

Between school and home lies a path through the woods. It's Friday afternoon and the sun falls from a cloudless blue sky. It's baking hot. No hint of wind. We're alone on the narrow path. But in my gut, I get that nervy feeling. A darkening. Something, hidden in the trees, is following me.

'I had that dream again last night,' I tell Bea to distract myself.

'No kidding? The same one?'

'Yeah. Kinda. I woke and found myself in an empty house. I stepped out on to the street and the whole place was deserted. Everyone had vanished . . .'

I don't have the courage to tell her the rest – a new part of the dream. The tall, spider-like creature I saw moving among the bombed-out buildings of a desolate city.

We hit a thorny stretch of the path, crossing a park in the heart of London, cut off from the clamour. I feel dizzy in the heat. Bea leaps up, fluid and light, snaps off a dead

tree branch, lands and dances forward, swinging the stick like a sword.

‘I can interpret the dream, if you like,’ she says.

‘No you can’t.’

‘Easy.’

‘Fine. Go for it.’

‘It’s panic,’ Bea says.

‘*What?*’

‘Blind panic you’ll never find *The One*. Always be alone. Always searching.’ She laughs and stabs the air. ‘Got Anaïs Moon written all over it.’

Anaïs Isabel Moon. Me. But, to everyone other than Bea (for reasons of her maverick lawlessness), I’m just Ana. Three letters. Two syllables. A palindrome. I was born abroad, in Paris. The Old Man and Frankie were studying at the Sorbonne. Frankie, Business. The Old Man, Arts. They were both in a phase – experimenting.

We pass under the eaves of a hunkered oak, its branches like arms, wide and bent, and here the path is walled in by nettles and thorns. Something moves, at the edge of my vision, in the shadowy green. A figure? The sprawl of wings?

I spin round. See nothing.

It’s back again – that raw, uncomfortable feeling, a sense of being watched. It quickens my step, plays a drumbeat of dread in my heart.

‘Hey, what’s the rush?’ Bea says, matching my pace.

I shake off the weirdness and look at her, at all the nuances that make her *Bea*. The tiny dot on her nose where the ring gets replaced. Dyed-black hair, just so, in a deep V over her left eye. A pity, if you ask me, because her eyes are startling.

‘God, this heatwave,’ she says, tugging a button loose. ‘It’s *September*.’

‘Bea . . . do you think we’ll always be friends?’

She stops, looks at me. ‘Are you literally crazy? What brought *that* on?’

‘Nothing. It’s just –’

‘Put it this way, Moon. You’ll be the one walking me down the aisle for weddings number one, two *and* three.’

‘Only three?’

She walks on. ‘The fourth, fifth and sixth will be in Vegas, baby. And, if I’m in the mood, the seventh might even be you.’

‘Right. Good to know.’

‘Point is, of course we’ll always be friends, you idiot. In what world could you desert someone as charismatic and amazing as me?’ She looks at the path ahead. ‘But you want the truth?’

‘Always.’

She turns to me. Smiles. ‘Truth is I’d go to the ends of the earth for you, Moon. Wanna know why?’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’d do it for me too. If I was mad and lost, you’d pull me back from the brink you would. That’s who you are.’

‘You make it sound easy.’

‘Make *what* sound easy?’

‘Knowing who you are. I never know who I’m supposed to be.’

‘All that back and forth between Frankie and your Old Man getting to you?’

She’s got one of those minds, Bea – quick-fire, straight to the point.

‘Sometimes I feel like I’m lost in the middle, you know?’

‘Yeah. I know.’

‘And Zig makes the whole thing harder. I mean, I thought it’d get easier. That, at some point, it would just . . . make sense. I’d forget everything before.’

‘But you don’t,’ Bea says. ‘You never forget. It changes you.’

‘I’m one person with her,’ I say. ‘Someone else with him.’

Bea looks away. Shadows fligree her skin. Eventually, she nods, and I can’t tell if she’s agreeing with me or just acknowledging my point of view, until she says, ‘Hey, at least you get the option.’ And the air punches out of me.

