

Close Enough to Cast a Shadow

A Novel

Markus Vinzent

Alle Charaktere, Personen und Orte sind frei erfunden. Jegliche Übereinstimmung mit lebenden oder verstorbenen Personen oder Geschehnissen wäre völlig zufällig.

Dramatis Personae

Die Drillinge:

Veronica Sinclair, verheiratet in den USA mit Ethan

Victoria Sinclair, alias Kleopatra

Valerie Sinclair

Cedric Sinclair, der Vater, Professor für Kunstgeschichte am King's College London, alias Aurelius

Vasylyna Sinclair, Professorin für Kunstgeschichte

Anika Maschka, Kunsthistorikerin, Philosophin, Literaturwissenschaftlerin

Bruno Recktenwald, ehemaliger Partner von Anika

Feeny Weingarten, Modedesignerin, Freundin von Anika

René Weingarten, Selbständiger Entrepreneur

Hulda Mannheimer, Exilkünstlerin

Arthur Blackwood, Professor für Kunstgeschichte, Lehrer von Cedric und Vasylyna

Hendrik van der West, Professor und Dean vom King's College, alias Lucius

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Part I

1. Again too late

23 November 2024

Had it not been for the first two delays, Veronica would have caught neither the boarding in Washington nor the narrow connection in New York, and certainly not found her way through the labyrinth of Frankfurt Airport. In the end she still ran into the inevitable: the closed gate of her flight to Munich. It did not surprise her. Lately her life seemed to know only two tempos: too late or too early, never hitting the right moment.

She had already underestimated the traffic leaving Washington. Even with Ethan, her husband, at the wheel, steering with quiet determination through the clogged arteries of the city, the journey had seemed doomed from the outset. Ethan drove. Veronica clung to the rear-view mirror, as though Feeny might still appear there, against every certainty.

Stop.

Move on.

Stop again.

The day dragged itself forward, as though resisting every step that lay ahead.

Veronica had already been ready to abandon the attempt and turn back, but Ethan kept driving. At times he understood what was happening within her before she herself was willing to admit it. She had told him how much the meeting awaiting her on the other side mattered. Yet he sensed that she feared it every bit as much as she longed for it: her sisters, and Anika, the almost-sister from a life that, five years after their last meeting, now seemed to belong to someone else altogether.

On the way into the terminal Veronica found herself returning to the beginning of the journey—not in the car.

There she had sat on her suitcase, waiting, while passers-by crossed to the opposite pavement rather than ask whether she needed help. Ethan, contrary to plan, had not arrived in time. A telephone call: his supervisor; a cyberattack; he could explain nothing, except one thing. "It concerns you as well."

So she had waited.

As so often.

It wounded her to sit there like abandoned luggage, left behind and forgotten. And then there had been Ethan's almost self-satisfied smile when the faded blue departure board suddenly announced: „Flight delayed.“

"That's why I couldn't leave work," Ethan had added. "An alert at several airports."

Even after his explanation she carried the hurt with her, right to the moment when she embraced him goodbye at the kerbside outside the terminal—without words, without drama. Airport staff waved him on with practised indifference.

Before she had time to gather herself, he had already disappeared.

She began to walk.

With the feeling that something old was moving ahead of her, not following behind.

She passed through the glass doors, through security, through the anonymous multitude, and once more relearned that time could not be negotiated.

Her phone vibrated.

New departure times.

New flights.

A new itinerary.

Perhaps Ethan had been right after all. Perhaps she was simply too impatient—even with him.

Feeny would have laughed at the whole sequence of mishaps. For her every delay was merely another word for destiny.

Veronica texted her sisters. Valerie replied within seconds. *We're waiting. We've always been waiting.* Waiting had acquired a different resonance now. Less hope. More absence.

Valerie and Anika were standing outside Café Jasmin. Yellow and violet. Colours rebelling against the grey street. Feeny's last wish: no black. No mourning without colour. A small act of resistance—the kind Feeny herself would have demanded.

Here, in Munich, Feeny's name still lived on.

Stitched into silk.

Woven into wool.

Whispered into the seams by the young women who still worked at the benches of her studio, bringing her designs to life while Feeny delighted in whatever emerged beneath their hands. The old photographs still hung on the workshop walls: Feeny's final collection. Her last models. Her last bold, unfinished vision. Beside them hung one of Hulda Mannheimer's watercolours: the work of a Jewish émigré, sculptor and gallery owner—a blurred yet luminous image of endurance, loss, and a life that nevertheless persisted. Feeny's icon for Anika.

For Anika, all this had become less memory than the continuing resonance of Feeny's presence beyond time itself.

The moment Valerie saw Anika she knew that five years were no more than a thin surface. Beneath it everything seemed more closely woven, less distinct, and somehow greater.

Anika shifted her weight from one foot to the other, as though she needed to anchor herself against memory. Five years since Feeny's death. Five years of trying—and failing—to fill the space she had left behind. Not even Valerie, standing beside her, could release her from that absence. Anika had never counted the days.

At first she refused to mark anniversaries. She stopped counting the visits to Feeny's grave—first every week, then every month, later only at life's crossroads, whenever decisions had to be made and the absence became too heavy to bear. The number five meant nothing. Time had altered nothing essential. It never had. This loss obeyed its own chronology, beyond every calendar. It did not diminish. It merely changed the places where it hurt. It burrowed deeper into her body and, through her body, into her innermost self, seeking fresh cavities, drilling deeper than she could endure.

Feeny belonged to the story of her life.

The years before her now seemed as though Anika herself had scarcely existed. Almost forty years had passed since they first met. Two strangers reaching for the same photographs at an exhibition entitled *Night Shadows*. Anika had been thirty. Feeny scarcely twenty-two.

Brilliant.

Impetuous.

That evening Feeny had looked at her as though she already knew that an entire lifetime would grow from a passing encounter. She never asked for promises. She demanded presence. Intensity.

The window of the café reflected Anika and Valerie back to themselves. The image seemed strangely unfamiliar. Inside, a little bell rang.

Life went on.

Always on.

Even against the will of those who carried it.

There is no voluntary return.

Anika laid her hand against the cold glass. The chill reached her skin. Softly she whispered the secret wish she could never suppress. *Stay, Feeny. Stay with me.*

Valerie seemed to read her thoughts and gently passed her hand through Anika's hair. Feeny had gone.

On the evening after her funeral, at Munich's Waldfriedhof, her closest friends had gathered in the house of her husband René. Among them were Valerie and her sisters Veronica

and Victoria. At Feeny's own request René had laid in generous supplies of Prosecco, a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and an impressive selection of whiskies for their English friends. The evening became a memorable night—exactly as Feeny would have wished. Corks flew. Whisky passed from hand to hand. Feeny returned in stories both hilarious and embarrassing. The gathering was meant to keep Feeny present, while at the same time allowing the friendship between Anika and the triplets—and above all Valerie—to continue. It was still Anika's hesitant attempt to build a future. Standing still had never been an option. The past arrived of its own accord. Sometimes it rose like a wild wave and swept her away— while shopping, folding laundry, or quietly drinking tea. For so many years she had struggled against the false clocks by which her life seemed governed. Grief kept no clock.

The November wind bit into her cheeks.

Tomorrow—the twenty-fourth—would mark the anniversary of the day on which they had buried Feeny. Yet Feeny had drawn even closer around Anika's ribs. She had crept into one chamber of her heart. There she beat together with her. Sometimes against her.

The first days of mourning had been brutal. A brutality that stripped her bare, making every casual cruelty and every accidental kindness equally unbearable. During those same months Anika had also lost her long-time partner.

Two farewells she had never chosen.

Twice uprooted.

Twice alone.

Feeny had fought her own battle. Those left behind had to go on stumbling—over invisible stones, through dark forests, across dense landscapes of shadow without a path. No one climbs out of grief. One sinks into it. Perhaps through it. If one keeps fighting. And even then...

It was an inward falling, with no way out in sight. At first Anika crawled. Later she learned that there was only one way: straight through the middle. She had to look the monster directly in the face. She had to choose life—not despite the past, but because of it.

She looked into the café window, where the shrubs beyond swayed wildly beneath the dark morning sky. Behind them the dark edge of the Munich forest emerged. Just as it had that day when she and Valerie had stood there together.

