

THE MISSING YEARS

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Also by Lexie Elliott

The French Girl
The Missing Years

THE MISSING YEARS

LEXIE ELLIOTT



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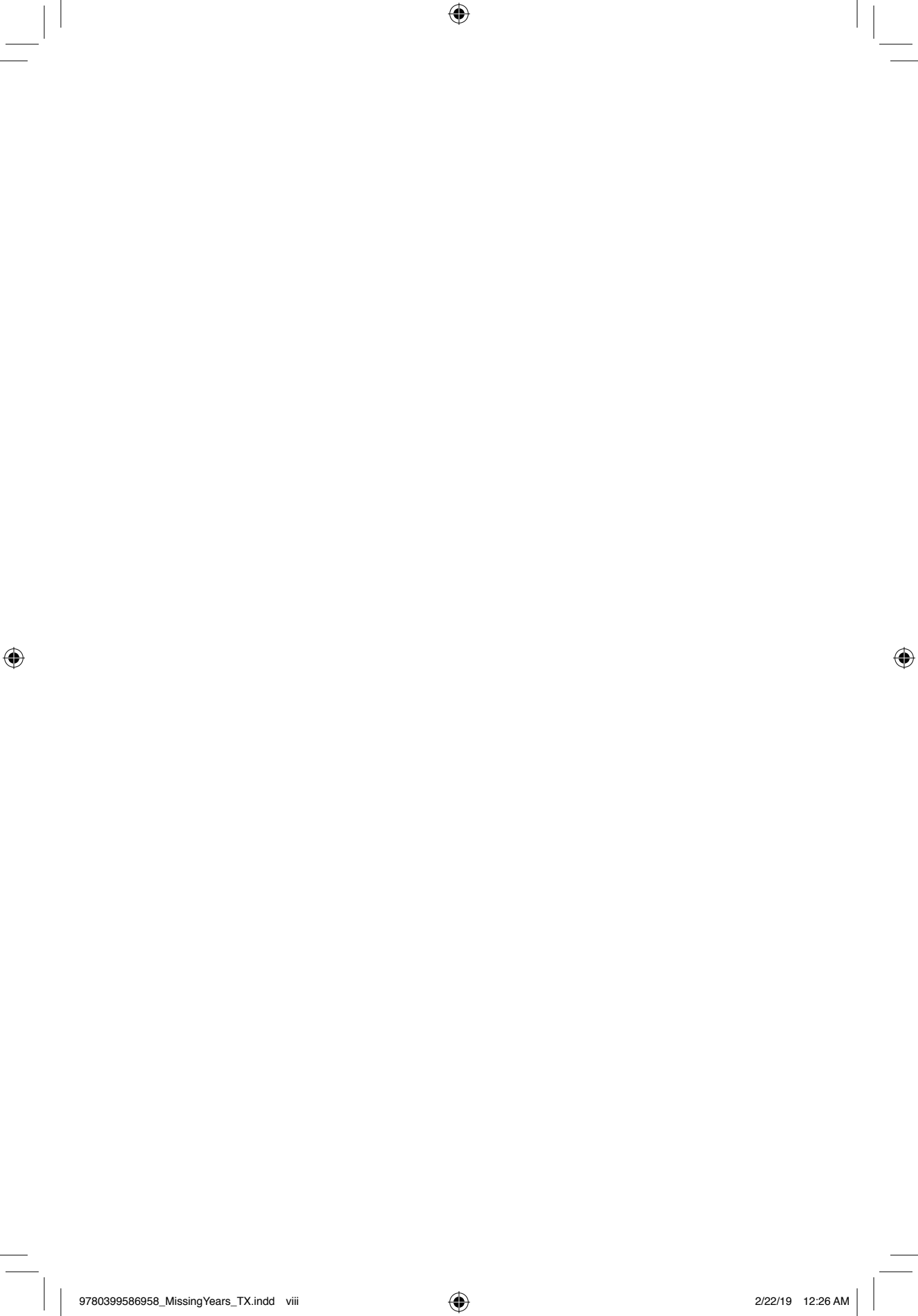
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*For my sisters,
Tor and Hels.*

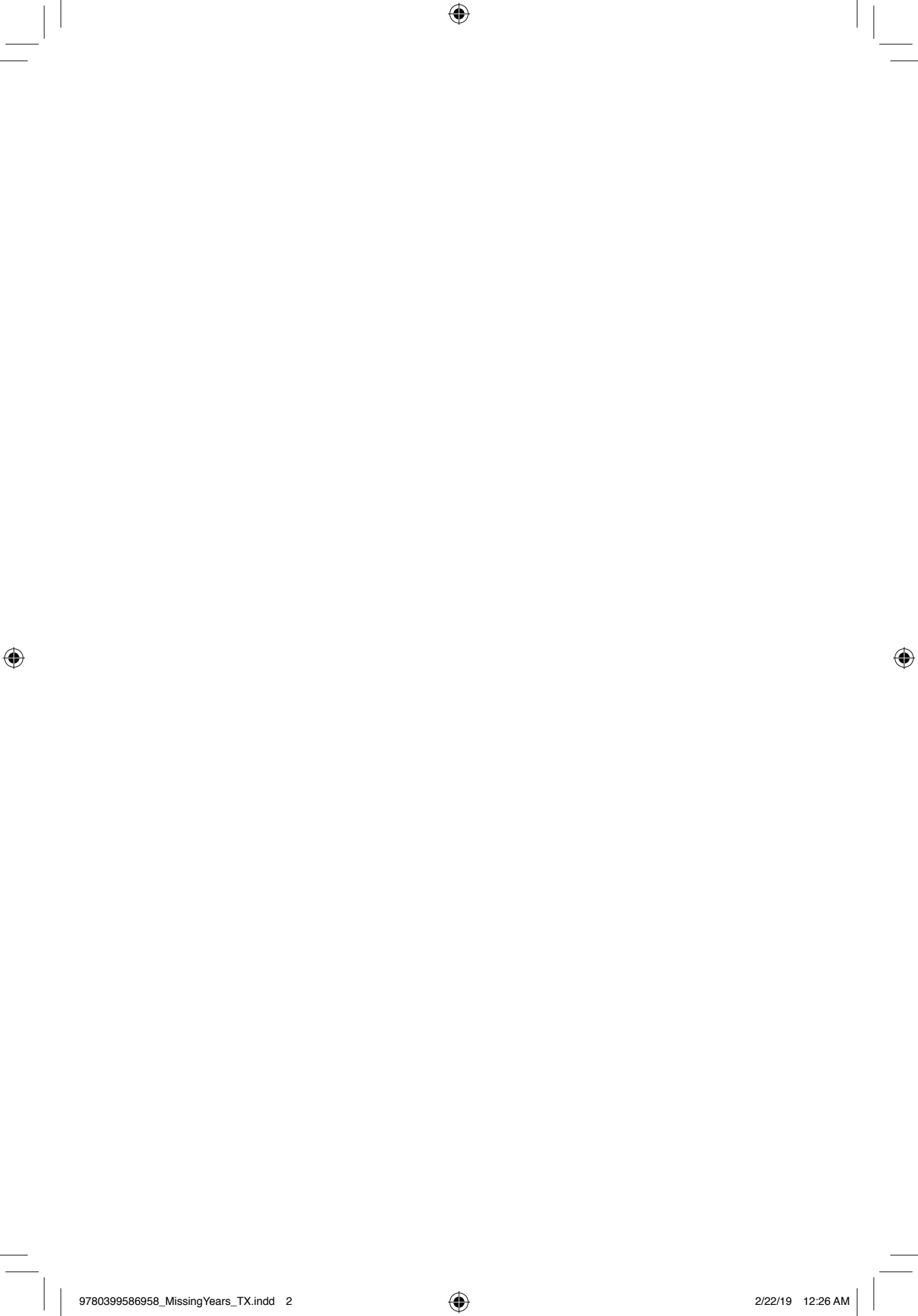
*And, always and forever,
for Matt, Cameron and Zachary.*



