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THE FRENCH GIRL

Written by LEXIE ELLIOTT

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THE FRENCH GIRL

LEXIE ELLIOTT



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For Mum and Dad, for everything

And for Matt, Cameron and Zachary,
for whom my heart beats

THE FRENCH GIRL

CHAPTER ONE

Looking back, the most striking thing is that she knew I didn't like her and she didn't care. That type of self-possession at the tender age of nineteen—well, it's unnatural. Or French. She was very, very French.

It's Tom who calls to tell me the news. Perhaps that should have tipped me off that something was wrong. I can't remember when he last called me. Which is not to say he isn't in touch: unlike most of my male friends, he's remarkably good on e-mail. I suppose I thought he would be calling with glad tidings: an invitation to a party, or a wedding—Tom's wedding—after all, he's been engaged to Jenna for what seems like years.

But what he says is: "Kate, do you remember that summer?" Seven years in Boston hasn't changed his accent a bit: still unmistakably a product of the finest English schooling money can buy. An image jumps into my mind of him, as I last saw him two summers ago: his blue eyes standing out against tanned skin with freckles across his remarkable hooked nose, his rumpled dark hair long

enough to curl. He won't look like that now after a hard New England winter, but the image won't shift.

I know exactly which summer he means: the summer after we finished university, when six of us spent an idyllic week in a French farmhouse. Idyllic, or mostly idyllic, or idyllic in parts . . . It's hard to remember it objectively since Seb and I split up immediately afterward. I opt for a flippant tone. "Isn't it a bit like the sixties? If you can remember it you weren't there."

He ignores my teasing. "The girl next door—"

"Severine." I'm not flippant anymore. And I no longer expect a party invitation. I close my eyes, waiting for what I know must be coming, and a memory floats up unbidden: Severine, slim and lithe in a tiny black bikini, her walnut brown skin impossibly smooth in the sun, one hip cocked with the foot pointing away as if ready to saunter off the moment she lost interest. Severine, who introduced herself, without even a hint of a smile to soften her severe beauty, as "the mademoiselle next door," and who disappeared without a trace after the six of us left for Britain.

"Yes, Severine." Tom pauses, the short silence pressing down the phone line. "They found her. Her body."

I'm silent. Yesterday, if I'd thought about it all, which of course I hadn't, I would have said I didn't know if she would ever be found. With Tom's stark words it suddenly seems entirely fated, as if all possible paths were destined to converge on this discovery. I imagine her bones, clean and white after a decade left undiscovered, the immaculate skull grinning. She would have hated that, the inevitable smile of death; Severine who never smiled.

"Kate? Still there?" Tom asks.

"Sorry, yes. Where did they find her?" Her? Was a corpse still a *her*?

"The well," he says bluntly. "At the farmhouse."

"Poor girl," I sigh. Poor, poor girl. Then: "The well? But that means . . ."

"Yes. She must have gone back. The French police will want to talk to us again."

"Of course." I rub my forehead, then think of the white skull beneath my own warm flesh and drop my hand hastily. The well. I didn't expect that.

"Are you okay?" asks Tom, his deep voice concerned.

"I think so. It's just . . ."

"A shock," he supplies. "I know." He doesn't sound shocked. But I suppose he's had longer to get used to the idea. "Will you tell Lara? I'm not sure I have her number."

"I'll tell her," I say. Lara is my closest friend, another of the six. The police will want to talk to all of us, I suppose, or at least the five of us who are left; Theo at least is beyond the jurisdiction of any police force now. Probably Tom has called Seb and Caro already, or is about to. It would doubtless be polite to ask how they are, but I don't. "Will you have to fly back from Boston?"

"Actually, I'm in London already. I got in this morning."

"Great!" Good news at last. "For how long?"

"For good."

"Wonderful!" But there is something odd about his demeanor, such as can be gleaned over the phone. "Is Jenna with you?" I ask cautiously. I'm beginning to suspect I already know the answer.

"No." I hear him blow out a breath. "It's for the best," he adds awkwardly.

As it happens I agree with him, but it's probably not the time to say so. "Right," I say decisively. "Sounds like you need to turn up on my doorstep one evening very soon with a bottle of wine."

"This might be more of a bottle of whiskey type of conversation."

"You bring whatever alcohol you like and I'll cook the meal. Badly."

He laughs down the phone, a pleasant sound. "It's a deal."

It occurs to me he used to laugh more, all those years ago. But then, we were twenty-one, with no responsibilities or cares, and no one had mysteriously disappeared yet. Probably we all laughed more.

A dead body has been found, but life goes on. For most of us, anyway—perhaps time stops for the nearest and dearest, but then again time probably stopped for them a decade ago when she went missing. For the rest of us, it's back to the same old, same old, which today means a meeting with a potential client. A very hard-hitting potential client: a contract with Haft & Weil could put my fledgling legal headhunter business firmly on the map. I stand in front of the mirror in the bathroom of my short-lease office in Bloomsbury. Smart business trouser suit: check. Tailored silk shirt, clean and ironed: check. Thick dark hair pulled back into a tidy chignon and discreet makeup accentuating my green eyes: check. Altogether a pleasing picture of a professional businesswoman. I smile to check my teeth for poppy seeds from the bagel I had for lunch; the image of Severine's grinning skull immediately jumps into my head. In the mirror my smile drops abruptly.

