

The following sections contain the first few sections of my book. They still need organizing, but I have not titled any of them as of yet as I am not sure how much of the content will be kept or how it might be organized.

Edinburgh was a beautiful place, no one could say that it wasn't, people came from all over the world to say it was beautiful. But Noora liked it best just after Christmas, when the crowds had dispersed for the moment. Each morning in early January felt bright and crisp, even though the sky was always clouded over, there was a newness, a freshness to the air. Noora felt it on her way to the pub in the early evening. It was already dark at only five pm, and she welcomed the warmth as she entered the Three Ladies. The pub always reminded her of a jewel box, with stained glass windows and lamps speckled about the place. Red velvet curtains mixed with shabby green upholstery, all filling up each nook and corner of the pub, trimmed in deep brown wood. The light was moody and multicolored, it was only the stage that was brightly lit.

Noora made her way over to the stage, where Patrick was tuning his guitar and Floyd was testing the microphone.

“Test 1 2, 1 2 3. Welcome to the shit show cunts,” Floyd grinned at Noora, “And now we welcome our brightest star, ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to...uh, what's your name again love?” Floyd leaned around the microphone to ask her in a mock undertone.

She rolled her eyes, “Very funny Floyd,” She scooted over to her corner of the stage and opened her guitar case.

“You know me Noora,” he replied, showcasing how he did, in fact, know her name.

Patrick glanced over at Noora with a smile, “Alright?”

“Yeah, fine,” Noora answered shortly. She was never sure how to respond when Scottish people asked if she was alright, it felt so much more personal than it was. Then again, coming from Patrick it might be very personal, there was no way of knowing.

“Had a good week?” He asked.

“Yeah, it was good. Bit boring, but you know,” she shrugged.

“Yeah, I know.”

Patrick worked at the Three Ladies as a bartender during the week, and - like most of the band members - Thursday night was the best part of the week. It wasn't always Noora's favorite night of the week, but sometimes it was, and she held on to that.

People began filtering into the pub over the next few hours and it quickly became hot and crowded. Noora's band was on from six to nine, and they moved through all the most popular pub songs with several Scottish classics thrown in, which were particularly loved by the locals and university students, but usually caused tourists to look around in confusion when the entirety of the bar burst into boisterous song.

Later in the evening, during one of these particularly popular songs, Noora noticed an older man bump into a college-aged man right below her corner of the stage, spilling his drink and nearly knocking him over. The younger man turned around in outrage, he was obviously drunk, and Noora missed a few cords as her focus on the music broke. Trying to return to the song, she didn't notice when the younger man pulled back his arm for a punch, swung, lost his balance completely, and stumbled onto the foot-high stage, tripping on the edge and falling into Noora and her guitar. She fell hard on her tailbone, knocking her head on the way down and

ending up on her back with only her guitar separating her from the university student who fell almost on top of her.

“Shit,” he slurred, “M sorry, didn’t mean to…” he trailed off as he struggled to disentangle himself from her.

He rolled onto his side next to her and Noora sat up, flustered, the crowd was now cheering and jeering simultaneously. Noora flushed, clambering to her feet. She could tell Floyd was making crude comments into the microphone, but she had no idea what he was saying.

Patrick pushed him aside and said, “Ah I think we’ll end it there for the night everyone,” he smiled as the crowd booed and the lights went off.

“You alright Noora?” Patrick helped her to her feet, the drunken man had been pulled up off the stage by his friends, who were ushering him away.

“Yeah fine, I’m fine,” she said, letting go of his hand, “I think I’ll pack up.”

“Okay,” he said, and Noora could hear the note of worry in his voice, “I’ll help you,” he started unplugging her guitar and wrapping up the cords.

Noora hurried out of the pub soon after. The fresh night air hit her like a cool drink of water, and she paused to lean against the wall of the pub a few feet from the bouncer, who continued checking IDs without a second look at her. She closed her eyes, willing her face to return to its pale complexion - a desperate hope when she was embarrassed.

“Hey,” someone tapped her on the arm.

She jumped, looking around, it was the guy who fell into her. He stood next to her, looking slightly anxious and still a bit drunk, although he was steadier than he had been in the bar. Possibly the night air was doing some good for him too.

“Hi sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I just wanted to apologize, I was an arse in there.”

“It’s okay,” Noora said, looking away. The man nodded, and Noora could tell he was watching her, but when she looked at him, he had looked away to rummage in his coat. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, pulled one out, and stuck it between his lips. Then he pulled out a lighter. He attempted to light the cigarette but had very little luck as there was a faint breeze blowing through the alley and he kept missing the end of the cigarette with the tiny flame. Noora sighed and held out her hand.

“Let me help,” she said, pushing off the wall. He handed the lighter over and held still as she held the lighter to the tip of his cigarette. He inhaled and the end of the cigarette glowed.

“Thanks,” he said, “And I’m sorry, again. I hope you’re not too badly hurt.”

She crossed her arms, she could still feel a throbbing pain in her tailbone and elbow, “I’m used to it.”

He laughed, looking down at his feet, he had a mop of curly brown hair that didn’t match his neat, coordinated clothing.

“I’m sure,” he took a drag from his cigarette and then looked back up, surveying her, “You sound American.”

“Well, I am American,” she said.

He nodded, “Where in America?”

“All over.”

He nodded again, “I’ve never been.”

She nodded awkwardly, not sure how to respond.

“What are you doing in Scotland?” he asked.

“I’m living with my aunt,” she shrugged.

“Ah nice,” he hesitated, “but that doesn’t really answer my question,” he gave her an impish grin.

“You’re very friendly for an English person,” she countered.

“How do you know I’m English?”

“Your accent,” she said.

“Well done you. But you still haven’t answered my question,” he said, undeterred.

Noora laughed, feeling put on the spot, especially since he was still surveying her closely. She felt her face go red.

“Well...my mom needed a place to live.”

He nodded.

“You seem much steadier than you were ten minutes ago,” she said.

“I sober up quickly,” he replied.

“Right, well, it was very nice to meet you,” She smiled politely, “I need to get home.”

“Right of course,” he dropped his cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out with his foot.

He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else, but all that came out was “Have a good night...” he looked at her questioningly.

“Noora,” she said.

“Noora,” he repeated.

She smiled, nodded once, and walked away.

Noora's mother was awake when she got home. She was reading a book in her favorite red armchair with her glasses slipping down her nose and two cats nestled into the crannies created by her legs, curled on the chair.

"Hello darling," her mother said, looking up from her book and pushing her glasses up her nose, "How was it?"

"Awful, a drunk guy fell on me again," Noora plopped onto the couch, "Is Mindy asleep?"

"I most certainly am not," Mindy, Noora's aunt, and her mother's sister, bustled into the room wearing a fluffy white robe and slippers.

"I had to hear about your concert dear," she said.

Noora laughed, feeling some of the tension leave her body, "It wasn't a concert Mindy, it's called a gig."

"Is that not the same thing?"

"Not where I'm concerned," Noora said, still smiling.

"Well, either way, you would think they'd have better security to stop hooligans coming in and ruining everything," her aunt huffed, picking up Noora's feet so she could sit on the couch underneath them.

"Yeah well, it's just a pub," Noora said.

"You're aunt's right darling, what are they doing letting these people in?" Her mother said, the conversation seemed to distract her from her book.

"I don't know mom they want to make money I guess."

Mindy raised an eyebrow, "And they will sacrifice their employees for money?"