Silence.

Stillness.

Valerie had put her arm around her. Feeny had stood between them. Separating them. Joining them. Women struggling together, refusing to let one another go.

More than thirty years had passed since Cambridge—since the day the triplets had burst into Anika's life: golden, chaotic, inseparable. And now, once again, here in Munich.

2. Victoria and Veronica in Munich

Out of the grey morning emerged a tall blonde woman, her coat half open. A restrained smile crossed her face as she caught sight of Anika and her sister Valerie. Anika pointed towards her.

"Veronica?"

She was corrected immediately.

"No. I'm Victoria. Veronica is still stranded in Frankfurt."

Anika blushed at the familiar mistake.

"An honourable attempt," Victoria laughed, "but you know I resemble Veronica even more than Valerie does."

Anika smiled with relief.

"You waited for me?"

"Of course. It's good you're already here."

Victoria nodded towards the table by the window.

"Ever since I discovered this café it's always full in the mornings. But today we're lucky." They stepped inside. Once again Anika caught sight of her reflection in the glass. Still blurred, though softer around the edges. Valerie kissed her lightly on the cheek. They settled around one of the tiny tables. Tea steamed while coffee was brought to them. For a few moments no one spoke

as the waitress took their order: salmon and avocado with chilli, Eggs Benedict, an exotic scrambled egg wrapped in banana leaves.

"Feeny would have loved this," Valerie said. "She'd have ordered the hottest dish on the menu."

"Without question." Victoria raised an eyebrow. They laughed, and for a fleeting instant it was as though Feeny were sitting among them again. It was that tiny interval before memory quietly reclaimed the stage. The conversation drifted back to Cambridge.

"You deliberately let me fail that first evening," Anika recalled. "Valerie, Victoria, Veronica—three names, and I was utterly lost."

"Naturally," Valerie laughed. "We were entertaining ourselves."

"Until Veronica met Ethan," Victoria added.

Silence settled over the table for a moment. Anika sensed the tension and gently turned the conversation.

"So how have things gone for you since then?"

Valerie straightened her cup.

"Professionally? More responsibility, less freedom. I became Professor at King's in London in 2011 and am now Head of School. Endless administration—but also wonderful new friendships. Eleanor, who heads Social Science & Politics, has become one of Putin's sharpest critics. You really must read her book on resistance in Russia. The next one is called *Defying the White House*. I can already imagine the feathers that will start flying." Victoria smiled and shook her head.

"You and your politics. Still, it's remarkable what you've achieved."

Anika listened, smiling. Then her voice faltered.

"I hinted at it already. Shortly before Feeny died my relationship collapsed. Long. Familiar. Yet as fragile as badly frozen ice."

Her fingers moved slowly around the rim of her cup.

"He was a narcissist—dangerously so. A Catholic priest. I simply refused to see it, blind to the warning lights even as they flashed more and more insistently."

Valerie frowned.

"And you really trusted him?"

"As I trusted my husband David," Victoria answered quietly. "Until the very end. Even after he had been convicted. I kept telling myself there had to be some misunderstanding. Until René told me what had actually happened."

Valerie covered her mouth with her hand.

"Incredible."

"That was the breaking point." Anika stared into empty space. "The next day Feeny died. Everything collapsed at once."

Victoria drew a deep breath.

"How did you survive?"

"With difficulty. A friend took me in. René offered help, but I couldn't burden him. Eventually I left. I moved to Tenerife."

"Tenerife?" Valerie raised her eyebrows.

"Yes. By chance—and yet not by chance. Feeny and I had spent time there together. The memories were different from those in Munich. Here I simply couldn't stay. Every street felt like running a gauntlet. At every corner I saw either *Anima* or *Femme Fatale*, and whenever I stepped onto the underground I thought I saw Feeny somewhere among the passengers. So I left Munich, resigned my post, and went as far away as I possibly could."

For a while none of them spoke.

Then Valerie asked quietly, "And your work?"

"It kept me alive. At first only in small steps—diaries, literary estates. Later came books on artistic exchange, queer art, Black art in Britain. I wanted to write a different history of Europe—a woman's history."

Valerie nodded slowly.

"To lose two people at once..."

"To lose them—and, in losing them, to lose oneself."

Victoria rested her hand upon Anika's arm.

"That doesn't sound like lament. It sounds like survival."

"Yes. And no. Depending on the day. Depending on the hour."

Anika looked up and smiled.

"As you said—not lament. I've come this far. Let's drink to our friendship."

The bell above the café door rang.

Veronica entered, pulling her suitcase behind her, exhausted, yet laughing.

"So—you've all managed to enjoy yourselves without me?"

"We've been waiting for quite some time," Valerie replied.

"I thought I was coming to a memorial service."

"Not only that," Victoria answered. "Feeny would have ordered Prosecco. Not water."

"Then Prosecco for me as well!" Veronica called to the waitress, demonstrating that she had forgotten none of her German. Their sparkling glasses touched. For a moment they summoned back a time when they had all been twenty.

"Do you remember the May Ball at St John's?" Valerie asked. A broad smile spread around the table.

"The Nigerian stripper whom Feeny..."

"...first dressed..."

"...and then undressed!"

"And naturally she was the first one standing on the table."

"You should have known her as a student," Anika added. "We must have seemed wonderfully naïve to you."

While the triplets exchanged memories, Anika's gaze drifted towards the street, a little self-consciously. A delivery van sounded its horn; someone balanced a tray of croissants through the café door. Before her rose the worn paving stones of Cambridge, the green college courts, and it seemed as though the decades had become superimposed upon one another. The present lay over those older scenes like the thinnest of veils.

"We grew up in a thoroughly English household," Valerie began. "Sheltered. Protected. Completely inexperienced. Before we left Richmond for our undergraduate years in Oxford, we'd never travelled anywhere on our own—not even by bus to Oxford, let alone to London."

Victoria laughed.

"When my father later drove me to London for an interview for a Master's place, he took me right to the university entrance. He stayed in the car—I have no idea for how long, only that he was still sitting behind the wheel when the interview ended. Then he drove me straight home again."

"But by then you'd already spent three years in Oxford," Anika objected.

"A tremendous leap," Veronica answered. "For the first time away from home. Binge drinking. Parties in college rooms. Three sisters nobody could tell apart."

"And then came Cambridge," said Anika.

"Where Veronica met Ethan."

"I'll never forget our discussions," Veronica smiled. "Especially the ones with Ethan."

Valerie laughed.

"I always thought that was our greatest strength. We could agree completely about classical art, and then the temperature rose the moment we started talking about the present."

Victoria turned towards her sister with a teasing smile.

"How could you possibly marry Ethan? A Democrat. A supporter of Biden. Of Harris. When you were friends with Boris Johnson's wife?"

"Oh, stop fencing with words," Veronica interrupted, hanging her jacket over the back of her chair while pretending to look severe. "Tell us something more interesting. What have the rest of you actually been doing these last few years?"

Valerie chuckled.

"I've already confessed my sins. Promotion—and now I spend more time in meetings than in seminars."

She winked.

Victoria pushed her cup gently aside.

"Still, Val, you've done remarkably well. Much more than Father ever imagined any of us would."

Valerie merely nodded. She understood the allusion but chose not to pursue it.

Anika straightened herself in her chair.

"I was in the middle of my story when you arrived, Veronica. Here's the short version again. My relationship fell apart. After losing Feeny I simply couldn't bear Munich any longer. So I moved to Tenerife. That's where I write now, where I do my research, where I try to steady myself through my work."

"Tenerife?" Veronica looked genuinely surprised. "Sunshine, certainly—but did exile really begin down there?"

"Both," Anika answered simply.

Silence settled over the table.

After a while Valerie placed her glass carefully beside her plate.

"It's strange," she said softly. "We're sitting here, and I keep expecting Feeny to burst through that door—loud, impatient, hungry."

Anika smiled, though her eyes remained serious.

"I miss her every day. And then I hear her voice again: 'More courage. Less retreat.'"

Breakfast arrived, steaming and brilliantly coloured. For a while politics reclaimed the table, and they slipped back into the old habit of teasing one another, arguing without malice, interrupting each other before anyone had properly finished a sentence.