My assistant, Julie, looks up from her computer as I exit the bathroom. "The cab's here," she says, passing me a folder. "All set?"

"Yes." I check the folder. Everything is there. "Where's Paul?" Paul is my associate and a very, very good headhunter. He's here because he has faith in me and even more faith in the proportion of profits he's due if all goes well. I try to keep a close eye on his diary. Paul won't stick around if the business plan fails to materialize.

Julie is checking on the computer, one hand working the mouse as the other pushes her glasses back up her nose. "He's meeting that Freshfields candidate over on Fleet Street."

"Oh yes." I check the folder again.

"Kate," Julie says, a touch of exasperation in her tone. "It's all there."

I snap the folder shut. "I know. Thank you." I take a deep breath. "Right, see you later."

"Good luck." She has already turned back to the computer, but stops suddenly. "Oh, you had a call that you might want to return when you're in the cab." She looks around for the telephone message pad. "Ah, here we are. Caroline Horridge, please call back. Didn't say what about."

Caro. Calling me. Really? "You're kidding."

Julie looks up, nonplussed. "If I am, the joke has passed me by."

I take the message slip she's holding out. "She went to university with me," I explain, grimacing. "We weren't exactly bosom buddies. The last time I saw her was about five years ago, at someone's party." I look down at the telephone number recorded under the name in Julie's neat hand. "This is a Haft & Weil number," I say, surprised. I've been dialing it enough lately that I know the switchboard number off by heart.

"Maybe she wants to jump ship."

Maybe. There isn't really any other reason for a lawyer to call a legal headhunter. But I can't imagine Caro choosing to ask for my help. I sit in the cab and think of ghosts: of poor dead Severine, her bones folded like an accordion to fit in the narrow well; of poor dead Theo, blown into disparate parts on a battlefield; of Tom-that-was, back when he laughed more; of me-that-was; of Lara; of Caro; and of Seb. Always, always of Seb.

I met Seb in 2000, the summer of my second year at Oxford. Lara and I had been there long enough to stop feeling green and naive and not long enough for responsibility to loom large: no exams all year, or at least none that counted officially, and no requirement

to think about jobs until the third year. Our tutors felt it was a good year to bed down the solid groundwork for the following exam year. We thought it was a good year to bed down in actual bed after late nights clubbing.

The favorite summer pastime was ball-crashing. Unthinkable now—to dress up in black tie and sneak into an event without paying, to avail oneself of everything on offer just for a lark. But it was a lark; no one made the connection with stealing that would be my first thought now. Perhaps I've spent too much time thinking about the law now, or not enough back then. Anyway, the point was never the ball itself, those were always more or less the same—perhaps a better band at one, or shorter bar queues at another, but the same basic blueprint every time. No, the point was the breaking in: the thrill of beating the security teams, and getting away with it. The high of that was worth far more than the illicitly obtained alcohol.

The night I met Seb the target was Linacre Ball. Linacre isn't the richest Oxford college, and it isn't the largest; there was no reason to think the ball would be particularly good. The only distinguishing feature was that Linacre is a graduate college: right there lay the challenge. Them against us, graduates against undergraduates, security team against students. Drunken students at that, due to the pre-ball-crashing council-of-war at one of the student houses that lay across the sports field from Linacre, where cheap wine was flowing freely. I remember going to the toilet and tripping on my high heels; I'd have crashed headlong into a wall if it hadn't been for unknown hands catching and righting me. It occurred to me then that we'd better go before we were all too smashed to cross the field, let alone scale the walls surrounding the college.

And then we *were* going, streaming out of the new-build house to congregate on the sports field. The darkness was periodically split by flashing lights from the college some two hundred meters away, the grass fleetingly lit too emerald green to be believable whilst the

rugby goalposts threw down shadows that stretched the entire length of the field. Someone was giving orders in a military fashion that set Lara off into a fit of giggles as she stumbled and clutched my forearm. I glanced round and realized in surprise that there must be thirty or forty of us ready to storm the college. Lara and I found ourselves split into a subgroup with barely anyone we knew. It was hard to tell in the dark, but at least two of them were men with definite potential. Lara's smile notched up a few watts as she turned her attention to them.

But there wasn't enough time for her to work her magic—we were off. It was sheer numbers that made the plan work. We went in waves, ten or so at a time in a headlong dash across the field—how did we run in stilettos? I cannot think but I know we managed it. Come to that, how did Lara make it across without ripping her skin-tight dress? Mine ended up hiked high, dangerously close to my crotch. I remember the adrenaline coursing through my veins with the alcohol; the battle cries and the shrieks around me; the fractured picture when the lights flashed of black-tie-clad individuals in full flight. Lara and I huddled at the base of the wall of Linacre College, trying to get our breath through helpless giggles. That was probably why we got in: the security team were too busy dealing with the first bunch that surged the wall. I lost track of Lara as we awkwardly climbed the wall, hopelessly hindered by utterly inappropriate clothing and footwear. As I reached the top a hand stretched down from broad shoulders to help me. I caught a glimpse of gleaming white teeth beneath a remarkably hooked nose, topped by wayward dark hair. I grasped the proffered hand and felt myself yanked unceremoniously upright just as the lights flared, leaving me temporarily blinded, blinking awkwardly on the top of the wall as I tried to thank my helper and regain my footing and eyesight.

