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Chapter 1

'Fold, fold, roll.'

It was a mantra; a three-word instruction representing a sequence of finger movements. I had been doing it daily since I was thirteen.

Capital FM's breakfast show hummed in the background from the radio on the window ledge as I mumbled the words under my breath.

Picking up another vine leaf from the blanched stack on the plate, I scooped up a measure of the mixture of rice and herbs and repeated the action. A plate of finished *dolmádes* – ready to be cooked – sat beside me on the kitchen table, a mug of coffee slowly losing heat next to it. My fingers were already prune-like beneath the latex food gloves.

I wiped sweat from my forehead with my arm and shifted on the chair. The kitchen lacked ventilation with only a small window above the sink – our neighbours' side brick wall the only view – but today was extra sticky. An unexpected June heat wave had hit the West Midlands and the flat was unbearably hot and would be stifling by mid-afternoon once the vents from our deli downstairs began pumping out fumes that always filtered through to the rooms above.

The clock on the wall ticked closer to six, reminding me that I needed to pick up a bit of speed. Usually, I had plenty of time between the hours of five and eight to make sure the one hundred *dolmâdes* were ready for the deli's opening and for dropping off another one hundred at the office of our one and only corporate customer.

But today I needed to carve out an extra half hour for my day job at the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. In fact, it was crucial I got to the lab before my boss got in. I was so close to making that discovery, I could feel the expectation of resolving the puzzle tingling in my bones. The grooves in the pieces had to match. I knew they did. I had dreamed of them lining up for days. And if they did, this could be it; my chance to prove myself and to stand out as the best contender for promotion to curator. My interview was on Monday. While I didn't have the experience of some of the other candidates, the lining up of two tiny metal plates to complete a Roman brooch found at the HS2 site near Solihull would definitely raise my status.

As I placed the final stuffed leaves into the casserole dish on the stove, I heard the shuffle of slippers along the hallway.

'*Ângelé mou,*' Dad sang out, stepping into the kitchen in his striped pyjamas. Even though I was twenty-eight, he still loved to call me his angel. My full name's Angelina but it had been shortened to Lina as soon as I started primary school and was teased for sharing my name with an animated ballerina mouse.

'Morning, Baba.' I yawned, bending my neck backwards to relieve the locked-up tension from leaning forward for so long.

'Why so early today?' He took out a mug from the cupboard and filled it with coffee from the pot that was on the warming plate. It was the first thing I had made as soon as I woke up after swallowing a couple of tablets. The cramps this morning had been especially bad, but I was trying not to think of what that meant.

'I need to get to the museum before eight. I have a lot of work to do.'

'You will still be there at closing time?'

'Of course,' I said reassuringly, pulling off the food gloves. Dad never liked to close the deli on his own. It had always been like that, ever since the robbery seven years ago when a couple of youths had smashed up the place, one holding a knife to his throat, threatening to 'do him in' if he didn't acquiesce and hand over the month's takings. Since that day I had sworn I would never let him close alone.

I filled the casserole dish with a seasoned brew I had whipped up in a measuring jug – a secret recipe Mum had penned long ago.

'Tonight is the reunion, yes?' He nodded; his thick dark eyebrows raised.

Drops of boiling liquid splashed my hand and I winced before carefully placing the lid on the pot and turning on the gas.

I sucked my fingers hard before running them under the cold tap. 'I am not sure I will go,' I said, my teeth clenched – the pain throbbing at the tip of my middle finger.

'I thought Nik will pick you up for it.'

'I think I'm going to pass. I fancy an early night tonight.' I let the cold water numb the digit for a couple of minutes.

The truth was Stockland Academy was the last place I wanted to go back to. It was our ten-year reunion. Ten years since Mr Collingwood – the head – wished us well for the future in his closing speech, handed out our yearbooks with various ‘most likely to ...’ awards filling the pages and sent us on our way into the big wide world; most of us directionless and scared of what the future held once we left the confines of secondary school.

Angelina Georgiades. *Most likely to ... be travelling the world.* That was what my award had been. I had laughed hollowly when I opened the email invite I received last week with a PDF file of the yearbook attached. Apparently at eighteen I was confident that it would be easy to take a gap year after finishing my archaeology degree at Birmingham University instead of getting a job. I had come close to fulfilling that wish, but my life had taken an unexpected turn at twenty-one. Ten years had now passed since the school gates shut behind me and not once had I stepped foot on a plane.

I kissed Dad on the cheek. ‘I’ve set the timer, Baba. The *dolmádes* will be ready in an hour. I’ve already made the order for Mr Markos. You’ll be OK to take the rest downstairs today?’

‘Of course, I’ll be fine.’ He patted his chest, like he always did when I asked him if he was OK. It was a reassuring gesture and one I knew he did to appease me and stop my fussing.

‘See you at six.’ He smiled and blew me a kiss.