‘I’m sorry, Bea . . . I didn’t –’

‘Forget it, Moon. Bygones.’

My family moved from Paris back to Bristol when I was two, but I have no memory of this. The idea was to give me English schooling, which Frankie considered a vital academic stepping stone to an autonomous life. The Old Man thought it was a load of crap. Then, when Bristol’s work opportunities dried up, we moved to London. The marriage dissolved a year later. But it was rotten and

badly formed from the start (obviously). The Old Man living in the closet, *that* didn't help. Plus Frankie's affairs. I was ten. My world had been perfect: the River Severn, the smallness of Bristol, trips to Wales and Cornwall. When I was thrown into the Big Smoke, I sank. Until Bea arrived.

She moved down to London from Northumberland and was full of edges and stubbornness and we looked at each other on her first day in class and we clicked.

Then her father died. As quick as a sentence, he was gone. Afterwards came the disbelief. Then the struggle to make sense of it. And, while Bea and Mrs G. argue about most things, they agreed when it came to the sudden loss of Avi Gold. He had deserted them. Their way of making sense of it – blaming him. I didn't judge.

Bea and I bonded over hurt and books and film, anything to sweep away reality. We conspired against all things messed up, corrupt and wrong in the world.

We were outsiders, on the outside of every side.

We were best friends.

'Look,' Bea says now. 'Maybe you're not *meant* to be anyone. Maybe you're just, you know, meant to *be*. Live in the now and all that.'

'Maybe,' I say. 'But *sometimes* I wish I could just flick a switch and make everything go back to the way it was before. Back to normal.'

Bea pulls a face and drags her hair across her forehead, then she bends the stick between her thumbs until it snaps.

‘I read the craziest shit online the other day,’ she says, flinging the remnants into the scrub. ‘Imagine this. You’re standing in a room with a baby.’ She glances at me from under that dark shank of hair. ‘Same age as your brother.’

‘*Half*-brother.’

‘And this baby, you know for a fact, is Adolf Hitler.’

‘What?’

‘At least, he’ll grow into Adolf Hitler. Now, what if I told you there was no comeback if you killed the baby? No repercussions. You wouldn’t be tried and you wouldn’t go to jail. So, the question is this: would you do it? Would you kill Hitler?’

‘Are you taking the piss? Would I kill *Hitler*?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s hypothetical. It can’t happen. It’s a paradox.’

‘*Clearly*, it’s hypothetical. But humour me. The baby, we can take as a given, *is* Hitler. He *will* go on to murder millions of people. *My* people.’

‘It doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Would you do it, Moon? That’s the issue. We’re not debating plausibility.’

I imagine myself in the room. I see the baby in his cot laughing, kicking his pudgy legs. I think about Zig. And I can’t. I *can’t*. But then I give the baby a perfect little Hitler moustache and my resolve hardens. Darkness stirs in me.

‘Yeah. I would. I’d kill him.’

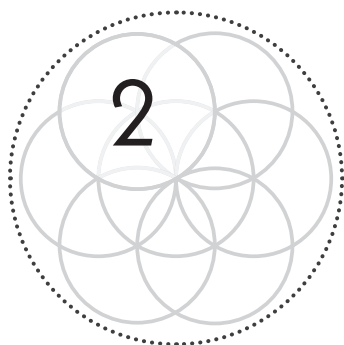
Bea smiles and nods. She says nothing.

‘Is that the right answer?’

‘There are no right or wrong answers,’ she says, kicking at the nettles.

We walk in silence, considering this. Then we stop dead. The sky is clear. The heat thick on my skin. Someone is on the path ahead. And, in my bones, I know . . .

This. Will. Hurt.



Erika Jürgen. A year above us, two years older. Flame-red hair and a wicked temper. She blocks the path in front of three shoulder-to-shoulder girls who look skittish. Louella Caden, Zoe Pierce, Evin O’Keefe. Two have their phones out already, filming. Meaning it’s no accident they’re here. They planned this. A bird, I don’t know what kind, cries and a shadow flits over the path. I feel Bea bristle next to me and the urge to turn and run is fierce – it’s primal. But we don’t.

