

JENNIFER

THORNE

Author of *LUTE*

*Welcome to Villa Taccola.
She's been waiting
for you.*

A NOVEL

DIABVOLA

*"Scorches the petals right off *The White Lotus*"*
CLAY McLEOD CHAPMAN

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Leave us a Review](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Your Flesh and Blood](#)

[Togetherness](#)

[Invisible Key](#)

[What Had Bothered Her](#)

[There is a Darkness in you](#)

[Pentimento](#)

[The Monster Role](#)

[Italian Blood](#)

[Do Not Open it](#)

[Triangle](#)

[What The Hell, Anna](#)

[So Nice of You to Help](#)

[The Trash](#)

[Poison, Rot](#)

[Things To Look out for](#)

[Like on a Boat](#)

[Girls' Night](#)

[Florentine Woman](#)

[Ask for Forgiveness](#)

[That's it, we're Dead](#)

[Twin Complex](#)

[Thursday](#)

[The Anna Test](#)

[Spreading Stain](#)

[You See How Nice it is](#)

[The Sacrament of Penance](#)

[When You're Around](#)

[Finale](#)

[Tuscan Hospital at Dawn](#)

[On The Back of a Beast](#)

[Infestation](#)
[Everything Becomes Mine](#)
[New York Normal](#)
[Spiderweb](#)
[Glad You're Still Alive](#)
[No One But You](#)
[A Gracious Hostess](#)
[I am Going to Have to ask you to Leave](#)
[Fogged-Up Windows](#)
[Killer Dress](#)
[Why Did You Do It](#)
[Deal](#)
[You've Done This to Yourself](#)
[Welcome it Like a Friend](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[About the Author](#)

“Jennifer Thorne scorches the petals right off *The White Lotus* with this supernatural downward spiral of gut-wrenching, teeth-baring terror. If you thought vacationing with your family was a living hell, look no further than *Diavola* as a primo esempio that there are deeper, darker levels to descent that would make even Dante blush. This isn't your mama's Italian gothic, this is a literary garrote strapped right at your throat, and my God, does it ever squeeze.”

Clay McLeod Chapman, author of *Ghost Eaters*

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Liz Kerin, author of *Night's Edge*

“First, she took us to a terrifying British isle, and now to a terrifying Italian villa? Jennifer Thorne is the travel agent from Hell, and *Diavola* is an exquisitely paced, thoroughly entertaining thrill ride. The delightfully dysfunctional family dynamics draw you in, while the dread cinches tight around your ankles. Like any dish that bears its name, this book will make you sweat.”

Nat Cassidy, author of *Mary: An Awakening of Terror and Nestlings*

“A wholly unique, wicked twist on the classic haunted house story, Thorne's *Diavola* will take you on a vacation like no other. I feverishly flipped the pages of this inventive horror novel, as enthralled by the family politics as I was by the ghosts.”

Lee Kelly, author of *With Regrets*

“Imagine *The Exorcist* meets *The Haunting of Hill House* in a creepy Tuscan villa with lots of atmosphere and a vein of dark humour running throughout. Brilliant!”

Gabriel Dylan, author of *Whiteout*

DIAVOLA
JENNIFER THORNE
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Diavola

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*To my family—who shouldn't be reading this book—
thank you for being nothing like the Paces*

YOUR FLESH AND BLOOD

Anna kicked off the annual Pace family vacation with a lie. It was the only smart move, and she didn't feel the least bit guilty about it.

Benny had wanted to maintain their usual twin-dependent status by meeting up on Friday and flying together to Florence from Newark, a compromise between New York and Philadelphia, but doing so would have involved her sharing a row with his newish boyfriend for the better part of nine hours, and besides the natural human inclination to avoid torture, Anna had better plans.

So she made her excuses—last-minute client meeting Friday afternoon, stupidly important one, ugh, her agency was such a pain, she really needed this vacation—and Benny rolled his eyes *with* her, not *at* her, a crucial difference.

Anna arrived in Florence early Thursday morning and stayed alone in a shoebox Airbnb apartment near Piazza Santa Croce.

In the afternoon and into the evening, she sat on a precariously thin half-moon balcony with her sketch pad stretched across her bare legs, trying to capture the soul of the skyline, until the wine she'd been drinking blurred the lines, and she set it all aside and went out to simply stroll.

La passeggiata, they called it. She liked it—the flow, the freedom, the cacophony of the people around her, and beauty absolutely everywhere she looked.

Friday was travel day for the rest of the Pace family, and although the Florence airport was miles away, she woke up feeling their arrival like a to-do-list item she'd been trying to ignore, a psychic tap-tap-tap on the shoulder. *Hey! Remember us? Your flesh and blood? Don't you care at all?*

Mom and Dad's flight from Ohio, via a changeover in Gatwick, landed at 7:28 A.M. Central European Summer Time—they'd forwarded her the itinerary—then they'd wait for Benny and the New Boyfriend, whom they'd not yet had the pleasure of meeting, and shuttle them in their rental car south into the Chianti region to the medieval hilltop village of Monteperso. Nicole and her circus would roll into town around the same time and make their own way over to the villa. A joyful, almost complete, Pace family reunion would be underway by lunchtime.

Anna doubted her absence would be felt all that acutely, despite what they were sure to say to her later.

She hit the galleries on Friday. L'Accademia. The Uffizi. *Molto bene*. Overwhelming in the best way.

She'd been careful not to tell the family when her fictional Saturday flight was arriving, which gave her time for a brioche and an espresso and one more stroll Saturday morning before she grabbed her shoulder bag and hauled herself out of Florence. She hopped a southern train into the town nearest Monteperso, then sat on a curb in the station's parking lot and booked an Uber.

The driver, a young guy with mussed, curly hair and a sparse mustache, spoke a little English.

"You sure you want to go to Villa Taccola?" he said as he cut off another car on a sharp right turn out of town. "I could take you . . . anywhere else."

"Should I be worried?" Anna asked, watching the landscape scroll past her window, one lovely postcard after another. Skinny cypress and squat olive trees, tidy lines of vineyard hills, beautifully crumbling walls, villages that had been clinging to their rocky brown hillsides for a thousand years or more. The occasional jarring modern sight: a massive satellite dish on a house, a fence plastered with ads for a summer funfair.

Her brain would filter those images out later, she knew. People tended to remember only the pretty parts of their vacations, and Anna was no different.

"No, no, I'm joking," the driver said, but he watched her through the rearview mirror, eyes tracking downward, and she wondered idly whether it was him she should be worried about. She envisioned the possibility. Uber driver with a few of his local buddies, a different car parked down a dirt track, waiting to find her alone.

"Where do you live?" she asked him in Italian. *Dove abita?*

In the mirror, his eyes slid back to the road, just in time for him to avoid oncoming traffic driving too centrally on a switchback.

Her heart thudded with the near miss. She bit her lip, adrenaline pulsing upward.

He replied in Italian. "Not far from where you're staying."

Anna stretched. "What's fun to do around here?"

"Everything is fun if you are fun," he answered. At least, she thought he did. Her actual facility with Italian wasn't nearly as good as her accent.

"Good point," she said. In English.

Up ahead, she saw a small wooden sign too overgrown with ryegrass to read. A narrow country track stretched along it to the right. The driver turned so abruptly she nearly fell over, and she heard him chuckling from the front seat as she rearranged herself.

They passed a field where a gangly goat stood tied to a post, next to a sagging soccer ball. From the long grass beside him, an orange cat emerged, stretched its back, and lazily trailed the car. Anna craned her neck to peer through the back windshield, tracking its path along the road.

By the time she'd straightened again, they were there.

Villa Taccola.

"I can come back, take you out, have some fun," the driver started to say as he stopped the car, but she hurried out, mumbling, "*Grazie mille, arrivederci.*" She slung her bag onto her shoulder and stepped through the iron gates of the villa.

Anna heard the car idle on the drive for a full minute before it crunched a turn and left her behind. *I'll keep a rock in my pocket when I go for walks here alone*, she thought, even while knowing she'd never bother.

There were two excessively large SUV rentals parked just to the right of the iron gates, signaling that the gang was all here, but as Anna approached the villa, she felt entirely alone. Unnaturally so. There was something careful about the energy here. Not calm, exactly. More . . . preserved in amber. Crickets twitched their relentless song around her, unseen. A brown lizard on the sunny courtyard tiles lay so still that Anna assumed it was dead until it twitched at her approach. There was a perfect circle of dirt surrounding the house and drive, inside of which even weeds didn't grow. Not well-tended gravel. Dirt. Remnants of dead plants poking up in places. The sky was solid cerulean blue and the day was *hot*. Hotter by the minute. Breezeless.

Anna slowed her step, allowing the sense of this place to wind tight around her. The sunlight and shadow, the isolation. Something else she couldn't yet name. She'd have taken out her sketch pad and plunked down right there, cross-legged in the front courtyard, capturing her first impression of this six-hundred-year-old villa—the afternoon light stretching across the pale brown stones of the flat façade, casting shadows that looked like teeth—if she didn't think she'd be caught. Somebody would spot her, take offense, mention it to the others, setting the combative script for the rest of the week.

Not this time. Anna wanted this vacation. She'd actually looked forward to it.

She set down her shoulder bag and looked around, making a mental sketch instead, marking the gently worn tile roofline, the square tower that rose elegantly from the western wall. There was a single tall window set high in the tower, thick curtains drawn, obscuring the view inside, but as Anna peered up, hand shading her eyes, she saw the fabric move like someone had been spying but had darted away to hide.

Hi, girls.

Anna wasn't surprised her nieces were up there. If she'd been the youngest of the group and gotten here first, she'd have bagged the tower bedroom too.

In any case, she'd been spotted. Time to join the party.

She rapped on the front door. Listened for footsteps.

A movement at her feet startled her into stumbling. The orange cat. She'd nearly trampled the poor thing. A tom, she saw now, not even remotely neutered. He'd walked all this way from that field to greet her with a dance around her ankles, but apparently these ubiquitous, feral Italian cats were the same as American cats—as soon as she bent down, he slinked out of reach, no longer interested.

Anna opened the front door.

Her eyes picked out the old before the new, everything quotidian blurring past notice. She saw smoke-blackened wood beams, stone walls, a frayed wall hanging with a pastoral image woven into it—dancing nymphs dangling clumps of grapes from their joined fingers.

Anna walked through the large, recessed entry hall now doubling as a living room, and mapped a kitchen off to the right through a wide archway, as well as a dim corridor to the left, leading to bedrooms, presumably. There was an extension out beyond the living room, with steps descending into a brighter space—a contemporary build-out?

“Heya,” she called to the house, mostly out of a sense of obligation. She was constantly being accused of sneaking up on people. Her voice echoed faintly against the stone walls. Nobody answered. The villa sat silent, apart from a dull hum she couldn't quite identify as insect or electric.

Someone's in here, Anna thought. Listening.

She turned slowly, taking in the weathered wooden floorboards in the entryway, the stones lining the kitchen arch, the terra-cotta tile on the walls

and kitchen floor. One of the ceiling's long wooden beams had a large divot, as if something had bitten a chunk out of it at some point in the past five hundred years. A few items of furniture looked nearly as old as the beams. The rest, Anna suspected, was bought in one big trip to a home goods outlet: the living room's beige sectional furniture and large, bland coffee table, a flat-screen television fixed over the great, gaping mouth of a fireplace. The kitchen had herbs and baskets of fruit and root vegetables hanging from the ceiling, pots dangling over the dining table that extended through the archway, but it looked to her like it was arranged for effect. More Epcot Italy than the real thing.

And yet there was something idiosyncratic about Villa Taccola. The whole house suggested pentimenti, original brushstrokes covered over by something else. The same subject in a different style. Past mistakes hidden by fresh paint. What mistakes had been made here? she wondered.

Anna peeked into the nearest of the bedrooms—bare, pristine, minuscule, a single bed crammed against a sloping wall. Obviously hers, so she dropped her bag down to claim it.

She flicked the bathroom light on and off, pointlessly curious—it was, you know, a bathroom—then tiptoed through the living room, wary of disturbing the quiet, and peered down at what indeed looked to be a modern addition in the back.

Well-designed, she had to admit, if jarringly contemporary, two stories of glass wall looking out on a stunning vista: those neatly lined vineyard hills, a church tower above a cluster of buildings in the distance, and much nearer, a pale blue square swimming pool, bright little figures dotting the water and the deck.

There they were.

Anna trotted down the stairs into the extension, taking in another line of open bedroom doors to the right, and set into that big glass wall, the door to a back patio where clothes had been hung out to dry. As she passed through a sitting area cluttered with her nieces' books and toys and electronics, a movement caught her eye. She turned in time to see one of the bedroom doors click shut.

After Anna caught a startled breath, she snorted. What a warm welcome. And she was supposed to be the antisocial one? Maybe someone was changing clothes, didn't want to be caught bare-assed. Oh lord, if Anna saw her brother-in-law naked, she'd never hear the end of it.

Stepping around the edge of the coffee table, Anna spotted a long tail, gray and ragged, and jumped back quickly so whatever it was wouldn't scurry across her feet. A closer examination, breath held, proved somehow more disturbing—not a live creature, nor a dead one. A possum. Toy. Thing? Anna shook her head and left it where it lay, under the coffee table.

Outside the villa, that buzzing sound trebled, joining the rhythmic song of the crickets. Cicadas? Frogs? What did she know. She'd lived in the city too long.

Down past the patio, a path of sparse stepping stones led to a long wooden table for alfresco dining on which a skinny black-and-white cat had draped itself like a pelt rug, paying her no mind.

Farther down the path, Anna found a flagstone patio with a clay oven and loungers arrayed to take in the view. Waves of heat rose off the patio. Anna wondered whether they could just plop a pizza down on the flagstone floor and cook it that way.

She shaded her eyes to get the panorama effect of the grounds. This place was huge, by far the biggest vacation rental they'd ever stayed in. Must have been expensive.

I could get lost here, Anna thought.

She heard Waverly's and Mia's high-pitched shouts and splashes, their dad growling monosyllables like an ogre as she made her way down the path to the pool. At the pool gate, shaded by olive trees, she heard Nicole snap, "Do not splash in this direction, *thank you.*"

Anna's hand froze against the latch.

Last chance. She could turn back, issue one more lie, say her flight got canceled, hang out in Florence, head elsewhere. Anywhere.

But somebody up at the house—not, apparently, the girls?—already knew she was here. She'd checked in to Villa Taccola, like it or not.

Anna clanged the gate shut behind her to announce her presence. Nobody glanced up. The girls were facing the other way in the pool, riding on Justin's arms like a fairground ride. Dad was squinting over his glasses at a paperback called *Strike Force Two* with a big red 10% OFF sticker on the cover, and Mom and Nicole were discussing something requiring their full attention, judging by the lines in Nicole's forehead. Or maybe her sister always looked that way these days. It had been a good seven months since Anna last saw her.

“I made it,” Anna announced, and when nobody turned, she bent down to wrap an arm around her mother’s shoulders.

Mom shrieked. Anna kissed her cheek anyway. Nicole reeled back, hand to her chest like she’d been shoved.

“Anna, you lunatic!” Mom laughed, fanning herself. “Why do you sneak up on us like that?”

Anna did the cheeks-lightly-grazing-air-kiss thing Nicole always went for, then turned to Dad, who propped his paperback carefully open on his lap before craning his neck to say hello.

“Did you have a good flight?” He sounded like a customs officer.

“Yeah, fine,” Anna answered.

And that was the end of that conversation.

“Girls, say hi to Auntie Anna,” Nicole ordered.

“Hi, Auntie Anna,” Waverly recited, swimming in the opposite direction.

Jaded by age seven, apparently. Anna was impressed.

“Get in the pool, Anna!” little Mia shouted, at five as yet unjaded.

“Let her get settled in first,” Justin said, hoisting Mia on his hip.

“You kidding? I’m boiling.” Anna kicked off her sandals, hiked up the hem of her dress and waded straight into the shallow end.

Waverly swiveled around, eyebrows raised. “Did you bring a swimsuit?”

“Of course.” Anna waded in a circle, feeling the water grip her thighs, ice cold.

“Why don’t you go put it on, sweetie, so you don’t get your nice dress wet?” Mom suggested. It wasn’t a bad idea, but she could see a different kind of judgment in her mother’s eyes when she turned to her, and a pinch to the corners of her sister’s smile that hadn’t been there a minute ago.

Anna remembered last Christmas acutely now. Nicole had gotten drunk, cornered her in the bathroom and told her to stop flirting with her husband, which was—sorry—ludicrous. Justin was nice enough and had been borderline attractive nine years ago at the wedding, but he’d dissolved into a dad bod before they’d even had kids, and whatever charisma he’d used to win Nicole over was either gone now or reserved for the nine-to-five of his sales exec job. Some people were into that middle-of-the-road Ohio guy thing, no judgment, but not Anna, and she’d told her sister as much, which had not gone over as well as she’d hoped it might.

Anna waded out of the pool without greeting Justin. He didn't seem to care.

She spotted yet another cat, solid gray, as it slid under the bottom of the gate and straight to Anna, rubbing itself against her wet legs.

"Don't splash," Waverly shouted to Mia. Her little sister went slack, suspended by her *Encanto* floaties. "You'll scare the kitty."

This one really seemed to want Anna's attention, so she bent down and gave it a pet. It felt dirty, bug ridden. She scratched it gently with her fingernails and it purred, arching.

"There are so many kitties here," Mia cooed. "I love it."

"I do too," Anna said, as the cat slunk away again, disappearing in a blink.

"You like cats?" Waverly asked her from the side of the pool, her head resting on her skinny tan arms. She sounded surprised.

"Course I do," Anna said.

"Why don't you have one, then?"

"Leave your aunt alone," Justin groaned, but Anna wasn't bothered. It was a fair question, not a critique.

She sat down on the deck with her legs swirling in the water, considering. "I think you can like something without wanting to own it."

Nicole muttered, "I'm not sure pets and Anna are a great combination," not quite under her breath.

Anna's eyes cut to her sister's.

Nicole held her gaze. *Am I wrong?*

"You look rested, Anna," Mom said, oblivious as ever to the tension. "Did you get some sleep on the plane?"

"Of course she did." Nicole kicked her feet up on her lounge. "No kids. Heaven."

Anna noticed a scowl pass over Waverly's face before the wiry girl shoved herself away from the side of the pool and dove into the depths again.

Nicole wasn't done. "What, did you drink wine, watch a movie, put your chair back and sleep?"

"I read a book, no movie, but yeah." Anna felt like she was admitting to a crime.

The book was another lie, to be fair. She'd watched trashy reality shows for a solid six hours.

“I hate you,” Nicole said, closing her eyes. “I still haven’t recovered from our flight. Red-eye, and these two didn’t sleep a wink.”

“Did you not sleep?” Anna grinned, kicking a splash at Mia and Waverly that made them squeal with giggles. “You little devils.”

“Daddy slept!” Mia said, paddling back to him.

“Yeah, let’s not bring that up again,” he murmured to her with a wink.

“So are Benny and the boyfriend hiding from me or what?” Anna asked, peering back at the house. The villa looked much less elegant from this angle. The great glass extension blocked the original architecture, creating the effect of something amputated and replaced with the wrong prosthesis. The modern bit was far too squat for the rest of the villa, and the midday sun reflected uncomfortably against all that glass. In contrast to the blinding new-build, the stone tower loomed unnervingly dark, like a great shadow cast by nothing.

How did you even get to that tower? She hadn’t seen a stairway to it from the inside.

“They’ve gone to Pisa,” Mom said. “Christopher wanted to see it. He was adamant.”

“Have you met him?” Dad grunted to Anna from behind his paperback. “It’s Christopher. Not Chris. Full name. *Christopher*.”

“Who’s up in the house, then?” Anna asked.

“Nobody right now.” Mom smiled. “They’ll be back around six. Benny’s *very* excited to see you. Didn’t really want to drive that far, but Christopher was not taking no for an answer!”

So nobody was in the villa, rustling curtains, shutting doors.

Anna thought about making a haunted-house joke, it was there for the taking, but she didn’t want to freak out her nieces, so she said to Dad, “Yeah, I met Christopher. Benny brought him up to the city and we had dinner.”

“When?” Mom asked.

Anna shrugged. “A month or so ago.”

“You never told me.”

Anna didn’t argue the point. A lull hit the conversation, filled by that swelling ambient drone.

“Benny seems happy,” Nicole said.

Anna could sense her sister’s eyes boring into her through the dark panes of her glasses. A glare with a message: *Don’t fuck this up for him*. As

if Anna were that powerful. And that malicious.

Anna bit back half a dozen caustic responses, then settled for, “He does, doesn’t he?”

Nicole flopped back against her deck chair, annoyed into submission by Anna’s calmness, and that was reward enough.

Mia swam to Anna’s dangling legs and raised her arms.

“You wanna come out, Meems?” Anna asked.

Mia nodded, her teeth chattering.

Anna hoisted her up, let her sit on her lap, soaking her dress. She didn’t mind. It cooled her off, but Mom tutted “Go and put your swimsuit on!” while Nicole groaned “Just watch, she’ll jump in fully dressed,” and Anna felt life force siphoning out of her like a caffeine crash.

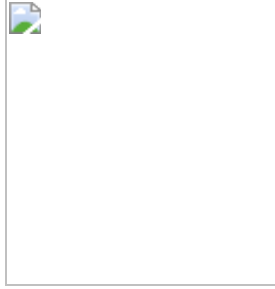
“Good idea,” she said, setting Mia gently to the side with a wink. “Be right back.”

“Right back” was another lie, meant to pacify, to just get through the next hour and the one after that. Pretty much the name of the game for the next nine days.

Tread lightly. Survive.

She slipped on her sandals and slid away up the path.

“This is so nice,” Anna heard her mother say behind her. “Everybody together.”



TOGETHERNESS

Anna took an extremely circuitous route back to the house so she could view it from new angles. It did not turn out to be the best idea—the grass was knee-high in places, concealing pine needles and anthills, until that continuously arcing line where thriving meadow abruptly gave way to the dirt circle Anna had seen from the front, dead plants jutting from cracked soil. It surrounded the house in all directions, as if there were some pollution oozing from the foundation of the villa into the soil. By the time Anna made her way around to the front drive, her ankles were not only lined with scratches but bitten up. Red ants crawled on her toes. She kicked off her sandals and left them by the front gate, scraping the tops of her feet along the hot flagstones of the courtyard until she made it inside with only the corpses of scorched ants for company. Her damp dress steamed in the half-light of the entryway.

She must have taken longer than she'd thought. Nicole had beaten her back inside with the kids. The girls stripped off their swimsuits down in the extension and handed them off to Justin to hang on the line, while Nicole pattered around the kitchen, making them a snack. Waverly slunk straight into underwear and a sundress, but Mia ran around naked, crowing, "I'm naked! I'm naked!"

Anna smiled at her. "*Yeah* you are."

"What was that?" Nicole poked her head out of the kitchen. "Did you say something?"

Anna shook her head and plopped down at the kitchen table. She watched a fly circle the open window over and over without finding its way out.

"Weird." Nicole got out crackers, grapes, cheese. "You want some?"

"Obviously."

Nicole rolled her eyes, but grabbed another plate and prepared it for her. “This house has funny, like, echoes. I keep thinking I hear someone talking when everybody’s outside. Or footsteps but there’s no one there.”

Anna chewed a few grapes, thought about the bedroom door closing on its own, considered saying something, decided against it.

“You’re losing it, Nic. Finally. Catching up with the rest of us.”

“Ha ha. Hilarious. I’m sure it’s something to do with the acoustics. Terra-cotta tile.” Rather than expanding on that theory, Nicole turned away, shouting, “Girls? Food!”

She flopped down at the table next to Anna, apparently exhausted by snack preparation. Anna felt the oddest urge to lean over and kiss her sister’s cheek.

Nicole gazed at her, plaintive. “Is it too early for wine?”

“Fuck no, you’re on vacation.”

Nicole’s eyes sharpened even as she smiled. “Do me a favor and watch your language this week?”

“Pour two wines. Say I talked you into it.”

The smile won the war over Nicole’s face. By the time the kids made it up the stairs to claim their snacks, she and Anna had vacated for the living room, glasses of Chianti Rufina in hand.

Anna observed more than listened to her sister talking. She loved watching Nicole get drunk. Nicole’s tipsiness was usually delightful. It happened hilariously quickly, and Nic was so much more human when she let herself get sloppy. Christmas had been a notable exception, and maybe that was why it had blindsided Anna so much.

It took Anna a second to tune back in and realize Nicole had asked a question.

“Your meeting?” Nicole repeated.

“Oh. Yeah. Ridiculous.” It wasn’t *such* a lie; it could have applied to any meeting at the agency at any point in the past ten years of working there.

“Who’s the client? If you’re allowed to say.”

Anna thought of the last big meeting she’d had. “Milton Foods. We’re doing a hot dog campaign. They’ve been clients for like fifty years, but now we’re trying to get people to eat more meat again.”

“Milton wieners are full of preservatives,” Nicole said, wrinkling her nose. “That’s why we don’t buy them. If that’s helpful.”

It wasn't. "Thanks. That's good to know."

Anna hardly spoke in meetings. She was there solely to perform, a sort of party trick, and she knew it. She sat in the corner, facing front, with a digital pad, and in real time sketched the concepts being discussed for print and broadcast campaigns. Wendell Rook Silver was a very old, venerable ad agency. Nobody from the old guard remained among the partners, but they still operated as if the ghosts of the founders were watching over their shoulders, ready to toss them out the thirty-fourth-floor window if they stepped out of line. Anna worked digitally when she was at her desk, making renderings, mock-ups, storyboards for video campaigns, but in the room, they wanted to dazzle with old-school ad agency nostalgia. She was just glad they didn't ask her to dress up as a 1960s secretary. It was fine. It was a job. She was good at it. Full benefits. What else was there to say?

"How do we get into the tower?" Anna asked.

Nicole raised her eyebrows, coy. She stood with an attempted flourish and wobbled as she walked to the woven wall hanging, pulling it back like a magician's assistant. "Ta-da!"

Behind the nymphs, an oak door, not quite level with the ground. Thick. Ancient and battered. Anna's eye was drawn to the decorative keyhole that sprawled under its rusted knob. It had some sort of design wrought into it, but mottled by age, it looked like a fungus.

Anna laughed. "Okay. Secret entrance. So who claimed the tower room?"

"Nobody," came a voice behind her. "It's off-limits."

Anna slid over the back of the sofa, tower forgotten.

Benny reached her in two eager strides, but hugged her gingerly. "I'm sweaty, don't get too close!"

"I do not give a shit." Anna kissed her brother's slick cheek and grimaced—truly disgusting.

Benny laughed, eyes crinkling. "I warned you!"

She wiped her face off with the back of her hand so she could turn to the boyfriend for whatever he expected. Hug? Double cheek kiss, like the first time she met him? Benny had giggled silently for a good ten minutes at the open horror that had gripped her when his boyfriend had swooped in twice that night.

This time, Christopher not Chris went for a rigid handshake. "Good to see you again, Anna."

She shook back briskly, matching his voice for deepness. “Likewise, Christopher.”

Anna heard Nicole choke back a laugh behind her, then cover it up with, “Anybody want a glass of wine? Anna talked me into starting early.”

“Bad influence.” Anna shrugged. “That’s why you all invited me, right?”

“God no.” Benny winked. “It’s because you’re the only one who speaks Italian. Yes please to wine, Nicky.”

“Pisa was very crowded,” Christopher announced.

“Everybody wants a look at that leaning tower.” Anna glanced sidelong at Christopher and got the same impression as a month ago. Blond, elegant, chiseled. If he were an actor he would be typecast as a Nazi.

“It is impressive,” Christopher said, mistaking her attention for interest. “We took some pictures.”

He offered his cellphone.

“That’s okay,” Anna said. “I’ve seen it.”

“You’ve been to Pisa?”

“No. But. I feel like I’ve seen a photo of it somewhere?”

Benny swept past with a smile and a glass of Chianti.

“Ease up,” he whispered.

She could not imagine going any easier without lapsing into unconsciousness, so she smiled blandly at Christopher and glided past him to join the girls in the kitchen.

Mia was clutching the gray thing tight in her armpit. As she snacked, she pretended to feed it bites.

“Who’s this?” Anna dared ask.

“*Blossom*,” Mia cooed.

“Rhymes with possum,” Waverly grunted, glaring across the table at the stuffed animal.

Anna turned to Nicole, who shook her head and whispered, “Natural history museum. She picked it herself.”

“It’s . . .” Anna nodded. “Lifelike.”

“Yup.”

“It’s an abomination,” Waverly announced.

Anna coughed a laugh. “Good vocab, Wayvs.”

Nicole shook her head, more flummoxed than proud. “She just pops out with this stuff.”

Mom joined the crowd in the kitchen, freshly showered, and tutted over their wineglasses. “Kinda early, isn’t it?”

Anna poured her a glass of red. “Join the party.”

“I will be asleep by seven if I start now!” Mom took it anyway.

“Can I watch YouTube?” Waverly asked, pushing up from the table.

Nicole pressed her lips together for a very long beat before saying, “Okay,” sending the children and Blossom careening down to the extension, limb over limb, instantly fighting over whose turn it was to pick the video.

Anna served herself cold prosecco this time, went out to the front patio to reclaim her sandals, and traipsed through the house, past Mia and Waverly, all the way out the back and down the path to the outdoor dining table, which now rested in the long shade of a duo of cypress trees.

The afternoon held a shimmering quiet for a moment, pollen and bugs hovering in the summer glow, but then the crunch of feet on gravel announced Mom and Nicole’s arrival as they came out to join her, chattering about plans for the week.

“What have you guys done so far?” Anna asked when they sat down.

“Not a whole lot really,” Mom said—a little peevishly, Anna thought. “We drove down to that town for some groceries. Took a walk in the village, but there wasn’t much going on. They were having a siesta or whatever you call it here.”

They both looked at Anna.

She shook her head. “I have no idea what you call it.”

“Anyway, we didn’t want to do too much without you to translate. Shame you had to come late but glad you’re here now.”

There are apps, Anna thought. You could literally just type things into your phone and it would translate it for you, out loud, in Italian.

“We went into the little church in the village,” Nicole said.

“Was it pretty?” Anna offered. “Of architectural significance?”

She put on a faux-snooty voice so Nicole knew she wasn’t throwing her art knowledge around. That never went over well.

“I don’t know.” Nicole squinted. “I wasn’t really sure what I was meant to be looking at.”

Refreshing honesty from Nicole, but then, her sister was on her third glass of wine, so all bets were off.

“It has a very nice square sort of tower,” Mom said. “Romanesque?”

“Sounds like it. I’ll check it out.”

Anna considered the distances. How far to walk into Monteperso? That road was narrow and the drivers here were creative about their definition of a lane. The verge had looked like a sheer drop-off at points. She'd need to beg rides to get there safely.

"How is the villa at night?" Anna blurted.

Nicole and Mom exchanged a startled glance that made Anna lean forward, intrigued. Nicole blinked queasily, but Mom perked up with visible effort.

"Extremely comfortable," she said. "Very quiet. And the night sky is just dazzling—you'll see!"

Nicole caught Anna's eye, parted her lips like she wanted to say something, but then just pushed herself away from the table and wobbled upward. "I'd better start on dinner. Always takes longer in somebody else's kitchen."

"I wish you'd let me help," Mom sighed, starting to rise.

"You've paid for this whole vacation! I can handle a meal, Mom, honestly." Nicole rustled Mom's hair, easing her back into the chair.

Anna glanced over her shoulder. "Are we not going out?"

"The kids will be hungry soon," Mom said, as Nicole retreated to the house. "We weren't sure when everybody would come back, so we thought we'd stay put."

"Dinner here sounds great," Anna lied. "It really is gorgeous, isn't it?"

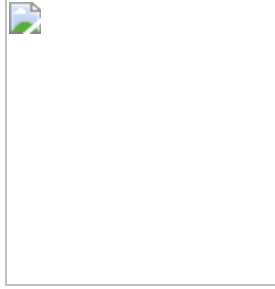
Even as she said it, though, she felt dread swirling in her stomach, and not just at the prospect of Nicole's cooking. *We'll stay put. Cement ourselves here.*

Anna itched to go out, get out, if only for dinner. Not to be alone. She wanted to be with them. It was just . . .

She peered up again at the house. There was no window on this side of the tower. This side, with all the light, and the view across the hills. It bothered her. There must be a window. She just couldn't see it.

Maybe they'd blocked it up sometime in the last six hundred years. God knows why they'd eliminate a natural light source.

How is the villa at night? You'll see.



INVISIBLE KEY

They dined outside, the whole big reunited Pace family.

Anna took her brother in discreetly. Benny had showered and changed for dinner into a linen shirt she'd never seen him wear before. It looked more like something from Christopher's wardrobe than his own. He was thinner than a month ago, his face more angular.

Anna and Benny didn't look much alike for twins, never had. Benny used to get knee-jerk defensive when people commented on their differences growing up. "We're twins! We're the same!" He'd hug her tight around the waist as if willing them to become conjoined. Anna always thought it was silly to feel hurt about the fact that they were two unique individuals—even more so now, when he had clearly turned out to be the better-looking sibling. Benny wasn't quite as pretty as Nicole, who still had that wholesome nineties supermodel thing going for her, but nearly. Anna alone in the family was sallow-complexioned and sharp-edged, no matter how well she ate or how much exercise she got. Nicole used to joke that Benny had stolen Anna's nutrients in the womb.

Anna didn't give a shit what she looked like most of the time, but she did prefer Benny with a little more weight on him.

Mom was still wearing her giant-brimmed poolside hat and Nicole a smaller version of the same thing, making them look like chorus members in a community theatre production of *Hello, Dolly!* Dad already had a sunburn on his neck, a deep red collar line. He'd be a human beet by the time they flew home, no matter how many times a day Mom nagged him to put on sunscreen. The girls sat cross-legged under an olive tree, cooing over the black cat who passed between them, allowing itself to be petted on its arched backside. When Nicole brought out the food and Justin the booze, the cat scrambled, glaring back at the adult assembly with open resentment.

Nicole had cooked an enormous pot of pasta with fresh ingredients from the local outdoor market and still somehow made it taste like an American TV dinner.

While Justin stood to wrestle the cork out of a bottle of Chianti, Anna caught a flicker of movement behind the glass wall of the villa. Everybody was out here, so it must've been a reflection. A bird flying past. No, something bigger. A shifting cloud?

Anna didn't think so.

The evening was as cloudless as the day had been, and she understood angles, perspective. This shape was inside the house.

Anna let the discomfort of that thought ripple all the way through her, then turned her attention back to the table.

"Hope it's all right," Nicole said as everybody quieted into their meals.

"Yeah, it's fine," Anna answered.

She swallowed her bite and drank a deep sip of wine before glancing up to realize that half the table was glaring at her.

"It's delicious, Nicole, you're such a chef these days," Mom said.

"Glad it meets with *your* approval at least!" Nicole had stopped drinking an hour ago. She was sobering into a frown.

"Shame Josh couldn't make it," Justin said.

Anna was gratified to see all the glares shift in his direction.

"They're not together anymore." Nicole managed to sound sympathetic, upbeat, and livid all at once. "I told you that, J!"

She shot Anna a *husbands, what are you gonna do* look.

"I knew that." Justin shrugged, unaffected. "I just mean it's too bad you split up. Would've been good to have him here."

"*And* you managed to make it worse," Nicole breathed.

"Yeah, I remember you two got along," Anna said, reaching down the table for the bread.

"We all got along," Mom said. "He was such a sweetheart. Still is, I'm sure. He's not dead!"

"Not that I know of," Anna agreed.

"Good for you, I thought," Dad said.

Anna blinked. "Good for me for breaking up with him?"

"No. I thought *he* was *good* for you." He leaned forward, looming over the table for emphasis.

“Four years,” Mom sighed. “We thought you two were headed for the altar, but apparently not!”

“Are you talking about Uncle Josh?” Waverly asked, eager to horn in on the grown-up conversation.

“Yes, and what we’re saying is that Josh and I broke up,” Anna said. “A few months back. I would like to extend my sincerest apologies to all.”

“Awww we liked him,” Waverly said, then shrugged. “Oh well.”

Anna grinned. “Exactly. *Oh well.*”

Nicole’s eyes passed between Anna and Waverly, her scowl deepening.

Out of nowhere, Mom let out a high-pitched “Hoo!”

She shuddered, hands clasped around her bare arms. Everyone turned to stare at her.

“Little chill!” she chirped. “Don’t worry. Eat. Eat!”

No one actually seemed particularly worried, but Anna at least watched until Mom recovered herself enough to sit up straight and take a sip of wine.

“You all right, Mom?”

“Yes!” She laughed breathily. “Just . . . time of life. Strange, though. Anyway.”

“So, why did you two split up?” Justin asked, voice rote, like he’d been rehearsing the question in his head for the past few minutes.

Nicole had turned to Christopher, noticing he’d pushed his bowl aside. “Is dinner all right?”

“No, it’s . . .” Christopher smiled with half his mouth, turning to Benny conspiratorially. “I ate all the vegetables. I’m keto. Two weeks into a carb fast.”

It took a lot for Anna’s jaw to drop, but it did now. Who the hell starts a keto diet two weeks before a trip to Italy? Christopher not Chris, that’s who.

Justin was still waiting for an answer.

Anna drew a deep breath. “Yeah, we just . . . I guess we just wanted different things.”

She grabbed her wineglass. It was empty. She sipped anyway.

“And what is it that you want?” Nicole asked her. “This is, like, the biggest family mystery, isn’t it?”

Benny raised a finger. “Uncle Augie’s gold stash.”

“Other than Uncle Augie’s gold stash, which never existed, by the way,” Nicole snapped. “Seriously, Anna, what *specifically* are your dreams? Your

aspirations?”

To be left the fuck alone?

To shed herself of the lifelong feeling of barnacles burrowing into her skin, growing larger every day?

Anna smiled. “It’s an interesting question. I’ll think about it.”

Nicole shook her head, but Benny patted Anna’s knee, reassuringly. He was the empathetic sibling, the twin, he’d never ask questions like that—except that he did, all the time, just never in group settings.

“I’m finished!” Mia stood up in her chair like she was waiting for a medal.

“Me too,” Waverly added, less triumphant. “Can we go watch iPad?”

“No,” Nicole answered, drowning out Justin’s “Sure.”

Nicole turned her glare on her husband. Anna sensed the continuation of a long-running argument.

“What is the point of bringing them to Tuscany if they’re going to have their faces buried in screens the whole time we’re here?”

“Not the whole time,” Justin said weakly. He turned back to his meal, sensing, Anna guessed, that he’d already lost this round.

“They need to be present, they need to experience this.”

Anna was too curious to keep quiet. “What *specifically* do you want them to experience?”

Justin leaped on it. “That’s an interesting question, Nicole. You should think about it.”

Mia and Waverly were still waiting for the green light. Squirming. Mia reached down and scratched her ankle, and like catching a yawn, Anna felt her own ankles itch.

She looked down and saw a cloud of gnats feasting on all the exposed skin beneath the table. She kicked at them. It did nothing.

“What specifically? Okay.” Nicole drew a huffing breath. “Food, landscape, water, sky, art, architecture, culture, foreign languages, why does anyone go on vacation, Justin? *No iPad.*”

“So what do we do?” Waverly droned.

“Read a book.” Nicole turned away. Debate over, asked and answered.

“Make sure it’s in Italian!” Justin called to the kids as they retreated.

Anna laughed. He refilled her wine.

Down the table, Christopher was talking finance. God help Mom and Dad, they must have asked politely about his job and now their eyes were

glazing over. Dad cleared his throat over and over, while Mom looked like she was trying hard not to blink. Christopher was an investment banker and Anna remembered from the last dinner she'd shared with him that he tended to hold forth about his work as if everyone read the Motley Fool every morning and understood what the hell he was talking about. Anna wasn't sure how Benny coped.

But he was happy. He was. These two must have had more in common than geographical proximity, good looks, and mutual attraction. Or maybe that was enough for some people. Benny never did like being alone. He used to trail Anna around the house when they were little, begging her to play with him. On the nights Anna refused to let him sleep in her bed, he had night terrors, and she got the blame.

Having run out of financial news, Christopher turned to Anna. "Which room did you take?"

"The empty one."

"You should have gotten here first, if you wanted your pick!" Mom got in.

"I like my room. I'd have chosen it anyway."

Anna heard the girls laugh behind her, but when she turned, they weren't there.

Nicole was right. Sounds carried strangely here.

But that thought itself suggested a pentimento. The truth plastered over with something comforting, logical, wrong.

"There's another bedroom," Christopher said, drawing Anna's attention back to the table. This was what he'd actually wanted to talk about, she saw; the question about her room was his version of a segue. "There's a room in the tower. Nobody thinks that's weird?"

"That there's a room in there?" Benny asked, teasing. "What, did you expect it to be a grain silo?"

He reached down to scratch at his ankles. Anna kicked to get the gnats away, which this time only seemed to make them hungrier. She pulled up her legs and sat cross-legged, her knee overlapping Benny's thigh. Benny smiled at the contact.

Christopher barreled on. "Why is it locked?"

Dad set down his fork. "We used to have a condo we'd rent out down in Hilton Head. We used to put our, not valuables, but . . ."

"Personal items," Mom suggested.

“. . . personal items in a closet we kept locked. Seems normal to me.”

“Yeah, but that’s a closet,” Christopher argued. “This is the best room in the villa.”

“How can you know that?” Benny looked charmed by how worked up his boyfriend was. Twinkly-eyed. Anna had never gotten the knack of that with Josh.

“It’s the highest point. It’s got the best views.”

Christopher motioned behind him without looking. Had he looked, he might have noted the lack of a window on the side of the house offering the best views. Anna, who did look back, got the faint sense of an outline, a window that wasn’t. She squinted, disoriented.

“Why is the key so fancy, then?” Christopher said to Benny. “What? It is. It’s a fancy key.”

Benny’s eyes crinkled like he was trying not to laugh.

“There’s a key?” Anna asked. “A fancy one?”

“We met the gatekeeper when we got here,” Mom explained.

“Caretaker,” Dad corrected.

“A nice elderly Italian fellow,” Mom said.

“Elderly,” Benny repeated, then whispered to Anna, “Yeah, he was younger than both of them.”

“He doesn’t own the house. It’s a British gentleman, I believe, who we’re renting from, but this local fellow looks after it, and he told us not to open that door.” Mom leaned forward, like she was sharing church gossip. “Pretty darn serious about it, but it took us a little while to figure out what he meant. Oh, I wished like *heck* you were here, Anna. He spoke very broken English.”

“Surprisingly bad,” Dad said.

“Surprisingly,” Anna repeated.

Benny’s eyes flitted to hers. He was still trying not to laugh.

“I thought this would be *agriturismo*.” Christopher produced beef jerky from nowhere and started unwrapping it while Nicole’s eyes bugged out of her head. “The peasants coming to make you breakfast and all that.”

Benny snorted up his wine. “‘Peasants’?”

“Locals, I meant locals.” Even Christopher laughed at that one. “Shut up!”

“Well, we thought that was the arrangement too,” Mom said, flustered. “But that was a wrong assumption, and that’s fine. Gives us a little more

privacy, doesn't it? And we can call him if we need him, he left his number."

"He's not coming back," Dad said. "He shot outta here like he was about to miss his flight."

Nicole frowned. "He flew away?"

"No!" Mom knocked on the table. "He lives in . . . how do you pronounce it? Monty Purse-oh?"

"Monteperso," Anna supplied.

Everyone but Christopher "ooh"ed sarcastically.

"What?" Anna shrugged, perhaps a little wildly. "That's how you pronounce it."

"I've got this coworker nobody can stand," Justin said. "Every time we go out for drinks and apps, he gets the bruschetta, but he says it 'broosketta.' Corrects the damn waitress, drives me insane."

Anna got up, breathed deeply through her nose, started gathering empty plates. She felt the gnats following her around the table like a nibbling stream.

"Did you pay for *agriturismo*?" Christopher asked Dad. "You should complain. Get a refund. Part refund."

"Not sure why you're upset, Christopher," Anna snapped, crumpling up his jerky wrapper. "I doubt anything they made would have been keto."

Mom lit up, beaming at Anna as she walked away. "Well, that's a good point, isn't it?"

Anna climbed back up to the villa, arms laden with plates, her empty wineglass dangling from two fingers, the family's miasma still clinging to her like a damp towel.

When she reached the kitchen and deposited her load, she considered opening another bottle of Chianti, but that wasn't what she was craving right now.

She turned. Froze. There was a red puddle on the tile in the entryway. Someone must have spilled their wine. That sloppy already. She grabbed a bunch of paper towels from the kitchen counter to dab it up, but when she turned back, she couldn't find the stain.

Trick of the light. So many tricks.

When she thought of the puddle, where it would have been, it seemed to grow in her mind. Seeping outward.

Down in the extension, the girls were illicitly watching their iPad, leaning shoulder to shoulder, cheek to cheek. They didn't even seem aware of each other.

Waverly glanced up at Anna, caught.

Anna smiled. Locked her mouth with an invisible key.

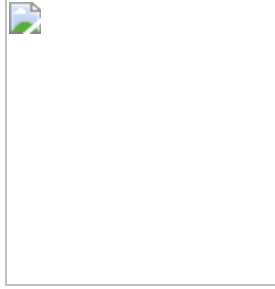
Waverly grinned, snuggling closer to Mia.

A lizard was doing push-ups on the stairs. He'd eat the gnats, Anna figured. She let him be, stepped over him to go downstairs, where she grabbed a book on Florentine architecture and retreated with it to her hermitage of a bedroom.

When she shut her door, she pressed her hands against it, feeling the grain of the old pine under her palms, as if to reassure herself it was really there.

Anna realized she didn't trust anything in this house. Not even the walls.

Definitely not the people.



WHAT HAD BOTHERED HER

Anna woke up fully dressed on the bed, the thick book folded on her lap, her neck cricked against the wooden headboard at an awful angle. The bedside lamp was still lit. She clicked it off.

Giggles echoed in the hall, just past her door.

Anna had no idea what time it was, but guessed that there was some serious jet lag at play here. She rubbed her neck and listened to her nieces running back and forth, their thudding footfalls on the wooden floorboards. When they got to her door, one of them shushed the other and they tittered again, whispering to each other.

“Don’t wake her up!”

“But I *want* to.”

“Shhhh!”

Anna couldn’t tell who was who. Little-kid voices all sounded the same in whispers.

She got up to change into her sleep T-shirt, and the girls quieted down out there. By the time Anna crept out into the dark entryway to get a glass of water from the kitchen, they’d fled. No sign of them.

Anna stood very still for a few seconds, trying to identify the particular kind of uneasiness she felt, as if knowing would help lessen it. In the faint glow of moonlight from the extension windows, Anna could barely pick out the furniture to navigate around. Somebody, to her amusement, had dragged a chair in front of the wall hanging, probably to dissuade Christopher from breaking down the tower door.

Less amusingly, shadows had gathered over it, creating the effect of something dangling. Almost a figure. Hanging. But only if you squinted, which Anna decided to stop doing.

Weird echoes, weird shadows. If not outright haunted, this house was fucking weird.

Her room was marginally cooler when she went back into it. Less stifling.

She could leave the door open for airflow, she thought, but the window seemed like a better bet, the shutters drawn in to keep out at least some of the bugs.

As she pulled the bifold shutters in, something caught her eye.

Not shadows. *Lights*.

Her first, childishly hopeful thought was fireflies—the lights were flickering, fleeting, hovering in midair—but no. They moved in too linear a way. Deliberate rather than meandering.

Flashlights, Anna realized. The flicker was the long grass cutting through the glow.

The lights went still, pointed downward, and Anna got a sense of four silhouettes in the field just before the flashlights cut out entirely.

She kept watching, breath held. Her room was dark, the bedside lamp extinguished, but she sensed she was being watched right back.

All was black now. Inside and out. She struggled to breathe slowly, straining her ears. She could hear grass crunching under feet—how many, she couldn't tell—the cicadas quieting in waves as someone passed near. Moving away from the house.

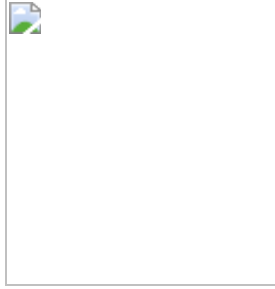
When the insect sound crested again, settling into the usual blanket, Anna knew they'd gone. Whoever they were.

She was suddenly exhausted.

Before she got back into bed, she tested the latch on her door one more time, pulling to make sure it was shut tight, and settled more easily against her pillow knowing she was keeping everybody else out.

Just before she drifted off, in the in-between between consciousness and oblivion, she realized what had bothered her about her nieces whispering in the hall.

They'd been speaking Italian.



THERE IS A DARKNESS IN YOU

Anna opened her eyes to find midday light streaming through the window. A stranger stood in her room, peering out with his hands pressed against the window frame.

He glanced back, not at her, exactly. Lost in thought.

He was a young man—*very* young—beautiful in the way of marble statues. Honey-colored hair curling around his ear, muscular neck, the whole thing. Like a teen idol. He said something in Italian, too fast for her to make out, and then she woke up.

It was bright in the room, but not like the dream. Morning bright, hazy and gentle. It had gone from stuffy to downright hot in here. The air felt like soup around her. Her ankles itched like something was growing underneath the skin.

As Anna got dressed and brushed her teeth, she pondered her dream. Fantasizing about sexy Italian teenagers three days into a trip abroad was not a great indicator of how well she was weathering this recent stretch of celibacy.

Catch and release could only last so long. One way or the other, she'd eventually need an actual release. But not quite yet.

Everybody was up already, gathered in clusters around the living room and the kitchen table eating their motley breakfasts.

Mom stood up. "Good morning, did you sleep all right? Your room wasn't too cold, was it? There are extra blankets if you need one."

Anna blinked, taking all that in. "Cold. No. Why, was your room cold?"

"Frigid in the middle of the night!" Mom mimed shivering. "Oof! Course it all warmed up by the morning—"

"Maybe we could swap rooms?" Justin asked. Nicole shushed him. "We did not have that problem."

Anna's neck hurt. She rubbed it as she walked.

“What can I fix you?” Mom asked, heading into the kitchen.

Anna misheard it as “How can I fix you?” and reacted with confused silence for a second before answering. “Oh, no, I’m good. Do we have coffee going?”

Benny winked and handed her a cup, already poured, black and sweet like she always took it. “*Caffè nero con zucchero.*”

“Not bad. More of a ‘ts’ sound on the z, though.” She bobbed her shoulder against his as a thank-you hug and drank it down. It was the perfect temperature, hot enough to sting her tongue without actually burning the taste buds off. He knew her well.

“*Zucchero.*” Benny tried again.

“Nailed it.”

“We’ve got bread from yesterday,” Mom kept offering. “Fruit?”

“We bought these weird Italian cereals!” Waverly said, holding up a box of off-brand Rice Krispies.

“Cool!” Anna replied to Waverly, then, to Mom, “I’m not hungry.”

“You’re too skinny,” Dad grunted from the corner of the table. Anna hadn’t noticed him there. He was reading a new book now, a senator’s about-to-run-for-president memoir.

“I just hate breakfast. The other meals are fine.” Anna started out to the back patio.

Nicole shoved a piece of paper in front of her face, trapping her. “Stay while we go over this. We were waiting for you, and we are already *super* late.”

Anna glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was nine thirty.

She took the paper from Nicole. An itinerary. Printed. She flipped it over and yep, double-sided. Single-spaced, detailed. The hourly schedule for every single day of vacation.

“Wow!”

“*Don’t.*” Nicole turned back to the group and clapped. “Okay?”

Dad sniffed loudly, and everybody but Christopher stopped talking. Benny shushed him, then leaned over to whisper something in his ear that made him snort.

“Pretty self-explanatory,” Nicole said, perching on the back of the sofa sectional. “We’ve got big outings roughly every other day, flex day next Sunday for whatever we’ve missed. Two days in Florence, one with the kids, one without.”

“Without?” Waverly asked, indignant. “What, are we just supposed to stay here all by *ourselves*?”

“Grandpa and Granny are taking you to a water park,” Mom announced.

The girls were surprised. So, apparently, was Dad. He set his book down slowly.

“An Italian one,” Mom chirped. “Which will be very interesting!”

“You’ve got dinner scheduled for five thirty every day,” Christopher pointed out, holding up his printout by the tips of two fingers.

“Only the days with the kids.” Nicole’s smile wavered. “They’ll get hungry by six and it’ll take some time to get served. So. Five thirty.”

Anna met Benny’s eyes and both of them pressed their lips together, trying not to laugh. When Anna turned back, she found Nicole gawking, arms wide.

“Yes, Anna? Do you have an *adjustment* to make?”

“No.” Anna coughed. “Sounds great. There will be loads of tables free, assuming we can find any restaurants that open that early. It’s a good plan, good job on all this hard work!”

Benny buried his face in his elbow.

“Anyway,” Nicole charged onward. “Today is Lucca. Historic city but there are apparently tons of playgrounds up on the city walls, so that’ll be fun. . . .”

Benny sidled up behind Anna and whispered, “We have got to get out of here.”

“Hard agree.”

“How fast can you get ready?”

Anna frowned down at herself. “Now.”

Benny cocked his head, dubious.

She slipped into sandals, grabbed her sling bag from beside her bed, and edged back into the living room, where the kids were arguing with their mom about how many times a day they were allowed to get gelato.

“We’re on vacation,” Justin said. He had his eyes closed against the argument.

Christopher and Benny waited by the front door. Anna slid through past them and whispered in Benny’s ear on the way out, “You do it.”

“Shut up, it’s your turn.”

“I’m always the bad guy, *will* always be the bad guy, just do it.”

Benny turned back into the house and called, “We’re popping out to a wine tasting, see you in a little bit!” Then, to Anna and Christopher: “*Run.*”

Anna thought she heard a faint “Is this a joke?” just before they made it out of range, into the car, and away down the long dirt drive.

The farther they got from the house, the more easily Anna could breathe. She wasn’t sure how much of that dissipating tension came from her family, how much from the villa itself, only that something inside her urged her onward. *Keep going. Don’t even look back.*

She kept it to herself.

That goat was still there, tied up, but the soccer ball was gone, like he’d eaten it. The car’s dust trail wafted over the scene like fog.

“Do you have a specific destination in mind?” Anna asked from the backseat. “Or are we just fleeing?”

Benny let out a nervous laugh before he answered. “We thought we’d go to the tasting room for that vineyard on the other side of the valley, the one we can see from the backyard.”

He steered the car onto the hill road.

“Good plan,” Anna said.

“Backyard.” Christopher ruffled Benny’s hair. “You are so Ohio.”

“Where did you grow up, Christopher?” Anna asked, not because she cared, particularly, but because she was curious to find out what they called backyards where he was from.

“Here and there,” he answered, and with that, she met the limits of her curiosity.

