

MATT LINENBROKER

GPYSIES: A NOVEL

CHAPTER ONE

I think things will be better here.

I stare out the pub window at the London sky, drizzle falling just as I hoped it would.

“It’s beautiful,” I say.

I hear Em slurp her beer. “Yes, yes, you dark fuck, the overcast sky perfectly reflects your inner turmoil, I *know*.” She smiles at me as she licks the froth from her lips.

“It’s good to be here with you too, Em.”

“Cheers!” she says as she lifts her glass into the air. I raise mine to meet it.

“Whenever two full glasses clink, an adventure begins.”

“Who said that?” she asks.

“Me.”

Her eye roll is like an earthquake.

“I guess I should’ve done more research on our neighborhood, though. I guess I was expecting something a bit more-”

“Oh, oh!” Em points furiously across the street. “Mohawk number three! I’m winning.”

From the pub below our apartment, we watch the entire island of misfit toys wander through the streets of Camden Town, the neighborhood in North London where our summer study abroad program has decided to house us.

“I can’t believe my parents were okay with letting me stay here.”

Em smirks. “Honestly I’m surprised they didn’t raise you here.”

“I’d probably be more like them,” I reply. They’re hippies at heart, my parents; they have jobs and wear normal person clothes and pay all their taxes, but they’ve draped our house in tapestries and incense is their oxygen. Although they didn’t have some cliché foreign romance, they both spent the summer before college exploring London. My mom with her aunt and my dad with his band. (DON’T get me started on my dad’s band, they played like three gigs of derivative grunge rock music. He had longer hair and wore more makeup than my mom, and watching your grandpa’s shaky recording of it at your twelfth birthday party is *really* not all its cracked up to be). They didn’t meet until years later, but both my parents say their summer abroad changed them, and that the shared experience brought them closer together when they finally did meet.

So here I am. And it’s not like I’m here against my will, but everyone in my life was just so into the idea that it kind of feels like I didn’t have a choice. My parents pitched the trip to my therapist before I heard anything about it. They didn’t want me to spend the whole summer before college curled up in a black hole of my own making. Dr. Kim agreed that the busyness would keep me from spiraling. And Em, well, like the surprisingly-good best friend that she is, signed up right after I told her about my intended shipment across the pond.

My parents never said anything about Camden, though. I wonder if they ever came here. Because there is literally a giant black dragon snaking along the side of one of the buildings across the street. Its eyes are bright red lightbulbs. It has the potential to be haunting, but the way-oversized rocking chair sticking out the side of the building next to it kind of takes away its thunder.

I guess I was hoping more for the Hogwarts vibe?

“I dig it,” Em says. “It just feels so raw, so authentic.”

“There’s an Urban Outfitters like two blocks south of here.”

“Hey, don’t ruin this. I’m here for you, after all.”

I stick out my tongue like a five-year-old annoyed at his older sister. Em is the self-appointed-but-unfortunately-kind-of-totally-needed protector in my life. Unlike my parents, I’m not so great with the whole new experiences thing (I kind of think they grabbed the wrong baby at the hospital). I’d like to think that Em is here out of more than just guilt and a legal drinking-age, that she actually couldn’t imagine adventuring without me, but just the fact that she’s here is miracle enough.

“Let’s be here for *London*,” I reply.

The bell over the pub door rings with the bang of a young woman exploding into the room. Her platinum blonde hair, falling down to the middle of her back, whips around her like an aura as she rushes to the bartender.

“Do you know if there’s an American student here?” she asks. Her lack of accent tells me she’s American, too.

The bartender nods his shaved head in our direction.

“Oh!” She walks over to us, each step half-bounce, half-stomp. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, revealing two giant peacock feather dangling from her ears, but she’s dressed in all black, with tattered skinny jeans probably cutting off circulation. I have no idea what to think of this girl.

“Sorry, are you Emma? Emma Lancaster?”

“Yes,” She says, cocking her head in confusion. “Oh, my god you’re Cadence! I’m sorry, hi, nice to finally meet you.” Em reaches out her hand in a formality that seems to confuse Cadence, but she shakes it anyway. “Do you want to grab a drink and join us.”

“Sure,” she says. An easy smile comes across her face and she flits toward the bar.

“That’s my flatmate,” Em says.

“Oh, shit,” I respond. “You showed me that picture of her but she looks nothing like it, I mean, wow. Didn’t she have dark hair?”

“Yeah, she must’ve dyed it.”

“And her eyes, they’re so-”

“Covered in a vampiric amount of eyeliner? Keep it in your pants, Jaime. Here she comes.”

Cadence pulls up a chair and sets down a beer that’s almost as dark as her clothes.

“Cadence, this is Jaime Black,” Em says.

Cadence just stares at me and smiles wide. “It’s nice to meet you. Are you Emma’s boyfriend?”

Em nearly does a spit take with her beer and starts coughing. This is not the first time this question has been posed to us, and Em’s reactions never cease to make it feel like tiny metal spikes are coursing through my arteries.

“No, we’re just friends.”

“Cool,” Cadence says. Her almond eyes narrow, and all of a sudden I feel as if I’m naked and she’s pulled out a tape measurer. She can’t possibly be sizing me up in a good way, can she?

“We just decided to both do the program together,” Em swoops in and saves us from the possibility of an awkward silence.

“Cool.” Cadence takes a long gulp of her beer. “How do you two know each other, then?”

Em and I glance at one another. Suddenly I realize no one has never really asked us this question before, because we've always just been accepted as a package deal, and everyone knew that. I guess this isn't suburbia anymore.

I think back and try to remember. One of my first memories of Em is her reading Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* aloud in our freshman English class. And then...I don't know, her lying on my bedroom floor, talking about the music we would want played at our funerals, and sitting in the woods behind her house downing cheap wine, and Em dragging me to that vegan restaurant I hated, listening to me worry about the eternal possibility of imminent loss as she pontificated about the importance of the avocado. Since the beginning, Em has always found my angsty, pseudo-emo bullshit charming, so how could I not love her for that?

"We're friends from high school," Em says. Sure, that works too... I take a hefty drink.

"Cool. I don't know anyone here. I kind of like it that way though, fresh and exciting, y'know?"

I wonder if she's trying to convince us or herself.

"Anyway," Cadence continues, "One of the girls across the hall said they saw you come down here, and I just really didn't feel like unpacking yet. Can you believe we're finally here? I mean we have drinks to drink and people to meet and so much to see!"

A smile asserts itself onto my face. She's so excited...and she's talking like we've been friends for years. Who is this girl?! There's something frenetic about her, like she's a walking electrocution. I want to reach out and touch her and see if she shocks me.

"What were you guys planning on doing tonight?" she asks.

I instinctively look to Em.

"To be decided," Em replies. "Any ideas?"

As Em brushes her short black hair behind her ear, I notice she's lit up a bit too. If she's captivated by Cadence, maybe it's safe.

"Let's explore." Cadence raises her eyebrows and grins softly.