"Jump!" someone called below, barely audible above the music. "I'll catch you."

I looked across at the stranger on the wall with me. He nodded, gesturing to the black-tie-clad individual below. As the lights flashed obligingly I looked down into a pair of spectacular blue eyes: Seb. Of course it was Seb.

I jumped. He caught me.

Halfway through the meeting with Mr. Gordon Farrow, senior partner at Haft & Weil, when he rearranges his papers for the umpteenth time and continues to gaze a little to the right of me, I realize I'm losing this piece of business. Shortly after that, whilst trying to explain the relative merits of choosing my firm over more established competitors, I realize I never had a chance in the first place. I'm the stalking horse: a competitor brought in to make sure the firm they really want puts in an honest and fair quote. I wind down mid-sentence and snag an oatmeal cookie instead. It takes Mr. Gordon Farrow a moment or two to notice. For the first time, he looks at me properly.

"Is there something wrong?" he asks.

I hold up a finger as I finish chewing my bite of cookie. He waits patiently, his eyebrows raised inquiringly. "Not really," I say when I've swallowed. "Only I just realized I'm wasting your time and mine, since you've already made up your mind. I appreciate you need a stalking horse, but if that's the case I'd sooner eat your cookies and drink tea than knock myself out trying to pitch for unavailable business."

A gleam of appreciation shows in his eyes. He's nondescript in every respect: mid-height, mid-gray in his hair, neither fat nor thin, not obviously fit but not particularly out of shape for a man in his mid-fifties. He wears well-tailored suits, but nothing flashy or unusual. I've heard the only exceptional thing about him is his intellect, though he's yet to show me much of that. "Do you always speak your

mind?" he asks after a moment or two. It doesn't escape me that he hasn't refuted my stalking horse claim.

"Less and less as I grow older," I say, smiling a little. "It's a high-risk strategy. Many of the best things that have happened to me came about because of it, but . . ." I grimace. "Many of the worst things also . . ."

He actually smiles at this. "What would you consider one of the best things to happen to you?"

I answer without hesitation. "Getting into Oxford."

He cocks his head, his eyes gleaming again. "How so?"

"I don't have the typical Oxbridge background. Getting into Oxford really opened up my horizons. I don't mean just in terms of job prospects—it showed me paths and possibilities I could never have believed achievable if I followed a different route."

"My daughter was at Oxford," he says. "I wonder if she would say the same."

"I suppose that might depend on her background. And her personality."

He shrugs with a wry smile. "Caro falls into the category of typical Oxbridge candidate."

I blink. "Not Caro Horridge?" But of course not Caro Horridge; his surname is Farrow—

"Yes," he says, surprised. "You know her?"

"We were at Oxford at the same time."

Suddenly I have the full force of his attention; it's a little unnerving. "And do you think Caro would say getting into Oxford was one of the best things to happen to her?"

Caro would never consider the question; Caro would view entry into Oxford as right and proper, exactly what she was due. "Well," I hedge, "we weren't particularly close."

His lips quirk. "No longer pursuing the high-risk strategy?"

I laugh. "Like I said, less and less as I get older."

The corners of his mouth tug upward, then he glances at his watch. "Well, Miss Channing, I know someone as direct as you will forgive me for cutting to the chase. You *are* the stalking horse. I like your business, I like the pitch book you sent through and your fees are ballpark, but you'd be a hard prospect to sell to committee, as you don't have a proven track record yet. I'm not sure it's worth my while to have that fight."

"What would make it worthwhile? A reduction in fees?"

He purses his lips. "It would help, but even that might not be enough. You just—"

"Don't have the track record," I finish for him.

He nods ruefully. "But I can honestly say it's been a real pleasure." His eyes are smiling; it takes ten years off him. I can't see the slightest resemblance to Caro.

In the cab on the way home I record my post-meeting notes on my pocket Dictaphone for Julie to type up later and then I call Lara and rant for five minutes about how I was an idiot to give up my lucrative job to start my own firm, how aforementioned firm will be bankrupt in six months at this rate, how no one will ever hire me again after such an appalling error of judgment, and so on and so forth . . . Lara has heard it all before. She doesn't even bother arguing back.

"Finished now?" she asks when I finally run out of steam.

"For now. Come round tonight—I'll probably bore you with more of the same, but I promise to at least treat you to a curry and some nice wine first." A giggle with the ever-sunny Lara is exactly what I need.

"Sorry," she says, yawning. "I'm knackered. Can we do tomorrow instead?"

"Knackered . . . What were you up to last night?" I couldn't remember her saying she had a date, but Lara picks up men like the rest of us pick up newspapers. She puts them down in the same way,

too. She is and always has been unrelentingly and unashamedly promiscuous, but somehow in her it seems . . . wholesome.

"I met someone in the pub after work. Just a bit of fun."

"Lucky you," I say, unable to keep the envy out of my voice. I'm not sure I've ever just "met someone in the pub." I can't recall anyone ever approaching me cold. Unless Seb counts.

