

Let's Pretend

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

‘You know what I blame?’ growled Nina. ‘Me-sodding-Too. All the men are running scared. Even the shameless ones. I mean, it’s all very well for the A-listers to come over all snooty about the casting couch. *They* can afford it.’

I was used to Nina mouthing off after failed auditions, so I just laughed and passed her the joint.

Nina and I first met at the age of ten, at a call-back for a yogurt commercial that neither of us got. Twenty-two years later and we’re still bonding over our mutual rejections.

‘Christ – if only I’d known my casting-couch power peaked at sixteen. In those days, they’d be happy with just a handsie, too.’

‘Ew.’

‘You’re just jealous cos none of the dirty old men wanted *you*. They tagged you for an uptight little madam, and they were right.’

I blew her a kiss. It’s never a good idea to rise to Nina’s baits. Even as a kid, Nina was the edgy one, accessorising her own quirky niche with big nerd glasses and a shit-eating grin. I’ve never known how seriously I should take her tales of juvenile debauchery – then or now. But the Momager, for all her faults, kept me on a tight leash. Nina’s mum is a drunk.

This is one of the many reasons the Momager's never approved of our friendship. 'Shop-soiled' was how she once described Nina, when she was still a teen. Nina didn't seem to bother with puberty, mind you, going straight from quirky-cute to *va-va-voom*. On her good days, she has a louche, jolie-laide sexiness that makes other girls seem insipid. I'm sometimes surprised it hasn't served her better.

The fact is, Nina Gill's spot on the 'Where Are They Now?' rankings is several places below mine. She gets by on the back of her residuals, supplemented by experimental theatre gigs and the occasional art-house movie, usually involving nudity.

'You and me should do a porno,' she said another time. 'We'd clean up. Little Miss Snowflake and the Disney Slut.' And later, 'We're two sides of the same fucked-up coin, baby.'

There are two things you should know about me. One is that I was briefly famous when I was four. The other is that I had a nose job when I was fifteen. These things are not, of course, unrelated.

To a great many people, Lily Thane is synonymous with Little Lucie, the winsome orphan who made a wish on a snowflake. ('All I want for Christmas is a daddy of my own!') Nobody expected *Snow Angels* to become a hit. It was a low-budget Brit romcom, with a cast of unknowns and an incongruous magical twist. But twenty-eight years later it's still on repeat every festive season, having somehow earned the status of a Holiday Classic. There I am, a tousle-haired, rosy-cheeked moppet, gazing upwards as the first cellulose snowflakes begin to fall. Forever frozen in my four-year-old glory.

I was only on screen for twenty minutes. The focus of the movie was the romance between nerdy Tim Randolph and sassy older sexpot Honey Evans. But even now, people will clock my name and ask me about it. ('So, what's Sir Tim *really* like?' 'Did they let you keep one of the snow mice?' 'Were you frightened of the icicle goblins?') The thing is, for a lot of people, that film looms larger in their childhood memories than it does in mine. I mean, c'mon, how much do *you* remember of what you were doing age four?

Off the back of *Snow Angels*, I had three more small film roles and a run of commercials and voice-over work. But the brutal truth is that a kid who is absolutely adorable at, say, four may not be the least bit adorable or even attractive once they've outgrown their dimples. Aged fifteen, I'd been pathetically relieved to acquire visible cheekbones. Alas, the loss of puppy fat came with a price: my nose was now distractingly prominent. Or so I thought.

When *Snow Angels* came out, reviewers liked to mention that the scene-stealing child actor who played Lucie came from a 'theatrical dynasty'. It's true that Pa and his two siblings are all performers of sorts, and my cousin Dido has a couple of Olivier awards in her loo, but none of them are what you'd call household names. In fact, we can only boast of one bone fide National Treasure: my grandfather, Sir Terence Thane, formerly Terry Stubbs, the butcher's son from Ealing who scaled the thespian heights along with Sirs Larry, Ralph and John. His nose was almost as famous as his Lear, and was long and arched, with flared wings. We've all inherited a version of it. On the right sort of profile – Dido's, for example – it is both handsome and distinctive. On others, it's simply all-conquering.

Either way, getting rid of the nose wasn't the liberation I'd hoped for. The new model was narrow and straight, with a demurely rounded tip. It made my face look neater, sweeter but also oddly unfinished. Work picked up, at least at first, but my late teens and twenties were filled with pilots for series that never got sold, forgettable British crime dramas and my most recent gig, the American legal dramedy *Briefs*.

Otherwise, my film credits are mostly along the lines of *Pretty Girl on Plane*, *Prostitute at Party* and *Crying Bridesmaid*.

If I had kept my nose, would it all have been different?

Would I still have agreed to beard for Adam Harker?

What then?

Ah, what then.

When the PR blitz began, it made for a cute anecdote: 'We were childhood sweethearts!' Like everything else, this was essentially bollocks.