Within five minutes of sitting down, she has somehow initiated us into her cult of curiosity. I think I may have repressed my initial "making friends" experiences; I don't remember it working this quickly.

I empty my drink. "I like that idea."

CHAPTER TWO

“Hey dude,” he says.

God I hate introductions. Especially when you’ve seen the person’s picture before, so you’ve had time to imagine what their voice sounds like, and how their hands move, and that their words and thoughts could be like your words and thoughts.

“Hey,” I respond, having just walked into my flat. Em and Cadence wanted to change before we went out, so I figured I should too.

He’s standing in our bedroom, too far away for a handshake, so I offer him an awkward half-wave.

“You’re Jaime, right?”

“Yeah. Calvin?”

“Cal,” he says, then offers a hair flip as if he’s in a music video. His wavy blonde hair is almost down to his shoulders. He’s wearing a t-shirt that says *UCLA* and I’m realizing that my new flatmate is into the whole California surfer thing in a very non-ironic way.

Our flat is small, made up of a kitchen/living room combo, a tiny bedroom with bunkbeds, and a bathroom that makes the British term “Water Closet” seem incredibly accurate. He’s putting his clothes into our closet, which I planned on rifling through to try to find something better to wear out, so I just sit on my bed (I claimed the bottom bunk, luckily) to wait until he’s done.

“How was your flight?” I ask.

“Aw man, you know, LAX is always a bitch.”

Why does he assume I would know that?

“But I sat next to a pretty cute girl on the flight, so it was chill. How about you?”

“Fine. I slept for most of it.”

“Shit, I can never sleep on flights. How’d you do it?”

As a general rule, I try to keep the extent of my crazy to myself for as long as I can.

“Oh, I took a sleeping pill,” I say. Which isn’t a lie, I did take a sleeping pill, but those things never really work for me unless I take them with one of my as-needed-for-panic-attack drugs. The cocktail of sedatives is like a day at the beach.

“I guess if they’d let you smoke weed on an airplane, I’d be able to sleep too.”

“If only,” I respond, unsure of how to entertain the idea at all.

It’s important to give people more of a chance, Dr. Kim’s words echo in my mind. I should try to be nice and...make friends?

“Hey, so, um, my friend and her flatmate and I, we were planning on going to this one bar down the street, I forgot what it’s called, but would you want to come?”

“Fuck yeah!” He beams and flips his hair again. The whiteness of his teeth makes me realize how tan he is. I’m sure he’ll stand out like a sunburst amongst the cloudy streets of London.

He reaches into a plastic bag sitting next to his bed and pulls out a giant bottle of tequila.

“I bought this when I went out to get dinner. We’re pregaming, right?”

“You mean like drinking before we go out? We can.”

“Sweet.”

“I actually came back to change.”

“Oh, sorry dude,” he says as he steps away from the closet, having mostly unpacked anyway.

I look in the closet and suddenly realize I have no idea what to wear. Most of the Londoners I've seen so far mostly wore dark colors, maroons and navys and blacks. I smile to myself when I see how much black I've brought. I pick out a simple black sweater and throw it over my t-shirt. I turn to look at the mirror. Black jeans and a black sweater, I feel like a classy looking emo kid.

I can fit in here.

We head out into the hallway with Cal cradling the bottle of tequila like it's his child. The building we're staying in looks nothing like the world outside. It's slick and modern, with off-white walls and a dark grey trim. It occurs to me that I have no idea how many people are actually on this trip with us. There are maybe six doors in our hallway on the second floor, and Em and Cadence are on the third and top floor. Is our whole building students, or are there actual Londoners living here too? I think about a beautiful bohemian English girl named something like Iris or Lottie living across the hall. And then I think of Cadence, with her bright blonde hair and her peacock earrings and her mischievous smile.

"Keep it in your pants, Jaime" I hear Em's voice. She's right, why bother? I haven't had much luck with girls...ever. But I suppose fawning over your best friend for four years will do that to you.

I knock on their door and Em answers, having changed into a tight tank top underneath a denim jacket.

"Hey," I say. "This is Cal, my flatmate. Cal, this is Em."

Em reaches out her hand and Cal shakes it, his eyes looking about 10 inches south of hers.

"Nice to meet you," she says, forcing Cal to snap out of the orbit of her boobs.

“Likewise.”

Their flat is identical to ours, just as cramped. Cadence is sitting at the kitchen table, and now I feel like I’m the one staring.

“You brought tequila!” she says, and of course she’s looking past me towards Cal, his shirt practically as tight as Em’s, showing off all his goddamn sculpted surfer boy muscles.

“I’m Cadence by the way.”

“Would you like a shot, Cadence?”

“Of course.”

“Your flatmate is cute,” Em whispers in my ear.

“Lucky me.”

Without asking us, Cal has taken out four glasses from the cabinet - not shot glasses, regular glasses. He fills them up maybe an eighth of the way, but the lack of proper measurement creates an anxious lump in my throat.

“Straight tequila?” Em asks. Whenever I’ve drunk in the past, Em has always been the designated bartender, flipping through a mixology book that she hid under her bed from her parents. Leave it to Em to be the high schooler making Manhattans and Old Fashions.

“I guess I should’ve bought limes and salt, too. My bad.” Cal grabs his glass anyway, and we do the same.

“What should we toast to?” Em asks. Cal’s eyebrows furrow.

“To London calling, may we answer her with adventure,” Cadence says and then downs her drink. We do the same.

My face contorts and I let out the muffled roar of a dying t-rex, my arms moving in a similar fashion. Em nearly spits.

“What the fuck kind of tequila was that?!” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Cal answers. “I bought it down the block, next to the, um, y’know, the sex shop.”

“There’s a sex shop?” Cadence sounds far more excited than disgusted.

“Yeah, I didn’t go in or anything though.” Cal says, and I’m ninety percent sure he’s lying.

I want to change the topic.

“So London Calling, huh?” I ask Cadence. “Like The Clash song?”

“Yeah,” she smiles bigger than when she heard about the sex shop. Take that, Cal. “I love classic rock,” she continues.

“Here we go,” Em rolls her eyes.

“Do you like Fleetwood Mac?” I ask.

“Of course.”

I suddenly feel Aunt Stevie in the room, swirling and twirling around us, between us, through us.

“Me too,” I say.

“He’s obsessed,” Em says, and I fight the instinct to snarl at her.

“*Stop fucking calling her ‘Aunt Stevie,’*” Em’s voice echoes in my head. “*She’s not your aunt. I hate when you do that.*” She may not be family, but Stevie Nicks feels like blood, like she’s been with me all along. Which she kind of has.

“My parents made me listen to them a lot when I was growing up, that’s all.”

“What’s your favorite album?” she asks.

“*Rumours* is the obvious choice,” I say. “It may be the best album ever made, in my opinion. But I think their self-titled album is my favorite. It has Landslide and Blue Letter and Rhiannon. It’s just so Stevie, so witch-like. *Rumours* was the product of a lot of screaming and fighting and cheating, which turned out great because it was so raw, but *Fleetwood Mac* sounds like it came out of another world, y’know? Ethereal and lost.”