"Ah, Kate." I can hear the smile in her voice. "Like I keep telling you, you need to drop your standards. Then you'd have as much action as you could wish for."

"Maybe." But I don't think that's it. I scrub up well—I'm tall and fairly slim, I've got good hair and I've been told I've got beautiful eyes—but none of that quite has the appeal of a buxom beauty of Swedish descent with an easy smile and a relaxed attitude to sex.

"Your place tomorrow, then?" Lara asks.

"Perfect." I'm about to ring off when I remember I still haven't told her about the body. About Severine. "Wait—Tom called me."

"How is he? Is he back in London?"

"Yes, actually, but that isn't why he called. They found . . ." I swallow. "They found the body. I mean, Severine. They found her in the well at the farmhouse," I finish in a rush.

"Oh God," Lara says bleakly. "That's horrible. Though maybe it will help her parents get closure or something. Do they think it was that boyfriend she was talking about?"

"I suppose so." It's an obvious question, but I hadn't considered how she got into the well. Who put her there. Even now, my mind shies away from it. "I don't know. Tom says the French police want to talk to us all again."

I can almost hear Lara's grimace. "Really?"

"It's probably just procedure; after all, we were the last people to talk with her properly." Before she went into town and was never seen again. "She must have gone back, though, since she was found in the well; I suppose that's new information."

"Still, it must have been that boyfriend, surely. I don't mean to be insensitive, but I really hope it doesn't take up much time. We're soooo busy at work right now." She yawns down the line again. "I suppose that explains why Caro's been trying to get hold of me."

"You too?" That's a surprise: if anything, Caro likes Lara even less than me. "She left me a message; I haven't called back yet. But she must have known Tom would tell us; she can't have been calling about that."

"Only one way to find out." She yawns. "Shotgun: you first," she adds impishly.

"All right," I say reluctantly. "I'll call her." I don't want to talk to Caro any more than Lara does, but I may as well find out what she wants sooner rather than later. If Caro wants something, she won't be deterred.

CHAPTER TWO

Severine hovers.

At first she is no more than a feeling, a presence that rests on my consciousness just out of reach of my field of vision. I put it down to the unwanted memories that have floated to the surface of my mind, stirred up by the discovery of her bones. But that is not enough for Severine. One morning I find those very bones, bleached white and neatly stacked in a pile with the grinning skull atop, resting on my kitchen counter; blinking does not remove them, though I know they're not there. On yet other occasions she manifests in a fleshed-out version of walnut-colored skin, secretive eyes and a superior lack of smile. With her comes an insistent tide of memories, fetid and dank after being buried for so long, that will drag me down into their rotten darkness if I yield to them. I trenchantly refuse to succumb; instead I call Caro.

"Caroline Horridge," she answers crisply, after only one ring. I imagine her sitting at her desk in Haft & Weil, her taut frame

wrapped in a business suit, with not a hair or a sheet of paper out of place.

"Hi, Caro, it's Kate." There's a pause. "Kate Channing," I add through gritted teeth. This is a classic Caro strategy, forcing me to identify myself; can she really be expecting a call from another Kate with a strong northern accent?

"Oh, *Kate*," she says, faux-warmly. "God, it's been so long. Thanks for calling back."

"No problem." I can feel my cheeks aching from my fake smile. Someone once told me if you smile on the phone, the caller hears it in your voice; apparently it doesn't matter if the smile is genuine or not. I'm not going to deliberately antagonize the daughter of a man who could hand me a major contract. Any accidental antagonizing can't be helped. "How are you?"

"Good," she says breezily. "Though busy. Which I can't really complain about in this market. You?"

"Same. Good. Busy." Not as busy as I'd like, which is evident when I glance at my computer screen and see my sparse diary for the week, but she doesn't need to know that.

There's a pause. I wait for her to get to the heart of the matter. "I take it Tom's spoken to you?"

"Yes. Not exactly the sunniest of news." My smile has dropped. The skull with yawning darkness for eyes is still waiting for me, just a step beyond conscious thought.

"Do you mean about Jenna or that girl?" I take a sharp breath in—is she really suggesting that murder and a broken engagement are on a par?—but Caro is still talking. "It was always just a matter of time on the girl—surely no one was expecting a different outcome—"

"Severine," I say bluntly. The bones demand to be named. I wish they would make their demands on someone else.

"What?"

"Her name was Severine." Not even a minute into the conversation and already I'm getting testy. I paste on the fake smile again.

"Yes." Caro pauses. "Well, anyway, the reason I called was that I thought it might be nice to have some kind of reunion for Tom. He must be feeling pretty low after the whole Jenna thing—getting the Oxford crowd back together and having a few 'welcome home' drinks might be just the ticket. I'm thinking next Friday, at my flat. We can always go on from there to somewhere on the King's Road if everyone feels up for a big night."

"Um, that's a nice idea," I say faintly. It is. I'm frankly astonished.

"Don't sound so surprised," she says dryly. "After all, I practically grew up with Tom and Seb. I can't wait to have them both back in London."

"Both? Seb too?" The words are out of my mouth before I can clamp down on them.