Anika let them continue. Gently she ran her fingertips across the tablecloth, as though smoothing an invisible crease before speaking again.

"I invited you," she said. "Please—today you're my guests."

3. Krambambuli

Leaving the hotel, Anika and Valerie stepped into the cool November evening that was settling over the grey day. The wet asphalt reflected the streetlights; passing cars sent shallow fans of water across the road, and the air smelled of fallen leaves, damp earth and metal. They walked in silence. Yet something walked beside them—formless, heavy, alert.

Anika began talking about the Munich avant-garde. Dada against Munich, Munich against Dada—language against language, meaning against absurdity. Her voice was calm, almost professorial, as though she hoped the conversation itself might soften the tension that had begun to gather between them. Valerie, meanwhile, felt a faint pressure beneath her breastbone.

At the corner Anika stopped before a traditional Bavarian restaurant.

"Krambambuli."

She smiled.

"Valerie—that's our place. Proper Munich cooking."

Inside, young faces crowded around tables of wheat beer, while a handful of elderly men occupied the far corner. The wallpaper resembled neatly stacked timber. Valerie looked towards a painting hanging on one of the walls.

"And the dog?"

"Krambambuli," Anika replied. "A dog torn between two masters—and destroyed by both."

Valerie smiled faintly.

"A grotesque symbol for an inn."

"Or," Anika answered quietly, "for what has been pressing upon you for a long time."

Valerie looked into the space that seemed suddenly to have opened between them.

Should she leave?

Anika had not invited her and her sisters to Munich merely to commemorate Feeny. She wanted closeness. Valerie knew that much. Yet she also knew that Feeny had never been merely a friend to Anika. There had been something deeper there, something into which Valerie herself had never been able to enter.

Finally she spoke, softly, precisely.

"I've been struggling with where to begin."

"Because of your mother?"

"No. My father once told me that my mother's death had not thrown him off balance. He'd prepared himself for losing her. But afterwards he said something else." She paused. "He believed his own life was in danger."

The word remained between them.

Cold.

"In danger?" Anika asked. "What exactly did he mean?"

"He never explained. Only that phrase—and a look I couldn't understand."

Silence settled over the table.

"And a few months later he was dead. Officially—a heart attack."

Anika frowned.

"But he was full of life."

"So I thought. It simply didn't fit." Valerie barely shook her head. "Even so, I accepted the explanation. Until I entered his house."

She hesitated.

"We all had spare keys. His body had already been taken away. The rooms were eerily empty. Everything seemed perfectly orderly—except his study. Every oak drawer stood open. Empty. Papers lay scattered across the floor."

The picture alone was enough to awaken suspicion.

"I'd have called the police immediately," Anika said. "I'd have turned the whole house upside down."

"I simply stood there."

Valerie lowered her eyes.

"Then the bell rang."

She looked up again.

"The neighbour. Pale. Breathless. Almost relieved to see me—as though she'd been waiting. 'Come,' she said. 'Right now.' Once we were inside her sitting room she added another sentence. 'Your father entrusted something to me—for Victoria.'"

She smiled without amusement.

"There were seven heavy crates waiting in her attic."

"Crates?"

"It sounded absurd to me as well. The neighbour disappeared upstairs and carried them down, one after another, until every one of those monsters stood in front of me."

Without noticing it, Valerie rubbed her thumb across her knuckles, as though she could still feel their weight.

"I should simply have delivered them to Victoria. That would have been the obvious thing to do. But something held me back. The neighbour told me that Father had become increasingly strange during his final months. About a week before he died he insisted on opening one of the crates. He asked her to leave the room. She obeyed—but watched through the crack in the door." Valerie paused.

"She saw an emblem."

"What sort of emblem?"

"A bottle pouring wine into a glass."

She looked at Anika.

"Dark red wine."

"Strange," Anika murmured. "But hardly dangerous."

"So I thought."

Valerie folded her hands.

"But the whole house felt as though someone had broken in."

Anika said nothing.

From another table came only the faint clink of cutlery.

"Driving back to London," Valerie continued, "a thought occurred to me that refused to leave. Perhaps my father hadn't died of a heart attack after all. Perhaps the heart attack was only the second event—not the first."

She looked towards the window.

"I brought everything to my office at King's. Then, over the weekend, I finally opened the crates."

Anika remained perfectly still. It was the kind of silence that does not relieve the speaker but carries her onward.

The third crate stopped me before I had even opened it.

Among the familiar papers lay two bundles. One was tied with a dark-red ribbon, bearing the word *Confidential* in my father's hand. The other was bound with coarse twine and marked only with a single letter: *K*. There, too, was the emblem the neighbour had described.

"This was no longer his academic work," Valerie said quietly. "It was the entrance into another life."

"You opened them?"

"I began with the red bundle."

Inside were letters, all written on the same distinctive stationery, bearing the mysterious emblem.

The sender:

The Disciples.

The address:

King's College London.

The name did not feel antiquated. It felt alive—as though the correspondence were still continuing.

Anika caught her breath.

"The Disciples?"

"A secret society. Everyone knows the name. No one knows who belongs to it today. It's more than a hundred and fifty years old."

"And who belonged to it in the past?"

"Some rather known people."

"The only secret society I know is the one in Cambridge."

"The Apostles," Valerie smiled. "More notorious than famous. During the war there were double agents among them, mathematicians from Bletchley who quietly supplied both Britain and the Soviet Union. They probably called it intellectual loyalty."

"Incredible," Anika murmured. "And something like that still exists?"

"The club itself does. Though nowadays it presents itself as a rather tame debating society instead of an underground network. Even so, names appear and disappear. In Cambridge people whisper. In Oxford they boast. There you have the Bullingdon Club—Cameron, Johnson... who knows how many pubs they wrecked? Windows smashed, lamps broken, crockery destroyed—and the entire bill settled in cash before the evening was over. Club etiquette."

"It sounds like decadence masquerading as power. And King's?"

"In London we have the Disciples. At least as opaque. And closely connected. The threads never really break—they merely change colour."

One did not have to know who was pulling the strings to know that someone was.

"I never imagined my father belonged to any of them," Valerie continued. "But he must have been one of the Disciples. Nothing else explains the stationery."

Anika slowly shook her head.

"As far as anyone knows, the Disciples have also evolved into little more than a debating club. Since the 1980s women have apparently been admitted as well—after all, King's has seventy members rather than the Apostles' twelve."

"But still," Anika said, "how does a secret society fit King's?"

"Especially since King's College London was founded by the Anglican Church as an anti-college. It was intended to stand against the secular London University founded by the city in 1829."

"I can imagine the Church enjoying that sort of secrecy."

"So can I. Yet King's soon became part of that very university while still defending confessional education against Oxford and Cambridge, and simultaneously championing progressive ideals and the education of women."

"And in the middle of all that—a male preserve that sounds like a respectable version of the Ku Klux Klan?"

Valerie laughed.

"You aren't entirely wrong. Men among themselves—for decades, certainly—and probably more conservatives than progressives."

"People with influence?"

"Enormous influence. Invisible. Ambiguous. I've sat on appointment committees where the entire mood changed without warning, and a candidate nobody expected suddenly emerged victorious. Cambridge, Oxford, London, the alumni—the Angels—and all those clubs. Always the same handwriting: power, loyalty, untidy threads. In England you never quite escape them."

"In the country that prides itself on democracy?"

Valerie smiled faintly.

"I was once helped by a historian named Claudia Capella."

"I've never heard of her."

"An extraordinary woman. You'd never have believed she was Professor of Early Modern History."

"One of those television historians?"

"Wilder."

"Is that even possible?"

Valerie brushed a hand through her hair.

"Stringy hair, worn-out clothes, sandals. In front of a camera she was almost cult-like. Most people found her intimidating. I never did."

The memory softened her face.

"Our supervisions often continued late into the night—arguments, laughter, conversations that became almost intoxicating."

"Was she one of the Apostles?"

"Possibly. I don't know. But she had a remarkable gift for discovering exactly where someone truly stood."

"How?"

"One evening she looked at the open collar of my coat as though she had spotted a clue and asked, perfectly matter-of-factly, 'Where did you buy your underwear?' No one had ever spoken to me so directly. I answered with a single word. Feeny."

