

## CHAPTER ONE

# EMILY

GOOSE BUMPS spread over Emily's arms like a rash. "Sorry," said a tall blond woman, who had neglected to introduce herself. "We'll be ready to go in just a tick." She fiddled with her digital camera, adjusting its position on the tripod.

Emily smiled politely. She had auditioned in countless church halls, but this one took cold and drafty to new levels. Echoes bounced off the walls and danced around the room, making it almost impossible to hear what anyone was saying.

A bearded man sitting behind a wooden table stifled a yawn.

"I do apologize," the woman muttered, squinting at the camera. "This won't take a moment. . . . Aha! There we go, all sorted. I hope this doesn't make you feel too uncomfortable, Emily, but we're recording all our auditions today. It helps us when we're having our casting discussions later on. Just ignore it if you can."

Emily nodded. Under her skirt, sweat trickled down her thighs.

"Right, so we'll start recording. Just give your name and agent to the camera, then we'll get straight into the scene."

Emily closed her eyes and took a breath, letting it out slowly. *Just breathe.*

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## THE SAFE PLACE

The bearded man picked something out of his teeth. She'd recognized him as soon as she walked in, but he seemed smaller in real life, and less handsome. One spindly leg lay draped across the other, the angles of the knee joint sticking out through his trousers, and his arms were folded across his chest in an attitude of utter indifference.

"Take your time. Whenever you're ready," the blond woman said, sneaking a glance at her watch.

Emily swallowed. *Breathe. Come on. You can do this.*

She gave a small nod. *Ready.*

"Okay," said the woman. "Off you go."

"Excuse me. *Ex-cuse* me, can I get past?"

Emily elbowed her way through the slow pedestrian traffic. Pushing past a couple taking selfies, she tripped over the wheels of a pram and smacked her wrist against a lamppost. She kicked the post and swore loudly, twice. The owner of the pram flinched and steered her baby away.

Emily pressed her sleeve to her eyes. Despite weeks of preparation, the audition had been a complete balls-up. All the lines she'd thought were safely committed to memory had somehow evaporated, leaving only a screaming inner monologue of fear and self-doubt: *I can't do this I don't know the lines I can't do this they hate me I can't feel my legs I can't do this.* She'd coughed, stammered, and sweated her way through the whole thing and only just escaped without vomiting. Why did that keep happening? What was wrong with her?

Also, she'd been an absolute idiot to think that Carnaby Street would be a shortcut; she should have known that the lunchtime crowds would be out in full force. *Stupid, stupid, stupid, can't get anything right.* She checked the time on her phone and sped up, squeezing past street performers and buskers until finally she broke free of the crush and scurried down the last few streets to the office.

Gasping for breath, she pushed through the revolving door

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and into the lobby. A signal light went on above the nearest elevator and she ran for it, arriving just in time to collide with a tall man emerging from between the silver doors.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, her face full of starched lapel.

“No harm done,” said the man.

He held the elevator open for her and she rushed inside, looking up at the last minute to realize she’d just crashed into the company’s managing director. “Shit,” she said as he turned and walked away, then clapped her hand over her mouth. “I mean, good afternoon, Mr. Denny!” Cringing, she jammed her finger repeatedly against the button for the fifth floor until the doors slid shut.

Checking her appearance in the mirrored walls, she realized she looked insane—her hair stuck out in clumps, her top lip glistened with sweat, and her eyes were ringed with smudged mascara. But, she supposed, running all the way from Soho to Mayfair would do that.

When the doors *pinged* open again, Emily scuttled across gleaming tiles with her head bent low and dived behind the reception desk. Glancing around, she rattled pens and flapped paper in a pantomime of important activity. *Just arrived? No, not me, I’ve been here for hours.* Fortunately, no one seemed to be paying any notice. She pulled out the collar of her shirt and blew downward, trying to dry the excess moisture underneath.

“Sweaty, flushed, out of breath. Somebody get laid on their lunch break, did they?”

She whirled around to see a lacquered head poking out, spy-like, from behind a newspaper. *Urgh. David.* The HR manager of Proem Partners sat on a low sofa with his legs crossed, his eyebrows raised in a matronly expression of disapproval. *Busted.*

Emily decided to brazen it out. “Well, why not?” she said, smiling. “It is hump day.”

David simpered. “You’re late,” he said, tapping his watch. “Again.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I lost track of time.”

THE SAFE PLACE

“Audition, was it?”

“Um. Yes. Sorry I didn’t tell anyone; it was kind of a last-minute thing.”

“I see. Well, we can’t keep Spielberg waiting, now, can we?” He made a show of neatly folding his newspaper. Then he stood and smoothed the creases out of his expensive shirt, his eyes roaming a little south of Emily’s face. “So how did it go? Are they gonna make you a star?”

“It went great, thanks,” she lied. “Fingers crossed.”