"Oh, you haven't heard?" I can certainly hear the smile in *her* voice—a thoroughly self-satisfied one. If she was fishing to find out if Seb and I are in touch, she's made her catch. "Seb is coming back. New York doesn't suit Alina, apparently." Alina. His wife of perhaps three years now. "Though he won't be back in time for Friday. We'll just have to do another get-together when he's back."

"Sure. Lovely." I'm absolutely positive I will be busy that evening, whenever it is.

"So you'll come? Next Friday?"

"Let me check." I flick through my electronic diary, though I already know I'm free. Maybe it works like the fake smile. "Um, yes, that should be fine. Thanks."

"Great. Can you do me a favor and tell Lara? I haven't managed to get through to her yet. No doubt you two are still thick as thieves."

"Oh, thicker," I say blandly, then hurry on before she can interpret that as mockery. Which it may be. "I'll tell her."

"Great. I'll e-mail you my address. See you next Friday."

I hang up and gaze blankly for a moment at my computer screen with that under-endowed calendar. It could be that Caro is simply being nice, with no hidden agenda. Lara will think that, when I tell her. But Lara lives in a world where sunshine is always just around the corner: a lovely idea, like Santa Claus and the tooth fairy, but requiring of a certain willing suspension of disbelief to maintain. I was born more suspicious.

Severine hovers.

The day of Caro's drinks party two things happen. Haft & Weil call me—or more specifically, Mr. Gordon Farrow's secretary calls me—and the police call me.

Gordon Farrow's secretary is calling to set up lunch for Tuesday, which makes absolutely no sense unless the firm he really wants have somehow dropped the ball. I spend the day refusing to get excited because it will all come to naught whilst also meticulously planning my sales pitch. It's an exercise in believing two mutually exclusive ideas; it's exhausting.

In comparison the call from the police is much less disturbing, at least in immediate terms. A French detective will be making the short hop across the English Channel next week and would like to interview me; would I be available? I eye the paltry diary again: far too much white space into which I can imagine Severine sauntering, stretching out each slim brown arm to take as her right. Other than Tuesday's lunch and a few other meetings in relation to two small contracts I've landed, I'm available. I'm depressingly, continuously available, and nothing I achieve all day changes that. By the time the end of business hours rolls round, I'm quite partial to the idea of a drink.

Tom, Lara and I have agreed to meet beforehand at a bar near Caro's place. Safety in numbers and all that. I come in from the rain,

shaking off my umbrella, and scan the crowded room for Tom. It's easy to spot his tall figure at the bar, ordering; he must have just got there himself as raindrops still glisten like tiny crystals in his dark hair, which is once again too long and starting to curl. He used to look more like Seb, I think. Or perhaps I deliberately dissociate them now.

"Make mine a vodka tonic," I say, slipping into a space next to him.

He turns from the barman, a grin already splitting his face. "Kate!" He pulls me in for a proper hug; none of the nonsense of London double-kisses for Tom. It's something I know yet am always surprised by—he gives really good hugs. I can feel the beaming smile on my own face as he wraps me up. This smile is genuine.

"It is so good to see you," I say into his neck. He smells of a mix of wood and spice.

"You too," he says, pulling back to look at me. His grin hasn't abated yet. The freckles aren't there anymore, and neither is the tan, and I think he may have been hitting the gym a lot lately, but otherwise he's reassuringly the same. "You look really well."

"Ten sixty," interrupts the barman impatiently, plonking the vodka tonic down beside Tom's beer.

"Jesus," mutters Tom, pulling out his wallet. "London prices double every time I come back."

"Then never leave again, for the sake of my bank balance if nothing else." Still smiling, I scoop up my drink. "I'll hunt down a table. Lara's running late, by the way."

It's too crowded to get a table all to ourselves, but I find us two free seats at the corner of the bar, and we do our best to cover almost two years in five minutes, our heads leaned together conspiratorially to combat the noise. Severine can't hold court here, among this warmth and life.

"I'm sorry about Jenna," I offer, after a while. I *am* sorry, even if

I didn't think them well suited. "I didn't really get to know her well when we visited you guys, but she seemed . . ." I grope around for the right adjective. Nothing fits. "Like a girl with her head screwed on," I finish lamely. Jenna's cool gray eyes had missed very little, in my opinion. It had been lovely to see Tom again, and Lara and I had both loved Boston, but I rather thought the tight corners around Jenna's eyes hadn't smoothed out until we were well on our way to the airport.

Tom's lips twist briefly, and he spins his pint glass back and forth in the cradle of his long fingers. "She wasn't on top form when you two came over. She really is a nice girl, it's just . . ." He trails off.

"I know. Lara is a lot to take."

He looks up from his beer, startled. "Lara?"

"Well, she's a difficult proposition for any girlfriend to cope with. Even supposing your boyfriend hasn't slept with her," I add dryly. Does he imagine I didn't notice him and Jenna during that visit, in secluded corridors and corners, standing too close and speaking low and fast to each other? I can see them now, Jenna's right hand making sharp, flat gestures while Tom's ran through his hair in frustration. "Or maybe you didn't tell Jenna about that." Tom and Lara's affair, dalliance, whatever one should call it, happened a long time ago—during that fateful French holiday—and Lara always maintained it was nothing but fun. Tom said the same, though I wondered if there was more to it for him. After Jenna's coolness during our Boston visit, I wondered even more. Wives and girlfriends always know.

