

Queen K

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For CCB

‘She thirsted for everything but the clear stream
of her own life, flowing hidden in the grass.’

Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions*

I went to dinner with some old school friends the other night and before I'd been there ten minutes they were asking me about that family I used to work for, the billionaires. Everyone does that. Everyone's heard the story and knows I was there that night. 'Something crazy happened, didn't it,' they say, 'with that oligarch's wife; didn't she just disappear or something?' They look at me and depending on the mood I'm in I brush them off with an arch quip or I try quite seriously to explain it all: how it came to that, how Kata got it so badly wrong.

On this particular night, I was looking at those girls from school arrayed around the dinner table, in their merino knits, comfortable in their professions: lawyer; TV producer; book editor. I caught the whiff of glibness, that I was being patronised. 'So exotic!' said Charlotte. 'Being a tutor. Makes office life seem very boring!'

Charlotte had seen I was in the country from one of my Instagram stories. I'd been packing up the last of Mum's stuff and found a big book of photographs, all these pictures from Mum's youth, on the seafront at Dartmouth with the sailing yachts behind her, hair blown about by that south-coast wind.

'Wow, you look like her!' Charlotte said. 'Come to dinner on your way back through London. I'll invite some of the others.'

When Charlotte led me down the hall to her kitchen it all came back to me: the lust I used to have for houses like this, the sounds of the street dying away as we passed a sitting room with heavy curtains, a faded sofa full of cushions, a fireplace and, on either side of the fireplace, blue and white china urns. Charlotte had seemed so helpless to me when we first met aged thirteen, both new at a girls' boarding school in the West Country. There was some incident in the library, a mouse ran over her books and

she screamed, then people followed her round chanting: 'Library Mouse, Library Mouse.' It irritated me, and one night in the dinner queue I told everyone how lame they were being. 'Teasing Charlotte is mean and lazy, it also happens to be totally risk free. Now, how about *her*,' I said, pointing to this girl a few years above us, someone beautiful and fascinating and tyrannical, known to be vicious in her punishments.

Push up, not down, I suppose is what I meant. Back then, I saw Charlotte as someone in need of *my* protection. It's relentless, isn't it, our need to order ourselves, to form hierarchies? When we were kids together at that school we were ordered by our wits, it was cruel and merciless. In the end of course we are ordered by our capital: it is cruel, it is merciless.

I think I was always aware Mum was heading towards an act of mortal stupidity, but I never saw it coming with Kata. Two such weak women. I grew up wishing my mother could have tried to hide her weaknesses from me, that she could at least have pretended to be some kind of a safe haven. So I could understand very well Alex's feelings towards Kata, and I could even understand the role she played in the whole sad thing. She clung on to love for her mother for a long time, before that love turned to disgust. She was so sweet and so gentle, my little pupil. I could never quite work it out: was she someone I needed to protect or was she undeserving of my protection, simply because she was so rich?

The email notification was on my phone: my return flight to Vienna the very next day, my apartment, my new life. It really was there, waiting for me. I brought it all up before me in my mind: drinking a cup of coffee in my kitchen, dressing and getting on the underground to the kindergarten where I worked, late afternoons in the cafés, evenings with Jakob and friends. I called it to myself and felt its warmth fill me, then expand outwards. It radiated through Charlotte and the others, and Charlotte's million-pound house in Clapham that her parents had bought her. I separated Charlotte from my envy, for just a moment: I looked at her across the table, at her face as she lifted the bottle of wine

and brought it towards my glass, the light freckles over her nose and the top of her cheeks, and for a moment I thought, Maybe we are all helpless, maybe we are all hostage. I think Kata was helpless and hostage from the beginning to the end of her life, and she was the richest of us all.

PART ONE

Courchevel

1

I first worked for Kata when I was twenty-two. I had done a few jobs for a tutoring agency here and there in London when they told me about a two-month home-schooling job abroad. ‘Sure, sign me up,’ I said, but to be honest I didn’t think I would actually go. February felt ages away, we were in November and I was sure something better would come along by then. One of my brief internships would have turned into a glamorous job, on a magazine, complete with invitations to parties and fashion shows, maybe even an expense account ... I said yes to the tutoring job as an insurance policy but really, it was like the certainty I have whenever I buy a lottery ticket: I’m going to win, I always think matter-of-factly, already planning where I’m going to buy my house, considering even the practicalities: hmm, I like that street because it’s near a pretty park but it’s quite far from the tube, but then I suppose if I’ve won the lottery I can take taxis ... A combination of magical thinking and – we can put it more baldly if you want – entitlement made me certain *things would go my way*.

Well, they didn’t. But my belief in my future burned bright, in those days. I decided to embrace the tutoring job as an interesting interlude before I returned to my real life.

Real life was in London. That’s where everyone went after leaving university, and I followed. It wasn’t like I had any intention of going back to Totnes, the small town in Devon where I

grew up. Kicking around in Doc Martens, throwing stones into the River Dart. And I hated being in the house with Mum. I'd know it from her very first sip, that look in her eyes, glassy and belligerent. Beer or wine, never spirits. So, no to all that, and yes to London. I'd been spoiled forever, anyway, for a small town like Totnes, first through my scholarship to the boarding school, where I'd mingled for five years with the daughters of bankers and interior designers and diplomats, and then by Bristol University, where I'd sat around in high-ceilinged flats in Clifton and summered at friends' houses in the South of France. Along with my peers, I now had a horror of the 'provincial'.

London was where life waited but even so, it *was* kind of exciting, when the time for the home-schooling job came around, packing up my suitcase in my flatshare in Lewisham, black mould oozing around the mirror in the bathroom, wondering: Where am I off to? What will my bedroom be like? Imagining immaculate white linen, pillows like clouds. And two whole months of not having to think about going to the supermarket, queuing for the bus, the cleaning rota, all the daily administration – no: I'd teach this kid for a few hours, easy, and after that I'd be free. I'd lie on my cloud bed and read; I'd roll around in the luxury.

