, and Chris pleaded with her not to become a fan of any of Chicago's professional sports teams. She promised to make that effort just for him. They talked about how impressive it was that Fiona got the teaching assistant job in New York, although she was quick to point out she had family connections that surely enhanced her candidacy. Either way, Lauren figured her smart, compassionate, offbeat friend would thrive and succeed there.

By the end of the night, Eric and Fiona were drunk enough to each claim a couch. Lauren, of course, had to get home so she was ready for her

morning flight. Chris refused her claims that she'd be fine and insisted on walking her the six blocks home. Anne not only agreed but encouraged the plan.

It was still warm out even though it was past eleven, and they took their time on the stroll, pointing out their favorite houses and yard landscaping along the way. She told him about her new place which would be much more urban, and that she couldn't wait for him and Ginger to visit.

"I'm pretty sure Ginger and I are the real deal," he said. "I can't make it through a day without her, so the rest of my life?" He waited a moment as the rhetorical question floated away.

She had no idea what prompted this comment, but the sentiment made her smile. "I'm happy for you both."

"You know I love you, right?" he said.

"What?"

"Not like I love Ginger, of course," he clarified. "But it's really hitting me that you're leaving." When she didn't say anything, he continued. "Like, really hitting me in a not so good way."

"That's sweet," she said. "I'm gonna miss you guys, too." She hugged his arm.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm not trying to hook up with you here."

"Noted," she said with a laugh.

When they reached her front porch, she thanked him for walking her home. In that moment she had a flash thought that she wasn't going to see him or the others for a really long time. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she just did. Making a distinct choice not to overthink it, she pulled him to her and kissed him. They melted together. His arms and upper body were surprisingly strong. In a bad situation, she'd think about being unable to break free, but this was the opposite. All she could think was that nothing could harm her while in his grasp. That was the feeling, the force she brought to the kiss.

When it ended, they parted, and he managed an almost inaudible "Wow," before letting her go with what felt to Lauren like reluctance. They stayed close. "Don't worry," she said with a wink. "I'm not trying to hook up with you here."

"Noted," he said with a smile.

"Take care of yourself, Mowgli," she told him. "And take care of Ginger, too." Each word of the second part was emphasized with a finger pressing

against his chest. She could tell he wanted to reply with some perfectly crafted movie line that she'd remember forever, but he just stood there in the echoing aftermath of his dumbfounded shock. She concluded that was best and turned for the door. She thought about turning back and blowing him another kiss, but decided against it, not wanting to make what they just shared too coy or suggestive.

She hadn't thought about that night in years, and the incident didn't strike her quite as innocent as it did back then. No sense feeling guilty about it now, though. She heard the women out in the hall, and as she went to join them, she realized that even though she was alone in this room for a good five minutes, she didn't look at – or even think about – the spy cam app. She took it as a good sign that she could maybe let go of the obsession and relax a bit.

Chapter 8

Anne

Anne stayed out on the balcony for another minute while Chris went to take his shower. In general, she would claim to be calm if asked, but the view of the trees and the lake took that feeling to a new level of real peace. She drank it all in with a few deep breaths, then headed out into the hallway, knowing Chris really was going to be out of the shower and dressing very soon.

The other bedroom doors were closed. She heard a friend inside each room she passed in the middle of the hall but didn't know who was where. Curiosity guided her to the last door at the end of the hall. Just as she reached it, she heard a door open behind her, causing her to turn back.

"I thought you guys were over there," Fiona said, standing in her doorway.

"We are," Anne said. "I'm just being nosy. I love the style of this place."

"Me too," said Fiona.

Just then Lauren opened her door and came out. "Dorm party," she said. "Don't let the RA catch you."

"We're not even drinking yet," said Fiona.

"Good point," said Lauren.

Anne couldn't resist trying the door she was still standing at, but it was locked. "That must be the sex dungeon," she said.

"Should wait on that," Fiona said. "We just got here."

“Haven’t unpacked my gear,” said Anne.

“TSA took mine,” said Fiona.

Anne laughed and couldn’t help but think of the worry and the brief conversation she just had with Chris. She and Fiona had indeed fallen right back into their banter from so many years ago, and it was still funny. Even the less decent material was clearly not going to be off limits. It suddenly felt like she had spent the last several weekends – or years – with them.

“I so need that drink,” said Lauren, shaking her head.

They went down to the parlor, and when they found the room empty, they joked about the women being ready for the evening before the men. They then wandered out onto the terrace and flopped down onto the matching striped lounge chairs.

“So relaxing,” said Anne. “I didn’t realize how much I needed this.”

“Same,” said Lauren. “Been oddly hectic lately. And I guess there’s an upside to getting away from the hubby for a few days,” Lauren said.

“Sure,” said Anne. “Rub it in.”

Lauren and Fiona laughed, and Lauren even apologized through her chuckle. “But you married Mowgli!” she proclaimed as if in her own defense.

“I did,” said Anne. “He’s still a keeper.”

“How are you doing?” Lauren asked Anne. “How’s the company?”

“It’s good,” Anne said. “Some changes coming up, I think, but too soon to tell.” She didn’t mean for her response to sound cryptic but feared it did. “One of my partners,” she clarified, “is trying to conspire with me to push the third one out.”

“That sounds messy,” said Lauren.

“The truth is,” Anne continued, “I’m feeling it might be time for *me* to move on. I’d like the two of them to buy me out. I just don’t know how to approach it or what I’d do next.”

“Sounds complicated,” said Fiona, “but maybe exciting, too?”

“Desperately trying to work the ‘exciting’ angle,” smiled Anne. Like with the joking banter, she noticed how effortlessly she fell back into a comfort zone confiding in these women, too. Chris didn’t even know this fairly recent situation or feeling in her. “We have a few clients,” she continued, “who would hire me in a second, but going from owner to employee sounds kinda dumb, doesn’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” said Lauren. “Everyone talks about the freedom of

owning your own business, but there's a different kind of freedom in letting someone else run the show."

"True," said Anne. "I just have no idea what any next chapter would look like. And Chris is good at his job, but he's not exactly the model of ambition." She immediately regretted saying that. Chris was no deadbeat, and she hated the fact that she might have just implied that. "I mean, he's just been at the same company forever. They love him; it pays well, so ..."

"He still cranking out those books?" Lauren asked.

"He is," Anne said, nodding. "Finishing the fifth one according to the last update. I think it's going as good as it's going to go, but he still enjoys it. Works hard at it. God bless him."

"That's cool," said Fiona. "Never lost the writing bug. Good for him."

"He just doesn't promote them in any way," Anne said. "Makes him feel narcissistic, which obviously, he's not."

"I don't remember him as a 'look at me' type of guy," laughed Lauren. "Selling is hard. A totally different skill set. The opposite of being a writer, I think."

"That's exactly what he says," said Anne.

"Get Gregor to hook him up," said Fiona. "He must know people."

"Chris would never ask that," said Anne. "Way too humble."

"I'll do it," Fiona said.

"I'm curious," Lauren said to Anne. "The clients who would hire you, are you ranking them? Is there a dream job in the mix?"

Anne thought about it. "There is this one company," she told them. "A consulting firm that runs reports on their client companies and shows them ways to be more eco-friendly and sustainable."

"That sounds great," said Fiona.

"I agree," said Lauren.

"It's not like I have my pick," said Anne. "But if I did, I think I'd like to go there in a project management role. The woman I work with on their events has mentioned the need. I've been poking at the resumé, thinking about reaching out. But there's a downside."

"What's that?" asked Lauren.

"I swear to God," Anne told them. "They're all kids. I'd be the old lady of the office."

Fiona and Lauren laughed. "Don't worry," Lauren said. "What do they say in Hollywood? You play much younger."

“Definitely,” agreed Fiona.

“Ha,” said Anne. “Thanks.”

“Be still my heart,” came Eric’s voice from the doorway back into the parlor. “The three most beautiful women in the world.” He came over, pulling a wicker chair from the table set and sitting at their feet. “You know what I was thinking about yesterday awaiting your arrival?” he asked. He waited a second, then told them: “Rehab-Tubbies.”

“Oh my god!” yelled Fiona.

“Classic,” said Lauren, laughing.

Anne laughed, too. What a memory! Their first year in school, they went to a packed club on Halloween and won the costume contest hands down. They went dressed as the Teletubbies, but years later after they had all gone off the rails like the worst, most unfortunate child actors. The whole crowd went nuts for them all night. It was really something.

“What were the names again?” asked Eric.

“You don’t remember your name, Stinky-Dinky?” Anne said.

“So gross,” said Lauren.

Anne continued. “I was Topsy, the drunk.” Then she pointed to Fiona who was already propping up her ample breasts with both hands. “Ta-Ta, the stripper,” Anne said then pointed to Lauren and asked: “And?”

Lauren sighed, embarrassed. “I was Ho, the ... public relations professional.”

There were only four Teletubbies, so Chris made up a fifth character, a drug addict he named Junky, who was already so delinquent he didn’t even make the preschool show. They practically fell out of their chairs cracking up over the sheer genius and the one-night fame of it all.

“It was like a serious prize, too,” Fiona recalled. They remembered splitting \$1,000 and a case of flavored Absolut vodka from the contest sponsor. “You should make Rehab-Tubbies into a movie,” she told Eric.

“Oh my god,” thought Eric aloud, clearly in love with the idea. “I wonder who I would need to call about the rights.”

Just then they heard Chris call from inside. “I got ditched already?” Then he found them. “Oh, phew,” he said. “Thought I might have showered for nothing.” They brought him in on the Halloween recollection as they all went inside. “Oh man,” he said wistfully. “That was iconic! We signed autographs! Do you remember that?”

Chapter 9

Chris

Eric made his way over to the bar, and Chris followed to help. “Who’s having what?” Eric asked the group. “Don’t be shy. This is fully stocked, and I know what I’m doing.”

Chris noticed that Eric was no longer the shy, quiet kid he used to hang out with. There was a confidence, a charisma, that he assumed came with Hollywood success. He did remember, though, that Eric had some of those qualities back in school, always getting the corner booth or the extension on his homework. He could draw people in and make them trust him. That skill must serve him well where he is.

Chris figured he was not enough of a people person to make it in Hollywood, especially at his age. To him, it was a bittersweet coincidence that Eric’s success started with the same thing Chris worked at every day: a novel. He wouldn’t call Eric’s break entirely lucky. *All That’s Left to Know* is a fantastic book, deserving of all the praise and attention it received. But there was some luck involved, wasn’t there? Did it even matter? Their lives were what they were. He wasn’t jealous of Eric. Sure, Chris would like to become the next Philip K. Dick with his elaborate science fiction universe, but his writing had become part of a smaller, more personal sphere in his life. Like some people collect stamps or cultivate a vegetable garden.

“You mix, and I’ll serve,” Chris told him.

“Perfect,” Eric said.

A few minutes later, Anne and Fiona had vodka martinis with lemon, and Lauren had a gin and tonic. The men each had Manhattans, which Eric made with a dash of dry vermouth along with the sweet. Chris noted it was good and planned to adopt the habit at home. Eric made his own drink last then joined them, clinking his glass into Chris' who stood closest. Then everyone touched glasses.

"I already sipped mine," said Fiona. "Is that bad luck?"

"We'll find out," joked Chris.

They drank and reminisced for the better part of the next hour. Chris noticed that Eric was the only one using nicknames, so he helped out by recalling a story with Woodstock and Brontë. He hoped the women would join in to accept, even embrace this gathering for what it was. Not just looking back but going back.

The conversation lagged into silence, then Lauren said to Eric: "So, are you going to tell us why we're really here? ... Or should I?" She dipped her chin at him and raised one eyebrow, a skill they'd all always admired.

Eric's mouth opened slowly in surprise then stretched into a smile. "You got my clue," he said to her.

"I did," said Lauren.

"Of course you did," said Eric letting the smile linger.

Chris, Anne, and Fiona looked at each other. What was going on? What clue?

"The floor is yours," Eric told Lauren with as much of a theatrical bow as he could manage while sitting down.

Lauren turned to the others. "Our dear old friend has brought us here so that we may each write an original ghost story."

"Cool," said Chris, who immediately felt embarrassed that he was the only one with a reaction, let alone a vocal one. But was this true? This weekend was going to be about writing?

Lauren continued: "It seems Gregor recognizes some parallels between our little group and the famous literary one from 1816 that included Mary Shelley in a different villa." Then she teased Eric: "You didn't want to fly us to Switzerland?"

"I considered it," Eric said as if in his own defense. "But too difficult, logistically."

"You mean the story where she came up with *Frankenstein*?" asked Anne.

As Lauren nodded, Eric stood up and took over. "Exactly," he said.

He moved like a stage magician, although Chris feared Anne might be thinking carnival barker. “It’s an iconic tale in the literature world,” Eric declared, “and now it’s *our* turn. As Brontë pointed out, our group is just like theirs. It’s uncanny!” He motioned to Chris and Anne. “The couple. Percy and Mary Shelley.” He moved to the couch and sat between Fiona and Lauren, taking a hand from each of them. He raised Fiona’s and kissed it. “Our free-spirited Claire Clairmont.” When he raised Lauren’s hand, he encountered what looked like resistance, so he only pretended to kiss it, his lips inches away from her skin. “And our doctor. Not of medicine – what use would we have for that? No, we have in our midst, in our inseparable family, a PhD in ... wait for it ... Victorian History! What could be more perfect?”

“So that makes you Lord Byron?” Lauren asked as he released her hand.

“By default, yes,” Eric said with a shrug. “Although similarities could be argued there, too. I have – how shall we say? – entangled myself in a number of relationships, some more lengthy and serious than others. I have what some would call fame while others might see it as notoriety.”

“Exiled?” asked Lauren.

“Not yet,” Eric replied with a wink.

“Wait,” said Fiona. “What was the clue? In the letter?”

Lauren looked at Eric, who raised his glass to her as if to say *by all means*. “The headline in the letter,” Lauren told them. “Don’t ignore opportunity. Do accept this invitation. It was an acrostic of sorts. The first letter in each word spells ‘Diodati’ which is the name of the villa in Geneva where Byron’s famous ghost story contest took place.”

“I don’t feel bad about not catching that,” said Chris.

Eric put his drink down and clapped. “Bravo,” he said. “I’ll admit, I had a whole pitch, but this was *so* much better.”

“Just saying,” said Anne. “I haven’t written anything in a long time.”

“Me either,” said Fiona.

“It’s not about that,” insisted Eric. “Needless to say, there will be no judging here. Byron did propose a contest, but ours will be no such thing. Competition will be replaced with inspiration, creativity, and fun. We all loved to do this sort of thing years ago, and I believe that passion never fully leaves you. Remember our late-night talks about how reading and writing are good for the psyche and the soul, helping gain a better understanding of this mysterious thrill ride we call the human condition? We were young,

but I don't recall our opinions being naïve or immature. The truth is, I believe in the potential and the possibility of our voices."

His excitement was palpable, and more than a little contagious. Chris was fired up and joined Eric's effort to convince the others, not knowing how much convincing they needed. "This is gonna be great!" he said. "You never forget how to write a story. We were all really good at it! Better than most of the people we went to class with." Then he seized the opportunity to playfully tease Anne. "And you weren't going to bring your laptop."

"Ah, ah, ah!" interrupted Eric with a raised finger. "There will be none of those so-called tops of the lap. No digital tomfoolery." He rushed to the desk on the other side of the room, opened a bottom drawer and took out a stack of identical black books and a canvas pouch the size of a clutch purse. "In fact," he continued, "as an homage to our predecessors, there will be no typing at all."

He handed a book to each of them, and they discovered, one by one, that they were beautiful (and no doubt expensive) hardcover journals. Full-page sized with lined, parchment-style paper. Each had a silken ribbon and endpaper printed with a vintage map of Lake Geneva and its surrounding countryside. Once all the journals were distributed, he reached in the pouch and produced, one at a time, exquisite fountain pens. Before handing each over, he looked at it and called a nickname. That's how they all knew to look and see that the pens were engraved with those names.

"Wow," said Chris. "Thank you. These are so nice!" This time he didn't care what he sounded like, and the others immediately followed, showering thanks on Eric for the unique, unexpected gifts.

Fiona turned to Lauren. "Wait, so you knew the whole time over here but didn't say anything?"

Lauren smiled. "I didn't want to steal Eric's thunder." She looked over at him, and her smile turned a bit sly. "Until I changed my mind and decided that I might." She raised the one eyebrow again. Chris so wished he could do that. Lauren's other anatomical trick was less endearing. She could dislocate her thumb (Both maybe? He couldn't remember.) making her hand the cringe-inducing shape of some crude garden tool. Chris shuddered just thinking about it.

"When I'm with this group," Eric said, "any thunder I may muster is yours for the taking." He motioned back to the desk. "Of course I have

a pen and journal as well. I ask that you write your stories only in these. Other than that, there are no rules. We'll share, applaud, ponder, and critique each other's work. Just like back in the old days. Only this time there will be no has-been or wannabe professors to look down on us, giving us incongruous guidance and meaningless grades." He said the last word like it had an awful taste. "No syllabus to categorize and define us, and, most importantly, no opinions from lesser minds that don't matter to us."

Chris was inspired, the wheels in his brain already turning. He was most comfortable writing science fiction, and he knew *Frankenstein* is widely considered the first science fiction novel. He saw that as an omen in his favor. What happens to a robot when it's shut down? Is its AI the soul that lives on and perhaps haunts the living? Or haunts the robots still in operation? What about aliens? If an alien ghost showed up, wouldn't we assume it was just a living alien? How would we know the difference? Those were two good, workable ideas, and it had only been like five minutes!

He understood it wasn't a contest, but he still wanted to win.

Chapter 10

Fiona

Preparing dinner was beyond easy. The refrigerator was stocked with clearly marked packages Eric told them were provided by a friend who was a catering chef. Everyone chipped in, and they ate in the dining room. Sitting at one end of the massive table, they talked about their professors and other classmates. Like with the Rehab-Tubbies, Anne was particularly good at recalling all the names. Even Frank, their favorite Lombardi's Pizza delivery guy. When those topics were exhausted, Eric asked: "So am I right to assume that everyone will partake in our little weekend activity?"

Chris held up his glass immediately, then Fiona, then Anne and Lauren in unison. Fiona was sure she would suck at it, but it would be fun anyway.

"Excellent," Eric said. "Obviously, I'm enamored with the coincidence of the makeup of our group, but don't get me started on that."

"Too late," said Fiona, making everyone laugh.

"Fair enough," conceded Eric. "Let me just say, I want this to be fun, but not silly. Challenging, but not stressful. We're not re-enacting any historical event here. That would be tired and boring. The idea is to inspire ourselves and each other, to lose ourselves in creativity with the support system we know, trust, and dare I say, miss. Let's go forth and break new ground the way we used to. For inspiration, I thought we could read aloud. I brought the very stories that inspired those at Diodati and the two

works that came from their famous contest.”

“*Frankenstein* and what else?” asked Anne.

“*The Vampyre*, by Dr. John Polidori,” said Eric.

“Which,” offered Lauren, “was first falsely published under Byron’s name.”

“On purpose?” asked Chris.

Lauren shrugged. “I imagine his fame helped sales. The story is based on a partial story Byron created at Diodati. Hard to say who knew what and who agreed to what.”

“Was this before or after *Dracula*?” Chris asked.

“Before,” said Lauren then seemed to hesitate before adding: “by almost a century.”

“Oh,” said Chris with a laugh. “I maybe should have known that.”

Lauren shrugged to indicate she didn’t necessarily agree. “Polidori’s character, Lord Ruthven,” she told them, “was the first literary vampire to be portrayed as an elegant man of means. Those before him were dirty, sewer-dwelling wretches like *The Walking Dead*. Although neither the work nor its author ever achieved fame like Shelley and Bram Stoker, Lord Ruthven undoubtedly influenced Count Dracula.”

Fiona couldn’t help but think how interesting it would be to take one of Lauren’s college courses. She could only assume all her students had crushes on her. How could they not? Fiona wondered if Lauren had ever given in to the temptation. She smirked to herself imagining her friend in some wanton tryst with a handsome college boy. Or girl, even better. Lauren was selective back in school, but she hooked up from time to time, and gave hilariously blunt kiss-and-tell reports to her and Anne. Fiona missed those laughs and hoped there would be more time for just the women this weekend.

After dinner they returned to the parlor where Fiona retrieved her journal and ran her fingers over its cover. It was like the book version of the seats on the private plane. This and the pen probably cost more than what she spent on groceries in a week. She opened to the first page, uncapped her pen, and wrote in an artful, swirling cursive: *This is where my awesome ghost story will be written. It will scare all my friends.* That’s when she noticed Chris writing quickly and somewhat earnestly in his journal. She tried to peek, but he pulled it to his chest. “It seems Writer Guy has already started his story,” she told the group.

“Not started,” said Chris closing his journal. “Finished.”

They all looked at him, not knowing what to say. After a moment, Eric motioned to the area rug in front of the fireplace. This would apparently be their stage. Once standing there, Chris pretended to wait for everyone’s attention even though he already had it, then he opened the journal, cleared his throat, and read:

*There once was a man from the villa
Who ate chocolate and never vanilla.
His story’s pale ghost,
More ghoulish than most,
Was a frightening, supernatural KILLA!*

The group burst into applause, and Chris gave an exaggerated bow. “This, my friends,” exclaimed Eric, “is precisely the spirit! No pun intended.”

When Chris sat back down, Anne came to him, beaming, and sat on his lap. She hugged him at the shoulders, kissed his cheek, and whispered something in his ear that made his eyebrows shoot up. Fiona thought they were just too cute.

“Let’s hear one of those old stories,” Fiona called to Eric. “Put us in the mood.”

“Soon,” Eric told them. “But first I have another story to share. A true one that begins with a confession: I did not choose this particular location by chance.” He let those words linger, and the silence caused the others to look around, intrigued. “This villa has a tragic history. In the winter of 1922 three young children were killed here. Everyone agreed the murderer was a witch named Agatha, but she was never held accountable. Why you may ask? Because she apparently committed her crime ... from beyond the grave.”

“That’s ... interesting,” said Lauren.

Eric went to the desk on the other side of the room, calling back to them. “It was a story that was told to me, but I took the liberty,” he returned and stood before them with his journal, “of writing it down. Adding to it a bit of craft.” He waited for what seemed like permission to begin.

“Let’s hear it,” said Chris.

Eric opened the journal and read aloud.

The news grabbed Catherine by the throat, making it nearly impossible for her to breathe. It simply couldn't be true. She had breakfast with him only hours ago. He took his eggs scrambled as he always does. She saw him off to work just like so many other days. How could this day be so different? How was it that this morning's goodbye was the last she'd ever speak to him? The last she'd ever see him?

But dead he was, the cause for which remained unknown to all those who examined him.

Before long Catherine's grief was overtaken by a cold, relentless fear. She knew she must do whatever she could to contact her husband just one more time. There was something she needed to know. Something only he knew. Could she somehow produce the miracle through which he could tell her?

She'd heard the rumors of the old woman Agatha Severin, who ran the local bookshop. If one asked with proper discretion, Agatha would sell you a forbidden book on the dark arts. Catherine was hesitant but knew this was her only chance. She entered the store and did her best to feign a mild, innocent curiosity in the occult and witchcraft, particularly séances as a means to contact the dead.

Here Eric surprised Fiona and the others by suddenly adopting the very convincing voice of a creepy old woman, which he mixed with his own narrator voice.

*"I think," Agatha said to her, "I have something that might interest you." With a crooked smile, Agatha produced a book titled *The Medium and the Dead*. Over the next several days, Catherine tried again and again to perform the ritual exactly as it was described in the book, but to no avail. Disheartened, she returned to the shop.*

"Just because you have the recipe," Agatha told Catherine, "doesn't mean you can bake the cake."

Then Eric spoke as Catherine, in a different, equally impressive and believable female voice. So much so that Fiona and Anna caught each other's surprised looks.

"What does that mean?" Catherine asked.

"You need a baker," said Agatha. "A chef."

"Where would I find such a person?"

“You already have.”

Catherine agreed to the witch’s fee, and Agatha conducted a séance in the villa. After falling into a trance, she was able to contact Catherine’s husband. Catherine was overjoyed. And also relieved. Having his attention one last time, she asked the question that had been burning in her mind since his death: “Where is the family fortune? Where is it hidden?”

Eric paused and let the dramatic moment sink in. Fiona looked around to see Chris, Anne, and Lauren all riveted, leaning ever so slightly toward Eric and the tale. That’s when she noticed she was, too. Eric continued:

There was a long silence as Agatha remained in her trancelike state. Catherine didn’t know what was happening. Did James hear her? Did he answer? Was he still there? “What did he say?” Catherine asked in desperation. Only then did Agatha’s rigid appearance ease into a slow, sinister smile.

“He told me what you want to know, and I’ll tell you ... but it will cost you half.”

“I knew it,” said Chris. “Never trust a witch.”

“Only half?” asked Lauren. “Not really taking advantage of the driver’s seat, if you ask me.”

Everyone, even Eric, appreciated the lightened moment. Sure, the story was providing plenty of spookiness, but its telling was meant to be fun. And it was. Fiona thought of the whispering girl in her bathroom. One of the Porter children? If only the others knew just how spooky their situation was. She hoped they wouldn’t have to find out. She’d never considered not coming to the reunion but felt in that moment so glad she did.

Eric continued in his own voice:

Catherine agreed to the deal. What choice did she have? Upon learning the fortune’s secret location, she acted grateful and even proposed working together. Perhaps they could use some of the money to make more from other desperate folks. A discussion ensued, and Agatha was intrigued with the idea of a partnership for the rest of her life ... which lasted only one more hour. Catherine would never give up half the family fortune. Once she had the information she desired, she poisoned the witch, allegedly in this very room.

“Oh, lovely,” said Anne looking around.

“But,” Eric said with a raised finger then looked back down at his journal.

As the poison took effect, Agatha’s final words were a curse on Catherine’s home and family. The next few days were filled with panic as Catherine refused to lend credence to the idea that the fate of her children had been decided. Nonetheless she couldn’t help but become overprotective of them, barely letting them out of her sight. All was well until late the third night when there came a strange, unexpected knock at the front door. Catherine answered it to discover a frail old man in a tweed overcoat carrying a small leather bag.

“Can I help you?” Catherine asked. She thought it must be a trick of the moonlight, but she could swear his eyes were entirely black like those of an insect.

“I’m the doctor,” the man said. “I was summoned. You have a sick child?”

“No I don’t,” insisted Catherine. “Who sent you?”

“I beg your pardon,” the man said. “I must be early.” With that, he turned and walked away.

Catherine stood frozen in fear then ran after him calling: “Who sent you?!” But the doctor seemed to disappear.

Sure enough, the next morning Catherine’s two youngest children burned with fever. The oldest, Elizabeth, tried to help care for them, but within hours both children were dead. Catherine prayed in earnest, pleading for answers about the alleged curse. She tried to convince herself that the tragedy was just an awful, dreadful coincidence.

But Elizabeth heard her mother’s prayer and demanded to know what curse she spoke of. Catherine couldn’t bring herself to convey the whole story, and her truncated, confused version sent Elizabeth into a fit of rage, screaming and breaking things. The outburst was so unlike her that Catherine couldn’t help but wonder if the curse was to blame.

Soon Elizabeth approached her mother carrying a large knife. Catherine pleaded with her to calm down and see reason, but the girl was possessed like some kind of demon. Catherine feared she might be attacked by this creature she barely recognized as her own child.

But no. With a guttural howl, Elizabeth raised the knife and slit her own throat. As the blood poured down the front of her dress, the young girl shouted over and over: “Mother, you did this! Mother, you did this!”

Catherine fell into a catatonic state. She was found days later and committed to an asylum where she spent the rest of her days, allegedly never speaking

a word to anyone.

“Wow,” said Lauren. “That’s quite the Air B&B ad. So, you’re saying this place is haunted?”

“Would be nice,” said Eric, “but no such luck. The legend will have to be inspiring on its own, I’m afraid.”

My roommate would like a word, thought Fiona. *And trust me, luck has nothing to do with it.*

“Does the curse have an ‘anyone who stays here is doomed’ clause?” Chris asked.

Eric looked like he was considering the question, then deadpanned: “Not that I know of, but I probably should have asked.”

“If it is haunted,” said Anne, “Maybe I can get a ghost to write my story for me.”

Fiona smiled at Anne’s take. Something told her it would be the two of them who would have the most trouble writing a story this weekend. Not the best thing over which to bond, but something, nonetheless. “Where’s the loo?” Fiona asked Eric.

Eric pointed. “Down the hall to the right. First door past the kitchen.”

Fiona gave a thumbs up and left them. In the hallway she took her time, noting the geometric tile floor pattern and the ornate carvings that ran along the top of the wainscoting. Leaves and berries at regular intervals felt very nouveau to her, but the conic light fixtures were unmistakably deco. A large, framed art print hung above a runner table caught her eye. She recognized it as *The Three Skulls* by Cezanne. Given the story she just heard, a decidedly odd choice of home décor.

She backed away from the picture, more puzzled than freaked out, and found the bathroom. She reached for the doorknob, but the door suddenly swung open inward, revealing a little old woman in a simple, black, uniform dress. Fiona let out the beginning of a scream then clamped her hand over her mouth. The woman stood without expression, her form backlit by the warm, golden glow of the vanity light behind her. Her silver hair was pulled back tight, and her dark eyes twitched ever so slightly.

“Pardon me,” said the woman in a soft, frail voice.

“Sorry,” Fiona said. “You just startled me. I’m Fiona.”

The woman just nodded slowly and stepped through the doorway into the hall. Close enough that Fiona had to take a step back.

“You must be the housekeeper,” Fiona said and saw the woman maybe sort of nod again. That was a nod, wasn’t it?

“I have instructions not to get in the way of the guests,” she said.

“You’re not in the way,” Fiona said nervously, although all she could think was this creepy old woman was quite literally just that standing in front of the bathroom door. An awkward moment passed, during which Fiona wasn’t sure how to proceed. The woman’s face softened, and she said: “I hope you enjoy your stay here.” Then she moved past Fiona into the kitchen.

Fiona ducked into the bathroom and closed the door, shuddering at the odd, unexpected meeting. She thought about the woman’s parting words. Something about the way she said it, like it was a hope that had little chance of coming true. She instinctually locked the door. It was obviously unnecessary, but she couldn’t help but think the woman was lurking close by.

When she returned to the parlor, Fiona went straight for the bar. “I met Mrs. Danvers,” she announced.

“What?” Lauren cried, laughing and covering her mouth to prevent spitting out her drink.

“Who?” asked Eric.

“The housekeeper?” said Fiona while pouring herself some vodka. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Carol?” asked Eric, surprised and confused. “What did she tell you her name was?”

“That was a Hitchcock reference,” Chris chimed in. “*Rebecca*.”

“It was a Daphne du Maurier reference,” corrected Fiona.

“What do you mean warning?” asked Eric.

Fiona took a swig of her new drink. “She scared the shit out of me. Whatever curse this place has, it goes through her.”

Chapter 11

Lauren

loading.

She hadn't checked the camera app since the start of the limo ride. Now they'd all gone to bed, and she was alone in her room, trying again. She'd watched it way too much at both airports, the second one until Fiona arrived, essentially rescuing her from the obsessive behavior. She'd seen Jonathan sitting on the couch once, so she knew it was working. It was pretty late there. He wouldn't dare have his mistress spend the night, would he? She could see the tart get up to use the bathroom. Wouldn't that be terrific?

At this rate, however, she wasn't going to see anything. There was no WiFi at the villa (Seriously?) and her cell service wasn't strong enough to connect and run the camera feeds. It was perpetually "loading." She thought about giving up but knew she wouldn't be able to sleep if she did. She'd waited months to have this operation in play now. If she saw evidence of an affair, she wanted the time away to decompress and make a plan.

Maybe Anne or Fiona had better cell service. She could ask to use one of their phones. She'd have to tell them why, and she'd prefer this whole thing stay as private as possible. What does it say about her if her husband is cheating?

She immediately rejected that dumb take. A decent percentage of guys

were jerks. His hurtful betrayal didn't say anything about her. She thought about reaching out to Fiona, who married and divorced an alleged jerk, but feared that partnership might turn into some man-bashing endeavor. She didn't have the energy for that. Plus talking with Fiona at the airport wine bar was a bit of a struggle. She seemed distracted and not all there.

Did that make Anne the better choice? Her marriage seemed good, which would mean Lauren would at least get genuine sympathy. That was okay, as long as it didn't turn into pity. She definitely didn't have the energy for that. After a few more rounds of debate which included the option of not reaching out to either of them, she texted Anne:

Hey. How's your cell service?

Good. Full bars. U need something?

Can I trouble you? Sorry.

No prob. One sec.

A minute later, Anne knocked on the door Lauren had left open for her. When she came in, Lauren closed it, immediately thinking this whole idea was a mistake. The plan tomorrow was to take some boat out on the lake. Maybe her service would be better out there. Maybe she should have waited to see. But again, the no sleeping thing. "What's up?" said Anne. "You look frazzled."

"I do?" This take was genuinely surprising to Lauren. She was off her game for sure, but apparently, she was showing much more than she realized. Not ideal. She lowered her voice to a near-whisper. "I'm in a bit of a situation," she began. "A potential situation. At home." Anne waited patiently, and Lauren finally sighed. "I think Jonathan might be having an affair."

"Oh no," said Anne, in a matching, low-volume voice. Her whole face deflated into sorrow and concern. "That's terrible. I'm so sorry. Are you trying to call him?"

Lauren shook her head and described what she had done with the cameras and how she couldn't access them.

"Wow," said Anne, surprised. "Where did you learn all the spy stuff?"

"The only thing I learned," Lauren told her, "is that there's nothing to learn. The whole operation is far less complicated than my espresso machine. Probably even my toaster. Frightening, if you think about it in a

cultural sense, but I've chosen not to do that."

Anne made it instantly clear she was all in to help her friend. She downloaded the app on her phone and let Lauren log in and check the feeds privately, insisting it was none of her business. Lauren appreciated the sentiment, but didn't care if Anne saw the feeds, especially now that they were showing nothing. Jonathan was most likely in bed asleep. Hopefully alone.

"It starts recording on a motion sensor," Lauren explained, "but I'd rather not discover anything incriminating when I'm back home."

"That makes sense," Anne said, then she gave Lauren a quick hug. "I hope it's nothing," she said. "A misunderstanding. But I'm really sorry you're going through this."

"Thanks."

"Okay, so you basically need unlimited access to my phone. My passcode is 281182."

"I appreciate that," Lauren said. "But it's bad enough that I'm consumed by this. I don't want to drag you into my drama. Maybe like once a day? Twice if it's not too much trouble?"

"Nonsense," said Anne. "I'll charge it tonight and give it to you in the morning. *I'll ask you* for it once or twice. Maybe."

"I can't ask that of you," Lauren insisted.

"You didn't."

Lauren felt the gratitude overwhelm her like a warm shower. This old friend with whom she hadn't had a real conversation in years, was without hesitation making certain that she had whatever peace of mind was possible. The feeling was so strong, she thought she might cry, but she held it together. "Thank you," she said. "I owe you one. A big one."

"Not a problem," Anne said. "Happy to help."

"Hey," Lauren said descending into a full whisper. "Does Fiona seem more ... unusual than you remember?"

"What do you mean?" asked Anne with a curious smile.

"I don't know," Lauren said. "We were catching up at the airport, and there were just times when her responses would be kind of ... off topic? Or she would suddenly change the topic midstream. I don't know. I guess she's always been all over the place."

"That's definitely how I remember her."

"You're right," Lauren said. "Probably nothing but let me know after you spend some time with her."

“Okay.”

Lauren immediately regretted bringing that up. It was unfair of her to put negative ideas about Fiona into Anne’s head. She should have let Anne experience her own interactions then maybe ask in a day or so. Although her approach on it was wrong, she knew she couldn’t take it back, so she let it go.

Just as she was thinking about Fiona, they heard her door, which was right next to the room they were in, open quickly and loudly. Then came the sounds of Fiona moving ... frantically? ... in the hallway. Lauren and Anne looked puzzled at each other, both clearly deciding whether to ignore or investigate. After a few moments the latter won out, and they found Fiona looking down over the banister. She seemed a little startled to be discovered, and Lauren concluded her old friend didn’t realize how loud she was being.

“Everything okay?” Anne asked her.

Fiona forced a smile and nodded.

“Did you hear something?” Lauren asked.

“No,” said Fiona. “I mean yes, but ... just some creaking. Old house settling I guess. Did you guys hear it?”

Anne and Lauren looked at each other then shrugged and shook their heads.

“Silly,” said Fiona as she headed back to her room. Anne did the same, and they all said goodnight. Lauren was last to leave the hallway. She looked over the banister but the first floor was just darkness. There was something about the way Fiona was acting that bordered on nervous. She was clearly lying about hearing something, but why wouldn’t she just tell them what she heard?

Chapter 12

Anne

Anne woke to see Chris out on the balcony scribbling in his journal. She had a feeling he would be really into this ghost story non-contest. She was equally sure that his story would probably be the best of the bunch, considering he had stuck with writing so persistently over the years.

She was not a fan of sci-fi but read his early books and knew he had talent which was best exemplified by his lyrical way of stringing sentences together. If only the sentences weren't about spaceships and intergalactic governments. That said, she'd always been impressed with the way he stuck to his one saga for so long. He used to tell her about it, which she enjoyed. The story had gotten pretty complex.

She was sure he could acquire a nerd-geek following of fans if he ever really set his mind to it. She often thought back to the completion of his Book One, *The Equinox Principle*. It was genuinely exciting, and she was so proud of him. As part of their agreed-upon marketing plan, he made some very professional-looking signs, and they bought a vendor booth at a sci fi convention in Boston.

The scene was beyond overwhelming. The massive hall was packed with people, many in costume, and their little table was one among thousands. People herded past them all day, both days, in both directions. His book cover was striking, created by a designer friend of theirs, so he had

what Anne felt was a decent number of people stop and look. Chris was congenial and eloquent pitching the story and answering questions. He never sounded like he was trying to sell the book. Some book marketing coach probably would have said that was a mistake, but his soft approach to engagement struck Anne that weekend as a plus. He was nice, someone you'd have a drink with. She remembered feeling it was unfair that someone like him didn't achieve industry success.