"I did tell her actually, and anyway, Lara really wasn't the problem," he says, a touch irritably, then blows out a breath slowly. "It doesn't matter anyway. We just weren't . . . right. I couldn't see us together in fifty years. I realized I couldn't imagine what that would look like. Soon after that, going to the gym got more appealing than going home."

"Fifty years," I say caustically. "I'd settle for knowing what the next six months is going to look like. Or even tonight." I grimace and knock back some more of my drink.

"Don't look like that," Tom says, laughing. "Caro will be on best behavior. The gracious host and so on."

"Mmm," I say noncommittally. "Oh, I wanted to ask you, how come Caro has a different surname than her dad? I know her parents are divorced, but still . . ."

"Well, it was pretty acrimonious." He takes a swallow of his beer and looks to one side, remembering. "From what I recall, Gordon had an affair, and Camilla—Caro's mum—did *not* take it well. Hell hath no fury, et cetera . . . though hers was a very passionless type of fury." He frowns, trying to find the right words. "Like she wasn't so much angry with Gordon for cheating on her as angry with him for disrupting her perfect life. Anyway, Caro took her mum's side. She must have been about thirteen at the time. She officially changed her surname to her mum's maiden name, though to be fair, I imagine her mum put her up to it." His lips twist ruefully. "I always felt sorry for Gordon, to be honest. If I was married to Camilla, I expect I'd've been having an affair a darn sight sooner than Gordon."

"She's difficult?"

"Not exactly difficult." He shrugs, trying to find the right word. "She's *cold*. And nothing is ever good enough for her. Caro's got the same sharp tongue, but at least she can have a laugh." He glances at me, one eyebrow raised, as if waiting for me to make a snide comment, but I don't, partly because what he says is true—Caro can indeed have a laugh; even I have to admit she can be wickedly funny—but also because I didn't know any of this before. It adjusts the picture somewhat. "Well, anyway, it was a tough time for Caro. That's when Seb and I"—he glances at me quickly—"started spending a lot more time with her; I think she just wanted any excuse to get out of the house."

Seb. Tom usually avoids that name with me; tricky since they are not only best friends but also cousins, but nonetheless he tries. I keep my face expressionless. "Is her dad still with whoever he had the affair with?"

Tom shakes his head. "No. Caro refused to see him if he was still seeing her, so he stopped." I absorb that for a moment: the child laying down the law to her father. There's a reason children are not supposed to have that kind of power; I wonder how that felt, for both of them. But Tom is still speaking: "You know, now I wonder if her mum put her up to that, too. My parents seemed to think it was a crying shame, that Gordon and this woman would have been very happy together. But Caro was adamant, so . . ." He shrugs. "That was that."

"Interesting that she works at his firm."

"Yeah, I didn't really know what to make of that when I heard she'd joined Haft & Weil." He is frowning, still trying to puzzle it out. "It's not like she didn't have other offers, either." He finishes his beer with one swallow, then eyes the empty glass. "Time for another? How late is Lara going to be?"

"She should be—ah, here she is." I start waving to catch Lara's attention as she scans the bar from the doorway. Half of the bar is scanning her in return. As she spots us, her open smile breaks out and she heads our way.

"Tom," she says, hugging him warmly. "Look at you! Do you have a job anymore or do you just lift weights?"

He laughs and climbs off his bar stool to offer it to her. "You're one to talk, looking gorgeous as ever."

"I'm at least six pounds overweight. But since it all seems to be residing in my boobs I can't really be bothered to do anything about it," she says complacently, perching her bottom on the proffered bar stool.

"How is it that you've only been in the bar thirty seconds and

already we're talking about your boobs?" teases Tom. I'm used to their easy, affectionate flirting, but suddenly I'm more alert to it. The context has changed: Tom is single. I'm not uneasy, exactly, but it would change the dynamic if they were to become a couple. I like things how they are.

"Well then, how about a much more macabre subject: did you guys get a call from the police today?" Lara asks, and immediately Severine reaches through time to tug me back. She sinks with studied elegance into a chair by the farmhouse pool, dressed in a loose black linen shift, and crosses one leg over the other; after the slim brown calf comes a slender foot, complete with shell-pink-painted toes from which a sandal casually dangles. Seb can't take his eyes off that sandal.

I knock back the remains of my vodka tonic and wrench myself into the present. Tom is nodding. "About interviews next week? Yeah, I did."

"Me too. Though I don't know what help we can be a decade on." I add, almost defiantly, "I can hardly remember a thing."

"Me either," says Lara. "I wonder if it will be the same one." She has an odd look on her face.

"Same what?" I ask, confused.

"Same detective. Only they don't call them that in France, do they? Investigator. Officer of judiciary police, or whatever the phrase is."

"I shouldn't think so," says Tom dismissively. "Wasn't he about sixty? He'll have retired."

"You two have finished your drinks," Lara says, in a sudden change of gear. "Can I get us all another?"

I shake my head, grimacing. "Shouldn't we really screw our courage to the sticking place and venture forth?"