And I did feel very cosmopolitan, flying off to Geneva for a job. This will be a holiday of the senses, I remember thinking to myself, when the driver opened the door of the blacked-out Jaguar and I got in and smelled the leather, put my hand on its slick surface. We drove through the French Alps way up high to the ski resort, Courchevel 1850. I'd never been to a ski resort before. The scene presented itself through the tint of the Jag's windows: chocolate-box chalets, snow packed cosily on wooden eaves. We drove through the resort and up a short winding road and then we turned into their place. It was different from the wooden chalets, the same pine facade but larger, the lines more modern. A slim, suited man opened the door to me. He took my coat, he opened a cupboard in the hallway and I remember that first glimpse of furs: blonde furs and white furs and black furs. The man added my Uniqlo puffa into the mix, into this Narnia,

then he said, with a little wink: 'Better come on up with me, Kata wants to meet you.'

'I'm Sebastian by the way,' my escort said as we walked up some pale wooden steps without a banister. I assumed Sebastian was a butler, or whatever the modern iteration of that was ('con-cierge', he would tell me later).

The enormous dimensions of an open-plan living area opened beneath us as we climbed. There was a vast glass sculpture of what looked like a stalagmite just to the side of the banisterless stairs and I concentrated on not falling onto it and impaling myself on its glassy spike. We reached a landing. Sebastian knocked on a door and I heard from within a voice bid us enter.

A woman was sitting behind a desk. She was statuesque, her hair a rich ebony black, a colour so sumptuous it must have been dyed. It fanned out in wings around her face. She extended an arm – slowly – and said, 'Please, take a seat.' I sat. I heard the door click behind me.

Kata looked at me for some five seconds before speaking. 'Welcome, Melanie. I hope you had a good flight.'

I opened my mouth to answer, but she held up a hand.

'It is very important, Melanie, that Alex, my daughter, gets into an English school. That is why you have been hired. I have taken Alex out of her school in Moscow because I think she will benefit from one-on-one teaching. You will prepare her for the entry exams and I expect her to get in. You know these schools?'

In front of her on the desk were some prospectuses for girls' boarding schools. Lots of glossy photographs of girls playing hockey and girls doing science experiments and girls marching across blustery grounds arm in arm and laughing into the wind.

'Yes,' I said. 'I went to a school like that.'

'Good, good. Very good. Then you can encourage Alex. In the last months, her marks have gone down. She used to be top of her class. You will make her work hard and get better.'

Kata shook her head.

'She does not want to go. It is childish, she does not realise the benefit it will give her. But I am the parent. I will decide.'

There was an American twang to her accent, overlaying the Russian.

‘You speak Russian, Melanie? The agency said so.’

‘I studied it as part of my university degree but I wouldn’t say I’m fluent. It’s been a while.’

‘Please, do not speak in Russian with Alex. Only English, her English can get better.’

‘Only English,’ she repeated.

I assured her that I would speak only English.

She pressed her forefinger to a white plastic device sitting on the desk; within seconds, the door to the study opened and Sebastian reappeared.

‘She takes some getting used to,’ he chuckled, as he led me through the house.

‘Yeah ...’ I said.

I was looking about me, taking it all in. A modern cathedral in which the icons were pale grey suede sofas, beige carpets, glass occasional tables, willow spray arrangements and chrome, so much chrome, chrome objets everywhere, spirals and hoops and panthers, two huge fingers making the peace sign. My bedroom was at the bottom of the house, away from the main guest bedrooms, but still: it had a small, comfy bed, fresh white linen. A gleaming little ensuite bathroom. There was a large picture window that looked out onto a pristine expanse of snow. ‘Welcome to the team, honey,’ Sebastian said, putting my case down next to the bed. He smoothed his hand over the crown of his head and gave me another wink. He was tall and neat; he picked a piece of fluff off his pale grey suit and smoothed the fabric down. His head was shaved, he was elegant. He spoke English with a global accent; I heard shades of American, I heard French inflections. I got the sense he had travelled the length and breadth of the world, working for people like Kata. We heard his name, *Sebastian*, floating down the corridor in her carrying, magisterial tone. He saw my pack of cigarettes fall out of my hand luggage onto the bed. ‘Come and have a smoke later, outside the kitchen,’ he said, ‘if it all gets too much.’

I had been pleased when Sebastian told me I'd be eating my meals with the family rather than with the staff to give Alex another occasion to practise her English. It was one more chance to observe. I was glad of my Russian, which I'd always been able to understand better than I could speak. Kata saw me glance at the empty chair next to me. 'Alex is not feeling well,' she said. 'You will meet her tomorrow.'

When Sebastian and a female staff member I hadn't met yet came out with our dinner plates I was provided with my first anthropological artefact. The order in which they distributed the plates appeared illogical at first – they darted here, then there – but as I watched I realised the order in which they were serving followed the pecking order of the people at the table. Kata was served first. Next came Kata's friend Igor. He was a plump, glossy man, seated to Kata's left and solicitous of her in a hyped-up, excitable way. As his plate was put before him, he was extolling the wine, insisting Kata have some, raising his glass to her.

'A toast!' he cried. 'To Kata. This is life!'

He picked up a remote lying beside him, turned in his chair and pointed across the room. Music blasted out from somewhere, some unidentifiable house tune. Kata frowned. 'Lower, lower,' she said, and Igor obeyed.

Sergei was served next. He was Igor's boyfriend, as discreet as Igor was voluble, self-contained in navy-blue cashmere. Olga followed. I would come to know them well, because they were often around. They were Kata's entourage. Nominally based in London, they were members of what I'd come to recognise as the nomadic super rich, wandering the globe from one identikit grey and beige interior to the next, above loyalties and localities, served the same food by the same brand of personal chef wherever they happened to find themselves. Olga's husband worked in finance and was never around. Sergei had some vague-sounding ventures in hostelry. Igor, as far as I could make out, did absolutely nothing.

Needless to say, I was served last.