She eventually rolled out of bed just past 8:30 and went straight to the bathroom to complete her morning routine. When she came out, Chris was still going strong. She poked her head out the balcony door, and he looked up, surprised, as if he didn't expect to see her there. "How's it going?" she asked.

"Good!" he told her emphatically. "I think I really got something here. It's about a robot named Darwin. He's a prototype that's decommissioned to make way for an upgraded model, but his artificial intelligence software continues to exist on this other plane."

"Like a ghost," said Anne with a wink. She used to like when Chris told his made-up stories. He was good at it, and his enthusiasm used to be charming. It wasn't fair to say she'd grown tired of those times, because the truth was, they didn't happen all that much anymore. He wrote primarily in his solitary world. She knew she should still be seeing his storytelling as an example of his youthful energy, but somewhere along the way youthful became immature. She figured her frustration was really about his inability to do what it takes to gain some popularity with his books. An audience. She knew that wasn't fair, but there it was.

"Exactly," Chris continued. "Darwin figures out how to exist outside his body, because, you know, AI, and ultimately makes contact with the designer who made him and essentially killed him."

"Meet your maker," Anne said. "Religious allegory. Ambitious."

Chris smiled. "Not sure how much I'm going to play that. Maybe just focus on the haunting analogy. Darwin is not happy. You have any ideas yet?"

"A couple," she lied and sat in the chair opposite him. "You're really into this," she said with a smile she hoped wasn't too condescending.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Chris asked.

"No, I think it's cute," she said.

He made a show of rolling his eyes. "When you are chilled to the bone

reading my story,” he proclaimed in a joking tone, “and have nightmares for weeks, ‘cute’ will be the last thing on your mind!”

“I have been warned,” she said. “Heads up. Lauren’s going to have my phone for most of the day.”

“So ... no dick pics?”

She laughed. “Correct,” she told him. “We’ll keep those interactions consistent.”

He nodded agreement with a smile and closed the journal. She thought about telling him Lauren’s situation. She almost let it come out, but then stopped herself. Lauren didn’t ask for privacy, but fair to say it was implied. Probably best to check with her before mentioning anything.

Once downstairs they could hear everyone in the kitchen at the end of the hall. When they joined the group, Anne apologized for oversleeping, a sentiment that was met with shrugs of dismissal. Eric, who was the only one wearing pajamas, had taken the lead on the breakfast preparation, and their arrival was timed with coincidental near perfection.

“Everyone still up for the boat?” Eric asked.

“I totally forgot about that,” said Anne. “Yeah, sure.”

“Will it be cold?” asked Fiona.

Eric shrugged. “Not too bad, but maybe bring a sweater or jacket just in case.”

As discreetly as possible, Anne moved behind the island where Lauren stood. She was wearing brightly colored leggings and running shoes, making Anne remember how last night she’d asked Eric about her daily run. Apparently, there was a mile-long path that offered great lake views and practically looped back to the front door. Lauren was ecstatic, and Anne wished she hadn’t given up running for her Peleton. She didn’t even bring running shoes, not that she’d be able to keep up with Lauren, who looked as fit as ever. Then she thought if the two of them did run together, Fiona would probably worry about what she was missing.

Below counter level, she pressed her phone into Lauren’s hand and quickly kissed her shoulder. She felt her friend soften and lean toward her ever so slightly. Lauren’s slow exhale gave a hint of her struggle, the pain and sadness she must be going through.

Sliding equal portions of the scrambled eggs, colorful with vegetables from the frying pan onto the plates, Eric said he needed to prep the boat, whatever that meant. He asked Chris if he wanted to join him.

“Sure,” said Chris.

Just then Eric got a text he was obviously not happy about. “Jesus Christ,” he said to himself. “These ... fuckers.” He typed a quick reply and put his phone away.

“Everything okay?” Anne asked him.

Eric sighed. In the pause that followed it was hard to tell whether he couldn’t share what was up or just didn’t want to. “I have this top secret project in a delicate stage of the development process, and there are ... forces who want in creatively. Forces who should just shut the fuck up and thank their lucky stars they’re involved at all. It’s a bit of a mess.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Anne.

“It’s most frustrating,” Eric said, “because I told the team to respect this weekend and me here with all of you. Then as soon as I’m gone, opportunists start poking weak links in the chain, and everyone freaks out. They didn’t even last twenty-four hours.”

“Can you talk about the project?” Chris asked.

“I could, but ...” Eric said with a smile.

“Then you’d have to kill us?” Chris asked.

Eric nodded along with the joke. “Maybe you could become the ghosts that finally haunt this place.”

Chapter 13

Chris

Chris was jotting story notes into his journal while he waited by the front door for Eric to change. Redemption. *AI = soul. Haunted people don't know the difference. Assume it's a human spirit. Apotheosis? Achieving humanity?*

Anne came by. "Be careful," she said.

"I will," he said not sure what the warning referred to. They were just walking down to the lake. Maybe she thought he would drown or cause the boat engine to explode. He caught her shooting a glance at the journal. "Yes, I'm bringing it," he told her. "I have a lot of wheels turning, and it gets complex. If I think of something, I need to write it down or I risk forgetting."

"I didn't say anything," Anne said defensively, shaking her head.

"You don't have to," he told her.

Eric emerged in jeans and a dark hoodie. "Ready?" he asked.

From the front steps the trail down to the lake looked gentle and inviting, like an Andrew Wyeth painting, but walking it showed its rocky uneasiness. Chris watched where he stepped but still almost wiped out twice, making him smile at Anne's call for him to be careful. "When do you think we'll have our first story workshop?" he asked Eric.

"I'm hoping before dinner," Eric said. "I figure the boat trip can be relaxing and productive. This first one we'll just get everyone set in

their ideas?”

“Looking forward to that,” Chris said.

They arrived at the dock, and Chris got his first glimpse of the boat. He was pretty sure it wasn't going to be sailing (someone needed true skill for that), but he wasn't prepared for the luxury cabin cruiser floating before him. “No way,” he said, sounding like a ten-year-old while resisting the urge to run ahead.

“Nice, huh?” said Eric.

The yacht, which Chris guessed was about forty feet long, seemed incongruous by the little dock at first, but then he saw from the shore that the lake was much bigger than it looked from the house. They boarded, and he took in the pristine cushioned seating areas in both the front and the back (“bow” and “stern” he proudly noted to himself although couldn't remember which was which). He ran his hands over the polished chrome steering wheel. The simple, shining dashboard console reminded him of the spaceships in his books.

“Check this out,” Eric said and disappeared below. Chris followed to discover the lower level featured a small but elegantly functional kitchenette, more seating, a private bed, and a bathroom.

“Nice,” Chris said. He absent-mindedly opened cabinets and drawers like a curious, unattended child. The last of which was a big, deep drawer that encompassed all the space under the bed. Inside was a small, uninflated life raft complete with compact motor.

Eric looked over Chris' shoulder and raised his eyebrows. “What do you know?” he asked. “Don't think we'll be needing that, but good to know it's there.”

Chris closed the drawer. “So what do we need to do?”

“Huh?”

“The boat prep.”

“Oh,” said Eric dismissively with a wave of his hand. “I just said that. This thing practically runs itself. I already took it out twice.” He opened the fridge and took out two cans of beer, handing one to Chris.

A little early Chris thought *but okay*. They opened them and climbed back up to the main deck which was just starting to get the touch of morning sun. They sat with their beers in the front of the boat, and Chris looked out at the serene expanse of water. The shoreline on the far side was mostly rock, high enough to qualify as cliffs at some points.

“How’s everything with you and Ginger?” Eric asked. “You guys look great from my vantage point. Not sure if that matters, but ...”

“No complaints,” Chris said. He didn’t see the need to get into a marital woes conversation, especially not on the morning of the first day. “Seems my luck hasn’t run out yet.”

“Happy for you both. I always knew it would work. We all did. Pretty easy to see.”

“Thanks. What about you? Have you met the future Mrs. Asher yet?”

Eric let out a breath of a laugh. “In my world? Not chance.” The sentiment dragged some silence in behind it, and Chris didn’t know what to say in response. “How’s your work?” Eric asked. “You’re still writing the Equinox stuff, right?”

“Yeah,” said Chris. “Just for fun really. I can’t stand the self-promo part. This weekend has actually been a welcome break, stepping away to recharge. Didn’t know I’d be writing something else, but that’s good, too. I need to figure some things out for the bigger story arcs ahead in the next book.”

“That’s great.” He dipped his head to one side, momentarily lost in thought. “How many books have you finished?”

“Fifth is almost done. Another month probably.”

“When we’re all back to our lives, I’ll put you in touch with this guy. I don’t really know him, but we have mutual friends. Let me feel it out. He does this cool sci fi stuff on the web. It’s animation, but not for kids. Good following, from what I hear. I can’t remember the site, of course.”

“Thanks,” said Chris. “I’ll talk to anyone. Doesn’t have to turn into anything. I like meeting creative people and learning what their thing is.” He was being honest when he said that. He held out no hope for any big, life-changing deal. He’d never considered seeing his story in animation. That could be cool.

There were a few more moments of silence, then Eric said. “There’s another reason I got you out here alone. If I tell you something, can you keep it between us? Just for now?”

“Of course.”

“A friend of mine in New York is going to publish our ghost stories.”

“What? How? They’re barely started.”

Eric sat up straighter and launched into the story he was obviously dying to share. “We were out having drinks a while back, and for some

reason the whole Mary Shelley, Villa Diodati thing came up. Once we established who was there, and yeah, I had to google that, the similarities of this group just struck me. My wheels started spinning, and this whole weekend idea started to gel. I pitched it right there over drinks, and he was all in. The book will be an anthology called *Gothic Revival*. Diodati history, old excerpts, our weekend here that mirrors theirs, and most importantly, our stories.”

“Holy shit,” said Chris. “That’s amazing!”

“I figured I could tell you because, you know, we both stuck with the writing. We get it. I’m not saying the women can’t handle the pressure or anything lame like that, but why introduce it? I figure you know all about that sort of thing. Probably put pressure on yourself even when you don’t need to.”

Chris laughed. “I wish I could say that wasn’t true.” Then a thought hit him. “Wait, a story in three days?”

Eric shook his head. “The point of this weekend,” he said, “is to get as far as we can. Then we’ll be working with their editors and getting everything where it needs to be.”

“Cool.”

“I just don’t want the business stuff to get in the way of what we’re doing here.”

“I can see that,” Chris said. He was still wrapping his head around this news. On the one hand, it made no sense. Four unknown writers get a deal with stories that don’t exist yet? Not exactly how the publishing business works. Then on the other hand, this was Eric, and Chris couldn’t help but sense that whatever he was cooking up was real. “This is unbelievable,” he said. “Thanks for doing this.”

“It’s going to be good,” Eric said. “Oh, and just so you know, the company has a real art-house, lit vibe. They don’t do science fiction or anything like that. Otherwise, I’d have you in there for meetings and what not.”

“Oh god,” said Chris putting a hand up, embarrassed. “You’re getting my work published, and I’m going to complain about *which* work? I don’t think so.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Eric said touching his beer can to Chris’. Then he thought for a second. “I know you’re in, and I imagine Woodstock will jump at the exposure and publicity for her artwork, but

what about Ginger and Brontë? Do I have any reason to believe they won't be on board with this?"

"With getting a story published? I can't imagine why they wouldn't be. We were all cut from the cloth where that was a pretty big deal. I don't think you lose that because you go down some other career path."

"I thought that, too, but I just have these feelings. First, that Ginger and Woodstock might not even write anything. And once the deal is on the table, I'm afraid Ginger might pull the 'private person' card."

Chris knew exactly what his friend was talking about. It was even a topic of conversation back in school. If they ever became famous authors, Anne would be the J.D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon kind, the recluse who didn't give interviews or make appearances. Is it possible that side of her was even stronger now? So strong that she wouldn't even want her *name* out there in print? He tried to pretend that he couldn't imagine that, but he could. Easily. Maybe she could create a pen name for her work persona and write under that. "I can get a read on her without seeming like I'm getting a read."

Eric smiled. "That would be good. The first order of business is making sure she actually writes something. Anything. Woodstock too, but I can work on her."

"I'll handle Anne," Chris said. "I mean Ginger."

Eric smiled and knocked his beer can into Chris' again. "I obviously don't like the secretive aspect of it," said Eric. "Deceptive if you want to get dramatic about it, but I see it as a nice surprise when I do tell them. Just like it was now when I told you. I want our best work without the nonsense, and figured what better way to present it than wrapped in our unique, nostalgic fun? Which is the opposite of deceptive. That's as real as it gets."

"I agree. I think it's great," said Chris, "and keeping it under wraps for now makes total sense. I wouldn't worry."

"When I do tell them," Eric said. "You can act like you're hearing it for the first time, right? I don't want to be accused of any sexism with my side conversations."

"I've been a husband for fifteen years," he said. "My acting skills are impeccable. I can drop to my knees and weep with joy if you want."

They both laughed and drank their beers. Chris' mind was already racing with the possibilities of this turn of events. He really liked his budding

ghost story about Darwin the robot, but if this publishing house didn't do sci fi, it would be stupid to submit that story as their introduction to him. He needed to start over with something more traditional and artsy. Avant-garde ghost. He could do that. He could create something that could be blown out into a novel, even a series, all through what was soon to be *his* new publisher. This was good.

The term "art house" made him think of a painter. *Older or modern time? Not sure yet. A portrait painter's work shows ghosts from his subjects' pasts that he didn't paint. That could be something. Maybe the story centers around his struggle with a self-portrait. The fear over what it will reveal.*

"Writing this story was an interesting challenge before this news," said Chris. "I think you just took it up a notch."

Chapter 14

Fiona

The boat was beyond fancy. Fiona could tell the next few hours were going to be decadent, and she was ready for it all: taking in the fresh air, basking in the sun, pretending to write a short story. An intoxicating pine, earthy scent enveloped her, nearly making her tear up being so used to the city as she was. Late morning was warm enough for shorts and light tops, but it was generally accepted that swimming was out of the question. Eric said the water was most likely in the 50s. Their packed lunch would begin in about an hour, at which time Fiona planned to switch from blackberry flavored seltzer water to Chardonnay. The guys were already drinking beer, but slowly.

The short story writing was a challenge, and Fiona did her best to make progress that first full day. Everyone had their journals out, and although writing was a highly solitary activity, they made it work. They joked with each other, pretending it was a competition like Lord Byron's and devising ways to cheat.

She was all over the map trying to come up with an idea. She laughed about the cliché fiction-writing mantra: write what you know. With all her paranormal experience, including the latest in her bathroom yesterday and the surprise last night, shouldn't an exercise like this be easy? She thought about all the ghosts she'd seen the past few years. There must be a story worth telling in there somewhere.

Not getting anywhere interesting, Fiona wandered down below to the bathroom. She could live on this boat. It was nicer than her apartment. Looking in the little square mirror over the adorable, tiny, stainless steel sink, she was able to admit to herself that the story writing was a good distraction from the question that had been simmering in her mind since last night. She hadn't fully asked herself yet because she didn't want to think about it. If she thought about it, she'd have to try to answer it, and she was afraid she wouldn't like the answer. Mostly, she hated how juvenile the question made her feel.

After poking around the little kitchen, she came back up onto the deck to find everyone quietly writing. "Weekend party at the villa," she said. "Let's simmer down, folks. Neighbors will call the cops."

"They'll never take me alive," Eric said without looking up.

Before sitting, Fiona took in the whole scene, and something occurred to her. "Speaking of neighbors," she said. "Is it weird that there are no other houses? No docks anywhere on the shore?"

"I thought the same thing," said Lauren.

The question never got addressed beyond Lauren also finding it weird. Eric, who acted as if he hadn't heard her, took a hardcover book out of his duffle bag. "Who's up for a listen?" he asked. "I was thinking Polidori's *The Vampyre* seeing as we already chatted a bit about that one?"

Everyone agreed that sounded good and that Eric should read. He did have a nice deep voice and wasn't shy about dramatic expression. They'd already experienced his impressive voice acting skills with the villa legend. He flipped through the book, and when he found the story, he looked over the opening page in preparation. After a few moments, he began:

It happened that in the midst of the dissipations attendant upon a London winter, there appeared at the various parties of the leaders of the ton a nobleman, more remarkable for his singularities, than his rank. He gazed upon the mirth around him, as if he could not participate therein. Apparently, the light laughter of the fair only attracted his attention, that he might by a look quell it, and throw fear into those breasts where thoughtlessness reigned.

Although she was sure the story was a good one, Fiona's mind was soon distracted back to the events of last night. While getting ready for bed she heard children running down the hall and then down the stairs. Because of

the Porter legend, she assumed there were three, although only two spoke. The first, who could easily have been the girl she heard in the bathroom called: *This way!* A few seconds later a small boy cried: *Wait for me!*

She should have just opened her door a bit and looked out, but she rushed into the hall without thinking, hoping to see something. When she didn't, her plan to go back to bed was interrupted by Lauren and Anne. Fiona was sure she sounded ridiculous in their exchange, but it wasn't like she could tell them everything then and there. Discretion was going to be harder to achieve than she anticipated. She had to be better about keeping herself in check.

She took in fragments of Eric's reading, noting he was really getting into it. But her wandering mind wouldn't allow her to focus for too long. The vampire Lord Ruthven and a man named Aubrey traveling together. Aubrey ditches him when Ruthven tries to seduce a woman. Then Aubrey falls in love, but she's killed, her throat torn open. Aubrey's sister becomes a character.

Coincidentally, Fiona returned her full attention to Eric just as the story was ending. Lord Ruthven marries Aubrey's sister, kills her, then disappears. Aubrey dies too, unable to warn her of the danger in time.

Aubrey's weakness increased; the effusion of blood produced symptoms of the near approach of death. He desired his sister's guardians might be called, and when the midnight hour had struck, he related composedly what the reader has perused—he died immediately after. The guardians hastened to protect Miss Aubrey; but when they arrived, it was too late. Lord Ruthven had disappeared, and Aubrey's sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!

"Well done!" Chris commended Eric, and they all engaged in light applause for him that Fiona happily joined. "You're like a real voice actor."

"Believe it or not," Eric said. "I've been doing some studying, training there. You guys know Tom Hiddleston?"

"Not as well as you, apparently," joked Lauren.

"You're friends with Loki?" asked Chris in disbelief.

Eric laughed. "He was in a film I wrote that ended up not getting made. We hit it off, and he's been teaching me voice stuff. Changing, throwing. He's really good. It's wild." Eric suddenly seemed embarrassed. "Sorry, name dropping. Back to the vampire!"

“I for sure have never read that story,” said Anne. “Really interesting.” She turned to Lauren. “You can definitely see the Dracula influence.”

“Now,” said Eric. “I don’t want to put any pressure on our college professor friend, whose life’s work is dedicated to stories just like this.” He smiled sheepishly at Lauren. “But, speaking only for myself, I welcome your insights and guidance as we discuss themes, settings, style, et cetera, et cetera. Would you be open to that?”

“I second!” called Chris.

“Free college course?” said Fiona. “I’m in.”

Lauren gave a kind of embarrassed smile, then sipped her wine and told them. “I would begin any discussion with an examination of either vice and virtue or loyalty and betrayal.”

That was all it took for them to dive in. Within minutes, the group felt to Fiona like it did all those years ago. The five of them up late in Mowgli and Ginger’s living room waxing poetic and philosophical. She was sure they weren’t as brilliant and insightful as they thought they were at the time. Were they now? Lauren certainly seemed to be.

“We have a good enough idea what ‘virtue’ meant in the 1800s,” said Anne. “But what about today? Things are so much more complex and complicated.”

“True,” Chris said. “Just think of the cultural, political mess we’re in. The specific thing you do because it’s good is deemed evil by a whole other group of people. It’s even tied to loyalty, I think. Whether your virtue can be someone else’s vice. It all depends on which ...” he searched for a word ... “ecosystem you’re loyal to.”

“Seeing how themes intersect and overlap helps any discussion,” noted Lauren.

“Ruthven makes Aubrey swear an oath,” said Chris. “That’s obviously about loyalty. He betrays Ruthven early in the story, but not when it matters most, when he can save his sister.”

“Is loyalty ambiguous?” Eric asked.

“I’d say definitely,” said Lauren. “The consequences Aubrey faces in his first betrayal of Ruthven are nothing compared to the next betrayal which he chooses not to commit.”

“Well, at the start,” said Anne, “Aubrey is ignorant to the fact his traveling companion is a vampire. That’s not his fault.”

“It’s not about blame,” Lauren said. “Ignorance is a vice.”

“I thought ignorance was bliss,” joked Chris.

“Please try not to confuse my husband,” Anne told Lauren with a funny, pretend overconcern. Lauren smiled. Chris was always willing to be the butt of any decent, comedic exchange, even setting them up as he sort of did then.

“Another interesting aspect of this story,” Lauren said, “is Polidori no doubt lifted the name Ruthven from another work by Lady Caroline Lamb, an author who specialized in unflattering portraits that exposed the hypocrisy of London society.”

“She sounds like my kind of girl,” said Eric.

“Her Ruthven,” Lauren continued, “is admittedly based on Lord Byron, with whom she had an affair a few years prior to the Diodati summer. She famously referred to Byron as ‘mad, bad, and dangerous to know.’”

“People say that about me all the time,” said Chris.

“You wish,” said Anne making them all laugh.

“How about this?” asked Eric. “What makes us who we are? Our virtues or our vices?”

“Depends on who you ask,” said Anne.

“I’m asking you,” Eric replied. “All of you.”

“I’m a mixed bag,” said Chris. “But I think the traits I cultivate the most are positive, virtuous ones. Those also come the easiest.”

“That implies laziness,” joked Anne, “which is a vice.”

“See how we finish each other’s sentences?” Chris asked wistfully. “Still so romantic.”

Everyone laughed.

“Seems best,” said Lauren, “to acquire some sort of balance, especially these days when we’re not caged in by simplistic Victorian or even Romantic notions. Anger is technically a vice, but is it so bad if it serves as a catalyst for seeking justice?” She turned to Eric. “What about you? It was your question.”

“For me it’s all tied to legacy,” Eric said. “And not to be too coincidental with our vampire story, but, the shot at immortality. Creating something that outlives us.”

“Like Alvin Skinner?” asked Chris.

It took Fiona a second to remember that was the protagonist in Eric’s big, successful novel and movie. The short-order cook who indirectly causes the deaths of his daughter and her best friend. The book was

gripping and heart-wrenching. Fiona remembered wanting to hate Alvin Skinner, trying to hate him, but being unable to. He was (“is” as they say in literature) the ultimate victim of circumstance.

“I’ve been very fortunate there,” Eric said, “but that is, of course, the example. To be able to create a person that others experience as real. Alive. It’s the closest thing to godlike we can achieve.”

“Well,” Lauren smiled. “I don’t know about that.”

“But I do,” said Eric. “That’s very much my point. Creating this ... life ... is a power unimaginable. I couldn’t explain or describe it if I tried.”

Fiona couldn’t tell if Eric was musing or boasting. She didn’t care one way or the other. She thought about what her legacy might be. Not much, she imagined. A bunch of paintings of dogs? She supposed it could be more if she used her clairvoyance for good. Making the gift virtuous. She could conceivably reunite loved ones, bestow unimaginable peace, and mend broken, grieving hearts. But she couldn’t bring herself to do that. Did that make her ability a vice? Or was the vice her selfish choice not to share? She wasn’t sure.

“Suppose you have an ability you choose not to share,” she said. “Where does that fall on the virtue-vice spectrum?”

“What kind of ability?” asked Lauren. “Like being an artist?”

“No, not that,” Fiona said and thought a second. “More like teaching. If you only teach yourself, and no one else benefits from your ability, are you guilty of vice?”

“I don’t think so,” said Anne.

“Why not?” asked Lauren.

Anne shrugged. “Just seems like a harsh conclusion. Maybe you’re not teaching others because you’re busy doing other things.”

Lauren turned to Fiona. “You mean you *could* share it, but for some reason you’re choosing not to.”

“Yeah,” said Fiona.

“Any vice there,” said Chris, “would be tied up in the reason for that choice.”

“I agree,” said Lauren.

Keeping her mind occupied was, for the most part, keeping the silly yet relentless question out of Fiona’s mind. She couldn’t let it ruin her week-end and God knows how much time after that. She was supposed to be going back to graduate school age here. Not seventh grade. Having spent

her childhood as an outsider, she had cultivated a process of burying feelings and rationalizing loneliness. High school was fairly miserable. College was slightly better. Grad school, however, with these friends, brought a kind of social peace she'd never really known. Why would she want to risk ruining all that by caring about this stupid, trivial question? It was embarrassingly childish. Why couldn't she just let it go? She hated that paralyzed feeling of not knowing which was bugging her more: the question or the fact that it was bugging her so much.

Last night she heard the children and came out into the hallway. Wondering what that was all about was so consuming that what happened next didn't register right away.

Why was Anne in Lauren's room?

Chapter 15

Lauren

Lauren wasn't sure about playing "professor" in their little discussion, but it turned out fine. She was happy to share what she knew, but coming across as a know-it-all or pretentious in any way would not make for an enjoyable weekend. It seemed they were all genuinely looking to her to help connect opinions and fill in historical gaps, just like she did with her students. She knew their discussion would feel like the old days, and it did, with perhaps a little more adult perspective.

She actually did have the opening of her story written but didn't feel like reading aloud so she kept quiet. After getting her PhD, Lauren published two non-fiction books. One was called *Setting the Stage* about how Victorian era crime, particularly murder, was often translated into theater and sensationalized as inspiration for the series literature known as the Penny Dreadfuls, which was the topic of her dissertation. So even though her advanced degree in fine arts led her to other, more academic pursuits, she continued to root her studies in writing and the creation of stories.

She guessed Eric and Chris were also past the idea stage with their stories, and that they just weren't ready to share either. As for Fiona and Anne, they just needed more time to get back into the frame of mind they all shared years ago. That made sense.

Lauren's aunt had a lake house, and she did her share of boating during the summers of her childhood. Nothing like this ridiculous, high-end

yacht, of course. Her time on the water consisted mostly of bouncing around on a whaler waving to neighbors and seeing how high they could spray water on sharp turns. When her cousins got older, they took up sailing. Their family's sailboat was nice, and they had a lot of fun on it. She learned a few things but not nearly enough to actually skipper.

Fiona was right to point out the strangeness of it all being so remote. Most lakes in Lauren's experience have private docks every hundred feet or so. Boats of all sizes sitting in meditative peace, skillfully roped to those weathered wood docks with the occasional gazebo that led up to the back sides of window-centric houses. But here there was nothing. Just the rocks and trees. It was as beautiful as it was unusual.

Reclining there on that luxurious yacht with her Chardonnay got her thinking about her old friends. Everyone seemed happy enough, but she had no way of knowing what was real. Even though her world was falling apart she was pretty sure she seemed "happy enough" to them (except Anne, who knew). Anne, Chris, and Fiona all seemed to be plugging away, making the best of their lives. Then there was Eric. He fell back into "grad school mode" most easily, but he was obviously troubled. He all but admitted that was the reason he called this reunion, and the idea made her think back to one of the saddest, most surreal nights of her life.

She was living in Chicago, well into her first year of her second master's degree. Eric was coming to town as part of a book promotion tour, reading and signing his first novel, the one he wrote as his MFA thesis. The event, his last on the relatively small tour, was conveniently at Lauren's local Barnes and Noble in Lincoln Park. They made plans ahead of time for dinner and a night out.

The reading went well, although there were only six people there. The two friends Lauren had invited had to back out at the last minute, making her feel bad showing up alone. Eric didn't mind, though. He told her six was about average, and the publisher seemed fine with the turnout. After he read an interesting passage about his protagonist's first day on the job, he opened up a Q&A session which really allowed him to shine. His humor and charm no doubt resulted in a book sale or two with attendees who may have been on the fence.

Dinner started out wonderfully. Knowing Eric was a fan of authentic Italian food, Lauren reserved a great table at Topo Gigio. They laughed and reminisced over pasta and Chianti until Eric got a call from his sister

Emma. Lauren saw his mouth fall open and his face go white. This wasn't good.

Eric's father had died after apparently mixing up his medications. Emma was there at his parents' house, visiting and helping to take care of their mother who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's years before. Feeling the sudden, crushing weight of sadness upon sadness, Lauren flagged their waiter and quickly paid the bill. Eric tried to offer, but his stupor didn't even allow him the right words. Once they were outside, she held him, noting that his shock wasn't even permitting him to cry.

She offered her couch for the night, but he declined. His hotel was taxi distance, but they walked arm in arm. She told him how sorry she was, and they took their time, even sitting on benches twice. He left a message with his publisher and was sure they would change his return flight to take him to his childhood home in Minneapolis where he could help Emma make arrangements then attend the funeral.

"I can't help but think it wasn't an accident," Eric told her.

"Oh my god," Lauren said. "Do you really think that? Does Emma think that?"

"I didn't ask. I know Dad was broken about Mom. I just don't see him taking the wrong pills or too many pills. Doesn't add up."

The idea made Lauren start to cry. She did her best to keep it together for Eric's sake, although she knew appearing strong was hardly necessary. She thought about her own healthy, happy-go-lucky parents sitting at home watching some true crime mystery on TV. Life was so strange, random, and unfair.

They ended up closing the hotel bar. Eric brought up his suicide theory again. If there was a note, Emma would have said so. Lauren suggested he text her, but he decided to wait until they could talk face to face. If the idea hadn't crossed her mind, springing it on her would be too much, especially with her being alone with their mom. All they could do there that night in the bar was hope Eric would someday get a definitive answer. (He never did.) For as long as they spent in the faux leather booth, they didn't have that many drinks. In his grief, however, Eric seemed like he did, so she helped him onto the elevator, into his room, and into bed. His room had two queens, and she thankfully crashed on the other one.

The next morning before he headed to the airport, Lauren asked for the funeral information as soon as he had it. She would be there. She also

promised to reach out to Fiona, Anne, and Chris. Hopefully they could make the trip as well.

“Thank you,” he said, “but that’s not necessary. It’ll be small and simple.”

“No one’s going out of necessity,” she told him with a hug. “You goofball.”

It turned out only Lauren was able to make it to the funeral. Despite the circumstances, it was nice to see Emma again, whom she had met once when she came to visit Eric at school. Months after the funeral, Lauren learned that the siblings had stopped speaking to one another, then Emma committed suicide, just like Eric suspected their father had. Their mother also died at some point around then, leaving Eric very much alone. It was during that time that he wrote *All That’s Left to Know*. He never talked about the estrangement with Emma, but it must still eat him up that things ended that way. Lauren suspected Eric’s theory about their father may have caused the rift. She never asked.

Chapter 16

Anne

Eric did an admirable job steering the boat back into its parking space against the dock. Anne imagined herself being nervous she'd dent or scratch it. It felt so nice to be outside for those hours. The weather could not have been more agreeable. Eric got off first and walked ahead. Always the gentleman, Chris disembarked ahead of her then turned back, helping not just her onto the dock but Fiona and Lauren as well. When she was a few steps up the path, Anne heard Chris yell: "Jesus!" She spun around to see the women laughing. Before taking his hand, Lauren did that thing where she dislocated her thumb, a quirk that always freaked Chris out.

"I just wanted to cover *all* the bases of our reminiscence," Lauren said, kissing Chris' cheek.

Now Anne was laughing, too. Chris caught up to her, smiling himself. "So freaky," he whispered. Then he turned back to Lauren and said: "Your nickname should've been Captain Hook." He walked very close to her up the path with his hands at the ready. He did the same thing on the walk down. It was uneven and rocky, but not that bad.

Once they were back inside, they gravitated to the parlor as usual. Anne assumed Eric would head for the bar, but he didn't. Instead, he disappeared back out the door they came in, toward his bedroom. That's when she remembered he mentioned on the boat that he wanted to show them a

“cut” of some new TV show he was Executive Producer on. It was his first foray into television from movies, and he was eager to get their take. He returned, however, with a look of annoyance, telling them that the scene he wanted to show them hadn’t been sent to him. It was still being edited.

“This is the secret project you couldn’t talk about?” asked Chris.

“No, no,” said Eric. “This is different. Much further along. Still proprietary though, but I’ll forego the non-disclosure agreements, especially because I have nothing to show you.”

“I was going to tell *both* of my social media followers all about it,” joked Lauren, making everyone laugh.

“The show is called *Now & When*,” Eric told them “They wanted to call it *Déjà Vu*, but I talked them out of that.” He described the premise as a man who is unknowingly the subject of a genetic experiment regarding memory. “Things happen to him,” Eric explained, “that he remembers happening before even though they didn’t. *Déjà vu*. Then eventually the whole concept of memory flips into its inverse, and he begins to have ‘memories’ of the future.”

“That sounds cool,” said Chris.

Then Eric softened his tone. “The show is a kind of personal project for me. The people who experiment on him are the bad guys, obviously. On the other side is a woman psychologist, an expert on memory care. She tries to help him and find out what’s going on.” Eric stopped and looked for a second like he was getting emotional. Choked up. “That character is named Emma. She’s based on the person I knew my sister was planning to become.”

The room suddenly fell heavy with sadness, but also an appreciation for what Eric was doing. His eagerness to show them the clip now made a lot more sense. “That’s very sweet,” said Anne.

“A really unique tribute,” said Lauren. “I love it.”

“Me, too,” said Fiona.

Eric composed himself. “It’s going to be on Amazon Prime next fall,” he said.

“They have good stuff,” said Chris. “I’m way into *The Expanse*.”

“My husband loves that show,” Lauren said.

Anne was a bit surprised to hear her mention Jonathan so casually, but it made sense. If he’s a fan of that show, its mention would obviously remind her of him. When Chris replied with “He and I should hang out,” she felt

bad for Lauren all over again.

“So ...” began Eric. “Instead of a TV show that people can’t seem to meet their deadlines on, perhaps we indulge ourselves in some brand-new original fiction? Any takers? Anyone?”

They all looked at each other, and Anne laughed. It was exactly like school. Not just grad school but all the way back as far as she could remember. The classic, educational scenario in which “Who wants to go first?” is met with deafening silence. “Chris has a bunch written,” she said.

“I can’t go yet,” said Chris. “Not there.”

“You’ve been writing all morning!” Anne exclaimed in disbelief. Chris just shrugged at her in reply.

“Maybe too soon to read?” suggested Eric.

“Seriously,” Anne said to Chris pointing at his journal. “What’s your deal there?”

“I really just have an idea,” Chris said. He looked almost nervous as he began. “My story is about a filmmaker,” he said. “A video artist of sorts. He gets some fame with a haunting montage piece that features the ghostly images of an old man in the background of all his scenes. But the thing is, he didn’t put those images there.”

“I thought you were writing about Darwin the robot,” said Anne.

“I started over,” Chris told. “Wanted to challenge myself away from science fiction.” Then he turned back to the whole group. “The guy, who I think I’m calling Chase, shoots with his phone, and people want to know his post-production technique because it’s like nothing that’s ever been seen before. He, of course, won’t say because he has no idea, but that adds to the mystery. I’m trying to be experimental with the chronology, pushing toward avant-garde fiction. The story goes from being about morality – he struggles with getting fame and money for something he’s not really doing – to *mortality*, when ...” He paused a moment for dramatic effect. “... he gets a phone call from the ghost.”

“Whoa. I like it!” cried Eric. “Next-level Twilight Zone.”

“I’ll have something to read by tonight,” Chris told them.

“Sounds fascinating,” said Lauren, then she added a quick: “Don’t fuck it up.” Everyone laughed. Lauren leaned over and poked Chris in the shoulder, then rubbed the same spot affectionately.

“Finally,” Chris sighed. “The workshopping part.” He slowly repeated the direction to himself as he pretended to write in his journal: “Don’t.

Fuck. It. Up.” They all laughed.

“I’ll go,” said Lauren. “Just a short opening.” She took out her journal and started reading:

The storms that came unexpectedly always seemed to have more force, more influence, not just on the natural world, but on the psyche of those who have no choice but to endure them. Ride them out, as the saying goes. Richard feared neither the wind and rain nor the thunder and lightning for such things were explainable and understood through science, which happened to be his calling. That which chilled his blood, however, had no such status in the world of known entities and occurrences. Since the season of heavy rain began a fortnight before, each storm brought with it an apparition who claimed to be his long-deceased father. Richard never met the man in life, but the stories he’d heard didn’t match the form who haunted him every time the clouds opened in their rage. The mere idea that this bent, broken, hideous creature with his snarling scowl and his scarred face could have been, in life, a respected physician simply wasn’t feasible to Richard.”

She stopped.

“Excellent!” said Chris.

“Keep going!” cried Fiona, to which Anne called: “Yes!”

Lauren smiled and shook her head in modest reply.

“Well done,” said Eric. “What can you tell us about Richard? What is his story?”

“Well,” said Lauren, looking glad she was asked, “Richard is the illegitimate, secret son of Dr. Henry Jekyll and his maid, whose name, Mary Reilly, I borrow from the contemporary work. We come to discover that Mr. Hyde raped a politician’s daughter who bore *his* son. This is a story of inheritance, centering around the meeting of these *half*-brothers, each of whom is haunted by the ghost of the other’s father.”

There was a full three or four seconds of silence before Chris said: “Holy shit.”

“That’s *really* good,” said Anne.

“Hurry up and finish that!” said Fiona, “so I can read it!”

“Bravo,” said Eric. “I knew this was a worthwhile endeavor. My prediction is that ends up being a novel.”

“Ha!” said Lauren. “Yeah, right. In my voluminous free time.”

Chris turned to Eric. “What about yours? You probably started months

ago when you wrote us that letter. Just read the first few chapters, ok?”

“I will say,” Eric told them. “Even though I knew this was never meant to be a competition, I refrained from even thinking about a story until you arrived here. I’m not trying to sound noble or anything. I just felt that if my experience was any different than yours, we wouldn’t be truly sharing it. It wouldn’t be as fun. So, although it is true that I could have taken a headstart, I’m happy to report that I didn’t.”

“That’s his Gregor way of saying he hasn’t done the assignment,” said Anne.

“This really is like being back at school,” said Fiona.

They all laughed. Anne started to think maybe she could share her story idea. Was it even an idea yet? Kind of. Maybe they could help her along. Wasn’t that the point? She would wait and see what Eric read and what Fiona had and decide based on that.

