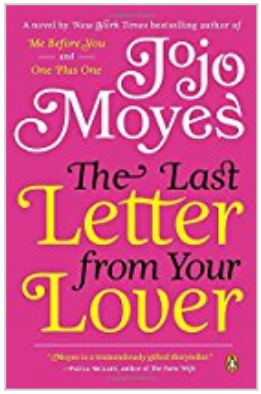

The Last Letter from Your Lover: A Novel

By Jojo Moyes

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Look out for Jojo's new book, *Paris for One and Other Stories*, available now.

A heartbreaking, stay-up-all-night novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Me Before You*, *After You*, and *One Plus One.*

A Brief Encounter for our time, *The Last Letter from Your Lover* is a sophisticated, spellbinding double love story that spans decades and thrillingly evokes a bygone era. In 1960, Jennifer Stirling wakes in the hospital and remembers nothing—not the car accident that put her there, not her wealthy husband, not even her own name. Searching for clues, she finds an impassioned letter, signed simply "B," from a man for whom she seemed willing to risk everything. In 2003, journalist Ellie Haworth stumbles upon the letter and becomes obsessed with learning the unknown lovers' fate—hoping it will inspire her own happy ending. Remarkably moving, this is a novel for romantics of every age.

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Editorial Review

Review
“With its realistically complicated characters and emotionally complex plot, *The Last Letter from Your Lover* is hopelessly and hopefully romantic.”
—***Chicago Tribune***

“Crafting a love story that feels not just compelling but true is a very difficult thing indeed—and yet, with *The Last Letter from Your Lover*, Jojo Moyes has done it twice. I found myself utterly transfixed by both sets of lovers in this marvelous novel. Moyes is a tremendously gifted storyteller, and I'm all admiration.”
—**Paula McLain**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Paris Wife*

“A fabulous, emotional, and evocative book—perfect for anyone who loves *Mad Men*.”
—**Sophie Kinsella**, bestselling author of *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

“This story of passion and missed chances—with a twist that provides fresh perspective 40 years later—is entrancing.”
—***Parade*** (Top Pick)

“A prize-winning, cross-generational love story of missed connections and delayed gratification [that] hits a seam of pure romantic gold. . . . A cliffhanger-strewn tale of heartache in two strikingly different eras [and] a tour de force.”
—***Kirkus Reviews*** (starred review)

“Elegiac . . . emotionally ablaze . . . Moyes’s genuinely captivating tale resonates deeply in today’s fast-paced, less gracious world.”
—***Publishers Weekly***

“What’s astonishing about this ingeniously crafted dual love story . . . is how swiftly and effortlessly Jojo Moyes pulls you in. . . . Like an afternoon spent watching a beloved old movie, made wonderfully new.”
—***Barnes & Noble Review***

“Toggling between two eras, Moyes cleverly juxtaposes the conventions of old-fashioned and thoroughly modern romance.”
—***Booklist***

“A modern yet ageless story of the human heart and its tenacity to hold on to a love that will not die or be replaced. Beautifully written . . . Jojo Moyes’s novel gives the satisfaction of a fine wine and meal before the fireplace on a winter’s night.”
—**Leila Meacham**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Roses*

“Exciting, moving, intriguing; the atmosphere’s perfect, the plotting is masterly, the characters are brilliant.”
—**Penny Vincenzi**, author of *The Best of Times*

“An engrossing double love story . . . a captivating tale of missed connections. *The Last Letter from Your Lover* is itself a love letter to the all-but-disappearing handwritten message.”

—***BookPage***

About the Author
Jojo Moyes is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *After You, Me Before You, One Plus One, The Girl You Left Behind, The Last Letter from Your Lover, Silver Bay,* and *The Ship of Brides.* She lives with her husband and three children in Essex, England.

Part 1

Chapter 1

OCTOBER 1960

"She's waking up."

There was a swishing sound, a chair was dragged, then the brisk click of curtain rings meeting. Two voices murmuring.

"I'll fetch Dr. Hargreaves."

A brief silence followed, during which she slowly became aware of a different layer of sound—voices, muffled by distance, a car passing: it seemed, oddly, as if it were some way below her. She lay absorbing it, letting it crystallize, letting her mind play catch-up, as she recognized each for what it was.

It was at this point that she became aware of the pain. It forced its way upward in exquisite stages: first her arm, a sharp, burning sensation from elbow to shoulder, then her head: dull, relentless. The rest of her body ached, as it had done when she . . .

When she . . . ?

"He'll be along in two ticks. He says to close the blinds."

Her mouth was so dry. She closed her lips and swallowed painfully. She wanted to ask for some water, but the words wouldn't come. She opened her eyes a little. Two indistinct shapes moved around her. Every time she thought she had worked out what they were, they moved again. Blue. They were blue.

"You know who's just come in downstairs, don't you?"

One of the voices dropped. "That singer. The one who looks like Paul Newman."

"I thought I heard something on the wireless about it. Lend me your thermometer, will you, Vi, mine's acting up again."

"I'm going to try and have a peek at him at lunchtime. Matron's had newspapermen outside all morning. I'll wager she's at her wits' end."

She couldn't understand what they were saying. The pain in her head had become a thumping, rushing sound, building in volume and intensity until all she could do was close her eyes again and wait for it, or her, to go away. Then the white came in, like a tide, to envelop her. With some gratitude she let out a silent

breath and allowed herself to sink back into its embrace.

“Are you awake, dear? You have a visitor.”

There was a flickering reflection above her, a phantasm that moved briskly, first one way and then another. She had a sudden recollection of her first wristwatch, the way she had reflected sunlight through its glass casing onto the ceiling of the playroom, sending it backward and forward, making her little dog bark.

The blue was there again. She saw it move, accompanied by the swishing. And then there was a hand on her wrist, a brief spark of pain so that she yelped.

“A little more carefully with that side, Nurse,” the voice chided. “She felt that.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Dr. Hargreaves.”

“The arm will require further surgery. We’ve pinned it in several places, but it’s not there yet.”

A dark shape hovered near her feet. She willed it to solidify, but, like the blue shapes, it refused to do so, and she let her eyes close.

“You can sit with her, if you like. Talk to her. She’ll be able to hear you.”

“How are her . . . other injuries?”

“There’ll be some scarring, I’m afraid. Especially on that arm. And she took quite a blow to the head, so it may be a while before she’s herself again. But given the severity of the accident, I think we can say she’s had a rather lucky escape.”

There was a brief silence.

“Yes.”

Someone had placed a bowl of fruit beside her. She had opened her eyes again, her gaze settling on it, letting the shape, the color, solidify until she grasped, with a stab of satisfaction, that she could identify what was there. *Grapes,* she said. And again, rolling the silent word around the inside of her head: *grapes*. It felt important, as if it were anchoring her in this new reality.

And then, as quickly as they had come, they were gone, obliterated by the dark blue mass that had settled beside her. As it moved closer, she could just make out the faint scent of tobacco. The voice, when it came, was tentative, perhaps a little embarrassed, even. “Jennifer? Jennifer? Can you hear me?” The words were so loud; strangely intrusive.

“Jenny, dear, it’s me.”

She wondered if they would let her see the grapes again. It seemed necessary that she did; blooming, purple, solid. Familiar.

“Are you sure she can hear me?”

“Quite sure, but she may find communicating rather exhausting to begin with.”

There was some murmuring that she couldn’t make out. Or perhaps she just stopped trying.

Nothing seemed clear. “Can . . . you . . . ,” she whispered.

“But her mind wasn’t damaged? In the crash? You know that there will be no . . . lasting ... ?”

“As I said, she took a good bump to the head, but there were no medical signs for alarm.” The sound of shuffled papers. “No fracture. No swelling to the brain. But these things are always a little unpredictable, and patients are affected quite differently. So, you’ll just need to be a little—”

“Please . . .” Her voice was a murmur, barely audible.

“Dr. Hargreaves! I do believe she’s trying to speak.”

“. . . want to see . . .”

A face swam down to her. “Yes?”

“. . . want to see . . .” *The grapes,* she was begging. *I just want to see those grapes again.*

“She wants to see her husband!” The nurse sprang upward as she announced this triumphantly. “I think she wants to see her husband.”

There was a pause, then someone stooped toward her. “I’m here, dear. Everything is . . . everything’s fine.”