“I’ll watch this space, then.”

“Yeah.” There was an awkward pause. Emily stacked letters and notepads into useless piles. David flashed her a creepy smile. Why was he hanging around? Didn’t he have anything better to do than stare down her top? “Right, well, I’d better crack on,” she said. “Make up for all that lost time.”

“Oh, sure, absolutely.” But David didn’t move. He tapped his fingers on the desk. “Actually, Emily?”

“Yes?”

“Can I have a quick word? Meeting room one?” The look he gave her was both patronizing and shifty, and it made Emily’s heart thump. She knew that look. She’d seen it many times before on other similarly officious faces.

“Sure, of course,” she said, standing up too fast and sending her office chair spinning into the back wall. She followed David into the meeting room, hoping against hope that this “quick word” was not what it appeared to be.

It was exactly what it appeared to be.

*Fired*, she thought, when Dave had finished talking. She couldn’t say it out loud. No matter how many times it happened, it never got any less humiliating. “But . . .,” she stammered. *No, no, no, I can’t lose this job.* Her frozen thoughts suddenly began to thaw and came pouring out of her mouth. “I’m really sorry. It’ll never happen again. I’m actually a super-punctual person. I can prove it. I can do better, I promise. I just need one more chance.”

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David shrugged, fake sympathy spreading over his ferrety face like oil. “You know I like you, Emily, but it’s not my decision to make. If it were, you’d have a job for life.”

“Okay, well, whose decision is it? Maybe you could talk to them for me?” *Don’t beg*, she told herself. *Surely you’re above begging for a shitty temp job?* But the words kept coming. “Maybe I could do something else, something with less responsibility. There must be other things that need doing?”

“Come now, you don’t need us. Good-looking girl like you?” David reached out as if to ruffle her hair but thankfully seemed to change his mind at the last minute. “I’m sure Hollywood is just falling over itself.”

Emily felt her cheeks burn. Proem was the only thing keeping her afloat. Bookings for temp jobs had been slow lately, and corporate videos and play readings didn’t pay much.

When the ordeal finally came to an end, David patting her shoulder like a headmaster sending her back to class, she returned to the mercifully empty reception area and the desk that was no longer hers. Behind her, the meeting-room door clicked shut and David’s busy footsteps faded away into the recesses of the building. A funereal silence settled like snow.

*Well . . . fuck.* What the hell was she going to do now? The upside of losing her job, of course, was that she would no longer have to pretend to care about filing and making new clients feel welcome. But then again, the rent was due, she was deep into her overdraft, and it wasn’t likely that she’d get another temp gig straightaway. Jamie at the temp agency had mentioned only a few days ago that they were struggling to find enough work for everyone, and getting fired wasn’t exactly going to propel her to the top of the list.

She lifted her head and glared at the computer screen. The phone rang but she ignored it. Nope, there was no other option: she’d just have to cook up a good sob story, phone Jamie, and throw herself on his mercy.

\* \* \*

## THE SAFE PLACE

There was no reason to stay until the end of the day, but the mid-afternoon rush made it impossible to leave. Every time Emily went to pack up her things, someone would approach the desk and issue instructions so forcefully that she found herself unable to explain that technically she no longer worked there. Then a female client arrived for a meeting with a four-year-old in tow and dumped him at Emily's feet like luggage, so then she *really* couldn't go. The poor little boy looked so forlorn that she ended up playing hide-and-seek among the potted plants while simultaneously directing calls and signing for packages.

After a while she began to feel sad. As she watched the well-dressed human traffic flowing steadily through the foyer, she wondered what it *would* be like to have a job for life. Decent money, security, colleagues, Friday-night drinks. It all sounded so *liberating*.

Emily realized then how much she'd enjoyed her six weeks at Proem. She didn't exactly fit in, of course, but people had started to say hi to her in the coffee room, and she'd even been sent a fun little questionnaire for the in-house "newsletter," whatever that was. "Get to Know Your Team," the email had said, with a note explaining that her answers would be posted the following week along with her photograph. It had felt nice to be included.

She looked for more excuses to hang around. Buoyed by the attentions of the abandoned little boy, she found increasingly elaborate ways to entertain him: Twenty Questions, magic tricks, a treasure hunt. She swept the floor. The photocopier was beeping; the paper tray was jammed. The coffee machine needed cleaning, the cushions straightening. She wanted to leave the place looking perfect. Maybe someone would realize what a great employee she'd been and call her back. But when the office activity began to wind down and the boy's mother finally appeared to reclaim her shrieking, writhing child (Emily had pumped him full of sugary bribes), she knew it was finally time to go.

Picking up her bag, she took a last look around. Somewhere

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ANNA DOWNES

in a parallel universe, maybe she belonged in a place like this. Maybe there was a version of her walking around in a Stella McCartney outfit and carrying a briefcase.