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MY FATHER IS HAPPILY LIVING IN AUSTRALIA WITH A LADY called Sarah. Or Susan. They have a handful of charming children—with the exception of the last, who even in his early twenties is something of a handful (they call him their “late bloomer”)—though of course my father struggles endlessly with thoughts of the child he left behind. But he’s come too far to be able to see a way back to her.



ONE

The Manse is watching me.

At first I don't notice it, I'm too involved in my study of the imposing gray stone edifice before me. It's a tall structure—three stories, and the first two must have high ceilings—with a turret and stepped gables like sets of staircases. *Grand baronial style*, I think, the half-remembered phrase leaping into my mind. I recognize the ground-floor bay windows that frame the wide doorway from the old battered photograph that has traveled as far and wide as I have, but as I squint at them, I become aware of an acute, uneasy silence, as if the whole building is holding its breath. There's a queer stillness to the dark, unreflective granite, to the slate roof; as I lift my eyes upward, I notice that even the sky behind is still—still and leaden and looming. I turn my attention back to the windows, wondering whether the photograph I always keep beside my bed was taken in front of the left or the right one, and as I study them, I have the disturbing sense that whatever lurks beneath the flat, gray surface is stirring; the windows are craning forward, crowding toward me. I blink to try to find a wider perspective, but then I notice that even the turret on the left is peering down; I have the sensation that it's swooping, rushing toward me, and my

stomach lurches as if the lawn has dropped away beneath my feet. *The house means to swallow me*, I think with an irrational flood of panic, *swallow me whole—and then what?*

“Jesus.” It’s Carrie, my half sister, pushing her badly cut fringe out of her eyes as she joins me on the mossy lawn to survey the house. Her voice drags me back to normality with a hard jolt. I feel like I’m staggering from the impact. “This is a bloody castle.”

“It’s not so big inside.”

I can feel her slanting gaze on me. “So you remember?”

Do I? Or have I created memories, built on the back of the photograph and the tales of others? Snatches of phrases, half-formed images, crafted in a child’s mind into a castle worthy of the Brothers Grimm, the type of castle in tales that have nothing to do with fairies. I weigh my answer. I have an irrational feeling that Carrie isn’t the only one listening. The Manse has been waiting a long time for me—a quarter of a century, give or take—but I imagine stone can be very patient.

I’m imagining rather a lot today. Tiredness from the long drive, presumably. *Stick to the facts, Ailsa.*

“Do you?” prompts Carrie.

“Yes,” I say finally. “I remember. At least a bit.”

Suddenly there is an earsplitting crack. Instantly I’m turning, scanning around, grabbing Carrie’s arm with one hand to pull her with me. “Ailsa,” I hear her say as I search the area wildly. Then, louder, more urgently, “Stop! It’s all right. It’s just a branch. On the oak. It broke.” She catches me with her cool silver-gray eyes, so like our mother’s, the only part of her that is. There’s a drumming in my ears. It takes me a moment to realize it’s my heartbeat. I take a breath, then another, staring into those pale eyes. “It’s okay,” she says gently. “Just a branch. Look.” I follow her pointed finger. There’s a very old oak tree that I hadn’t noticed but somehow knew was there, to the right of the house. The lowest branch, thicker than the width of a well-built man, has cracked and is dangling at an odd angle. The twisted wood looks dead and dry. The tree is uncomfortably close to the house; its roots must

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be irreversibly tangled with the foundation. They must have burrowed into the dank earth, thin tendrils slipping through cracks in the brickwork below, growing and expanding over time, tightening around the bricks and pushing out the mortar, inveigling themselves until house and tree became irrevocably entwined. Rot in one can only lead to the same in the other.

The facts, Ailsa. Stick to the facts.

“Well,” says Carrie, drawing in a deep breath. Her thin shoulders rise and fall with the draw of her lungs. “That was dramatic.”

I’m not sure if she’s referring to the broken branch or my reaction. I turn away to ward off her gaze. “Sorry,” I say, looking at the tree instead. Only the broken branch appears dead; the rest seems to be thriving. “It was . . . Anyway. Sorry.” I head for my little hire-purchase Golf before she can press her point, whatever that may be. “Time to move in, I guess.” I throw a swift glance at the Manse as I open the boot of the car, but it’s not watching, breathing, swooping or in any way exhibiting animated behavior. The facts: it’s just a rather impressive old Scottish manor in the middle of nowhere that now happens to be mine.

Except it’s not. Not mine, not completely—and if you don’t completely own a house, you might as well not own it at all, or so I discovered on meeting my mother’s lawyer in his smart office in the City of London. I wasn’t quite fresh off the boat (yes, boat) from Egypt; I’d slept two nights in my mother’s and Pete’s house in Surrey—my mother’s very last abode, but never a home to me—but I was still adjusting to the cool, the lack of sunshine, the muted shades after color so intense it could hurt the eyes. The England I found myself in was lacking, whereas Egypt had been too much.

“Sell it?” The lawyer repeated my question, shaking his head. “Oh no. I’m sorry to say that with this type of joint ownership, there is very little you can do. You can’t sell the property without the permission of the joint owner, you see.”

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"I can't . . ." His words took a moment to sink in. In fact the whole situation was still sinking in. Had I known my mother still owned the Manse? I couldn't say for sure either way. Certainly it wouldn't have been something we talked about. "I can't sell it?" He inclined his head apologetically. "What about renting it out?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Not without the permission of the joint owner."

"And the land?"

"No, not that either. Again, not without the permission of the joint owner."

"Even though that joint owner—my father—hasn't been seen or heard from for, let's see, *twenty-seven years*?"