‘Well, well, well,’ Erika says, grinning, sauntering towards us. ‘Look what the universe has gone and coughed up.’

It’s been building, this fight. Last week, they cornered Bea in the changing room. Someone spat a derogatory comment at her, which wasn’t smart. Bea doesn’t back down. It escalated quickly, ended only with a teacher intervening.

‘Hurrying home to Mummy and Daddy?’ Erika says in a sing-song voice.

The other girls snicker in solidarity. We say nothing.

‘Oh, that’s right. I forgot.’ She’s warming up, enjoying this. ‘Gold doesn’t *have* a daddy, does she? My bad.’ Hysterical laughter. Slaps on the back.

‘Shut up, Erika!’ I can’t stop myself – the words blaze out.

I sound panicky.

‘Oh, don’t get me started on *you*, freakshow.’ She pouts and runs a hand suggestively over Zoe Pierce’s cheek. ‘Daddy still a fruit?’

Her minions double over, like it’s the funniest joke ever.

Bea lets go a sigh. ‘Jürgen,’ she says, her voice quiet. ‘D’you have any idea what they’ll say about you when – *if* – you leave school?’

The laughter dies. Erika’s face blooms red. ‘You better watch it, Gold. Whatever you’re gonna say, be very, very careful.’

Bea smiles. ‘You understand the question, though, right?’

Erika says nothing. Her eyes slide from me to Bea, momentarily off balance, a boxer recouping from an unanticipated, lightning-fast jab.

‘It’s binary,’ Bea says. ‘Yes or no. Either you understand or you don’t.’ She looks unafraid and I can’t tell if she’s acting relaxed or if it’s real.

Erika takes a step towards us. I feel a spurt of anxiety. The trees seem to crowd the path.

‘They’ll say,’ Bea continues, blithely unaware of my fear, ‘absolutely nothing. You’ll disappear, like a fart into the ether. You’ll be forgotten.’

*

Dr Alice Augur leans back into her leather chair, which is ergonomic and stylish. She's slim, in her late thirties. She's wearing designer glasses and a sharp black knife of a dress. Ruby garnets at her throat, like drops of blood. 'Why not turn back?' she says in a calm, smooth voice.

I shake my head. 'Delaying the inevitable. They'd have been on to us the next day. There are rules. Someone calls you out, you face them.'

'I see. And this feeling of someone following you, I assume it was them?'

'Erika and the others? No. It wasn't them.'

Dr Augur steeples her fingers. 'Someone else?'

'I can't say.'

'Can't or won't?'

'Take your pick.'

'I'm on your side, Ana. I'm here to help.'

'Are you?'

Dr Augur lifts a pen and wobbles it between her fingers. 'Ana, you can trust me. Tell me what you saw. In the trees, following . . . if it wasn't the other girls . . . then, in your opinion, what was it?'

'In my *opinion*?'

'Yes.'

A rhombus of sunlight falls across Dr Augur's desk. I shift in my seat and stare at a pair of framed photographs. A man – intellectual-looking, darkly handsome. Two laughing kids at Euro Disney. The perfect family.

Dr Augur rolls her pen. 'This is a safe place, Ana. Nothing can hurt you here.'

‘Not true. You’re trying to get inside my head. *That* hurts.’

Dr Augur gazes at me, the epitome of cool. Uncrackable.

‘All right,’ I tell her. ‘But, remember, you asked for this.’

She opens her palms to me, an invitation to proceed.

‘There are things,’ I tell her. ‘I don’t know what they are. I don’t know where they’re from. But they’re coming for me. I feel it. And they’re getting closer.’

‘Things?’ She glances round the room.

‘That’s right.’

‘That . . . aren’t from here?’

‘No.’

‘OK. Go on.’

‘They’re watching me. I see them all the time.’