They drove through Monteperso on their way to the vineyard. It was like a ghost town, not a soul in sight, until they passed the local *tabaccheria*, a BIG bar sign out front, four sour-faced Italian men of indeterminate age leaning on the building and smoking cigarettes, seemingly in silence. They all turned to stare at the car as it approached, unsmiling.

Benny gave a neighborly wave.

They didn’t react. Not even to shift weight.

When Anna turned to look out the rear window, the men were still staring down the road at them. One of them pointed.

“Drinking this early,” Christopher said. “Huh. What day is it?”

“Sunday.” Benny glanced at Christopher with a tentative smile. “And we’re on our way to a wine tasting. So.”

“‘Bar’ means something different here,” Anna couldn’t resist correcting. “They won’t be drinking anything stronger than espresso. Actually, Italy has one of the lowest alcoholism rates in the world.”

“I doubt that,” Christopher said.

Anna looked out the window. “Okey doke!”

Deeper into town, they passed a restaurant with a nice courtyard strung with lights, currently dimmed, a village grocery that looked open but empty of customers. There was a small public square where Anna imagined they must hold the weekly market, and then the promised church. It was somewhat impressive—blocky and blunt, nothing like the glorious buildings in the book Anna had been leafing through last night, but the tower was indeed Romanesque and there was an ocular window, a slim Lombard band, enough craftsmanship that even from the car, Anna got a sense of a time when there had been money in this hillside town. Someone had shelled out to build a church that people would come to see from miles around.

It was Sunday morning, so there must have been a morning mass going on inside, but Anna saw few cars parked and no sign of life within before they drove out of view.

She’d come back, check it out more closely. Maybe on market day when everybody else was occupied with vegetables.

As they drove out of Monteperso, Anna wondered where the local farms were. It was incongruously arid in this town, any field or hillside that looked like it could be worked into a vineyard left completely fallow. She supposed it had something to do with sunlight and soil quality, but that was as far as her knowledge of agriculture extended. Back in New York, she didn’t even keep houseplants.

The road became winding as they reached the edge of Monteperso and headed down and up again, into the southern hills. It felt more verdant on this side of the small valley, perkier trees, window boxes brightening the sides of some of the flat white houses that butted up against the road. It wasn’t long before they saw a sign for the vineyard. Benny followed the arrows until they reached a smooth paved road that cut through neat lines of grapes.

In the front seat, Christopher’s shoulders visibly relaxed. He liked structure, Anna suspected, like Benny. Charts and paved roads and numbers. Lined paper.

But when they got out of the car, Christopher turned to her, and said, “You’ll order for us. I don’t want to struggle with the language gap,” without waiting for a reply, and Anna thought, *No, not just structure. He has to be in control.*

Benny was peering into the front window of the tasting room.

“Oh jeez,” he said. “I think we’re the first takers today. Is it too early? And it’s a Sunday! They’re gonna think we’re heathens.”

“Are they open?” Anna asked.

“Yeah, but they *just* opened—”

“If they’re open, then it’s not too early.” She held the door for the boys, ushered them through, then strode to the front to talk to the young lady manning the desk, who did, in fact, look a little surprised to see customers here at ten in the morning.

She recovered quickly enough, and Anna’s Italian was sufficient to get them all a tasting table with a view, in a breezy spot to boot. The full flight: two reds, two whites, one prosecco.

Anna felt a little smug when she saw that the woman had brought to the table two tasting sheets in English and one for her in Italian, but she still had to peek at Benny’s to make sure she was translating correctly.

The prosecco came first, sweet, “fruit forward.” Anna liked it. She wasn’t fussy. Benny only took a sip or two, though, and Christopher grimaced as he tasted.

“Girl wine,” he announced.

“Are you fucking kidding me? ‘Girl wine’?” Anna cackled.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

He shrugged, resting his case, but he drank the rest of his glass anyway, as well as the rest of Benny’s, in the time it took Anna to finish her own. Benny used the little pencil and made notes on his tasting sheet.

“In Napa this place would be packed,” Christopher said. “Sad.”

“Why sad?” Benny asked. “I’m sure it’ll be busy later.”

“Busy for here,” Christopher said. “This whole place is economically depressed. It’s making *me* feel economically depressed.”

Anna wasn’t sure that was true, but the first white had come and when she thanked the young lady and managed to banter a little in Italian, she wondered if she was actually being flirted with or if it was just the wine and the thrill of being a capable translator getting to her.

This one was to Christopher's liking. "Dry," Anna guessed you would say, or maybe "Oaky," but, after swirling it around his mouth, Christopher came out with, "*Flinty*. Not bad, not great. Flat compared to a Napa sauv blanc, but we should still get a case of this."

Benny coughed. "A case? How about a couple bottles."

"Anna, ask her where the bathroom is," Christopher said.

"Yes, my liege." Anna rose, surprised to find herself wobbly—apparently two sampler glasses of wine in the morning after near-zero caloric intake will do that to you—found the toilets herself and pointed Christopher in their direction.

Benny had hardly touched his second glass.

"Are you not drinking?" Anna asked.

"I'm the driver," Benny said ruefully. "And I'm already feeling iffy. This is strong wine, right?"

It did seem to be, but Anna couldn't figure out why. "Can I have yours?"

He slid it over the table. "Leave some for Christopher."

"Are you two doing well?" Anna blurted. She glanced over her shoulder. "I never get you alone anymore, so let's confess all now."

"Yes." Benny's jaw quirked. "We're great."

"Great!" She drank, left a bit for Christopher, slid it away.

"And how about you? You never really told me what happened with Josh, you know."

There was something sulky lurking underneath Benny's look of concern. Anna chose to ignore it.

She glanced back to make sure Christopher wasn't coming. "Okay, superfast version because this is just between us, all right?"

She waited until Benny made eye contact.

"*Between us*," she repeated.

"Yeah! Course." He looked shell-shocked that she was answering the question at all.

She leaned in. "Rapid-fire. Okay. So, basically, I got pregnant back in February and I had an abortion. I didn't tell Josh until after I'd done it because I knew he'd want to drag out making the decision and once I'd decided, I needed it done and over. But he was really upset when I told him, like, out-of-all-proportion angry."

Benny leaned back slowly in his chair.

Anna glanced behind her. Still no Christopher. She drank the rest of Benny's glass and went on.

"He started ranting at me, all this stuff that was obviously pent up over the years, but it was frankly ridiculous. At one point, he stood up from the sofa—we were at his place—and he backed away from me like he was scared, and he goes . . . I shit you not, he goes, 'There is a *darkness* in you, Anna.' And I started laughing! I mean, how could you not? It was so dramatic. So him. And that was it. That was the unforgivable thing, really, not the baby, but the fact that I laughed at him. And you know what? I was relieved. I think I'd probably wanted to laugh at him for a long time."

Anna scratched her ankle. Her fingernail came up with blood.

When Christopher sat back down, he rubbed Benny's knee. "You all right, Ben? Your tummy okay?"

Anna was punchy from telling the breakup story. She nearly burst out laughing all over again, hearing a grown man refer to another grown man's "tummy," but the Italian girl turned up with the second white, and gave a little explanation, which Anna translated for the others as best she could, rewarded with a "*molto bene*" and a wink from the waitress, who Anna decided was most definitely flirting with her.

It wasn't an arrogant assumption. Anna had this *thing*, an odd magnetism that superseded her underwhelming looks. She was self-interested enough to be grateful people were attracted to her but not enough to bother trying to suss out the reason for it.

Whatever the mysterious alchemy, she had no trouble getting laid. She simply hadn't wanted to since Josh. Sex with him had gotten so dull that, even now, the thought of sex with someone else seemed like far too much effort for too little reward.

She did like the game, though, still fished for potential lovers, but now it was catch and release. She'd be a flirtatious nun for as long as she could sustain it. That dream wasn't helping, though, so she made no promises.

Maybe not during the family vacation, though. She'd learned that lesson the hard way.

"So when's it coming?" Christopher's voice slurred slightly.

Benny glanced behind them, confused, but Christopher's eyes were homing in on Anna.

She shrugged, game enough. "When is what coming?"

"The train wreck."

The lingering wine in Anna's mouth turned to vinegar. She kept her vacation smile in place, though. "As in *my* train wreck? One that I cause?"

Christopher stretched his back against his chair, grinning. "Benny said it was about fifty-fifty—"

"I did not," Benny argued. Very weakly.

"But he said if shit did go down, it would one hundred percent be you doing it."

Anna swallowed the last of her white. "Fifty-fifty's a little high."

"That is really *really* not how I put it," Benny said, avoiding Anna's eyes in a way that confirmed that his boyfriend was quoting him almost verbatim.

"I'm just excited to see what happens!" Christopher raised his glass. "Part of the travel package. Pool, villa, entertainment—that's how you sold it to me, sweetie, don't lie."

"I'll do my best to make it worth the airfare," Anna slurred back, and lifted her own, empty glass for a scraping clink that set her teeth on edge. "Wouldn't want to disappoint anyone."

"Anna—" Benny cut in.

Anna looked at him. Waited. But nope, that was apparently all her brother wanted to say. He glanced over at the approaching waitress and seized eagerly on the next wine course as a subject change. Anna wasn't surprised. Direct apologies—admissions of occasional lapses in saintliness—were not in Benny's wheelhouse.

The topic of potential drama avoided for the moment, the rest of the tasting was a dull blur. The reds were *complex*, according to Christopher, but not as *layered* as California zin. The day had grown steadily hotter out on the patio, that breeze settling down for an early nap—*un riposo*, was that the Italian equivalent of a siesta?—and Christopher regaled them with stories of summers he'd spent in Montauk as a teen, all of which had slipped loose from Anna's memory by the time they piled back into the car, laden with bottles from the shop.

Christopher didn't seem worse for wear from the tasting—they were only sampler glasses, after all—but Anna was small and hungry and the wine had hit her strangely hard. Italy swirled around her, kaleidoscopic, queasy, all the way back to the villa.

She instinctively looked up at the tower when they got to the house, curious as to whether the curtains would move again in the window, but no.

There were no curtains.

There wasn't even a window. Only an outline. It was bricked up on this side too.

She'd seen it. She knew she had.

She wobbled, vertigo striking from peering up for too long, and blinked her vision steady again. Time to put some food in her stomach.

As soon as they got into the villa, Christopher carried all ten of the bottles he'd bought into his bedroom, presumably to hide them among his dragon hoard.

"When do you want to head out to Lucca?" Benny called, leaning on the kitchen counter as Anna assembled a sandwich.

It wasn't until Anna had finished slicing tomato that she realized he was talking to her.

She put down her knife. "You want to meet up with them?"

"Well." He blinked, annoyed. "Yeah. I want to see Lucca too."

"You guys go on." Anna finished making her sandwich. Took a bite and talked around it. "I'm gonna hang out here today. Plan out my train wreck."

"Seriously, Anna?" Benny rubbed his temple. "You're gonna be like this already?"

"Like what?" She'd found a nectarine, just the right ripeness. She bit into it and felt the juice drip down her chin.

"It's a family trip," Benny said. "And I know how you get—"

"It was *twelve years ago*." Anna dropped her plate with a clatter onto the counter. "I am so sick of hearing about it."

Benny flinched as if she'd struck him.

Christopher came out of their bedroom wearing a fresh polo shirt. "We leaving?"

"Have fun, lovebirds. I'll see you guys at dinner if not sooner." Anna scarfed the rest of her sandwich, grabbed the architecture book, and headed through the extension. "We're going to the *ristorante* in Monteperso, right?"

But Benny had already left.

The heat thickened as she stepped onto the back patio. Anna sat down and seethed.

They were never going to forgive her for Hilton Head. And for what? What had she done that was so terrible? Gone drinking with Nicole. Flirted with a bartender. Seen her sister safely back to the condo, doubled back to

the bar and hung out until closing and the bartender got off, so she could also get off with her new friend back at her beachside apartment. Stayed the night. Whatever.

Anna could acknowledge there were things she'd gotten wrong. She should have anticipated that, however explicit she would be in explaining to Nicole her plan for the rest of the night, Nicole would be too hungover to remember it the next day. Anna should have remembered how reactionary her sister was, and that Mom was a human sponge designed to absorb and spread anxiety. Should have realized that it wasn't inconceivable that they'd declare Anna missing and send out alerts all over the damn resort. Shouldn't have counted on Benny to intervene, ever.

And when Anna turned up in midafternoon to join them by the pool, only to find the entire Pace family frothing panicked, surrounded by an ad hoc search and rescue crew, she probably shouldn't have shouted, "I was fucking the girl from the tiki bar! I'm fine!"

Dad sold the condo soon after that trip.

Come on, though, she was *twenty-two*. That should have been all the explanation anyone needed. But no, they watched her warily even on this trip, now, like at age thirty-four she was still scouting exit routes around every corner, desperate for novel ways to bring shame to the Pace name.

And how dare they box her in that way? Judge her. Anna gripped the stone balustrade so tight she felt her fingernails peeling away from the quick. A lifetime of petty insults and indignities buzzed in her chest like a kicked beehive. She felt the strongest itch to break something, hurt something. Hurt *them*, all of them, have the revenge that she deserved, take

From the patio, she heard Benny's rental car grind away up the drive, the sound startling her away from the railing.

She stared down at her reddened fingertips and let out a shocked laugh, the rage of the moment before sloughing out of her like a cork had been pulled.

What the fuck was that? It wasn't Anna, that was for sure. Or at least not a part of herself she was in the habit of entertaining.

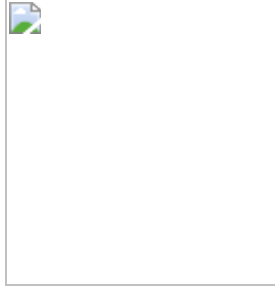
She shuddered, chilled, teeth clacking. Then that too passed.

Anna sat down in the sun. She willed her eyes closed, her heart placid again, and listened to the soundtrack shifting into a song of abandonment around her. Crickets, frogs, wind, occasional birdcalls, her own breath and

heartbeat. Okay, so there were odd things about this villa. Wafting chills, odd sounds, movement when there shouldn't be any, but looking out at this glorious landscape, this pristine day, did it really matter? This was peace. Vacation. Here, now, while the rest of them were sightseeing.

It seemed to Anna that the concept of "vacation" was antithetical to the concept of "family." Vacation required vacancy. The abandonment of all scraps of everyday life.

And so, Anna drank deeply of the solitude while she still could. She kicked up her feet, looked out at the vista through her sunglasses, and tried her best to ignore the creeping thought that it wasn't solitude if she wasn't actually alone in the house at all.



PENTIMENTO

She dozed a little, swam and read, making mental notes about places she wanted to check out on Wednesday, Florence Day, not that she'd be calling the shots. She stretched out and felt the sun on her pasty thighs, thought idly that she should put on some sunscreen, didn't do it. She picked out the occasional whir of farm equipment echoing from another hillside, a truck passing by on a distant road. Once, she distinctly heard someone whisper, "Salve," behind her, and thought it was a local coming for an impromptu visit, but no, just a voice carried up the hill by the wind. And a simultaneous warm breeze on the back of her neck. *Yep, let's go with that idea.*

Anna covered her eyes and peered over her shoulder past the scrub, but couldn't see any neighboring houses, let alone people. Beside the house and grounds, there was a steep hillside, the earth vaguely terraced in the way of a vineyard, but entirely barren. Not even weeds grew there, except in random tufts. It stretched as far as she could see. Anna found it hard to look away.

When the heat and the biting insects got too oppressive, even with the refuge of the pool, she went back up to the villa to swap out books and cool off, grab a bite to eat. Maybe some juice. Maybe something stronger. Vacation. She was grabbing rest and relaxation by the horns, dammit.

She felt it as soon as she opened the door from the patio.

It. Nameless, formless, paralytic. Strong enough to stop her where she stood.

A rat had died inside her apartment wall a few years back. The feeling she'd gotten from smelling its decay—this, now, was the same.

Gingerly, Anna sniffed, but there was no stench, only wood and dust and the girls' spray sunscreen lingering in the air.

She did not want to go inside, though.

Her stomach warned her not to even breathe.

Just as she was stepping back, scrambling for rational excuses, she heard a sound coming from upstairs. Faint, but extended. And repeating.

“This is fine,” she said, out loud, thinking of the meme. Imagining herself as a dog with a cup of coffee was absurd enough to fuel her first step into the villa, and then the next, until she was walking up the steps out of the extension, curiosity overtaking her nerves.

The noise continued, louder now. A scraping.

Something was scratching. Inside the wall.

Something bigger than a rat.

Anna crouched low and shuffled, trying to identify the source of the noise, until she reached the wall hanging. The tower door.

There it went again—*scritch. Scritch.*

From inside the tower.

She hadn’t seen any of the villa cats yet today, Anna realized, swallowing dry. Could one have somehow gotten stuck in there?

The scratching continued, low to the ground, increasingly frantic.

Anna’s sweating intensified into drips. She swiped at her forehead, dragging a gnat along for the ride, then pulled back the wall hanging. It fell onto her head, shrouding her.

The scratching stopped.

Downstairs, a bedroom door slammed shut.

Anna flinched, gripping the hanging for balance. “Anybody there?”

She knew damn well there wasn’t.

She ignored the sick chill pouring through her and tapped at the door. Once. Twice.

“Kitty? You in there?” She felt foolish saying it. What did she expect? A meow for yes? “*Gatto? Sei qui?*”

Because Italian cats speak Italian. She was losing her mind.

One more beat, listening, then she stood and let the tapestry drop. The nymphs stared her in the face, unimpressed.

Anna went downstairs, determined to at least solve the mystery of the self-shutting door, but all of them were open, just as they had been a minute ago. She walked into Mom and Dad’s room and played with the door handle, irrationally certain that it was this one that had shut. Inside the room it was, in fact, cold, but only in pockets, and as Anna shifted weight between her parents’ suitcases, hands outstretched, trying to find the source

of the air current, the cold spot seemed to shrink, eaten up by the rest of the ambient heat.

The house was quiet. That sick feeling remained.

Anna jogged upstairs, poured herself an overflowing glass of water, let it slosh around her fingers as she grabbed her sketch pad from the satchel in her bedroom, and hurried back out to the pool.

She pulled a deck chair around to face the villa, and started to sketch, in plain old number 2 pencil, willing her fingers to remain steady.

She'd been too skittish to take the time to dig for the nicer set of charcoals that had settled somewhere deep in her travel bag. She'd needed to be gone, outside, peering up at the villa from a small distance, and now that she was, her nerves had dulled from fear into wary fascination.

And so she worked.

It was somewhat fanciful, this sketch. She hadn't intended to make creative changes, but as the image took form, she found she couldn't bring herself to draw the modern addition, and once you've decided you're not being observational, all bets are off. She put a window in that south-facing tower wall—no cats trying to get out, only the effect of a wider space within. A woman's outline at the window, with hair flowing loose like a veil around her. Below the tower, Anna omitted the footpath to the pool, erased the gate and the potted plants, added the shadowed roofline of an extra, smaller structure to the left, where there were brush and stone pines now, a large wagon wheel against the wall.

The sketch settled neatly when she held it out from herself, transposed it over the villa. This image seemed to exist, even now, behind the glass wall and the line of bright children's clothing and the electrical wires.

Once she decided it felt balanced, complete, Anna did what she did with all her sketches: ripped it from the book, folded it into minute rectangles, and went up to the house to toss it into the trash.

There was nothing amiss in the villa right now. Even so, Anna made it a quick trip. She grabbed a can of *limonata* and a tourist guidebook and took them straight back outside.

Her step faltered as she headed back down poolside and she let out a startled cry. There were two people floating in the water. Facedown.

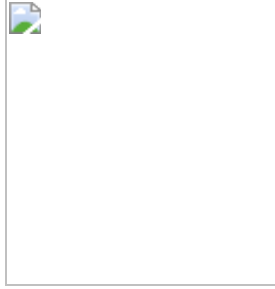
A blink, and they were gone, merely the shadows from the surrounding trees.

Anna blew out a breath and physically shook off this feeling, jiggling her arms and legs all the rest of the way to the pool.

She did relax. A little. But she couldn't focus on the guidebook.

She drew the pool instead. Seen from above.

And then she drew something else.



THE MONSTER ROLE

When the gang got back, the girls in the vanguard screaming “Anna, come swim!” like a war cry as they sprinted down the footpath in their bathing suits and burning bare feet, the feeling of dread Anna had felt emanating from the villa, from the pool, had been so thoroughly eviscerated that she felt like an idiot for having imagined it in the first place.

Since when was she afraid to be alone anywhere?

She was glad everybody was back, at least. Benny would be gratified to hear it.

Anna splashed around with the girls for a little while, giving their parents a break. “Do Pool Monster,” Mia ordered, but Waverly kept telling Anna to make her voice more growly, until Anna finally said, “Can I be Jenny Greenteeth instead?”

The girls asked who that was and clung to the side of the pool with the tips of their fingers as Anna explained the basics: the pondweed hair, mossy skin, the whole luring-children-to-their-death thing.

“That’s the lady from my dream!” Mia squealed.

“Mia’s been having nightmares,” Waverly explained to Anna, sagely, as if to demonstrate that she was one of the grown-ups. “She keeps waking me up in the middle of the night.”

“Oh.” Anna started to rethink this plan, but Mia paddled over to grip her shoulder, screaming directly into her ear, “Do it! Do Jenny Greenteeth!”

So Anna did. She dunked her hair over her face, extended her hands and chased. By the time Justin arrived to take over the monster role, stomping into the pool, ogre voice perfectly pitched, the girls were screaming their little heads off, and Anna felt maybe a little bit guilty, but mostly amused. She slipped out of the pool, into a towel, and up past Nicole, applying sunscreen to her ridiculously toned legs up on the patio.

Inside, Mom and Dad's bedroom door was shut, but she heard Dad tromping around in there like a rhino. Ah, normalcy.

Anna walked up the extension steps.

Christopher stood transfixed in front of the tower door, staring at the wall hanging, hands lax at his sides. His expression wasn't curious or spooked. It was entirely vacant.

Anna stopped behind him. "Did you hear something?"

She half expected him to jump, like her family always did when she started a conversation from nowhere, but he just turned his head owl-slowly to look at her. "No. Why?"

She considered gently pointing out that she'd caught him staring at the tower door like a complete psycho. She could tell him about the cat scratch noise from earlier, but that would peg *her* as the lunatic, so she blinked sagely, said, "Why indeed," and went to grab a snack from the kitchen.

"You didn't answer your phone, missy," Mom said in lieu of hello. She stood at the sink washing dishes.

"I turned it off." Anna washed off some strawberries and ate them perched at the table, legs tucked up tight.

Mom's hands dropped to her hips, dripping. "Are you worried about the roaming cost? Are things tight right now? You can tell me! I'm not going to judge. Listen, we'll pay for roaming, sweetie, just tell me how much it is and we'll transfer it over, but it really would have been useful to be able to reach you."

Anna could ride the waves of her family's mood changes like a championship surfer, but she felt herself flailing now. "Why?"

Mom raised her eyebrows and spoke slowly, like a schoolteacher. "We were hoping you'd make a dinner reservation for us for tonight down at the . . . I don't remember what it's called, the place in Monty-purso."

Benny sidled into the kitchen and grabbed a nectarine.

"We should be fine without a reservation as long as we keep to Nicole's early-bird-special schedule," Anna said. "And thank you for the offer, Mom, that's really sweet, but I'm going to keep my phone off. It's nice to be unplugged while I'm on vacation."

"Good for you!" Dad shouted from the living room. "Everybody's too damn addicted to their devices."

Anna smiled in validation, even though she suspected Dad was just happy not to have to transfer any money.

“Did you bring a laptop?” Christopher barked at her from the archway.

“Nope.”

“How are you checking in with work?”

Anna snorted in answer. She turned to Benny. “*You’re* not checking in, are you?”

Benny shrugged. “I mean. I’m an adult, I have a job.”

“At a school. It’s the summer break.” “And yet I still get five emails a day, minimum, from school administration.”

“So? Ignore them.”

Benny rolled his eyes, tossed out the nectarine pit, and left the kitchen right as Nicole thundered up the steps and through the living room, hair hanging sodden around her face.

She’d make a great Jenny Greenteeth, Anna thought, then straightened up, ready for a telling-off. *How dare you share your perverted folktales! My children are scarred!*

But Nicole walked past, arms spread, groping for the kitchen counter, and Anna’s hackles went up in a different way. Something was wrong.

Nic silently gathered a thick bunch of paper towels and pressed it to her forehead.

“You okay, honey?” Mom glanced up from drying dishes.

Anna watched red drip from Nicole’s hair onto the kitchen tiles. She jumped up. “What happened? Let me see you.”

Nicole waved her away. Mom put down the dishrag, alarmed, just as Waverly ran into the kitchen. Her face was very pale. Pool water streamed off her.

Nicole dropped the paper towels to point at her daughter. “*What* did I tell you? *Time-out. In your room. Now.*”

Anna seized the moment to cup her sister’s chin, taking in the damage. “Holy . . .”

Nicole’s eyebrow was split deeply in two, streaming blood, the area around the gash swollen like a slug, mottling with bruises already.

“I didn’t *do* it!” Waverly shrieked. “It wasn’t me!”

“Well, I know what a child’s hands feel like all over me, and it wasn’t Mia, because she was in the pool, so there go all your arguments.” Nicole’s voice was flat with shock, her hands shaking. She snatched up the bloody paper wad and clamped it back onto her face with a wince. “Clean up the

water you've dripped in here, so nobody else cracks their head, and then get into that room, and do not come out until you're ready to apologize."

"I didn't push you!" Waverly started to stomp, tears welling.

Tears of frustration, Anna thought. Not guilt.

As if sensing Anna's assessment, Waverly turned to Anna, eyes wide in appeal. "I didn't. You believe me, don't you, Auntie Anna?"

"You need to stop it with this and say you're sorry to your mother," Mom cut in, in her best approximation of sternness. She'd stepped between Waverly and Anna, physically cutting off any possibility of an alliance. "Go on. Say sorry."

Waverly lifted her chin, contemptuous, and stalked off without saying anything.

Nicole held statue-still until she heard the downstairs bedroom door slam shut, and then she slumped against the counter. "I don't know what got into her. I'm just standing at the edge of the pool, talking to Mia, and I feel this shove! Smacked my head into the side of the steps. I mean, what the hell!"

"I think you might need stitches, sweetie," Mom said.

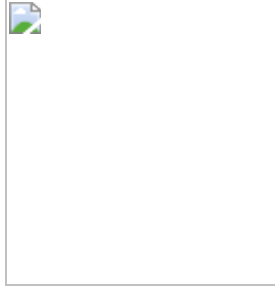
"It's not that bad," Nicole said. She turned to Anna. "Is it that bad?"

But Anna was still staring at the space where Waverly had been standing. Anna knew the particular indignation of the unfairly accused intimately enough to recognize it in others, and felt a cloud of regret that she hadn't spoken up in her defense right away.

Waverly hadn't pushed her mother. Maybe Nicole had stumbled, blamed it on Waverly out of embarrassment or a fit of pique, but Anna doubted that too. *I feel this shove*. Pretty specific.

Anna thought of the giggles she'd heard behind her. Of her sketch of the pool, now buried deep in the trash can.

Two bodies floating, facedown. Bloat setting in. Drawn as if from memory.



ITALIAN BLOOD

“We’ll take you to the hospital,” Mom said, jarring Anna back to reality. “Anna, would you look up the closest—?”

“No,” Nicole cut in, her voice rising in panic. “No, no, no. We’re going to dinner in town tonight.”

It took Anna a second to connect the logic there: an ER visit was not on the almighty itinerary.

Nicole glanced up at the wall clock and gasped. “Did *nobody* think to tell me what time it was?”

There was so much wrong with that complaint that Anna could only sit back down at the kitchen table and wait for Mom to say, “Oh goodness, I had no idea.”

Five twenty-five. Dinnertime. Apparently.

“I’m just going to deal with this and then we’ll go.” Nicole jogged out of the room, sliding a little on the trail of water Waverly had left behind. “Waverly! Get out here and clean this up or absolutely no YouTube for the rest of this vacation!”

Anna slid herself quickly out of the fray and into her room, slipped out of her bikini and back into this morning’s sundress, tied her hair back into a sort of bun and her feet into sandals, splashed water on her face, and then sat on the sofa for fifteen minutes while the rest of the family swirled around her, shouting between rooms. If there were “weird echoes” at the moment, they’d be completely drowned out by the living.

Anna tucked her feet under her. The *living*, implying *the dead*. Was that really what was going on here?

She pulled a plush sofa cushion onto her lap. A comfy little shield.

Nicole wandered into the living room, examining herself with her phone in selfie mode. She’d applied matte makeup around the thick Band-Aid on her eyebrow, in a seamlessly blended way that made her entire forehead

look deformed. She frantically combed her bangs onto that side of her face, then straightened up, satisfied.

“I wish you’d see a doctor,” Benny offered gently, as he passed through the room, buttoning up his linen shirt. “You could have a concussion.”

He looked to Anna for agreement.

“I’m with Benny on this one,” Anna said.

Benny sulked, inexplicably disappointed by something in her phrasing.

“I’m *fine*,” Nicole laughed. “You two are worse than Mom.”

At the “you two,” Benny brightened. Shot Anna a conspiratorial smile, which she returned with effort.

Bang.

Anna jumped up from the sofa and turned to the dining table, along with Benny and Nicole.

A decorative pot had fallen. It continued to vibrate against the wood until it settled, while above it, its hook and all the neighboring cookware swayed slowly.

Nicole turned to Anna, eyes wide. Anna opened her mouth.

“What on *earth*?” Mom stomped up the stairs, accusatory.

Nicole blinked. Shrugged. Fussed with her hair. “Pot fell down. Must have been loose.”

“Goodness!” Mom laughed. “Gave me a scare.”

“Us too,” Benny murmured, but when Anna glanced at him—a pointed *you get what’s going on here too* glare—he was casually hanging the pot back up and walking away to check on Christopher.

Back to normal. No matter what happened, Anna observed, the natural instinct was to file it away, put the furniture where it belonged, restore it all to what you were used to. But while everybody finished primping, Anna sat on the arm of the sofa, watching those hanging pots for any sign of movement, until finally, just after six fifteen, everyone congregated at the front door and flew out together, a susurrant of Paces.

And Anna breathed.

She rode with Mom and Dad this time, affording herself a few minutes’ break from Christopher. Benny looked hurt when she bypassed his rental car, but he’d get over it. She’d sit next to him at dinner. Christ, her brother was a lot of work.

“Is that . . . oh, what’s his name?” Mom leaned over, squinting at a car parked on the lane ahead, just before the turnoff to the main road.

“Don’t think so,” Dad said, though he slowed down.

It was an old Fiat, eighties maybe, slug gray. An equally run-down woman in a dishrag wrap-dress stood stooped beside the open back door, talking to someone. It took Anna a few blinks to spot a black tail swishing back and forth under the woman’s arm and realize what was happening. The dumpy woman’s arms were laden with cats from the villa. She was half coaxing, half shoving them into her car.

“Jesus,” Anna muttered. “She’s stealing the cats.”

“Maybe they’re hers,” Mom said, a fair guess, but Anna shook her head.

“They’re strays. It’s a thing in Italy. They like being free.” She frowned. This upset her more than the fallen pot somehow, watching the cats writhe powerless in this woman’s hands.

Mom rolled down her window and waved as they rolled slowly past. “Hi there!” Then, to Anna, “Say it in Italian, honey.”

The woman understood the meaning well enough in English. She stiffened, taking them in. As she granted them a somber nod, an orange bundle slipped around her feet and darted away.

Anna stifled a laugh. *Run, tomcat, run.*

The woman looked like she was cursing to herself, but at Anna’s almost laugh, her eyes flew up. Staring straight at Anna, she lifted her hand in a stiff gesture—pointer finger and pinky raised around a fist, like a surfer hang ten. It might have looked friendly if the old woman hadn’t spit into the dirt straight after.

They turned onto the main road, the others caravanning behind them.

As Mom rolled her window up, Anna looked away from the stranger, an irritating apprehension rippling over her. Was that like the Italian middle finger? Pretty rich coming from a catnapper. Anna hoped the girls hadn’t seen her taking all their friends away.

Nicole, for her part, was all smiles, some of them sheepish, when they arrived at the restaurant to find it barely open and completely empty.

Even so, when Anna took her place in the lead to ask for a table, the bearded young man who greeted them asked her in Italian, “Do you have a reservation?”

“No phone,” she answered, shrugging one shoulder, hoping that would suffice.

It did. He grinned.

Her pulse went up a little, like she'd just dropped a few feet on a thrill ride. Quite a grin.

"This way," he called in English to the others.

He ushered them into the courtyard to the side of the restaurant, where the strung white lights were now turned on but drowned by the summer evening sunshine. The stone walls out here were hung with vintage ads for Italian sodas. Anna wished she'd brought her sketch pad—the partners at her agency would eat this shit up—but one hard blink was enough to shove work back out of her brain. Instead, she watched her mother, who was looking around, gauging the family's reaction, whether they were as pleased as she was. This was one of those rare moments that aligned exactly with Mom's idea of what it would be like to visit Italy. Grass-basket bottles and Vespas and this place.

Anna had to admit, she found this place charming too. There was something reassuringly normal about it. It could have existed in any Tuscan village, in any decade of the last fifty years. Nothing hiding under the surface here. It was what it was.

The girls were maybe the most delighted with the restaurant, largely because they'd found pizza on the menu. They started shouting their orders down the table to Anna as soon as she sat down next to Benny.

"You order," she called back. They looked petrified. "I'll cue you up and then you say, '*Margherita pizza per favore.*' Try it!"

They did. Completely unintelligible.

"Perfect!" Anna said.

"You're a good aunt," Benny said, not quite looking at her. He sounded weirdly lugubrious.

Anna scrolled the menu. "Yup."

The young man returned and came straight to her, crouching jauntily beside her seat with his muscular forearm resting on the table, sleeves rolled up, as he asked for their drinks order. It took a good five minutes for Anna to negotiate with the others, translate and confirm, so when he stood again, it was charmingly stiffly. Maybe he wasn't younger than Anna after all.

"Another minute to decide on food," Anna said in Italian, apologetic. "I will find you when we're ready."

He winked in agreement, then doubled straight back.

"You are Italian?" he asked her. She glowed until he amended, "American, of course, but your family. Italian blood?"

She laughed, understanding. “Ah. No. Not that I know of. *This* is my family.”

She motioned around the table, all those Anglo-Germanic apple-blossom cheeks.

He frowned. “Really?”

More customers arrived from the sidewalk, an elderly couple he seemed to recognize on sight. They waved to him.

“*Un momento*,” he said, and went off to seat them, leaving Anna to wonder what on earth he’d thought her role was at this table, if not family member. Benny’s girlfriend? A tour guide?

“You two were chatty.” Nicole shot her a side-eye that wrinkled her Band-Aid. “Don’t pull a Hilton Head.”

Anna exhaled slowly through her nose, wishing like hell the wine had already been served.

Mom’s jaw dropped open theatrically. “Now *Nicole!*”

Nicole shrugged, innocence incarnate. Benny coughed into his napkin and turned away, but his boyfriend leaned forward, eyes sharp.

Anna she felt sure Christopher was about to dig into that Hilton Head reference—it wouldn’t be a Pace family vacation without an early pointed reference to The Incident, now would it?—but instead he asked, “How did you learn Italian?”

From anybody else, that would have been a friendly conversation starter, but something about Christopher made all his questions sound like an interrogation. Was it his voice? The lack of cadence in it? Combined with the haircut. His side-parting.

“Duolingo,” she said.

Christopher smirked. “Be honest.”

“It’s true,” Benny cut in. “She learned French that way for our trip to the Loire Valley last year.”

“You took it in high school,” Christopher accused.

Anna laughed, bewildered now. “Took what? French?”

“She took Spanish,” Benny said.

“You can’t learn a whole language on an app,” Christopher insisted.

Benny shrugged. “Anna can.”

“Duolingo’s meant to be really good,” Nicole piped up. “*I’ve* never tried it.”

Justin glanced at his wife with a quickly stifled smirk.

“Auntie Anna’s teaching me Italian,” Waverly bragged while digging her knife into the table.

“Me too!” Mia protested.

Waverly rolled her eyes. Nicole snatched the knife away from her and put it on the other side of the table, glaring at Anna like she’d also been teaching Waverly table manners.

The young waiter brought the wines, three different selections, along with orange sodas for the girls, brightly striped straws jutting out of the glass bottles.

“Christopher’s right, actually,” Anna admitted. She let her eyes slide up to the waiter’s, more than a little flirtatiously, because why the fuck not. “*Grazie mille.*” Back to the table. “I don’t speak Italian, not really. I don’t speak French either. I’m not fluent.”

“Oh stop,” Mom shushed from down the table, then turned to Christopher. “She speaks German too and she won an *award* for Spanish in high school.”

“She’s the brains of the family,” Dad grunted. Any pride that might have once shone in those words had long since worn away. It sounded more like an accusation now.

“Got a twenty-three ninety on her SATs.” Mom still glowed with pride, bless her.

“That’s not possible.” The hot waiter poured Christopher’s wine, and he gulped half of it down immediately. “It only goes up to sixteen hundred.”

He straightened, triumphant, having won match point in some game of his own imagining.

Anna couldn’t help but enjoy replying, “Ah, see, you’re too young to know this, but there was a brief window where they lumped the English SAT Two in with the rest of the test for a total of . . . ?”

She shrugged.

Christopher turned on Benny. “What did you get?”

Benny swirled his wine around his glass. “Twenty-three hundred.”

Christopher looked disgusted. He turned to Anna. “Where did you go to college?”

He was scrambling for a win here, and he didn’t know it yet, but he was about to get one.

The young man came back with a carafe of water. As he turned away, Anna stopped him with a light touch, her fingertips grazing the golden hairs

on his tanned arm, then suggested to the table that they order.

The girls needed some prompting for the “*per favore*,” but giggled like mad when they got it right and were rewarded with a wink from Hot Waiter. Nicole and Dad both asked Anna to translate various ingredients for them and then to make *adjustments* to their goddamn orders, which she did, with apologies in Italian.

Hot Waiter laughed it off and disappeared inside.

“So?” Christopher’s eyes pinned Anna. “College?”

“Harvard,” she said.

He scowled, disappointed, but no need—she wasn’t done.

“And then RISD. And then nowhere.”

It took a second for Christopher to catch the throw. “You don’t have a degree.”

“Nope. Didn’t graduate.”

“You still could,” Mom said, reaching down the table to grab Anna’s hand, way too far to touch her. “You’re only thirty-four!”

“Thanks, Mom,” Anna said. “But nah. I’m good.”

“Spent a damn fortune on your tuition,” Dad grumbled. “Might as well get the degree.”

“I went to Ohio State,” Nicole piped up between sips of prosecco. “My tuition was less than an eighth of what Harvard would have cost.”

“You turned down Harvard?” Justin deadpanned. “You never told me that.”

Nicole glared at him. He ignored her, producing paper and crayons for the girls out of his dad bag on the floor.

The food arrived, to appreciative oohs, especially over the pizza, which Anna had had the good sense to join the girls in ordering. Hers had anchovies—heads on and everything. She picked one up out of the molten cheese and popped it into her mouth, relishing the salty crunch.

Benny wrinkled his nose, edging away.

“It’s good! You should try it. Come on, you weenie.” Anna picked it up and put it under his face, making him laugh, at long last.

Then she could breathe again.

“Everything all right?” the waiter asked in English after a little while. The restaurant was starting to fill up. He rested his palm on Anna’s back, fingers splayed wide.

She did not mind. How long a walk into Monteperso from the villa, she wondered again. Or maybe he could give her a lift back in the morning.

Don't pull a Hilton Head.

"*Molto bene,*" Waverly answered smugly.

Nicole stared at her in astonishment.

"Where are you all staying?" the waiter asked.

"Villa Taccola," Mom answered.

The waiter stiffened.

He drew his hand away from Anna, fast.

It was like they'd spat at him.

Anna peered up and saw that he was still smiling, but it looked taped in place. She could swear the string of lights behind him dimmed.

Mom caught his discomfort. Her smile wavered. "Do you know it?"

"Yes," he said, then, flustered, switched to rapid Italian, to Anna. "My uncle, he is the caretaker. I go there sometimes to help him . . . fix things."

He left before she'd finished translating what he'd said to the others. It was getting busy, but Anna sensed that seating people was an excuse to end the conversation.

More than that. To get away from them. It was like they were ill, coughing, and he didn't want to catch it.

Christopher leaned past Benny to stare at Anna. "Ask him about the tower when he comes back."

Nicole barked a laugh. "Why are you so obsessed with this?!"

Anna was grateful someone else had asked.

"I have a theory," Christopher said, and Benny leaned back, closing his eyes as if from a headache. He'd heard this theory already, then. "It's the master suite, for the owner, the best room in the house, but they only open it up for bigger groups, or if you pay more money. I'll pay, if it's about that. Happy to contribute. Just ask him. See how much it costs."

All the color had drained from Mom's face and flooded into Dad's.

This was about to be a moment.

"I'm gonna guess it's a storage cupboard," Anna cut in, shooting Dad a glance she hoped he'd interpret as *stand down*. "But sure, whatever, I'll ask."

Benny whispered in Christopher's ear, one hand on his wrist. Christopher shook his head.

Anna got up before anything could escalate and walked inside, toward the bathrooms. She had a halfhearted look around the indoor dining room for the waiter, but felt a dry hand grip her elbow and whirled around, gasping.

“*Mi scusi.*” It was the old man from the table next to them, leaving with his wife. The couple juddered slowly past her and away.

The waiter slid out from the kitchen, shouting goodbyes to the couple. Regulars, clearly. Locals.

Just as Anna’s shoulders started to relax, the elderly wife turned back to peer at Anna with sad, milky eyes and Anna felt rooted to the spot. The woman crossed herself, whispered to her husband, shook her head, and continued out.

Anna lingered, leaning against a wall, until the waiter turned to her with a closed-off smile.

“The tower?” she asked. *La torre?*

He glanced behind him. Sighed. “I should not tell you anything.”

She flinched at that, hoping she’d misunderstood. “Cannot?” She used a slightly different word. “Or,” how he’d put it, “should not? Sorry, my Italian isn’t fluent.”

Anna felt even more flustered, admitting that. Revealing weakness. She blinked quickly, feeling blood rush to her chest, her face.

A moment passed, the waiter examining her with fresh interest. He licked his lips, leaned past her to peer into the dining room; then he motioned her to follow him, deeper into the corridor that led to the restrooms.

There he leaned against the wall, hovering close enough to kiss her, dipped his chin, and whispered warm into her ear, “The tower. Do not open it.”

Before her heart could settle enough for her to land on an adequately translated follow-up question, he’d launched into a stream of rapid-fire Italian, of which she could only make out the odd word. He slowed down enough to say, “*La chiave?*” and that she understood. *The key.*

“My uncle will have given it to someone,” he said, intense. “Did you take it?”

She thought she understood what he meant by that. Her, personally. She shook her head. “I wasn’t there when they arrived.”

He nodded. “Be careful of your family. Do not open that door.”

Anna was sure now that what he'd said was "*should* not tell you anything." *Should* not warn her.

This was crazy. Maybe he was teasing her, flirting in his odd, rural Italian way.

But just as Anna tipped her chin up, lips parted, testing, he pushed off from the wall and walked away from her, eager only to be gone.

She called after him, "Are there ghosts?"

She wasn't sure she'd gotten the word right. *Spiriti* could mean souls. Was it *fantomi*? *Fantasm*?

He paused, turned back. "*Molti*."

He said it so casually. Not as a warning, not this time, but almost in a surprised tone. Like it should be obvious.

Anna used the restroom. Took her time, splashed water on her face, the back of her neck, more shaken than she felt she should be.

Molti. Many. Right.

By the time she came out, the restaurant was bursting, the bill was paid, their table was cleared, and the Pace family was waiting for her out on the sidewalk.

Anna wavered, holding the restaurant wall, disoriented. It didn't seem like that much time had passed.

She wasn't sure she was ready to go back to Villa Taccola.

"Let's have a walk," she called to the others. The sun had set, but the street was still bathed in orange from the dusky sky.

"We'll be back in the morning for the market," Nicole said. "I've gotta get these girls to bed."

"I don't want to go to bed," Waverly said, but Justin was carrying Mia, who looked mostly asleep already.

"Well, I do," Nicole said under her breath. "My head is fucking killing me."

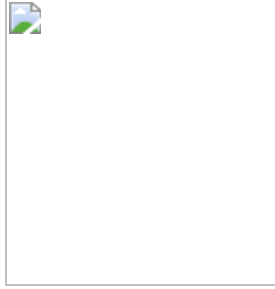
She touched her forehead with the tips of her fingers. Her bruise was seeping past the edges of the Band-Aid.

"There's a market tomorrow?" Benny asked, pulling out his car keys.

"Yeah, I saw a sign for it." Nicole blinked hard, leading the way across the street to where they'd all parked.

"We could split up," Anna suggested weakly, mostly to herself, but of course they didn't. She didn't. She got in the back of Mom and Dad's car

and breathed into the disquiet pooling in her chest until she figured she could just about tolerate it for the night.



DO NOT OPEN IT

Anna was about to give up on trying to translate the Italian book on viticulture she'd found out in the coffee table collection and turn off her light when she heard footsteps crunching around the side of the house, straight past her window.

So she hadn't imagined it. The people in the field.

The flashlights. She felt her fists clench involuntarily around the spine of the book, as if she might use it in self-defense. Maybe she could. It was pretty heavy. Angled just so to the back of someone's head, or to the eyebrow, like Nicole's injury.

Fight, flight, or freeze. Now she knew where she stood. Fucking *fight*.

She forced herself out of bed and over to the window to peer out. From here, she could make out whispers. Two people. Men. She couldn't parse the words but the conversation had the rhythm of an argument.

A non-Italian cadence.

Not intruders. Anna set the book down. Growled under her breath.

She knew what was going on but still couldn't quite believe it. She slipped into flip-flops, then crept out of her room, out of the house, silently around the corner to the utility room that housed the laundry machines, the cleaning supplies and toilet paper, the set of keys to the house.

"Just to see and then I'm done, honey, this is not a big deal." Christopher no longer bothered to whisper.

"Like two seconds," Benny agreed. "A *peek*."

Both seemed to relax, debate over, until they whirled around with Benny's iPhone flashlight and jumped at the sight of Anna.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Anna, I thought you were a ghost."

"I thought *you* were ghosts for a minute there." Or local Uber drivers with flashlights, out to rob the rich American tourists. Or worse. "Are you

seriously out here plotting to open up the one door we've been asked not to open? In the middle of the night?"

"It's like nine thirty, Anna." Benny looked sheepish.

"The dark of night, then. Do you even know which key goes to it or are you planning to test them all out?"

Past their two silhouettes, she could just make out a line of keys on hooks of varying sizes, each marked with a word in Italian that she was sure as hell not going to translate for Christopher.

Christopher didn't need her to. "It's this one."

He opened his hand, displaying a black iron key that spanned his whole palm.

"Because of course it is," Anna muttered.

It was ornately wrought, with an intricate bit mechanism, a long stem, and a sort of grapevine pattern along the bow. At the top was the outline of a bird. A jackdaw? That's what *taccola* meant. The bird had one eye facing outward, glossier than the rest of the iron, so that it seemed to gleam.

Anna wanted to touch it. She didn't.

Christopher was still talking. "The caretaker gave it to me. Handed it right over. Why would he do that if he didn't assume I was going to use it? It's not logical."

"He handed it to you." Anna pulled up the bits of the conversation she'd been able to interpret from the waiter tonight. He'd wanted to know which of them had taken the key. *Watch the others.*

She stepped closer.

Christopher clenched his fist tight around the key as if fearful she'd snatch it away.

"I think there might be a cat stuck in the tower," Anna blurted.

It was a relief to say it. She hadn't realized how bottled up she'd felt since this afternoon.

"Oh," Benny said. "Yikes."

"All the more reason." Christopher strode past and they fell in line behind him, Benny ineffectually hissing, "And then we lock it right back up again!"

Benny hate-hate-hated breaking rules. He didn't set a toe outside the lines of a crosswalk, and if there wasn't one painted there, he crossed the road at a perfect right angle.

Anna tended to be more relativist—she considered rules malleable according to her own sense of reason and rightness—but this was on the edge. She *felt*, palpably, that they were about to do the wrong thing, but momentum was pulling her onward.

Once, as a kid, she'd climbed a tree and felt the deadness of a branch under her hand, had the complete thought *This branch is going to break off if I climb it*, but pulled herself onto it anyway and fell twelve feet onto her back. This, now, was a mirror of that moment in the tree, knowing she shouldn't do it but watching like a passenger as her body continued to climb anyway, refusing to take orders from her brain or anyone else.

The tower, the waiter had said. *Do not open it*. It sounded like a dare to her now.

Inside the villa, Anna couldn't hear anything except the loud night drone of the cicadas punctuated intermittently by Dad's snoring. She huddled with Benny and the boyfriend beneath the wall hanging, feeling ridiculous, like they were reenacting a scene from *Scooby-Doo*.

Christopher fitted the key into the lock and twisted it hard. Almost viciously. He let out a sigh as he did it, like a soda bottle opening.

"Wait wait wait," Benny said, fumbling on his iPhone. He put the flashlight up to its top setting and glanced at Anna before saying, "Okay."

Christopher pushed on the door.

The smell hit Anna first. Stale. Dust of ages, a pharaoh's tomb. Then she felt the weight.

The air in here was active. It had intent.

She felt it on her shoulders, the top of her head, pressing in on her chest.

Yeah, okay, bad idea, I need to get out of here, she thought, but Benny was following Christopher up the tightly winding stone staircase, lighting the way with his phone, and so she followed.

Halfway up the stairs, Benny let out a shout and flailed at his face. Christopher had kept going, so Anna lurched outward to keep him from falling.

He turned to her. "Spiderweb. In my mouth."

She wanted to mock him but her throat was too dry.

They needed to see the top and get back down and shut that door again, fast.

When Benny reached the top, Christopher took the phone from him and shone the light around the room. Anna had to hold on to the cold stone wall,

abruptly dizzy.

The room was empty. Just a solid cube. Apart from netted cobwebs, it was a uniform sort of dirty. No furniture. No stored treasures or personal effects. No curtains, no windows on either side. Everything blocked up.

The glow of the flashlight reached Christopher's face and Anna recoiled, stumbling on the top step of the stairway. Fury was roiling off him. He'd *really* wanted a treasure hoard.

"You still wanna switch bedrooms, hon?" Benny said. "Best room in the villa."

Christopher shouldered past Anna, down the stairs, without responding.

Benny gulped, regretting his attempt at humor, and turned to Anna. "No cat."

"Yeah. That's a relief." But only sort of. Something had been scratching. She knew.

Already, she knew, with the miasma of this place bearing down on her.

Still, she intercepted Benny before he started downstairs. "Hey, can I use that?"

Borrowing his iPhone, she pointed the beam at the far wall. Right where she'd expected to see it, there it was—the tall stone frame of what was once a window, maybe even a balcony. There was a keystone with intricate stonework, surprising for an interior, grapes with their vines twirling along the edges.

She swiveled the light to the other wall, the one where she'd imagined curtains, movement.

The iPhone light went out. Anna clicked the side of the phone. Dead.

"Come on," Benny whispered, somewhere in the darkness.

"Yeah." Anna followed his sound down the steps, careful not to trip on the worn edges of the stones. There was no banister, no lights, no modernization. She wondered how long this space had been vacant.

It didn't feel vacant. Locked up, yes, unfurnished, but not empty.

Once Anna made it out, Benny slid the door silently shut, so as not to wake up the rest of the house, and turned the key in the lock.

Click. There. Over.

Anna had half expected some sense of relief from locking it up again, a lessening of that feeling of foulness, but it wasn't until she and her brother went outside, heading for the utility room to return the key, that it finally started to subside.

“Why would they tell us not to go in there?” Anna wasn’t really asking Benny, only trying to short-circuit the thought from repeating in her head again.

“Because it’s a ruin.” Benny put the iron key back on its unlabeled hook. He opened and shut his hand as if it hurt him. “Possibly an unsafe one.”

“It’s not that bad,” Anna argued as they walked back. “They could easily fix it up. Put in some windows, make it a feature. Best room in the villa.”

“I didn’t like it,” Benny said, flat. “Did you?”

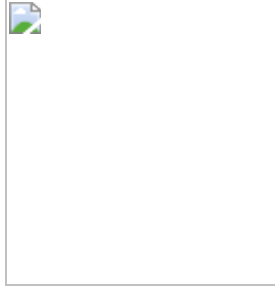
Anna glanced up at the tower. She didn’t even like it from out here.

Christopher had taken a bottle and three glasses out to the back patio, which struck Anna as uncharacteristically thoughtful. She sat with the boys for a while, drinking, talking about work, the city, Benny’s dog, anything but the villa.

It helped. She went to bed just before midnight, a much more civilized hour than nine thirty, as respectably tipsy as she should be on vacation, and at last, relaxed enough to sleep.

* * *

The scream came just before dawn.



TRIANGLE

Anna had been dreaming of that teen idol again, the young Italian in his loose linen shirt, his golden curls, staring out to a sunlit front drive. Sweat glistened on the back of his neck, dampening his hair. He bobbed unconsciously from one boot to the other, eager. Anna wasn't attracted to him, despite his beauty. She felt only a fierce kind of pity, and a sense of futile desperation—the impulse to wrench him away from that window.

And then came the shriek from beyond the bedroom wall, and the boy turned away from the window. Horror slackened his lovely features, and Anna woke up, *up up*, bolt upright.

It was Benny. Anna could tell immediately, knew that night-terror panic from years and years of her brother running from his room to hers for comfort—but he didn't run to her now.

Through the wall, Anna could hear Christopher soothing him already, if you could call it that. “Calm down. Breathe. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Benny's shouts had subsided to a litany of “Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.”

Anna picked out the sound of feet scrambling on their floor, their door opening, and someone, Benny presumably, stumbling through the living room to the front door.

Anna found him out past the iron gates, pacing. Christopher wasn't with him. He'd stayed in bed, presumably. Gone back to sleep.

“You're gonna hurt your feet,” she said, pointing to the gravel.

“I'm not going back in for shoes,” Benny said. His hair was matted with sweat. He met her eyes and breathed. “Not yet.”

She didn't want to go inside yet either. But the last thing he needed was a top-up of her own fear, so she stayed therapist calm. “You wanna talk about it?”

“It was a shape.”

“Triangle? Pentagon?” She couldn’t quite smile, but she could keep her tone sardonic. “Pentagram?”

“Human shape. Dark. And then gone. But not gone, just not.” He swallowed. “Visible.”

Anna clenched her hands tight, bracing against panic. “Okay.”

