THE BOOK GAME

FRANCES WISE

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'from morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day'

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 4

'We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?'

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

Prologue

Friday 12 August 2022

Claudia is bleeding, two bright streaks running from wrist to elbow. Ash has an arm around her. They are walking steadily, determinedly, across the courtyard, away from the garden and towards the house. Through the bedroom window, himself unseen, Lawrence watches: dead still, gripped by the panicky lightness of adrenaline, and with a nauseating sense of a transgression that cannot be reversed.

Beyond the courtyard the lawn stretches down to the large pond and the tall poplars that mark the edge of the estate. The window frames the view as a series of rectangles, divided from one another. In the late sunset, each of these scenes looks unnaturally still, as though the garden contains no movement of any kind, as though the living have been expelled, cast out, leaving behind only abandoned objects which, separated from people, are returned to quiescence, frozen in their last moment of drama: a wrought-iron bench, tipped over at the far end of the lawn; a book splayed on the grass by a deckchair; six metal croquet hoops leaning against a stump; broken pieces of a bowl on a white table.

As if in reaction to Lawrence's thoughts, Claudia and Ash stop moving directly below the window. Lawrence leans forward as though he might hear them talking, but no sound permeates the thick glass. He watches as his wife draws her injured arm towards her body and raises her other hand to Ash's face, her fingers just touching his hair. For a moment they stand motionless, and then Claudia lifts her head and kisses Ash's cheek, her hand clasping his face.

Lawrence makes no sound but he covers his mouth with his hand. He sees Claudia turn away from Ash towards the house, for a moment keeping hold of Ash's hand. Until this past week, Lawrence would have called Ash his best, his oldest friend, the person he trusted most, after his wife. He steps back from the window to keep out of sight. As he takes his hand away from his mouth, he notices blood across his own palm, still wet.

Chapter One

8 August 2022: Monday morning

Lawrence's office is the largest in College, and he reminds himself of this several times a day. The largest, that is, by volume. By sheer floor footage, Clarke's is slightly bigger – Lawrence has paced it out, taking the keys from the porters' lodge on a Sunday – but he's convinced himself that volume is the fitter measure. The space is extravagantly, pointlessly grand. The previous occupant had owned a harpsichord (although he hadn't played); Lawrence himself has a mobile stepladder for the higher shelves; and the sofa, three armchairs and low desk which sit marooned in the centre have the effect, in their drawn-together isolation, of making the room feel like an outdoor space, a section of a garden. There is a pre-modern unevenness to the wooden floorboards and the limestone window frames. The two large casement windows on the right-hand wall, as one looks from the door, gaze from this second floor across the rounded tops of Cambridge's buildings. The wooden boards are partly covered with a single huge rug, a gift from Claudia on Lawrence's appointment twenty-two years ago. Its edges are

fraying, and there are a number of red wine stains, but Lawrence likes the visible decay. He calls it 'historical texture', rubbing his fingertips to his thumb, and hasn't asked for the thing to be cleaned. Two of the walls are lined with tiers of bookshelves that stretch the full length: every space is crammed with books, neat verticals augmented with volumes squeezed on top and these are supplemented with several piles of stacked books on the floor. There are nine or ten books on the chair by the door: this is Lawrence's 'return to the library' spot. Running all the way around the perimeter of the room, snaking across the shelves and under the windows and over the desk, are cards emblazoned with 'Thank you!' or 'Congrats!' or images of famous authors or old libraries or manuscripts or abstract art. Five or six printed invitations to dinners at various colleges are grouped in a cluster beneath a print of medieval Cambridge. Under the casement windows, and so below the view over the rooftops, is a large old wooden desk with a laptop, a mess of papers, jars with pens and pencils, a framed photo of a middle-aged woman standing on a bridge in Venice, another of a teenage boy leaping into a swimming pool with raised arms, and an asparagus fern, thin green shoots tumbling down the side of the desk. A tall glass vase holds three peacock feathers that arc towards the ceiling. Beside it stands a metal trophy, ugly but given its prominence clearly prized, with gold lettering spelling out 'Cambridge University Student Union Teaching Initiative Award 2016–17'.