But back in the elevator, she studied her reflection once more. *On second thought*, she decided, *probably not*.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### SCOTT

THE FAT nib of the pen was too blunt to penetrate his skin, but Scott Denny was giving it his best shot. He forced it into the center of his palm, turning it slowly like a screw, first one way and then the other, grinding the metal against his flesh.

It was painful but not nearly enough. He cast his eyes over his meticulously ordered desk, searching for something that might do the job properly. There wasn't a lot to work with. His phone obviously wouldn't do much damage. Neither would the metal prongs of the charger, not even if he pressed really hard. He could maybe crush his fingers with one of the heavy granite statuettes. Or smash the ornate picture frame and use the glass to carve lines into his arm. If he had a stapler handy, he could slam it repeatedly into his thigh.

Too messy, though. Too loud. Too conspicuous.

On the other side of his desk, her slender frame perched delicately on a Danish cherrywood swivel chair, his executive assistant, Verity, blathered on. Her immaculately manicured nails tapped an irregular beat on the keyboard of her laptop as she made updates to his schedule.

“You’ve got the managing exec of Alkira-Dunn coming in with her lawyer tomorrow at eight thirty, and after that you’ve

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got a conference call with the rep for Truss and Boulder. He's hoping we'll finance a buyout. I've already talked to him; he doesn't have a business plan and we're a bit unclear on competitors, so we need to look at that tonight. And then if you need to run models you've got some time before your lunch meeting. Now, you need to tell me what you want me to do about . . .”

She droned on and on.

And under the table, *grind, grind, grind*.

He really should stop. It was going to leave one hell of a mark.

The sky outside, dissected into squares by bronze-mullioned windows, was dishwater gray. Where had the afternoon gone? In just a few hours, the streetlights would start flickering on: a neat line of fire stretching along Grosvenor Street all the way to Hyde Park, a procession of torches lighting the way home for all but the likes of him, the night owls for whom the days were not defined by the rising and setting of the sun but by the open and close of global trade.

Scott suddenly registered silence. He looked up. Verity had paused mid drivell and was giving him an odd look.

“What?” he said.

“Yesterday's start-up. I need to know if you want me to go ahead and contact their director.”

Scott tried to recall the previous day and drew a blank.

“Everything okay?” Verity's doll-like face was rumped with concern.

“Fine.” He smiled thinly. “Just a few issues at home. Nothing major. Yes, set up a meeting. What else?”

Verity gave him a sideways look and returned to her screen, unconvinced but keen to press on.

*Grind, grind, grind.*

Beside him on his desk, Scott's phone lit up displaying yet another new message. There was now a neat little queue of them.

Please talk to me . . .

Last night I thought . . .

THE SAFE PLACE

We need you, don't . . .

I swear if you . . .

I fucking hate you . . .

Selfish thoughtless cowardly bastard . . .

*Grind, grind, grind.*

He nodded along with whatever Verity was saying, his thoughts drifting further and further away. Images darted birdlike through his mind, swooping and flashing their colors at him. He saw an orange sun peeking through feathery fronds of pampas grass. A wet footprint evaporating on hot polished travertine.

Then a pillow, soft and plump. A delicate finger, pointing.

And stars. A thick blanket of stars across a clear, black sky.

He fought the urge to slap himself. His eyes wandered, seeking an anchor. Through the glass wall of his office he could see the worker bees buzzing from room to room at a time-lapsed pace. Clients came and went. Junior staff members leaned in doorways clutching dainty cups of espresso. And over in reception, a large potted fig tree wobbled as a fully grown woman tried to wedge herself behind it.

He narrowed his eyes. Was he seeing things? No. His receptionist really was hiding behind a potted plant. Suddenly, a small boy jumped out from under the desk and hopped up and down, pointing with glee at the ill-concealed blonde. She clutched at her chest as if shot, then fell to the ground in a heap. The boy laughed and sat on her head.

Scott removed the pen from his hand.

He watched, entranced, as the receptionist negotiated her way out from under the boy and staved off a second attack with some sort of trick. The child gazed up at her as she produced a small object from behind his ear, and for the first time in a long while, Scott smiled.

There was a soft knock at the door, and both he and Verity turned to see David Mahoney's smarmy little face peeping

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around the door. “Sorry to interrupt,” David said, “but I just wanted to let you know that it’s done. I told her.”

Scott blinked. “What?”

“The temp on reception. I fired her. As . . . as we discussed.” David’s eyes slid to Verity, who shrugged.

“Oh.” Scott glanced back toward reception. The young woman was now galloping around and flapping her arms like wings. “Yes. Good. Thank you.”

David pressed his hand to his heart and pretended to faint. “Oh god, don’t do that to me. For a minute there I thought I’d made a mistake.”

“No. No mistake.”

“Thank heaven for that.” He let out a high-pitched laugh. “I was worried *I’d* be out the door next!”

