

I

The phone call came shortly before midnight on the eve of Corinne's arrival.

Abi lay slumped against her pillows skimming a novel for her book club, wondering when Mark would get home, when the phone in the hall downstairs began its shrill bleat.

Instantly, her thoughts tilted towards the catastrophic. A mugging on his way home. An accident. She swung her legs out of bed and hurried downstairs, anxiety lending an involuntary sharpness to her tone when she picked up the receiver and said: 'Yes, hello?'

It was met with a corresponding silence.

'Is there someone there?' Abi asked sharply, leaning forward to switch on the table lamp, casting a small pool of light over the polished surface. This time she heard something, a swift intake of breath and then a voice she didn't recognize, saying:

'Mrs Holland, I am so sorry to disturb you at this late hour. My name is Valentina Catto.'

Words spoken softly with a foreign inflection; there was a depth to the woman's voice and a slowness to her delivery that lent her some gravity. Abi's thoughts whirred. Catto – she knew the name.

'You're Corinne's mother,' she said quickly.

'That's correct.'

It was almost one a.m. in France. Beth's exchange partner, Corinne, was due to arrive from Tours at lunchtime the next day.

There had been a picture alongside her details – Abi brought it to mind now: a round, blank face, eyes that were a little wide apart, a suggestion of slightly prominent front teeth in the close-lipped smile. ‘She looks like a squirrel,’ Eva had commented, which had caused Beth’s face to darken. But Abi had been reassured by the photograph. The last thing they needed was some sultry Mediterranean beauty with manners and affectations older than her years.

‘I am very sorry,’ Valentina Catto said now, ‘but I don’t think Corinne can come to Ireland.’

‘Has something happened?’

‘I am unsure if it is wise for her to come.’

Again, that low, soft tone, a certain formality in the enunciation. Abi felt herself simultaneously irritated by the flimsiness of the message while at once being drawn in by the voice.

‘I’m sorry to hear that. But surely it’s just nerves? Let me reassure you – and Corinne – that she will be very well looked after while she’s here. Beth has been so excited about this visit; I know she’s been communicating regularly with Corinne. They’ve been making all sorts of plans.’

It was true that they’d been Snapchatting and WhatsApping for weeks.

‘Corinne told me tonight that you have had a bereavement.’

Abi caught herself then, sudden feeling rising in her chest. Melissa had died a few weeks ago and they were still reeling from the shock. Abi wondered how much Beth had told this girl.

‘Yes, that’s true. Beth’s aunt – my husband’s sister – recently passed away,’ she said carefully, pressing her thumbnail into the flesh of her index finger to keep herself steady. Her voice remained level. ‘But that doesn’t have to change things.’

‘It would be wrong – Corinne coming to you when you are grieving.’

‘Really, we are fine. I appreciate your concern, but Beth will be so disappointed if Corinne doesn’t come.’

‘It is not right,’ Valentina went on. ‘Someone close to you has died.’

‘What can I say to reassure you? Yes, Melissa’s death was a shock, but we’re coping. And we feel very strongly that it’s best for the girls if we carry on as normal.’

Still it was there – the pull of hesitation at the other end of the line. Abi couldn’t help but feel that this talk of Melissa’s death was just a ruse. That the real reason behind the woman’s reluctance lay elsewhere.

‘Is there something else, Valentina? Some other reason?’

‘I’m not sure how to explain it.’

Valentina’s voice had lowered to almost a whisper.

‘It’s just a feeling that I have. A thought, oh, how do I say it?’ She gave a little huff of impatience with herself before alighting on the word. ‘Intuition.’

From upstairs, Abi could hear a door opening, footsteps creaking on the landing. She looked up, and saw Beth leaning over the bannister, her face pale in the shadows.

‘Something Corinne told me tonight,’ Valentina went on, ‘it troubled me. She has a good heart, but she is not always reliable in what she says. It made me realize that she’s not ready for this.’

Again, there it was – that push of fear in Abi’s chest. What had Beth told the girl?

‘What’s going on?’ Beth hissed from the top of the stairs, and Abi shook her head and gestured for her to wait.

On the other end of the line, the voice had broken off. Abi could feel the woman’s hesitation, and under the pressure of Beth’s gaze, she found herself saying:

‘Look, Mrs Catto – Valentina – why don’t you sleep on it, both of you. I’m sure once you’ve had a chance to rest, things will feel different. Corinne will have a wonderful time here – all

the exchange kids do. You may rest assured that we will take good care of her,' she added.

'I'm not sure if that's—'

'Please. I promise – everything will work out wonderfully. Why don't you ring me in the morning and we'll see where things stand? Hmm?'

It was a reasonable suggestion, and the other woman softly acquiesced. An instant later, the line went dead.

Abi put the phone down, her mind snagging on those words: *something she told me tonight* . . . But what?

'She's not coming?' Beth asked, interrupting her thoughts.