Eric opened his journal, saying: “Ok, it’s still very rough.”

Everyone always talks of the community of faith, and it’s true that religion can be an important cornerstone to any group. Any anthropologist will tell you that shared beliefs are the primary reason people have been able to organize and cooperate in large numbers. Without this ability, who’s to say that ancient empires and today’s cities and nation states would ever have come to be? The only issue I take with the anthropological view is that they call the beliefs of religious faith myths. That’s disappointing.

As for the community aspect of faith, I understand the reasoning, but my own, personal experience as a Catholic priest is far different. I greet the same, small assemblage of people every Sunday. They come and go and perhaps even listen while they’re here, but the entire interaction is all quite perfunctory. In my experience faith isn’t a community. It is, in fact, the most solitary, the loneliest thing I’ve ever known.

That is why I welcome the apparition.

“The next part is way too sketchy,” Eric said. “He believes the ghost in his church to be the spirit of Mother Mary. Spoiler alert: she is not.”

“Ooooh,” said Lauren. “I’m scared already.”

“Nice,” said Chris.

Without being asked, Fiona promised to share next time, so Anne jumped at the chance to offer the same. Eric took out his phone and looked at it with a show of annoyance. “Sorry,” he told them. “Be right

back.” As he walked briskly out of the room, they heard only a “Yeah?” and then: “Why? ... That makes no sense ... I’ll talk to him.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Chris turned to Anne and Fiona. “You guys holding out on us? Going to read finished, polished stories your first time?”

“Yeah, right,” said Fiona.

Anne tried to think of something to say in response, but nothing came to her.

“I’m only teasing,” said Chris. “Looking forward to hearing what you both come up with.”

Eric returned sooner than Anne expected, still talking on his phone. “We’ll talk about it later,” he said. “I gotta go.” He hung up and started to put his phone in his pocket, then decided to keep it out. He turned the camera on, and held it out, landscape mode, at his friends, first Anne. “We agree this reunion was long overdue, correct?”

“What answer will make you turn that off?” teased Anne. He moved closer to her, and she put a hand up over her face. “I’m thinking yes,” she said. “Yes, it’s been far too long.”

He turned to Lauren and asked: “What is it like shaping the minds of young college students?”

“Diabolical,” Lauren replied.

Chris was next. Eric continued his voiceover from behind the camera. “May I introduce the greatest science fiction writer you’ve never heard of, Chris Quinn, or as he is better known: Mowgli. Tell us, how do you keep your wild side in check these days?”

“She was just on your camera two women ago,” Chris said.

“Last but not at all least,” Eric said. “Our dearest Woodstock, gentle soul and artistic visionary, tell us: is this place haunted or what?”

Chapter 17

Chris

Chris and Eric offered to make dinner. Once again seeing the clearly marked containers neatly stacked in the fridge, Chris was reminded of those DIY meal prep services that advertise on social media. “This catering chef seems like a good friend to have,” he remarked.

“She is,” Eric said. “Her company works on a lot of movies. She and I have become ... quite close over the years.” He offered this last bit of information in a sly tone that was much more than a hint.

“I see,” said Chris. And he did.

“It’s a situation her husband would definitely not appreciate.”

“Oh, man,” Chris chuckled, shaking his head. He opened a carton which he hadn’t done at previous meals and was surprised to find all the cooking steps printed on a card. “She included instructions?”

“Let’s say that’s a habit of hers.” Again with the sly tone.

“You are living some kind of life,” Chris said.

“I don’t know about that,” Eric said dismissively then changed the subject. “You’re okay with me telling you about the publishing deal, right?”

“Of course.”

“Alright. I just don’t want this to be less fun for you because you’re having a panic attack over trying to impress people.”

Chris was surprised to hear Eric use that term. He felt he should

respond but didn't. It had to be a mistake, right? A slip? Then he thought maybe his dropping that so casually into conversation proved the infamous prank wasn't top of mind for anyone.

Weeks before graduation, Chris stole a bunch of lawn ornaments on a drunken, late-night, solo walk home. The women chastised him about it, and he said he would return everything. Eric was fascinated by the theft of a flamingo, a couple of gnomes, and a wooden sign with a bunch of stick figures that read "Home Rowdy Home." He was most interested in learning how Chris was able to carry all the stuff back to their apartment, but Chris had no idea. He barely remembered committing the crimes.

Days passed, and Chris never got around to returning the items despite his open-ended promise to do so. Then one afternoon when all five of them were at the guys' place, there was a knock on the door. Chris answered it to find a uniformed police officer on the front porch.

"Chris Quinn?" the officer asked.

"Yeah," said Chris already feeling this was not good.

Eric came up behind Chris. "What's going on?"

"We had some reports about yard thefts," the officer said. "You're on three home security cameras, and the stole items are ..." He leaned to his right and made a bending, pointing gesture, "at the end of your driveway there."

"I can explain," said Chris. All three women had come to the door now, too.

"Great," said the officer, "but not here." Then he shocked Chris by pulling handcuffs from his back pocket.

"What?!" cried Anne.

"Whoa," said Eric.

"That's not necessary," said Chris.

The cop ignored the comment, cuffed Chris, and led him to the squad car parked right in front of their place.

Chris' head was swimming and a wave of nausea crashed over him. He didn't even realize his friends had followed them down to the car. He heard the cop reciting his Miranda Rights, but it sounded like bits of a conversation he was picking up in a noisy crowd. The cop eased Chris into the backseat on the driver's side. As the door closed, Chris saw Eric at the window. "Should I call your dad?" he asked loud enough to permeate the

window. Chris tilted his head all the way back. That was the last thing he wanted, but then he looked at him and nodded yes.

Chris' father was a big-time attorney who did little to hide his disappointment in his son's choice of graduate programs. (Creative Writing?) *You call that disappointment?* Chris thought. *Wait 'til you see my mugshot!* Being arrested wouldn't affect his graduation, would it? He tried to wish it all away as a misunderstanding, but he was guilty. He took those things that didn't belong to him. He felt his chest tightening and his heartrate speeding up. He wished he had asked to use the bathroom before leaving. Was that even a thing? Could he have done that?

As the car pulled away, Chris said: "I'm sorry. It was just a dumb, drunken stunt. I was going to return everything."

"You understood the 'remain silent' part, right?" said the cop. He drove for another minute then pulled into a strip mall parking lot. "I gotta make another pickup," he said. "Sit tight."

Chris looked out the window to see a scary-looking vagrant sitting by himself on the curb. The cop approached him and after a brief exchange, grabbed the guy's arm and led him to the car. The vagrant resisted, but not much. Mostly just yelling "C'mon, man!" and "What the fuck?"

Chris was uncomfortable a minute ago, but now it was unfathomably worse sitting next to this grubby, God-knows-what criminal whoever. He felt the sweat on the back of his neck and running down both sides of his body under his T shirt. The cuffs were making his hands feel numb.

They drove away. "How come I'm in cuffs, and he isn't?" asked Chris.

"He didn't steal anything," said the cop without turning around. It was clear Chris was the only one in the car not satisfied by that answer. Then the vagrant pulled a six-inch blade from his pocket and started fiddling with it.

"This guy's got a *knife!*" Chris yelled. The vagrant glared at Chris who immediately regretted the outburst.

The officer turned his neck just enough to see at the vagrant. "Put the knife away," he said, deadpan.

"Or maybe you could *take* it from him?" Chris pleaded.

The officer shifted his glance to the rearview mirror and locked eyes with Chris. "You got a weird habit of telling me how to do my job."

Chris took a deep breath and looked out the window. This was not good. His dad would visit him in prison. Just long enough to kill him. The

vagrant leaned toward Chris. Too close. “You don’t look like a bad guy,” he said. “What’d you steal?”

“Nothing,” said Chris. “Just leave me alone, please.”

“You got attitude for me?” The vagrant asked, suddenly looking angry. “I still got the knife.”

“It’s not attitude,” Chris said. “I would just appreciate being left alone.”

“What the fuck do I care what you appreciate?”

That did it. Chris suddenly couldn’t breathe. It was as if the vagrant had grabbed him by the throat. His gasping for air was soon joined by an uncontrollable trembling. The officer turned to the vagrant. “What’s going on?”

“Beats me,” said the vagrant. “Some kind of seizure.”

“Shit,” said the cop and made a sharp turn, cutting across a lane that was thankfully empty. Within a couple of minutes they were at the admitting door of an emergency room. The officer got out quickly, opened Chris’ door, uncuffed him, and led him inside.

The next part of the scene was entirely surreal in Chris’ memory. Like it just wasn’t happening. Couldn’t be happening. He remembered doctors saying “panic attack.” He remembered getting a pill he later found out was Xanax. He remembered the cop disappeared. Was he no longer under arrest?

A half hour later, Chris had calmed down. Eric and the women came to pick him up. Anne was beside herself with concern, but something was off about the group. Weird. Was Eric smirking?

On the way home, Eric came clean, admitting the whole ordeal was a prank. The officer was the older brother of a college friend of his. The vagrant was his partner. They were just supposed to drive around for a bit then drop Chris off back home. Eric made clear he could never have anticipated the panic attack. The women wanted to go straight to the police station, so Eric told them the deal as soon as Chris was driven away.

“We thought it was funny enough,” Anne said. “But I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you got panic attacks.”

“Neither did I,” admitted Chris. He wanted to be mad at Eric and felt he should be, but he couldn’t get past being embarrassed for freaking out like he did. If he had kept his cool, the whole thing would have been over soon, and they all would have laughed about it.

“I didn’t call your dad, by the way,” said Eric.

“Appreciate that,” said Chris.

The next day when Chris and Anne were alone, she told him the women had talked and they all felt Eric didn’t apologize enough. If at all. None of them could remember hearing him say he was sorry for the trauma he caused. Chris told her that he and Eric had talked about the incident late into the night, and that Eric did indeed express how sorry he was.

But that was a lie. Eric mostly continued to laugh and tease about the whole thing. Since it happened, Chris carried the guilt of that lie. In order to keep the peace in the group, he painted Eric as more sorry than he actually was. He’d stuck to the story so long that it became the truth for him, although he got the feeling Anne, Lauren, and Fiona were never fully convinced.

Chapter 18

Fiona

The guys were cooking dinner so Fiona found the parlor as the natural place to wait and relax. The villa was a big place with a lot of rooms, but the parlor had become their de facto hub. With its lush furniture and access to the back terrace, the space was exceedingly comfortable and inviting. She wasn't sure where Anne was, so Fiona seized the private time with Lauren. "I've been meaning to ask you about teaching," she said.

"Shoot," Lauren said, closing her journal.

"I still enjoy it," Fiona began. "But I'm finding the number of kids who habitually disengage is growing. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do know," Lauren said with a smile. "Firsthand."

"My lower-level classes are required, so there's that battle. Then the upper-level, elective classes are getting more and more kids with this 'Entitled Artist' attitude. They see themselves as only a couple of years away from being Instagram or TikTok famous, so my class is just a waste of their time. Like they should be teaching me how it all works."

"Yikes," Lauren said. "Thankfully I don't have to deal with that. What do you do?"

Fiona shrugged. "Try to reinforce that my class is about technique, appreciation, understanding. Artists can always improve on that. Whatever's happening on the popularity side of things is different, and that's their

business. Literally.”

“So they’re like divas in eighth grade?”

“Seventh, too. There’s an arrogance, for sure.” Fiona said. “Narcissism even. I find myself spending more time teaching them how to respond to and critique the work of their peers without sounding like assholes.”

“Ugh. I don’t envy you there. Your approach seems right. And I bet it helps you weed out the less serious students. I mean, talent is talent, but the question is who is there to learn, and they all have so much ahead of them.”

“Exactly,” said Fiona.

“In my world,” Lauren told her. “The serious students are easy to spot. The less serious ones don’t want my attention, so it works out in an unspoken contract kind of way.” She went on to say her classes were going better this semester than she’d anticipated. She had the same issue with younger students “suffering” through her required courses, but for the most part, the academic curiosity and integrity were there. Her biggest “over the years” note was that more and more students looked at pretty much everything through a political lens. She found the phenomenon to be interesting and a bit frustrating at the same time as the practice narrowed the scope of both discussions and their essay writing. Fiona thought again that Professor Brontë must be a campus star with her sharp mind, cool style, and supermodel looks.

Anne came in and sat on the couch. “It seems,” she said without introduction, “Eric really put a lot of planning into this weekend. The place, the activity. It’s reminding me of their themed parties.”

Fiona smiled, and they all happily fell into a tapestry of recollections about the parties Chris and Eric hosted in their apartment. There was always a theme, and they went all out on the decorations, keeping everything a secret, even from them, until the doors were opened. “My favorite,” Anne said, “was the post apocalypse party.”

“Oh my god,” recalled Lauren. “So well done.”

For that night, the guys made their place look like it had been destroyed by nuclear war. Fake “rubble” everywhere, red, spinning emergency lights, a huge world map with green-glowing pins showing bomb strike locations. They even built a structure using desk lamps as headlights that made it look like a car had smashed through the wall. Fiona remembered that the creative ideas came mostly from Eric, and that Chris’ main job was to carry stuff and help set up. In other words, Eric was the rock star, and Chris was the roadie.

“Is this weekend just the grown-up version of an Eric theme party?” Fiona asked.

“I’m starting to think that,” said Anne.

“The budget is certainly bigger,” Lauren noted.

They laughed, and Fiona suddenly heard another voice, a grown woman, and it wasn’t a whisper this time. *Where are you hiding?* she called. *You can’t hide from me!*

“What?” Fiona asked aloud, making Anne and Lauren look her way, confused.

“We didn’t say anything,” said Anne.

“Sorry,” Fiona said. “Was just thinking of something.” She felt a panic setting in. She should excuse herself and go upstairs to settle down. But she knew that wasn’t going to happen.

The ghost woman spoke again: *I will find you!*

“A few years ago,” Fiona started in before fully deciding to. “I got my fortune told at a party.” They looked at her, genuinely interested in whatever story was about to unfold. Fiona braced herself. This was happening. She was going to tell these old friends, with whom she had been so close but not anymore, her deepest secret. She imagined this whole reunion had come to be so that she could have this moment with them. Besides the fortune teller, only her parents knew of her gift. And Diego, but he didn’t believe any of it. She was right to wait until she was back with the truest, deepest friends she’d ever had. She hoped the two women with her now were still those people.

“The medium took a liking to me,” she continued. “More like a fascination, to be honest. She recognized the gift of clairvoyance in me so I read all about it. Talk about scary. I didn’t know what to make of anything I was learning, but since I accepted it, I’ve had ... encounters.”

“What?” gasped Anne. “Are you serious?”

Fiona nodded.

“What kinds of things have you seen?” asked Lauren. Something in her expression, a kind of interest and compassion, put Fiona at ease.

“It’s mostly hearing,” she told them. “People in my building or on the subway. I see people, too.”

“Oh my god,” said Anne. “Like *The Sixth Sense*. That’s crazy.”

“No it isn’t,” Fiona snapped back. *Too stern. Too serious. Too defensive.*

“I didn’t mean it like that,” said Anne. “Sorry. I just meant ... really

surprising. You weren't like this back in school, were you?"

Fiona shook her head. She didn't appreciate the phrase "like this" but let it go. She was dumping a lot on them without warning. "It's all pretty recent," she told them.

"When I was a kid," Anne said. "We had noisy pipes. My brother and I used to pretend ghosts were trying to communicate with us. We named them and everything."

"There's a woman," Lauren said, "who owns a Thai food place near me. She's so old my friends and I theorized that she died years ago, but couldn't stop working, so it's her ghost now. The food is still good, so ..."

The mix of interested questions and funny, personal stories calmed Fiona down. There was no indication she was being judged. She wanted to tell them about hearing the whispering voice in her bathroom and the woman there now but thought that would be a mistake. No sense scaring them on their vacation weekend with innocuous occurrences she was certain she had under control.

"Question," said Lauren. "Are you saying the woman you ran into last night was a ghost?"

The take surprised Fiona, although in truth she wasn't a hundred percent sure on that. She seemed real. "No," she said. "She was the housekeeper."

"Working that late at night?" asked Lauren.

Shit. Fiona hadn't thought of that. She figured Lauren would be skeptical, but didn't she just make the case that the housekeeper *was* a ghost? Maybe this was too much too quickly. She shouldn't have said anything. They probably thought she was crazy, just like those stupid doctors. "I don't know what her schedule is," she said.

Lauren suddenly stood up. "Gotta hit the bathroom," she said and walked out.

Once the two of them were alone, Anne said: "Would be interesting if the housekeeper was a ghost. You said she scared you."

"Just startled, really. Didn't expect to see anyone."

"You could keep us all safe?"

"I don't think it will come to that," Fiona said, hoping that was true.

"Is it constant?" Anne asked. "Like are there ghosts everywhere?"

"Not at all," Fiona told her. She knew the real question was *Are there any here now?* She also knew the answer was yes, but she kept that to herself.

"Have you ever felt like you were in danger?" asked Anne.

“Not really,” said Fiona. “I’m used to it.” Again, bending the truth to suit the moment.

“I can’t imagine getting used to that,” Anne said. “Speaking of ghosts, how’s your story? Now that I know you’re like an expert, I’m not sure this whole thing is even fair anymore!”

“Ha!” laughed Fiona. “Trust me. I’m behind.”

“Are you as behind as me?”

Fiona smiled coyly. “I don’t know. How behind are you?”

They laughed, confiding in one another that they liked *the idea* of this creative activity, but actually doing it was proving to be a drag. Fiona told her about the inspiration of meeting the creepy housekeeper. “Who was not a ghost,” she reiterated.

“If you say so,” said Anne.

“I’m not a writer anymore,” Fiona said, shaking her head. “If I ever was one.”

“You were!” Anne insisted. “I loved your stuff. I used to be one, too. But I’m like you. That was a lifetime ago.”

Fiona thought this was her moment, before Lauren returned. She did her best to sound casual, like she was making a joke. “Hey,” she said. “When I heard the house creaking last night, you came out of Lauren’s room. Were you guys bonding without me?” Was that casual and jokey enough? She hoped so but wasn’t sure. She knew the question was pathetic but had to ask it.

Anne’s reaction showed neither surprise nor pity. “Her cell service sucks,” she said. “She asked to use my phone to check something. Work, I assume. Jonathan or the kid maybe? I didn’t ask.”

“Oh,” said Fiona. For some reason she couldn’t convince herself to be totally satisfied with that answer. But she knew it would have to do.

“Then we discussed the time you hooked up with Eric.”

“Shut. Up.”

“I’m kidding,” Anne said. “That didn’t come up ... yet.”

“We’ve been through this,” said Fiona, holding back a laugh. “I had my reasons.”

“I know,” Anne said, ramping up the teasing playfulness. “And I’m sure they were *really good* personal, private reasons.”

“Did I mention shut up?”

They were both laughing now.

Chapter 19

Lauren

Lauren wandered into the conservatory that featured a whole wall of tall windows. Covered with the white sheet, the piano in the center of the room made her think of ghosts. At least a children's trick-or-treating kind. She walked over to it, folded the sheet back in the front, then lifted the keyboard cover. She was tempted to sit down and play one of the very few pieces she knew, but that would just draw everyone to her, the opposite of what she wanted this time to be. She tried to imagine what it must be like to be wealthy enough to own such a fine instrument only to have it sit untouched in some giant house you also own but never visit.

She didn't really have to use the bathroom. She just wanted some time alone before dinner. It was nice to be back with these old friends, and she was relieved to discover their interactions were more natural and pleasant than she had imagined in a worst-case scenario. She felt fortunate that the time away from home, the time she needed to conduct her infidelity investigation was being filled with something this unique and, so far, enjoyable. That said, the company was a bit too constant for her liking. There's only so much "catching up" one can do over a few days.

She genuinely liked these people, and they were an enormous part of a very important time in her life. Had they stayed close since school, things might have been different, but their natural separation helped solidify the

various paths they took. It was nice to confirm what she had hoped: that everyone turned out okay. If Fiona wanted to claim she sees ghosts, then more power to her. Lauren wasn't going to take that bait. If anything, the belief helped explain what Lauren was finding off about her.

Looking out the tall windows into the grassy side yard, she started thinking about her short story, of all things. She was quite pleased that the opening and the idea went over so well. The truth was, she did still write fiction on occasion but nothing finished and certainly nothing ever shared with anyone. The next-generation Jekyll and Hyde idea was something she came up with a while ago. She didn't know (or care) if that was cheating. She was enjoying the opportunity to flesh it out. *One of the brothers has to die in the end, but which one? The lawyer in Jekyll & Hyde is named Utterson. He should be a character, too. A very old man now who knows the truth. But he has reason not to share it?*

The spy camera app started tugging at her attention, so she checked it. The feed showed Jonathan tidying up the living room which was odd. "Having company?" she asked the tiny screen then cringed and fumed at the thought. She had to keep it together, which was certainly easier as long as nothing was actually happening.

She missed Connor. He'd grown into such an impressive, thoughtful young man this past year, and she looked forward to any opportunity to speak with him and get updates on his life. He had a girlfriend, although he didn't give much information on that front. Just the headlines. They were in French and Biology together, and she was from North Carolina. He talked about her accent in a way designed like he was poking fun at it, but Lauren sensed her drawl was part of the reason her son was smitten. It was all so cute she could barely keep the story to herself.

Her instinct was that Connor would be okay with the divorce. That he would take it in stride in his usual, low-key manner. But she knew it was wrong to ignore the effect it might have on him. He was very mature, but still only fourteen. She had to make sure he got whatever support he needed. Supporting him was, of course, second nature to her, but he did live far away much of the year and didn't always make his emotional needs known. Was there a teenage boy anywhere who did? His relationship with Jonathan was fine as far as she could tell, and she assumed that would probably help ease the transition. She thought to send him a checking-in text, even opened that app, then remembered it wasn't her phone. She'd left

hers back in her room. She'd send one later.

She rejoined the women in the parlor. After a while she returned to the phone app as slyly as she could to discover Jonathan had some friends over, no doubt watching his beloved Ohio State Buckeyes play football. Or basketball. Or ping pong, or whatever was being televised that day. Jonathan went to Princeton, but both his parents graduated from Ohio State, and he grew up near Columbus rooting for all their teams. On the little screen, the somewhat chaotic scene of five, maybe six, guys gave her peace of mind that she knew would last for the next several hours.

"Do we know what we're having for dinner?" Lauren asked.

"The guys didn't say," said Anne. "Everything has been amazing."

"The forks here are so skinny," said Fiona.

Anne looked at Lauren who just gave the slightest hint of a shrug.

Fiona continued. "I was never skinny. You guys are skinny, but I'm not. There are a lot of skinny people in New York. There are all kinds of people in New York. So crowded. Like sardines. Sometimes."

"I think you look great," said Lauren. "Very healthy."

Fiona didn't respond. For some reason Anne decided it was okay to laugh. It was really just a slight giggle, but Lauren wished she hadn't. She was glad the moment came and went smoothly. The truth was, she had already retreated from her desire to get Anne's take on the Fiona situation. She was sure they'd talk about it when alone, especially now after the musings on skinny. After all, it was Lauren who brought up the idea of Fiona being off.

Anne perked up. "Oooh! I just thought of one!" she said. "On our honeymoon. We were in Greece in this super nice hotel. It was weird, but little things around the room kept getting rearranged. Like the TV remote or the ice bucket would be in one place, but then somewhere else. We could both swear we hadn't moved any of things."

Lauren realized with some disappointment that they weren't done talking about ghosts.

"Sounds like a poltergeist," said Fiona.

Or the hotel staff with keys to your room, thought Lauren. Did a stack of towels mysteriously appear? She needed to stop being mean in her thoughts. She was angry and impatient about something that had nothing to do with these two women. She needed to let go of that anger. Especially after the huge favor Anne was doing for her. She needed to get it together and be

nice, even in her thoughts.

“Are they different than ghosts?” Anne asked.

Fiona shook her head. “It’s a kind of classification. They’re the most common. The mischievous prankster. It’s German. Geist means spirit and poltern means to knock.”

“Have you seen those shows with the ghost hunters?” Anne asked her. “They’re mostly all hype. Nothing ever happens.”

“I don’t watch a lot of TV,” said Fiona, “but I know what you’re talking about.”

Lauren had seen shows like that and thought to join the conversation, but she didn’t have the energy. She kept eye contact and nodded enough to show she was there, but her mind wandered. In addition to all that was potentially going on at home, she had a stack of student essays to read and grade.

Chapter 20

Anne

The plan was to have a “very casual” (Eric’s term) story workshop after dinner. Anne finally had an idea and since the boat ride had jotted down enough things to participate. She was convinced that her story, which was inspired by the villa legend of Agatha the witch, needed a surprise twist at the end. The story was evolving from bits of dialogue she’d written. She had a long way to go, but she knew what was going to happen. Except for the surprise twist ending. That would come to her. She hoped.

She took the lull in conversation as a good excuse to open her journal. She liked the name Agatha for the witch but struggled to name the ghost something unique and memorable. *A full first and last name? Or Mr. Something? Maybe Dr.?* She always hated coming up with names for characters. Anything she thought of struck her as fake and contrived. Then she always thought Holden Caulfield and Atticus Finch would sound equally dumb if they were hers. And what about Hannibal Lecter? He’s a cannibal! Rhyming? Seriously? How in the world does that work? But it does because the story makes the name, not the other way around. Telling herself not overthink it, she decided to go with her first instinct and call the ghost Mr. Callahan. That could be spooky.

She remembered feeling her mental wheels turning like this during school. She had to give Eric credit there. He had a vision for this weekend

to take them all back and reintroduce their creative selves. And it was turning out not to be as pointless and far-fetched as she had thought at first. Creating characters and their lives was a kind of rush of command and control that had its merits. She was still quite convinced that she was no longer any good at it, but it made for an interesting way to spend some time.

Chris came in to tell them dinner was ready. They made their way to the dining room for a meal that was, again, excellent. Salmon fillets with rosemary potatoes. In a culinary sense, Anne was getting spoiled for sure. Chris surprised her with a comment to the group. "I almost wish the cooking took a little longer, as I found my lovely wife very engrossed in her journal just now."

"I noticed that, too," corroborated Fiona, smiling at Anne.

"Anything you want to share?" asked Eric.

Anne thought about it. Why not? Talking about it now would take any pressure off her later. "My story," she told them, "is a prequel of sorts to the villa legend. A young woman named Agatha has an encounter with a ghost who convinces her to choose the path of witchcraft."

"Love it," said Chris.

"I am completely on board with this," said Eric. "Well done. Really. Tell us about her. What's she after?"

"Well," said Anne. "She encounters a ghost who calls himself Mr. Callahan. He claims to know that Agatha's mother is plotting against her, making up lies that the girl is consorting the Devil so that she will be taken away. When Agatha asks what she should do about it, Mr. Callahan tells her to call her mother's bluff and consort with the Devil. She tells him she doesn't know how, and he responds that it's easier than she thinks."

The room filled with "ooohs" and "ahhhs" of interest and appreciation, making Anne feel a rush of gratitude and delight.

"Is the Devil going to be a character?" Fiona asked.

Anne shook her head. "I think Agatha is being played."

"What does it mean these days?" Eric asked, "to consort with the Devil?"

"I think," said Fiona, "your God and Devil are yours alone. Tempting you and saving you from within."

"The Devil tempts," said Lauren. "But you're going with 'save' for God?"

"Not the Bible God," Fiona said, sticking her tongue out. "An actual, helpful one. Both sides are a personal construct. You make them what you

need them to be. It doesn't even happen on an entirely conscious level. And they can change as you grow and change."

"Fair enough," said Lauren with an approving nod.

"So if everyone answers," mused Eric, "only to their personal, individual gods and devils, are we all less accountable to each other?"

"You mean accountable like the Ten Commandments?" asked Fiona.

Eric shrugged.

"The point is," Fiona continued. "Rules imposed from without, i.e. religion, are bullshit. Everyone worth listening to knows that. There are worlds and existences beyond this one that have nothing to do with pearly gates or fire and brimstone."

Anne could see Fiona was hinting at her experiences with the paranormal without taking over the conversation. Maybe she didn't want the guys to know. Anne had every intention of telling Chris but wondered if she should reconsider. Fiona hadn't sworn them to secrecy or anything, but she needed to think about it.

After dinner in the parlor as Eric made drinks, Anne saw Lauren sneaking peeks at her phone. What a terrible situation that was! She hoped the spy camera feeds were showing nothing. They had to be, otherwise Lauren would react in some way, wouldn't she? Anne couldn't imagine calmly and coolly watching Chris cheat on her via some phone app. She was certain of Chris' fidelity, but wouldn't all wives say that unless they had some specific reason to doubt like Lauren must have? The truth was, Anne was perfectly comfortable flirting with clients to help her business. She knew it was crossing a line. Just not *that* line. It was all perfectly innocent. Except for that one dinner.

About two years back, an out-of-town client arranged for a dinner she assumed would be attended by his whole team. He was, however, traveling alone, a surprising fact she learned only as they were being seated at a too-romantic-for-business restaurant. He was cute enough, charming, and funny, and they hardly talked about business at all. When the evening was over, he invited her to his hotel for a nightcap. She politely declined and went home but had since played the alternate version of that night in her mind countless times. She felt no guilt in doing so. She and Chris had been married a long time, and she would never believe a claim that he didn't do the same thing on occasion. She could probably even guess his top two or three fantasy partners.

“Okay,” said Eric. “Who’s reading?”

“You,” said Chris.

With no objections, Eric agreed and took their little stage in front of the fireplace. He read nearly a full draft of his priest-meets-demon tale. There was just an unwritten section in the middle he had to gloss over and explain. The story was really good. Scary. He named his female ghost/demon entity Aamirah, which he said was Egyptian for “inhabitant.” She was a manipulative psychopath, and the priest character, although sympathetic, really had no chance.

Chris read next. Anne tried but found his story hard to follow. She appreciated his efforts to challenge himself with avant-garde whatever, but playing with the chronology just confused everything. Thankfully, Lauren started the discussion with that exact point, so Anne could just nod and agree. Knowing it was a gamble, Chris welcomed the criticism and was able to clearly express what he was trying to do. Suggestions came at him from every angle, and he furiously and appreciatively took notes. Anne could see everyone was helping him, but she found herself missing Darwin, the robot she never got to meet.

Chapter 21

Chris

Chris and Anne were first to call it a night, knowing their friends would stay up a while longer. It was Anne's idea to turn in, and she suggested Chris stay if he wanted. But he went with her, figuring he could use the time fresh off the workshop to get her fired up about finishing her story. As they got ready for bed, Anne whispered something about Fiona seeing ghosts.

"Here?" he asked.

"No, but apparently, it's frequent. She's a clairvoyant."

"Since when?"

"Since like a few years ago." Anne shrugged and shook her head. "Really weird, right?"

"Is that an ability you just ... come into?" he asked.

"I have no idea," Anne said. "I imagine it's something you're born with but have to discover? Some medium at a séance or something opened her up to it."

"Totally weird." He wasn't sure if that was end of that topic. He didn't want to rush things unnaturally, but he was waiting for the right time to offer up his idea about Anne's story as if it just occurred to him. The truth was, he crafted the idea silently during the discussion in the parlor so that he could bring it up here and start a private conversation about her work.

"I like your story," he said.

“Thanks. Not much there I’m afraid.”

“It’s coming along great,” he said. “It’s a process. You know that.”

“I remember,” she said.

“I was just thinking. What if Agatha doesn’t know Mr. Callahan is a ghost at first? There’s a trust issue at play.”

“I guess,” she said as her hands and shoulders bounced up in a shrug.

“I’m just saying. That would add another layer to both of them. If you look at—”

She put a finger on his lips. “I know you’re into this,” she said. “It’s your thing. But it’s not mine. It was mine a long time ago, but not anymore. It’s fun. I’m having fun, I promise. But I’m not going to get into the narrative weeds and sweat blood over this. Little Agatha can know or not know, or pretend to know, or not know that she knows, or know that she’s pretending to know.” She shrugged again and switched to a whisper to add: “I don’t care.”

“You should care,” he said then watched her face twist into her unmistakable *What the fuck does that mean?* scowl. He immediately tried to answer the unasked question. “We’re here. We’re all doing this. Eric set all this up so we could accomplish this one thing.”

“So I *owe* this to Eric?”

“No, I’m not saying that.” He expected a little pushback, but not this firewall of disinterest. As a discussion, this was already not going well. He’d been in this position countless times, having her dig her heels in and systematically dismantle every point he tried to make.

“You think I’m going to offend poor Eric if I don’t put my heart and soul into writing this short story?”

“No,” he said. “I’m just going by what he told us last night. Doing this thing. Yes, it’s solitary and individual, but it’s also together because we help each other achieve our best. I’m only trying to help you. You’re a really good writer, and this project has more potential than you realize.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not a project. It’s just a silly way to pass the time.”

“What if it isn’t?” he asked. He had to be careful treading toward the information he promised to keep secret. He would prefer to keep his word, but wasn’t this a clear case of the ends justifying the means?

“Wow,” she said and looked at him as if she just discovered he had another wife and family somewhere in Kentucky. “I see you can be all

about promotion if it's pressuring *me* to do something."

Now it was his turn to make the scowl. What the fuck did *that* mean? He wasn't "pressuring" her. Was she making this about how he doesn't sell his novels? Part of him couldn't believe it, and the other part couldn't believe he didn't see it coming. "Look," he said. "I know something." He needed to turn down the emotional temperature between them which was heading for a boiling point he was already recognizing. "I know something about what we're doing here." She just held his stare. "Eric told me, and I promised I wouldn't tell."

"Oh, well, as long as there's loyalty involved."

Christ, she was good at this. So much better than he was. He could tell her. He *had* to tell her in order to get what they all wanted. He sat down on the bed and beckoned her to do the same. He spoke in a near whisper. "You can't tell Brontë and Woodstock, okay?"

"I'm not making any promises."

He sighed and rolled his eyes, knowing that was the best he was going to get. "Eric has a deal in place to publish our stories in an anthology book."

"What are you talking about?" she asked at full volume.

He put a finger to his lips. "Please," he said. "I promised. Can we just keep it between us for now?"

"Seriously," she said. "What the hell?"

"He told me the whole story," Chris explained. "He has a friend with this new publishing company. The book is going to be about Mary Shelley and Lord Byron and that whole other villa thing plus the work we're doing here."

"That's bullshit," she said.

"Oh, okay. Thanks for pointing that out." He sighed hard, got up, and walked to the balcony door. He looked out into the blackness and took a few deep breaths.

"It makes no sense," she said in a harsh whisper. At least he appreciated the whisper part. "Do you hear yourself? Who would blindly publish fiction by a bunch of nobodies?"

Chris turned back around to face her. "This friend of Eric's," he said. "That's who. It's happening. The deal is done." He didn't actually know if the last part was true but figured he could infer given what Eric told him.

She just continued as if he hadn't responded, a tactic he was frustratingly familiar with. "Not only written by nobodies," she said, "but written by

nobodies in three days? Bullshit.”

He thought about addressing her persistent “nobodies” angle but decided against it. Any argument that he was kind of, perhaps, maybe a somebody of sorts in the literary world sounded stupid even to him, so he could only imagine what her response might be. “We’ll be working with their editors,” he told her. “The idea for this weekend is to get as far along as possible. There’s no expectation that we’ll all be polished and ready for print on Monday.”

“Who is this guy?” she asked. “What’s the company? Did you look it up?”

Shit. There was only one answer to this, the true answer, and he knew it wasn’t going to help him in this conversation. She dipped her head toward him and raised her eyebrows. Waiting. “He didn’t say,” he told her

“For Christ’s sake.” She got up and went into the bathroom, leaving the door open as she brushed her teeth.

Chris sat back down on the bed, stewing. He actually thought they were going to talk about her story, and he would inspire her to dive in, work on it, and be proud of it. Having his real life play out in what was essentially an alternate universe to his expectations was disconcerting, to say the least. “He didn’t tell me,” he said, trying not sound defeated, “because he doesn’t want me looking it up and psyching myself out, trying to write what I think they would like. He doesn’t want any of this to be about the business or the deal. He wants it to be about the stories coming genuinely from us.”

She appeared in the bathroom doorway and spoke with the toothbrush in her mouth. “You got the first part right. He doesn’t want you looking it up.”

“Why is your default setting to be suspicious of everything?”

“I’m suspicious of things that reek of suspicion,” she told him. She returned to the sink, spit, and came back to her standing position in the doorway. “Have you even considered the possibility that maybe this isn’t true?”

“No, I haven’t,” he said. The annoyance was burning in his chest. If they were home, he’d have already made the decision to sleep on the couch, but he couldn’t really do that here. “Why would he lie about that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But that question is no less valid than why would some mystery person agree to publish unknown writers sight unseen?”

“Lying to me about it makes no sense,” demanded Chris, showing his frustration in tone but not volume.

“Of course it makes no sense to Eric’s gullible little lap dog. Did he promise to make you famous?”

He stood up, angry and hurt. “Seriously?” He went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Chapter 22

Fiona

Not long after Anne and Chris went to bed, Fiona felt the rest of them were approaching the winding-down state. That was, until Eric surprised her by pouring himself another drink. “You’re still enjoying this?” he asked them. “The writing?”

“I forgot how hard it is,” Lauren confessed. “Making it all come together I mean.”

“Yours is good,” Fiona told her.

“Not yet it isn’t,” said Lauren.

Fiona found it interesting that Lauren was experiencing a feeling they all remembered from school: that struggle to make your writing work beyond just a clever idea. Fiona was experiencing something from that time, too, except her feeling was the stress of faking it through a class, trying to convince everyone she had more than she really did. It was silly because this wasn’t a class. They were old friends who’d all grown up way past that stage of their lives. And yet here she was with that familiar knot in her stomach.

The knot tightened just a bit when Eric looked to her. Was it that she wanted to impress him? It couldn’t be that. He did look very handsome. They’d spent one night together way back when, the result of a specific calculation on her part. A manipulation of sorts, but an innocent enough one that he certainly didn’t object to. Plus, it was almost two decades ago.

“My guess is Woodstock’s story will be the most authentic,” Lauren said. “She actually sees ghosts.”

“Wait, what?” asked Eric.