On my way out later, I noticed the lights of the deli were still off but knew Dad would be down any minute to set up

for the breakfast run – our usual gaggle of regulars keen to pick up their polystyrene containers filled with a mezze of Greek Cypriot delights and a black coffee. My museum lanyard hung around my neck and my backpack was weighed down with two large boxes of *dolmádes* ready to be dropped at Markos Insurance – a mile from the museum.

My daily fifteen-minute walk along Slade Road to Gravelly Hill station always took me past my old school – the 1970s concrete building set on an acre of grounds housing over twelve hundred students. But today I found myself turning the corner before I crossed at the lights even though I knew I would have to rush once I got to Birmingham Central to deliver the food and get to work in good time.

Thoughts of the reunion had made me think of him. Ash.

I stood outside his house – the side gate that was always unlocked now replaced by a ten-foot black door with a padlock; the sand-coloured pebble-dash render replaced with smooth grey stucco.

Ash's semi-detached house – my refuge growing up. But he no longer lived there, nor did his family.

Would he be at the reunion? I shook my head and walked on by. Of course he wouldn't. He lived in Mumbai now and swore he would never return to Birmingham. And who would blame him? I was the last person he would ever want to see again.

Chapter 2

My fingers twisted the dial to zoom in further. One more time. It had to be this piece.

Please, please. Line up.

Two solid hours I had been hunched over the microscope, left eye scrunched up, peering into the lens with my other.

'Nope.' I sighed and carefully lifted the bronze specimen from the glass dish with a pair of tweezers, placing it back into the plastic bag.

'Oh, Lina,' Greer said, her American accent elongating the 'ee' sound in my name. 'Here, try this one.' She handed me the sample labelled 364. Her box braids framed her face that was full of hope, her nose ring catching the glare of the fluorescent lamp next to the microscope.

I checked the number against the list on my laptop. 'Already have. It's no use. We're not going to find the right grooves.'

Greer laid a reassuring hand on my shoulder. 'Here, drink this.' She passed over a tall paper cup with the museum's logo branded on it.

I peeled off my blue plastic gloves, wiped my sweaty hands on my apron and let the heat of the beverage unfurl my tense fingers. I brought the coffee to my lips and blew steam

away. It was a dark roast with two sugars. I might as well have an intravenous drip pumping it through my bloodstream – this was already my third cup this morning.

My shoulders dropped. ‘It’s no use, Greer. I have tried *every* single piece three times. And I’ve got a stack load of documenting to do today. I won’t get another chance before the interview on Monday.’

She gave me a nudge and theatrically pulled out another pair of plastic gloves. I slipped off the stool and let her take over.

‘I gotta hunch,’ she said, unearthing specimen 276 from the collection and placing it on the lens. You had to love her for her unfailing sense of optimism.

‘Well?’ I asked eagerly, before noticing her shoulders drop as well.

‘It was worth a shot.’ Her bottom lip protruded, and she disposed of the gloves.

I sank onto the stool next to her and stared at my laptop showing a 3D design of what the Roman brooch might look like.

‘Don’t worry, Lina. I still think you’re the best candidate. No one knows the museum better than you. You’re one of the longest-serving members of the team.’

‘With no real experience out on the field.’

‘That’s not your fault. You put in enough hours here. And the school tours love you. Your ratings are sky high.’

‘Thanks to you.’

‘Ugh, Lina. Drop this self-deprecating British bullshit. You’re great at the assistant job. You’ll be a shoo-in for the next

level.' She bumped my shoulder with hers. *'And you smell better than Mr McCrusty who should've retired centuries ago.'*

A message pinged in my inbox. A cursory glance showed it was an email reminding me about the reunion tonight. Greer grabbed her screen glasses and leaned in. She never gave me any personal space. It had taken a while to get used to that. *'American brashness'* she had once called it when I saw her reading my texts over my shoulder. It was the same brashness that had got her the six-month placement at the museum. She was in her penultimate year at UCLA and would soon be heading back to California to complete her studies. She had beaten a list of over a hundred undergraduates to get this coveted placement. I was getting too used to having her around, though. She brought a lightness to my life that had been missing for years. Or maybe it was that I had missed female company. I dreaded her leaving and wondered when I would see her again once she left.

'A reunion, huh? You going?'

I shook my head and scrolled through my other emails.

'Why not?' She pressed her finger on my touchscreen, opening up the attachment. *'Is this your class?'*

'Yup.'

'Ooh, fun. Shove over.' She scraped her stool across the linoleum floor and brought it flush next to mine, taking control of the mouse. *'Let's see if I can find you.'* She zoomed in on the picture and dragged it left and right. *'Jeez, it's like *Where's Waldo?* You all look the same in those dark colours.'*

Although Stockland Academy was a state school, it modelled itself on being like some of the private ones in the

area and encouraged its sixth formers to come smartly dressed each morning and wear only black, grey or the mottled green colour of the younger kids' uniform. Some girls tried to flout the rules, as evidenced by the splashes of hot pink and lime green on the photograph.