“It doesn’t seem like they treat you very well there darling,” Charlotte said, brushing Noora’s bangs off her face.

“Oh please! You guys, it was nothing, the guy apologized to me,” Noora said, rolling her eyes.

“Hmmm,” Charlotte said, unconvinced, “Are you sure you want to be in that kind of environment Noora?”

“Mom, it’s fine,” Noora said, sitting up and starting to regret saying anything.

“You know what negative energy does to your humors,” Mindy said, poking Noora in the arm.

“Oh god, not that again,” Noora said, exasperated.

Mindy had recently become obsessed with medieval medicine, she seemed to think the fluids in your body could hold bad emotions or desires and if they built up enough, your body would explode or something. But this was not unusual for Mindy, who also believed her and Charlotte’s grandmother (who had been born in Scotland) was a witch who worshipped magic, mixed potions in her countryside cottage, and had tea with Brownies. Not the baked good, but the mischievous household creature. Mindy was constantly brewing strange concoctions of herbs that she believed to be highly medicinal if rubbed all over the body on the night of the full moon. Noora thought they smelled like rotting leaves.

“Min, don’t be ridiculous,” Charlotte said, rolling her eyes. She had never engaged Mindy’s farfetched theories. “There is no such thing as humors,” she said.

“That’s all you know,” Mindy said, pulling her knitting out of a basket on the coffee table.

Noora laughed and lay back down on the couch, enjoying the warm, familial feeling of her mother and aunt beside her. She always felt most at home when she was with the two of them. When it had just been her and her mother, they seemed farther apart somehow, like there was a link between them that was faulty or weak, or broken. But Mindy seemed to patch this gap and bring the three of them closer together. Noora had never fully understood why her mother didn't just live with Mindy, especially since her mother had had very little money for a very long time. When she was younger she had been especially upset about it, but now everything felt right with the world.

Noora stared up at the ceiling, letting her mind wander. It was one of those beautiful eighteen-foot ceilings with Victorian molding, painted in a warm white. The circle of light from the lamp threw golden light across the room. Noora let out a long breath, the feeling of tension she had felt before entering the flat returned. She thought of the man she had met before leaving the Three Ladies, he looked put together, despite being off his face. She always turned bright red and laughed a lot when she drank too much, but he was cool and relaxed, even as he struggled to speak straight.

Noora saw the man from the bar several more times over the course of the next few weeks. Well, she thought she did anyway. It was very strange, but he seemed to have taken up permanent residence in her mind and she couldn't really figure out why. She couldn't even picture what he looked like because she only saw his face in the half-light of the alley outside the Three Ladies and, anyway, they only spoke for a few minutes. Maybe that was why she remembered his voice more than anything else. That and his cigarette, the smoke spiraling from the tip and curling into the night air.

When she was picking up a few bits for tea, she thought she saw him in the shop, picking up a sprig of mint to smell it and putting it in his basket. But it wasn't him, just a man in a grey overcoat with brown hair. She had a similar experience several more times in various places around the city, and she was starting to believe she was going mad. Her mind was lost in one of those obsessive spirals that happens when you have nothing to do and no one you want to talk to.

Then one evening, she was cozied up in the corner of her favorite bookshop, reading a huge book on Japanese ceramics that she could never afford, and he materialized in front of her. This time it was actually him, standing right in front of her, scanning the bookshelf to her right. She was too surprised to say anything, but she didn't have to, because he looked over as if he knew she was there all along.

"Funny seeing you here Noora," he said.

She sat up with both feet on the floor, "Where did you..." she trailed off, "Did you know I was here?"

"I saw you, but I didn't want to disturb you."

Noora looked down at her book and closed it quietly.

"You're not disturbing me."

He walked toward her and she stood up. He held out his hand, "I don't think I ever told you my name."

"No, you didn't," she said, taking it.

"I'm Avi," he said.

"That's an unusual name."

"Yeah well, my mother's an artist."

"I see, would I know her?"

“Probably,” he said, without telling Noora her name.

Avi let go of her hand to point at the book she was still holding, “Are you interested in ceramics?”

“Oh,” Noora looked down at the book, “yeah I am.”

“You know, this is a crazy coincidence, but I have a class on world ceramics in twenty minutes.”

Avi must have seen her eyes light up with longing because he laughed and said, “Would you like to come?”

“Is that allowed?”

“Oh sure, as long as your professor likes you. And mine does,” He smiled a wide and open smile, and Noora took note of his face this time. His skin was browner than hers. His eyes were brown too, and his eyebrows were asymmetrical, which made his smile look strangely mischievous.

“In that case, I would love to.”

The classroom was tiny, and it was located on the third floor of a school building that looked like it used to be a house. They had to climb a cramped spiral staircase to get there, and all the way up Avi caught her up on the class. But he talked about content only a little bit, and spent much more time telling her who was sleeping with who and about meeting his professor at the pub over the weekend accidentally, where they spent three hours discussing the influence of Buddhism on East Asian ceramics. Noora didn't mind, she was fascinated. Her mind lapped up Avi's words like a dog dying of thirst, and she struggled to comprehend the wideness of his world. Avi introduced Noora to his professor, who welcomed her with a smile. She thanked her

about seven times before sitting down next to Avi and pulling out a notebook. She wished she still had the book she had been reading but she had to put it back.

The rest of the students filtered in, talking and laughing, their voices slowly quieting as everyone settled into the room, taking out books and laptops. Noora heard the sound of pens clicking and pages turning, and she couldn't seem to stop staring around. Mostly everyone in the classroom was nicely dressed, with smart jackets, warm scarves, and expensive leather shoes. Noora noticed a girl sitting on the other side of Avi who was wearing the most beautiful brown suede jacket Noora had ever seen and she had to tamp down her jealousy. The girl turned to Avi to make a comment about the reading and Noora looked away, embarrassed. The professor, however, interrupted their quiet conversation.

“While I love the discussion going on over here,” she gestured toward Avi and the girl in the brown jacket, who both laughed and glanced knowingly at each other, “We really must get started.”

Noora was suddenly very conscious of what she was wearing, plain jeans with grubby Adidas sneakers and a battered brown leather jacket. She pulled at the cuffs of her sleeves awkwardly, wondering how on earth she ended up in a classroom with all of these people who were clearly so far above her social class she probably appeared tiny and insect-like compared to them. She was wondering what her aunt would say if she knew Noora had followed a stranger halfway across the city, when the stranger in question raised his hand in response to a question the professor had asked while Noora was busy being self-conscious.

Then Avi started talking and Noora forgot to think about her clothes or social class. He had a way of speaking that made her focus on what he was saying completely. The distractions of the other students and the faint noises from outside the window faded into the background. He

used his hands animatedly when he talked, flinging them out wide in indignation and circling his wrist to illustrate repetition. He also used his book - which was covered in black ink annotations - and from which he read segments to illustrate his points. He seemed to know the material incredibly well. Throughout the rest of the class, several other people spoke about the book in a way that made her think they might have read the first chapter at most as their ideas were abstract and devoid of examples. But anyone could tell Avi knew what he was talking about.

The class flew by in a heartbeat, and two hours suddenly felt like ten minutes to Noora, whose mind flicked back and forth between speakers as she listened. When they left, walking down the stone steps and across the square toward the Meadows, Avi asked her if she liked it and she didn't know what to say. He could not have known what he had just given her, and he was a complete stranger.

“It was incredible, I wish I was in that class.”