"Indeed." Ignoring my caustic tone, he paused to remove his glasses and rub the bridge of his nose, then went on diffidently. "I don't suppose that you've had some slight contact with your father over the years?" His small myopic eyes blinked hopefully from his round face, putting me in mind of a mole. He must have been at least fifty, and he looked so much like how I would have imagined a probate lawyer would look that I could have believed I was on a film set and none of this was real. "A birthday card or something . . . anything . . . that you might not have wanted to share with your mother?"

I shook my head mutely.

"Ah," he said sadly. "That *is* a shame." I stared at him, but he was rubbing the bridge of his nose again. The gross absurdity of his understatement appeared lost on him. "Then the avenue that is open to you is to apply to the courts to rectify the situation; that is to say, to have his ownership share transferred to yourself. It would be under the Scottish Courts; you'd have to apply for a Presumption of Death. Our Edinburgh office would help you with that, though." Presumption of Death. I found myself imagining a form with those words in crisp black ink on stark white paper. How neat and tidy and definitive for a situation that was nothing of the sort. He went on, adopting an apologetic tone again: "I have to say that given the precise details of your

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father's disappearance, I imagine it might not be a straightforward process. It could take quite some months. Years even."

"Right," I said faintly while the Manse in my memory grew, expanding out from the photograph, hijacking my thoughts, my mind, my life. A house I hadn't lived in since my father disappeared and we fled from his absence—at least my mother fled, and I was dragged along, repeatedly bleating, *But, Mummy, when he comes back, how will he know where we've gone?* The lawyer looked at me sympathetically as I took a sip from the glass of water that had been thoughtfully placed in front of me, next to the square box of tissues. This lawyer was nothing if not prepared, though I doubted he had seen a situation quite like this before. "So what you're saying is that I own fifty percent of a property on which I have to pay one hundred percent of the maintenance bills, but there's nothing I can do with it?"

He placed the glasses back on his nose. "Nothing, I'm afraid." He paused. "Unless you want to live in it, of course."

I didn't. I don't. Yet here I am. Temporarily.

Carrie unpacks the food we bought en route at what Google had told us was the nearest supermarket, whilst I wander through the rooms; I suspect she is trying to give me space to unpack my memories alone. But any such memories, if they do exist, are keen to stay neatly parceled up. The kitchen is large, farmhouse style, and has an ancient-looking range cooker that I leave Carrie to tinker with. There's a boot room, a lounge, a formal dining room with what looks like original wood paneling and another reception room on the ground floor; all are dated, but clean and bright—there is nothing that gives rise to the unease I felt on arrival. The wide staircase up the center of the house with its stained wooden banisters catches at me—do I remember tumbling down those stairs to run out onto the wide lawn?—but I cannot tell which way to turn at the top to find whichever bedroom had been mine. There are three good-sized bedrooms on this floor, and a large

family bathroom with a raised cistern and a chain pull on the toilet that seems fuzzily familiar. All the walls have been painted an off-white, and the furniture is a cheery pine. The impression is of a bright and breezy mid-level bed-and-breakfast. My mother was perhaps unaware of the legal position, or perhaps, characteristically, she chose to ignore inconvenient truths; in any case, according to Pete, she's been blithely renting out the place for years. The master suite is on this floor too, but I leave it for last and head up a much narrower staircase to the top floor, which is far less attractive on account of lower ceilings and small windows. There are three more bedrooms up here, of awkward shape, and another bathroom, and a door which on inspection is locked.

Locked. That puzzles me for a moment until I recall the managing agent telling us when we collected the keys that it's a storage room—most rented houses apparently have a secure area where the owners can leave some things. But what would my mother have left in here? As far as I know, she never came back to the Manse. Did we leave some things behind when we bolted all those years ago?

I try the door again, but there's no mistake: it's most definitely locked. The smooth round knob of the door stares unblinking at me as if it can see through me, right to the center of my unease. I can imagine that dull gold sphere growing in my mind, until it throbs and pulses and burns away other thoughts—but I won't allow it. I will get the keys and open it right away.

On the way back down the stairs, I hear a snatch of music. Carrie must have found a radio. She likes to have noise in the background, a television or a radio or an iPod with speakers; I'm learning these things about her. I suppose I will learn a lot more as we live together in the coming weeks. If she does live with me, that is—when I suggested she stay with me in the Manse, I was more than prepared for her to politely decline. I'm still half expecting her to announce that she's actually found a flat in Edinburgh for the duration of the play she's in, which would surely be much more convenient for her. I haven't lived with Carrie since I left my mother's home at eighteen for university, and I've

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probably only seen her three or four times since she went to university herself four years ago. My fault, entirely. I could have handled things differently. I should have handled things differently.

The master bedroom door is open (was it open before?) and it stops me in my tracks: from the hallway, I can see the spectacular view afforded by the wide windows, over the lawn and the road and out across the stream that's hidden by trees up to the craggy hilltops on the other side of the narrow valley. It's a landscape of moss greens and bracken browns and gray granite, with the occasional splash of bright yellow April daffodils. An ancient landscape: one that makes no attempts to hide its years, stoically unflinching and contemptible of the petty jealousies and small prides of those who walk across it. The house is well suited to it—not this version with its bright pine beds and white-washed walls, but the one I saw when I arrived. The Manse that lies beneath.

I take a small step into the bedroom, and as I do, I am suddenly absolutely sure the bed will be to the right of the doorway, facing those windows: a memory is slowly unraveling, a memory of entering this room in dim light, of walking all the way around the high bed to clamber onto the other side—a big scramble for a little person—where my father lay, warm and solid.

But then I stop. The bed isn't where I expect it. It's at ninety degrees, the wooden headboard against the adjoining wall, a cheerful purple throw spread across the white duvet. The smell is wrong, too: there's the vaguest hint of something sickly sweet on top of a suspicion of stale cigarette smoke. I find myself putting a hand on the wall for balance. Florence and the Machine floats up from the kitchen, telling me I've got the love they need. Before I've made a conscious decision, I'm halfway down the stairs heading for the kitchen. Carrie looks up from inspecting the contents of a drawer as I enter. "This place is at least well kitted out for the basics," she says cheerfully, bumping the drawer closed with her hip. "I made you a cup of tea."

"Oh. Um, thanks." I had been planning to grab the keys and go

straight back to the locked room, but I take the tea she is holding out to me. The source of the music is a battered analogue radio in the corner; I have an urge to turn it down, but I don't want to seem dictatorial.

Carrie picks up her own mug, cradling it in her long-fingered hands. All of Carrie is long: long fingers and long limbs. Even as a child, she was always the tallest in her class. She's thin, but her frame gives a sense of strength. Rangy, is what she is. We've never looked like sisters. "So," she says brightly, "you have a house."

I chink my mug against her own, which is almost empty. "Go me. I have a house." Neatly sidestepping first-time buyer status, I have at the age of thirty-four achieved what is, according to the *Financial Times*, the dream of my generation: I am now a homeowner. I don't even have a mortgage. "Not one with any value, to be fair, since I'm legally unable to sell it . . ." I have a house I don't know what to do with.