"Macbeth? Isn't that a little dramatic?" protests Tom, but he's laughing. "It'll be fine. Especially since you two are going to behave

impeccably." He fixes us both with a mock-glare that lingers longer, and with more steel, on me than Lara.

"Such blind optimism," Lara says, fluttering her eyelids in a deliberately over-the-top fashion. "A man after my own heart."

I wonder.

Caro's flat smells of vanilla. Later I track the source to a number of expensive candles dotted around the space, the sort that have three wicks and cost more than a boozy restaurant meal for two. The enticing smell, the cozy lighting and the welcome warmth of the flat after the driving rain outside add up to give a Christmassy feel even though it's March. Caro has a couple of teenage girls with heavy eyeliner answering the door, taking coats and pouring champagne. It's all exceedingly grown-up.

There are perhaps twenty-five people already there when we arrive. At a quick glance I know a few, and there are others I recognize but can't put a name to; all from Oxford days. I spy Caro across the room, wearing a severe black minidress and truly lethal black suede ankle boots, with her dark blond hair scraped back from her face. Skinny, blond, self-assured and possessing of a delicate bone structure that screams English aristocracy: posh totty. I almost drowned in an army of girls just like her at Oxford before I learned how to swim in a big pond. It's important to kick.

"Relax, Kate," says Tom quietly, amused.

I exaggerate taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly. His blue eyes, similar to Seb's but flecked with gray, are crinkled at the corners at my theatrics.

Caro breaks off a conversation when she spots our entry and crosses to us quickly, zeroing in on Tom with a delighted smile spreading across her face. She's even thinner than I remember, and older, of course—we all are—but for Caro the extra years have

gnawed away any softness. Now she appears brittle. I try to imagine the thirteen-year-old girl that she once was, taking refuge in her friendships with Tom and Seb, but I can't form an image in my mind. Still, Tom's words drift around me; they herd me into a corner where I can't help but feel that my dislike of Caro reflects badly on me. Surely I *ought* to like her: she's a strong, smart, ambitious woman who is working very hard in what is still a heavily male-dominated workplace; she's sharp and cleverly funny, and moreover, Tom likes her, which has to count for rather a lot . . . and yet . . . and yet . . . She's *too* sharp. She cuts. Or at least, she used to.

"Tom! The guest of honor!" she is saying, as she kisses him on both cheeks; Tom doesn't try to hug her, I note. Then Caro turns to Lara and myself; Lara gets the double-kiss treatment first. "It's been so long," Caro exclaims to her. "You look . . . just the same." Lara murmurs back something innocuous.

"Hi, Caro." I'm last in line. I dutifully offer my cheeks; the spiked heels on her boots almost raise her up to my height. There's no contact in either kiss.

"Kate," she says, her lips curving in a smile that her eyes don't entirely match. "I hear you met my father."

"Um, yes." I'm a little surprised she would choose to lead with that. "I think we're meeting again next week, actually."

Her eyes narrow a fraction, but she nods emphatically and says, "Excellent. I told him weeks ago that he wouldn't regret giving you a chance."

"Thank you," I say, thrown. "That was . . . kind of you." At least, it would have been kind if it were true. I'm absolutely positive she's lying. Her father would have already known about our acquaintance had she spoken to him.

"It's nothing," she says with a dismissive gesture. "It can't be easy starting up your own business in this economic climate. Now, you all have drinks, yes? Then come join the melee." She links her arm

through Tom's and drags him off; I watch her stretch up with a sly smile on her face to deliver something to his ear that elicits a sharp bark of laughter. He's soon ensconced in vigorous hellos complete with enthusiastic back-thumping with three or four men whose faces I vaguely remember, but not their physiques; ten years has done a lot of damage to hairlines and waistlines.

Lara and I sip champagne. We mingle and chat. By and large the faces I don't know are the other halves of people I do. Some more people come in, and the music moves on to a more upbeat tempo. The volume of the chatter and laughter increases. We drink more champagne and do some damage to the trays of nibbles. I take in the flat: a property like this must be hideously expensive in this part of London. I wonder if her father helped her buy it, and if he did, I wonder at the dynamic of refusing his name but taking his financial aid.

Caro joins us. "I'm so sorry I haven't had a chance to chat with you two. But you know what it's like at your own parties—you hardly get time for more than a hello with each person before you're dragged off." She rolls her eyes as if it's a chore, but she's in her element. The gracious host indeed.

"Great turnout," says Lara, raising her glass to Caro.

"It is, isn't it?" She has a satisfied smile on her face as she scans the room. Then she turns back to us. "Sorry to speak of unpleasant things, but I expect you both have meetings with the French investigator next week, too?"

"Yes, Monday," I say.

"It was such a long time ago, I wondered if we should discuss beforehand. Make sure we're all singing from the same song sheet, so to speak."

Lara opens her mouth, most likely to agree because it's the path of least resistance, so I jump in quickly. "What's to discuss? She was alive and well the night before we left, and that's the last we saw of her."

Caro is nodding. "True. Then she went into town." She frowns. "Odd that she came back to her cottage when she told Theo she was going to Paris."

"Did she?" I didn't know that.

"When did she say that?" asked Lara.