There was her daughter at the top of the stairs, narrow ankles poking out from the ends of her pyjama legs, hair hanging lank and thin over her shoulders. Abi could hear the note of distress in the question.

'Beth . . .' she said, but the girl had already turned and fled back to her room. After a moment, Abi followed.

Beth's bedroom overlooked the back garden. A second bed had been made up beneath the window for their guest, and as Abi looked around, she noticed other changes to the room. The Jellycat stuffed toys that usually lined the little mantelpiece were gone. So too were the dreamcatchers that had once slowly turned, suspended above the bed. Justin Bieber sulked and preened from the wall above; Billie Eilish on another wall, a tarantula crawling into her open mouth.

'What if she doesn't come?' Beth said. 'What if I'm the only one whose exchange doesn't show up? Everyone already thinks I'm a freak—'

'Shhh, come on now, enough of that. Who cares what people think?' Abi said, adopting the same brisk tone of reassurance that lately she found herself using with all of them – Beth, Mark, Eva.

In the dimly lit room, her daughter's face looked small and

pale, a cross look marring her features. Beth was a worrier. A bed-wetter until the age of seven. An inveterate nail-biter. ‘She really feels her feelings,’ Mark used to say of her. Of their two daughters, Beth was the one that had always inspired the most anxiety within them.

Abi thought for a moment about reaching out to smooth Beth’s hair back from her face, or leaning in to kiss her cheek. But she did neither of these things. Instead, she hung back by the mantelpiece, her thumbnail leaving a crescent-moon indent in the flesh of her finger, as her eyes flickered over Beth’s face, trying to fathom the dark run of her thoughts.

‘It will all be fine,’ Abi reassured her, making her voice bright and as convincing as she could to hide the undercurrent of nerves. Backing out of the doorway, she said: ‘Now get some sleep.’

The next morning Valentina Catto sent a text message that read: *All fine*. Somehow, the curtness of the text was more unsettling than the phone call, but Abi said nothing of how she felt to the others, not even to Mark. When he commented: ‘A bit weird, isn’t it?’ his face sceptical and serious, she brushed it aside saying: ‘I wouldn’t worry about it. Last-minute jitters, that’s all!’ She was accustomed to answering his concerns with breezy dismissals.

When she suggested that he accompany them to the airport, Mark declined.

‘I need to sort out Melissa’s stuff,’ he explained.

‘Liar,’ she retorted. ‘You just don’t want to face the other parents.’ Words said half-jokingly, but she watched to see how they landed, observed the nerve being touched.

The uneasiness stayed inside her as she drove to the airport, the windshield wipers of the Grand Cherokee animated as

the rain splattered down. Beth was in the passenger seat checking her phone for updates.

‘They’ve landed,’ she announced.

Abi glanced across at her daughter. The girl was pale with tiredness, marks of anxiety there in the tight bud of her pursed lips, but it was clear that she had taken some care with her appearance. The old Ramones T-shirt she wore was a favourite, and Abi noticed the touch of lip gloss and the citrusy scent of CK One.

‘Listen,’ Abi said as she pulled the car into a space. ‘Valentina mentioned that you’d told Corinne about Melissa.’

‘Yeah. So?’

‘I was just surprised.’

‘It’s not exactly a state secret, is it?’

‘Of course not.’

Beth was staring out the window, but Abi could feel attentiveness filtering into her silence.

‘I was just wondering what exactly you’d told her, that’s all,’ Abi went on carefully, as she turned off the engine and looked at her daughter. Beth’s jaw tightened, and then she let out a brief frustrated breath.

‘Don’t worry, Mum. I didn’t say anything to cast us in a bad light. God forbid I should shatter the illusion of our perfect family.’

She slammed the door and Abi was left alone for a moment.

Was that what it was? An illusion?

The night’s phone conversation revisited her, and she remembered once more the hesitation in the woman’s voice, the unspoken sense that this girl had her own problems, her own difficulties.

Abi had been so focused on not disappointing Beth, persuading this woman to send her daughter, that it hadn’t

occurred to her there might be risks involved. *Intuition*, Valentina had said. Abi had the sudden thought that they'd made a terrible mistake.

But it was only a fleeting feeling. She had long held the view that nerves were merely a loss of confidence. That fear could be quashed with optimism. She stepped out of the car and pressed the lock. The unease lowered its head beneath the surface once more as she walked away from the car, the cabin light fading to black.

Contrary to what Abi believed, it was not cowardice that held Mark back from going to the airport, but a hangover.

He waited until the Cherokee had pulled out of the driveway before dropping two Solpadeine tablets in a glass of water and retreating to the quiet of his studio, shutting the door behind him. There, he threw himself on to the sofa and closed his eyes, the luxuriant silence of an empty house on a Saturday afternoon wrapping comfortingly around him as he mulled over the night's events.