I first met Adam when I was twelve and we were both enrolled at stage school. Students called it the Fame Factory, as if mock disdain could cover up the rancid whiff of our ambition. My first few years there were not happy ones, on account of the puppy fat and the nose. Meanwhile, the only name Adam had made for himself was that of a cocky little shit. He was small and squat and acne spattered, yet possessed of unshakeable confidence. 'Ten years from now,' he used to say, 'all these talent-show losers will be dining out on how they went to school with me.'

Adam was a year older than me, so we only got to know each other when we were cast as brother and sister in a play about an

upper-crust family at war over their inheritance. They were small parts in a fairly awful show that folded after a month, but as the only juveniles on set we spent a certain amount of time backstage together. We used to play card games and take the piss out of the director, as well as the Barbies 'n' Kens (Adam's term) back at school. Adam liked hearing about the Thanes, too. 'A pedigree like that's the real deal,' he told me once, with a solemnity that surprised me.

'Sure, he'll be a great *character* actor,' the Ken dolls sneered when rumours of Adam's on-stage charisma began to spread. Then he got his growth spurt, his skin cleared up and, for a while, his rise seemed as effortless as it was inevitable.

At the age of nineteen, after rave reviews for his part in ITV's World War I drama *The Last Hurrah*, Adam headed to LA. From there he bagged a BAFTA for playing Brad Pitt's troubled son in art-house flick *Silent Hour*, which was followed by a few small but well-received parts before being cast in *Wylderness*, billed as the biggest dystopian fantasy franchise since *Hunger Games*. The box-office returns were disappointing, however, and when they didn't film the third of the trilogy, Adam's trajectory began to stall. There were rumours of difficult behaviour, an on-set bust-up that halted production on a film that was later shelved. His prediction that he'd be the Fame Factory graduate we all name-dropped had come true only up to a point. Most people knew who he was, but indistinctly.

'Adam Harker's a meth head,' said Nina authoritatively, the same afternoon as her #MeToo rant. 'He got a bit too much into character during that Deep South family saga. Hasn't been able to shake the habit since.'

‘Says who?’

‘The make-up girl on the *Evening Standard* shoot. So there.’

Nina always claims the most successful stars are nursing the darkest secrets. Drugs, violence, paedophile rings ... She’s got a lot of contacts in showbiz-adjacent roles, so she’s better informed than most. But I also happen to know she makes stuff up and sends it to the blind gossip sites just for shits and giggles. I can see the appeal. I mean, *I* want to believe it. It’s certainly easier on the ego to assume the famous and beautiful are also the miserable and the damned.

‘I wish you’d dig up some dirt on the Thanes.’

‘Pfff. No one gives a crap about your family.’ Nina looked mischievous. ‘Though I did hear Dido’s shagging a spear-carrier.’

‘No!’ I was delighted. My cousin Dido is three years older than me and the heir apparent to Sir Terry’s luvvie legacy. People still rave about her Lady Macbeth, and her Hedda is almost as fawned over as her Antigone. My one comfort is that she’s too much of a snob to take her talents mainstream.

Actually, that’s not true. I also take comfort in the fact that Dido’s husband is a dick. Hence the spear-carrier, presumably.

‘You can ask her about it tonight,’ said Nina. ‘He’s fresh out of RADA and hung like a donkey. Allegedly. Mind you, those Shakespearean codpieces can be very misleading.’

‘Dinner. *Shit.*’ We’d spent the afternoon in Nina’s flat, getting stoned and watching Fred Astaire movies. It’s Nina’s thing when she’s had a setback. Those big monochrome dance numbers are trippy at the best of times, like an Escher print come to life, but weed slows them down. It’s very soothing. Too soothing on this occasion; I now had less than an hour to straighten out and get

to Dido's. It was her standard invitation: 'Just a kitchen supper, *super* relaxed, *super* fun crowd.'

For Dido, 'fun' means worthy yet snide. Habitat for Humanity meets *Mean Girls*.

Dido and Nick live in a large house in Highgate. Patchily painted in Gothic hues, it's chilly and cluttered, with stacks of Nick's unpublished novels and Dido's scripts piled up everywhere. There's quite a lot of dog hair, too, courtesy of Hotspur. Hotspur is an Afghan hound. Hotspur looks very much like Dido, but of course nobody has ever dared point this out.

As I said, it's not an inviting house. The location of these famous kitchen suppers is in the basement; the fittings are unvarnished wood, and the crockery looks like it's been thrown together by depressed Scandinavian pre-schoolers. But the thing about my cousin is that she can *really* cook. In interviews, she'll say things like 'feasting people is how I show love' and it's not entirely bollocks. Dining chez Dido means platters of fragrant meats melting from the bone, lacy lacquers of chocolate and slicks of spiced butter, swirls of boozy cream. The hostess herself will barely touch this largesse. She'll pick at a slice of fruit or paring of cheese, all the while eating us up with her eyes.