“You could be, it's only the second week of the semester, you could still sign up for it. What are you studying?”

“Oh, I'm not at uni right now,” she replied.

“Oh right, fair enough,” he didn't ask why, and she didn't offer an answer.

“Well, I could give you the reading list,” he said.

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

He pulled a slightly crumpled piece of paper out of his book bag and smoothed it out, he scribbled something on it before handing it to her. She ran her eyes over the paper, noticing the phone number at the top, and smiled at him.

“That was smooth,” she said.

Avi just smiled and looked down at his feet while he walked, “Just in case.”

“Right of course, just in case.”

They broke off when they reached the Meadows, and Avi headed toward Morningside after Noora got on the bus toward Leith. She entered the number into her phone carefully and texted it right away, *Just in case*.

When Noora got into Columbia University, her mother was ecstatic, and Noora’s heart was full of her dreams of the future. Her mom drove her to campus and helped her move in. Her roommate was friendly, and since she had already moved in, she helped carry bags up from Charlotte’s car.

“This is lovely darling,” Charlotte said, out of breath from three flights of stairs.

They set up her desk with its cup of pencils. She organized underwear and socks in the dresser they provided for her. She lined up her toiletries in an organizer under the sink and filled her shower caddy with brand-new products. Her mother insisted on leaving her with multiple plants to take care of. It was the best feeling in the world.

She lasted a semester before her mother ran out of money. Noora wasn’t aware that her mother was running out of money until the first day of finals week, and she didn’t know she would have to drop out until she got home for Christmas. She moved out on January 2nd, before the spring semester started and anyone could witness her putting her pencils and toiletries into a brown cardboard box.

Her one semester was lonely and horrible and lovely and exciting and tiring. Her mind felt so full of ideas and she spent so much time with people she barely knew and reveled in deciding whether she wanted to spend more time with them. She dated two different guys, one for a week and one for longer, and it was wildly anxiety-inducing and fun.

Then, as spring was arriving her mother well and truly ran out of money. So Charlotte called her sister and the two of them packed all their belongings into four suitcases and moved across the world to live with Mindy because they had nowhere else to go. Now, Noora was playing at the Three Sisters on Thursdays and working in the bar the rest of the week. She woke up at 11 regularly and read in all her free time. Now, Noora brushed her dreams of university under the rug, old news. She tried it and it didn't work out.

But still, the class she attended with Avi felt like a drop of water after a year of thirst. She was enraptured, intoxicated. The people with their classic, expensive clothing - wool jumpers, overcoats, oversized scarves, loafers everywhere, and opaque tights with mini skirts. The teacher's complex questions and the way she moved her hands animatedly when describing a concept. The afternoon light slanting through the eighteenth-century windows and the smell of rain outside. And, a tall, mysterious man beside her who raised his pen in the air when he wanted to speak and talked about art as if he existed inside of it, seeing every contour and color in fine detail. It was like a dream.

Noora remembered the experience as she wiped glasses at the Three Ladies, running a clean rag over each glass until it shone. She wanted to go to the class again but she knew that would be pushing the limits as she wasn't a student. The class was too small for her to slip in unnoticed, and all her fantasies of infiltration were unrealistic and ridiculous. The door creaked open and Noora looked up from her work.

Of course, it was Avi, followed by a group of people who were all talking and laughing. Their merriment joined the murmur that already permeated the bar, and they immediately approached the bar with Avi in the lead.

He leaned against the bar and smiled at her, "Hello again."

“Hi,” Noora grinned back, “Looking for a drink?”

“I am.”

“What would you like?”

But before he could respond, one of the people he was with cut in; “Six Midnight Falls please,” he said, naming their most expensive cocktail.

Avi rolled his eyes, “Andrew not everyone wants a cocktail.”

Andrew looked affronted, “Speak for yourself Avi.”

“I could say the same to you,” Avi said.

“Whatever, you get what you want,” Andrew said, pushing his hand into Avi’s face flippantly.

Noora stood frozen, “So...I’m sorry. What did you guys want?”

“Let’s go with five Midnight Falls,” Avi said pointedly, “and one whiskey on the rocks please.”

“No problem.”

Noora took her time making the cocktails, which were quickly picked up by Andrew and another man with brown hair and a silver earring and brought over to a table in the corner where Avi’s friends were sitting. Noora noticed the girl from Avi’s class was with them. However, when she served Avi his drink, he did not immediately join them.

“How are you?” He asked once his friends had vacated the area.

“Oh... alright, and you?”

“Yeah good,” he sipped his drink, looking over at the door as a couple walked in, “I didn’t know you worked in the bar here too,” he said, looking back at her.

“Well I do,” Noora said, but she wasn’t interested in talking about herself, “What about you? Are you working at the moment?”

“No, not really,” Avi said.

“Just school then?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you studying?”

“Well, politics, technically.”

“Politics?” Noora frowned, “But, then why are you taking a class on world ceramics?”

Avi sipped his drink again and set it down on the bar, pursing his lips, “Because I hate politics.”

Noora’s confusion and curiosity mounted. “But then why -”

But Avi cut her off, “My parents wanted me to study it, to become a politician or something.” He didn’t look at her when he said this but she could sense the bitterness in his voice.

She nodded, staying quiet for a moment.

“Well, what would you study if you wanted to?”

“Ceramics,” he said instantly, “I’ve taken a bunch of studio ceramics classes now.”

“Oh that’s incredible,” Noora said, leaning on the bar, “what kind of stuff have you made?”

“Oh all sorts, most of it is terrible, but there’s a few pieces I like.”

“Wow, and is that all through University of Edinburgh?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s really cool, I didn’t know they offered ceramics. I’ve always wanted to try it.”

“Well...” and for the first time since she had met him, Avi looked nervous, “I could show you the studio if you want.”

“I would love that,” she said, grinning.

Avi smiled back. Then he picked up his drink and gestured her around the bar, “Come on, come meet my friends.”

Noora glanced along the bar, but no one was waiting for a drink, so she followed Avi over to his table. Avi’s friends generally received her graciously, she shook hands with several of them and the girl who Noora had seen in Avi’s class got up to give her a hug, and Noora learned her name was Ita. Noora said a few quiet hellos and waved shyly.

“Why don’t you join us?” Ita asked, smiling.

Noora glanced back over at the bar, noticing a couple of people waiting to be served.

“I’m sorry, I have to get back, but let me know if you need anything.”

She returned to the safety of the bar, relieved to escape such an intimidating social situation.

However, Avi and his friends stayed for hours, and Noora could feel them in the corner of the bar. She served them several rounds of drinks, and the man called Andrew got steadily rowdier as the night progressed. As the pub got busier, Noora was able to ignore them and focus on working, but Avi eventually showed up again at the bar attempting to get her attention.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey, when are you off?”

Noora checked her watch, “In about twenty minutes, why?”

“Wanna come out with us?”

“Oh um,” Noora was suddenly very conscious of her sweaty hair and flushed face, and to give herself time to think, she asked, “When are you leaving?”

“Twenty minutes?” Avi said, shrugging.

Noora laughed, “Alright then, let me just finish up,” She gestured to the sticky bar.

“Of course,” Avi smiled and went back to his table.

Noora dropped her rag immediately and hurried into the back to find her stuff. She had a fresh t-shirt in her bag that she usually packed for the walk home, but it could not be considered suitable club attire. Noora swore as she rifled through her bag, looking for mascara she was convinced she had put in there.