It had been a long time since he'd been that drunk. There had just been two of them in O'Donoghue's that Friday night – Mark and his old roommate, Andrew, who was in Dublin to shoot a whiskey commercial. Andrew mainly worked on film productions now but, as he explained to Mark, the ad work was regular, not to mention lucrative. 'The money's too good to turn down, you know what I mean?' he'd said.

Yes, Mark knew. But only anecdotally.

The truth was, whenever he met up with Andrew – which was less and less as the years went by – Mark felt himself exposed to a niggling sense of envy. When they had started out together at university, two enthusiastic film students with differing sensibilities, Andrew's interests had lain in animation – Manga and Japanese anime mainly – while Mark was drawn to Eastern European cinema with its dark themes and slow pacing, its preoccupations with memory. Their friends used to joke that one was a fan of Tarkovsky, the

other of Tartakovsky. Regardless of their differences, the friendship had been close, and for a while after university, they had shared a flat, often working on the same productions, both of them as junior designers expected to muck in and complete whatever tasks needed doing from painting the set to fetching sandwiches for the crew when the caterers failed to show up. Exhausting, exhilarating, back-breaking, impecunious – they had been the most exciting years of his life. But then Mark and Abi got together and Andrew had moved to London. Their paths had forked at that point, swerving in different directions.

Now Andrew had his own production design company, his crew working on locations all over the world, involved in film projects that had won BAFTAs and once, an Oscar nomination. Mark was a stay-at-home dad.

‘You’re the lucky one, really,’ Andrew had said. This was after the fourth or maybe fifth pint. ‘A wife, two gorgeous kids, a comfortable home. What I wouldn’t give.’

The travel was exhausting, he said. You got sick of hotel bars and room service. And some of these directors were total pricks. ‘Fucking children throwing tantrums,’ he mumbled, swirling the dregs of his glass.

Mark had believed him, but only up to a point. And besides, while Andrew may have to deal with the odd prima donna, Mark was at home with actual children throwing actual tantrums. It was worse now that they were getting older. Two teenage girls with their fluctuating moods, their maelstroms of hormones. Spots and tears and slamming doors. Broken friendships and exam stress. Their endless needs, requests, demands, with no hotel bar to retreat to at the end of the day. And now there was going to be a third girl – this French exchange student of Beth’s – adding to the hormonal swamp. He’d said as much last night, griping a

little in a self-pitying way, and that's when Andrew had sat up and put his hand on Mark's shoulder, a new seriousness coming into his voice, his demeanour.

'Come and work with me,' he'd said.

'Yeah, right,' Mark had snorted, nodding to the barman. He'd lost track of whose round it was.

'I'm serious, man. Look, there's a shoot coming up in September – a major production. We're talking Canal Plus and FilmFour. Locations in Prague, Italy, London.' Andrew rapped the table with his knuckles, biting his lower lip in a way that was familiar to Mark and signalled his determination. 'I'm sending you the brief. *And* the script. Think about it, yeah?'

At the time, he had allowed himself to get caught up in imagining what it would be like to work on a major project again, an old excitement stirring to life inside him. Now, as Mark lay on the couch, the codeine crawling into his cells, he thought again about the offer, wondered had Andrew really meant it, and even if he was serious, would Mark be able to make things work?

He recalled the agreement made with Abi back in the early days of parenthood. Eva was still in her infancy when Abi's career began to take off, and by the time Beth came along, Mark's career had stalled while Abi's was firmly in the ascendant. It made sense for him to stay at home with the children, and part of him had welcomed it. Once the girls were older and more independent, then he could focus on his work once more. Abi was earning enough to cover their outgoings, and by the time Beth had started school, they were able to sell their starter home and buy the house in Willow Park – their forever home. He was lucky, and the fact was not lost on him. But it was also true that the bargain they'd made had cost him something. He realized now, as his

headache waned, that it was not just work he had given up, but the friendships that had gone with it. Yes, he still had friends, but they were closely connected to his family. His social life revolved around the tennis club and, to a lesser extent, the school. He had no close friendships of his own – one by one, he'd let them slip away. When the Campbells had moved in next door earlier that year, he had hoped that some kind of warmth might develop between him and Ross Campbell. They were both stay-at-home dads, both married to high achievers. But Ross was only interested in cars and rugby. And Mark realized now, thinking back on the hours he'd spent in the pub with Andrew the previous night, how much he missed those close friendships that sprang up on set, the easy camaraderie. For a moment, he considered the possibility that he was lonely.

Just as he was having that thought, his phone sounded with an incoming mail, and when he checked the screen he saw that Andrew had indeed sent him the script and the brief, just as he'd promised. *Read these and get in touch*, he'd typed. Adding: *Brain bleeding through my eye sockets. Hung-over to fuck, you bastard.*

It made Mark smile, warm feelings flushing through him. Two minutes later, he was at his desk, downloading the first document, passing his eyes over the opening pages. He was still there a couple of hours later, when he heard the car pull into the driveway, held fast by the images flashing over the canvas of his brain as he read through the script, as though a part of him that had been asleep for a very long time had just awakened, blinking and stretching in the daylight. Reluctantly, he closed down the documents, and went outside to greet them.