But the most striking feature of the room is the far wall, opposite the door. The top half of the stone wall has a series of eight leaded glass portals, each the size of a football, cut into the stone, through which Lawrence – or his earlier, fifteenth- or sixteenth- or seventeenth- or eighteenth- or nineteenth- or

twentieth-century incarnations – might look down directly into the interior of the college chapel. Lawrence's room was built for the chaplain and the little round windows meant Angell Robert or Thomas Arderne or Aston James (Lawrence had transcribed the names under the heading 'Staircase 11, room 1: 1442–present', sitting snug in the college archives in the first term of the job) could time their dash to the service with the filling of the pews. Lawrence is looking at the rebus cut into the fourth portal, an ash tree and a well for George Ashwell, and imagining his own name represented in glass: notes swelling up from a violin, perhaps. Right now, the chapel, and in fact the whole college, is deserted. It's a Monday morning in the second week of August.

Lawrence is standing with no clothes on.

'You know this is probably the most architecturally complete fifteenth-century room in Cambridge.'

He seems to address the comment to an empty room – that wouldn't be out of character – but a reply comes sharply from the sofa in its centre.

'Jesus, Lawrence.'

American.

'This isn't a tour.'

East coast.

'Will you come back over here?'

The Danby Visiting Fellow in Medieval Studies.

'I have less than twenty minutes.'

Professor Angela V. Olson (University of Pennsylvania).

As Lawrence moves towards the sofa, he catches his reflection in the mirror above the sink in the corner of the room. He stops for a second; turns a fraction.

'Do you know that if I stand *here*' – Lawrence shifts his position a bit, lining things up – 'and look in the mirror, I can see my own buttocks, and also the Wren Library?'

'Sir Christopher's masterpiece.'

'I've been called worse.'

Lawrence is wrapping a used condom inside a tissue which he places in an old envelope he pulled from a desk drawer, the envelope labelled 'Earl of Surrey – images'. He drops it in the bin in the corner of the room.

Angela is lying on her stomach, her elbows propped on a cushion and her chin resting on one hand. The light streaming through the windows falls so that the shadow traces a curve across her back, the lower half of her naked body luminous in the sunshine.

Lawrence stands and looks at her with satisfaction. For the rest of the day, Angela will be outside of this room, walking around the city, working in the library, in meetings, and she will elicit, Lawrence reflects, intense desire from other men; but right now, the object of this desire is here in his room, on his sofa, behind his locked door, belonging to him alone. This triumph gives Lawrence pleasure.

'You look like a goddess. The *Rokeby Venus*.'

Angela rolls her eyes at him and raises herself a little on her elbows.

Clothes are scattered around the room: his shorts, her denim skirt, his checked shirt, her white T-shirt and sunglasses. Angela's bra is draped across *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*.

Lawrence looks at his watch, which he never takes off.

'Lawrence?'

Lawrence smiles, but the smile has nothing to do with anything. It is a placeholder. His head is now elsewhere: specifically, three miles east in Hawton Manor. He had said to Claudia he'd be back by mid-morning with aubergines and mint. He's yet to go to the shops. The guests are meant to arrive by two. He's been insistent enough in his emails about punctuality that he can't be late himself.

Angela can feel his growing distance without looking at him. She shifts her position on the sofa and folds her arms.

And the pool needs cleaning. Skimming and filter. Claudia can do the beds of course. But he has some emails to get through. Then the seating plans with his special quill. He says it out loud: 'Oh God, the seating plans!'

'Jesus Christ, Lawrence, can you just be present? Here and now.'

He steps towards her; sits down on the edge of the sofa; rests a hand on her thigh. 'I'm sorry. Of course. I am here. You look absolutely beautiful.'

'Fuck you.'

Angela pulls herself into a sitting position, sliding away from Lawrence's touch, and picks up her T-shirt and bra.

'Where's my underwear?'

Lawrence looks round, ineffectually. 'I'm not sure. Maybe by the printer?' He's thinking about whether there are enough of the good wine glasses.

'I should just leave it for a student to find. Would that work for you? I bet it would, actually.' Angela fishes behind the printer under Lawrence's desk. 'Narcissus.'

'Angela. *Mon ange*. Don't go.' Lawrence takes the clothes from her and drops them to the floor. One hand traces the

length of her spine. 'Of course we have time. I'm sorry. I was being an idiot. Forgive me.'