“What are you doing?”

Noora looked up to see Molly watching her.

“Oh thank god, Molly, do you have any mascara?”

“Yeah,” she said slowly, “why?”

“Because I’ve just been invited out by a ridiculously attractive man and if I don’t go I’ll regret it for the rest of my days,” she said desperately.

Molly’s eyes widened, “Oh my god, are you talking about the guy who kept coming up to you at the bar?”

Noora nodded and Molly squealed, “No fucking way. You know who that is right?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s Avignon Morgan, his mother is Alice Tate.”

“What?” This was a shock, Alice Tate was one of the most famous modern painters in the UK and belonged to one of those old British families. One which still had money left over from generations of exploitation.

“Yeah, and you’re going clubbing with him?”

“I guess so, but more importantly, do you have any mascara?”

“Oh I’ll do better than that.” Molly grabbed her bag and Noora’s hand and led her into the toilet, she pulled out a lacy, wine-colored top that she had apparently purchased before coming to work, and a makeup bag. Noora was dressed in ten minutes, the black top matched her black work jeans well, and Molly brushed her hair while Noora applied a bit of smokey eyeshadow and some black mascara.

“Thanks Molly,” Noora said, putting on her jacket, “you’re a lifesaver.”

“Wait one second,” Molly left the bathroom and was back in a few seconds with a bottle of vodka. “Here, have a swig.”

“Oh god, that stuff is disgusting,” Noora said, looking at the cheap label.

“Do it! It’s for your nerves.”

Noora consented, downing a swig of the stuff and then drinking quickly from the tap to clear her mouth of the taste. Then she checked her makeup in the mirror and reentered the bar where Avi and his friends were standing by the door. Ita smiled at her as she approached.

“You coming out with us?”

Noora nodded.

“Lovely, come on then.” Ita looped her arm around Noora’s and they led the group out into the night air.

When they got to the club, Avi asked Noora if she wanted a drink, and when she said yes he put his hand lightly on the small of her back and led her up to the bar.

“What would you like?” Avi had to practically shout to make himself heard over the music.

“Gin and tonic,” she said, shouting as well.

Avi repeated her order to the bartender and got a pint for himself. When their drinks had arrived he led her back to his circle of friends in the middle of the dancefloor. It was stiflingly hot. Sweaty bodies pressed up against each other and Noora saw hands lifting into the air and faces turned toward the ceiling. She took a long sip from her drink and felt the alcohol go to her head almost immediately. She realized she hadn't eaten since her break at the bar, which had been hours ago, and the mouthful of alcohol she had taken in the bathroom at the Three Ladies had acted upon her quickly. She was now quite tipsy.

Ita came up next to her with a drink and smiled widely, throwing her free arm over Noora's shoulder and shouting in her ear, “I'm so glad you came out with us!”

Ita swayed a bit and Noora wrapped her arm around her to keep her steady, both of them laughing tipsily. The music swelled, and Ita grabbed Noora's hand and spun her around. Noora laughed and did the same to her. Noora let go of Ita's hand and raised her hands to the ceiling with the rest of the crowd, feeling as though she was worshipping the music, absorbing the vibration of the bass into her chest. Her head was swimming with alcohol, and sweat shone on her skin in the hot crush of bodies.

She opened her eyes then and locked eyes with Avi. Noora realized dimly that he must have been watching her for a while, but when she looked at him he did not look away in embarrassment but held her gaze and sipped his drink as she continued to dance. Had she been sober, Noora might have reacted differently, but her intoxicated mind had other ideas. She had experienced the steps of this dance plenty of times before and her body knew what to do. Noora moved toward him, dropping her hands and looking up at his face, which seemed to shift in the flashing lights, blurring the lines of his eyes and mouth. Avi stepped closer to her too, and she

could smell his cologne. Someone put a hand on Noora's shoulder and she turned around to see Ita's face, her eyeshadow sparkling.

"Will you come to the toilet with me?" She said in Noora's ear.

Noora nodded and followed Ita from the dance floor without looking at Avi. The line for the toilet was painfully long, and Noora and Ita had to wait for a full ten minutes. By the time they got to the front, they both had to go so badly that they piled into a stall together. Ita hiked up her black mini skirt and sat on the toilet with a sigh of relief. Noora laughed, holding onto the bathroom door to keep it closed as the lock was missing.

"God I'm drunk," Ita said, her head in her hands.

"Me too," Noora giggled.

Ita laughed too and stood up from the toilet, "Here, you go," she said.

Noora unbuttoned her jeans and sat down.

"You and Avi seemed quite friendly," Ita said, a twinkle in her eye.

Noora smiled and stood up, "I'm allowed a bit of fun," she said.

"Of course you are," Ita said, "Just be careful with that one. He's been known to steal hearts."

"I'm not worried," Noora said, "my heart has only been stolen once and I doubt it will happen again anytime soon."

"If you say so," Ita said with a grin.

Someone banged on the stall door Ita was leaning against, "Will you hurry up? Some of us have to piss!"

“Oh shit, come on,” Ita said, and her and Noora vacated the stall quickly mumbling apologies and trying to contain their giggles as an ill-tempered girl glowered at them before marching into the stall and slamming the door shut.

“I just don’t want Avi to scare you off,” Ita said as they washed their hands, “You’re such a laugh and he can be so weird with girls.” Ita pulled out a tube of shimmering lipgloss and began applying it to her lips.

“Oh don’t worry,” Noora said, “I don’t scare easily.”

“Well give me your phone number and then if he does I can make sure we stay friends.” Ita popped the lipgloss applicator back into its tube and pulled out her smartphone as they left the bathroom. Noora entered her number into Ita’s phone and then they went to rejoin the dancing.

Avi had disappeared, and Noora supposed he had gone outside for a cigarette. She resisted the urge to go find him. Instead, she downed a drink purchased by Ita and continued dancing, enjoying the lightness in her head and a mind free of thoughts.

Noora woke up the next day with a blaring headache. She became immediately conscious of how dry her mouth was and how difficult it was to open her eyes. When she finally did open them, she closed them again almost immediately with a groan of protest as the room she lay in was full of bright sunlight. Noora sat up slowly and opened her eyes slowly, squinting at her surroundings.

Noora lay in a bedroom with high ceilings, Victorian mouldings, and a huge bay window. The room was painted in a warm white and furnished with an antique wardrobe and desk, along with the huge bed Noora was sitting on, which was piled high with white pillows and a flowery bedspread. Noora tried to remember how she had ended up in such a beautifully lavish apartment

that she did not recognize in the slightest, but her memories of the night before came to her only in flashes. The sound of voices floated toward Noora through a door in front of her. She got up and opened the door.

She entered the living room of the flat to find Ita making coffee in the kitchen and Avi sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette and drinking his own cup of coffee, steam rising softly from the mug.

“Hello sleeping beauty,” he said cheekily.

Ita looked around, “How are you feeling Noora?”

“Fantastic,” Noora said grumpily, slumping into a chair at the table. Ita laughed and Avi smiled at Noora over his coffee cup. “Would anyone care to tell me where I am?”

“God, you did have fun last night,” Avi said.

“My flat,” Ita said, “I realized last night that I had no clue where you live.”

“And I suppose I also had no clue where I live?” Noora asked.

“Your words, not mine,” Ita said with a laugh. She walked over to the table and placed a cup of coffee in front of Noora. She was wearing a floaty blue silk robe and her hair was wet, she looked freshly showered and clean.