The pink hair was a shock.

Mark found himself staring as he stood on the doorstep, his hands in his pockets, watching as she climbed out of the car and came towards him. Her hair lifted in the breeze, a tuft of pink spun sugar, and there was a goofiness about her as she struggled with her bag, flip-flops tripping over the gravel, laughing at her own awkwardness. Her hand felt warm and clammy when he took it in his, but her face seemed open and clear.

‘You’re very welcome to our home,’ he said after introducing himself, and she giggled at his formality and hooked the strap of her bag – a bright yellow messenger bag, the type usually seen against cycling couriers’ backs – slinging it over one shoulder.

She was small – a good head shorter than him – and when she spoke to return his greeting, he noticed the gaps between her teeth like her gums were too large for her mouth. It made her seem gauche, something endearing in the imperfection.

‘Thank you for letting me come. I am happy to be here.’

There was no evidence of the glasses she had worn in her photograph. The lack of glasses coupled with the pink hair gave the disconcerting impression that a mistake had been made – that Abi had picked up the wrong girl at the airport.

‘How was your journey?’ he asked.

‘It was okay. But I don’t like flying. It is boring, don’t you think?’

He nodded, bemused, then went to the rear of the car to fetch her luggage.

‘Where’s her suitcase?’ he asked, staring at the empty boot.

‘She didn’t bring one,’ Abi replied, the two of them speaking in hushed tones.

‘That’s all she brought?’ he asked, nodding to the messenger bag that rested against her hip.

Abi shrugged. ‘I guess she travels light.’

But Mark found himself assessing her more closely – the frayed ends of her jeans, the hoodie that was probably white once but now looked greyish with wear. The way she stared up at the house with obvious wonder and perhaps a little envy too. He knew that feeling, recognized it instantly as one who had himself grown up feeling desperate, longing to escape to something better – something *normal*.

Poor kid, he found himself thinking. Then he shut the boot and went inside.

In the kitchen, she clapped her hands as she looked around and exclaimed:

‘Oh wow, I love this! Everything is so modern.’

‘I suppose it is,’ Mark said, glancing up briefly as he reheated curry in a saucepan. The rice-cooker was already on.

There was something precocious about her, the type of girl who couldn’t help but draw attention to herself. The shock of her hair – a clouded tuft of candy-floss pink – she kept fingering it as she giggled, delighted with the novelty of it.

‘Everything in your house is so big, so new – everything shiny and bright. It’s a mansion.’

‘I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration.’

He was prickly on the matter of their wealth. When they’d had the kitchen remodelled a year ago, he’d worried about

the cost, pointing out to Abi that they could put the girls through college with the money they were proposing to shell out. 'We can always go to Cash and Carry instead,' she'd suggested. He'd kept his reservations to himself after that.

Over dinner, Corinne chattered animatedly about her home in France – a medieval house situated at a bend in the river Vienne. Description flowed from her of sun-soaked walls and diving kingfishers, lazy afternoons canoeing down the slow-moving river.

'It sounds idyllic,' Abi commented.

'You must come!' Corinne said, seizing on the idea. 'All of you! In the summer!'

'Well, maybe,' Abi said, doubtfully.

'No, really! You must!'

Her vehemence was surprising, the force of her goodwill a little disconcerting. Abi flashed a quick glance at Mark, and then he changed the subject, saying: 'Where did you learn your English, Corinne?'

They had all noticed the fluency and ease of her speech, even though her words were heavily accented.

'We spent a couple of years in Canada when I was younger,' Corinne explained. 'I went to pre-school there.'

'How come?' Mark asked.

She shrugged. 'My mother liked to travel around.'

'For work?'

'Oh no! Val never works. It's not her thing.'

He raised an eyebrow but let that pass.

'So why Canada?' Abi asked. 'Do you have family there?'

'No. It's just somewhere that interested Val at the time. Or maybe she'd met someone from there and got an invitation. I really don't know.'

She dropped the bread on to her plate and leaned back to admire the view of the garden. Mark noticed the curve of

her long, lean neck. The way she spoke of her mother, calling her by her Christian name, jarred with him. She struck him as a child who spent a lot of time in adult company.

‘My sister’s there now,’ she said, brightening as she turned her attention back to the room. ‘She got a place at McGill. She’s studying medicine.’

‘Sounds like a high achiever,’ Mark commented.

‘Oh, Anouk’s really smart. She got a scholarship to McGill. She’s just one of those people – really smart as well as beautiful and talented. Everyone loves Anouk.’ She paused, then her eyes fixed on Eva across the table, and she said: ‘Actually, you remind me of her.’

‘Me?’