“Woah,” Cal says under his breath.

“You really love them, huh?” Cadence asks, her eyes narrowed in focus, her lips just slightly twisted upwards.

I love Fleetwood Mac like a toddler loves his favorite blanket. I love Stevie Nicks like a captain loves his compass. I don’t say that, though.

“He wants to be Stevie Nicks,” Em says, and then casually pours another round of tequila shots into the glasses.

“I don’t want to be her!” Em knows exactly how to make me lash out like I’m her little brother. “I just, I really respect her art, that’s all.”

“I think that’s really cool,” Cadence says. She picks up her glass and says, “To Stevie Nicks!”

Never has a girl been more beautiful to me.

CHAPTER THREE

The fox has sunglasses on.

He's sitting behind the bar, surrounded by a fortress of liquor bottles. He's stuffed, of course, but he was once alive, and I like the idea of him with his shades on, weaving in between peoples drinks, purring...do foxes purr?

"What's this place called again?" Cadence whispers, her lips nearly touching my ears.

"Queen Anne's," I say. It's down the high street from our flat and full of twenty-somethings with leather jackets and round glasses and the sense that they're way cooler than me.

"Let's get the ladies drinks, shall we?" Cal says, clapping me on the shoulder.

"Whiskey," Cadence commands.

Em looks at me. She wants a gin and tonic, I'm sure, like she usually makes at parties, but doesn't want to say it at risk of sounding less badass than Cadence. I just nod at her, understanding.

We walk up to the fox's castle of booze and wait behind two dudes, one of whom I notice has shining golden boots.

I had never seen gold boots before, and I feel a knot start to form in my chest. I bite the inside of my lip, wondering why I don't feel the affects of the tequila shots yet. And my head is bowed and I'm staring at this guy's winged combat boots of Hermes and I begin to realize where I am. I am at a bar. A bar full of older, cooler people. No, no - older, cooler, *British* people.

The glimmering shifts and the royal walker slides past me with a drink in his hand, his friend trailing behind him. The bartender looks up at us. Holy fuck, I have to order a drink now.

I can't tell whether Cal is asserting his dominance or if he can simply sense my paralysis, but he steps up to the bar.

“Two whiskey cokes,” he says, then flips his hair and looks back at me. “What do you and Em want?”

“Gin and tonics,” I force out. The bartender looks at me and squints his eyes.

“ID,” he says. Not a question, an order.

Yes, asshole, I am indeed eighteen. I feel a little fight stir up in me. *I know I look like a fucking twelve year old, but thanks for rubbing it in.* Maybe the tequila is starting to kick in, after all.

I hand him my ID. He stares at it, really stares at it, is still staring at it - it's real. Why doesn't he believe me? Finally he gives it back to me and goes to make our drinks.

“I got this round,” Cal says, sounding insanely adult, and puts his card on the bar.

Suddenly a guitar riff explodes in the room like an atomic bomb. My body tenses and I whip around to see that a band has taken over a small stage tucked in the back of the pub. Their frontman keeps pounding his strings, forcing his cacophony through the room. His long, dirty blonde hair is straightened around his face and he's rocking the guyliner hard. Is this Kurt Cobain's flamboyant, teenage ghost?

The drums and the bass from his band pick up, and he starts to sing with a voice that sounds way too deep to be coming from him. I can't make out the words, but they sound determined and sure.

Cal nudges me and I see that he has two drinks in his had. I pick up the other two plastic cups and follow him towards the music, where Em and Cadence have wandered.

We hand them their drinks. Em smiles, glad that I got her exactly what she wanted without her having to ask for it.

“Who are these guys?” I ask, nearly screaming into her ear.

“Don’t know, but I’m into it,” she replies.

We head towards a small mezzanine, overlooking the stage. The sounds of indie punk follow us up the stairs, but it’s slightly quieter here and we can actually talk. We find a table pushed up against the exposed brick wall and sit down.

“This place is amazing,” I say, taking a sip of my drink. *Strong*.

“I wonder if Amy ever played here,” Cadence says. I notice half of her drink is already gone.

“Amy who?” I ask.

“Amy *Winehouse*. Look over there.”

Cadence points to the other end of the mezzanine, where a graffiti bust of Amy Winehouse is painted on the wall. She’s wrapped in a white, angelic fur, just exposing her tattooed left shoulder. There’s an ornate halo around her, with a drop of gold running down her face - golden blood from the puncture of her golden halo. Her lips are red and her eyes are closed and she looks so immensely sad.

“Did she live here?”

“Yeah, and died here,” Cadence says. “She was like Camden’s poster child, their success story. And she went out in a Camden bang.”

“Didn’t she die alone in her flat?” Em questions. “I don’t know how much of a bang that is.”

“Well, to Amy,” I say, raising my glass like Em had to Stevie. Cadence smiles and Em rolls her eyes (“*Keep it in your pants, Jaime*”) and we toast to the Patron Saint of Camden. Cadence nearly finishes her drink. I’ve barely made a dent in mine.

“Time for another drink?” Cal asks, putting his hand on the small of her back.

“Sure.”

“Cool,” he says, and then downs his own drink. “Looks like you two still have a ways to go.” I notice Em’s drink is just as full as mine. Shit, they drink fast. Or do we drink slow?

Cal heads for the stairs. Cadence jumps up and follows him. “Wait! You bought the last one, it’s my turn.” They disappear downstairs into the noise.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“No!” I say, but the alcohol makes me a terrible liar, and my lips curl upwards and I laugh.

“Liar.” She laughs too.

“I mean I barely know her, but so what if I do?”

“Can you say ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ five times fast?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I’m just saying, she’s too perfect, Jaime. Girls like that aren’t real. There’s definitely some crazy lurking behind those doe eyes.”

“Maybe I could use a little crazy.”

“Trust me, you’re crazy enough for the both of you.”

She’s not wrong.

“Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying.”

“What about Cal?” I ask.

“What about him?”

“You like him?”

“He’s fine.” Em takes a sip of her drink and I regret asking the question. She’s a better liar than me, but I can tell he’s piqued her interest. What does he have that I don’t? What if they

get together and hook up in our flat? What if I walk in on them? What if he treats her like shit? I mean it's not like I can beat him up.

Or what if she falls in love with him and forgets about me entirely?

"Jaime. Come back to earth." She snaps her fingers at me and I realize I've been staring across the room. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine. The band is good."

"Yeah, it's cool they have live music here. I didn't realize they would."

"Shouldn't Cal and Cadence be back by now?" I bite the inside of my cheek.

"I don't know. Maybe there's a line at the bar."

I take another sip and feel the gin tingle the inside of my mouth.

"What time is orientation tomorrow?" I ask.

"It's at ten, but I think it's like a thirty-minute tube ride. So we should really leave around 9:15, especially in case we get lost."

I pull out my phone, set my alarm for the morning, and finish my drink.