The body retreated, and she heard the pat of a hand on a back. “There, you see? She’s getting back to herself already. All in good time, eh?” A man’s voice again. “Nurse? Go and ask Sister to organize some food for tonight. Nothing too substantial. Something light and easy to swallow. . . . Perhaps you could fetch us a cup of tea while you’re there.” She heard footsteps, low voices, as they continued to talk beside her. Her last thought as the light closed in again was, Husband*?*

Later, when they told her how long she had been in the hospital, she could barely believe it. Time had become fragmented, unmanageable, arriving and departing in chaotic clumps of hours. It was Tuesday breakfast. Now it was Wednesday lunchtime. She had apparently slept for eighteen hours—this was said with some disapproval, as if there were an implied rudeness in being absent for so long. And then it was Friday. Again.

Sometimes when she woke it was dark, and she would push her head up a little against the starched white pillow and watch the soothing movements of the ward at night; the soft-shoe shuffle of the nurses moving up and down the corridors, the occasional murmur of conversation between nurse and patient. She could watch television in the evenings if she liked, the nurses told her. Her husband was paying for private care—she could have almost anything she liked. She always said, No, thank you: she was confused enough by the unsettling torrent of information without the endless chatter of the box in the corner.

As the periods of wakefulness stretched and grew in number, she became familiar with the faces of the other women on the little ward. The older woman in the room to her right, whose jet-black hair was pinned immaculately in a rigid, sprayed sculpture upon her head, her features fixed in an expression of mild, surprised disappointment. She had apparently been in a moving picture when she was young, and would deign to tell any new nurse about it. She had a commanding voice, and few visitors. There was the plump young woman in the room opposite, who cried quietly in the early hours of the morning. A brisk, older woman—a nanny perhaps?—brought young children in to see her for an hour every evening. The two boys would climb onto the bed, clutching at her, until the nanny told them to get down for fear they would “do your mother an injury.”

The nurses told her the other women's names, and occasionally their own, but she couldn't remember them. They were disappointed in her, she suspected.

Your Husband, as everyone referred to him, came most evenings. He wore a well-cut suit, dark blue or gray serge, gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, and usually sat at the foot of her bed. He would make small talk solicitously, asking how she was finding the food, whether she would like him to have anything else sent along. Occasionally he would simply read a newspaper.

He was a handsome man, perhaps ten years older than she was, with a high, noble forehead and serious, hooded eyes. She knew, at some deep level, that he must be who he said he was, that she was married to him, but it was perplexing to feel nothing when everyone so obviously expected a different reaction. Sometimes she would stare at him when he wasn't looking, waiting for some jolt of familiarity to kick in. Sometimes, when she woke, she would find him sitting there, newspaper lowered, gazing at her as if he felt something similar.

Dr. Hargreaves, the attending physician, came daily, checking her charts, asking if she could tell him the day, the time, her name. She always got those right now. She even managed to tell him the prime minister was Mr. Macmillan and her age, twenty-seven. But she struggled with newspaper headlines, with events that had taken place before she arrived here. "It will come," he would say, patting her hand. "Don't try to force it, there's a good girl."

And then there was her mother, who brought little gifts—soap, nice shampoo, magazines—as if they would nudge her into a semblance of who she apparently used to be. "We've all been so worried, Jenny darling," she said, laying a cool hand on her head. It felt nice. Not familiar, but nice. Occasionally her mother would begin to say something, then mutter, "I mustn't tire you out with questions. Everything will come back. That's what the doctors say. So you mustn't worry."

She wasn't worried, Jenny wanted to tell her. It was quite peaceful in her little bubble. She just felt a vague sadness that she couldn't be the person everyone evidently expected her to be. It was at this point, when the thoughts got too confusing, that she would invariably fall asleep again.

They finally told her she was going home on a morning so crisp that the trails of smoke broke into the blue sky above the capital like a spindly forest. By then she could walk around the ward occasionally, swapping magazines with the other patients, who would be chatting to the nurses, sometimes listening to the wireless, if they felt so inclined. She had had a second operation on her arm and it was healing well, they told her, although the long red scar where the plate had been inserted made her wince, and she tried to keep it hidden under a long sleeve. Her eyes had been tested, her hearing checked; her skin had healed after the myriad scratches caused by fragments of glass. The bruises had faded, and her broken rib and collarbone had knitted well enough for her to lie in a variety of positions without pain.

To all intents and purposes, she looked, they claimed, like "her old self," as if saying it enough times might make her remember who that was. Her mother, meanwhile, spent hours rummaging through piles of black-and-white photographs so that she could reflect Jennifer's life back at her.

She learned that she had been married for four years. There were no children—from her mother's lowered voice, she guessed this was a source of some disappointment to everyone. She lived in a very smart house in a very good part of London, with a housekeeper and a driver, and plenty of young ladies would apparently give their eyeteeth to have half of what she had. Her husband was something big in mining and was often away, although his devotion was such that he had put off several very important trips since the accident. From the deference with which the medical staff spoke to him, she guessed he was indeed quite important and, by extension, that she might expect a degree of respect, too, even if it felt nonsensical to her.

Nobody had said much about how she had got there, although she had once sneaked a look at the doctor's notes and knew that she had been in a car accident. On the one occasion she had pressed her mother about what had happened, she had gone quite pink and, placing her plump little hand on Jennifer's, had urged her "not to dwell on it, dear. It's all been . . . terribly upsetting." Her eyes had filled with tears, and not wanting to upset her, Jennifer had moved on.

A chatty girl with a bright orange helmet of hair came from another part of the hospital to trim and set Jennifer's hair. This, the young woman told her, would make her feel a lot better. Jennifer had lost a little hair at the back of her head—it had been shaved off for a wound to be stitched—and the girl announced that she was a wonder at hiding such injuries.

A little more than an hour later she held up a mirror with a flourish. Jennifer stared at the girl who stared back at her. Quite pretty, she thought, with a kind of distant satisfaction. Bruised, a little pale, but an agreeable face. My face, she corrected herself.

"Do you have your cosmetics on hand?" the hairdresser said. "I could do your face for you, if your arm's still sore. Bit of lipstick will brighten any face, madam. That and some Pan-Cake."

Jennifer kept staring at the mirror. "Do you think I should?"

"Oh, yes. A pretty girl like you. I can make it very subtle . . . but it'll put a glow into your cheeks. Hold on, I'll pop downstairs and get my kit. I've got some lovely colors from Paris, and a Charles of the Ritz lipstick that'll be perfect on you."

"Well, don't you look fetching? It's good to see a lady with her makeup on. Shows us that you're a little more on top of things," Dr. Hargreaves said on his rounds, some time later. "Looking forward to going home, are we?"

"Yes, thank you," she said politely. She had no idea how to convey to him that she didn't know what that home was.

He studied her face for a moment, perhaps gauging her uncertainty. Then he sat on the side of her bed and laid a hand on her shoulder. "I understand it must all seem a little disconcerting, that you might not feel quite yourself yet, but don't be too concerned if lots of things are unclear". It's quite common to get amnesia after a head injury.

"You have a very supportive family, and I'm sure once you're surrounded by familiar things, your old routines, friends, shopping trips, and the like, you'll find that it's all popping back into place."

She nodded obediently. She had worked out pretty quickly that everyone seemed happier if she did so.

"Now, I'd like you to come back in a week so that I can check the progress of that arm. You'll need some physiotherapy to recover the full use of it. But the main thing is simply for you to rest and not worry too much about anything. Do you understand?"

He was already preparing to leave. What else could she say?

Her husband picked her up shortly before teatime. The nurses had lined up in the downstairs reception area to say good-bye to her, bright as pins in their starched pinafores. She still felt curiously weak and unsteady on her feet, and was grateful for the arm that he held out to her.

"Thank you for the care you've shown my wife. Send the bill to my office, if you would," he said to the

Sister.

“Our pleasure,” she said, shaking his hand and beaming at Jennifer. “It’s lovely seeing her up and about again. You look wonderful, Mrs. Stirling.”

“I feel . . . much better. Thank you.” She was wearing a long cashmere coat and a matching pillbox hat. He had arranged for three outfits to be sent over for her. She had chosen the most muted; she didn’t want to draw attention to herself.

They glanced up as Dr. Hargreaves put his head out of an office. “My secretary says there are some newspapermen outside. You might wish to leave by the back entrance if you want to avoid any fuss.”

“That would be preferable. Would you mind sending my driver round?”