Fiona was a little surprised that Lauren blurted that out, and her facial expression must have revealed the feeling because Lauren immediately apologized to her. “It’s okay,” Fiona said. “I don’t really advertise, but it’s not a secret or anything. I mean, it *is* a secret everywhere else in my life, but not with you guys.”

“Fascinating,” said Eric.

“Despite seeing ghosts,” Fiona said, anxious to change the subject. “My story is inspired by my run-in last night with the housekeeper,” Fiona said then looked at Lauren. “Who is not a ghost.”

“So you say,” teased Lauren.

“Ghosts don’t use the bathroom,” Fiona said. Although she was thinking *Ghosts don’t interact with me directly.*

“Ah,” Lauren conceded. “Good point.”

“My story’s ghost lady,” Fiona continued, “is sent back to this world.” She noted both Eric and Lauren were attentive, interested to hear what she was saying. This gave her a welcome boost of confidence. “Any ghost here in our world has been banished for doing something bad on the other side. Once back here, it’s forever. Crossing the other way only happens in death.”

“I like it,” said Lauren. “Good rule. What did she do?”

“She killed someone,” Fiona said dramatically.

“But ...” started Eric.

“I’m kidding,” said Fiona. “They’re all already dead over there. I know.” Eric smiled at the joke. He always had a nice smile.

“She was part of a plot to overthrow what is just suggested to be a tyrannical leader of the other side. I’m not going to get too into that, though. She brings her sense of justice with her and hunts down another ghost on this side who is terrorizing a family.”

“Ghost versus ghost! I love it!” said Eric. “Is the family main characters or background?”

“Background,” said Fiona with confidence even though she just made that decision on the spot.

“That sounds great,” said Lauren. “Sounds like you have a lot of room to build something really engaging.”

“Thank you,” Fiona said. Getting validation and encouragement from Lauren meant the world to her. Maybe the story would turn out great, and she’d use it in a class.

“I’m beat,” Lauren said suddenly then stood up and stretched. She was all arms and legs in a way that should come across as lanky, but with her it was just appealing. Sexy even.

Eric looked at Fiona’s half-filled glass. “A few more minutes?” he asked her. “Late-night drunken workshop?”

“If you promise to walk me home,” she said.

“Deal.”

Lauren left them, and Fiona made a conscious decision to end the flirting there. They talked about Eric’s story which was really scary. Fiona pushed him to make sure the priest character wasn’t too weak and passive, merely reacting to what was happening to him. At some point he needed to become the initiator of the action. She suggested that maybe a real-world motivator in addition to his faith might help. A sick brother or niece or something. Anything the reader can better identify with. He appreciated the suggestion.

“This place is so nice,” she said. “Would the owners even know if I just stayed? I could send for my stuff.”

Eric laughed. “Carol would know.”

“We’re like BFFs,” Fiona joked.

“I’m glad you guys came,” he said. “It means a lot to me.”

“Of course. It was a really nice surprise to get that invite. Even though I didn’t get the historical reference word puzzle part. Very clever, by the way.”

He laughed again. “I’m just having trouble dealing with how fake my world has become. I needed something real. This here, us, is the most real thing I’ve ever known besides family, and, well ... you know with that.”

She felt a pang of sadness with him referring to his family being gone in such a nonchalant way. Since she met him, Eric had lost everyone, including his poor sister Emma. And they’d been estranged when she killed herself. She couldn’t imagine how unbearable that must be for him.

“It sucks that we grew apart,” Fiona offered. “I hope this is the start of something.”

“Me too,” Eric said.

“I can host next time,” she joked. “It’s just three rooms, but I have a bean bag chair that’s pretty big.”

“I’m in,” he said.

She knew with a good deal of certainty that she didn’t want to start up anything with him, and she was equally sure he felt the same. She understood what he was saying about real and fake, but of course, it meant something quite different to her. Fake was the way she had to conduct herself so that those around her didn’t know she might at any moment hear or see people who died at some point. She even started playing that fake card this weekend and was glad to have what was real out in the open. Only Chris didn’t know yet, although Anne probably told him.

This was a good start. Maybe she could start telling an inner circle of people back home. Some combination of her gift and her standards being too high resulted in a limited number of close friends. That plus New York City. Exotic and exciting, she sometimes thought it was exactly the wrong place for her. To be lost in an ocean of nameless people provided perfect cover for someone like her. Someone with an unbelievable secret. But she’d grown tired of living her hidden, unidentified life.

“So, you’re like a psychic?” he asked her. “When did this happen?”

“It’s called clairvoyance,” she said then told him the fortune teller story, which he drank in with an enthusiasm that bordered on rapture.

“What was that about the housekeeper?” he asked her.

“Just Brontë teasing me,” Fiona replied. “The woman I saw and spoke to was real.” Funny that she used the nickname when alone with Eric. Like if she had said “Lauren,” he’d have asked: “Who?”

“So I’m walking you to your room?” he asked.

“I was kidding about that,” she said.

“How about to the bottom of the stairs? It’s on my way.”

She smiled. “Deal.”

She sighed relief when she was able to stand without any unsteadiness from the alcohol. Out in the hallway, Eric hugged her in a very familiar, friendly way, kissed the top of her head like a brother would, and said goodnight.

Upstairs was quiet. Everyone must be asleep. She felt less tired, a little energized by Eric’s tale of haunting, but knew she needed to calm back down and get some sleep. She changed into her sleep shirt and sat on the bed. Gently closing her eyes, she went through her nightly routine of breathing exercises. Less than a minute in, she heard the whispering voice of the young girl.

You don't belong here.

Her eyes shot open and a flash movement in the full-length mirror caught her attention. The reflection included the open bathroom door. She'd left the lights on in there, and something or someone had shown itself in the doorway and ducked back in.

She got up slowly and walked around the bed to the bathroom. She heard nothing. When she got to the door, she leaned in and looked. It was empty. Not a trace of disturbance. She even went in and looked behind the small vanity table. As she stood there in the soft, incandescent light, something dawned on her. In all her time experiencing the paranormal, this was the first instance in which a spirit had addressed her directly. Whether she was seeing or only hearing in the past, she had always been a mere witness. A voyeur. She thought back to the initial encounter in this very space. *Strangers in my house*. Even that qualified as a first in that the ghost was commenting on Fiona's situation. Recognizing her existence.

When she went back into the bedroom, she gasped. In the mirror's reflection stood a young girl of about ten or eleven who most certainly was not there in the room. She wore an old-style, dark calico dress with an off-white apron top layer. Although there was no bonnet, the accessory would have fit right in. Very turn of the century, Fiona thought. As she approached the mirror, Fiona noticed a distinct scar across the girl's neck. "We are old friends visiting each other," Fiona quietly said to the girl. "We're not here to disturb you or your family."

Too late.

Fiona noticed the girl she saw didn't speak those words. She never opened her mouth at all. The whispering was separate. Seeing and hearing things that didn't sync up was not uncommon in her experience. "If I can help you in any way, I will," Fiona told her in a whisper of her own. "You just need to tell me what you want."

I don't need your help. I will get what I want.

Fiona took a tentative step toward the mirror, and the girl walked out of the frame and was gone.

Chapter 23

Lauren

Back in her room, exhausted, Lauren pulled off her dress in one continuous, fluid motion. She then clawed her way into an oversized sweatshirt. It was just cool enough in the room that the fleece top plus the puffy comforter made for luxurious comfort. She realized she still had Anne's phone, so she used her nightstand plug for that and left hers on the dresser.

Despite her teasing, she was glad to conclude no one believed the housekeeper was a ghost. She could be reading too much into Fiona's quirky behavior, but she couldn't help being cautious. Mental illness was no joke, and she felt truly sorry for her old friend that she might be going through something difficult. She knew a couple of professors in the Psych department and made a mental note to talk to them when she got back. If Fiona hadn't been diagnosed or even tested, she would do her best to help set that up.

She got into bed but suddenly lost her sense of being tired. This frustrating shift of physical states happened to her on occasion so she just lay awake, staring at the ceiling for a while. She didn't know how long it was before she turned and saw the phone on the nightstand. She picked it up and checked the camera feeds one last time. Jonathan was sitting on the couch, almost perfectly centered in the frame. It was late there, and it seemed his guests had left. She hoped his team won because that always

put him in a good mood. Superficial, but she had always given him his fandom. As she watched him sitting there, no doubt watching something else on TV now, she thought maybe she had overreacted and that there was nothing going on.

Just then she was surprised to see someone else enter the frame. Another man she didn't recognize. A sports party holdout she guessed. The other guy looked younger and had longish, shaggy blond hair. He sat next to Jonathan on the couch, way too close, practically on his lap, and they immediately started to kiss.

She gasped and sat up involuntarily. The kissing continued and within a minute, Jonathan's pants were undone, and this man was leaned over giving him oral sex. Lauren was in shock, frozen in disbelief, not even realizing that she was still watching the scene.

She closed the app and placed the phone back on the nightstand gingerly, like it had suddenly become a live explosive. She was experiencing a complete rejection in her mind. That. Did. Not. Happen. Jonathan had a lot of layers, some more subtle than others, but bisexuality was nowhere to be found in all the years she'd known him. When the question "What else don't I know about him?" popped into her mind, she rejected that, too. *Let's just focus on this newest, latest thing, shall we?* Like many long-married couples, their intimacy had dwindled to the somewhat rare occasion. Was this why? Was he not bi but gay?

Of course, what he was doing was cheating, but it wasn't as simple as what she had anticipated her discovery to be. Her main, overwhelming feeling was confusion, and that bothered her. Fury and betrayal were right there, just out of reach. Why couldn't those feelings, the ones more easily expressed and dealt with, come to the forefront? Had he been in that same position with a woman, everything would have gone according to plan. She spent months plotting with the sole objective of knowing. She just wanted to know. And now that she did know, a part of her wanted to go back to not knowing. Back to before her suspicions even arose.

Then there was what her mother would call the "kicker." She was all set to confront him with video evidence of his infidelity, kick him out of the house, divorce him, the whole saga. So why did *this* video evidence strike her as an invasion of *his* privacy? He was not the victim here, and yet she suddenly felt guilty spying. That made no sense.

Was she also guilty of being clueless, living in a lie of a marriage for how

many years? If he is bi or gay then he has always been such, but when did he come out to himself? She started going through his friendships, noting a few unmarried men (although marriage was clearly not a dealbreaker). Most were work colleagues, which made her think of the travel, the hotels. That's when she noticed she was crying. When did that start?

She couldn't think straight. She needed to talk to Anne, who was no doubt asleep. Fiona might be up, but talking to her, starting back at the beginning, seemed like a disaster in the making. She decided that despite her shock and embarrassment about it all, two trusted takes were better than one. She could tell Fiona, too, but she'd tell them both together tomorrow.

Her mouth felt like it was full of cotton. The air on the second floor was dry, and a similar thing happened the night before. She had meant to grab a seltzer water from the fridge before coming upstairs but forgot. She didn't trust the bathroom sink water and decided to suck it up and make the trek to the kitchen.

She slipped on her pajama pants and once in the hallway saw Fiona coming out of her room. She looked dazed. "Everything okay?" Lauren whispered, and Fiona nodded. Lauren relayed her mission to get some water, Fiona asked if she could join her.

As quietly as they could, they made their way to the kitchen, seeing ahead of them that the refrigerator light was on. Eric must be in there. They continued to be quiet as he was blocked by the open fridge door. A moment later, a dark-skinned woman's hand with two jeweled rings appeared, grabbing the edge of the door, and swinging it closed.

Standing there before them was a ridiculously gorgeous woman. Her glossy black hair went down her back past her shoulder blades, and her already huge eyes went wider in a gasp of surprise at seeing them. Lauren hated the word "exotic" in this context because it sounded to her like a dumb, white American way of saying "attractive and of foreign descent," but that was the first word that came to mind upon seeing here. The second one was "naked." She was pretty much naked. Red thong underwear, but that was it.

"Hello," said Lauren.

"Hi," the woman managed, obviously embarrassed. Then she added a silent, mouthed "oops" and a "sorry" before hiking her bony shoulders up in a shrug and ducking out of the room.

MICHAEL MULLIN

Lauren looked at Fiona who stood dumbfounded. Eric had a secret woman on the side? Here? This weekend? The two of them shook their heads and suppressed laughter. “Looks like we have a conversation topic for breakfast,” said Lauren.

Chapter 24

Anne

Chris was already in the bathroom when Anne woke up. A dull headache pressing on the entire back half of her skull effectively advertised a mild hangover and made her note that she had indeed been drinking more the past two days than she had in quite some time.

She looked at the closed bathroom door and listened to the running sink. This was going to be rough. The whole thing could have been avoided if she just pretended to believe the publishing thing. “Wow, that’s amazing!” What difference did it make? Why did she feel the need to call Chris out on his gullibility? She knew the answer had something to do with their drifting apart the last few years. He was spending more free time writing his novels which meant less with her. But in fairness, she knew she was keeping herself busy in a way that gave him the impression she had less time for him as well. Why was that so okay with both of them?

He came out of the bathroom and dressed in silence. She formulated a strategy. An approach she figured would work. “Can we talk?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“I’m sorry about last night. I’ve been kind of overwhelmed in general here, and I let it get to me. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“I wasn’t pressuring you,” he said. “I was helping.”

She figured that word would have stuck with him. “It’s just what I felt

in the moment,” she told him. “It wasn’t fair. I don’t think you would consciously do that, and I can see that’s not really what it was.”

“I’m sorry I’m not a best-selling author,” he said.

“What?” she asked, genuinely surprised. “It wasn’t that.”

“It was a little that.”

“I don’t know why that is still so raw for you,” she said. “Yeah, ten years ago I was all about you getting an agent, and blogging, and having separate author social media accounts to post on every day. But that was *me* helping *you*. I’m not going to apologize for that. I get your take on promotion and selling now, and I wish I could truly convince you that I’m fine with it.” She knew she couldn’t convince him because deep down inside she wasn’t fine with it, and she wasn’t a good enough actress to pull off the deception.

After a moment of silence, he started back in. “I don’t know why you would think that about me with Gregor.”

“What about Gregor?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

“Lap dog?”

Ugh. She had completely forgotten about that one. “I’m sorry,” she said. “That was stupid and insensitive.”

“And wrong. I’m not sucking up to him. I’m not here to ask anything of him. I never do that.”

Although he was right not to push himself and his work here to Eric, the fact that he “never” did it was a big part of the problem. “I know. I’m sorry. I drank too much, and I didn’t believe what you were telling me. If Eric has worked out some book deal, then great, but he should tell us. He should have told us from the beginning.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m apologizing,” she reminded him, then started speaking slowly, as if to a child. “I shouldn’t have said those things. I’m sorry.” She was desperately trying to pull him down out of his anger. It didn’t seem to be working, but she was more than familiar with his emotional processes. He needed time, but it was crucial that time began with her admitting what, if anything, she’d done wrong and with him knowing that he’d been listened to. She contemplated saying one more thing but thought it might be a bit over the top. When he didn’t respond for several seconds, she decided “what the hell?” and went for it. “How can I make it up to you?”

He finished tying his shoes and headed out the door, responding with his back to her. “Write your fucking story.”

She waited a full minute, stunned, then headed downstairs. Instead of going to the kitchen where everyone was gathered, she went out the front door. She wanted fresh air and felt the terrace wouldn't give her the solitude she also desired. It was brisk but nice out. She wandered aimlessly down the driveway, trying to determine if she deserved the reply Chris spat at her. Her instinct was that she did not, yet she decided to let him have his Hurt and Angry Time then be done with it. But the clock was ticking. If he tried to milk the feeling, he'd regret it.

As she turned and walked back up, she was surprised to see a side door of the villa open. Out walked a young, thin woman with long, dark hair carrying a cardboard box. She made her way to a small shed that stood about twenty feet away from the door. Was there more staff than just the housekeeper? Less than a minute later, the woman came out of the shed and went back inside.

When Anne did eventually reach the kitchen, she discovered breakfast was a more casual affair with everyone standing around sampling fruit and pastries. Chris was already laughing with Eric about something, and she couldn't help but notice Lauren and Fiona were whispering and holding back giggles the whole time. Just as she wondered what they were sharing, Lauren came clean about it.

"So," she asked Eric in an obvious teasing tone. "Did you have some company last night?"

"What?" asked Chris looking first at Lauren, then Eric.

Eric closed his eyes and smiled. He clearly knew this was coming. "Prisha said she ran into you."

"Prisha," said Lauren with pursed lips and a slow nod. "Very nice. She's quite the naked little friend you have there."

"Okay," joked Chris. "No more going to bed early."

The mystery of the woman outside was suddenly solved for Anne, but another one took its place. Eric has a woman here?

"Alright, alright," said Eric to the rising laughter and teasing. "Settle down. Prisha works at my company. She arrived very late last night with some documents that required my attention and signature. Sensitive legal stuff that couldn't be emailed. She's already gone back to LA."

No she hasn't, thought Anne.

"She works for you?" asked Fiona. "Can I ask what it says on her

business card?”

“I have no idea,” said Eric.

Everyone was laughing. Except Anne, who was lost in thought. What was going on here?

“Whatever her job is,” Fiona said. “It sounds challenging. Her resumé must be impressive.”

Eric looked to Chris, who shrugged. “Boat ride?” Eric asked him. “I was thinking about really opening her up, seeing what she can do.”

“Sure,” Chris replied. Anne felt a wave of relief that they’d be justifiably apart for a while he reset his emotions.

“You’re all invited, of course,” Eric told the women.

“Sounds a bit too manly for me,” said Lauren.

Fiona laughed. “I’ll pass, too.”

“Have fun,” said Anne.

As they all left the kitchen, Anne felt Lauren’s hand on her upper arm, holding her back. “Hey,” Lauren whispered with urgency. “I have ... an update from home.”

It took a second, but then Anne’s eyes went wide. She thought “oh no” but didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to tell you and Woodstock together,” Lauren said. “Can you pretend like you don’t know anything? I don’t want to, you know...”

“Good call,” said Anne. “I’ve got you covered.” Lauren thanked her, and as they walked out of the kitchen, Anne remembered Fiona’s odd, sad question about her being in Lauren’s room. Was it possible that Fiona could have gotten more insecure in adulthood? Wasn’t it supposed to work the other way? Then Anne wondered how bad Lauren’s update was going to be. She started feeling sorry for her all over again, but also couldn’t help wondering why she was the only one not falling into the nickname trap?

Chapter 25

Chris

Chris was into the boat excursion. He was grateful for Eric's idea mainly because he couldn't see avoiding Anne all morning in a way that wouldn't look obvious to the others. Because his efforts to help her turned into a fight, he had to consider the fact that anything and everything could backfire. That meant she'd work even less on her story or abandon it altogether. She knew the truth about the publishing deal but didn't believe it, so that wasn't going to influence her. To her, the news was just an example of his stupidity.

Once they were out on the water, they took turns gunning the throttle and steering haphazardly around the enormous, serene surface. Eric's only word of caution was to stay clear of one area he pointed out that had dangerous rocks close to the surface. "They would tear the bottom off this thing," he warned.

Chris didn't really know what to expect and was shocked the boat went as fast as it did. While Eric drove, he found himself grabbing the chrome rail more than once. During Chris' last turn, Eric went below and got a couple of beers. Then they stopped and lounged in the front sitting area.

"If you don't mind me saying," Eric started. "You and Ginger seem off this morning. Came down separately. Didn't acknowledge each other. Hard night?"

"Very perceptive," Chris smiled. He knew he couldn't get into the

specifics of the argument because that would mean admitting he told Anne about the publishing deal. “You always hear about how much work has to go into a marriage,” he said. “You have to work to make it work. I think that’s true, but I also think there’s way more luck involved than anyone wants to talk about.”

“You feeling unlucky lately?”

“Maybe.” Chris appreciated what seemed like genuine concern from his old friend. They’d always been comfortable confiding in one another, especially early on in their friendship when Eric was quite seriously involved with a girl back home named Amanda. When Chris met Eric, they’d been dating almost two years. Amanda was a junior undergrad who was doing a semester abroad. She broke up with him upon her return. Eric kept it together, but Chris could tell he was devastated. The bottled-up emotions came to a head late one night, when Eric, who had already become Gregor, returned to the apartment with a big bruise on his eye.

“What happened?” Chris asked him.

“Sucker punch,” Eric said. “You should see the other guy.”

“Can I?” Chris asked with enthusiasm. “What hospital is he in?”

Eric laughed, and there was something about that moment. Like Chris was watching him let Amanda go. Things got much better after that, but Eric never took an interest in any women during their time at school. Except for that one unexpected, unexplained night with Fiona.

“To be honest,” Chris told him, using a phrase that struck him as odd because he wasn’t being totally honest. “I tried to help her along with her story like you and I talked about, but it blew up. She said I was ‘pressuring’ her to finish it.”

“That’s weird,” Eric said. “Sorry to hear that.” He then looked lost in thought like he was preparing some sage advice. At this point, Chris would listen to a sage-in-training. Or even a village idiot. “I’m no expert,” Eric said finally, “but I think you can change your luck, give yourself better odds. Of course, that takes work, too, so not sure if that puts you back at square one.”

“I sometimes think there aren’t any other squares,” Chris said. Eric found this funny, so Chris allowed himself to as well. “Looking forward to your show,” Chris told him. “It’s called *Now and When?*”

“Yeah,” said Eric looking out at the water. “Thanks.”

“Anything else you can tell me about it?”

Eric smiled. “I don’t want to ruin anything, but it gets fucking insane. Crossed timelines, interdimensional travel, even aliens.”

“Whoa. That sounds awesome. I hope it’s a hit.”

“Should be,” Eric said. “All the pieces are in place. That’s the weird thing about what I do. And I bet no one understands this better than you. I got lucky with my novel, and a path opened up to me. Several, actually, but the one I chose was pretty good. I made some dumb choices but some good ones, too. Enough good ones and enough additional luck to get where I am.” He stopped and looked right at Chris. Sad, almost apologetic. “I’m not bragging when I tell you this. It’s all very strange. I know you’re outside looking in, and I wish I could help you. I really do.”

Chris waved off the disclaimer. “Don’t worry about that. I’m fine. What were you saying? I’m interested.”

Eric collected himself and continued. “So now I’m starting to do TV stuff. There used to be a stigma for movie people. Blah, blah, blah. I don’t give a shit about that. Anyway, I learned pretty fast that if you get the right people and the right money behind your project, you can almost guarantee a hit. Of course, the show has to be good. You wouldn’t believe how often people on a terrible show are convinced what they’re working on is great.”

Chris laughed. He certainly could believe it. “Like some of our old classmates with their stories and screenplays.”

“Exactly!” Eric laughed. “But the grown-up, professional version. It’s delusional. They’re idiots. I know what I make is good. But the most shocking thing I’ve learned is all you really need to do is get something decent in front of enough people. That’s where the invested money really does its work. It’s all about promotion.”

That word was like a live hand grenade to Chris, the cause of so much fighting and disappointment at home, but he didn’t let it show.

Eric continued: “Even something mediocre that’s put in front of enough people gets viewers and can mean business success. And if it *is* good, word of mouth kicks in, people *keep* watching, and the sky’s the limit.”

“You’re talking about your secret project, too, right?”

“Very perceptive.”

“Definitely looking forward to that one,” Chris said. After a moment, he started up again. “The other thing I’ve been thinking about,” Chris said, “is the legend here. Would make a great novel.”

“Interesting,” said Eric, nodding.

“I gotta finish this fifth Equinox book first, but I’m close. After that, and when our ghost stories are out, I’m thinking I’m gonna take this story on. I don’t know.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Eric.

“The writing here has been a good break from the laser guns and the space politics.” He laughed a bit to show he didn’t take his work too seriously in that way. “The villa legend didn’t occur to me as a real idea until this morning. I started thinking about Agatha escaping death or haunting the villa as a ghost. Trying to set it up so the whole story implies a history that turns out to be false. A big Act Three reveal kind of thing.”

“Those books sell,” he said. “People love them. And with your new editor and publishing house, I don’t see why it wouldn’t get a very serious look from the start.”

That was all the validation Chris needed. He had no intention of bringing up the publisher of their short stories, so when Eric did, he pressed his back teeth together in a silent show of triumph. He’d like nothing more than to get another beer, talk the story out, and kick around plot ideas. “It’s safe to say,” he offered to that end, “that the family fortune was never found.”

“Good story driver,” said Eric.

“I think the current owners know the truth and have been searching all these years. That’s why they don’t rent the place out. They didn’t mention it to you because they didn’t want us turning the place upside down looking for it.”

“Ha!” Eric tried to sip his beer, but it was empty. “That would have made for a very different weekend.”

“Scavenger Hunt like no other,” laughed Chris.

“Hey,” said Eric. “Did you hear Woodstock sees ghosts?”

“Anne told me that. She’s like a clairvoyant?”

“Not sure I believe that,” Eric said. “But Woodstock sure as shit does. She was going on and on telling me about it last night. Hearing voices. Seeing people no one else sees. Serious *Beetlejuice* vibe.”

Chris laughed. “That’s so bizarre.” Woodstock always had an “out there” personality with her crystals and astrology. It was part of what they all loved about her. That said, he was finding this next-level affectation hard to wrap his head around. He had no idea what Woodstock’s life had been like the

past several years. But ghosts?

“Between you and me,” Eric said. “There’s something going on with her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wish I knew. But get this: she emailed me after I sent the invitation letter asking if the reunion was real and if she was really invited.”

“What?” asked Chris.

“I know, right?”

“That’s so weird,” Chris said. “We were on the phone with her right after she read the letter. It was nothing like that.”

“Hmm,” said Eric. “I mean this was a week or so later. I don’t know.”

The idea made no sense to Chris. Was it possible that Fiona had some paranoid change of heart?

“Again,” Eric reiterated. “Just between us. I couldn’t let it go. I reached out to her parents as an old friend pretending I was looking to get in touch with her. They were super nice. Didn’t take long to crack them open, but all I got was Woodstock is heavily medicated, and they’re big-time worried.”

“Holy shit,” said Chris. “Medicated for what?”

“They said depression, but that doesn’t seem like her.”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Chris, but almost to himself, suddenly lost in thought. Woodstock was always the outlier, but in the most endearing way imaginable. She was so easygoing, go-with-the-flow, that insecurity like this seemed out of character. If she had started battling depression, what would he and Eric know about that?

Chapter 26

Fiona

She felt like she should tell the others about the encounter. Not warn them, but tell them. What the girl said about getting what she wants wasn't really threatening, was it? Fiona was confident she could handle this. She had everything under control. There was no point in scaring everyone and maybe even bringing the reunion to an end should anyone want to leave. Of course, beyond that is the idea that she wouldn't even be believed. Where would that get her?

Not long after the guys left on the boat, Lauren, who hadn't gone on her run yet, suggested they all sit on the terrace. She had something she wanted to talk about. Fiona happily agreed, instantly curious and eager for some personal connection. They all sat on loungers, and Lauren jumped right in.

"I'm in need of some friendly advice," she said.

"Okay," both Anne and Fiona replied.

Lauren turned to Anne: "The real reason I've been using your phone," she said, "is that I suspect Jonathan is having an affair."

"Oh no," said Anne.

"That's awful," said Fiona, "I'm so sorry." She didn't quite see the connection to Anne's phone yet, but her mind raced. It was a number her husband wouldn't recognize. Was she calling him to see if a woman would answer or be heard in the background?

“I set up a couple of cameras that I can see through an app,” Lauren continued.

“Oh wow,” said Fiona. She did not expect that, but it made sense. Lauren never took any shit from anyone, and using spy cams against her cheating husband was just the latest proof. Then something dawned on her. Lauren would only need advice if she saw something. This was terrible. She felt bad for her friend. She’d never even met Jonathan, but he seemed nice enough in all the photos. What a jerk!

“You saw something?” Fiona asked, tentatively and with measured respect.

Lauren nodded, and Fiona couldn’t tell if she was holding back tears or rage. Probably some combination of both.

“He’s with,” Lauren started then paused, looking out into the yard, taking deep breaths through her nose. While Fiona and Anne patiently waited for her to finish the sentence. Fiona’s mind raced again. This sounded bad. Who was he with? Someone she knows. Otherwise, why would she have to pause? Lauren’s sister? Wait, Lauren didn’t have a sister. The cleaning lady? Someone underage? Whoever it was, Fiona already hated the bitch.

“... another man.”

“Oh my god,” said Anne.

“Whoa, really?” said Fiona. She wanted to say she didn’t expect that, but that was obvious. None of them did, especially Lauren. After several moments of silence, Fiona asked: “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Lauren said. “The truth is, things haven’t been great.” She gave a sad, tired laugh and added: “Not to point out the obvious.” She took another moment before continuing. “I’ve been picturing myself on my own. Even before the suspicions. Not planning, but picturing.”

“That’s so hard. I’m sorry,” said Anne. “But I do think cheating is cheating.”

“I agree,” said Fiona.

“I know,” said Lauren. “I just think it would be easier if it were some undergrad, cheerleader bimbo. It’s hard enough. Why does it have to be harder?”

“Hard is hard,” said Anne. “I’m not sure you need to qualify it beyond that.”

“He’s fulfilling some need I can’t give him,” Lauren said. “Does that

even make sense?”

“Definitely,” said Anne.

“If you do split up,” Fiona told her, “maybe it’s all a little less angry? That’s better for everyone. Especially Connor.” She hoped it was okay to bring up their son. Why wouldn’t it be? Wasn’t this the advice she was asking for?

Lauren took out Anne’s phone. “He’s still there,” she told them. “If you want to see.”

Anne and Fiona both recoiled a bit. “Uh,” said Anne.

“Not see *that*,” Lauren said, smiling and shaking her head. She opened the app and logged in. “They’re just hanging out,” she said, holding the phone out. Then she pulled it back and looked at it. “At least they were ... Okay.” She held it out again. Fiona saw the camera feed that instantly reminded her of that morning in the store when she watched the security footage of her coming in alone, her first ghost ever who didn’t show up on film right behind her. The black and white image showed two men sitting close to each other on a couch, obviously watching an offscreen TV. The younger man was shirtless with a tan, muscular physique. He had a surfer look: ragged dirty-blond hair and a few days scruff.

“Hmm,” said Fiona.

“I know,” Lauren said. “He’s hot.”

“So is the surfer guy,” Anne said, affectionately pushing Lauren.

“Very funny,” said Lauren. “I know what you’re thinking. Maybe we could work something out.”

“I was not thinking that,” said Anne.

“I was,” joked Fiona. “No, I’m only kidding.” They giggled, and Lauren’s laughter turned into tears. She tried to stop them or at least hide them, but it was no use. Both Anne and Fiona leaned in and hugged her, a gesture Lauren seemed to appreciate.

“I think,” Fiona said. “If you’re already in the mindset of being apart, then maybe this is what should happen. I do think he should be honest with you about everything. When this all started? Who? How many? He owes you that. And he needs to be honest with Connor, too. His generation is very accepting.”

“I’m not too worried about that,” said Lauren. “It’s just the way he’s gone about it. It’s all so ... unacceptable.”

“Maybe the confrontation is easier,” said Anne. “Or like Fiona said, at

least less angry?"

Fiona wanted to tell Lauren that she was doing a great job being truly thoughtful about this horrible situation but decided against it. She didn't want to fill the conversation with platitudes and compliments that may sound empty. She wanted to offer real support. "If this does all go down," she said, "and you need to get away, you can come stay with me as long as you want."

"Same here," said Anne. "Don't hesitate to reach out."

"Thank you," Lauren said, her lips bending into a small but genuine smile. "I could just stay here," she said. "Send for my stuff."

Fiona gasped into a smile. "I just said that to Eric last night! The exact same thing. Would the owners even know? That's so funny."

They all smiled at the coincidence, then Lauren said to Anne. "You and Chris are fighting?" Fiona got the cue that Lauren was ready to change the subject and figured Anne did, too.

Anne rolled her eyes and shook her head. "So stupid."

"What's going on?" Lauren asked.

"I'm not even sure," Anne said. "Well, that's not true. Chris said last night that Eric told him our ghost stories are going to be published in some anthology book."

"What?" asked Lauren.

"How?" asked Fiona. She couldn't help but think she misheard what Anne just said. Either that or Anne misheard Chris. Or Chris misheard Eric? Somewhere was a communication hiccup.

"I know, right?" said Anne. "It makes absolutely no sense. But it's Eric's Big Secret, so don't let anyone know that you know. Now we all know."

"Why wouldn't he tell us?" Lauren asked.

"Maybe because it's bullshit?" said Anne. "And Chris is the only one who'd buy it."

"Ouch," said Lauren.

Anne's shoulders slumped. "I know. I'm sorry. I just have to figure out what's going on with us. I wish I had more to share, but I really don't get any of it."

Fiona wanted to offer some wisdom, but marriage was not exactly her strong suit. She was surprised when Lauren suddenly shifted the conversation to her. "What about you?" she asked. "How are you doing with the lesser gender?" she asked. "Seeing anyone?"

Fiona shook her head. "Dating is hard," she sighed in conclusion. "You know what they say, at our age when you meet a nice guy, you just have to wait to discover if he's gay or married."

"Or both," Lauren quipped.

Fiona felt her face burn with the flush of embarrassment. "Oh my god," she said, shocked at herself for being so stupid. "That was really ... I'm so sorry."

"It's okay."

"The dumb cliché just popped into my head."

"It's okay," Lauren repeated, looking like she might actually laugh about it. "Honest."

They sat for a while in silence, Fiona hoping her gaffe was indeed okay. Anne remained silent through the exchange. Fiona imagined them reconnecting on it later. *Can you believe what she said? What an insensitive bitch!* No, it was an honest mistake. Stupid but honest. They wouldn't start excluding her over one misstep. This was a reunion for all of them.

"A lot think about," said Lauren, sounding as if she were talking to herself.

"We're here for you," said Anne. "Not just for another couple of days."

"Seriously," said Fiona. "We need to stay back in touch."

Lauren nodded, but Fiona wasn't convinced it was in total agreement with the suggestion.

Chapter 27

Lauren

Lauren felt relieved telling her friends the blockbuster update from her shitstorm of a life. She couldn't imagine keeping what she now knew bottled up for another couple of days here. Their conversation had been sweet and supportive. She had asked for advice but didn't necessarily expect or want that. She had some big decisions ahead, and talking with Anne and Fiona made it clear she didn't have to make them in the next forty-eight hours. That in itself was relief enough for now.

She went outside and stretched for her run, plotting out the day until Eric's happy hour, when she could have the drink she wasn't sure she'd turn down if offered to her right then. When that hour came, she wouldn't be happy, but she knew that was never a requirement.

Out in front of the villa felt nice, not as sunny as the back terrace, and the shaded coolness was a welcome refresher on her face as she stretched. The run had a similar effect. Instead of trying to think things through and figure things out, she used the rhythmic beating of her sneakers on the dirt trail to clear her mind and achieve an almost meditative state. She used to be pretty serious about meditation, but it somehow lost its appeal and became too infrequent for true results. Life got in the way, as the saying goes. Given all that was happening now, she made a point to reconsider the practice when she got back home.

She made good time around the trail, and when the villa came back

into view, she stopped well short and sat on a large rock just off the path. At first she focused on her breathing, letting everything slow down to normal. But soon the stress and uncertainty crept in as she knew they would.

She wanted Jonathan to tell her everything. Fiona was right about that. Not because she wanted to know, but because she didn't want him getting away with not telling her. His mind and heart were elsewhere for as long as she could remember. Now she knew his body was, too. It was all so infuriating, but she also recognized the situation as her ticket to leave him. A golden ticket in a sense.

She hated the idea of the story getting out at the university, which of course it would. She didn't pay attention to gossip, but its persistence on campus made at least hearing such stories unavoidable. This illicit affair with a student, that bribery-for-grades scandal. There was one a few years back about chemistry professors running drugs. Nice. The gossip alone was reason enough for her to leave and start fresh somewhere else. She was really warming to the idea of going east to be closer to Connor, not just for the rest of his time in high school, but through his college years, too, as she was certain he'd choose a college in New England. She couldn't imagine for a second that Connor wouldn't be living with her after the divorce. She'd be surprised if Jonathan even made a play for custody. Almost fifteen, Connor's say would have to matter, wouldn't it? He would choose her. She couldn't help but smile when she thought of all the opportunity awaiting him.

He could visit his father whenever he wanted and wherever he ended up. By that time, the logistics of such things wouldn't be up to her anyway. She wondered what terms she and Jonathan would be on as they began their new, separate life chapters. She couldn't even bring herself to hope one way or the other. His being with another man wasn't a forgivable offense, but it had the makings of an understandable one. On the other hand, it spoke to a deception, a betrayal that ran much deeper and for far longer than a stupid fling.

She knew she couldn't plan anything too specific until she got home, but the time here was a blessing, nonetheless. She'd played the "we need to talk" conversation in her head several times already, but all she could muster was a half-baked, bad-movie version of it. When it really happened, she needed to be firm and straightforward. She had to let him know how hurt

she was. How respectful did she need to be? Maybe his bisexuality was a real struggle for him. Maybe what she witnessed was a first for him.

She doubted that.

There was also the issue of money. They made about the same salary, so there would be no alimony. She imagined their assets could easily be split, and she didn't foresee any real arguments. "Who gets the ski chalet in Colorado? Oh, right. We don't have one." Part of her wanted to find a way to come into some money after the split that she wouldn't have to share. Spiteful, but there it was. Sitting there on that rock, she was surprised when an idea to that end came to her so quickly. She'd have to talk with Eric. Maybe he could connect her with a documentary filmmaker to make a movie based on her second book.

A couple of years after *Setting the Stage*, she published another non-fiction work called *Scientific Murder*. Very well received and reviewed, it is even, coincidentally she realized, *Frankenstein* related in that the book documents the diabolical episodes of the original serial killers. These Victorian era monsters killed people and sold the corpses to unscrupulous doctors who needed bodies to experiment on. One surprising reason the practice came about was because it was found to be easier than grave robbing. Fresher corpses carried a premium because one of the more popular scientific experiments of the day was attempting to reanimate a dead person. Experiments were conducted in theaters with ticket-buying audiences, which was a whole different scandal as the doctor/scientist performers used the special effects of the day to trick their audiences into believing they'd witnessed something miraculous. That could be a really good movie! People would want to see that, wouldn't they?