"Come on," I say and head for the stairs.

I don't look back, but I hear Em following me. I walk down the stairs with alcoholic confidence, feeling like a prince descending the stairs at a ball in his honor, except no one in this pub knows who I am and the fancy classical music of a king's court is replaced with the punk rock wails of an eyeliner-smudged teenager.

And Cadence and Cal are in the crowd, listening to him sing. Cal's hand is on her waist and he's whispering something in her ear. And she's laughing.

Of course she's laughing, and smiling, and surely falling in love. Who was I to think I could make her feel those same things? Obviously it's only a matter of time before Beach Boy Adonis moves his hand about six inches south where it is now.

Stupid, stupid Jaime.

Em sees them too, and then sees me seeing them. She claps me on the back and says, "It's fine. They're just talking. Let's go get another drink."

The night begins to get away from me, time speeding up with each drink I down. I keep watching Cadence and Cal, thinking *don't kiss her don't kiss her don't kiss her* whenever I see them get close.

I convince myself that I feel an energy between them. Cupid Kurt Cobain has shot his arrow into Cadence, and her eyes have landed on Cal.

I drown my social anxiety in gin as I dance to the staccato bursts of electric riff. As we all dance around, my glazed eyes stare through Cadence because I don't want to bring her into focus. I make her face a blur, or maybe that's the alcohol doing that. I get another drink.

Coming back from the bar, I watch the three of them. I don't want to disturb their perfection with my presence. Em is banging her short hair up and down, and Cadence is swaying back and forth - I imagine her wrapped in a black silk scarf, twirling around and around and around like Stevie. Cal is bobbing his head to the beat, standing between them, his eyes flitting from one to the other. He could have them both if he wanted, couldn't he? And what could I have? Alcohol. I can barely taste the gin anymore; it goes down like water.

A haze encroaches the corners of my vision and I am dancing again, with them, invading their space, letting the anxious voices flow in and out of my mind like a lazy low tide.

I nearly fall to the ground from the visual explosion as the overhead lights burst on. Kurt Cobain is waving his goodbye and walking backstage and people in the pub are mulling around. Cadence grabs Cal's arm and says, "What a great show," and I think I may understand why the real Kurt Cobain shot himself.

"*So dramatic,*" Em says, but I don't think she actually says it, because now Cadence is holding onto her, and they're laughing hysterically, and then the brisk London air smacks our faces and I think the lights of the passing black cabs and the big red buses start to make me feel a bit better. We're walking home and Cal mutters to me, "You alright, dude?" and I think he means because of all the drinks but I wonder if he can already tell I'm crazy. I half scream, "Fine!" as I stare at the people around us shuffling in every direction.

"I'm fine," I repeat. "Totally fine."

CHAPTER FOUR

An elephant has shrunk itself, crawled into my bed, and curled up on the top of my head.

Ow. Hangovers suck.

I hear Cal rummaging around in the other room. I check my phone; I have about an hour before I need to leave. But I never want to get out of this bed. Ever.

I look at myself and realize while I must've managed to take my pants off before I got into bed, I slept in my sweater and I'm sticky with sweat.

Shower. I can do this. Just get up and take a shower.

I force myself onto my feet and stumble into the bathroom like a zombie in desperate need of brains. Pulling off my clothes feels like I'm struggling to twist out of a straight jacket. I fill up a cup of water from the sink and take a few small sips, praying it will help alleviate the pain from Satan's poison juice.

I stare at myself naked in the mirror, disappointed. I am not tall and lanky, which seems somewhat acceptable, I'm just average height and *skinny*. My psychiatrist makes me go on runs and stuff, for my mental health. Dr. Kim is always talking about the power of endorphins. I'm just not a big fan of food. It's not like I have an eating disorder or anything, I just don't like to eat. It's stressful, finding something I like, cooking it, making time for it. Sure, I enjoy a good meal at a nice restaurant with my parents or Em or whatever, but if I have homework or something else to do, a lot of the time I don't even bother. Too much anxiety.

The result is the slight protrusion of my ribs and my mother frequently texting me, "Did you eat today???"

As I shower, I think about Cal, with his hair and his muscles, probably downing protein shakes so he can stay “swoll”. If I’d had muscles, would Em have fallen in love with me all those years ago, when I fell in love with her?

“Get over it,” I mumble in the shower. “And eat something.”

Since the mere act of standing currently feels like an olympic sport, the thought of eating horrifies me. But I know that putting food in my stomach may absorb some of the alcohol, so it’s worth a shot.

“How you feeling, dude?” Cal asks as I emerge from the steam-filled bathroom like a walking corpse brought back from the grave.

“Just a little hungover,” I say. A little, hah. “How are you?”

“Feelin good. Did you black out last night?”

“Oh, um, I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure I remember everything.”

“Cool. Em stopped by while you were in the shower to check on you. She wants to leave in like twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s fine,” I say as I stagger to the bedroom and attempt to dress myself, which proves itself to be Olympic event number two. I manage to force on a hoodie and the pair of black jeans I wore the night before. Man, how much did I drink last night? Have I ever drank that much before?

Thankfully, Em and I picked up a few things at the grocery store yesterday before we went to the pub, I grab a strawberry yogurt and sit down at the kitchen table. I can only manage to eat about half the cup before I feel my stomach start to turn on me. *C’mon. Keep it together. Don’t look like a little bitch in front of Cal. Not a good first impression.*

I wonder what it would be like to not care what people think about me.

There's a knock on the door and Cal yells, "Come in!" from the bedroom. Em and Cadence walk in, and Cal emerges shirtless, showing off his six pack and everything.

"I'll be ready in just a sec," he says, then goes back into our room, not closing the door.

Ughhhhhhh.

"How you feelin, bud?" Em says, sitting down with me at the table. Cadence joins, too.

"Fucking fantastic. Like a million pounds."

"Yeah, I'm pretty hungover too," Cadence replies, smiling.

"What is this orientation supposed to be like?" I ask.

"I don't know, it goes until 4 though."

"4?! Like, 6 hours of orientating? That's way too much."

Why did we go out? Why did I drink so much? So stupid.

"Did you have some water?" Em asks.

"Yes."

Cal emerges from the bedroom, thankful clothed. "You guys ready?"

"I suppose," I say, and throw away my half finished yogurt.

Here we go, the ultimate olympic competition, forcing our way through the crowded, sweaty, shaky tube. God, have mercy on me.

When I was sixteen, my parents took me to New York City for a week. In our typical family style, my parents introduced me to cool things like a show at the People's Improv Theatre and brunch in Dumbo around a bunch of up-and-coming Brooklynites, and I spent most of the time worrying about a terrorist attack or catching a disease from a rat in the subway.

This is why I'm relieved to find the Camden Town Tube Station relatively clean and, as far as I could tell, rodent-free.