"Oh?"

"The next time we met she appeared in a new black negligée—sharp, unmistakably Feeny's design. She never mentioned it. She simply wore it."

Valerie smiled.

"That was when I realised how many threads already connected her, Feeny and me—and why Feeny was commissioned soon afterwards to design the costumes for the next May Ball at St John's."

"It wasn't patronage," she said, „it was resonance."

"So quickly the invisible strings begin working backstage," Anika said, still unconvinced. "And your father really belonged to the Disciples?"

"Apparently."

She paused.

"And to be honest, his membership worries me far less than the letters themselves."

"What did they say?"

Valerie glanced towards the waiter.

"Let's order first. I need something stronger before I continue. It gets darker from here."

"Then I'll have a Black Ukrainian," Anika said. "Vodka and coffee liqueur sound like good companions. What about you?"

Valerie shook her head.

"Not that."

She smiled for the first time in several minutes.

"I'll take a Dark 'n Stormy instead. Dark rum, ginger beer, lime... and perhaps a little hope."

The story had plainly exhausted her. Speaking of her father's death and of the discoveries hidden inside those crates seemed to have reopened wounds that had never truly healed.

"The letters had all been arranged chronologically," she continued once the drinks had arrived. "The uppermost one had been written only a few days before Father's death. It was signed *Lucius*. And addressed to *Aurelius*. That was my father's code name."

"And Lucius?"

"I still don't know who he was."

She looked directly at Anika.

"Not yet. He wrote that Aurelius' life was in danger."

Anika straightened.

"A threat?"

"Perhaps."

"Or a warning."

"In any case he urged Father to remove every document from the house and place them somewhere safe."

"And your father?"

"He replied that very day."

Valerie smiled almost imperceptibly.

"He kept copies of everything. I recognised his handwriting immediately, even though he signed himself *Aurelius*. He wrote that the documents were already safe. Lucius was not to press him any further."

But what archive is ever truly safe?

Anika frowned.

"That sounds like anything but a natural death."

"Exactly."

"That's why I spent the entire weekend reading. For hours. The correspondence stretched over years. There was no doubt. My father and Lucius shared more than friendship."

"You mean..."

Valerie remained silent for several moments.

Then she nodded.

"Yes."

"A relationship?"

"Homosexual. Secret."

"And you're the only person who knows?"

"As far as I know my sisters and I have never spoken about it."

Another pause.

"I want them to remember our father as they knew him. That's why I'm telling only you."

"And your mother?"

"I don't think she knew. Though perhaps she could have lived with it. After all, she tolerated my own relationships."

She smiled sadly.

"Our family was an intricate web of etiquette, silence and mutual accommodation."

"Almost unimaginable. You're far more direct than I am."

"I wish I could be."

"You," Anika smiled, "were simply taught better manners."

"True."

"After my own separation I actually grew closer to my father. He even defended me against my sisters. That was entirely new. And yet he remained the most conservative man one could imagine. High Church Anglican."

"Conservative—and yet..."

Valerie nodded.

"Yes."

"Life is complicated."

"It rarely travels in a straight line."

They ordered another round.

The waiter returned with the cocktails, moving with an almost ceremonial dignity, as though paying homage to Krambambuli himself.

They raised their glasses towards the faithful dog on the wall.

"To life," Anika said,

"and all its entanglements."

Only after taking a sip did Valerie begin again.

"On top of everything else lay a newspaper clipping. *THE STATUE — EXPERT DISMISSED!*

"A headline?"

"Yes. I vaguely remembered it. The family always said Father had made a mistake while authenticating a late antique sculpture found near Aquileia. He declared it a copy. It was later sold as an original—for a million pounds. That cost him his reputation as an expert."

Anika remained silent.

"Now I know it was far more complicated. He had collected articles, sketches by Pirro Ligorio—the antiquarian of Pope Paul IV in the sixteenth century. Father wanted to prove that the base Ligorio had discovered originally belonged not to a female figure but to a male one, which Ligorio later complemented with a head of St Peter from another find. His opponents argued exactly the opposite. They claimed Ligorio's own drawing clearly showed a woman standing on the pedestal from the beginning. A conclusion neither the Pope nor my father found acceptable."

Anika frowned.

"If your father's opponents were right, Hippolytus would originally have been portrayed as a woman?"

"Precisely."

"And not merely a woman."

"A woman with one breast exposed. An Amazon."

Valerie's voice no longer seemed directed at Anika but at the memory of her father.

"Hippolytus is, of course, famous for praising women—even calling them *Apostles of the Apostles*. But imagine if the papacy's most celebrated ancient monument had actually displayed a half-naked woman."

"That would have become a formidable argument for women occupying the Church's highest offices."

"No wonder colleagues objected."

"Some accused Father of deliberately devaluing the statue so that he could buy it himself."

"He actually did bid?"

"Through an intermediary. And insisted he merely wished to prevent the sculpture from being exhibited publicly."

"Criminal."

"Or naïve."

"Perhaps both."

"His career ended. But neither he nor his opponents ever abandoned the argument. He compared the statue with the Abercius Inscription—the so-called Queen of Christian Inscriptions. Both Hippolytus and Abercius, he maintained, were the earliest monumental witnesses to Christianity."

"And each interpreted the other."

"Always men."

"It sounds as though he was fighting an entire coalition," Anika observed. "Art historians, church authorities, their critics, auction houses, collectors..."

"He was."

"And perhaps one of those battles eventually cost him his life."

Whatever lay behind it, he had never yielded.

Anika lifted her glass.

"Then let us drink to his courage."

"And to yours," she added quietly, "for carrying all this."

Valerie inclined her head.

"And to the hope that one day I shall understand what truly happened."

After dinner, and after everything that had been said, they walked silently through the city, side by side, their fingers intertwined. "Shall we go back to the hotel?" Anika asked. "Or may I tempt you with a digestif in a rather special bar? It has something to do with Feeny." Valerie drew her gently towards herself and held her for a moment.

After a few more steps Anika pointed across the street. *The Silver Bar*.

They crossed over and made their way to one of the free seating alcoves. Valerie was immediately captivated. Munich surprised her once again: cultivated, elegant—and, after a glance at the drinks menu, considerably less expensive than England. She settled back into the dark leather armchair.

"You like it?" Anika smiled. "One can stay here until well into the night. Officially they close at two, but that only means they lock the doors and stop admitting new guests. I've never once been thrown out."

Valerie smiled with a trace of irony. "And yet it's called *The Silver Bar*, although everything inside glitters in black and gold."

"That's precisely the joke. The uniforms were designed by Feeny—black with gold buttons, all made in her own atelier. The photographs on the walls are from a collaboration she did with the art photographer Chris Gartland. You can even buy the catalogue at the bar, together with a cocktail book featuring all the drinks they serve here. Every signature cocktail comes decorated with edible gold leaf."

Valerie let her eyes wander across the room before looking back at Anika. "Only now do I realise how closely your imaginations were woven together. Yours and Feeny's."

Anika edged a little nearer, resting her arm lightly across Valerie's shoulders. "Have we ever really spoken about our closeness?"

"Not really."

"May I ask you something? How have you managed since your separation?"

Valerie smiled. "Let's order first. I'll have an Angel's Kiss."

"Then I'll risk the Knickerbocker. It sounds adventurous enough."

"What an extraordinary retro bar," Valerie observed. "Cocktails invented in 1923."

"Let's taste them before we judge them."

Their drinks arrived, brilliant with colour and tiny flecks of gold. They raised their glasses. Holding hers against the light, Valerie watched the gold shimmer through the amber liquid.

"I was with Elaine for ten years. Then one day she left. No conversation. No explanation."

"How?"

"Perhaps she had come to feel our relationship was one-sided. I hadn't realised that she wanted someone who was always available whenever she needed her. I couldn't live partnership on demand. I've always needed to shape my own life before making claims upon someone else's."

"But aren't you rather severe with yourself?" Anika asked gently. "Isn't there something beautiful about knowing that someone depends upon you?"

"Of course. We tried. Whenever she returned from travelling I prepared everything. I laid the table. Along the staircase from the front door to the sitting room I placed little tea lights, each beside a handwritten card—sometimes a greeting, sometimes a question about her journey, sometimes only the slightest suggestion of intimacy. I cooked properly."