“I thought I was dreaming, but then I felt it sit on the bed and it, it like, it dipped?” He sounded on the verge of tears. “And I reached out to feel it and it moved over me. *Onto* me. And I couldn’t breathe, it was like it was putting all its weight on me and it was not good, Anna, it was like a smothering . . . cloud? I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.”

Anna waited for a minute while Benny caught his breath. She imagined that cloud surrounding them now. Listening. This was happening, wasn’t it? Something was happening. But what Benny needed right now was a cognitive out and a good night’s sleep.

“You do know that could still be a dream,” she offered. “Just a vivid one.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you been having night terrors all these years, Ben?”

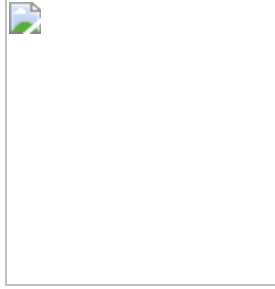
He shook his head. “Not since I was a kid.”

“It’s that tower,” Anna said, wrapping an arm around him. Her own hand was clammy. “Stupid tower, spooking all of us. You gonna sleep out here? Should I bring out a blanket and pillow? Warm up some milk?”

Benny shoved her, playful. “Okay, enough, thank you for your assistance.”

They went inside together, Anna leading the way, her entire body clenched tight.

“You’re fine,” Anna whispered. “Okay? Go back to bed with your boyfriend.” She pinched his arm. “And if it happens again, we’ll grab some sage at the Monteperso market tomorrow and burn the living crap out of it.”



WHAT THE HELL, ANNA

The house was charged with the right kind of manic energy to meet the strictures of Nicole's Monday itinerary, everyone breakfasted and out the door by nine forty-five sharp, ready for the market's opening at ten.

Anna wondered how much of their promptness came from fear of Nicole, how much from fear of something else. She needed zero prodding to get the hell out of this villa for the day.

Out in the front courtyard's sunlight, Mom drew Nicole aside and adjusted the edges of the caked cover-up on her forehead, smudging it with her thumbs. Nicole tilted her chin down, passive as a child getting face paint at a party. When they were done, Anna could still see the shadow of the bruise beneath, the swollen mound unmistakable around the Band-Aid, but she knew better than to comment on it.

Anna—with unrealistic hope, she knew—had brought along a big slouchy bag with her sketch pad and pencils inside. Maybe she'd find a way to sneak off in a moment of chaos like this one: Nicole trying to wrestle her children into car seats, while Waverly huffed, "The neighbors! Do you not know the word *neighbors*?"

"I do know the word, I am an adult, and you need to watch your tone with me, I just don't know what you're talking about."

Nicole got the last seat belt latched and slammed the back door shut.

Waverly already had her window rolling down. "If we see the neighbors when we get back, can we play with them?"

"I want to play with the 'talian kids!" Mia chimed in.

"Yep, fine, sounds great." Nicole glanced at Justin as she got into the passenger seat. "Have you met these Italian kids?"

Nicole made air quotes around *Italian kids*. Justin kept whistling. Started the car.

As she rode with Benny and Christopher into Monteperso, Anna wondered about their neighbors. There didn't seem to be any whatsoever within a mile.

I ragazzi. Maybe they were real, just bored. Small-town life, after all. They might be at the market day, running around, glad to see the American girls from the villa up the hill. Tuscany was strange, though, demographic-wise. Even in Florence, Anna had wondered where all the children were. She saw families of tourists, but no local kids, and wondered whether they went to school year-round. Maybe she was just too used to the constant tumble cycle of bodies of every age in New York, but she'd expected more *life* in Italy, somehow. More animals, even. For a natural, pastoral corner of the world, she hadn't seen much variety of species, but maybe she was looking in the wrong places.

Even the cats were missing today, thanks to that weird old catnapping lady, Anna supposed. And the lizards had vanished. No shortage of bugs, though, and the goat was still there, forlorn in his field, though somebody had given him a longer tether.

Somebody owned that goat. Maybe the "neighbors"?

Benny yawned as he drove. Christopher scrolled through his phone, not looking up.

They made a right into the town center.

"Might be hard to find parking," Benny murmured. "I wonder if the street's gonna be blocked off for the market."

It wasn't. There was no reason for it to be.

Monteperso was dormant, entirely. Tumbleweed empty. There wasn't even anybody smoking outside the bar, which looked dark inside, locked tight.

Up ahead, Nicole was already standing outside her parked rental car, pacing. Justin's arm emerged from the driver's-side window to pass her a cellphone.

Benny pulled up behind them, with a "Welp," and yanked the brake.

Anna got out. "I think we might have gotten the day wrong?"

Nicole gave up on the phone. "This completely blows the schedule. What the hell, Anna."

"Oh, wow," Anna said. "Okay. So. When I said 'we' just then, it was me being polite, but what I meant was 'you.' You got the day wrong. I've done zero planning for this week, but that's fine, blame me if you feel like it."

“It might have been nice if you’d contributed,” Nicole snapped. In an incredible feat of self-control, Anna simply walked away. Benny called past her, looking at his phone, “I think it’s tomorrow, Nic.”

“A Tuesday market?” Nicole argued. “It said Monday!”

Anna leaned against Dad’s rental car, peered across the street, and saw a sign for the market pinned to a light post. *MARTEDÌ ALLE 10*. Tuesday.

She wrestled with whether to chime in with the correct translation, thereby redirecting Nicole’s wrath back to her from Benny, the current target.

“I’m not confused,” Nicole was squawking, arms flapping by her sides to add to the effect. “Why would you say I’m confused? I’m literally the only one doing any kind of—”

“There’s the whole untreated . . . concussion . . . thing.” Benny winced, smiling, to soften the dig.

His eyes found Anna’s and widened with panic. Anna bit her lip around a laugh.

Nicole caught their look and turned away. “You know what? Screw all of you.”

Mom covered Mia’s ears, tutting at the sky.

“Go on,” Benny called to Anna. “What does the sign say?”

“*Martedì*.” Anna rubbed her eyes. Turned to them. “Tuesday.”

“I am *sure* there’s a market today,” Mom argued, but as Anna looked to Benny, incredulous, she clarified, “Somewhere! A market somewhere near here. Anna, honey, go and ask around.”

“Ask around,” Anna repeated dully, but Mom had already turned away to calm Nicole down, and Benny was now calming down Christopher, who’d also turned peevish, so she surrendered, hands up, laughing to herself. “Ask around. Yep.”

She walked down the empty village street, listening to pigeons coo on the church roof. The farther she got from the rest of the group, the saner she felt.

There was something comfortably eerie about Monteperso today, like someone had hit pause just for her, so she could slide through and observe without the bother of interacting with any of the residents. The *ristorante* was as locked up as if it had been closed for twenty years. All the houses had their shutters drawn, even in this heat. Maybe it kept the coolness in?

Anna wasn't sure. It was cloudy today, not quite so brutal, but that lent the scene even more of an air of stagnancy, as if even the sky had closed up shop.

Anna could hear the family arguing behind her.

"Don't ask me, don't ask *me*, I'm the idiot who screwed this up, apparently!" Nicole was ranting. "Tomorrow is Siena but whatever, you can all come to the Monteperso market instead, if it's that important. I'll just go to Siena by myself."

No wonder the windows were all closed. They'd sensed the Americans coming.

Watched them coming too. In a second-floor window of one of the houses lining the street, Anna spotted two silhouettes, turned away from her, staring down the road at her family. She felt but didn't see other eyes, other watchers, some on her family and some, no doubt, on her. Anna opted not to seek them out.

Ask around. Only one building was even open in this town.

The tall church door opened easily when Anna tried it, and as it swished shut behind her, it swallowed all sound but her footsteps and her breath, both of which echoed in the dark space.

It was small but cavernous, a typical Romanesque design, maybe a little wider in the nave and shallower in the vaults than others Anna had seen. It was modest, as Italian churches went, but still much richer in ornamentation and detail than the depressingly austere churches she was once forced to attend in Ohio. It looked empty, abandoned, but there was a faint telltale scent of incense in the air. Anna closed her eyes as she breathed it in.

They'd had mass here yesterday after all, then.

"*Ciao?*" Anna tried. Only her echo answered. Nothing here but temporary respite.

Along the narrow aisles, wooden altars were laid with dozens of votive candles beneath a mirroring set of two large frescoes. Anna saw they were a Pietà and an Annunciation, but the colors were too dull in the dim church light for her to get any real impression beyond that.

Only one flame was lit, evidence that somebody, at least, had been up and about in Monteperso this morning. The candles were meant for prayers and church donations, she knew, but she wanted to see the art, and there was nobody else here, so she took the one live candle and used it to light the rest, all four dozen on one side and then the other.

She stepped back and exhaled, slowly, audibly, like she was sinking into a hot bath. Yes. This was how the artist had expected this space to look.

The sea of flickering flames animated the Pietà. As Mary cradled the dying Jesus, Anna could swear she could see her breathing.

It looked like a Botticelli, but not quite. Jacopo da Sellaio, maybe? He'd studied with Botticelli and then got stuck in the role of Salieri to his Mozart, forever trying to catch up to genius.

Sellaio was still a hell of a lot more brilliant than she would ever be, Anna acknowledged, smirking at herself. Even so, this was an awkward Pietà, and Anna had seen some truly ugly ones. It was the characterization—the expression on Jesus' face. He wasn't dead yet. There was no release, no sinking into a faithful afterlife, only discomfort and fear. Mary looked like she was struggling to hold him up. It was effective in its own disturbing way.

Anna didn't like it, if she was honest. Bit too real.

The Annunciation was also kind of *off*—highbrow art-theory terminology right there, but the word fit. Anna wasn't sure she'd seen another Mary with quite that shade of blond hair, for one thing: Gatorade yellow. Quite a choice. But it was more than that. There was something both familiar and out of place about the woman in this image. Anna felt she must have seen her in another painting, which tracked; the Renaissance masters used to pass the same models back and forth, society denizens—debs from rich families, or popular courtesans—transmuted from party girl to holy virgin through oil and canvas.

This Mary hadn't quite made it to holy virgin. As Gabriel alit, descending to tell her there was going to be a bun in the oven and God was the baker, she didn't look biblically awed. There was a distinct smirk to her expression, an arrogance, like she knew it was coming, had arranged it all herself.

Anna took a quick circuit of the rest of the church. She found a few intriguing carvings on gravestones, but not much else to match the frescoes for interest. On the way out, though, the candle glow caught on a collection of gravestones set into the floor, and Anna crouched to get a better look.

Six graves, all with the same surname, de Felicibus. All dead in 1505. Some of the flat stones had rosebuds carved into them, and on those the years between birth and death were very short. Must have been a plague year.

It wasn't until Anna stood that she picked out the pattern roping around the set of gravestones. A cluster of grapes, the vines winding around, penning them in. A bird stood in the top right corner. A jackdaw. *Taccola*. Identical to the carving on the key; she was sure of it.

The door opened behind her with a clang and she whirled around, hand to her neck.

Benny tiptoed in, shoulders stiff. He was always uncomfortable in churches, even beautiful ones. Still went to services with Mom every time he came home to Ohio.

"We're going on some wild-goose chase to find a Monday market," he said. "Did you light all these?" He shook his head. "*Anna*."

"Come check this out." She waved him over and pointed down at the gravestones, careful not to step on them. "I think they might have lived in the villa."

"Our villa?" Benny scrambled his hair. "You know, you're supposed to put money in the tin for every candle. This is the Catholic Church, Anna, prayers ain't free."

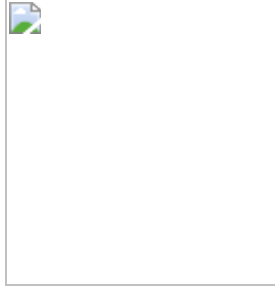
He bumped her with his hip.

"Okay." She bumped him back. "Do you have any euros?"

He snorted. "I've got a twenty, but no, just extinguish them and come on. You're on my team. Whoever finds the first market is calling the others, and I want to win."

It didn't seem right to put out the candles.

Anna glanced back before she shut the church door, admiring the glow. This place needed light, she told herself, but she smiled maybe a little less beatifically when she imagined the candles burning down to low drips, a stray spark igniting the wooden tables, catching on the murals, burning the neon-yellow hair off that tacky-ass Mary's head.



SO NICE OF YOU TO HELP

They didn't win. Mom and Dad found a lively market, with a band playing *and* a playground, in a town twenty minutes to the west.

Anna insisted on buying the ingredients for that night's dinner, linked arms with Nicole to pick it all out, stall to stall: zucchini, tomatoes, garlic, fresh trout, arugula, cute little pinched tortellini, made fresh right there at the booth. It was a crowded market, the antithesis of Monteperso on pause, and even as Anna managed to drag her sister to the wine-tasting stall, where Nicole's look of perma-irritation succumbed to an *oh I'm being so naughty* smile, Anna daydreamed of letting go and getting lost.

She could do it, slide into the scene and vanish. Her family had always been terrible at *Where's Waldo?*

But she ate at a long market table with everybody, too hot to finish her *porchetta*, and rode back with Mom and Dad so she wouldn't have to listen to Christopher's "check in with work" call the whole way. Mm-hmming while Mom fretted about neighbor Miriam's latest health issues, none of which were even close to life-threatening, was torture of a different and therefore refreshing variety.

They were the first back to the villa, laden with the entire family's collected food purchases. Anna balanced a paper bag of produce on her hip and grabbed the front door key from Dad, but something made her hesitate before turning the knob.

A heaviness. An inner *no*.

Anna opened the door anyway and stepped forward into a wall of flies.

Mom yelped and dropped her bag, sending peaches rolling loose.

"Well, come on now, Linda" Dad snapped. He charged ahead, flapping his arms at the swarm, a method that proved surprisingly effective in at least clearing a path inside.

There was a stench now to go with the feeling of rot in the walls.

The kids' cereal bowls were still on the kitchen table, abandoned in the morning rush. Anna set her bag on the counter, then turned to the table and flinched, fighting down a surge of bile.

The milk was past curdled, well into rancid, a skim of green mold floating on the top. Maggots swam among the Rice Krispies.

Anna covered her nose with the heel of her hand and waited outside, watching Dad as he opened the shutters to every room, shouting at the flies to leave. "Out! Out!"

When Nicole got out of her car, Anna nodded to the kitchen window. "I'm sorry, Nic, but I am not cleaning up your breakfast."

Nicole went inside. Anna bit her thumbnail. There was silence, and then, "What the fuck!"

Justin raised his eyebrows and made a move as if to steer the girls clear of the profanity zone, but they were already running in the other direction, out the iron gate.

"Can we go play with the neighbors?" Waverly called.

"Yeah, sure, have a blast," Justin said, then turned to Anna, conspiratorial. "There are no neighbors, right? I've got *weird kids*."

Anna did not want to go back into that house, so she walked around the side, following the path the kids had cut through the wilted grass and into the green. The line that divided the dead lawn from the living looked farther from the house than when they'd arrived. Maybe there really was some kind of pollution. Or an infestation?

The girls stood staring into the neighboring field, shoulders sinking.

"They'll come back," Waverly said, then, noticing Anna, perked up. "Teach us some Italian so we can talk to them!"

"Do you know '*buongiorno*'?" she offered, squinting into the field.

Mia rolled her eyes. "Sì."

Anna snorted. "Okay, sorry, level two, then. If you want to introduce yourselves, it's '*Mi chiamo Mia, mi chiamo Waverly*' . . ."

They repeated it. She tried out a few more phrases, saw their eyes glaze over, released them back into the wild, and braved setting foot inside the villa in search of her sketch pad.

It was fine inside, only a few flies left, which Justin was gallantly helping Dad chase out the windows, but Anna didn't linger indoors long. She grabbed a can of *limonata* from the fridge and took it out to the back

porch, overlooking the pool, where Benny and Christopher had already set up camp.

As soon as she plunked herself down and cracked her can, Mom popped her head through the open doorway and hissed, “So nice of you to *help*. Did you notice we have a little bug problem going on?”

Anna blinked rapidly as Justin replaced Mom in the doorway. “Did Benny get the same lecture?”

“Course not.” Justin smiled, sly. “He’s the golden boy. You’re . . . not.”

He grabbed wet clothes from a basket at his feet and started hanging them on the lines.

Anna slurped her lemonade through a smile. She had to admire his frankness.

“Look, we’re all a little spoiled here,” he said. “How could you not be? Annual luxury vacations, a financial safety net, even if you choose not to use it . . .” He leaned on the porch wall with one elbow, taking in the view. “I catch myself sometimes. When we were at their house for dinner last year and they were inviting us on this trip, I heard myself bust out with, ‘You know where I’d love to visit? Germany for Oktoberfest.’ Like I’ve got any skin in the game!” He winked at Anna. “It’s inescapable.”

She grinned around the metal rim of her can and for the first time ever—sincerely . . . *ever*—wondered what it would be like to sleep with her sister’s husband. That thatch of light brown hair on his chest, that soft stomach grazing hers as he ground into her.

Nicole chose an opportune time to glide past in her bikini, giving Anna the chance to wrench her mind out of that strange daydream. She rubbed her eyes, surprised at herself. More than a little weirded out. She trained her attention back on her sketch pad. Didn’t notice Justin leave.

Today, she drew that Annunciation from the church. Not the whole thing, just the Mary. The look on her face. The gloating.

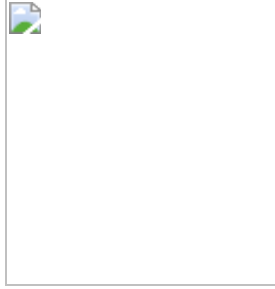
She held it out once she felt she’d captured it; the long straight nose, curving lips, pretty round chin, wide-set eyes, and Gothic arch eyebrows. Long curls pinned back in the Florentine fashion, everything just so.

In perfect control.

Color the hair in with an office highlighter and that was her, that was the Mary.

Anna hated it.

Instead of folding it neatly, she ripped the sketch in half, straight through the face, before tossing it in the trash.



THE TRASH

As they all sat for dinner, Mom produced the decimated portrait from under the table and smoothed it before her like a piece of evidence in a trial—and then, not just today’s drawing, but the others Anna had tossed away in the past few days, the fanciful Villa Taccola, the Piazza della Signoria from memory, a study of the pool’s edge with the vineyard view beyond. Another one of the adjacent field that had turned out a little strange, not exactly as Anna had intended it.

She hadn’t found the one with the drowned bodies in the pool—or if she had, she’d left it behind.

“I want you to guess where I found these. *Not you.*” Mom pointed at Anna without looking at her. “Tell me where you think I found these pieces of art.”

Benny dipped a piece of bread into the bowl of oil. “The trash.”

Anna laughed. “What gave it away?”

“There’s a banana strand hanging off one of them.”

“*The trash,*” Mom repeated, with emphasis, now fixing her glare on Anna. “You could sell these. That’s how good they are.”

She absolutely could not. “Thanks, Mom!”

“Do not ‘thanks Mom’ me. Is this a cry for help?”

Nicole snorted. “Anna wouldn’t cry for help if she was trapped in a burning building.”

“That’s true,” Anna admitted, and at Benny’s appalled look, added, “Fires are loud. Nobody would hear me. Better to save oxygen and try to find a way—”

“You have a gift,” Mom said, louder, “and you are wasting it and I have no idea why.”

Anna reached over her drawings to dip her bread in the bowl of olive oil. “How am I wasting it?”

Mom yanked the sketches away from the trail of dripping oil. "I'll stop, I won't bother, you'd think I'd know by now. Anna *does not need* a mother! She has never needed a mother. There is nothing I can offer that she would find useful. So I will stop trying!"

Everyone's eyebrows crept up at that little speech.

"Let's just calm it all down, Linda," Dad leaned over to murmur, a vein pulsing in his temple. "Have a nice dinner."

Mom leaned back in with a sniff, and Anna did too, relieved that Dad had spared her from performing the requisite reassurance dance. *Of course I need you, Mom, I'll always need you, let me prove I need you . . . !*

"What medium do you work in?" Christopher burst out. "Primarily."

Anna considered blanking him, but: "I paint. Primarily."

"How would we even know that, as we have never seen a single painting in the past fifteen years?" Mom smoothed out the sketches. Her fingers left a smudge. Anna didn't care. "I am keeping these. You could sell them, but *I* am going to bring them home and put them in a nice frame."

Anna leaned over Dad and kissed her mother on the cheek.

Mom huffed, shaking her head.

"Do you have gallery representation?" Christopher asked.

Benny shook him by the shoulder, laughing. "You are not reading this situation, hon. Anna trashes everything she ever makes."

"Not everything," Anna said, as Justin brought out the trout and pasta. "My Taco Loco commercials are still going strong."

"I like those commercials," Dad grunted.

"You are using your talent," Benny said. "Albeit in a very oblique way."

"Stop picking on her," Nicole of all people piped up. Anna looked up, surprised. "She's not a starving artist."

Nicole's voice slurred on the word "starving." She'd been combining wine and painkillers all afternoon. Her head wound was so vividly purple that it had started to look almost pretty.

"She has an actual job at a top ad agency with a respectable salary and full benefits, which is kind of amazing, right? Especially since we all thought she'd grow up to be a serial killer." Nicole poured herself more wine. "I mean, I guess she still could be. In her spare time."

"What's your agency?" Christopher asked.

"Wendell Rook Silver," Benny answered for her.

“Is that a top agency?” Christopher frowned. “‘Top,’ I think Grey, Saatchi—”

“Why don’t we eat . . .” Anna offered the platter of trout around. “. . . this incredible looking dinner? And find something more interesting to talk about?”

“Oh, that reminds me!” Nicole reached over the table to grab Anna’s empty wineglass. “We’re going to pop out for a couples’ dinner tomorrow night, Anna.”

Nicole filled Anna’s glass almost to the brim and pushed it back at her.

“What is a ‘couples’ dinner’?” Waverly asked, wrinkling her nose.

“It’s a dinner you have to be in a couple to attend,” Anna said. She took a deep, deep sip. Licked her lips. “You want me to babysit.”

“Well, since you’re . . . yes.”

“How *dare* you,” Anna snapped. “This is ridiculous. No, I’m coming to dinner with the rest of you. I have every right to be there. Call a local babysitter.”

The blood drained out of Nicole’s face. She opened her mouth.

Anna smiled around her forkful of fish. “Of course I’ll babysit. You guys have fun talking about coupley things. The girls and I will have fun talking about stinky boys and how much they smell.”

Waverly offered a high five over the table, which Anna gladly accepted, while Mia fell off the bench, giggling, “Stinky boys, stinky boys, you’re *stinky*, Daddy.”

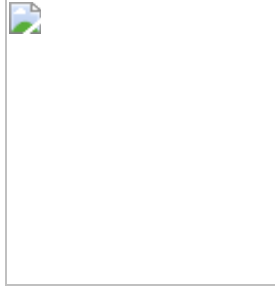
“I could use a shower,” Justin conceded.

“What made you draw it this way?” Benny was looking at the sketch of the vineyard, tracing the edge of the paper with one fingertip. “The grapevines look—”

“Dead,” Anna answered. “Shriveled. I don’t know. Bad harvest year.”

Anna was glad when Nicole changed the subject to the next day’s plans, of which there were many. She hadn’t wanted to elaborate in front of everybody else that this was what she’d felt was hidden in the landscape. Poison. Rot.

Benny set the sketch aside and Anna slid it out of sight before anyone could spot the corpse of an old woman she’d drawn sprawled between rows of vines, her blood seeping deep into the soil like tentacles.



POISON, ROT

The girls were in bed by eight, after which Anna faced a choice of evening entertainment: 1) sitting with Nicole and Mom while they gossiped about middle-aged friends in Ohio, the citronella candle Nicole bought at the market doing little to nothing to stave off the mosquitoes; 2) joining Benny and Christopher, thus risking an argument over whether they would share Christopher's personal stash of wine with her; or 3) tapping on Justin's door and asking whether she could also watch whatever action movie he was streaming on his laptop.

Anna opted for choice 4, tucking in early, like Dad, at nine o'clock, right after the sun had fully set. Ridiculous, infantile, but something about the heat and Nicole shouting after her to remember she was babysitting tomorrow and leaving sharp for Siena in the morning, don't forget, Anna, made her more than ready for the sweet oblivion of sleep.

The light was off in her room, but she could just make out a cloud of fat flies darting around her bedroom, buzzing in panic. She grabbed her sketch pad and used it to herd them toward the open window.

She'd only managed to evict one, the others bumping into the nape of her neck, when she spotted flashlights out in the tall grass and let the sketch pad drop.

Anna clenched her teeth, tight. She slipped into sneakers.

Outside in the not-that-cool evening air, she could hear her mom and sister chirruping in the back of the villa like birds sharing a feeder. She could hear the nocturnal insects. And she could hear footsteps. Quiet muttering. Definitely Italian.

Then a sharper sound—a hiss of warning.

The lights cut out, one, two, three. Anna picked up her pace, *jogging*, God help her.

Her eyes had adjusted. Three of them. Men, vaguely limned by the evening's last light. They were stooped over. Pouring something onto the ground from a bag.

Seeing her, all three turned and took off running.

"Hey!" She waved over her head. "This is not . . . *Non va bene!*"

Anna kept up her pursuit past the front drive, into the meadow, where all the vegetation was dead around her, until she reached the spot where they'd been standing and had to catch her breath between curses. She could see the path they'd trampled through the tall grass. They'd been standing right here, at the dead line, the edge of the expanding wasteland. And it was expanding, there was no doubt—the nonarable circle reached much farther than it had when Anna arrived here.

Anna swallowed spit, breathed deep, considered investigating further, but she heard the rumble of a car engine and the spit of gravel and didn't have it in her to make a show of chasing them down.

Instead, she bent to look at what they'd been pouring. Some clearish-white grit, in a line. Maybe an intended circle, all around the house, if they'd managed to finish. Was this what was killing the grass? Some chemical?

It was dark, no way to know without testing it, but Anna could swear it was . . . salt.

She shook her head. Went back inside. Mom and Nicole had come in from the patio—she could hear Nic down in the bathroom.

Anna walked around shutting and latching the windows. Locked the glass back door. Triple-checked the front door.

She got the rest of the flies out, but it still took her a frustratingly long time to fall asleep.

And then, some murky hours later, she woke up to the sound of moaning.

It rattled her, her hand flying to her mouth, before she realized who was in the room next door.

Jesus, it sounded almost pained. So that's what Benny and Christopher saw in each other.

Anna stuck a pillow over her head, but a new sound broke through, Benny's door slamming open against the wall, and then a whisper-shout, "Anna? You okay?"

She sat up, confused, and wandered into the hall.

Benny stood outside her door in his boxers, alarm cutting through his bleary eyes. “That wasn’t you?”

“Of course not.”

“You heard it, though, right?” Benny’s upper body pivoted to look around. His feet seemed glued to the floor. “I thought you had food poisoning or something.”

“Yeah, I heard it. Thought it was . . .” Anna opted not to share her theory.

Opted not to tell him about the men in the field either. The salt, or whatever the fuck they were spreading all around the villa.

He was sensitive, Benny. It was her job to buffer him.

They both paused, listening again. Nothing. Dad’s snores echoed faintly down in the extension.

“We forgot to get sage yesterday,” Benny murmured. “This place. I mean. It’s definitely . . .”

He swallowed.

“Definitely what?” Anna didn’t want to be the one to say it.

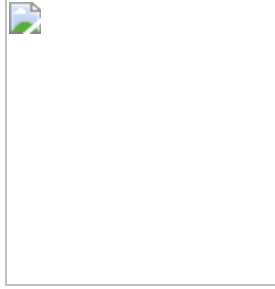
Neither did Benny. He opened and closed his hands like they were sweaty. “I don’t want to talk about the house while we’re in it.”

“That’s probably smart.”

There was a held quality to the silence, Anna thought. A fullness. It was the sound of something keeping still.

The pause before someone bursts out laughing.

Anna rubbed her brother’s shoulders. “Get some sleep, Benny. The only thing we really need to be afraid of is Nicole if we fuck with her departure time.”



THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Precision operation in the morning. Everybody wanted to get up and out. Kids dressed, breakfast done, all scraps of remaining food fully disposed of—smart move, Nicole—bowls cleaned and dried, Justin waiting in his driver’s seat, car idling, Dad and Mom waiting, starting their engine right as Anna bounced into Christopher and Benny’s backseat in shorts and a blousy tank top, and slammed the door. Ready.

“We don’t need to follow them,” Christopher said to Benny. “I’ve got GPS.”

“You remember what she was saying about the low-congestion zone or whatever it is?” Benny said. “Maybe we should stick together?”

Anna’s amusement that Christopher had insisted on driving today instead of Benny quickly soured. Christopher took the dirt drive at way too fast a clip, startling even the increasingly lethargic, strung-up goat as they barreled onto the main road.

If you manage to out-Italian the Italians in your driving, Anna thought, you probably shouldn’t have a license in the first place.

They were nearly killed twice on the autostrada into Siena, but, to be fair, only one of those near incidents was Christopher’s fault. He didn’t seem to notice it happened, kept talking about some condo he wanted to buy in Miami as an investment property.

Anna vaguely tracked the cars around them for signs of the two massive SUV rentals, but still flinched in surprise when Dad passed them on the left. Mom waved wildly and made some motion about rolling down her window that Anna and Benny, in tacit agreement, pretended not to see.

When they neared Siena, Anna saw the other two cars in the Pace family convoy pulling into a massive parking lot down the hill, but Christopher kept going.

“I don’t know why they’re parking so far away, there’s another lot right up here.” He was looking at the GPS instead of the road and nearly hit a moped as he changed lanes.

“It might be in that *zone*, though,” Benny said.

“What zone?”

“That zone! The low-congestion zone, they give you a fine.”

Anna saw a sign at the edge of the city gates with a big red circle and the words ZONA TRAFFICO LIMITATO.

She leaned into the front seats, pointing. “You’re about to drive right into it. You might wanna . . . ? Okay, yeah, do you see that sign? ZTL?”

Christopher did not turn or stop. “What sign?”

“That . . . one?” Anna said, her finger trailing behind her.

They passed it, entering the great walled gate of the city. Pedestrians stared at them in mild alarm. The street was narrow. Built for mule carts a long, long time ago. The only turnoffs were driveways.

“Wait, what does ZTL mean?” Christopher kept driving.

“It means they fine you, like, five hundred euros if you go in?”

Anna didn’t know. She just threw that figure out there to see what kind of reaction it would get, but holy hell, she was not prepared.

“*Fuck!!!*”

Christopher slammed on the brakes. They all jerked forward into their seat belts.

“What if . . . I’ll just turn around now. Before they give me a ticket.”

He had picked the narrowest part of the road to try to do a U-turn. Local-access cars trying to get out or in honked with gusto, with hand gestures, and he kept screaming “Fuck you, fuck this!” so wildly that Anna had to cover her face she was laughing so hard.

“There’s a camera. Isn’t there?” Sweat dripped down Christopher’s side-parting. “I’m gonna get a bill in the mail. Months from now. Right when I’ve gotten comfortable.”

“Yeah, probably,” Anna said, just as Benny said, “I seriously doubt it.”

“Anna,” Christopher snapped. “Is there a *camera*? Is there—never mind, I fucking see it.”

Yes, there was a large camera over the ZTL sign, and yes, they would absolutely contact the rental company and shake down the idiot *turisti*.

“Don’t worry,” Benny said, rubbing his arm. “It’s not a big deal! We’ll go park down where the others—”

“Fuck this. No. I’m going back.” Christopher had made it out the city gates.

A busker saluted the car as they passed him again, enjoying the spectacle.

“I’m not doing Siena. *Fuck Siena.*”

“Can you just drop me off, in that case? Side of the road?” Anna winced at Benny in appeal. “No?”

Her brother ignored her. “I’ll pay! It’s not your fault, hon, I’ll cover the bill when it comes. Let’s just go park.”

“Benny.” Anna’s mirth dried up. “You are on a teacher’s salary.”

He glared over his shoulder at her. “*I’ll pay*, and I’ll get lunch too. And drive back. You can have some wine when we get in.”

It was a quarter to ten but that hadn’t stopped any of them last time, Anna supposed. It didn’t sound like a bad idea at this point.

They drove past the rest of the family climbing up the sidewalk. Benny waved out the window. Nicole gave a *what the hell, Anna* shrug.

Anna had planned to spring for parking as her passenger fare to Siena, but it was pay and display, and she *really* didn’t want to have to return to the car and walk up to Siena with Benny and Christopher, so she got out, called over her shoulder, “I’m gonna catch up with the fam,” scarpered up the parking lot and away from the happy couple.

It was hilly here, a nice little bit of exercise. She was glad she’d dressed for comfort today and wondered how Nicole was feeling in her strappy heels.

As it was, Anna’s satchel was a dragging anchor on her shoulder. She’d brought too many art supplies she probably wouldn’t get to use, but she still liked her bag of props. There were moments, often, when she felt her presence as a question mark, the very purpose of her existence a debate for others to freely take up. *What are your dreams and aspirations, Anna? This is the family mystery!* But when she had her sketch pad with her, her pastels, her charcoals, she could assign herself a role. A solitary one. One that required concentration, quiet. There. Question answered. Go away. Plus, Anna liked art, on its own merits. It was fun, and that was enough.

Mom stood loitering at the city gates—Porta Tufi, medieval, brick, arched, crenellated along the top—so there went Anna’s first chance to stop and draw Siena.

But Mom stopped her from walking straight through. “Let’s wait for your brother.”

Anna noticed with amusement the omission of his other half.

“They’re gonna grab a drink and then meet up with us,” Anna said, spotting them way down the road. It was only partly a lie.

“This early?” Mom tutted.

Anna shrugged. “They’re on vacation.”

“Benny deserves it. He works so hard.” She sighed. “Oh well.”

Anna glanced at her mother, curious as to what that “oh well” referred to exactly, but as they passed through the small western archway, Siena swept the last threads of conversation away.

Anna loved the dreamlike feeling of being somewhere new, striding forward into the unfamiliar. It was pleasantly unsettling. Pleasant to her, anyway—she suspected it was that same feeling that made Americans get louder abroad. Her family, for example. They were covering over their disorientation with the familiar—their own language, their own voices. Anna preferred to stay quiet, to revel in the strangeness, to get knocked off-kilter and stay that way. How else could you really absorb the aesthetics, art, environment, culture, the vibrant truth of a place? Especially a place like this.

She walked, and so did the group.

Green shutters against pale bricks. Labyrinthine alleyways, one stretching all the way to the horizon, past a courtyard echoing with the sound of a lone violin. Mia whining, “How long do we have to *walk*?” Skinny other church towers and a curved road abutting a field of scrub. Nicole hopping to one side to avoid a Vespa, clutching her strappy sandal while asking whether anybody had a Band-Aid. Mom producing one. Sweat streaming down Anna’s spine, pooling in the small of her back. This was the wrong way, they argued behind her, looking at their phones, but Anna strode ahead, up a dark, dark stairway, and they followed, emerging into the very place, the Piazza del Duomo.

What a cathedral. Anna’s impulse was to abase herself, to sink to her knees, to kneel right there on the hot paving stones. Her hand had already slid into her bag, scrabbling for charcoal, but Mom grabbed her elbow and wouldn’t let go.

“We need you to tell us what we’re looking at!” she laughed.

And so Anna did. She joined the group inside as tour guide, showing them the mosaics, the panels, the *Maestà*, the Piccolomini Altarpiece.

“Nice,” Dad said every single time she pointed something out.

Every work felt dimmed, reduced by her own rote description of it. The year, the artist, exactly what you could read on the little placards, but her family wanted to hear *her* say it, to point to what made it important. Only one element, and make it quick, Anna, the girls are getting restless.

The first chance to get out the sketch pad came after lunch, in the Piazza del Campo, when Nicole finally succumbed to Waverly and Mia’s steadfast begging for gelato. They still hadn’t connected with Benny and Christopher, which Mom was Very Concerned about, but even she wound up pacified by the prospect of ice cream.

They sat en masse on the steps of a fountain as Justin brought out a pile of cups and cones in a variety of colors, balancing them all impressively in the crook of one arm.

“Sure you don’t want one, Anna?” Justin nodded behind him, offering to go back.

She bit the end of her pencil and squinted up at the impossibly spindly Torre del Mangia. “I’ll get one later.” She added, “But thanks,” a little too late, when he’d already drifted out of earshot to distribute the bounty.

“Careful with your dress,” Nicole barked.

Anna froze, thinking she was talking to her, before she realized she was neither wearing a dress nor eating gelato.

“Did you get napkins?” Nicole asked Justin, even more sharply. He produced a pile and she shoved past him, muttering, “I’ll go get more.”

It was a particularly hot one, in a week of hot ones. The gelato melted as fast as the girls could lick. As fast as the makeup on Nicole’s forehead.

Anna glanced between her nieces, the tower, her sketch, a laugh blooming. They were in their very best white floral dresses, milliseconds away from staining them irreparably when Nicole swooped in with millions of napkins and scraped frantically at the sides of the cones, catching a lemon dribble on Mia’s wrist, a raspberry stain on Waverly’s face.

“Hold them out,” Nicole said. Her own gelato cup had turned to soup next to Justin on the steps. “Out to the side—the side, Waverly! *Why* did you let them get cones?”

Justin took another bite of his gelato. “Mmmm, you should try this, Nic. Pistachio. So good.”

“What was she thinking with these dresses?” Anna couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“It’s Italy, you wear dresses in Italy. You’re wearing a dress!” Nicole gestured to Anna and then blinked. “I could have sworn you were in a dress.”

Anna scratched her ankles, gently—the bites were evolving into sores, two centimeters in diameter, like chicken pox. Just as itchy.

“Mommy, why is that lady waving at me?” Mia asked as Nicole dove in for another round with the wadded-up napkins.

Anna glanced past them and saw a cluster of old Italian women in folding chairs who were, indeed, waving at Waverly and Mia—beaming, the dears, wiggling their fingers. They had scarves tied around their hair, floral dresses to just below their knees, paper fans they shared between them. Picture-perfect.

“*Buongiorno*,” Waverly called out, to their instant delight. They actually clapped for her.

“Don’t talk to them,” Nicole hissed. She turned to Anna. “Why are they staring at us?”

“Italian grandmothers like children,” Anna said. “Love them, actually. They fatten them up and bake them into bread. It’s a Florentine delicacy.”

“You *stop* that, Anna, you’ll scare the girls,” Mom said, and swatted at her so hard the pencil slipped in Anna’s hand, marring the sketch.

Anna liked the new line. It added an interesting shadow effect to the scene that she could play with.

The girls were laughing, but Nicole hustled everybody away, whispering, “Do not wave at those women.”

“Oh, come on, be polite,” Anna said. “When in Rome.”

“We’re in Siena, Anna,” Justin joked as he stood up to bus the trash to the nearest receptacle. “How drunk *are* you?”

“Not nearly drunk enough,” she muttered back, getting a grin out of him.

Careful, she thought. *Nicole will accuse you of trying to steal him.*

Anna stayed put a little longer, finishing her sketch and sending it to its wastebasket death. She smiled at the old ladies as she left the piazza, and when one graced her with a friendly wink back, she felt gratified, self-satisfied even, thinking, *Yes. This is how you tourist.*

Then she felt fingers on her arm and turned without time to wipe the alarm from her face.

One of the women, not the one who'd winked, was holding something, offering it to her.

Anna found herself tightening her elbow around her satchel, as if this were a criminal gang preparing to steal her wallet. She didn't want to look away from the woman's eyes, so insistent was her expression, so piercing, so she only got a sense of what was being pressed on her once it was in her hand.

"You take this," the woman said in stiff English. "Yes."

It was an ornament, a pendant without a chain, red—a pepper? It looked familiar.

Anna shook her head, offering it back.

"Yes." The woman nodded, waving for her to go so she could sit back down.

Anna wanted to take it. It seemed important, somehow, but then she remembered Nicole at dinner the other night talking about "things to look out for" in Italy. She'd read some social media post that said you should never accept a supposed gift from a stranger, because they would then demand money for it or accuse you of stealing.

Anna placed it on the ground by the old ladies' feet. "*Grazie, ma no.*"

The woman let out a long hiss, scooped up the pendant, and returned to her conversation, all without looking at her.

When Anna glanced back from a few steps away, she saw the women watching her, shaking their heads, muttering to one another.

Anna found the others—including Christopher and Benny, both in much better spirits—gathered outside the Torre del Mangia, staring upward as they chatted.

Dad had his hands in his pockets, lost in thought. When Anna walked up to him, he announced, "I got the two of us tickets. Let's climb the tower."

She glanced to confirm he was actually talking to her. "Okay."

It shouldn't have been that surprising. Of all the Pace kids, she was the one she would pick to climb a massive clock tower, but this still felt loaded. One-on-one time with her dad. Was there a talk coming? A lecture? A heartfelt . . . something?

She braced herself as they presented their tickets and started the climb.

They mounted a wooden set of curving steps to start, and then the tower opened up in the center and the stairs became metal, which could have been reassuringly sturdy, except that they were gridded and, therefore, see-through. When Anna looked down to check her footing, she saw all the way down to the ground. If she slipped off the side, let vertigo overtake her just enough to veer too far left and stumble, that would be it. Game over, neck snapped, what a lovely vacation.

Dad trudged up ahead of her in total silence, steady as a machine. Anna kept her eyes on his broad shoulders, matching the rhythm of his climb around and around until they emerged at last onto the roof, the whole city spread beneath them like a banquet.

This was a new kind of dizzying. The ledge barrier was high, but it didn't feel high. One stumble would be enough, even up here. The tower itself felt precariously proportioned, like a gust of wind could send it teetering.

Anna stood next to Dad and waited for the shoe to drop. Career advice? Concerns over her breakup? Chin up, sweetheart, or: You need to move back home to Ohio, or: You don't fit in our family, never have, we want you out.

Dad stared down at Siena. Anna imagined an earthquake striking, the cracks forming along the city walls, the tower dropping a meter and then slowly tumbling, taking her with it, flying down into the rubble like a firebird.

Dad turned to Anna. "Ready to go down?"

She stared at him. "Yep."

So that was why Dad had bought her a ticket to come along and nobody else. He'd surmised, correctly, that of all his children, she'd be the least likely to attempt chitchat.

Cornicello, Anna remembered, as they descended the tower in a careful, dizzy spiral. That was the name of the charm the old woman had offered her. It was meant to ward off the evil eye.

Out in the glaring sun, she glanced across the piazza to where the women had been sitting, but they were gone now, chairs and all.

"Did you take any pictures?" Mom asked.

"Nope," Dad said.

"I don't have my phone," Anna said.

Mom rolled her eyes. "*You two.*"

Anna looked to Dad for a reaction. “You two” felt warm and fuzzy enough to prompt at least a complicit glance—and if she was honest, she did expect a wink or something, a pat on the back—but he walked past in his usual hibernating-bear fashion and the moment passed into irrelevance.

They were alike, Anna and her father, but often in the wrong ways. They were identical magnets, she thought, turned to repel.

Waverly held back from the crowd to fall into step with Anna. “Can I come visit you in New York?”

“Your mom hates New York,” Anna said. “But maybe if we work on her together . . .”

“I meant just me,” Waverly said, carefully, testing.

“Aha.” Anna smiled. “What about Mia?”

Waverly considered. “Maybe on the *second* trip. When she’s older.”

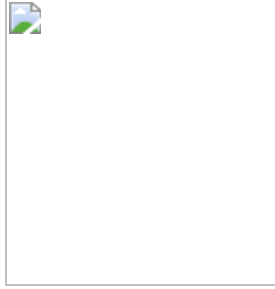
Anna nodded. “I think we can arrange that.”

To which Waverly jumped in midstep, pumping her fist in the air, making Anna laugh outright.

Nicole, five full yards ahead, flinched at the sound and turned back to fix her sister with a hooded glare.

Il malocchio, Anna realized. Jealousy. The evil eye.

She should have been gifted a *cornicello* at birth.



LIKE ON A BOAT

The convoy rolled back out just after three, though Anna would have liked to have stayed in Siena longer. She'd thought it might be nice to take a look inside the Palazzo Pubblico, considered looking at bus routes, but she hadn't brought her phone, and everyone was leaving, and that was that—this was a *family* vacation.

As Anna had been last to leave the villa this morning and still had the front door key in her bag, she was the first one to step inside when they got back.

Behind her, Nicole shouted after the girls and the girls ignored her, running down the lane to find “the neighbors.” Benny looked at some email Christopher wanted to show him on his phone. Mom wondered aloud how dressy tonight's restaurant would be. Dad kicked at the flagstones like a child.

Anna stood in the entryway. She stared, her heart a mounting drumbeat. Then she swallowed.

She shut the front door and locked it again, so no one would get in ahead of her.

This was a Dad job. She glanced over at Benny, thinking he might be useful too, but that would mean involving Christopher. Not an option.

Anna clasped her father's arm. “We've got an issue. Can you come with me for a sec?”

He turned to Mom and Nicole.

Anna grabbed him more tightly, shaking her head as she whispered, “Just us for now. We might need to call the police.”

Mom was looking over, irate.

Dad put up a hand. “Hang out here for a sec, hon.”

Everybody squirmed, but Dad followed Anna to the door before they could verbally object.

They went inside. Anna locked the door behind them.

Dad grunted.

Anna knew that particular grunt. It was more intense than his *I'm not actually listening* grunt. This one meant, *Well, I don't know what the fuck to say to this.*

The living room was upended. Carefully so, and that was what made it all the more alarming.

Chairs were neatly overturned around the table, like each had fallen down dead. Every single cabinet and drawer in the kitchen had been opened, along with the fridge. All the contents were still in place.

"Hello?" Dad called out. Anna froze beside him, listening.

No one answered.

They toured in terse silence, taking stock of one room, then another.

The beds were stripped, but not completely. Skinned, more like, blankets and sheets rolled like dough to the bottom of each mattress. Every closet door was open at the same angle, every drawer pulled out exactly halfway.

"Cleaners?" Dad suggested quietly.

Anna shrugged. "There's no car parked outside. No supplies."

It didn't smell clean either. It smelled, frankly, rank.

And then there was the extension living space. The books down there had all been removed from their shelves and lay on the floor like tiles.

Anna stood at the top of the steps and let her eyes blur, in case there was some sort of message hidden in the mosaic pattern of them.

Her head began to throb with the effort.

"Robbery?" she asked.

Her father was a retired auto exec, hardly a cop, but he'd been the head of the neighborhood watch for thirty years, which made him more of an expert than she was.

He took off his ball cap to scratch his head. "Might be, but I don't think so. No signs of forced entry. Check your stuff, to be sure. Almost looks like a . . ."

He shook his head, his voice trailing away as he headed for his bedroom.

"Like what?" Anna asked.

"Like on a boat." He made an undulant motion with his hands. "The boat hits a wave and all the doors open up."

Earthquake, Anna wondered, but that didn't make sense. She couldn't rationalize this away.

"Devices are here," she said, picking up the kids' iPad from the couch and letting it fall.

Dad called from the bedroom, "Your mom's jewelry's still here, don't know why they wouldn't have taken that."

He stood in the doorway, and he and Anna stared at each other for a moment.

"There were people in front of the villa last night, Dad."

He blinked. "How close to the house?"

"Not that close," she admitted. "Down the drive. I saw their flashlights and they took off when I tried to get closer."

"When you did *what now*?" Dad's face went red. "Anna honey, you gotta start to use that brain of—"

"It was fine." Anna talked over him before he could work himself into a lecture. "It's not the first time I've seen them and I wanted to find out what was going on. They were spreading something in the grass. Looked like . . . salt? I know it sounds crazy."

"Huh." He drew in a breath, his nostrils slowly flaring. "Might be they were gardeners. Putting down insecticide. Lawn sure needs it."

"But in the dark—?"

Something crashed into the glass door.

Dad jumped back. Anna stumbled into the coffee table, clutched her leg, and looked up to see an indignant Nicole standing on the back patio, shrugging wildly.

"Okay," Anna muttered, "let's do this," and opened the door for her.

"What the fuck, Anna?" Nicole hissed, as Anna whispered, "Don't freak out."

Justin lingered on the patio, watching for the kids' return while Nicole *completely* freaked out, her voice a tornado siren, begging Dad to call the "What do you call them here? Policia? This is not okay!"

"Check your stuff, sweetie," Dad said calmly. "I agree this is damn weird, but it doesn't look like anything was taken. I don't think we need to make any kind of fuss."

"I'm not *making* a fuss, I'm *reacting* to one," Nicole snapped, defensive. Anna had to admit, she had a point. "This is very weird!"

“I’m just saying there’s no need to upend the vacation,” he grunted. “We’ve put a lot of effort into this. A lot of money.”

Dad glowered down at the carpet of books. He snatched a paperback from one corner and lumbered with it up the stairs, decision made. Ignore the weirdness. The weirdness never happened. Just remember the pretty bits.

But was he wrong? Did it matter how weird this house was? It was in the middle of Tuscany. It was freaking gorgeous. And there were only a few days left of the trip. Surely they could tough it out.

Nicole looked anything but tough.

“You want to cancel your couples’ dinner?” Anna tossed out with a feigned wince.

She had a hunch that that was what would pull her sister from the brink.

“No.” Nicole looked more horrified than ever. “God no! This restaurant is booked solid for the rest of the trip and came highly recommended. It was a *Travel and Leisure* pick, we are not . . .” She glanced out the window at the kids. “Dad’s right. Let’s tidy all this up and figure it out tomorrow. You’re safe here. You feel safe, right?”

Anna sensed she wasn’t actually expected to answer that question.

She went around the house, shutting all the drawers, picking up the chairs, then joined her brother in putting the books back on the shelves.

Benny had caught the tail end of cleanup, it seemed.

“What the hell happened?” he asked Anna in an undertone.

“Fuck if I know.”

“You were the last to leave this morning.”

Anna snorted, gathering up the last of the books from the floor. “That’s your theory? *I* rearranged the entire villa real quick before we left for Siena? To freak everybody out, or . . . ?”

“Dad said nobody could have broken in. Only other person with the keys is the caretaker. And there’s no one else in the house.”

They looked at each other.

Anna arched an eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

Benny hit her. “Shut up. It was just a dream, right? The . . . dark figure. Whatever. That’s what you said.”

“I said it was possible it was a dream.” Anna stared at her brother. “Not *just* a dream.”

“You’re trying to scare me.” He laughed nervously. Raised his hands to throttle the air in front of her.

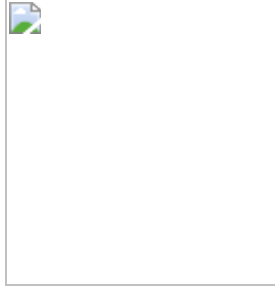
“I am doing next to nothing, Ben, I promise you that. I would not go to all this effort. When I vacation, I vacation.”

They blinked, at last, and peered around the room.

Neat, tidy, wrong. Just like it was this morning.

Nicole poked her head out of her bedroom, chipper. “Okay so I’m hopping in the shower, we are leaving in forty-five minutes for dinner, would you tell the others, thanks!”

She slammed the door shut before Benny could answer, dissipating their fear more effectively than sage ever could.



GIRLS' NIGHT

Anna and the girls waved the couples off from the front patio like a mini von Trapp family.

Then she turned to them. "I've just gotta throw in some laundry and then the awesome wild singles' night can start."

"The laundry room *outside*?" Mia was weirdly excited. "Can we come?"

Anna laughed. "Sure. Laundry party, let's go! Wear your flip-flops so the gravel doesn't get you."

There wasn't much to wash—a dress, a few T-shirts, underwear, and bras. The girls waited outside for Anna in their flip-flops like this was the event of the vacation, and the three of them paraded merrily around the corner to the covered utility area under the villa.

Right away, Mia spotted one of those crocodile floats Anna used to love. "There's pool toys?"

"I'll blow it up for you," Anna offered, shoving her clothes into the washer.

Waverly didn't seem interested. She was staring into the brush past the property line.

"You looking for your friends?" Anna asked with a smile.

"*Ragazzi*," Waverly said, almost to herself.

"You're picking up a lot of words." Anna poured in the detergent and turned it on.

"We told them we were American but they didn't understand us," Mia said.

Anna stood. "You spoke to them?"

The girls just looked at her.

She hadn't thought they were lying, exactly, more that it was some flight of fancy, their imaginary Italian friends, but now Anna wasn't sure

why. It wasn't inconceivable that locals would pop by here, curious about the Americans. Maybe they were the ones waving flashlights around at night, dumping salt.

"Tell me about them," Anna said, leaning on the washer as it whirred. "What do they look like? Are they your age, or . . . ?"

"There's three of them." Waverly drifted into the utility room, idly scanning the shelves. "Two boys, one girl, different ages, I guess. The girl is like sixth grade maybe?"

"They wear weird clothes," Mia said.

"That's not nice, Mia," Waverly snapped. Mia stared at her feet. "I think they're lonely."

"Oh yeah?" Anna glanced over her shoulder.

Waverly shrugged. "They just seem super bored. Like they don't meet new kids that often."

You sure they're alive?

Anna didn't say it.

"Want me to blow up the crocodile?" Anna walked to the back of the utility room and stood on tiptoes to try to get it.

"Ooh, look at that one," Waverly said behind her.

Panic seized Anna. She turned around, gasping, to see Waverly reaching for the key to the tower.

"Don't touch that," she snapped.

Waverly's hand paused an inch away. Her eyes went wide. "Why?"

Anna breathed. Blinked. It was a pretty key. Old, weird. It had that bird on it. Of course Waverly wanted to touch it. "I have no idea."

Waverly smiled and slowly stuck out a single pointer finger and—*boop*—touched the key. Her eyes lit up with sly rebellion.

Anna shook her head, grinning. "I would have done the same thing. Come on."

She knocked down the crocodile with a broom handle and led the way out of the utility room, blowing up the pool float as she went.

"Mommy says I'm like you," Waverly said behind her. "But she only says it when she's mad at me."

"Mommy never says I'm like Auntie Anna," Mia said, pouting.

"I think you're a lot like me," Anna said between puffs into the crocodile. She winked at Mia. "Both of you."

Mia beamed. Anna capped off the inflated crocodile and handed it to her, all five feet of it.

“Now what should we have for dinner?” Anna opted to change the subject as they reached the house. “I’m assuming you’re both completely bored with pizza. Ugh, pizza, disgusting, so healthy.”

They squealed in disagreement.

She threw up her hands. “Fine! Pizza it is!”

They’d left the front door wide open. Anna didn’t remember that.

Mia skipped ahead toward it—then stopped like a horse balking at a snake in the road.

Anna peered down at her. “You all right?”

Mia shook her head. Her lips were very white.

“I don’t want to go in either,” Waverly whispered. “It feels bad.”

It did. It felt like it was breathing. Waiting.

Anna watched her nieces for a moment. “Let’s go swim.”

