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Lex (Girl A)

YOU DON'T KNOW ME, but you'll have seen my face. In the earlier pictures, they bludgeoned our features with pixels, right down to our waists; even our hair was too distinctive to disclose. But the story and its protectors grew weary, and in the danker corners of the Internet we became easy to find. The favoured photograph was taken in front of the house on Moor Woods Road, late on a September evening. We filed out and lined up, six of us in height order and Noah in Ethan's arms, while Father arranged the composition. Little white wraiths squirming in the shock of sunshine. Behind us, the house rested in the last of the day's light, shadows spreading from the windows and the door. We were still and looking at the camera. It should have been perfect. But just before Father pressed the button, Evie squeezed my hand and turned her face up towards me; in the photograph, she is just about to speak, and my smile is starting to curl. I don't remember what she said, but I'm quite sure that we paid for it, later.

I arrived at the prison in the mid-afternoon. On the drive I had been listening to an old playlist made by JP, *Have a Great Day*, and without the music and the engine, the car was abruptly quiet. I opened the door. Traffic was building on the motorway, the noise of it like the ocean.

The prison had released a short statement confirming Mother's

death. I read the articles online the evening before, which were perfunctory, and which all concluded with a variation of the same happy ending. The Gracie children, some of whom have waived their anonymity, are believed to be well. I sat in a towel on the hotel bed, surrounded by room service, laughing. At breakfast, there was a stack of local newspapers next to the coffee; Mother was on the front page, underneath an article about a stabbing at Wimpy Burger. A quiet day.

My room included a hot buffet, and I kept eating right up until the end, when the waitress told me that the kitchen had to begin preparing for lunch.

‘People stop for lunch?’ I asked.

‘You’d be surprised,’ she said. She looked apologetic. ‘It isn’t included with the room, though.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Thanks. That was really good.’

When I started work, my mentor, Julia Devlin, told me that the time would come when I would tire of free food and free alcohol; when my fascination with platters of immaculate canapés would wane; when I would no longer set my alarm to get to a hotel breakfast. Devlin was right about a lot of things, but not about this.

I had never been to the prison before, but it wasn’t so different from what I had imagined. Beyond the car park were white walls, crowned with barbed wire, like a challenge from a fairy tale. Behind that, four towers presided over a concrete moat, with a grey fort at its centre. Mother’s little life. I had parked too far away, and had to walk across a sea of empty spaces, following the thick white lines where I could. There was only one other vehicle in the car park, and inside it there was an old woman, clutching the wheel. When she saw me she raised her hand, as if we might know each other, and I waved back.

Underfoot, the tarmac was starting to stick. By the time I reached the entrance I could feel sweat in my bra and in the

hair at the back of my neck. My summer clothes were in a wardrobe in New York. I had remembered English summers as timid, and every time I stepped outside I was surprised by bold blue sky. I had spent some time that morning thinking about what to wear, stuck half-dressed in the wardrobe mirror; there really wasn't an outfit for every occasion, after all. I had settled on white shirt, loose jeans, shop-clean trainers, obnoxious sunglasses. *Is it too jovial?* I asked Olivia, sending a picture by text, but she was in Italy, at a wedding on the walls of Volterra, and she didn't reply.

There was a receptionist, just like in any other office. 'Do you have an appointment?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'With the warden.'

'With the director?'

'Sure. With the director.'

'Are you Alexandra?'

'That's me.'

The warden had agreed to meet me in the entrance hall. 'There's a reduced staff on Saturday afternoons,' she had said. 'And no visitors after three p.m. It should be quiet for you.'

'I'd like that,' I said. 'Thanks.'

'I shouldn't say this,' she said, 'but it would be the time for the great escape.'

Now she came down the corridor, filling it. I had read about her online. She was the first female warden of a high-security facility in the country, and she had given a few interviews after her appointment. She had wanted to be a police officer at a time when height restrictions were still in force, and she was two inches under. She had discovered that she was still tall enough to be a prison officer, which was illogical, but OK with her. She wore an electric blue suit – I recognized it from the pictures accompanying the interviews – and strange, dainty shoes, as if somebody had told her they might soften her impression. She

believed – absolutely – in the power of rehabilitation. She looked more tired than in her photographs.

‘Alexandra,’ she said, and shook my hand. ‘I’m so sorry for your loss.’

‘I’m not,’ I said. ‘So don’t worry about it.’

She gestured back from where she had come. ‘I’m just by the visitors’ centre,’ she said. ‘Please.’

The corridor was a tepid yellow, scuffed at the baseboards and decorated with shrivelled posters about pregnancy and meditation. At the end there was a scanner, and a conveyor belt for your belongings. Steel lockers to the ceiling. ‘Formalities,’ she said. ‘At least it’s not busy.’

‘Like an airport,’ I said. I thought of the service in New York, two days before: my laptop and phones in a grey tray, and the neat, transparent bag of make-up which I set beside them. There were special lanes for frequent flyers, and I never had to queue.

‘Just like that,’ she said. ‘Yes.’

She unloaded her pockets onto the conveyor belt and passed through the scanner. She carried a security pass, a pink fan, and a children’s sunscreen. ‘A whole family of redheads,’ she said. ‘We’re not built for days like this.’ In her pass photograph she looked like a teenager, eager to begin the first day of work. My pockets were empty; I followed her straight through.