Dr Augur frowns. ‘You believe people are following you?’

‘Not people. I told you, *things*. They were there, before the fight. In the trees.’

‘I see,’ she says, as much to herself as to me. I imagine the cogs in her brain twitching and turning. ‘And . . . are they menacing?’

‘Some are. I feel the danger pouring off them. Others seem more . . . I don’t know, benevolent. As if they want to warn me.’

‘Warn you about what?’

I shrug and squint out of the window at a bright blue, sun-baked London – city of a thousand cranes – a half-made place, eternally under construction.

‘I saw one on the way here,’ I tell her.

‘Oh?’

‘It was on the other side of the road. I couldn’t make out its face – it was blurred and sort of indistinct. Its body was more a shadow than physical.’ I’m aware, as I say this, how ridiculous it must sound to her. But I know what I saw. ‘It was just standing there, facing me. Even though I couldn’t see its eyes, I knew it was looking at me. Then a bus shot past and it was gone. It vanished.’

Dr Augur adjusts her glasses. ‘I see.’

‘You always say that. But you *don’t* see. You don’t believe me.’

She looks at me squarely. ‘I believe you’re very clever, Ana. Few of my young patients would use a word as particular as “benevolent”. I also believe in the mind’s extraordinary power. That, if you want something to be real, then –’

‘Look, why do we even have to do this?’

‘We don’t,’ she says, raising her shaped eyebrows, scribbling something down on the notepad on her desk. ‘You’re welcome to leave now and we’ll tell your parents to fetch you and inform the school you’re not inclined to return.’

‘That’s a joke . . . What are you writing?’

‘My notes, Ana.’

‘You’re telling them I’m not normal, right?’

Dr Augur looks up from the tight scrawl on her notepad (spidery handwriting that’s impossible to read upside down). ‘Define normal,’ she says.

‘You only say that because you’re a shrink.’

‘Psychologist.’

‘Same difference.’

An uncomfortable quietness settles on the room. Dr Augur spins her pen on the desk, between thumb and forefinger. It bobbles like the dial of a compass.

‘I’m lost,’ I say finally. ‘That’s what you’re writing down.’

‘Is that what you think?’

I clench my hands between my knees. Say nothing.

‘All right,’ she says, putting the pen aside. ‘Let’s come back to the figures later. First, I want you to tell me what happened with Erika and Bea. And don’t leave anything out. Be specific. It’s important we acknowledge everything. OK?’

I sigh and slouch back in my chair, a kind of scooped Scandinavian minimalist thing – comfortable enough to relax in, but not enough to let you fall asleep.

I stare at the wall clock over the door, willing the hands to accelerate.

Dr Augur watches me. ‘Ana,’ she says. ‘What exactly happened?’

Erika surges forward. But Bea, light on her feet and laughing, dances out of the way, causing Erika to stumble, swinging her fists, red-faced with rage. Bea, cool as you like, taunts Erika, beckoning her to come after her again. Which I figure is tempting fate, because Erika looks set to murder someone. It then becomes apparent that *someone* means *me*. Instead of going after Bea, she turns and she looks in *my* direction.

And, like a bulldozer, she comes.

Next thing I know she's got me pinned up against a tree. It happens fast. Before I can react, her hand is at my throat and I can't breathe and I'm seeing dots and Erika is staring at me, stony-faced and contemptuous.

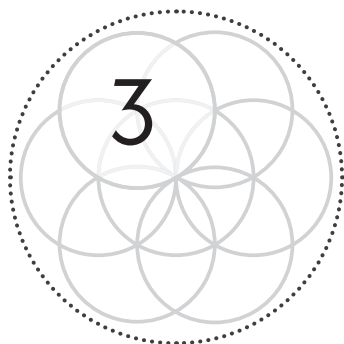
I'm powerless. Trapped.

Then Erika's eyes go as wide as plates and she jerks backwards.

