

The Guest

B.A. PARIS

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PROLOGUE

Gabriel handed a glass of champagne to Iris, then gave one to Esme, his fingers shaking slightly on the stem.

‘I didn’t drink at all at the christening, so I’m allowed this,’ Esme said. She looked over at Iris. ‘Thank you for inviting us back here. It’s lovely to be able to relax now that it’s finally over.’

Iris smiled. ‘You deserve it.’

‘It was a great day, though.’ Hugh raised his glass. ‘Here’s to Hamish. And his mum, of course.’

‘And to you,’ Gabriel said. ‘The proud father.’

The four of them drank, and Esme gave a contented sigh. ‘Gosh, I’ve missed this so much.’

Hugh raised his glass again. ‘Iris, Gabriel, it’s been one hell of a summer. Here’s to happier times.’

A silence fell on the group. Gabriel cleared his throat. ‘Thank you, Hugh. As you said—’

An almighty explosion, followed by the panicked rustling of birds taking flight from the trees drowned out the rest of his words. Iris’s heart thudded, echoing the *boom* still reverberating in the air. And then, deathly silence.

For a few seconds, they were a tableau frozen in time. Gabriel and Hugh standing, their champagne glasses in their hands, their heads turned towards the sound of the explosion; Iris, the alarm in her eyes mirrored in Esme’s. Even baby Hamish paused in his nuzzling, and Esme, the instinct to protect

her child automatically taking over, tightened her arms around him. Reassured, he went back to drinking, his tiny legs kicking under his blanket, the only movement in the stillness.

‘I hope that wasn’t the house,’ Esme joked, breaking the spell the explosion had cast over them. ‘Not after all our hard work.’

‘Maybe I should—’ Hugh stopped mid-sentence, his attention caught by something. Iris followed his line of vision and saw black smoke billowing into the sky.

In the distance a siren wailed, then became louder.

Gabriel turned to Hugh. ‘Shall we go and take a look?’

‘Good idea. It looks a bit too close to home for comfort,’ Hugh added, his voice low. He looked over at Esme. ‘We won’t be long.’

Esme waited until they’d left. ‘As long as Joseph hasn’t blown himself up,’ she said, detaching Hamish from her breast and shifting him to the other side. ‘I’m so disappointed in him.’ Hamish settled, she stretched out her free hand and laid it on Iris’s arm. ‘Thank you for taking him home before he became completely out of control.’

‘I only suggested taking him home because I didn’t want everyone to see him in that state.’ Iris paused. ‘Do you think he fell off the wagon before today and managed to hide it from everyone?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m furious, and disappointed and everything else in between. I’m beginning to regret asking him to be Hamish’s godfather.’ She looked suddenly nervous. ‘He didn’t say anything, did he, when you and Hugh took him home? He tends to shout his mouth off when he’s drunk.’

‘No,’ Iris said. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘I should have been upfront with Hugh in the first place,’ Esme fretted.

‘It doesn’t matter now. Joseph is leaving tomorrow, isn’t he?’

‘If he’s sober enough.’ She moved Hamish to her shoulder and began to pat his back and, as Iris listened to her chattering about the christening, and how lovely it had been, an extraordinary sense of well-being flowed through her body. For the first time in months, she felt at peace.

‘Oh, they’re back!’ Esme exclaimed.

Iris turned her head towards the terrace, but before she could register that anything was wrong, Esme had thrust Hamish into her arms and was hurrying across the lawn towards Hugh. Alarmed, Iris caught Gabriel’s eye, and her heart dropped at the desolation on his face. Moving Hamish to her shoulder, she took comfort from the warm, sleepy weight of him and, as she began rubbing his back, her eyes fixed worriedly on Hugh and Esme, he obligingly expelled little pockets of milky air. And then a wail started, and at first she thought it was coming from Hamish.

But it wasn’t Hamish, it was Esme, weeping brokenly in Hugh’s arms.

FOUR MONTHS BEFORE

ONE

Iris thought they'd never get home. Oban to Markham, five hundred and twenty miles, journey time nine hours without stops. They'd left at ten this morning, and it was now ten in the evening. No wonder they were both shattered.

It wasn't meant to be this way. They were meant to have broken their journey with an overnight stop in York, and only arrive home tomorrow. Iris had booked a beautiful hotel and if everything had gone to plan, they would have finished dinner by now and would be heading up to bed. Instead, they were heading down the hill into Markham.

Iris laid her head against the seat rest and closed her eyes, shutting out the bright lights of the town. Normally she would have welcomed them, this sign that she was almost home. But tonight, their garishness, so at odds with the dark velvet nights of the Scottish Isles, jarred.

She shifted restlessly, peeling her bare legs from where they'd stuck to the cream leather seats. She was desperate to get out of the car, feel blood circulating in her ankles again. Sensing her discomfort, Gabriel threw her a guilty glance.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured. 'Maybe we should have stopped in York after all.'

Iris gave him a smile, hiding her disappointment. 'It's better this way. We'll have tomorrow to relax.'

Her disappointment wasn't because she'd been denied dinner in a Michelin-starred restaurant followed by a night in a luxurious hotel, but because, during the two weeks they'd been away, she hadn't been able to get Gabriel to open up to her. Despite the idyllic sea-view cottages, the beautiful scenery, the long, lazy walks along deserted white beaches, she hadn't been able to get him to talk about Charlie Ingram.

Charlie had only just been reported missing by his mother when Gabriel, out for an early morning run, had spotted him lying at the bottom of the old limestone quarry, surrounded by the tangled metal of his bike.

'He must have taken the path around the top, gone too fast, skidded through the trees and down over the edge,' Gabriel had said, his face ashen. 'Or hit a stone that sent him off-course. What a tragic waste.'