After weeks in the warmth of the ward the air was shockingly cold. She struggled to keep up with him, her breath coming in short bursts, and then she was in the back of a large black car, engulfed by the huge leather seats, and the doors closed with an expensive clunk. The car moved off into the London traffic with a low purr.

She peered out of the window, watching the newspapermen, just visible on the front steps, and muffled photographers comparing lenses. Beyond, the central London streets were thick with people hurrying past, their collars turned up against the wind, men with trilbies pulled low over their brows.

“Who was the singer?” she said, turning to face him.

He was muttering something to the driver. “Who?”

“A singer. Apparently he’d been in some kind of accident.”

“I have no idea who you are talking about.”

“They were all talking about him. The nurses, at the hospital.”

“Oh. Yes. I think I read something.” He appeared to have lost interest. “I’ll be dropping Mrs. Stirling back at the house, and once she’s settled I’ll be going on to the office,” he was saying to the driver.

“What happened to him?” she said.

“Who?”

“The singer.”

Her husband looked at her, as if he was weighing something up. “He died,” he said. Then he turned back to his driver.

She walked slowly up the steps to the white stucco house and the door opened, as if by magic, as she reached the top. The driver placed her valise carefully in the hallway and retreated. Her husband, behind her, nodded to a woman who was standing in the hallway, apparently to greet them. She was in late middle age; her dark hair was pulled back into a tight chignon, and she was dressed in a navy two-piece. “Welcome home, madam,” she said, reaching out a hand. Her smile was genuine, and she spoke in heavily accented English. “We are so very glad to have you well again.”

“Thank you,” she said. She wanted to use the woman’s name, but felt uncomfortable asking it.

The woman waited to take their coats, and disappeared along the hall with them.

“Are you feeling tired?” He dipped his head to study her face.

“No. No, I’m fine.” She gazed around her at the house, wishing she could disguise her dismay that she might as well have never seen it before.

“I must go back to the office now. Will you be all right with Mrs. Cordoza?”

Cordoza. It wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. She felt a little surge of gratitude. *Mrs. Cordoza*. “I’ll be quite all right, thank you. Please don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll be back at seven . . . if you’re sure you’re fine . . .” He was clearly keen to leave. He stooped, kissed her cheek, and, after a brief hesitation, was gone.

She stood in the hallway, hearing his footsteps fade down the steps outside, the soft hum of the engine as his great car pulled away. The house seemed suddenly cavernous.

She touched the silk-lined wallpaper, took in the polished parquet flooring, the vertiginously high ceilings. She removed her gloves, with precise, deliberate motions. Then she leaned forward for a closer look at the photographs on the hall table. The largest was a wedding picture, framed in ornate, highly polished silver. And there she was, wearing a fitted white dress, her face half masked by a white lace veil, her husband smiling broadly at her side. I really did marry him, she thought. And then: I look so happy.

She jumped. Mrs. Cordoza had come up behind her and was standing there, her hands clasped in front of her. “I was wondering if you would like me to bring you some tea. I thought you might like to take it in the drawing room. I’ve laid a fire in there for you.”

“That would be . . .” Jennifer peered down the hallway at the various doors. Then she looked back at the photograph. A moment passed before she spoke again. “Mrs. Cordoza . . . would you mind letting me take your arm? Just till I sit down. I’m feeling a little unsteady on my feet.”

Afterward she wasn’t sure why she didn’t want the woman to know quite how little she remembered about the layout of her own house. It just seemed to her that if she could pretend, and everyone else believed it, what was an act might end up being true.

The housekeeper had prepared supper: a casserole, with potatoes and fine French beans. She had left it in the bottom oven, she told Jennifer. Jennifer had had to wait for her husband to return before she could put anything on the table: her right arm was still weak, and she was afraid of dropping the heavy cast-iron pot.

She had spent the hour when she was alone walking around the vast house, familiarizing herself with it, opening drawers and studying photographs. My house, she told herself over and over. My things. My husband. Once or twice she let her mind go blank and her feet carry her to where she thought a bathroom or study might be, and was gratified to discover that some part of her still knew this place. She gazed at the books in the drawing room, noting, with a kind of mild satisfaction, that while so much was strange she could mentally recite the plots of many.

She lingered longest in her bedroom. Mrs. Cordoza had unpacked her suitcase and put everything away. Two built-in cupboards opened to reveal great quantities of immaculately stored clothes. Everything fitted her perfectly, even the most well-worn shoes. Her hairbrush, perfumes, and powders were lined up on a dressing

table. The scents met her skin with a pleasant familiarity. The colors of the cosmetics suited her: Coty, Chanel, Elizabeth Arden, Dorothy Gray—her mirror was surrounded by a small battalion of expensive creams and unguents.

She pulled open a drawer, held up layers of chiffon, brassieres, and other foundation garments made of silk and lace. I am a woman to whom appearances matter, she observed. She sat and stared at herself in the three-sided mirror, then began to brush her hair with long, steady strokes. *This is what I do*, she said to herself, several times.

In the few moments when she felt overwhelmed by strangeness, she busied herself with small tasks: rearranging the towels in the downstairs cloakroom, putting out plates and glasses.

He arrived back shortly before seven. She was waiting for him in the hall, her makeup fresh and a light spray of scent over her neck and shoulders. She could see it pleased him, this semblance of normality. She took his coat, hung it in the cupboard, and asked if he would like a drink.

"That would be lovely. Thank you," he said.

She hesitated, one hand poised on a decanter.

Turning, he saw her indecision. "Yes, that's it, darling. Whiskey. Two fingers, with ice. Thank you."

At supper, he sat on her right at the large, polished mahogany table, a great expanse of which was empty and unadorned. She ladled the steaming food onto plates, and he placed them at each setting. *This is my life,* she found herself thinking, as she watched his hands move. *This is what we do in the evenings*.

" I thought we might have the Moncrieffs to dinner on Friday. Might you be up to it?"

She took a little bite from her fork. "I think so."

"Good." He nodded. "Our friends have been asking after you. They would like to see that you're . . . back to your old self."

She raised a smile. "That will be . . . nice."

"I thought we probably wouldn't do too much for a week or two. Just till you're up to it."

"Yes."

"This is very good. Did you make it?"

"No. It was Mrs. Cordoza."

"Ah."

They ate in silence. She drank water—Dr. Hargreaves had advised against anything stronger—but she envied her husband the glass in front of him. She would have liked to blur the disconcerting strangeness, to take the edge off it.

"And how are things at . . . your office?"

His head was down. "All fine. I'll have to visit the mines in the next couple of weeks, but I'll want to be sure

that you can manage before I go. You'll have Mrs. Cordoza to help, of course."

She felt faint relief at the thought of being alone. "I'm sure I'll be all right."

"And afterward I thought we might go to the Riviera for a couple of weeks. I have some business there, and the sun might do you good. Dr. Hargreaves said it might help your . . . the scarring . . ." His voice faded.

"The Riviera," she echoed. A sudden vision of a moonlit seafront. Laughter. The clinking of glasses. She closed her eyes, willing the fleeting image to become clear.

"I thought we might drive down, this time, just the two of us."

It was gone. She could hear her pulse in her ears. *Stay calm,* she told herself. *It will all come. Dr. Hargreaves said it would.*

"You always seem happy there. Perhaps a little happier there than in London." He glanced up at her and then away.

There it was again, the feeling that she was being tested. She forced herself to chew and swallow. "Whatever you think best," she said quietly.

The room fell silent but for the slow scraping of his cutlery on his plate, an oppressive sound. Her food suddenly appeared insurmountable. "Actually, I'm more tired than I thought. Would you mind terribly if I went upstairs?"

He stood as she got to her feet. "I should have told Mrs. Cordoza a kitchen supper would suffice. Would you like me to help you up?"

"Please, don't fuss." She waved away the offer of his arm. "I'm just a little tired. I'm sure I'll be much better in the morning."

At a quarter to ten she heard him enter the room. She had lain in the bed, acutely aware of the sheets around her, the moonlight that sliced through the long curtains, the distant sounds of traffic in the square, of taxis slowing to disgorge their occupants, a polite greeting from someone walking a dog. She had kept very still, waiting for something to click into place, for the ease with which she had fitted back into her physical environment to seep into her mind.

And then the door had opened.

He did not turn on the light. She heard the soft clash of wooden hangers as he hung up his jacket, the soft vacuum*thuck* of his shoes being pulled from his feet. And suddenly she was rigid. Her husband—this man, this stranger—was going to climb into her bed. She had been so focused on getting through each moment that she hadn't considered it. She had half expected him to sleep in the spare room.