"Oh, you'll sort that out," she says. Then she goes on, in an uncanny echo of my own thoughts, "I was thinking, when were we last living under the same roof? It must have been just before you went to university, right?" A very different Carrie then: one without permanent smudged eyeliner and purple dye at the tips of her shoulder-length dark hair, one without a gaze that inexorably presses, silently demanding answers. The Carrie I last lived with was in love with ponies and Michael Jackson music and any makeup she could sneak from our mother; she was seven, the same age I was when my mother and I left Scotland, the age I was when my father left me.

"Right." Half a sister and half a house. And I don't quite know what to do with either.

"Is it strange, being here?"

"Not really. I don't remember much." She's watching my face as I answer; I fight the urge to turn away. If I was at work, I'd have my professional persona firmly in place: tough, capable Ailsa, ready for anything, nary a chink in the armor to be found. I can't be that person with Carrie—it wouldn't be fair—but I don't know what to be instead.

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"I suppose it's strange how *normal* everything is inside. Very IKEA. I don't know what I was expecting, but I guess it wasn't flat-packed furniture and magnolia-colored walls."

She's nodding. "It should be all oak panels and stags' heads, like a hunting lodge. But I suppose Mum just wanted to make it rentable for as little outlay as possible." I tense at the mention of our mother: we haven't really spoken about her death yet, except in practical terms. And that one, brutal, phone call about the funeral, when Carrie made it quite clear she was at the adult table now:

It's on Friday.

Friday? But there aren't any flights, I don't know if I can make it back—

It's all fixed. Dad wants it then.

Pete does? But—why?

He wasn't sure you'd come. This way, if you don't, he doesn't have to explain.

But the Carrie that's here with me now is forging on. She has an energy I haven't seen all day. In the car from London she mostly slept. "What does Manse mean, anyway? Is it just a Scottish version of Manor?"

"Yes—no, wait." That's not quite right; something is nagging at my brain. "No, it's a house for the minister. I think."

"Bloody inconvenient for the minister, seeing as the church is in the village." I glance at my watch: just after six. Perhaps she's an evening person. I suppose that would make sense given all her evening performances. "I meant to ask—is there a bedroom you'd prefer me to take?" she says.

"Whichever. I don't mind." When I take a sip from my mug, the tea is only lukewarm and far too strong for my liking. The time nags at me: just after six, the news will be on. I could turn on the somewhat outdated television I spied in the lounge and see Jonathan reporting

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from Louisiana on the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig disaster. But I know if I do that then Carrie will see me watching Jonathan.

Another half thing. Half a house, half a sister, half a boyfriend. A sly whisper tells me that boyfriends are just like houses: if you don't have the whole of one, you might as well not have one at all.

But no, I'm overdramatizing—half isn't accurate. Surely at least four fifths. And the rest isn't available anyway: no one could ever have the whole of Jonathan, because he has forever mortgaged part of himself to broadcast journalism.

I could tell Carrie I'm keen to find out what's happening with the volcano, which at least has the benefit of truth. Somewhere in Iceland a malevolent volcano is belching a vitriolic stream of fire, ash and lava into the jet stream, shaking the ground with malicious laughter at the havoc it is causing. Or maybe the volcano is the victim, cruelly assaulted from below by the magma . . . In any case, the resultant ash cloud has grounded all flights in and out of Northern Europe. It's been the headline news item for the last seven days and my own private obsession, given that it genuinely is the reason I missed being both at my mother's deathbed and funeral, regardless of whether Carrie and Pete choose to believe me. But if the television is still on when the topic switches to the other major headline—the oil rig explosion—Carrie's eyes will fill up with all the things that she hasn't yet found a way to say, and I won't be able to bear their weight.

"I'll leave the biggest for you then," she says.

It occurs to me that she's trying very hard. I am too, of course, but I hadn't quite expected her to make such an effort, and I'm not sure if her reasons are the same. I have no idea what the landscape between us looks like from her point of view. "I don't mind."

"Okay then. Well, I'll go and have a look round then and get settled in. Shout if there's anything you want me to help with."

"Okay." She heads for the door, mug still in hand. "Wait," I say reluctantly to her back. She turns inquiringly. "I don't want the master. You take it. If you want to."

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She pauses for a moment as if about to ask something, but in the end all she says is, “Sure. I’ll take a look.” She doesn’t know what to do with me, either.

The keys.

There are four on the key ring, plus a pink plastic fob labeled *The Manse* in a curling, jaunty script that in no way matches the building itself. I stand in front of the locked door on the top floor, eyeing the lock and the keys and trying to work out the match. It can’t be the Yale key; this is not a Yale lock. Of the other three, one I know is for the front door, so that seems an unlikely candidate. That leaves a large black iron one that looks more like it would fit a garden gate, and a key very similar to the front door—one for a traditional lever lock. I try the latter first. No luck. The black iron one won’t even fit the aperture. I try the front door key, and for a moment I feel a slight give—*Yes!*—but then it sticks. It’s not the right key, either. I try the two lever lock keys again, just to make sure, but the door stays resolutely, rebelliously, locked.

The door itself seems to be constructed the same as every other door in the house: of fairly old, but solid, whitewashed wood. I could take an ax to it, if I had an ax (is there one in the boot room or the cellar?), and if I was on my own, perhaps I would, but I can just imagine Carrie’s surprise if I started smashing the place up. Though perhaps I shouldn’t have expected the managing agent to have a key: if the room is purely for storage of the owner’s things, you wouldn’t want the agent to accidentally give that key to a rental family. Probably I should be asking Pete if he knows where the key is. Irrationally it rankles that I’ve been beaten. The defeat is only temporary, but I know that somewhere in a deep, dark corner of my mind, that dull spherical doorknob is lingering malevolently and looking for the opportunity to spread its malice.

But there are other things to do, chief among them to decide where to sleep. I take a bedroom on the second floor that looks out to the

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back, principally because it's right next to the bathroom and has a large wardrobe, though the latter is unnecessary as I have brought so little clothing that I could have flown up with hand luggage only (if there were any planes flying, that is). My paltry wardrobe looks even more meager and pathetic hanging on the ill-assorted high street hangers that were in the wardrobe (Topshop, Miss Selfridge, Oasis: it's been years since I bought anything from those). Carrie has dumped her suitcase in the master bedroom, which has an en suite, so I feel able to leave my toiletries in the family bathroom. There's a full-length wall mirror in there that catches me unawares, causing me to falter mid-step; for a moment it throws out a stranger's image, but a blink later it's recognizably me peering back. I stare and stare at the mirror, trying to see what I had a fleeting glimpse of—not even a glimpse, the merest hint: me as other people see me. But what gazes back is entirely familiar: average height, average build, average brown hair (though I like to think it has a touch of auburn to it). Pale skin, paler even than the average Scot, but you might not notice that right now given the smattering of freckles across my nose from the Egyptian sun. Even my clothes are average: jeans and a lightweight linen T-shirt. Really, the only thing that's worth remarking upon is my eyes: almond shaped and green, with a distinct black border to the iris. Cat's eyes, Jonathan called them. My father's eyes, my mother once said. *For God's sake, you're just like your father. You even look like him. Those bloody eyes!*

Suddenly I hear Jonathan's voice floating up the stairs; it throws me for a moment before I realize Carrie must have turned on the news. My legs are taking me down the stairs before I've finished deliberating. Carrie is standing in front of the telly, the remote still in hand; she turns at my entry. "Jonathan," she says unnecessarily.