"You romantic."

"When she came through the door she noticed none of it. Not the candles. Not the cards. She walked straight upstairs into our bedroom. I assumed she was changing. A few minutes later she reappeared with her suitcase. She closed the front door behind her—and was gone."

"You never had the chance to speak to her? Not then? Not later?"

Valerie shook her head. "No. She blocked every possible way of reaching her. She left—and remained gone."

"You recovered from that?"

"Only with difficulty. But eventually I understood that it wasn't only she who had made a decision. So had I. My own inability to commit myself completely. Yet my worth doesn't depend

upon another person." She looked directly at Anika. "Tonight feels different. No pulling. No pressure. More like... a quiet warmth."

She hesitated before continuing. "If I met Elaine by chance tomorrow, I'd still have questions. But I wouldn't resent her for leaving. Yes, I was hurt. Humiliated. Angry. But no less with myself than with her."

Anika quietly set down her cocktail. The waitresses kept a respectful distance; the neighbouring tables were far enough away for their conversation to disappear into the low murmur of the room. She reached for Valerie's hand, her fingertips following the faint lines time had traced across the skin, lingering over the joints and the softer places between them before finding Valerie's fingers and quietly intertwining with them.

A slight tremor passed through her.

Valerie placed her own glass on the table. Without taking her eyes from Anika's, she gently undid the pale lemon-coloured buttons at the top of her blouse. Her fingertips brushed warm skin. She smiled. Their lips found one another.

The following morning they still lay close together. During the night Valerie had kept Anika's hand resting upon her breast. They had gone no further. Valerie would have been ready, yet she had sensed Anika's hesitation and had not wanted to hurry anything. Simply feeling her warmth beside her had been enough.

"Shall we stay here a little longer?" Anika asked softly.

Valerie smiled. "I'm glad you asked. I still have to grow used to this."

"Grow used to it? It's no privilege—only an exception."

Anika laughed quietly and nestled closer.

Later, beneath the shower, she found herself singing for the first time in years. *She may be the song that summer sings... A trace of pleasure or regret...* As the water ran through her hair she whispered, "Feeny... what would I give if you could be here, so that I might share this with you." She could not tell whether what she felt was loyalty or escape. She only knew that it was stronger than she was.

When she had dried herself and lightly made up her face, she returned to the room—and stopped. Breakfast had already arrived. White sausages. Pretzels. Sweet mustard. And Valerie, entirely naked.

Anika let her bathrobe slip to the floor.

The breakfast tray was forgotten.

4. Five Together – Feeny's Breath

The following morning Anika and the triplets entered Munich's Waldfriedhof. Sunlight filtered through the tall trees, while brown squirrels darted across the woodland paths. It felt less like a cemetery planted with trees than a forest into which graves had quietly settled, a place where mourning and playful stillness flowed naturally into one another. Valerie could not cross its threshold without recalling Feeny's funeral, memories still overshadowed by the pain of farewell. They walked on in silence, surrounded by vigorous life and ancient stones whose language seemed to require fewer words than stories, fewer still than poems.

In a small clearing they came upon Michael Ende's grave. They might easily have passed it by had it not been for the tiny wooden house containing letters left by visitors. Victoria knelt beside it and slowly deciphered the weathered inscription, recalling Indicavia from *The Mirror in the Mirror*, the wanderer who sought the signpost leading to the gate of the world where true wonders begin.

Anika pointed towards the little bronze tortoise beside the stone.

"Have no fear."

"It reminds me," she said, "of Nikos Kazantzakis' grave in Heraklion, which Feeny and I once visited together. The inscription there reads: *I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.* It engraved itself upon my memory. Feeny recited it as though it were her own confession."

"Did she love Michael Ende as well?" Valerie asked.

"Very much. She always associated him with Meister Eckhart. Both tried to explore the mystery of time."

Victoria bent once more over the stone, tracing the moss-filled letters with her fingertips before reading softly, her Oxford English barely above a whisper.

"Once again he struggled to his feet, took a few steps forward and asked, 'Who are you?' ... 'I,' answered the Light, 'am you. Now come.'" Then Indicavia bowed and crossed the threshold." "That gift," Anika continued, "of making the invisible visible—Michael Ende shared it with his father, the surrealist painter. He once said that his father first sketched his paintings in complete darkness with a penlight. Only when the image had grown beyond him did he finally paint it."

Valerie remained looking at the grave for a long moment.

"A grave isn't a full stop," she said quietly. "It's a question mark."

They continued from the Old Cemetery into the New until they reached Feeny's grave: a simple sandstone marker, its date of death placed before the date of birth.

Everything begins in the present.

Without speaking, they laid their roses upon the stone.

Thank you.

Feeny's favourite word echoed silently within each of them.

"In her final week," Anika said, "she told me, *I shall breathe with you*. Now there are five of us breathing."

Gently their chests rose and fell, presence and absence sharing the same rhythm, blood moving away only to return more deeply to the heart.

How does one part from someone who continues to move one's very life?

After a long silence Anika spoke again.

"I still see her returning from the grave of a friend who had died two years before she did. She was carrying the bouquet she had meant to leave there but was not allowed to place in the Friedenswald. She told me that, in that instant, she had truly lost her friend."

With a quiet sigh she looked at the three sisters.

"We wouldn't be standing at Feeny's grave if we didn't raise a glass of Prosecco to her."

She smiled for the first time.

"Come. There's a woodland inn nearby."

The woodland inn revived memories of Feeny's and René's wedding on the shores of Lake Starnberg. Timber-panelled walls, stag antlers, black-and-white photographs. In one corner stood a green tiled stove, with beech logs stacked beneath it, filling the room with the scent of the forest. The tables were laid with cream-coloured linen.

Yet unlike this traditional Bavarian parlour, Feeny had transformed her own wedding reception into an exhibition of table art. No two place settings had been alike. Knives and spoons had been balanced into tiny sculptures, napkins folded into playful Dada constructions. That had been Feeny's genius: whimsical, avant-garde—and for that very reason all the more astonishing within so traditional a setting.

Anika glanced at her watch. René had promised to join them at the inn after visiting the cemetery. When he arrived, he looked leaner than she remembered, lighter somehow. He embraced each of the sisters in turn before finally taking Anika into his arms.

"Too long," he said simply.

They spoke of the passing years, of work, politics, war, loss, and new beginnings.

"Manchester suits you," Anika observed.

René laughed. "And Spain suits you. I don't see a single grey hair."

"It's all fake," Anika burst out. "Without my hairdresser I'd be as white as you."

"A little retouching in life—we all allow ourselves that."

He embraced her again.

"We haven't seen each other for far too long," he whispered, almost like a quiet declaration of affection.

"Not surprising," Anika replied. "With the lives we've both been leading."

"You did move rather a long way away."

"Your own fault," she answered defensively, before softening. "So... have you settled back into England?"

René smiled.

"There are still bare light bulbs hanging in the new flat. What I'm missing is an artist's hand."

"I'm the wrong person to ask," Anika replied mischievously.

"And how are you settling into your island home? Can you already speak the language?"

"Oh, don't remind me about Spanish," Anika laughed. "Sometimes I feel I've been transported back to those first years when I thought I'd drown in an ocean of English. Now it's Spanish instead. Although, every now and then, I discover little islands where I can stand. The taxi ride to the airport was the first time I actually managed a conversation with the driver—in admittedly rather modest Spanish."

"No modest achievement," René replied. "Congratulations."

The triplets listened with genuine curiosity. They wanted to know how Anika and René had rebuilt their lives after everything that had happened.

"I really can't complain," Anika said. "Every new beginning is difficult. But every time I board the flight to Tenerife I feel myself relax. By the time we land, I'm already home."

"I know exactly what you mean," René answered. "Whenever I arrive back in Manchester, I feel much the same. Distance from the past can sometimes become part of healing."

Veronica looked thoughtfully from one to the other.

"How did you end up in Spain? Why Tenerife of all places? You still had several years of work ahead of you—just like us."

"That's true," Anika replied. "But retirement has made me busier than ever. Strangely enough, I have the feeling that only now has my real work begun."