She bit down on her lip, her eyes shut tight, forcing her breathing to stay slow, in semblance of sleep. She heard him disappear into the bathroom, the sluice of the tap, vigorous brushing of teeth and a brief gargle. His feet padded back across the carpeted floor, and then he was sliding between the covers, causing the mattress to dip and the bedstead to creak in protest. For a minute he lay there, and she fought to maintain her even breaths. *Oh, please, not yet,* she willed him. *I hardly know you.*

"Jenny?" he said.

She felt his hand on her hip, forced herself not to flinch.

He moved it tentatively. “Jenny?”

She made herself let out a long breath, conveying the blameless oblivion of deep sleep. She felt him pause, his hand still, and then, with a sigh of his own, he lay back heavily on his pillows.

Chapter 2

Moira Parker regarded the grim set of her boss’s jawline, the determined way in which he strode through her office to his own, and thought it was probably a good thing that Mr. Arbuthnot, his two-thirty, was late. Clearly the last meeting had not gone well.

She stood up, smoothing her skirt, and took his coat, which was speckled with rain from the short walk between his car and the office. She placed his umbrella in the stand, then took a moment longer than usual to hang the coat carefully on the hook. She had worked for him long enough now to judge when he needed a little time alone.

She poured him a cup of tea—he always had a cup of tea in the afternoons, two cups of coffee in the mornings—collected up her papers with an economy born of years’ practice, then knocked on his door and walked in. “I suspect Mr. Arbuthnot has been held up in traffic. Apparently there’s a big jam on the Marylebone Road.”

He was reading the letters she had left on his desk earlier for his signature. Evidently satisfied, he took his pen from his breast pocket and signed with short, abrupt strokes. She placed his tea on his desk and folded the letters into her pile of papers. “I’ve picked up the tickets for your flight to South Africa, and arranged for you to be collected at the airport.”

“That’s the fifteenth.”

“Yes. I’ll bring them through if you’d like to check the paperwork. Here are the sales figures for last week. The latest wage totals are in this folder here. And as I wasn’t sure you would have had time for lunch after the car manufacturers’ meeting, I’ve taken the liberty of ordering you some sandwiches. I hope that’s acceptable.”

“Very kind, Moira. Thank you.”

“Would you like them now? With your tea?”

He nodded and smiled at her briefly. She did her best not to color. She knew the other secretaries mocked her for what they considered her overattentive manner with her boss, not to mention her prim clothes and slightly stiff way of doing things. But he was a man who liked things done properly, and she had always understood that. Those silly girls, with their heads always stuck in a magazine, their endless gossiping in the ladies’ cloakroom, they didn’t understand the inherent pleasure in a job well done. They didn’t understand the satisfaction of being indispensable.

She hesitated briefly, then pulled the last letter from her folder. “The second post has arrived. I thought you should probably see this. It’s another of those letters about the men at Rochdale.”

His eyebrows lowered, which killed the small smile that had illuminated his face. He read the letter twice.

“Has anyone else seen this?”

“No, sir.”

“File it with the others.” He thrust it at her. “It’s all troublemaking stuff. The unions are behind it. I won’t have any truck with them.”

She took it wordlessly. She made as if to leave, then turned back. “And may I ask . . . how is your wife? Glad to be back at home, I should say.”

“She’s fine, thank you. Much—much more her old self,” he said. “It’s been a great help for her to be at home.”

She swallowed. “I’m very pleased to hear it.”

His attention was already elsewhere—he was flicking through the sales figures she had left for him. Her smile still painted on her face, Moira Parker clasped her paperwork to her chest and marched back out to her desk.

Old friends, he had said. Nothing too challenging. Two of those friends were familiar now, having visited Jennifer in the hospital and again once she had returned home. Yvonne Moncrieff, an elongated, dark-haired woman in her early thirties, had been her friend since they had become close neighbors in Medway Square. She had a dry, sardonic manner, which stood in direct contrast to that of the other friend, Violet, whom Yvonne had known at school and who seemed to accept the other’s cutting humor and droll put-downs as her due.

Jennifer had struggled initially to catch the shared references, to gauge any significance from the names they bandied between them, but she had felt at ease in their company. She was learning to trust her gut reactions to people: memories could be lodged in places other than the mind.

“I wish I could lose my memory,” Yvonne had said, when Jennifer confessed how strange she had felt on waking up in the hospital. “I’d walk off into the sunset. Forget I ever married Francis in the first place.” She had popped over to reassure Jennifer that all was in order. It was to be a “quiet” dinner party, but as the afternoon had worn on, Jennifer had become almost paralyzed with nerves.

“I don’t know why you’re flapping, darling. Your parties are legendary.” She perched on the bed, as Jennifer wriggled in and out of a succession of dresses.

“Yes. But for what?” She tried to rearrange her bust inside a dress. She seemed to have lost a little weight in the hospital, and the front puckered unattractively.

Yvonne laughed. “Oh, relax. You don’t have to do a thing, Jenny. The marvelous Mrs. C will have done you proud. The house looks beautiful. You look stunning. Or, at least, you will if you put some damned clothes on.” She kicked off her shoes and lifted her long, elegant legs onto the bed. “I’ve never understood your enthusiasm for entertaining. Don’t get me wrong, I do love going to parties, but all that organizing.” She was examining her nails. “Parties are for going to, not for having. That’s what my mother said, and frankly, it still stands. I’ll buy myself a new dress or two, but canapés and seating plans? Ugh.”

Jennifer wrestled the neckline into shape and stared at herself in the mirror, turning to the left, then the right. She held out her arm. The scar was raised and still angrily pink. “Do you think I should wear long sleeves?”

Yvonne sat up and peered at her. “Does it hurt?”

“My whole arm aches, and the doctor gave me some pills. I just wondered whether the scar would be a bit . . .”

“Distracting?” Yvonne’s nose wrinkled. “You probably would do better in long sleeves, darling. Just until it fades a little. And it’s so cold.”

Jennifer was startled by her friend’s blunt assessment but not offended. It was the first straightforward thing anyone had said to her since she had come home.

She stepped out of the dress, went to her wardrobe, and rifled through it until she found a sheath in raw silk. She pulled it off the rail and gazed at it. It was so flashy. Since she had been at home she had wanted to hide in tweed, subtle grays and brown, yet these jeweled dresses kept leaping out at her. “Is this the kind of thing?” she said.

“What kind of thing?”

Jennifer took a deep breath. “That I used to wear? Is this how I used to look?” She held the dress against herself.

Yvonne pulled a cigarette from her bag and lit it, studying Jennifer’s face. “Are you telling me you really don’t remember anything?”

Jennifer sat on the stool in front of her dressing table. “Pretty much,” she admitted. “I know I know you. Just like I know him. I can feel it here.” She tapped her chest. “But it’s . . . there are huge gaps. I don’t remember how I felt about my life. I don’t know how I’m meant to behave with anyone. I don’t . . .” She chewed the side of her lip. “I don’t know who I am.” Unexpectedly her eyes filled with tears. She pulled open one drawer, then another, searching for a handkerchief.

Yvonne waited a moment. Then she stood up, walked over, and sat down with her on the narrow stool. “All right, darling, I’ll fill you in. You’re lovely and funny and full of joie de vivre. You have the perfect life, the rich, handsome husband who adores you, and a wardrobe any woman would die for. Your hair is always perfect. Your waist is the span of a man’s hand. You’re always the center of any social gathering, and all our husbands are secretly in love with you.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not. Francis adores you. Whenever he sees your minxy little smile, those blond tresses of yours, I can see him wondering why on earth he married this lanky, cranky old Jewess. As for Bill . . .”

“Bill?”

“Violet’s husband. Before you were married, he virtually followed you around like a lapdog. It’s a good job he’s so terrified of your husband, or he would have made off with you under his arm years ago.”

Jennifer wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief. “You’re being very kind.”

“Not at all. If you weren’t so nice, I’d have to have you bumped off. But you’re lucky. I like you.”

They sat together for a few minutes. Jennifer rubbed at a spot on the carpet with her toe. “Why don’t I have children?”