It's a live piece. I try to consider him dispassionately, as any other viewer would see him; but really, does anyone view him dispassionately, when we've all grown up with his serious expression and dry BBC English reporting from every notable event around the globe? A tall, slim man in his fifties with a decent head of gray hair and piercing pale

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blue eyes. A man with authority, a man of gravitas, but not without charm—charm of the old-school variety: terribly Britishly polite. He's not, though; not in private, with good friends, after a drink or four: then he's scandalously, wickedly indiscreet. It's a required characteristic of the perpetual bachelor, presumably, if dinner party invitations are going to be forthcoming after everybody else has coupled up: *Oh, we must invite Jonathan, he's always a scream.*

There are other versions of him, ones that nobody sees but me. Or whoever was there before me, or whoever might come after. Perpetual bachelor: he shouldn't be considered as such, given we've been together for nigh on a decade. But I know that's how everyone thinks of him. I am presumed to be a barnacle on the hull that will at some point be scraped off, while the ship itself blithely forges on.

On-screen the oil rig burns, the fiery plume impossibly tall, the black greasy billows above it so thick they appear solid. The Icelandic volcano is not the only part of the earth making its protest through the medium of a deadly cloud.

Now Jonathan is in the picture again. He's fielding questions from the news anchor in London, his hand straying up to his earpiece; there must be a lot of background noise. He's doing a good job—well of course he is, he's Jonathan Powell—and the professional part of my brain relishes the story. It's a newshound's dream: a complex human and environmental disaster with wide-ranging economic, political and environmental implications. I can just imagine the atmosphere in the newsroom, an atmosphere I've lived through so many times: so charged your skin prickles with it, like wearing a blanket of static electricity. At the beginning it felt like that for me all the time, but the human body can't handle that level of adrenaline for a prolonged period. At some point you have to become inured. But for a story like this, nobody would be immune.

"What time is it there?" asks Carrie.

"They're six hours behind," I say distractedly. Jonathan has his gravest face on, laying out the facts in a final roundup. Eleven people

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are missing; the rig is in danger of sinking. This is the hard news dilemma: usually every great story is a terrible one, too. Eleven people: I wonder who is waiting anxiously for them. Parents, siblings, young wives? I imagine pinched faces, gray-white with worry; a snot-nosed child, crying . . .

"When did he get there?" asks Carrie, her eyes on the television as Jonathan explains the next steps for the rescue operation.

"Last night, I think. He took the last flight from DC."

"So did he work all night?"

"Probably. I should think so."

"He doesn't look tired."

"He's used to it. He'll catnap." Everyone is tired in hard news, all the time.

"You guys must be so good at that," Carrie comments. "Catnapping, I mean."

"I suppose." Jonathan is offscreen now. I collect myself and turn my attention to Carrie. Conscious I've been giving her abrupt replies, I add, "I can do it just about anywhere. But I'm especially good in bed." The ribald joke slips out before I can stop it, a knee-jerk newsroom habit, where the mantra has always been that if there's an entendre that can be made double, by all means go ahead.

Carrie's eyes jump to mine in surprise, and she laughs. It's an appealing sound. I remember her giggle from when she was a child. Pete used to tickle her all the time: not the ribs as you'd expect—Carrie's weak points were her knees and her calves. She'd scissor kick and roll around, and the laughter would huff out of her in wheezes and bursts. It's gratifying to hear her laugh again. Perhaps she doesn't want to ruin the moment, or perhaps I was wrong earlier; either way, her gray eyes hold nothing but the return of my own smile.

Later I lie in the strange bed, curiously unsleepy for someone who claimed to be able to sleep anywhere. I texted Jonathan before I went

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to bed (nothing momentous: Arrived at the Manse. It's rather yellow. Knackered and going to bed, speak tomorrow. Stay safe xx), but he hasn't replied. There's nothing to be read into that, he'll be madly busy with the story. Not that it's a real story to me yet; it hasn't taken shape in my mind. Jonathan cautions all newsroom newbies to let the facts speak for themselves, but they don't, they never do. Facts need to be shepherded and woven into a tapestry of human reactions and interactions, and then they don't speak—they sing.

I check the time on my phone: 1:35 A.M. Abruptly I fling back the covers. There's no use denying it: I can't sleep. It's too strange, being here, waiting for memories to strike at any moment. All day long I've been simultaneously avoiding thinking about the past and straining to find something familiar; no wonder I'm too overtired to drift off. Even while trying to sleep, part of my mind has been mulling over whether this could have been my bedroom before. I grab my dressing gown and pull it on as I leave the room. Carrie has left the door to the master bedroom open, but I know she's in bed—I can just make out her rhythmic breathing. I stand in the hallway and listen to those peaceful breaths with a feeling of relief: that she's comfortable enough to sleep, that with her asleep, I don't feel her hovering around the edge of my consciousness. My eyes are adjusting to the dark and I realize she's left the curtains open as well as the door. There's enough moonlight that I have no need of the hallway light, even if I could remember where the switch is. The stairs are lit by the same moonlight, streaming in through the fanlight above the front door. In this silvery half-light, the house is different again, neither bright and breezy nor uneasily dark, but something . . . other. Something patient, comfortable in its own skin, authentic. I can sense that the well-worn wood of the stairs beneath my bare feet could tell many a tale, some of them presumably relevant to me. When I get to the ground floor, I don't grope for the light switch—I like this version; I don't want to chase it away with the glare of artificial light. Instead I wander slowly through the ground floor, trailing my fingers along the walls where the moonlight is painting them gray.

