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FOR GEORGIA BOWERS,
MY FAVOURITE WEIRDO

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If you want to understand the artist,
you have to look at the painting.

– John Douglas,
Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit

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ONE

I didn't sign up for this.

I trail behind Dad and Kim (who I flat out refuse to call my stepmum, especially when they've been married for less than forty-eight hours) and slow down as much as possible, while keeping them in sight. I've barely had a moment to myself since I was dropped off in the countryside for their wedding on Thursday.

Between a manor house full of guests, my bridesmaid duties (which mostly consisted of wrangling two tiny flower girls) and the ceremony on Friday, I'm exhausted. Yesterday was supposed to be chilled, but by the time the guests actually left the house, the sun had gone down. Honestly, there's nothing worse than being left alone with soppy newlyweds the day after their wedding. Extra disgusting when one of them is your dad.

Thankfully, we made the two-hour drive back to Blackwood early this morning, and I was allowed approximately fifty-six minutes to make myself at home before I was herded out again just before ten a.m. I was hoping for a nap, but instead we're out for a morning walk to an estate sale, whatever that is.

I check my phone to see if there's any update from my mum.

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I haven't had a proper chat with her or my little brother Ethan yet, because they flew to Sydney on Friday. I begged to go with them – my stepdad Darren has been showing me photos of where he grew up for years, and they're headed there because his mum needs major surgery – but they decided that me being at Dad's wedding was more important. I still don't know if I agree with them.

I drag my feet over the winding cobbled streets and think about all the times I walked around Blackwood as a kid, back when Dad taught art history at the university the first time around and me and Mum lived here too, one not-so-happy family. It's probably been six years since I last visited, and I get a little thrill of satisfaction that it's still as old-fashioned and magical as I remember. I don't recognize everything, though, and I have to admit I might lose my bearings if I don't keep up, so I let out a loud and somewhat obnoxious sigh and start to walk a little faster. As tempting as it is to get lost down a dark alleyway, I don't want to do anything that makes Dad and Kim regret letting me house-sit while they jet off on their honeymoon. I just need to get through the rest of today and then tomorrow they leave for the Maldives and Izzy arrives. Ten whole days living with my best friend.

I can't wait.

'Almost there, Fliss!' Dad says cheerfully, turning around to make sure I am actually following them. His cheeks are rosy from the warm August morning as he grins at me.

Kim copies him, smiling in that insipid way that she does. Okay, fine, it's not insipid. Kim is perfectly nice; I just don't know

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her very well. After the divorce, Dad left Blackwood to teach in Paris, where he was offered his dream job at Sorbonne University and he started his other life, without me. The one I never had any say in. It's part of the reason I detest *feelings* – if I gave in to every complicated feeling I ever had about my parents' divorce or Dad's absence, I'd be a mess. Anyway, Kim was living over there too and they've only been dating for eighteen months, so the whole moving-back-to-Blackwood-and-getting-married thing happened very quickly.

'There's a cute little vegan café around the corner from the estate sale. I'll treat you both to a lavender latte when we're done,' Kim offers.

'Great,' I reply, allowing a touch of sarcasm to tinge the word. I feel a pang of regret as Kim's smile wavers slightly. 'That sounds lovely,' I add, catching Dad's eye and making sure I don't sound like the evil stepdaughter. How are people mean? It's draining.

I stay behind them, watching as Kim casually links arms with my dad and rests her blonde head on his shoulder for a second as they walk. Dad is just over six foot, and she's shorter than him, but not by much. She dresses in a relaxed 1950s style, all red lipstick and soft flared skirts – the total opposite of my business casual mum. Dad's style has never really changed over the years and remains mostly casual, like the black jeans and T-shirt he's wearing today, but Kim did manage to make him wear a nice suit for the wedding. I inherited his rosy cheeks and brown curls, though his are cut short and starting to grey at the temples, while mine run wild.

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We turn a corner and arrive at the quad in the centre of Blackwood University, which consists of a huge courtyard filled with a lush green. It's surrounded by old buildings that rival the architecture at Oxford or Cambridge. The main attraction, the Clarendon Building, dominates one entire side of the square, all Gothic spires and soaring turrets. This is the central hub, where I remember students gathering on sunny days. I used to dream of being one of them. A tingle of excitement hits me as I remember that it's not long until I get to apply.