'Found you!' she said triumphantly. 'Those are major bangs you got. So ... who did you hook up with from this lot?'

'Greer!' I put my finger to my closed lips. We weren't the only ones in the lab room today and our boss – Mr McCrumb, or McCrusty as Greer called him – could come in at any moment. Awkward coughs and shuffling of seats filled the room from the rest of the archaeology team and I cowered. 'Keep your voice down,' I whispered.

'I don't care. I'm outta here in a few weeks and I can't wait. God, I miss the ocean. Birmingham is so land-locked.'

I couldn't be more jealous of Greer though I knew it was silly to be. I had a good life here, my expenses were low, and I was saving for ... well I had no idea at this point what for, but everything would be different once I got the promotion from assistant curator to curator. My boss had an exciting career, moving from museum to museum, all round the country, sometimes even abroad. The only thing I hadn't figured out was how to tell Dad that there might be times I wouldn't be around to help. Maybe with an uplift in pay we could afford to hire a part-time worker for the deli on the odd occasion I was away. But I would reassure him that I would never move out; that it would always be me and him. Forever.

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'OK, so who did you ...' She put her hand by her mouth to whisper '... fool around with?'

'No one.' A flush crept into my neck and my skin would soon be all blotchy – an affliction I had had since I was a teenager whenever I was nervous or had told a fib.

'Your eyes are all shifty. You definitely got down and dirty with someone. Let me guess.'

I did my best to keep a poker face. 'I didn't have sex with anyone from my year,' I said, holding my hand over my throat to hide the blemishes.

'You're such a spoilsport. How about that guy, the one you spend every weekend with? The one who knows how good-looking he is, whose shirts are tighter than an eighteenth-century corset.'

'You mean Nik?' I said, pointing at the guy sitting in the front row. Nikolas Markos. *Most likely to ... be driving a Lamborghini, living in a mansion and modelling for Hugo Boss.*

'Yeah, the one you have a "relationship" with.' She did quotation marks with her fingers. 'Or wait, your "friend with benefits", isn't that what you call him?'

The truth was I didn't know what to call me and Nik.

'Woah, he's a cutey.' I sat up with interest to see where she had zoomed in on. 'Who's that?'

That was Ash Patel. My best friend. Correction. He *was* my best friend. 'Yeah, he and I were good mates once. But he won't be there. After he went to study maths at Cambridge, he went to work at a bank in London before relocating to Mumbai.'

'Hmm. Smart and loaded. You missed out there.'

'You're so shallow, you know that, right?'

My phone vibrated on the counter and Nik's name flashed up. Before I could reach for it, Greer had grabbed it and answered.

'Hey, Nik,' she drawled. 'Nah, she's right here. I am trying to persuade her she has to go to the reunion.' She nodded. 'I know, right? That's what I told her. Ah huh. Yeah.'

I shot her a 'can I have the phone now' look but she dismissed my request with a flick of her hand.

'OK, great,' she said with a broad smile. 'I'll tell her.' She hung up and put the mobile back on the counter before zoning in on my screen and inspecting the faces of my classmates some more.

'Well?'

'Well, what?' she said with a coquettish smirk.

'What did Nik say and why didn't he want to speak to me?'

'He said he'll pick you up at your flat at seven.'

'Let me call him back. I'm not going,' I said, reaching for my phone. She swatted my hand away. 'Ow.' I scowled. She really was being difficult, acting more like a toddler than someone only six years my junior.

'Why on earth don't you want to go?' she said.

I rubbed my hand. 'Because ... oh you wouldn't understand.'

She twisted on the stool to face me. 'I might.'

'Because ...'

It wasn't just any old reunion. It was a dance. And I made a promise to myself years ago that I was never *ever* going to dance again.

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Chapter 3

'Where am I?' I said, slowly opening my eyes.

A sunset hovered on the horizon – the sky polluted and murky. My feet scrunched the wet sand between my toes. Thick, humid air invaded my nostrils, seeped with the smell of incense and cardamom. Lurid green trousers billowed around my legs and a scarlet cropped top decorated with gold brocade peeked from beneath a silk maroon sash that hung from one shoulder and draped over my chest. My black hair fell in ringlets over my shoulder to one side.

Two arms wrapped around my waist, and I leaned back into him – his heartbeat reverberating through me at a steady pace, calming my racing thoughts.

'Are you ready?' he said by my ear.

I turned to face him and wanted to get lost in those dark chocolate eyes. A white shirt hung loose on his body. I trailed my hand down his naked chest, dipping in and out of his muscles, and he sighed contentedly.