The four of us huddle together as we wait on the underground platform for the train to arrive. We're not only surrounded by pierced-and-cool-haired Camdenites, but a slew of professionals young and old making their way to work. And I feel like all of their skin fits better than mine; my eyelids are heaving, my throat is constricting, and my stomach is making angry sounds that cannot be leading to anything good.

Three stops. I will not throw up; I can make it through three stops. Mornington Crescent. Euston. Warren Street. Three stops.

A rumble begins to grow beneath my feet and headlights emerge from the end of the tunnel. The white and red train brings with it a cool gust of wind that feels divine on my sticky, nauseated body.

The doors open and my chest tightens and my heart beats way faster than it should and I clench my fists and all I'm thinking is, *Oh, fuck* because only a handful of people get off the train and now I'm shoved next to Cal trying to squeeze into the clusterfuck that apparently is the tube during London's morning commute.

I hold onto a bar running across the ceiling as I'm squeezed in between the door and Cal. Em and Cadence are practically intertwined with one another, jammed a few people away. The door closes and the train rattles into motion.

I distract myself by looking at the faces around me. There's another cluster of teenagers on the other side of the car, and I wonder if they're in our program too. One of the guys is wearing a Green Bay Packers shirt, so I think it's a safe bet. Do people watch American Football here? I don't really know much about English Football, so there's no reason for them to.

My eyes switch to a man with high-and-tight dark hair and a clean cut beard. He's wearing a shirt and tie underneath his peacoat, and he's holding a black leather briefcase. He has

all the look of Wall Street except for that he has two black stud earrings and is one-handedly reading a copy of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. The thought of being able to read on the crowded, shakey train baffles me.

“This train is approaching Mornington Crescent. The next station is Euston Road,” says the over-articulate feminine voice recording. The door opens and I hear her say, “Please mind the gap.”

I realize it's my first time hearing this phrase in real life, and I smile in anglophilic glory. Then the doors close and my brief stint of joy is over.

No, no, no, no, no. It's coming. Don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw up.

I focus on breathing deeply and press my tongue hard against the roof of my mouth, forcing every muscle in my body to fight its instinct to expel last night's mistake.

Jaime, you will not throw up on the fucking tube in front of a bunch of Londoner's trying to get to work. They'll probably deport you. You would not deserve the beauty of this country.

The intercom lady announces that we're approaching the next stop. The doors open and people push past us getting off, and then again getting on.

Nope. I decide just before the doors close and I leap out of the train, running away from the platform and furiously searching for a trash can somewhere. I run up a flight of stairs, weaving between people like a Nascar driver, and I finally spot a clear plastic trash bag hanging from some circular extension jutting out of the wall. It looks like a giant used condom being held by a robotic hand, but I don't care; I rush up to it like it's my long lost love and empty the bile-y contents of my stomach into it with a roar. It's such a strange relief, because I feel awful with my abs flexing and my hands holding onto the garbage bin for support, but each time the yellowy liquid comes up I know I'm a little bit better.

Then I feel a hand start to rub my back, and I hear him say, “It’s okay, dude, just get it out.”

I lift my head up to see Cal standing behind me, smiling as he squeezes my shoulder.

“You okay, man?”

“Yeah. Better now. Thanks.”

“Cool. Ready to get back on the train?”

“Yeah,” I say, straightening up, forcing a smile back at him. “Thanks.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Cal and I emerge from the Warren Street tube station and the sun nearly cracks my head open and spills my brain onto the sidewalk. I guess the London skies didn't account for my hangover.

Before my eyes adjust, I'm accosted by a blurry figure running up and wrapping its arms around me.

"What happened? Are you okay?!" It's Em.

"Fine," I say. "Just had to take a slight detour."

"Did you throw up? Was it black? That means it's alcohol poisoning."

"It was thoroughly strawberry yogurt colored."

"He's fine," Cal says. "Just a gentleman's barf, that's all."

Em sighs, and I feel the terrible dichotomy of guilt for making her worry and joy for how much she cares.

With the relatively rare display of her own neuroses, Em marches us down a street lined with grey stone buildings. She tells us that we're not late, and that Cadence is saving us seats, and then ushers us through a vibrantly red door into what looks far more like an office building than a school. There's even a front desk, manned by some guy in a hoodie who looks barely older than we are.

"You have to check in," Em says.

Cal and I approach the desk, and the guy reluctantly looks up from his phone.

“Hi,” I say, and he raises his eyebrows out of bored acknowledgement.

“We’re...umm...checking in?” Even the tiniest of social interactions have always created various-sized knots in my stomach.

“American exchange I take it,” he replies, and I’m unsure if it’s meant as an insult or not.

“Names?”

“Jaime Black,” I respond. His attention turns to a piece of paper with highlighted names.

“Black, Black, Jaime Black,” he mutters searching for my name, then crossing it off. I suppress a smirk at hearing my name said with a true English accent.

“Calvin Burrows,” Cal says next.

The guy hands each of us a red folder stuffed with who knows what, then goes back to his phone.

Em leads us upstairs. The building seems to be much more tall than wide. The stairs are narrow and nearly all the doors are closed, so I’m unsure of how large this building actually is. When we get to the room, there’s about twenty or so students, sitting down on old chairs facing a large chalkboard. Their voices pound my skull, and I’m beginning to understand the stereotype of the loud american...or maybe that’s just my hangover still.

We sit down in the back with Cadence, who looks at me and asks, “Everything okay?”

“Yep, fine,” I say.

And luckily, before Em can explain the details of my puking in a trash can in front of a billion Londoners, the door bursts open with the force of Churchill. A tall, blonde woman wearing an almost robe-esque navy cardigan struts to the front of the room. She has huge golden hoop earrings, and she seems relatively young - late twenties, maybe?

She says nothing, but we naturally silence ourselves under her ethereal command. She turns her attention to the chalkboard, the sound of her writing screeching through the room. I honestly couldn't remember the last time I had legitimately seen a chalkboard used.

She steps to the side and reveals what she's written: "*Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.*"

"Does anyone know who said this?" Her voice is melodic and kind, but also as strong as she stands, firmly atop high heels.

I look around the room. People are shaking their heads. No one knows. It's one of my favorite quotes from my favorite play and potentially my favorite work of literature ever. I can't not say it, right? I mean, I know my answer is right, but what if it's only right in some alternate universe I'm existing in, and in reality it's from something else entirely? Or what if it's the residual effect from last night's drunken confidence? Am I sure enough to say it outloud? I raise my hand anyway.

"Yes?" She points to me.

"Claudius says it in *Hamlet*," I force out, glad that strawberry yogurt didn't accompany the words.

"Wow, yeah, exactly," she says, and my eyes flicker to Cadence smiling, and I feel a huge sense of relief wash over me.

"Most people don't get that," she continues. "They hear 'Hamlet' and all they think of is 'To be or not to be', which is of course a very important question, and one we'll look at quite closely, but I prefer the austerity of this quote, personally.