Inside, too, there was no one around. We walked through the visitors’ centre, where the plastic tables and secured chairs awaited the next session. At the end of the room was a metal door, without windows; somewhere behind that, I assumed, was Mother, and the confines of each of her small days. I touched a chair as we passed, and thought of my siblings, waiting in the stale room for Mother to be presented to them. Delilah would have reclined here, on many occasions, and Ethan had visited once, although only for the nobility of it. He had written a piece

for *The Sunday Times* afterwards, titled 'The Problems with Forgiveness', which were many and predictable.

The warden's office was through a different door. She touched her pass to the wall and patted herself down for a final key. It was in the pocket above her heart, and attached to a plastic photo frame, full of redheaded children. 'Well,' she said. 'Here we are.'

It was a simple office, with pockmarked walls and a view to the motorway. She seemed to have recognized this and decided that it wouldn't do; she had brought in a stern wooden desk and an office chair, and she had found a budget for two leather sofas, which she would need for delicate conversations. On the walls were her certificates, and a map of the United Kingdom.

'I know that we haven't met before,' the warden said, 'but there's something I want to say to you before the lawyer joins us.'

She gestured to the sofas. I despised formal meetings on comfortable furniture; it was impossible to know how to sit. On the table in front of us was a cardboard box, and a slim brown envelope bearing Mother's name.

'I hope that you don't think that this is unprofessional,' said the warden, 'but I remember you and your family on the news at the time. My children were just babies, then. I've thought about those headlines a lot since, even before this job came up. You see a great many things in this line of work. Both the things that make the papers, and the things that don't. And after all of this time, some of those things – a very small number – still surprise me. People say: How can you still be surprised, even now? Well, I refuse not to be surprised.'

She took her fan from the pocket of her suit. Closer, it looked like something handmade by a child, or a prisoner. 'Your parents surprised me,' she said.

I looked past her. The sun teetered at the edge of the window, about to fall into the room.

‘It was a terrible thing that happened to you,’ she said. ‘From all of us here – we hope that you might find some peace.’

‘Should we talk,’ I said, ‘about why you called me?’

The solicitor was poised outside the office, like an actor waiting for his cue. He was dressed in a grey suit and a cheerful tie, and sweating. The leather squeaked when he sat down. ‘Bill,’ he said, and stood again to shake my hand. The top of his collar had started to stain, and now that was grey, too. ‘I understand,’ he said, right away, ‘that you’re also a lawyer.’ He was younger than I had expected, maybe younger than me; we would have studied at the same time.

‘Just company stuff,’ I said, and to make him feel better: ‘I don’t know the first thing about wills.’

‘That,’ Bill said, ‘is what I’m here for.’

I smiled encouragingly.

‘OK!’ Bill said. He rapped the cardboard box. ‘These are the personal possessions,’ he said. ‘And this is the document.’

He slid the envelope across the table and I tore it open. The will said, in Mother’s trembling hand, that Deborah Gracie appointed her daughter, Alexandra Gracie, as executor of this will; that Deborah Gracie’s remaining possessions consisted of, first, those possessions held at HM Prison Northwood; secondly, approximately twenty thousand pounds inherited from her husband, Charles Gracie, upon his death; and thirdly, the property found at 11 Moor Woods Road, in Hollowfield. Those possessions were to be divided equally between Deborah Gracie’s surviving children.

‘Executor,’ I said.

‘She seemed quite sure that you were the person for the job,’ Bill said. I laughed.

See Mother in her cell, playing with her long, long blond hair, right down to her knees; so long that she could sit on it, as a party trick. She considers her will, presided over by Bill, who

feels sorry for her, who is happy to help out, and who is sweating then, too. There is so much that he wants to ask. Mother holds the pen in her hand, and trembles in studied desolation. Executor, Bill explains: it's something of an honour. But it's also an administrative burden, and there will need to be communications with the various beneficiaries. Mother, with the cancer bubbling in her stomach, and only a few months left to fuck us over, knows exactly whom to appoint.

'There is no obligation for you to take this up,' Bill said. 'If you don't want to.'

'I'm aware of that,' I said, and Bill's shoulders shifted.

'I can guide you through the basics,' he said. 'It's a very small portfolio of assets. It shouldn't take up too much of your time. The key thing – the thing that I'd bear in mind – is to keep the beneficiaries onside. However you decide to handle those assets, you get your siblings' go-ahead first.'

I was booked on a flight back to New York the next afternoon. I thought of the cold air on the plane, and the neat menus which were handed out just after take-off. I could see myself settling into the journey, the prior three days deadened by the drinks in the lounge, then waking up to the warm evening and a black car waiting to take me home.

'I need to consider it,' I said. 'It's not a convenient time.'

Bill handed me a slip of paper, with his name and number handwritten on pale grey lines. Business cards were not in the prison's budget. 'I'll wait to hear from you,' he said. 'If it's not you, then it would be helpful to have suggestions. One of the other beneficiaries, perhaps.'

I thought of making this proposal to Ethan, or Gabriel, or Delilah. 'Perhaps,' I said.

'For a start,' Bill said, holding the box on his palm, 'these are all of her possessions at Northwood. I can release them to you today.'