They skirted the house, pulled suits and towels off the drying line, changed, giggling, right there in the open, rode on the crocodile and splashed and forgot why they were scared in the first place.

Eventually the girls got hungry, and Anna knew she’d have to coax them back inside. She couldn’t leave them unsupervised down here, by the water.

“Come on,” Anna chirped. “Food time.”

It was way too hot to shiver, but Waverly’s teeth still chattered as she stood on the back patio wrapped up in her towel. “Is this a haunted house?”

Anna looked at the girls, their wide, expectant eyes.

“Yeah,” Anna said. “I think it probably is.”

Her nieces looked at each other. Not surprised. In confirmation.

“But you know what?” Anna frowned. “I’m way tougher than ghosts. They don’t mess with me.”

She opened the glass door of the house. The girls shrank back, watching as she swaggered inside.

“Hey, ghosties!” she shouted.

Behind her, Waverly gasped in delight.

“Stop trying so hard to be spooky! You’re just a bunch of . . .” Anna turned back to Mia. “Quick, what’s a good insult?”

“Poopy face?” Mia offered, then slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Oh, I like it.” Anna shouted back into the villa. “You’re a bunch of poopy faces! Invisible poopy-face poops! Go back to sleep and stop bugging us, poop-heads!”

The girls were in hysterics. They held hands and walked inside, giggling, and as Anna shut and locked the door behind them, she knew it would be fine for the moment.

The truth was, she’d known when she walked in. If the air had been laden with sick dread, if that watchful weight had been there like it was a few hours earlier, she might not have been brave enough to do this little comedy routine.

But they didn’t need to know that.

The girls watched YouTube—hell yes, they did—and Anna made pizza and they ate together and got into PJs and under the covers, if not by bedtime, at least close.

As she cut out the light, Waverly sat up. “What’s so bad about you, Anna? I don’t get it.”

Anna wavered on the edge of a laugh, then sat on the foot of Waverly’s bed. “You mean, why does everybody talk about me like there’s something wrong with me?”

Waverly looked abashed but she still nodded.

“You know . . .” Anna smiled. “I have no idea, but if you manage to figure it out, please tell me.”

“Mommy said you murder animals!” Mia squeaked.

Anna blinked. “Like, as a hobby?”

“No.” Waverly glared at her sister. “*Ugh*, Mia.” She sank as she looked up at Anna. “She said . . . when you were little . . . you killed a guinea pig.”

“She told you about Gus.” A shocked grin spread across Anna’s face. “*Wow*.”

“Not us really, but we heard her talking to Daddy about it after bedtime and then she tried to pretend she was talking about something else,” Waverly said.

“Grown-ups do that sometimes.” Anna nodded, brisk. This line of questioning needed to end immediately. “Listen, there’s nothing wrong with anybody, is the truth. We’re all just doing our best at being ourselves. And who you are and you are . . .” She turned to Mia. “. . . is amazing, so just keep on being you and forget about everybody else. And also go to bed and no talking.”

She pointed at them, mock-stern, and they giggled.

“Night, girls!”

It occurred to her as she shut the door that this was one of those idyllic moments where she should probably start lamenting all her life choices. Josh would certainly think so. Anna, the good aunt, feeling genuine affection for and devotion to these little creatures who to some extent belonged to her, listened to her, cared for her. Why not become a mother?

But the feeling sloughed off quickly for Anna. She was an aunt and she liked it and she liked that she would hand responsibility for them back to their parents whenever they rolled up from their ridiculously long dinner. How many courses did Nicole say this thing was going to be?

And then there was the matter of Gus, the class pet. Her first taste of responsibility for a life and for its death, the pressure, the power, all in one heady eighteen-hour period. A start and an ending, in a very short loop.

I'm not sure pets and Anna are a great combination.

Anna snorted to herself.

She double-checked the locks on the glass back door and the oak front door, poured herself a glass of Montepulciano red, and took it to her room. She'd grown fond of this tiny bed, these close walls. A monk's cell suited her. She just wished there were a smidge more airflow.

Italians hated air conditioners because they thought they made you sick. Bad air. *Colpo d'aria*. The expression didn't necessarily translate to *illness*, Anna supposed. Just badness. Wrongness.

Anna thought of that *cornicello* pendant with faint regret. The old woman had certainly seemed convinced she needed it. It was kindness, wasn't it? And Anna had responded with small-minded cowardice. A typical *turista*.

She sat in the open window, listening to the cicadas outside, the string orchestra of the Tuscan countryside—when abruptly, all sound stopped, like someone had muted the world with a remote control.

And in that instant, Anna felt it.

Heaviness seeping into the villa. The space around her crawling closer, squirming around her, loaded, conscious. More biological than chemical.

She couldn't move, felt like even breathing was an iffy call at the moment, because what exactly was she breathing in? She simply braced herself, and was therefore at least a little prepared for the sound of feet running up the stairs and through the entryway to get to her.

She only hoped they were real feet, living feet.

Anna's door opened, and Waverly lurched through, tear-streaked.

Anna stood from the window. Waverly garroted her waist and clung on, wailing.

"What's the matter?" Anna stroked Waverly's hair, repetitive, simple, trying to calm her own pulse down. "Oh my gosh." The pressure in here hadn't broken. Very bad air. "Shhhh, tell me. Bad dream?"

"I wasn't asleep yet!" Waverly snapped, offended. "I saw her, the monster."

Anna's hands went numb against Waverly's head. "I saw J-Jenny Greenteeth, but she wasn't g-green, she was all yellow, and she pushed on me. She wouldn't let me up from the . . . the bed . . ."

Waverly's words dissolved into panicked hiccups.

"Okay. It sounds like a night terror, babe." Anna knew damn well she was lying, even though everything she was saying was possible. "Your uncle Benny used to get them when he was little. I probably scared you, put the idea in your head when we were playing in the pool."

"But I saw her, everything except her face, she didn't have a . . ."

Waverly was struggling to breathe. Anna got down on her level.

"Okay, deep breaths, baby, I'm right here, okay, and remember how tough I am? I've got you now. You just try to calm down your body. Do you do mindfulness in school?"

Waverly nodded.

"Let's do that now. Whatever it is." Anna glanced past her, through the empty doorway. "Where's Mia, did she sleep through it?"

Waverly shook her head. "She wasn't in bed."

Anna straightened up, listening hard, but all she could hear was her own heartbeat. "Where is she?"

"I don't—"

Anna walked past Waverly, out into the echoing villa, down the stairs, and forced out a whisper. "Mia? You in the bathroom?"

She opened the door. Dark. Empty.

"Mia?"

Louder now. She didn't care about waking her up, only finding her.

She crept into the girls' room. The beds were both empty, but Anna pulled Mia's covers way back, like she might somehow be hidden curled up in one corner.

Anna's bare toes grazed something animal. She recoiled with a thick gasp, but it was that awful stuffed animal. Blossom. She picked it up and tossed it on the bed, silently cursing Nicole for not being back yet.

Waverly, eyes now dry and very wide, trailed Anna around the house as she checked impossible places—empty bedrooms, cupboards, under the dining table.

And then, Anna thought of outside. Of the pool.

Bodies floating facedown.

She laid her hand onto the rough wall to tamp down her panic.

“Does Mia ever sleepwalk?” she asked Waverly, her voice so tight it sounded warped.

Waverly nodded. “A lot.”

Everything dissolved. Anna said, or thought, “Okay,” and lurched down to the back door, the glass one that led to the patio and the pool, a dark death trap for a child with no water wings, the world outside with all its threats, men with flashlights, catnappers—but the latch caught.

The door was locked. She'd locked it, she had. Mia couldn't have gone out that way.

As Anna breathed out profanities, relief rushing her, she heard a sound issuing from up in the living room.

Pounding.

Waverly was already upstairs.

“Anna?” she squealed, pointing at the wall hanging.

The pounding became scratching. Frantic.

Anna ripped the nymphs to the side. “Mia?”

Mia's voice was muffled behind the thick old door. “I don't know how I got in here, help me out, I can't get out?!”

“Don't cry, it's okay, sweetie, just give me a sec!” Anna wrenched at the door, tugged on the handle.

It was locked. This wasn't possible. Maybe they hadn't properly secured it the other night, but there was no latch to fall just so and lock it from the inside. This made no rational sense.

Anna pulled and pulled until her palms went raw.

“Stay here,” she barked to Waverly, who was too wan with panic to do anything but nod.

Anna unlocked the front door and sprinted outside, barefoot along the gravel path, the rocks shredding the soles of her feet, until she got to the

utility room and felt around in the dark for that ugly iron key.

She gripped it tight, a nauseous current surging through her arm, and sprinted back upstairs, crying out from the stabs of gravel.

Mia was pounding the door more wildly than ever, impervious to Waverly's efforts to calm her down. In between knocks, she scratched at the wood with her little nails.

It was the same sound Anna had taken for a trapped cat a few days ago.

Anna shoved the key in, twisted that iron jackdaw viciously, and wrenched open the door.

Mia flew out.

She gripped Anna's leg like a pole in a flash flood.

Anna locked the door again, pried Mia's fingers gently away, said, "Sit on the sofa. I'll be right back."

She wasn't even sure why, but she raced just as fast back down to the utility room to put the key back on its hook, as if that fixed it. Everything in its right place.

As she returned, catching her breath, she saw a faint glimmer up the road, flickering between trees. Not flashlights. Headlights.

Inside, Mia had calmed down incredibly quickly, and was already bickering with her sister. "I don't *know* how. I just woke up there. I'm *scared*, Waverly. Don't tease me when I'm scared."

Waverly motioned Anna over and pulled her down so she could whisper in her ear. "Don't tell Mia about the lady."

Anna nodded, whispered back, "That's a good idea."

"What are you whispering?" Mia cried.

"I'm saying not to tell Mom anything," Waverly lied, louder. She turned to Anna, serious. "Don't, though. She'll freak out."

Outside, gravel crunched. Engines growled, closing in.

Anna looked at the girls. "We have to tell your mom what happened."

Mia took Waverly's hand. Solidarity.

"*Please?*" Waverly begged. "She'll blame me, you know she will. She blames me for everything! She'll just think I'm lying, or I did it, or—"

A car door slammed. Another.

Footsteps approached.

Anna remembered how Nicole had reacted to a bunch of open drawers earlier today. How she'd accused her daughter of pushing her into the pool.

The front door swung open. The party people were back, in midconversation, laughing.

Christopher walked in first. He moved his head straight to them, sensing the tension like a shark tastes blood, and a smile of sheer malicious delight stretched over his smug face. *When's the train wreck?*

Not tonight, asshole.

Nicole came in behind Benny. Her smile calcified as she saw the kids in the living room. "Still awake! Wow! Did I *not* tell you their bedtime?"

"We were just having so much fun," Anna said, matching Nicole's smile for brittleness. "So? How many courses was it?"

Nicole stood in place as everybody filtered in behind her. "Twelve."

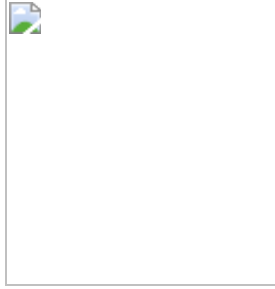
The girls looked up at Anna, white-lipped. Pleading.

"Twelve!" Anna shot her sister a thumbs-up and breezed past Christopher. "Sounds amazing. Well. I'm exhausted. Nighty night."

* * *

She dreamed of that boy at the window again, his hands pressed against the frame, fingers splayed wide. This time, his shoulders were shaking. A circle of sweat bloomed through the back of his linen shirt and when he turned to Anna, he looked her square in the eye.

"*È qui,*" he said, and blood spilled from his mouth.



FLORENTINE WOMAN

Anna sat up and ripped off her T-shirt, damp as a washcloth with sweat. The room didn't feel actively hostile anymore, but it was so icy she wanted more than anything to pull the covers up around her slick body and shudder back into unconsciousness.

She opted otherwise. The first light of the morning was murky out past the shutters; Nicole would be up soon, making sure they didn't miss the 8:06 train into Florence.

Anna slipped into the hall to snag the first shower.

It was a nice bathroom. Good, modern fixtures. A rain showerhead, which was a nice touch. She actually managed to forget, to wash it all away in the hot flow. Her mind wandered into the mundane, her shower back home with its variable temperature and erratic water pressure and whether it was worth the effort of looking for a new apartment. The shampoo she'd brought smelled like a piña colada. Its lather expanded between her fingers and slid slick down her neck.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of the water sloughing it off, everything must go, nothing is permanent.

And then the air shifted.

Anna opened her eyes.

The light didn't flicker, but there was a definite dimming.

And with it, the sense of an elevator dropping down a level.

She felt something else in here. Something, someone, riding down with her.

Anna held on to the tile wall. Shampoo had dripped into her eye and it fucking stung and she still needed to do conditioner, and so she did it, dammit, applied it, waited a full minute before rinsing, shaved her armpits and legs, washed out the little nicks the gravel had cut into her feet when

she ran for the key last night, but the whole time, she stared at the edge of the shower curtain, teeth gritted, waiting for something to lurch. To grab.

She turned off the water and waited, dripping.

Her nakedness felt like a liability. Like her skin was tissue-thin.

In the hall, she heard Nicole chirping at everyone to start getting ready and the singsong pitch of her sister's voice was enough to restore a feeling of normality. Anna jumped on the break in the tension, let it propel her out of the bathtub and into a towel.

There. Armor.

The room was steamed up. She hadn't put on the extractor fan, didn't like the growl of it. She dried herself quickly and slathered moisturizer onto her face.

When she looked back up at the clouded mirror, there was something behind her.

She dropped the bottle. Gripped the sink. She didn't look away.

A blurred figure, standing so close it could lower its chin to her neck and bite her.

Taller than she was by an inch or more.

Hair more yellow than blond, hanging lank.

The faint outline of a gown, also yellow, staining the steam.

Anna couldn't breathe. Her hands shook around the slick sink as she stared at the reflection.

She felt acutely aware of the *absence* of breath on her back—not a reassuring sensation. It felt like this thing was simply waiting.

Anna muttered, "My turn, huh?"

In one violent swipe, she smeared her hand across the mirror, clearing the steam.

No one else was there in the clear reflection—just her, looking like a ghost herself. A drowning victim.

Anna opened the door and reemerged into vacation. The villa was full of living people getting ready, the girls screaming as they fled nothing scarier than a sunscreen application.

Christopher stood waiting in the hall holding his monogrammed toiletry bag. He was actually tapping his foot with impatience. That was apparently a real thing real people did in real life.

"Good luck in there," Anna said, sliding past him in her towel.

She got dressed, slipped her stinging feet into socks and sneakers, poured herself some coffee, and looked around at her family. Chatting, happy, relaxed. For once, Mom wasn't telling her to eat. Nobody noticed Anna's hands shaking around her coffee mug.

She could tell them. Issue a general warning. But family ghost-story time wasn't exactly on Nicole's itinerary. Even if it were, Anna would not start the conversation *in here*. Inside Villa Taccola.

No, it was Florence Day, no harm in Florence. She clung to that thought, finished her coffee, and before she knew it, it was time to get the fuck out of this villa.

Nicole wrote down last-minute instructions to Mom and Dad for keeping the kids from drowning or burning or tumbling to their doom at the water park, Dad reading along over her shoulder like they were a guidebook to entering a war zone, and then the child-free gang was out the door, squeezing into a single rental SUV, and erupting from it into the train station with ten minutes to spare.

Anna dug through her satchel until she found her train pass from last week. With a glance to make sure Benny wasn't looking, she crumpled it up and tossed it in the trash, then got a new one from the machine.

Justin had a hard time figuring out the Italian instructions, so she helped him buy tickets while Nicole glared at them from across the track.

Nicole was in a full snit, Anna noticed, and it seemed to be about more than what absolutely didn't happen last Christmas or keeping the kids up last night. More than a headache, although that had to be a factor. Maybe the girls had told her about the tower incident after all. If so, Nicole had to be pretty pissed that Anna hadn't brought it up herself. Or maybe Nic had cramps and resented Anna for not synching her own period up in sympathy. The possibilities were dizzying. Best not to think about them while standing on a train track, Anna figured. Or, you know, at all.

Something else, then. She thought of last night. This morning.

The scratching, the tower room, the shower, the fogged-up mirror, the yellow *thing* behind her—

The train shot past. Anna jumped back, blinking hard, then got on with the others.

On the ride north, Anna stood against a pole and listened to the blend of languages around her, lulled by them. Every so often Benny insisted on getting her attention, letting her know how many stops were left, as if she

couldn't read the signage herself—or, now, asking her what she wanted to see in Florence.

"I'm easy," Anna said.

Nicole glanced up from her compact mirror to snort, then went back to dabbing her head wound with powder foundation.

Anna fixed her eyes on a young woman at the end of the train car, sitting with one foot up on the seat. She had a heart-shaped face, cropped hair, a big old backpack—a Euro traveler stereotype, but there was something so lovely about her. Gamine. Free. It took Anna a second to realize that the stabbing feeling in her chest wasn't attraction so much as envy.

That realization was enough to drop her from uneasiness into actual sadness, an ache that seeped down her arms and into her gut.

She'd missed that chance, to travel the world solo. Anna rarely felt old—she wasn't old, objectively—but glimpsing this girl, this life, through the thick panes of a window that for her had closed gave her the sense that she might as well pack it all in now, she was so ancient. If she were to wake up tomorrow and adopt that same getup, that lifestyle, people would just think she was homeless. No one would understand.

Benny pointed out that the next stop was theirs, and she turned and looked at her brother and sister and their partners, considering.

Really considering.

Then she got off with them.

The Uffizi Gallery was their first destination. Nicole bypassed the serpentine line of tourists waiting for admission in the *piazzale* by brandishing the printout she'd pulled from her purse.

Mom had booked them a private tour—probably a good call as well as a kind gesture. Anna had waited close to two hours for admission when she'd come here last Friday.

She glanced at the paper as the guide handed it back to Nicole. Six tickets. Mom must have assumed Josh would be coming when she bought it. Anna was on the verge of suggesting they pluck someone from the line to join them—a young person going solo backpacking, maybe?—but they were shuffled inside before she could select a lucky winner.

Anna hadn't brought her sketch pad today. Without the cheerful chaos wrought by the kids, she knew she'd become today's spotlight scapegoat if she stopped to enjoy herself. *Hurry up, Anna. Stop ignoring us. This is a*

family *vacation*. She'd sketched and discarded some studies here last Friday, but there were angles she hadn't noticed before, ways the light traveled along the exteriors, illuminating the columns, the shadows creating a fresh sense of movement, of breath in the statues . . .

"Anna," Benny whispered. He stood waiting at the doorway, holding out a headset. "Just join in, okay? They paid a lot of money for this."

The guide was an Italian woman in her late thirties wearing incongruously high heels and a full veneer of makeup. She looked like a realtor trying to get them to buy the Uffizi.

Anna put on the headset, listening to the guide's brightly accented English as she introduced the group to the Medici, their patronage of the arts, the construction of the Uffizi, clearly assuming that as Americans, they knew nothing.

It was a time machine, this gallery, arranged from ancient works through to late Renaissance, far too many important works to possibly absorb in one tour. The guide apparently agreed, sending them from a quick stop in the Giotto room straight down the checkerboard Primo Corridoio past statue after statue, door after door. They were skipping so much.

Anna peered upward as they walked, picking out the grotesques painted on the ceiling panels, friendly little beasties, pagan traditions sneaking back in wherever they could. Devils were everywhere in Florence. You just had to look.

"We are going over here now," Anna heard in her headset and felt a jolt as she realized the guide was snapping at her from halfway across the Botticelli rooms.

They were seriously ditching the rest of the early Renaissance. No *Battle of San Romano*? No Lippi? Anna didn't have the energy to stage a revolt, so she just judged. Hard.

As she joined the group in front of *The Birth of Venus*, Justin craned his neck to whisper, "*Busted*," and Anna laughed, despite herself.

The painting was an obvious masterwork, too spectacular to be called *basic*, but Anna knew it so well that it felt like a poster hanging in some art student's dorm room now, rendered artificial by familiarity. She waited for the tour guide to start explaining the allegorical figures, then turned her headset's volume all the way down and drifted again to take in some of the less flashy paintings she might have missed last time.

Landscapes. Small biblical scenes. And there—tucked away beside the squat doorway, over a power outlet and fire extinguisher, a small portrait. She had noticed it last time, stopped to look at it mainly out of pity at its placement.

This time, seeing it, she felt she couldn't move away even if she wanted to.

Jacopo da Sellaio. *Florentine woman*.
c. 1500, Tempera on wood.

An unnamed subject, no reference in description or landscape to Monteperso, thirty miles from the center of Florentine life.

But somehow, Anna knew.

This was the same model as the Madonna in the church. Not the strained Mary of the Pietà. The smug one awaiting God's impregnation.

The lady in the portrait was a neon blonde. Unnaturally so. Naples yellow, you'd call it, if you were painting it on wood, not dying it into your hair. Unlike most of the era's female portraits in full profile, she was turned three-quarters, looking askance at the viewer, that same imperious smile playing on her lips. Her beauty was tightly coiled, something in the careful stillness of her pose that suggested the moment before a predator strikes.

Or maybe it just felt that way because the last time Anna saw this Florentine woman was this morning. Inches behind her. Lank yellow hair bleeding through the fog of the bathroom mirror.

This was it. The *thing* in the villa. She knew, somehow she knew.

And Anna felt something ripple outward from the portrait, from that smile. The sense that this painting wanted her to know it.

A hand grazed her arm. She flinched—smacked it, hard, shoving it away.

Benny stepped back, offense shining in his eyes.

He leaned in to hiss, "We're moving into the next room. If you'd care to join us."

Anna wondered whether to tell her brother about the painting, her realization, her experience this morning, but that would require first engaging with his sulk, and she didn't want to switch mental gears. Not now. She'd tell him later, after a few glasses of wine had washed his bad mood away.

"It's fine," Anna murmured, turning away from him. She didn't want to look away from the portrait for too long. Didn't trust it not to lurch at her.

“She won’t skip the Leonardo room. I’ll just meet you at the Annunciation.”

She could feel Benny watching her for a long breath, his jaw stiffening, before he shook his head and left.

Anna refocused, memorizing the details on the card below the portrait, the flat city scene behind the woman’s finely draped shoulders. She took in the white gown, the arched, finely plucked eyebrows, the ice-blue eyes, that smirk. She looked like *the Florentine Woman*, not simply one resident among thousands. Maybe that was why there was no name. Or maybe, despite all this woman’s confidence, history swallowed her identity whole.

With that thought, Anna walked away.

She was right. The tour was still stuck in front of Leonardo da Vinci’s Annunciation when she made her way into the next gallery. It was a lesser Leonardo, everybody knew it, but the tour guides always went for the biggest paintings so their groups could fit around them. Anna turned the volume back up just as the guide finished one last anecdote.

“If you think this marble table looks a little bit strange here for the home of the Madonna, well, you are right! It was painted to look like a sarcophagus belonging to an important Medici patron, Piero the Gouty. Its inclusion here could be a sign of respect to the Medici or a kind of memento mori, a reminder that, you know, *we’re all gonna die!*”

The guide grinned, Anna smiled blandly back, everyone else murmured in interest, and they all drifted onward into the outer halls, Justin laughing about “Piero the Gouty,” while Nicole tried to pretend she didn’t know him.

Anna wiped her slick palms on her skirt.

Benny shoulder-checked her as he passed her on the right.

“You sure know the Uffizi well,” he hissed.

Anna stopped walking. She breathed.

Okay. Well. He’d figured it out, her little solo stay in Florence. You couldn’t get much past Benny. She didn’t usually try to—but now, you know what? She was glad she’d lied. It had bought her a few days’ peace. Benny wasn’t mad she didn’t tell him. He was hurt that she hadn’t invited him along.

I want to play with you, Anna! Some things never ever change.

Anna stuck with the group for the rest of the tour but kept the earbuds muted and laughed faintly when everybody else did. Her eyes drifted, wildly, rarely landing on any work for long. She was searching for her, she realized, for *it*, that particular yellow hair, that curling smile. She didn’t find

her in any other room, which should have been a relief, except that her gaze seemed instead to latch on to only the most jarring images in the gallery: the blackened, dead eyes in the *Madonna dello Spedalingo*, the knife digging into Saint Justina's breast, Judith's workmanlike concentration as she sawed through Holofernes' neck. Anna was struck afresh by that painting, by the dark blood spurting upward, by Judith, arching away so she wouldn't get it on her dress.

Apart from that, with Benny now joining Nicole in refusing to speak to Anna, it made for a peaceful next hour. She could almost pretend she was visiting the gallery alone.

Outside the café, the tour broke up to applause and whispered confusion over whether to tip the guide that lasted long enough for the guide to finally give up and leave, and they were out of the Uffizi and back on the streets of Florence, greeted by a cascade of flying pigeons.

"Where are we lunching, dearest?" Justin asked Nicole.

Nicole's face flashed panic. "I didn't book anywhere. I thought this was a good time to be spontaneous!"

Scheduled spontaneity. This would usually prompt a shared *look* between Anna and Benny, but as Benny was assiduously avoiding acknowledging Anna's presence, she wound up smiling knowingly past him at a Japanese tourist.

Spontaneity Hour did not go well. Some part of Nicole must have known it wouldn't, had thrown it onto the itinerary in order to reinforce the validity of the rest of it, thus rendering everyone obedient to their printouts for the remainder of the vacation. Without a pre booked lunch reservation, they wound up wandering for forty-five minutes in search of open *ristoranti*, in alleys, main thoroughfares, on their cellphones, looking up reviews, arriving at one place after another, waiting for Christopher to read the menu and inevitably render a grimacing "Meh," before Justin finally snapped and said, "Listen. I'm hungry. This place has tons of great reviews on Tripadvisor, let's go get some goddamn pasta."

The place with the "great reviews" wound up being a vast, charmless room festooned with fake plants, with paintings of Pompeii on the walls, and a laminated menu all in English, but by that point even Christopher was too hungry to argue.

No one had spoken to Anna since the Uffizi. She'd half expected them to request a table for four, omitting her entirely—they didn't, simply sat

without acknowledging her—but when the waiter arrived, everyone turned to Anna again, waiting for her to take up the reins. Which she did.

The food and wines arrived and everyone made conversation around her. Anna finished her *pici all'aglione* first and excused herself to the bathroom, to at least a glance from Benny, but detoured outside instead.

God, she wished she were a smoker—such a good excuse to take yourself away, however deadly. Maybe she could take it up this week. God knew she'd seen plenty of Italians smoking outside the bar in Monteperso, most of them young enough to know better.

She thought of that Uber driver, his wild curls and vaguely threatening come-ons, and wondered whether he knew the hot waiter at the *ristorante* in Monteperso. They were around the same age, might have grown up together. They both knew the villa.

Everybody seemed to know Villa Taccola.

Back inside, Anna asked for the check and paid ahead for her part of the meal so she wouldn't have to thank anyone profusely for treating her to lunch.

As they left, Nicole forgot her Dior sunglasses on the table. Anna brought them out, forcing a murmured “Oh God, thank you” out of her sister as Nicole slipped them back on.

The conversation embargo thus breached, Anna snuck in one more exchange. “Are the kids doing okay after last night?”

Anna watched as her sister's face hardened from confusion to irritation.

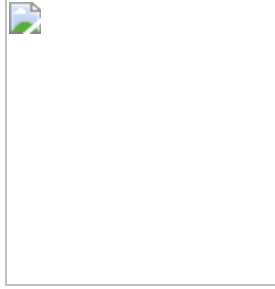
“No. Yes. They're fine.” Nicole huffed a sigh. “I'm assuming you're talking about how late they stayed up, but you don't need to be passive-aggressive about it. I wasn't even angry. It's what I expected when I left them with you.”

So this wasn't about the locked door, the sleepwalking. She still didn't know.

Anna smiled. “Duomo next?”

“Yep.”

“Can't wait.” Anna walked ahead of the others. She knew the way.



ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

Anna decided to skip going inside the Duomo and spend more time taking in the architecture instead, but a mounting drama at the entrance caught her eye before she could slink away.

Nicole was walking away from the cathedral with her fists balled, holding them tight to keep from crying.

“What’s going on?” Anna crossed the piazza to stop her. “Are they not letting people in?”

“My *shoulders*,” Nicole gasped. “Oh my God.”

Anna drew her hands back, but for once, Nicole didn’t look like she was in pain.

“There’s a sign,” Nicole sputtered. “You can’t have bare shoulders in the Duomo. *How* did I not—”

“Nic,” Anna tried to interrupt.

“I didn’t think to bring a sweater. It’s like ninety degrees, why would I need one? I really wanted to see inside!”

“Ignore the sign,” Anna said firmly.

Nicole started to nudge Anna toward the Duomo. “You’ve got cap sleeves, you’re fine, *you* go in. I’ll see it with the girls, I guess, if they’re behaving. If we’ve got time on Saturday, I don’t know, I didn’t build it into the plan . . .”

“Where’s Justin?”

Nicole shrugged wildly. “He went in! Didn’t even look back at me!”

Come tour the exterior with me, Anna nearly offered. *The façade, Giotto’s bell tower, the best parts of this place, all free of charge.*

But she sighed. “Okay, this is stupid.”

As she grabbed for her sister’s arm, Nicole recoiled, so she dug her fingers into the sash belt of Nicole’s dress and physically dragged her sister

across the piazza, ignoring her whining protests and the tour companies waving their hands, trying to pass out cards.

As Anna led them to the back of the short line, her eyes flitted over the Catholic dress-code sign, its crossed-out images of various prohibited outfits alongside a comically blunt appraisal: “NO.”

When they reached the modest visitors’ entrance, she draped her arm over Nicole’s shoulders and marched them both onward. The guard standing in the shadows of the entryway leaned forward to scrutinize them. Anna stared back and willed her eyes expressionless, a void, as they met his. Cold certainty. *Try me*. She didn’t move her arm a centimeter from around Nicole’s neck, her hand from her shoulder. The guard frowned, but stepped back, opting to ignore them.

Anna kept Nicole in a semi-headlock for a full ten steps before she released her.

“Ask for forgiveness, not permission,” Anna said. “From God, I guess.”

She crossed herself, only a little sarcastically. One never knew, and this was a hell of a church.

Nicole walked in silence alongside her, taking in the mosaic pavements, the famed clock, the great painted dome. Their footsteps echoed hollow around them, loud.

The acoustics in churches added to the effect, Anna thought. She really felt like someone was listening to every breath she took in here. Every little misstep.

As Anna spun, peering upward at *The Last Judgment*—her eyes alighting right away on the winged beast eating one of the writhing damned—Nicole whispered, “I’m glad I didn’t miss this. Thank you.”

Anna didn’t feel she needed to respond. She hadn’t done anything but drag Nicole out of her own pile of bullshit, after all.

But the floodgates seemed to have opened now. Nicole pressed her lips tightly together, then aimed a humid whisper into Anna’s ear.

“Benny told me about your abortion.”

Anna’s laugh exploded throughout the church. Tourists turned and looked.

Anna didn’t lower her volume. “Sorry, wait, what? Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

Now Nicole grabbed Anna’s wrist and dragged her backward, into the pews, for a sit-down talk—presumably a private one, but as she’d chosen a

spot right beside the painting of Dante and the sculpture of King David, they wound up sitting directly in the firing line of tourists snapping pictures. Nicole was undaunted.

“I am *really* hurt, Anna,” she said, and the waterworks started in earnest. “Just . . .”

She pointed to her heart, face crumpling, head wound mottling.

Anna felt acid boil in her throat. “*You’re* hurt that *I* had an abortion.”

“That you didn’t tell me.” Nicole winced, like it should be obvious. “You didn’t come to me to, like, mull it through first. Seek guidance. I’m your *sister*.”

Anna could not think of a single instance in the course of her entire life in which she’d gone to Nicole to mull things over. And this hadn’t been a mulling situation. It was clear and concrete and quickly achieved.

“You know what I went through, with IVF, both times with the girls, all the losses. How long we tried, and for you to just conceive, just like that! And then throw that gift away!” Nicole’s voice was getting a little loud, even for Anna.

Anna glanced behind her for tourists or priests or nuns or the descending fiery spear of God. If that winged beast flew down from the dome to devour her right now, she might not have protested much.

“You think I should have kept the baby,” she said, flat.

“I’m not saying that.”

“You think I should have become a mother, that’s what you’re saying, because it’s such a gift from God.”

Now Nicole glanced around. “Keep your voice down.”

Anna laughed again. “You are the one who started this conversation!”

“Only because you were never going to start it.”

“No. I wasn’t. And this is why. This is a big sore spot for you, clearly.”

“Don’t act like I’m being oversensitive,” Nicole hissed. “It is a big deal. It just is. Ask anyone here.”

“Here, as in, this *Catholic church*?”

Nicole shrugged. People were looking. Italians and tourists alike.

Anna considered taking her up on that offer, walking around and quizzing tourists about their views on abortion, just to see if it would tip her sister into a full-fledged aneurism.

Instead she cocked her head. “Do you think I’d be a good mother, Nic?”

Nicole blinked, startled. “God no. You’re way too self-obsessed.”

As a matter of fact, there were few things in the world Anna found less interesting than herself, which was probably why it was so easy for her to concede the point.

Instead of arguing, she stayed silent. Watched Nicole softening, working something out within herself.

“I just wish . . .” Nicole breathed. “That you had come to me.”

Anna sensed movement behind her and turned in time to see Christopher and Benny strolling along the nave.

Benny’s eyes flashed panic as he took the two of them in—Anna stone-faced, Nicole on the verge of weeping.

Anna watched Benny slink after Christopher to the dome, the slow, telltale creep of pink up her brother’s exposed neck.

Then she turned to Nicole and extended her hands, plaintively, the way she’d seen sisters do in movies.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

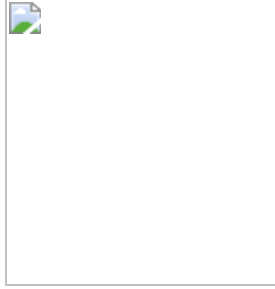
Nicole beamed, beatific, and pressed her fingers into Anna’s. “I accept your apology.”

Anna walked out of the church feeling like she was leaving the hospital after an amputation, some vital part of herself sawed off.

Benny fell into stride with her as they headed to the Baptistry, Giotto’s bells ringing throughout the piazza.

“It was too big for me to hold on to myself,” he said. His voice had gone high and plaintive, like a child’s. “You should never have dropped it on me.”

“You’re right. It’s cool.” Anna took him in without emotion. “I’ll never make that mistake again.”



THAT'S IT, WE'RE DEAD

At the Galleria dell'Accademia, Benny took a photo of Christopher next to the massive statue of David, Christopher mirroring David's pose down to the facial expression, with no apparent irony. Anna walked past them through the halls and breathed slowly, listening to the echoes of footfall against stone. This was a cool and marbled space, masculine—Michelangelo for all his genius never did demonstrate much interest in the female form—and Anna felt reassuringly distanced from the Florentine woman in the portrait, like the walls here were insulated against her energy. A bunker.

Due to the lengthy lunchtime debacle, this sanctuary stop was destined to be a quick one—in and out before the docents closed up for the night. Nobody but Anna seemed to mind much. Justin loudly declared himself “all arted out,” which made Nicole sigh like a long-suffering wife, but Anna could see her sister's eyes dulling too.

Anna's heartbeats grew loud at the prospect of leaving.

She was terrified of going back, she realized. Ridiculous.

She dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands and marched straight past the others to the exit, knowing they would seize on her lead and trail her outside.

Nicole had booked a very good restaurant for dinner, a triumph of the almighty itinerary. Even Christopher frowningly said, “Nice,” as they sat down on a *terrazza* overlooking the Piazza della Repubblica.

“Rick Steves recommendation?” Benny teased Nicole.

She glared back. “Anthony Bourdain, I'll have you know.”

“Ooh, classic,” Benny laughed.

Benny had chosen a seat as far from Anna as possible, but Nicole plopped down next to her, all sisterly, and for once, Anna was glad for the proximity.

Nicole went girlish within a few sips of wine, delightful, really, until she spotted Justin pouring himself a glass and sharpened again. “You’re *driving*.”

“From the train station.” He blinked. “In, like, hours.”

Christopher, true to form, had ordered a separate bottle of Montepulciano for himself and Benny, which he sequestered in their corner of the table as soon as it arrived. They had already guzzled most of it by the time the food arrived, scrawny puppies scrabbling for their share of mother’s milk.

Anna didn’t mind. It made everybody giddy, the freedom from kids—but no, it wasn’t the kids. It was the freedom from their parents, the benefactors of this trip, whose presence could be oppressive, if they were honest about it, every lovely experience saddled with the expectation of a suitably grateful and effusive response. They could drop all that here. They drank too much, too fast, like teenagers out on a lark, and even Benny got caught up enough in the spirit of it to forget for a few minutes that he was angry with Anna for her two days of alone time in Florence.

They stretched out their courses, got desserts and coffees, and only when the check came did the mood start to dampen. Conversation grew sparse. Shoulders started to sag.

Nicole was drunk enough to say the quiet part out loud. “I don’t want to go back.”

Apparently shocked at herself, she grabbed at Anna’s wrist.

“I’m not talking about the girls! I miss the girls, every second I’m away from them.”

“Okay,” Anna said, not sure what else she could say to make Nicole let go.

Nicole pulled away and drank her cappuccino. Slowly. “It’s just . . .”

“That house,” Anna said.

Nicole set down her cup, addressing the group now. “It’s not right, is it? There’s something—”

“Haunted,” Benny cut in. His cheeks had gone gray. “There’s something fucking haunted about it, and that thing is a ghost.”

Christopher had gone to the bathroom. Anna wondered whether Benny would have come right out with that if his boyfriend had been next to him.

“Yeah, I’m not sure I’d go that far.” Justin’s forehead crinkled when he frowned. It was weirdly attractive. “Could just be weird feng shui or

whatever.”

“You believe in feng shui but not ghosts?” Benny’s voice was more caustic than usual. Anna wasn’t sure whether to blame their fight, the wine, the company he was keeping these days, the ghost, or what.

Anna looked up and realized everyone was waiting for her to say something. “What?”

“Care to weigh in?” Justin smiled. “What’s your take on all this?”

“My take?” Anna folded up her napkin. Put it on the table. “The villa’s haunted.”

“Huh.” Justin sank. He must have expected her to take his side.

Nicole, for her part, scooted her chair back, peering at Anna like she was a stranger who’d just plonked down at the table. “*You* believe in ghosts?”

Anna shrugged, scooting in so Christopher could walk past to his seat.

Nicole huffed as if offended. “I thought you were a nihilist.”

“That’s . . . not what ‘nihilism’ means.” Anna tried not to sound snotty, but lord, she was too tired to dumb herself down. “And I’m not that either, but . . . no. I’m not a believer or a disbeliever. It would be laughably arrogant to say that *anything* is impossible, that any human can know the secrets of the universe. Even one secret of the universe, even that the universe as we think we know it exists. We’ll never understand enough to be able to say anything so absolute as ‘I don’t believe—’”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Christopher declared.

Justin choked on his “sober up, honey, remember you’re driving” glass of San Pellegrino.

Christopher straightened up, starting his own TED Talk now. “It’s superstition plus confirmation bias. People fool themselves into thinking they hear or see things that aren’t happening because they’ve heard stories of things happening there before, when really it’s a trick of light or a hallucination or a dream. It reassures people to think there’s proof of a soul out there when we’re obviously just a collection of firing neurons and when we’re dead, that’s it, we’re dead, and don’t even start with that ‘energy cannot die only be converted’ bullshit, because it’ll be converted into something not even remotely conscious. Nothing exists beyond our last breath, and I know that’s a depressing idea, but somebody’s got to say it.”

The table fell silent.

Anna got up to flag the waiter. “So should we split the check?”

* * *

Nicole got gushy during the walk to the train station, sweetly at first, linking arms with Anna to lean heavily against her, their feet knocking tipsily together on the uneven streets.

Then she started the interrogation.

“What do you *do*, Anna, for fun? Do you have any friends?”

Anna laughed. “Yes, Nicole, I have friends.”

“Not anybody from back home.” Nicole shot Anna a gotcha side-eye that crumpled the cut on her eyebrow and made her wince. “Everybody always asks after you, since you’re not on social media. I was at a baby shower a few weeks back and Keira Sherman said you hadn’t spoken for years. And she was your *best friend*.”

“Um.”

“One of your best friends.”

“I think Keira would agree we don’t have much in common these days. How many kids does she have?”

“But what I’m asking is *who* do you hang out with? In New York?”

Nicole wasn’t letting this go. She was a drunk dog with a bone.

“I have work friends,” Anna said. It was sort of true.

“They don’t count,” Nicole said, with remarkable authority for someone who hadn’t worked for the past eight years. “Mom has these *lifelong* friends, they play golf, they have a book club, they go on weekend trips together. I think about you getting old, Anna—”

“Seriously?”

“What are you going to do if you get old and you’re all . . . well, I hate to say it.” She didn’t hate to say it. “All alone?”

“Nicky.” Anna stopped walking and gripped Nicole’s arm more tightly. “I always assumed I’d move in with you.”

She waited for a wave of horror to pass over Nicole’s face before she finally broke, nudging her with a grin.

“You’re a beast,” Nicole growled, laughing with relief.

But she did let go of Anna’s arm soon after, and Anna could breathe.

She assumed their sister-talk would be all wrapped up for the day—and it very well might have been if an awkward silence hadn’t hit their train car on the way back, which Nicole, by her nature, felt compelled to fill.

If there hadn’t been an ad on the wall featuring a woman in a pale blue off-the-shoulder gown.

Anna knew what Nicole was going to say as soon as her eyes landed on it.

“That looks like your prom dress, Anna.”

It didn’t, except for the color.

Anna smiled noncommittally, nodded, looked away.

“Have you heard the prom story, Christopher?” Nicole said, louder now.

“Oh yay,” Justin droned. “The prom story.”

Nicole backhanded him.

Christopher leaned forward, his Spidey-sense for drama tingling.

Anna stared out the dark windows, removing herself from this discussion. Part of her was primed to listen, though, curious as to what version of events she’d hear this time.

“So.” Nicole leaned on the back of the seat next to her. “Basically. When Anna was a freshman, she went to *my* senior prom.”

“You always make it sound like she went in your place,” Benny cut in. “Like she *Single White Female*’d you.”

“She kind of did.”

Benny leaned forward. “You were there! You were crowned prom queen!”

Anna could feel her brother’s eyes searching for a reaction from her, a warm glance, a mouthed *thank you*, but she was too tense to budge. Because what was coming next was . . .

“Yes, and *as* I was being crowned prom queen, where was my boyfriend? The *rumor* was—”

Anna’s head shot over her shoulder. “He wasn’t your boyfriend. He was your prom date. I didn’t give him a blow job in the girls’ bathroom. I didn’t give anyone a blow job. I missed you being crowned because I was changing my tampon, and I have no idea why Jeff Lawrence missed it. Maybe he got bored and left. Maybe Erica Ellis went down on him, and neither of them wanted you to find out, so they blamed it on me. I don’t fucking know, Nicole, but you have to let this go.”

Justin started a slow clap. Tucked his hands away at Nicole’s glare.

Anna acknowledged she might have gone too far with the Erica Ellis thing. Erica was still Nicole’s best friend. Even so, she didn’t want to issue an apology.

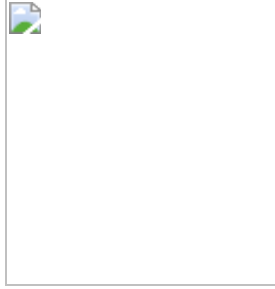
Benny’s eyes were pleading, though, and Anna knew she couldn’t let this linger.

She drew a breath—but Nicole’s bright fake laugh cut her off.

“Way to overreact, Anna!” Nicole dabbed at the edges of her head wound. It had become a tic. “Jesus. Looks like you’re the only one not letting it go. I was just joking around. Anyway, that’s the prom story!”

There was more to it, not that Nicole cared. The period stain Anna had tried to hide all night. The nerdy senior who’d invited her trying to shove his hand down the top of her dress on the limo ride back home. The fact that the blow job rumor followed Anna through the rest of her high school career, and even Keira Sherman believed it.

Anna could have shared more. Christopher would have eaten up every detail. But silence had thickened in the train car again, and she liked the blanketing weight of it.



TWIN COMPLEX

The car ride back from the train was as quiet as the last part of the train trip, infused with fatigue, family tension, and more than a little dread. Nicole piped up from the front seat from time to time about practical things, the solid mundane—new school clothes for the girls when they got back, while the sales were still going on, wanting to make sure the kids saw some art when they hit Florence again on Saturday. Justin didn't respond to any of it beyond a murmur. Eventually, they all gazed silently out of the dark windows, except Benny, who'd fallen asleep in the middle seat with his head lolling onto Anna's shoulder, and Christopher, who stared daggers at Anna in the dark, like she'd conspired to position her brother that way.

The goat was awake. He looked agitated as they passed, straining his rope as he paced back and forth. The bind had shorn a ring of fur away from his neck, leaving him raggedly pink.

The house was still when they went inside. Mom, probably, had left the kitchen light on so they wouldn't stumble about when they got in.

Christopher grabbed a bottle of wine from their room and went straight out to the back patio, while Benny rinsed wineglasses in the kitchen sink to bring out. Anna would have said a quick good-night and left them to it, but Benny wordlessly handed Anna a glass—a pointed, jabbing olive branch—and shrugged for her to join the two of them.

When she trailed her brother onto the patio and slid the glass door shut, Christopher looked over and let out a harsh laugh.

Through the window, Anna saw the door to Justin and Nicole's room shutting, the light going out.

Christopher filled his own cup, then Benny's, then put down the bottle with his fingers still threaded around it.

He smiled at Anna. "Where's *your* wine?"

Anna sensed that he was waiting for her to turn to Benny, to appeal to him for help.

She didn't oblige. She smiled back. "I'm all out."

Benny started to fill her glass.

Christopher yanked the bottle away from Benny, spilling some onto the table, never breaking eye contact with Anna. "I bought this. I'm not your daddy."

"Woooooow," Anna muttered.

"What's mine isn't yours. That's not how the real world works, beyond this weird little bubble you've set up for yourself. You're not going to steal my prom. I'll tell you that much."

Anna laughed, startled—how could she not? quote of the week!—and stood. "Yeah, I'm going to call it a night."

"Wait," Benny said, lightly touching her waist.

"I don't want any wine," Anna said. "It's fine."

She didn't. Honestly. What she wanted was for things to be normal with Benny again, and this was not helping.

"The Great Queen Anna says it's fine!" Christopher laughed, jostling the patio table. How was he this drunk? He hadn't seemed it on the train—but maybe that was just in comparison to Nicole. "Say what you really want, Your Highness, tell the truth. You want me gone, don't you? I see it. I see you glaring, you're not smooth."

Benny glanced between them anxiously. "Christopher—"

"You want me to go? Because I don't play by your family rules?" Christopher stood, trying to be nose-to-nose with Anna, she sensed, but limited by the table between them. "Because I don't bow down to you like everybody else?"

"I mean this in the nicest possible way?" Anna backed off, tightrope careful. "You are having a fight with yourself right now."

Benny stroked Christopher's shoulder. "Yeah, hon, just calm—"

Christopher whapped his hand away. "I am calm. I don't care, I don't take it personally. It's not about me." He swallowed a burp. "It's Anna's . . . fucked-up . . . *twin complex*. Right?"

Benny shook his head, not looking at either of them.

"You just want to have your little claws dug in, don't you? Right? You can't stand it when there's anyone else he listens to."

At long last, Christopher turned away, slinking back into his chair to slurp at his wine. Anna's shock made her miss that small window of possible escape before he called out again.

"That's why he moved to Philly. You know that, right? To get away from you."

Anna stared at Benny now. He made a show of sipping wine through white lips, looking away as if fascinated by the pitch-black view.

She remembered a night seven years ago, almost as tense as this one. It was back in the noisy East Village apartment she and Benny used to share. A blowout fight without shouting, with hardly even any talking. Benny had looked just like this, white-faced, sipping wine through taut lips. Anna had told him to take the job. It was a better school, better pay, and he'd always hated New York City, let's be honest, he'd only moved there to be with her. When he asked her to move to Pennsylvania with him, she'd laughed, sure he was joking, and seen the hurt work through him, seen him bury it deep inside his stomach like a smooth round stone.

Apparently he hadn't passed it yet.

"Nailed it," Anna said to Christopher. "You're right. I should try to be less clingy. And with that, I bid you both good night."

Anna had aimed for finality in her tone, but of course Christopher had to have the last word, calling a faux-cheery "Good night!" to her back.

And then, as she slid the glass door open, not even in an undertone, he added:

"Cunt."

Benny was up. Instantly. Shoving him, hard. "What the *fuck* was that?"

Even Christopher looked slightly dazed at having said it.

"Apologize to my sister. Right now. Or I swear to God." Benny's hands were shaking.

Anna's too. She shoved them onto her hips and waited, unblinking.

"Sorry." Christopher recovered himself, smiled even more viciously. "Bit too far."

Anna rolled her eyes, turned away before either of them could see tears starting to needle them, slid the door shut a little harder than was strictly necessary, ignored the sounds of the continued argument coming from the patio, her father's snores, stifled grunts and shuffles issuing from Nicole's room, and took herself off to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Compared to the scene she'd just left, it felt neutral in the villa, ascetic, as unemotional as she'd pretended to be.

The thing was, he'd gotten to her. He had. It had sucked up all her energy to pretend he hadn't.

She considered showering, scrubbing off all that ugliness, but she was too on edge, waiting for a different set of clouds to roll in. Through her anger at Christopher, she sensed another threat drawing closer. A sort of herded feeling, like she'd been corralled into here.

Like this was where it wanted her.

Sure enough, midway through brushing her teeth, it shifted. The air, the weight, all of it.

She groaned through her foaming mouth and kept brushing.

The lights went off. At the switch. *Click.*

Anna spat in the general direction of the sink. "Very funny."

It was harder to get the words out than she would have liked. Fear was a tightening scarf around her neck. She groped for the faucet and went through the motions in perfect blackness, rinsing her toothbrush, swiping at her lips, putting everything back in her toiletry case, not rushing or trembling or fleeing. Hell no, not her.

Anna gritted her teeth and reached for the light switch, winced in the sudden glare and turned to the mirror to make sure she hadn't left spittle on her face.

It was behind her.

Indistinct, face obscured, yellow gown, yellow hair, lank and dirty and long, breathing on her shoulder.

Anna fled. Slowly. Pretending she wasn't, that she didn't care, that she wasn't completely terrified. One casual step, then another, into the kitchen. She needed a glass of water, she decided, before bed, good idea, stay hydrated.

She could feel it following her.

Feel it stopping behind her at the kitchen sink, as she ran the tap. *Feel* its breath on her. Hot, moist air—and then it became solid.

A wet slug. Sliding up her neck, to her ear.

Licking her.

Anna swallowed back her scream but dropped the glass of water into the sink and lurched forward, away, so quickly her hip slammed into the

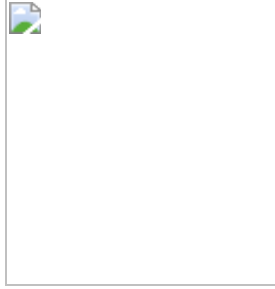
kitchen counter, and the pain from it sent her down onto one knee, eyes streaming.

By the time she'd heaved herself upright again, seconds, maybe less, the air had lightened.

Anna cricked her shoulders straight and squinted into the reflection of the faucet before she turned, knowing the Florentine lady was gone. Still trembling at the prospect of being wrong.

"Fuck." She refilled her water, hands shaking hard. "Yeah. You're scary. I'll give you that."

She downed her drink. Then she grabbed some paper towels and scrubbed her neck so hard her skin started to pill.



THURSDAY

The mosquitoes were back that night, invisible, noisy, ravenous.

Anna achieved unconsciousness between bouts of slapping at her own ears, and sank instantly into a vision of that young Italian man at the window.

A boy, really. A child.

When he turned to her this time, he said nothing. Just turned and walked through the open doorway. She followed him out—not a decision, just gliding, like she was latched into a theme park ride. Wearing a gown.

It hung heavy on her, a thick, dank sort of fabric penning in the heat, like slabs of raw bacon against her.

She was dressed for a party, she saw. The villa was full of . . . how else to put it but *revelers*.

Young children, adults, one with bright pink hair, a very old man, dancing to no music at all, falling over, drinking, stuffing their faces with dripping brown peaches and moldy bread and fly-laden meat, all of them absolutely shit-faced, including Anna.

The villa was small and then palatial, depending on the blink. Everyone swirled, in constant queasy motion, until they all seemed to form a child's spin art. Here a beautiful dark-haired woman, and there was Dad, there Justin, letting Nicole slap him again and again.

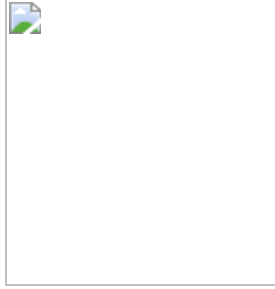
Nausea pulsed in Anna's stomach, swelling in time to the tuneless beat, but she couldn't close her eyes or stop herself from moving. She swiped grease from her face and looked down to see herself clutching a raw chicken carcass, cradling it like a doll. A child ran past with shrill laughter to where Waverly and Mia were sitting. Waverly turned to Anna with desperate pleading in her eyes, but Anna was already dancing away to where Christopher lay prone on the tiles, squirming in ecstasy as Benny

walked over his chest. He'd spilled red wine all over his face. It formed a spreading puddle around him.

Anna felt vaguely that she should stop this, but then a hand was in hers, and she was dancing away with the young man from the window, the beautiful youth.

“What’s happening?” Anna asked.

He couldn’t answer. His mouth was spewing blood.



THE ANNA TEST

Sunshine slapped Anna awake. Her shutters were open, the window wide, though she'd closed it last night in a vain attempt to keep the mosquitoes at bay. She sat up, stretched, and scratched and scratched. She peeled off her T-shirt to reveal a body evenly devoured, riddled with red spots, even in the areas that should have been covered by the bedsheet. Even on her *eyelid*, the fuckers. She must have scratched herself even in the night—as she got dressed, she saw a deep gouge on the inside of one arm. She kept her fingernails trimmed short, so it must have taken real intent for her to injure herself that badly and not wake up.

She looked at the window and the dream came back, so vivid that she felt bile rise in her throat, acrid, tinged with red wine. Man. She really did overdo it last night. Her hip was blotched blue from hitting the kitchen counter. She didn't want to think hard about the why of that until she'd successfully emptied her bladder and brushed her teeth and made it out of that cursed bathroom in one sane piece.

The air felt murky when she joined everybody at the table, but it was the usual Pace family murk, bad moods combining to form a full low-pressure weather pattern.