Thinking of how she might approach Eric reminded her of what Anne told them about their ghost stories being published. What in the world was that nonsense? She'd published two books and could attest that was not how it worked. So what was it that Eric told Chris? Did Chris misunderstand him? And why would it be a secret?

She headed back in, and after a quick shower, came downstairs and was surprised to learn the guys weren't back yet. Anne and Fiona were still on the terrace. As soon as she sat down with them Fiona suddenly cried "Guys!" making them start. Lauren looked at Fiona who was pointing inside. She turned her gaze to see an old woman in a black maid's uniform dusting around the fireplace.

“You see her, right?” Anne asked Lauren.

“Yep,” Lauren said stifling a chuckle.

“Just checking,” Anne said as Lauren stood up and headed inside. Anne and Fiona followed.

“Hi,” Lauren said to the housekeeper.

Carol seemed surprised as she turned and nodded. “Hello,” she said, all business like.

“I’m Lauren. This is Anne, and you already met Fiona.”

Carol nodded again at the other two women. “Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “I’ll be out of your way shortly.”

“Take your time,” Lauren said. “You’re not at all in the way. The place looks amazing. Quite the upkeep job, I imagine.”

Carol nodded again, said “Enjoy your day,” and started to leave. She probably didn’t see them on the terrace and thought the area was empty. Now she seemed embarrassed at running into the guests a second time. Before she made it to the door, however, she turned back. “I beg your pardon,” she said, “but there’s something I feel I should tell you.”

Lauren stared at the woman along with Anne and Fiona. What could this possibly be about? Something about the villa legend that was a little truer and more dangerous than what they’d been told? When the woman spoke again, they all froze in surprise, barely registering that after speaking, she turned and left the room. What she said to them echoed in Lauren’s head, daring her to believe it.

“Your host is keeping secrets from you.”

Chapter 28

Anne

What. The. Hell? None of them said anything for what seemed like a full minute. They went to the hallway, but the housekeeper was nowhere to be found. Anne then offered up what she knew. “Eric’s friend Prisha might have left, but she wasn’t gone when he said she was.”

“What?” asked Lauren. “How do you know that?”

“I saw her outside before I came to breakfast. She didn’t see me, and of course, I didn’t know who she was.”

“That’s weird,” Fiona said.

“But maybe nothing,” said Lauren. “He said she left. Maybe she was on her way out.”

“But there was no car,” Anne said, making them both stop and think. “I was out front in the driveway when I saw her. If she really arrived late last night with important papers, how did she get here? Remember the drive up?”

“So she’s still here?” asked Fiona.

Lauren shrugged. “If she is, then who is she really?”

“Part of Eric’s secret, I guess,” said Anne. She wasn’t sure how her theories were being received, but she thought they had merit. They already suspected Eric lied to Chris about the publishing deal. If he would lie about something as simple as when Prisha was leaving, then why trust him

on anything? She was now looking at Eric through the lens the housekeeper unexpectedly and shockingly provided. She was pretty sure Fiona and Lauren were, too.

That said, Anne was not fully on board with what came next. It was a plan to sneak into Eric's room while the guys were still out on the boat. It sounded childish, and she couldn't imagine what information or peace of mind it might bring. One second their goal seemed to be finding this Prisha woman and talking with her while the next, avoiding her seemed like the priority.

"We just need an excuse in case we run into her," said Fiona.

"Any ideas?" asked Lauren.

With reservation, Anne joined her friends as they walked quickly past the kitchen, into the only area of the house they hadn't seen yet. The door to Eric's suite was closed, of course, and Fiona pressed her ear against it. This all seemed very silly and risky to Anne. "Wait," she whispered against her better judgement. If they were going to do this, they should at least minimize the risk. "I have an idea."

Fiona and Lauren looked open to anything, so Anne motioned them back to the kitchen. "We knock on the door," she told them. "If no one answers, we go in. We are actively looking for Prisha. We call her name." Anne and Lauren waited, looking not-yet-convinced that this was the best plan. "If she's there," Anne continued, "we just say we know Eric is hiding you, and that's stupid. Come out and have a coffee with us." She could see she was starting to make sense to them. "If she's not there, snoop away."

All in agreement, they went back and knocked. No answer. Fiona slowly opened the door and peeked in, calling: "Prisha?" Again, no answer, so they went in.

The room looked pretty full and messy with clothes lying around. If she had to guess, Anne would say Eric had been there more than a week. She recognized that take as more fuel for the conspiracy theories, but what did the housekeeper mean? Anne noticed her friends were better at snooping than she was. While they pored through things, she glanced around in several directions then lifted a shirt on the back of a chair to find another underneath it.

"Kink-o-rama," said Fiona as she pulled a pair of handcuffs from a duffle bag that was half under the bed. She looked back down at the bag. "There are *four* of them. What the hell?"

Anne shared Fiona's curiosity, but Lauren's look said *You guys are joking, right?* When Lauren had their full attention, she stepped her feet apart and put her arms up, making her body a giant "X." *Got it?*

Anne felt her eyes go wide. "No further questions, Your Honor," she said, making them laugh. She saw Fiona drop the cuffs back into the bag with what looked like regret for having found them.

Lauren went to the desk. "My goodness," she said flipping through at a stack of books on the desk. "He really got himself into the weekend theme. I don't remember him being this studious."

Anne came over and saw several books on Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Villa Diodati. "Interesting," she said.

Lauren moved away, but Anne stayed at the desk, trying to decipher a dense Excel chart that was labeled a production schedule. It looked very complicated. There were some business cards strewn about, one for a sound tech and another for a lawyer. Then she saw a business envelope sticking out from under a larger, manilla one. For no reason, she pulled it out, happy to find it had already been torn open. She took out the letter and started reading it. She hadn't gotten very far when an "uh-oh" escaped her lips.

"What is it?" asked Lauren coming back to the desk.

"He got fired from producing that show," Anne said.

"What show?" asked Fiona. "The déjà vu one with Emma?"

Anne nodded. "*Now and When*," she said, referring to the show's title which was clearly indicated in the letter. She gave the letter to Lauren.

"From General Counsel of Horizon Line Productions," Lauren read. "Is that Eric's company?"

"No," said Anne. "His is called ETA, his initials."

"That's some shitty news," said Fiona. "He seemed really proud of that show. Do we think that's the document that Prisha brought?"

"No," said Lauren. When they looked at her, she told them: "This letter is dated over a month ago."

"What is his deal?" asked Anne with more than a hint of exasperation. "The Prisha lie, now this lie, the publishing deal nonsense, whatever that is, probably a lie. What else?" She couldn't help but wonder if this villa was rented every weekend for the past twenty years. Unlike with Prisha, they couldn't exactly confront Eric for answers on this latest discovery.

"Maybe," Lauren said in a tone distinctly different from Anne's, one that

was contemplating and full of compassion, “this is all tied to the reason he called us together.”

“What do you mean?” asked Anne.

“Look at what he’s being untruthful about,” Lauren explained. “His lover, this dumb TV show that I would never watch, by the way. Maybe Jonathan, but not my thing.” She realized she’d gotten herself off track and shook her head. “My point is, I think Eric’s life has taken a negative – maybe very negative – turn. TV production is hardly my world, but this,” she held up the letter, “reads like a really big deal. Like ‘you’re not going to be considered for the next show or the next one after that either.’”

Anne thought about that. It made sense. She could tell by Fiona’s softened, pensive expression that she might be thinking the same thing. Lauren spoke again, saying the exact thing that came to Anne’s mind as she was saying it.

“The stuff he’s lying about has nothing to do with us or this weekend. Even the dated letter. He invited us here two months ago. He didn’t know then. Bad shit is happening to him. He’s covering up, figuring things out as he goes. Trying to keep up the appearance that he has it all together.”

“So why doesn’t he just talk to us?” Fiona asked.

“Must be harder than we can imagine,” guessed Lauren.

Anne felt bad being suspicious of Eric. Lauren was holding the letter out to her, so she absent-mindedly took it as she thought of the housekeeper’s warning. That was a full-on, red-alert, pack-your-bags-and-run moment. How? Why? “What about what the housekeeper said?” she asked. She hoped Lauren would have a decent explanation for that, too. And she did.

“That could mean anything,” Lauren dismissed. “Maybe he was a jerk to her, or she overheard some out-of-context phone call. Why would her loyalties be with us?”

Just then they heard the front door open, and a panic exploded in each of them. “They’re back!” Fiona called in a loud whisper. All three of them ran out of the room, Anne quietly closed the door, and they ducked into the kitchen. While regaining her composure, Anne felt Lauren grab her wrist “Anne!” She looked down. *She was still holding the letter!* “Oh my god!” She ran back to Eric’s room as Fiona and Lauren headed for the front door.

She tried not to be too frantic as she opened the bedroom door, found the envelope, and returned the letter just as she had found it, half covered

by the manilla one. She heard everyone talking by the front door as she ducked back out of the room and into the bathroom. The mirror told a surprising story. She looked like she had spent the last two hours at the gym. Face flushed, breathing heavy. Was that actual sweat? She needed a moment to calm down and get a grip on herself.

She was against the snooping but never voiced that opinion. She was the one who came up with the Prisha excuse when she should have been saying “let’s not do this.” In the end, though, their unethical visit reaped an ironic, unexpected benefit. Instead of some smoking gun revealing Eric as some sort of villain, they found a fairly good reminder that they all agreed on some level to come here to help him. To take care of him, even though they didn’t know exactly what was going on.

Once her skin tone returned to almost normal, she joined her friends in the parlor.

Chapter 29

Chris

Walking back up to the villa, Chris tried to gauge where he was emotionally for when he saw Anne again. He was still mad and hurt but continuing to show that would be childish. Like with all their recent fights, the time had come to sweep things under the rug and move on. That had become quite the impressive rug over the years. He would just have to see how things played out. Take his cues from her, which was something he didn't like doing, but understood to be the most efficient path to closure.

He gladly pushed those thoughts aside and returned his focus to the new novel brewing in his mind. "What about this?" he asked Eric. "Agatha is wise to Catherine, only pretends to drink the poison, and fakes her death."

Eric thought for a second. "But Catherine would check and confirm."

"Maybe it's a witchcraft trick Agatha knows. Slow her heartrate to near zero or something like that."

Eric stopped just outside the door. "So then Catherine thinks she's a ghost?"

"Maybe," Chris said still kicking around a number of ideas in his head. "What if she fakes her death, kills the kids, then reanimates them, Frankenstein-style?" When one side of Eric's mouth stretched into a smirk, Chris backpedaled. "Okay, maybe that's too much."

When they came inside, Lauren and Fiona came to meet them at the door, which was strange, but nice. He tried not to read too much into Anne's absence during the unexpected greeting. The truth was, she knew he wanted and needed time away, and she was probably waiting for him to come to her, something he was ready to do. Racing around on the boat had settled him down, and talking with Eric helped, too. A second opinion was rare in his world. That plus the excitement over the new book project was enough to set things right for now. "Hey," he said to the women. "How's everything going here?"

"Good," said Fiona. "Just hanging out. How was the boat race? Did you win?"

"So intimidating," Chris said, "no one else even showed up."

Chris heard fragments of Lauren asking Eric about something she saw in the backyard. She was practically dragging him to the terrace to see for himself. Chris and Fiona followed much more slowly. Normally he'd share the new book idea with Anne, but after their argument, he felt his excitement would come across as dumb and tone-deaf. Fiona, however, was a different story and a different audience.

"Big epiphany out on the water," he told her as they walked to the parlor.

"Really?" she asked. "What was that?"

"My next novel."

"Elixir Book Seventeen?" she asked coyly.

"It's Equinox," he said, making her laugh and apologize. "And no." He shook his head slowly at her but was fighting a laugh of his own. "I'm going to write a horror telling of the villa legend."

"Ah," she said. "Very cool. You and Anne should collaborate on it."

The idea surprised him. He couldn't place where it might have come from. He was certainly intrigued with the idea of working with her on something, but ... "I can't imagine she'd want to do that," he said.

Fiona shrugged. "She's already writing about young Agatha the witch. Who knows?"

The correlation to Anne's short story hadn't occurred to him, and that, too, caught him by surprise. It was an obvious, top-of-mind connection that he really should have made. If only he had waited a little longer before trying to help her. He could have come to her with this idea for a novel as a way to inspire her on the short story. Not that it would have worked, but

at least it would have felt less to her like pressure? More equitable?

He envisioned her story as the opening for the novel and also began to see the larger idea of “his” book becoming “their” book. Could they actually write a novel together? She was always so busy with her company, work she seemed to enjoy. If they did write together, some things would have to change about their daily lives, but like Fiona said: Who knows? “I’ll ask her,” he said. “Thanks.”

When they got to the parlor, Lauren and Eric were coming in from the terrace. It seemed whatever Lauren was asking about in the yard was no longer there. A moment later Anne came in from the hallway making an odd declaration that she was in the bathroom. She went right over to Chris, and he gave her a gentle hug then kissed the top of her head. Message sent and received.

“Our boy Mowgli,” Eric told them all, “was a beast behind the wheel.”

Chris laughed. “I don’t know about that,” he said. “I gotta say, though. That boat is a lot faster than I would have guessed. I felt like I was going to get thrown off a couple of times. Serious adrenaline-rush thrill.”

Eric said to Anne: “You might have to get him one.”

Anne laughed. “Maybe the bathtub version.”

Chris could have talked about the ride for longer, but the room was easy to read. This was not a captive audience on horsepower. Was that even the right term for boats? He had no idea. He was essentially glad that things had returned to relative normalcy with Anne.

Fiona pushed Chris’ arm. “Tell everyone your big announcement.”

Chris was surprised at the sudden spotlight, but welcomed it and pitched what little he had on the new novel. “I have to finish my current book first, though,” he said. “I can’t leave that hanging.” He said this with conviction even though he had already toyed with the idea of moving away from his series for a time. What difference would it make if Equinox Book Five was delayed? Who would even know?

Anne seemed genuinely surprised by this news. “Wow,” she said. “That’s exciting.”

“I’m looking forward to that already,” said Lauren.

“Who needs a drink?” Eric asked. “The bar is open early today.”

Anne hugged Chris’ arm as they sat down. “I’m happy for you,” she said. “You’ve told me that the start of a book idea is the most fun.”

“That’s still true,” he said.

“Then have fun with it.”

“Thanks.” First Eric now Anne, and even a little Fiona in between. This was more validation in the last thirty minutes than he usually gets in a year. He was already thinking about Fiona’s suggestion. He knew it could, and probably should, wait, but his curiosity was hard to ignore. He spoke softly, privately to Anne as they sat on the couch. “I know this weekend hasn’t put the writer’s bug back in you.”

“It’s been fun,” she corrected. “I told you that.”

“Write this book with me.”

“What?” She laughed and rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious.”

“That’s just what your writing needs: dead weight.”

“That’s not how I see it,” he said. “Your story can be the opening chapter.” She seemed to contemplate this with a degree of seriousness. “Just think about it,” he told her. He almost said “no pressure” but caught himself, realizing that would sound like a dig about their fight.

“The most interesting part,” Eric told the group, “of Mowgli’s idea is about the fortune.” He joined them holding a splash of whiskey in a rocks glass. It seemed he was the only taker on his early bar call. “He has an interesting theory that it was never found and is perhaps still here in the villa somewhere.”

“Oh, I found that already,” Fiona said. “It was under my bed. I put it in a Swiss bank account in my name. Was that bad?”

Chapter 30

Fiona

Just before lunch, Fiona went to her room to get her journal. Waiting for her in the mirror was the ghost girl. Fiona took a deep breath, turned the reading chair to face the mirror and sat down. “Hello,” she whispered.

The girl just seemed to giggle a bit and turn back and forth at the waist in a gesture of coy shyness. She was the same girl Fiona saw before, but her demeanor was entirely different from their last encounter. Fiona couldn’t help but wonder what that meant.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Fiona said.

Suddenly the girl twirled like a ballerina, her apron dress billowing as she did. She was here to play, and that put Fiona at ease.

“Are you Elizabeth Porter?” Fiona asked.

The girl stood still looking like she was searching for the answer until it dawned on Fiona that she was deciding whether or not she *should* answer. After a few moments, the girl gave a quick curtsy. “I’ll take that as a yes,” whispered Fiona. “Where are your siblings?” she asked. The girl placed a finger over her lips in a clear *Shhh* gesture. “Are they with you?” Fiona pressed.

Shhh again.

“What happened to the three of you?” asked Fiona.

The girl continued to dance about, ignoring the question.

“Is it true?” she asked. “Did your mother poison Agatha?”

At this, the girl walked out of the frame. Fiona tried not to be too loud when she called “Wait, come back.”

A moment later the girl walked back into center frame. Her arms were rigid at her sides, and her fists were clenched. When she turned to face forward, Fiona could see her expression was like a carved statue of stone cold anger.

“I’m sorry,” said Fiona. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just the story I heard. I don’t believe it.”

You don’t know what it means to be sorry. But you will.

Fiona froze in fear. This was not good. She had been holding out hope that this spirit was not a threat, but now couldn’t fathom how she could have been so naïve. The legend was clear regarding what Elizabeth Porter was capable of. The only remaining hope was that the threat was directed at her alone. Her friends were safe. She’d see to it that they stayed that way. “I’m glad to know the truth,” she said, doing her best to stay calm. “I can tell the others. I *will* tell them your mother did no such thing.”

The girl’s expression didn’t change. Fiona slowly reached for her phone and discreetly opened the camera app. She tried to set it to video, but when she pushed the button to start recording, she heard the camera shutter click, realizing the setting was just for a photo. At the moment she took the picture, the girl transformed into a shape of black smoke that floated up and dissipated.

Fiona looked at the photo. It was blurry and captured the instant she started to transform, so the girl was darkened as if being swallowed up in shadow. But you could still see her, her dress and even her face to some degree. A moment later Eric appeared in the doorway, startling her. “Hey,” he said. “You joining us for lunch?”

“Yes,” she said, trying to compose herself.

“You okay?” Eric asked.

“Yeah. Just ... a lot on my mind.” She was frantically weighing the pros and cons of showing him the picture and telling him everything right then and there. She couldn’t bring herself to accept that any of the others were in danger. She didn’t want this kind of focus and attention put on her. She kept telling herself that she could handle it. She must handle it.

Lunch was light and quick, but gave Fiona enough time to decide that Anne would be her confidant on this. When Lauren left on her run,

Fiona got an idea. “Hey,” she said to Anne. “We could never keep up with Brontë, but how about a walk around the trail?”

“Ooh,” said Anne. “That sounds nice. Lemme change my shoes.” Fiona noticed Anne’s flat sandals as her friend went up the stairs to her room.

Out on the wooded trail, the two women took in the cool, refreshing air and amazing scenic views of the lake. “So,” said Fiona, unsure how to begin. “Can I show you something?”

“Sure.”

“But I don’t want you to freak out.”

Anne’s eyebrows shot up. “Ummm,” she said.

“Sorry,” Fiona said. “Not trying to be cryptic. The villa has spirits. Ghosts.”

“Really?”

“I’ve heard voices, and well ... ” Fiona took her phone out and showed Anne the photo.

Anne’s eyes went wide. “Oh my god! That’s in your room?”

Fiona shook her head. “Just in the mirror. She’s a young girl.” She told the story of her encounters, making a point to leave out the threatening moments of what she saw and heard. And her theory that the girl is Elizabeth Porter from the legend. “I don’t want to alarm anyone.”

“Except me,” Anne joked.

“Sorry.”

“I’m kidding,” said Anne staring at the photo. “This is ... wow.”

“Any advice?”

“I think you have to show everyone. I mean, she’s not like Angry Little Ghost Girl wielding the Villa Curse, right?”

Fiona thought for a second. “That’s not the impression I’m getting.”

They finished their walk and found Chris out on the terrace with his journal. They showed him the photo, and he immediately asked to see the mirror.

Fiona led them upstairs and into her room. The girl was not there. “She’s like right out of *Little House on the Prairie*,” she told them. “Her dress, I mean. It’s like she’s here in the room but only reflects. Or through there is some alternate, identical plane of existence.” Fiona only hoped she was making sense to them and not sounding like some lunatic. The photo was an argument against lunacy, wasn’t it?

Fiona watched as Chris walked over and leaned in close to the mirror. He was inspecting it although for what, she had no idea.

“Can you, like, summon her?” Anne asked.

Fiona shrugged and shook her head. “I’ve never been able to do that.”

Chapter 31

Lauren

During her post-run shower, Lauren concluded that all the personal turmoil pinballing around in her head was making it more difficult to engage with the others here. The women knew what was up, but she didn't feel the need to talk any more about it. She thought of the brief conversation with Fiona about teaching. That was nice. She'd welcome more interactions like that. Perhaps she should make an effort to initiate them.

Once downstairs, she saw Chris out on the terrace and decided to wander into the kitchen. She checked the camera app, but no one was on the couch (or standing next to the bed). Looking to busy herself, she cleaned the coffee pot. While she was doing that, Eric came in.

"Carol will get that," he said.

"I don't mind."

"Yeah, I'm with you," he said. "Would rather do things myself." He took the drinking glasses from the drying rack and put them in the cupboard. "Good run?"

"Yes, it's been great, actually."

"Hey, wanna see something cool?" he asked.

"Okay," she smiled.

"This way!" He led her over to a small, unassuming door she'd seen there in the kitchen but never asked about. She assumed it was a pantry. He

opened it, and she was surprised to see a long stone hallway, arch-shaped and a bit cramped. At the end, about thirty feet away was a medieval-looking door, the same arched shape as the whole environment. Heavy, weathered wood fixed with iron hinges, plates, and a latch.

“What the hell is that?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said and started down the hall.

He walked ahead, but she caught up to him by the time they reached the door. She smiled to herself thinking of Anne’s sex dungeon joke about the locked bedroom upstairs. Eric pulled the latch free and opened the door, revealing nothing but darkness.

“Um,” she said. “You first?”

He laughed, leaned in, and turned on the light. The room, about ten feet square, was a completely stocked wine cellar. All four walls made a multi-colored, polka dot pattern of bottle tops pointing out, some foiled, some not. An island structure, probably four feet cubed, stood in the center of the room, also full of bottles on two sides. On the floor by the door stood a pyramid stack of at least ten more bottles.

“Wow,” she said. “Impressive.” She walked in and slowly made her way around the island. Picking a bottle at random, she slid it out and looked at the label. Chateau Cheval Blanc. 1964. “These look expensive.”

“They are,” Eric confirmed, staying by the door. “Needless to say, we’re not allowed to partake, but they told me about it, and I had to check it out. Look at this,” he said, pulling on an iron latch on the inside of the door. “Locks from both sides. Weird, right?”

“I guess,” she said. “Nice safe room. Just don’t forget the corkscrew.”

The joke sent Eric into a giggling fit. His attempts to suppress it were cute, and contagion struck Lauren who found herself laughing, too.

“Hey,” she said, turning serious. “What happened with that *Now and When* TV show you told us about?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I was curious about it and looked it up online. Imdb?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” she said and waited for him to offer some explanation. When he didn’t, she said: “Your name’s not on it. Is everything okay?” She trusted that Eric understood the question was meant to be both specific and general. She also didn’t bother to mention that there was, at least currently, no character in the show named Emma. She conceded that they could have

changed the name after firing Eric. Erase all traces of him. The firing letter was that harsh.

“Things got messy,” he told her. She could see the sadness on his face. “Lots of arguments. I was being agreed with less and less. Writing on the wall. That sort of thing.”

“Sorry to hear that,” she said and came around to the door with him. She couldn’t, for the life of her, understand why he was so eager to show it to them. Was it the Emma connection? The fact that the psychologist character made it personal for him? “I didn’t tell anyone,” she said. “Just so you know.”

“I appreciate that,” he said then surprised her by adding: “I appreciate you.”

“Okay,” she said, confused.

He shook his head, and she thought maybe he didn’t mean to say that out loud. “It’s just ... my world ... relationships. They’re not real.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yes, I’m occasionally with the kind of woman most men fantasize about. So what? They’re with me because they want something. It’s self-serving on their part, so I make it self-serving on my part. An equal and fair transaction.”

“How romantic,” she joked.

“That’s just it,” he said. “It’s hardly a basis for anything meaningful.” He paused, then continued with a tentativeness in his voice. “Want to know what I fantasize about?”

“Not particularly.”

He laughed. “Sorry, I could have worded that question better.”

Now she was laughing, too. “If there’s something PG-13 you want to share, I’m all ears.”

“My fantasy,” he began, “is to be with a woman who has nothing to do with the entertainment industry. Her whole being, her whole self, her passions and her life are somewhere else, immersed in something she shares with me in the most fascinating way because it’s something she’s great at and something I could never do.”

“That sounds lovely,” Lauren said. “She exists. Go find her.”

“I know she exists,” he said. “I already found her.”

“That’s great,” said Lauren, then thought: *Then what are we talking about?*

“She teaches college. She’s you.”

“Eric ...”

“No, no,” he said putting his hands up. “I don’t mean you in the literal sense. I know you’re happily married, and I would never ... I mean whenever I think of that ideal, what would make me most happy, content, and fulfilled, you are the standard. It’s a blessing to have it so clearly defined. But it’s also a curse because it’s a standard that can never be met.”

Good God. Of all the turns this weekend could have taken, this was one she never would have predicted. She knew she was at the most monumental of crossroads in her life and that she was far from “happily married,” but she didn’t see Eric fitting into whatever her next chapter would be. Nonetheless, his words not only enveloped her with a comforting warmth, but they also propped her up with a dose of completely unexpected support. When was the last time she heard a compliment like that? Just for fun, she allowed herself to picture the impossible hypothetical scenario for a moment. Why not? She takes a job at some reputable school in Southern California. She even convinces Connor to go there. Her boyfriend makes movies. He’s kind of famous. They met back in grad school.

Okay, that was enough. She shook the picture off. How long had she been silent in those thoughts? She needed to say something to ground herself. Ground them both. “That’s very sweet.” Stupid and generic, but at least she said something, putting them back in the villa and not off in some make-believe parallel universe.

“I was scared to tell you that,” he said in a reserved tone usually saved for confessions. “But now that you know, I feel a lot better.”

She put her arms out, and they hugged. It began friendly, but before she knew it, the embrace became something much more. Not sexual, and not just one-sided from him. She recognized she wasn’t just hugging him, but holding him, keeping him from falling into some unseen abyss. She was also aware that because her life was spiraling out of control not unlike his, the embrace, his rock-solid arms that she knew could swiftly and easily break the bones of much larger men, was keeping her out of an abyss as well.

When they both realized the unexpected nature of what was happening, he moved his head from her shoulder out in front of her, so they were face to face, just inches between them. Despite the passion (Was that what this was?) in the moment, she stayed in control. She thought of how hurtful it was that Jonathan chose to cheat on her. Then she thought of Prisha, who very well could be waiting in Eric’s room.

“I can’t kiss you,” she said, shaking her head.

He didn’t reply right away, and she had no idea what he was thinking. Her own thoughts were a scattered mess but rooted in the firmness of her conviction. If she searched harder (which she did not) she’d have found confusion, sadness, and regret mixed in the soup as well.

“I understand,” he finally said and relaxed his arms. “Of course.”

Instead of pulling away, she rested her head back on his shoulder. How did this happen? She hated the idea of being vulnerable, but clearly Jonathan’s infidelity had made her just that. What had Anne called her? Frazzled? Luckily Eric was a good enough friend not to take advantage. He whispered into her ear: “Am I mad, bad, and dangerous to know?”

She smiled. “Maybe one out of three.”

“Which one?”

“Not telling.”

They parted, smiling at each other. He kissed the back of her hand, and jerked his head toward the kitchen.

Chapter 32

Anne

Anne returned to the parlor with Chris and Fiona. Chris made them drinks. She couldn't get the photo image out of her mind. Fiona had explained the whole changing into black mist or smoke or whatever. It seemed like the most cliché description imaginable, but the image was haunting. Anne couldn't think of a better word to describe it. The girl's mouth was open. What was she saying or about to say? Everything about it was nightmare-in-the-making. Even so, the thing that surprised Anne most was her lack of fear about it. It was all fascination. She always believed in spirits and paranormal encounters in a "Yeah, sure. Why not?" kind of way. But now she was a member of the exclusive club with direct (well, slightly indirect) experience.

Did she really ask Fiona to "summon" the girl? Perhaps she would have been scared if the girl appeared in the mirror. She guessed that would have depended on how the girl acted. On their walk, Fiona described her as playful at one point.

Eric and Lauren came in from the direction of the kitchen and dining room. Fiona immediately showed them the photo and brought them into the loop on everything. Anne thought Chris might have a theory, especially after his close inspection of the mirror, but he stayed quiet.

"Oh my god," said Lauren staring at Fiona's phone.

"Whoa," said Eric looking over her shoulder.

The two of them asked Fiona questions that was all repeat information to her, so she pulled Chris aside and told him she was going to take a breather on the terrace.

“Are you freaked out?” he asked.

She thought about it and shook her head. “It’s strange,” she said, “and kind of interesting. I think if I were seeing dead girls in mirrors, I’d react differently.”

“Same,” he said.

Once alone out on the terrace, Anne sipped her drink and looked out at the tree line that stood about fifty yards away. The arc it formed made a clean border of the manicured oval of green grass. Going into those woods would be plenty spooky now.

The weekend was weighing on her. The unexpected paranormal twist was just the latest in a string of episodes she was having trouble dealing with. Poor Lauren and her situation at home. What a mess that was! She’d make sure her support continued. And Eric acting like everything is fine when it clearly isn’t, pretending he’s still a producer on a show he pitched to them as a tribute to his sister. How does that even work if he’s no longer on the team? His firing was clearly one of several recent devastations for him.

She thought of the only time she met Eric’s sweet, thoughtful sister Emma. It was the fall of their second year, and her weekend visit was a big turning point in their family. Chris was behind in two classes and couldn’t go out, and Eric had to turn in earlier than usual because of some important morning meeting. That left the women to themselves for a few hours, so Anne called Fiona and Lauren and the four of them went to a popular bar in Harvard Square. Emma looked older than her age, but that didn’t matter. Her fake ID was impeccable, way better than anything Anne ever had.

Inside they stood at a high table, and Emma told funny stories about growing up with Eric, how for years in childhood they both thought they were fooling their parents far more often than they actually were. She told the story of Eric’s martial arts training, how at first it led to him getting in trouble at school because he was picking fights and hurting other kids, often kids much bigger than he was. He always claimed he was bullied and was just pushing back. He was adamant that he shouldn’t be punished for that.

In his eighth grade year, Eric and Emma’s parents were called in by the principal and together they seemed to get through to him. He started keeping his hands (and feet) to himself. Kids Eric didn’t like got fewer

injuries. Everyone seemed happy.

Not long after, Eric started having trouble with local police, and Emma felt like she was the only one who connected the dots. The syrup-soaked platitudes of grown-ups in the principal's office didn't guide him toward being a model student and citizen. He was bored of wreaking havoc within the mundane parameters of the school. He needed a challenge worthy of his abilities, so he (literally) took to the streets.

"Eric speaks really highly of you three," she said. "I was wondering if I could ask about something."

"Of course," they all told her.

"I'm visiting," Emma said, "but I'm also here to bring bad news. Sad news," she corrected herself. "Well, both."

"What is it?" asked Fiona.

"It's my mom," Emma said. She told them a heartbreaking story of how her mom got lost in the parking garage at a mall. When someone tried to help her, she got scared and belligerent. Security was called, and it was soon determined that she didn't know where she was or how she got there. They were eventually able to calm her down and get a look at her ID. They called Eric and Emma's father who came to the rescue.

She saw several doctors and received the diagnosis they all feared. The path she was on was set. Emma read all about the condition and its care-giving. She knew her dad's state of devastation would only get worse. Her dying would be one thing. Grief is grief. But this was different. She would soon be there every day, every hour, with him but at the same time, gone. Not her anymore. Eventually not even knowing who he was. "I'll admit," Emma told them. "I've spent so much time worrying about my dad that I haven't even begun to emotionally prepare myself."

Anne, Lauren, and Fiona expressed their deepest sorrow and sympathies. Anne remembered feeling crushed for Emma and Eric. And for their dad, whom she had never met. And of course for their mom, who was suddenly, as Emma put it, on a path that was so tragic, sad, and unfair. She didn't envy Emma having to break this news to her brother. It was nice though, meaningful, that she came here to talk in person. Anne couldn't imagine getting such news over the phone.

"I'm here to tell him," Emma said. "But I haven't yet. I'm finding it hard. It's like he doesn't live in the real world. I don't know if that makes sense." Anne thought it did. At least she knew the idealism Emma was

referring to. "I have this fear," Emma continued, "that he's not going to accept it."

"Denial seems like a natural response," said Lauren. "I imagine you and your dad are experiencing something like that at times?"

Emma nodded. "But Eric is different. The way he thinks. Nothing is ever just 'denial' or 'suppression' or even 'anger' or 'joy.' It's like he operates on this other plane, one that he controls. Or tries to at least."

"Hey," Eric said as he came out on to the terrace. "You alone?"

"Not anymore," Anne joked making him smile.

He joined her at the railing, looking out. "Maybe I was asking about ghosts."

"You weren't," she smiled. She wanted to get him to open up about what was going on. He'd come out here to her. Clearly, this was the best opportunity she'd get. "What's the deal with that *Now and When* show?"

"What do you mean?"

Okay, that was a stupid way to phrase the question. Time to backtrack and recover. "I just meant how's it going? You happy with it?" If she could get him talking about it, he might confess the truth.

He squinted, a look she tried hard not to read as suspicion. "Yeah," he said. "The usual frustrations, but all in all, I think it'll come together pretty great."

"That's great," she said regretting the repeat of his word. She sounded hollow, like she didn't really care about his show. She should be more blunt, but that was never her style with anyone other than Chris. "How's everything else going?" she asked, hoping the hollowness was gone. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," Eric said without hesitation.

Just then Chris walked outside and innocently asked: "What are you doing?"

Anne was surprised to feel Eric pull her into an embrace. "Stealing your woman," he told Chris.

Chris suddenly and inexplicably acted like he just woke up, emphasis on "acted" because it was unconvincing. Through a fake yawn he waved a hand and said: "Take her."

"What the hell?" cried Anne. She took an ice cube from her drink and threw it at him.

Chris tried to catch the ice, but it hit his chest and fell to the ground. “What?” he cried. “I thought we were doing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid!*”

Eric laughed. “The bicycle scene,” he said. “I remember.” Then he said to Anne as he let her go. “Legit movie quoting, I can attest.”

“Wonderful,” said Anne.

“And ...?” Chris prompted Eric, “Butch’s next line?”

Eric thought a second then smiled, obviously pleased at his recall. “You’re a romantic bastard. I’ll give you that.”

Chris put both hands up in a victory gesture of sorts causing Anne to roll her eyes and sip her drink.

“Speaking of movies,” Eric said to Anne. “You know your nickname would be Skywalker now, right?”

“What?” said Anne. “Why is that?”

“Ann-a-quinn?” Eric said adding a syllable so it sounded like Anakin. It took her a second, then she dipped her chin and glared at him.

Chris laughed. “I am so calling her that now,” he said.

Anne turned the same expression to her husband. Then she put her hand up at him and spoke like she was using the Force. “From an ever-increasing distance, I foresee.”

Chapter 33

Chris

After Anne went out onto the terrace for her “breather,” Chris noticed Lauren’s body language, arms crossed, weight on her back foot. She was surprised and intrigued by the photo like the rest of them, but she still seemed skeptical. Just as he was noticing all this, she asked Eric: “The owners who rented you this place didn’t say anything?”

“About ghosts?” asked Eric. “Nope.”

“Do we think they don’t know?” Lauren pressed.

“I suppose I can ask them,” Eric said.

“What about the housekeeper?” Lauren was using just enough curiosity in her tone to sound interested, but what Chris heard underneath was the interrogation of seasoned trial lawyer in cross examination. Trying to get him to contradict himself. In the movie version of this scene, Fiona breaks down and confesses she fabricated the whole thing. But that wasn’t right. Lauren was grilling Eric. Something was bugging Chris about this whole thing, and he realized Lauren was a good ally on the topic.

Later that afternoon he found her by herself on one of the terrace lounge chairs. When she invited him to join her, he told her: “I’m here for my Brontë time, which has been sorely lacking this weekend.”

She smiled. “You’re in luck. I’m running a special.”

She hadn’t lost one bit of her striking, angular beauty. He hadn’t thought about their lone kiss in years. He was sure it wouldn’t come up,

but couldn't help but wonder if she ever thought about it. "What do you make of the whole Scooby Doo thing?" he asked.

She laughed. "Honestly?" she said. "I can't even form a real opinion on it. Definitely strange, but until I see something myself, which I don't think I will, I'm staying out of it. Psychologically, emotionally, all of it."

"Pretty good take," he said. "I'm with you. Something's bugging me, though."

"What's that?" asked Lauren, then she looked past him at the door and whispered: "Hang on."

"What?" he whispered back without turning.

Lauren called over his shoulder. "Hello. How are you?"

He turned to see Fiona had come out but stopped, staring at them. She looked almost scared. After a second, she went back inside.

"At least she's consistent in her weirdness," Lauren said.

Chris continued: "When she showed Anne and me the photo, I checked out the mirror. Seemed normal except for one thing. It's weirdly attached to the wall, full surface to surface like a postage stamp. Immovable. Usually a mirror like that would hang on a nail or a hook, right?" Lauren squinted her eyes, curious as to where he was going with this. "What if that's because it's more than a mirror?" She waited. "What if it's plugged in?" he asked.

"Like a screen?"

Chris nodded. "The other side of the wall is the locked bedroom."

She raised one eyebrow, clearly accepting this bizarre possibility, but Chris wasn't done. "There's another thing," he said. "If that's a Porter girl who lived here in this mansion in the 1920s, why does she dress like a poor farm girl from fifty years earlier?"

Lauren's eyebrow shot up again. She was clearly impressed. Then she drifted away for a moment, lost in thought. "So ..." she started, trying to wrap her head around what she was hearing. "... Eric?"

Chapter 34

Fiona

After everyone had seen her photo, Fiona went back to her room and sat on the bed. “They’ve all seen your picture,” she whispered. “You don’t have to hide from them.” The girl did not appear. No whispering either. Fiona had no experience interacting with ghosts, and she couldn’t help but think she had messed this all up by focusing on trying to validate the stupid legend.