The starter was an infinitely delicate thing; it looked like origami. I think there was a scallop in there amid some decorative sprigs of fine red stuff and dashes of pink jus. It was delicious.

Kata spoke, addressing Igor and Sergei. 'We had a night that was quite ... interesting.' She nodded at Olga, who took the cue.

'Yes!' she said. 'Yes, we did. The party of Valentin Kemerov.'

'Oh!' said Igor. 'Tell us everything. How was he? What was he like?'

'He's involved in everything,' Olga said. 'He has many projects.'

She spoke softly. There was something cow-like and placid about Olga's demeanour, in contrast to Igor's manic ebullience. She had blonde hair parched by hair straighteners. She was wearing the same kind of clothes as Kata: velour lounge-wear, grey. Diamanté sparkles spelled the word CHAOS across her shoulders.

Even I had heard of Valentin Kemerov, because he was often in the UK press. He was a publicity-friendly exile, a regular and outspoken critic of affairs back home in Russia. The son of a high-ranking minister, Valentin had profited from the privatisation of the nineties by gaining control of one of the country's main newspaper chains, but had fallen out of favour in the 2000s by refusing to share his spoils with the new regime. He was regularly photographed in top hats at sporting events and exiting the revolving doors of stratospherically expensive London restaurants in the company of well-known businessmen, high-profile Russian émigrés, the occasional TV personality.

I pieced together what had happened through the conversation. Valentin had thrown a private party at Calico in London to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. Kata had been surprised to receive an invitation in the post as she'd never met him, but Olga had been very excited. 'We have to go,' she'd said. 'Valentin knows everyone!'

They were still reeling from the experience. There had been lots of famous people there. They had arrived, they had milled around and then Valentin had come over, in his black silk shirt, to

introduce himself; the crowds parted before them as he led them over to a corner, a roped-off area, his own private table.

‘Who was at the table?’ Igor asked, unable to contain himself. He turned the music up a fraction. ‘I can’t believe we missed this to visit your mother!’ He shook his head at Sergei.

‘Such glamorous people,’ Kata said. ‘He had a friend with him who was very nice. Such impeccable manners. He was an English lord. An earl. His name was Oliver.’

He had been so charming.

Valentin had sat her next to Oliver and he had asked her many questions. How long had she been in London? Was she enjoying it? Had she partaken of any of their rather idiosyncratic summer traditions? Had she been at Ascot, Goodwood? No? That was a shame. If he had known her then, she could have come with his party. She could come with them next year, everyone was there, in the Royal Enclosure. And her husband, did he like racing?

He had known her husband’s name, without her telling him.

‘No? Well, it’s an acquired taste. I’d like you both to come, as my guests. What about tennis: Wimbledon, the Queen’s Club?’

‘Fabulous!’ cried Igor. ‘Will you see him again?’

‘I hope so,’ Kata said.

Something interesting had happened at the end of the night.

There had been this man, some nobody, who had been paying Kata undue attention throughout the evening. Coming on to her, I inferred. He had followed her and Olga out of the club as they were leaving. They were waiting on the pavement for Dmitri, Kata’s driver. Wanting to get rid of him, Kata told the man she was married.

‘Who is he, baby?’ the man said. ‘I bet he’s not worth what I am.’

Kata told him her husband’s name and the man laughed.

‘Sure, baby.’

Luckily, Dmitri arrived at that moment. Kata moved towards the car, but the man continued to harass her.

‘When Dmitri saw what was happening, he got out from the

car and spoke to the man. He said, "Do you know who this lady's husband is?" He said Ivan's name and the man realised I had been telling the truth. You should have seen his face! He went completely white and put his hands over his mouth. "Please, please," he said, "a mistake, a misunderstanding."

Igor whistled.

Jesus, I was thinking. Who exactly was her husband?

'So maybe Ivan will join you in meeting Oliver and Valentin,' Igor said, after a silence.

Kata didn't answer Igor, but she gave him a funny look. She raised her eyebrows, she pursed her lips. It was a look he seemed to understand because he answered it in kind, he nodded and pursed his lips too, and no more was said. Igor raised his hands in the air and shouted: 'Dessert!' and I saw Sebastian come through the swing doors.

Kata had been animated when recalling the events at the nightclub; I watched her now, looking down at her dessert, as she brought her expression under control, as she subdued herself into immobility. Her lips set themselves into a pout. She reached for her spoon and her arm moved as slowly as it had done up in her study, when she had gestured to the chair opposite her, when she had looked at me for five seconds before speaking.

'It is very good,' Igor said to Kata, 'that you will be based more in London from now on. You will have a bit more freedom there. And you will see more of us. And now you know Valentin, and this lord, they can introduce you to others. We will all go to Ascot this year,' he said, raising his glass. 'Cheers!'

'I will stay in London more,' said Kata, 'if I can persuade my husband.'

At the mention of her husband the others fell silent.

Igor soon rallied. 'Of course you will persuade him! Alexandra must go to school in England. They have the best education in the world!'

He turned to me then. It was the first time anyone had spoken to me. 'You will make Alex work very hard, won't you? You will make sure she gets into one of those schools.'

‘I’ll do my best ...’

‘See?’ Igor said, turning again to Kata.

The corners of Kata’s mouth pulled upwards; once again, she subdued them. She pressed her little plastic bell. Coffee was brought in.

The last thing I remember from that dinner was Igor, irrepressible after several glasses of champagne, turning the music right up. Guetta blasted out and Kata moved her head. She moved it back and forth, lips pressed out. She reminded me of a mantis in that moment, swaying her head back and forth to the beat. I watched her for quite a while, hypnotised. Then I excused myself and went to bed.

*

At breakfast the next morning Kata said to me, without looking up from a glass cylinder of yoghurt and berries and seeds: ‘Melanie, lessons will start after breakfast. Alexandra is in her bedroom, please collect her and go to the study. She has been in bed long enough; it is time for her to work.’

When I knocked on the door to Alex’s bedroom and went in, I saw a dark-haired girl, cute with puppy fat, sprawled on a king-sized bed, staring into her phone.