Scott stared at him.

“Okay, well, she ought to be packing up her things as we speak.”

“No rush,” Scott murmured. Down the hall, the receptionist was wrapping what looked like a stack of cookies in a napkin. She pressed them into the little boy’s hand.

David backed away with an almost courtly bow and the door clicked shut after him. There was a brief pause, during which Verity raised a penciled eyebrow. “Dare I ask what she did to offend you?”

Scott said nothing, and Verity went back to her laptop. She knew better than to push him. She resumed her meaningless stream of facts and figures.

And underneath it, a small unpleasant sound.

*Tap tap tap.*

Scott frowned. It was coming from under the table. A soft, wet rhythm, somewhere near his feet.

*Tap tap tap.*

Peering down, he saw several tiny dark splashes of blood on the polished concrete. *Well, would you look at that*, he almost said. Clearly, you should never underestimate a blunt instrument.

## CHAPTER THREE

### EMILY

AFTER HEADING out of the main lobby and onto the street, Emily circled around the back of the building and turned left toward the small Tesco Metro near the Tube station. She was starving, and the cupboards at home were pretty much bare. A mental rummage through her fridge turned up a small hardened block of cheese, a jar of curry paste, tomato sauce, and a carrot. Not even Jamie Oliver could make a meal out of that.

She checked her phone as she walked. No missed calls, no new emails; just a text from her acting agent, Lara, reminding Emily of the times of both the following day's audition and the routine admin meeting they'd scheduled for an hour beforehand. Emily tapped out a response: **Yay! See you tomorrow!** and quickened her step. At least getting fired meant that she wouldn't have to sneak out of work again. Actually, maybe it was a sign. Destiny or something. Maybe she was supposed to get fired so that she could go to this audition. After all, the universe worked in strange and mysterious ways.

In the supermarket, Emily found herself humming along to the tinny background music as she browsed the aisles, her basket dangling from her elbow. She picked up milk, eggs, cereal, onions, tomatoes, and chicken, and on a cheerful whim she threw in

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some smoked salmon and an avocado. By the time she reached the self-service checkout, she'd also acquired a block of the good chocolate and a four-pack of Bacardi Breezers, because why not?

Unfortunately, the display on the card reader soon told her why not. Card declined, insufficient funds.

Emily frowned. Impossible. She definitely had money in that account; she hadn't been paid yet, but the rent wasn't due until next week.

A Tesco employee hovered nearby. "Do you need some help?"

"No, no." Emily grinned. "All good, just used the wrong card, that's all. I won't be a sec."

She pulled her phone out of her bag and brought up her banking app. Her account details appeared. *Shit*. The rent came out this week, not next week. It had bounced, which meant she had yet again hit her overdraft limit and would have to apply for her third extension in as many months. She would be laughed out of the bank.

"You sure you don't need help?" asked the shop assistant again.

"Yes, fine, no problem." Emily went to pull out her credit card and remembered that it had been canceled due to irregular payments. *No, no, no*. She briefly considered running out of the shop without paying but thought better of it.

Blushing, she beckoned the Tesco lady over. "Actually, I do have a bit of a problem. This is so embarrassing, but I've left my card at home. I must have picked up my old one by mistake. So annoying—they look exactly the same!"

The woman peered at her over the top of her glasses. She was nobody's fool. "You can go home and get it," she said. "We'll keep your shopping here until you get back."

"Well, no. I live quite far away so that's not really . . . Look, can I just take a couple of things and leave the rest?"

Nobody's Fool rolled her eyes. Without saying a word, she pushed a couple of buttons on the screen and swiped her staff

THE SAFE PLACE

clearance card, erasing Emily's shopping list and bringing up the start page once more.

"Thanks. Sorry." Emily paid for the Breezers, milk, and eggs, and watched as her extravagances were taken away.

Outside on the street, she bit her nails. Her pay would come in next week, but it would only just cover the missed rent, so there would be nothing left for food or travel. Or bills. She thought of the overdue electricity reminder taped to the fridge.

Things were not looking good. Nobody's Fool was right; she needed help.

Rather than get straight on the Tube, Emily took the side streets off Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square down to the river. The smoggy London air was far from fresh, but it beat the vacuum of the underground and she needed a clear head.

On the Golden Jubilee Bridge, she placed her shopping bag at her feet and pulled her phone out of her pocket. Underneath, the Thames slid by, brown and soupy. Her thumb hovered over her mother's number. Did she really have the nerve to call? Was she that desperate?

"I have had *enough!*" Juliet had shrieked during Emily's last visit. "You can't keep doing this! You can't just disappear for months on end, no phone calls, no emails, nothing, and then show up out of nowhere asking for *money.*" Afterward, the two of them had sat in stunned silence, neither knowing how to bridge the gap. Juliet, as always, was the first to try. "I'm sorry for raising my voice," she said, her face drawn. "But your father and I worry so much about you, and we're afraid that . . . Look, it would just be lovely to hear from you because you'd like to say hello, and not just because you want something."