The vortex appeared to be Benny. He stood slumped against the kitchen table, while Mom and Nicole spoke to him in tones so hushed with sympathy that Anna couldn't make out what they were saying, only Dad's grunt from behind his barrier of a paperback, "Let's not let it spoil the trip."

"Good morning," Anna ventured, more a question than a greeting.

Benny's head lifted enough for her to see his eyes, dark as fetid puddles as he fixed her with a glare. Confusion knocked Anna back into her dream, the blur of it, but only for a heartbeat, because then Benny was shoving himself away from Mom's comforting hand and stalking out of the room.

"The hell?" Anna mumbled, staring after him.

“Watch your mouth,” Mom snapped, stomping past her into the kitchen. “There are children in this house, for *goodness*’ sake.”

Said children were down in the extension, giggling together.

Anna turned to Nicole, busy clearing up breakfast plates, for explanation, but her sister seemed sulkily determined to avoid eye contact, so she plunked herself into an empty chair and stared fixedly at Dad.

It took a full minute, maybe more, for him to peer up over his book at her. “Christopher left.”

“Left? For where?” Anna squinted through the front window and saw their rental car still in the drive.

Dad hmphed, noncommittal. “Think it’s a breakup situation.”

It was clear from Dad’s forceful page-turn that this was the limit of his patience for this conversation. Anna got up and left him in peace.

Nicole swept past, muttering, “Help yourself to whatever’s left in the kitchen, but there isn’t much. It’s all gone bad. Moldy.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, I just can’t explain it!” Mom called out, defensive. She seemed to take every complaint personally, as if she herself stood accused of shutting off the fridge in the middle of the night so all the food would rot.

“What’s the deal with Christopher?” Anna asked in a low voice.

Nicole cocked her head. “You tell me, Anna.”

Then she tromped downstairs, calling, “Hold your horses, missy,” to Waverly, who was whining that she couldn’t find her racer-stripe swimsuit.

“He left a note.”

Anna turned to see Justin lounging on the sofa, scrolling the news on his phone. He was astonishingly good at blending into the furniture. Anna wished she had that skill.

Justin reached out to give the coffee table a tap, and Anna saw a folded piece of unlined paper there. Even before she opened the note, her heart gave a lurch.

It was coarse and thick. Ripped from her sketch pad.

Christopher had gotten right to the point.

I’m saying goodbye now, Ben.

Don’t bother calling. I won’t pick up.

Pretty obvious I haven’t passed the Anna test.

Enjoy the rest of your life in her shadow.

Christopher

Anna had started to reread it a third time—something fundamental was needling her, beyond the blame for their breakup that Christopher had laid at her feet like a parting gift—when Nicole’s hand appeared from nowhere to snatch the note away.

“This is *Benny’s*,” Nicole hissed. “I don’t think he would appreciate you gawking.”

Anna looked at her sister instead. She’d changed into a bikini and flip-flops. Her pink manicure was frayed and peeled. She’d been biting her nails since yesterday. Her head looked better, though.

“So what’s on the agenda today?” Anna asked, safer ground. “Given . . . everything.”

Her sister looked torn as to whether she should respond at all, but she succumbed to a sigh. “No change. Chill-out day. We’ll go to San Gimignano tomorrow.”

Justin put his phone to the side and sat up, head cocked. “You sure?”

“What do you mean, am I sure?” Nicole folded Christopher’s breakup note into tiny triangles and tossed it back onto the coffee table.

“Thought the itinerary said San Jimmy-hoosit was Friday.”

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

The girls took the steps up two at a time, dressed in pink and purple bikinis with Disney characters on them.

“Yeah, so, it’s Friday, hon,” Justin brandished his phone as evidence.

Nicole had already turned away, but Anna caught a glimpse of the date before the screen blinked out again. Friday, August 9.

She could swear today was Thursday.

Because yesterday was very obviously Wednesday.

They’d gone to Florence. Wednesday was Florence Day, and so today was the ever-alternating Chill Out at the Villa Day. Anna turned dizzily to Nicole, ready to join her side of this debate, but Nic was down on one knee, fussing with the girls.

“You have got to stop itching those bites! How many times—?”

“I did stop!” Waverly protested, but Anna could see telltale scratches down her bare stomach, where there didn’t even seem to be that many welts.

Nicole turned Mia around for inspection too. She had two lines running down the backs of her legs, thin but not shallow. And she wasn’t the only one.

“Um. Nicole?” Anna started to reach for her.

Justin stood first, rattling the coffee table. “You’ve got cuts, hon. On your back.”

Three stripes, down the length of Nicole’s back, like something had scraped at her with a gardening fork.

Justin touched one, gingerly, and Nicole drew in a hiss of pain, then swatted him off and sprinted for the downstairs mirror to see for herself.

“When did we go to Florence?” Anna asked Justin. Her throat was tight.

“Yesterday. Wednesday.” He blinked down as Mia tugged on him.

“But yesterday was Thursday?” Anna laughed, desperate. “This isn’t adding up.”

“No.” Justin squinted, like just forming words took effort. “I was . . . sorry, hang on, Mia, I was correcting myself. We went Wednesday.”

“So then, what was yesterday?” Anna laughed, at a loss as to what else to do. “What did we do yesterday?”

Justin just stared at her, his expression deeply, solidly blank.

Waverly groaned with impatience. “Can we *please* go to the pool, Daddy?”

The kids were crankier than usual.

“Yup.” Justin snapped out of his stupor, grabbing for the sunscreen bottle on the coffee table. “Your mother says it’s a chill-out day, I am not gonna question it. Come on, line up for lotion, you know the drill.”

Mom and Dad’s bedroom door slammed downstairs. The girls flinched.

“Bob?” Mom said from the kitchen, turning around.

Dad was still sitting at the kitchen table. He looked up from his paperback, incurious, just as Nicole careered back upstairs, brandishing her own illuminated cellphone like a hot poker.

“It’s Friday.” She looked like she’d been slapped.

Justin looked between Anna and Nicole. “I’m not sure why this is so controversial.”

Anna spread her fingers, incredulous. “Because yesterday was—”

“Jesus Christ, we’re meant to be on the road by now.” Nicole swept the girls into her bare arms. “Let’s suit up for San Gimignano, guys! I.e., not swimsuits.”

Anna grabbed Nicole’s wrist. “I thought it was Thursday too. I was sure.”

“I’m just a little confused.” Nicole shuddered, bumps breaking out on her half-naked body. She shook Anna off. “It’s the concussion. Maybe. I need to get dressed. Come on, girls, let’s motor, chop-chop!”

She’d nearly successfully shoved a slumped Waverly toward the stairs when Mia let out a wail and threw herself onto the ground, moaning, “I wanna swim, you said swim, I want the pool, it’s no fair!”

Justin wince-smiled. “How important is this outing exactly?”

“We’re not staying home today. *Yesterday* was Villa Day.”

But it wasn’t!

Anna suspected if she tried to say that yet again, it would come out as a shriek.

“I don’t want to . . . waste . . .” Nicole licked her lips to plaster a smile in place. “Right, well, fine, keep the swimsuits on, we’ll go to the beach. How does that sound, girls? Get out and see the Mediterranean?”

Anna remembered earlier in the vacation, Nicole explaining that she hadn’t scheduled any beach time because she was well-informed that the Italian seaside was laden with thieves and overpriced tourist traps and more stress than it was worth as a day trip. Now she acted like a boat was waiting there to carry her away. If there was, Anna would jump aboard.

She wanted to press her sister about yesterday—she felt like all rationality was slipping loose around her, and Nicole, of all people, was the last bastion—but tears had started to form in Nicole’s eyes.

Justin caught that too.

“Let’s go talk outside for a sec,” he suggested, and Nicole let herself be led away into the front courtyard, her fingers pressed to the bridge of her nose.

The girls looked to each other.

“What happened yesterday, Waverly?” Anna crouched low. Tried to keep her voice from going shrill. “What did we do? Can you remember?”

“You went to Florence, and we went to the water park,” Waverly said, right away, though she looked a little bewildered, questioning herself. “My head hurts.”

“Mine too,” Mia said, looking a little green.

Even so, Anna stood upright, triumphant. She nearly bolted immediately to find Benny, find Mom, take a vote, prove the date wrong.

But then Mia piped up, “*I* remember yesterday, Auntie Anna. We played Uno and I won one time and you won lots of times, and Benny pretended he

was mad, but then he beat you and that was the last game, and then we watched iPad and we swam in the pool, and you were Jenny Bluetooth.”

“Greenteeth,” Waverly corrected wrongly. All the confusion had cleared from her eyes. She tugged at her sister’s hand. “Come on, let’s look for the cat.”

“Someone came and took all the cats,” Anna murmured. She remembered the old woman in the beat-up car. When was that? Days ago? Years?

“Not all of them.” Waverly tossed over her shoulder, “We’re looking for the inside cat. The one that scratches at the doors.”

Anna’s back went cold.

She slid away from the wall and followed the children downstairs.

Mom and Dad’s door slammed shut again. All on its own.

Waverly ignored it.

“Kitty!” She scrambled onto her knees in the dark of their bedroom, shutters drawn, slid under the bed, arms long.

Anna fought the urge to run in and drag her back out.

“Here, Kitty?”

Benny walked past on his way to the back patio, clutching his laptop to his chest.

Sensing him coming, Mom darted from the kitchen. “Sure I can’t fix you anything, honey? Anything you feel like eating? Some toast?”

“Toast sounds good,” he murmured, more to appease Mom than out of hunger, Anna suspected.

He looked sad. Angry. A little queasy. But not confused. Not scared.

Anna used all her remaining daily allotment of self-control to restrain herself from physically pinning her brother down and forcing him to admit that something deeply fucked-up was happening.

Instead, she sidled into his path with a look of vague contrition. “You doing okay?”

He scowled past her. “You’re seriously asking me that right now.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

His eyes darted to hers more quickly than she’d expected—too quickly for her to pretend the offer had been completely heartfelt.

Benny laughed under his breath. “Don’t put yourself out.”

He left his laptop on the deck table and stalked away down the steps to the pool, and she wanted to shout after him that there was a lot going on at

the moment, more than just his asshole boyfriend making a French exit, but then the sun glinted off the logo on Benny's MacBook.

Anna sat down, picked at the corners of her fingers, and opened it up.

His password hadn't changed. *Loumax2*. Her middle name merged into his.

The date on the top read "Fri 9 Aug."

Waverly poked her head through the doorway. "How do you say 'cat' here?"

"*Gatto*," Anna tried, throat dry, then coughed and said it again. "*Gatto*. Is it cold inside? If you feel cold, don't stay in the room, okay?"

They didn't answer. Kept calling for the cat in high, sweet Italian.

"Be careful," she muttered, running her hand through her sweaty hair.

She was grateful to be on the patio. She didn't want to do this inside the house. Even the café table out here felt too close to the villa, but she needed proximity to Wi-Fi.

"Coffee, anybody?" Mom called, and when nobody answered, Anna muttered back, "Yeah, sure," and continued typing.

Monteperso. Villa Taccola.

The first page of entries was what one might expect—house-rental sites, photos, reviews, and then, right down there at the bottom, an odd one.

A British blogger, a young woman—*LucyLife*. Anna could tell right away that this would be a slightly different account of staying at the villa from all the blandly glowing reviews on the other sites. It was from more than a decade ago, for one thing, an old WordPress page featuring posts from various locations, some exotic, others less so, mostly based around bargain solo travel, luxury on a dime, that kind of thing.

Villa Taccola was the top post, as it happened. The last one.

Mom set down a cup of coffee for her on the table before continuing downstairs with Benny's toast.

Anna blinked at the cup. Touched the handle. Didn't pick it up.

LucyLife. She'd probably migrated to Instagram or TikTok or whatever the new thing was.

Anna sipped her coffee. Hot, black, bitter. It stung.

She scrolled until she found a picture of the blogger. Lucy Montrose, head cocked way over so her blue bobbed hair dangled onto her shoulder. "Manchester girl with a restless heart."

Now to the post. Villa Taccola. The photos of the house showed it in much shabbier times. No extension. A wooden deck in the back with steep steps down to a mossy old pool.

She must have come in before the current owner, Anna guessed, gotten the rental for a song, to be able to stay here on her own and then blog about it.

The post itself was positive enough—general descriptions of Tuscany, of Italian food. Not particularly well-written.

Anna, impatient, scrolled down to see an embedded image, a photo still from that Casper the Friendly Ghost movie from the nineties, after which Lucy referenced her “Italian roommates.” Anna wondered dully if the blogger was sharing costs with other travelers, but the thought felt rote. Pointlessly skeptical.

Lucy was very obviously writing about ghosts.

My Italian roommates opened most of the windows while I was out exploring, but I wasn’t fussed. The air flowed straight in, winds from the old vineyard. They know best, having lived here for however many years! Three hundred? More?

This Lucy person didn’t seem particularly bothered by the idea of bunking in a haunted house, more charmed than anything, which made Anna chug her coffee, grouchy at this blogger showing her up. She was about ready to click out, but decided to at least make it to the end of this rambling post. How did this person have so many subscribers? Anna was witnessing a relic from the dawn of the influencer age right here.

Only section I haven’t explored is the tower, which I’ve been told in strictest terms not to enter. It’s calling me, though, and what kind of chronicler would I be if I didn’t peek into absolutely every corner? I’ve located the door and the old key awaits me in the utility cupboard. Pics to come once I get over my goody-goody upbringing. 😊

The door to the tower.

Calling her.

And that was it. Anna clicked around in vain for the next post, the aftermath, if there was one, but this was it. Nothing else in the sidebar.

Anna scrolled down to peek at the comments. Clicked “newest,” arbitrarily.

CabanaCatie Can’t believe it’s been four years. Thinking of you still, Lucy Luce. xx

Julia Peters RIP Lucy, the world misses your spark!

MrPapas Like if you’re just here for the suicide porn.

Anna felt like bugs were crawling on her. For once, they weren’t.

She clicked away from the page, from the increasingly vile comments, and googled the blogger's name, hoping against hope for that TikTok account.

Instead, a brief obituary.

Services back in Manchester. No cause of death. The date was a few weeks after that last post.

When she talked about going up into the tower.

Anna tried "Lucy Montrose," with "Monteperso."

What came up was in Italian, news articles, a local constabulary report that when she clicked on it came up as "404 Not Found." She got the gist of it from the search page, though. This girl, a popular travel blogger, had ended her career, and her life, inside Villa Taccola.

The second page of search results, a mere click, sent Anna straight into the paranormal Web, blogs with such ugly designs they hurt Anna to look at them, featuring stories of the notorious ghosts of Monteperso, the legend of that one bad villa, you know, the old one up on the hill, La Dama Bianca the locals call her, a deadly ghost, they say, claiming victim after victim over the years, though of course it can't be proven, but what can? It could simply have been a lovely spot people visit to off themselves, like that Japanese suicide forest. A vortex of negative energy. A crossing of ley lines. There were various theories. There were *podcasts*, for fuck's sake.

And several other police reports.

"What are you looking at?" Waverly's voice tickled Anna's shoulder.

Anna slammed the laptop shut and turned to see her nieces standing behind her, Mia clutching the orange cat.

"He was in the house?" Anna asked, incredulous.

"He was scratching at the door to the tower." Waverly looked warily past Anna at the closed laptop.

"To get in or out?" Anna's heart rate ratcheted up another notch.

The cat blinked at her. She blinked back.

"Out." Mia kissed the top of its head. "We saved you, buddy. You're my ___"

It gave a quick wriggle loose and darted to the patio wall, where it perched licking its back feet, trying to recharge its dignity.

"Wasn't the tower door locked?" Anna asked. "How did you . . . ?"

But Mia had already skipped off, distracted by the return of her father, announcing a "New plan, gang!," and Waverly's attention was still fixed on

the laptop.

Waverly's eyes moved slowly to Anna's. "She died? That girl?"

Anna didn't have time to think up a kid-appropriate reply before Nicole came out with Mia, standing sentry next to Justin, smiling at the kids like a wax sculpture. Nic had her arms crossed tight, fingers white-knuckled, but Anna could still see them trembling, and she felt a fierce and unfamiliar urge: to throw her body onto her sister's, hold her tight, brace together for impact.

"We should *all* go out." Anna said it to Nicole, broadcasting her meaning with a stare: *Your instincts are right, Nicole. This place is fucked.*

But Nicole had looked away, and Benny, climbing the steps with his empty plate, paused, thinking she meant him.

She turned to her brother.

"We shouldn't stay here." All her thoughts were caveman sentences now, blunt with fear. "Not here. I found something. I'll tell you. Just not . . . Let's just go."

She couldn't explain to him the rationale behind the web search, or what she found, or the vertiginous feeling of the house behind her, or her abject panic at the prospect of even going inside in search of shoes. Could she ask one of her nieces to grab them for her? Was she that much of a coward? Was there any meaningful difference between cowardly and smart?

It knew that she knew. She could feel it looking at her. Daring her to go inside.

"Benny, would you grab me some shoes?" she asked.

His eyes elided hers as he slunk inside without answering. His fists were clenched by his sides like he was steeling himself to go in. He felt it too—the danger—and he didn't even know what she knew. He'd seen her, though. La Dama. Bad enough to know the place was haunted. Worse to have seen it. Worse still to know what it led to.

"I'll grab you some shoes, Anna," Justin murmured, glancing at her in pity.

"Thanks," Anna said.

Waverly was still staring at Anna, unblinking. Under her vacation tan, all the blood seemed to have left her face.

"Let's go, Wayvers," Justin called behind him. "Choppity-chop!"

"Go on," Anna said weakly.

Waverly swallowed, went inside, fists balled, white-knuckled like her mother's.

Anna intended to wait for her shoe delivery right there on the patio, but couldn't. Too close to the house. She didn't need the Wi-Fi anymore, she needed to be away, off away. Walking to the front drive from the back patio would have meant bare feet on razor-sharp pine needles, so she fled to the pool, hoping Justin would find her there.

She sat on the edge of a deck chair watching the white morning light slither across the surface of the swimming pool. It seemed to her that shapes were taking form, congealing into something coherent, and she didn't want to see what they would become. Floating corpses. Something different this time? She didn't trust her eyes, so she shut them and pressed her fingers to her aching temples and breathed. Tried to. In. Out.

She was not inside the villa, she was safe, she . . .

She felt something behind her.

There wasn't a sound, not footsteps, not anything to announce Justin had come with the shoes, only the feeling of movement.

Anna turned, trembling—and nearly burst out laughing. Three Italian kids stood at the edge of the little copse of trees lining the property. Two girls, one boy, tan and feral, just like Mia and Waverly had described. The neighbors!

Anna gave a rueful wave and the youngest waved back with a shy smile. The oldest, a girl, said something, quickly—a question, Anna thought, but she couldn't make out the local dialect. Her Italian wasn't strong enough for kid voices and regional slang.

The girl asked again, pointing to the house, so Anna took a guess and answered in plain old Duolingo Italian. "Are you looking for the American girls? They're outside, around the corner there. If you want to play before we go out, there's probably a little time."

She smiled.

The Italian children stared back, blank. She must have fumbled it. The boy shook his head and pointed again. Anna followed his finger upward. The tower.

She looked back at the kids, remembering Waverly telling her sister off for making fun of their clothes. Mia wasn't wrong, to be fair. They looked like a postcard of Tuscan pastoral life, all natural linens and bare feet, even

on the pine needles. Their feet were tough from a run-around life, these Monteperso *ragazzi*.

But. No.

Now she saw that their feet were bleeding. Not the soles. The beds of the toenails.

Oh God. It swept her in a swift wave, her muscles clenching, skin gone clammy cold. Her body knew long before her brain caught up.

The drop in air pressure. An absolute vacuum of hope.

It was death. That was the feeling. Death so thick you could breathe it in.

Anna slid off the edge of the lawn chair, her hands scrabbling for purchase on the iron frame, and stared at the children like staring would save her.

It wasn't just their toes now. The children raised their arms, straining for her, their maimed feet locked in place at the edge of the wood's shadow. Their noses trickled red, the corners of their eyes, and then their mouths spilled over, like the young man in the dream. They looked like him, like his family. His brother and sisters. She was dreaming now, she must be, she needed to scream and wake up, except when she tried, no sound would come out of her clenched throat.

They looked more sad than frightened, horribly resigned, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to help them or kill them more fully, stab and strangle and make them gone.

"There you are! Jesus."

Justin's voice startled her into blinking, at last, and it was enough.

They were gone. Never there.

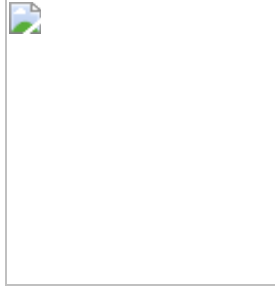
Justin stared at Anna sitting on the cobbled pool deck with her knees tucked tight, right beside a perfectly good lawn chair. He didn't comment on it. "We couldn't find you."

Anna's nose was streaming. She swiped at it and looked down. No red, just snot.

"Thought the house ate you."

He smiled, to signal he didn't really mean it. To reassure himself.

Anna took the shoes he offered. Didn't smile back. "Not yet."



SPREADING STAIN

The capacity for voicing words in any language shriveled up in Anna during the hour that followed. She focused her mental energy on tucking her hands into pockets and under her thighs so no one could see them shaking, breathing so that her teeth wouldn't chatter, focusing her glassy eyes just enough to know when to avoid her mother's loaded glances. An illusion of normalcy. A Friday on vacation in Tuscany. How lovely, all of this.

They went to San Gimignano after all. Had lunch at a restaurant. It was picturesque, in the modern sense as well as the original. Crumbling walls. High elevation. Mountain views in every direction. Everyone was on edge, so no one got mad at Anna for her silence. She didn't eat more than a few bites of the panino she'd ordered. Felt like she might vomit it back up. Didn't stop her from ordering wine, though, and then a second, larger one, after she'd downed the first.

"We could go to the evening market in Volterra." Nicole was on her phone throughout the meal, scrolling and tapping, looking for more things to do, places to go that were not Villa Taccola. "Or we could pop over to Cinque Terre? A little drive?"

Mom was oblivious. "Let's head on back, Nicky. It's my turn to cook tonight and I've got this nice fresh—"

"No," Nicole blurted.

Mom leaned back in her chair, startled.

Nicole swallowed. Justin laid a hand on her back, and she breathed.

"We're going to explore some more, Mom. Only a few more days in Italy, you know? You go back, though. You don't have to be glued to us."

Mom looked hurt. "Well, if that's what—"

Anna gripped the stem of her wineglass. "*Nobody* should be going back to that house."

Everyone stared at Anna. As if this was a strange thing to say, as if it wasn't the most rational response right now.

Dad set down his fork. "Care to elaborate?"

It was a dare, that question. Most questions from Dad were. This one meant, *Ready to see how pissed off I can get?*

Anna was always ready.

"It's not right, that villa. It's not a place we should be. I think we should pack up, quickly, and go stay somewhere else."

Dad went *Looney Tunes* red, but Mom was the first to snap.

"I don't know why you're trying to stir things up, Anna," she spat. "I gave up trying to figure that out a long time ago, goodness knows, a *long* time! There is absolutely nothing wrong with where we're staying."

She was addressing the rest of the table now, and her tone had warmed right up.

"It's perfectly lovely and clean and the beds are very comfortable. Don't you think the—?"

Anna felt anger flare inside her, slapping awake the dormant parts of her brain. "Did you even google the place, Mom? Beyond the rental site?"

"There were excellent reviews, and I for one—"

"Well, I googled it. This morning. It's the local haunted house, like, famously haunted. La Dama Bianca they call the ghost, the White—"

Now it was Nicole who shoved up from the table and screamed, "*Shush!*"

Her pupils were tiny specks in her irises. She moved behind Mia and clamped her hands over her ears, while Waverly looked between Anna and Nicole in queasy fascination.

"You will stop scaring them," Nicole hissed at Anna. "*And* me."

She took the girls firmly by the hand, one after the other, heaved them up out of their chairs, and dragged them away from the table.

Waverly, stumbling, asked, "Where are we going?"

"Home," Nicole snapped. "The villa."

"We've lost! A day!" Anna shouted, swiveling in her chair so hard her ribs wrenched. "*No one* remembers Thursday—don't you think that's a little worrying?"

"*I* remember it." Mom whapped the table like she was spanking it. "Nicole made that lovely pasta. She . . ."

Anna saw a look of bewilderment sweep Mom's face as she reached for her purse and started away. It might have raised red flags for dementia if they weren't all suffering from it.

Anna looked to Benny.

His face had drawn in. He still wouldn't meet her eye.

"Forget Christopher," she sputtered. "Just for a second. We can deal with whatever blame you want to attach to me later. When we're home. Going back into that house is a mistake. You know it is! You've seen—"

"Just." Benny slid his chair away from the table. "Stop."

As he followed the rest of the family through the emptying piazza, Anna rubbed at her headache. Thinking better of it, she lurched for her wineglass, the rest of the large Chianti she'd ordered, but wound up knocking Benny's unfinished one with her elbow.

The glass toppled. Cracked against a bread plate. Red seeped over the edge, onto the white tablecloth.

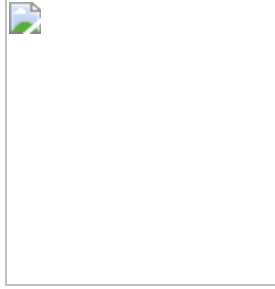
She remembered Christopher, smirking over his wineglass, eager to see the train wreck Benny had promised. If he'd stayed one more day, he'd have gotten his wish.

Anna stared down at the spreading stain.

And she remembered another red stain, a dreamed one, spreading too fast to be real, making crimson patterns on white fabric, seeping into the grout between the tiles.

She remembered Christopher *not* smirking. Not talking.

Only gasping like a banked fish.



YOU SEE HOW NICE IT IS

They'd taken two cars out, so Anna was forced to sit in the back of Mom and Dad's rental with Benny, who found a way to turn away from her the entire ride. Mom talked incessantly about how they'd fill the next few days, all the lovely plans, making sure to get in a lot of positive comments about the villa and the five-star review she'd give it once they were back in Ohio.

Anna looked out the window until she started to recognize the roads, the way back, the turnoff to Monteperso's central piazza ahead.

They would continue past it, up the hill to the villa.

Anna felt her stomach lurch.

She gripped the door handle and leaned forward. "Dad, do me a favor and drop me off in Monteperso."

He didn't reply. Continued past the turnoff, as if she'd said nothing.

"Just . . . let me out, please?" She forced a smile. It hurt. "There's an errand I need to run."

Benny looked at her.

Dad sped up.

Anna's heart flailed like a drowning fly in a cup of water. "What the hell, Dad, just stop the car. Stop the car, and I'll get out!"

"You will not derail this vacation, young lady." Dad's voice was a scrape of gravel. "Do you have any idea how much this trip cost? Didn't think so. I came here for a nice time with my family. *Relaxing. A relaxing getaway.* Not this. So you're going to sit back, you're going to enjoy yourself, and you are going keep your mouth shut for the rest of the week. That is final."

Anna sat back. Kept her mouth shut.

So did Benny. No defense of her. No reproach. Just silence.

She breathed fire until they turned onto the villa's long drive and passed the stake where the goat stood tied.

Dad slammed on the brakes, cursing.

Anna stared past him. The orange cat lay dozing in the road. Not such an inside cat after all.

It stood, slowly, and arched its back, refusing to even acknowledge the car, let alone budge.

"*Grazie mille.*" Anna scrambled out of the car and slammed the door.

"What the hell, Anna?" Oh, so *now* Benny could talk.

She didn't answer.

She knew the way to Monteperso. She wished Justin had brought out her sneakers this morning instead of these strappy sandals, but it was fine. She'd get where she was going, and where she was going was not back into that fucking house.

Anna wasn't sure what energy source propelled her down the road to Monteperso, a current pulling or hands pushing, only that she moved faster and faster until she was jogging along the scrubby verge, flinching and stumbling when bright cars sped past so close her ears stung. Rocks rolled into her arches and out and she felt the long grass cutting the insect bites on her ankles, a strange relief from the itching. And it was hot, lord above, as hot as ever. Sweat streamed between her shoulder blades, pooled into a hot tub in the small of her back, but she kept running until she got to the turnoff into the village—so much farther than it had seemed from the car—and stopped.

Hands on her knees. Catching her breath. *Fuck.*

Another car careened around the corner from the north-south road. Anna ignored it until she saw it reverse toward her. She straightened, swiping at the sweat on her forehead, realizing how deranged she must look.

It was the Uber that had brought her to the villa that first day.

You sure you want to go to Villa Taccola? the driver had said.

Now he rolled down his window, grinned at her like an old friend, and said, in English, "Where you going? I take you there. For free, no charge, free."

Anna's feet were cut into ribbons from the sandal straps. She leaned against the car's roof, stretching out a stitch in her side, airing the sweat from her armpits.

“Do you know where the caretaker lives?” she asked. “The one who looks after Villa Taccola?”

The driver smiled, but his eyes went fuzzy as he mentally translated. Anna tried to cobble together the same question in Italian, and he interrupted, “*Mi dispiace, no*—I was thinking, but no, not sure exactly. Gianni will know. You want me take you to him?”

This was incredibly suspect, of course, a young male stranger taking her to meet another male stranger—for free, no cost!—but so much less ominous than everything else Anna had been dealing with this week that she climbed into the front passenger seat with not even half a second of hesitation.

“*Grazie*,” she said, and stuck her head out the open car window when they got moving, like a dog, eyes closed in rapture.

“You don’t like the house so well?” The driver laughed, uneasily. “La Dama Bianca, you see her?”

Anna pulled her head back through the window so quickly she cracked it on the roof.

“You know La Dama Bianca?” she asked in Italian. “Have you seen her?”

“Me, no.” He answered promptly in Italian, as if forgetting momentarily she was American. “My cousin swears to me he saw her. When we were small, before the house got fixed up, we dared each other to go to Villa Taccola, throw rocks at the tower. He says he saw her up there, but I don’t know how. There are no windows. He lies about everything, my cousin. Lots of people have seen her, though, and if they do . . .” He shook his head, then turned to wave to the men loitering outside the *tabaccheria*. “Not good.”

They waved back to him, unsmiling as ever.

He started to whistle, but stopped mid-tune to pick his story back up. “That was a long time ago, you know, nobody owned it, it was all locked up. It’s nice, now, isn’t it?”

Anna laughed, helpless. What could she say to that?

“New owner came in, not the British man, the one before, Genoese. He fixed it up, did a good job. You like it, the new section? I worked a few weeks on that job. We all did. Everybody.”

“Everybody? Like everybody in Monteperso?”

“Villa Taccola, yes, it is very important to the town. Better that we use tourists.”

Anna didn't answer. She watched as he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing hard.

“*Get* tourists, I mean,” he said, stiffly. “Tourists are important for the economy. In all of Italy.”

“*Certo*,” Anna said. *Sure*. “So you never saw La Dama Bianca.”

He stopped in front of the restaurant and pulled the parking brake, then leaned back with his arm stretched over Anna's headrest.

“No, I didn't see anything. I heard stories. People stay there too long, they get confused. And there were many little accidents while building. Things breaking, tools left on all night.” Sweat was dampening his curls. “Nothing too dangerous until he died.”

Anna's finger hovered over the seat-belt button. “Died?”

“The owner. Il Genoese.”

“How did he die?”

The driver raised his eyebrows. “You want to know?”

He looked surprised that she'd even asked. At her nod, he sighed, then wrapped his hands around his own neck and made a strangling motion, head lolling.

He grinned as he broke character. Anna didn't laugh along.

He pulled his arm back and rubbed the back of his neck, drawing inward. Realizing, probably, that he was not doing his part for local tourism. “It was better after that. For a long time, no trouble. Better in the town too. You see how nice it is. You like it, Monteperso?”

Anna wasn't sure what to say. She supposed now that she'd wanted to have a local back her up, say, “Yeah, you need to leave immediately so you don't all die,” but this wasn't quite it.

Why did she want to hear it? Validation, proof she was right? She could leave, herself, she could go pack and take off, but they'd stay and fume and rant about her.

It was more than that, though. She owed it to the rest of them to drag them out of danger. They were her family. Everybody kept telling her how important that was. And while the collective concept of the Paces as a family made Anna grind her teeth, when she pictured them individually—the children in particular—her heart beat faster with resolve. At the very least, she had to find out what was happening.

The driver squirmed in his seat, lapsing back into English. “Okay, you go see Gianni. He’ll help you.”

Anna took off her seat belt. “In there?”

“*Il ristorante, sì*, he owns it, you go, tell him Pietro said hello.”

Anna slunk out of the car, dizzied. Pietro the curly haired Uber driver gave a salute and a wink and drove away with the radio on, and that was it. If there’d been an ulterior motive, she still couldn’t tell what it was.

The restaurant wasn’t open yet—dinner service only today, she supposed—but she could see someone moving inside, through the dark glass of the window. She knocked on the door, stepped back, and waited.

The good-looking waiter from the other night answered, smiling quizzically.

Of course. His nephew.

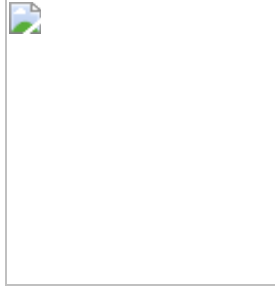
“Gianni?” she said.

He lifted a tanned arm to lean against the doorframe, all charm. “*Sì, bella?*”

She watched ruefully as he slowly remembered her, the American—from that dinner, from Villa Taccola—and his face clouded, broad shoulders drawing in.

“There’s a problem,” he said, in English. Not a question.

She answered in Italian. “I need to speak to your uncle. Please.”



THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

The caretaker lived in the southernmost part of Monteperso, along a winding residential side street with a pretty valley view marred by a busy road and a cinder-block supermarket. The house was painted rusted pink, tidy and bright, with window boxes bursting with pink and red peonies. It could have been a vacation rental in its own right, Anna thought. Maybe she should forgo probing for answers and simply ask to stay here for the rest of the trip.

She hung back while Gianni knocked on the door.

There was a long silence. Gianni's back stiffened. He shifted from one sneakered foot to the next, waiting.

Anna looked behind them. Saw a car roll slowly past, the window down. The driver was one of the men from the *tabac*. He sped up when he saw Anna looking.

And then the door opened.

The man who answered was Gianni's height, but slim as a broom and grim faced, even as he embraced his nephew, suggesting that this was his permanent expression on good days and bad.

As Gianni spoke to him in Italian so quick and low she couldn't make out even a single word, the caretaker's frown etched itself even deeper. The old man leaned past his nephew at last, taking Anna in with something like respect. His pinched eyes met hers, briefly; then he nodded and turned in to the house. Gianni waited to follow her inside, then took a seat by the front door he'd closed, like a museum guard.

The interior was abruptly dark, the southern windows shaded by a deep pergola, but it was neatly kept and surprisingly modern. It could have been a retirement condo anywhere, which was perhaps what made certain decorative elements stand out so jarringly now—red *cornicelli* hung over every doorway, braided garlic and other bundled herbs strung onto

windowsills with blue glass eyes dangling beneath, a metallic wall hanging shaped like an inverted tree, another an arm ending in an awkward fist. Gauzy paintings of Jesus and of the Pope served for framed art alongside copious crucifixes. Beside the small flat-screen TV, a glass box displayed what looked like no more than a tuft of animal hair and a tooth.

Shadows moved in one dark corner, another something on the sofa, and Anna's breath caught with panic before she realized they were cats, stretching. *Familiar* ones. She picked out four, five, certain at least three of them had sat in her lap on the patio of Villa Taccola when she'd first arrived. So this was where they went. Maybe that old woman was his wife. He cared for the house and she cared for the cats. Not kidnapping them. Saving them.

As the old man motioned for her to join him at his small round dining table, he shot off rapid-fire Italian to his nephew, who brought over a white candle from the collection on the window, lit it, and placed it in the center of the table. Anna worried fleetingly that he was planning a séance, but it felt like more of a protective flame.

He crossed himself before he drew a long breath and began to speak.

In thick Italian.

Gianni must have told his uncle that Anna spoke their language—her accent had been too convincing back at the restaurant—and now that the caretaker was holding forth, she didn't dare interrupt and ask him to speak more slowly or plainly. He didn't have any English. She remembered everybody whining about that. And she was imposing on him, she could see that. This was his home, his escape, protected at every opening, and she'd breached it.

He looked physically pained by the act of speaking, even as his gestures became animated and his voice took on the tone of a storyteller, musical and low. Anna sat hypnotized, watching the candle's light playing on the crags on the caretaker's narrow face, and she scarcely breathed for fear of missing the words she understood. For the first time this vacation, she truly wished she had her phone on hand, to record, to translate, but never mind that. Memory would have to do. The cats slunk around her ankles, onto her lap, off again. She felt she was dreaming this, that she would wake up and it would slip between her fingers like water, leaving her only with an even greater sense of menace and confusion. She clung on to the thread when she could find it. There were moments that made perfect sense, then she'd lose

them and she'd repeat one of the words he said in her mind to remember it later, blotting out everything he said next. And then there were things that made no sense. The phrase "*dobbiamo nutrire*," over and over, which Anna thought meant feed, we must feed, have to feed, but she couldn't connect that to the rest of it.

At last, the old man sat back. It was even darker in here. The candle was half burned down, uneven, spilling down one side.

Anna felt drained, sweaty, and slack, her backbone merging with the wood of her chair.

The caretaker nodded.

"*Mi dispiace*," he said. He reached for her hands. "*Perdona, perdona.*"

She held on to him, fervent. "No, no. *Grazie.*"

It's not your fault, she wanted to say, but she wasn't confident that that was true and couldn't find the words in Italian anyway. Her mind felt sapped of all it had ever learned, and she didn't want to forget any of the flimsy scraps of what he'd told her. What she thought he'd said.

Sensing an ending, Anna let go of his dry hands and stood. She turned back to the corner where Gianni had been sitting, but he was gone. He must have slipped back to his restaurant while they were speaking. Nearly time for them to open, Anna supposed. It felt strange to think of something so normal, so cheerful, so directed at the continuation of life as a restaurant.

You eat to sustain your body, you gather for the joy of it, you go out and go on.

Restaurants feed you.

And what about Villa Taccola? La Dama Bianca. Did she need to be fed too?

Dobbiamo nutrire . . . we have to feed . . . the house?

The caretaker hobbled into his small kitchen, talking to himself in a quiet voice as he pulled ingredients from his cabinets.

Anna decided not to say goodbye, just to slip out the door and find her own way back to the villa.

Because it was the only place to go. And she wanted to, now, somehow. Whether to pack her bag and shove everybody out into their rental cars and away or to confront, to see it for herself, but more than anything, to find a piece of paper and write it all down.

Anna mouthed words silently while she walked through Monteperso proper, past the restaurant—still closed, she'd been wrong about that—

feeling the eyes of the smoking men outside the bar follow her as she crossed the street to walk up the road to Villa Taccola.

Once they were out of earshot, she spoke aloud. The words made her shiver, even in the heat, but she kept saying them so that they wouldn't fade.

La dama bianca.

Ricca, potente.

Vinaio.

Infedele. Ossessiva.

Colture avvelenate.

Il figlio.

Veleno, tutti avvelenati.

Attacchi ai vivi. Allucinazione.

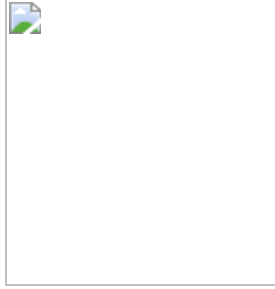
Esorcismo.

La chiave.

La chiave del male. La chiave del torre.

Mi dispiace.

Perdonami, perdonami, perdonami . . .



WHEN YOU'RE AROUND

Midges and flies trailed Anna like a retinue, nipping at her damp neck, the backs of her knees, as she walked up the grassy verge.

Just before the dirt drive, she saw something blocking the street that hadn't been there hours before. A barrier, road-closure signs. Two horizontal candy stripes and a triangle fencing in the image of a man digging: *LAVORI STRADALI*.

Anna squinted through the heat haze down the long road and saw a van parked farther along the road. Two men positioning more signs, more blockades.

Shutting the road to them in both directions.

There was no work being done on the road between Monteperso and here. No *lavori stradali*.

"Hey!" Anna shouted. "*Che cosa sta facendo?*"

She saw their heads turn toward her, bodies locked, like deer. Then they turned away, finished laying down the signs, scrambled for their van, and peeled away with a screech before she'd even reached the dirt track to the villa.

She watched them go, hands on her hips, then kept going, turning right.

The goat lifted his head from the scrubby grass he was eating to watch her go. She was glad he was eating. His ribs were threatening to jut through his skin.

Lizards darted across the road ahead.

The insect buzz grew louder. Anna glimpsed orange amid the tall grass to her left, flies hovering like a tiny storm cloud. She felt her throat clench tight around the word "No," but felt compelled to see it for herself.

She diverted, slowly, her hand pressed to her nose to keep the bad air out.

It was what she thought. The orange cat. Once the cat, now carrion. A hooded crow sat perched on a neighboring branch. It shouted at her, impatient for her to leave. The little tomcat's entrails were exposed, half cleaned away, the skin around it blackened, bubbling with maggots.

Dead for days or longer, very clearly. And yet it was only this morning that Waverly found him behind the tower door, clutched him tight and kissed his head. And only yesterday that it was two days ago.

Anna stared down at the cat for a long moment, then waded a little way into the woods to tear leaves off the trees, enough to make a shroud for it so the girls wouldn't see. It was only when she turned away from her work, dizzy enough from the heat to decide it was good enough, that she saw something else that didn't belong there, half hidden in the tall grass.

A black shape, rectangular.

A suitcase. Rollers facing her like dead little legs.

As she approached, plodding through thick dread, she saw wasps swarming the bag, dipping down and around, darting up to fight with the others for whatever was inside.

She was holding her breath, she realized.

Was it big enough to fit a body? Not an entire one. Maybe parts.

It was definitely Christopher's bag, though. Tumi. Brand-new. Ditched in the grass.

Anna foraged for a suitably long stick, clenched her jaw, and pried the lid of the suitcase open.

Flying insects swarmed from the exposed cavity of the bag. Anna covered her face as they took flight. She crept closer, peering past her forearm.

She very nearly vomited. A pond of red liquid, jagged broken things within, an upper layer of dead insects floating in what had been their feast.

Not blood and bones. Wine.

This was Christopher's bottle haul. Smashed to bits.

He must have broken the wine, abandoned it all here on his way out.

Anna would have smirked with relief, but she couldn't picture Christopher heading out in the early morning or dark of night, roller bags in tow, dragging his brand-new luggage so roughly that all the bottles exploded. Did he pick up a taxi at the end of the drive? An Uber?

He'd have been running, to break the bottles like that. Fleeing.

Maybe she'd tell Benny, see what he thought. Big maybe.

Anna noted the line where the circle of dead grass began as she passed it in slow crunching steps. It looked nearer to the house than it had been that night she'd seen the locals with their flashlights, like the circle of infestation had shrunk, rather than grown. She couldn't tell, though. She couldn't say for certain that any of this was even happening.

They, the living, were all in the back garden eating dinner when Anna got to the gates. She could hear their chatter, laughter, the clink of forks on plates and the bump of wine bottles against the wooden table. At least they were safely outside.

Was that even safer? She thought of Nicole, the shove into the pool. And that was before they'd even opened the damn tower.

Anna hesitated at the front door, hand trembling. She clenched and unclenched it, dogged, twisted the handle, and went inside.

Entering the house felt nothing short of disgusting, like walking around inside of some viscous entity, but she was sort of used to that now. This villa might as well be a dumpster. An abattoir. Anna fought the tide of the house pushing and pulling on her like digestive juices, focused on riffling through drawers in search of paper, a pencil, anything. No joy until she went downstairs, where the girls had left their coloring books and art kits out. She found a page of pink construction paper, an orange marker, it was fine, it would do. She ignored beyond a reflexive flinch the sudden staccato slams of two of the bedroom doors, and then escaped through the glass door into the thinner miasma of the patio.

She could see them from here, her family, their little heads, their familiar gestures. They weren't looking for her, so she turned her attention to the task at hand.

She wrote it all down in the approximate order he'd said it to her and arrived at something of an explanation. It could very well have been completely mistranslated, misconstrued, total fiction. More than likely her understanding was to some degree mangled, but it was still better than those few sordid web-search results from this morning. Better than "404 Not Found."

They called the ghost La Dama Bianca. She was a rich woman, not from Monteperso, Anna was pretty sure. Florentine. She'd had some entanglement with the family who lived here. A wine family, vintners. She was in love with one of them. Obsessed. The boy from Anna's dream, maybe? There was something to do with the crops, a plague on the

vineyard, and then worse, poison. He'd definitely said poison. Everyone dead. She died here, the Florentine woman, and killed others. Or maybe they were all poisoned by someone else? Not just the family, but later, "*i vivi*," the living. Something about hallucinations. Many ghosts, but she the worst. If you died in the house, you stayed in the house. There were priests once, some kind of ritual up in the tower. But it didn't help. Not completely. There was something about the key. He kept apologizing about the key.

And about the house. It had to be fed. If it wasn't fed, her rot would spread. It had happened before. The villa had lain empty and the dead circle around the house had spread down the hill. Crops had failed. Villagers had grown ill, died. Some had simply vanished. They checked now. They turned up at night, spread salt or whatever, made sure the decay didn't go past *la capra*.

That poor fucking goat.

"So you're not dead." Benny blurred past her on his way into the house.

Anna reread her notes. Orange on pink had been a bad idea. The whole thing looked written in blood.

Benny came back out with a bottle of prosecco and paused on the top step. "If this was a ploy to get attention, it didn't work. We've gotten on with our day, and you know what? It's been really nice without you here. Relaxing."

"Okay," Anna said.

"Where did you go?" It sounded like it cost Benny something to ask her that. "What were you doing all this time?"

"Getting answers." She looked up and waved him over. "Give me some of that. I need it."

He rolled his eyes but she could see his sulk dissipating slightly. He sat down beside her and handed over the bottle. She drank straight from it, letting the fizz drip off her chin, then handed it back to him for a draw.

He sipped more daintily, but at least from the bottle. It felt reassuringly like solidarity.

"I went to see the caretaker," Anna said. "Take a look at this."

Benny leaned over her list of blood-drenched Italian words, the conspiracy-theorist lines she'd drawn between them. "What am I looking at?"

"The truth about this place, which is that, yeah, it's really fucking haunted and everybody's in on it. They know. They've set us up. We've got

to go, Ben.”

“Who is this ‘we’? Are we a *we* now, Anna?” Drunkenness had amplified the petulance in his voice.

“I’m talking about all of us. Honestly, good for Christopher for going. At least we don’t have to worry about him being in danger.”

Even as she said it, bile swirled in her throat. That was a lie, a dirty lie, and this could be a good moment to tell Benny that she’d found the wine suitcase, that she knew Benny’s handwriting better than her own, but these were things to sort out from a place of safety. First things first: move the fuck out.

She smiled, conciliatory. “I mean, we could stick it out for the next few nights but I hate the idea of Waverly and Mia being subjected to it.”

“Oh, because you’re such an involved aunt.”

“Just fucking shut up and listen,” she snapped. “For two seconds!”

That startled him into nodding.

She breathed. “Let’s suggest we all get apartments in Florence for the rest of the time. Or go to Bologna or someplace else, make it sound fun. You need to be the one to say it. They won’t listen to me.”

“I’m not listening to you either. Not anymore.” Benny stood up so that he could blink down at her. “You know, this place only feels haunted when you’re around. Why do you think that is?”

He trotted down the steps and took the bottle with him. Yeah, his boyfriend left him, and he was smarting, lashing out, but he didn’t have to take the wine.

Christ but her brother could be a petty bastard.

So no to help from Benny. This left Anna with a couple of choices.

She could pack up, now, immediately, call her Uber buddy, find an Airbnb, leave the rest of them to fend for themselves, and hey, maybe Benny was right. Maybe it was better here when she was gone.

But she could just see the hurt spreading through Mom like dirty water into a sponge, the blame she’d be subjected to. Everybody would worry about her if she left and it would poison the rest of their vacation and she wouldn’t want to hear about it, but by God, she would. She’d hear about it at every single gathering forevermore. Like the Gus story, like Hilton Head, they’d say “remember Anna in Tuscany” in dark undertones, and any newcomers to the family would grin and ask to hear the story and there

were only so many times Anna could stand like a seawall and let the waves hit her again and again, unmoving.

Of course, there would be no stories to tell about Anna ruining the family vacation if her family never left this villa. If she saved her own skin and disaster struck in her absence, Anna wouldn't need them to relentlessly castigate her. She'd do it to herself.

But what could she actually achieve, staying here with them in the sinking ship, except bear witness to whatever happened? Maybe watching her get out would finally spur them into making the right decision too.

A compromise, then. The morning. She'd have breakfast with them, issue one more warning, and then head off to Florence. Or catch an earlier flight back to New York. The charm of Italy was gone. She wanted her own bed, her shitty American TV shows, her smelly bodega, the sound of her idiot neighbors having sex.

She went into her monk cell and shut the door, not planning to sleep much, if at all. Her hackles were up so high she could feel herself snarling at every odd noise, even her own family coming back inside, their bedroom doors shutting, the shower running, Benny's click of the light switch, and then the noises of the night—an owl, a cat in heat, cicadas or crickets or whatever they were, loud, loud, rhythmic and loud. Anna kept her bedside lamp on, the shutters drawn to repel the bugs, to little effect. Moths swirled, mosquitoes landed on her arms and drank deep before she smashed them into little red puddles. She sat cross-legged on the bed, awake, determined, and she sketched into the night. Cozy street scenes, cheerful vignettes, children with dripping gelato, things her ad agency would fawn over. Somewhere in there, she fell asleep.

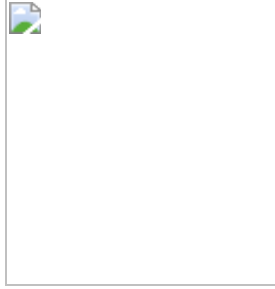
It was the silence that woke her up. The cicadas had stopped screaming.

The light was still on, Anna still dressed in day clothes, her bed strewn with loose pages.

It wasn't like her to rip the paper from her sketch book, not until she was ready to dispose of something. Somehow, the sight of these scraps of sketches bothered her even more than the leaden pressure descending on the room.

She sat up and put all the pages in a stack, closing the sketch book around them.

And then it began.



FINALE

The noise came from the kitchen this time, a low, agonized moan.

Her bedside light flickered.

Anna slapped at the lamp, more annoyed than scared, but then the groaning intensified, and fear took the lead.

Someone was stumbling around out there.

She could hear chairs scraping slowly around the kitchen table. Benny?

But no, in the next room, there came a thud and a startled cry as her brother fell out of bed.

Anna rose onto her knees, holding the blanket up like a shield with her fisted fingers.

A man's voice reverberated low now, somehow both inside the walls and beyond.

Unfamiliar. Frantic. Praying?

Yes, Catholic litanies in Latin interspersed with tearful Italian, real enough to keep Anna from opening that bedroom door, even as she gathered all her nerve to rise from the bed and stand beside it, her hand tight against the handle to stop it from turning.

There were footfalls now, shaking the wooden floorboards. He, it, was stumbling in this direction. The moaning had devolved into a wet sort of retching punctuated by sobs.

The room had grown steadily icier, even while sweat broke out all over her, and Anna numbly observed the feeling—*cold sweat*—before a movement made her turn, all sensation but panic eviscerated.

The shutters to the bedroom were opening themselves, slowly, one a little wider than the other.

“Nope.” Anna flung wide the bedroom door, choosing Risk Number One over remaining in this tiny enclosed space with a ghost that could now, apparently, move things. “Nope, nope, nope.”

Wise choice. As soon as she stepped out into the hall, the moaning stopped.

Anna watched Benny's door in the dark hall, waiting for him to come out and investigate, but nothing moved.

Too scared to come out here. Too smart. Not smart enough to leave yesterday, though.

"Benny?" Anna whispered. He might not have heard her.

But something else seemed to.

Anna pulled her T-shirt away from her slick stomach, rubbed her bare legs, and shivered, still freezing. She considered making her way outside, out back, curling up on a lawn chair for the night, letting the mosquitoes feast on her until the sun rose and she could say her goodbyes, maybe even her I-told-you-sos, and get the fuck out for good. But as she tiptoed through the sitting area, to the extension, she felt the wooden floors bumping behind her, out of rhythm with her own steps.

Something was following her.

She started walking faster, of course she did, practically a jog, when she saw the outline of a person at the top of the extension steps and stumbled to a gasping halt.

A dark, small figure. A child. Groaning.

No.

It was a convulsive sound. A grunt. And again.

It's hiccupping, Anna realized.

A second later, she recognized the figure. Waverly staggered forward.

Anna lurched for her, down on one knee, scanning her niece instinctively for injuries, but Waverly giggled.

"Who was makin' all that noisy?" Waverly asked, rubbing her eyes. *Hiccup*.

"Not me," Anna said, unsteady in her crouch.

"It feels weird out here." *Hic*. "I feel weird."

Anna believed it. Waverly sounded "weird." Not little-kid-woken-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night weird, Anna thought, not that she had that much experience with children. If she didn't know any better, she could swear her niece was drunk.

"We. Uh. Ur. Duh." Waverly scrunched up her forehead. "Am I awake?"

“Only sort of.” Anna stood and wrapped an arm around Wav so she could walk straight.

This is it, Anna thought, fiercely. The end of it for tonight, normalcy restored, back to bed everybody. We’ve had enough.

But it only seemed to intensify, the *aria cattiva*, bad air, so bad, like a net was bunching up around the two of them.

Waverly stopped walking before they got to the steps and stuck her tongue out.

“My mouth tastes funny,” she said. “Bleh. Glah, you’re pretty, Anna, I don’t know why Mommy says you’re not, you’re so pretty. You’re my favorite.”

Anna nearly smiled, would have smiled, if she didn’t feel the *thing* smiling behind her.

La Dama.

Its teeth were exposed. She was sure of it.

“Let’s get you back to bed, sweetie.”

“Anna?” Waverly tugged at Anna’s shoulder. “I think I remember.”

She peered slowly upward, her eyes wide with horror, a line of tears rising higher and higher.

Anna’s mouth went dry. “What . . . what do you remember?”

Waverly shook her head, the corners of her mouth turning down. “They don’t want to know. She wants us to be confused but nobody wants to know anyway. You can’t look right at it so they pretend it’s all pretty and normal but it’s not, Anna, it’s not!”

She hiccupped, hard, then let out a groan and slumped against Anna.

Anna winced. Her need for answers would have to give way to the larger wisdom of child welfare. “Bed. We’ll talk tomorrow. Promise.”

She looked up for the edge of the steps and saw herself and the top of Waverly in the reflected glass of a framed print, and it too—the Florentine woman—exactly where she thought it would be, behind her right shoulder, its face blocked by her head, yellow hair dangling so close she could almost feel it.