"And why an island?"

Anika smiled.

"Oddly enough, René is partly responsible."

She turned towards him.

"You tell the story."

"Gladly. I wanted to escape grief—and loneliness—for a few days. So I went to Málaga and asked Anika whether she'd join me."

"You actually went?" Valerie asked, unable to conceal a faint trace of jealousy.

"I hesitated," Anika admitted. "After Feeny's death we'd hardly been in touch. But I wanted to do René a kindness."

"So we spent a week in Málaga," René continued. "The city offers exactly what its reputation promises: wonderful art, wonderful food. Only the weather refused to cooperate. My picture of southern Spain needed serious revision."

He laughed at the memory.

"It was my birthday when we decided to walk the Caminito del Rey. According to the guidebook it was an easy hike."

"It wasn't."

"The moment we entered the gorge, with its narrow pathway clinging to the cliff face, the sky turned black. Then the rain came."

"Not English rain."

"Biblical rain."

"The Caminito became a battle against water itself. When we finally reached the end, I'd had enough."

"And then?" Veronica asked.

"We flew on to Tenerife."

He smiled at Anika.

"Blue sky. Sunshine. Warmth."

"We both fell in love with the island."

"I simply never really left."

"What an extraordinary decision," Veronica said in amazement.

"I admire that sort of courage," Valerie added.

"Sometimes," Anika answered quietly, "one mustn't think for too long."

"The chance to begin again after those exhausting and painful years in Germany—and to exchange the Föhn winds and endless changes of weather for sunshine and a slower rhythm of life—has done me more good than I ever expected."

She smiled apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I've spoken far too much about myself."

"Not at all," Valerie replied. "That's exactly why we accepted your invitation. We came to build, through our memories, the bridge that Feeny's grave has made possible."

René nodded.

"I wish I could have joined you at the cemetery this morning, but work kept me away. Thank you, Anika, for bringing us together on the fifth anniversary of Feeny's death—and thank you, all of you, for making the journey. You meant an enormous amount to Feeny and to me then."

"You still do."

By then they had ordered dessert and shared cherry *Datschi* and warm apple strudel with vanilla sauce.

No gathering of the triplets would have been complete without politics eventually finding its way to the table.

"Since Putin's invasion of Ukraine," Veronica said quietly, "Ethan hardly ever stops working. He tells me very little, but I know he's fighting disinformation and Russian propaganda. It takes its toll."

She hesitated.

"On our marriage as well."

Valerie frowned.

"Sometimes I wonder whether Putin believed he really had no alternative."

She paused.

"But look at what he achieved."

"Finland."

"Sweden."

"Both are now members of NATO."

"I doubt that was ever part of his plan."

Veronica nodded gravely.

"For me he'll always remain the aggressor. I see only war. Bombs. Death."

"And Ethan trying, day and night, to hold the digital front."

Victoria laid down her fork.

"What matters to me is who came to Ukraine's aid. Boris Johnson was among the first to stand in Kyiv."

She smiled almost defiantly.

"That made me proud to be British."

For a while Anika simply watched the three sisters.

"It amazes me how a war thousands of miles away reaches right into your own family."

Veronica sighed.

"It always has. My mother and father were already arguing after the annexation of Crimea, even though my mother was growing frailer by then. For her it was deeply personal. She had been a child of both St Petersburg and Ossetia. Her mother was Ukrainian. Her father came from Ossetia. She carried all of that within her."

Victoria gently intervened.

"Let's not spend the whole afternoon sitting in these trenches."

She smiled.

"We came here for Feeny."

"True," Valerie agreed. "But Feeny was a pacifist."

She looked thoughtfully into her glass.

"I often wonder what she would have said to us now."

When at last they rose to leave, they lifted their glasses one final time.

"To Feeny," Anika said softly.

"To Feeny," the three sisters answered together.

5. Coda

"I never imagined I'd be coming to Europe a second time this year," Veronica said, leaning back against the headboard of the hotel bed, where she and Victoria lay beneath the warm duvet as though no time had passed since the days when sharing a room had been second nature to them.

"All the better that we're together again," Victoria replied. "Even if it takes gravestones to bring us back to one another."

They exchanged tired smiles. The day still clung to them like mist. It had been years since they had last shared a room. Veronica could still feel the weight of the time difference between the States and Europe. Victoria had left Birmingham the previous morning before dawn to catch an early flight from Stansted after an evening event at the Barber Institute. The late-night drive, the predawn departure, the visit to the cemetery—it was hardly surprising that exhaustion had overtaken them.

After a while Victoria asked quietly, "So? What did you make of Anika and René? And Valerie?"

Veronica shrugged.

"Closeness. Fractures. And something suspended between the two."

They finished their tea. Weariness settled into their limbs, yet sleep refused to come. Too much of the past lay between them; too many unspoken things rested beneath the covers.

Victoria asked after Ethan and the twins. Veronica answered briefly—Abby in cybersecurity, Emily studying Creative Writing—carefully avoiding the finer cracks in her marriage. Victoria spoke instead about Sarah's baby, about Liam—"my little sweetheart"—whose laughter rescued her heart on the right days.

Yet beneath every word lingered David's shadow.

The Dean of Christ Church, Oxford.

The man who had left her for one of his students.

Or perhaps only half left her.

The man Veronica had never truly understood.

"I couldn't have endured it," Veronica said at last. "I'd have thrown Ethan out within the hour."

Victoria remained silent for a long moment, as though searching for words that carried no accusation.

"I know," she finally answered. "You're different."

Veronica swallowed.

"I still don't understand how you can let him remain so close—to you, to the children—after everything..."

"Because I still love him," Victoria interrupted.

There was no drama in her voice, only fact.

"And because the children love him. And because..." She hesitated before continuing.

"Because he is part of my life, whether I choose it or not."

Veronica let the silence remain between them. For the first time she sensed how deep the wound really was, how carefully her sister had concealed it through the years.

Victoria smiled faintly.

"I have to admit, your twins already live farther apart at university than we ever managed."

"Perhaps that's healthy," Veronica replied. "They're different people, each determined to become themselves. Very unlike us—or at least unlike the way we once experienced ourselves."

Victoria lay quietly before answering.

"That has always been our greatest difficulty. I often feel so close to you—or to Valerie—that I begin to lose sight of myself. Whatever happens to you, I live through it as well. Whatever burdens you somehow becomes mine."

She looked towards the ceiling.

"I've never forgotten the day you told us about Ethan. About the moment you realised you had chosen one another..."

She recalled one of those famous Cambridge wine tastings—Chardonnay, Port, cheeses laid out across long tables—where everything was sampled blind and, more often than not, the cheapest bottle won the competition. Ethan had shone that evening: charming, intelligent, astonishingly well read. No one had been surprised that Veronica had fallen in love with him.

But what Victoria remembered most was the impossible choice facing her sister.

Cambridge.

Or America.

A doctorate.

Or Ethan.

"It felt," Victoria said quietly, "as though I had to make the decision myself."

"You tell me that only now?" Veronica answered.

"I felt your expectations far more strongly than my own uncertainty. Inside me everything rebelled—not so much because I was torn between America and England, between Ethan and my doctorate. I simply wanted to free you from the burden of my decision."

She smiled gently.

"And yet today I know I chose rightly. I couldn't have imagined a happier life than the one I've got with Ethan and the children."

Victoria reached across and squeezed her hand before slipping an arm around her shoulders.

The gesture spoke of agreement—but also of the guilt she now recognised. Veronica had suffered for years because she had left her sisters, England, Cambridge, even her parents' world of scholarship behind.

Victoria's own life had proved no easier. She had returned to her parents' house. David had abandoned her.

The humiliation had been immense.

Her parents had stood by her, helping to raise the children, supporting her while she struggled to establish both her academic career and the financial stability her family required.

Veronica had always watched with divided feelings. To her, Victoria remained far too attached to David, too determined to preserve him for the children, too unwilling to let go. Victoria saw it differently.

She had never accepted the separation.

She had survived it.

She had suffered through it.

Yet every day she encountered David again in their children.

His voice.

His gestures.

His smile.

She still loved him.

Against every argument of reason. More deeply than she had ever loved anyone else. She had even come to understand why another woman loved him more than she did—and why he had chosen that other life.