After retrieving a key from under the usual plant pot, I slunk in late, red-eyed and dishevelled, hoping to find the party in full tipsy swing. But the eleven people gathered around the kitchen table looked disconcertingly alert. Except for Nick, perhaps, who was doing the rounds with a carafe. The sloshing way he poured suggested he'd had a head start on the rest of us.

'Darling Lily,' said Dido, arms flung wide. 'We're all so thrilled you could make it.'

I wasn't sure if this was a dig. It can be hard to tell with Dido. I think she honestly believes she's doing me a favour with her condescending suppers and cast-off clothing and unsolicited advice.

'And how gorgeous you look!' Definitely a dig, then.

Dido's studied carelessness on the domestic front extends to her own appearance. She favours mannish tailoring, oversize shirts and ugly shoes. ('Who does she think she is?' sniffs the Momager. 'A lesbian?') But Dido can carry it off. She lopes about on her endless legs, curtained by swirls of her endless hair, that famous nose jutting forth like the prow of a very sexy ship. The kind with billowing sails and lots of guns.

'Isn't she adorable?' Dido declared to a narrow bearded man sitting at the more shadowy end of the table. 'Gideon, have you met my adorable cousin? Lily, this is Gideon. He's a music journalist and *the* most fascinating man.'

She ushered me into the seat next to him. Within seconds, a loaded plate of food was steaming in front of me. The gloom of the basement was barely alleviated by a scattering of hurricane lamps, so it was hard to tell exactly what I was eating. The pot had left me ravenous in any case. Blindly, I forked in various richly spiced and scented mouthfuls, as introductions to assorted artistes and do-gooders were made.

Dido had recently finished a run of *Mary Stuart* at the National, and the conversation I'd interrupted was moving from Schiller to Goethe. 'Not a fan of Weimar classicism?' Gideon asked in a stage-whisper.

'It doesn't come up much in my line of work.' I was too busy shovelling in food to pay attention. There was butter on my chin and I didn't even care.

‘Aren’t you an actress too?’

‘Ah, but Lily’s in actual “showbiz”,’ Dido trilled from the other end of the table.

‘Right.’ I took a long swig from my glass. ‘Here to represent the bread-and-circuses division of Thane, Inc.’

‘Oh, so *you’re* the child-star,’ said somebody else.

‘I took a lot of growth hormones before coming out tonight.’ Nobody laughed.

‘I remember you from *Briefs*,’ said the woman across from me, so graciously it was clear she thought she was throwing me a lifeline. ‘Weren’t you the bitchy one? With kleptomania? The Honourable Hermione Whatnot.’

‘Hancock. Yeah. It was a ... fun role.’

‘One of my guilty pleasures. Mostly, I watched it for the power-dressing.’

It turned out she was a lawyer. Human rights, inevitably. She started to tell me – archly, but in great detail – all the ways that TV shows get the legal profession wrong.

‘What *I* find off-putting about those glossy American dramas,’ said Gideon, cutting in, ‘is how they make up their leading ladies to look like drag queens.’

‘Oh, I know.’ Human Rights made a moue of distaste. ‘False eyelashes and ridiculous hair extensions and all that contouring goop.’

‘People get self-conscious with high-definition,’ I said, sounding defensive in spite of myself.

‘Why should they? Seems to me everyone on the telly these days is a perfect ten. Or eight, minimum. Take a girl like you.’ Jovially, Gideon speared an asparagus from my plate.

‘You don’t need three inches of slap to look fuckable.’

I turned my chair towards Nick, who was on my other side and had contributed even less to the general conversation than I had. He’s quite good looking, in a sneery sort of way, but tonight he looked more than usually morose. Maybe Nina was right and Dido *was* carrying on with some oversized codpiece. I supposed I should feel sorry for him. ‘So tell me about the new book ...’

Nick had an agent for a while, but they parted ways over the direction of his latest effort, which was written in the voice of a drug dealer from the Bronx who believes he’s the reincarnation of the Earl of Rochester. Writers and actors share the impulse to be as overweening as they’re insecure; the difference is that actors, even failed ones, have a pathological need to win over their audience. Nick has never felt the need to ingratiate himself with anyone. Thanks to family money, he’s under no pressure to produce a bestseller. Or any kind of seller, in fact.

‘Ever thought about self-publishing?’ I asked at the end of his monologue on the relationship between gansta-rap and seventeenth-century erotic poetry.

‘*Vanity* publishing?’

‘Well, not exactly. I mean if, like you say, traditional publishing’s so corrupt ... and, you know, the model’s broken, why not look elsewhere? You’d get total creative control. And that could be good. Right?’

‘Honestly, Lily.’ He looked at me coldly. ‘Asking a novelist if they’ve thought about self-publishing is like asking an actress if they’ve considered porn.’