Eva, who had barely said a word for the entire meal, looked up, and Mark noticed that as the two girls made eye contact, Corinne’s complexion pinked a little.

‘Yes,’ she said, her voice dropping, shyness coming into her tone as she ventured the opinion: ‘The way you look, the way you dress.’ Her eyes flickering over the grey silk blouse Eva was wearing, her blond hair brushed straight and swept over one shoulder. ‘Like Anouk, you are full of thoughts. Moody.’

Eva’s forehead creased into a slight frown. ‘I’m not moody.’

‘Yes, you are,’ Beth countered.

‘You’re hardly one to talk,’ Eva shot back.

‘I’m sorry. My English,’ Corinne said quickly, becoming a little flustered, ‘I do not always know the right word. I meant you are silent – a listener—’

But Eva was already on her feet. ‘I’m only silent because it’s impossible to get a word in edgeways,’ she observed drily, opening the dishwasher and slotting her empty plate inside.

It was true that Corinne’s chatter had dominated the conversation.

‘Where are you going?’ Corinne asked now, as Eva went to leave.

‘I’m babysitting next door,’ Eva replied, and a swift look of hurt passed over Corinne’s face. A minute later, the front door banged shut and the room filled with an awkward silence.

Mark watched as the girl stared down at her plate, the food untouched. He felt a need to apologize for Eva’s rudeness but it was Abi who broke the silence.

‘Your parents must be very pleased,’ she said.

Corinne looked up, uncertain.

‘About your sister’s scholarship?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, but an air of sulky distraction persisted. He watched her unhappily nudging the rice around her plate.

‘Are there any doctors in your family?’ Abi pressed gently.

Corinne looked at her with confusion. ‘No.’

‘I just wondered if Anouk’s choice of medicine was because—’

‘Valentina was an aid worker, and Guy an engineer. They’re retired now.’

This detail interested him. He wondered how old her parents were. The phone call last night from the mother, and now these allusions to a peripatetic lifestyle; he was beginning to guess at an alternative upbringing – anti-vaxxers, home-schooling, living off the grid.

Mark did not think that Corinne was pretty in a conventional sense; her teeth were too prominent, wide gaps between the incisors, and a suggestion of acne in the chaffed redness of skin that lined the grooves on either side of her nose. The wildness of her pink hair was distracting, but really it was her eyes that drew your attention – short-lashed but a deep granular brown. Corinne turned the fork over in her

hand and lifted her gaze to meet his, and he noted a splash of orange in the iris, a surprising bloom of colour amidst the brown. Eyes that were playful; they held a spark.

‘They are cousins, you know,’ she told them now, ‘my parents.’ The fractional lift of one eyebrow – a challenge there.

Beth’s brow furrowed. ‘Isn’t that like illegal? You know, in case their kids are born with deformities, extra toes and things like that?’

‘I don’t have extra toes.’ She said it mildly, but they all heard the rebuke.

‘No, of course not,’ Beth conceded, and Mark, trying to smooth things over, said:

‘They might be distant cousins, right?’

A delicate pause and then she laughed, her eyes glittering with mischief. ‘I was just joking!’

Mark took a sip of water from his glass, watching her.

‘Really. I was just fucking with you,’ she giggled, and he stifled his discomfort at her casual use of the phrase. He caught the glance that Abi threw at him.

‘I’m surprised you’re even doing an exchange,’ Beth told Corinne. ‘It’s not like you need it.’

She was giving voice to what they all thought.

‘You are sweet to say it,’ Corinne exclaimed, reaching across to briefly wrap her arm around Beth’s shoulders, drawing her close. Mark saw his daughter’s cheeks flush with embarrassment, but Corinne was unperturbed. ‘But my English is not perfect. You will see.’

And it was true that she tripped over the occasional phrase, making funny little mistakes. Like when Mark asked about the phone call from Valentina the night before, hinting at some unexpressed reservation, Corinne had shrugged and said: ‘It was just cold toes.’

‘You mean cold feet,’ Mark said, gently correcting her.

Corinne blushed, putting her hand up to cover her mouth as she laughed, eloquent eyes moving quickly around the table.

‘You see,’ she told them. ‘There is still so much that I have to learn.’

She threw a glance at Mark as she spoke, and at the same time, she reached out and touched his wrist, her hand resting there for a second or two. Something conspiratorial in the gesture, the look, like she was trying to draw him in, which confused him as he’d done nothing to earn it.

He was glad when Abi suggested coffee, grateful for the distraction, attention drawn away from how disarmed he felt.

4

Abi had seen the touch and pretended not to notice.

But after dinner, she followed Mark into his studio, closing the door behind her.

For a moment, she looked about at the detritus gathered there – photograph albums, folders full of tax documents, envelopes stuffed with invoices – the room felt oppressive with her sister-in-law’s death and the whole mess she had left behind. Sitting in one of the armchairs, Abi felt the shock of it all over again: the little grenade Melissa had lobbed at them from the grave. Her thoughts went to that day in the solicitor’s office when the will was read out. At first, she’d thought she’d misheard: that Melissa had left her house to Beth, and Beth alone. Solely and completely. A look of dull confusion had come over Mark’s face. He’d had to ask the solicitor to repeat it.