The box was light.

‘They’re of negligible value, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘She had a number of goodwill credits – for exemplary behaviour, things like that – but they don’t have much value outside.’

‘That’s a shame,’ I said.

‘The only other thing,’ the warden said, ‘is the body.’

She walked to her desk and pulled out a ring-bound file of plastic wallets, each of them containing a flyer or a catalogue. Like a waiter with a menu, she opened it before me, and I glimpsed sombre fonts and a few apologetic faces.

‘Options,’ she said, and turned the page. ‘If you’d like them. Funeral homes. Some of these are a bit more detailed: services, caskets, things like that. And they’re all local – all within a fifty-mile radius.’

‘I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding,’ I said. The warden shut the file on a leaflet featuring a leopard print hearse.

‘We won’t be claiming the body,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Bill. If the warden was perturbed, she hid it well.

‘In that case,’ she said, ‘we would bury your mother in an unmarked grave, according to default prison policy. Do you have any objections to that?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t have any objections.’

My other meeting was with the chaplain, who had requested to see me. She had asked me to come to the visitors’ chapel, which was in the car park. One of the warden’s assistants accompanied me to a squat outbuilding. Somebody had erected a wooden cross above the door and hung coloured tissue paper across the windows. A child’s stained glass. Six rows of benches faced a makeshift stage with a fan and a lectern, and a model of Jesus, mid-crucifixion.

The chaplain was waiting on the second bench back. She stood

to meet me. Everything about her was round and damp: her face in the gloom, her white smock, the two little hands which clasped around mine.

‘Alexandra,’ she said.

‘Hello.’

‘You must be wondering,’ she said, ‘why I wished to see you.’

She had the kind of gentleness which you have to practise. I could see her in the conference room of a cheap hotel, wearing a name badge and watching a presentation on the importance of pauses – of giving people the space to talk.

I waited.

‘I spent a lot of time with your mother in her final few years,’ she said. ‘I had worked with her for longer than that, you see, but in the final years I saw the changes in her. And I hoped that you, today, might take consolation in those changes.’

‘The changes?’ I said. I could feel myself starting to smile.

‘She wrote to you many times in those years,’ she said. ‘To you and to Ethan and to Delilah. I heard about you all. Gabriel and Noah. Sometimes she wrote to Daniel and Evie. For a mother to lose her children, whatever sins she committed – she had lost so much. She would bring me all of the letters, to check her spelling and the addresses. She kept thinking that the addresses must be wrong, when you didn’t reply.’

The tissue paper cast a fleshy light down the aisle. I had assumed that the windows had been an activity for the prisoners, but now I could imagine the chaplain, balanced on a chair after hours, dressing her kingdom.

‘I wanted to see you,’ she said, ‘because of forgiveness. For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you.’

She rested her palm against my knee. The warmth of it seeped straight through my jeans, like something spilt. ‘But if you do

not forgive others their sins,' she said, 'your father will not forgive your sins.'

'Forgiveness,' I said. The shape of the word lodged in my throat. I was still smiling.

'Did you receive them?' the chaplain asked. 'The letters?'

I received them. I asked Dad – my real father, you understand, and not the rot in my bones – to destroy each one when it arrived. They were easy to identify; they came resealed, with a stamped warning of correspondence from an inmate at HM Prison Northwood. Soon after my twenty-first birthday, when I was home from university, Dad came to me with a confession and a box, and all of the fucking letters stuffed inside. 'I just thought,' he said, 'that in the future – you may be curious—' It must have been the winter holidays, because the barbeque was in the garden shed; he helped me to wheel it out, and we stood in our coats, him with his pipe and me with a cup of tea, and posted them into the fire.

'I think that you're in the wrong story,' I said to the chaplain. 'There's a narrative – you see it a lot – which builds up to a prison visit. Somebody inside, they're waiting for somebody else to visit. To be forgiven. The visitor's been mulling it over for years, and they can't decide whether to do it. Well. In the end they go. It's usually a parent and a child, or maybe a perpetrator and a victim – it depends. But they go. And they have a conversation. And even if the visitor doesn't *forgive* the person, exactly, they at least take something from the whole thing. But, you see – my mother's dead. And I never did visit.'

I had the mortifying sense that I was going to cry, and I pulled my sunglasses down to hide it. The chaplain became a lumpy white spectre in the darkness. 'I'm sorry that I can't help you,' I said, absurdly, and stumbled back down the aisle. The sun was finally starting to soften, and now it was time for a drink. I thought of a hotel bar and the weight of the first glass,

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settling heavy across my limbs. The warden's assistant was waiting for me.

'Are we all done?' she asked. Our shadows were long and black on the tarmac, and when I reached her they became one strange beast. Her shift was probably over.

'Yes,' I said. 'I should go.'

In the car, I checked my phone. *Is there such a thing, Olivia had texted, as too jovial?*

I held Mother's cardboard box in my lap and lifted the lid. A ragtag of possessions. There was a Bible, predictably. There was a hairbrush. There were two clippings, sticky with tape, which had been torn from magazines: one was an advertisement for beach holidays in Mexico, and one was for nappies, with a little row of clean, happy children laid out on a white blanket. There was a newspaper cutting about Ethan's charity work in Oxford. There were three chocolate bars, and a lipstick which was nearly finished. As usual, she gave nothing away.