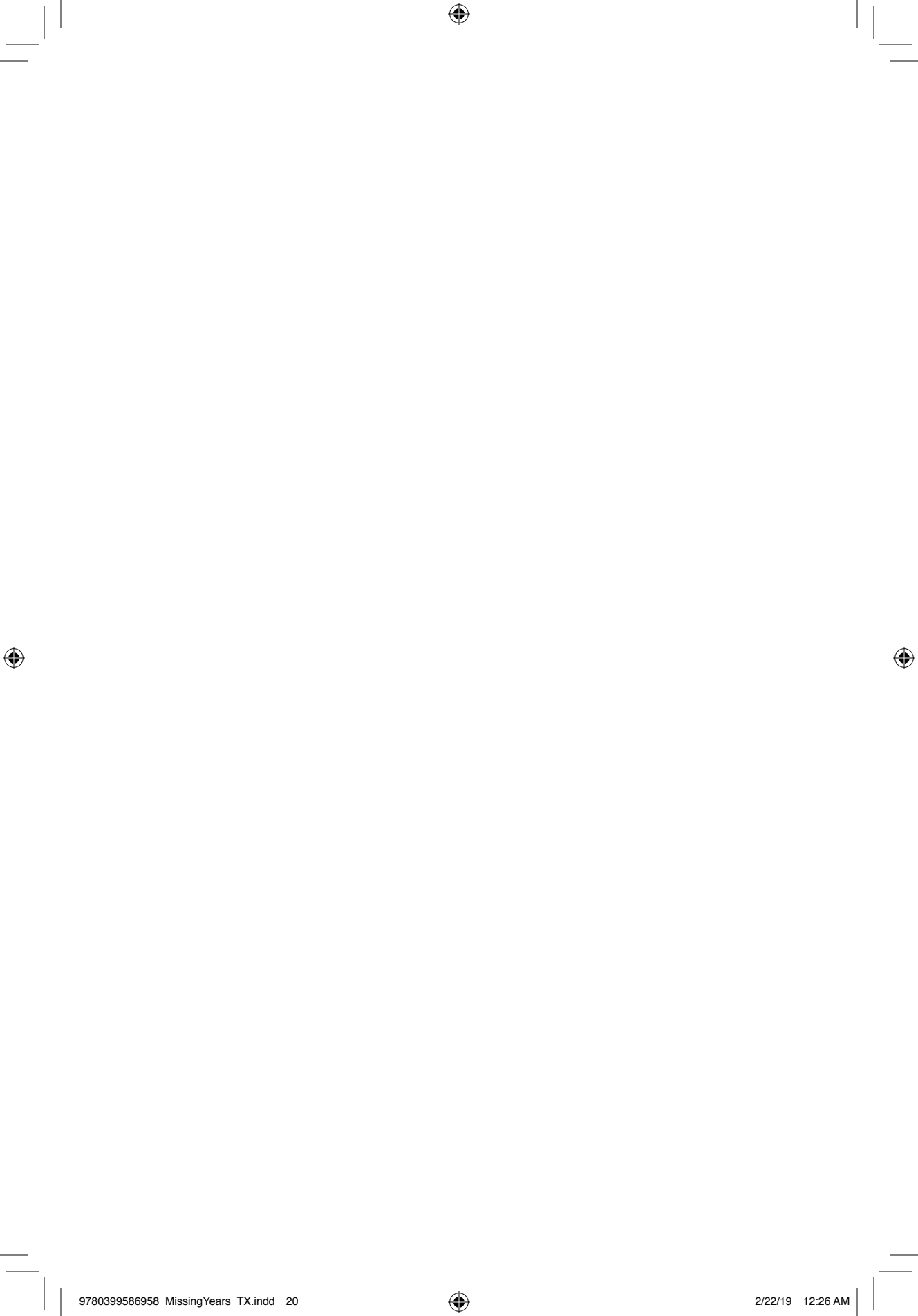
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The linoleum floor of the kitchen is cold beneath my feet; I should have brought my slippers. I try two cupboards before I find the glasses. As I fill one from the kitchen tap, I look out the window, to the back garden. There's a wood that finishes at the low, crumbling drystone wall at the end of the lawn, some twenty meters away. I know from the boundary map the lawyer showed me that the wood is mine, and so, too, is the fishing lake that lies beyond it, but right now there's very little to be seen except extreme blackness where the moonlight can't penetrate—a true darkness that nothing can break through. I wonder what it would be like to walk through that wood right now. Oddly I don't think it would be terrifying. I expect it can see me now, the wood. I can almost feel its eyes upon me, like a prickle on my skin—not unpleasant, just a constant pressure. Not even a pressure, an awareness. I expect the wood saw my father, too, many years ago, perhaps filling up a glass from the kitchen tap just as I have done, or raiding the fridge for a late-night snack. I wonder if the wood knows what happened to him.

But now the cold of the floor is chilling more than just my feet, and my warm bed has a certain appeal. The kitchen table is strewn with miscellaneous items from the shopping that haven't yet found a home. I grab a roll of toilet paper, as there was no spare in my bathroom, and take that and the glass with me, focusing on not spilling the water as I slowly climb the stairs, still relying only upon the moonlight, and relieved to feel the warmth of the wood under my feet once more. When I get to the top of the stairs, I turn for my bedroom, but instantly I know there is something wrong. I couldn't say what, but I can feel it before I can see it . . .

There's a man in the hallway.

MY FATHER IS LIVING IN COLOMBIA. OR VENEZUELA. (REALLY,
anywhere exotic without an extradition treaty where a dollar
goes a long way.) He's lithely strong and has grown a beard
which is more gray than dark now. He likes to lean on the
balustrade of his veranda which overlooks the city as darkness
falls. Sometimes there's a woman with him, but never the same
one for long. He leans on the balustrade, a cerveza in one hand,
and looks at the stars, and sometimes he wonders if his daugh-
ter is looking at the same sky.



TWO

For a brief moment of lunacy, a hope flares in me (*Can he really be here? Has he been here all along, all these years?*), but common sense douses that flame almost instantly. The adrenaline is already coursing through every inch of me; my skin is crackling with it. Fight or flight? I wouldn't hesitate to flee except this man is only paces from Carrie's doorway. I can't see clearly in the dim light—now I'm cursing the ridiculous flights of fancy that led me to leave the light off—but I have the impression of a young man, perhaps six feet; certainly several inches taller than myself. He's facing the door of the master bedroom—Carrie's bedroom—and even as my brain gallops through possible weapons (Knife from the kitchen? An umbrella from the hallway? Or even just throwing the glass I'm holding at him?), I've run out of time: he's turning his head toward me.

As we stare at each other, I have the impression of shocked gleaming eyes, and then I drop the toilet roll and reach out a hand, with astonishing certainty given my earlier ignorance, to find the light switch at the top of the stairs. He blinks and hunches away instinctively from the sudden flood of yellow light. I'm cataloging him for a police report: younger than I, late twenties perhaps, dark haired, dark

eyed, clean-shaven with a completely nonplussed expression. He doesn't look like a burglar, and there's no crazed drug-addict look about him, either. He's not even dressed for a bit of light breaking and entering: his pale gray wool jacket is far too visible to be a sensible choice, and the jeans he's wearing look designer. But there's no question he's much bigger than I am—probably much faster, too—and he's horribly close to the room where Carrie is sleeping, peacefully oblivious. *Carrie. Please don't wake up, Carrie. Stay safe.*

"You're trespassing." I mean to say it mildly, as I don't want to antagonize him until I know what I'm dealing with, but my heart is thumping in my ears and I misjudge the tone; my words are sharply accusatory.

"Um. Christ. Yeah." He clears his throat and straightens up, running a hand over his face. "Look, I'm not a burglar or anything . . . Shit, this is awkward."