As the years passed, Victoria became increasingly aware that love did not diminish merely because time had passed.

Time might heal wounds. It did not lessen love. If anything, the opposite was true. The misunderstandings faded. Even the deepest injuries lost their sharp edges. The rare days they were still allowed to spend together with the children became all the more precious.

Her parents, however, regarded David as the very embodiment of self-absorption. The more Victoria defended him, the more fiercely they rejected him.

They despised the Anglican clergyman.

The scholar.

The Dean.

To them he remained a man who continued to bind their daughter to himself while leaving them—the grandparents—to shoulder the everyday burdens of family life. It was one reason why Cedric condemned not only the Anglican Church but defended, with almost stubborn passion, the Catholic Church and the celibacy of its priests.

For Victoria, however, David had become something altogether different.

He was the invisible wall that allowed her and the children to establish a life distinct from her parents'.

They sensed it. And they hated him all the more. Ever since the day he had left Victoria and the children, they preferred seeing him walk out of the house rather than through its door.

That, more than anything else, strengthened Victoria's determination to leave as soon as she received her professorship in Classical and Medieval Art History at the University of Birmingham. There she finally built a life of her own.

A professorship.

A house in Moseley.

Parks.

Cafés.

The distant rumble of trains.

Tolkien country for the children.

A house with rather too much space—and too much silence. She transformed it into both gallery and seminar house, even installing a small swimming pool. A kingdom of her own, constructed out of hurt, defiance, and the determination to show her children that breaking apart need not be the end.

On one excursion into the Black Country they visited the open-air industrial museum, where at weekends an entire nineteenth-century town came back to life. The children sampled old-fashioned sweets, sat at wooden school desks, wrote the alphabet in chalk. Street games filled the lanes as though celebrating the opening of the Worcester Canal two centuries earlier. Later they rode behind a steam locomotive, soot drifting through the air while waiters in white livery passed through the carriages.

For Victoria it became a quiet consolation.

The past could also become play.

Not only burden.

And the future was built less through victories than through noise, sticky little hands searching for their mother's, and the stubborn decision to keep walking.

The tea had long since been finished. The lights were dimmed.

Their hair touched upon the pillow. They were tired. Yet stronger than fatigue remained that old feeling of closeness—and caution. Two sisters, awake in the same darkness, each enclosed within her own uncertainty.

"You don't need to pity me," Victoria said softly. "I'm well. Very well."

She loved her oversized house. She had restored the decorative inlaid walls of the drawing room and reconstructed the great entrance hall with its rectangular skylight. The dining table could still be transformed into a full-sized billiard table simply by removing its leaves, while the cues hung neatly in their rack beside the chalk, waiting for another game.

Though Victoria spoke warmly of Birmingham, Veronica would not let the conversation rest there. For the first time she spoke with complete honesty herself. She wanted to encourage her sister to speak equally openly about fear, hurt, and disappointment. She spoke of Ethan. Of the tensions between them.

Of America.

Politics.

Bodies.

Intimacy.

She admitted how deeply she longed for tenderness—for challenge—and how strangely unfamiliar Ethan's gentleness had gradually become.

"I need a partner who actively engages me," she said. "Someone who challenges me. Someone who doesn't always want to walk ahead of me, clearing every obstacle from my path."

"That would suffocate me too," Victoria admitted.

"Does it surprise you that he's a Democrat?" Veronica smiled ironically. "The name itself gives him away. Back home they'd be regarded as the extreme left of Labour—or outright communists."

"So he's another one of those incurable world-improvers," Victoria laughed. "Not unlike David in his Church."

"A world-improver, certainly. But when it comes to ordinary life—to the children, to our marriage—he notices neither obstacles nor responsibilities."

"And yet our television news always portrays Republicans, not Democrats, as enemies of women."

"My own experience has been different," Veronica answered. "At least they're real men. And they aren't afraid of strong women. Things happen. Anyone who truly understands America's social problems knows they can only be addressed if people recover their own initiative instead of being permanently supported, as they often are in Britain or elsewhere in Europe. Only then can society really change."

Victoria, whose own instincts lay closer to her sister's than she usually admitted, nodded encouragingly.

Veronica continued, becoming more animated.

"Take Ethan. He campaigned for Biden, for Harris—for every one of those social idealists. He thinks I'm some blind, right-wing patriot undermining everything America stands for."

She gave a weary smile.

"Every day he bombards me with stories from work about misinformation supposedly flooding the country, about attempts to weaken democratic institutions in favour of the Republicans."

"He genuinely believes that?" Victoria asked. "So do your friends?"

"Completely. Ethan lives inside that world. Most of his colleagues think the same. Personally I believe much of it is simply left-wing propaganda."

"Or perhaps it's the consequence of the work he does."

"Perhaps. He only ever sees one battlefield—the cyber war inside the Pentagon."

Victoria squeezed her hand.

"I'm glad you've remained true to yourself—and to what our parents taught us. It's surprisingly easy to lose that."

"The older I become," Veronica replied quietly, "the more I realise how much of them still lives within us."

Victoria slipped her arm around her sister once more.

"Perhaps life simply consists in learning to live with circumstances because we refuse to betray ourselves."

She moved a little closer. Their hair mingled across the pillow. Her father's judgments still echoed through Victoria's mind.

David doesn't take you seriously.

He has rejected you.

He's hopelessly self-absorbed.

Self-absorbed.

Self-absorbed.

She hated her father. Even if he happened to be right. David was still her David. Not entirely hers—yet, somehow, still hers.

Almost casually, Victoria finally said,

"May I tell you something... before my courage disappears again?"

She did not wait for an answer.

"It happened in Cambridge. With Claudia Capella."

An image flickered before her mind's eye: pints at the Eagle, voices, the faint scent of old books.

Victoria spoke of that night.

"She looked at me. Her gaze pierced straight through me. I didn't look away. I knew something had begun. Her hand rested on mine—firm, impatient. *'Stop playing roles. Be yourself.'* I never went back to college. I followed her to her flat—books, glasses, disorder everywhere. And I surrendered. I felt both seen and dissolved. History was suddenly no longer only paper; it had become skin. Hers. Mine."

She hesitated.

"For years I believed David had been the first to break faith. But it was I. And even now I cannot decide whether it was guilt—or freedom."

Veronica felt both pain and consolation. Everything within her wanted to protect her sister. Yet for the first time she understood something she had never fully grasped, something she had never even wished to see: Victoria's love for David had never been weakness. It had been an attempt to mend an older fracture.

"Now let me tell you something about myself," Veronica said quietly. "If you still have the strength to listen."

Victoria raised herself slightly on one elbow.

Veronica drew a long breath.

"I never entirely abandoned our discipline after moving to America. I still wrote, not only the occasional review or article, but even registered for a PhD program and did my degree. During the years I attended the annual conference of the Association of Art Historians in London. At one of those, I remember vividly the moment I passed through the neo-Gothic gateway of St Mary's, beyond the old Jewish cemetery, I felt I was entering another age—not America, not family life, simply myself again, as I had once been. Standing opposite me was the chairman, Professor Gabriel Lenoir—attentive, gracious, almost unsettling in the intensity of his gaze.

'Dr Ashcroft?' he said, and I started.

'Your review of my latest book—thank you. It was generous, precise, more careful than I myself had been during proof-reading. You helped me sharpen the argument.'

I scarcely knew where to look. Could he really remember something I had written?

Only when one of his assistants placed the key to my room in my hand did I dare look at him properly. He was barely into his forties—several years older than I was then—with unruly dark hair, alert, serious eyes, skin browned by the Italian sun. An open-necked shirt beneath a casually cut jacket.

The assistant, dressed in a blue suit that seemed to belong to the old college tradition, lifted my suitcase as naturally as though he were the porter.

'I'm helping with the logistics,' he said quietly. 'But my own work lies elsewhere. I'm writing about iconic empty spaces in Late Antiquity.'

I looked at him questioningly.

'What fascinates me,' he continued, 'is the point at which the image fails. Where the artist shows nothing although something is there to be shown. I believe absence often speaks more loudly than visibility.'