The last time I saw Mother was the day that we escaped. That morning I woke up in the soiled bed and knew that my days had run out, and that if I didn't act then this was where I would die.

Sometimes, in my head, I visit our little room. There are two single beds, pressed into opposite corners, as far away from one another as they can be. My bed and Evie's bed. The bare bulb hangs between them, twitching at footsteps in the hallway outside. It is usually dull, but sometimes, if Father decides, left on for days. He has sealed a flattened cardboard box against the window, intending to control time, but a dim, brown light seeps through and grants us our days and our nights. Beyond the cardboard

there was once a garden, and beyond that, the moor. It has become harder to believe that those places, with their wildness and their weather, could still exist. In the peaty glow, you can see the two-metre Territory between the beds, which Evie and I know better than any other. We have discussed the navigation from my bed to hers for many months: we know how to traverse the rolling hills of plastic bags, bulging with items which we can't remember; we know that you would use a plastic fork to cross the Bowl Swamps, which are blackened and congealed, and close to drying out; we have debated the best way to pass through the Polyester Peaks to avoid the worst of the filth: whether to take the high passes and risk the elements, or to pass through the tunnels of rotting materials beneath them and face whatever may be waiting there.

I had wet myself again in the night. I flexed my toes, twisted my ankles, and kicked my legs as if I was swimming, as I had done every morning for the last few months. Two. Maybe three. I said to the room what I would say to the first person I met when I was free: My name is Alexandra Gracie, and I am fifteen years old. I need you to ring the police. Then, as I did each morning, I turned to see Evie.

We had once been chained in the same direction, so that I could see her all of the time. Now she was tied away from me, and we both had to contort our bodies to meet eyes. Instead I could see her feet and the bones of her legs. The skin burrowed into each groove, as if searching for warmth there.

Evie spoke less and less. I cajoled her and shouted at her; I reassured her, and sung the songs which we had heard when we still went to school. 'Your part,' I said. 'Are you ready for your part?' None of it worked. Now, instead of teaching her numbers, I recited them to myself. I told her stories in the darkness and heard no laughter, or questions, or surprise; there was just the

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quiet space of the Territory and her shallow breathing, rushing across it.

‘Evie,’ I said. ‘Eve. Today’s the day.’

I drove back to the city through the early dusk. A thick golden light fell between the trees and across the open fields, but in the shadows of the villages and the farmhouses it was already dark. I contemplated driving through the night and hitting London before sunrise. Jet lag made the landscape bright and strange. I would probably end up asleep on a roadside in the Midlands; it didn’t seem such a good idea. I stopped in a lay-by and booked a Manchester hotel with vacancies and air conditioning.

In the first bad year, we had talked only of escape. This was in the Binding Days, when we were only restrained at night, and gently, with soft, white materials. Evie and I slept in the same bed, each with one wrist attached to a bedpost, and our other hands holding. All day, Mother and Father were with us, but we went about our lessons (heavy in biblical studies, with some questionable world history), and exercise (laps of the yard, in vests and pants; on one occasion, some of the children from Hollowfield clambered through the nettles at the back of our property just to see us, and to guffaw), and mealtimes (bread and water, on a good day), without any restraints at all. Our famous family photograph was taken at the end of this period, before the Chaining commenced and we ceased to be portrait-ready, even by my parents’ standards.

We talked of tearing the bindings with our teeth, or of slipping a knife from the kitchen table into a smock pocket. We could build up speed during a lap of the yard, then keep running,

out through the garden gate and down Moor Woods Road. Father kept a mobile phone in his pocket; that would be easy to snatch. When I think about this time, I feel a terrible confusion, which Dr K – with all of her reasoning – never managed to resolve. It was on the faces of the police and the journalists and the nurses, although none of them could ever bring themselves to ask it. Why didn't you just leave when you had the chance?

The truth is, it wasn't so bad. We enjoyed each other's company. We were tired, and sometimes we were hungry, and on occasion, Father would hit us so hard that an eye was bloodshot for a week (Gabriel), or there was a guttural crack just below the heart (Daniel). But we had little knowledge of what would come. I have spent many nights combing through the memories, like a student in a library, wiping the dust from old volumes and examining each shelf, searching for the moment when I should have known: ah – there – it was time to act. This book eludes me. It was checked out many years ago, and never returned. Father taught us around the kitchen table, mistaking submission for devotion, and Mother visited us last thing at night to make sure the bindings were in place. In the early morning, I woke beside Evie, and the warmth of her body glowed against me. We still talked of our future.

It wasn't so bad.

I spoke to Devlin first, and asked to work from London for a week. Maybe more.

'Probate drama,' she said. 'How exciting.' It was early afternoon in New York, but she had answered right away, already half-cut. Around her, I could hear the hum of a civilized lunch, or a bar.

'I'm not sure if that's the word I would use,' I said.

'Well, take your time. We'll find you a desk in London. And some work, no doubt.'

Mum and Dad would be eating, and could wait. Ethan's fiancée answered the phone; he was attending the opening of a gallery and wouldn't be back until much later that night. She'd heard that I was in the country – I should come to visit them – they would love to have me. I left a voice message on Delilah's phone, although I doubted that she would call me back. Last, I spoke to Evie. I could hear that she was outside, and somebody near her was laughing.