"I'll say." I register his accent: Scottish, from these parts I would guess. "What are you doing in my house? How did you get in?"

"Your house?" He blinks again.

"Yes, my house. You are in my house." Is he deranged? Does he not know where he is?

"As in . . . You're Martin Calder's daughter?"

"The very same."

"Christ." He looks stunned. Then he pulls himself together. "Jamie McCue." He takes a step toward me and sticks his hand out as if at a cocktail party. I'm not quite sure what's going on here, but I'm fairly certain burglars don't normally introduce themselves . . . unless of course that's what he wants me to think . . . "Ah," he says after a moment, dropping his hand. "Well. Aye, fair enough."

"Downstairs, please." I adopt the tone I reserve for errant interns in the newsroom. "Into the kitchen, where you can explain to me why I shouldn't call the police this very moment."

He nods resignedly, and I move away from the stairs, keeping my distance from him and keeping him in sight at all times. Once he's on

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the stairs, I dash into my bedroom and ditch the glass in favor of my phone, keying in 999 in readiness—though I don't press dial just yet—and then I follow him down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, I grab an umbrella, keeping it half hidden against my side. Every step away from Carrie's bedroom makes me lighter, more able to think clearly. I don't think he has any idea there's another person in the house.

He switches on the light as he enters the kitchen, and instantly the silver-gray oasis I enjoyed only minutes earlier is replaced by the relentless cheer of daffodil walls and bright red checked plastic table cover.

"Sit down." I don't say it as an invitation, but a command. I want him boxed in by the table, at a disadvantage if it comes to moving quickly. He pulls out a chair then sits, looking up at me searchingly as I remain standing near the door, the width of the table between us. He has a strong face, long and lean. The skin is taut over his cheekbones. His dark hair flops carelessly onto his forehead; he pushes it back and starts to say something, but I talk over him. "You've been here before." Unlike myself, he knew exactly where the kitchen light switch was.

He sighs. "Aye." He leans forward, propping his elbows on the table, focusing on me. This is his pitch moment—his chance to win me over, to stop me calling the police—and he knows it. "Look, I cannae apologize enough. I had no idea anybody was here—"

"That's hardly an excuse. It's still breaking and entering."

"Well, the back door was unlocked"—he catches sight of my expression and hurries on—"but that's hardly the point. You're right, there's no excuse. There *is* an explanation, though, if you're willing to hear it?" He looks up at me beseechingly. "Or would you rather beat me senseless with that umbrella you're hiding? I have to admit, it's way more threatening than the toilet roll you were carrying before . . ." He quirks his eyebrows upward, inviting me to join him in his humor. He's a charming man, this non-burglar before me. On another day, in another place, I might briefly enjoy allowing myself to be beguiled, but this is not that day or place. My face remains stony. "Look," he tries

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again, dropping back to earnest mode. “The thing is . . . we just live across the field there”—he gestures vaguely—“and I was looking for my sister. Fi. Fi McCue. You havenae seen her? She’s about your height, brown hair, two years older than me.”

It’s my turn to be nonplussed. “Why on earth would your sister be here?”

“Because sometimes she comes here. Obviously not when anyone’s renting it, you ken. She’s . . . Look, ask anyone, she’s completely harmless, she’s a sweetheart, but she’s . . .” He spreads his hands. “She’s a wee bit . . . different. Not a tinnie short of a six-pack exactly but . . . a wee bit away wi’ the fairies. I couldnae find her, and I thought she might be here. I didnae realize the house was occupied.”

“She comes here?” I feel queasy at the very thought. What kind of person goes wandering through empty houses? And why?

“She has a thing about this place.” He looks around the kitchen and then back at me. “The Manse. Always has. Sometimes I find her here. Usually in the big bedroom upstairs.” I don’t know what expression crosses my face, but he starts shaking his head. “No, Christ, no, nothing like that; I think she just likes the view. Look, everyone round here will tell you, she really is harmless. Ask anybody. Everyone knows her and everyone looks out for her; you’ll nae hear a bad word about her. Really.”

“How does she get in?”

“The back door doesn’t lock properly.” His expression turns earnest. “You know, you should get that fixed.”

“You think?” I say dryly. I’m still revolted by the idea of someone wandering through the house; I have an image of a demented young girl leaping through the rooms à la Kate Bush in the “Wuthering Heights” video. But right now, what to do with Mr. Jamie McCue? Of course I have ample grounds to call the police, but it does seem somewhat unnecessary. On the other hand, what if this is part of something more sinister? I would need evidence to go to the police with. I look him over again, as if I can read a solution on his skin. He’s self-

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possessed, I'll give him that: my scrutiny isn't fazing him. In fact, he's doing a fair bit of scrutinizing himself; his dark eyes are busily taking in every detail of me. I can't help wishing I was wearing something other than a drab toweling dressing gown, however securely I may have tied the belt. In jeans, a sweater and Converse trainers I might have felt less vulnerable to the inspection.

A loud beep makes me jump.

"Mine," he says, patting a pocket on his jacket and then pulling out a mobile. He frowns and scrolls down on it quickly, then his expression clears. "It's okay, we've found her. She's back at home now," he says, looking up at me with evident relief. He starts to push his chair back. "I'll get out of your hair then."

"Not so fast."

He pauses halfway to upright, his face wary. "You're not really going to call the police, are you?"

"No." He relaxes and stands upright. "But before you go, I want a confession."

"Come again?"

"A confession. Here, I've got a Dictaphone app on this." I raise my phone. "Just state your name and admit you were in the Manse without permission on the"—I glance down at my phone to check the date—"the twenty-second of April, and you acknowledge you were in the wrong and will never again return uninvited."

There's amusement in his eyes as he shrugs. "Tell me when you're ready."

I hit the record button and hold out the phone in his general direction. "Go ahead."

He begins in a mockingly grandiose baritone. "I, Jamie McCue, being of sound body and mind, do hereby declare that on the twenty-second day of the month of April in the year 2010, I entered the property known as the Manse without permission, whilst looking for my sister, under the impression that it was unoccupied. I offer most humble apologies for the unintended intrusion and promise never to do it

again. I also promise to try harder to leave the toilet seat down, to attempt to keep my feet off the train seats and to try to curb my rants about the incompetent eejit who runs First ScotRail. Oh, and to floss more." I hit stop on the Dictaphone app, uncomfortably aware that my cheeks have flushed defensively. "Happy?" he asks, his dark eyes dancing.

"You want to be a little more respectful," I say severely, but in truth I know I've lost the upper hand now. "I could still call the police, you know."

"Well, that would be a real shame," he says, moving round the table. "We're neighbors. We ought to be getting to know each other." He looks back over his shoulder at me as he heads toward the front door. "Especially since our parents were pals, you ken."

I want to bite, really I do, but I'm determined not to give him the satisfaction. "Is that so? Well, good-bye then. I would say let's do this again, but really, let's not."