'That's the Heywood Gallery, Fliss,' Dad says, directing my attention to a newer building that I'm not familiar with. It's sleek and modern, with a glass facade that reflects the morning sunlight, but it somehow blends into its surroundings. 'You should pop in while you're here. We have some amazing pieces on display. Still working on the new exhibition for September, though, so the whole top floor is closed off. But I'm sure I can ask someone to give you a sneak peek, if you want?'

'Sure,' I say, with very little intention of following through. Modern art isn't really my thing, much to Dad's disappointment. 'So you're working at the gallery? I thought you were teaching?'

'It's a split role. The university owns the gallery, so I'll be teaching art history to the undergrads three days a week and then working with the postgrads at the gallery the other two, helping them curate the exhibitions. It's half of the reason why I –' he pauses and smiles at his new wife – 'why *we* chose to move back.'

'Oh, Mr Keller.' Kim simpers at him as I try not to vomit in my mouth. There was a lot of Mr and Mrs Keller talk yesterday, and it doesn't take much to get them started.

CONFIDENTIAL
PRH CHILDREN'S

'So what's the other half?' We walk around the wide expanse of lawn and head down another cobbled street.

'You, Fliss,' Dad says, beckoning us round a corner. 'I miss you. Plus, I know how much you want to apply to Blackwood. If you get in, and I know you will, we'll get to spend more time together. Make up for me working away so much.'

'Thanks,' I say, not sure how I feel about that, because I never knew he cared about being away from me. I leave the word hanging and focus on our surroundings instead. Dad and I aren't known for our *deep* conversations.

Most of the campus has barely changed, and I recognize the row of tall, narrow, terraced houses carved from the golden stone that is ubiquitous around town. This is where a lot of the professors live, though Dad had to give up our old house after the divorce and Mum and I moved an hour north. Now that he's back and doesn't have a kid in tow, he's been shoved into a much less grand two-bed flat on the outskirts of town. Though with Blackwood being as small as it is, the outskirts are barely more than a ten-minute walk from here. I look wistfully at number nine, our old house, as we walk past it. I have nice memories there, before Mum and Dad started arguing all the time.

We approach a house towards the end of the row, where an elderly white man with an impressive moustache and a stack of leaflets is standing guard.

'Good morning,' he booms as we climb the steps to the front door. He's in a black three-piece suit and doesn't seem to be remotely bothered by the August heat. 'Feel free to browse inside.' Kim takes a leaflet, but he addresses my dad, and I get the

CONFIDENTIAL PRH CHILDREN'S

impression he is completely disregarding her. He doesn't even look at me. 'Most of the listings are in here, but please find me directly if you would like to discuss anything. My name is George.'

'Thank you, *George*,' Kim says pointedly so George is forced to look at her. I can't help but smirk, and it makes me warm to her even more. Yay for micro-feminisms.

We enter the long hallway, and I pause as a dozen memories hit me at once. The house is identical in layout to the one I grew up in – stairs on the left, living room and kitchen to the right. My bedroom was the one right at the top of the stairs – a box that was tiny but had a low window ledge I could perch on. I loved looking out of that window at all the students running between classes. You can tell a lot about people when they don't think anyone is watching them.

'You coming, Fliss?' Dad says it gently, and I know he's reminded of our old house too. I decide not to be the one to mention it and change the subject instead.

'Yeah. What is an estate sale, anyway?' I ask, following them through the house.

'Well, when someone . . . dies –' Dad chooses his words carefully – 'and there is no surviving family –'

'Or will,' Kim chimes in, waving the leaflet to fan her face as we cross the threshold into the living room.

'Or will,' Dad agrees, 'then sometimes they sell off belongings, also known as the estate. It's just a fancy name for a rummage sale, I suppose. Tim – Professor Williams – fell into that category. He had a heart attack and no surviving family to speak of.'

CONFIDENTIAL
PRH CHILDREN'S

'You knew him?' I ask. I aim a puff of breath towards my forehead. It's stuffy in here.