That had been Emily's cue to be gracious, conciliatory. Instead she chose the lowest road. "I'm sorry I'm such a massive *disappointment* to you guys," she said, "but you were the ones who adopted a kid from fuck knows where. If you wanted perfection then maybe you should've left me where I was."

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Juliet had recoiled as if slapped. “That is not fair, Emily. And you know it.”

Emily did know it, but there was a spark of truth in what she’d said. Plus, she always got a kick out of seeing her saintly mother snap. *What, no jolly silver lining for me? Oh, how sad.* This time, though, the look on Juliet’s face had been somewhat less satisfying.

After a few moments, Emily replaced the phone in her bag. The river stretched out beneath her, full and fat. Lazy waves licked the cold stone walls and slapped the undersides of party boats, and Emily had a fleeting urge to throw herself in. Life just felt . . . too big. She was supposedly an adult, but for some reason she struggled to deal with, well, anything really. She didn’t understand her rental agreements. Tax returns were like cryptic crosswords to her. Conversations about mortgages and small-business loans (very rare in her life, but they did crop up occasionally) might as well have been in Urdu for all the sense they made to her. She seemed to spend most of her days feeling baffled and overwhelmed. Which, she mused, perhaps explained why she now found herself broke and unemployed, standing alone on a bridge with only half her shopping.

Sighing heavily, she picked up her bag and turned away from the water, heading instead for home.

As usual, the door of Emily’s building got stuck on the bulging carpet, and she was forced to squeeze her body sideways through the gap. Her cardigan snagged on the latch, which pulled a small hole in the weave. “Crap,” she muttered, trying unsuccessfully to shove the door shut again. She gave it a kick. The doorknob fell off.

She trudged up the stairs, brushing a film of dust off the bannister with her sleeve. Inside the flat, the ever-present smell of curry, courtesy of the Indian restaurant below, was today enriched by an acrid tang of burned toast. Spencer must be cooking.

## THE SAFE PLACE

She poked her head into the kitchen, expecting to find her flatmate in his favorite spot at the table, bent over a packet of tobacco and some rolling papers. He wasn't, but the evidence suggested he'd only just left. An ashtray full of roll-up stubs smoldered on the table, and a thin haze of smoke hung in the air. A tub of margarine sat lidless and sweaty next to greasy plates and, in the corner, takeout boxes spilled from the bin.

Curling her lip in disgust, Emily returned the margarine to the fridge, opened a window, and then picked her way over to the countertop to search for a clean glass—one that didn't have a small pool of alcohol at the bottom. Something caught her eye as she rummaged. Among the debris was an oil-spattered note.

*Guess what, it said in Spencer's lazy scrawl, rent bounced again, landlord lost his shit. We've got four weeks.*

Emily sat at the table and cradled her head in both hands. She racked her brains, running through a mental list of friends who might have a spare room or even a sofa she could crash on for a few weeks but, surprisingly, she came up with nothing.

*How is that even possible? I have friends, don't I?*

She did, but many of them had thrown in the towel and moved away from London to get married and have kids. Now they were all scattered across the country, moving on with their lives, sending invitations to events that made absolutely no sense to her. Tupperware parties. Gender-reveal parties. She had no idea what these things even meant. Whenever she'd made the effort to visit, she'd found that she had nothing to say, nothing to contribute. It was as if they'd all flown off to the moon and left her behind.

Of the friends who had stuck around, she could only think of two who might have had space for her, but Louise had sublet her room while she was away on tour and Rhea's father had just died, so the time probably wasn't right for favors. That, and Rhea's place was like a drug den. The last time Emily had stayed over she'd woken up in the living room at 8 A.M., hungover as

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fuck, surrounded by bearded men and bong smoke. She hadn't the courage to ask who they were or where they'd come from, so she'd fronted it out, sitting up and pretending everything was normal. The TV had been on, spitting out news story after gruesome news story, the men all staring with glassy eyes at grim accounts of domestic violence and mass shootings, child abuse and murders, and she'd sat and watched with them for over half an hour before she'd felt brave enough to stand up and leave the room.

And then Rhea had appeared, gray-faced and groggy, insisting that Emily come with her to her niece's second birthday party. "Please, Em," she'd pleaded, "I can't face it on my own." So, off they'd trudged to a clean white house in Putney where cake-faced kids literally ran rings around them. Emily had never felt so dirty in all her life. That was three years ago, and she hadn't been back to Rhea's house since.

Of course, there were her parents, but the thought of moving back in with Juliet and Peter, even temporarily, almost made her retch. There was another option there, but it was only marginally less horrendous. Over the past five or six years, Emily had called her mother countless times and asked to borrow money; always Juliet and never Peter, who told anyone who would listen that kids these days would only learn self-sufficiency when they were thrown into the churning waters of adulthood with no life jacket. Juliet, on the other hand, always caved, but would it be different this time?