'So,' I said. 'The witch is dead, it seems.'

'Did you see the body?'

'God, no. I didn't ask to.'

'Then – can we be sure?'

'I'm quietly confident.'

I told her about the house on Moor Woods Road. About our great inheritance.

'They had twenty thousand? That's news.'

'Really? After our resplendent childhood?'

'You can just see Father, can't you? Squirrelling it away. "For my God will meet all your needs" – whatever it was.'

'The house, though,' I said. 'I can't believe that it would still be standing.'

'Aren't there people who enjoy those things? There are some tours – in LA, I think – murder sites, celebrity deaths, stuff like that. It's pretty morbid.'

'Hollowfield's a little isolated for a tour, no? Besides, it's hardly the Black Dahlia.'

'We're a little more downmarket, I guess.'

'They'd be giving the tickets away.'

'Well,' Evie said. 'If there's a tour, we should certainly go on it. We'll be able to impart some real gems. There's a career there, if the law doesn't work out.'

'I think Ethan's already cornered the market,' I said. 'But really. What the hell are we meant to do with the house?'

Again, somebody laughed. Closer, now. 'Where are you?' I asked.

'At the beach. There's some kind of concert this afternoon.'

'You should go.'

'OK. I miss you. And the house—'

The wind was picking up where she was, whipping the sun across the ocean.

'Something happy,' Evie said. 'It should be something happy. Nothing would annoy Father more.'

'I like that idea.'

'OK. I'm going to go.'

'Enjoy the concert.'

'Well done, today.'

The plan was this:

Like undercover agents, we had been tracking Father's footsteps. In the Binding Days, we had kept a record, noted in our Bible with a stump of school pencil (Genesis, 19:17; back then, we still had a taste for melodrama). When we could no longer reach the book, I committed Father's day to memory, the way Miss Glade had taught me when I still went to school. 'Think of a house,' she said. 'And in each room of the house, there is the next thing that you want to recall. Franz Ferdinand is slumped in the hallway – he's just been shot. You walk into the living room, and you pass by Serbia on the way out, running. They're terrified: war's coming. You find Austria-Hungary in the kitchen, sat at the table with the rest of its allies. Who's with them?'

And Father occupied our house; that made decoding his days even easier. After so many months in a single room, I knew the sound of each floorboard, and the flick of each light switch. I could see the bulk of him moving through the rooms.

We had done several all-night stake-outs from our beds, so

we knew that he woke late. Even in the winter, it was already light when we heard his first, slow footsteps through the house. Our bedroom was right at the end of the hallway, and he was two doors down, so a night-time attempt would be no good; he slept lightly, and he could be on us in a few seconds. Sometimes I would wake to find him at our bedroom door, or crouching beside me, in contemplation. Whatever he was considering, he always resolved, and in time he turned away, into the darkness.

He spent each morning with Mother and with Noah, downstairs. The smell of their meals permeated the house, and we heard them at prayer, or laughing about something which we couldn't share. When Noah cried, Father took to the garden. The kitchen door slammed. He exercised: the grunts of it carried up to our window. Sometimes, just before lunch, he visited us, radiant, his skin sodden and red, a barbarian just done with the battle, wielding his towel like an enemy's head. No, the morning wouldn't do: the front door was locked at all times, and whether we went downstairs through the kitchen or right out of the window, Father would be waiting.

This was a point of contention between Evie and me. 'It has to be through the house,' she said. 'The window's too high. You've forgotten how high it is.'

'We'd have to break the lock on our door. We'd have to go through the whole house. Past Ethan's room. Past Mother and Father. Past Gabe and D. Down the stairs. Noah sleeps down there – sometimes Mother too. There's no way.'

'Why haven't Gabriel and Delilah left?' Evie asked. And whispered: 'It would be easier for them.'

'I don't know,' I said. There had been one night, many months before, when I had heard something quiet and terrible at the other end of the hallway. A thwarted attempt. Evie had been asleep, and I had never mentioned it. Now, with hope hanging precarious between us, I didn't think that I could.

After lunch, Father was in the living room, and silent. This, I believed, was our chance. With Father still, the whole house sighed and slacked. Delilah's whispers snuck down the hallway. Some days Ethan tapped on the wall, as he had done when we were very young and set on learning Morse code. Other days, Mother visited us. There had been a time when I pleaded with her to do something, but now I responded to her confessions in my head, and turned away.

'It's the only option,' I said to Evie. 'Once he wakes up, it's out of the question.'

'OK,' she said, but I knew that she saw this as make-believe, like the other stories I told to her to pass the day.

We had already discussed the window. With its cardboard cover, it was outside our scope of surveillance. 'It opens,' I said. 'Doesn't it?' I couldn't picture the latch, or whether the ground beneath it was concrete or grass. 'Maybe I am forgetting,' I said.

'I don't think it does,' Evie said. 'And it hasn't been opened for ages, now.'

We strained to look at one another across the Territory.

'So if we have to break the window,' Evie said, 'how long do we get?'