Beth had always been Melissa’s favourite niece, but to so blatantly reward her while Eva got nothing? Surely, she must have known the trouble such a bequest would stir up in their family?

Eva’s response to the snub had been one of lofty dismissal. ‘I never liked that poky little house,’ she’d announced airily. ‘Beth’s welcome to it. The place gives me the creeps.’

But Beth had said little. She’d just sat there absorbing the information, her face giving little away. Later, when it was just the two of them alone, Mark had said to Abi: ‘She seemed so composed, didn’t she? Almost as if she knew about it already?’

Abi hadn’t responded. But she had noticed an unmistakable coolness hanging in the air now whenever both her

daughters were in the same room together. She knew Mark sensed it too.

‘Have you made any progress?’ Abi asked now.

‘A little.’ Then, sheepishly, he conceded: ‘Actually, that’s not true. I couldn’t face going through all this shit. I was too hung-over.’

‘*Quelle surprise*,’ she remarked, an eyebrow raised in mock-disapproval. ‘So what have you been doing with yourself?’

‘Reading a script.’

‘Oh?’

‘Andrew sent it over. He thought I’d be interested.’ Then he added: ‘Actually, he asked me if I’d come on board with the production.’

‘Really?’ The surprised scepticism leaked into her voice before she could stop it.

‘That wouldn’t be a problem, would it?’

‘No.’

‘We always said that once the girls were old enough—’

‘Of course—’

‘And when we had this extension built, and you suggested I use it as my studio, I assumed that meant you’d be happy for me to get serious again about—’

‘Mark, it’s fine. You don’t need to persuade me. I think it’s great that you’re thinking about work again. Really.’

This was only partly true. Yes, she wanted him to feel happy and fulfilled. But selfishly, she couldn’t help thinking of how his revived interest in his career would affect her life. It all seemed so precariously balanced – she was afraid how this might tip things over.

Her glance flickered distractedly over the shelves where some of his old model sets were displayed.

‘What do you think of her?’ she asked after a moment. ‘Corinne.’

‘She seems nice enough. Friendly. Confident.’

‘Her English is excellent,’ she remarked, adding: ‘It makes me wonder why she’s even here.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘I don’t know. I mean, I thought it was a good idea, this exchange. But now, I just wonder if it’s too soon.’

‘It’s a bit late to have doubts, Abi.’

‘True.’ When she spoke again, it was in a lowered voice. ‘If you’d seen Beth at the airport – my God, the anxiety. So pale and worried.’

‘She gets anxious about these things. So what? She seems fine now.’

‘No one spoke to her. None of the girls in her class.’

‘Not even Lisa?’

Lisa had been Beth’s best friend since kindergarten. At least she had been until ‘the incident’ as they kept referring to it, for want of a better term.

‘They didn’t even look at each other,’ Abi admitted now.

At the airport, Abi had chatted to her friend, Irene Ferguson – Lisa’s mother – while they’d waited at Arrivals. All the while they were talking, Abi had kept an eye on the group of girls hovering by the gates. It was such an awkward age, fourteen. Some of these girls still looked like children, and yet others had breasts and hips and attitude to go with it. If what was spoken about today’s teenagers was to be believed, then a lot of these girls were already drinking and smoking. Some of them might be sexually active or experimenting with drugs. It was frightening, the stuff parents were warned about these days: cyber bullying and self-harm. Sharing indecent images of themselves with their peers. Paedophiles lurking in chatrooms. Suicide ideation. They were just kids. Why were they in such a hurry to grow up?

Lisa had stood alongside Sasha Harte and Nicole Nash,

showing them something on her mobile phone. Abi observed the tight little triumvirate they had formed. Sasha with her arched brows, sweeping her hair over one shoulder and making some comment out of the side of her mouth. Nicole, small-eyed, sneaky, her hand moving to cover a mouth full of braces as she giggled at Sasha's aside. And Lisa – mild-mannered, waifish, thin brown hair and sad eyes – Abi had known this child since she was four years old. All those years Beth and Lisa had spent going in and out of each other's houses, it seemed to Abi as if Lisa was almost as familiar to her as her own children. It pained her to see Beth – pale, copper-haired, freckled – standing alone, not talking to anyone, a distance between her and the others. Abi had felt a push of silent alarm.

'Have you talked to Irene about it?' Mark asked now, drawing her attention back to him.

'I've tried to, but she keeps being evasive. Whenever I bring it up with her, trying to find out if she knows what actually happened between them, she just says something non-committal about how flakey teenage girls can be and how they'll work it out between themselves eventually.'

'Maybe she's right. Maybe they will patch it up themselves, in time.'