‘It’s hardly –’

Gideon leaned in. 'Maybe you should expand your range. A webcam girl who quotes Schiller ... Think about it.'

'Excuse me. I've just remembered there's somewhere I have to be.' I got up from my chair, which scraped dramatically against the floor, knocking into Hotspur in the process. Amidst the anguished yelping and flurry of dog hair, there was no hope of a swift exit. Dido insisted on escorting me to the door.

'Are you sure you have to dash? I know how good you are at putting a brave face on things but Uncle Lionel *did* mention you're at rather a loose end ...'

'Right. Luckily for me, your guests had some tips for getting into porn.'

'You funny creature! But you *will* let me know if there's anything I can do to help?' She was thrusting a Tupperware filled with leftovers at me, followed by an enormous woolly muffler thing. It was possibly one of Hotspur's blankets. 'Anything at all. Promise me.'

'How about an introduction to one of your casting-director chums?'

Dido actually blanched. 'I, ah, thought you didn't do theatre ...'

'I'm kidding! But thanks anyway. It was a lovely evening. Except for Gideon. He's a perv.'

She raised her brows. 'I'm sorry, darling. I thought you were too stoned to notice.'

CHAPTER TWO

I dumped the Tupperware and the muffler by the side of the first bin I passed. Maybe some deserving Dickensian orphan would find them. Then I wandered around aimlessly for a bit until I eventually found myself in a pub.

It was the kind of place I'd only ever gone into by accident. It was cavernous and dimly lit, with an ancient Axminster carpet and wooden fittings that looked like they'd been varnished with gravy. It wasn't busy, even though it was near ten on a Saturday night, with just a handful of old duffers propping up the bar. In one corner, a trio of Japanese tourists were glumly picking over the remains of what looked like truly terrible fish and chips. I headed straight to the toilets.

They were mercifully unoccupied, though I still made sure to flush to cover any noise as I vomited. All Dido's exquisite feasting. All those buttery, creamy, bloody-meaty mouthfuls gurgling off to the sewer. I felt much calmer, as well as cleaner, afterwards. It's not a big deal. I've never used laxatives and I'm basically too lazy for excessive exercise. But I like my thigh gap and this is a shortcut to keeping it. Standing by the basin, I felt the reassuring jut of my pelvic bones.

I'm a pretty girl, I know that. The big blue eyes. Those radiantly white teeth. The honeyed locks. That adorable nose.

I'm still young enough to get trashed and go out with unwashed hair and no lipstick and get away with it.

You don't need three inches of slap to look fuckable.

It was a mistake to look in the mirror, all the same. My cheeks looked blotchy in the harsh fluorescent light, and there was a tiny broken vein in the left crease of my nose. I made a mental note to go to the dermatologist and get it zapped before the Momager noticed. Were my pores getting bigger? And what about the crinkles starting at the edges of my eyes? Vomiting up food is like vomiting up the rot inside, the sludge and stink we all carry around with us. But you can't purge this kind of decay.

I went back to the bar. I was feeling light-headed and my throat hurt. The old geezers had moved to a table so there was just one other person sitting there, a young guy in a beaten-up leather jacket and a baseball cap, nursing his drink with a leave-me-alone hunch I could relate to. I ordered a double rum and Coke. Diet, obviously.

'Do I know you?'

I didn't even turn around. 'You absolutely do not.'

'Ah, but I think I absolutely do.' His voice was slurred, but not aggressively so. 'Didn't we go to school together?'

'Really? That's your line?'

'Try this one, then: "How he loves you. How he loathes you. How he devours us all!"'

This time I actually looked at him. 'Adam?'

"The worm-eaten apple of Daddy's eye."

He was quoting his lines from that crap play we did when we were kids. I was amazed he'd remembered it. I was even more

amazed Adam Harker had remembered me. I glanced around the pub, but nobody had given us a second glance.

‘You know, you were pretty good in that thing.’

Condescending prick. ‘Wish I could say the same.’

He laughed. ‘It’s Lily, right? Lily Thane. What’ve you been up to since?’

The question was as unwelcome as it was inevitable. Adam’s Hollywood ambitions might have come unstuck, but he was still several leagues of success above me. Just last year, he’d been the villain in a prestige HBO thriller about political corruption. And he had a film coming out this autumn – a war movie. I didn’t know much about it, but the director, Kashif ‘Kash’ Malik, was said to be a hot new talent.

I swallowed some more of my drink. Sticky fake Coke, with the nail-polish whiff of cheap rum. Childish yet bitter, just like me. ‘Oh, you know. Playing klepto lawyers and drunk bridesmaids. Toothpaste ads. *Poirot*. Disappointing my mother.’

‘Well, as long as we’re disappointing our parents we must be doing something right.’

The smile that followed was conspiratorial. Intimate. I was now regretting the unwashed hair and lack of make-up. My throat still burned from the vomit. Furtively, I reached into my bag for gum.