'Of course. He's been teaching art history at Blackwood since the late nineties. Had been.' Dad corrects himself. 'You don't remember him? His wife Hazel used to bake that chocolate cake you loved so much.'

'She did?' A memory hits me and suddenly I'm eight years old again, eating cake that a nice lady brought by Dad's office as he marked a pile of essays. 'What happened to her?'

'She died a couple of years ago. Anyway, Tim had a huge personal collection of art and so on,' Dad continues. 'He used to donate a lot of his finds to a Victorian museum in London, but I heard he started to hoard things after Hazel passed. I think a lot of people will come to see if he actually had anything valuable. That's why we're here so early – I want to see if there's anything the Heywood Gallery might want to acquire.'

'These people are no better than vultures.' Kim tuts, even though she's already scouring a shelf of bric-a-brac. She selects a black disc, studies it and looks disappointed as she puts it back down. 'Coloured glass,' she explains. 'I thought it could have been obsidian. I need a new scrying dish to help with my fortune-telling, though the cleansing I'd have to put it through might be beyond me, what with his body having been here for so long. It's such a shame nobody thought to check on him until they noticed the smell . . .'

'Let's look over here, Kim.' Dad flushes even redder and redirects her attention to a large wooden armoire on the opposite

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PRH CHILDREN'S

side of the room. I hide a smirk as he turns back to me. Who knew my serious dad would fall in love with a woman who thinks she's part witch? 'Have a look around, Fliss. We won't be long. Then maybe you can let Kim treat you to that coffee, okay?'

'Okay,' I agree, but he raises his eyebrows at me. 'I've been nice so far, haven't I?' I say defensively.

'So far.' He tips his head as I avoid eye contact, studying some drab landscape paintings that lean against the faded yellow wallpaper. 'She's looking forward to getting to know you better.'

'I know,' I mutter, aware of the whine in my voice. I flip through the nearest stack of paintings before stopping on an unframed portrait. 'Ew, who would even paint this?'

'Felicity Keller, I will never understand your lack of appreciation for the fine arts.' Dad laughs, moving closer to me and glancing down at the canvas. 'Oh my god.'

'Grim, right?' I lift it carefully, realizing the wooden bars that the canvas is stretched over weigh a ton, so I prop it up at the front of the stack awkwardly. 'You've got to be messed up to paint something like that, right?'

Dad crouches down and peers at it. 'Fliss, wait there.' When he stands, he has the jittery look of someone who might be going into shock, and I can see the whites all the way around his eyes. Panic bubbles in my stomach and I wonder if I should shout for Kim, when he breaks into a huge smile. He presses a hand on my shoulder and looks me in the eye. 'I mean it. You wait here, and you do not let anybody touch that painting, do you hear me?'

CONFIDENTIAL PRH CHILDREN'S

He lowers his voice and whispers conspiratorially, 'This could be a huge find. Just guard it while I talk to that guy at the door, George. Okay?'

I nod mutely, confused but also relieved as he pulls his phone from his coat pocket, takes several photographs of the painting and taps the screen a few times. 'Oh my god,' he repeats, holding the phone to his ear as he walks out into the hallway. 'Alessandra? It's Michael. You'll never guess what . . .'

Dad moves out of earshot, and I look back at the painting, bewildered. As unsettling as it is, it's oddly mesmerizing, and I find that when I close my eyes, the image is seared onto the inside of my eyelids. I think about the art terms Dad has taught me over the years as I try to analyse it.

Medium: I think it's painted in oil, though the streaks look thicker than I'd expect, like the tube was out of date when the artist used it. There's a letter 'A' slashed into the paint on the bottom corner too, which could be a signature.

Composition: it's a portrait, or maybe even a self-portrait. I think it's a man, but it's hard to tell, because the whole image is so disfigured it barely looks human. The top of the head is so smudged it blends into the burgundy background, as though the figure is being sucked into it. Its mouth is stretched in an eternal scream, and long, violent streaks of white and yellow paint slash down its face, giving the impression of rotting, desiccated skin. I tilt my head so the light hits at a different angle and see the almost-hidden layer that sits just beneath the paint, the flash of a grinning skull painted beneath.