"The night before we left, I think. Theo had a long chat with her." I remember that: I see the pair of them now, lying on their backs in the dark of nighttime on sun loungers beside the pool. Severine has a glass of white wine resting on her stomach, and the red glow of a cigarette makes a repeated arc up to her mouth then down to dangle off the armrest. She's still in the black linen shift, but her sandals are now tossed carelessly beside the sun lounger. I don't want to look at Seb in case he's drinking in the sight of her; instead I watch Severine myself. After a time she turns her head to look at me directly; it's too dark and she's too far away to see the expression in her eyes. Not that there was ever anything to see in Severine's eyes.

I shake my head. Caro is still talking: "I just thought, well, maybe we should all compare notes . . . After all, I can barely remember that last night, what with the alcohol." She gives a high, tinkling laugh.

"And the drugs," I say evenly. Her laugh stops, and she cocks her head and meets my eye. Lara is looking from Caro to me and back again. Across the room I can see Tom repeatedly glancing away from his conversation to keep tabs on the three of us; he's easy to spot on account of his height and that bold nose. And his shoulders, now, after all that relationship-avoiding gym work; he must be even bulkier than Seb these days. "It's okay," I say after a moment. "I didn't mention it back then, and I won't now."

Caro nods, a short, quick movement. It's not exactly a thank-you, but close.

"It was a pretty crazy night," says Lara, smiling.

"Yes," laughs Caro, happy to move on. "Didn't you end up skinny-dipping with Tom?"

Lara is grinning. "I seem to remember something like that. Then World War Three broke out and we were trying to calm everyone down whilst naked and dripping wet." She frowns. "I can't remember, what were you guys arguing about anyway?" she says with wide-eyed innocence. I glance at her sharply, then look at Caro. Twin spots of red are burning in her cheeks.

Suddenly Tom appears at my elbow waving an empty bottle of champagne. "Caro, are there any more of these?"

"Oh, crates of them, literally. Let me sort that." She grabs the bottle gratefully and disappears quickly through the crowd.

Tom turns a stern eye on Lara and me. "Didn't I tell you guys to behave?" he says, running a hand through his hair in exasperation.

"You want *us* to behave?" asks Lara archly. "Caro's the one who wants to airbrush our response to the police to make sure there's no mention of drug-taking. You might be happy to forget that she smuggled Class A drugs through customs in Kate's bag, but I don't think I ever will. And nor will Kate." I can't stop a smile spreading across my face: this is so unexpectedly combative of my easygoing best friend, and in that moment I love her fiercely for it. It seems I was wrong: where Caro is concerned, even Lara is naturally suspicious.

"I haven't forgotten," says Tom quietly. "If you remember, I was furious with her. But you don't have to rub her nose in it now. It was a long time ago and she did apologize."

"Not until the next day," I mutter mutinously, temporarily forgetting my previous inclination to a generosity of spirit toward Caro. "And as far as apologies go, it was distinctly underwhelming." Her so-called apology had been accepted as it was offered: with no charm at all, and under clear duress.

"You really want to go into all that again right now?" asks Tom. He is glaring at me with an expression I can't quite interpret. Suddenly the exasperation melts away, and he tilts his head. I'm close

enough to see the gray flecks in his eyes. "Come on, Kate, let's not dredge up the past," he says softly.

I breathe out slowly. He's right. I've no desire to let those particular memories out of their box; though they seem to be seeping out regardless. I find a smile and clink my glass against Tom's. "To the present."

"And to Tom," says Lara, clinking her glass against Tom's also. She smiles winningly at him. "Nice to have the voice of reason back." Tom shakes his head and smiles back, then glances round the room. The crowd is thinning out; I glance at my watch and am surprised to see it's past 1 A.M.

"Come on," he says. "Let me escort you two home."

We get a cab together. It makes geographical sense to drop me off first; I hug them both good-bye and climb out, then watch the taxi disappear. In my mind I replay the scene of them intervening with Seb, Caro and myself, in the glory of their birthday suits. Lara's impressive frontage jiggles hypnotically until Theo throws a towel round her, discomfort making his cheeks as red as his hair. When Tom works out what's happened, he rounds on Caro; I've never seen Tom angry, and it's majestic. I'm surprised she can remain upright in the face of such a biting onslaught. Lara is openmouthed in awe, but I'm too full of hurt and acid fury and cheap wine to truly appreciate the display. Mostly hurt, because Seb thinks I'm overreacting. His lack of support is a physical blow; it literally takes my breath and speech away. The shock of it strips away all my defenses and forces me to face the truth: it's over.

At the time amidst the mayhem I barely noticed Severine, but now she has my attention. She sits casually to one side, observing detachedly as she calmly finishes a cigarette, then collects her sandals and walks unhurriedly to her cottage, leaving the chaos behind. I stumble alone to the bedroom Seb and I should be sharing, tears

streaming down my cheeks. Six months, even two months, previously he would have followed me, but no longer.

Back in the present, I'm also going to bed alone. Seb is presumably in bed somewhere with his wife, give or take a time difference impact. Who knows what Caro's sleeping arrangements are? Theo—well, Theo is dead. Severine, too, though death seems to hold her too loosely as far as I'm concerned. And Tom and Lara are together in a taxi.