Ten minutes later, Angela retrieves the rest of her clothes and gets dressed quickly. Lawrence, now lying on the sofa, watches her pick up her bag, unfold her sunglasses and put them on.

Angela says, 'Next time, a hotel.'

'Of course. I'll book us somewhere special.'

'You always say that and you never do. Maybe I'll book us somewhere.'

Panic flickers inside Lawrence. 'But I can't get away this week. I'm hosting.'

'You could come say hello.'

Angela bends down to pull the straps of her sandals over her heels.

Lawrence says, 'I'll see what I can do.'

He pauses for a moment, as if waiting. Then: 'Aren't you forgetting something?'

Angela's hand goes to check the back pocket of her skirt for her phone. 'What?'

'My chapter?'

'Fuck, of course.' She pulls a stack of papers from her bag and puts it on the coffee table. 'I read it on the flight over. In between *Elvis* and *Death on the Nile*. I'll leave my notes to reveal which I thought best. Sorry they're a bit of a scrawl.'

'Super,' says Lawrence, grasping the pile of papers a little too urgently, almost snatching them, reaching for his glasses in a donnish manner, holding the first page close, and forgetting, in his absorption with his own reception, that he is a 53-year-old professor reclining naked before the 55-year-old Danby

Visiting Fellow, forgetting his wife making beds in the spare rooms three miles away, forgetting his son in France, forgetting his friends travelling right now across the country towards Hawton for a week-long writing retreat.

'I can't wait to see what you made of it.'

In the sealed capsule of his train carriage, Ash is dislocated from the world below and around him. The train sweeps past a series of long gardens, back fences flush with the railings guarding the track, which runs along a stretch of higher ground, so that the traveller looks down into the green patches below. Garden after garden flashes by, each empty of people but filled with the paraphernalia of lives: a vegetable patch; a trampoline; a child's bike; a swing. As the houses give way to fields, Ash sees a smudge of smoke on the horizon, which reveals itself to be a bonfire on the edge of a scrap of land, the kind of space that has become the resting-place of unwanted objects, too large to be removed: farm machinery, an iron bedstead, and a caravan. For a moment, Ash can smell its thick smoke, and then the field and the bonfire are gone, along with the familiar scent, surely the product of his memory and not the real fire.

Ash shifts in his seat. Even at this time of day the train is unbearably hot and airless, the windows locked shut and the air conditioning not functioning. Ash tries to adjust his legs into a more comfortable position and opens his laptop on the fold-down table. It's very cramped. The train WiFi isn't working so he connects online via his phone and clicks on the shortcut to *The Guardian* Comment section. His piece on the attainment gap in A-level results between white and ethnic

minority students already has eighty-seven comments. Ash has a policy of never looking below the line but he keeps an eye on the numbers: his academic publications seem to be met with silence on a cathedral-like scale so he likes the sense of readers. His editor uses the word 'traction'. He closes Safari and clicks open a desktop folder labelled 'Et in Arcadia Ego' and then a document titled 'Case Studies – Current Draft'. He scrolls through the document until he gets to the last section, which has the heading 'LNA: Plagiarism/Power abuse'. These paragraphs Ash reads through, until he realises that his gaze has fixed on the screen and he has stopped paying attention to the text: he is looking at pixels, not letters. He runs a hand over his face and checks the time: twenty more minutes till Cambridge.

Claudia pushes through the iron gate in the orchard wall and places her cup on the rickety picnic table beyond it. In front of her lies the swimming pool, shaded at this time of the morning, its surface quiet and still. Claudia unbuttons her dress and folds it over the wooden bench. She walks slowly to the deep end, where she raises her arms above her head and grips the stone edge of the pool with her toes before diving into the water. Its cold bite is all-encompassing, taking her briefly and painfully beyond thought and entirely into the realm of feeling. As she surfaces, heart thumping, Claudia pushes her wet hair from her face and begins a slow breaststroke to the pool's shallow steps, touching the edge with her fingers before turning back towards the deep end and repeating the action, settling into the rhythm of her swim. The cold water, its chill lasting through the heat of the morning, the solitude and the

calm green of the trees beyond: these are the things, Claudia tells herself, which keep her sane.

'I'm not saying you're being selfish, I'm just saying it's bad timing.'

Josh, tucking in his shirt, says nothing. He fastens his watch and turns to the mirror, running a hand through his hair until it falls forward by just the right amount. He knows he just has to endure this for a few minutes, and then he's free for the week: it's the price he has to pay.