It's Bea – she's pulling Erika off me and then she's hitting her and hitting her and hitting her and I'm falling and, at the edges of my vision, everything bends. The light changes colour. It turns silvery and then blue, and then it vibrates.

No.

It shimmers.



A dream. A stupid dream. I'll wake up and everything will go back to the way it was. But the world doesn't work that way. Sometimes things just happen and, like *that*, nothing is the same. I lie on my bed and chart a pattern of sepia water stains on my ceiling, like clusters of faraway planets.

It was agreed – by the headmistress, Mrs Tsukishima, and the board – that, to protect the school's reputation, only suspension would suffice. A month. Served to both Bea *and* me. Readmission hinging on one proviso: Psychological Evaluation.

One week down so far, one to go.

My phone buzzes.

Moon! You OK?

Barely.

F**kin parental won't let me see you.

Mine either. You're banned.

Lol. Been to the shrink yet?

Once. You?

Same. It sucked.

‘ANA!’ Frankie, downstairs, yelling up at me to get moving.

‘All right! All right!’ I yell back. My thumbs fly over the screen.

Bea, I gotta talk to you.

Me too.

I think I’m losing it.

You’re not losing it.

She’s still in hospital.

Only been a week.

I’m switching today. Off to the Old Man’s. I can

sneak out. You?

Of course. The Usual?

Done.

Downstairs, Frankie’s back is turned. She’s brewing her morning coffee with her keep-your-damn-hands-off-my-state-of-the-art-Italian-espresso-machine. It’s Sunday. She’s in her suit, despite the heat. Ziggy is at the kitchen table in his high chair, flicking mashed banana with a spoon. In the corner of the kitchen, the telly blares out a depressing news story.

POLICE GIVE UP HUNT FOR MISSING TEEN.

I slump into a seat opposite Zig.

Frankie swivels round, espresso cup in hand.

OK, I'll admit it: she looks good for forty-five. I've seen men stop in the street to leer at her toned legs (courtesy of Seb, her Pilates trainer) and it never fails to creep me out. Francis, aka Frankie Solana – her readopted maiden name. Early in her banking career, she was identified as a bona fide investment wunderkind. The move to London was a career thing – a haul up the corporate ladder.

'How'd you sleep?' she says.

'Fine.'

'No nightmares?'

'As a matter of fact, I dreamed I was living with a family in Australia. In the outback. We were hunted by dingoes and crocodiles and killer snakes.'

'Sounds terrifying.'

'I loved it.'

She takes a sip. 'So you're seeing Dr Auger again tomorrow?'

Cuts to the chase does Frankie.

'Do I have a choice?'

Frankie moves to the stove. The ingredients are prepped and waiting in glass bowls: chives, eggs and grated cheese. She's making omelettes and I know what they'll be like – runny in the centre, burned brown at the edges.

'I don't get it,' she says, cracking an egg.

'What's to get?'

'Your school isn't free, Ana. And who's paying for that girl's private medical bill? *You?* Your *father?* But you

don't think about that, do you? The universe only exists for you.'

'So . . . you're saying I'm a solipsist?'

'A *what?*'

'A person who believes only the self exists or can be proved to exist. So the world, and everything in it, is just an invention of their subconscious mind. Technically, that makes you a figment of my imagination. I made you up, Frankie.'

She shakes her head, works the spatula. 'If only you applied that brain. You're a straight-A student, Ana. And now you're getting into *figh*ts?'

'We didn't start it.'

'*We*. That Beatrice Gold.'

'She saved my arse, Frankie. If it wasn't for her –'

'A girl's in *hospital*, Ana. Shattered collarbone, broken nose, you name it. I mean, really! Sometimes I don't know who you are any more.'

Frankie sighs. The pan sizzles.

'I take it you're not offering me a lift,' I say.

'I don't have time,' Frankie says. 'This one's important.'

'Right.' I watch Zig's attempt to squeeze out of his high chair. Fifteen gargantuan years lie between us. That and a different surname. *Ziggy Thorn*.

'I've been working on it for months,' Frankie says. 'You know that.'