'It'll take him a good few seconds to know what's happening,' I said. 'And a few more to reach the stairs. Ten to get to our door, say. And then he'll have to do the lock.'

My neck ached. I lay back down. 'Twenty in all,' I said. The meagre number hung in the space between us. Evie said something else, too quiet for me to hear.

'What?'

'OK, then,' she said.

'OK.'

Our other obstacle was the chains, which had once been my greatest concern. But Father was clumsy. After the discovery of the Myths, and what happened after it, he didn't turn on the

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light when he left the room. I liked to think that he couldn't bear to look at me, but he was probably too drunk to find the switch; either way, it didn't matter now. I'd spread my fingers out as far as I could, so that he closed the cuffs around my thumbs and little fingers, rather than my wrists. So: it would have to be me, and it would have to be soon. 'He messed up,' I whispered to Evie, when I was sure that everybody else in the house was asleep. Her breath huffed across the bedroom, but she didn't respond. I had left it too late. She was asleep, too.

I contemplated the evening. It was dark, but it was still hot outside. I called room service, ordered two gin and tonics, and drank them naked on the bed. I had thought about going for a run, but the hotel was encircled by motorways, and I didn't want to pick my way around them. Instead I would drink, and find company. I changed into a black slip and leather boots, and asked reception for a taxi and another drink.

In the car, I thought that this was a good development: three drinks down, alone, Mother dead, and the strange city above and around me. I opened the car window as far as it would go. People queued outside dark doorways and sat on the pavements to drink. 'There's a storm forecast,' the driver said. He said something else, too, but we were at a crossing, and it was lost in a gale of chatter.

'I'm sorry?'

'An umbrella,' he said. 'Do you have an umbrella?'

'You know,' I said, 'I used to live around here.'

He caught my eye in the mirror, and laughed.

'That's a yes?'

'That's a yes.'

I had asked him to drop me somewhere local and busy. He stopped outside another hotel, a cheaper one, and nodded. The club was in its underbelly, down a narrow staircase, with a

dance floor at the back and a vacant stage above it. It was busy enough. I took a seat at the bar and ordered a vodka tonic, and looked for somebody who would be glad to talk to me.

There had been times when Devlin and I had travelled so much that I would forget which continent we were on. I would wake up in a hotel room and walk the wrong way to the toilet, taking the route from my apartment in New York. I would come to in an airport lounge and need to read my boarding pass – really read it – to recall where we were flying next. There was always solace in sitting at a bar; they were the same the world over. There were lonely men with similar stories, and people who looked more tired than I did.

I sent gin to the man six seats down, who was wearing a shirt with a golden pin of wings, and searching for his wallet. He looked happy to receive the drink, and surprised; moments later he touched my shoulder, smiling. He was older than I had first thought. That was good.

‘Hello. Thanks for the drink.’

‘That’s fine. Are you on the road?’

‘I flew from Los Angeles today.’

‘That’s pretty dramatic.’

‘Not really. It’s a regular route. You’re not from around here either?’

‘No. Not any more. You’re a pilot?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you the main pilot or the second pilot?’

He laughed. ‘I’m the main pilot,’ he said.

He told me about his job. Listening to most people talk about their careers is tedious, but he was different. He spoke with sincerity. He talked about his training in Europe, and the first inevitable time that he flew alone. His hands reached for controls in the space between us, and when the disco lights hit them I could see small muscles shifting, just beneath the skin. It made

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you a drifter, he said, but a rich one. In those early years, he had lived in a state of anxiety, thinking always of the next landing, adrenaline pulsing through his body in the hotel beds. Now, he was arrogant enough to sleep well.

‘The main pilot,’ he said, still laughing. ‘So. Where next?’

We danced for a short time, but we were older than the bodies around us, and neither of us was drunk enough. I was fascinated by a group of girls beside me, their limbs careening together. They wore a variation of the same, skin-slick dress, and laughed as one many-headed creature. Watching them, I touched the tired skin at my throat and at the corners of my eyes. The pilot was behind me, with his fingers slotted between my ribs.

‘You can come to my hotel,’ I said.

‘I fly back tomorrow. I can’t stay.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘I didn’t want you to be disappointed. Sometimes—’

‘I won’t be disappointed.’

It had been raining, as the driver promised. The streets were shining and quieter, and neon floated in the puddles. There were only taxis left on the roads, but none of them were stopping; we needed a busier junction. I watched the lights of the city slide over his face, and took his hand. ‘There are things that I need,’ I said. ‘To make it worth my while.’

‘Really,’ he said. He had turned away from me, looking for a car, but I saw his jaw lift, and I knew that he was smiling.

In my room, I opened the minibar for drinks, but he stopped me, and sat down on the bed. I removed my dress and peeled my underwear to the floor, then knelt down before him. He surveyed me, nonchalant, just as I had hoped that he would.

‘I want you to humiliate me,’ I said.

He swallowed.

Abigail Dean

‘You see,’ I said, ‘it needs to hurt.’

His fingers were twitching. I felt the familiar twinge in my cunt, like a new pulse. I arranged myself on the bed beside him, stomach down, with my head resting on my arms. He stood, came to me, with plans on his face. The turndown service had taken place, I saw, and there were chocolates on the pillow.