To be fair, Adam didn’t look in great shape either. He was unshaven in a patchy way that suggested it wasn’t designer stubble, and there were dark rings around his eyes. Their smoulder was bloodshot. I remembered what Nina had said about him being a secret meth head. Tonight, I judged, he was merely drunk.

‘So what brings a girl like you to a dive like this?’

I drained my drink and signalled for another one. Then I told him about Dido, and pervy Gideon, and Hotspur's muffler. I remembered he'd always liked hearing about the Thanes back in the Fame Factory days. And he seemed to be listening, albeit in a slightly unfocused way.

'And what's your excuse?' I finished.

'Hm?'

'A nice boy like you in a place like this. Et cetera.'

'Among the civilians, you mean?' Adam belched. 'Wonky faces. Fugly clothes. Crap hair. You ever have that moment? When you step out of your bubble and realise how unbelievably *dingy* most people are?' He raised his glass in a toast. 'So here's to the beautiful people and those who screw 'em. Over and under and every which way between.'

It was obviously a blackly private joke. Neither Adam's reference to beauty nor the sourness with which he said it had anything to do with me. All the same, I wondered – feverishly – where he put me on the scale. In any London bar, I'm pushing ten. But at an LA casting? An eight. Maybe only a seven-point-five. And that average will slip with every year.

The gorgeousness of female movie stars is generally uncomplicated. It's why I'd got rid of the nose. (Ha. A vain hope, that one, in every sense.) But the big male stars, the most admired and iconic ones, often boast some knot or crookedness or quirk. Maybe that's what we need to take them seriously. Adam the ugly boy had grown into a startlingly beautiful man, and this was partly because of – not in spite of – the pitted skin on his right cheek. He had the bone structure for heroic but there was always something else behind it – something jagged,

wolfish. Blue-black hair and bruised blue eyes. Seeing the trace of his acne scars up close, I felt a drunken tenderness towards both our former selves.

‘I’m thinking of getting out,’ I said abruptly. ‘Of the bubble and everything else.’

‘Whaddya mean?’

‘I’ve been in the business since I was four. All the castings and callbacks ... all that smizing on demand. I guess I can’t remember the last time any of it felt like a choice.’

‘Why should acting feel like a choice? If you’ve got talent, it should be an imperative.’

‘Ugh. You sound like my cousin.’ I was nettled: I’d been expecting sympathy.

‘I don’t believe you, anyway. You still want this more than anything else. You’re like me, I’ve always known that. Desperate.’

I didn’t know what to make of this, so I laughed. ‘Are you seriously telling me you’ve never had any doubts about your talent or where it’s taken you?’

‘Nope.’

‘Well. Nice to see success hasn’t gone to your head.’

‘OK. Fine. Maybe there was this *one* time ...’ He paused. ‘After the studio killed off *Wylderness 3*, there was a review of the first one that got stuck in my head.’ This time the wait was so long I almost thought he wasn’t going to continue. “‘Adam Harker struts and scowls so prettily it hardly seems to matter he’s dead behind the eyes.’”

‘Miaow.’

‘It was the *Guardian* critic.’

‘Bitter old hack.’

But Adam was still frowning. ‘The reviews that get under the skin aren’t the unfair ones. It’s the ones that show you what you’re afraid of.’

Our conversation had abruptly sobered up. Last orders were called; we said our goodbyes soon afterwards. If there had ever been a moment when Adam was going to invite me back to his, I’d missed it. It was probably just as well, I told myself. He was the same cocky shit he’d always been, just drunker. And I wasn’t wearing good underwear. And he’d taken my number in any case.

He didn’t call. I’m sure I wouldn’t have heard from him again if it wasn’t for our second chance encounter. Yet that night in the pub was a turning point all the same. Not even a year later, as I stared at Adam’s lifeless body in the swimming pool, his ring on my finger, I found I couldn’t pin down the moment when there was no going back.

I *was* guilty, though. And desperate. It’s best you know this from the start.

CHAPTER THREE

The day after our meet-cute, when I still thought Adam might call, I sat down to watch the first *Wylderness* movie. Adam had dated his A-list co-star, Casilda Fernandez, for over a year, and seeing her in action was as depressing as I'd feared. She was all Bambi eyes and golden curves, fetchingly showcased in a post-apocalyptic outfit of ripped leather. Although they'd kept the acne scars, the camera heightened Adam's features so they had an almost fearsome symmetry, artfully infused with both light and dark. I didn't think he looked dead behind the eyes. But he didn't look quite human either.

For the first shirt-less scene, our hero was rescuing someone from a poisoned lake. Adam's lean muscled torso filled the screen. The film was only 12A but the camera lingered, knowingly, on the abdominal glisten of fake sweat. That was the point at which I stopped the film. I was starting to feel like a voyeur. Sex makes me a bit queasy anyway. All that frenetic rubbing and sucking, the squelches and smells ... as an act, it's demeaning; as a performance, it's exhausting. Of course it's always going to be better on screen.