After some time she headed back downstairs, passing Lauren’s open door which showed her empty room. Anne and Chris’ door was closed. Once in the downstairs hallway, she was surprised at the quiet. Maybe everyone was writing. The parlor was empty, and it didn’t look like anyone was on the terrace either. She walked through the dining room and kitchen, finding them empty as well. Were they out front? She couldn’t imagine why, but she was running out of options. Then something hit her making her panic.

They had gathered in private to talk about her. Maybe in Eric’s room? She walked quietly that way to find his door closed. But no sound was coming out. She went all the way to the door and pressed her ear against it. Not even whispers. She was sure of it now. They were off hidden somewhere talking about Crazy Woodstock and her ghost girl. Probably planning the next reunion without her. Why had she told them anything? She felt like she might cry but used her anger to fight back the tears.

Refuse them.

She went back into the parlor, then sighed relief when she saw Chris and Lauren out on terrace lounge chairs. Not sure how she missed them a minute ago, she made her way quickly to them, but as soon as she stepped outside, she stopped in her tracks.

It wasn't them. It was an older couple, late fifties maybe, sunning themselves. He was shirtless and wore red swim trunks. She was in a yellow gingham one-piece with the faux skirt ruffle around the waist. Fiona must have gasped audibly, because the woman turned to her, pulled her big, round sunglasses down to the end of her nose and said: "Hello. Who are you?" Then the man turned to look at her. It was all too much.

Instead of answering, Fiona rushed back inside and immediately heard a burst of laughter from what sounded like a sizable group of people in the dining room. She ran there and again froze in shock. The table was full of more strangers, at least ten of them dressed and seated for the dinner party that was happening right in front of her. The laughter had been replaced with the clinking of silverware and the heavy murmur of several simultaneous conversations. Every plate was full of food. Open bottles of wine were shared and poured. There was even a large, rustic-looking, flowery centerpiece Fiona didn't recognize.

Suddenly, the woman closest to Fiona turned to face her. She had long red curls, pale skin, and wore a pearl necklace over the straight neckline of her emerald green party dress. She handed Fiona her glass of white wine. "You can take this back," she said. "Too sweet for me."

Fiona took the glass, felt its hard, cool smoothness in her hand, its delicate weight. She even smelled the wine's fruity bouquet. She'd never been handed anything by a ghost before. How could that even happen? She slowly backed out of the room, instinctually drinking the entire glass as she did.

In the hallway, she flung the glass at the base of a wall like it was suddenly something dangerous to be holding. She watched and heard it shatter into several pieces. She went into the kitchen to find a hushed but bustling scene of a cook and four servers. Carol the housekeeper was not among them. Two of them kept going out and coming in the door that led straight to the dining room. The cook, who seemed to be in charge, was not happy about something and scolded a server quietly, mostly with hand gestures, so as not to disturb the dinner guests.

No one in the kitchen interacted with or seemed to even notice Fiona, so she seized the opportunity to go back out in the hall where she could be alone. The first thing she noticed was the shattered wine glass had disappeared. Not a trace of broken glass anywhere. How could that be? The aftertaste tang of the wine still blanketed her tongue! She tried to catch her breath, but the simple, natural skill became harder with each passing second. Who were these people? When did they live? And why would they all show themselves now? Where did her friends go?

As she fought off the panic, the bathroom door opened, causing her to gasp again and spin toward it. Out strolled an ashen, sinewy man in a black suit who pulled the door closed behind him. His dark eyes were sunk deep in his face. Just as she noticed one side of his salt-and-pepper hair was mussed, he reached up with a bony hand and slicked it all back into place. He clearly didn't expect her to be there, and he fixed his stare on her. As he walked toward her, he pressed the edge of his forefinger to his lips, a silent contract of secrecy that Fiona was in no way prepared to sign. He held the gesture until he passed her, and he didn't look back as he entered the dining room. Fiona heard the group's voices swell in greeting at his arrival.

Once he was gone, Fiona fixated on the closed door of the bathroom. She thought about how frightened she was meeting the housekeeper in that very spot. And now this. What was she supposed to keep quiet about? Was there something in there? She didn't want to look but knew there was no avoiding it. *Who were these people?* She confirmed she was alone in the hallway and slowly opened the bathroom door.

She sighed relief as everything looked normal. Nothing was out of place. When she turned and came back out, she gasped in horror.

The dark-eyed man was back in the middle of the hallway, staring at her. Fiona stifled a scream and thought to run away into the parlor. Would he chase her? She inched sideways in that direction, and he only moved his head to follow her with his gaze. Just before she concluded it was safe to get out of there, he spoke in a low, guttural growl: "Mind your business."

She thought of the quiet old couple on the terrace. She could return to them and maybe get some answers. She ran through the parlor and gasped yet again as she saw another man standing behind the bar. He had a trimmed, reddish beard and wore a uniform jacket with epaulets and tassels. "How about a drink?" he asked Fiona as she rushed by.

"No, thank you!" she cried, trying not to sound too flustered.

She rushed outside and found Chris and Lauren sitting where the ghost couple had been. They looked at her in surprise. She must have looked a mess.

“You okay?” asked Chris.

“Yeah,” she told them. “Fine.”

Chapter 35

Lauren

Fiona looked like she was trying to catch her breath and calm down over something as she joined them on the lounge chairs. She looked back into the parlor a few times before sitting. Lauren felt bad for being so skeptical, but she couldn't help it.

"Where's Ginger?" Fiona asked.

"Power nap," Chris said.

Lauren remembered those from school and found it cute and funny that they were still her practice. They'd stopped asking about Eric because he was in and out of meetings and calls all the time. He tried to apologize, but they understood. For Lauren, his absence now provided something she recognized as relief. It sounded mean, but their strange, unexpected interaction in the wine cellar was still swimming around in her mind. That could have been disastrous. She was glad it stopped as naturally as it had begun.

Because Fiona had joined them, she and Chris couldn't continue their talk about the mirror, but she could still think about it. The easiest way to test Chris' theory was to get into that locked bedroom. She was thinking of ways to pick the lock. It was an old door. Didn't that make it easier? Maybe Chris knew how to do it. When she asked if he told his theory to Anne, he said he hadn't and implied she might not be receptive. She wasn't sure what that meant, but that was between them. She just hoped their fight

had run its course.

Another option was to find the housekeeper and ask her (bribe her?) to open the door, although she didn't see that happening. The point was, if Eric somehow created the girl in the mirror with Hollywood special effects, then Fiona was off the hook as far as seeking attention and making drama. It was clear he wanted them all to be in some Gothic story of his creation, but would he really take it to that level? She thought of his old theme parties and that terrible prank he once played on Chris. If so, it was no surprise he targeted Fiona, who was most susceptible to such a thing. The fact that she actually claims to see ghosts must have been some sort of fortuitous boon to him.

Chris offered to get everyone's journals. Writing was the last thing Lauren wanted to do, but she thanked him, as did Fiona, and he went inside. She could tell Chris was all in believing whatever this secret publishing deal was and was doing his best to help everyone along. Once alone with Fiona, Lauren asked: "You sure you're okay?"

Fiona nodded. After a moment, she said: "I know you don't believe me."

The bluntness surprised Lauren. "It's not that," she said, "at all. I'm a natural skeptic. I'm sorry if that comes across as disrespectful. I certainly don't intend it to. That photo is certainly something not normal!"

"It's okay."

"You saw something else?" Lauren asked. "Just now?"

"Yeah."

"You can tell me," Lauren said. "I believe you." *I believe that Eric may be tricking you, but that's something at least.*

"It was nothing, really," Fiona said. "Just a glimpse down the hall. Probably the housekeeper, or even Eric. It was down by his room."

"Or Prisha," Lauren joked. "Was the entity gorgeous and naked?"

Fiona laughed.

Chris and Anne joined them, and as evening settled in, they went inside to the parlor. In Eric's continued absence, Chris made them each a drink. After a short while, Lauren saw the others had their journals open so she did the same but just for appearances. The fog she felt about what happened with Eric had neatly layered itself atop the baseline Jonathan fog. Delightful.

She hadn't looked at the camera app in a while. She took out Anne's phone and logged in, a process that was more tentative now that she knew

what she might be suddenly seeing. The surfer guy was still there, but now he was alone on the couch watching TV. He had put on a faded blue tee shirt. Lauren rationalized that this was better than seeing a new, different guy. Wasn't it? She found herself wondering what his name was, what his deal was. Did he have any association with the university, or did Jonathan meet him some other way?

"Afterlife question," Chris blurted out as he looked up from his writing. "I'm trying to give my ghost – who is getting more terrifying by the minute, if I do say so myself – some kind of otherworldly power or ability but I don't want it to be cheesy."

After waiting a second, the professor in Lauren came out. "So what's the question?" she asked.

"Right," said Chris, realizing he hadn't asked anything. "What would be an otherworldly power or ability that's not cheesy?"

The women laughed. "So we're writing it for you?" Fiona teased.

"Just ideas for this one, tiny part," Chris said. "In the spirit of helping each other! Okay, fine, my question is, is that even a thing?"

"Ghosts fly around, don't they?" asked Anne. "That's an afterlife ability."

"Maybe," suggested Lauren, "your ghost's ability is less physical and more psychological."

"Mind control," said Fiona.

"Is that a thing?" Chris asked Fiona directly.

"Not in my experience," she replied. "But in a scary story, why not?"

"That could work," Chris mused. "Thanks!"

"Did you know?" Anne asked Lauren and Fiona, "that my husband's plan is to become a famous science fiction writer after he dies?"

"That's sad," said Fiona.

"And a bit morbid," added Lauren.

"It's not really a *plan*," corrected Chris. "More like a belief. I have some ideas about how I might get discovered."

"Ideas that you wrote down," said Anne.

"Well yeah," he said. "For you because I'll be gone."

"So," Anne said, "like a plan?"

"Fine, whatever," Chris said over the women's laughter.

After a few more minutes, Lauren announced that she was getting an iced tea. She asked if anyone wanted anything, but they all declined. She took her time walking to the kitchen, thinking about what it would be like

to not be married anymore. About moving out and living someplace else with just Connor. If Eric and Chris were brought into the loop, she could just ask about it openly, but she didn't want her personal drama to be the center of attention in that way. Her conversation with Anne and Fiona had been good and necessary in a therapeutic way, but these weren't her now friends. The Lauren they knew and related to was in her early twenties. She even had a different name, she joked to herself.

Wherever she ended up living, she wanted a kitchen like this one. She was sure she couldn't afford that, but she allowed herself the dream. Maybe if she ended up teaching someplace with really cheap houses. Would that be like Mississippi or Arkansas? She definitely didn't see that happening.

Looking out the other kitchen doorway she saw Eric sitting at the end of the dining room table, his back to her. He was on his laptop with air pods in. Realizing that any awkwardness between them was something she just couldn't deal with, she decided to sneak up on him, maybe scare him as a "villa ghost." Still a ways away from him, she saw a grid of images on his computer screen. He was on a video conference call. She couldn't interrupt that.

Then she looked more closely. It wasn't a conference call.

She quietly backed out of the kitchen into the hallway, took a breath, then came back in, making a point to get a tumbler and fill it with ice as noisily as she could. Sure enough, she heard Eric quickly close his laptop and join her with it tucked under his arm.

"How's it going?" he asked her.

"Good," she said pouring herself some tea. "You want some?"

Eric shook his head. "I'm gonna dump this in my room and get my journal. I have a question about your Jekyll and Hyde thing. Remind me." Then he left.

What she saw on his laptop was so familiar she didn't think for a second that it could be anything else. She absent-mindedly reached for her iced tea but just held the glass without picking it up. Feeling the cold on her hand, she desperately racked her brain for a logical explanation, but nothing came to her. Just the shocking question that felt like a slap to the face:

Why did Eric have spy cameras set up in the villa?

Chapter 36

Anne

Anne stared at the journal page where she had left off in her writing. She wrote her last sentence like twenty hours ago. *She thought of all the bad things that could happen if she followed this strange man but decided his offer was just too enticing.* What if the whole publishing thing Chris told her about was somehow true? But how could it be? It sounded like a bogus Hollywood promise. *Have your people call my people. We'll do lunch.* But what did she know about how deals like this worked these days? She didn't understand the book business back in grad school when it actually made sense for her to know a thing or two.

She looked over at Chris engrossed in his work. When he wasn't writing, he tapped the end of his pen against his temple. Anne felt a wave of something. Admiration? Or was it jealousy? She didn't want to be a writer anymore but found herself wishing she had something she could be passionate about. Her career had become a big question mark lately. Her job was a job. Her company was a company. She was looking to get out as she told Fiona and Lauren (and not yet Chris). She knew the two of them shouldn't be as broken and distant as they were. She promised herself that when they got back home, she'd look into ways to help change that for the better.

She was sitting in one of the single chairs facing the door out into the hall, and Chris sat with Fiona on the couch to her left. As she struggled

to dive back into her fictional world, she saw Lauren out in the hallway, standing in a spot where Chris and Fiona couldn't see her. She was frantically trying to get Anne's attention, and when she did, Lauren pointed to the stairs and beckoned Anne to meet her there.

"Be right back," said Anne as she stood up.

"Everything okay?" asked Chris without looking up from his journal.

"Yep."

Out in the hallway, Lauren was already on the first stair holding out Anne's phone. Anne took it and was surprised when Lauren leaned in close, grabbed her shoulder, and whispered in her ear: "Text those two to come up to my room about a minute apart. Tell them to act natural and not to say anything out loud." Then she started up the stairs. When Anne didn't move, Lauren turned around and waved both hands in toward her chest. *C'mon.*

Anne shook herself out of the little stupor that had taken hold and texted as instructed. Then she followed her friend upstairs. Once they were in Lauren's room, Lauren looked all around the room like she was scanning for something, running her fingers along the edges of furniture, fiddling with plugs in outlets.

"What's going on?" Anne whispered. She felt a whisper was necessary and was anxious to know why this was probably true.

"In a minute," Lauren whispered back then placed a finger on her lips. They already heard someone on the stairs, and a moment later Fiona joined them looking scared and confused.

"Ghosts?" Fiona asked.

Lauren shook her head and held up a finger. Soon enough Chris was on the stairs and into the room with them. Everyone was quiet. Lauren led them out onto the balcony. It was fairly cramped with the four of them in that space, but Lauren closed the door anyway. "Eric has been filming us," she told them. "There are cameras all over the place."

"What?" said Anne, abandoning the whisper.

"I imagine microphones, too," Lauren continued. "I don't know if there are any up here, but just being safe. There are multiple angles in the parlor, dining room, kitchen, and terrace. I saw the feeds on his laptop."

"Oh my god," said Fiona. "That's ...". She couldn't find the word.

"Are you sure?" asked Chris.

"She's sure," said Anne, knowing how familiar Lauren was with spy

camera feeds.

“You were tapping your pen against your head,” Lauren said to Chris.

“I couldn’t look for the cameras because he might be watching, but I pretty much know where they are from the angles.”

“What do we do?” asked Chris.

“Confront him, of course,” said Lauren. “Make him tell us what the fuck is going on.”

“I mean, yeah, of course,” Chris backpedaled. “I just can’t ... what the hell?”

“I’m really creeped out,” said Anne.

“Me, too,” said Fiona.

“Ditto,” said Lauren.

Anne’s whole body shook in a brief spasm. As Chris put his hands on her shoulders, she turned to him. “We should go.”

“I can see that,” he said. “But we get answers first? Maybe there’s some explanation?”

“Please don’t kiss his ass,” said Anne through gritted teeth. “Not now.”

“I’m not,” said Chris with a flaring anger and annoyance of his own. Then he calmed right down. “I didn’t mean it like that. This is completely fucked up, and I want answers as much as any of you.”

“I can’t think of an explanation that’s going to make this okay,” Lauren said. “Right now it’s about finding out what his plans are. He has footage, personal unauthorized footage of all of us saying and doing things that were not intended for any other eyes and ears.”

Anne thought of Lauren’s whole horrible private situation at home. The conversation the women had on the terrace. He was listening? Watching? She felt like she was going to be ill.

They agreed on a plan of action and headed back to the parlor. It was empty, but a few moments after they entered, Eric came in. He called out: “What is everyone having tonight?” and went behind the bar. As was customary, Chris followed him, waiting to serve the cocktails. Anne and Fiona sat in the single cushioned chairs, but Lauren went to the unused half of the room behind the couch. Anne saw her inspecting the now obvious leafy potted plants lining the shelves.

“What are you doing over there?” Eric called to Lauren.

“Looking for your cameras,” Lauren said. “How many are in this room?”

Everything went silent and the ice cube Eric held in the tongs fell into

the glass. *Clink!* “Four,” he said with the same matter-of-fact tone that Lauren used for her question. “But only one back there.”

Lauren reached into a plant and pulled out a small, expensive-looking digital camera. She inspected it, shut it off, then returned to the sitting area where they all stared at Eric behind the bar.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a heavy sigh. “This was not the reveal I was planning, obviously. There was no other way, I swear. Can I finish making the drinks then explain? It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

Hearing him say the word “promise” made Anne cringe. *Have your people call my people. We’ll do lunch.*

Chapter 37

Chris

The room stayed silent, and Chris avoided eye contact with Eric as he handed out the drinks, part of an evening formality. Nobody was in a cocktail mood. When he was done, he sat on the couch next to Anne, whom he could see was still going back and forth between being shaken up and disgusted. Chris really hoped that this wasn't some creepfest and that they could all get past it, understand what was happening, why it was happening, and finish the weekend. He would of course do whatever Anne wanted, but he held out hope.

Eric took a barstool and sat in front of the fireplace. "The secret project," he began. "I couldn't tell you about it, but the truth is, I just couldn't tell you about it *yet*. It's a television show I created. Netflix was onboard before the pitch was even over. You should have seen them. The money they put up front is unprecedented."

"Perhaps," Lauren interrupted, "we can skip ahead past this part."

Eric sighed. "I obviously planned a much more exciting way to let you know, but here it is. It's a limited series called *Gothic Revival*. Eight episodes. The first three are a mix of us here this weekend intercut with Mary Shelley and her gang at Diodati in 1816. We're going to script, cast, and dramatize that in a way that's historically accurate. Anya Taylor-Joy is in talks to play Mary Shelley, and we're close on getting Timothée Chalamet for Byron. Anyway, the remaining five episodes are each one-hour adaptations of our

ghost stories.”

Chris felt his eyes go wide. Whoa. Despite the disaster of getting to this moment, that was pretty amazing news. If it were up to him, he'd be all in. No further questions. He resisted, however, the urge to even smile over the revelation. Excitement definitely wasn't the vibe with Eric's current audience. In fact, even his own initial elation had already subsided, and the cold hard truth took painful root in his stomach: none of what Eric was describing was going to happen. But man, if it did. It would be the kind of break he'd dreamt about his whole adult life.

“You couldn't know you were being filmed,” Eric continued, “because that would affect everything. Ruin everything, to be honest. It's not just a mix of reality TV and scripted, which has never been done like this before, but it's also next-level reality because you weren't aware of the cameras. It's hyper real. But let me make perfectly clear, the four of you have final cut approval. I assume you all get what that means? That's a big deal. You'll only appear in shots you approve. Nobody's going to be made to look bad or be embarrassed or anything like that. And it goes without saying that everyone has to be on board. The group is the show, so it's all of you or it's a no go.”

Lauren was getting angry. “You pitched this weekend to us as something intensely personal. We'd ‘inspire each other’ with the ‘support system we love and miss.’ And now you're saying it's all for a TV show?”

“I can see how it sounds,” Eric said.

“Not how it sounds,” said Lauren. “How it *is*. You lied right to our faces.”

“That wasn't a lie,” Eric insisted. “I talked about our experience, and with your permission, I'd like to share a glimpse of that experience with the world, let everyone know how special it was and maybe could be again. You can understand why you couldn't know you were being filmed. It wouldn't have worked.”

“For your TV show,” finished Lauren.

“Yes!” said Eric with slightly increased volume. “For *Gothic Revival*, the groundbreaking limited series that's gonna shatter records and win every fucking award there is.”

“Where is the footage?” asked Lauren. She was not messing around, and Chris, Anne, and Fiona were fine with her as spokesperson.

“It's all here,” said Eric. “Every second. No one has seen any of it but me, and I've hardly watched any. I was waiting to do that together. No one

will ever see it if any of you say no.”

“I think it’s pretty clear we’re saying no,” said Lauren.

“I’m a no,” said Anne.

“The fact that you don’t see this as a big, exploitative deception,” said Fiona. “What does that tell you?”

Eric looked down at his glass, defeated. “It tells me I messed up,” said Eric, both hands in the air. “I was looking at the whole thing entirely differently. I’m sorry.”

Chris noticed Anne sitting, staring blankly ahead. He couldn’t think of anything to be scared of, but she looked scared. Had she said something on tape that she wished she hadn’t? Maybe confided in the women about how she wanted a divorce or was having an affair? He caught himself in his stupid line of thinking. She was freaked out and needed support, not suspicion. He let go of the idea that this TV show was a good thing. Maybe if Eric pitched it from the start, but not like this.

“Yes, I was keeping things from you,” Eric admitted. “And that wasn’t easy. Believe me. But it was just for a short time. A few days. A drop in the bucket compared to what this whole thing can become.”

“This is not for me,” said Anne. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“I’m sorry, too,” said Lauren. “My life can’t ... turn into this.”

“Even with final cut on everything?” Eric asked almost sheepishly, like a child seeking a bedtime extension. “All of you have that. Do you know how hard that is to negotiate?”

“That seems to mean quite a bit in your world,” said Lauren. “But none of us live there.”

Fiona was being noticeably silent. Chris wondered if she were in a frame of mind closer to his. Being on TV would certainly help her as an artist, but again. The betrayal. The deception. The violation. He was pretty sure she was a no with the other women. And himself. He was a no, too, of course. Just a more hesitant, disappointed one. Something suddenly occurred to Chris, and he wondered aloud: “So the publishing deal was fake? Just to keep us moving?”

“No,” said Eric. “That’s real, but contingent on the show, of course. Same title. We’d be building a brand with it. You were right to be skeptical about someone publishing unknowns, but you won’t be unknowns. That’s the whole point.”

“I prefer being an unknown,” said Anne. “I can’t make myself do

something I don't want to do. Not even for money.”

“Especially for money,” said Lauren.

Eric seemed to ignore them and turned to Chris. “Mowgli, help me out here. I know you want this.”

The writer in Chris noticed Eric was avoiding the past tense *Nobody's going to be made to look bad ... The four of you have final edit approval ... You won't be unknowns. That's the whole point.* Despite being emphatically turned down, he was still pitching, clinging to the hope he might change minds. Part of him wanted to help Eric there, but he knew any efforts there would be beyond futile, not to mention suicidal with Anne.

“Of course, I'm intrigued with the idea,” Chris told Eric. “But you set it up in a way I can't go along with, especially ...” His voice trailed off, and he motioned to the women. “They're not just saying no,” he pointed out. “It's way worse than that. They feel violated.” He hoped his response was strong enough to appease his wife and insightful enough to open Eric's eyes. Anne had to know that under normal circumstances, he'd agree to any legit TV show project. He figured what he said was acceptable because if it weren't, she'd have exploded at him right there in front of everyone.

Eric turned to Fiona who looked away immediately. “I feel the same,” she said to the floor. “Obviously, TV exposure would help me, but not like this. Chris is right. I feel violated.”

Eric seemed to take this pretty hard. He looked intensely sad and embarrassed. “I'm really sorry about that,” he said. “I thought you would be surprised, maybe a little ‘what the hell?’ but mostly excited. I saw us going through the footage, laughing about it, putting the show together with each of you being only as involved as you wanted to be. I wasn't looking to upend anyone's life or anything like that.” He let those ideas sink in before continuing. “And I'm sorry to keep pleading my case, trying to change your minds.” He spoke softly and calmly, but it seemed to Chris like he wanted to scream what came next. Instead, he was clearly choosing the more prudent path. “I seriously didn't think anyone would decline. You were all going to be famous. As yourselves. On your own terms. Who wouldn't want that?”

“Is that a real question?” asked Lauren in disbelief. “Seventy-five percent of the people you offered it to turned you down immediately. Are you that self-absorbed that you can't fathom anyone turning down *your* dream?”

“I,” Eric started. “I guess I was seeing you as you were. Back in the day

when we were all trying to be writers. Back then something like this was the goal. Wasn't it?"

"Being a reality TV star?" asked Lauren, incredulous. "How is that even remotely the same thing?"

"We were trying to be authors," Anne added. "Known and respected for our work."

Fiona and Lauren nodded to show they agreed. After a moment, Lauren spoke again: "I understand you're going through rough times, professionally. We all get that. We came to help, but not with this."

After a few more moments of silence, Fiona asked: "Are there cameras upstairs?"

"What?" said Eric with genuine surprise. "No, of course not. It's nothing like that."

Fiona didn't respond and seemed to appreciate the solidarity of the others staying silent, too. No one believed Eric, and he sensed that, pushing a long breath out through his nose. Offended, he looked hard at Fiona.

"If I wanted to watch you undress," he said, "I'd just seduce you. Again."

"You didn't seduce me, you arrogant prick!"

"Remember it however you want," said Eric as he went back behind the bar and poured himself some bourbon.

"There's *five* of us!" Fiona yelled at him. "Chris and Anne were already a couple. I thought you were developing feelings for Lauren, and I didn't want to be the *odd person left out!* So I *slept* with you hoping that would at least make it *harder* for the two of you to end up together! And it *worked!*"

"There were other factors," Lauren noted dryly. "But okay."

Chris remembered the two of them hooking up that one time, but never thought of it as anything more than a drunken mistake. He mostly remembered being glad it didn't have any awkward repercussions within the group. Learning it was a whole thought-out, self-protective plan by Fiona surprised him and made him feel a little bad for her.

"Oh," said Eric, "so let me get this straight. You were deceptive and *exploited* me for your own personal gain?"

"I was twenty-two," Fiona said with a roll of her eyes. "I would have rigged your apartment with spy cameras, but they were a little big and clunky at the time."

"Okay," said Eric taking another deep breath. "Again, I'm sorry. The point is there are no cameras upstairs. The other point is all the footage is

here, only seen by me. Most of it not even seen by me. And I will delete all of it. You can watch me delete it. You can take turns pushing the button. I don't care. Whatever gives you peace of mind. I'm sorry I saw this all wrong." He offered up a slight laugh. "There's even an irony. I suppose I could have tried this with other people. Strangers. But I wanted you guys. The only people I know I can trust."

"Trust?" asked Lauren, her jaw open in disbelief. "Did you really just say that?"

"Okay, okay" said Eric putting a hand up. "Poor choice of word." He sipped his drink, said "I'll be right back," and left the room.

Chapter 38

Fiona

Was that even real?” asked Lauren. “Seriously, what the hell was that?”

“I have no idea,” said Anne, “besides incredibly disappointing.”

Something about that word struck a chord with Fiona. Anne could have described the revelation of Eric’s secret project in countless ways, but “disappointing” was exactly right. This reunion with people from whom she’d grown apart, who were so different than the versions she had been close to years ago, was so much about expectations being met. Look, everyone is happy and successful. She was neither of those things. She was medicating for depression which she thought put her closer to Eric on their little spectrum. He didn’t act it, but she wouldn’t be surprised to learn he was battling depression, too. His plea that set this whole thing in motion was indeed a cry for help. What at first sounded like *I’m sad and desperate and need your company* turned out to be *I’ve got this idea, and I need to exploit you to make it happen*. So disappointing.

Artistically, she knew what it was like to spend time on something and have it not work out. Eric had obviously spent a lot of time on this TV show project, way back to before he sent the invitation letter months ago. It was weird to think about that. The deception of the past couple of days started long before they were all back in touch. It was the reason he

reached out to them in the first place.

Yes, exposure on the TV show would help her as an artist. If only he'd approached the whole thing truthfully. Not that it would have mattered. She couldn't imagine Anne and Lauren agreeing to it, but at least it would have been a real conversation. The truth was she could get on board with the show, getting Instagram followers and selling her art. She wasn't happy about sounding like her students, but she felt that, unlike any of them, she had earned this opportunity. She was not okay with being secretly filmed. But filmed with her knowledge, getting fame and some fat paycheck, and having doors open for her professionally? That sounded pretty good. Maybe if she had more of a life, she'd feel more like Anne and Lauren did. Like this unbelievable opportunity was something to be avoided.

If you want the show, go make it happen.

It was same woman she heard in this room before. Only this time she was speaking directly to her. Like the girl in the mirror. Fiona didn't like this woman at all. Way too pushy and clearly amusing herself at Fiona's expense.

Be quiet, Fiona thought. And mind your own business.

Everything that happens here is my business.

The encounter reminded Fiona that being on TV would also mean the kind of exposure she didn't want. It was all hypothetical now, but would she have been able to take the bad with the good? Could she become however famous as some sort of psychic, medium, clairvoyant? What would that do to her daily life? Could it even work against her? Wouldn't she be considered the "crazy" one on the show? The episodes would have to address the whole ghost thing. No, she concluded. It was much better that none of this was going to happen. Stressful life questions like these were exactly the sort of thing that triggered her depression. She was thankful to have her pills and that they were working.

Into the heavy silence, Chris unexpectedly commented: "I'm keeping the journal and the pen."

He was always the one looking to lighten whatever mood weighed on the group. Bless his heart. Fiona wasn't sure if Anne appreciated the crack, but she did and laughed to let them both know.

The TV show had the biggest potential upside for Chris. An episode writing credit and professional association with Eric would change his life in ways he probably dreamed about. She felt bad for him. Couldn't Eric

have made that happen for Chris in a way that didn't exploit the rest of them? "Thanks," she said to Chris, "for clarifying our point of view on all this. I really don't think he got it until it came from you."

"Of course," Chris mumbled. Anne leaned into him and hugged him.

"Yes," said Lauren. "Thank you for understanding. We appreciate it. And seeing as you're the only one who doesn't know now, I'll fill you in on my personal struggle."

Fiona didn't expect Lauren to get into her story, but she guessed it made sense. It had to be top of mind throughout this whole mess. Eric filmed her private conversations.

"I recognized the spy camera feeds right away," Lauren continued, "because I set up similar ones in my home before I left for here. Yesterday I caught my husband in an affair."

"Oh wow," exhaled Chris. "I'm so sorry. That's terrible!"

"Yep," said Lauren. "I told these guys. We talked about it."

"Which Eric filmed," Chris finished.

Lauren nodded. Fiona was sure Chris was being honest when he said he understood the whole violation thing, but a fact like this, an example of a private conversation secretly taped, must make it all even more real.

"I can see," Chris told Lauren, "why you don't want to be a reality TV star."

Fiona chuckled at this, then was relieved to see Anne did too, and even Lauren's pretty face stretched into the gray area between a smile and a laugh. "When we get back," he told Lauren, "if there's anything we can do, just let us know. I'm sure Anne already told you that."

"She did," said Lauren. "Thank you."

Chapter 39

Lauren

So much had happened in such a short period of time, Lauren had trouble letting her mind catch up. Her strange, almost romantic moment in the wine cellar with Eric suddenly seemed like something that happened back in grad school. Now everything had blown up in their faces, and they sat with the wreckage of what this reunion was supposed to be at their feet. A TV show? Really? She couldn't for a second imagine herself doing that. Even with a normal, boring home life. The idea alone represented the opposite of everything she was about. She'd soon have to find a teaching position at a new college, and she was going to do that while being known as a star of reality TV? Not a chance.

Her situation with Jonathan made it exponentially worse. Final cut approval. Bullshit. She could just imagine saying "No mention of my husband's homosexual affair." Like that would fly. Or what if Fiona didn't want her "clairvoyance" out there? Netflix would be fine with the most boring television show ever made? She'd seen shows like the one Eric was cooking up. They were all about scandal, gossip, and back-stabbing. So gross. Eric thought of himself as some auteur, and maybe in some circles he was. But it was clear that he'd bought into the narcissism, exploitative immaturity, and deep-seeded misogyny that defined Hollywood these days. Maybe, she thought, the two were not all that mutually exclusive.

He really didn't see what he did as being so unbelievably wrong. It

struck her that she came here in part to process what was happening at home, and now she was longing to be home so she could process what happened here. They would all leave in the morning and get on with their lives. If she ended up teaching in New England, she would probably reconnect a bit more with Anne and Chris. Even Fiona wouldn't be that far away in New York. The truth was, she'd have to wait and see.

She noticed Anne looked frazzled and remembered that was the term Anne used the first night when she asked to use her phone. "You okay?" she asked her friend.

Anne nodded with a big intake of breath. "Yeah," she said. "I kinda don't want to stay here tonight, though."

Chris jumped in. "We're leaving in the morn—"

"— I know," Anne said, cutting him off. "We're staying, obviously. Just putting it out there that I'd rather not."

"That's fair," Lauren said. "I think it's cruise control for one more night."

Fiona suddenly spoke as if analyzing some plot in a book club. "I think the housekeeper found cameras while dusting or something. That's why she warned us."

Anne sighed. "It's just all so ... sickening."

"It is, but it's Gregor," Fiona said. "Heart in the right place..."

"Head up his ass," finished Lauren and Anne in unison.

Chris' face went wide. "Was that a thing?" he asked. Lauren shrugged and nodded to him, a bit surprised that he had never heard it. Maybe he just didn't remember. "If you have a slogan for me," he said. "I don't want to know it."

Lauren smiled. They didn't have one for Chris that she could recall.

"If the idea for the show was really met how he was claiming," Chris said, "I wouldn't want to be him having to cancel everything." He shook his head then shrugged.

"Are we supposed to feel sorry for him?" asked Anne.

"Of course not," Chris said. "I was just commenting."

"I wouldn't want to be him right now for several reasons," said Lauren.

Eric returned with his big MacBook Pro which he carried open. He set it on the coffee table where they could all see the screen. "This app here is a file shredder," he explained, pointing to an icon on his desktop. There was also a file and a folder visible. He dragged the file onto the app icon and a little progress bar appeared on it. A second later it disappeared,

and the file was gone. “You can see in the Preferences that I have it set to the maximum thirty-five passes, making everything completely unrecoverable.” Then he opened the folder to reveal a massive list of video files. He scrolled down to show them all. “This is everything,” he said. “The whole weekend.”

“How do we know these are the only copies?” asked Lauren. She knew the thought had occurred to the rest of them, and she also knew she was the only one bold enough to ask. Status she was already growing tired of.

“Really?” said Eric with exasperation. He made no effort to hide how much the question hurt him. “One mistake, and I’ve lost all trust?”

“Fine,” said Lauren. No apology for the question. Just “Fine.”

“Just drag the folder onto the app like I just showed you,” said Eric as he backed away from the table. “Whoever wants to do it.”

They looked at each other. Lauren couldn’t understand why this had turned into something so dramatic. Just before she decided to move, Chris shrugged and reached out for the track pad. Probably an act of chivalry on his part. He slid his finger around, and they watched the screen as he completed the task. Or rather, started the task. The progress bar appeared again, but barely moved. The shredding of all these big media files was going to take a long time.

“It’ll be a while,” Eric confirmed. “There’s a plug back there.” He pointed to the old desk on the other side of the room. “I brought a cord and turned off the screensaver. We can just leave it running. You can check on it whenever you like.”

“Thank you,” murmured Anne.

That was a gesture that probably took some effort on Anne’s part. Deleting the files showed a baby step of progress, but everything was still moving too slowly for Lauren. “Fiona’s mirror,” she blurted out. “Was that a trick?”

“Huh?” asked Eric.

“What are you talking about?” asked Fiona.

“Is it really a screen?” Lauren asked. “Plugged in some outlet in the locked room?”

“That’s pretty good,” said Eric nodding with raised eyebrows. “But no. I assume there’s more art locked in that room. The owners are collectors. I told you that, didn’t I? We could break the door down, but how would I explain that?”

He put the laptop on the old desk, plugged it in, and propped it up in full view. “Plus, I already told you I didn’t have cameras upstairs, so what would be the point?” He double checked that the laptop was still deleting, then said: “As you can imagine, I have some calls I have to make. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

As soon as he was gone, Lauren spoke to Fiona. “I’m sorry about the mirror stuff,” she said. “I’m sure you’re familiar with people searching for rational answers.”

Fiona nodded, but she was clearly unhappy with being thought of as a stupid, gullible pawn.

“It was my idea,” said Chris. “Just a theory. Nothing against you, but the situation wasn’t adding up. Something felt off about the whole thing. Like Brontë said, just looking for an explanation that made sense.”

“Even if the girl in the mirror is fake,” Fiona said, seeming fed up with defending herself. “That doesn’t explain everyone else I’ve seen here.”

Chapter 40

Anne

What did you just say?" asked Anne whose mind was still turning over the idea that Fiona's bedroom mirror was some kind of trick.

"Wait, you've seen more ghosts?" asked Chris.

Fiona nodded. "There are a lot. A whole dinner party earlier tonight. It was catered. The kitchen was full of cooks and servers."

"Holy shit" said Chris. "For real?"

"It's hard to explain," Fiona told them. "So I've always avoided explaining it."

Chris suddenly stood up and looked to the back half of the room. Anne had a flash thought that maybe he was now seeing ghosts, too. "What is it?" she asked.

He pointed tentatively to Eric's laptop.

"What?" repeated Anne with aggravation.

"A catered dinner party of ghosts?" Chris asked.

"He thinks they could be on film," Lauren guessed correctly.

"It's possible, right?" He first asked that to everyone, then looked at Fiona and repeated: "Right?"

"I don't think so," she said as she seemed to fall into a sadness. "My first time involved a security camera at a store. The footage didn't show anything." She shrugged, and a kind of defeat came over her. "I felt okay

telling you guys. Thought I could at least get the benefit of the doubt.”

“You have that,” insisted Anne. She was clearly the least skeptical of the three of them with Lauren, perhaps being the most. She didn’t know exactly where Chris stood and was surprised by his mirror theory. She turned to Lauren. “Maybe cut her some slack.” The harshness in her voice surprised even her, and she pulled Chris into her gaze as well. “Both of you. We have no idea what her life is like, so maybe dial down the arrogance.”

“Excuse me?” said Lauren.

Anne wasn’t having it. “She tells us she sees things. You don’t believe her. She’s shows us a fucking picture, and you both find a way to still not believe. That’s arrogance.”