"Anyway, that's my dramatic little way of introducing myself. I'm Professor Margaery Fox, which is what it says on all your forms and what not, but you can just call me Fox. A bit

like Prince or Madonna for you Americans, yeah? But I far prefer Prince, please don't compare me to Madonna. And, please, while it may be flattering, no, 'Foxy Fox.'

I'll be your British Literature instructor. You'll have my class on Mondays and Wednesdays, and you're with Professor Chapman for British History on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But the reason he's not here and I am, besides the fact that he's probably asleep in his arm chair like an old goat, is because I will also be doubling as your main point of contact for the trip. That's right, you get terribly lost on the tube, or break your nose in a fight about football, or wake up on a train half-way to Wales, you call me, and I'll sort you out. But remember, the more trouble it is, the more pints you have to buy me at the pub after."

We all chuckle.

"I'm glad your laughing now," she says, "Because once your parents see your credit card bill after I bail you out of Buckingham Palace's dungeon for trying to steal one of the Queen's Corgis, you will find the world a bit less funny. Which leads me to my main point and the reason you're all here trying to keep those jet-lagged eyes open - London is perfectly safe, and you will be completely fine, as long as you're smart and keep your wits about you."

I gulp. I don't know how many wits I had with me last night. And something tells me Fox would not approve of my little tube detour this morning.

The rest of orientation consists of Fox telling to us the things that she promises will keep us alive and functional (two things I know to be very different, so I'm glad she promised both).

She explains how the tube system splits London into zones. Central London, including where we currently were, is Zone 1. From their, the zones spread out like a ripple in a pond. Camden is in Zone 2. Beyond that are Zones 3 through 6, which she says we will seldom go to. Our tube passes, called Oyster Cards for whatever reason, are only good for the first two zones,

so if we have some need to travel further, we would have to put money on them before we got on the train.

She then passes around a box of what she calls “Burner Phones”, and we each choose a small white brick that apparently will serve as our non-digital form of communication with her and each other. Unless we have an international plan, which none of us do, our smart phones won’t work here, so the school chooses to issue each of us a relic from our antiquated past - a cellphone that is only good for making phone calls and sending short text messages (no keyboard, only numbers, hello stone age).

“Everyone has their flatmate here with them, right?” Fox asks, and I glance over at Cal. As our eyes meet, I feel a shiver of trepidation run down my spine. *I can’t believe you threw up,* and then I retort to myself, *It’s fine, he was cool about it. Way too cool. It’s all fine.*

Upon hearing no objections, Fox continues, “Good. I’d like each pair of you to take a look at the tube map in your folder, pick a tube stop, run it by me, then go there. Orientation by fire! When you get there take a picture for proof with your not-quite-entirely-useless smart phones, explore for half an hour or so, then come back. Go!”

Cal and Em quickly switch seats, so we’re sitting next to our respective partners. I pull out the tube map from our folder, and it’s an intimidating interweaving of colored lines and quintessentially British names like “Lancaster Gate” and “Tottenham Court Road”.

“Any thoughts?” Cal asks, looking at my map.

“No idea,” I reply. “But we’re on the northern line, which is this black one. So it may be a good idea to try and get to a stop on another line, to figure out how switching works and stuff.”

“Yeah, cool,” he casually nods in agreement. We both stare at the map in silence. I wonder if I smell like vomit. “That one sounds cool.” Cal points to a stop called “Blackfriars”

along a double yellow and green line. I look at the key and see that those mean the circle and district lines.

“Um, sure,” I say, not having a reason to say no.

“Sweet.” Cal stands up and heads over to Fox. I fumble to put the map back in the folder and follow him to the front of the classroom. No one else has chosen one yet. Shouldn’t we be researching this or something?

“Is Blackfriars okay?” He asks her without hesitation.

“Fantastic choice!” She says. “You wanted to go to the pub?”

“What pub?” I really don’t know if I can handle any more alcohol.

“Oh that’s not why you picked it? Ah, well, you’re in for a treat. You’ll see it. Alright, off you go!” She makes a hand motion shooing us out of the room and then turns to the rest of the class and practically screams, “Blackfriars is taken!”

We step out the door and I wonder if I need to vomit again.

CHAPTER SIX

There's a small market just inside the Warren Street tube station, and as we pass it, Cal says, "Wait," and walks in. He grabs what looks like two adult-sized juice boxes, quickly pays for them, and then hands one to me.

"Drink up," he says.

"Uh, thanks. What is it?"

"Coconut Water. Super good for hangovers. Super good for the body in general." He unscrews the lid and takes a long drink. I do the same.

"Wow," I say.

"Good right?"

"Really good."

"Yeah, there's this guy at Venice Beach who has a coconut stand and lobs off the top of the coconut with a machete, then gives it to you with a straw. This stuff isn't as good, but it's close."

As Cal leads us into the underground, I realize I've never actually asked him where he's from. Wasn't Venice Beach supposed to be full of artsy weirdos? It's hard to imagine Cal in that setting, but then again, he came to London.

This time it's Dr. Kim's voice I hear: *You can't psychoanalyze people before you get to know them. Besides, Jaime, you're too busy psychoanalyzing yourself to be good at doing it to others.*

"So we're switching at Embankment," Cal says with confidence as we reach the platform's map.

“I think that makes sense,” I reply, and we get on the train, which is packed with either late-morning commuters or early-lunch-goers. It’s silent besides the sound of the wheels on the track, so talking to Cal feels like it would be breaking some kind of rule. I guess my mind was too loud this morning to realize the silence outside of it.

Cal walks with confidence through the Embankment station, following the signs without hesitation. I’m definitely going to get lost when I’m alone.

We reach Blackfriars with no stumbles, which both relieves me and makes me think, *This is too easy, I’m totally gonna screw this up later.*

Upon surfacing, I notice that this tube station looks incredibly modern, its front is made almost entirely out of glass. London seems full of these juxtaposition, the new living amongst the old.

“Do you know where this pub is?” I ask.

“Nope, but she said we’d find see it.”

“Fox seems really cool, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, and, if I’m being honest, pretty hot.”

I laugh.

“You’re not wrong.”

Then, having just walked outside, we both see it at the same time. A black stone friar with a jovial face mounted on the front of a long, narrow building like the figurehead on a ship. Above him is an old looking clock, and below him the address, 174, in green and gold mosaic. I can immediately tell that this building is not only old, but is powerful, as if it’s full of hundreds of years of bubbling energy soaked into the floor and the walls and the bricks.

And I'm right. The pub is fairly empty, but we claim a table in the back anyway. The ceilings are low and everything is covered in stone and mosaic, with laughing monks being the central decoration. Cal asks how old the building is, and the bored-looking waitress is suddenly excited to tell us as she hands us our menus.

"Well, the building is only from the late 1800's," she replies, and I think *Only?* "But it's built on the same site as the Dominican Monastery, which was built in 1279. The big rumor is that Henry VIII and his court met here when they were trying to figure out how to allow him to divorce Catherine of Aragon."

"That was his first wife, right?" Cal asks.

"Yes, and only one of two to survive," the waitress responds. How did Cal know that? I guess all those hair flips haven't killed that many brain cells.