'Yeah, yeah. I get it.'

Ziggy worms out of the chair's harness and now he's a few short moves from cracking his skull open on the

hard marble floor. I stand and mooch round the table, shove Zig upright in the chair, clip him in properly and return to my seat.

Flip. Scrape. Flip. Frankie sees nothing of this.

‘You act like you got the worst deal in the universe,’ she says.

‘Where’s the proof I didn’t? It’s logically and mathematically possible I *did* get the worst deal. Someone must have. Why not me?’

‘I give up. I really do.’

‘Well, now you know where I get it from.’

‘This is your father’s fault.’

‘Can’t argue with that. It *could* be the Old Man’s fault.’

The Old Man. Michael Moon. Aka Dad – which, if Moon legend is anything to go by, I’ve declined to call him from birth.

Frankie swivels and drops a plate down in front of me (more emphatically than necessary, if you ask me) and here’s the omelette (runny in the centre, brown at the edges). Frankie picks up her espresso cup and takes a neat, controlled sip. ‘You’re welcome,’ she says. She looks slick in her suit, but also a little baffled and sad. She glances at her watch and downs the espresso, goes to Zig and kisses him on the cheek and ruffles his hair. For a second, I feel like an intruder watching a stolen moment between mother and child. There’s an easy tenderness in the way she looks at Zig that stings. She unclips him and lifts him into the air and Zig laughs. Frankie carries him

outside the room and I hear a brief exchange in the corridor. The nanny.

Frankie returns – alone. And I swear she almost looks guilty.

She sweeps up to me and her hand finds my shoulder. ‘Ana . . .’

‘I’m fine. Just go.’

‘I love you, Ana. You know that, right?’

‘I know.’

‘You could tell me the same thing.’

‘I could.’

She sighs. ‘Whatever this is, I don’t pretend to understand it, but I’m here. OK? I’m your mother, regardless of this Frankie charade. Your *mother*.’

I say nothing, let myself become petrified, as hard as wood.

‘We’ll get through this,’ she says. ‘Together. We’re a family. Maybe not a normal one. But then . . . well, maybe there’s no such thing.’

As always, she smells of expensive leather, strong coffee and, weirdly, chocolate, despite never touching the stuff (bad for the perfectly toned abs). She stands next to me, hand still resting on my shoulder – just sitting there.

‘I’ll see you next week,’ she says. ‘OK?’

‘Fine.’

‘Are you going to wish me good luck?’

‘Who has a meeting on a Sunday?’

‘It’s an informal meeting.’

‘Right. Well . . . good luck.’

‘Can you say it like you mean it?’

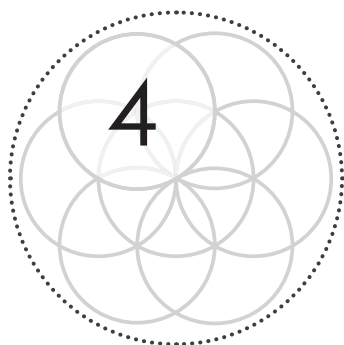
‘Break a leg, Frankie. Knock ’em dead, Frankie. Do whatever it is you do so well. You’ll get the deal. You always do. You’re Frankie Solana. Super-achiever.’

‘Ana . . .’

‘*What?*’

‘Nothing. Just . . . be safe. OK?’

I don’t look at her. I stare ahead. And, when I turn round, she’s gone. But her smell lingers – the chocolate, the coffee. Suddenly I feel like crying. And the world outside the door seems like a black precipice. I leave the omelette untouched.



I stand in front of the burgundy-red door of 7 Underwood Lane, Earls Court. Heat burns off the walls. The sky is a mindless blue, almost black. Before I get the chance to knock, our front door flies open and I'm hit with this: hair – shaved on the top and sides and, at the back, drawn up into a ponytail of beaded dreadlocks. Ears – pierced and run through with twisted ash-black bones. A scarlet kimono – silk, with black and white herons, gaping open, revealing a hairy chest, rib bones, a potbelly and . . .