‘Hey, Alex,’ I said. ‘I’m Mel. How are you feeling? Any better?’

She didn’t answer me or look up.

‘Your mum told me to tell you it’s time to start lessons. We should go up to the study.’

She sighed and rolled off the bed. She trudged after me down the corridor, all the while looking at her phone. Kata and the others were still at the breakfast table. They were discussing the day’s schedule. Skiing, shopping, massages.

‘Can I come?’

Kata stopped talking and turned to Alex. ‘What are you talking about? Of course you can’t come.’ She pointed at me. ‘It’s time for you to work.’

‘I’m still ill,’ Alex said.

‘If you are ill, then how can you come with us? Enough excuses. Work!’

She turned back to the others, but Alex didn’t move. ‘Please, Mama,’ she said.

‘No,’ Kata replied.

Alex shot me a look of hatred. She began to trail up the stairs to the study.

‘Melanie,’ Kata said, ‘you have to be *strict* with her. You have to show her who is boss.’

‘Yes,’ I said meekly.

I slunk up the stairs, anxious about the furious little creature that awaited me. When I entered the room, she glared. She was slumped on the floor with her back against a bookshelf, knees hunched up to her face.

What had I got myself into? Why was I here, in this strange family’s house, grappling with their livid child? For a moment I felt too nervous to speak. Children have the capacity to be more intimidating than adults. They’ve yet to acquire the mask of politeness with which most adults spare one another. Their brutal honesty, their unfiltered responses to your person, are terrifying to the emotionally squeamish. I thought of children as animals and I quailed at the power of their instincts. Once they smell fear, it’s all over.

‘So, Alex,’ I said, my voice a shade too strident. ‘Your mum says you might be going to boarding school, in England. Have you looked at any schools? Is there one you like more than the others?’

‘I’m not going.’

‘You don’t want to go? It can be scary, going away to school, but it quickly becomes fun. I remember it myself.’

‘I’m not going.’ She shook her head and brought it down onto her knees.

‘Look. Let’s just take it easy today.’ I made my voice gentler. ‘OK? What are some of your hobbies? Like, if you could be doing anything in the world right now, what would it be?’

At first she didn’t respond. Then she raised her head and gazed

into the middle distance. 'Watching a movie with—' she said, and then stopped.

A burst of laughter came from the people downstairs. She strained as if to hear them.

'You can join them afterwards, Alex. Lessons won't take all day.'

She peeled herself from the floor and sat at the desk.

'OK,' I said, 'look, we're going to take it easy, we're going to go through this paper together. It's a maths paper, it's like doing a puzzle, we'll go slowly, one question at a time, easy-peasy.'

She was small in the big black swivel chair. She was only eleven. She looked at the paper in front of her. 'I can't do it,' she said. 'It's too hard.' She threw the paper onto the floor.

An hour and a half later, nothing had changed. I'd put a succession of things in front of her. Comprehension stories about baby rabbits. Reasoning exercises with fun shapes. 'It's too hard,' she said, for each new thing.

'Look,' I said, eventually. 'We are going to do one of these papers today. I'm sorry if you don't like it, but that's why I've been hired. I don't mind not taking a break. We are going to stay in this room until one of these papers is done. The moment one is finished, you are free. For the rest of the day.'

Some instinct told me what might be effective. I hesitated before saying it because I knew it was manipulative. And she was so small in her swivel chair.

'Think,' I said, 'how proud your mum will be if you work hard today, if we go downstairs together and I'm able to give you a glowing report. You don't want to make her cross with you, do you?'

She looked down at the maths paper in front of her.

She wrenched a pen out of a stand on the desk with such ferocity that the stand toppled over and pens spewed all over the floor.

'Great,' I said. I knelt down and began to pick the pens up.

When I stood, she was bent over the paper, scribbling furiously.

She was already at the end of the first page; she began speeding down the second.

‘Oh, come on, Alex,’ I said, ‘at least try. Don’t write just anything.’
She zoomed down the third.

I give up, I thought. I’ll call the agency and tell them I’m not cut out for this. I don’t know how to deal with this girl.

She threw down the pen and walked towards the door. She had done ten pages of maths questions in under five minutes.

‘Wait a moment,’ I called after her.

‘You said when I’d done a test I could go.’

‘I meant actually *done* a test, Alex, not just covered ten pages with pen marks.’

‘The answers are right,’ she said.

‘We’ll see about that. Sit down. You’re not leaving this room until I’ve checked them.’

She sat down, crossed her arms over her chest and watched me.

I checked them.

Every single answer was correct.

It had taken me longer to check her answers than it had taken her to do them.

*

Kata and the others were lying supine in the living room when I left the study and went back downstairs. They had a pale grey couch each, the pale grey tones of their loungewear melded into the couches perfectly, they lay there like four lazy chameleons.

I explained why lessons had finished for the day and assured Kata we’d have a full day tomorrow. I told them about the extraordinary ability Alex had displayed.

‘If she’s like that in her other subjects, I reckon she’ll get into any school of her choosing.’

Kata sat up. ‘Alexandra!’ she called.

Alex appeared in the doorway. She looked wary.

A look of beatific softness and pleasure spread across Kata’s face. She opened her arms wide. ‘My brilliant clever girl. Come to me.’

Alex remained in the doorway. She appeared to be processing what her mother had just said. She looked confused, and disbelieving.

‘My beautiful clever girl,’ Kata said. ‘Come and give your mama a cuddle.’

Alex started across the room, shyly. She was trying to keep her face still. But then, unable to control herself any longer, pleasure soared into her eyes, her cheeks. She ran the last few steps into her mother’s arms. She buried her face in her mum’s chest and Kata tightened her arms around her. When she raised her face slightly, some long seconds later, I saw that her eyes were wet.

The other three rose from their couches and chorused exclamations of their own. They moved towards mother and daughter, they formed a circle around them.

Feeling uneasy, an intruder in this scene of intimacy, I left the room.