Yvonne took a long drag on her cigarette. She glanced at Jennifer and arched her eyebrows. “The last time

we spoke about it, you remarked that to have children it's usually advisable for husband and wife to be on the same continent for a while. He's away an awful lot, your husband." She smirked, exhaled a perfect smoke ring. "It's one of the other reasons I've always been horribly envious of you." As Jennifer gave a reluctant chuckle, she continued, "Oh, you'll be fine, darling. You should do what that ridiculously expensive doctor said and stop fretting. You'll probably have some eureka moment in a couple of weeks and remember everything—disgusting snoring husband, the state of the economy, the awful size of your account in Harvey Nichols. In the meantime, enjoy your innocence while it lasts."

"I suppose you're right."

"And having said that, I think you should wear the rose pink thing. You have a quartz necklace that goes fabulously with it. The emerald doesn't do you any favors. It makes your bust look like two deflated balloons."

"Oh, you are a friend!" Jennifer said, and the two began to laugh.

The door had slammed, and he had dropped his briefcase on the hall floor, the chill air of outside on his overcoat and skin. He took off his scarf, kissed Yvonne, and apologized for his lateness. "Accountants' meeting. You know how these money men go on."

"Oh, you should see them when they get together, Larry. Bores me to tears. We've been married five years, and I still couldn't tell you the difference between a debit and a credit." Yvonne checked her watch. "He should be here soon. No doubt some unmissable column of figures to wave his magic wand over."

He faced his wife. "You look very fetching, Jenny."

"Doesn't she? Your wife always scrubs up rather well."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. Right." He ran a hand across his jawline. "If you'll both excuse me, I'll go and freshen up before our other guests arrive." I don't suppose one of you ladies could pour me a whiskey? Two fingers, no ice?

"We'll have a drink waiting for you," Yvonne called.

By the time the door opened a second time, Jennifer's nerves had been dulled by a potent cocktail. *It will be fine*, she kept telling herself. Yvonne would step in with prompts if she was about to make a fool of herself. These were her friends. They wouldn't be waiting for her to trip up. They were another step to bringing her back to herself.

"Jenny. Thank you so much for asking us." Violet Fairclough gave her a hug, her plump face almost submerged in a turban. She unpinned it from her head and handed it over with her coat. She was wearing a scoop-necked silk dress, which strained like a wind-filled parachute around her ample contours. Violet's waist, as Yvonne would later remark, would require the hands of a small infantry company to span it.

"Jennifer. A picture of loveliness, as always." A tall, redheaded man stooped to kiss her.

Jennifer was astonished by the unlikeliness of this coupling. She didn't remember the man at all, and found it almost funny that he should be little Violet's husband. "Do come through," she said, tearing her eyes off him and recovering her composure. "My husband will be down in a few minutes. Let me get you a drink in the meantime."

" 'My husband,' eh? Are we terribly formal this evening?" Bill laughed.

“Well . . .” Jennifer faltered. “. . . as it’s been so long since I’ve seen you all . . .”

“Beast. You’ve got to be kind to Jenny.” Yvonne kissed him. “She’s still terribly fragile. She should be reclining upstairs consumptively while we select one man at a time to peel her a grape. But she would insist on martinis.”

“Now that’s the Jenny we know and love.” Bill’s smile of appreciation was so lingering that Jennifer glanced twice at Violet to make sure she wasn’t offended. She didn’t seem to mind: she was rummaging in her handbag. “I’ve left your number with the new nanny, Jenny,” she said, glancing up. “I hope you don’t mind. She really is the most useless woman. I fully expect her to be calling here at any minute to say she can’t get Frederick’s pajama bottoms on or some such.”

Jennifer caught Bill rolling his eyes and, with a flash of dismay, realized that the gesture was familiar to her.

There were eight around the table, her husband and Francis at either end. Yvonne, Dominic, who was quite high up in the Horse Guards, and Jennifer sat along the window side, with Violet, Bill, and Anne, Dominic’s wife, opposite. Anne was a cheerful sort, guffawing at the men’s jokes with a benign twinkle in her eye that spoke of a woman comfortable in her skin.

Jennifer found herself watching them as they ate, analyzing and examining with forensic detail the things they said to each other, seeking out the clues to their past life. Bill, she noted, rarely looked at his wife, let alone addressed her. Violet seemed oblivious to this, and Jennifer wondered whether she was unaware of his indifference or just stoic in hiding her embarrassment.

Yvonne, for all her joking complaints about Francis, watched him constantly. She delivered her jokes at his expense while directing at him a smile of challenge. This is how they are together, Jennifer thought. She won’t show him how much he means to her.

“I wish I’d put my money in refrigerators,” Francis was saying. “The newspaper said this morning that there should be a million of the things sold in Britain this year. A million! Five years ago that was . . . a hundred and seventy thousand.”

“In America it must be ten times that. I hear people exchange them every couple of years.” Violet speared a piece of fish. “And they’re huge—double the size of ours. Can you imagine?”

“Everything in America is bigger. Or so they love to tell us.”

“Including the egos, judging by the ones I’ve come up against.” Dominic’s voice lifted. “You have not met an insufferable know-all until you’ve met a Yank general.”

Anne was laughing. “Poor old Dom was a bit put out when one tried to tell him how to drive his own car.”

“ ‘Say, your quarters are pretty small. These vehicles are pretty small. Your rations are pretty small . . .’ ” Dominic mimicked. “They should have seen what it was like with rationing. Of course, they have no idea—”

“Dom thought he’d have some fun with him and borrowed my mother’s Morris Minor. Picked him up in it. You should have seen his face.”

“ ‘Standard issue over here, chum,’ I told him. ‘For visiting dignitaries we use the Vauxhall Velox. Gives you that extra three inches of leg room.’ He virtually had to fold himself in two to fit inside.”

“I was howling with laughter,” said Anne. “I don’t know how Dom didn’t end up in the most awful trouble.”

“How’s business, Larry? I hear you’re off to Africa again in a week or so.”

Jennifer watched her husband settle back in his seat.

“Good. Very good, in fact. I’ve just signed a deal with a certain motor company to manufacture brake linings.” He placed his knife and fork together on his plate.

“What exactly is it you do? I’m never quite sure what this newfangled mineral you’re using is.”

“Don’t pretend to be interested, Violet,” Bill said, from the other side of the table. “Violet’s rarely interested in anything that isn’t pink or blue or starts a sentence with ‘Mama.’ ”

“Perhaps, Bill, darling, that simply means there isn’t enough stimulation for her at home,” Yvonne parried, and the men whistled exuberantly.

Laurence Stirling had turned toward Violet. “It’s not actually a new mineral at all,” he was saying. “It’s been around since the days of the Romans. Did you study the Romans at school?”

“I certainly did. I can’t remember anything about them now, of course.” Her laugh was shrill.

Laurence’s voice dropped, and the table hushed, the better to hear him. “Well, Pliny the Elder wrote about how he had seen a piece of cloth thrown into a banqueting-hall fire and brought out again minutes later without a scrap of damage. Some people thought it was witchcraft, but he knew this was something extraordinary.” He pulled a pen from his pocket, leaned forward, and scribbled on his damask napkin. He pushed it round for her to see better. “The name chrysotile, the most common form, is derived from the Greek words *chrysos,* which means ‘gold,’ and *tilos,* ‘fiber.’ Even then they knew it had terrific value. All I do—my company, I mean—is mine it and mold it into a variety of uses.”

“You put out fires.”

“Yes.” He looked thoughtfully at his hands. “Or I make sure they don’t start in the first place.” In the brief silence that followed, an atmosphere fell over the table. He glanced at Jennifer, then away.

“So where’s the big money, old chap? Not flameproof tablecloths.”

“Car parts.” He sat back in his chair, and the room seemed to relax with him. “They say that within ten years most households in Britain will have a car. That’s an awful lot of brake linings. And we’re in talks with the railways and the airlines. But the uses of white asbestos are pretty limitless. We’ve branched out into guttering, farm buildings, sheeting, insulation. Soon it’ll be everywhere.”

“The wonder mineral indeed.”

He was at ease as he discussed his business with his friends in a way that he had not been when the two of them were alone, Jennifer thought. It must have been strange for him, too, to have her so badly injured, and even now not quite herself. She thought of Yvonne’s description of her that afternoon: gorgeous, poised, *minxy*. Was he missing that woman? Perhaps conscious that she was watching him, he turned his head and caught her eye. She smiled, and after a moment, he smiled back.

“I saw that. C’mon, Larry. You’re not allowed to moon at your wife.” Bill began to refill their glasses.

“He certainly is allowed to moon at his wife,” Francis protested, “after everything that happened to her. How are you feeling now, Jenny? You look wonderful.”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“I should think she’s doing terribly well holding a dinner party not—what?—not a week after getting out of hospital.”