'It's really bad timing that you're going on this "writing retreat"' – Gemma mimes scare quotes and says the words with sarcastic emphasis – 'now, this week, and it was bad timing last month when you had Mike's stag do, and it's going to be bad timing next month when something else happens, and at some point, at some point, Josh, you're going to have to start putting this ahead of whatever else is happening in your life.'

Josh straightens his collar.

'So, you *are* saying I'm being selfish.'

'No, but it's starting to feel as though it's not actually a priority for you, right now, making a baby together.'

Josh flinches internally at that phrase. Is it the word 'making', or the word 'baby'? He glances at Gemma, who is lying on the bed wearing only a T-shirt with 'PARADISED' printed across the front. A pillow is wedged under her buttocks and her legs are resting up the wall, toes pointing at the ceiling. Her face, looking back at him, is disturbing, its upside-down position lending it a comical, clownish air, forehead rutted and eyes slightly bulging.

'Gem, it is a priority, of course it is. And, at the risk of stating the obvious, we have just had sex. We could be . . .' – he swallows – 'making a baby together right now.'

'I'm not ovulating until Thursday at least. It's highly unlikely that an egg released then could be fertilised by ejaculate more than seventy-two hours old.' Gemma adjusts the pillow and looks at the ceiling. There could be nothing less erotic, Josh thinks, than that sentence. Trying to conceive involved more and better sex, in which Gemma's need for him was urgent and satisfying; the accompanying conversations were not.

'But, sweetheart, the retreat is this week – not next. And it's Lawrence.'

Josh only calls Gemma 'sweetheart' when he's pleading a case.

'I honestly can't see why Lawrence still exerts such an influence. It's like he has you in a spell. You finished the PhD ten years ago.'

'Twelve.'

'And he didn't get you a job.'

'Supervisors don't get their students jobs,' says Josh, putting his wireless headphone case, a phone charger and a power cord into his bag. 'That's not how it works.' Gemma's distance from academia had been one of her attractions when they met at a teaching conference five years ago, and Josh's dissertation on 'T. S. Eliot and the invention of the seventeenth century' (the title had been Lawrence's), and his hopes for an academic career, were long behind him.

'I still don't understand how you can have a system where you write for four years—'

'Five.'

'—for *five years* producing a three-hundred-page dissertation which eight people read and then there's no job at the end of it.'

'Eight's actually rather optimistic.'

'I mean: how can that be? Why do people put themselves through that? Masochism?'

'There are jobs. There were jobs. There will be jobs.' Josh zips up the bag like he's concluding an argument. 'Just not for me.'

Gemma's devotion to Josh is such, and her reverence for his intellect so great, that she can only understand Josh's academic failure in terms of some higher negligence, and her aim falls, commonsensically enough, on Josh's teacher. Why else would Josh, with all his brilliant capacities, not get what he wanted?

Josh had stuck it for three years after the viva, eking out a living on sessional teaching where he was paid £32 for a lecture which took him ten hours to write, and doing increasing volumes of better-paid but demoralising private tutoring for the children of affluent parents preparing for the eleven-plus. He saw his peers get jobs or jump ship to law conversion courses or journalism, or the civil service. He started to see people younger than him get the posts he was applying for. The only ones who held on, waiting for the job which may or may not arrive, were those with family money or an employed spouse, who were able to endure three years on £6k. Josh knew he couldn't wait that long. In job interviews, Josh began to feel a worse version of himself unfolding within as he sat in the waiting room: he was resentful at his failure even before he started the interview, and he began to give answers with the intention of confirming that foreboding. He was in a downwards spiral. On the morning of his 32nd birthday, Josh

emailed Lawrence at 3 a.m. and told him he couldn't hang on any more: the money from his mum was gone. 'I feel I've let you down,' Josh wrote, 'but this is no way to live.' Josh had a panicked sense of months spooling past, of time as reels of film falling rapidly to the floor as a wheel turns and turns. This year, when Gemma talked about being thirty-six and wanting a baby, the terms she used brought those images flooding back.

'It's nice of Lawrence to ask me after all this time,' says Josh, 'and there will be a ton of networking opportunities for the film. You know Lawrence's wife, Claudia? She's absolutely loaded. It's her family's place, that massive house they live in. If I can persuade her and Lawrence to put some funding into *Canterbury*, then that's a week well spent.'