I didn't sleep well that night. It was partly because of the film and partly because I was thinking about that quote from the

Guardian critic and how all these years later Adam could hardly bear to repeat it. You have to be a bit of a masochist in a profession that requires you to knock on the door of rejection time after time. Sometimes the burn of humiliation is almost a thrill. Like the tang of stomach acid on the back of my throat. But we've all had the dismissals and takedowns that do more than sting. Those are the moments of annihilation. The thunder clap and the ringing of static that follows, drowning everything else out ... That night, I woke up clawing at the sheets, my breath rank and heart racing. What had Adam meant when he fixed me with that adamantine blue stare and said, *You're like me, I've always known that. Desperate.* I couldn't even remember how he said it, whether he had been light-hearted or loathing.

A week passed with no contact from Adam. I tormented myself by chasing him down the internet rabbit hole: reviews, interviews, fan-sites, gossip blogs, *Wylderness* slash fiction ... His new film would be out in October. Adam played a traumatised US veteran of an unspecified Middle Eastern war, whose breakdown was dramatised with hallucinogenic scenes inspired by Shakespeare's play *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. For an art-house movie, it was picking up a lot of buzz.

Filming on *Tyre* had finished in January. More recently, Adam had been appearing on Broadway in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. He needn't worry about those reviews, at least. 'As big brother Jamie, Adam Harker has a formidably magnetic presence,' swooned the *New York Times*. 'Catch him while you can.'

Fat chance.

It had now been exactly five months since I'd been booked for anything. I prostrated myself on the sofa, listlessly scrolling

through the *Backstage* ads. *Must be comfortable with nudity ... Proud of her sexuality; happy to wear push-up bra ... Petite/thin, wears revealing party attire ... Drop-dead gorgeous and knows it ... Drop-dead gorgeous but doesn't know it ...* And my personal favourite: *Looks intellectual but is still smoking hot.*

Ninety-five per cent of these ads were for actresses under the age of thirty. Did I really want this life 'more than anything else'? *Still?*

Despite everything that happened, I truly believe Adam had what it took to become one of those undeniable, immortal things: a movie star. It was different for me; I've always known I don't possess that kind of heat and light. That's one of the things I'm grateful to the Momager for. She knew from the start that I was never going to be an Ingrid Bergman. Instead, I was to be the girl with unclouded eyes and a guileless smile, who will sell you anything from a belief in true love to kale-soup cleanses. The girl who brightens chat shows and romcoms and shampoo ads because she looks like a better version of your best friend or first sweetheart. A face that when it fills your screen feels like a homecoming.

Trouble is, there are literally thousands of girls who could fit this bill. We act, we model, we sing and we dance. We're as interchangeable as we're appealing. And for a while, I was less interchangeable than the rest because of *Snow Angels*. I was already gift-wrapped as a happy memory.

It still wasn't enough. I don't know, even now, if Little Lucie held me back rather than pushed me forward. Either way, a pathetic part of me still believes I can outgrow her. That all I need is one last lucky break, and I'll be able to prove all the clichés wrong and that everything was worth it. I will find a role or give

a performance that's such a perfect fit it will redefine me forever. And once that's done I'll be free to give up and move on. Little Lucie will be left behind for good. Dead and ice-bound, where she belongs.

Or so I kept telling myself.

'Oh, darling,' the Momager exclaimed as soon as she saw the nest of fast-food wrappers I'd made for myself on the sofa. She put her hands to her face. 'Is it time for me to *really* worry?'

Not for the first time, I regretted giving my mother a key to my flat. In minutes, the festering contents of my fridge were binned in favour of celery, tofu and brown rice milk. (I don't think the Momager knows about my eating habits or that she'd necessarily disapprove. She told me that when she was at ballet school, the girls used to eat cotton wool soaked in orange juice to suppress their appetites.) Curtains were flung back and cushions plumped. She even lit a scented candle. As a final touch, she fluffed out my hair and dabbed some gloss on my lips. I sat up straighter, despite myself. 'There,' she said. '*Much* better. And I have a nice surprise for you. Talia's in town – did you know? I ran into her outside Selfridge's, of all places. She's dying to catch up. And she's got an invitation for you. Some party or launch event on Saturday night. I said you'd be thrilled.'

'Talia is very far from thrilling. And I don't want to go out. I'm on a break from all that.'

'Nonsense. You've wallowed long enough, and it's starting to show. Talia knows *everyone*. It's time to start putting yourself out there again. Who knows who you'll meet or what might turn up?'

‘Pimping me out to C-list It girls isn’t going to reignite my career.’

‘Please don’t be confrontational, Lily.’ My mother took on a martyred air. Nina calls it her Dying Swan. ‘It’s very unkind. You know I’m only trying to make you happy.’