Emily hadn't spoken to either parent since her last visit, so naturally a repeat performance would go down like a shit sandwich. But what was the alternative? Live in a box on the street? She was fairly certain that her mother would rather part with some cash than see her sleep in a doorway. Eighty percent certain, anyway. Maybe seventy-five.

Emily looked at her phone. Her mouth was bone dry.

*Just do it.*

She picked it up and pressed the call button.

THE SAFE PLACE

Juliet picked up after six long rings. “Hello, Emily? Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me. Hi.”

“Darling, hello! I’m so glad you called! Listen, let me just . . . hang on, I can’t quite . . .”

“Hello? Are you there?” There was a lot of noise in the background, clinking and laughter and music.

“Hold on,” Juliet was saying, “I’m just . . .” There was a squeak and a bang, and the chatter was instantly muffled. “Ah, that’s better! Sorry, I’m in a restaurant. You know the one on the corner where the old bank used to be? They’ve done it up. It’s very nice, the food is superb.”

“That’s nice.” Emily took a breath. “Listen, I just wanted to apologize for, you know, the thing at your house. The way we left things . . . I’ve been feeling bad.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you, darling, I appreciate that.” Juliet paused. “How about we just forget it happened, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay. So, we’re good?”

“Yes, sweetheart, we’re good.”

“Cool.” Emily picked at a dry smear of egg yolk on the tabletop. “So . . . how’ve you been?”

Juliet chuckled. “I’m just fine.” She made it sound like a question, her tone playful.

*She’s being weird*, Emily thought, instantly on her guard. “And Peter?”

“Yes, your father is also fine. He’s here, actually. Your grandparents and Auntie Cath, too. Do you want to say hello?”

“Oh, no, I don’t want to disturb.” A pang of guilt curdled into bitterness. *How cozy, a quiet family dinner without the black sheep, just the way you like it.* “Look,” she said, pressing on. “This is going to sound bad, but please hear me out because I’m, uh, dealing with a bit of a situation here.”

“Are you alright?”

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“Well, I’m not dying or anything. But things are a bit difficult. I’m in a bit of trouble.”

“You’re making me nervous.” Juliet snickered. “You’re not pregnant, are you? I only ask because I *know* you’re not calling about money.”

“I told you it would sound bad.”

“Emily—”

“And I wouldn’t ask unless it was an emergency.”

“Emily, stop.” Juliet’s tone had changed completely. “Are you about to ask me for more money? Yes or no.”

Emily swallowed. There was no way around it. “Kind of. Yes. But please believe me when I say I’m desperate.”

There was a sigh, followed by a short cluck of a sound that could have been a laugh or a sob.

Emily listened resolutely to the muted clink and buzz of the restaurant, steeling herself for a lecture. “Oh, come on,” she said, breaking the silence. “It can’t be that much of a shock.” She didn’t mean to sound sulky, but that’s how it came out.

When it came, Juliet’s voice was thick. “I’m not shocked. Not one bit. I just thought . . .”

“What? What did you think?”

A sniff and a rustle of tissue.

“I just thought you might be calling to wish me a happy birthday.”

*Oh. Fuck.*

“Juliet, I—”

There was a soft click and the line went dead.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SCOTT

FOR SCOTT, every working day began with an early morning ritual. He arrived at the office before sunrise and wandered from room to room, trailing his fingers lovingly over the curves and corners of his kingdom. Soft leather, polished timber, frosted glass, and black steel: he caressed it all, making a silent inventory of every detail. He knew the building as intimately as he knew his own skin. He'd overseen the entire renovation process, from knocking down the first wall to repositioning the electrical outlets; he remembered every single purchase, every decision, every placement. This space was his brainchild, his vision, his literal dream come true.

Years ago, just after graduation and before landing his first job with an investment bank, Scott had fallen asleep on a train from London to Bristol and woken up knowing exactly what he was going to do with his career. With a clear and burning certainty, he knew that one day he would launch his own fund, one with an emphasis on the development and mentorship of emerging companies, and that he would build the perfect corporate palace in which to house it. He could see the pure beauty that would be his offices, the devilish expense hidden beneath dazzling simplicity. He'd nursed his dream and worked relentlessly

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until it came to life. That was his way. That was how he'd been as a child, as a teenager, and as a young adult, always dreaming and planning and working, pulling thoughts out of his head and making them real.

Somehow, he'd managed to orchestrate his married life in the same way, dreaming up the perfect girl to be his perfect wife and only barely believing his good luck when Nina showed up behind the counter of his local coffee shop. He'd never seen anything more beautiful in his life. She was a miracle, the very image of what he wanted: a mysterious stranger from a far-off land with a face as fresh as ocean spray. It was love at first sight. With her, he knew, he would build something pure, something unbreakable. And sure enough, as if by magic, their perfect life had materialized before their eyes.