He glances at me as if he wants to say something further, but instead he turns back to the front door and opens it, peering into the blackness beyond. The frost-tinged April air has been waiting for its chance to enter; it wastes no time in enveloping me in its cold embrace. "You dinnae have a torch or something I could borrow? It looks like the clouds have come in now."

"Nope," I say cheerfully, starting to close the door on him so that he has to step out into the darkness. "Off you go. Night." I see the amusement gleaming in those dark eyes as I close the front door firmly on him. After a moment, I swing the door open again. "Oh, Jamie," I call. He turns questioningly. He's far enough away that I have to raise my voice. "Perhaps you'd be so kind as to make sure your sister knows the house is occupied."

I have the sense that he grimaces, but really it's too dark to tell. Still, his voice finds its way to me through the blackness. "Aye, for sure. Bye then."

There's a dead bolt on the front door that neither Carrie nor I had

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thought to use before we went up to bed. Now I shoot it firmly home. Then I check all the windows on the ground floor. Finally I confront the back door. Contrary to my night visitor's statement, it's not immediately obvious that there's anything wrong with the mechanism. At a loss for what to do, I shoot the dead bolt, then look around for something to jam the door for good measure, but nothing springs to mind. Reluctantly I admit defeat and head on up the stairs, though I imagine I'll be far too keyed up to sleep. I stand in the yellow light of the second-floor hallway, listening once again to Carrie's rhythmic breathing, and marveling that she has slept through this entire episode. I wonder what she will say when I tell her about it, and even as the thought passes through my mind, I realize I won't tell her. She would expect me to have woken her, and how could I explain why I didn't even think of it?

Carrie's steady breathing continues. I turn off the hall light then go directly to climb straight into my new bed in my new bedroom. If the Manse has anything more to say to me, it can wait for the morning.

I awake with the awareness that sleep has been a threadbare blanket, unable to block out reality: I've had an uneasy sense of exactly where I am all night. I'm rubbing my scratchy eyes and nursing a cup of tea at the kitchen table when Carrie wanders in wearing a fleecy dressing gown tied loosely over flannel pajama trousers and a thin-strapped camisole. Is this what she sleeps in, or is this simply what she pulls on in the morning? Yet another thing I suppose I will learn. How many pieces of the puzzle are required before the full picture emerges?

She runs a critical eye over me whilst yawning herself. "You don't look like you slept very well."

"You say the nicest things," I say wryly. "The kettle has just boiled. How did you sleep?"

"Like the dead." The phrase makes me flinch, but Carrie is busying herself with a mug and instant coffee, and doesn't notice. "It's so quiet

here. Anyway, sleeping is never a problem; it's the waking up. Coffee is the only answer." She takes her mug and sits opposite me, pushing her fringe out of her eyes. There are remnants of yesterday's smudged eyeliner around her eyes, and her features are still blurred with the traces of sleep. It's like seeing her through a Vaseline-coated lens.

"You have a rehearsal today, right?"

"Yep. What time is it?"

I glance at my watch. "Just gone eight." Two in the morning in Louisiana. I check my phone again: Jonathan hasn't texted me back, or called. There's still nothing to be read into that.

She grimaces. "I'm cutting it fine." She takes a sip of her coffee and momentarily closes her eyes, savoring the taste. There's no apparent sign of the time pressure forcing her into action. The aroma of her coffee wafts across to me, but something else has become tangled in there, something stale lurking beneath the warm scent of the roasted grounds—

"Do you smoke?" I blurt out in surprise.

"Mmm? Oh no, I could never stomach the smell." Sleep lies like a fog around her; it takes a moment for her brain to process my confused expression. "Oh, the ashtray. Not mine." She points to the kettle, and her words finally make sense to me: there is a small brown earthenware ashtray on the counter beside the kettle. I stand up to inspect its contents; it's filled to the brim with cigarette butts. Carrie is still speaking behind me. "I guess it was left over by whoever rented this place last. I found it on the windowsill in my bedroom, but on the outside."

Left over by whoever rented the Manse last. Perfectly plausible, but my mind has skittered back to my would-be-charming night visitor: *She has a thing about this place. Sometimes I find her here. Usually in the big bedroom upstairs.* I feel a sudden rush of adrenaline: before I even have time to process the intention, I've grabbed the ashtray and dropped it in the bin. I sit back down opposite Carrie, my heart still thumping.

"Well, I guess you *really* don't like smokers." She has pulled the sleeves of her dressing gown over her hands, and she covers her mouth

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with both hands as she yawns. It looks like she's stifling a scream. "Is it still called a windowsill if it's on the outside?" she muses.

"What?"

She shakes her head. "Never mind. Just my brain waking up."

We sit in silence for a moment. Carrie is savoring her coffee, and I am trying not to see a wild-eyed young girl sitting cross-legged on Carrie's bed, smoke curling up from a lit cigarette. Though perhaps Carrie was right: perhaps it really was left over by the previous renters. But who smokes leaning out of an upstairs window? A rebellious teen perhaps? Though not the teenager that I was—like Carrie, I could never stomach the smell, so my rebellions came in other forms—but surely a teen would be camped in one of the smaller bedrooms? Then perhaps a parent of a young child, who is trying to quit. My own mother smoked, though not with Carrie; she quit when she was pregnant with her. She knew more about the ill effects then, I suppose. Or she cared more. I look across at Carrie again with so little of our mother in her features, and suddenly I'm wondering how much common ground we really share: three quarters of our DNA is different, and all of our upbringing. Surely we are far more different than alike—can we really find a way to connect after all these years? I cast around for something to say, something to distract me from the unease that has anchored itself around my breastbone, and catch sight of the kitchen clock: quarter past eight. If Carrie was cutting it fine before, she must surely be late now. "I can drive you to the station if you like."

"Oh, would you?" She brightens. "That would be great. I should get in the shower." She pushes back her chair, taking the coffee mug with her, then stops in the doorway, frowning. "Your meeting with the lawyer isn't until this afternoon, right? What are you going to do with your morning?"

What I want to do is get some good quality sleep, but I don't say that. "It's not till quarter past three. I thought I might go up to the hotel this morning. Take a look at the health club the estate agent told us about." She doesn't need to know that priority number one is actu-

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ally to call a locksmith. Preferably one that can do the job this very day.

“If they have spinning classes, maybe I’ll join too.”

I am momentarily thrown. “You like spinning?” I would have picked her for a yoga enthusiast: all contorted positions and inner peace.

“Nope, not really. But yoga always seems like a cop-out, and I hate running with a passion, so . . .”

“Oh. Well, I’ll check.” My eyes follow her as she leaves the kitchen, the dressing gown flapping around her. There must be any number of times that I have watched her leave a room, probably thousands in the seven years our lives crossed over, but none of those half-remembered occasions have any relevance now. It’s like studying for an exam and then finding that the curriculum has entirely changed. I’m starting from scratch.