We end up ordering a plate of fish and chips to share, because my stomach isn't completely normal yet, and one pint of beer and one pint of water - with it being quite obvious who has what. Settled, I finally feel comfortable enough to ask the questions I never got to ask.

"Where exactly are you from in California?"

"Oh, I'm not. I mean, I'm going to UCLA next year, and we have a vacation house in Venice, but I grew up in Brooklyn."

"Woah, cool," I say, then realize that I probably sounded like a gawking idiot. I shouldn't think he's cooler just because of where he lives.

"Yeah Brooklyn's cool. My mom's a Broadway Director, so we should really be in Manhattan, but my dad never wanted to leave the townhouse he grew up in after my grandparents died, so we just stayed there."

Brooklyn townhouse? Broadway director? A bereft father? He's being so open with me, so unassuming and genuine, I feel like I owe him the same. I bite hard on the inside of my cheek because I totally misjudged this kid.. I mean, maybe he still is a complete asshole, but I keep getting good-person vibes nibbling into my chest.

“What was growing up in the city like?”

“Fun, but kind of suffocating. I went to one of those preppy New York private schools that they shit on in the movies. Everything was so competitive and uptight, and a lot of the people were just so into themselves. Probably why I wanted to switch coasts.”

“And also come to London?”

“Yeah, London's way better than New York. But, you know, the grass is always greener on the other side and what not.”

Is it? I want to believe that the grass truly is greener here. Maybe Cal does too.

“You've been here before then?”

“A few times with my mom, to see West End shows and stuff.”

“So that's why you knew the tube so well.” I'm figuring him out!

“Oh, yeah, sorry dude, was I going too fast? Habit from the subway I guess. By the way, even covered in your puke, the underground is way cleaner than the New York subway system.”

I laugh, half out of nerves and half out of relief that he's comfortable to lightly joke with me. That's a good sign, according to my previous internet “how to make friends” searches, which Dr. Kim told me were both unnecessary and unlikely to be very accurate.

And yet I think back to them anyway. *He's sharing things with you. Share things with him. Relate to him. Be normal for once in your life.*

“I actually stayed in Brooklyn a few years ago. My dad used to be in this band, and one of his friends from it was playing a show there, so we went up and visited.”

“That’s cool. What band was your dad in? Would I know them?”

“Well,” I say, and take a nervous sip of water. I gulp. “I don’t usually tell people this so quickly. But I guess we’re going to be living together for the next two months. So…”

I lean forward a bit, not wanting to announce it to the entire pub. I stare intently at Cal, who has ever-so-slightly furrowed his brow in anticipation.

“He was in The Rolling Stones. My dad’s Mick Jagger.”

Cal’s eyes widen a little and his lips part, caught in a speechless moment of confusion.

Then I fall back in my chair, smile shamelessly and say, “I’m totally kidding.”

His body un-tenses and, thankfully, he laughs. “You’re an asshole.”

“I know,” I reply. “But yeah, no, my dad was in this really awful wannabe punk rock band after high school. They were called Poison in the Human Machine, which is a lyric from a Sex Pistols song. I guarantee you that you haven’t heard of them.”

Cal laughs again. “Point taken. But that’s cool though. So do you play guitar or sing or anything?”

“Nah. I mean I took guitar lessons when I was little, so I know how to, but it’s not really my thing.”

“I wish I could play guitar,” he says. “I bet it’s like a moth to a flame for girls.”

Em’s seen me play. It’s really not. Although I think even if I actually was Mick Jagger’s son, Em wouldn’t be into me.

“Yeah, I don’t know, I never really play in front of anyone or anything.”

“So your dad’s chill with you not picking up where he left off?”

I smile at the idea of my dad forcing me to write anti-establishment lyrics and wear safety pins in my clothes. “Oh, yeah, definitely. That would not have gone well.”

“That’s nice,” he says, and I think *don’t be weird, don’t pry*, and then I’m weird and I pry.

“Does your mom want you to go into theatre?” I ask.

“I mean, kind of. I still might. I don’t know. My dad used to be an actor too before he got into advertising. So they’re both pretty into it, and my sister’s really into it too, and, I mean, I’ve done a few things but I really just don’t love it as much as my family does.”

Woah. Suddenly I think his teen heartthrob aesthetic may be the product of his parents being douchey, not him. What’s that line from *Shrek* about people being ogres? No, no, they’re onions, that’s right, because they have layers. Cal is definitely an onion.

But I definitely should not tell him that I think he’s an onion. Or like a character from a stupid kid’s movie.

Okay, it’s not a stupid movie. It’s a classic. I’m sorry, Shrek.

Shit. Em isn’t hear to snap in my face when I zone out. Talk. Say something.

“So what do you want to do, then?”

“Wander.”

“Well, I think you came to the right place.”

“For sure.”

“Besides,” I continue. “*All that is gold does not glitter.*”

Now he’s the one staring blankly. Dammit, I was doing so well. Why did I think quoting nerdy poetry wouldn’t fall into the whole *don’t be weird* thing? Here we go...

“Have you ever read *Lord of the Rings*?” I ask.

“I’ve seen the movies.”

“I don’t remember if it’s in there or not. But it’s a poem Bilbo wrote about Aragorn. I guess it’s kind of like a prophecy. But it goes:

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.*

*From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.*

I mean, the second part doesn’t really apply to you I guess. But I like the wandering part. I always see that line in inspirational pictures all over the internet, but I don’t think most people know where it actually comes from.”

“I’d like to point out that you just recited an entire poem in an 800-year-old pub,” he says.

And we just kind of stare at each other, becoming aware of the bizarreness of the moment, of how out of place we are, of the stone monks and the Tolkien poem and the stories of our parents and the uncertainty of our futures, and then we laugh. We laugh like we’ve been friends for years.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I open my eyes, awake in London, and feel a tingle surge up my spine.

I have always found naps to be a hugely important part of my life. On some days, it's because worrying about the entire world is incredibly exhausting. On others, it's because hangovers just need that little extra push to go away.

So after finishing our orientation and safely traveling back to our flats without any vomit stops, I took a pre-dinner snooze.

And now here I lie, alone in a new bedroom, at the beginning of something that I am entirely unsure how to feel about.

The voices in my head are competing for attention. *Quiet*, I try to quell the imaginary manifestations of my anxiety as I stare up at the ceiling.

Don't get too comfortable, one says to me, and the pillow under my neck instantly becomes a little less soft. *Don't let your guard down here. You could get stabbed or Em could ditch you or you could fail your classes.*

No. I won't. I don't want to think of all the things that could happen. Instead I think back to Professor Fox, ending our orientation.

"Do not be fooled by the veneer of a common language," she tells us, and I feel my heartbeat accelerate again. "You will not experience the immediate culture shock that those studying in Spain or France might. Your initial sense of communication may come easier, but England is still a country all its own, full of its own customs and taboos and personalities. Try to assimilate as best you can. Don't just be a visitor here. *Live* here."