'You really think they'll go for it?'

'Perfectly possible. Lawrence has already agreed to be a consultant. He said so. He's not exactly a Chaucer expert but close enough, and the pitch will read better with his name attached. Once this draft of the script is finished, I'm going to ask him to have another look. And that's another thing: if I can do a full week concentrating on the rewrites, it will be done before term starts.'

Lawrence hasn't actually agreed to anything, and Josh knows this, but when talking about the film with Gemma, he's prone to turning things-that-might-be into things-that-definitely-are. He doesn't want to worry her.

'You're obsessed with that bloody film.' Gemma removes the pillow and hugs her knees into her chest.

'Well, we both have our obsessions.' The comment comes out sharper than Josh intends. 'And the retreat is really going to help me get somewhere.'

The switch from academia to teaching had been a natural step for Josh, the rhythms of one academic year sliding into those of another. His attempts at moving into scriptwriting alongside his post at a minor public school in north London have been more disjointed and ever more time-consuming. This increasingly intense work on what even Josh admits can only be a massive long-shot has come at the same time as Gemma's desire for children has grown. The alignment is not a coincidence.

'You're not going to fall in love with some glamorous poet, are you?'

Josh leans over and kisses Gemma on her inverted forehead. 'I wouldn't find anyone I'd swap you for.' The response isn't quite right, he thinks, suggesting a failed search, rather than a desire not to look, but the moment passes.

'And, sweetheart,' says Josh, 'I'm not going anywhere next month. It's September. Back to school. The little cherubs.' He picks up his bag and leaves the room, feeling his pockets for his car keys. 'The little shits.'

'Maybe I could come and visit? Josh?' Gemma's voice follows him into the hallway.

'Visit? No, I don't think so. I don't think it works like that. It's just for writers.'

'I know, but I could come just for the evening, maybe Wednesday, and come straight back here on Thursday morning. Or Thursday night. No one would even have to see me.'

'Gem, no, it just wouldn't work. It would be breaking the . . .' Josh reaches for the right word, 'the atmosphere. The agreement. Believe me, I would love to see you, and I know it's bad timing, but it just wouldn't work. Anyway, I'll have the car.'

'I could get the train? Their house is, what, fifteen minutes from Cambridge station. You could pick me up?'

Josh collects the door keys from the hallway table and sticks his head back around the bedroom door.

'Goodbye, my darling. Have a good week.' Then he adds, bluntly, 'It's all going to be all right, I promise.'

But before Gemma can ask 'What is?' Josh crosses the room to kiss her again. Gemma pats the side of his face at an awkward angle.

Josh says, 'You know I love you. See you when I get back.'

A peacock stalks across the courtyard, its feet picking out a beat to which its head keeps time. For no apparent reason it stops, raising itself erect and cocking its head to one side, as though in response to a sudden sound. All that can be heard is the familiar church clock striking eleven and the distant noise of traffic on the main road. After a moment, the bird resumes its stately progress, following the curve of the cobbles around the wall of the house, its tail feathers trailing behind it over the warm stones.

'You're late.' Lucy watches Neil unhook the rope latch of the front gate and then, as he pushes it open, looks down at her feet, bare and dusty on the bottom step of the stone stairs which lead to her front door. She flexes her toes, delaying the moment of eye contact.

'I think you'll find I'm on time.' Neil checks his watch. 'Yes. Eleven-thirty on the dot. To the minute. Christ, it's hot.' He

stops on the path and takes a bottle of water out of his bag, loosening its cap with a click. 'So you see I'm not late.' Lucy's position on the step puts their heads, as Neil straightens up, at exactly the same height. Neil raises his wrist towards her so that the face of his watch is at her eye level and a fraction too close for comfort. Lucy notices the tan line where the watch slips on his arm, the trace of blue veins on the taut skin of his fist. She leans backwards, just a little.

'Neil, we agreed nine-thirty. You're two hours late. Two hours. You can't keep doing this.'

'Doing what? I'm not "doing" anything.' Neil lowers his arm and takes a drink from the bottle before putting it back in his bag. 'And you certainly told me eleven at the very earliest. I made a note of it.' He moves closer to Lucy. At an earlier point in their relationship, he might have reached his hand out to gently tuck her hair behind her ear. But he doesn't, and his closeness has the quality of resistance: a physical threat. He says, 'You must be very tired.'