In fact, for a long time it seemed he only had to think of what he wanted and, lo, it would appear. Even Nina couldn't dispute his ability to make special things happen. She used to say he was like a glassblower, somehow able to coax shape and color from dry, dusty sand.

A warm glow spread over Scott's shoulder, and he turned to see the sun breaking free of the London skyline. Its buttery rays came bouncing through the glass walls of the mezzanine, lighting up the meeting rooms as if from the inside and transforming the whole office into a glittering prism. He tried to smile. In the past, his offices had always made him happy, but lately he'd found himself stroking the surfaces not with pleasure but with melancholy, as if he were saying goodbye. As if the mere touch of his finger could turn his dreams into dust and his glass back into sand.

Shrinking away from the light, he looked down over the balcony. The mezzanine was one of his favorite features, not least because it provided a bird's-eye view of reception. It was from here that he liked to watch his staff arrive for work. Verity was always first, her long hair swishing behind her like a cape. Then his most senior associates appeared, usually followed by a few

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of the younger, hungrier junior team members. His second-in-command would show up at some point. And then, over the past six weeks, almost always red-faced and out of breath, Emily the receptionist had brought up the rear.

Initially, Emily had caught his attention because there'd been something familiar about her, something Scott couldn't put his finger on. But she'd held it because she was fascinatingly different. Wide-eyed and often late, she couldn't have been further from the highly experienced temps they usually hired. She'd stared at the switchboard as if she'd never seen anything so complicated in her life and greeted everyone who walked through the door like they were a guest at a surprise party without ever stopping to check who anyone was (he once saw her show a courier through to the boardroom). With her panic-stricken responses to most requests, she made for an amusing distraction from his clogged in-box and buzzing phone.

Every day he'd watched her fumble around on the desk, dropping the headset and misplacing paperwork. He watched her eat lunch on her own, compulsively checking her phone with visible disappointment. He watched her watching the team, especially the girls: she followed them with hungry eyes, imitating their show-pony walks and bouncy hairstyles, aping their outfits with high-street knockoffs, desperate for them to notice her. And as he watched, an idea had taken shape, or the seed of one, at least—and not an especially viable one at that. But as the days rolled by and Nina's messages became increasingly frantic, the seed grew, until one day he decided to conduct a few tests.

First, he ran a Google search. He discovered Emily was an actress, though not a successful one. She'd grown up in a village in Derbyshire. Her social-media accounts revealed limited activity—just a few pictures of the same two or three friends hanging out at cheap venues and free events. No boyfriend. No family photos.

He made a few phone calls, dug a little deeper.

He asked Verity to relay a few random requests, assign some

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tasks that he knew Emily had already completed, just to see if she would do them again. She did. He asked her to go outside at a specific time every day for a week and take a photograph of the building at the end of the block. She went. He emailed her the password for an absent junior's desktop computer and instructed her to access a file marked PRIVATE. She raised no objections. She was so eager to please that she complied with every order without hesitation.

He then found a Jungian personality quiz online, the type often used for career assessment, and pasted it into an email, tailoring it with a few "fun" questions of his own. Anticipating that Emily would enjoy the special attention, he invented a story about a company newsletter and an initiative to spotlight individual members of the team. Naturally, she took the bait. Her answers were most illuminating.

He even followed her home one night, shadowing her on the Tube all the way to Deptford, where he'd watched her wrestle with the door to a depressing little flat above a curry house.

And then something amazing had happened. He'd made a call to a former colleague, cashing in on a long-standing debt of thanks. Three days later, that former colleague made good on his word and delivered a thick orange envelope to Scott's desk, the contents of which almost stopped Scott's heart. He'd never been one to believe in fate but here, it seemed, was a certain kind of proof. The heavens, the gods, *whatever*: something had conspired to lead that girl here, to Proem, to him. It could be no coincidence. Everything was too spookily, flawlessly aligned.

That very afternoon, the idea went from tiny seed to fully formed plan. He called in a few more favors, made a few arrangements. Placed some ducks in a neat little row. And then, about a week later, he instructed David Mahoney to terminate Emily's employment.

Of course, he'd had moments of doubt. Moments when he'd questioned his own judgment. But then, as he'd watched Emily

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play hide-and-seek in reception with the little boy, the final piece fell into place. She was the right choice; he was sure of it.

Soon, he would call Yves. Start the preparations. There was just one thing left to do.

In his pocket, his phone vibrated once. Twice. Three times. Probably Nina again. Fortunately, he'd had the good sense to deal with yesterday's barrage of messages before he'd gone to sleep. They'd spoken at midnight, her anguished whispers traveling the distance between them like a thread-thin beam of light, arcing back and forth over land and sea, bouncing off stars and satellites. He used to see their connection like that: an unbreakable line from his heart to hers, holding them together no matter how far apart they might be. Not anymore.