“Thanks,” Noora said. She looked around the flat. It was gorgeous: Victorian eighteen-foot ceilings, another bay window, a real fireplace, floor-length curtains and antique furniture. The kitchen had a gas hob and a white ceramic sink, with a modern fridge and dishwasher. It was just now hitting Noora how wealthy Ita and Avi actually were. The flat was beautiful, spacious, and lavishly furnished, and Ita lived there alone. It was insane. Unless Avi lived here too. Noora looked over at Ita and Avi. They made a lovely pair, with Ita’s dark hair dripping on her expensive silk robe and Avi’s plain white t-shirt paired with gray trousers and

Adidas sneakers. No, he couldn't live here as well. It was clearly a girl's flat. Noora suddenly became aware that Ita was looking at her expectantly.

"What?"

"Do you want to have a shower?" Ita asked again.

"Oh yeah, that would be great. But I don't have any clean clothes."

"That's alright, you can borrow some of mine," she said.

Ita led her into her bedroom and opened the antique dresser, pulling out a soft blue pajama set.

"The showers in there," she said, pointing to a blue door off the bedroom, "use whatever you'd like."

"Thanks," Noora entered the bathroom, another beautiful room, and stripped off her club clothes which were uncomfortably pinching her body. She started the shower and sighed as the hot water ran over her body. She stood there for a moment, enjoying the feeling of washing away the night before. She used only body soap and a tiny bit of shampoo, not wanting to take advantage of Ita's generosity. She was just washing the shampoo out of her hair when she realized she had not spoken to her mom since before her shift yesterday.

"Shit," Noora said loudly, clambering out of the shower and drying her body quickly. She pulled on Ita's pajamas and left the bathroom with her hair dripping everywhere.

"Have either of you seen my bag?" Noora asked as she hurried into the living room.

Ita pointed to the coffee table, and Noora hurried over to find her phone.

"What's up?" Ita asked.

"I haven't texted my mom for ages," Noora said anxiously. She pulled her phone out of her bag, it was dead. "Do you have a charger I could use?" She said, looking up at Ita.

“Yeah, on the counter,” Ita said, pointing again.

Noora found the charger and plugged her phone in, clicking the power button repeatedly.

“You might have to wait for it to turn on,” Avi said, watching her, “do you want to use mine?”

“Oh that would be great,” Noora grabbed the proffered phone and typed in her mom’s phone number.

Her mom answered on the third ring, “Hello?” She said, her voice sounded strained.

“Mom, it’s me,” Noora said, walking into Ita’s room for some privacy. She saw Ita and Avi exchange a look as she left the room.

“Noora?”

“Yeah?”

“Jesus Christ Noora, where have you been? I’ve been calling and texting all morning.”

“I’m sorry, I went out last night. I forgot to tell you.”

“Yes, I figured that out,” She said coolly.

Noora pinched the bridge of her nose, “I’m sorry, it was stupid, I was excited.”

“Where are you? Are you okay?”

“Yeah fine, I slept at a friend’s house.”

“What friend?”

“Can I tell you when I get home?”

Her mother was silent for a moment, “Fine, but I’ll have you know I’m furious with you.”

“I know mom I’m really sorry.”

“I know,” her mother’s voice softened a tiny bit, “please don’t ever do that again darling.”

“I won’t.”

“When will you be home?”

“Soon, just have to find a ride.”

Noora said goodbye and reentered the living room, handing Avi his phone.

“Thanks for that, I completely forgot to tell her I was going out last night.”

“Seemed like a big deal,” Avi said.

“Well, I do live with her.”

“Really? Where do you live?” Ita asked.

“Leith, close to the Links.”

Ita and Avi nodded as Noora sat down.

“We were just talking about plans for the weekend,” Ita said.

“Yeah?” Noora said.

“Oh yes, Ita’s throwing a terribly lavish party in her Highlands mansion that you absolutely must attend,” Avi said in his most posh diction.

“Oh like you’re one to talk,” Ita said, looking over at him and smiling.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about darling,” Avi said, blowing cigarette smoke into the air.

“Oh my god, would you put that out? This is my flat you know.”

“Yes alright,” Avi said guiltily, stubbing out the cigarette, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Ita said, smiling and gripping his arm to show she wasn’t angry. Noora followed the movement with , feeling a strange twinge of jealousy and embarrassment in her stomach. Then Ita looked at Noora.

“In case you were wondering why Avi’s here, he dropped in to discuss my party.”

“What party?” Noora asked.

“Well, like Avi said, I’m having a birthday party at the weekend in my father’s house. I would love it if you would come.”

“Really? You do realize you only met me last night, right?”

Ita laughed, and, for some reason, blushed a bit, “Yes really, do you want to come?”

“Well of course, I’d love to. How do I get there? Is there a train?”

“Don’t be silly! You can drive with us,” Ita said, looking at Avi.

“Of course,” Avi said, watching Noora closely.

“Well I…” everything suddenly felt completely surreal, had she really just been invited to a party at a mansion in the Scottish highlands? It felt like she had walked into someone else’s life in the past few days, and she wasn’t sure she quite fit it. “I would love to! Of course, I would love to.”

“Lovely,” Ita said, looking incredibly happy. She reached across the table and squeezed Noora’s hand. “Now, would you like a lift home? Avi can take you.”

Avi nodded when Ita looked at him.

“That would be great, thanks,” Noora said, standing up, “Let me get changed.”

“No no, you can keep those,” Ita gestured to the pajamas.

“Are you sure?” Noora said.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ll see you this weekend!”

“Alright, thank you so much for everything Ita,” Noora walked around the table to hug her. Then she found her shoes and her jacket, which she slid on over Ita’s pajamas, she rolled her clothes into a bundle and grabbed her phone and purse before following Avi out the door.

Most of the drive passed in awkward silence. Avi's phone connected to the bluetooth and automatically started playing a 90's rock playlist quietly, but otherwise there was no sound in the car. Noora felt a kind of barrier had been erected between them last night, but she wasn't sure who had erected it or why. She admitted to herself that she found Avi attractive. And who wouldn't? He was a wealthy British heir with perfect hair and a sense of style. However, they had officially moved past the flirtatious relationship they had started in. Ita's interruption last night meant that they had not gone past intense eye contact, and Noora couldn't help feeling they had now entered uncharted territory. Did he think she had rejected him? No, that would be insane, she had been pulled away. Still, after that moment she had not made any more advances, and she wondered if he had expected her to. But this was ridiculous, she thought, glancing over at Avi's hands on the steering wheel as he made a tight turn. Why did she care so much anyway? He was just a stupid boy, and anyway, Ita seemed to genuinely want to be her friend. Noora had found friends hard to come by in the year since she had moved to Scotland, and she didn't want to let anything come between her and a blossoming friendship. Especially since Ita and Avi seemed to have a strangely intimate relationship that Noora didn't fully understand.

Noora glanced over at Avi, wondering what he was thinking, but he noticed and looked over at her, catching her eye. They both looked away quickly, and the awkwardness heightened. But soon, they had arrived outside Noora's apartment and Avi pulled to the side of the road to let Noora out.

"Well, have a good week then," Noora said as she gathered her stuff.

"Thanks, you too," Avi replied, watching her climb out of the car. "Noora," he said before she could close the door.

"Yeah?" She bent down so she could see him.

“Do you think you’ll come next weekend?” His face was impassive.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Cool,” he said, smiling now, “See you then.”