“I disagree,” said Lauren.

“Big surprise,” said Anne.

“Okay,” said Lauren, standing up.

“Look,” said Anne in a clear effort to get Lauren to stay. “All I’m saying is maybe we can just be empathetic and supportive instead of trying to scrutinize, analyze, and find answers that suit us. You’re really going to say you know for a fact there is no afterlife, no spirit world, no possibility for the kinds of encounters she’s having?”

“I know nothing on that topic,” said Lauren.

“Then *act* like you know nothing,” said Anne. “Especially when you’re talking with someone who clearly knows a *shit ton!*” A cold, awkward silence took over the room like a virus. Lauren’s silence told Anne she was taking the high road. Or at least trying to and so far, succeeding.

Lauren chose not to respond to her and instead, turned to Fiona. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any disrespect. Whatever you’re going through sounds extremely difficult.”

“I’m sorry, too” Anne said to Lauren. “This whole filming thing has me on edge. I’m not thinking straight. I need some air.” She got up and went out onto the terrace. Once outside, she’d barely made it to the railing before Chris came out and joined her.

“I’m sorry I can’t do this,” she told him.

“Do what?” he asked, then realized. “The show? I wasn’t thinking for a second that was a possibility.”

“But it would have been good for you. I understand that, and I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” said Chris. “If only you were a fame-seeking attention whore, this whole night would have been great for my future.” She was supposed

to laugh at that, but couldn't. She managed a half smile to show she got it while he pretended to contemplate that alternate reality. "Of course, the fifteen years leading up to tonight probably would have been unbearable."

She allowed her smile to grow to normal size. "Am I overreacting?" she asked him.

He shrugged and shook his head. "If you're feeling exactly like this tomorrow, next week, next month, then maybe. But we'll take it slow. As slow as you want."

Chris' phone must have vibrated because he took it out and looked at it. "Gregor wants to talk with me in his room."

Anne shrugged and shook her head. "Whatever."

"He's probably scared to come back in here," Chris said. "Can I mention possible, potential forgiveness sometime in the future?"

Anne looked hard at him and let a long, quiet exhale pour from her nose. She was disappointed that's where his mind went in that moment. "Maybe find other topics to discuss," she told him.

Chapter 41

Chris

The door to Eric's room was cracked open a few inches. Chris lightly knocked and heard "Yeah, come in." He did so, and closed the door exactly as he'd found it then looked around.

The room was, of course, much bigger than his upstairs. It was neat and clean, including the large desk stacked with books and folders. Chris didn't remember Eric as a "neat and clean" roommate so he chalked the condition up to Eric's being packed to leave tomorrow.

It took a couple of seconds for him to see Eric waving from the other side of the French doors, one of which was open. He went out to find that, instead of a balcony, Eric's first-floor room had a stone patio which was, again, bigger and more lavish with four cushioned metal chairs, a low, rectangular table, potted plants, and even a small fountain. Eric was sitting in the chair facing back inside. He held a glass of whiskey and motioned to an identical one on the small, square end table next to the chair opposite him.

"How long before it's safe for me to go back in there?" Eric asked.

Chris sat down and picked up his glass. "The holiday season will be here before you know it," he said. They both laughed, then he said: "I think it's going to be okay soon." Off Eric's look of anticipation, he added: "Very soon."

"I really didn't see it," Eric said. "How bad am I?"

"I don't think you have to beat yourself up."

“No, I have three women to do that for me.”

Chris smiled. They were not happy, but he was confident this would blow over.

“People are being secretly filmed all the time,” Eric said. “They know that, right? Look at all those TikTok videos with a reveal at the end. ‘Ha ha. We were making a video, and you’re the star!’ Or what about that network show *What Would You Do?* You’ve seen that? That’s really popular. The whole premise is people not knowing they’re being filmed.”

Chris remembered how much the women appreciated him pointing out that they’d been violated and decided to lean in and educate his old friend. “Are you asking what the difference is?” he asked. “Because there is a pretty clear one.”

“Hit me,” Eric said.

“Interestingly enough, the difference is in the legal definitions.”

“They think what I did was illegal?” Eric asked with a look of shock.

“No one is going to press charges. It’s just for your understanding. The *What Would You Do?* show is shot in bars and stores and diners. In public. Same with the TikToks you’re thinking of. Out on the street. The law says there’s no reasonable expectation of privacy when you’re in public. But staying in a place like this with friends?” He watched as Eric seemed to digest and comprehend what he’d said. To be sure, he added “Get it?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Eric looked off into the distance, which wasn’t much. The side yard of lush grass was small, bordered by a track of white pebbles, about a foot wide. Then the woods started. Big full trees like maples and oaks. Chris didn’t know trees, just evergreen with pine needles and the other kind with leaves. These were all leaves.

“I’m just under a lot of pressure,” Eric said. “This whole life of mine stopped being fun a long time ago. My reputation isn’t what it used to be. I was putting everything on the line with *Gothic Revival*.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Chris. “I imagine those calls to cancel production were no fun.”

“You have no idea.”

“If it’s any consolation, it sounded pretty cool.”

Eric smiled. “Thanks.”

“I know it isn’t going to happen,” Chris continued, “but I did have an idea on it.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I think you’re right that the show would have been big,” Chris began. “But then what? Wouldn’t there be a clamoring for a season two?”

“I guess, but it’s contained. One and done. Leave ‘em wanting more.”

“Or give ‘em more.”

Eric tipped his head to one side, intrigued. “What are you getting at, Mowgli?” he asked with a smile.

“Instead of an episode, what if each one of our stories was developed into a season.” Eric’s eyes lit up as he waited patiently to hear more. Chris continued: “For Netflix, a season can be anything. Instead of one hour, it’s eight. Or even six. For credit, we go with ‘based on’ or even ‘inspired by.’ No one would care about that.” When Eric smiled and nodded, Chris threw out something else that was on his mind. “And ... hypothetically, of course, the way it all came out, Brontë discovering the cameras, would be phenomenal PR. Not the violation part, of course. But the unexpected twist of it. You’d leak what happened behind the scenes during the making of. The story of the story. People love that stuff.”

Eric continued nodding slowly. “I gotta say,” he said. “Considering it’s not going to happen, I was hoping your ideas would be bad.”

Chris laughed. “I have bad ones, too.”

Eric laughed then went back to thinking. “That’s good,” he mused. “Really good.” He held his glass out across the coffee table between them, and Chris knocked his own gently into it. “Hey,” Eric said with an expression that could have had Chris drawing a cartoon light bulb over his friend’s head. “You still want to write that novel about the legend here?” Eric asked.

Chris tightened his brow down. “From this morning?” he asked. “Yeah, that hasn’t faded into obscurity yet.”

“Ok, smartass,” Eric said, laughing. “Can you write it as a movie?”

“I could do that,” Chris shrugged, surprised and happy that this was suddenly an actual conversation.

“Novels take too long. We can write the script together, mostly you though, and I’ll get it made.”

Whoa. Did he just say that? “That would be cool,” Chris said, then as if on instinct alone, he checked in on the exchange. “For real?”

“I gotta deliver something out of this weekend,” Eric said. “People are counting on me.”

This was getting more real by the second, and Chris made a distinct

effort to keep it together, acting cool, like he had these kinds of conversations all the time, even though they both knew he didn't. "Should it be a TV series?" he asked. "So you're talking to the same people?"

"Good point," Eric said. "You could do that?"

"I'd need help," Chris admitted, "but sure." He had no idea if he could write a TV series, but he'd seen enough of them. How hard could it be?

"You'll get a whole team," Eric said. "But it can be yours."

This was starting to go from real to surreal, and Chris just went with it. "First I was thinking it would be a thriller," Chris said, "but we can't rule out straight horror, right? Smart, though. Not slasher, but horror. Ghosts and witches, psychological terror, in your face screams."

"Makes sense to start there," Eric said. "Depends on what the real strengths of the story turn out to be. I think the more the fortune comes into play, the less horror. Is that fair?"

Chris shrugged. "The fortune is the motivator. Everyone wants it, but my instinct is it never shows up. The unattainable goal. And the mother, Catherine, has a much bigger secret than just the fortune."

"What's that?" asked Eric.

"Well, I don't know yet."

Eric laughed. "Right. Got it."

Chapter 42

Fiona

The women sat without speaking for a while. Chris was off talking to Eric. It was as if there was no air in the room. “Not to sound like a grad student,” said Fiona, finally breaking the heavy, tired silence. “But is anyone else interested in getting a little extra drunk tonight?”

“Not the worst idea I’ve heard today,” said Lauren.

As if on cue, Chris came in alone and headed straight for the bar. “What’s everyone having?” He spoke with an energy that didn’t fit the situation. Fiona looked at Anne, who shrugged, then all three of them looked at Chris. “Gregor has to make one more call,” he told them. “He’ll join us in a minute.”

“Someone’s taking charge,” commented Fiona.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” said Chris.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Anne. “What’s going on?”

“Let me make the drinks first,” he said. “And one for Gregor. One sec.”

The women soon each had a drink. *So this is a party again?* thought Fiona. She was intrigued but guarded about whatever Chris was bursting to tell them, and could tell Anne and Lauren were, too.

Chris finished making two identical drinks and left one on the bar, taking the other with him to an empty chair. “First things first,” he told them. “You’re welcome.”

“Phew,” joked Fiona. “Glad we got that out of the way.” Then she shrugged at the women to let them know that she, like them, had no idea what he was talking about.

“I’m not sure if you noticed,” said Chris, “a little earlier, right in this very room, our friend Gregor seemed kinda into that TV show idea of his? He was a little disappointed it wasn’t going to happen? It was subtle. You may not have caught it.”

“We remember,” said Anne, clearly trying to decide if losing patience was permissible yet.

“Well,” Chris continued. “We talked, and he suggested I write the villa legend not as a novel but as the replacement TV series. He’s going to team me up with veteran writers, and we’ll put it together. He’s pitching it right now.”

“Oh my god!” said Fiona. “That’s fantastic!”

He clinked his glass into hers, but she noticed Lauren and Anne made no effort to raise theirs.

Eric came in. “You told them?” he asked Chris.

“Couldn’t wait,” Chris said, pointing to Eric’s drink waiting on the bar.

Eric’s eyebrows shot up, and he smiled as he grabbed the rocks glass of whiskey whatever cocktail concoction. He took a sip and said: “Perfect. So I made the call. Netflix hasn’t left the table, as they say, which is the absolute best we could hope for right now. We know they’re looking in this genre. That’s what *Gothic Revival* was. They want to see a treatment for the legend series soon.”

“Piece of cake,” said Chris.

Fiona felt really happy for Chris. He deserved this. She hoped Gregor would keep Chris central on the project. She knew how egos played in things like this and hoped the established writers would be okay taking a smart, easygoing, talented outsider under their wings.

Fiona looked to Anne, assuming she was getting all this, too, but Anne was off in some other world. Fiona made a mental note to sidebar with Chris, artist to artist, and let him know that he was up for the new and different challenges that come with writing for TV. She’d tell him to think about the series like his series of books. Larger, ongoing story arcs. Set-ups and pay-offs. She watched as Eric put his arm around Chris and spoke directly to him, but not in a private way. They were all meant to hear him when he said: “This is a big, fucking deal, my friend.”

Then Eric turned to the whole group. “Not to sound like an infomercial, but . . . wait! There’s more!” Eric switched his attention from Chris to Fiona. “Woodstock,” he said.

“Gregor,” she replied, put off guard by the sudden, unexpected attention.

“The other call I just made was to a long-time, trusted colleague. We’ve worked on a bunch of films together, and he was going to work on *Gothic Revival*. He’s an Art Director, and he’s pretty much the best. He’s in on this new show development, and I told him about you.”

“And he’s cute and single?” Fiona joked.

“I’ll let you discover that for yourself,” Eric said. “Entirely up to you, but if you want to, you can come work on this show on his team. Learn the ropes.”

“Oh wow,” said Fiona. “Are you serious?” Her mind started racing. This wasn’t just appearing in scenes that were already filmed without her knowledge. This was an actual job offer, a brand new career, on the other side of the country.

“No pressure,” he said. “Take your time. Think about it. Ask me anything you like. I’ll put the two of you in touch soon. The opportunity is yours if you want it.” Then Eric joked to Anne and Lauren: “And of course, the two of you will star as Agatha and Catherine. You’re going to be famous!”

Chris and Fiona laughed. Lauren and Anne each allowed themselves a smirk.

Eric proposed a night of celebration out on the lake. Fiona sensed that she and Chris were most agreeable to the idea. Concerns that it may be too cold at night, were assuaged by Eric telling them the yacht was equipped with heat lamps. *Because of course it is*, thought Fiona, smiling and shaking her head. “It’ll be like the terrace at noon,” Eric promised.

They milled around and Fiona saw Anne pull Chris aside. They had a bit of an exchange, then took it out onto the terrace. They were out there earlier, and Fiona couldn’t tell if they’d had a fight or not. She had to assume things between them were different now, better, with this unexpected news. After a minute or so, they came back in. Chris was still elated, but Anne did a poor job hiding the fact that she was not.

“So I have an idea,” Chris said as he helped Eric collect some booze and glasses for the boat. “We were all writing our own stories, and for some reason, that kind of worked, even though it really shouldn’t have, writing

being such a solitary thing. For what little time we have left here, I'd like to invite everyone to dive in on *this* story."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Eric.

"The story Eric told us," Chris continued, "is a good start. I was thinking tonight we open the floor to whatever ideas anyone can come up with. And I mean anything. There is a lot of screen time to fill. Your idea about a debt collector villain or the primordial witch could drive season three or season nine."

"Optimistic," Eric commented. "I like it."

Fiona liked how Chris was brimming with confidence. She could see even Eric was impressed. He was talking like a seasoned pitchman, not condescending at all. The way he offered up his idea and got them all thinking was inspiring. It was also funny. In a way, he sounded like Eric on their first night. And he made the drinks, too.

Eric packed a duffle bag, and they made their way down to the yacht. Fiona gave the legend story some thought. The idea of expanding it exponentially seemed daunting but also kind of fun. She figured tonight she would probably end up being more helpful expanding on someone else's idea versus coming up with some story pillar of her own. She never did get her writer's confidence back, but who knows?

She was last in the line of friends as they walked down the crooked, rocky path. At one point she suddenly got an uneasy feeling that the villa was about to be out of sight, covered by the trees, behind them. She stopped, turned back, and looked at it. Such an unusual place. Like some strange, four-day dream. And now this life-changing offer. Could she do it? Could she quit her teaching job and move to Los Angeles to learn a whole new career? The line of thinking, the questions, were obvious, but she didn't know why she felt she needed to be looking at the villa when she asked them. Then she saw, standing in the driveway circle at the beginning of the path, the red-haired woman in the green dress with the pearls. She was alone, holding a glass of white wine. A different variety, one less sweet, Fiona assumed. When their eyes locked, the woman held up her glass to Fiona. Cheers.

"Woodstock!" she heard Eric call. They had gotten quite a ways ahead. "You coming?"

Chapter 43

Lauren

They drifted slowly and silently to what Lauren remembered as pretty much the same spot as their other daytime lake outing. She didn't really want to go out on the boat but agreed so as not to seem contrarian or indifferent to the good news Chris and Fiona received. Maybe Anne would have joined her staying back, but she had no desire to play the part of marital wedge. The night was not as cold as she feared, and the onboard heating system provided a coziness she did not anticipate. It would be fine. Surprisingly, after all that had happened, they did have something to celebrate, although she was in no mood. She was happy for Chris. And Fiona, too. The magnitude of Eric's offer to Fiona made Lauren pull her aside and speak softly to her: "What are you thinking?" she asked. "Is this something you think you could do?"

"Just overwhelmed at the moment," Fiona said. "A lot to think about."

When Anne joined them, Lauren asked her: "You doing okay?"

Anne nodded. "Just pushing through," she said. "Last night. I'm sorry it all went off the rails there. It's been really great to see you guys."

Lauren gave Anne a one-armed hug. "One last little celebration. Pretty amazing opportunities."

"Definitely," said Anne then she patted Fiona's upper arm. "Congrats. So amazing."

Anne's distant, generic take on Fiona's situation told Lauren that Anne was

still focused on the violation of Eric filming them. As Fiona turned to the guys, Lauren leaned in close and whispered to Anne. “Let it go. Just for tonight. For Chris.” It was a risky thing to say, having no idea what the response might be, but Anne just drew in a breath, steeled herself, and nodded.

“Oh,” said Eric suddenly. “I almost forgot!” He reached into the duffle bag and took out two identical, expensive-looking bottles of red wine and five glasses. How they didn’t break on the walk to the dock was anyone’s guess. He opened both bottles and poured generous servings. “I got these special for this very occasion,” he said showing one of the bottles. “Although I did think we would be celebrating *Gothic Revival*, so apologies, all the significance is related to that. It’s a pinot noir from Geneva, where, as you now know ad nauseum, our predecessors met at the Villa Diodati.” He read from the label, doing his best to not mangle the pronunciations. “Domaine des Balisiers Comte de Peney from 2016. I wanted to get a vintage 1816 bottle, but that probably would have cost more than this boat. So we will have to settle for the 200-year anniversary edition.”

Everyone put down their current glasses and Eric handed the full wine glasses one-by-one to Chris, who passed each down until everyone had one. With a bit of Eric-styled dramatic fanfare, they toasted to the success of this exciting new television project. Eric echoed the sentiments from their first night, telling them how much they all meant to him, and that he hoped it wouldn’t be another twenty years before they were all together again. That seemed not only unlikely to Lauren, but an odd thing to say, seeing as Chris and quite possibly Fiona were going to be working together with Eric. She noted that made her the one who would have to come through to make the group complete.

There was much talk about how amazing the wine was. They passed around an empty bottle and inspected its label. Lauren, however, barely got past the smell. Too acidic. She preferred white but joined into the praise with adequate smiling and nodding. She was realizing she felt less connected to this group than she sensed the others might be. It was great to see them and spend time with them, but they seemed to be able to “go back” in ways that she couldn’t. She was looking forward to leaving this place and getting back to her life despite the emotional catastrophe awaiting her there.

They started talking about the new TV series. Chris had his journal out. The group was too small for her to simply say nothing, so Lauren

sucked it up and employed the practice she used in faculty meetings she didn't want to attend. She called it "frontloading." She engaged herself and listened intently early on, contributed a solid idea or two, then checked out. After only a couple of minutes there on the boat, she was able to suggest that Agatha the witch already knows the eldest Porter child. Agatha senses the girl has witch-like power, secretly befriends her and trains her, unbeknownst to Catherine.

"Oooh, that's good!" said Chris, writing it down.

Done.

Anne was sitting next to Lauren on the cushioned bench, and after a while, she leaned over and rested her head on Lauren's shoulder. Lauren turned and kissed the top of her friend's head. "All's well that ends well?" Lauren asked.

"I guess," Anne said unconvincingly. "You should come and stay with us. As long as you like."

The invitation surprised Lauren. "Thank you," she said. "Not sure what's next for me."

"You're always welcome," Anne said. "You don't even need to call. Just show up."

Lauren laughed. Anne sounded drunk. Sweet and thoughtful, but drunk. She also sounded as if she'd taken Lauren's advice and put the events of earlier behind her, at least temporarily. Lauren was feeling many things, but mostly relieved the trip was ending on this relative high note compared to where it was not too long ago. Chris and Fiona, who were most intrigued by the original idea, were being rewarded. And she and Anne were getting what they wanted as well, to be left alone. She had to give Eric credit there. Despite whatever professional hardships he was enduring, he must still be a persuasive voice in his world. She thought of their near kiss again and shook her head, laughing to herself in disbelief.

With this life-story chapter wrapping up, she was starting to feel the weight of her next reunion, the one with her unfaithful husband. She looked out at the dark expanse of water and tried not to think about that. But it was a hard thing to not think about. She looked at Anne's droopy eyelids then down at her own empty wine glass.

Chapter 44

Anne

Anne knew Lauren was right, but she was finding it very hard to stay engaged in all the cheerful, joking banter. And she certainly wasn't interested in developing a TV series. She just had to keep up the appearance that she had "let it go" in order to "celebrate" Chris' big news on their last night.

In truth, she was thinking about the brief conversation she and Chris had after Eric came up with the boat party idea. She pulled him aside and said: "We need to talk." She was sure she came across as desperate, frantic even. He ushered her out onto the terrace, and she started right in. "I don't want to go out on that boat," she told him. "I want to go home. Tonight. Right now."

"What?" he said. "We're leaving in the morning."

"I want to go now."

"We can't."

"We can do whatever we want. Can we at least go to bed early? That will feel like waking up and leaving sooner."

"I get it," he said in his familiar *let's take a step back and calm down* voice. "He filmed us, and he shouldn't have. He apologized. We all know he can be stupid like that. You guys even have that saying about him. But his mistake is behind us. There's something else now. Can you please put all that aside just for tonight and celebrate this new project that doesn't have

anything to do with you? Celebrate with me what it means for me?”

Every fiber in her body was against the boat ride, but she thought of the possibility that their leaving early might in some way tarnish or even ruin this opportunity for Chris. “Fine,” she said.

“I promise,” he told her. “The conversation about what happened here isn’t over. We can and should revisit it, but in time. Let’s just make sure this new thing happens. Would that be okay?”

She didn’t want to say it but felt she had to: “What if the new thing isn’t real?”

His face totally deflated, but there was some anger showing, too. “Really?” he asked. “We’re going there again?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“The publishing deal was real.”

“Not –” she started but had no idea how to express the thought.

“Please,” he begged.

She nodded, but she was fighting back tears.

“Thank you,” he said and led her back into the parlor before she was ready to go.

Back on the boat, Fiona complained that her arm felt numb. At first it was just an oddity, but she soon started showing signs of real fear. That’s when Anne felt a tingle and heaviness in both legs. She tried stretching them out, a simple task that took far more effort than it should have. They all sat in the seats at the front of the boat. Chris mentioned strange physical sensations, too.

“I know you were all excited,” Eric told them, “to turn the villa legend into some *Game of Thrones* television epic. But that’s not going to happen.”

“What do you mean?” asked Chris. He looked at Anne who felt a sudden weight fall and burn in her stomach. Eric had lied all weekend, and she now saw their situation was very, very bad. “Chris?” she pleaded, trying to will them both back to the terrace where they could make a different decision about their night.

“*Gothic Revival*,” Eric continued. “*That* is the idea. It’s the *only* idea. There are no other ideas. I’m sorry I had to lie one last time and make it seem like I was *so* sorry for my *mistake* of filming you. Pretending I’d moved us all onto another project was the only way to get you out here and drink what you all just drank.”

Anne gasped in panic and looked down at her empty glass. Then she looked at Chris. “My legs!” she cried. “I can’t feel them!”

Chris got up and tried to rush at Eric, but he immediately fell, face-first onto the floor. His legs couldn’t hold his weight. Anne screamed when she saw him, and Eric grabbed Chris by the shoulders and dumped him back in his seat.

“Don’t worry about your shitty, half-baked stories,” Eric said. “We’ll get ghostwriters – Ha! No pun intended. They’ll be great, and you’ll get all the credit for writing a lot more than any of you actually did this weekend, but that’s neither here nor there. You’re forgiven.”

Anne tried to catch her breath. “You’re *killing* us because we didn’t want to be in your stupid TV show?!” she cried.

Eric cocked his head with a look of genuine surprise that bordered on shock. “What?” he asked. “Of course not. That would be petty.”

She didn’t understand his answer. “Then what’s happening?”

“What’s happening is the plan,” Eric said. “The only thing this weekend,” he told them, “that didn’t go according to plan was you finding the fucking cameras. The *one* time I checked them somewhere outside my room, I got caught! But I got us back on track. Here. All this? Out on the boat on our final night?” He motioned around them with both hands. “All part of the original plan.” He turned to Chris. “You mentioned the drama being good PR. You were right, but as usual, you think too small. The four of you dying in a tragic boat accident? Now *that’s* PR.”

Anne screamed. Then Fiona did, too. They both looked at Lauren, who was slumped over, unconscious.

“You’re the sole survivor?” asked Chris. “Don’t you think that’s a little too convenient?”

“You are the story guy, aren’t you?” Eric said, impressed. “I’ll be here for the crash, but not the sinking. I have no desire to witness that. I really do like you guys. That’s the beauty of it. I’m telling the police I fell ill and couldn’t join you out on the boat, which also means I can delay calling them until I’m good and ready. As far as I know, you guys are just out here having a good time. How’s that? Better?” He leaned in close to Chris’ ear. “I even warned you about the rocks,” he said. “Shame on you for forgetting that. Did you drink too much?”

Anne didn’t realize she was still holding her wine glass until she (barely) felt Chris take it out of her hand. She had no idea how he found the

strength, but she saw him knock the glass into the side of Eric's head. The force was so feeble, however, that the glass only cracked and fell to the floor. "Son of a bitch," Eric said touching the spot of impact. "Fighter to the end," he said. "I can respect that. Normally I'd break you into pieces, but there can't be any injuries that would need explanation."

If only Chris had more strength, Anne thought, maybe the glass could have really cut Eric. If he lost enough blood and fainted, they could steer the boat back in. But it didn't happen that way. She wasn't sure, but she didn't think the boat was sinking yet. How was he even going to do that?

Eric went back to his duffle bag and pulled out four pairs of handcuffs. Anne remembered them from their snooping in his room. He pulled them one by one from their seats onto the floor of the boat and sat them against the wall. Then he raised one of their numb, lifeless arms and cuffed the wrist to the long, chrome railing that ran about twelve feet. Sitting on the floor, the railing was above their heads, so the four of them sat with one arm raised looking like a group of schoolchildren hoping to be picked to give an answer. Eric sat back, also on the floor, across from them. Gently touching the spot where the glass hit his head, he said: "If it's any consolation, I'm not enjoying this. It just needs to happen to move things forward."

Suddenly Fiona started freaking out. "They're here!" she kept saying. "They're here!"

"Who's here?" Eric asked, disinterested. "Ghosts?" When she wouldn't answer, he seemed mad at her but didn't raise his voice. "I gave you every opportunity to have your breakdown inside during filming. Now it's too late. I don't have any cameras out here, for obvious reasons!"

"I see them," Fiona said.

"What you see," said Eric, "doesn't exist."

"That's not true," Fiona said.

"You have no idea what's true."

"You don't know anything about me!" screamed Fiona.

"But I do," Eric said, staying calm, refusing to take the bait of a yelling match. "I've been talking with your parents for months."

"What? No you haven't!" yelled Fiona.

"We had an arrangement. I was your long-lost friend, and I needed to know everything. And they couldn't mention me to you. That would

betray your trust and ruin any chance of me helping you. They agreed, and our little secret was born.”

“You’re lying!” cried Anne. “Again!” She turned to Fiona who looked like she was in shock. “Fiona, don’t listen to him. He’s lying.”

Eric ignored Anne, keeping his focus on Fiona. “Those pills you take? Zyprexa? They’re not anti-depressants, but that’s what you want to believe, what you need to believe, so no one reminds you they’re anti-psychotics.” He spoke to everyone now. “Our dear friend Woodstock didn’t become a clairvoyant. She became a schizophrenic.”

“What?” cried Anne. She looked at Fiona, tearful, wanting to let her know she didn’t believe what Eric was saying. She looked past Fiona to Lauren who was still unconscious, her wrist cuffed like the rest of them.

Eric crouched down close to Fiona. “Your parents told me about the fortune teller. Was she a hallucination, too? That’s where my money is.”

“Fuck you,” growled Fiona.

Eric stood up and glanced at Lauren. “Too bad Brontë is out. She’d love this part. Schizophrenia has two main symptoms: delusions and hallucinations. Woodstock created a delusion that explained her hallucinations. Absolutely brilliant. I mean it. I’m totally putting that in a movie someday.”

“Is this really happening?” Anne asked Chris in a panic. “I’m scared.”

“It’s going to be okay,” he told her, although that certainly seemed untrue. She didn’t want to come out on the boat. He made her. She agreed for his sake. For this fake writing project that he’d waited his whole adult life for. She wanted to tell him that despite everything that had happened, she loved him. She thought she said it but wasn’t sure. She tried again, but none of her motor functions were working. They looked at each other. He looked tired and a bit confused. She imagined she looked the same to him, or worse. She tried telling him with her eyes that she loved him. That she was sorry she wasn’t always as supportive as she could have been. He was the love of her life and she couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. They still had so much to share. She was sorry for all the fighting and all the times they spent apart when they should have been listening to each

Chapter 45

Chris

Anne had fallen asleep. She'd be okay. All three women were to Chris' left. Farthest from him was Lauren, who was out, too. She hadn't said anything in a while. Fiona's eyes were open but locked in some sort of trance. Was she really schizophrenic? That explained a lot. Poor thing. He wondered how it happened. He didn't know anything about the condition and was surprised to think it could come on later in life. Was it a condition or a disease? He wasn't good at stuff like that. He'd have to ask her about it, offer to help her, when this was all over.

The whole poisoning thing wasn't real. As messed up as Eric could be at times, Chris was sure murder was not something his old friend was capable of. He needed to figure out what was really going on. His body was completely numb, and the helplessness that triggered was alarming to say the least. He rationalized his state of complete denial as calm strategizing. The way he saw things, saving the day was an option, and he was up for the challenge. He tried pulling his cuffed arm, but his muscles just wouldn't obey. "Gregor," he pleaded. "What are you really doing here? How can you do this?"

"I'm doing what needs to be done," Eric said.

"You've gotta stop this. You're making a big mistake. They'll never buy this was an accident. You know that. I'm already thinking of four things

you've overlooked that the police won't."

Eric looked at him, surprised, then looked around the boat, thinking. Then he smiled. "No you're not. Good bluff, though. You need to go to sleep like your friends," Eric said. "I'm on a bit of a schedule here, and you don't want to be conscious for what comes next. I'm sparing you that out of the kindness of my heart. I don't expect you to understand."

"Try me." Chris said, feeling he was owed some sort of explanation. Whatever it was, he could tell the women when they woke up.

Eric looked like he was considering the request. "In some ways," he said. "You are my best friend. In other ways, you are a complete stranger to me. Both are true, and I can exist in either state at will."

"Why do you pretend not to care?"

"No," Eric said. "I pretend *to care*. I have to in order to function in society."

"That's not true," said Chris, racking his brain until a good example came to him. "The night you got your nickname," he said.

"What about it?"

"You beat that guy up because he messed with Brontë," Chris said. "That's caring." He wanted to yell the last part, emphasize his point, but his depleted motor skills wouldn't allow it.

Eric shook his head slowly. "That's what it looked like," he said, "because that's what I wanted it to look like. That guy could have done anything to her, and I wouldn't have the ability to care. Kicking his ass was an easy way to solidify our group relationship and define for you guys *who I was to you*. That's all I *cared* about. My caring is objective-based. Does that make sense?"

Chris' deadened, soft-muscled body betrayed his mind, which burned in a fit of rage. Even if his body did work, fighting Eric would be the most futile five seconds of his life. Eric wasn't just a monster. He was a highly trained one, and remembering that long ago night was the perfect reminder. "That night," Chris started, making Eric sigh and turn his attention back to him. "You said something to the guy you beat up. I've always wanted to know what you said."

Eric sighed again. "I told him the same thing I tell every guy I put down." He paused for dramatic effect. Always the showman. "I said: 'The only reason you're going to wake up tomorrow is because I chose not to kill you here right now.'"

"How many people have you killed?" Chris asked.

Eric took in a deep breath, held it, and thought a moment. “You guys will make eight. Doubling my tally in one night. This is my first multiple, by the way. Not easy.”

“When? How did this happen to you?”

“Pretty sure you’re born with it.”

“But I knew you. We all did.”

“You only knew what I presented to you. Don’t beat yourself up. I’ve duped people way sharper than the four of you.” He caught himself. “Sorry, that totally came across as an insult. That wasn’t necessary. Look on the bright side,” he added. “Your wish is coming true. I’m going to personally see to it that you become posthumously famous.” He gently slapped Chris on the cheek twice. “You’re welcome.”

Chris turned and looked again at Lauren, then Fiona, and finally Anne. She was pale, and her lips looked like they were turning blue. He felt he might throw up, but didn’t think his body could even manage that. She didn’t want to come out on the boat. She pleaded with him, and he convinced her to change her mind for his sake. He leaned his head down and placed it gently against hers. How did he let this happen? Before he realized it, he was thinking of their honeymoon in Greece. They stayed at the Electra Palace in Thessaloniki and every day there – every minute – was confirmation to him that he was the luckiest man alive. That this amazing woman had chosen to spend her life with him was still unbelievable after all the years together. His only true regret was how that life was ending at the hands of someone they thought they knew. Someone they considered a friend. He should have seen what was happening sooner. He should have done something to prevent all this. But he didn’t see it, and now it was

Chapter 46

Fiona

Fiona pulled at the cuffs with a fleeting, empty hope that they would just open, and she'd be free. These, of course, were the cuffs they'd come across in Eric's room. Four pairs. It was his plan all along to kill them and use the false story of a tragic accident to promote his stupid TV show. Even if she could break free, she was drugged. She couldn't feel her own body. She'd never be able to swim to safety. Chris and Eric were still talking. Chris asking questions. She couldn't focus on what they were saying. Maybe Chris was negotiating a deal to save them. That would be just like him. She hoped it was going well.

Anne and Lauren were both unconscious. She was certain she was crying, but she couldn't feel the tears on her cheeks or raise her free hand to wipe them away.

Why had Eric said all those mean things about her? He's no doctor. Did her parents say those things to him? Did he really talk with them? He must have. How would he know about her medication? None of that seemed to matter now.

A man's voice rang in her ears. *What are you doing out here?*

Another man. *This is quite a predicament.*

She looked around but didn't see anyone. Just voices. She refused to think of them as hallucinations. They were ghosts. They'd always been ghosts. Whoever was talking to her once walked the earth just as she did.

They all had lives, families, hopes, and dreams. She knew this.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” she told them, although she was sure it was thinking and not talking. “Help me. Help all of us.”

How on earth would we do that?

She wanted to yell at Eric. Tell him how much she hated him and how he would never get away with what he was doing. But she couldn’t speak. She tried thinking the words but feared the ghosts would think her anger was directed at them. Could she get them to haunt Eric? Curse him in some way? She doubted it.

All that she had done in her life. All that she hadn’t done yet. It ended here? Handcuffed to a yacht and left to drown in some lake somewhere? She thought of the people at her school. Maybe they would put up a plaque or something. Or even name the art studio after her. That would be nice. She thought of Kaitlyn Foster, the eighth grader she was advising on a special, semester-long project. Such a sweet, smart, creative girl. She wanted to tell Kaitlyn one more time that she had a great eye for color and that she should trust it more. She thought of her parents and how much they would miss her. How supportive they had always been. She should have called them more and visited them more. Then she thought of her cousin Becca, whom she had grown up with. When she was thirteen, Becca died in a car accident. Would she see her? Would they be together again? She knew she’d become a ghost, but what kind? Would she speak or show herself to someone like her? She didn’t want to cause anyone any fear but maybe there was a way she could finish things that needed finishing.

Chapter 47

Gregor

Waiting for all four of them to go under took longer than he anticipated. He wasn't in a rush. He just preferred things to keep moving. Once he was operating in a psychological rhythm of sorts, disruptions tended to anger him.

Brontë was first to close her eyes. Mowgli was last. Probably a body weight thing. Per the plan, he took a bottle of whiskey and vodka, first pouring whiskey into Chris' mouth. The idea was to raise their blood alcohol content, which he assumed would be tested at some point. Wouldn't their loved ones want to know?

It all spilled down his shirt, however, because he couldn't swallow. Eric hadn't thought of that and tried again after tilting Chris' head back and prying his mouth open. Still no good. He tried that method with the vodka on Anne and got the same, disappointing result so he gave up, tossing the bottles into the lake. It didn't matter. He had more important things to focus on.

He'd been at the villa almost three weeks before his friends arrived. In that time he had quite a lot to set up. Not just the cameras and microphones. Hiding the Wi-Fi network from all their devices was easy, allowing him exclusive access to his state-of-the-art production. In truth the access was primarily for Prisha, who ran the entire tech operation of visual

and audio effects. Although he would have preferred to work alone, her expertise was invaluable. He shot the ghost girl as part of a fake casting call weeks before, then Prisha worked her magic. He regretted not giving Chris credit for figuring out the mirror trick. That was impressive.

Soundproofing Woodstock's room was another project, but the crew that did that came highly recommended. They took less than six hours, and when they were done, no one outside the room could hear the whispering.

The other thing he had to do was identify the crash site. The rocky area of the lake was good, and he went to great lengths to find the perfect protrusion just under the water's surface. His plan was to hit that rock at an angle and let it rip along the hull, Titanic style. The important thing was to get it right in one pass to limit suspicion and inquiries.

He retrieved the inflatable life raft with its compact motor from the drawer under the bed. Then he put on a life jacket and gunned the throttle, heading for the spot he had marked with a small black flag, an innocuous sign that wouldn't have meant anything to anyone had they seen it, which no one ever would unless they were looking for it. Of course the flag meant everything to him. None of this was going to work if he didn't know exactly when to cut the steering wheel sharply left.

When he did just that, the sharp rock pierced the boat's hull near the bow with a deafening crunch. He knew enough to brace for the impact but still nearly fell over, grabbing the wheel tighter to keep his balance. Eric cut the throttle, then fired it up again, driving the boat along the edge of the rocks. The pointed rock, which had lodged itself deep enough, tore a long, jagged hole a good twenty feet. Eric heard the water rushing in.

He maneuvered off the rock to ensure the boat would actually sink. Once he felt that process was irreversibly underway, he inflated the life raft, started it up, and headed toward the villa dock. He did not look back.

Going back to the villa while the boat sank was part of the plan. He could have just waited, but he saw that as wasted time. He needed to check in with Prisha and get the peace of mind that she had done what he asked of her. By the time he reached the villa door he felt an inexplicable exhaustion as if he'd ripped the hole in the boat by hand. The important thing was that the plan was once again proceeding by design. He hated having to improvise, but when they found the cameras, he had no choice. He also hated having no choice.

At the time of the unfortunate discovery, he thought briefly about convincing them to actually do the show, getting Mowgli and maybe even Woodstock on his side, but realizing the effort that would take made it a highly unattractive option. Sticking to the original plan of killing them then playing off the tragedy was the only thing that ever made sense.