“Quick now,” Anna said. “Let’s go.”

Downstairs, the girls’ door creaked open. “Mommy?!”

Mia staggered into the sitting area, clutching that awful possum to her stomach.

“I want Mommy, I want Mommy, I don’t *feel* good.”

Anna heard a running thump-thump-thump from Nicole's room before her sister came rocketing out through the door, gaunt but alert. "Hey, girls, what's—?"

Mia vomited onto her feet.

Anna slammed her hand into the light switch beside her. She winced in the glare for a second, Nicole too, before their eyes adjusted enough to see what Mia was spewing.

Pure liquid.

Dark red.

"Oh no," Waverly moaned. "Gross, gross, gross!!!"

Nicole let out a weak scream and held Mia through another wave. "Oh my God, oh my God, call nine-one-one, somebody help her, oh my God, *do* something, Anna, for Christ's sake!"

Anna shook her head, frozen. She was holding Waverly's hand tight. It was her dream, exactly her dream, like the boy, like the children, spewing blood.

Mom and Dad's door started to open, and Anna nearly called to them for help, when it slammed shut again, with force, and Anna could only clutch Waverly tighter.

"Goodness," Mom muttered from inside. "Everybody . . ." She mumbled something. "Everybody all right out there?"

Justin called to Anna. "What's the emergency number here?"

She looked up to see him flanking Mia's other side, cellphone in hand.

Fuck, what was it? "One-one-two."

He started to dial.

Nicole looked up—at her husband in his boxers, at Anna in a T-shirt and panties—and her face went rigid. Anna drew a steadying breath, trying not to scream at her sister. *Now? Really?*

It was the breath that did it. She smelled it. Blinked.

Put her hand out to Justin like a traffic cop.

"Wait a second." She crouched beside the red puddle and sniffed again. "Okay, so good news bad news, this is not blood."

Nicole pulled Mia's pale face toward her nose, breathed in, and arched away again, astonished. "What the *hell?*"

"Mommy, don't curse," Mia said. Her teeth had started to chatter.

"What on earth is going on out there?" Mom shouted again from behind her shut door. "Can't . . . get . . . this. Honey, would you come and have a

try? Get on up out of bed and . . .”

Waverly, across the room, muttered, “Oh no,” and vomit chased the words out of her mouth, spewing straight onto the tiles. Bright red. Nothing but wine.

Justin dropped his phone and went to her, holding her long hair back.

“Have you girls been drinking?” Nicole screeched. “Grown-up drinks are *off-limits!* Oh my *God!*”

“We haven’t,” Waverly snarled back, “you never—” then spewed again.

As Anna turned to her, she caught the group’s reflection in the glass windows of the extension.

It was a much larger family portrait than it should have been. Three extra children, three more men—not Benny, not Dad, the third looked an awful lot like Christopher—two women, more upstairs, peering in.

One woman stood an inch behind Anna, dress hanging lank, face obscured.

Hands slowly rising.

Anna swatted the air behind her. “We need to go outside.”

Nicole swiped the corners of Mia’s mouth with toilet paper, frantic. “Not that again. Jesus, Anna, can’t you see—?”

Nicole’s bedroom door slammed behind her.

Mom and Dad banged on theirs.

“We’re locked in!” Mom shouted.

“No, I’m telling you, Linda, somebody’s holding it.” Dad sounded more exasperated than scared. “Couldja let it go, kids?” He rattled it, to no effect. His voice got louder. “I’m gonna count to five now!”

The children’s bedroom door opened wide, slamming against the far wall. Nicole screamed.

All the while, Anna kept her eyes fixed on that huge glass window, the view she could see reflected in it. They, the living, were alone one blink, and not the next.

La Dama Bianca now stood behind Mia. Her yellow hair was draped over Mia’s face.

Anna muscled past Nicole, picked up Mia by the armpits and hauled her away. Justin did the same with Waverly, starting toward the patio door, breathing hard.

A chair slid fast across the room, landing in front of the glass wall—a feeble blockade, but enough to send them all scurrying upstairs, deeper into

the house.

The front door was open. Propped by Benny's suitcase. The lights of his rental car were already on, the engine running.

Anna heaved Mia onto her hip and nodded forward, to the door. "Let's go."

Nicole ran to take Mia from her and followed Justin out without further argument.

Anna doubled back and ran to Mom and Dad's door. They were still arguing inside. Mom was crying, Dad snapping at her to stop.

"I'll get you out," Anna said, looking at the doorframe. It was old, unfamiliar. The hinges were shaped like spiky spades. This wouldn't be as simple as pulling them out.

Nicole's door slammed again, opened again, slammed again.

"Stop this right now, Anna," Dad shouted.

Anna laughed, desperate. "I would if I fucking could, Dad!"

"Don't you use that kind of language . . ."

Benny took Anna's arm and drew her away. He was fully dressed, calm as an oyster. "I'll do this. You go out and check on the others."

He took the hinges off, deftly—apparently, it *was* that simple—and Anna heard the pop of the doorway's suction breaking as she hurried through the living room.

Something yanked hard on her hair. She slapped it off and made it out the door, panting.

"You guys okay?"

Justin, pacing around his crying family, gave Anna a shrug as if to say, *The fuck do you think.*

"Could Benny grab our stuff?" Nicole gasped from down on the gravel, clutching the girls. "Or you? Can you go back in, Anna?"

She nearly laughed in Nicole's face, a cathartic *ha*, when Mia wailed, "Blossom is in there! She's not safe, she's not safe, she's not—"

Mia shuddered hard, her face going mottled.

"Breathe, honey," Nicole said, her voice pitched high with panic. Mia heaved, spat red.

Anna crouched low to meet her niece's eyes. "I'll get Blossom. Don't worry. Just try to relax."

As she rose, Benny passed her, bringing Mom outside. They knocked shoulders, and Benny reacted with a muffled shout of pain.

She grabbed him, reached for the right hand he was hiding with the left. He drew it back, peevish. “It’s fine. It’s not your problem.”

“Stop being such a little bitch, Benny, let me see!” Anna snatched at him, again, and he relented.

The rusted metal hinge of the door stood erect, bisecting his palm and jutting out the other side. How the hell had he managed that?!

“It’s fine,” Benny repeated dizzily, and before Anna could stop him, he yanked the hinge out of his hand in one frantic pull.

It made a popping noise. Benny’s face went white, and then he doubled over.

Anna steered him toward the drive. “Justin, take Benny’s rental. Drive him to the emergency room. Nicole, you follow with the girls, and Mom . . .”

Mom was facing away, hands cupped in front of her face, muttering to herself.

Anna pressed a gentle hand to her shoulder. “Go sit in the car. I’m getting Dad.”

Mom’s eyes cleared a little. She nodded.

Nicole herded the girls after Mom through the iron gate, then turned back to Anna. “We can’t just leave our clothes, our passports—”

“I’m getting your fucking stuff!” Anna snapped. “Just go!”

Anna drew a deep breath at the doorway to the house and held it, like that would help.

She saw La Dama Bianca lurking behind her in every single reflective surface and forced herself to fucking stare back rather than cowering, but the sight of it, the pallor, the damp yellow, the rot, made her feel like she too would vomit up wine, so she got on with the task at hand.

Her room first, dammit. She was mostly packed anyway.

She put on jeans and shoes, grabbed the overstuffed sketch pad, her shoulder bag, carried it all into the bathroom and kept the lights off as she shoved her toiletries into the top. She didn’t dare look up at the mirror this time and, yeah, she felt like a coward, but she had the rest of the house to do.

Benny’s room was empty. He must have packed up earlier. Maybe right after Christopher left.

Anna flung her own bag through the front door into the courtyard next to Nicole, who jumped back like it was a grenade.

Beyond the gate, she heard Justin driving Benny away.

Deep breath and back into the fray.

Dad was still downstairs in his bedroom, folding everything and putting it in the exact right spot in each of their suitcases. He moved at a glacial pace while doors slammed around him.

His face was very white.

“Dad,” Anna called softly.

The door to his room lay on the floor. It rattled like something was still holding on, still trying to keep it from opening.

Dad cleared his throat, hard, kept folding. Precisely. Neatly.

Anna went inside and laid a hand on his arm. He passed straight by her like she wasn’t there, opened another drawer.

She went to the closet and quickly tugged Mom’s dresses off the hangers, balled them up, heaved them into the bag. There, done.

Dad stared at the mess and cleared his throat again.

“I don’t . . .” He couldn’t finish the thought.

Anna nodded. “Just grab it and go, Dad, we’ll sort it all out once we’re away from here.”

That seemed to animate him.

She moved on to Nicole’s room, where there was a huge pile of dirty laundry next to the folded-up clothes. Anna shoved them all into bags and kicked the luggage into the hall. Then she swept through the shared bathroom and the girls’ room, freezing cold now and saturated with a cloying scent—had they thrown up before they even came out? Anna couldn’t find a mess, hardly cared, got their toys, their clothes, their coloring books and marker set, the all-powerful iPad.

No sign of Blossom. Hadn’t Mia been holding it, out in the living room? It wasn’t there now, just puddles of wine vomit and a broken-down door and several toppled chairs.

Anna hesitated, gritting her teeth, cursed softly to herself, and got down on her hands and knees. Sure enough, there it was, as far under Mia’s bed as it could possibly be, as if the possum had come to life and fled there to hide.

This was a bad idea, she knew it was, but Mia loved this goddamned stuffy, and so Anna slid onto her stomach and pulled herself into the dark pocket beneath the bed.

She tilted her head hard to the side and reached out, straining. Her fingers barely tickled the possum’s tail.

The bed creaked over her, sagging under something's weight.

She crawled forward, one more centimeter, and she had it.

The instant her fingers closed around the possum tail, she felt something grab at her in exactly the same way—cold, damp fingers twisting around her ankle.

She kicked, but it only made the fingers slide higher, up into the leg of her jeans, all the way to the inside of her thigh. The fingers curled. She felt its nails start to scratch.

And then the tongue. Running along the arch of her foot.

Anna kicked, hard, hitting absolutely nothing, shoved herself out from the bed, upright, and the sensation vanished. She zipped Blossom into Mia's Trunki and raced for the door.

It slammed in her face. Anna screamed in frustration and grappled with the door handle—only to find no resistance.

Confused, relieved, Anna opened the door and passed through, up, away, out of the house, all belongings accounted for. Hopefully.

Outside, Dad was slamming his rental car's trunk, still on autopilot, full emotional lockdown. Justin and Benny were gone. Nicole waited just outside the gate for Anna to relay bags to her. The engine of their car was running, the girls strapped into their car seats, heads lolling lax, chins blotched red with vomit.

Anna stared back at the house from beyond the iron gate.

What a show. Bordering on camp, really.

Maybe it just wanted them gone. *Well, game over, you win, we're out.*

Last bag passed on, Nicole clutched at Anna, kissing her wildly on the cheek, then fled into the driver's seat.

Anna picked up her own bag, still open at the top. As she lifted it, she spotted something inside.

Something that didn't belong to her.

Dark. Iron. The jackdaw fixed her with one black eye.

Anna let out a bitter, booming laugh. She extracted the key to the tower with two taut fingertips and held it up to the villa like a raised middle finger. "*Nice! Try!*"

Anna felt that dark miasma sloughing off her, wafting harmlessly off into the night. She curtsied—no idea why, just felt fitting—aimed for the blocked-up tower wall, and chucked the key at it as hard as she could.

She watched the key bounce off the stone of the tower and into the tall grass beyond; then she zipped her bag tight and dragged it with her into the back of Mom and Dad's idling rental car.

Mom's face was lit blue from the glare of her cellphone. "Well, the emergency room is five miles from here. Oh gosh. What a mess, Bob. What a mess!"

"Not your fault," Dad replied, rote, as he drove off.

Mom tilted her head so her cheek faced Anna, daring her to disagree.

Anna twisted herself so she could see out the back window. Nothing was following. The house was as they'd left it, wide open, lit like a lantern, doors removed, glass shards like shrapnel, and wine vomit on the floor.

Anna had a hunch they'd still get the security deposit back.

There was a traffic jam at the end of the drive.

Justin had stopped Benny's car. Nicole's SUV's lights illuminated him, standing in the road with his hands on his hips. He turned to give the convoy an exaggerated shrug.

"Oh my *God*." Mom's voice was a high whine. "What is it now?"

Anna got out of the car and ran to the road. Without a word, she picked up the road-closure signs, scraped them to the side of the street, and kicked them into the grassy verge.

Justin goggled at her.

"They're bullshit," she explained.

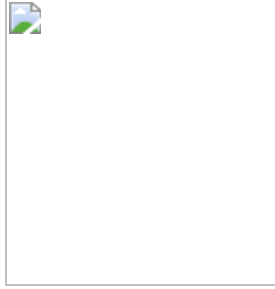
Justin nodded, explanation accepted. He grabbed the other signs, hauled them out of the way, and motioned for everyone to follow.

Anna got back in Mom and Dad's car and slammed the door. "It's handled. Let's go."

They didn't ask.

As they drove past the turnoff to the little town, Anna fought the urge to spit out the window.

Arrivederci, Monteperso. And fuck you very much.



TUSCAN HOSPITAL AT DAWN

The Pace family met up at the parking lot of the *pronto soccorso* attached to a larger hospital near the autostrada. Everything was brightly lit, but they seemed to be the only visitors to the emergency room tonight.

Anna hunkered down in the backseat of the rental car and changed into a fresh shirt and a bra, ran a brush through her hair, rendered herself presentable enough to climb out and stretch.

She found Justin sitting outside the hospital on the curb, smoking a cigarette, and smiled for the first time all day. “Where did you get that?”

He shrugged. “Some guy.”

She sat next to him and stared until he offered up a drag.

“Thanks.” She inhaled deeply, heard Mom tutting down the sidewalk, and ignored her as ever.

It went right to her head. Maybe she wouldn’t pick this habit up after all.

She handed it back. Justin nodded.

They sat in silence for a second; then Justin raised his eyebrows and said, “So *that* happened.”

It was all that was needed to send them into fits of snorting giggles.

Mom stalked closer. “What is the matter with you two? Your children are very ill, and Benny got a door hinge stuck in his hand!”

They waited until she’d paced away, fuming, and then they doubled over in silent laughter once again, tears streaming.

Anna drifted away into the nearly empty parking lot and found Dad standing with his hands in his trouser pockets, staring at the PRONTO SOCCORSO sign.

She said, “Ready to sort it all out?”

Thankfully, he understood what she meant.

They used the open trunk of the biggest rental SUV—Nicole’s—to go through all the hastily bundled clothes, fold them, put them neatly in the bags. Anna found Mom’s jewelry case among the mess and passed it to Dad for safekeeping.

He nodded. “Good.”

Setting the world to rights, he called this kind of tidying. Back home, anyway. Anna suspected that this time, he was setting his own memory to rights, erasing where needed, scrubbing it clean, resetting all of this back to a normal family vacation.

She couldn’t really blame him. It had already taken on an air of unreality. This had happened, of course it had, and yet, even Anna had started to second-guess herself.

Leaning against the car, watching dawn bleed slowly into the sky, Anna remembered the feeling of that finger traveling up her thigh and drew her body into a taut line, legs crossed tight.

Benny came out first, hand bandaged thick like a mummy.

Anna duly went to him. “How bad is it?”

“No nerve damage,” he said, walking, so she had to keep pace with him. “Stitches. Tetanus shot. And no, I didn’t cry, I wasn’t a *little bitch* about it.”

They’d reached his rental car. He clicked it open with his unmaimed hand, dumped himself into the passenger seat, and slammed the door in Anna’s face.

She scrunched her eyes so tightly shut that stars gathered. Then she took herself off again, to the far side of Dad’s rental SUV. She sat down cross-legged on the gritty asphalt, her head resting so hard against the door of the car that she could feel the metal dent inward. From behind the car, she heard Justin chatting with Mom, only the worried music of it, no words, heard Mom open Benny’s passenger door, her voice assuming a high plaintive tone, shut it again, calling through it, her “just let me know how I can help, sweetie” trailing into defeated silence.

The sky had turned a queasy sort of pastel. What a painting this would make, Anna thought. *Tuscan Hospital at Dawn*.

She yawned, slumping, then opened her bag for the sketch pad. Why not.

Loose pages slid out, scattering on the asphalt.

Six, seven pages, all portrait studies. All of her. *It*. La Dama, her face blurred, in shadow, in profile.

In one, Anna had captured her eyes, remembered from the portrait at the Uffizi, but here they were sharp rimmed, piercing. Devilish. In another, her cheek was rotted away, exposing her back molars in a snarl.

The last one was more than her face. She was naked, breasts exposed, arms flung back. Her mouth spilled blood over her exposed breasts, her softly rounded navel. Her left wrist bled too, from a strange pattern of cuts. This sketch wasn't finished. There was more Anna could add to it.

Her finger traced the shadow beneath La Dama's breast. Circled the nipple.

Anna blinked.

She gathered up the pages, crumpled them into minute, compact balls, and let them all cascade into the trash can beside the clinic door, just as Nicole hurried through with the girls.

Waverly and Mia looked like they were sleepwalking, but not Nicole. She was as wired as Anna had ever seen her.

She snapped her fingers to make Justin stand up off the curb and hurried them onward.

"We've gotta go," she hissed.

Spotting Anna, she detoured to whisper, "What does '*servizi sociali*' mean?"

"Child services. Social services."

"Right. Shit."

Waverly woke right up. "Mommy! *Language!*"

"Let's get in the car, girls, scoot." Nicole dug her hands into her hair as Justin approached. "They're fine, it was the alcohol, no fever or anything like that, but they were making calls and mentioned '*servizi sociali*.' They did a full exam and saw the scratches and bruises, my head . . . thing, and had some questions. Understandably!"

"There are bruises?" Justin asked. "On the kids?"

"We've gotta go." Nicole started briskly toward the car. "I booked us a place in Florence. Three-bedroom, plus living room. Benny'll have to take the sofa."

Mom trotted over to Benny's car and tapped on the window.

Nicole glanced at Anna, wary. "You can crash on the floor, if you want? Or . . ." She scrolled through her phone. "There are other places close to what I booked if you want to grab something now. This one is . . . Piazza . . . how do you pronounce—?"

Nicole looked up again to ask Anna, but she couldn't answer.

She was gone.

There was a train station across the road, and Anna had shouldered her bag and headed for the closest platform, exhaustion spreading through her like a fever.

The station map said she could make it to the Florence airport from here via a shuttle bus from the central station, and the next train was due within minutes, affording her a quick getaway, but it didn't even wind up mattering.

Nobody chased her down. The three rental cars pulled out of the hospital parking lot and passed the station on their northbound route into the city.

Anna watched them go. Nobody waved. But then, neither did she.

She felt that bone-deep familiar ache of shame. She'd done it again. Hadn't remained within the bounds of mutually-agreed-upon correct behavior. She'd hear about it later, possibly forever. Hers hadn't been a graceful, gracious exit, no hugs or thanks or explanations, but she was too strung out to care.

The truth was, Anna was still on the run—fleeing the villa, the vacation, all of it. All of them.

She needed this ordeal to be completely over. And family was nothing if not ongoing.

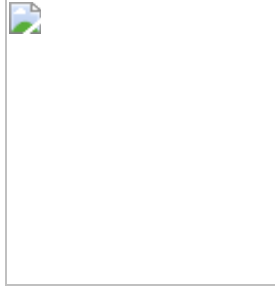
On the train, there were few fellow passengers. She finally dared to look across the car, at herself, her faint reflection in the window. Only hers, at last. She looked like that backpacker from a few days ago—self-contained, itinerant, a little bit dirty—which was strangely comforting.

She could, in fact, pack up and go. It was an option, even if she never had the guts to actually do it.

She pictured the Paces in their new Airbnb in Florence, opening a bottle of Chianti. Maybe they'd talk about her, how she'd taken off. Not about Christopher, no, they wouldn't want to upset Benny. No rehashing of the horrors of last night either, or every wrong moment that led to it, just the worn grooves of that old album, "Ugh, *Anna*."

She didn't even begrudge them it. They needed to do what Dad was doing, repacking those bags, smudging the edges of everything that had just happened, blurring back into the sensation of normal life.

She got off at Santa Maria Novella and tried, in her own way, to forget.



ON THE BACK OF A BEAST

It was so easy to swap to an earlier flight that Anna wondered why she hadn't done it sooner.

Like, exactly a week ago.

Sleep swept her under before they'd even taken off. She had murky dreams, sexual encounters in which she was both participants, shifting between male and female and simply observing. They weren't nightmares, nothing to do with the villa, only a few hours of vaguely titillating distraction. She woke up to eat, to down the oversized red wines the flight attendants plied you with to keep you docile for nine hours, to watch *Real Housewives* on the tiny seatback screen. This was her guiltiest pleasure and the most potent one, especially now. It was so *mundane*. It was the real world, tacky and dumb and arbitrary. She smiled while she watched, her knees tucked up tight under her chin like a little kid.

Anna hadn't checked a bag, so she passed through immigration and erupted out of JFK as fluidly as a sleepwalker. When she saw the taxi stand, all the yellow cabs lined up, the drivers leaning out of their windows to bicker with one another, she felt a swell of relief so strong that her eyes began to sting.

On the ride into Manhattan, she kept the window open, breathing in the car fumes, listening to the thump of the bridge beneath them, its rhythm fighting with the Hindustani music on the radio.

Midtown East. Anna got out of the taxi on the easiest corner and slunk into the shadow of the six-floor apartment blocks, humble neighbors to corporate skyscrapers and low-slung restaurant awnings. The whole city thrummed like some great beast beneath her, honks and chatter and the clang of delivery trucks unloading melding into one sound, one growling breath. She was just a flea on its back. It unnerved her, if she was honest. Funny how she felt this way every time she got back to New York and then

forgot about it again within days, part of its ecosystem once again, unconscious as everybody else.

Anyway, it wasn't fucking Tuscany, was it?

Anna punched in the door code and shouldered her way inside her building, holding the door for an elderly neighbor with her decrepit white dog in a pushcart.

Not much mail had piled up in her absence. Junk and bills. A new burrito place had opened down the block to replace the three other takeout places that had opened and closed there in the six years Anna had lived in this apartment. She read through the menu as she rode the elevator up to the top floor, deciding what she'd order for dinner. Cuban with a side of plantains. And a beer.

Her apartment opened with a faint puff. It smelled stale in here, but her own brand of stale. Her own stagnant, decomposing skin cells welcoming her back.

She dumped her bag and stretched and blinked around. Everything looked a slightly different color than when she'd left it two weeks ago. Had that rug always been greenish? Apparently so.

It felt smaller than ever in here—galley kitchen lining the cube of a living area that doubled as her art studio space, a dividing line between living room and workroom suggested by the dustcloth she had draped on the floor to keep paint splatters from costing her four grand in security-deposit fees.

There was a work-in-progress on the easel. Forever in-progress—Anna had been futzing with this one for over seven months—and now that she looked at it after time away spent in the company of Renaissance masters, their richness of color, of form, she was pretty much ready to chuck it out unfinished. It was a remembered view from her bedroom window in Ohio, the tree in the front yard with one curving bough that grew almost as far as her room but never quite got there. She'd been trying to get at something with it but never defined what, and that was the problem. It was bland. It would probably sell in a gallery in some beachfront tourist town, that's how bland.

Anna tugged her hair loose from its ponytail and gave it a scratch, grimacing at the grease she felt sliding under her fingernails. She smelled like an airplane.

In her room, the bed was still unmade, drawers and closet open from last-minute packing. That crumpled-up pillow was calling her, that double bed, so roomy, so familiar, but she wanted to get back on local time—power through, sleep through the night, and forget the rest of it ever happened.

It always took a while for the water to warm up in this building, so she started running the shower before she peeled off her clothes.

Pigeons were squabbling on top of her window-unit air conditioner. She watched them for a little while, naked, arms crossed over her head, memorizing them so she could draw them later in mid-scrap. They froze, stared at her as if offended, and flew off.

Anna smelled steam in the air. The hot water must have woken up. She swung her bag onto her bed, in search of toiletries, and unzipped it.

She inhaled with a hiss. Drew her hand back, fast.

Goose bumps broke out over her thighs, her arms, her stomach.

She'd thrown it. Far. Ridden away from it, she knew she had, and *yet*.

Right there, at the top of her bag. The key to the tower.

The air took on weight, more than she could reasonably blame on the humidity from the shower, or even her anxiety. Anna didn't have the energy to rationalize any of this away.

There was hardly any reflection in her bedroom window, with midday summer light streaming through, so she couldn't confirm it.

Even so.

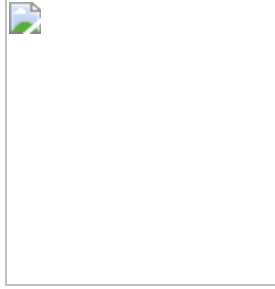
She knew.

Anna walked past framed art, shining door handles, her open laptop screen, and sour spit bubbled in her throat.

The bathroom mirror had begun to fog up, but not so much that she couldn't see it standing behind her.

Piss-yellow hair, coiled and stringy, sweat-sodden sleeves, face obscured.

"Well," Anna said. "Shit."



INFESTATION

She took that shower. She was dirty and stubborn but scared too.

She scrubbed and shampooed and conditioned and shaved and realized that what she had felt in Italy was a skin and muscle fear and now it was bone-deep, like the knowledge of a terminal illness.

It wasn't waiting for her when she stepped out of the bath basin, lurking in neither the air nor the mirror, but it didn't need to, Anna realized. It had made its presence clear enough. It had invaded, and that was that.

Anna felt watched as she dressed in jeans, sweatshirt, socks, nothing exposed, despite the August heat.

Watched as she went to her laptop, then stood again, reconsidering.

Watched as she walked shakily into the kitchen and rummaged for wine. There was a quarter of a bottle of red left in the fridge, half corked and soured to vinegar, a cheapo white unopened in the cabinet above the microwave. Warm, but whatever.

She frowned as she poured. "No."

She shook her head, knowing it was pointless, needing to say it anyway.

"Nope. You have to go. You don't belong here. At all."

When she looked up and caught her reflection in the glossy black of her dirty stove top, it was only herself she saw, but the words still seemed to resonate. *You have to go. Get out, Anna.*

But she'd already gotten out. Already fled. What was left for her to do?

She turned on the TV, reality shows on Netflix, pumped up the volume, neighbors be damned, and sat cross-legged on her sofa with her computer purring in her lap.

Her bedroom door slammed shut.

She raised her eyebrows, drank her glass of hot white wine in one swallow, and began a Google search, starting with the obvious.

"Getting rid of ghosts."

There was a lot of content on this subject. An overwhelming amount, even a wikiHow entry with sketched diagrams that reminded Anna of the ones she'd done for a pharmaceutical client a few months back.

Night descended, which on any other day would have sounded to Anna like a ludicrously overwrought way to describe it, but tonight she felt the dark pooling over her, thickness creeping into the corners of her apartment that the lamplight didn't reach.

She ordered herself a goddamn Cuban burrito and a Sierra Nevada, as planned, and watched the delivery guy retreat down the hallway, clinging to that last bit of human company before she registered his wary glance back at her from where he stood waiting for the elevator and reluctantly shut the door.

Everything felt rearranged in the living room when she looked at it again, but she couldn't say why.

Wait. Yes, she could. She was losing it, that was why.

She ate and drank and ordered a shitload of assorted ghost-fighting items on Amazon. Sage bundles and glass eyes like the ones she'd seen at the caretaker's house, some crazy-expensive salt, white "cleansing" candles, a tulsi plant, a hamsa hand. She borrowed from any culture that seemed more legit than, say, Goop, but stopped shy of a crucifix. That was one hypocritical leap too far.

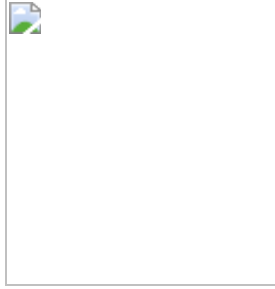
While she was at it, she bought a few secondhand books, one on Italian Florentine families, another about the work of Jacopo da Sellaio. A third, on *stregoneria*, was too niche to still be in print and would take too long to track down, but Anna wanted it. Luckily, it was old enough to be on Project Gutenberg, so she bookmarked it for later perusal on her cellphone.

Among the many advice entries on the internet, Anna read that clutter was a key factor in attracting ghosts. She was fairly certain this thing hadn't glommed on to her in the hope of moving into a Manhattan flophouse, but a tidy-up wasn't the worst idea.

She was slumping lower and lower on the sofa, though. It was four in the morning in Tuscany. Housecleaning would have to wait until tomorrow.

She crawled into bed in the clothes she was already wearing. The first few times she slipped under, panic woke her up again, warning her not to, but it was inevitable.

She slept.



EVERYTHING BECOMES MINE

It started as a sex dream again, same as on the airplane, but this time, she could see the man clearly. Tawny, sunbaked skin, neat-trimmed beard, wavy hair you could dig your fingers into, and she did as she rode him, dug deep and pulled. He loved it.

As he tipped his head back, she became him and saw who was above him, around him.

The Florentine woman smirked down at Anna, that same exultant expression she wore in the Annunciation. *You are mine*, that smile seemed to say. *Everything's mine*.

Her yellow hair spilled down around her face as she lowered herself onto Anna, and Anna kicked and squirmed, trying to fight her way loose, but when their lips connected, she wanted it. Black circles of mold spread out from the bedsheets and onto her skin, bubbling, but Anna ignored it. She gave in, strange pleasure rippling through her until it all went away—with a scream.

* * *

A woman's scream. A shriek of rage, not fear, not physical pain. A tantrum.

Anna saw the hair first, the neon yellow piercing the blackness, and then hands raking through the lank locks, scratching at the tear-streaked face beneath. La Dama Bianca was pacing, screaming and screaming, until someone stopped her, held her firmly, rocking her like a child.

This was an older woman, dressed in dun, practical colors, a white cap tied all the way under her sagging chin. A servant, maybe—but the Florentine woman listened to her as she whispered in her ear.

Anna stepped forward, straining to hear, when the two turned to her, livid.

They hissed.

She fell backward.

* * *

Onto the rough ground of a field.

No, it was terraced—a vineyard, by night. Overripe grapes seeped between her fingers as she pushed herself upright again. The smell all around her was vibrant, clean. And then it changed.

Something sour was drifting through.

Anna saw a gnarled olive tree in the near distance. Two dark figures in long dresses stood locked in an awkward embrace beside it. Anna felt in her spine that this was something she was not meant to see, but still took it for a romantic encounter until she saw something writhing between them.

As it struck, Anna knew what it was. A snake, a viper.

It bit the larger woman again and again, until the taller one threw it to the ground, smashed it with a rock, and kicked it away.

The other woman slumped to the ground like a pile of laundry.

The tall one turned to her. Light from the full moon glinted off the knife in her hand. Illuminated the yellow hair on her head.

Anna watched as La Dama Bianca stooped low to dig something soft and loose from the center of the old servant. Entrails, intestines, maybe more. She pulled them out and sliced them where they held and buried them in a hole and covered them with dirt, all before she noticed Anna standing there.

She dropped the knife into the dirt before she stalked closer, a peace offering, but Anna still tried to run, a scream lodged behind her teeth that wouldn't shake loose.

Her feet were loosely locked, like they'd grown roots deep into the soil. She could shake all she wanted, but she couldn't leave.

La Dama Bianca came closer, closer, her fingers dripping blood. She lifted those red-drenched hands to Anna's cheeks and pulled her into the sweetest kiss.

* * *

The villa. She was in the villa.

Just Anna, though she wasn't herself. She could feel the start of fuzz on her cheeks, a throbbing urgency between her legs. She was that boy now, that beautiful teen.

Villa Taccola was smaller. Newer. It smelled like fresh-cut wood. Windows were open to the breeze, doors wide, an open, safe embrace for

the children running in and out. Anna drifted into the small room, the dry pantry where they hung the herbs and ground the grain. She watched the road from the window, her heart a wild horse fighting its reins.

Nothing along the drive. White wispy clouds high in the sky. A jackdaw landed in the courtyard, then darted away again. Past all this, the vineyard stretched, worryingly black. There had been a rot among the plants, Anna remembered. The harvest would be ruined. The business would suffer.

A carriage arrived in a dust cloud, and she got out, La Dama Bianca, her telltale hair covered by a deeply hooded cloak. There was no sign that she'd been killing and gutting and digging in the dirt. She was pristine.

Anna rushed to her and knelt before her, kissing her hand. The fine lady seemed embarrassed by the gesture, waved it off and helped Anna stand, then whispered promises in her ear. "Inside."

* * *

It was night. Anna was not the young man anymore, only a shadow, watching as a family gathered for dinner.

The handsome, bearded man sat at the head of the table, eating food brought in by a plump, dark-haired woman she took for his wife. Beside them sat four children, the eldest the eager young man Anna had been moments before. The father was scruffier, less polished than he'd looked in bed, with La Dama on top of him, but somehow even better now for the lack of effort. He poured wine into leather cups for all, even the children, and they ate and laughed—and into this pastoral domestic bliss walked La Dama.

There was confusion. The patriarch stood from the table, face white. He looked like he might strike her but she strode to the table as if she were the lady of the house, and her certainty deflated him.

She poured herself a cup of wine, raised it in a toast, and drank it down.

It was then that the children began to vomit.

The neighbors, the little *ragazzi*.

Their noses streamed with blood. Their ears.

"Caterina?" the young lad said, his eyes brimming with betrayal and then, yes, blood.

La Dama cupped his cheek. Her own nose had begun to drip. "You wanted forever. *Ecco il tuo sempre.*"

Anna felt herself taking on solidity among them, panic rising and physically congealing inside her, forming into flesh. The family turned to

look at her, at the blood pooling in her own mouth, metallic and thick, spilling in great choking gushes onto her bare feet on the cold tile floor.

La Dama Bianca swept the family's dinner off the table with an outstretched arm, leaving the lit candles in place. In the empty center, she laid objects in place, briskly, almost cheerfully: a stripped green stick, a lit candle, an empty cup, a dagger. From her side, she drew a pouch, upturned it to pour the contents onto the table. Salt.

Then La Dama lifted the blade to her own wrist and began to dig.

The others had fallen. Anna collapsed beside them. Before it all went black with pain, she felt a blanket covering her that hardened into wood, the floorboards themselves pulling her underneath.

* * *

Anna woke up, in her own home, in reality.

She sucked in a breath, a dry, tasteless one, no blood, and shivered.

A shadow of a woman loomed at the foot of her bed. It had been watching her dream.

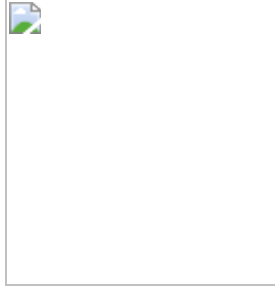
Anna could see only its outline, but she knew it was smirking. She felt it, the negative image of it, imprinted in her mind.

You're mine, it seemed to say. Your dreams are my dreams now, your brain my brain.

Everything becomes mine.

Anna waited for it to go, to blink away, but it never did, only got blurred by daylight, so she couldn't tell if it was still at the foot of the bed or right beside her, above her.

Inside her this whole time.



NEW YORK NORMAL

There were two days left of Anna's "vacation" before she was expected back at work, but she abandoned her original plans of decompressing at her now polluted home. She went out, haggard and determined, first across town to the League to buy fresh sketch pads and charcoal pencils and then to Central Park, where all was cheery and bright. Everything was alive, and that was incredibly comforting. Initially, anyway.

Sheep Meadow proved too much for her after twenty minutes, Anna found. The contrast gave her a headache born of cognitive dissonance. All this sunshine, these happy people, children and dogs and couples stripping down on blankets and playing fucking Frisbee.

A little boy walked by licking a Mister Softee cone, and his mother darted in front of him with a clump of napkins, dabbing at his face, telling him off in Spanish, and with that, Anna packed up for the moodier twists of the Ramble.

She stationed herself just off the main path where a tree bent low, a nice, easy study. She sat cross-legged in the grass and sketched it, letting her thoughts flow into her fingers, coalescing in the line, the shade. Peace reigned until the moment it felt done enough to hold it out a little and take stock.

It wasn't the tree. It wasn't *any* tree—she'd drawn a portrait, without knowing.

Even as resentment and horror braided themselves around her in a tightening vise, the cooler-headed part of her took in how different a style this was from her other work, how sure the lines were, how clear a likeness. This was, frankly, better.

She heard a couple walking past behind her on the path. The man muttered, "Wow," pointing the sketch out to his girlfriend, who smiled shyly at Anna, like she was a somebody.

Anna waited until they'd passed, and then she crumpled up La Dama Bianca and her scarred wrist and her pretty little vial of poison, and left her in an overflowing trash can near the boat pond.

She felt her—it—like the hood on a sweatshirt, hovering behind her all the time. Even out and about.

It was better to be in public than alone at home with it. La Dama seemed a little better behaved, cowed slightly by the public, so Anna took herself out to dinner at a busy sushi bar she couldn't afford, then walked slowly past block after block of rowdy Midtown bars without going in.

There were a bunch of Amazon parcels waiting for Anna when she got home. She opened the sage first and burned it, right off the bat, waving it everywhere, but there was something too Italian about the smell. It brought her right back to Villa Taccola.

She put the books aside for the moment and read the old book about *stregoneria* on her laptop in one sitting. Black magic, Italian style. It presumed some familiarity with the occult craze of the early twentieth century, which Anna could not claim, and therefore mainly served to lull her to sleep.

She dreamed of the villa again. No bloodbath, not this time, but this dream was somehow even more frightening for its lack of variety. In this variation, she walked around the house. Just walked. Silent. Passive. Sometimes shadowy figures would emerge and move past. Sometimes they'd stop in front of her as if pleading, but she would continue on, dully testing the doors, the windows, unable to find a way out. For hours that felt, in the dream, like months.

When she woke up and brushed her teeth, she saw black mold creeping up one corner of the bathroom tiles. She decided not to bother her landlords with it. It probably hadn't spread beyond her apartment yet.

She sketched and sketched, things from dreams, memories that weren't hers, finding more and more strange specifics with every study.

It wasn't until Sunday that she finally decided to unpack her bag. The key was in there, and she hadn't wanted to touch it.

And that's when it occurred to her.

The caretaker had gone on and on about the key, *apologizing* for the key. *Mi dispiace*. Not just the feeding, the key, always the key. There had been some ritual, right? A Catholic priest, and then the key, the spirit, in the key.

There was something attached to it.

Did you take it? Gianni had asked.

Who had touched it? She tried to remember. All of them? Christopher was first. He took it from the caretaker. Benny brought it back to the utility room, put it back on the hook—and then he saw the ghost, didn't he? That night. He was the first to see it after they opened the tower door. It was all blurred in memory, like that lost Thursday, and Anna's lack of sleep certainly wasn't helping her recall ability. Then Waverly, that glint of rebellion as she touched it with a single fingertip, and later that night, Anna. She'd used it to open the tower door again and let Mia out. She was the last one.

Anna wondered if the girls had told their mother what happened that night. If so, she'd hear about it, either through a tirade email—Nicole found confrontation much easier via indirect communication—or through a pointed, sullen silence. The latter, the cold-shoulder tactic, wouldn't last long. Anna knew that from experience. It was a staring contest, and Nicole always blinked first.

They'd be arriving back in the US that afternoon, all of them, if they hadn't decided to fly home earlier. Anna couldn't remember what their original flight times were, never having paid attention to them in the first place, so she made a guess of around five o'clock.

Sitting on a bench along the East River, Anna braced against the noxious sensation of a malevolent ghost lurking a centimeter behind her and dialed Benny. It rang before going to voicemail, so he'd obviously landed. Maybe he was going through immigration or something.

She tried Mom's phone too, and left a message.

"Hope you guys had a nice last few days in Italy!" Her voice echoed on the line. She could hear exactly how pinched and fake she sounded. "Wanted to make sure everything's, you know, okay. Normal, considering. Um. Yeah, and sorry about dashing off like that, I just really wanted to make that train. And I didn't want you guys to feel bad about not including me in the Florence accommodations."

Anna wasn't sure why she said that last bit. It was petty, and not at all why she'd called.

"Anyway. Call me back when you get a chance."

Somebody grabbed Anna's shoulder just before she hung up, so her gasp made it into the recording. No one was there when she turned, because

of course they weren't, but she felt staccato bursts of warmth on her ear. It was laughing, hot breath stabbing her.

It could touch her, then. In public. She was sure it couldn't before, which meant it was getting stronger.

"Come on, then," she grumbled, and made her way back home, twitching all the way.

It was a work day tomorrow. She needed to try to get some rest. She stopped off at Duane Reade for sleeping pills and dropped them in the aisle, hands shaking, when she saw the woman coming around the corner, yellow hair dangling like ribbons. Anna blinked fast and saw that it was a normal human, if you call a seventy-something woman wearing a canary-yellow wig and a crop top normal. New York normal.

Back home, Anna picked at a microwave meal on her sofa, but gave up when she heard something slowly scratching the inside of the front door. Could have been a bug, but this was steady. And big. Fingernails.

"Wanna go out?" Anna called through a full mouth. "I'll let you out."

It kept going. *Scratch*.

"You need a nail file?" Anna rubbed her temple. "They're in the bathroom."

The sound stopped, and she felt a full second of satisfaction before the bathroom door slammed shut, and she flinched so hard her dinner spilled out of its tray.

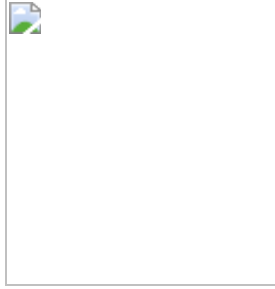
This is not sustainable, Anna thought, downing her sleeping pill with a glass of water instead of wine. Virtuous. Healthy living. Work tomorrow.

She checked her phone before she got into bed, but nobody had called back. She reminded herself that this was good news—it meant there were no pressing issues anybody needed her to solve, no residual hauntings plaguing them—but she still felt something gnawing at her stomach in the absence of reassuring words from them.

A text, even? A "Hey we're back, talk soon"? Apparently not.

Anna reread a little of that public-domain book on her phone, then kept her ringer on while she slept. Nothing woke her up, not even La Dama, for once.

She didn't even dream. Sleeping pills for the win.



SPIDERWEB

It was hard to wake up. As Anna forced her sticky eyes open, groping for her phone to silence the irritatingly Zen gong alarm sound, she wasn't sure what she dreaded facing more: the reality of her parasitic new roommate, or her first day back at Wendell Rook Silver after two full weeks away.

She hauled herself out of bed and turned the shower on.

When Anna walked into the living room, stretching, a sine wave of fruit flies rose from every surface. The milk she'd bought only yesterday had gone sour in the fridge—chunky sour, nothing subtle about it. There were maggots in her brand-new box of muesli.

Anna could sense a lot of takeout in her immediate future.

Steam curled out of the bathroom. Anna took a deep breath for courage before she stripped down, fast and surreptitious, like she was in a high school locker room.

She soaped up, shampooed, fast, fast, waiting for bloody hands to slide down the shower curtain, for a faucet reflection of a Florentine woman—oh God, a naked one?—leering behind her, but nothing happened. Anna still felt nauseous from tension. She got out without properly rinsing, without conditioner, without shaving. She threw on the first clean work clothes she could find, tied her wet, tangled hair into a low twist bun, and was out the door ten minutes early.

The first 6 train that arrived was too full to get on, so Anna paced the platform, trying to stop her hands from shaking like a drunk's. She breathed. When the next train clattered by, she checked out her reflection in the film reel of windows.

Good news: it wasn't standing behind her at the moment. Bad news: she looked like the resurrected dead herself.

Nothing a little caffeine wouldn't fix. Keying herself into the massive downtown elevator bank, Anna had never felt so desperate for the agency's "mingling kitchen," part of the open-plan hell they'd created five years ago, supposedly to foster more creative collaboration but really designed to help management keep a constant eye on productivity. *Mingle! But not too much. The corner offices are watching.*

Ceci, the receptionist, was on a call when Anna stepped inside and gave Anna an apologetic wave, mouthing *Catch me later!* Anna, relieved not to have to commit to any small talk just yet, headed straight for the mingling kitchen, where she poured herself a Keurig dose of the strongest overpriced pod they had and piled up a napkin with mini blueberry muffins to carry to her desk.

One of the interns had taken over her workstation while she was away, she saw. There were frankly terrible drawings left on the easel and a ring stain on the white desktop. She half suspected the partners instructed the cleaners to leave it like that as a reminder to Anna that she was replaceable.

She placed her mug onto the coffee stain like a coaster and clicked her work computer to life.

"Welcome back, stranger." Tim of the Northeast Corner Office teleported from nowhere.

Anna barely managed to stifle a gasp. Christ, she was jumpy.

Tim crossed his gangly arms and tapered ankles as he sat on the edge of Anna's desk.

"Morning," she croaked.

He blinked at her, his supervisor smile fading. "Jesus."

Peter of the Southeast Office was passing, glowering across the room in preparation to ream some poor soul out, but Tim snapped his fingers at him, and Peter jumped like a kicked dog.

"Pete, look how rested Anna looks after her vacation."

Peter boomed a laugh. "What the hell happened to you?"

Anna finished off her coffee, slowly, then stood to go get another. "You do not want to know."

She wasn't surprised that Tim trailed her to the mingling kitchen. That was his management style: relentless pursuit. Come to think of it, there had always been something familiar about the reflection of La Dama Bianca hovering behind her, and now Anna knew what it was.

She put in another Keurig pod, feeling Tim's eyes bore into her back.

“You know, I was going to lay into you for not answering your emails, make some joke about how you’d gotten lost in the Alps, but now it feels like a cheap shot,” Tim said.

His voice had gotten louder. Anna could feel her colleagues perking up, clearly expected to watch. Open plan, open company, open communication.

“We did wonder where you were, you know.”

“Did I not tell you I was going to Italy?” Anna tried her best to sound confused, not insolent, but *oh* was it hard today.

“Is there no internet in Italy?” Tim grinned like a chimp, rocking back onto his heels. “Been a while since I’ve gotten over there. We sent you a bunch of emails, looking for your Cartier mock-ups? Had to hack into your computer to get to your files in the end.”

“That’s fine.” Anna smiled, cheery, and slid past him to her desk. “Anytime, seriously.”

Anna logged in to her work computer, didn’t flinch at the two hundred and thirty-seven new emails littering her inbox.

Tim stared at her. Anna stared at her computer until he finally left, shouting behind him, “Three o’clock!”

“PepsiCo. I’m on it.” She was, in fact, on it. It wasn’t hard to pick the thread of her projects back up. They weren’t exactly rocket science. Not even art, just someone else’s ideas made visible in the blandest way possible.

Peter popped by to lean his fists on the desk, showcasing his hulking form to best effect, and to grumble at Anna that she’d better have the designs ready in both print *and digital* format, as if she’d ever shown up to a meeting unprepared in the past ten years of working here.

Ten! Years! Long enough to know that the client wouldn’t even want to look at those designs. This was a triage meeting. They’d want something fresh. She’d be live-designing today.

Once again, she wasn’t wrong. The suits from PepsiCo, younger than Peter by half, waved off the old images: various citrus bowls with various suns shining out of them.

“We want something fresher. More spark. More of a celebration. Not as domestic, and we mean that in both the national and household sense. Spritza consumers aren’t staying home these days, they’re out interfacing socially in dynamic public or even virtual settings, and my concern, I don’t

want to speak over you, Kevin, but, right, we're not sure this firm has the strongest grip on the mindset of the demographic we're targeting . . ."

Anna pretended to nod and listen while she worked. In the first pause, when all the executives happened to take a breath at the same time, she held up her sketch pad.

"Something like this?"

Juice shooting out of the lemons and oranges, forming a fireworks display. The sense of a rave underneath, partiers forming the fruit bowl. Digital details at the edges, like it could be a party in the metaverse.

The Pepsi folks stared for a long beat before looking at one another, recalibrating. "I think we can start to spitball off that, yeah."

So she'd saved the account. Wasn't the first time.

Peter stopped her on her way to the elevator as she headed out for the day.

"Anna," he said. "Get some rest. Seriously. You look like shit."

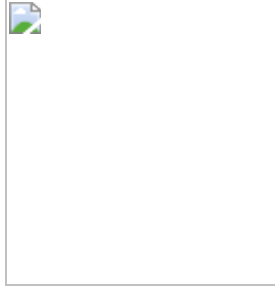
"Thanks, Pete, will do."

Anna rode down with Ceci, who liked a good bitch session.

"That fucking slob, saying that to you," Ceci whispered as soon as the doors shut. "You know what Shira wrote in my three-sixty eval? 'Tone down the makeup.' Do you believe that shit? Thought it would be better around here having a woman promoted to partner but I'm an idiot. Of course it's worse. I swear, if it weren't for my kids, I'd be gone. Five more years, right?"

Anna made sympathetic noises until the elevator reached the lobby and they reached the sidewalk and split off in opposite directions with their usual wave and wince of solidarity. Ceci had been with the agency nearly as long as Anna. She'd heard no fewer than two dozen variations on the "if it weren't for" theme. Anna never suggested she quit. Ceci was too nice to lose.

They were all *nice*, in their own ways, the copywriters, the art directors, the hungry junior staff, the account execs, everyone but the partners, really, who were only nice when there was an audience to witness it and dutifully clap, but Anna supposed that wasn't their fault, really. It was the job and they were stuck in it. She'd be the same if by some ludicrous twist of fate she was made partner. The agency was a spiderweb and they were all flies wrapped up tight for juicing and that was all there was to it.



GLAD YOU'RE STILL ALIVE

A text came in from Benny just as Anna reached the subway stop. She pressed herself against the wall of a bodega, while rush-hour crowds flowed past her, and stared at her phone, considering it.

We're all back. Glad you're alive.

Me too! she typed, but frowned and deleted it.

There were two sides to Benny—sincere cinnamon roll and mopey brooder, and they could switch within seconds. The line reading for the text he'd sent depended entirely on which Benny had sent it.

She opted for a light reply, hedging her bets. **Cool, call you later.**

The books she'd ordered were waiting for her when she got back home. She opened them so hastily a strip of the packaging fell onto the elevator rug. When she reached the top floor, Mrs. Levine was waiting to get on, so Anna deboarded quickly, leaving Mrs. Levine to glare pointedly at the cardboard scrap while the doors shut.

Anna hesitated before she opened the door to her apartment, getting a sense of what might be waiting inside. She'd felt better today by virtue of feeling worse—the familiar irritations and indignities of her job had been so immediate that they'd forced the larger problem into the background. Even now, as she walked into her living room, finding it just as she'd left it, the events of the past few weeks felt muted in the way of memories. The air wasn't heavy with dread. The mold she'd scrubbed from the bathroom walls hadn't come back. Only the usual sense of the world pressing in on her reverberated against her skin, and Anna reckoned that had more to do with the incessant honking outside, the sound of conversation bleeding through the walls, the air conditioner rattling in the window.

She was sick of New York, but wasn't sure where that left her. She sure as hell wasn't moving back to Ohio.

She ordered in Italian food without considering the associations of that choice, but it was fine. The sage smell still permeating the air reminded her more of Tuscany than her *penne alla vodka* and Caesar salad. Anna popped Netflix on—a nature documentary—uncorked the bottle of cabernet she’d grabbed on the way home, and cracked open her freshly delivered good-condition copy of *Jacopo’s Saints*.

She ate, drank, flipped pages, learned about poor Jacopo da Sellaio, forever in Botticelli’s shadow but plenty skilled in his own right. The images of his work caught her enough that she found herself reading with legitimate interest, lost enough in the history to find herself startled cold when she turned to the central gallery of glossy repros and saw La Dama Bianca smirking back at her.

Florentine Woman. c. 1500, Tempera on wood.

It was as if a cockroach had crawled onto the page. She wanted to chuck the book off her lap and grab a dishrag and beat the crap out of it.

But this was why she’d bought the damn thing. She needed to know.

The subject of this coy portrait has inspired lively debate, as it could have been any among the scores of Florentine bright spark socialites who sported fashionable blond waves during this period. The particularly vivid shade of yellow Jacopo uses for his unknown Florentine noblewoman lends credence to those who have identified this enigmatic model as Caterina Colonna, named in contemporary courtly accounts as a great beauty, renowned as much for her Naples yellow tresses as for the suspicious rapidity with which she transformed from blushing newlywed to influential widow. The Caterina theory certainly adds an edge of intrigue to the smile of Jacopo da Sellaio’s Florentine Woman, though on its own merits alone, the portrait stands among his finest and most distinct works.

Naples yellow. Had Caterina *actually* dyed her hair with a lead freaking oxide instead of dipping her head in piss like all the other well-turned young ladies? She’d wanted to stand apart, Anna sensed. Well, she’d found a way to do so, and to go completely insane in the process—but who cared, as long as you were the one all eyes turned to when you walked into the palazzo? There was power in that. Even more power if you were intelligent enough to become “influential.”

Caterina was still intelligent, Anna thought, though now insensate, unreasonable, unleashed.

She looked up from the book, peeked around the room.

“Caterina?” she said, out loud.

Only the pod of whales on the TV answered.

Maybe the sage had worked, after all, or the salt beside the doorway, or the ten *nazar boncuğus* she’d hung throughout the apartment. Anna suspected otherwise.

Everything here felt back to normal. Anna didn’t trust it. The muscles of her neck had tensed into a sort of coat hanger from which the rest of her body dangled.

As she got ready for bed and brushed her teeth, she caught herself holding her breath, spots gathering in her vision until she sucked in foamy toothpaste and gagged.

Breathe, she had to tell herself. *Keep breathing*.

She took a sleeping pill that night. Just in case.

Her dreams were normal, forgettable, strange in a purely mundane way, and then she was in the tower. It was dark. The windows were gone. Blocked up. It smelled like clay and dust.

Anna spun around, laughing, her yellow hair falling all around her, though no one could see her. The others here, the living, looked translucent, flimsy. Their fear was the most solid thing about them. Anna could taste it in the air when she stuck out her blackened tongue.

A haggard priest in ankle-length vestments was leading them. He began throwing water around from a vial, and Anna found to her shock that it sizzled against her with real pain. She hissed and shrank back against a far wall. The priest kept chanting, and Anna realized what they were trying to do. Sever her. Evict her. They couldn’t do it, not this way, but they seemed to be doing something else. She felt compressed, the air thick around her, binding her.

She wailed, furious, sending shudders through the men, making the priest’s reedy voice break, even as he kept going, blinking hard—and tried to dart past them, only to find the way barred to her. If she could attach herself to one of the men, take refuge in one of their bodies, she might escape that way—but no. They had charms strung over their necks, not just crucifixes but *cornicelli*, and she couldn’t find a way into them.