“See you!”

A few days later, however, Noora received a text while she was at the bar. She checked her phone and her heart dropped. It was a message from Avi that read *Hey, sorry to spring this on you. I don't think I can drive you to Ita's this weekend. Would you be able to find a way yourself? Here's the address:* followed by a location pin. Noora's immediate reaction was intense embarrassment. Of course he didn't want to drive her, she occupied such a tiny space in his life, and probably in Ita's too. She was negligible, really. At first, she wanted to give up on the whole thing completely and stay home. However, her mom changed her mind.

“When's the next time you'll be able to attend a party in the Scottish highlands?” She asked.

“I know mom, but imagine how humiliating it will be if I show up and it turns out no one wants me there?”

“What evidence do you have to suggest that?”

Noora crossed her arms and grumbled, “I just have a feeling.”

“Don't be silly darling!” Mindy said, “What about Ita? It seems like she likes you. And that boy did send you the address after all.”

“I suppose,” Noora said.

“You take my car,” Mindy said.

“You'll have a lovely time darling.” Charlotte said.

Noora was facing a dilemma. The thought of arriving at Ita's gorgeous, Scottish mansion made her nauseous, but the thought of skipping it completely made her anxious, and the thought of texting Ita to tell her she couldn't come because Avi couldn't drive her made her anxious and nauseous. Basically, she had no clue how to approach this situation and every time she thought of it she actively tried to not think about it. Even so, she was going to do it, because it was still a party in the Scottish highlands and if she hated it, she had a car. That was her mother's reasoning at least.

This was how Noora found herself in her aunt's car with an unnecessary number of clothing options in the back seat, driving over the Forth road bridge and trying to distract herself with very loud music. For a while, her anxious thoughts consumed her, but as she drove deeper into the heart of Scotland, she was completely distracted by the landscape around her. Soon, she came to a region where great mountains rose out of the earth, towering over the landscape like giants. Clouds scudded across their peaks and settled in the passes of grey rock, and greenery covered the sides. The peaks of the mountains pierced the clouds as if the giants were raising their swords to the sky in triumph. Noora could see thousands of little waterfalls trickling down the sides, carving into the rock from a millennia's worth of rain. Deer picked their way across the rocky upper terrain, their grey fur making them nearly invisible against the mountainside.

Driving through this landscape calmed Noora, and her thoughts wandered to different things, much more simple and beautiful things. However, it wasn't long before Noora arrived at the mansion and all her fears returned. The place was truly an estate. The drive was bordered by trees and the house at the end of the lane was made of a beautiful gray stone, complete with gables, slate roofs, and even a turret. It was beautiful and stately, and when Noora parked in front

of the gorgeously adorned front door, Ita emerged, also looking gorgeous and stately in a fine, long gray dress.

“Noora darling, you made it!” Ita kissed her on each cheek without mentioning the change in plans at all. “How did you get on? Was the drive alright?”

“Yeah it was beautiful, this place is incredible,” Noora said, looking up at the house.

“Oh that’s so kind of you,” Ita said, gripping her hand and leading her inside.

“I think I should grab my stuff,” Noora said as Ita pulled her inside.

“Nonsense, I’ll have it brought in for you. Come on, I want you to meet everyone.”

Ita led her through a beautiful foyer with a grand stone staircase, and Noora thought dejectedly of the pile of clothes in the back seat. Ita pulled her into a small library lit by huge windows and lined with shelves of books. There were around ten or fifteen people in the library, and after pouring Noora a cup of tea she brought her around to meet each of her friends. Noora immediately forgot everyone’s names and began to wonder what she had gotten herself into when she spied Avi from the other side of the room. He was sitting on a loveseat with a dark-haired girl and speaking in low tones. He seemed to feel her gaze on him because he glanced across the room, but Noora looked away quickly, avoiding his eye. Noora was then ensnared in a terribly boring conversation with a man whose profession she forgot quickly as he droned on and on to her about his latest travels across Europe. After a very long description of Paris cuisine, Noora told him she was going out for a smoke, smiled politely, and left the room.

She spied a back door and made her way outside into the garden. Of course, she wasn’t really going out for a smoke, as she didn’t usually carry cigarettes, but she did want a breath of fresh air and few moments respite from the conversation she had just been subjected to. Noora sat on a low stone bench where she was obscured from the house and took a long sip of air. It

was cool and it felt refreshing on her face and lips. It was November now, and even though it was only 4:30pm, the overcast sky was already darkening. A light rain began to fall and Noora tilted her face upward and closed her eyes.

“I’ve only ever seen Americans do that when it rains.”

Noora jumped and looked around to see Avi standing by a fountain, a smoking cigarette held in his relaxed hand.

“What are you talking about?”

“Tilting your head up to feel the rain on your face,” Avi said, imitating the gesture, “I only ever see it in American movies when the writing is particularly dramatic.”

“Well, maybe I’m feeling a bit dramatic,” Noora said, turning away from him.

“And why would that be?”

“No reason,” Noora said. She was not going to let him wheedle an emotional confession out of her.

“I’m sorry I bailed on you.”

Noora looked around. He did look sorry. Still, she refrained from responding.

“I had to drive a couple of the lads, there wasn’t much room. I didn’t think you would want to be smashed in with all of them.”

“It’s alright,” Noora said, with only partial sincerity.

Avi gave her a hopeful smile. “Are we still friends?”

“I suppose,” Noora said, defeated.

“Great,” Avi walked over and sat next to her on the bench, “It’s freezing out here isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” It was nearly dark now and the temperature was dropping.

“Want to go for a swim?”

Noora looked at Avi in surprise, his eyes were twinkling mischievously.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

Avi took her hand and led her back into the house through the back door, but instead of leading her back into the living room, he turned left and opened a door leading to a spiral metal staircase.

“Avi, are you sure this is okay?” Noora said in a half whisper so the people across the hall wouldn’t hear her.

“Of course, I’ve been here plenty of times.” He started down the staircase, beckoning for her to follow.

“What do you mean plenty of times?” Noora said, following him onto the staircase and closing the door behind them.

“Me and Ita used to come down here all the time at sixth form, it’s the best part of the house.”

“You were at sixth form together?”

“Yep, George Heriot’s School,” he said grandly.

“I didn’t know that.”

“That’s how we met, been friends ever since. She’s one of the only normal ones.”

Noora was about to respond to this, but they had reached the bottom of the staircase and Noora gasped at the room before them. It was a huge underground swimming pool, with light gray stone walls and dancing yellow lights at the bottom of the pool, making the whole place look like an underground cave full of treasure.

“Jesus,” Noora whispered, “you all are *rich* rich.”

Avi laughed, “Don’t go saying that to anyone else here, they might start talking about their European holidays.” Avi winked at her, and she had a feeling he had witnessed her entanglement with the pompous gentleman earlier.

“Well come on,” he said, “let’s get in and warm up.”

“Warm up?”

“Yeah, it’s heated.”

“Of course it is,” Noora said, rolling her eyes.

Avi began stripping off his clothes, which, to him, seemed perfectly normal in the given circumstances. Noora did not quite agree with this sentiment, but she began doing the same anyway until she was left in only her underwear and a tank top. Avi was already sliding into the water, and she followed quickly. The pool was, indeed, quite warm, and Noora sank into it with a sigh of relief. Avi was already doing laps around the pool, but Noora simply twisted onto her back and floated in the warm water, feeling strangely at peace. After a while, the ripples from Avi’s swimming subsided and she lifted her head out of the water to see him floating near her, staring at the dancing light on the ceiling.