‘Christ, Gad!’

Gad bunches the kimono at his navel with a fist. ‘*Pardon, chérie. Ça va?*’

Unbelievable. Zero embarrassment. *Nada*. Zip. *Rien*.

Committed eco-warrior, Moroccan Frenchman and (to my profound and unceasing embarrassment) practising nudist, Gad Moudnib. Aka the Hippie.

Welcome to stage two of my Brilliant Imploding Life.

A week with Frankie. A week with the Old Man. On and on. Ad nauseam.

‘How bad was it?’ the Hippy says, stepping aside (pronouncing ‘was it’ *waz eet*). By ‘it’ he means the past few days with Frankie.

‘Beautiful.’

‘*Ah bon?* That horrible, huh?’

‘Worse.’

‘*C’est la vie.* Now you are here.’

I turn and look at him, throwing my satchel down on a couch. ‘You heard what happened, right?’

He flicks his hand and spits a plosive ‘whatever’ sound, as if to suggest the whole school-suspension thing is a storm in a teacup, entirely unworthy of his attention. He understands solidarity, I’ll say that for the Hippy.

He follows me into the kitchen.

‘Where’s the Old Man?’ I ask, flinging open the fridge door, enjoying the blast of cool air. I haul out the orange juice. Down it straight from the carton.

‘On the terrace,’ the Hippy says. ‘*Comme d’habitude.*’

I find him in Downward Dog, arse in the air, face beetroot-red. I drop into one of two LA-style, retro plastic-strip garden chairs and sigh, long and deep.

‘Darling,’ the Old Man grunts. ‘Manageable week?’ He glances up at me and switches from Downward Dog into Leg Raised.

Gad follows me out, commandeers the second chair and takes a sip from a glass of slug-green juice. He flips through

the *Sunday Times* magazine on the table, crossing a leg over his knee. The kimono sluices open.

‘Jesus, Gad. Clothes aren’t optional, you know.’

‘Ana,’ the Old Man wheezes. ‘Don’t be such a prude. A nude body is a glorious and natural thing.’

‘Peeing is a natural thing, but you don’t see me squatting on the front lawn.’

Gad, to his credit, laughs.

We watch the Old Man power up through Warrior into Reverse Warrior, until finally he salutes us with Mountain Pose. We clap. Me ironically. Gad with gusto.

‘How’s your mother?’ the Old Man says, towelling his arms.

‘No change.’

‘Still a complete nightmare then?’

‘This is my cue to leave,’ Gad says, standing up and giving a mock bow. ‘I bid you lovely people adieu. My citizenship test waits.’

The Old Man blows him a kiss and Gad departs, humming.

‘She hasn’t signed the divorce papers yet,’ the Old Man says. ‘Can you believe it?’

I shrug.

‘The master manipulator at work,’ he says. ‘Incredible. Same way she’s managed to get her sixteen-year-old daughter to see a psychologist.’

‘Seventeen.’

‘What?’

‘I’m seventeen. Not sixteen.’

The Old Man throws the towel over Gad's empty chair. 'Now let me look at this beautiful face.' He cups my cheeks in both hands. His palms, despite the yoga, are dry from countless hours handling clay in his ceramics studio. 'I see you, sweetheart,' he says. Like the bloody Na'vi in *Avatar*. The Old Man's way of saying 'I love you'.

'Are you eating properly?' he says now, frowning.

I pull away.

'You know what you need?' he says, narrowing his eyes.

'Enlighten me.'

'A dog.'

'A *what*?'

'One of those beautiful chocolate Labradors. Dogs can centre a person.'

'You're *allergic*.'

'Your next appointment,' he says, changing tack. 'It's tomorrow?'

'Yeah.'

'How many more sessions do you have?'

'Six.'

'It makes me mad. You don't need this. We should go to Brighton. There's this Wellbeing Festival there. Love and wholesomeness, that's what you need. And trees.'

'Right. And a dog.'