'I sense that Irene feels embarrassed by it all. That she doesn't want Lisa hanging out with Beth after what happened at the school. Has Craig ever mentioned anything to you?'

'No.'

Mark sometimes had a pint with Craig at the tennis club, and occasionally they paired up for doubles. But Abi knew Mark didn't trust Craig, that he regarded him as shady. Rumours swirled about Craig's business dealings, his links to Nicky Kehoe, a major gangland criminal. And while Abi was prepared to turn a blind eye, a lasting distrust lingered between the two men.

‘She must have some friends, surely?’ he asked, a nudge of irritation mixed with worry sounding in his voice.

‘I can’t remember the last time she’s had a friend home. There’ve been no invitations to parties or sleepovers. The other girls go to discos – I read about it on the mums’ WhatsApp group – but Beth doesn’t go. I look at Eva, all the friends she has – she’s hardly ever home—’

‘That’s hardly fair, Abi,’ he said, exasperation leaking into his tone. ‘You can’t expect Beth to behave like Eva – they’re completely different people.’

‘I know that.’

‘You’re always holding Beth to Eva’s standard and I just don’t think that’s right.’

‘No, I don’t,’ she said, affronted, and he seemed to pull back then, softening his tone.

‘Things will change,’ he said. ‘Kids do this – girls especially. One minute you’re out of favour, next minute you’re back in.’

‘It’s been a year, Mark.’

‘Yeah . . . well.’

‘Sometimes I think we did the wrong thing, leaving her in that school.’

‘It was your idea that she stay there, remember? You were the one who went and sweet-talked Helen Bracken into keeping her.’

She shot him a look. The accusation was there in his tone.

Most of the time Abi could convince herself that what had happened – what Beth had done – was just a blip. It was only when she was confronted with Beth among her peers – or rather not among them, but standing off to one side, head bowed, scanning her phone, while the other girls made jokes among themselves, giggling and fingering each other’s hair and jewellery in the easy tactile way of teenagers – it was only then that Abi heard the alarm ringing inside her head.

She thought about admitting this now to Mark, but at that moment there came a burst of laughter from upstairs and both of them looked up instinctively.

‘If this girl can be a friend to Beth,’ Mark said after the laughter died away, ‘then I don’t care how good or bad her English is, or what her reasons are for coming. Perhaps it will be the best thing that ever happened to Beth.’

‘Yes, perhaps,’ Abi replied. But her voice sounded weak and unconvincing, even to herself.

Beth couldn't take her eyes off the girl. The candyfloss hair, the ease with which she moved beneath Beth's avid gaze. It was like an exotic bird had suddenly landed inside the bedroom, making everything around her look drab and grey.

They were at an age where assessing each other's appearance was instinctive – irrepressible – but Corinne conveyed little interest in studying Beth, and if she was bothered by Beth's attention, she didn't show it. She touched the keyboard of the laptop, and Beth's eyes travelled to her fingertips – nails that were bitten down, the stubs painted a deep purple.

'This is yours?' Corinne asked, surprised.

It was a silver iMac, gleaming with newness.

'My mum got it for me. She gets like a special discount through her office.'

Beth tried to sound nonchalant. She didn't want to get into a conversation about the row that had erupted the day she came home from school and found her old computer was gone. Tearful protests over the loss of documents, photographs that she'd saved, privacy breached. Abi, tight-faced, had looked at her and said in a low voice: 'It's for the best, Beth. You know that as well as I do.' And as she'd moved to leave the room, Abi had paused at the door, taken by a sudden ferocity, and hissed at Beth: 'My God, you should be *thanking* me!'

Disturbed by the memory, she looked down quickly, but Corinne didn't seem to notice. Impetuously, she kicked off

her flip-flops and hopped up on to the bed. Leaning into the poster of Justin Bieber, she kissed his pouting lips, turning to look back at Beth, her face shining with mischief, before jumping down off the bed again.

Beth liked the way Corinne laughed. And she liked the way Corinne moved around the room, so sure of herself, a liveliness within her mannerisms, the busy way her attention flitted from one thing to another. It made her think of Lisa – not because Corinne and Lisa were alike, but because they were so different. Lisa was always quiet, thinking her big, deep thoughts. ‘She’s like a nun-in-training or something,’ Eva had once remarked. ‘A fucking postulant.’ But Beth had loved that about Lisa: the quality of her stillness, her grace. It made Beth feel calm. Lately, whenever Beth thought about Lisa, it was the loss of her gentle serenity that hurt the most. She missed her friend.

Corinne was different. To be near her was to feel excitement, the lick of an electric current, the fizz and jolt of her personality lending a charge to the air.

She was at the wardrobe now, briskly looking through the clothes that hung there. Most of the clothes were Eva’s cast-offs that Beth couldn’t bring herself to wear, the rest a boring selection of jeans and tracksuits, everything shapeless and muted, like she was trying to make herself disappear. Corinne plucked a dress from a hanger and held it up for inspection. It was a green satin slip that Beth hadn’t the courage to wear.