CONFIDENTIAL
PRH CHILDREN'S

'Well, I like the weird and wonderful, but this is a little much, even for me,' Kim says from behind me, and I force my eyes away from the empty eye sockets that bleed darkness. 'Interesting use of a pentimento, though,' she adds. I tilt my head in confusion at the unfamiliar word, so she indicates the skull. 'It seems as though that was painted first and then the artist covered it. "Pentimento" comes from the Italian word meaning to repent or change your mind. Canvas was expensive back in the day, so painters would sometimes reuse it by painting over existing works. You can't always see them with the naked eye – a lot are only detectable with scans – but some artists chose to leave them visible.'

'So you can see the skull on purpose? Why?'

'Part of the artist's vision, I suppose.' Kim's eyes are glittering. She's a painter; I should have known she'd be into this stuff. That's how she met my dad – he went to one of her exhibitions in Paris. 'See this part here?' She points at an area of the face that appears flatter than the rest. 'This would indicate that the portrait was unfinished for some reason. It's called underpainting, but I prefer the other term for it.'

'Oh yeah?' I say, interested now. 'And what's that?'

'Dead colouring.' Kim grins ghoulishly, and a shiver runs down my spine despite the heat. I'm sorry I asked.

'Got it.' Dad reappears in the doorway, his face flushed with excitement. 'The Heywood Gallery will officially own this beauty once I sign the paperwork.' He comes over and squeezes me to him, planting a kiss on my head as I marvel over his choice of words. As captivating as the painting is, I don't think anyone else

CONFIDENTIAL
PRH CHILDREN'S

would call it a 'beauty'. 'Fliss, you little star. Do you know what you've uncovered?'

'Everlasting nightmares?' I say, avoiding eye contact with the portrait, though it seems to demand it. 'I was worried about you. Your eyes looked like they were going to pop out of your head.'

'I'm fine,' Dad reassures me. 'I just didn't expect *this* to be here. I mean, if it's what I think it is . . .' He trails off and grins at us both.

'What do you think it is, honey?' Kim asks Dad, laughing at his obvious joy. I soften to her in that moment. She really does make it difficult for me to dislike her.

'Well, if I'm right – and I'm not saying I am, but I sent Alessandra at the gallery some photos and she's on the same page – then it's a Very Big Deal. A lost piece of art so fabled that no one was sure it even existed. I had to buy it for the gallery before someone else got their hands on it.'

'Really?' I ask, looking at the painting. It leers back at me. 'So why did Professor Williams keep it a secret, then?'

Dad furrows his brow, and I can tell that he hasn't thought about it. He brushes off the question as George appears in the doorway with a roll of brown parcel paper, a shear-like pair of scissors and a ball of string. Dad approaches him, thanks him profusely as he takes the items and heads back to us. He is practically oozing excitement.

'Give me a hand, will you, Kim?' Dad asks. Kim takes the paper and unrolls it across the floor; then Dad lifts the painting and gently places it on top. 'Fliss, can you grab those scissors and cut the paper so we can tie it up?'

CONFIDENTIAL
PRH CHILDREN'S

I take the shears and chop into the paper until the scissors start to glide in that satisfying way they do. 'Ouch!' I snap my hand back as a white-hot pain slices into the meat of my palm.

'You okay?' Kim asks.

I study the slash in my skin as a drop of blood wells to the surface. 'Paper cut. A big one.' I wince, putting down the scissors so I can press my mouth to the wound.

Kim pulls a sympathetic face before helping Dad wrap the painting. George then reappears with some paperwork and Dad follows him over to a table, copies down some numbers from a credit card and signs his name with a flourish as Kim finishes tying the string. You can tell she's done this before – each corner is supported, and the extra string forms a handle of sorts as she picks it up.

'I guess we're stopping by the gallery before we go for coffee, then?' I ask.

'No way.' Dad shakes his head as he pockets his copy of the paperwork and takes the painting from Kim, beaming at it. 'Alessandra is away until tomorrow, and I don't trust anyone else with it. This baby's coming straight home with us.'

Oh, great, I'll be living with a demonic painting for the foreseeable future.

What could possibly go wrong?

CONFIDENTIAL
PRH CHILDREN'S