*

To this day, I’d say that Alex is the brightest pupil I’ve ever taught. She didn’t need a tutor at all. After those first few hours, the job, in terms of teaching, was the easiest I’ve ever done. She could do any task you set in front of her. They kept me on regardless. I think they saw having a tutor as standard, a thing you just *had*, along with a chef and a housekeeper and a personal trainer and a masseuse. And it was convenient for them to have someone to look after Alex for five or so hours a day.

Later that night I came up from my room to get a bottle of water from the kitchen.

They were lying on their sofas again, watching a film on a massive flatscreen that appeared to have descended from a hidden compartment in the ceiling.

Alex was lying next to her mother, nestled right into her. She was the only one not gazing up at the screen. She was gazing up at her mother. The look of disbelief I had seen earlier had not gone

completely but had softened and rounded out into what seemed to me a wondering joy.

Kata moved an arm to pull her closer. Alex looked back towards the screen and they continued to watch the movie, together.

Not so hard then, to work out what had been going on, why Alex's marks had gone down over the last few months. Now the act had been dropped, there was no going back on it. Of her two conflicting desires, her desire not to be sent away to boarding school and her desire to win her mother's approval, the latter had won.

You are cruel, I can remember thinking, looking at Kata. You are cruel, for your love of that little girl to be conditional.

2

A month and a half after my arrival, Olga, Sergei and Igor began to behave erratically. They seemed jittery. Something appeared to have startled them out of their indolent daily routine. I'd grown used to watching them move placidly from breakfast down to the gym, up to the masseuse's table, back down to the sauna, into their bedrooms to change out of their loungewear into smarter clothes – jeans and sunglasses and furs – in which to go shopping, or into their Moncler ski suits before hitting the slopes. I'd grown used to them returning in the early evenings, most often to change back into their loungewear with a sigh, to take their places at the table and await Sebastian's ministrations, Igor over by the Apple Box, shouting suggestions as to what movie they should watch that night. I had wondered, at one point, how they were able to take such an extended and seemingly indefinite holiday, had wondered that there was nothing pressing calling them back home, but then I reminded myself of the world I was moving in, that I was applying layman's rules to them that were entirely inappropriate.

That first time, in Courchevel, when they were still new to me, when I hadn't yet come to understand what really drove them, I assumed that they arranged their days in this way because it was how they wanted to live them. I assumed that, because they were rich, they were living on their own terms. Maybe there were

signs of the true nature of their desires, but I didn't yet have the context to pick up on them. I do remember that I often came upon the four of them huddled extra close on one of the grey sofas, eyes glued to one of their phones, watching some Insta story, which was usually pumping out loud music and laughter. Passing by I'd catch a glimpse on the screen of tanned and surgically enhanced people embracing one another, the swirl of brightly coloured gowns, the pulse of some DJ spinning house beats. I thought of Emma Bovary in the convent, transporting herself by reading the lives of the saints. Their social media forays took them all over the world: to Cannes; to London; New York; Miami; Mykonos; Buenos Aires; Mustique; St Barths. 'Beautiful,' I heard Kata murmuring one time; I craned my neck and saw on her screen a long outdoor table at dusk, with lanterns and candles and flowers and chattering people milling about in kaftans; it was a private party at some socialite's Caribbean home; she had invited a handpicked coterie of aristos, fashion designers, former super-models and names on *the international scene*. The hostess had a phenomenally successful lifestyle brand. I'd watched her videos on Instagram before. She radiated a self-esteem so iron-clad as to survive nuclear devastation. The world could burn to ash and this person's self-regard would remain, some hard, metallic form, pulsating undaunted.

Sometimes they did go out of an evening. They would gather in the beige and chrome living room for a drink before setting off; Sebastian would pass round glasses of champagne. They would be dressed to the nines: PVC trousers, leather jackets, spike heels and accessorising bling for Kata and Olga; jeans and suit jackets for Igor and Sergei. They would look freshly showered, they would exude perfumes and cologne. They would seem nervous and excited, they would clatter off into the night. Debriefs would be issued at next morning's breakfast: they'd managed to speak to so-and-so, he owned the most famous hotel in Dubai ... But there was always a downcast air to these morning-afters, as if the night had not fulfilled its promise, and so maybe I did begin to get the sense, as the days rolled by one into another, that their

loungewear-clad flatscreen-watching did not represent all that they most dreamed of for themselves.

Alex and I came down from the study after our daily lessons one day to find the living room devoid of its usual occupants. Voices murmured from the hallway where the guest bedrooms were. Dinner that night was a clipped and muted affair. Phones were checked. They seemed distracted as they lay on their sofas after dinner watching Barbra Streisand in *A Star Is Born*.

‘When will you know for sure?’ I heard Igor ask Kata as I collected a book I had left lying on the coffee table.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ she replied.

Sergei got up purposefully, walked across the room, stopped and then returned to his seat. ‘I forgot what I was going to get,’ he said, laughing.

The following morning when I came upstairs to breakfast Sebastian was pacing back and forth across the living room, phone to his ear, speaking urgently in French. He put his hand across the phone’s mouthpiece and spoke across the room to where the four of them sat watching him from the breakfast table. ‘I have three seats confirmed,’ he said, ‘on the 14.20 from Geneva.’ The next couple of hours saw staff bringing wheelie cases out of bedrooms and gathering them in the entryway, passports in leather passport-holders being produced, Sebastian printing out boarding passes up in the study.

As the driver idled outside, they gathered round Kata. There were kisses and squeezes and exclamations of gratitude.

‘Remember, don’t say anything about it!’ Igor said on his way out. ‘Better to keep it to ourselves.’

And then, just like that, they were gone.

I was quite sad to see them go, actually. I could see why Kata liked having them around. The soothing predictability with which they kept to their roles. Docile, dependable Olga. Igor never failing to bring the fun factor. Sergei, bulking up the numbers without being obtrusive, just there, dignified and quiet.