“I can’t believe you live this life,” Noora said quietly.

For a moment, Avi didn’t respond, and Noora wasn’t sure he had heard her. But then he said, “I guess I’ve never known any different.”

“Do you have any idea how your life looks to other people?”

Avi looked at her, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you look like gods to us.”

“Whose us?”

“People like me, people who stress about money all the time. Normal people.”

“We can be normal,” Avi said with a slightly defensive tone.

“You can be, but you’re not truly. Not at your core.”

Avi raised an eyebrow, “This is very bold of you to start talking to me like this while we’re alone in a basement in my rich friends mansion in the middle of the woods. I could be the scary kind of ‘not normal’ for all you know.”

Noora laughed, “So you’re planning to kill me then?”

“Who can say,” Avi gave an exaggerated shrug, “maybe I am.”

“Well, if you are, you’re being very open about it.”

“All bad guys have to tell the good guys their entire plan at some point. It’s part of the personality test.”

“Well, you sound normal,” Noora said, smiling.

“Don’t be fooled,” Avi replied.

They lapsed into a strangely comfortable silence, listening to the water lap against the edges of the pool and condensation drip from the roof of the cave-like basement. Then a clatter of sound came from upstairs.

“Avi? Are you down there?” It was Ita’s voice, calling down from the top of the stairs.

“Yeah we’re here,” Avi called back, “what’s up?”

“The party’s started, get up here! We’re taking tequila shots.”

“We’ll be right up!”

The door closed again. Noora and Avi hopped out of the pool and Avi opened a chest by the edge of the pool which contained several fluffy towels.

“Here you go,” he said, throwing one to Noora. “If you want, there’s changing rooms over there,” he pointed to other side of the pool.

Noora undressed in the privacy of the changing room and dried her body down before dressing quickly. She combed through her hair with her fingers (it looked better messy anyway) and mussed her bangs. Then her and Avi climbed back up the stairs to rejoin the party.

The celebration lasted for hours. It included several shots of tequila, various piano solos that eventually included everyone in the chorus, and (for some) various kinds of drugs. Noora partook in more than was probably good for her, but not as much as some, and for that she remained proud of herself. She ended the night in a bed that she actually remembered getting into, and considered that a win in and of itself.

The next morning found Noora and Avi awake before everyone else and tramping through the woods for vague reasons including Avi’s fascination with Scottish stone circles and a determination to find one. Noora was along for the ride, and she also wanted to explore, as the woods at the edge of the estate were deep and mysterious and she was partial to mysterious things. As they walked, Avi told her stories about previous adventures on Ita’s estate in their sixth form years.

“And that’s where I convinced Ita to smoke her first cigarette, her father was furious,” Avi said, laughing and pointing to a boulder laying in the midst of the trees. “We should be coming to the loch now.”

Avi had insisted on showing Noora the small loch on the estate because he seemed convinced the thing was full of dead bodies from past families living on the estate, and if you put even one toe in the water they would come out and grab you and pull you under the water,

screaming. Of course, this was all nonsense, but when they arrived at the loch, Noora couldn't help agreeing that the place carried a sense of unease. The two of them walked down to the edge and stared out across the water. It was smooth as glass in the morning light, and mist rose from the surface as the sunlight hit the water.

"What's that?" Noora said, pointing to what looked like a little island shrouded by mist in the center of the loch.

"I'm not sure," Avi squinted at the little island in confusion, "I've never seen that before."

"What do you mean?" Noora laughed, "you said you've been here a hundred times."

"I know, but I don't remember an island being here," Avi said, looking at her with wide eyes.

"You're pulling my leg," Noora said.

"I'm not," Avi replied.

"Really?" Noora whispered.

Then Avi laughed, "No I am, of course I've seen that island before."

"Oh my god," Noora shoved him as he cackled.

"It does look spooky right now though, with all that mist."

"Yes it does, it looks like there's a building on it."

"There is, it's an old stone tower."

Noora's eyes widened, "Really? That's incredible, why is it there?"

"It's an old tower house, they were everywhere in the Middle Ages, they have very strong fortifications."

"Is that one medieval?"

“Yeah I think so, I don’t know if it’s every been examined properly. Ita’s father wasn’t interested in history much.”

“Ita’s father?”

“Yeah, this was his estate. He died while we were in sixth form.”

“Oh that’s awful, I didn’t know that,” Noora said quietly.

“Yeah it was. I mean, they weren’t terribly close, Ita grew up with her grandparents in London, but still.”

“Is her mother alive?”

“No she died when Ita was really young, that’s why she lived with her grandparents.”

“Oh I see,” Noora gazed out at the glassy surface of the loch, which was reflecting scudding clouds in the sky. “Would she mind you telling me all this?”

“Nah,” Avi said, “she’s quite open about it.”

Noora nodded and looked back out at the tower.

“Do you want to go see it?” Avi asked.

“Is that possible?” Noora said, looking at him in surprise.

“Sure! There’s a boat over there,” Avi pointed to the other side of the loch, where, sure enough, there was a tiny boat tied onto a dock, partially obscured by the mist.

“I would love to.”

They tramped over to the dock and Avi helped Noora into the little boat. Then he untied the lead and climbed in himself. He picked up the oars and began rowing them across the water. Noora trailed her hand in the water, watching tiny ripples stream out from her fingers. The water was very cold.

They reached the little island quickly, and Avi navigated the boat into a small cluster of rocks where he tied the lead onto a wooden pole sticking out of the water. He climbed onto the rocks and helped Noora up after him. Then they looked up at the tower before them. It was quite small up close, with only two levels and what looked like a basement. It was a simple, rectangular tower with crenellations at the top and tiny slit windows dotting the face. A round tower protruded from one corner, and the door sat a few feet off the ground. Avi pointed at the door.

“They build the entrance like that so it’s easier to defend. They would usually have a wooden staircase leading up the door, and if they saw enemies approaching they would burn the staircase, locking them out.”

“That’s so cool,” Noora said, stepping closer to the tower, which loomed above them. “This tower must have been very well defended, sitting in the middle of a loch.”

Avi nodded, following her closer to the tower.

“Can we get inside?” Noora asked.

“Good question,” Avi said, frowning. “I’m not sure.”

They walked around the tower, looking at it from all angles.

“It’s incredible that it’s still in good shape after so many years without being used,” Noora said. She stepped up the wall of the tower, wanting to touch it, to feel the remnants of a life that existed hundreds of years ago. She put her hand on the cool stone wall.

It happened almost instantly. Noora forgot where she was and how she had gotten there, she forgot her own name. A series of images flashed across her eyelids, one after the other. She saw a great church with a pointed roof that reached toward the sky, slicing out a section of it and devouring it in darkness. She saw a great bonfire burning in the night, and women in white

dresses dancing around it, wailing and moaning into the darkness. Their eyes were closed but their bodies seemed to move of their own accord, twisting and running around the fire, their hands lifted upward toward the sky. She saw a garden surrounded by high stone walls. The plants in the garden were like nothing Noora had ever seen, and yet they seemed familiar to her. The garden was dark, with no light from the sky at all, but it was lit by tiny hovering golden lights, like fireflies. The plants in the garden glowed too, red flowers gave off a dull red light. She saw a sky so full of stars it was blinding. Each star was the size of the sun, and yet the light they emitted was strange and otherworldly, cool instead of hot, silvery instead of golden. The light grew brighter and brighter, encroaching upon her senses and burning away everything.