“If Jenny wasn’t giving a dinner party I should think there was something terribly wrong—and not just with her but the whole damned world.” Bill took a long swig of his wine.

“Awful business. It’s lovely to see you looking like your old self.”

“We were terribly worried. I hope you got my flowers,” Anne put in.

Dominic laid his napkin on the table. “Do you remember anything about the accident itself, Jenny?”

“She’d probably prefer not to dwell on it, if you don’t mind.” Laurence stood up to fetch another bottle of wine from the sideboard.

“Of course not.” Dominic lifted a hand in apology. “Thoughtless of me.”

Jennifer began to collect the plates. “I’m fine. Really. It’s just that there isn’t much I could tell you. I don’t remember very much at all.”

“Just as well,” Dominic observed.

Yvonne was lighting a cigarette. “Well, the sooner you’re responsible for everyone’s brake linings, Larry darling, the safer we’ll all be.”

“And the richer he’ll be.” Francis laughed.

“Oh, Francis, darling, must we really bring every single conversation back to money?”

“Yes,” he and Bill answered in unison.

Jennifer heard them laughing as she picked up the pile of dirty china and headed toward the kitchen.

“Well, that went well, didn’t it?”

She was seated at her dressing table, carefully removing her earrings. She saw his reflection in the mirror as he came into the bedroom, loosening his tie. He kicked off his shoes and went into the bathroom, leaving the door open. “Yes,” she said. “I think it did.”

“The food was wonderful.”

“Oh, I can’t take any credit for that,” she said. “Mrs. Cordoza organized it all.”

“But you planned the menu.”

It was easier not to disagree with him. She placed the earrings carefully inside their box. She could hear the washbasin filling with water. “I’m glad you liked it.” She stood up and wrestled herself out of her dress, hung it up, and began to peel off her stockings.

She had removed one when she looked up to see him standing in the doorway. He was gazing at her legs. “You looked very beautiful tonight,” he said quietly.

She blinked hard, rolling off the second stocking. She reached behind her to undo her girdle, now acutely self-conscious. Her left arm was still useless—too weak to reach round to her back. She kept her head down, hearing him moving toward her. He was bare-chested now, but still in his suit trousers. He stood behind her, moved her hands away, and took over. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her back as he parted each hook from its eye.

"Very beautiful," he repeated.

She closed her eyes. *This is my husband,* she told herself. *He adores me. Everyone says so. We're happy*. She felt his fingers running lightly along her right shoulder, the touch of his lips at the back of her neck. "Are you very tired?" he murmured.

She knew this was her chance. He was a gentleman. If she said she was, he would step back, leave her alone. But they were married. *Married* . She had to face this some time. And who knew? Perhaps if he seemed less alien, she would find that a little more of herself was restored to her.

She turned in his arms. She couldn't look at his face, couldn't kiss him. "Not if . . . not if you're not," she whispered into his chest.

She felt his skin against hers and clamped her eyes shut, waiting to feel a sense of familiarity, perhaps even desire. Four years, they had been married. How many times must they have done this? And since her return he had been so patient.

She felt his hands moving over her, bolder now, unclipping her brassiere. She kept her eyes closed, conscious of her appearance. "May we turn out the light?" she said. "I don't want . . . to be thinking about my arm. How it looks."

"Of course. I should have thought."

She heard the click of the bedroom light. But it wasn't her arm that bothered her: she didn't want to look at him. Didn't want to be so exposed, vulnerable, under his gaze. And then they were on the bed, and he was kissing her neck, his hands, his breath, urgent. He lay on top of her, pinning her down, and she linked her arms around his neck, unsure what she should be doing in the absence of any feelings she might have expected. What has happened to me? she thought. What did I used to do?

"Are you all right?" he murmured into her ear. "I'm not hurting you?"

"No," she said, "no, not at all."

He kissed her breasts, a low moan of pleasure escaping him. "Take them off," he said, pulling at her knickers. He shifted his weight off her so that she could tug them down to her knees, then kick them away. And she was exposed.*Perhaps if we . . . ,* she wanted to say, but he was already nudging her legs apart, trying clumsily to guide himself into her. *I'm not ready*—but she couldn't say that: it would be wrong now. He was lost somewhere else, desperate, wanting.

She grimaced, drawing up her knees, trying not to tense. And then he was inside her, and she was biting her cheek in the dark, trying to ignore the pain and that she felt nothing except a desperate desire for it to be over and him out of her. His movements built in speed and urgency, his weight squashing her, his face hot and damp against her shoulder. And then, with a little cry, a hint of vulnerability he did not show in any other part of his life, it was over, and the thing was gone, replaced by a sticky wetness between her thighs.

She had bitten the inside of her cheek so hard that she could taste blood.

He rolled off her, still breathing hard. “Thank you,” he said, into the darkness.

She was glad he couldn’t see her lying there, gazing at nothing, the covers pulled up to her chin. “That’s quite all right,” she said quietly.

She had discovered that memories could indeed be lodged in places other than the mind.

Chapter 3

AUGUST 1960

“A profile. Of an industrialist.” Don Franklin’s stomach threatened to burst over the top of his trousers. The buttons strained, revealing, above his belt, a triangle of pale, pelted skin. He leaned back in his chair and tilted his glasses to the top of his head. “It’s the editor’s ‘must,’ O’Hare. He wants a four-page spread on the wonder mineral for the advertising.”

“What the hell do I know about mines and factories? I’m a foreign correspondent, for Christ’s sake.”

“You were,” Don corrected. “We can’t send you out again, Anthony, you know that, and I need someone who can do a nice job. You can’t just sit around here making the place look untidy.”

Anthony slumped in the chair on the other side of the desk and drew out a cigarette.

Behind the news editor, who was just visible through the glass wall of his office, Phipps, the junior reporter, ripped three sheets of paper from his typewriter and, face screwed up in frustration, replaced them, with two sheets of carbon between.

“I’ve seen you do this stuff. You can turn on the charm.”

“So, not even a profile. A puff piece. Glorified advertising.”

“He’s partly based in Congo. You know about the country.”

“I know about the kind of man who owns mines in Congo.”

Don held out his hand for a cigarette. Anthony gave him one and lit it. “It’s not all bad.”

“No?”

“You get to interview this guy at his summer residence in the south of France. The Riviera. A few days in the sun, a lobster or two on expenses, maybe a glimpse of Brigitte Bardot . . . You should be thanking me.”

“Send Peterson. He loves all that stuff.”

“Peterson’s covering the Norwich child killer.”

“Murfett. He’s a crawler.”

“Murfett’s off to Ghana to cover the trouble in Ashanti.”

“Him?” Anthony was incredulous. “He couldn’t cover two schoolboys fighting in a telephone box. How the hell is he doing Ghana?” He lowered his voice. “Send me back, Don.”

“No.”

“I could be half insane, alcoholic, and in a ruddy asylum, but I’d still do a better job than Murfett, and you know it.”

“Your problem, O’Hare, is that you don’t know when you’re well off.” Don leaned forward and dropped his voice. “Listen—just stop crabbing and listen. When you came back from Africa, there was a lot of talk upstairs”—he motioned to the editor’s suite—“about whether you should be let go. The whole incident . . . They were worried about you, man. Anyway, God only knows how but you’ve made a lot of friends here, and some fairly important ones. They took everything you’ve been through into account and kept you on the payroll. Even while you were in”—he gestured awkwardly behind him—“ you know.”

Anthony’s gaze was level.

“Anyhow. They don’t want you doing anything too . . . pressured. So get a grip on yourself, get over to France, and be grateful that you’ve got the kind of job that occasionally involves dining in the foothills at ruddy Monte Carlo. Who knows? You might bag a starlet while you’re there.”

A long silence followed.

When Anthony failed to look suitably impressed, Don stubbed out his cigarette. “You really don’t want to do it.”

“No, Don. You know I don’t. I start doing this stuff, it’s just a few small steps to Births, Marriages, and Deaths.”

“Jesus. You’re a contrary bugger, O’Hare.” He reached for a piece of typewritten paper that he ripped from the spike on his desk. “Okay, then, take this. Vivien Leigh is headed across the Atlantic. She’s going to be camping outside the theater where Olivier’s playing. Apparently he won’t talk to her, and she’s telling the gossip columnists she doesn’t know why. How about you find out whether they’re going to divorce? Maybe get a nice description of what she’s wearing while you’re there.”