She and Pa met when they were both in *The Tempest* at the Old Vic (appropriate, really, seeing as their six-month marriage was as stormy as it was short-lived). Pa was Alonso; the Momager was one of the dancers hired to be Prospero’s sprites. Despite her training, she was never a classical ballerina and mostly picked up gigs in West End musicals or ballroom-dancing shows. But she has always looked the part of a prima: dainty and upright, with snap-able wrists and a crown of white-blond hair. Her steeliness is swathed in chiffon.

My agent handles the majority of my career requirements; these days, the Momager is reduced to curating my social-media accounts. Even so, there are occasions when I like to get her perspective on things. Her instincts are usually right. And she never needed to be pushy, or at least not during her stage-mother days. Her trick was to give the impression that she’d arrived at the position by accident, swept up by the irresistible tidal wave of her daughter’s talent. She would hint at the burden of her responsibilities with a brave and selfless smile; her negotiations were conducted with an air of trusting hopefulness that others – most of all me – found very hard to disappoint.

So I went to the party with Talia, and also Nina, who finds Talia hard to take but never says no to a free ride. Talia’s the only child

of Flora Templeton, the English aristo-model, and US retail tycoon Joey Banks, and as such gets invited to everything. Although she's five or six years younger than me it feels like we've been crossing paths forever; we're more than acquaintances but not quite friends. Talia prefers the term 'influencer' to 'socialite', designs jewellery or swimwear, possibly both, and is always ever-so-keen for me to attend her various charity fundraisers and launch parties and first nights.

Tonight was the private view of a fashionista-turned-artist's début. Her financier boyfriend had hired the gallery: a converted warehouse in Shoreditch, replete with steel pillars and exposed ceiling joists. Assorted glamazons flitted about, their sparkle made even more effervescent by the raw industrial space.

'Lily, Nina, over here!' Talia called out as soon as we got in. She click-clacked across the concrete floor, arms outstretched. 'Oh,' she said, 'but you're *stunning*. The two of you! Look at that dress! Look at your *hair*! God. I hate you both. Argh!' Beside me, I heard Nina suppress a groan.

Talia has her mother's Disney-princess eyes and nose and mouth, but these features are all bunched up a little too closely together and look slightly incongruous on her face, which is broad and square like her father's. Efforts to further emulate her mother include a boob job, ear-pinning and a chin-reduction (according to Nina, at any rate, who may not be the most reliable source). Still, I know the signs of someone who isn't at ease in their own skin. They're there in Talia's jittery, gym-whittled frame and the gnawed flesh around her synthetic nails.

'Isn't the show great? I'd love to have a talent like this. All that *purpose*. It's inspiring.'

Talia has the naivety of those born into extreme wealth. 'Absolutely,' I said, though the art on the distressed brick walls looked pretty underwhelming to me. It was mostly neon scribbles of bad poetry, superimposed over grainy photos taken backstage at fashion shows.

'You heard about my latest project? I'm excited, I really am. It's this ethical skincare company and they want me to be a spokesperson, so – hang on.' Talia had caught sight of another friend. 'Christian! You *beast*, why didn't you let me know you were coming? This place is *so you* –' She turned back to us. 'Two minutes! Don't talk about me once I'm gone. Promise? Ha, I'm kidding. Kidding! OK, I'll be back –'

Nina slumped extravagantly against the wall. 'Thank Christ. I've already heard all I can take about sustainable mud-packs for your fanny.'

'You two met up?' I was surprised; I didn't think Nina and Talia hung out without me.

'I was at a loose end. I guess Talia does for me what I do for you.'

'And what's that?'

'You know: makes my own life look slightly less pitiful by comparison.'

At least she said it with a grin. I wanted Nina to be in a good mood; I wanted both of us to have a good time. I'd made an effort, in a backless silk dress the colour of midnight. Nina was rocking her nouvelle vague sexpot thing. I collected two negronis from a passing waiter and clinked glasses with determined cheer.

'Bottoms up.' Nina downed hers in one. 'Ack.' Then, 'Stone the crows. Isn't that Adam Harker?'

She sounded interested rather than impressed. It wasn't like he was even the biggest name in the room, since it was the kind of party where most people were at least vaguely recognisable, or desirable, or both. Life in the bubble, as Adam had put it.

And there he was, in the flesh.

I looked away quickly. It would be awkward running into him again, and not just because he hadn't called. We might not have seen each other naked but I felt our last encounter had been unexpectedly exposing, all the same. Luckily the gallery was becoming as crowded as it was cavernous; Adam would be too busy schmoozing models to notice the likes of Nina and me. One more drink and I was headed out of there.

'Hello again.'

'Oh. Hi.'

I'd been on my way to find Talia, to tell her that Nina and I were moving on. And there he was, abruptly in my path.