But one man, she saw now, was holding a key, anxiously turning it over in his palm. Anna recognized it. The jackdaw pattern. Freshly wrought, and quite fine, lovelier than any jail key had a right to be. A fancy key. Anna

felt Caterina's mind working, her own mind working, arriving at the same desperate idea.

As one, they darted for the key. They managed to enter it, tried to fit inside, but it was too small. Too hard, too warm with living sweat from the man's clammy fist. There was no time to find anything else.

As the exorcism ritual ended, Anna felt her lungs being cleaved in two, other bits of her breaking loose, like someone was scooping ice cream from her and carrying it away.

The men left. The tower door slammed shut. And Anna and Caterina screamed.

* * *

She woke up, still screaming, gasping upright, like she'd been jolted by a cattle prod.

The key.

She wanted to say it out loud, this epiphany, but didn't dare.

Anna didn't bother to shower. Up and dressed and out. She'd grab breakfast from the mingling kitchen at work, but first things first: she grabbed the iron key on her way out the door.

She couldn't grip it without grimacing. This filthy thing. Bits of soul all over it, revolting.

But *aesthetically* interesting. The vines, the bird, the old iron. A curious object for curious people, and there were lots of them in this city.

What Anna intended to do was simple: set it down on the sidewalk, and walk away. Go to work, forget the past month happened at all.

What she actually did was: drop the key, take ten steps down the sidewalk, and then turn back.

You never turn back. It's in every goddamn story, Lot's wife, Orpheus, but Anna turned, and saw two things in the space of so many blinks: One, a little girl walking ahead of her dad down the sidewalk. Two, a movement above her in the sixth-floor corner window.

The girl wore a backpack and had colorful beads dangling from her braids. Anna watched the key catch the little girl's eye, the spark of interest, the slack jaw as the child veered through foot traffic to approach it.

Anna doubled back toward her building, peering upward. There was a silhouette in the apartment window now, at once vague and horribly distinct. Heavy sleeves, lanky hair like a shroud.

Anna charged forward. "*Don't touch it!*"

The child drew her hand back, scowling. She hadn't made contact, hadn't quite touched it, but it had been close. *Jesus.*

Sweat dripped down Anna's back. She crouched beside the key and snatched it back up. "This is mine."

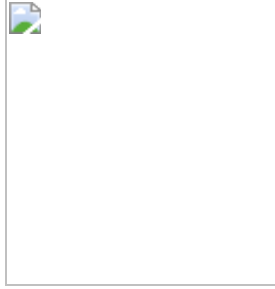
The little girl ran back to her dad, who was glaring at Anna in obvious alarm. He drew his daughter into the arch of his arm and hurried her away.

The usual commuters, people Anna recognized from her daily ride downtown, walked past Anna without making eye contact.

An invisible bubble had formed around her—one perk of looking crazy, she supposed.

She dropped the key into her bag, gritted her teeth, and continued her journey to work.

It couldn't be random. She would have to choose.



NO ONE BUT YOU

Anna managed the usual morning greetings and small talk with her colleagues, then got down to catching up on some of her deadlines. It was a good distraction, and if her storyboard for a digital ad campaign for a skin-care line looked oddly like a Renaissance triptych, nobody seemed to mind it. The director even made an appreciative comment to Peter about how “different” the firm’s artistic sensibilities were, which Anna figured, for better or worse, bought her another four months of guaranteed employment.

And that was the goal. Right? Anna was an adult. Adults had jobs and houses and friends, or, okay Nicole, at least warm acquaintances, and partners—ex-partners—and family. It was a tightrope, but she was walking it. Even now, even after she went to use the restroom and the lights went out and she washed her hands in the darkness and her eyes adjusted to find *it* shadowing her in the reflections of five different mirrors.

Ceci came in, flipped the light switch on, and saw only Anna, sweaty and shaking.

“You all right, hon?” Ceci glanced back at the switch, wondering, no doubt, why Anna had chosen to empty her bladder in the dark. Or whether she’d finally snapped, like they’d all been threatening to do for years. If Ceci had found the digital sketches Anna had snuck in between work assignments, finished and deleted—wrist scars in the shape of a pentagram, hanged men in suits, young bloggers foaming at the mouth—she’d never have walked into this restroom with her.

“Yeah, I’m good.” That wouldn’t fly. Anna rolled her eyes, sheepish. “Don’t say anything, but I’m massively hungover. New guy, too much wine.”

Ceci winked, brightening right up. “My lips are sealed. I’ve got some Tylenol in the top drawer if you want some.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

Anna had just left the restroom when she heard Ceci shout “The fuck?” and turned back to see that the lights had gone out again.

* * *

Anna felt the fug from the moment she stepped out of her building’s elevator. There was something rancid about the air, but it was odorless, this rot.

The apartment felt five times smaller than usual, the ceiling taller, all proportions off. Her jewel-toned furniture and duvet cover and rugs all looked soured by a few shades, like a filter had been applied to make everything look like it was from the seventies. Fat flies hummed around the apartment, bumping into one another in midair, into the windows, into Anna.

She rubbed her eyes, her nose, tossed her bag away, iron key inside, and poured herself a glass of wine from last night’s bottle.

As she lifted it to her lips, she felt a breath on her neck. Sharp, warm. A laugh.

A shrill sound pierced the air, combined with a low vibrating growl.

Startled, Anna dropped the glass against the counter and cursed again as it shattered, wine sloshing in a red waterfall down the white cabinet doors.

The sound came again, and this time Anna recognized it as her cellphone.

She grabbed for it blindly while dabbing up the wine with balled paper towels.

It was Nicole.

Anna answered on speaker, said, “Just a sec, I’ve got a situation, hang on.”

The red puddle seemed to writhe where it had seeped inside the paper towel. Anna froze before tossing it in the trash and looked closer. Maggots. In the wine. Thank fuck she hadn’t drunk it.

“Hilarious,” she said to the empty air, tossed the glass shards in the trash, grabbed the phone and took it to the sofa. “Heya, sorry about that.”

There was a pause. “What happened this time?”

“What do you mean, ‘this time’?”

“Don’t get fussy. I’m calling to say hi, but if you’re not up for it—”

“Are you guys okay?” Anna got right to the point. “Did anything weird follow you home?”

Nicole let out a huff of a laugh. “*What?*”

“Well, given everything that happened in Monteperso . . .”

“Nothing happened in Monteperso.”

Silence stretched across the phone line. And then, again:

“Nothing happened!”

Anna had no idea how to respond.

Nicole muttered something under her breath, then went on, “I don’t want to even *think* about the trip, I mean, the bad bits, and I am trying really hard to extend an olive branch here? Mom and Dad are livid, but you are my sister and that matters to me and, I would hope, to you as well.”

“You’re mad because . . .” Anna shook her head. “Because I left without saying goodbye, or—?”

“*Stop.*”

Anna pictured Nicole holding an actual olive branch, dropping it, stomping on it with high heels.

“Just stop, Anna. I *know*, all right? Did you think the girls wouldn’t tell me? I don’t understand why the hell you felt the need to scare them so badly. To *lock* Mia in the tower? It’s deranged, Anna, I really do think you need help, and that’s why I’m not cutting you off yet. So.”

“‘Yet’?”

The book on Florentine families flew off the coffee table, slamming against the wall and onto the floor, splayed open to Caterina’s face.

Anna kicked it closed again, too livid to be scared. “After everything that happened, you seriously think it was me who did all that? And . . . *how* exactly would I pull that off?”

“Pull what off?” Nicole’s voice had the clipped certainty of a Fox News pundit’s. “Nothing happened beyond your usual brand of dysfunction, and this time, we all fell for it.”

“But you *saw* it! If not the ghost, you saw the doors slamming, the—”

“I didn’t see anything, Anna. And you know, I’ve asked everyone? Nobody saw anything. No one but you. Conveniently. Listen, we know you rearranged the furniture that day. That you locked poor Mia up as a joke. *Was* it a joke, Anna? None of us can understand! You’ve given us nightmares, all of us, like we’re catching whatever mental illness—”

Anna’s mouth was desert dry. “The missing day. Explain that.”

There came a silence, and then, shaky: “Anna. There was no missing day.”

If Anna had the energy to ask what they all remembered, she knew what she'd hear: a collection of memories peppered from other days of the vacation. *We played Uno, Nicole made bland pasta, we swam a little, we looked at your sketches, don't you remember?*

Lies, but not theirs. They believed it. They were clinging on to fake memories for dear life.

“Listen Anna, explain it to me, why you did it, and maybe—”

Anna hung up the phone. She picked up a throw pillow and pressed it to her face, then, on second thought, viciously beat her iPhone with it, smothered the screen until she was pretty sure Siri couldn't breathe anymore, and when her energy was expended to the point that she herself could finally breathe, she took stock of her immediate surroundings.

Nothing visibly lurking or scratching or moving shit around. Useless talismans lying where she'd left them. Absolutely nothing in the kitchen she trusted to eat. She could go out, get a little food, more than a little alcohol, but she'd already played the hangover card at work. Besides, seeing maggots crawling in her wine somehow rendered everything in the world unappetizing.

So she stayed in, ignored her pinching stomach, and worked. She set up a large canvas and mixed new colors on her palette. At some point in the evening, more canvases came out. She switched to charcoal and drew until her fingers cramped. She ran her hands under hot water, splashed water on her face, looked up into the mirror expecting it to be there, and it was, she thought, right there behind her, but not visible, not this time.

She took a sleeping pill and later wished she hadn't. This time, she did dream, and it was a deep one, the kind you try to fight your way out of even once you know it isn't real, but it pulls at you like an anchor while you kick and kick.

She was in the villa, empty of furniture and full of darkness, an unnatural, painted-on kind of darkness, like an overlay. She wasn't alone.

She stood in a line, watching the people ahead of her step up, pause, step aside, lie down on the ground, face pressed against the dirty entryway floor. The girl in front of her had a pink pixie cut.

This all reminded Anna of something, but it wasn't until she saw La Dama Bianca standing in the front of the queue, yellow as old newsprint, offering a sip from a chalice to each person who reached her, that Anna recalled going to church as a kid, taking the sacrament, drinking much too

deeply, and watching with satisfaction as the deacon's beatific smile went pinched.

There were twelve on the floor now. Twelve people. Bodies, made strange.

Down there on the ground, they lay contorted, twisted like grapevines, shins bent in the middle, arms curving painfully—and it was painful, she could see from their faces, their wide agonized unblinking eyes, the rise and fall of their breathing through dented ribs.

The girl in front of Anna sipped from the cup, seemingly placid—but as Anna stepped forward for her own turn, the girl whirled around, wild, and reached for her.

“Help us,” the girl hissed, and that was all she got out before her slender throat became mottled, as if something were wrapped around it, bruising it. The girl's face went pinker than her hair, her mouth opening and closing, a fish in a dry bucket, but her eyes weren't panicked. There was something rote about it, like she'd played this death out many times.

The girl lay down next to the others. One space remained.

Anna recalled something, in the warped, fish-eye way real memory turns up in dreams—but this was a physical memory. Strong. Anna remembered lying down, on this floor, the way it felt beneath her, her head swirling sick with wine. She remembered a twisted body lying supine and still beside her, its face turned away, its limbs twisted into wrong angles, its white popped-collar polo shirt stained red . . . a stream issuing from that side-parting.

La Dama held out the cup, face height, urgently, and Anna couldn't see past it. Couldn't think of anything but drinking. The wine smelled strong, sweet, and welcoming.

She started to crane her neck forward, lips parted to drink, but something in her kicked hard, up and out, flailing loose, and it worked.

* * *

She was awake.

It was still dark out. Three in the morning, not much of a sleep, but she wasn't going back for more. She grabbed her laptop and googled “Lucy Montrose.”

Yeah, it was her. The blogger. The hair was different on her profile pic—longer, blue—but Anna had a hunch that if she found a postmortem picture, Lucy would look just as she had in the dream.

The apartment felt empty. Anna flicked the light on so she could make coffee—assuming it hadn't rotted inside the freezer bag—and was instantly confronted with her output from the night before.

Caterina was everywhere. Smirking, exultant, strangely beautiful. Not obviously attractive, not in her features, but beautiful in her confidence. *Insistently* beautiful. Daring you to say otherwise.

Anna went to take the pictures down, as usual, but her hands began to shake. Sweat broke out, clammy, all over her body. She ran to the bathroom, convinced she was going to vomit, but panted instead over the toilet bowl and the feeling subsided.

When she came out, there was sunlight filtering through the windows, stretching geometrically across the messy floor. Confused, Anna grabbed her phone for the time and blinked hard when she saw 8:13 A.M. She must have read the time wrong when she got up. Now she'd be late for work—but all in all, the time was good news. It meant she'd gotten more sleep than she'd thought, and, more important, she now had an excuse to abandon this fucked-up art installation for the day.

She dressed in something far too heavy for the late August weather, which didn't register as a problem until she stepped out of her building and was met with a wave of humidity that sent sweat dripping between her breasts within minutes.

Even more than the stifling clothes she'd put on—silk under black cashmere, for Christ's sake—more than the radiant city heat, more than the press of commuters around her, Anna felt *it* breathing on her, attached, a massive weightless leech getting a piggyback ride.

When she got through the subway stiles, a train was just leaving, and so she had to wait on the platform for four full minutes feeling rhythmic hot breaths fluttering the bottom of her hairline. Anna did an admirable job of ignoring it, she thought, of not swatting or twitching, but when the 6 thundered in, Anna looked up and saw La Dama standing farther behind her, palms cocked. *Ready.*

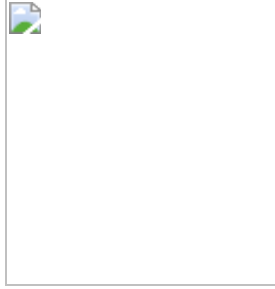
Before Anna could do anything more than gape, she felt the shove and stumbled forward, stopping her own momentum a mere two centimeters away from the slicing edge of the oncoming train.

Anna spun around, fists balled. “You really wanna kill me here? Get stuck *here*? You like New York that much? Because I've got a feeling you'd rather be back in your fucking villa.”

The train had stopped. People got off, others on, but nobody was choosing Anna's car.

Everyone watched her with wary frowns, edging away.

Anna got in the subway car, claimed a seat, and got to keep it the whole way downtown.



A GRACIOUS HOSTESS

Anna's attempt at "Good morning" was greeted with raised eyebrows from Ceci.

"Where you been, girl?"

"Ugh." Anna pulled her sweaty silk blouse away from her sodden armpits as she crossed the reception area. "Overslept."

Anna could feel Ceci's wincing eyes trailing her.

She kept walking. She might be able to slide into her desk and pretend to have been in the restroom if she got the timing right. Keep her job, keep her benefits, keep her rent paid.

She sat at her workstation, shoved her bag deep underneath, opened a file at random and started working it, as if she'd been concentrating for hours.

Tim crept up and crouched beside her, silent. She kept working. Deep focus.

"A word," he finally said.

She blinked, smiling sheepishly as if coming out of a trance. That usually charmed him, the artiste effect, but today he squinted at her with something like pity. Maybe disgust. How long had it been since she'd showered? Anna couldn't remember.

He pressed his lips together and nodded. "I think it's probably a good thing you took some personal time. I don't know what's going on, *nor do I need to . . .*" He put his hand up as if to stop her from talking. "But we do expect the bare minimum of a phone call or email to let us know you'll be out."

Tim knocked on the desk and stood, not asking for a reply, which was good because Anna was floundering for one. Out? Was he complaining about her vacation again?

He pointed at her, jaunty now, as if all had been resolved. “And we’ve got Milton Foods on Tuesday, so get some rest this weekend. We all gotta show up ready to impress.”

“You got it,” Anna said, and held on to her smile until he left to harass a junior copy editor across the room.

Then she clicked her calendar open.

It was Friday.

She’d lost two days.

Her stomach gave a pinch so strong she had to double over, holding her abdomen with her elbows. Had she eaten in the past few days? Just slept? Sleepwalked to the bathroom? Played Uno and forgotten it?

There were bagels and fruit salad in the mingling kitchen today, but she stuck with black coffee and muesli that she picked at slowly as she worked, easing her digestive system back to life.

At lunchtime, Anna forced herself to go out and bought *pasta e fagioli* from the crowded corner deli—not a popular choice on a ninety-degree day.

While she waited in line, she called Benny. Two rings, then: “You’ve reached Benjamin Pace. I’m afraid—”

Anna hung up without leaving a message, unsure what to say. She wasn’t used to being in this position. Benny was the one who called her and left messages. When she returned a call, he picked up. This might have been the longest they’d ever gone without speaking to each other.

“Fucking Nicole,” Anna muttered to the alarmed cashier, then grabbed some gum from beside the counter. “This too, please.”

The bars were crowded on her way home. Friday night and all that. Anna considered ducking into one before remembering how much she hated them. There was a time when they’d seemed fun, when all of this, the city, the nightlife, city life in general, felt like exactly what she was meant to do. But somewhere along the line, her life had become compacted into work, apartment, art, takeout once a week and frugal home cooking the rest of the time, managing Josh when there was a Josh to be managed, calling her family, getting up, doing it all over again, and she wasn’t sure it was worth the price of rent and a MetroCard anymore.

The thought of anywhere else was overwhelming, though. It brought bigger questions to mind. What was the point of *any* of this? Of getting up at all? Ever?

On the corner of Third Avenue and Forty-Fifth, Anna's phone dinged. Her heart jumped, thinking it was a text from Benny, but no, just a push notification—Duolingo, wondering where she'd been, why she'd stopped studying Italian. That damn owl looked so disappointed in her.

She crossed the street and detoured into a swanky market she couldn't afford, picked up a TV dinner and a bottle of Montepulciano and took them home. As she let herself into the building, the old woman from the fourth floor was coming out with her infirm little dog. It growled at Anna, which nearly startled the wine out of the crook of her arm. The old woman didn't seem to notice.

It was a strange relief to come home, this time. As soon as Anna shut the door, she stripped down, too hot and crunchy with day-old sweat to care that La Dama could see. She stripped to her underwear and bra and splashed water from the kitchen sink down between her breasts and over her armpits, more to cool her down than wash her off. Gave a few desultory kicks at the puddles to clean them up as she opened the wine. She turned to lean against the kitchen counter and drank straight from the bottle.

La Dama Bianca stared at her from the paint canvas, the large sketch pad, the medium sketch pad, the pile of drawings on the coffee table, from the floor.

"Don't worry," Anna said. "I'm not going to throw you out."

It was nice to be able to talk freely without worrying about sending some terrified commuter child into early therapy.

"I am, however, going to drink this entire bottle of wine before you have the chance to spoil it with your maggots or mold or Renaissance poison or whatever the hell it is you do."

She felt the tension growing around her now, not dissipating, but she was getting used to the feeling of constant dread, punctuated by jump scares. It lived everywhere in her body now. Even her fingernails. Truth was, it was just a different flavor of blanketing anxiety from the one she was used to. And not just at work. She couldn't blame Tim's management style for everything. When she thought about her family, she felt them like a physical presence too. Always had. Her mother's hand gripping her shoulder, trying to steer, Benny's arms tight around her waist, Nicole tapping her with a pointed finger, *me me focus on me*, Dad looming ahead, a human wall, arms crossed. Everywhere she went, there they were. Four freight-hoppers she couldn't shake.

What was one more?

She picked out two wineglasses and poured them both to nearly overflowing.

Anna drank hers down in a long greedy gulp, then nodded to the other one. “For you, Caterina. I’m a gracious hostess, which is more than you can say.”

She went to her desk and opened Duolingo, the familiar sounds of simplistic Italian reverberating against the exposed brick wall. Anna glanced from time to time at the other wineglass, to see if it had moved or emptied.

It hadn’t.

“I have many animals, including monkeys,” Anna repeated in Italian as she poured herself another glass.

Anna didn’t remember going to sleep. She woke up to the percussive chime of a breaking glass and thought for a second she was still at her desk, that she’d fallen asleep there and knocked her wineglass over, but no, she was in bed.

The sound had come from the kitchen.

And as she replayed it in her mind, it was the sound of a thrown glass, not a dropped one.

She tried to sit up but there was something on her stomach, her chest, pushing her down—a great weight, an unnaturally even one, like a wooden floorboard blanket, combined with the sensation of individual fingers on her collarbone, twisting upward and curling. Squeezing. Thumbs intertwining and pushing hard.

Fight, flight, freeze. Anna *fought*.

Flailing her limbs did nothing, and her chest was growing tight with lack of air, so she gathered up the night phlegm from the back of her tongue and *spat*.

That did it. Shock effect, maybe, but Anna felt the pressure vanish and leaped from bed, clutching at her neck, doubled over and heaving.

The instant she had enough air to do so, she began to shout. “You’re one dumb ghost, you know that? Of all the places in the world, you want to kill me in a one-bedroom in Midtown? And *share* the place, for all eternity? How fucking bad were living conditions when you were alive, lady?”

The pressure, the miasma, was congealing around her, the electric charge before a rainstorm, but inside Anna’s head, her throat, was a sharp,

pointed scream. She felt the unfairness of all this, the illogic of her being the one to be targeted, glommed on to, punished. It made. No. Sense.

“Do you know how many square feet this apartment is?” Anna snapped, in one direction, then the other. “*Guess.*”

She spat again, onto the floor, and listened to the silence, the rattle of rain on her air conditioner.

“Nothing? Two hundred ninety-two square feet. And guess how much I pay for the privilege of squeezing into it? Thirty-two hundred dollars a month, which is thirty-eight thousand four hundred dollars a year, and if you add in utilities and take out the mandatory insurance and 401K contributions from my paycheck, yep, that’s more than half my salary. And for that, you get to live next to college students bankrolled by their absentee parents and couples who loudly fuck and break up and have makeup sex a few feet from your headboard and old people who glare at you for existing when you hold the door for them. See these shitty brick walls? You pay *more* for those! You’d have covered them up with a woven hanging or something back in Florence, wouldn’t you? And you want to stay *here*?”

The wall behind Anna’s bed began to pound. She jumped, backing away.

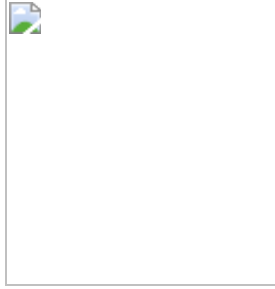
A voice boomed from the other side. “Would you *please! Shut! Up?*”

The loud-sex couple!

“You know what.” Anna nodded.

This was a cage, wasn’t it? No different from that goddamned tower. Was she a trapped cat in this analogy or was she Caterina? The ghost, melding into her more and more every day. Either way, the urge was the same. Anna crawled onto her bed and scratched her nails down the wall, over and over again, until the plaster and paint and mold dug under her nails, until her arms hurt, until, at last, she heard her neighbors grumble and settle again into silence.

Building management called the next morning.



I AM GOING TO HAVE TO ASK YOU TO LEAVE

Anna had gone back to sleep on the sofa, and now, according to her phone, it was close to noon. She let the call go to voicemail, slept a little more inside the comforting ray of sunshine falling across her cheek, then, feeling her neck start to spasm from however many hours she'd spent curled up on what was essentially a love seat, she sat up and faced the music.

“Hello? Ms. Pace? Yeah, this is Leonard from Clark Management in reference to your apartment 6B at 238 East Fifty-Second Street? We've received a number of complaints about the noise levels in your rental unit over the past week, and while we usually encourage neighbors to settle disputes courteously and individually . . .” His voice had a recorded quality, like he was reading from a script. Anna set the phone down on the coffee table, put it on speaker, and hobbled across the room to make coffee. “. . . we are going to need to ask you to refrain from slamming doors and moving furniture to an excessive degree, even during the day, as we have several residents with young children or who are infirm and/or work from their residences.”

“And/or,” Anna repeated, turning on the kettle. The hiss of the water boiling drowned out the rest of his message, but Anna had heard enough. There was some sort of a request for a callback at the end. Anna deleted the message and called Benny instead.

Two rings, voicemail. Classic call rejection.

Anna deliberated for a good ten minutes.

It was Saturday morning. It would be her normal routine, so why not? Mom would be expecting it. Maybe. She hadn't returned Anna's texts or voicemails from after the vacation, but even so. Saturday morning, catch up with the parents. Normal.

Anna poured hot water into the French press, let it sit in the grounds, shoved it down, read a little of her *stregoneria* book while she waited, practicing her Italian: “*Sciolgo il tuo incantesimo. Incantesimo? Maledizione?*” She poured a *tazza di caffè*, sucked up a sip so hot it toasted her taste buds clean off, and then called her mother.

She was surprised when Mom picked up, even if it was with a tight “Hello? Yes?”

“Hey! Mom!”

“I *cannot* talk right now, Anna, I am in the middle of something.”

Anna sat on the floor beside the sofa. “Oh, okay. Do you want to call—”

“I’m with your sister. She is very upset.”

“Oh no.” Anna dragged her laptop over, half listening. “What about?”

“Well?” Mom let out an indignant laugh. “You!”

Anna sipped her coffee. “Like, right now upset? She’s upset about me to the point of needing an intervention right when I call you? Wow. What are the odds.”

“What do you need, Anna? Are you calling to ask for money?”

Anna hadn’t asked her parents for money since she moved into this apartment six years ago and got a loan from them for the security deposit, which she’d repaid within four months.

“No,” Anna said, biting back the rest of it.

“Good.” Mom sniffed. “Because your father will be a firm no, I can tell you that much. Especially now that we know what sort of activities our money has been funding.”

Anna blinked. “I have no idea what you’re talking—”

“*We know about the baby.*” Mom’s whisper ground into a hiss.

Okay.

That was a gut punch.

Almost a literal one. Anna leaned crumpled against the sofa, struggling to breathe.

Nicole had told Mom and Dad about the abortion. As ammunition, as revenge, for literally nothing. Or Benny, but Anna wouldn’t look directly at that possibility.

“What is Nicole so upset about, anyway?” Malice crept into Anna’s voice. Contempt. She usually hid it, but there were cracks now big enough for it to seep through. “What is it this time? Am I trying to steal her husband again? Her prom date? Or is this still about Italy?”

“Of course it is. *You* know that it is!”

Anna heard a rhythmic bumping on the line, as if Mom were walking quickly while talking to her. She must have taken the phone outside. Anna could picture her power-walking angrily down Nicole’s suburban sidewalk. Every time Mom’s voice went muffled, she was passing neighbors watering their hydrangeas.

“She is very concerned about the girls.”

“Has something happened?” Anna’s voice hitched.

“Nothing that hasn’t come straight from you!” Mom squawked, then drew a deep, performative breath. “She is concerned about their *emotional* state.”

“Well, yeah, I am too,” Anna shot back. “Not easy having Nicole for a mother.”

“I am going to have to ask you to leave,” Mom hissed.

Anna laughed. “This is a *phone call!*”

The line went dead.

Anna sipped her coffee and felt the air shift around her in an unexpected way. There was something leavening the usual mire, an odd effervescence, like the room was a spinning fairground ride.

“You’re enjoying this,” Anna said. “This is your deal, your playbook, huh? This whole . . . unraveling.”

There was no answer. Anna didn’t need one.

She dug her hands into her greasy hair and pulled until tears sprang to her eyes.

Anna took herself off to the park with her sketch pad. Her skin felt itchy in the apartment, but she was still too chickenshit to shower. It was windy out today, threatening rain, not delivering. She bought a pretzel and a Coke Zero and sat on the steps outside the Metropolitan Museum, working.

She didn’t bother to pretend. Not today. No landscapes, no city scenes, no childhood memories. She drew La Dama holding that chalice out, but in this sketch, you could see her face, lips slightly parted, seductive. Her wrist was exposed at an oblique angle, so you could just make out the edges of the wound pattern she’d carved into herself.

Anna set it aside and started another one, to cleanse herself of the last one. This portrait was not so beautiful. It was the underneath, the decomposed, everything Caterina’s madness had wrought on her. Black

stumps of teeth, lips bubbling with sores, and despite all that, absolute, unshakable hauteur in the way she looked out at the viewer.

“How much for that?”

Anna gasped alert. She looked up to see a middle-aged couple, well-dressed, on their way out of the Met, staring down at her last sketch. Maybe they weren't a couple, not yet; they stood an awkward foot apart, and neither wore wedding bands. The woman peered down at *La Dama*—the beautiful version—and murmured to the man something Anna couldn't hear.

“That one's two hundred,” Anna tossed out so they would leave her alone.

“Cash all right?”

Anna looked up, incredulous.

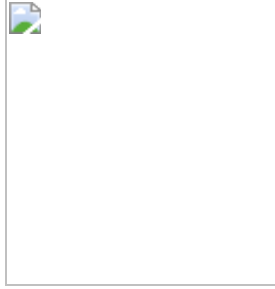
The man counted out twenties from his burnished leather wallet, one after another. They were crisp from the ATM. He was trying to impress his date. Who even carried cash these days? Absolutely bonkers.

“Don't forget to sign it,” the woman said, sweetly enough, so Anna did.

She waited until they'd moved on with their prize in hand before she shook her head at the folly of it all.

A drip of rain hit her head, her sketch pad, smearing *Caterina's* rotted mouth. It suited it.

Anna packed up and left before the couple could come back and ask for a refund.



FOGGED-UP WINDOWS

Saturday night was very bad. Anna wasn't even sure why. She woke up feeling like she'd walked all night without stopping, like she'd fallen and hit her head and forgotten everything that had happened, but there was no injury, no sign that she'd left the apartment.

Sunday night, she was too afraid to go to sleep, so she stayed up drinking coffee, doing Duolingo Italian, and watching *Real Housewives*. She drifted off in front of the television mere minutes before the Zen gongs of her cellphone ordered her to get up and go to work.

Anna spent her lunch break at her desk, scrolling through Benny's Instagram. No shortage of posts, unlike her own decidedly lurker account. He'd been busy since he got back. Drinks with coworkers. Brunch with a bevy of golden young men. Smiles throughout, but no pics of Christopher, which she didn't realize was what she'd really been hunting for until she stopped passive-aggressively liking all of Benny's posts and clicked over to Christopher's account.

He hadn't posted since Italy. That photo of him as David at the Accademia had been stuck in the top left corner for over a week.

Maybe he was depressed from the breakup. Gone to ground. Sulking.

Anna zoomed in on the picture. Bigger. Bigger. Not knowing why, exactly, just wanting to see Christopher's face as it was in life.

In life.

Where the fuck did *that* come from?

Someone knocked on the desk.

Anna gasped. She swiveled to smile tightly at Shira of the Northwest Office. What was it with partners and knocking on desks? A holdover from the pre-open plan days, maybe, like how everyone still said "Hello?" when answering cellphones, as if the caller ID weren't right there.

Apparently Shira had said something. She was waiting for an answer with her head cocked way over, like Anna was a baby in a crib.

Anna smiled and took a guess. “Sure!”

Right answer. Shira turned and swept her arm out, ushering Anna in front of her.

Anna glided as best she could ahead of Shira to her glass-paneled office, ignoring the glaringly furtive glances of her coworkers. Spying a vacant laptop, she strained her eyes to see the date on the screen.

It was indeed Monday. The correct Monday, the one she thought it was.

It was a big office and therefore an agonizingly long walk. Shira clip-clopped behind Anna, asking every third person how their weekend was, continuing onward without waiting for an answer.

A year after making partner, Shira still had that “please like me” veneer she’d arrived with. Even when she tried to be a hard-ass to impress the men, she’d pull people aside later for whispered half apologies and chitchat, even the occasional random gift.

She’d only messed with Anna once, though. In her first week with the firm, Shira was completely befuddled by Anna’s job description. Anna remembered with some pleasure the staff meeting where Shira suggested reducing expenses by laying Anna off—right in front of her!—after which old Mr. Silver appeared out of nowhere like the ghost of Jacob Marley to give Shira a spittle-spattered earful about how hand-drawn art was integral to maintaining the Golden Age standards of advertising and how if she didn’t understand that, perhaps she wasn’t the best fit at their agency.

Mr. Silver had patted Anna’s ass on the way out. Not an unusual occurrence. Anna still went to the old man’s funeral two years later, grateful for that day’s intervention.

Now Shira sat down behind her wall of a desk, motioning Anna into the seat opposite. Anna noticed that the petite woman was taller than her when sitting. She must have jacked her office chair up to full height. Anna wondered if her legs were dangling.

“Anna.” Shira leaned forward. “We’re concerned.”

Anna glanced back at the shut door, the glass walls. Shira hadn’t pushed the button to fog the glass up, so she wasn’t getting fired, just lightly dressed down.

“You haven’t been yourself lately, and, frankly, it’s beginning to affect your work.”

Anna let her genuine confusion show. “In what way?”

She knew the style she was working in had shifted, become decidedly more classical and less pop graphic, but so far, the clients and directors had seemed to like it. Besides, she wasn’t the art director here, only the mock-up artist. As far as she knew, she’d been meeting all her deadlines.

As far as she knew . . .

The sweat on the back of Anna’s neck began to prickle. She felt someone standing there.

Could Shira sense it? Was it there, reflected in the glass, that sleazy smear of yellow hair?

“I’m going to be blunt.” Shira smiled sympathetically. “It’s your appearance. We do expect a certain unanimity of brand here at Wendell Rook Silver, and since you’ve come back to work, you’ve started to look . . . um.”

“Indigent?” Anna offered.

Shira coughed a relieved laugh. “I didn’t want to say it! It’s a big change, is all—you’re usually one of the . . . well, not most *stylish*. I wouldn’t say that, exactly. You’ve just always had a certain personal aesthetic that seemed to . . .”

Anna considered it, she really did, laying it all out on this woman’s vintage teak desk: *Listen Shira, here’s the thing. I’ve stopped showering because there’s a murderous ghost living in my apartment and I don’t love being naked around her?*

Shira was still talking. “I mean, the clients couldn’t get enough of you! And I hate to say it, post-hashtag-MeToo and all that, but let’s be honest, it helps, doesn’t it? Your attractiveness is a draw. On good days.”

Anna leaned back. “Are you . . . ?”

Shira’s smile wavered. “Am I . . . ?”

Anna squinted. “Are you *hitting* on me?”

Shira’s round face went ripe red. “No. God. I . . .” She licked her lips, adjusted her hair. “I’m married. I’m *straight*. So.”

“Oh. I’m not.” Anna winced. “Not strictly. Is that the problem? Does that not fit the Wendell Rook Silver aesthetic?”

Shira rolled back from the desk—involuntarily, Anna thought.

“God no! I mean, yes; we are an inclusive workplace and we embrace our LGBT.” Shira swallowed. “Q. I. Colleagues. Of course we do. Well,

listen, I'm sure you've got a lot to be getting on with, so I won't keep you. Did you have a good weekend, by the way?"

Anna winked. "*Amazing.*"

Shira ushered Anna out, laughing loudly at nothing.

"Great talk, Anna, just remember my door's always open," she said, shutting the door behind her.

Anna returned to her desk and got back to work stalking Benny online, distracted only momentarily by the sight of Shira stomping into Tim's office with Peter in tow, ranting wildly until Tim caught Anna's eye across the open plan and fogged up his windows.

* * *

When Anna left for the day, she saw a group of her "I have work friends" loitering in the reception area, waiting for Ceci to log out.

They all waved, said goodbye to Anna as she passed, but in an eye-avoidant way.

After-work drinks, Anna realized. Third Monday of the month. She and Ceci had started the tradition. Nobody had invited her this time. Maybe they'd been waiting for her to bring it up. Or hoping she'd forget.

Looking at herself in the bronze elevator doors as they opened to admit her, Anna couldn't blame them. She'd avoid herself on the subway, was the truth.

And on the ride home, sure enough, everyone did.

* * *

Two notes had been slipped under Anna's door when she got back home. One was a piece of unevenly ripped lined paper, the other a sealed envelope.

She read the sloppy one first.

Please stop jumping? Get a gym membership? This is ridiculous! ~ Your neighbors downstairs.

Anna enjoyed that one. She pinned it up on her wall.

The one in the envelope was considerably less fun, a list of her supposed noise violations, complete with dates and times, typed up on the building management company's letterhead. She threw that one away.

Out of habit, Anna opened her cupboards for a snack and a wineglass, but she'd bypassed the bodega on the way back. The plan had been to pick up a nice red and a cheese plate or something, but then she'd pictured her nieces vomiting red, the thick blood spilling from the mouths of the Italian

children, felt an irritating sort of pulsing from the ghost behind her, and she'd continued home queasy and empty-handed.

She poured a glass of water now and went to her laptop. When she clicked it on, her browser was open to the booking page for Villa Taccola.

It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at and why—and then she let out a shocked laugh.

“You learned to work the internet! That is *adorable*.”

It was there. Behind her. Watching. She could see it in the screen's reflection now, those filthy sleeves flanking Anna's shoulders.

Wild rage flared hot through Anna's muscles. Oh how she longed to whip around and strangle it, tear at it with her fingernails, pin it down and stomp and kick and watch blood fly in satisfying arcs from its rotted face, but she knew that none of that would work, she would pass straight through it, so all that violence sat inside her like a boiling pasta pot with the lid glued shut.

All she could do was carry on, breathe through the frustration, and continue. To what? To live, she guessed. Keep cursed and carry on.

As Anna slid her finger across the touchpad to click out of the booking page, a wave of nausea crested over her so violently she convulsed with it. She clamped her teeth shut and shoved away from the desk, running for the bathroom.

She only made it halfway into the toilet, the rest spilling down the side. She'd had salad for lunch, but this vomit was red as sin.

As she heaved again, gripping the porcelain, she felt her hair being held back from her face.

Its fingers were cold. Helpful at the moment, while Anna retched, but even so, not exactly gentle.

Anna waited for the shove into the toilet, to be held down, to drown in her own sick, but it didn't happen. Not tonight.

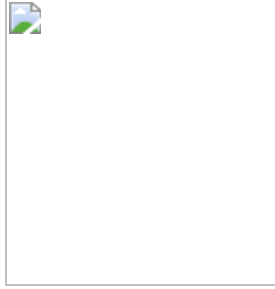
She woke up later, on the bathroom floor, and crawled her way through the hall, into the bedroom, and up onto her mattress. She didn't even see the room around her.

She was in the villa, wasn't she? Exhausted, wrung out. She climbed the stairs to the tower bedroom on her hands and knees, and when she reached her own bed, it was a wooden bed carved with the vines and grapes of Villa Taccola, and there were real vines too, winding around the posts and the

feet, and when she finally settled under the thick, soft cover, the vines wound over her too. Lovingly.

A welcome. A rest.

She slept even in her dream, a dream of dreaming. She needed it so much.



KILLER DRESS

She woke up to her phone alarm, and gasped like she'd been submerged. It couldn't be the morning—she felt like she hadn't slept at all, massively hungover and starving and sick—but it was, in fact, the morning. Tuesday morning, the day of the Big Meeting.

There could be no calling in sick today.

“Get ready, get on the subway, show up, do your work, smile,” Anna recited while she gave the bathroom floor and toilet a quick spray and wipe. The sour smell of the mess made her dry heave. She coughed the feeling away, spat in the sink, and tossed out the red paper towels.

“Job, money, home, security, you're doing fine, just keep going.”

A quick glance in the mirror told her she needed a shower more than ever before, but there was no time. This was an eight-thirty meeting. She'd need to get in early.

She peed, wiped, saw red spilling out of her and panicked a moment, checking her nose for bleeds, her mouth, before she realized it was just her period. It had been a while. She'd been irregular since the month she got pregnant, but supplies were still stocked under the sink, so she got on with it.

One thing she hadn't gotten on with lately was laundry. The only clean work item left in her closet was a vintage Chanel dress she'd bought to meet Josh's parents, years ago, and hadn't worn since. It wasn't her style, but it was clean, so she put it on, slicked her greasy hair into a low chignon, slapped water onto her face along with a quick swipe of lipstick, and hurried off into the fray.

Anna rode up in the office elevator with a tan young man in an expensive suit who brazenly checked her out but did at least step back to let her push her floor button first.

It had been a while since anybody looked at her that way, she realized. As the brass doors shut, she got a glimpse of herself in her sheath dress, red lips, hair tied back. Not washing her face for however long had given her complexion a dewy shine, and the grease in her hair had somehow smoothed all possible flyaways into the kind of sleek look you'd see at Fashion Week. As an added bonus, the edge of the dress just managed to conceal her unshaved armpits.

It was a definite look.

She moved aside so he could push for his floor, but he had his hands in his pockets.

"Me too," he said, nodding. "Wendell Rook Silver?"

"Yup."

"Ah." He looked pleased. "You might be my eight-thirty."

She had no ready response, so they rode in silence, emerging into a crowded reception area.

The clients were here en masse but waiting, for this guy, apparently. Anna slipped past the handshaking throng into the grid of the open plan.

Tim and Peter stood waiting beside her desk.

Anna stopped walking. "I'm on time, right?"

"On time's late," Peter grunted. "You look great. Killer dress. Grab your stuff, get set up, we'll meet you in there. *Hey! Good morning!*"

It took Anna a second to realize he was talking past her to the client group Tim was now ushering toward the conference room.

"Look at that tan, where you been this summer, do I want to know?" Back pats, deep unnatural laughs, chatter.

Anna grabbed her laptop, her stylus and tablet. One thing she'd say for the agency—they didn't skimp on technology. She had a state-of-the-art digital sketch pad for these meetings, ready to send to devices, project onto the meeting screen, save, share, edit. It even had a texture to it, a grit, like the real thing. If Anna had to cite the one reason she'd lasted this long in this job, it would be this scratchy tablet.

Anna set up her gear in her spot near the head of the conference table while the clients filed in and shuffled into seats.

Milton Foods. Used to be Milton Meats, when she'd started. They weren't the agency's biggest client, but they were the oldest—launching their first television campaign with Wendell Rook Silver back in the *Mad Men* era—and that made them the most important.

It also meant their mascot had stayed largely the same for the past fifty years.

A singing hot dog. Sometimes rapping, God help us all. Sometimes postmodern and louche, lounging by the pool. But *always* a sentient hot dog, which you would then convince someone to eat.

Anna scanned the room, spotting the usual frequents: their EVP and director of marketing; a handful of junior-executive tagalongs, only one of whom she hadn't seen before. The far seat was usually filled by the head of the company, Mr. Milton himself, who took a hands-on approach to pretty much everything, including Ceci, who'd started wisely hiding in the bathroom when Milton Foods client meetings kicked out. Mr. Milton had never been gropey with Anna. She wasn't his type. He liked her drawings, though, nostalgic for the "artistry" of the meetings of his youth, which was a big part of why the agency kept Anna around.

Mr. Milton wasn't here today. That young guy she'd ridden up in the elevator with was sitting in his place. The head seat. Nobody had told him not to.

Shira walked in briskly to shut the door, shake hands, and launch the meeting. That sim-like polish of Shira's glitched once, when she blinked with relief at Anna's dress, and then again when she spotted the young man.

"Mr. *Milton*." Shira extended her stubby hand to shake. "Such a pleasure to finally meet you. Have you met Anna Pace, our art director?"

Anna wasn't sure why she was being introduced, nor why Shira had just given her a massive verbal promotion. She'd have to ask for the salary increase to go with it, but hey. That could wait 'til after lunch.

"I haven't," the young man said. "Not *officially*." Peter and Tim exchanged a worried look. "But my father used to talk about Ms. Pace when he came back from these meetings. Always looked forward to coming here."

Peter nodded. "Well, I very much hope that—"

"Used to?" Anna blurted, and everyone looked at her again.

"He suffered a heart attack," said young Mr. Milton.

"Oh, okay, cool."

Anna felt discomfort sweep the room, but she was too bone-tired to figure out why or to try to correct it. Surely that was the job of the partners. She fiddled with her USB cord and held her stylus ready. Tight. Very tight. If she dropped it, everything might fall.

“We were all so very sorry for your loss,” Tim said, his voice a low rumble. And then: “Now let’s talk hot dogs!”

And so they did. For over an hour, discussing how to merge contemporary sensibilities, a sense of responsible consumerism, environmentalism, and increasing vegetarianism, into that gold-standard, singing, dancing wiener. A relentless, incessant discussion . . . of hot dogs.

Anna worked in silence throughout, drafting mock-ups, which she then displayed on the screen to be picked apart, one after another.

“Less of a grin . . . more intelligence, if that makes sense?”

She breathed.

“Something to signify responsibility without being too hippy-dippy, excuse the expression, although that might work for our vegan line.”

She had to close her eyes for a second before trying again.

“There’s something not quite right about the shape there.”

Well yeah, it looks like a dick, Anna thought, but she kept her mouth shut. Kept her hold on the stylus.

The concept they liked best was the hot dog surrounded by a lush garden, at one with nature, smiling at a butterfly. Still, almost everyone had a tweak. That was how they justified their own existences.

“We don’t want the bugs actually touching the food.”

Of course not, that would be disgusting.

“A little more energy to it, if that makes sense?”

Of course, of course, an energetic hot dog. Anna’s finger cramped so violently, she drew in a gasp, but she kept her hold on the stylus. Kept drawing. Couldn’t drop it yet, but soon.

“Maybe the issue with the shape is where the *bun* is positioned?”

The only one who didn’t say anything was young Mr. Milton, though the Milton Foods throng looked to him continually for his opinion on their opinions. The partners too, especially Shira, who, Anna could swear, had undone a blouse button sometime in the past half hour.

Anna had hot dogs floating through her mind, prodding at her face, her neck. She swatted at the air and no one noticed, so she kept drawing, fevered, while they droned, their words becoming an AI-generated script of a business meeting.

How long had she managed to sit through meetings like these without going insane? Ten years and this, right here, was the culmination of it. The catharsis.

Here in this room, with *it* behind her, hands on her shoulders, unmoving, only breathing.

Waiting.

Anna's hair, however sleek, was so dirty it hurt. Her Chanel dress pressed into her skin at every seam, the zipper a dagger along her spine, but more than anything else, she felt Caterina's breath on her. Stinging. Hot. Rhythmic. Relentless. It owned her, no matter where she went.

Couldn't they see it? What was happening here, to her, what could happen to all of them if they stayed in the wrong fucking vacation rental? As if *any* of this mattered.

It was pointless, absurd, dizzyingly stupid. Her whole existence, a joke told to an empty auditorium.

She redrew and redrew, hot dogs galore, then swiped it all blank, turned off the screen, and got to work on the final mock-up.

The. Final. Mock-up.

The conversation dwindled at around the ten-thirty mark. A couple of repeated "All right"s alerted Anna to the fact that the meeting was wrapping up, several people checked their phones, and then Tim rapped on the table like he was knocking on Anna's desk, and said, "Let's have a look."

"Just . . . one . . . sec . . ." Anna said, not looking up.

"Can't rush art," Shira said, which was apparently meant to be a joke and not an unassailable fact.

And this was art. It was magnificent.

Anna turned the screen back on.

She felt herself shudder with release as the shock wave rippled down the conference table.

Horrified laughter. Outrage. And up on the big screen, there it was. Anna's masterpiece.

She'd incorporated the hot dogs, in a way. Oh, they were *smiling* hot dogs. Rapturous. She'd drawn the meeting room down to the light glinting off the polished table, along with each of today's participants, but in this image, her colleagues and clients were all standing up, trousers around their ankles, each reaching forward to grip the next person's smiling hot dog.

Shira had the biggest dick, of course, *and* the most pained expression of ecstasy.

"What the fuck, Anna?" Peter kept repeating. "What the fuck?"

"Is this meant to be funny?" The EVP of marketing.

“I . . . am so . . . sorry . . .” Shira, trying not to stroke out.

“You’re really talented.” Young Mr. Milton.

Anna looked up at that one, meeting his eye. He seemed sincere.

“Get out. Now. You’re fired.” Tim, but Anna was already on her way out. “Gentlemen, I apologize in the strongest terms. This particular employee, former employee . . .”

She didn’t hear the rest of it as she glided through the open plan, feeling the air changing around her. The chaos spreading.

Back in the meeting room, Tim had whipped the cord from the flat screen, slammed his hand onto the tablet to erase the image, but it was too late. Anna had emailed it to the whole company before she’d even turned on the overhead screen.

She grabbed her bag from her workstation, left the rest of it, continued onward to the elevators.

Running feet, whispers, stifled laughter erupted all over the cavernous office, echoing like bats waking up. Some colleagues looked up at Anna in a mix of disgust and approbation, sure, but one of the junior copy editors mouthed *legend* as she passed, and that sentiment seemed to be the dominant one following her out the door.

Security was already waiting in the reception area, in the form of the burly middle-aged guy from the lobby who’d been working there even longer than Anna. “I’m going to have to remove any company property—”

“I didn’t take any,” Anna said. He checked her bag anyway.

She glanced up at Ceci to say goodbye or “Hey, I finally did it! I finally snapped,” but Anna’s best work buddy was too busy typing absolutely nothing on her keyboard to look up.

The security guard gripped Anna’s arm lightly and ushered her into the elevator.

When the door closed, he murmured, “What’d you do?”

“Drew a sketch of senior management jerking each other off. Sent it to the whole company.”

He chuckled. “That’s a new one. You got a copy of that sketch?”

She shook her head, adrenaline giving way to numbness. “I’m sure somebody up there can forward it to you.”

And now panic was setting in. She’d lost her job. On purpose. It was amazing. A disaster.

She sensed it, Caterina, behind her, felt its glee like a hot candle flame.

Down in the lobby, Anna had to turn in her key passes and sign a form that said “Don’t ever come back” in seven hundred words. The various processes took enough time for the elevator to travel up thirty-four stories and back down again, this time depositing young Mr. Milton in the lobby.

He chased her out the revolving doors. “Anna!”

She turned, more out of curiosity than anything else.

He was better looking after a light jog, hair tousled, tie askew.

“Do you have gallery representation?” he asked. “Do you want to grab a drink sometime?”

Anna wasn’t sure if the two questions were related, but she was in no state to answer either of them.

She stared instead, sizing him up.

She could bring him home. Go to his place . . .

Hello, *much* better plan. Maybe her little parasite would prefer a penthouse to her squat and decide to stay awhile.

“Or coffee?” He swallowed around his smile. Nervous, apparently. “We could go grab—”

“I just lost my job,” Anna said, quickly. “I’m definitely going to be drinking something stronger than coffee. *Alone*, though,” she got out, before he could suggest a place. “I think I’d better drink alone tonight. But thank you for the invitation.”

He looked crestfallen in the manner of a beloved child hearing “no” for the first time, but Anna felt virtuous.

This dude seemed inexplicably decent. Besides his obscene inherited wealth, the tan, the suit, there was no evidence whatsoever that he deserved the thing currently hanging off her back.

She turned away from young Midwestern Mr. Milton and got lost in the crowd.

Down in the subway station, shock set in. Anna began to shake.

If La Dama decided to shove her now, she wasn’t sure she’d fight momentum.

But there came no shove, just the uptown 6, lightly filled, it being midmorning and all. There was a vacant seat in the corner, which Anna took, putting her head in her hands, releasing her hair from its bun to spill like an oil slick around her face.

“Anna?”

She froze, except to laugh, her shoulders juddering, like Muttley.

She knew that voice. Half expected it, honestly. Oh lord. He was right on cue.

She looked up, finally. “Hey, Josh.”

Her ex had crossed the subway car to say hello. He was dressed in an old-man sweater—V-neck, with buttons—and corduroy slacks. His glasses looked new. She’d broken his last pair.

He looked good. Healthy. The contrast could not have been more striking. If she’d been in primo condition, Anna suspected Josh would have quietly slipped between cars and away before she had the chance to spot him.

“How are you?” He sat down opposite her, knees wide.

“I’ve been better!”

Anna watched Josh’s expression continue to shift—assessing her, assessing himself. He was the most emotionally analytical person she’d ever known. Absolutely exhausting.

“How about you?” she asked. “How’s tricks?”

He snapped out of it, thank God.

“Good! Yeah. Work’s picked up in the past few months. I’m doing some pro bono stuff, which keeps me going. Family’s good.” He blinked hard. Smiled. “Trina had the baby.”

“That’s great!”

Anna had no idea who Trina was. Josh had a massive family.

“It’s a girl,” Josh said. “I have a girlfriend. Actually. Weird segue, but yeah.”

“Okay.”

“It’s new. Going well.”

He licked his lips. His eyes traveled down Anna’s body then fled upward, staring at a subway ad for night school.

“I remember that dress,” he said, and then he looked back at her, waiting for something. A “thank you,” maybe, as if he’d paid her a compliment.

“I never wear it,” she said. “I mean, *never*. What are the odds, huh?”

The train slowed, the station announcement ringing out. They were pulling into Union Square. His stop.

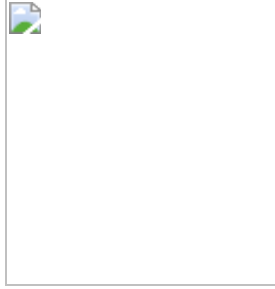
Josh perched at the door, waiting for it to open. “Should we grab a drink?”

His brow was furrowed, like he wanted an empirical answer. *Should* they? Fuck no!

“Absolutely,” Anna said. She gazed up at him the way she used to. “Come to my place. I’m not in any fit state to be in public right now.”

He sat back down opposite her. Didn’t hesitate for a millisecond.

Anna smiled. Bingo.



WHY DID YOU DO IT

“I can’t stay long,” Josh kept insisting as they walked up Third Avenue, though he’d picked up a six-bottle craft beer sampler at the bodega. “Tentative plans with Penelope.”

“Pretty name,” Anna said.

Josh glanced at her, wary.

They rode up in her elevator in silence, broken by Josh chuckling to himself.

“They still haven’t fixed that bulb.” He pointed up.

“They did. It went out again.”

“Huh.”

Anna was turning the key in her lock when she remembered what her apartment looked like and wondered with nervous amusement what Josh would have to say about it.

The answer was: not much. He just strolled about and perused the many sketches of La Dama Bianca as if he were at an art gallery cocktail party.

“This is different,” he said.

Anna cracked open a pale ale and handed it to Josh. She offered her own bottle to clink but he ignored her, kept browsing. Blinked straight past an image of Caterina with her mouth dripping blood as if it were a child’s school photo.

“You’ve kept these.”

“For now,” Anna said. “I’ll toss them at some point.”

A storm gathered above her shoulders. She felt it grow fingers.

Good, Anna thought. I’ve got your attention.

“Always drove me crazy how you would throw your work out,” Josh said. “Never understood it.”

“Never understood *you*” was left unsaid.

Anna sat.

Josh didn't. He crossed his arms and stared at her.

"You know, I've tried not to think about you, but when I did . . . I assumed you'd be fine. That it meant nothing to you, that it wouldn't impact you. Us. The baby. But look at you."

Anna knew she was a wreck. If Josh wanted to believe this rolling breakdown was all about him, she wasn't going to burst his bubble. She'd never been one to argue, anyway, even when she was right. That was another thing that had always driven him crazy: her unwillingness to engage.