‘Anouk has a dress just like this,’ she said.

Beth didn’t answer because at that moment, Corinne pulled the T-shirt she’d been wearing over her head, and yanked down her jeans, and Beth found herself staring at the thin body exposed to her, alert to the blue underwear, silky bra-straps cutting through tanned skin. There was a shrugging carelessness to Corinne, like she was unaware of her

exposure as she reached for the dress. It made Beth twitchy with envy and longing.

The satin rippled as the slip fell over Corinne's body.

'What do you think?' she asked.

'Beautiful,' Beth breathed.

Corinne was hunting around now for her smartphone.

'Here,' she said, handing it over. 'Take a picture of me.'

Corinne pressed herself against the wall, drawing one leg up so the sole of her foot rested against the skirting board, her chin tilted up, her face unsmiling. Impressed by the readiness of her pose – the *professionalism* – Beth took the photograph. But when Corinne examined it, she frowned, displeased.

'I look fat. Take it again.'

She altered her pose, changed the angle of her face. Still it wasn't right. After five attempts, she was satisfied.

'I will Instagram it,' she announced, her thumbs flickering rapidly over the screen.

'You can keep the dress if you like,' Beth offered shyly. 'I'm never going to wear it.'

'Why not?'

'It's just a bit . . . I dunno, revealing or something. I'd feel too exposed.' She ducked her head, aware she was blushing again.

'It would look cute on you. The green colour with your hair.'

But Beth hated her copper-coloured hair. Just as she hated her pale freckled skin and her teeth that still felt furry and strange since the braces had been removed barely a month before. She hated her stupid body with its flesh bulging in all the wrong places, her ugly feet, her sloping shoulders and flat chest.

'Anouk used to tell me what to wear,' Corinne said then. 'For a whole year, it was a game we played. Every day, she

would pick my clothes for me. And it didn't matter what she chose, how silly or unsuitable for the weather – I had to wear what she picked.'

Beth frowned. 'Didn't that annoy you? Giving up control like that?'

'No! It was liberating!' Corinne laughed. Her whole face lit up when she laughed. 'To not have to choose – to not have to worry what people would think.'

Beth thought of Sasha and Nicole and some of the other girls at school. The way they scrutinized what everyone wore, allocating points based on your appearance. That stupid *Outfit Of The Day* group they'd started on WhatsApp and now everyone in the class was on it. Everyone except for Beth.

'Hey, we should play that game!' Corinne announced, suddenly seizing on the idea. 'Why not? Every day, while I am here, I shall choose your outfit and you can choose mine!'

'I don't know,' Beth said, uncertain.

But Corinne was already flicking hangers across the rail, scanning the clothes in the wardrobe before seizing on a bib-shirt Abi had bought for Beth last Christmas, hard fold-marks from the packaging still visible through the cotton.

'Here. Put this on,' Corinne instructed, waiting with the hanger dangling from a crooked index finger.

Beth felt seized with indecision. She baulked at the idea of shedding her clothes under Corinne's watchful eye. But it had been so long since Beth had brought a friend up here to her room – over a year. Whenever her parents asked if she wanted to bring Lisa back to the house for pizza or a movie, she made excuses. But now, under Corinne's steady gaze, she felt the hard carapace of her defences begin to melt.

Head down, she took off her T-shirt, clutching it in a ball against her chest while Corinne took the shirt from the hanger and placed it over Beth's head. She pushed her arms

into the sleeves and reached to loosen her hair from beneath the collar, and as she did, she felt a hand go to her neck, the lightning touch of a finger trailing over her skin. She jumped aside as if she'd been burned.

'What?' Corinne asked.

Beth stood there with her hand clamped hard across the back of her neck. 'Don't touch that.'

'What is it?'

'Nothing.'

'Let me see it.'

Corinne was coming towards her now and Beth backed away.

'Please don't.'

Corinne moved quickly, one hand reaching for Beth's arm and pulling her around, the other hand plucking at the neck of Beth's shirt.

'Hey!' Beth shouted, alarmed by the sudden move and taken aback by the girl's strength, the shock of this physical contact. Corinne's grip was strong, and Beth felt herself pinned against the desk, unable to shake free.

'It's just a scar,' Corinne announced, sounding disappointed. She released her grip and Beth turned around quickly to face her, heart beating fast, sweat on her back. She felt the French girl's proximity; the curl of her smile seemed teasing.

'I don't like people touching it,' Beth said quickly. She couldn't say why she felt so alarmed, tears threatening to spring in her eyes.

'How did you get it?'

'An operation when I was twelve. I had scoliosis.'

'What?'

'My spine grew curved.' She gestured with her hands to demonstrate. 'They had to put metal pins in my back to straighten the curve and to make sure it grew properly.'