'It's normal,' the Old Man says. 'This'll pass. It's a phase. Life is full of phases, one after the other, you'll see.'

Yeah, right. A phase. Like marriage.

'You're on a journey, Ana. All you have to do is find the real you.' He taps my chest bone. 'The Ana Moon in here.'

Vintage Old Man. Michael Moon believes in the healing power of trees and forest walks and staring into night fires. He believes in crystals and reiki, that the heart is the most important organ in the body, and that kindness trumps intellect any day of the week. What he *doesn't* believe in is psychotherapy. But Frankie does.

'I forgot to get something from the High Street,' I tell the Old Man, plunging my fingers between the plastic straps of the chair, widening them, then pinching them back in place. 'It won't take long. An hour tops.'

'Get what?'

'A book. It's on our English Lit. reading list for next term.'

'What book?'

'*Equus*,' I reply. 'It's a play by Peter Shaffer.' Which is true – both the title and the author *and* that it's on our reading list. The only thing I leave out is my real intention: to meet up with the one person everyone thinks is leading me astray. Bea.

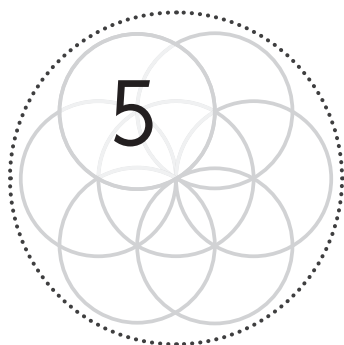
'It's all about horses,' I tell the Old Man when I see him frown.

'Hardly,' he says. 'It's about far more than that.'

'Can I go?'

The Old Man levers himself down into a chair and reaches for the paper. 'You're not under house arrest, Ana. But suspension's a big deal.' He snaps the paper open in his hands. Then his eyes find mine. 'Tell me you'll be right back.'

'I'll be right back,' I tell him. 'I promise.'



‘MIND THE GAP!’ a voice commands in a disaffected monotone, as if the gap might be a black and bottomless pit, but anyone falling through would raise no more than an eyebrow. This is The Usual – *our* place. The Tube. Circle Line to be exact. Bea claims there’s no better place on the planet to talk. Safe, surrounded by the indifference of strangers. Going round and round in a giant, endless loop.

We step into the carriage and plant ourselves on seats near the door, sipping frozen lattes. Here sit the usual suspects: an old woman opposite us with shopping bags at her feet, a load of tourists, a man in shorts and a T-shirt wet with perspiration. Countless others staring gloomily at their smartphones.

‘So?’ Bea says.

She’s wearing a fitted lime-green jumpsuit. On anyone else it would look ridiculous. On her it’s perfect. She seems delicate, otherworldly almost. I catch my reflection in the

dark glass of the carriage window. Curly auburn hair. Cheeks pale and shiny. I'm taller than Bea; my bony shoulders curve inwards. But my go-to mustard-yellow hoodie looks OK, despite the heat. And my black skinny jeans too, torn at the knees and worn to silver, and my Stan Smith trainers, a month old.

'Moon. Tell me what happened, with your shrink.'

'Nothing.'

'*Nothing?*'

'Not a single thing worth repeating.'

'So you're saying your shrink *doesn't* hold the key to universal understanding and consciousness? No shit, Sherlock. Mine neither.'

'She says it's a process.'

'Bloody hell, Moon! I don't see how the school gets away with this.'

'I know. Tell me about it.'

Bea slides her bum down in the seat and kicks her legs out across the aisle, drawing a hostile sigh from the woman opposite. 'Know why shrinks are *called* shrinks?' Bea says, staring down the woman.

'Nope. But I get the feeling you're about to tell me.'

'It's from headshrinker,' Bea says, turning to me. 'I looked it up.'

'*Headshrinker.*'

She grabs my arm at the elbow. 'Which was taken from cannibal tribes in the Amazon that literally shrank the heads of their victims.'

'Right. So . . . what does it mean in *this* context?'