He leaned down and placed his lips on mine. A chaste kiss at first, but when I pushed myself up to him, the kiss intensified. My hands reached up to his face, fingers brushing against his light stubble, not wanting to let him go,

ever. His hands grasped mine as if he didn't want to let me go either.

Pulling back from the embrace, I stared up at his face – those eyes, deep and intense. I noticed my hands against his chest – olive skin against brown.

'You don't have to do this, Lina,' he said.

He stroked my cheek and I melted beneath his fingertips.

'I want to do this; I want the pain to go away. And I need to do this. For me. For Mum. For your sister.'

He pressed his lips together, trying to keep his emotions in check. 'I want to do this too.'

The music drifted over the water.

'Has the movie begun?' I asked him.

He nodded. 'Don't be scared. It's not our part yet. You can look.'

Turning in his embrace, he tightened his arms around me. There in the distance across the sand sat a man with a guitar. The tune was soft and melodic. His fingers strummed, the twang increasing in intensity as he moved his hand up and down. More musicians appeared and joined him on the sand – a drummer, an electric guitar and a piper.

From stage right a chorus of women in elaborate saris came into view. An explosion of colour against the pale yellow sand. Their movements were fluid and in sync – hand gestures indicating this was a time for celebration.

A band of men in more modern clothing followed next, weaving in and out of the women. I let the music wash over me and I could feel it: the rhythm pulsating through my veins. It began with a foot tap, a twitch of the knee, a flick of the hip.

Caroline Khoury

He grasped my waist tighter, and his voice began a sweet tune against my ear. Before I knew it, I was singing back to him.

Wait ... since when did I speak Hindi?

And ... cut.

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Chapter 4

I studied my reflection in the mirror on my cupboard door. Nope. Too formal. I peeled off my third choice of outfit and threw it onto the floor beside my wet towel and a couple of pairs of shoes and tried on a pale blue sundress.

My nap had disorientated me. The mindfulness technique I had learned at the pain clinic wasn't intended to make me fall asleep but a combination of the medication I had been given at the last visit and a long day at work must have pushed me over into dreamland. Thankfully the cramps that had plagued me on the journey home from the museum had lessened but, with these tablets in my system, I knew alcohol was a bad idea tonight.

It had felt so real; the Bollywood movie with me and Ash as its stars. Looking over that school photo must have catapulted him to the forefront of my mind.

I rubbed my temples to banish the images and took in the sight of me in this dress. What did this look say about me? Twenty-eight-year-old Lina Georgiades totally in control of her life, knows exactly what she wants and where she's going. My body sagged. This look said nothing of the sort. More like

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I nabbed it from the Primark sale last summer with what little cash I had to splurge on a frivolous dress I knew I would only have limited opportunities to wear.

Why did I let Greer and Nik talk me into this?

Nik had promised to be by my side the whole night. He knew why I didn't want to dance and never challenged me on it which I appreciated. I had called him back after fobbing Greer off with the excuse that I had nothing to wear, but before I could get a word in, Nik had persuaded me. He wanted me there by his side so he could face up to those that had tormented him during his years at Stockland.

'*Matia mou,*' Dad said, appearing at the doorway. 'You look beautiful. Just like your mother.' His smile turned sad with that last word.

I glanced back at my reflection. I had Mum's dark hair and eyebrows. That much was obvious from all the photos Dad had of her around the flat. Before I could reply, the doorbell sounded. Dad shuffled out and I heard his enthusiastic greeting all the way to my room – the words of endearment in Greek, the playful slap of the back and the sound of cheek kissing.

My heart skipped a beat when Nik strode in, a roguish grin plastered over his face. He was decked out in a sharp dark suit with a thick knotted grey tie. His smile could easily melt a piece of granite.

'For you.' He revealed a big bunch of white roses from behind his back.

'You didn't have to do that.'

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'For my best girl? Yes, I did.' He leaned in and kissed me on both cheeks. His aftershave pricked my nose and I inhaled. A memory from long ago stirred in my mind.

'You promise to have my daughter back by midnight?' Dad said from the threshold of my bedroom.

'Baba!' I giggled. 'I'm twenty-eight. I don't have curfew any more.' I gave Nik a once-over and whistled. 'Check you out. New suit?'

He held the lapels of his jacket and spun around. 'Yup.' Straightening his tie, he glanced at the mirror and stroked his shaved face. 'And I've got the Lexus for the night.'

This was all part of the plan; Nik's way of showing everyone at school that he had made it. Never mind that the car was his dad's and he never had to go up for promotion at the insurance company he worked at because it was run by his father, Nik had scores to settle and was clearly going all out tonight.

'And –' he turned back to me with a serious expression before taking my hand and kissing it – 'I will also have the most beautiful girl on my arm.' His thumb caressed the bracelet he had given me for my eighteenth and he smiled as he stroked the jewel nestled in the middle of it.