He was only inside a few seconds when he heard Prisha running to him from the kitchen. He needed to keep her calm and get her out of here. Although he knew she would never talk, her involvement was a wrinkle he didn't care for. This weekend was a complex endeavor he couldn't possibly have pulled off alone.

He saw her running down the hall like a child greeting her daddy at the end of a workday. He braced himself for the inevitable stupid question that was coming. Something like "Did you do it?" or ...

"How did it go?" Prisha asked. She looked scared and tired which he found understandable given the situation she found herself in not entirely against her will but about as close as one could get.

"Everything is exactly where it needs to be," he told her. It dawned on him that he should kiss her, take her in his arms like Clark Fucking Gable and reassure her that getting mixed up with him would indeed be worth it in the end, despite the nightmarish short term. Knowing the only thing that mattered was moving the plan forward, he turned on the charm and went through the motions. "It's all going to be okay," he whispered in her ear. "We're almost there. I couldn't have done it without you. You've been great. Soon we'll have everything we've ever wanted."

A bit thick, perhaps, but she melted in his embrace. So much so that he found himself calculating how long it was going to take her to come back down from her pathetic Cloud Nine and become a functioning partner again. "I'll go back and get the cuffs soon," he told her. "Everything okay here?" That was his nice way of saying *You did what I asked, right? And you know what you still have to do, right? I don't need to go over it all again, right?*

She nodded in a way that was so cartoonish he thought she might hurt her neck. "I sent the emails and left the voice messages like you said."

He was pleased to learn she was able to accomplish that simple, logistical task, bolstering his alibi that he'd stayed in the villa while his friends went out on the lake. He'd typed replies to over twenty emails and gave her a specific timeline stretched over two hours when to send each one. He'd also made eight separate recordings of himself leaving voicemail messages

asking simple questions and reaching out to get together. Prisha again had specific instructions when to call people Eric knew never answered their phones and play the recordings into their phones. Strong digital documentation that Eric was inside all night.

“Good job,” he said. *That was the easy part. Keep going I’m still listening.*

“When you come back with the cuffs,” she said, “I take them and the scuba stuff and drive back home. I only stop to throw one pair of cuffs away in the outside trash can at four different roadside stops.”

“After?” he asked.

“After sealing them in the bubble-wrap envelopes that are in the car.”

He hugged her again, more perfunctory this time. His mind was already elsewhere. “I know you know what to do. It’s all going to be over soon.” He separated them and looked at her with a painted smile. “I need to get my suit.”

“Yes,” she said. “Right.”

As he went to his room a thought hit him. He really hoped their situation never turned such that he’d have to kill her. He didn’t see a scenario in which she’d be questioned. Her alibi was better than his. She was in Los Angeles the whole time. But still, he hoped she could keep it together if anything came up.

In the back of his wardrobe cabinet was a scuba suit on a hanger and a mesh bag of gear. Eric took the next couple of minutes stripping to his undershorts and pulling the suit on. When the fit was good enough, he took the handcuff key and zipped it into the small pocket over his heart. Then he grabbed the bag and headed back to the front door where Prisha had stayed waiting for him. In the bag were flippers, a mini tank, and a diving mask equipped with a light. He checked the light and the tank then kissed her cheek saying: “I’ll be back soon. Make sure everything you’re taking is in the car.”

“Okay,” she said, completely rattled with nerves.

He walked back down the path to the dock, carrying the bag of gear. He loaded everything into the life raft and rode at a low, relatively quiet speed back to the site of the staged accident. Only the yacht’s highest point, the steering bridge was still above water.

He pulled the lifeboat up onto a flat rock that skimmed the surface, From there he put the gear on, turned on the mask light, and fell into the water. The shock of cold disoriented him for a few seconds. That and the

utter darkness. Even the beam of light coming from his forehead revealed only more darkness, just a different, golden hue. He turned until he faced the yacht, adjusting and getting his bearings. The fact that he could only see what was in the circle of light, a circle that got smaller the closer he got to anything, was unsettling. He found himself moving his head a lot, darting looks all around in every direction, trying in vain to increase his visual scope.

He swam up, over the railing and onto the deck of the sunken vessel. His light found Mowgli's body trying to float to the surface but tethered by the cuff like a Macy's parade balloon. Eric unzipped his breast pocket, took out the key, and released him, placing the cuffs in the zipper pouch at his waist. Then he moved right to Ginger and repeated the procedure, only instead of letting her go he took her wrist and swam away, dragging her over fifty feet then leaving her to float before heading back.

Woodstock was next. He uncuffed her and per his plan, dragged her below, trapping her in the yacht's tiny bathroom. Poor thing. *Have fun with your ghost friends.* He swam back up for Brontë who was to be let go right there like Mowgli, but when he arrived back at their spot, shock and confusion slammed him.

Brontë wasn't there. Her handcuffs hung empty but still locked against the chrome railing. It made no sense. How could she—? Then it hit him.

Her fucking freak thumbs! God Damn it!!

Chapter 48

Lauren

Although it felt like miles, it wasn't that far of a swim before she could stand up, waist deep, and walk to the shore. There was an easier, mostly wading and walking way to shore, but she deliberately avoided that direction, figuring when Eric returned and discovered she'd escaped, he'd hunt her down that way. She knew it was all about buying whatever time she could.

The shock and despair of what just happened clung to her, weighing her down as if trying to pull her under to share the fate of her old friends. Knowing Eric had to come back for the handcuffs, she kept walking into the wooded area and didn't stop and sit until she was well out of sight from the lake. Once she was still and safe for the moment, the tears and the rage poured out of her.

Her plan had failed. She didn't save any of them. She tried, but she couldn't. Now she had to lock away her pain and grief, get Anne's phone from her nightstand back at the villa, and call the police. She thought about trying to find another house, someone to help, but it was too dark and remote. Any direction she wandered would be a complete guess, and she didn't like those odds.

Or maybe she should just hide until the police came to investigate the "accident" then call out to them and tell them the truth. That wouldn't work. Eric would never call the police until she was taken care of. Once

he came back for the cuffs, she'd become his prey. Those odds struck her as even worse. There was no way she could evade his pursuit, but if she stayed smart and focused, she could follow the shoreline back to the villa and take control of the timeline.

As she made her way back, staying hidden, she replayed the horrific scene in her mind. She cried again, overwrought with guilt and horror.

Playing unconscious was a calculated risk, but one she felt was her only choice. She dumped her drugged wine overboard simply because she didn't care for the taste. When the others started feeling the effects, she couldn't exactly have fought Eric. He'd have knocked her out the old-fashioned way in a matter of seconds. Once cuffed to the railing, she pulled on it, and the railing moved a tiny bit in the spot where it attached to the wall of the boat. That was enough to convince her that once Eric was gone, she could free herself and knock the railing off. Once that was done, the others could simply slide their cuffs off the end. She had no idea how she would be able to get three unconscious people to shore, but she'd have to cross that bridge when she got to it.

When Chris stopped asking questions, she peeked and saw Eric pouring liquor into his passed-out body. Or trying to. She sat farthest from him and if his plan was to do that to each of them she'd be last. She panicked about how she was going to remain convincingly unconscious during her turn. Eric soon realized the liquor was just spilling on Chris. He gave a half-hearted try with Anne, then threw the bottle overboard in annoyance. She was lucky he never got to her.

Then he went to the wheel, and she heard and felt the boat speed up. When he suddenly made a sharp turn, Lauren braced herself and was jolted by the impact against what she assumed were rocks. It was all she could do to keep from crying out in fear. The awful, wrenching sound of metal being crushed and torn rang in her ears, lasting several seconds as Eric steered the boat along the rock.

Luck worked in her favor two more times. First, Eric hurried to inflate a small boat and ride away. That meant more time for her rescue. Second, the crash site was an area of rocks, plenty of them at and even above the surface of the water. Once she freed Anne, Chris, and Fiona, she could lay them on the rocks and bring them to shore one at a time. She could see when she stood up that it wasn't even that far.

Her ultimate stroke of luck was Eric forgetting that she could dislocate

her thumbs, although in his defense, she was supposed to be drugged unconscious. She pushed the restrained thumb out of joint and slid out of the cuffs. She'd already thought to use the fire extinguisher to break the railing. She'd seen it when she used the bathroom on their first boat trip and ran to get it as soon as she was free.

The boat was not on the rocks or stuck to them in any way. Eric made sure it was out enough so that it would sink. And it was sinking fast. Lauren had to hope he was far enough away that he wouldn't hear the metal-against-metal smashing of her efforts. She really thought it would only take a few hits to knock the railing off.

But she was wrong. It wouldn't break off. She kept hitting it and hitting it, growing exhausted, but the railing never moved more than that little bit she witnessed when she pulled her cuffs. Panic gripped her as she imagined the railing was reinforced with an inner bar, perhaps made of iron or something, that went into the wall. She tried the other end with the same result, then scolded herself. She had to keep working at the point she was weakening. Switching ends was like starting over! As the water rose steadily, her breaths became a vocal mantra of "Oh God. Oh God. Oh God." She knew once they were under, she wouldn't be able to strike the railing with any force.

She thought about cutting off their hands. She knew she could do it to save their lives, but she had no means to cut through bone. The macabre idea, however, gave her another, more feasible one. Before the railing was submerged, she positioned Chris' hand on it with his thumb facing up. She then smashed the fire extinguisher against his hand, trying to break his thumb and replicate her escape method. It didn't work, and she couldn't figure out why. She tried it on the women too, but couldn't reshape any of their hands in a way to free them. She returned to Chris and his hand had already begun to swell from the injury making matters worse.

The water kept rising. She couldn't be there when Eric returned. She stayed with them as long as she could.

Her walking progress was slow and quiet but methodically successful. The villa finally came into view but was still a ways off. With her mind battling between fog and fury, she couldn't begin to calculate the distance or the time it would take to get there. Ideally, she'd get close enough to wait and see Eric leave to return to the crash site. She had to assume he

hadn't done that yet because she would have heard the lifeboat motor. With him gone, she could get inside and call police. But then she would need to hide. She was soaking wet and muddy. She would drip and leave tracks everywhere. A child could find her.

Then she remembered the wine cellar with its locks on both sides. The safe room.

Chapter 49

Gregor

Eric climbed up on the rocks and stood ankle-deep in the lake water. *That bitch!* He looked around in all directions, seeing clearly that there were two, maybe three ways she could have gone to reach the shore. He figured she took the easiest path, hardly any swimming. He made a mental note of the distances back to the villa. She would be stupid to go in any other direction. He scanned the shoreline but didn't see anything. She went deeper into the woods, of course. She was smart. A college professor. Although he was pretty sure she never took a class to prepare her for what was coming next.

Catching her could wait. Build up her fear and helplessness which he knew would serve him when he found her. The first order of business was getting back to the villa and getting Prisha on the road. Now that her involvement had come to an end, he needed to be alone. The lifeboat ride and the walk up the path were fueled by a seething rage he did his best to keep under control.

Eric stormed into the villa. "Prisha!" he called, not trying to hide the fury in his voice. She came running. "We have a problem," he said.

"What is it?" she asked already in a panic even though she didn't know anything yet.

"Brontë escaped."

"What?! How?!?"

“I don’t know.” He did know, but she didn’t need to.

“Which one is she?”

“Tall, short hair.” Eric’s mind was racing. If she asked another question, he wasn’t sure what he’d do. Luckily for both of them, she did not. “I have to go find her,” he said peeling his arms out of the wetsuit. As he eyed the towel and stack of dry clothes waiting for him, he took the handcuffs out of the waist pouch and handed them to her. The schedule had room for contingencies. He could call the police in an hour and still be well within a normal, believable timetable. He didn’t give her that level of reassurance. He just said: “Everything’s fine.” Off her scared look, he told her: “I’ll handle this. Keep it together. You weren’t here.”

He figured handling it wouldn’t be too hard. An inconvenience more than anything else. It wasn’t as if he’d have to determine where or how far Brontë had gotten. She was most likely coming to him. Or she’s staying hidden in the woods. If that’s the case, he could retrace her steps, find her, knock her unconscious, and put her back in the water to drown with the others. Piece of cake.

He wrestled his legs out of the scuba suit, pulled off his underwear and kicked them both in her direction. “Go,” he said. As he towed off and pulled on the dry clothes, he couldn’t help but notice Prisha standing at the door with her back to him. She was looking down at her hands. Why wasn’t she opening the door?

“Wait,” she said timidly.

“What!?” he barked, already way past dealing with her.

She held up the cuffs for him to see. “There are only three here.”

Eric froze in shock, then anger. *Shit!* In his disarming fog over her escape, he’d forgotten to collect Brontë’s empty cuffs! He took a deep breath in and looked at the ceiling.

“You left them?” Prisha asked.

“I’ll handle this,” Eric repeated.

“Can you just drop them, let them sink in the lake?” Prisha asked, clearly wanting to get out of there.

“No,” he said. “Wait here.”

“I’m just trying to—”

‘—STOP! Trying to do anything except what you’re told. I have to go back to the crash wearing *this!*’ He violently grabbed the wetsuit from her. “When I come back, I have to give *this*—” He shook the wetsuit in her face.

“back to you to *take!* Why would I leave the cuffs at the scene instead of giving them to you *WITH THE SUIT!?*” He watched as she trembled in terror. He spoke more calmly but still focused on the fear he was instilling. “You didn’t forget that you were taking the suit, did you?”

“No,” she stammered. “I didn’t forget anything.”

“Good. Now stop suggesting things to me.”

He undressed again, pulled the suit back on, grabbed up the gear bag, and left, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 50

Lauren

Lauren finally reached the villa and discovered she was closer to the driveway than the dock and the walking path. That was probably a good thing. Staying in the wooded area, she thought about poor Fiona and cried again, this time specifically for her. Because Lauren was only pretending to be unconscious on the boat, she heard all of what Eric said about meeting with her parents and learning about her condition. Schizophrenia explained some things: the hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, even the scattered talk. Lauren had a colleague whose brother suffered from the disorder, and the two professors talked about it on several occasions. Based on her limited knowledge, Lauren concluded one of two things must be true. Either Fiona was among the small percentage of people living with the disorder who were high functioning or the whole story was just another Eric lie.

As she made her way closer to the villa, she heard the front door slam. She ducked and looked to see Eric walking quickly and pointedly toward the dock path. He was wearing a wetsuit and carrying some bag. She assumed he was headed back out to collect the handcuffs. The timing was perfect, and she thanked whatever god might be listening. It would probably be more than ten minutes before he was able to get to the boat and discover she had escaped. That should be enough time.

She also had to assume Prisha was somewhere inside. She couldn't leave

until she had the handcuffs with her. And anything else that might raise a red flag with police. Lauren knew they planned to call the police about the boat “accident” after Prisha was able to get away.

When she got to the villa, she ducked around outside looking into the first-floor windows until she saw Prisha standing in the dining room talking on her phone. This was good. She seized the opportunity to sneak in the front door and upstairs to her room. Anne’s phone was right where she left it. She dialed 9-1-1.

She told the situation as quickly and quietly as she could while at the same time, she pulled off her wet clothes and put on jeans, a loose shirt, and ditched her muddy shoes for her running shoes. She had no address and didn’t even really know where she was on a map, so she had to let the dispatcher find her location from the phone. The dispatcher wanted her to stay on the line, but she couldn’t. She had to get to the wine cellar. If reception worked there, she’d call back. That was the best she could do. Before leaving her room, she went out on her balcony which offered a decent view of the lake. Sure enough, she saw Eric in the lifeboat. He’d almost reached the crash site. She was hopeful this might work.

Before turning to come back in, she heard a woman’s voice behind her, soft but trying to sound tough. A slight Indian accent. “Don’t move.”

Lauren slowly turned to face Prisha who was standing in the bedroom doorway pointing a gun at her. Lauren knew nothing about guns, but could see this was one of those small, lady-types. She thought of the self-defense class she took last summer with three of her female colleagues at the university. The only thing she remembered was that the instructor was adamant that Lauren use her elbows as weapons. Something about her frame, height, long arms, and their relative pointedness meant the force she could generate was better than a punch or even a kick. Although that knowledge was solidly in her head, she didn’t find it particularly useful in that moment, ten feet away from someone pointing a gun at her. What she needed were notes from an *attack* class. Did they have those?

“You’re going to shoot me?” Lauren asked incredulously. “Then what?” When Prisha didn’t say anything, Lauren not only continued talking, but also started taking slow deliberate steps toward her. “Put me back in the lake with the others? Our times of death won’t match, not to mention one alleged drowning victim would have a bullet wound. Eric’s not going to like that.”

“Don’t come any closer,” Prisha said.

Mentioning Eric’s displeasure got to her. This woman was as deathly afraid of him as she should be. She was trying to sound tough, but it wasn’t working. She sounded as if someone had a gun on her.

“I know you have to be out of here soon,” Lauren said. “You trust Eric to clean up all traces of my blood in this room?” Prisha’s face turned to stone. “Blood caused by *you*?” Instead of continuing forward, she sat on the bed and lounged back a bit. “How about here?” she asked. “Shoot me here? You going to take the bloody sheets and blankets with you? What if it soaks through to the mattress? How big is your car? Don’t get pulled over.”

Lauren knew Prisha was stalling, waiting for Eric to come back, but that wasn’t going to happen soon enough for her. He might be combing the woods for her by now. Prisha’s plan to scare her into submission was a dismal failure. “I don’t know what your alibi is,” Lauren said calmly. She was terrified, but couldn’t show it. Her confident, upper-hand way of talking was working on her timid, in-over-her-head adversary. “But you can forget it.”

“What do you mean?”

“That phone call you just made in the dining room? There’s now a cell record that puts you here in the villa, tonight.”

Prisha’s eyes flared, and she started breathing with an open mouth.

“What do you think Eric’s going to do about *that*?” she asked, making Prisha look like she was going to cry. “I’m going to give you one chance,” said Lauren, “to join me and take him down.” She got up from the bed and continued her approach. “My friends are dead. He murdered them. That can’t necessarily be tied to you. But you have to decide right now. Which side of this story do you want to be on?” They were close now. Lauren was a good six inches taller. “Decide,” she repeated.

Prisha moved the gun slowly to one side, just enough to show she didn’t want to point it directly at Lauren anymore. As soon as that direct line was gone, Lauren grabbed Prisha’s wrist. Prisha screamed and held onto the gun for another couple of seconds, but when Lauren bent and twisted her arm, Prisha yelled out again, this time in pain, and dropped the gun on the floor. Lauren kicked the gun away and kept pressure on Prisha’s arm, turning and bending it with a hold she surprisingly also remembered from that self-defense class. Prisha dropped to her knees. She was crying

hard now.

“What’s the matter?” asked Lauren. “Things not going according to plan? Eric explained it all before leaving us to die. You’re supposed to take all the incriminating stuff and disappear before the police arrive.” She pulled Anne’s phone from her pocket and showed it. “Trouble is,” she whispered. “They’re already on their way.” Prisha nursed her injured arm and looked up at Lauren, sad and defeated. “Get up,” Lauren said.

As soon as the groggy, bewildered Prisha was standing again, Lauren stepped back, turned at a slight angle, then smashed her elbow, full force, right into Prisha’s nose. Prisha screamed. The blood was instantaneous and poured nonstop in an unbelievably heavy flow that caught Lauren by surprise. It couldn’t have been more copious if Lauren had slit the woman’s throat. Prisha’s face and the whole front of her shirt were soaked in a matter of seconds. She stumbled back into the hallway, trying to cover her face with her hands, but it was no use.

“Why?!” Prisha yelled. “I was joining you like you said!”

“I lied,” Lauren said. “You’re going down with him.” She knocked Prisha hard down to the ground, then quickly and methodically pulled the laces out from both of her running shoes. Prisha could only writhe in pain, her vague pleas had a wet, choking edge from the blood.

Lauren roughly flipped Prisha onto her stomach and dragged her to the top of the stairs. She pulled back the arm she had already injured. Another scream. The arm definitely felt broken, but Lauren was no expert there. She then grabbed the opposite foot and tied the two together, wrist to ankle, with a shoelace. She ran the lace around the strong, corner banister pole a few times. Then she did the same with the other arm and leg using the other shoelace. The knots were tight, painful, and effective.

She started down the stairs, then turned back, eye level with the twisted, restrained, broken woman. She took a picture of Prisha and texted it to Eric with the note:

The only reason she’s going to wake up tomorrow
is because I chose not to kill her here right now.

Chapter 51

Gregor

Back at the crash site, Eric saw the yacht had completely disappeared under the water. With his lifeboat up on the rock, he geared up again and turned on his light. Confirming the cuff key was in the breast pocket, he got into the icy water once again, put the mini tank's regulator in his mouth, and dove down.

He wasn't a great swimmer, so getting down to the boat was a struggle, and all he could think about was the time he was wasting. How the plan was supposed to be going vs how it was actually going. He managed to work his light and find the cuffs. Unlocking them took a few tries, his cold, shaky hands not cooperating with his scattered, angry mind. When he got back to the surface, it was all the energy he had left to pull himself up onto the rock where he lay on his back, panting and looking up at the starry sky.

He just needed a second to catch his breath. Even with the oxygen tank, the diving took a physical toll on him. He figured he was subconsciously holding his breath the whole time. Stupid. He experienced the *déjà vu* of being in this same spot not long before thinking the same thing: he had to get the gear back to Prisha, see her off, then go find Brontë and finish this thing. Once he'd done that, he was certain he could deal with the police and his story. From then on, the tragedy of the deaths would work in his favor.

He got back into the boat and heard his phone buzzing a text from within its sealed bag. Prisha? She couldn't possibly be that stupid, could she? Using her phone from the villa? He might have to kill her after all. He angrily rummaged for the phone and gasped in shock when he saw a text from Ginger. How could that be? She was dead. He instinctually looked out at the lake, roughly in the direction of where he had dragged her body. It took a second, but he found what he assumed to be her shoulder blades breaking the surface of the still, black water. Then he remembered from his film footage that Brontë had her phone. He scanned along the woods on the shoreline on all sides, hoping to see the glow of the phone, but there was nothing.

He opened the text and saw the picture of Prisha, beaten and bound to the stair banister. *Jesus Fucking Christ*. Brontë's note made him smile, despite himself. Was it possible that she was going to be a more worthy adversary than he envisioned?

He hit the throttle and barreled toward the villa. He didn't care how loud the motor was. Once at the dock, he jumped out of the boat, tore the gear off, and pulled on his shoes. Then he stormed up to the villa only to find the front door locked. Of course. He picked up a stone planter and tossed it through one of the sidelight windows. After kicking enough of the glass away, he was able to step through without getting cut or scratched.

First he ran up the stairs, stopping with several left so he was eye level to Prisha lying bound next to him. "Where is she?!" he demanded.

"I don't know," she murmured. If there was a glimmer of hope or gratitude that Eric had arrived to save her, that was already gone. She started weeping.

"HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?!"

"I don't know," Prisha repeated, then managed: "She called the police."

Damn it! "Can you drive?" he asked her, and when she didn't answer immediately, he yelled: "CAN YOU DRIVE?!"

"No!" she cried. "My arm ... it's —"

He tore back down the stairs, not caring what she had to say about her arm. Knowing Brontë wasn't going anywhere, he changed his clothes then went through every room, tearing things apart, looking for her. As soon as he stepped into the kitchen, it hit him. He knew where she was. Well played, Professor. But this is far from over.

Chapter 52

Lauren

The iron latch seemed strong enough. As soon as she pulled it across the thick, heavy door, she sighed in a moment's peace. For the first time since Fiona felt numb on the boat, the moment Lauren knew what was happening, she thought she was going to survive this. That peace was immediately interrupted with a flash thought that made her angry with herself. She should have grabbed Prisha's gun! How could she be so stupid to not think of that? She'd never fired a gun before, but she was certainly safer with it than without. There was nothing she could do about it now, she thought. She just needed the door to hold.

She knew Eric would figure out where she was hiding. She tried calling 9-1-1 again, but no service. She sat on the floor with her back against the door. Silence continued for several minutes, maybe longer. She couldn't tell. She made sure to close the kitchen door so she'd hear it open and know he was approaching.

It unnerved her when the relative silence was betrayed by Eric's fist pounding on the door just above her head. She jumped and started, knocking over the small pyramid stack of wine bottles that stood on the floor by her feet. Two of the bottles broke and a pungent, fruity scent filled the air in the small space.

"Careful with those," Eric said from the other side of the door. "My

security deposit.” After a moment, he asked: “How is this going to work?”

“You’re going to prison,” Lauren said. “Any more questions?”

Eric laughed. “How about we take turns with questions? You can go first.”

She thought it over. Keeping him engaged in conversation until the police arrived was probably a good thing. “When did you become a killer?”

“Long time ago,” he said matter of factly, as if describing when he took up golf. “Never more than one at a time, though. This was new. Not easy.”

“Why?” she asked.

He grunted in disappointment. “First of all,” he said. “It was my turn, but I’ll allow it. Secondly, I’d expect a better question from you, Professor, but fine. People get in the way. When people are in the way, you get them out of the way. It’s that simple. And I gotta say . . .” He paused for dramatic effect. “Once you kill your own sister, other people come easy.”

“You killed Emma?” Lauren gasped.

“I see you’re going to ask all the questions,” he said, then after a short pause he continued: “She wouldn’t play along. I couldn’t trust her.”

“What are you talking about?”

After a moment’s silence which seemed longer to Lauren than it probably was, Eric spoke. “You remember when my father died? I was with you.”

“Yes,” she said. “I remember.”

“Difficult time at the house. Cleaning everything out. Emma was the only other person who’d read the manuscript I found in my dad’s desk drawer. My mom probably read it, but she was too far gone for that to matter.”

“Manuscript?”

“All That’s Left to Know,” Eric said wistfully. “It really is a good book, you have to admit.”

Lauren couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You didn’t write that book?” she asked. The question sounded barely audible to her, but he heard it fine.

“Not one word,” Eric said, then they stayed in silence for a good half minute. “It was easy to assume the role of Lord Byron in our little gothic revival weekend,” he said. “But I’m not Byron, am I?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Who am I?”

She didn’t want to indulge him but felt it best to play along. Maybe he had more to reveal. “You’re Frankenstein’s monster,” she said.

“You are *so good at this!*”

Better than he was, that was certain. She gave the answer he wanted and expected, but she knew Eric had much more in common with the scientist Victor Frankenstein. His arrogance and his disregard for those he saw as standing in the way of his ambition. Ambition that she hoped would soon prove to be his fatal flaw, just as it is for Frankenstein.

“So Alvin Skinner is someone else’s creation. You’re just a fraud.”

“I brought him to the world.”

“How godlike of you.” She knew sarcasm would anger him, but she had to keep him off his game, keep him thinking about things of her design.

“I wrote other movies, other characters,” he said with a hint of defensiveness in his tone.

“Yeah,” she replied dismissively. “So I’ve heard.”

He fell silent. She figured he was stewing over being called out so directly. Then the silence was suddenly broken by another voice, a man at the far end of the hall. “Police!” he called. “Show me your hands!”

Lauren released a sigh that almost brought tears. Thank God. Finally, this whole nightmare was coming to an end. Hopefully. She knew whoever this guy was, Eric could most likely incapacitate him in a matter of seconds, even facing a gun. She leaned against the door, listening.

“Here,” said Eric to the officer. “See? No weapons. No threat.”

When he said “Show me your hands” the officer sounded scared, a trait she was sure Eric picked up on, too. That made her nervous. *C’mon, Officer Whoever. You got this. Do your job. Almost there.* She suddenly heard some sort of physical struggle, and her heart leapt. Eric wasn’t stupid enough to attack a cop, was he? What kind of question was that? Of course he was. The tussling only lasted a few seconds, then Eric cried “Ow!” and “Easy! I said no threat!” Lauren sighed again. It was clear the officer had him, probably cuffed, lying on the floor.

There was a knock on the door. “Someone in there?” the officer asked.

“Yes. My name is Lauren Curtis-Pritchard.”

“You’re safe now,” said the officer. “Come out slowly. We’ll get you taken care of.”

Lauren stood and took a deep breath. As she unlatched the door, a strong, sudden feeling consumed her. The thought that this horrific ordeal was over switched to merely a *hope* that it was. She didn’t know why, but she couldn’t bring herself to let her guard down. Not just yet. She pushed

the heavy door open slowly as instructed, feeling the weight of it more than she did when she locked herself in. Looking out, her eyes went wide in confusion and surprise.

The hallway was completely empty.

Something was very wrong. She moved frantically to jump back inside, but it was too late. The door smashed closed behind her, and Eric jumped out from behind it. He grabbed her by the throat and smashed her against the stone wall. First her shoulder blades hit, then the back of her head. Not good. His grip was so forceful and immovable that it didn't feel human. She knew he could restrict her breathing in a second and was thankful he was, for some reason, choosing not to. He moved in close to her and spoke in the "officer's" voice. "We're gonna need you to come to the station and make a statement." He smiled, then used his own rough tenor to add smugly: "Voice acting."

She held his stare as hard as she could and replied: "Wine tasting."

She moved so fast that he only showed a quizzical expression for a second before it turned to shock and terror as she plunged the jagged edge of the broken wine bottle into his neck. He let go of her, and when he stumbled back, she let go of the bottle which stayed stuck in its lethal place, protruding from the bloody, gurgling wound. He instinctually reached for the bottle and pulled it out, a mistake as any ER doctor would have told him. The blood flow more than doubled, not just pouring down the front of his shirt but spurting up and out in two arcs she could see. He fell to his knees and pressed both hands on the wound, a move that made him cry out in pain. He'd no doubt made things even worse given the shards of glass lodged in his neck.

He looked up at her, his blue eyes receding fast toward vacancy. Then he reached a weakened, bloodied hand toward her. She slapped it away. Eric Asher was the fourth person she'd watch die in the last hour.

She walked through the kitchen and heard sirens as she approached the front door. At the top of the stairs, she could see Prisha lying motionless, still bound to the railing as Lauren had left her. She'd probably passed out from shock and exhaustion. Or maybe she was dead, too. Lauren didn't care one way or the other.

She opened the front door slowly to see police in the driveway, crouching by their cars, guns drawn on her. She walked out to meet them showing the palms of both her hands, fingers outstretched.

Epilogue

Lauren nineteen months later ...

Lauren had settled into her new teaching position at Boston College in Chestnut Hill. She'd answered an inquiry from the school shortly after the divorce, and after a few interviews, they not only offered her a position but granted a year sabbatical given the tragedy she'd endured. Jonathan was living with a man his own age. Their correspondence was limited to civil exchanges regarding Connor's travel and other issues with him.

Moving back to the place where she got her MFA with her late friends took some soul searching, but having Connor near and his desire to attend BC when the time came was enough to move her plan forward. The city felt so different – she was so different – that living there again was not the barrage of difficult reminders she feared.

The way the tragedy exploded in the media was reminder enough. In the immediate aftermath, she advised the forensic team to test the drowned victims for paralytics and note wrist scars that corroborated her handcuff account. She also explained the broken bones in their hands. She later testified at Prisha's trial, helping secure what Lauren felt was a much-deserved prison term of twelve years. Other than that, she stayed out of the spotlight despite countless offers from anyone and everyone to tell her story.

She thought about the relentlessness and the futility of those offers as she prepared for a meeting in her office, one she'd been putting off for

weeks. She'd rather not have it at all, but when the Chair of her department applied the slightest bit of pressure, she knew she had to play ball.

In a few minutes she'd be talking with the local documentarian team of Oliver and Lenina Hudson, a married couple younger than she was but not by much. Operating under the production company name of Unframed Pictures, they had reached out to Lauren to discuss making a movie about her book *Scientific Murder*. The potential project struck her as ironic, as it was the very idea Lauren contemplated while at the villa.

She spent some time on their very clean, professional website that boasted several festival awards, including one for a film about Jack the Ripper, disappointingly titled *You Don't Know Jack*. Their critically acclaimed experience documenting the time and place of her book made Lauren think a discussion was worthwhile.

The filmmaker couple arrived on time and greeted her with an almost jubilant warmth. Oliver had closely cropped dark hair and wore big, square, black-framed glasses. Lenina was fair-skinned and freckled with reddish-brown hair. She had strikingly long nails that were painted two shades of blue, alternating one finger to the next.

Lauren stood up when they came in, and after the handshakes, she motioned them to the small seating area with a couch and matching cushioned chair. "I'm not a fan of talking across the desk," she told them as she followed, grabbing the copy of her book she had out for them. Oliver and Lenina sat on the couch, and Lauren took the chair with her back to the window.

She felt that odd, familiar sensation of meeting people she felt she already knew, given her look at their website which featured an extensive "About" section. She knew they met studying film at Boston University and lived in New York for several years before returning to Boston. She knew their production company started after Sundance recognized their third film, *Time Off*, about man wrongly accused of murder. They were avid bike riders and had a cocker spaniel named Terrence.

Before they got started, Oliver reached into his messenger bag which he'd just put on the floor and pulled out his own copy of *Scientific Murder*. "Way ahead of you," he said, then joked. "Although, probably not."

Lauren smiled and watched him pull a pen from his inside jacket pocket. "If you wouldn't mind?" He offered the pen and book to her.

"Of course," Lauren said as she took both graciously.

As she signed the title page to the both of them, Oliver said: “Lenina read it first. I’m almost done. Really fascinating.”

“I never knew anything about this,” Lenina said. “I couldn’t believe it! And so well researched.”

“Thank you,” Lauren said, allowing herself to be excited about where this discussion and this project might go.

“We just have to say,” Lenina offered. “We were so sorry to read about what happened to you. Just awful. I couldn’t even imagine.”

“Thank you,” Lauren said again in the required, softer tone. She’d grown quite used to these brief exchanges, all of which were slight variations on the same script. All of which had the distinct subtext of *let’s get this out of the way*. Lenina’s wording, however, seemed deliberately crafted. She made it sound like they possibly could have read about Lauren *after* their contact, but Lauren found that hard to believe. Although she declined to speak publicly about the villa, she had become somewhat famous for the events there. The irony of that fact was not lost on her. Her status didn’t get her the new teaching position, but she wouldn’t be surprised to learn it expedited her interviews.

“Now *there’s* a story,” Oliver said.

“Pardon me?” asked Lauren, convinced she must have misheard him.

Oliver backpedaled. “I mean ... like Lenina said, unimaginable. So many questions. So much still unknown.” He put his hand up. “But,” he said. “That’s not why we’re here.”

Are you sure about that? thought Lauren.

“Too soon, I’m sure,” he added.

“It’s not a calendar issue,” Lauren assured them.

They discussed their approach to *Scientific Murder*, but Lauren’s interest was now compartmentalized and firmly encased in two feelings she’d come to know very well: wariness and suspicion. Both Oliver and Lenina thought it best to focus the *Scientific Murder* documentary on fewer killers than are chronicled in the book, the obvious choice for leads being the notorious William Burke and William Hare. Their seedy relationship with the anatomist Robert Knox, who purchased their victims for dissection and other experiments, would serve as a great spine for the narrative.

Their pitch started to sound to Lauren like a grade school book report, their collective attempt to prove they read her work. They might have had some cinematic insight, but Lauren was deciding right then and there to

stick exclusively with academic pursuits and let the “entertainment” industry continue down its own deceptive, manipulative path.

“Let me ask you this,” said Lauren, not minding that she was interrupting their regurgitative thoughts. “Do you see this film as a stepping stone to the one you really want to make about Eric Asher?” She hadn’t said his name out loud in quite some time. It stung and tasted like vinegar.

Oliver and Lenina looked at each other then at Lauren. They were trying too hard to look surprised by her question. The only thing they looked like to Lauren was busted. “We’re ... already making that film,” Lenina said.

“And we’re not the only ones,” Oliver added.

“But you’ll be the only ones with access to me,” Lauren said.

Oliver pointed to the hardcover book on the table. “This is an amazing story and will make a great documentary. We’re not belittling what’s in front of us. We’ll make *Scientific Murder* with you and show you we can be trusted to tell *any* story with respect and integrity.”

They really did rehearse all this. Lauren kept quiet on purpose, holding her expression blank so they wouldn’t know if she was interested or offended.

“The questions,” Oliver continued, knowing he and his wife were both out on a limb. But this, Lauren imagined, was part of their job. “The hidden cameras being about some Netflix show Asher claimed to be producing? A show Netflix denies any involvement in or even knowledge of?”

“I see you’ve done some research,” Lauren said. “If you did any on me, you’d know I won’t be involved in that.”

“We’re in no rush,” said Oliver.

“Ever,” finished Lauren.

“We understand your hesitation,” Lenina said.

“Calling it ‘hesitation’ proves you don’t understand anything,” said Lauren.

“You know who else won’t talk about that weekend?” Oliver asked.

“I don’t care,” said Lauren.

“Prisha Sarkar. We visited her in prison.”

“I still don’t care.”

“We would never do this,” Oliver said with his hands up. “But this film is getting made multiple times with or without you. So you should know: her not talking and you not talking creates an association that other

filmmakers – again, *not us* – might play upon.”

After taking a moment to imagine smashing her elbow down on his nose, Lauren stood up. “Thank you for your time. I’m sorry it’s not going to work out.”

They stood, too, but much slower and with disappointed, defeated expressions. Understandably so, but Lauren didn’t care. She was back behind her desk by the time they’d reached the door. Her attention had shifted to her next meeting about the department’s new policies regarding students sharing class material on social media. She already had her “front-loaded” ideas ready to go.

Once alone, her thoughts went to another meeting she had several months before with HarperCollins. That one she initiated, and the publishing company rolled out the red carpet for her. She kept quiet about her reasons to ensure she met with top decisions makers. The spokesperson for the group expressed surprise that she had chosen them. They were the publisher of Eric Asher’s two novels, both of which, they emphasized were pulled from shelves.

She of course knew all that. Although they didn’t hide their disappointment when she told them she was not there for a book deal, she did regain their interest with the news that Eric had plagiarized *All That’s Left to Know*. She gave them a file containing all the biographical information she could find on Eric’s father Thomas Asher. They were stunned, but she didn’t wait around for a reply of any kind. Before leaving, she presented the team with paperback copies of Chris’ four *Equinox* books. She asked them to see what they could do as a tribute to her old friend.

The End

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