Alex and I sat upstairs in the study doing vocabulary exercises. She’d learned twenty new English words that day and was

writing sentences for each as a way of remembering them. She read out the sentence she'd written for 'unprofessional': *The doctor began the amputation with a worried look on his face that was quite unprofessional.*

'That's amazing,' I said, laughing, and she smiled. 'Are you looking forward to seeing your dad?'

But I didn't need to ask. Every time there was a noise of a car slowing down on the road outside, she would look up in excitement. She nodded now in answer to my question, she lifted her plump little wrist to her mouth. She was wearing an edible bracelet, pastel-coloured sweets on a string. She nibbled one.

When the door finally opened around 3 p.m. and loud male voices filled the house, Alex jumped up from the desk and I didn't call her back, even though we were in the middle of a lesson. I followed her down, curious, and hung back, in the living room, looking at the people who had just come in.

There were three men, the same age – mid to late forties – and they wore the same style of clothes: jeans, trainers, leather jackets. Two of them were stockily built and one was tall and slim. Alex ran up to one of the stocky men and flung her arms around his waist. 'Papa!' He had short sandy-coloured hair and his nose was soft and rounded. His face was smooth, inexpressive. He was the least physically prepossessing of the three but the others hung back, as if awaiting direction. He smiled and put his arm around Alex, he looked at her but just for a moment; his eyes were up, around, searching, until Kata appeared in the doorway. He let go of Alex, stepped forward and kissed Kata on the mouth.

Sebastian and the housemaids, Francine and Astrid, relieved the newcomers of their coats and bags and the two other men came down the stairs into the living room. 'Hello,' they said to me. They shook my hand, one after the other.

'Anton.'

'Vova.'

Anton wheeled round and scooped Alex up. He was quite hot. Tall and sexy and lanky. He whirled Alex around in the air until she shrieked and giggled with pleasure.

‘How’s the cheeky monkey?’ Vova said. He produced something shiny from his pocket.

‘It’s my favourite chocolate!’ said Alex, showing it to me. ‘From Moscow.’

As Anton, Vova and Alex gambolled and scuffled, I looked back up the stairs to Kata and her husband. He kissed her again. He put his hand in the small of her back, he angled his head down to her. His air was paternal. He handled her like something precious.

They came down the steps together, his hand still in the small of her back. They walked across the room towards the dining area.

‘Sebastian,’ murmured Kata. ‘We would like to have tea, please. Would you like to eat?’ she asked her husband. ‘Are you tired? Would you prefer to rest?’

She seemed solicitous, deferential. It was markedly different from the dominance she displayed around her acolytes, Igor, Sergei and Olga, and it was interesting to see her like this.

Alex looked up at her dad as he walked past.

He happened to glance down. He gave her an easy wink before passing on and by, out of the room, with Kata.

*

I don’t really get it, I found myself thinking, later that day. Why Igor, Sergei and Olga fled like that, like animals on the Pacific plate margin that sense an impending tsunami. He’s not that intimidating, for God’s sake.

It was early evening and the atmosphere in the sitting room was informal, messy, relaxed. The massive screen was down; Ivan and his mates were playing Grand Theft Auto. They’d ordered in some burgers and beers, and the usually immaculate space had given itself up to paper bags and plastic wrappers, buckets of fries, beer cans.

‘Who are Anton and Vova, exactly?’ I asked Alex.

She had come over to where I was sitting at the dining table to ask me the meaning of a word.

“‘Cautious” means careful,’ I said.

She had been following her dad and the other two men around ever since they arrived. She had stayed beside them in front of the games console all afternoon, reading her book. The noise of heavy artillery had not seemed to bother her. She'd been nestled into her dad's side. He'd had his arm around her even while holding the controller; she'd been jostled here and there as he manoeuvred his avatar out of the way of exploding shells and mortars.

'Anton and Vova work for my dad,' she said. 'I've known them since I was a baby. They are like my uncles.'

'Look,' I said, pointing down to a comprehension of hers that I'd just finished checking. 'Almost full marks.'

When I looked back up, I saw that Kata had appeared at the door on the other side of the room. She stood there, surveying the scene. The others, absorbed in their game, hadn't noticed her. A burst of computerised machine-gun fire filled the room; they shouted instructions to one another about the game. Kata continued to stand there. I saw her eyes move over it all. They were very thorough. They left nothing out. First, they took in the coffee table; they moved, like a game of join-the-dots, from soiled wrapper to half-eaten burger to beer can. They went to the screen, where a man in an Adidas tracksuit top was having his head beaten to a pulp. She looked at Vova, she looked at Anton and then, finally, she looked at her husband. I watched her watching them, and as I did so their gestures and grunts, their open mouths as they handled the controllers, seemed bestial. A look of cold disdain passed across Kata's face. Raising her chin, she walked across the room.

*

'I want to see what Mama will be wearing,' Alex said the next day. It was noon and we were all going out for lunch. 'She always dresses up when she's going out with Papa.'

When Kata appeared about ten minutes later, I saw what Alex meant.

She was wearing knee-length bodycon in cerulean blue. Her

hair had been blow-dried into enormous curlicues that stood out around her head. Her eyes were dramatic, huge, surrounded by an eyeshadow in glittering, gunmetal grey. No potential site for display remained bare: neck, ears, both wrists were clustered with diamonds. Ivan followed just behind her, hair slicked, in a black suit and wearing a vast and complex-looking watch. Sebastian opened the closet and took out Kata's fur. He went towards Kata, but Ivan stopped him and took the fur. He would put it on Kata's shoulders. After he had done so, his hand came to rest in the small of her back, the definitive and recurring gesture with which their two bodies seemed to connect.

'Come on,' Kata said to Alex and me.

Sebastian waited until the car could be heard outside, purring its way from the underground car park, before he opened the front door.

It was a Chinese restaurant, but not the kind of Chinese restaurant in which I was used to eating. The restaurant had been done in the Art Deco style. The carpet was plush, with its pattern of interlocking grids. Kata's heels sank down into it. We were led to our table through a dim, soft space. The walls were rosewood, inset here and there with golden panels. Even the sound was soft, the clinking of metal and glass muted into something rich and rounded, the chatter of the diners mellifluous. We were seated at our table and the waiter came forward to attend us.