I lightly punched him on the chest. 'Show-off.'

'Come on, we'd better go,' he said. 'Mr Georgiades, I promise I will take good care of your daughter.' He gave me a cheeky wink to which I rolled my eyes.

I threaded my arm into Nik's as we approached the school hall and gripped it unnecessarily hard.

'Hey, it's fine,' Nik said, putting a hand over mine. 'I'm here. I'll be by your side. Always.'

I nodded and we carried on walking down the corridor. The smell of cabbage permeated off the walls from the canteen at the far end; the cabinets lining our way proudly displaying the school's prized alumni.

I stopped still at one photograph and Nik scoffed.

'Thank God Patel won't be here,' he said.

Ash's cheesy grin beamed through the glass. It was a picture of him receiving the Maths Challenge gold award in Year Eleven. He was also immortalised in another photo from our sixth-form days for being the first from our school to ever go to Cambridge.

'I never understood why you two weren't friends,' I said. 'Remember when we were at Stockland Primary? We were inseparable – the Three Musketeers.'

'We grew up and I soon realised what a tool he was.'

'You weren't exactly ever nice to him, or me for that matter.'

He stopped and retracted his arm. 'When was I ever not nice to you in primary school?'

'Have you forgotten? End of Year Three?'

He shook his head.

'You told me and Ash a meteorite would hit the Earth in twenty years.'

He snorted. 'No, I didn't.'

'Yes, you did. You absolutely freaked us out. We were doing that assignment with Ms Bell where we had to write a story about what we would be doing in twenty years. We even had to do a sketch of what we would look like. You told

me and Ash in the playground that it was pointless because we would be dead.'

He dipped his head and gazed at his shiny new shoes. 'You have an impressive memory, Lina, because I don't remember any of that. You and Patel were always so serious, though – not surprised you fell for it if I did say it.'

I hugged myself tightly, thinking back to how Ash and I had responded to Nik's teasing. Twenty years had passed since that time. We had made a promise to each other to always be friends and now we weren't.

I linked my arm in Nik's again. 'It doesn't matter anyway, we're still alive.'

'Do you remember what you wrote?'

I stilled. Did he know about the secret box? How could he? It had been mine and Ash's secret. 'What I wrote for what?'

'For the assignment. This mysterious piece of homework set by a Ms Bell who I have no recollection of.'

My heart rate steadied. 'Oh, that. No, haven't got a clue.' My parents never kept my work – not enough room in the flat, they always said. And who would remember something they wrote twenty years ago?

'Are you doing what you always dreamed of doing?' Nik said, looking at me a little more seriously now.

'An assistant curator at Birmingham Museum? I doubt I wrote that. What about you, Mr Regional Assistant Manager of Markos and Son insurance company?'

'Oh yeah, insurance was always my dream, baby.' He grinned, a wicked grin, and I nestled into him – his bicep

flexing at my touch. 'Come on.' He flicked his head in the direction of the hall. 'Let's do this.'

As we opened the door, we were hit by a cacophony of strobe lighting, music and laughter. At the desk by the entrance, we picked up our badges and made our way further towards the crowd of our old classmates, stopping at the bar to pick up a couple of drinks. A few people that Nik and I had known in the loosest sense came over and we exchanged pleasantries. It was all so fake. The 'God, I've missed you' and 'we should keep in touch' statement after we had chatted about their lives but not told them much about ours. Who were we kidding? We all knew after tonight we would probably never make the effort to see each other again.

'God, this is lame,' Nik whispered at my ear.

I took a few sips of my orange juice. 'Look over there.' I tipped my chin. A guy who I vaguely remembered as being the head of the football team had a captive audience around him, his stance wide and arrogant. I knew he had been one of Nik's tormentors when we were about fourteen, fifteen, but when Nik had joined the First XI at the beginning of sixth form, things had changed for him, and he had been part of that crowd.

'Shit, he's coming over.' Nik cleared his throat and straightened his tie.

'Nikolas Markos.' He slapped Nik on the shoulder. Toby. *That* was his name as I clocked his badge. 'How the hell are you? And ...' Toby made an obvious glance down towards my chest where my badge was probably a little too close to

my neckline, but his eyes lingered at my cleavage and I kicked myself for choosing this dress over the other two outfits.

‘Lina,’ I said as he continued to look at my boobs.

I could tell from the wrinkles in his forehead that he didn’t have a clue who I was. He drained his beer and swayed a bit. Another song came on the sound system, the opening chords to ‘Demons’ by Fatboy Slim from the soundtrack to our last year of school.

‘Are you both ...’ He did a gesture with his hands, mimicking putting a ring on his finger.

‘No, we’re not married,’ I said.

He staggered forward and I could smell the alcohol on his breath as he leaned in. ‘Then you’re fair game?’

He grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me towards the dance floor and my heartbeat escalated. I tried to wrestle from his hold. ‘I don’t want to dance.’

‘Hey,’ Nik said, stepping between us. ‘Let her go.’

‘Don’t be such a wanker, Markos, you can spare your bird for one dance.’

‘I *don’t* want to dance,’ I said, loud enough that it caused a few heads to turn.

The next few seconds seemed to happen in slow motion. Toby increased his grip and Nik took another step forward and shoved Toby hard in the shoulder. He turned, relinquishing his grasp of me almost immediately before holding both his hands up and shoving Nik so hard in the chest that he stumbled backwards. The commotion caused a group of five lads who I also recalled had played in the team to be instantly by Toby’s side as if we had all been transported

back to our schooldays and weren't getting close to our thirties.

Toby strode forward and jabbed his finger into Nik's chest. 'You and me. Outside.'

Nik stroked his suit, as if Toby's touch had left a stain on it. 'I'm not going to fight you, Toby.'

'Pussy,' Toby spat, rolling up his sleeves. One of the other guys held onto his shoulder trying to calm him down, but the slur that came from another in the huddle caused Nik to still.

At first, I wasn't sure if Nik had heard it, but when I noticed the expression on his face, I knew he had – I could see the tension radiate from him like steam from hot tar being spilled onto a road. It was the same hurtful moniker he had heard many times before.

Another track from our graduating year bellowed from the sound system but I couldn't focus on the words or even register the name of it because my full attention was on Nik. I knew what I had to do. I clasped his arm and pulled him towards me, reaching on tiptoes to his eyeline. I held his head in my hands and kissed him.

Flashbacks popped in my mind – the thrill and excitement of locking lips with him for the first time, the sexual desire flooding my veins as his tongue met mine. But this was different – so much time had passed. There wasn't the same eighteen-year-old lust coursing through me or the anticipation of my first sexual encounter on the immediate horizon.

It was only when I pulled away and settled back on the balls of my feet that I noticed it wasn't only the whole hall

Always You

which was the audience for my public display of affection but that someone was standing in the doorway; the one person in the world I had never expected to walk in at that moment. Ash Patel.

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Chapter 5

Nik stirred in bed next to me, his arm draped across my hip, pinning me to the mattress. My room still had my single bed from my childhood and wasn't big enough for a double so there was no room to move away.

'Nik, wake up. You've got to go and sleep on the sofa.' He groaned and rolled onto his other side. I poked him. 'Get up, Nik. If Dad catches you in my bed, he'll freak.'

'Why?' he mumbled. 'You stay at mine every Saturday night.'

'Yes, but I tell him I sleep in the spare room.' I prodded him again.

The sheet slipped down his back as he dragged himself up. His Achilles tattoo that snaked up his arm was visible in all its glory – the ink illuminated in the early-morning sun peeking through the curtains. He looked back over his shoulder and that's when I saw the full extent of last night's drama plastered over the right side of his face.

'What? Is it bad?' He winced when he touched the skin around his eye.

'I knew we should've kept that ice pack on longer.'

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‘What will your dad say when he sees me? Maybe I should go home now. I’m awake already. I can return the car before my dad notices it’s gone from the office car park.’ He picked up my digital clock. ‘I can’t believe you wake at five on a Saturday and then put in a full day’s work downstairs.’

‘Dad needs at least one day off. He can’t run the deli on his own all week.’

Nik shuffled out of bed and rearranged himself inside his boxers before dropping to the floor for a few press-ups.

‘You still coming round tonight?’ he said, his breathing a little ragged as he held his body in a plank position.

‘Of course,’ I said, opening my chest of drawers. ‘Maybe we’ll have a quiet one, though. Don’t think I’m up for the pub tonight. But you can go to the Fox without me if you want.’

The Fox was our favourite Saturday-night venue – the atmosphere welcoming and the vibe laid-back – and a handy fifteen-minute walk from Nik’s Birmingham city-centre flat.

He yawned. ‘Nah. I don’t feel up for it,’ he said, holding his temple. ‘I’ll order takeout, my treat. It’s the least I can do after last night.’

‘It wasn’t your fault. And I appreciate you were defending my honour, but it wasn’t necessary to get into a punch-up with Toby the Tank.’

He chuckled. ‘Forgot that’s what everyone called him.’

‘I didn’t even remember his name but then it all came back to me.’

‘Did I imagine it, or was Patel there too?’

I steadied myself on the dresser. ‘I think you imagined it.’

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A lie. It was definitely him. He had stood glowing in the doorway but that's when Toby had thrown his punch. The next few minutes were a blur, and by the time they were prised apart, Ash was gone. What on earth was he doing in Birmingham?

Nik rubbed his hand over his non-bruised eye, yawning. 'Could've sworn it was him.' He shrugged and got changed while I threw on my Saturday deli work clothes of white T-shirt and three-quarter-length jeans. 'Glad he was a mirage, then. He's the last person I want to see.'