Noora went back to the lake that night just as the sky was darkening. Clouds rolled in from the west, brewing with foreboding swirls in the distance. The loch, however, was glassy and smooth, calm and tranquil before the impending storm.

The boat was gone, but this didn't trouble Noora somehow. She wanted to reach the island by swimming, she wasn't sure why, but something was calling her to. She began stripping off her layers of clothes until she was standing in nothing but a tank top and underwear. Then she waded into the glassy water, disturbing its surface, sending ripples across the reflective surface. It was cold, but not so cold that she couldn't stand it. She continued deeper until the water came up to her chest and the rocky bottom of the loch dissolved into silt. Then she dove, striking out toward the island with long strokes and coming up for breath periodically. When she reached it, she clambered up onto the rocky banks. The cold was settling in now, seeping through her skin and making her shiver.

She stood up and made for the tower in the center, remembering the doorway that hovered a few feet above the ground. It was quite dark now, but she could just make out the outline of the doorway in the stone. She wrapped her fingers around the edge and, with a few tries, hoisted herself up onto the ledge. Then, feeling around to make sure she was on solid stone, she crawled into the castle.

It happened instantly. The cool stone melted away beneath her. The loch, the island, and the tower all vanished and Noora found herself on her hands and knees in a muggy bog. Mud seeped inbetween her fingers and tall grasses waved around her in a cool breeze. She climbed to her feet quickly, looking around to get her bearings, shivering violently now. The sight she saw was beautiful and terrible and she gazed ahead of her in awe. Noora was standing before a collection of stone buildings, forefronted by a towering church whose stained glass windows glowed with light. Between Noora and the church raged a towering bonfire, flames reaching upward into the night and licking the star-strewn sky. Around the bonfire stood several figures in dark green and red robes, lit by the flames. They were all looking at her. Then, one of them began moving toward her, through the long grasses. The figure wore robes of a deep, blood red. Noora didn't run. She didn't feel afraid, exactly, but the figures unnerved her a little bit. The figure stopped several feet away her.

“Welcome Noora,” the person said in a ringing voice, “We have waited for you for a very long time.”

Noora stepped forward slowly, unsure. Two other figures hurried after the first and held out a set of long green robes. They were young women, perhaps a few years younger than Noora. One had pale skin and red hair hidden under a green hood. The other had darker skin with deep brown

freckles. They helped Noora dress and wiped the mud from her hands without saying a word. When they were finished. The other figure stepped forward and Noora saw that this was also a woman, thought she was much older than the other two, and she carried a sense of authority that the others lacked.

“I’m sure you have many questions,” the woman said.

“Yes, I do. What is this place? How did I get here?”

“Please,” the woman raised her hand, “all will be answered in time. For now, you must answer my question.”

Noora waited, the only sound was the crackling and popping of the fire.

“You are the most recent daughter in a long line of magical women, do you agree to protect their legacy and guard their secrets for time eternal?”

Noora didn’t answer immediately, “What does that mean?”

“You must answer before you may know anything else.”

Noora hesitated for a moment, she didn’t seem to have many options. She also felt a strange ache in her chest that seemed to pull her toward the great church and she wanted to know why.

“Yes, I agree,” she said.

The woman nodded and held out her hand, Noora took it and the woman led her toward the fire. The other women parted to her through and then closed around her again. They seemed entranced, fixated on her. Noora expected to join the circle around the fire, but the woman in red led her around the fire and through the open doors of the church, which were nearly completely blocked by several more green-robed women, all of whom were holding flickering candles. They pushed through, however, and then the woman turned and said in her commanding voice.

“Close the doors.”

It was done, and Noora was separated from the green-robed women. She turned to look at the immense interior of the church. It was in the Gothic style, with great pointed vaults that met at least thirty feet above the floor. The windows were long and thin, filled with jewel-like depictions in stained glass. Ribbed pillars supported the immense stone, separating the nave from the aisles. The space was huge and echoing. At the far end stood a row of women dressed in red habits like the one worn by the woman beside her. Noora looked at her and she motioned her forward.

Noora began walking the length of the church, and as she did she heard the sound of music coming from outside and voices chanting and wailing into the night. She shivered. The stone was cold under her bare feet, which made no noise as she walked. The line of women at the front of the church watched her as she approached. There were five of them, and although their robes resembled a habit, Noora noticed that each one of them had their hair down, flowing over their chests. For many of them, their hair reached past their waist. This struck her as decidedly bizarre for nuns. When she reached the chancel, one of the women moved aside to reveal a richly embroidered chair.

“Sit down,” she said. Her voice was softer than the other woman’s, and Noora obeyed her. Then, two women pulled out a basin of water and another brought a stack of white towels, and the women busied themselves with washing the mud off Noora’s feet. It was the strangest experience Noora had ever had, she was tempted to tell them to stop, that she could do it herself, but she thought that would do little to stop them as it seemed to be of great importance. So she let the women wipe the black mud from her feet, knees, and even the remnants on her hands.

Then, they laced her feet into soft slippers and stepped back, carrying the basin and towels away.

The first woman stepped forward.

“Now, you may ask questions.”

“Who are you all? Why am I here?” Noora said immediately.

“We are the Sisters of the Order of Morgayn le Faye, and you are here because this is where you belong.”

Noora’s eyes narrowed, “Why do I belong here?”

“Because, as I said, you come from a long line of sorceress’s, and you may prove to be more powerful than all of your ancestors combined,” the woman was looking at Noora with her head tilted slightly to the side, surveying her.

“But...my mother and my aunt.”

“Your mother has no power,” the woman said, “your aunt may have some, but it acts as little more than a good luck charm.”

“And how do you know I have power?” Noora asked, skeptically.

“We suspect, but we do not know.”

“And I suppose you brought me here by magic?”

“Yes.”

“And what do you intend to do with me?”

“That is up to you,” the woman said after a moments hesitation, “We will not force you to do anything. You must make up your own mind as to whether you want to know more about us.”

“And if I want to leave?”

The woman took longer to respond this time, “You may leave whenever you want. But, I feel I must tell you that we have brought you here because you may be able to help us. Your

power has been hidden from us for many years, but now that we have found you, we would be unhappy to let you go.”

“What does that mean?” Noora said, her heart skipping a beat.

“It means that if you wish you leave, you must find your own way home. We cannot help you, as it would mean giving up our best chance at salvation since the days of the Holy Grail.”

Noora nodded slowly, processing the woman’s words. The noise of music and chanting was growing louder outside.

“What are they doing out there?” Noora asked, curious.

“Celebrating your arrival.”

“Celebrating...Why?”

“As I have said, the sisters need you.”

“Are you in danger?”

The woman hesitated, looking uncomfortable for the first time. “Not...in so many words. We are in need of assistance. Our traditions are in danger, our ancient laws are failing, the moon and the earth are out of balance.”

“And you think I’m the person to restore all that?” Noora was starting to feel an overwhelming urge to laugh, this was ridiculous. What the hell was going on?

“I hope so,” the woman said simply.

“And they all believe that too?” Noora nodded toward the doors of the church and the group of women outside.

“I have said all I can at this time,” the woman said with a slightly pinched look on her face. “If you would come with me, we must begin the initiation process”

Noora nodded and rose to follow, feeling she didn’t have much choice.