'I'm fine.'

'You look exhausted.'

'I'm sleeping fine.'

'Washed out.'

'I don't want to talk about this with the kids inside. You should have called.'

Neil holds up his hands in a don't-shoot gesture. 'Let's go into the house and you can take me through whatever comprehensive documentation you've no doubt prepared.'

'I haven't prepared anything. You've got my number. I'll only be at Lawrence and Claudia's. It's ten minutes away if anything happens. I've left the GP's number on the fridge.'

'This is progress,' says Neil. 'One day soon I might even be allowed to tie my own shoelaces.' Lucy hates Neil's continually sarcastic mode. Early on, when they'd just met and in the first year or two of marriage, she'd thought of it as a kind of dry charm. Now it's just a ceaseless undermining of everything. He never stops; there is no moment when the mask falls and the real person behind emerges. Neil follows Lucy up the stone steps and into the hallway of the house he used to live in. 'The last time you went away for a week, you left a fucking manual.'

'Neil!' Lucy admonishes in a whisper. 'The children are in the sitting room. They can hear you.'

'A veritable tome,' Neil says, at the same volume, 'with sectional instructions for each day.' He smiles, amused at his formulation. 'But you always did infantilise me.'

'Why do you talk like this?'

'I'm surprised you didn't include an index.'

'We're not married any more, Neil.'

'We actually *are*,' Neil says. 'Even your quickie divorce is going to take longer than four months.'

'It's not . . .' Lucy begins, then stops. 'Come and say hi to the kids and then I'll get going.'

'You can go now,' Neil says.

'It's good for them to see us together,' Lucy replies, still quietly, 'being amicable.'

'Our children can take reality. We shouldn't lie to them.'

'Neil, they are ten years old.'

'How can you expect me to be amicable when you are literally forcing me out of my own home?'

'For fuck's sake,' Lucy hisses, and watches immediate satisfaction spread across her husband's face like a blush. 'It

was you who had the affair, you who said you needed space – not me. I didn't make those things happen. *You* left *me*.'

'No, I left because you made me leave. I didn't want to.'

Lucy continues as though he hasn't spoken, 'And now I am just trying to be an adult and make the best of it, for the kids' sake.'

'As am I. You're not the only one who thinks about the kids.'

'Right.' Lucy steadies herself. 'Do you want to take your bag up before you come through? I made up the bed in the spare room upstairs.'

'I know where the spare room is,' says Neil, pushing open the hallway door so that it bangs on the radiator. 'It's my fucking house.' Raising his voice, he calls: 'Where are my beauties? Daddy's home!' and Lucy hears her children squeal with excitement as she follows their father into the room.

Claudia is standing in the middle of the kitchen. Lawrence is listening, or half-listening, his eyes glancing down at his phone. Claudia says, 'So, Deborah and Lucy are in the annexe bedrooms, and I'm putting the artist woman, Inês, in the spare room, and Miles upstairs, so that leaves Ash in your study, and I guess Josh in Tristan's room? Does that work?'

'It does as long as I'm not sleeping in my study too.' Claudia looks up quickly, but Lawrence is smiling and his tone amicable; she smiles back.

'I will enjoy having you in with me.'

'Me too,' he says. 'And I promise not to snore. Mind you, Ash would probably rather be in the annexe next to Lucy. You could swap him and Deborah.'

'No, Deborah will want more space than she'll get in your study. And Lucy's been through so much, it's not a good time for her to be with someone new. Even Ash.'

'He'd be great for her. Loosen her up a bit. He's always had a bit of a thing for her.'

'He's not over Kate.'

Lawrence looks up from the screen. 'How do you know? Did he tell you that?'

'No, just a feeling. I did talk to him about it a bit, a while ago.'

'You did?' Lawrence's tone is still affable but there is now a texture to it which Claudia recognises. Lawrence doesn't get jealous, exactly, but he resents not knowing things first: wanting always to be the origin point, he finds discussion of Claudia's life before they met, including her friendship with Ash, difficult. 'I haven't seen Ash since May. At the Michaels' party.'

'Me neither. It was before then.'

'He's probably feeling quite differently now, in that case.'