I was taking it all in: the weight of the white linen tablecloth, I revelled in the feel of it, rubbing it between forefinger and thumb. We were given menus and Alex leaned forward to tell me what she was going to have, what she always had when she came here. Kata and Ivan were next to us but we might as well have been at separate tables, because there was little to no communication between us and them. That was why I was there, to tend to Alex, so that the adults might be left alone. It was always the case, when I was taken along on outings, and it suited me fine. I got to enjoy the luxury privately, without the distraction or stress of interaction. I opened my menu contentedly and began to consider what to have.

When I had made my decision and set the menu aside, I noticed

that Alex was absorbed in a game on her phone. I glanced at Kata, diagonally opposite me, and I was surprised by what I saw. There was something different about her, something I hadn't seen in her before. She had a look of girlishness about her, of breathlessness. It made her look younger and lighter. She stretched a manicured hand across the table and took hold of her husband's hand. At that moment the waiter came over. She let go of Ivan and sat back.

We gave our orders and the waiter went off again. Alex disappeared back into her game. Across came Kata's hand, once again, to her husband's. She leaned forward.

'You look handsome,' she told him.

He told her she looked beautiful. I saw her look beyond him, to her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall, and smile.

He told her he liked it when she wore blues, purples, greens. The colours he picked out for her. They were the colours that suited her best. 'We will go shopping while I'm here,' he said. 'I want to choose some dresses for you and watch you put them on.'

'I only like to wear the clothes you pick out for me, Ivan,' she said. 'You know best, what is good for me.'

There was silence. In the silence I saw their fingers, caressing and interlacing. He probed his thumb gently into her palm.

I looked down at my napkin. The atmosphere had become very intimate, erotic even, and I was embarrassed. I thought they might feel embarrassed too when they remembered I was sitting right there. It only took me a second to get real. You don't exist to these people, I reminded myself. It's laughable and deluded of you to feel embarrassed. They certainly don't.

'You know, Ivan,' Kata said, gently stroking the hairs on the back of his hand, 'when we get back to London, it might be, I was thinking, enjoyable, to see some people, to entertain occasionally. What do you think?'

He nodded. He was looking across the room, maybe checking to see if the food was on its way.

'Yes,' he said. 'Why not, if you would like it.'

She smiled. I saw her look at herself again in the mirror across the room.

He mentioned a couple of colleagues of his, she had met their wives once or twice, they'd also just come over to London from Moscow. One of them lived in Surrey; in fact, they were having a barbecue in a few weeks' time, he would be out of town but she should go, take the car.

'Yes ...' she said.

She hesitated.

Large bottles of sparkling water were brought over to our table and uncapped.

'Well ...' Kata continued. 'But I meant ... How about if we had a small dinner at home, in our house?'

'If you like.'

'I would.' She was smiling again now. 'And Ivan, we could ask Igor and Olga to help us. They would know the right sort of people to invite. They have some contacts in London.'

Plates of dim sum were put on the table, a single crab claw, dumplings in bamboo steamers.

'Olga could help us, with invitations and planning and,' she repeated herself, 'she can advise us, on the right sort of people to invite.'

I cringed a bit, when she said that for the second time. I began to see where she was going. I'm not sure this is the right tack, Kata, I was thinking to myself. You're being a bit clumsy, a bit on the nose.

Ivan picked up the crab claw and ate it.

'And who exactly,' he said, 'are the right sort of people to invite?'

'Well, you know. Society people. People in the high society there, in London.'

It was hard not to feel a sort of affection for her then. The way she put it. So guilelessly, so openly. She wasn't being manipulative in that moment. Quite simply, she was appealing to him. She was asking his permission to do something, and she seemed to want him to do it with her. She was like a little girl.

‘Ah,’ Ivan said. He examined a plate of particularly elaborate-looking dim sum and lifted up a piece with his chopsticks. ‘Have you tried this yet, Kata?’

He lifted the chopsticks until the piece of dim sum was right in front of her face.

‘Open your mouth.’

She hesitated but he kept his hand where it was. She allowed the piece of dim sum to be placed in her mouth.

She chewed it down, it took quite some time. It was a big piece, her cheeks bulged and she blushed. He watched her chew.

He began to speak of something else. Of some work that needed doing on the house in Moscow.

‘Ivan,’ she said.

I saw her look around, as if trying to pull the right words from the air around her. ‘Wait,’ she said. And she began to tell him about her night at Calico. She told it in the same way she’d told it at the dinner table my first evening, to Igor and Sergei. The fact that she was retelling it, verbatim, to her husband, reinforced my impression that she wasn’t trying to manipulate him, that she wasn’t engaged in anything underhand.

At first she was awkward in the retelling but then, in recalling it, enthusiasm and excitement made her words flow. She told him about the glamour of the people she had seen and met in the club, about their famous names, how she had moved among them, about all the things they did and the places they went, about how, if they tried, they too, she and him, could be a part of it. Not everyone could be a part of it, but they could, they could be.

He cut her off.

‘Yes, I know you went there. Dmitri informed me.’

Dmitri, the driver.

He didn’t follow up on his statement.

He looked down at his plate. He ate, stolidly.

It had been a while since Kata had touched her own food.

I saw her look at her husband’s down-turned head, the chopsticks shovelling food up into his mouth.

‘I would like,’ she said, ‘I would like us to entertain. I would like us to get to know people.’

He shook his head and laughed, not looking up.

Kata’s fists were clenched. They lay on the table on either side of her plate. Her nails must be digging into the flesh of her palms, I thought. She had very long nails.

Her mouth opened, then closed. It opened again, it closed again. He’d finished eating, he tossed his chopsticks down onto his plate. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he leaned back, he looked about for the waiter.

She hesitated for a moment and then she began to speak. The words rushed out.

She began to tell him about Valentin, and Oliver.