I decided to let that comment slide because I knew it was a conversation that wouldn't end well if I said anything different.

As I said goodbye to Nik at the side entrance to the flat, he slapped his forehead.

'Shit, I forgot. Mum and Dad are coming for brunch on Sunday. You'll stay, won't you?'

I rubbed my hand up and down my arm. 'I really need to prepare for my interview on Monday.'

He stroked my cheek. 'You don't need to prepare. You're going to knock it out of the park. They'll be fools not to give you the job.' He clasped my hands and dipped his chin, looking back up at me with those puppy-dog green eyes – those eyes I had fallen for years ago. 'Please, stay. I'll order in all your favourites from that Italian place. You know Mum and Dad will be expecting you.'

Brunch with his parents had become a monthly obligation and I knew Nik hated the interrogation he had to endure about his life and valued my support.

'OK,' I acquiesced.

He planted a huge soppy kiss on my cheek which I quickly wiped away and I shoved him out of the door. 'Will you go already. I've got food to make.'

He walked off, half turning to blow me a kiss and pose as if he was on an ad shoot: jacket slung over his shoulder, white shirt unbuttoned more than halfway down, his pecs dancing beneath the fabric. I giggled and waved him away.

I closed the door and went back upstairs and set to work on making the *dolmâdes*.

'Fold, fold, roll.' My three-word instruction flowed from my mouth as I tried to process the events of last night. Eventful was an understatement. Nik and Toby were now barred from the school indefinitely.

But why had I lied to Nik about seeing Ash?

A sharp cramp interrupted that thought. I dropped the vine leaf and pushed the skin at my hip inwards, willing the pain to abate. I stumbled to the bathroom, ripping my food gloves off, and pulled out my prescribed medication from the cupboard above the basin. I swallowed a couple of tablets with several scoops of water from the tap.

Day Six. I scrunched my eyes tight and breathed through clenched teeth. The monthly pattern seemed to be changing. Maybe it was the spicy kebab Nik and I had shared late last night once we got booted out of the dance. The last GP I had seen had told me to record any flare-ups after eating certain foods to see if there was a pattern.

I sank onto the bathroom floor and let my mind wander to the Bollywood movie I had imagined yesterday: colours,

music, dancing. Always dancing. Me and Ash together, like time had been suspended. I floated on the ridge of the pain as the minutes passed, allowing myself to believe in the fantasy of a happier time.

As the pain eventually eased, I returned to my tasks for the deli and made a mental note – avoid spicy kebabs in future.

Creeping down the stairs to the deli a couple of hours later, I slipped on my apron and switched on the lights. I made several salads in the small kitchen at the back and brought out some prepared meals from the fridges that Dad had cooked last night.

When I pulled up the blinds my heart lurched as I saw who was waiting outside, leaning on the window. Ash. Decked out in a navy-blue polo shirt and jeans, he had his arms folded over his chest as if he were nervously waiting for something.

When he saw me, a smile flooded his face – the creases by his eyes intensifying. I flipped over the Open sign and unbolted the door.

‘Hey.’ His voice was soft, almost apologetic.

I took in the sight of him for a second – the glimpse last night had been too fleeting. His face was as I remembered, but his shoulders and chest were broader, a day-old stubble caressing his jaw, hair a little wet as if he had just had a shower.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked.

He pointed to the sign in the window. ‘You sell coffee, right?’

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I laughed. 'Yes, of course we sell coffee. Come in. I'll make you one.' I ushered him inside.

'Thanks.' He brushed past me, a hint of shower gel confirming what I had suspected.

I placed some beans in the percolator and pulled down the handle until it poured out into the portafilter. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ash drag out a chair and sit at one of the three tables we had tucked away in the deli. I guessed that meant he was staying.

Bringing him his coffee, I turned to go back to behind the counter when I felt a touch on my hand. Ash held it lightly – the tingle from his touch fizzing up my arm, igniting a warmth inside me that I hadn't felt in years.

'Do you have time to talk?' he asked.

The ding of the bell above the door caused Ash to pull his hand away.

'I'd love to, but I've got to work,' I said, with a nod to acknowledge the customers.

His face fell. 'Maybe later? What time do you close?'

'Five thirty.'

'I'll be back then. It's been what ... six years?'

'Seven,' I said without hesitation.

He twisted his cup. 'That's a long time. We have a lot to catch up on. I wasn't even sure you'd still be here.'

I tightened the belt of my apron. 'I'm still here,' I said with a note of resignation, spreading my hands out to take in the sweep of the room.

I went to the group that had just come in and didn't even notice Ash leaving. My mind whirred. What did he want to

talk about? I didn't want to go back to the last time we had seen each other – it was too painful.