There was another lengthy pause. Outside the room, Phipps ripped out another three pages, smacked his forehead, and mouthed expletives.

Anthony stubbed out his cigarette and shot his boss a black look. “I’ll go and pack,” he said.

There was something about seriously rich people, Anthony thought as he dressed for dinner, that always made him want to dig at them a little. Perhaps it was the inbuilt certainty of men who were rarely contradicted; the pomposity of those whose most prosaic views everyone took so damned seriously.

At first he had found Laurence Stirling less offensive than he had expected; the man had been courteous, his answers considered, his views on his workers pretty enlightened. But as the day had worn on, Anthony saw he was the kind of man to whom control was paramount. He spoke at people, rather than soliciting information from them. He had little interest in anything outside his own circle. He was a bore, rich and successful enough not to try to be anything else.

Anthony brushed down his jacket, wondering why he had agreed to go to the dinner. Stirling had invited him at the end of the interview and, caught off guard, he had been forced to admit that he didn’t know anyone in

Antibes and had no plans, other than for a quick bite at the hotel. He suspected afterward that Stirling had invited him to make it more likely that he would write something flattering. Even as he accepted reluctantly, Stirling was instructing his driver to pick him up from the Hôtel du Cap at seven thirty. “You won’t find the house,” he said. “It’s quite well hidden from the road.”

I’ll bet, Anthony had thought. Stirling didn’t seem the kind of man who would welcome casual human interaction.

The concierge woke up visibly when he saw the limousine waiting outside. Suddenly he was rushing to open the doors, the smile that had been absent on Anthony’s arrival now plastered across his face.

Anthony ignored him. He greeted the driver and climbed into the front passenger seat—a little, he realized afterward, to the driver’s discomfort, but in the rear he would have felt like an impostor. He wound down his window to let the warm Mediterranean breeze stroke his skin as the long, low vehicle negotiated its way along coastal roads scented with rosemary and thyme. His gaze traveled up to the purple hills beyond. He had become accustomed to the more exotic landscape of Africa and had forgotten how beautiful parts of Europe were.

He made casual conversation—asked the driver about the area, who else he had driven for, what life was like for an ordinary man in this part of the country. He couldn’t help it: knowledge was everything. Some of his best leads had come from the drivers and other servants of powerful men.

“Is Mr. Stirling a good boss?” he asked.

The driver’s eyes darted toward him, his demeanor less relaxed. “He is,” he said, in a way that suggested the conversation was closed.

“Glad to hear it,” Anthony replied, and made sure to tip the man generously when they arrived at the vast white house. As he watched the car disappear to the back and what must have been the garage, he felt vaguely wistful. Taciturn as he was, he would have preferred to share a sandwich and a game of cards with the driver than make polite conversation with the bored rich of the Riviera.

The eighteenth-century house was like that of any wealthy man, oversize and immaculate, its facade suggesting the endless attention of staff. The graveled driveway was wide and manicured, flanked by raised flagstone paths from which no weed would dare to emerge. Elegant windows gleamed between painted shutters. A sweeping stone staircase led visitors into a hallway that already echoed with the conversation of the other diners and was dotted with pedestals containing huge arrangements of flowers. He walked up the steps slowly, feeling the stone still warm from the fierce heat of the day’s sun.

There were seven other guests at dinner: the Moncrieffs, friends of the Stirlings from London—the wife’s gaze was frankly assessing; the local mayor, M. Lafayette, with his wife and their daughter, a lithe brunette with heavily made-up eyes and a definite air of mischief; and the elderly M. and Mme Demarcier. Stirling’s wife was a clean-cut, pretty blonde in the Grace Kelly mold; such women tended to have little to say of interest, having been admired for their looks all their lives. He hoped to be placed next to Mrs. Moncrieff. He hadn’t minded her summing him up. She would be a challenge.

“And you work for a newspaper, Mr. O’Hare?” The elderly Frenchwoman peered up at him.

“Yes. In England.” A manservant appeared at his elbow with a tray of drinks. “Do you have anything soft? Tonic water, perhaps?” The man nodded and disappeared.

“What is it called?” she asked.

“The *Nation*.”

“The *Nation*,” she repeated, with apparent dismay. “I haven’t heard of it. I have heard of the *Times*. That is the best newspaper, isn’t it?”

“I’ve heard that people think so.” Oh, Lord, he thought. Please let the food be good.

The silver tray appeared at his elbow with a tall glass of iced tonic water. Anthony kept his gaze away from the sparkling kir the others were drinking. Instead he tried out a little of his schoolboy French on the mayor’s daughter, who replied in perfect English, with a charming French lilt. Too young, he thought, registering the mayor’s sideways glance.

He was gratified to find himself seated beside Yvonne Moncrieff when they finally sat down. She was polite, entertaining—and completely immune to him. *Damn the happily married.* Jennifer Stirling was on his left, turned away in conversation.

“Do you spend much time here, Mr. O’Hare?” Francis Moncrieff was a tall, thin man, the physical equivalent of his wife.

“No.”

“You’re more usually tied to the City of London?”

“No. I don’t cover it at all.”

“You’re not a financial journalist?”

“I’m a foreign correspondent. I cover . . . trouble abroad.”

“While Larry causes it.” Moncrieff laughed. “What sort of things do you write about?”

“Oh, war, famine, disease. The cheerful stuff.”

“I don’t think there is much cheerful about those.” The elderly Frenchwoman sipped her wine.

“For the last year I’ve been covering the crisis in Congo.”

“Lumumba’s a troublemaker,” Stirling interjected, “and the Belgians are cowardly fools if they think the place will do anything but sink without them.”

“You believe the Africans can’t be trusted to manage their own affairs?”

“Lumumba was a barefoot jungle postman not five minutes ago. There isn’t a colored with a professional education in the whole of Congo.” He lit a cigar and blew out a plume of smoke. “How are they meant to run the banks once the Belgians have gone, or the hospitals? The place will become a war zone. My mines are on the Rhodesian-Congolese border, and I’ve already had to draft in extra security. Rhodesian security—the Congolese can no longer be trusted.”

There was a brief silence. A muscle had begun to tick insistently in Anthony’s jaw.

Stirling tapped his cigar. “So, Mr. O’Hare, where were you in Congo?”

“Léopoldville, mainly. Brazzaville.”

“Then you know that the Congolese army cannot be controlled.”

“I know that independence is a testing time for any country. And that had Lieutenant General Janssens been more diplomatic, many lives might have been saved.”

Stirling stared at him over the cigar smoke. Anthony felt he was being reassessed. “So, you’ve been sucked into the cult of Lumumba too.” His smile was icy.

“It’s hard to believe that the conditions for many Africans could become any worse.”

“Then you and I must differ,” Stirling retorted. “I think that there are people for whom freedom can be a dangerous gift.”

The room fell silent. In the distance, a motorbike whined up a hillside. Madame Lafayette reached up anxiously to smooth her hair.

“Well, I can’t say I know anything about it,” Jennifer Stirling observed, laying her napkin neatly on her lap.

“Too depressing,” Yvonne Moncrieff agreed. “I simply can’t look at the newspapers some mornings. Francis reads the sport and City pages, and I stick to my magazines. Often the news goes completely unread.”

“My wife considers anything not in the pages of *Vogue* to not be proper news at all,” Moncrieff said.

The tension eased. Conversation flowed again, and the waiters refilled the glasses. The men discussed the stock market and developments on the Riviera—the influx of campers, which led the elderly couple to complain of a “lowering in tone,” and which awful newcomers had joined the British Bridge Club.

“I shouldn’t worry too much,” said Moncrieff. “The beach huts at Monte Carlo cost fifty pounds a week this year. I shouldn’t think too many Butlins types are going to pay that.”

“I heard that Elsa Maxwell proposed covering the pebbles with foam rubber so the beach wouldn’t be uncomfortable for one’s feet.”

“Terrible hardships one faces in this place,” Anthony remarked quietly. He wanted to leave, but that was impossible at this stage of the meal. He felt too far from where he had been—as if he had been dropped into a parallel universe. How could they be so inured to the mess, the horror, of Africa, when their lives were so plainly built upon it?

He hesitated for a moment, then motioned to a waiter for some wine. Nobody at the table seemed to notice.

“So . . . you’re going to write marvelous things about my husband, are you?” Mrs. Stirling was peering at his cuff. The second course, a platter of fresh seafood, had been laid in front of him, and she had turned toward him.