"Please," she'd begged yet again. "You can't imagine what it's like. I'm so alone."

He'd murmured his support, told her what she wanted to hear.

"If I just had someone to talk to, I . . ." She stopped. Switched tack. "When are you coming? When?"

For a few sweet moments he'd allowed himself to remember what it was like before. He thought about how it felt to laugh with her, to hold her and feel her hair tangled around his fingers. He remembered the day they met, and euphoria rose in his heart like a ghost from a grave. He conjured the smell of her perfumed skin and the warmth of her body, and after they hung up he'd felt, briefly, like he could breathe again. But inevitably, the feeling hadn't lasted long. Within a couple of hours, he was back to jittery, agitated, and semiviolent.

Downstairs, the rumble of the elevator signaled the start of the day. The doors opened and Verity stepped out, her heels clicking across the polished concrete.

Scott cracked his knuckles and rolled back his shoulders. He pulled his phone from his pocket, determined to dismiss Nina's latest communications and forget about her for at least the next few hours. But the missed call wasn't from his wife.

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Scott checked the number. The caller had left a voicemail message. Hitting the button, he lifted the phone to his ear.

“Scott. It’s Tom. Tom Stanhope?” The voice was eager, confident. “Sorry it’s early. Just wanted to tell you that I spoke to Damien and the job’s going ahead. Everything’s moving surprisingly quickly, actually, which is great. We leave next month. So, I just wanted to call and say how much I appreciate you setting it all up. You’ve changed my life, man. And that thing we spoke about?” The man’s voice became hushed, as if he’d just ducked into a quiet room. “It’s getting sorted today. Ten o’clock. So, yeah, I hope it helps you out. Anyway, give me a call later. And thanks again.”

Scott deleted the message and slid the phone back into his pocket.

“Scott?” Verity’s voice rang out from somewhere below. “Are you up there?”

“Yep,” he called back. “Coming down.”

Taking a deep breath, he threw one last glance at the empty reception desk before making his way back down the stairs, sliding his palm over the bronze stair rail as he went.

By 9:15, Scott was already exhausted. The breakfast meeting was not going well. Sweeping his aching eyes around the restaurant, he tried to pay attention to the conversation. Verity was on a roll, engaging their investors with her usual flair, but Scott couldn’t keep up. He felt distracted and devoid of ideas. The conversation with Nina had resulted in a fitful night’s sleep; he’d tossed and turned, finally drifting off at maybe 3 A.M. Then two hours later, for reasons he now couldn’t quite fathom, he’d forced himself out of bed and into the gym.

Underneath the table, he balled his hand into a fist and winced. Gouging a hole in his palm with a pen had not been a great move. He’d cleaned and dressed the wound, but it was still throbbing. When Verity had asked about the bandage he’d told her he’d burned it on the oven. She seemed to buy it.

Someone nudged him.

“Sorry,” he said, clearing his throat. “What was that?”

“I said, congratulations on the latest IPO,” said the investor to Scott’s left, an Italian man with hair plugs and a frozen Botoxed forehead. “Impressive. I don’t mind telling you that a few of us had our doubts about that one, but once again, you did it.” He tapped Scott gently on the arm. “I tell you something now, Scott Denny: I will always invest with you. Whatever it is, I’m in.”

“I appreciate your faith in me.”

“Oh, I have faith. You know why? Because you, my friend, are ruthless.” The Italian held aloft his macchiato in a silent toast. “They told me in the beginning that you were ruthless, and that’s exactly what you are.”

Scott nodded, accepting the compliment with what he hoped passed for grace. Yes, he was ruthless. But he had good reason to be.

He clenched his jaw and shifted in his seat. He was in no mood to celebrate. Actually, that was an understatement. Suddenly, he was in no mood to drink, eat, talk, think, or suffer any company whatsoever.

Verity said something to him from across the table. He smiled, but inside him a storm was gathering.

“Another piccolo, Mr. Denny?” The maître d’ hovered at his elbow.

Scott dismissed him with a small shake of his head. He felt unwell. A hot rage was building behind his eyes, and the urge to unburden himself right there in the restaurant, to vomit his secrets all over the white linen tablecloth, became almost uncontrollable.

Checking his watch, he placed his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back. “Gentlemen, I hope you’ll excuse me,” he said to the table. “But I have another meeting to attend.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Verity’s head snap up. She mouthed something at him. *What meeting?*

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ANNA DOWNES

“I’ll leave you in Verity’s capable hands. Thank you for your time, gentlemen, and I look forward to seeing you again.”

Shaking hands with both investors, he turned toward the door, leaving his assistant frantically scrolling through her calendar, looking for an appointment she would never find.

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