When he had left, I ordered room service, and I thought about JP. It was as though he had been waiting for my attention all day, patient and just out of view. One more drink, and I might have called him. I had his work number, which he always answered. I could have been distressed at Mother’s death, alone in Manchester, and with no one else to turn to. ‘And I’ll be in London next week,’ I would say, as an afterthought. ‘Maybe even longer.’

I had heard that he lived in the suburbs now, with a new girlfriend and a small dog. ‘Or a small girlfriend and a new dog,’ Olivia had said. ‘I don’t recall.’ I thought about the day that he left our flat. I had expected that he would rent a van or ask a friend for help, but he fit his belongings into two suitcases and a series of cardboard boxes, and waited on the street for his cab. It was raining, but he refused to come back in, as if the proximity would have made him change his mind. It wouldn’t. There was nothing that either of us could have done to change things. I pulled my legs up to my chest and felt the scars on my knee, the skin smoother there. Then I touched the scars from the other surgeries. My fingers followed their familiar route. The scars were immaculate; in dim light, you couldn’t see them. When I had pointed them out to JP, he was uninterested: ‘I never even noticed them,’ he said, and I liked him all the more for that. No, there was nothing that either of us could have done. To think of something else, I wondered if Evie’s party was over. It was late,

Girl A

and later still where she was. I turned off my light and set an alarm for breakfast.

‘Evie,’ I said. ‘Today’s the day.’

The great expanse of the morning extended ahead of us, flat and barren. I had lived with the strange pain inside of me for many weeks by then, but today it felt worse; the blood smelt different. Then again: it was hard to distinguish that pain from the anticipation, which writhed in my gut like beasts breaking from eggs.

I tested the handcuffs, as I had done every day since Father’s mistake. My left hand slipped through, but my right caught just beneath the knuckles. ‘Is it warmer today?’ I asked. I tried again, but it seemed harder still. My fingers were swelling with the effort. I had another idea: what Ethan, who had once loved to read about the Wild West, would have called a last chance saloon. But this idea was irreversible, and if Father visited us before lunch, I needed to be in chains. I would have to wait.

I listened to Father awaken. His footsteps lumbered slowly down the stairs, and I wondered if we had made a mistake. Perhaps it should be now. Then he was in the kitchen, and I heard the murmurs of early conversation, words interspersed with breakfast and contemplation, and probably some silent prayer. I had long abandoned Father’s God, but still I closed my eyes, and prayed to older, wilder deities. I prayed for a while.

I woke again in the middle of the morning. I had been in a dense, dark place, just beneath the surface of consciousness. Cutlery clattered in the kitchen. The smell of Mother’s baking padded up the stairs and curled on the floor of our room. There were a few scant strings of saliva in my mouth. ‘Your first meal out,’ I said to Evie; this was a discussion which usually escalated fast.

‘Tea at the Ritz?’ I asked. ‘Or the Greek tavern?’

She tucked her legs closer to her chest and coughed, saying nothing, and I noticed the strange appearance of her feet, oversized at the end of each skeletal shin, like the shoes of a clown.

I had learnt not to imagine my parents eating, but this would be the last day, and so I allowed it. They sat hand in hand at the kitchen table. Noah surveyed them blankly from his chair. Mother had made an apple pie, and she stood to slice it. The top was golden, and brushed with sugar, and there were soft dimples in the crust where the fruit had tried to bubble through. The knife caught on the pastry top, and Mother pressed harder. When she broke through, steam and the smell of hot fruit rose around the table. She cut Father’s slice, and served it on a warm plate, and before she helped herself she watched him eating. The crisp pastry and its viscous filling moving around his mouth. She feasted on his pleasure.

That day they had a long lunch, and Noah wouldn’t settle. It was the middle of winter, I guessed, and by the time the living room door clicked closed, the light through the cardboard was dimming. The house was quiet.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘OK.’

Before I could think any more about it, I pulled the chains taut.

My left hand contorted through the metal and came free. Still my right hand was too swollen to squeeze through, however hard I pressed my thumb into my palm.

Last chance saloon.

‘Look away,’ I said to Evie; even after all this time, there were some degradations which I didn’t want to share.

When Delilah was nine or ten, she forced Mother’s wedding ring onto her thumb, and it became stuck. Delilah was rarely in trouble, and I was delighted. I sat in the hallway, at the top of the stairs, and watched events unfold in the bathroom. Delilah

was sitting on the edge of the bath, in tears, and Mother was kneeling before her, running a damp bar of soap between her fingers. With disappointing efficiency, the ring slid over Delilah's knuckle and landed with a tinny chime on the bathroom floor.

I pulled my hand through the metal, right to the sticking point, and started to twist it from side to side. There was already an indentation left from the morning's efforts; the skin there was bruised and close to breaking. I bit down on the sheet and moved faster. Unlike Delilah, I didn't intend to cry. When the skin split, my hand, black-red and wet, grinded through.

I laughed and cradled my arm to my chest. Evie's eyes were frightened, but she smiled, and gave me a thumb-up. I crouched on my bed and reached out into the Territory, searching with my good hand for something hard enough to break glass. My fingers passed through warm, damp patches, and things that seemed to move against them. I recoiled, and swallowed, and kept searching. Old food and small, rotting shoes, and mould on the pages of our childhood Bibles. Everything soft and useless.