There was something reassuring about his voice. It made the unfamiliar surroundings seem almost welcoming. Despite his formal appearance he possessed none of the ambition one so often encountered. Rather, he carried the uncertainty of someone who still wondered whether his ideas would find an echo. For some reason, I felt understood. He disappeared upstairs with my luggage.

Professor Lenoir resumed the conversation. Leaving the circle gathered around him, he walked directly towards me.

'And you?' he asked with the informality that belongs to a second conversation. 'I know your title from the programme. But what is it you're really trying to discover?'

My heart seemed to sink one floor lower. Still, I gathered what courage I possessed.

'I am asking how art makes the invisible present. How it directs our gaze towards what is absent in order to open another kind of presence.'

He listened to every word, weighing it carefully. As we talked he accompanied me upstairs. The staircase creaked beneath our feet; wax and furniture polish scented the air. We stopped outside my room.

'Then, for your approach,' he said, 'space—and even time—do not exist beforehand. Art itself brings them into being. Have I understood you correctly?'

His words struck home. He had reached the very centre of my paper. Yet there was something more in his voice—an inward resonance, a hint of playfulness. He saw me, not merely as a fellow scholar."

Victoria broke off, allowing Veronica to interrupt.

"You take my breath away. Didn't you know, at that very moment, that he wanted more from you—that he was trying to draw you towards something you had never imagined, never wanted?"

"At the door Gabriel said to me, 'Shall we talk later? Once the conference begins tomorrow, conversations will be rather tightly scheduled.'

I was relieved. Gabriel had no intention of entering my room. I understood more than he had actually said. Flattered, emboldened, and just a little mischievous, I replied, 'Shall we say... nine o'clock?' And as I spoke, I caught myself offering him precisely what, only a second earlier, I had feared and recoiled from. But you see—it wasn't he who pressed me. I was the one who lit the fuse, who placed the fire in his hands, who offered the explosion. I wanted to be seen—not as a mother, not as a wife—but simply as myself.

I found myself alone in my room. Plain enough: a desk, a bookshelf, a narrow bed. I lay down for a while, stared at the ceiling, and tried to understand what had just happened. Before I had even taken off my coat, I knew I would have to rewrite my paper. I had thought about space, yes—but time had never entered my calculations."

"Didn't Ethan come to mind? Or the children?"

"Hardly. Not then. I was looking for closeness. A different kind. Challenge. Intensity. Resistance. Ethan was good. Too much goodness can suffocate. Gabriel was not much older than Ethan, yet there was something in his manner, in the way he spoke, that awakened something I had been missing all my life: being challenged. Urgency. Insistence. Someone who thought with me and entered into what I was thinking. What I had once seen in our father—and at the same time despised—I now experienced with Ethan. Even though it was precisely the opposite of our father that I had sought in Ethan's gentleness.

Ethan is lovable—too lovable. I miss clarity. Provocation. Our parents liked him. You all think him the perfect brother-in-law, the one who remembers birthdays, who never forgets your children. But I—I gradually began to feel that he was no longer truly interested. I no longer sensed in him any willingness to struggle with me, even against me, and therefore for me; to immerse himself in what held me captive, and to offer me something in return.

Gabriel's idea of emerging empty spaces, capable of speaking about what remains unspoken on the surface, what only then allows the hidden to come into being. Was it that provocation which drew me to him? That the invisible is not something to fear, but something to live—and to love?

That evening, at the reception, I saw him again. A waiter approached with a white tray and handed each of us a glass of wine. Suddenly we found ourselves standing opposite one another and raised our glasses.

"Thank you," he said, quietly, almost conspiratorially.

"Thank you," I replied, 'also for the inspiration. I've revised my paper once more.'

His eyes sparkled with curiosity, almost mischievously.

'Nine o'clock,' I confirmed.

He gave the slightest nod.

And I knew: this was no accident, no ordinary evening at a conference. It was a cut. A fissure. An empty space that spoke more loudly than any image."

"What did that night come to mean—for everything that followed?"

"And yours?"

Victoria merely nodded, rested her head against her sister, and closed her eyes.

But sleep would not come.

Not for Victoria.

Not for Veronica.

At some point Victoria drifted into a dream in which Roman vases, broken fragments, and a removal lorry appeared, swallowing one container after another—the night her family had been forced to leave their old house. Her father, bent, taciturn, obstinate. Her mother, packing away memories instead of books. And herself, still a girl, convinced that the ground beneath her feet was giving way.

A few days later, after her father had lost his "secondary occupation" at the auction house, an enormous removal van drew up outside. The evening before, workmen had placed seven containers in the driveway. Now her mother and father emptied the attic, the annexes, the back house, and the garage. Box after box they carried outside, as though they were burying their lives piece by piece.

Her mother looked sad; her father grimly determined as he emptied his study, taking down the heavy bookcase behind his desk chair, the one he had once bought in Bremen. She asked him how he could possibly live without his books. With characteristic phlegm he replied that the important ones were in the university library. The new house, into which they would shortly move, had only two bedrooms instead of five, but those would be entirely sufficient: one for the parents and one for the girls. Between the two university salaries, they would easily be able to afford it.

As far back as she could remember, they had lived just around the corner from Abbey Road in central London. Their new home would be much farther north, in a residential area of Watford beyond the city. Her father maintained that it was more affordable and better suited to children, with its canals and expanses of green. Yet money had never before been a topic at their table.

So she helped fill the containers—the graves of her past. Only a very few things found their way into the removal van.

She woke with a start.

Why had that scene returned to her now? Why this moment? Was her parents' rejection of David calling forth these dark images from the past? Because before that she had already experienced her father as the one who had endangered the life of the family?

Her mother had rejected David. So had both her sisters. Yet of them all, it was her father who had found the fewest kind words for him.

Until this very night no one in the family had truly understood her—or perhaps they had been unable to.

Her father possessed a fixed vision of life; at least, that was how he appeared to the world. There had been moments when she doubted his convictions—his patriotism, his conservatism, his religious rigidity. Then again she saw his steadiness, the foundation that had prevented him from despairing despite professional ruin and the loss of their home.

Every book he removed from the shelves he weighed in his hands. He opened one, now and again. Sometimes he even inhaled the scent of its pages. From the movements of his head one could almost tell with what reluctance he consigned most of the books to those coffin-like containers. Then he lowered a particularly precious volume into the small crate reserved for the new house, carefully, as though nestling a raw egg into soft straw. Everything weighed heavily upon him.

Ever since the sale of the house had brought about such a fundamental upheaval in their lives, she had noticed other changes. Whether doubts had already stirred in her beforehand she could no longer say. But she had become aware that her father invariably travelled alone on academic excursions, without her mother, although she too, as a Byzantinist, specialised in the Christian East.

His research journeys, workshops, and conferences took him mostly south: to Italy, Spain, Croatia, Greece; also to Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. He spent weeks every summer in Georgia, and later in Armenia, studying ancient manuscripts in the celebrated Matenadaran Library in Yerevan.

When he spoke about those journeys—and he was never a man of many words—he usually spoke of the colleagues with whom he had travelled. Her mother never belonged to that circle.

As both daughter and wife, Victoria had the impression that her father moved within a world of men in which he felt entirely at ease. The older she became, the more conscious she grew of that other world he inhabited. Yet the less she understood why he should have been so deeply hostile towards David, her former husband.

Was it because his own wife had rejected him and wanted nothing more to do with him? Was she disappointed by his failure, by the loss of their home?

For all the support her father had shown her and the children, his rejection of David remained profoundly unsettling.

She buried her face deep in the pillow.

The darkness of the room was dense.

Veronica slept heavily.

Then a thought pierced her like a shaft of light.

It was not her father's downfall that had wounded her.

It was that she had been unable to hold on to him.

And that the same fear had bound her to David.

She pressed her forehead into the pillow and breathed.

Slowly.

Painfully.

Suddenly her father stood before her again—unyielding, conservative, enigmatic.

And the realisation she had avoided for years finally took shape.

She had never learned how to let go of someone who had disappointed her.

Nor how to hold on to someone without losing herself.

She turned towards her sister. A sleeping figure, closer to her than anyone else in the world.

And she knew.

This night had not been a confession.

It was the beginning of a new—and more dangerous—chapter.

A chapter that only sisters could bear.