I feel a strange sense of excitement bubbling in my stomach. Em is here. Cal is nice. Cadence is beautiful. My parents found their place here, why can't I?

I reach over to the small nightstand and grab my phone. I scroll through my music until I find the playlist that's titled "Breathe," and press play.

Aunt Stevie starts singing and even the gnawing little demons in my head perk their ears up so they can listen.

I close my eyes. I think of one of the last things Fox says to us: "Adventure is out there, but be deliberate in how you chase it."

How do I want to chase my own idea of adventure?

"How was dream-land?" Em walks in and I force myself to sit up in bed. "I heard Stevie, so figured you were awake," she says.

"Barely," I admit. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Must you always assume something awful has happened?"

"We both know the answer to that question."

"Well, everything is fantastic," she says as she runs her fingers through her hair, pushing it out of her eyes. I can feel a playfulness bubbling in her veins, and my heart lightens because of it. "I just wanted to work on Fox's assignment, and obviously we'll have to compare notes," she continues.

Fox's assignment is hardly something meant to cause stress, so I'm relieved that so far it hasn't. For class on Monday, we are to come with a list of two things (along with a short history behind them) that we *will* do or see while on this trip. Nothing obvious, like a selfie with Big Ben or a ride on the Eye. And nothing we'll be seeing on field trips, like the Tower of London or Shakespeare's home in Stratford-upon-Avon. I can practically hear her voice: "Something *you* want to see. Points for creative ideas. British stank eye for boring ones."

I stretch my arms and arch my back in bed, attempting to shake off any post-nap weariness.

“Alright,” I agree.

“Well, Cadence, Cal and I are out here whenever you manage to get up,” Em says.

“Oh.” It slips out of my mouth. I sound more instinctually hurt than I would’ve liked to have let on.

“I just figured the more the merrier,” Em says, her wide smile faltering.

“Yeah, no, it’s fine,” I lie, hoping she’ll believe me. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Okay,” she says, then turns away and closes the door.

My chest feels like it’s been hit by a wrecking ball. I slump back down in bed, grab the pillow and push it over my face.

The pace of my thoughts pick up from a jog to a sprint, from *you’re an idiot* to *what did you expect to she’s leaving you sooner than you thought she would. This is an obvious sign that she’s trying to avoid spending time with you to did you really think that you were going to manage spending eight weeks in another country with Em all to yourself, without interacting with anyone else? Why can’t you give Cadence and Cal a chance? Because they complicate things. They complicate me and her. What is you and her? There is no you and her. Yes, there is. You’re right, there is - the one where she takes care of you because you can’t take care of yourself.*

I stand up and face the mirror hung on the back door and look at myself. The circles under my eyes have lightened, and my hair looks disheveled in a not-necessarily-bad way. But what lies behind the eyes that stare back at me? I sigh at my mild flair for hyperbole, but let my mind run with it.

I imagine seeing my eyes turn black, bleeding out from the iris until there isn’t a spec of white left. Black-eyed Jaime smiles a toothy grin, revealing that his teeth are filed into points, like a shark’s. I roll my neck and close my eyes, feeling him inside of me. *Get out get out get*

out.

One voice says, *Why do you create these fantasies, then let yourself get lost in them?*

Black-eyed Jaime echoes from a distance, *You can try to carve me out with a knife.*

Stop being so morbid.

Further away: *You'll never kill me.*

Go out and be with your friends. You're doing this to yourself.

Disappearing: *I'll always be here.*

I jolt my eyes away from the mirror, grab the doorknob, and walk out into the living room.

Everyone is sitting at our small kitchen table. Cadence and Cal immediately give each other a look that I'm still too tired to decipher. I scratch at my bedhead and sit down.

"Okay, he's out here, tell us now!" Em says.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Well Cadence and I were talking just now, and I think we have a pretty sick idea if you guys are up for it."

Cadence immediately jumps in, her eyes shining like they did when we talked about Fleetwood Mac. "So Fox wants us to come up with two things that we *will* do, right? Well, what if all four of us do one thing from everybody's list. Like, we promise to. We *have* to. No excuses."

I'm struck with the sudden realization that I have known Cadence for less than 48 hours. What do I really know about her? And Cal, too? What if they're crazy people.

"I'd definitely be down," Cal says. And I look to Em. Is she wondering the same thing?

I think back to my talk with Cal at Blackfriars, and to Cadence's respect for Aunt Stevie. The voice inside my head switches from *You don't know these people at all* to *Why does it feel like you do know these people?*

Em starts to open her mouth. I beat her to it. “Yes,” I say, “I’m in.” I don’t know who’s more surprised, Em or the little anxiety demons.

“I think that sounds cool,” Em agrees. “Do you guys have any ideas what you want us all to do?”

“I have mine,” Cadence says with the excitement of a child who knows the right answer to the teacher’s question. “Have you guys heard of The Punctured Wings?”

“Nope,” Cal admits.

“They have that song about ghosts, don’t they?” Em asks.

I try and recall every song I’ve ever heard and pray that I can remember a song about ghosts by a band that most be extremely cool for the sole reason that Cadence likes them. I stay quiet.

“Yeah, A Happy Haunting, it made its way around the radio. But they’re this awesome pop punk band, and I’m basically in love with the lead singer. Her name’s Clara Richards and she’s just the coolest person ever. She’s got this short blue hair but, Jaime, she dances like Stevie; she just like floats around the stage. Anyway they’re actually coming to this club in Camden at the end of July, and I think it would be so fun if we all went.”

“I’m sold,” I say.

“Shocker,” Em rolls her eyes. “But as long as the tickets aren’t too expensive, I’d be up for it.”

“They’re only fifteen pounds!” Cadence replies. “I almost bought a ticket before I came, but I thought I would wait to see if anyone would go with me.”

“Well that’s one out of four decided,” Cal says. “And I think I have an idea, but, it might be kind of a stretch. I’ll totally go alone if know one else wants to or can.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“Well, Wales is apparently a really awesome place to surf. And it’s just a few hours away by train. So I was thinking of maybe sneaking away for a weekend. But it’d be cheaper and way more fun if we all did it together.”

Shit. International athletics. My skinny body in a wetsuit.

“Could you teach us?” Em asks, and I’m sure it sounds way more flirty in my head than it does to others. But images of Cal instructing Em in a tight wetsuit, hands wandering, flash before my eyes, and it takes everything in me to not roll my eyes like Em does.

“Sure, it’s actually pretty easy once you get the hang of it.”

I find that hard to believe.

“It sounds like something I would never do,” Cadence says. “Which means I’m in.” Her sense of adventure tugs at the corners of my lips.

But the chirping of *you can’t do it you can’t do it you can’t do it* echoes in my mind.

“I want to do it, too!” Em says, locking eyes with Cal.

Shit shit shit.

They all turn to look at me. I think of Cal in the pub with the stone monks and the Tolkien poem.

“Alright, let’s go surfing in Wales,” I decide.