Evie pointed, and I froze, expecting Father at the door. She shook her head and pointed again, and I followed her eyes beneath my bed. Underneath it – my whole arm shaking – my fingers closed around something hard. It was a wooden stake, grubby with old blood and its time in the Territory. I looked at it for a moment, remembering why it was there.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes. Perfect.'

I stood up, unsteady, and shuffled to the window. Father had put little effort into securing the cardboard, and the tape which sealed it had started to decay. I eased the last few pieces away, bit by bit, until I was holding the board. 'Ready,' I said, and set it down onto the floor. Light howled into the room. Evie buried her face in her arms. I couldn't turn around and see the room lit by the day. It was time to go. I crossed the Territory; after all of our navigation, it was just three short footsteps to reach Evie's

bed. I took her hand, as I had when we slept in the same bed in the years before, when things hadn't been so bad. She was still motionless: now I could see her spine and the exposed parts of her scalp, and how each breath was a little labour. I knew that once I broke the window, the seconds – our scant seconds, which we had spent so many months planning – would begin to pass.

'I will come back for you,' I said. 'Evie?'

Her hand fluttered in mine.

'I'll see you soon,' I said.

I lifted the wooden stake over my shoulder. 'Cover your face,' I whispered; then the time for quiet was up, and I swung the wood against the bottom corner of the window. It cracked, but it didn't break; I swung it again, harder, and the pane shattered. Downstairs, Noah screamed. Beneath that, I could hear footsteps underneath our room, and Mother's voice. Already, somebody was on the stairs. I tried to brush away the glass on the window ledge, but instead a shard lodged into my palm. There was too much of it, and there wasn't enough time. I hauled one leg onto the ledge, and pulled the other after it, and sat at the window, facing outside. Somebody was at the door; the lock was moving. I had told myself that I wouldn't look down. I pivoted around, and for a moment I was suspended, half inside the room and my legs in the winter air. 'We'll need to lower ourselves,' I had said to Evie, 'until we're hanging, so that we reduce the fall as much as we can.' The door opened, and I saw a flash of Father. The shape of him in the doorway. I let my body drop, but I was too weak to hang like we had planned it, and as soon as my arms locked, I fell.

The grass was wet, but the earth was frozen beneath it. As I landed, something in my right leg collapsed, the way that a building falls in on itself when the foundations are blown. The crunch ricocheted across the garden. I fell forward, and the impact shot the glass further into my hand. The air was too cold to

inhale, and I was crying, I knew. 'God, get up,' I whispered. Slowly, I straightened, and pulled my T-shirt down towards my knees, and there, at the kitchen door, was Mother.

I waited for her to run at me, but she didn't. Her mouth was moving, but I could only hear the blood in my ears. We looked at one another for a long last second, then I turned and ran.

The garden gate was unlocked. I hobbled around the house, holding onto the walls, and then out into the road, following the white markers at its centre. The evening was a cold, dark blue. Here was the neighbourhood I remembered: Moor Woods Road and its quiet houses, each far apart from the next. Windows glowing like shrines in the gloaming. Father would be behind me. I couldn't expend energy approaching a doorway: he would catch me there, before the residents could answer. I could anticipate the precise weight of his hands on my shoulders. I screamed, trying to summon them from their living rooms, from their sofas, from the evening news. Festive lights hung from trees and over front doors, welcoming their inhabitants, and I thought, stupidly: Christmas.

The road curled downhill and my leg buckled, and I veered into the wall at the side of it, grasping at the wet stones. I steadied myself and kept going, in the shadows now, my feet slapping on frozen leaves and winter-long puddles. Pain was seconds away, like coming out of sleep; I was on the brink of it, and once it hit me I wouldn't be able to ignore it again.

I could see the end of Moor Woods Road. Beyond it, about to pass by, was a pair of headlights. I ran straight for them, my hands held up in appeasement, and the driver braked just before she hit me. The car bonnet was warm beneath my palms, and I left rusty handprints where I touched it. The driver was climbing out of her seat in silhouette; she moved tentatively towards me, and into the light. She was dressed in a suit and holding a mobile phone, and she seemed so bright, somehow, and clean, like a visitor from a bold new world.

Abigail Dean

'My God,' she said.

'My name,' I said, 'is Alexandra Gracie—'

I couldn't get the rest of it out. I looked back, up to Moor Woods Road: the street was silent and impassive. I sat down in the road and reached for her, and while she called the police, she let me hold her hand.

I woke once in the night, cold from the air conditioning, and folded the covers across my body. Already it was light outside, but I couldn't hear any traffic. It was nice to wake like this, with many more hours before morning. I would feel better then.

Just as I was falling asleep, my body started. I had been thinking of the fall from the window, fifteen years before. The impact, half dreamed and half remembered. A spectre of pain brushed my knee. Mother at the kitchen door. I rolled over. I stood in the garden in the dim winter dusk, in my sullied T-shirt and nothing else. My leg twisted behind me, like a ball and chain. It would have been so easy for her to stop me. This time, in the dream, I listened; I could hear her over my heart. 'Go,' she said. Further north they were preparing her grave, wielding shovels in the warm, pink dawn so that they could bury her before the sun rose. She said, 'Go.'