He adjusted his napkin. “I don’t know. Should I? Is he marvelous?”

“He’s a beacon of sound commercial practice, according to our dear friend Mr. Moncrieff. His factories are built to the highest standards. His turnover increases year after year.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“No?”

“I asked you if he was marvelous.” He knew he was being spiky, but the alcohol had woken him up, made his skin prickle.

“I don’t think you should ask me, Mr. O’Hare. A wife can hardly be impartial in such matters.”

“Oh, in my experience there is no one more brutally impartial than a wife.”

“Do go on.”

“Who else knows all her husband’s faults within weeks of marrying him, and can pinpoint them—regularly and from memory—with forensic accuracy?”

“Your wife sounds terribly cruel. I rather like the sound of her.”

“Actually, she’s an immensely clever woman.” He watched Jennifer Stirling pop a prawn into her mouth.

“Really?”

“Yes. Clever enough to have left me years ago.”

She passed him the mayonnaise. Then, when he didn’t take it from her, she spooned a dollop onto the side of his plate. “Does this mean you were not very marvelous, Mr. O’Hare?”

“At being married? No. I don’t suppose I was. In all other respects, I am, of course, peerless. And please call me Anthony.” It was as if he had picked up their mannerisms, their carelessly arrogant way of speaking.

“Then, Anthony, I’m sure you and my husband will get along terribly well. I believe he has a similar view of himself.” Her eyes settled on Stirling, then returned to him, and lingered just long enough for him to decide she might not be as wearisome as he’d thought.

During the main course—rolled beef, with cream and wild mushrooms—he discovered that Jennifer Stirling, née Verrinder, had been married for four years. She lived mostly in London, and her husband made numerous trips abroad to his mines. They came to the Riviera for the winter months, part of the summer, and odd holidays when London society proved dull. It was a tight crowd here, she said, eyeing the mayor’s wife opposite. You wouldn’t want to live here full-time, in the goldfish bowl.

These were the things she told him, things that should have marked her out as just another rich man’s overindulged wife. But he observed other things too: that Jennifer Stirling was probably a little neglected, more clever than her position required her to be, and that she had not realized what the combination might do to her within a year or two. For now, only the hint of sadness in her eyes suggested such self-awareness. She was caught up in a never-ending but meaningless social whirl.

There were no children. “I’ve heard it said that two people must be in the same country for a while to have one.” As she said this, he wondered if she was sending him a message. But she appeared guileless, amused by her situation rather than disappointed. “Do you have children, Anthony?” she inquired.

“I—I seem to have mislaid one. He lives with my ex-wife, who does her best to make sure that I don’t corrupt him.” He knew as soon as he’d said it that he was drunk. Sober, he would never have mentioned

Phillip.

This time he saw something serious behind her smile, as if she was wondering whether to commiserate. *Don't,* he willed her silently. To hide his embarrassment, he poured himself another glass of wine. "It's fine. He—"

"In what way might you be considered a corrupting influence, Mr. O'Hare?" Mariette, the mayor's daughter, asked from across the table.

"I suspect, mademoiselle, that I'm more likely to be corrupted," he said. "Had I not already decided to write a most flattering profile of Mr. Stirling, I should imagine I would be won over by the food and company at his table." He paused. "What would it take to corrupt you, Mrs. Moncrieff?" he asked—she seemed the safest person to whom he could direct this question.

"Oh, I'd be as cheap as anything. Nobody ever tried hard enough," she said.

"What rot," said her husband, fondly. "It took me months to corrupt you."

"Well, you had to buy me, darling. Unlike Mr. O'Hare here, you were entirely lacking in looks and charm." She blew him a kiss. "Whereas Jenny is entirely incorruptible. Don't you think she gives off the most terrifying air of goodness?"

"No soul on earth is incorruptible if the price is right," said Moncrieff. "Even sweet little Jenny."

"No, Francis. M. Lafayette is our true beacon of integrity," said Jennifer, her lips twitching mischievously at the corners. She had begun to look a little giddy. "After all, there's no such thing as corruption in French politics."

"Darling, I don't think you're equipped to discuss French politics," Laurence Stirling interjected.

Anthony saw the faint color that rose to her cheeks.

"I was just saying—"

"Well, don't," he said lightly. She blinked and gazed at her plate.

There was a brief hush.

"I believe you are right, madame," M. Lafayette said gallantly to Jennifer, as he put down his glass. "However, I can tell you what a dishonest scoundrel my rival at the town hall is . . . at the right price, of course."

A ripple of laughter passed around the table. Mariette's foot pressed against Anthony's under the table. On his other side, Jennifer Stirling was quietly instructing staff to clear the plates. The Moncrieffs were engaged in conversation on each side of M. Demarcier.

Jesus, he thought. What am I doing with these people? This is not my world. Laurence Stirling was talking emphatically to his neighbor. A fool, thought Anthony, aware even as he said it that he, with his lost family, his disappearing career, his lack of riches, might more accurately fit that description. The reference to his son, Jennifer Stirling's humiliation, and the drink had conspired to darken his mood. There was only one thing for it: he motioned to the waiter for more wine.

The Demarciers left shortly after eleven, the Lafayettes a few minutes later—council business in the morning, the mayor explained. He shook hands around the huge veranda to which they had retreated for coffee and brandy. “I will be very interested to read your article, M. O’Hare. It has been a pleasure.”

“All mine. Believe me”—Anthony swayed as he stood—“I have never been more fascinated by council politics.” He was now very drunk. The words emerged from his mouth almost before he knew what he wanted to say, and he blinked hard, conscious that he had little control over how they might be received. He had almost no idea of what he had discussed over the past hour. The mayor’s eyes met Anthony’s for a moment. Then he relinquished his hand and turned away.

“Papa, I will stay, if you don’t mind. I’m sure one of these kind gentlemen will walk me home in a little while.” Mariette stared meaningfully at Anthony, who gave an exaggerated nod.

“I may need your help, mademoiselle. I haven’t the faintest idea where I am,” he said.

Jennifer Stirling was kissing the Lafayettes. “I’ll make sure she returns home safely,” she said. “Thank you so much for coming.” Then she said something in French that he didn’t catch.

The night had grown chilly, but Anthony hardly felt it. He was aware of the waves lapping the shore far below, the clink of glasses, snatches of conversation as Moncrieff and Stirling discussed stock markets and investment opportunities abroad, but paid little attention as he downed the excellent cognac that someone had placed in his hand. He was used to being alone in a strange land, comfortable with his own company, but tonight he felt unbalanced, irritable.

He glanced at the three women, the two brunettes and the blonde. Jennifer Stirling was holding out a hand, perhaps to show off some new piece of jewelry. The other two were murmuring, their laughter breaking into the conversation. Periodically Mariette would glance at him and smile. Was there a hint of conspiracy in it? *Seventeen*, he warned himself. *Too young*.

He heard crickets, the women’s laughter, jazz music from deep within the house. He closed his eyes, then opened them and checked his watch. Somehow an hour had passed. He had the disturbing feeling that he might have nodded off. Either way, it was time to go. “I think,” he said, to the men, as he hauled himself out of his chair, “I should probably get back to my hotel.”

Laurence Stirling rose to his feet. He was smoking an oversize cigar. “Let me call my driver.” He turned to the house.

“No, no,” Anthony protested. “The fresh air will do me good. Thank you very much for a . . . a very interesting evening.”

“Telephone my office in the morning if you need any further information. I’ll be there until lunchtime. Then I leave for Africa. Unless you’d like to come and see the mines in person? We can always do with an old Africa hand . . .”

“Some other time,” Anthony said.

Stirling shook his hand, a brief, firm handshake. Moncrieff followed suit, then tipped a finger to his head in mute salute.

Anthony turned away and headed for the garden gate. The pathway was lit by small lanterns placed in the flower beds. Ahead, he could see the lights of vessels in the black nothingness of the sea. The lowered voices

carried toward him on the breeze from the veranda.

“Interesting fellow,” Moncrieff was saying, in the kind of voice that suggested he thought the opposite.

“Better than a self-satisfied prig,” Anthony muttered, under his breath.

“Mr. O’Hare? Would you mind if I walked with you?”

He turned unsteadily. Mariette stood behind him, clutching a little handbag, a cardigan slung around her shoulders. “I know the way to the town—there’s a cliff path we can take. I suspect you will get very lost on your own.”

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