Everything was different. My hair was blow-dried and my lingerie was designer. Adam looked more like his on-screen avatar. Taller, rangier, lazily assured.

He smiled down at me. 'So you're a connoisseur of art as well as old men's boozers.'

'Actually, I'm here for the models.'

He laughed. 'I was going to give you a call, wasn't I?'

'I don't know. Were you?'

'Right now it looks like I definitely should've done.'

'Lily! Thought I'd lost you. Oh!' Talia stopped. 'I'm sorry. Am I interrupting?' She laughed skittishly, fingers pressed to her mouth, and peeping out at us from under her My Little Pony mane.

‘Adam,’ said Adam, putting out his hand.

‘Yeah, hi, we actually met before, briefly? At Lula Burstein’s summer party? I’m Talia ...?’

‘Of course,’ he said, with an easy warmth that was so practised I felt sure he hadn’t a clue who she was. ‘Great to see you again. It’s turning out to be quite a reunion.’

She beamed. ‘So how do you two know each other?’

‘Lily and I were stage-school brats together, back in the day.’

I became aware that a man with a camera was hovering expectantly in front of us – the event’s official photographer. ‘Gotta pay the piper, right?’ Adam murmured in my ear, before slinging his arm around my shoulder and pulling me in. The camera flashed several times. When the photographer moved on, Adam didn’t immediately release me. Instead, I felt his fingers on my bare back, tracing something on my skin. Our eyes met, mine still dazzled by the camera’s flash. But the next moment he saw someone he knew and was called away.

‘What. Was. That?’ demanded Nina, suddenly by my side.

‘The chemistry between the two of you is *insane*,’ said Talia.

‘Please. He’s just working the room.’

Nina narrowed her eyes. ‘Weren’t you spotty teenagers the last time you met?’

‘Actually, we bumped into each other the other week.’ Miss Insouciance.

‘Bumping uglies, was it?’

‘Hardly. It was just a drink in some awful pub. We’re not – ow.’

Talia had nudged me sharply in the ribs. ‘*Act cool*,’ she hissed. ‘*He’s coming back over.*’

This time, Adam stayed. When a section of the party moved on to a neighbouring bar, we moved with it, and from there to somebody's house. The rooms were long and dark, painted in the same inky colours that Dido favoured, but lit by sparse gleams of crystal and gilt. In the shadows, the guests had their own glister – the flashes of mirth in their teeth and eyes, the gloss of money everywhere else. They were all strangers, except for Adam; I'd lost Talia and Nina somewhere along the way. It didn't matter. His hand was still on my back. The tips of his fingers were cool; my skin shivered.

At some point a tray was brought out, neatly arranged with razor blades and mirrors and white baggies. 'You don't have to,' said Adam when he saw me hesitate. So of course I dipped down to one of the slimmer lines, avoiding my own reflected eyes. There was no hesitation on Adam's part, and I remembered Nina's drug gossip again. But, 'Whew,' he said, pinching his nose, so smiling and surprised it looked like innocence, and as my own sinuses sparked and fizzed, we leaned in for our first kiss. I tasted smoke and chemicals, a trace of sweetness from his cocktail, and then he moved his mouth away from mine, across my cheek, where he bit me, hard, just above the jaw.

I recoiled, swearing, and the other people in the room momentarily paused. 'You *animal*,' said someone admiringly, and for whatever reason, I started to laugh, a little too loudly. To soothe me, or to shut me up, Adam kissed me again. 'You're delicious,' he murmured. 'Unbearably so.'

I went to find a bathroom and splash some water on my face. The bite mark was striking in a good way. I looked beautiful. Exhilarated. The stimulants buzzed through me even as I stood still. When I came back, Adam wasn't in the main room. It took

me a while to find him; he was smoking in the alcove under the stairs.

‘You want to get out of here?’

He considered me. ‘Not with you. Not like this.’

I was too wired to feel wounded. I wanted to laugh again. ‘Fuck you, then. Or not.’

‘Don’t misunderstand me – I want to see you again. But clearly. Soberly.’ He put his head to one side. ‘How do you hold up in the cold light of day, I wonder?’

‘Better than you, I’ll bet.’

‘You’re probably right. You’ve still got a touch of the ingénue, just about. Little Lily ...’

‘There’s never been anything the least bit ingénue about you.’

‘Maybe not.’ Adam reached out and put a finger on my cheek, where he’d bitten it. ‘Jesus. I can’t think what came over me.’

‘Ah. This is where you tell me what a terrible person you are and how I should stay away for my own good.’

‘What if it’s true?’

‘Even if it is, you should come up with a better cliché.’

Watch out, I’m bad news is how a person positions themselves as irresistible while admitting they’re irredeemable. But I can’t deny it: I was warned there would be trouble ahead. Maybe I should have returned the favour.

‘I’ll call you,’ said Adam, and I nodded, and by then it was too late for either of us.