Valentin Kemerov. Oliver who was an earl. ‘Listen, Ivan, both of them already knew of you, they knew who you were! They admire you! They go to so many things, listen.’

She named some of the places. Ascot, Cannes.

‘They welcomed me that night, and they’d like to meet you, too, what do you think of that? Valentin grew up in Moscow. He described the house where he grew up, it’s near our house. It’s on a lake, with beautiful gardens. An old and beautiful estate. As a little boy, his father took him duck shooting.’

‘So, you met Kemerov in the nightclub, did you? Yes, that is fitting, that seems to be his natural habitat.’

Alex looked up briefly from the game on her phone and glanced in her parents’ direction. A worried expression flitted across her brow before the game pulled her head back down.

Ivan’s face was red.

Surely, I thought, he can’t be jealous? It was evident even to me that Kata wasn’t referring to Valentin or her ‘English earl’ in that way. I had wondered, when she’d first started on the story, the night I’d arrived. Maybe she’s talking about someone she’s got a crush on. Everything I’d seen and heard subsequently had made it clear that this was not the case. This woman isn’t conducting anything erotic outside of her marriage, I thought. That’s not what drives her. I thought of the way she had twirled the hairs

of her husband's hands in her long fingernails. Her next words confirmed my intuition.

'Ivan,' she said. 'Valentin can help us; he can help both of us.'

When he replied, his voice was tight, his face still red.

'Kata,' he said, 'people like me cannot meet with people like Kemerov.'

'But why not?'

'There are some things you do not need to understand. But when I tell you it is so, you should trust that it is so.'

'You are not making sense, Ivan.'

'Let me try and explain it to you. Things back home have changed. There are people who used to be important who are no longer important. They refuse to understand that things have changed. I understand. Kemerov: he doesn't understand. He is indiscreet. I cannot afford to be like that. I'm not that stupid. You like this, don't you?'

He gestured around the restaurant, at the opulence that surrounded them.

'And you like these.'

He touched the jewels on her fingers and on her wrists.

'One stupid move and—'

He wiped the palms of his hands together in a nullifying gesture.

I found it thrilling, the turn the conversation had taken, the things to which Ivan was alluding. I had never before encountered people for whom the great political events of the world played out on a personal level, came and sat down to lunch with them, infused their private relationships. I might not have two beans to rub together, I thought, but I am accruing social and cultural capital, aren't I, first through my school and university and now through this sort of thing, in foreign climes, being exposed to people so radically other from me; it would all contribute to my becoming a sophisticate, wouldn't it, everything I experienced could be stored up and then bartered, could be used for my advancement, couldn't it, once I got back to London, once I plunged again into the swim, swimming upstream? I would

hustle, I would ascend. I was full of such a bankrupt optimism, in those days.

A waiter moved past our table, carrying an intricate dessert. It was a delicately spun confection, pale and orbed with tiny pearls. Kata looked at it.

‘Kemerov is like a piece of shit lying in the street. I can step around it, but if I step in it, I will stink like shit too.’

She recoiled at his coarse words.

When she looked back at him it was with unmistakeable disgust. It was the look I’d seen her give the soiled coffee table, the computer game.

A waiter approached the table and asked if everything was to our liking.

‘Go away,’ said Ivan, with his tight red face.

Kata saw the look the waiter gave Ivan, covertly, as he retreated.

A deep flush swelled out into her cheeks.

‘I knew it,’ she said. ‘Igor was right. I should not have spoken to you about it. I should have kept it to myself. You always spoil it for me, you are threatened by people like Valentin, so you want to keep me locked up forever with nothing to do.’

Just the clinking of diners, the soft tread of waiters across the carpeted floor.

‘Threatened?’

He brought the word out again, a foreign object.

‘Threatened?’

‘Oh ...’ She shook her head, made a brushing motion with her arm.

He was clicking his fingers, summoning the waiter, dealing with the bill.

For some moments I had felt a vibration under the table. I realised it was Alex, tapping her foot against the table leg. I’d been so absorbed in the drama unfolding between her mother and father that I’d forgotten about her. Now I looked at her and saw that she was looking at them, as I had been, and that she was frightened. The whole of her little body seemed clenched.

We got up to leave.

Ivan waited for Kata to go first. 'Please,' he said, in what seemed a tone of exaggerated politesse.

We were about halfway across the restaurant when Ivan reached out a hand and closed it around the soft flesh of Kata's upper arm. It was not a hard or violent grip, but it halted her in her tracks. I found myself reaching down to put my hand on Alex's back.

We were in the busiest part of the restaurant. All around us, close enough to touch, people were chatting and enjoying their meals.

Ivan spoke, loudly so that his voice carried over the chattering diners, startling many of them into silence.

'You know that man, Kata, the one who followed you out of the club, the one Dmitri had to speak to? Do you know what he thought you were?'

His voice was calm now, and tender.

'My darling. He thought you were a whore.'

3

They seemed stunned, both of them, in the car; they seemed stunned as they stood in the hallway, allowing Sebastian and Francine to relieve them of their outerwear. Ivan walked slowly up the stairs to the study. Kata, pale, put one foot in front of the other, across the living area and down the corridor to her bedroom. She did not appear for dinner. Later, down in my bedroom, I heard reverberating explosions: Ivan watching an action movie with Anton and Vova. When the explosions stopped, I went upstairs to find them lounging on the couches while the credits rolled. I went outside through the kitchen for a last cigarette and when I returned I saw Ivan's back, retreating down the corridor, towards the bedroom he shared with Kata.

I thought of how they had been in the previous days, him solid and her pliant, and how they had been just a few hours ago in the restaurant, when we had first sat down, she the girl and he the man. I wondered if she would already be asleep. Turned away from him, eye mask on, wrapped in the duvet, just a bundled-up shape in the bed. Or if she would be awake. If she would look up at him as he came into the room, the hours of the night stretching before them.

And the next morning, as I sat down at the breakfast table I thought: Yes, the long night in their bedroom must have effected something, because there was Kata, back in her proper place at