Josh finally sat, noncommittal, on the arm of the sofa, staring at the brick wall above the dark TV screen. "It was hard for me. I was pretty fucking broken for a little while there. It hurt so damn much, you know?"

He turned and looked at her now.

"Yeah. I think you do know."

Despite his law-professor clothes and expensive glasses, what Anna saw was a teenager in a private-school uniform. Naïve. Willfully so. Far too easily wounded.

He took a swig of beer, then tapped the bottle against his knee. "It got better. Past two months have been great. I got over you, over all of it. I really thought I'd moved past it, and then I saw you today and . . ."

Anna was tired. She almost regretted this. Should have sent him on his way at Union Square.

She could see a woman's shadow stretching out of the lit bathroom onto the living room floor.

"And what, Josh?" She met his eyes.

He reached for her. She knew he would.

It was easy at first, familiar, his hand sliding around the small of her back, the way he liked to catch her bottom lip in his teeth, the ineffective way he used his tongue. Anna wasn't caught up in it like she'd hoped she might be. Even after their clothes were nearly off, she kept staring over his bare shoulder at the shadow on the floor, trying to ascertain whether it was moving.

"Do you have a condom?" Anna asked.

Something bitter flashed over Josh's face, but he fished one from the wallet in his trouser pocket on the floor nonetheless.

He stopped kissing Anna as soon as the condom was on, and when he pushed inside her, his motions grew less and less gentle. He looked past her,

blinking quickly, his jaw clenched tight. Anna had the seam of a pillow folded awkwardly under her shoulder blade and tried to shift to dislodge it, but Josh was holding her arms down.

She squinted up at him as he thrust, and realized what this was: punishment. A petty sort of closure. He'd looked at her on the subway and seen a bruise, but he wasn't compelled to heal it. No, that was the old Josh. This Josh wanted to push on it.

Anna tilted her hips so at least her pubic bone wouldn't get battered and waited for him to finish. In her experience, it wouldn't be long.

He growled, "Why did you do it, why did you do it," a few times, tears dropping from his face onto her nose, and she couldn't even wipe them off because of the whole arms-pinned situation.

The shadow had moved into the kitchen. She felt its attention on them. Its eyes.

Anna arched her back and moaned as if in rapture.

Josh was startled enough by her sudden reaction to finally climax.

After ejaculating, Josh used to flop down onto her like a seal on a rock, but this time, he pushed himself away without looking at her.

Anna felt like a whore.

She grinned, rubbed her arms, and stood up to take a long draw of her beer.

Josh left the rest of his beer behind, untouched.

While he dressed, Anna walked to the bedroom and opened her bedside drawer, then came back out again into the living room, still naked.

"Think fast," she said. As his head darted up from zipping his fly, she chucked the key at him.

He caught it inches from his face, then scowled down at it. "What am I looking at?"

"An old Italian key." Anna leaned against the brick wall. "Found it in Tuscany. Thought it was cool."

"Let me get this straight," Josh said, turning the key over in his hand. "You found a key in *Italy*, presumably one that someone needs, to, you know, open their door, and you brought it home with you. As a souvenir."

"Something like that."

"That is just . . ." Josh gritted his teeth, almost a smile. "*Classic Anna Pace.*"

"You want it?"

“What?”

“The key,” Anna said, walking closer, enjoying how uncomfortable he was with her nakedness. “I’m not that crazy about it. Feels more *you*, somehow.”

Josh sputtered for a second, unsure how to interpret that, then said, “I’m good.”

“Okay, cool, just do me a favor and throw it away on your way out? There’s a trash can on the corner of Fifty-First and—”

“Yeah. Fine. Whatever.” Josh grabbed his work satchel and slid the key inside.

The shadow was gone, but Anna felt dread gathering, congealing around that bag, that key.

Her heart rate started to ratchet up.

“Good luck, Anna,” Josh said on his way out the door.

Anna resisted the urge to lean out into the hallway and offer love and kisses to Penelope.

She shut and locked her door, all the latches. She stretched her arms out on the narrow walls of her hallway and breathed.

It felt cleaner in here. Light. Empty.

Anna took a very long shower. Extra hot. She soaped up everything twice, washing Josh off her forever. Maybe more than Josh.

Maybe she was clean now, clear and free.

No job, but she’d hated it, hadn’t she?

This could be a fresh start. A—

Something screamed. A *thing*, Anna thought. Not a person. Not a ghost either.

Outside. Metal. Brakes.

Anna knew what happened. She’d felt the shove in her palms like it was her own hands that had done it. Her hands, Caterina’s hands, no difference.

Heaviness sank into her. She was too fucking exhausted to rush.

Anna rinsed her shampoo. She applied conditioner, waited two minutes, combing it with her fingers. Shaved. Exfoliated.

A high, undulating whine seeped through the bathroom door. Sirens. She’d been right, then.

The water went cold.

She turned the shower off, pulled back the curtain, ground her teeth in readiness as she scoured herself with a towel, twisted it around herself,

walked through her bedroom to the window.

Peered below.

A fire truck, an ambulance. A tangle of other stopped vehicles and bunched crowds on the street corners with hands pressed to their mouths as they gawked. Four cops interviewed one stunned taxi driver.

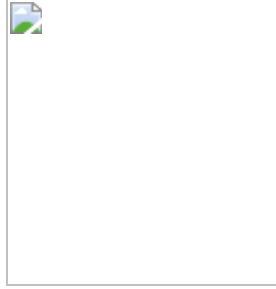
Anna had gotten to the window just in time to see the EMTs pull the blanket up over Josh's face. One side was concave, of course, but still recognizable by the familiar appalled shock in his expression. He would always look like that now.

She shut the blinds. Turned around, and there it was, in the exact center of the bed.

Anna picked up the key with the tips of her fingernails and dumped it back into her bedside drawer.

"Worth a try," she said.

She could have sworn the drawer laughed.



DEAL

There came a reckoning that night, glorious in its pettiness. Footsteps pacing the halls, banging on the walls, both from within and without, her neighbors shouting, threatening to have her evicted, doors slamming throughout the apartment, and worst of all, every time Anna did drift off, despite her efforts to stay vigilant, it would come back, sitting on her chest, shaking her shoulders, hot breath in her face, invisible at least, small blessings.

Anna couldn't stand to look at that yellow right now, that decay. Bad enough to smell it.

La Dama Bianca indeed. La Dama Putrida.

When the sun came up, Anna wasn't sure if she'd mostly kept vigil or slept, too delirious to sort through the past hours. She staggered into the living room, the arch of one foot narrowly missing a shard of glass on the floor.

The craft beer bottles were all shattered, their fragments strewn around the room, but there wasn't much liquid pooling around the glass. Judging by her sour morning breath, she'd drunk them all at some point in the night.

She'd had coffee too, apparently. There was a nearly empty mug beside her computer, a film of spoiled milk swimming on the surface.

Anna woke up her laptop and saw that she was halfway through filling out the booking page for Villa Taccola.

Her cellphone was dead. She plugged it in.

There was blood on her sofa. Huh.

Anna rubbed her head, her matted but blessedly clean hair, trying to remember why. Had Josh been that rough? Yes and no—she was on her period, she remembered now. She'd ruined the damn sofa, and her bedsheets, and her underwear.

Her phone beeped back to life. There were a whole lot of email alerts.

Only one voicemail, so she tackled that first.

“Ms. Pace, due to repeated attempts to contact you and continued violations of our rental policy, we will have to move forward with eviction procedures beginning this Sunday, September the seventeenth. We . . .”

Anna let the phone dangle and then just drop. *This Sunday?* It was August. The end of August.

She looked at her computer screen. The rest of the booking page was filled in now. When had she done that?

It was asking for her credit card details for the deposit.

Up on the top of the screen was the date and time.

Wed Sep 11 2:21 p.m.

Anna went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth with the last centimeter of her desiccated tube of Colgate.

She looked at herself. Her cheeks, already sharp, angular, were skeletal now. There was no color but gray in her complexion.

Whatever she’d been doing in these lost days, it wasn’t sleep-eating.

Anna got dressed, made coffee—there was still a little bit left in the freezer—and scrolled through her phone for missed texts, emails, messages. All the emails were from companies, apart from one, hilariously, from Andrew Milton, still trying for a drink date, which she left mostly unread.

Nothing from her family, nobody checking in, not in . . . how many days? Anna had lost the will to count—but then a push notification popped up.

The Duolingo owl congratulated her on her three straight weeks on top of the Diamond League Italian charts.

Anna laughed, mouth hanging open. “The fuck?”

Her computer lit up across the room.

Photos of Villa Taccola started scrolling from the booking page.

Anna threw a pillow. “I *get* it! Fuck off, take a nap or something.”

That’s what she herself wanted to do, give up, give in.

She called Benny instead, mentally rehearsing a voicemail. She wasn’t sure what she would say. Maybe just a long, gasping, “*Send help.*”

But he picked up. “Hi, Anna.”

Benny sounded sad.

His voice, she’d missed it, my God, enough to knock the breath out of her.

She had to sit down on the floor between broken bottles and curl up to respond, such was her surprise at the tenderness of her reaction, while Benny said, “Anna? You there? Please don’t tell me you butt-dialed me.”

“I didn’t,” she blurted. “I . . . it’s just really good to hear your voice.”

He didn’t say anything. Self-conscious about his voice now, maybe.

“Are you busy? If you’re busy, I could . . .” Anna let her words trail out. She could hear herself, how desperate she sounded. It was like watching an actor play her in a movie, getting it painfully wrong.

“No, I can talk,” Benny said. “We *should* talk.”

If there was ever a moment for honesty, she thought, it was now. Lay it all bare.

But when had she ever done that?

“It’s been a minute,” Anna said. “I’m not sure we’ve ever gone this long without catching up.”

“Yeah.” Benny murmured something away from the phone, then back to her, said, “Sorry.”

“How have you been?”

“Good.” Benny laughed—again, ruefully. “I’ve been really, really, really good, Anna.”

There was a point to all those “really”s, and Anna knew Benny was not going to hang up without making it.

“Have you seen Christopher?” she asked, and felt a dirty grain of satisfaction at the uncomfortable beat that followed.

“No,” Benny finally said. “He blocked my number, I think. It’s fine. I’m enjoying being single.”

“Glad I could help.”

This was a test. A nudge. An invitation for Benny to admit it wasn’t her fault. Anna bit her cheek, waiting.

“Yeah, well, I guess there’s that.”

So he did blame her. Anger flamed up Anna’s throat, but this wasn’t why she’d called him. Not at all.

“And how are you?” Benny sighed, reciting more than asking the question. “Enjoying—”

“The ghost followed me home,” she said.

He went silent.

“You probably think I’m crazy, like Nicole does, or—”

“Nicky doesn’t think you’re crazy, she thinks you’re a liar,” Benny said. “I don’t think you’re either of those. I mean, not in this case.”

Anna let the dig slide. She was holding her breath.

“I saw it,” Benny said. “Not just that hinge flying into my hand and not just the doors but . . . *her*. She was real.”

“Is real,” Anna corrected, shakily, an important distinction. “Why didn’t you tell them? Nicole swore that no one else in the family saw a thing, just me.”

“I didn’t want to tell them.” Benny sniffed. “I’m tired of backing you up.”

“It’s not about me, Ben. You lied. You made me look like a liar.”

“So it is about you?”

Anna held the phone away from her and silently screamed.

When she put it to her ear again, Benny was in midsentence. “. . . getting involved. This is a you thing, and I just want out of it.”

“You’re lucky you *can* be out of it! You’re not the one it’s . . . fucking . . . piggybacked onto.”

“Well, that’s no surprise, is it?”

Anna wasn’t sure what that meant. Silverfish were crawling across her ankle in curlicues. She swatted them and tried to brighten, like he could hear her smiling across the line. “Maybe we could share custody? Take turns? It’s got to have something do with that key, although I can’t quite figure out how to pass it—”

“I think it’s you, Anna,” Benny interrupted. His voice was sharper than the Benny she knew. “I think you *are* the ghost.”

Anna was too tired for semiotics. “Literally? Like a poltergeist, or—?”

“You know something? When you told me what Josh said to you, when you broke up. About there being a darkness in you. I didn’t disagree.”

You want darkness, you should have seen Josh last night, she nearly said.

But it wasn’t last night, was it? She wasn’t sure when it was.

And he was dead. Possibly. Unless she’d imagined it, all of it.

“Shit like this happens around you. Haven’t you noticed that?”

Anna’s anger dropped, started to roil in her empty stomach. “No, Ben, it’s weird, but I can’t recall another time a killer ghost from the Renaissance moved to New York with me. This is a first.”

“Don’t be pedantic, I mean chaos, Anna. You’re right, this is the longest we’ve ever gone without talking, and I felt weird about that at first, but you know what? This is the most normal I’ve felt, maybe forever. The most functional.”

Anna bit her lip while her jaw shook, then swallowed hard. “I’m gonna need you to be more specific in providing evidence that chaos follows me around.”

“Nicole’s marriage is fine when you’re not around. Not so rock-steady when you are. You scared away all my boyfriends before I moved to Philly.”

“Oh, is that why you moved, Benny?” Anna was shouting now, holding the phone out. “Is that why? To get away from me? Because I seem to remember it differently.”

Benny plowed on, louder. “Mom worries about you constantly. Constantly! About your existence. She asked me once if you were a sociopath, and honestly, Anna, I didn’t know what to say.”

“I’ve done a little googling and I really don’t think I am, but sorry. Go on. Anything else?”

“Well. Gus?”

Anna screamed silently into the ceiling. “Gus. Okay. Cool. Tell me, Benny. You think I did it? You think I killed our class pet when we were eight?”

“All I know is the guinea pig was alive when I went to bed and dead when I woke up. And you were already awake, and you weren’t . . . you weren’t bothered by the fact that it was dead! You didn’t seem surprised. You’d written a note to the teacher, gotten dressed for school—”

“What do you want me to say, Benny?” Anna was going to fall asleep right here on the phone.

“I want the truth. I want you to finally tell me the truth.”

“Did I kill Gus?”

“Yes. I mean, you tell me. Yes, I want the truth.”

“While we’re talking truth, Benny, why don’t you tell me what happened to *Christopher*.”

She could hear Benny breathing. Her shoulders cramped together, tight.

He let out a huff of a laugh. “What do you mean?”

He sounded abruptly young. Like when they were thirteen. When his voice had changed and he went silent for days at a time, unsure how to

wield it, forcing Anna to do the talking for both of them.

“I mean . . .” Anna dug a piece of glass into the apartment floor. “. . . that Christopher’s farewell letter was in your handwriting.”

“That’s . . . insane.”

“I agree.” Benny was hiding something. She could feel the sharp edges of it poking through the phone line.

Anna gripped the phone more tightly. He remembered something. Maybe everything. She froze tight, waiting for something, a confession, anything.

“*It was a dream!*” Benny screamed into the receiver, so close there was snarling feedback. Then, just as quickly, his voice deflated on the other end of the line. “It was just a fucking dream, Anna. Why are you torturing me with this?”

The line went so silent, Anna had to check to make sure the call was still connected. She started to offer something to her brother, words of comfort, easing him back from the brink.

But then he said, “You should just be grateful.”

“Grateful?”

“If anything did happen, you’d be the obvious suspect.” Cool calm had crept back into his voice. “And arguably, anything that hypothetically happened, started with you.”

“Because I’m a sociopath,” Anna offered dully. “Class pet killer.”

“Well.” The brittleness of Benny’s laugh eviscerated any concern she’d had for him a moment before. “Yeah.”

“You wanna hear what honesty sounds like,” she said, her anger rising, mercury in a boiling thermometer. “Here it is, Benny. I didn’t kill Gus. Sometimes things just die—but you know what? I wish I had done it. Cracked his neck or smothered him or whatever it is you all think happened. I’ve *fantasized* about it. If I’d done it, it would be so neat, wouldn’t it? It would line up. What you all think of me, the truth, it would be orderly. It would be a clean shelf for you to put all your jealousy on. In little jars. Labeled with your names.”

Benny coughed. “Jealousy? Nicole, *maybe*, but—”

“All of you.” Anna got up and paced now, away from the glass, treading on her portraits, letting her toes smudge the faces into a blur, blotting out the pentagram scars, the poisoned chalices, the deadened eyes. “I’m sorry I got better grades than you without trying. I’m sorry I didn’t go places,

impressive places, to justify all that potential. I'm sorry, but beyond that, I don't get it. You've all got what you want. A comfortable retirement, a nuclear family, a new underwear-model boyfriend waiting in the wings. Why can't you all? Just? Leave me the hell alone?"

There was a long silence, and then, "That's what we are doing, Anna. I didn't want to have this call. I just thought I owed you one last something."

Anna sat down beside the fridge again, feeling it whir. "*Last* something. Cool. Well, do me a favor, okay? When chaos creeps back into your life without me there to blame for it—and it will, Benny, that's just life—when you break up with whoever the new guy turns out to be, when you burn out on teaching like everybody does, when you finally look hard at everything that happened in Italy, when you're ready to be fucking honest, and you want to crawl into my bed and snuggle up and sleep where it's safe . . . pretend I'm dead. *Assume* it. Deal?"

Benny breathed for a few seconds into the phone, considering.

"Yeah," he said. "Deal."

And Anna hung up.

The room spun with glee, and Anna held on. It wasn't her brother from the past ten years she thought of, it was the twin she'd just described, the little sweaty-haired boy who'd needed her, her strength, her coolness to regulate his own temperature, who'd needed her to hold his hand when they went into pre-K together.

She thought of how he used to grab her face, giggling, and kiss it, and she wept, right there on the kitchen floor.

She shook with it, moaned like she was poisoned, and she felt the air laughing around her, dancing merrily.

When she was all dried up, she went to bed.

* * *

Anna dreamed she was in the tower bedroom, lying in bed. The windows were open, late-afternoon light spilling through the fine, white curtains, the breeze cutting through the warmth, tickling Anna's hair.

She rolled over to find Caterina beside her. The young woman's lips and cheeks were flushed from sleep, dandelion-yellow hair spilling around her bare shoulders. She woke up, long lashes fluttering open, revealing blue-green eyes like the water of a mountain stream. She blinked at Anna, catlike, and at last laid a warm hand on Anna's cheek, finger stroking. Then she slid entirely atop her and kissed her, gentle as velvet.

“You understand me now,” Caterina said, and her voice was just as sweet as her touch. She whispered into Anna’s ear. “My mind is your mind, my thoughts your thoughts, my language your language. When I speak, you listen. You understand. You obey.”

Anna turned to see open cuts on Caterina’s wrist, sliced so neatly, a circle penning in a five-pointed star. It must have hurt her so much to carve it into herself like that. Anna kissed it like a mother, a little magic to heal the pain.

Caterina closed her eyes, soothed, then moved that hand lower where Anna couldn’t see it, only feel it.

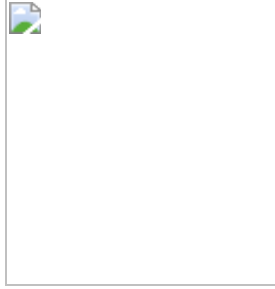
They began to move and it wasn’t anything like Josh, like any of the other women Anna had been with; it was like nothing she’d ever known. This was rapture and beauty, pure beauty, overwhelming all sense.

Anna succumbed to it, to her, her Lady in white sheets, as pleasure swept her and she knew what she wanted. Understand. Obey.

The only choice that remained.

Deal?

Deal.



YOU'VE DONE THIS TO YOURSELF

Anna got up. She felt rested for once. There was a crease in the pillow beside her, a dent in the blankets. She hadn't slept alone.

She went straight to the bathroom, unable to face the wreck of a living room, got dressed, shoes and all, and then took stock.

Broken bottles she still hadn't swept up. An ancient banana on the kitchen counter, rotted into an oozing black peel. La Dama Bianca everywhere. On the floor, the walls, the canvases, plastering the windows, that smirk, dozens of eyes pinning her like a field of lasers. And flies, so many flies. Had there always been this many flies?

A glimpse of white in her peripheral vision made Anna turn.

A piece of paper had been slipped under her door.

30-DAY NOTICE TO VACATE

She crouched to pick the paper up and felt its presence dangling behind her as she rose.

She closed her eyes. "I know. All right. Let's go."

* * *

Anna hadn't wanted to risk another time slip and a missed flight, so she bought tickets for later that same day, JFK to Florence. It was inordinately expensive, of course, but at this point, what difference did it make?

Anna left the apartment exactly as it was. Broken glass, dirty clothes, art, if you could call it that. She packed a carry-on with her wallet, a sketch pad, a charcoal pencil, and abandoned all else, even—especially—her laptop and phone. She'd already memorized her favorite public-domain book. She'd rented Villa Taccola and scheduled an Uber from the train station.

That was it, done.

The flight wasn't fully booked, so Anna had a row of three seats to herself—but she wasn't alone, not really. She saw that sickly yellow hair in

the reflection of the airplane window. She didn't bother to shut the blinds. Her trash TV-watching days were behind her.

Everything was behind her now.

When she went to use the restroom, she washed her hands and spoke to the thing behind her. "You're happy, huh? Great mood?"

It had its yellow hands on her shoulders—she could see them but not feel them. The fingernails were long and brown, like blood had rusted underneath them.

"Happy because we're going home or because you get to add me to your people collection?"

No movement. No answer, beyond an alarming flicker of the lavatory lights.

"Don't break the plane," Anna muttered as they both went back to her seat.

* * *

She'd wondered if Pietro would be her Uber driver again, a neat little bookend. But no, it was a woman, who chatted with her phone on speaker the whole ride in Putongua Chinese. Anna could only make out a few phrases. There was a red *bagua* knot hanging from the rearview mirror, a charm to ward off evil energy. Maybe that was why the ride went by so uneventfully.

The goat was still tied up along the drive to Villa Taccola. It bleated as they passed.

The circle of dead grass had encroached into the trees. Some were losing their leaves, shriveled black instead of gold or red, others already bare. When the car rolled over the line into the rot, the wasteland, Anna felt her stomach drop, shoulders clenching with panic.

She'd made the decision, though. No going back now.

The caretaker stood at attention outside the iron gates, grave, as if he were keeping vigil.

Anna got out and listened to the Uber crunch away behind her. Behind that noise, there was a purer one, repeating.

Church bells in Monteperso. She hadn't noticed them the last time she'd stayed here.

With autumn coming on, there were new amenities here, she saw—a stack of firewood, a smaller basket of kindling sticks. She picked one up

and idly spun it between two fingers as she approached the caretaker with a rueful smile of greeting.

She watched his eyes sink to her other hand, the tiny bag she'd brought. Not enough for a long stay. When he looked back up at her, his eyes were sad but unsurprised.

"I brought the key back," Anna said, in Italian.

He shook his head. "I will not take it. I'm sorry. It used to eat me alive. Always, always, 'Open the door. Open the door.' I cannot return to that."

She understood everything now—the Italian words and the reason he was saying them.

"I am sorry you came back," he said, opening the front door for her.

Anna wasn't sure whether he meant for her sake or his own. "Don't worry. It's all going to be okay now. You won't have to feed it anymore."

She wasn't at all sure that this was true, not in any long-term sense, but she said it with as much confidence as she could muster.

Regret wrestled with fear in the caretaker's expression. He looked like he wanted to ask more questions of her and just as strongly dreaded the answers.

In silence, he turned, got into his car, and rumbled away.

The villa inhaled when Anna shut the door behind her. Breathed in and held its breath.

She felt them around her, all of them, the ones who had lain facedown on the floor for La Dama Bianca to tread on, to break, to drink energy from like glasses of wine, more and more of them as the centuries wore on.

And she'd just brought their tormentor back.

Maybe Anna should have borne it better, kept it quarantined in New York, given everybody else an eternal break, but she wasn't that selfless. Never had been.

There was a welcome basket on the dining table. A bottle of Brunello, another of prosecco, bread, olives, cheese. She didn't remember this from last time, but then she realized her family must have consumed it before she arrived.

"Should have come sooner," she could hear her mother saying, eyebrows raised. *You've done this to yourself.*

Anna wondered now, rolling olives around in her mouth, what might have happened if she'd just stayed in Florence after that first weekend. If she'd never come here. Left them to it. Went back home.

It was an empty exercise, void of significance. This felt inevitable. She was always meant to come to this point, to this place. To be stripped down to nothing.

She lit a candle, watching the glow dance around the room, drank the red wine, one cup after another, ate the bread and the cheese, spilled salt on the table and played with the shape of it like a Buddhist monk making sand mandalas. She watched the day's last light slide from the western windows across the polished wood floors, around the corner of the sofa, skipping along the second archway onto the hanging covering the tower door, one final beacon before it slid away into night.

Unless it was all imagination blurring into hallucination, she could actually see them now, better than before. The neighbors. The Italian roommates. Not directly, but in movement, around the edges of her vision, every time the single candle's flicker danced away. They were close, and they were waiting intently for something terrible to happen. Trembling, maybe, especially the small ones.

Anna did regret that. Their fear.

La Dama Bianca could be felt at the doorway, blocking the exit, even though Anna hadn't even motioned toward leaving.

As the dusk turned to twilight, Anna thought about switching on the electric bulbs but opted not to. She wondered if her eyes might be able to pick out more in the dimness, and she was right. She could see them. So many. A full household, some old, one no more than five, some in ornate dress, one in a sad, sagging modern sundress. Not the young blogger, either, Anna thought. Some other lost soul.

And her, Anna. She shouldn't leave herself out. This was her welcome party. La Dama's attendants stood ready to receive her into their ranks.

Anna felt malice wrap around her, sharp as an itchy sweater now, that awful grating feeling, chalk on her fingers, eyebrow hairs being tweezed too quickly, the music they play when you're on hold for customer support.

Anna twirled her kindling stick one more time, and laid it on the table between an empty wineglass and the candle.

She sucked in a breath, downed the rest of the Brunello straight from the bottle—not poisoned yet, she thought, but what did she know?—and headed for the kitchen.

A butcher's knife lay waiting for her on the thick wooden counter.

As she approached, it slid closer. Subtle as ever.

She poured herself a glass of water before she picked it up. Took one last drink, then turned the blade in her hand, watching the hazy reflection of herself and La Dama behind her revolving together, seeping into one form.

“You never figured out how to completely possess somebody, I’m guessing,” Anna mused. “But that’s not your thing, is it?” She spun the knife again, nestling backward, into Caterina. “You don’t want to be alive. You want to be in control.”

Control was antithetical to life. To be alive is to be battered about. To endure and adapt and keep stumbling onward despite it all.

Anna stopped spinning the knife. She held the point of the blade to her wrist and pushed.

There was a shock of pain. Anna blinked away quick-sprung tears.

Behind her neck, the air sucked inward, as if someone, something, had drawn a languorous breath.

Blood beaded claret red on Anna’s wan skin and dripped like paint. No pattern. Not like Caterina. Only blood.

“I have nothing.” She spoke into the empty room, listening to the echo. “No home, family, friends. No job. No purpose, no structure, nothing but the void.”

The darkness seemed to pulse around her in agreement.

“This is the truth, isn’t it?” She turned the knife so its slicing edge sat flush against her wrist. One moment of respite. “This is what most people spend their lives trying not to face. The pointlessness of it all. Things fall apart, the center cannot hold because there was never any center in the first place.”

Anna closed her eyes and leaned back against the emptiness of La Dama.

“I know you want me, Caterina.”

She felt a cold hand slide down her forearm, guiding the knife back into carving position.

Anna felt the cold of the metal. The cold of Caterina’s hand. She smiled.

“And while I am flattered . . .”

She chucked the knife across the room, into the sink, with a clatter that made even her jump.

“I’m gonna have to pass.”

The glass of water was ready at hand. Anna pushed her wrist against the rim, watching her blood stream into it like paint, Venetian red.

And spoke the words.

In English. Casually, conversationally. Smiling.

“I unbind your spell. Your name is forgotten. Your work is forgotten. Your power is gone.”

La Dama Bianca stood by the sink. There seemed no recognition of what Anna had just put into words. It was as she'd thought—the ghost hadn't learned a lick of English during its American adventure. Only faint bewilderment, irritation, rippled outward from it. It tickled.

Anna pulled herself onto the kitchen counter and wrapped an elbow around one knee, letting her blood get soaked up by her jeans.

“The thing is, I'm just not like most people. Ask my family, they'll tell you.” Anna's heart started hammering like a roller-coaster track. Did this mean it was working or just that she was terrified? Either way, what a rush. “Well, you can't ask them, now that you've nudged me into alienating them, one after another—and thank you for that! Oh my *God*, Cat. Can I call you Cat? I'm gonna call you Cat. I never would have been able to do that without you shoving me off the edge. It's dizzying how liberated I feel! Okay, yeah, I've just downed a bottle of wine and suffered a bit of blood loss . . .”

Anna saw the knife rising from the sink, pointing in her direction, traveling through the air. With visible effort, but *still*. Impressive! She saw the dim shape of La Dama, yellow bleeding in to fill it, one sickly dangling arm urging the knife closer.

Okay. This might have been a mistake. She was pulsing, this ghost. More powerful here than in New York, feeding on the trapped energy of the villa, sapping the force of all these other things that once were people, drinking up their fear, their submission.

But Anna could feel that energy around her.

And in her. She could feel it in her veins.

The knife darted to her face. She snatched it in one palm, letting it cut deep, and stared into Caterina's rotting face.

“Could you back the fuck off for two seconds? I am *monologuing!*” Anna snarled.

That last word sent La Dama flying across the kitchen and onto the tile wall with a thud that rattled the villa's foundations.

It wasn't just the floor rattling, though. Not just the walls.

Anna could feel movement among the other partygoers. Shock. Disruption.

She could feel waves issuing from herself too.

Her anger. Steeped for years in the brine of the Pace family. Now it had *mass*.

“*Thank you,*” Anna snarled, switching to Italian.

She hopped off the counter to tie a kitchen towel securely around her wrist.

“Where was I? Oh right, so here’s the thing, Cat. You were looking for the weak one in the flock, right? The one you could draw aside and push over the edge. Isolate from everyone and feed upon, but see, that was the first flaw in your logic: I’m not a lost lamb. I’m a *black sheep*. These are two very different things.”

Even as Anna spoke, in Italian no less, her entire body’s awareness remained fixed on the far wall, where La Dama was straining to regroup. Anna could feel it flailing, reaching out its energy to pull from the others. From her.

She could feel its confusion, feel it at last turn to the dining table and realize what Anna had drawn there in salt—the circle, the star. A pentacle, to match Caterina’s scar. She felt it pivot to the empty wineglass, the kindling stick, the cheese knife: cup, rod, blade. And the water, swirling with Anna’s blood.

The air wavered and shook as if to knock all the objects loose. The chairs fell, but everything within that salt circle remained as still as a painted tableau.

Anna let out a loud, bitter, almost shocked laugh. The circle held! Well, damn! That dodgy public-domain book on Italian witchcraft had not steered her wrong.

La Dama had moved closer, undaunted. Its yellow hair strained toward Anna’s face. Anna felt tendrils issuing from each lank lock, pulling at her, clutching outward for her energy.

Anna swatted it away, sneering. “You don’t want what I’ve got, you jaundiced hag. And you really, *really* don’t want me dead. If I get stuck here, things are going to change. It’s going to be vacation. A mess, but vacation. I’m going to have a good time, because I fucking deserve it.”

Anna stalked into the living room. She felt it follow her and tried not to shudder as she tossed it a smirk over one shoulder.

“You were a spoiled brat when you were alive, weren’t you? Poor baby couldn’t stand that your lover left you. Chose his family over you. Well, of course he did, he had adorable kids and a brunette wife with big tits, and you were a skinny hot mess of a mistake. And then you . . . what? Killed your nursemaid? She was the one who taught you black magic, wasn’t she? Or maybe just the nicer arts, the ones that don’t involve snakes and gutting and poisoning soil and ruining family businesses. And he still didn’t come back to you, on his knees, begging for money, didn’t work at all, so . . . new plan. You seduced his son to get to him. How old was he? Fifteen? Younger? Jesus, Cat, you are *messy!*”

The pots and pans over the countertops rattled and dropped from their hanging hooks. Some flew across the room. Ooh, it was pissed.

Anna danced out of their way, dodging the chairs that skidded away from the table, the books flying from the shelves. With sudden panic, she lurched for the welcome basket and clutched the prosecco before it could get smashed.

“I thought I was terrified of you all this time—I mean, I was. At first, I was! You’re disgusting, and you pop up at the most awkward moments. But then . . .” Anna bit her lip, considering. “It wasn’t you that really scared me. You see that, right? It was *me*. How fucking done I was. The consequences of that feeling.”

She opened the prosecco with a pop, watching the fountain stream up and onto the floor.

Oh, La Dama didn’t like that. She snarled from across the room.

The other ghosts shrank back.

“So I’ve told you your first lapse in logic,” Anna crowed, holding up the bottle, ignoring the protestation from her wounded wrist. “Now here’s the second one, and it’s a biggie, Cat. You made the same mistake as your nanny. You taught me *stregoneria*. And not to brag, but I am a quick learner. I mean, you flat-out showed me the spell you’d performed at your dinner party of doom. A binding curse, right? You tied yourself to the villa in exchange for power, basically, the ability to subsume other spirits, to pollute outward when you didn’t get enough. That was a nice touch, by the way. Everybody in Monteperso is scared shitless about what will happen if you don’t get fed regularly.”

In the corner, the thing that was Caterina drew itself up taller and taller.

“Gosh, how rude of me. I’m speaking English. You can’t understand a word I’m saying.” Anna smiled acid and switched to Italian. “*Meglio che tu lo capisca.*”

Caterina was still rising. Its feet now dangled above the floor.

Anna faced her, legs shaking but braced, ready. “*Sciolgo il tuo incantesimo. Il tuo nome è dimenticato. Il tuo lavoro è dimenticato. Il tuo potere è andato.*”

She felt it more strongly this time—the rush—so sudden it left her gasping. The spell was so much more effective in Italian.

La Dama convulsed, and not just with rage. It tossed its head back and forth in impossible contortions, fighting something inside itself.

Anna watched it, unblinking. “Once I’d figured out the curse, it wasn’t very hard to find the antidote. Should I recite it again? *Sciolgo il tuo incantesimo . . .*”

A maelstrom had begun to swirl around Anna, the astonishment of the other souls stuck in the villa changing the atmospheric pressure.

And so Anna decided to gloat just a bit more, this time for the benefit of the gallery.

“I’d say don’t blame yourself, but you really really should. We were roommates for weeks, Cat, and you never noticed the work I was putting into this? The research? You were too busy violating me with your memory injections. All those dreams. All those details recorded in paintings, but you only saw the portraits, you vain, needy, narcissistic child. You are incapable of seeing anyone else as anything but an extension of yourself. Well, here I am, Caterina. Get a good look.” Anna flung her arms wide. “There is a *darkness* in me!”

It struck her as funnier than ever. Funnier even than when Josh had said it.

Anna laughed and laughed, even as she saw a seething yellow shape shove itself across the room, curled rusted fingernails aimed at her throat.

She managed to place the prosecco out of harm’s way before La Dama connected.

If Anna’s anger had mass, so did Caterina’s. There was power left in her, and plenty of it, all congealing into a singular impulse. To *maim*. Anna felt the skin of her neck shredding, her feet sliding out from under her, her head knocking so hard against the floorboards that a bright galaxy flashed between her and La Dama’s rotting face. Its teeth were bared and rusted

brown where the gums had bled, but Anna felt no more fear, only an unfamiliar blazing within her—a desperate determination to live. To survive this.

To win.

She flexed her right hand, the dripping slice stinging hot against her wrist tendons, and slapped.

The feeling of Caterina’s face, the flesh sliding slack over bone under Anna’s palm, made her stomach heave, even as she watched with dim satisfaction the ghost tumbling away into the living room.

Anna vomited quickly, spat, got to her feet, a shaky scramble that she covered with a hoarse, cocky laugh. “Maybe you can hurt me physically, but you can’t drink from me. From anyone. Your little energy-vampire routine is done.”

Caterina rose slowly, matted hair draping around her rotten face.

“Don’t believe me?” Anna shrugged, turning. “Ask them.”

The wall of lost souls stared back, wavering. Vibrating. Expectant.

“You don’t need to obey her,” Anna said, hoping like hell she was right. “She can’t hurt you anymore.”

The crowd juddered, disappearing, reappearing like reflections on water—until only one seemed to take clear form.

Not what Anna had expected. Not in the slightest.

His side-parting was gone. That part of his skull had caved in. Dried blood formed a sort of goatee beneath his snarling lips. One arm hung limp several inches below where it should have connected with the socket.

He lumbered forward. Anna lurched back.

“Chri . . .” She choked on the name. Couldn’t say it. *Christopher. What happened to you?*

He moved as if to take another labored step, but when Anna blinked and opened her eyes again, he was centimeters away, and her composure snapped, she let out a scream at the sight of him—so close, so maimed, so furious—and when he lunged again, pushing his head straight through her face, she stopped breathing, certain that this was it.

And she did crumple. Smacking her elbow against the floor. It was wet now, with wine, with blood, she couldn’t tell. The scene had changed, but she was still on the floor.

She saw her family around her, guzzling straight from Christopher’s bottles. Her mother, Justin, all of them. Even the girls, caught up in this

delusion. Everyone but Christopher.

He had reappeared beside her, eyes frantic, blinking and blinking, a sick gurgling issuing from his throat. Before Anna could reach for him, Benny's foot stepped between them and then *onto* Christopher, crushing his neck. It sounded like tearing a wing off a roast chicken. The light left Christopher's eyes, but everyone kept kicking, stepping, crushing. Everyone.

Even the little girls.

Even Anna.

She saw herself now, there but not there, not in the eyes, dancing wild, hand in hand with Benny, laughing, bruising herself knocking into furniture and walls.

She could feel each blow, even now, lying here watching. And she felt herself in the present, in this cursed place, gasping between sobs, her stomach cramped tight, and then moaning low, "We all did this. Oh God, no, it's real, it's real."

She watched the Anna of the missing Thursday rip a page from her sketch pad and hand it to Benny.

Between hiccups and giggles, Benny wrote a letter to himself.

"I knew it," Anna blurted. "I *knew* it."

Something in the sound of her own voice, the smug pettiness, startled her alert.

She let out a furious laugh. "You blame me for this, Christopher? Seriously? You and Benny really did belong together! You want to blame somebody living, blame your boyfriend. This was *not my fucking fault*."

Those last screamed words scraped Christopher out of her like a bread knife.

Anna's eyes opened into the here and now. And not a second too late.

Caterina lay on top of Anna.

The ghost had used Anna's distraction to gain the upper hand, and that hand was now wrapped tightly around Anna's hair.

Anna bucked and kicked, her world reduced to the few square inches of tearing in her scalp, as Caterina dragged her across the floor, letting her shoulder ram against the legs of the modern five-piece living room set until they reached the tapestry.

Anna blinked up, past the gathering spots and stars, and saw the nymphs flapping, distressed. She latched on to it with her outstretched fingers, but La Dama ripped it down. The door to the tower was already open.

Anna tasted wine-tinged vomit as she realized what Caterina meant to do. She reached back to fight the ghost's grip on her, but this time, there was nothing there to fight, only ice-cold air, and as her back slammed and scraped against one stone step after another on the way up, all she could do was try not to throw up again, fight to stay conscious.

At the top of the tower, it was daytime. White curtains billowed in the sweet-smelling breeze. The bed was waiting, and it looked so comfortable. There was something peppering her face, like confetti thrown after a wedding, welcoming her here with fanfare, getting everywhere, her ears, her mouth.

And Caterina was beautiful again.

La Dama Bianca. Her dress was white. Her hair was like the sun. Her eyes were fucking deranged.

"Stop." Anna struggled to rise, but that weight was back on her chest. Hands around her throat, pressing.

The smell was no longer sweet, only cloying. Rot. Liquid decay. Thick as spoiled cream, and Anna only had to strain her eyes to the side to see why. The only thing to identify this body was the once-white polo and the side-parting, though hunks of blond hair were missing. The corpse was soft and purpled, black on the bottom and seeping outward in a slow puddled creep. There was movement in his face, and Anna prepared for Christopher's corpse to do as his ghost had done, to animate, reach for her, rage fueled, but then maggots crawled from his decaying lips, other insects following, and she realized what the confetti feeling all over her had been. Flies. On her eyes, in her nostrils, darting in and out of her mouth.

She felt them less and less as her panic mounted and her throat constricted, everything simplifying into desperation for breath that would not come. And Caterina, unblinking, triumphant, her hair a damp, piss-colored curtain around Anna's face, kept squeezing.

Anna had known all along, throughout her planning, that this was the most likely possibility. Arrogant, really, to think there was even the smallest chance she could pull this off. A spirit who'd amassed five centuries of power, who'd absorbed souls, and when that wasn't enough, sucked the very landscape dry, versus some American who'd learned *stregoneria* on the internet. Not much of a matchup, but again, Anna had known her odds. Real shame to be stuck here with Christopher for all eternity, but from a real estate perspective, there were far worse houses to haunt.

And she hadn't been lying. It hadn't all been bravado. Whether the spell worked or not, she would make Caterina's afterlife an un-living hell. However bad La Dama got, Anna would be worse.

She gritted her teeth hard and smiled up into Caterina's half-exposed eye sockets, even as her vision of the room faded, and the black chamber contracted into a single point of dark matter and her lungs screamed for breath, her entire body simultaneously burning and numbing, and the air around her roaring like a charging army . . .

The weight vanished. Anna gasped, sucking in air. Swarms surrounded her, of a different texture from the flies. Silky, invisible, parting the pixelated masses of insects like water. A writhing mass of dark figures. A wall between her and La Dama, who was flat on her skinny spectral ass and scrambling backward.

The peasants were revolting!

Anna would have laughed if her throat didn't feel like tenderized beef. She held the wall and watched, as they scrambled like rats over the rancid thing that was once Caterina, picked at it, pulling its yellow hair, its gown, and it howled soundlessly, fighting to free itself, with no effect. Anna could see it reaching out, increasingly desperate, trying to clutch at their souls, getting no grip at all. Absorbing nothing.

There were so many of them. They vastly outnumbered her, and they knew it now.

And there was Christopher. Right there in the fore. He passed Anna without a glance. He knew who his enemy was.

La Dama looked terrified. Enraged, yes, incandescent with it, and still trying every trick, becoming beautiful again, reaching for the young man from the window, its surest bet.

The young man ignored her entirely. He turned to Anna, and bared his blood-slicked teeth in a dog snarl.

Anna took the hint. She sprinted, dimly hearing voices behind her, a unified drone. It was a mix of languages, dialects, forceful in its cacophony. Even so, she could sense in her bones what they were all chanting.

I unbind your spell. Your name is forgotten. Your work is forgotten. Your power is gone.

Down the steps Anna fled, her heels slipping until she stumbled out into the living room and darted for her bag.

The key was warm to the touch.

She flipped her arm over and saw the notch she'd etched there. The cut was deep. She'd wear this badge for life now. However long that lasted.

The darkness was nearly perfect down here, but Anna knew this place well by now. She picked her way back to the tower door, then stood aside as a wind tunnel rushed down the steps.

As they passed, she saw each of them as they were in life, rather than death—not bleeding or moaning, but vibrant. Exultant.

When the air settled, the door slammed shut on its own. Anna shoved the key into the lock, twisted it hard, and stepped back.

She felt it, the sense of a vault pinching off foul air. La Dama was sealed away once more.

A scream of rage sounded from the room above. An impotent one. Anna didn't even shiver.

She wasn't sure what she expected when she faced the living room. Ghosts, yeah, but in what state? Celebrating? Bowing before her in gratitude? Or more dramatic, all the longtime residents walking en masse toward some mysteriously illuminated doorway in the distance?

None of that happened.

Nothing at all happened, in fact, which Anna took as a very good sign.

The house was empty. *Felt* empty. Smelled like a vacation rental in Tuscany.

Wherever they all were, they were not upset. And very much not her problem.

It was as if nothing had ever happened.

Anna wasn't tired. Aching, bleeding, beaten up, and wretched, yes, but not ready for bed.

As she walked away down the drive, she slurped from the rescued prosecco bottle and listened to the song of the night birds. A black cat joined her for part of the walk, then sat and licked its ass and turned back for the villa.

Anna turned onto the main road—stopped, doubled back, and untied the goat.

“Go on,” she said. “Scram.”

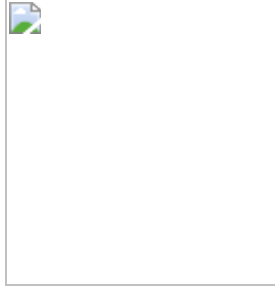
It stared at her for a long, confused moment, then capered away like some partying satyr.

She chucked the tower key into the woods. Maybe it would stay put in that pile of leaves.

Did it again a few miles later. The key still liked her, apparently. But there was no presence attached, no threat, beyond a faint vibration in her pocket. Caterina was well and truly trapped.

And Anna was free.

She had absolutely no idea where she was, where she was going. It was *perfetto*.



WELCOME IT LIKE A FRIEND

It's afternoon, in the height of tourist season, not that it ever really stops in Tuscany.

Anna has stationed herself on the city walls of Lucca today, looking outward at the countryside below, her legs resting on her backpack. A tiny portable easel is set up beside her, but she's ignoring it for the moment.

She's been working in oil lately, black, blue, brown, getting the sense of the layers beneath the landscape. The soil. The life beneath. The way decay fuels beauty. She works quickly, then sets the studies to dry beside her.

A sunburned British couple took one away an hour ago. They offered her twenty euros in lazy Italian and she shrugged in agreement. She's already sent her requisite quarterly bundle of paintings off to Andy Milton's New York gallery, with a handwritten note letting him know where to find her the next time he pops over. The ones she doesn't sell today, she'll sign with her pseudonym and leave behind. She also signs when she gets a good vibe from the person who buys them, on the off chance they get their little impulse buy valued back home and realize they've won the lottery.

She did *not* sign the one she sold for twenty euros to the Brits abroad, just took the money down to the piazza and bought herself a gelato.

It's a scorcher today. The heat set in back in May and intensified in the weeks that followed. Anna doesn't mind it. You just have to lean into the discomfort, welcome it like a friend, and commit to wearing only what feels good against your skin.

Today that amounts to very little—sneakers for walking, a halter top, frayed shorts. She wears a necklace to ward against *il malocchio*, not because she's afraid, but because she likes the way it taps the place between her breasts as she walks, rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

She walks a lot. Keeps moving.

She hasn't been back to Monteperso, though she returns in dreams, incessantly, and then wakes up and drinks strong coffee, washing away the urge to go back. Washing away the memories, if she's lucky.

She bumped into Pietro the Uber driver, in Paris, of all places. He looked older, which suited him, but that cherub hair was still thick and curly. They lived together for a few months. Parted amicably. He's got a French wife now, French Italian kids. Anna sends them postcards sometimes, and signs them with her real name.

A teenaged tourist passes, looking at her work, back at her, the girl's kohl-lined eyes sharpening. This one might know, Anna thinks. She smiles back, trying her best not to be enigmatic, but the girl still draws in a little gasp, lips tightening.

It's funny what they call Anna: the Tuscan Lady. She hadn't invented it—that was Andrew Milton, reading internet forums out loud in the middle of the night from bed, after Anna insisted she wouldn't sign her work with her real name. It wasn't a huge leap from the *Florentine Woman*, but Anna had settled into it over the years. La Dama Toscana. Why not.

The teen girl has returned to her family, sitting a little bit apart along the fountain's edge. Anna waits for her to tell the others, for their attention to turn her way, but the girl keeps silent. She glances up at Anna from time to time, then back down to her phone.

Anna wonders for a moment whether this is what Waverly looks like now. No, she's older. Early twenties. Mia's probably in college.

Waverly contacted the gallery a few months ago, in person—left a note asking to be put in contact with the Tuscan Lady. Claimed to be the artist's niece. Anna had no idea how she'd pieced that together, and felt impressed, flattered, wary in equal measure.

A second note followed, close after the first. Waverly was living in New York. She didn't speak to anyone in the family anymore apart from her now-divorced dad and Mia. The others had all unraveled, it seems, one by one. "The rot got to them," Waverly had written, promising to tell Anna more if they saw each other in person.

Anna doesn't want to know. Even so, she's been thinking about writing back via the gallery, saying yes. She could send along a card like the ones she sends not-that-young-anymore Mr. Milton for their occasional assignments, wait for her niece to arrive in some piazza at some appointed time, let the fallout be what it will.

She hasn't decided yet, but it doesn't weigh on her. She feels no gripping hands, no weight like a hood behind her.

Only the lump in her pocket, as ever.

Sometimes the key gets hot. Sometimes it rattles. Sometimes she has the oddest urge to swallow it in one gulp or chew it or ram it into her eye. Mostly she wants to drive it deep into that lock back at Villa Taccola and turn it hard and swing that door open and feel release in every cell of her body.

Every day, she feels that urge. Every day, she says no.

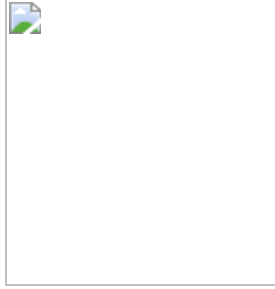
Anna owns the house and it owns her, and her old friend is still there, pacing the tower, powerless to kill even a single blade of grass, angrier by the second about it, that little bit of its soul scraping its fingernails inside its cage of a key.

But Anna is in Lucca, looking out at the great wide world. She sits on the city wall and eats her gelato. *Limone*, thick and tart and sweet.

The heat overtakes it as she licks. She watches it slide slowly over her hand, her wrist scars, down her elbow, drawing a line through the air, onto the ground. Onto her knee, sticky.

It drips and drips.

She can think of few more beautiful things than the mess it makes.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Endless gratitude, as ever, to my intrepid, nurturing agent and all-around amazing person, Katelyn Detweiler, along with the rest of the wonderfully supportive JGLM family, especially Sam Farkas for getting this book out into the great wide world.

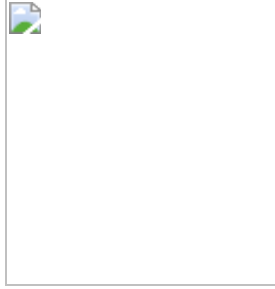
To Daphne Durham, my brilliant US editor, you shared my vision for this book from day one, and it truly wouldn't exist without your instincts and insights. It's been such a joy to work with you.

To Daniel Carpenter and the team at Titan Books, thank you for adopting me! I'm so thrilled to have found a dream publisher in the country I call home, especially one as tireless and innovative as you lot.

More thanks go out to Esther Kim and artist Judy Jung, whose combined efforts on the cover wound up giving me nightmares—and I wrote the damn book!

My now go-to early-reader squad came through with flying colors once again: Lee Kelly, Jo Brett, and Donna Gordon (aka Mom). And to my whole big family: Dad, Charlotte, Mom, Ryan, Celia, Levin, Alastair, Nakia, Harriet, Leo, and especially my Rob and Oliver and Henry, you are spectacular human beings, and I'm so grateful to have you all in my life. Even if you did read this book when I told you it was a hard R.

So. Where are we going on vacation next?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Thorne is the author of *Lute*, *The Wrong Side of Right*, *The Inside of Out*, *Night Music*, and with co-author Lee Kelly, *The Antiquity Affair* and *The Starlets*. In addition to her writing, she is a classically-trained soprano who sings with chamber choir the Standish Consort, among other groups. Originally from the US, she lives in Gloucestershire, England with her husband, two sons, and various other animals.

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“An ink-black story about grief, courage, and what we’ll do for those we love.” **Catriona Ward**
After striking out on her own as a teen mother, Madi Price is forced to return to her hometown of Brandywine, Virginia, with her seventeen-year-old daughter. With nothing to her name, she scrapes together a living as a palm reader at the local farmer’s market.

It’s at the market that she reconnects with her high school boyfriend Henry McCabe, now a reclusive local fisherman whose infant son, Skyler, went missing five years ago. Everyone in town is sure Skyler is dead, but when Madi reads Henry’s palm, she’s haunted by strange and disturbing visions that suggest otherwise. As she follows the thread of these visions, Madi discovers a terrifying monster waiting at the centre of the labyrinth—and it’s coming for everyone she holds dear.

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“An ice-cold brew of cannibalism and ghoulish horror served up by an author with a visceral feel for the extremes of polar exploration. Powerful stuff indeed!” **Michelle Paver**

William Day should be an acclaimed Arctic explorer. But after a failed expedition to find the fabled Open Polar Sea, in which his men only survived by eating their comrades, he returned in disgrace. A cannibal. A murderer.

Thirteen years later, his second-in-command, Jesse Stevens, has gone missing in the same waters. Perhaps this is Day’s chance to restore his tarnished reputation by bringing Stevens – the man who’s haunted his whole life – back home. But when the rescue mission into the frozen wastes becomes an uncanny journey into his own past, Day must face up to the things he’s done.

Aboard ship, Day must also contend with unwanted passengers: a reporter obsessively digging up the truth about the first expedition, and Stevens’s wife, a spiritualist whose séances both fascinate and frighten. Following a trail of cryptic messages, gaunt bodies, and old bones, their search becomes more and more unnerving, and it is clear that the restless dead are never far behind.

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“One of the most remarkable novels I’ve read in quite some time.” **Eric LaRocca**

Myrrh has a goblin inside her, a voice in her head that tells her all the things she’s done wrong, that berates her and drags her down. Desperately searching for her birth-parents across dilapidated seaside towns in the South coast of England, she finds herself silenced and cut off at every step.

Cayenne is trapped in a loveless marriage, the distance between her and her husband growing further and further each day. Longing for a child, she has visions promising her a baby.

As Myrrh’s frustrations grow, the goblin in her grows louder and louder, threatening to tear apart the few relationships she holds dear and destroy everything around her. When Cayenne finds her husband growing closer to his daughter – Cayenne's stepdaughter – and pushing her further out of his life, she makes a decision that sends her into a terrible spiral.

The stories of these women will unlock a past filled with dark secrets and strange connections, all leading to an unforgettable, horrific climax.

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A LIGHT MOST HATEFUL

Hailey Piper

LIBRARY JOURNAL BEST HORROR NOVELS 2023 PASTE MAGAZINE BEST HORROR BOOKS 2023

“A juicy horror tale you'll want to sink your teeth into, before it sinks its teeth into you.” **Rachel Harrison**

Three years after running away from home, Olivia is stuck with a dead-end job in nowhere town Chapel Hill, Pennsylvania. At least she has her best friend, Sunflower.

Olivia figures she'll die in Chapel Hill, if not from boredom, then the summer night storm which crashes into town with a mind-bending monster in tow.

If Olivia's going to escape Chapel Hill and someday reconcile with her parents, she'll need to dodge residents enslaved by the storm's otherworldly powers and find Sunflower.

But as the night strains friendships and reality itself, Olivia suspects the storm, and its monster, may have its eyes on Sunflower and everything she loves.

Including Olivia.

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