'Maybe. Anyway, Lucy doesn't need the stress of a new relationship right now. She needs some time alone.'

Lawrence is about to say 'You seem very keen to keep them apart' but his phone pings and he glances down to swipe it open.

'Lucy's vulnerable, that's all, and Ash . . .' Claudia lets the sentence drift.

'Best thing for her, as far as I can see.' But Lawrence is losing interest, his eyes on the screen.

'Did you have a shower when you got home?'

'What?' Lawrence doesn't look up.

'Your hair's wet. And you've changed your shirt.'

'Hmm? Yes, it was extraordinarily hot,' Lawrence says, starting to type. 'Christ, another Master's student panicking about their dissertation. I don't think a single one of them is going to finish on time at this rate. The anxiety levels are absolutely through the roof this year.' Lawrence is silent for a moment as he concentrates on wording his reply.

'Well, that's everyone,' Claudia concludes. 'All the beds are done, and I asked people to bring their own towels, so I think that's it. Just dinner for tonight to get ready and I'm doing that. Did you manage to do the seating plans?'

'Not yet, darling. And please don't badger. The shopping took longer than I thought. It's on my list.' He pauses for a moment, then adds, 'Your dinner will be sensational. The best of the week.'

'Miles is an excellent cook.'

'Not as good as you.' Lawrence finishes checking his emails and puts his phone face down on the table. 'Okay, finished, and that's my out-of-office done. I am officially on retreat. What are we making?'

'*Melanzane parmigiana*, now that I have enough aubergines.'

'I got good ones, didn't I?'

'I've asked everyone to do veggie because Miles is and I don't know about the artist woman.'

'She's Portuguese. She won't be vegetarian.'

'She could be. Which reminds me, Deborah doesn't keep kosher, does she?'

'No, no,' says Lawrence, getting up and going to the fridge.

'Okay,' Claudia says, 'well, it's just salad for lunch. It's too hot to want anything else.'

'I think we should start as we mean to go on.' Lawrence opens the fridge and selects a bottle of wine, uncorking it and pouring her a half glass, himself a full one.

'It's a bit early, isn't it?'

'Nonsense. Cheers, darling. Here's to our retreat.' He clinks his glass against hers.

'To our retreat.'

There is a pause as Lawrence assesses the wine. 'Delicious. Almost as delicious as you.' He leans over and kisses his wife's cheek. 'You look absolutely beautiful.'

As Claudia puts down her glass, she registers Lawrence glance at her wrist – a tattoo of a horizon and clouds – and then quickly look away.

Lawrence hates his wife's tattoos. She'd had this first one done two years ago, on her 47th birthday, and Lawrence had hit the roof in a manner she hadn't foreseen and found astonishing. He'd said it was inappropriate, 'particularly for someone of your age', and that it 'puts you on display like you're in the mosh pit at Glastonbury'.

Claudia had said, 'I don't think you want me to have a body at all,' and Lawrence had cycled off to sit in his office all evening.

Claudia turns her arm so that the tattoo is hidden against the table. She takes another sip and then opens the paper bag of aubergines. She had asked for five, and Lawrence has bought three, but her frustration registers only in a little shake of her head which is over in a second and certainly before Lawrence can notice. She takes her favourite sharp blade from the knife rack.

'I'm going to go and clean the pool before anyone gets here.' Lawrence walks to the back door, carrying his glass. 'I'll be in

the garden if you need me. Thank you, darling, for doing it all, as always.'

Once alone, Claudia reaches for her phone and selects a playlist. Puccini streams into the kitchen as she picks up an aubergine and cuts into it smoothly, the long slices falling one by one onto the chopping board. Claudia finishes the first and starts on another. Through the open window she catches sight of Lawrence heading towards the orchard, putting on his favourite cap, an old khaki one that he bought at an army and navy surplus store in Connecticut. He swerves a little to avoid a peacock standing on the path. The bird doesn't move, seemingly oblivious to Lawrence's proximity. Claudia's knife pauses and she suddenly and vividly imagines – the thought comes in an instant, unbidden: how it would feel to slice the blade down the peacock's long narrow neck, to feel its slender throat open up. As she watches, Lawrence raises his wine glass to his lips with one hand and with the other adjusts the cap over his eyes before slipping his phone from his shorts pocket.