I swept the broom around the last remaining diners, hoping they would get the message that I was closing. Dad had helped with the lunchtime crowd as usual but now he would be happily playing cards and backgammon with his friends at the Hellenic Greek centre – a hall in a neighbourhood a few miles away from ours, where a large group of men in their fifties and sixties liked to congregate to talk about the old days and drink ouzo.

I checked my watch. Quarter to six. There was no sign of Ash. I guessed something must have come up. Oh well, there was no point in dwelling on what he had wanted to talk about.

I still had a couple of hours free before I was due at Nik's. My feet throbbed and I was looking forward to reclining on the sofa upstairs and having a cup of tea. It would also give me time to run through some practice interview questions.

As I went to turn off the light, a tap on the window made me turn. Ash stood outside looking contrite. I unbolted the door.

He held his hands flat against each other as though he was praying. 'I am so sorry. It was a struggle to get away. Family.' It was a one-word excuse, but I understood without any need for an explanation.

'That's fine. I wasn't waiting long.'

He comically swiped his hand across his forehead. 'Phew. I thought I might have missed you.'

'I actually have plans this evening but—'

'Of course.' He nodded. 'You're busy, I understand. But ... do you have time for one drink?' His eyebrows raised. 'We could go to the Village Green, for old times' sake.'

I took in his pleading look. 'Sure. Let me lock up and freshen up a bit. I smell of grease and oil. I'll meet you round the side in a few minutes.'

His shy smile warmed my insides. I battled to suppress the feelings that his presence was stirring in me. If I closed my eyes, I would be in that meadow again, with him – our hands entwined, grass in our hair, sun on our faces.

After a change into a vest top and skirt, I grabbed my bag and headed down to meet him. The sun was still warm enough for no jacket.

As we walked down the road towards the pub, we didn't look at each other. So much time had passed, I guessed he didn't know where to begin and neither did I.

I turned and caught him looking at me, but he pursed his lips and shoved his hands into his pockets.

'I guess the obvious first question is, why are you here? I mean, back in Birmingham. I thought you live permanently in Mumbai.'

'I do.' He rubbed his chin, his face looking sombre. 'I'm back for a few days.'

'Surely you didn't come all the way from India for the reunion?'

He laughed. 'Definitely not. I came back because ... well ...' He clenched his hands. 'There's no easy way to say it. My dad is dying.'

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I stopped suddenly and turned towards him. 'Oh, Ash. I'm so sorry.'

He shrugged and carried on walking. 'That's what he believes, anyway. I still have hope. It's leukaemia. He's being stubborn. Refusing treatment. My mum is beside herself. She begged me to come to try and talk some sense into him.' He held his palms upwards. 'He is convinced his life is in the hands of the gods and we can't disrupt their plans. My parents usually come to see me in summer. I have not been back here since ... well since I left after university. But how could I not come now? I got the reminder about the reunion and thought that maybe, well, I wondered what it would be like to go back.'

'But you didn't stay long.'

He didn't elaborate and I sensed the awkwardness between us. Had he seen me kissing Nik? He must have.

'Do you work at the deli every day?'

'Only Saturdays but I help prepare the food in the morning like always and I do lock-ups too. I've worked as an assistant curator at the museum for a few years now.'

He nodded enthusiastically. 'I'd love to hear about it.'

I filled him in on my day-to-day life – the documenting of findings, school tours, hours spent staring into a microscope. The more I talked about my role, the more I realised I had stagnated there – this promotion was essential for progression.

Before long, we reached the pub and Ash held the door open for me.

'Shall we sit in the beer garden?' he said. 'It's quite stuffy in here.' He tugged at the neckline of his polo shirt.

'OK.'

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'What can I get you?'

'Something refreshing.'

'The usual?'

I smiled, surprised that he remembered after all this time.

'Yes, but without the vodka.'

Out at the back of the pub, the atmosphere was convivial – large beer barrels were spaced out on the grass with punters sitting in front of them swigging drinks from plastic cups. Outdoor lights lined the perimeter of the fence and were also strung in criss-cross patterns across the garden – ready to be switched on once day turned to dusk. I settled at a barrel close to the back, far enough from the chatter of families enjoying the balmy summer's evening – their kids' raucous cries filling the air as they ran around in the children's area at the far side.

Ash came out a few minutes later with a beer for him and a glass of cranberry and grapefruit juice for me. It was a mixture that always raised eyebrows from the barman, but had been my favourite drink since Ash and I had come up with the combination one day after my first A-level exam and I had needed to offload.

'I had forgotten how much a pint of beer costs here,' he said.

'You've been gone from England too long.'

He nodded. 'I have.'

I took a sip of my drink through the straw – the tartness of the grapefruit juice catching on the roof of my mouth. Stirring it, the ice cubes clinked against the sides. It was a measured movement because I had no clue what to say. Apologise straight off the bat?

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