Charlie had been alive when Gabriel found him, but he'd died before help arrived. And during those few minutes, when he'd been hovering between life and death, Charlie had entrusted Gabriel with a message – *Tell Mum I love her.*

'It was as if he was waiting to be able to give that last message,' Iris had said, wanting to comfort him.

But her words had distressed him more, and for the last two months, Charlie Ingram – eighteen years old, popular, good-looking, a place guaranteed at university and a year younger than their daughter Beth – had continued to haunt him. Maybe if Gabriel hadn't

known Charlie, it might not have hit him so hard. They hadn't seen each other since Charlie's childhood, but they had recognised each other immediately.

Iris's stomach fluttered with guilt. She should have given Gabriel time to wind down, to acclimatise to being at home before rushing him to Scotland. It couldn't be easy to be told, however gently, by your partners, that they were putting you on compassionate leave, especially if you were a doctor in the local, understaffed medical practice. Gabriel had refused at first, unable to accept what Iris and his colleagues had been able to see, that he was suffering from burnout. Already depleted by the death of his beloved father four months earlier, plus an increasingly unmanageable workload, Charlie's death was the straw that broke him. It had devastated Gabriel to the point where he was unable to talk about what had happened. Despite Iris's efforts, and those of his colleagues, the few minutes that Gabriel had spent in the quarry with Charlie Ingram before he'd died, before help had arrived, remained locked deep inside him.

Night was chasing dusk into its shadows as Gabriel pulled into the drive. Unable to stay in the car a moment longer, Iris snapped off her seat belt and opened the door. A blast of warm air wrapped itself around her as she climbed out of the air-conditioned car. Her legs, stiff from sitting, gave slightly and she put a hand on the roof to steady herself, then pulled it back quickly. Like the air around her, the sun-scorched metal had retained its heat.

‘How is it possible for it to be so hot at this time of night?’ she asked, transferring the grime from the car to her face as she swiped damp hair from her forehead.

Gabriel eased himself from the driver’s seat and stretched his arms high above his head, loosening the muscles in his lower back. ‘They had a mini heatwave here while we were in Scotland, remember? And it is the beginning of June.’

He lowered his arms, moved towards the boot.

‘Leave the bags,’ Iris said, stifling a yawn. ‘We’ll unpack tomorrow.’

‘Good idea.’ Gabriel glanced towards their home, an old stone farmhouse in the small village of West Markham, its interior tastefully brought into the twenty—first century by its previous architect owner. ‘Do you know what the best thing is about going on holiday?’

Iris smiled. ‘Coming home?’

‘Exactly.’ He came around the car to where Iris was standing and kissed the top of her head. ‘Thank you for a wonderful holiday.’

She reached a hand to his cheek, relishing these few moments when he wasn’t preoccupied by that other, darker thing. ‘Do you have your keys?’

He took them from his pocket. ‘Come on, let’s get to bed.’

‘A long bath for me first.’

Hand in hand, they walked to the front door. Gabriel unlocked it and, impatient to be inside, Iris was about to step over the threshold when he shot out an arm, barring her way.

‘There’s no mail,’ he hissed.

Iris frowned, then realised what he meant. Usually, after two weeks away, there’d be a build-up of mail on the doormat. But there was nothing.

‘Put the light on,’ she whispered.

Gabriel reached inside and found the switch.

‘My cardigan.’ Iris pointed towards the bottom of the stairs where a blue cardigan lay draped over the newel post. ‘I didn’t leave it there. Nor those,’ she added, pointing to a pair of espadrilles lying haphazardly on the floor.

‘Beth isn’t here, is she?’ Gabriel asked, his voice low, even though he knew their daughter was volunteering at a dog shelter in Greece.

‘No, she’s not back for another three months. And anyway, she wouldn’t be seen dead in my cardigan.’

Gabriel moved past her, stepped into the hall and pushed open the door to the sitting room.

‘Well, somebody’s been here,’ he said, nodding towards a pile of magazines strewn on the low table.

Iris peered around him, then pointed to the indents in the sofa. ‘And is maybe still here.’ She looked at Gabriel in alarm. ‘Squatters?’

Instinctively, he moved in front of her, then bellowed down the hallway.

‘Is anyone there?’

From somewhere upstairs, there was an exclamation of surprise, followed by the sound of footsteps running along the corridor.

‘Gabriel?’ A woman’s voice, breathy, hesitant. ‘Is that you?’

Iris stared at the figure standing at the top of the stairs, her dark hair tumbling around her shoulders, the legs of her pale blue pyjamas pooling around her feet. ‘Laure?’

Laure placed a hand on her heart. ‘Iris! You gave me a fright! What are you doing here?’

‘Apart from the fact that we live here, you mean?’ Gabriel said, sounding amused rather than offended.

Embarrassed, Laure laughed. ‘Yes, yes, of course, it’s just that I wasn’t expecting you.’ Hitching up her pyjama bottoms, she ran down the stairs, hugged Iris fiercely, then moved back, reproach in her liquid-brown eyes. ‘You said in your email that you wouldn’t be back until tomorrow.’

‘We decided not to stop off in York,’ Iris found herself explaining, aware that she was practically apologising for coming back earlier than expected to her own house.

While Gabriel swept Laure into a hug, Iris looked up the stairs, waiting for Pierre to appear. It would do Gabriel a world of good to see his best friend. Pierre must have had a meeting in London, and he and Laure had come to surprise them. ‘Where’s Pierre?’ she asked. ‘Don’t tell me he’s already asleep?’

Laure shook her head, then sank onto the stairs, her pretty face etched with misery. A chill crept down Iris’s spine.

‘Laure, what’s happened?’

‘It’s Pierre.’

‘Is he all right?’ Gabriel’s voice was rough with urgency and, turning towards him, Iris saw that his

face had drained of colour. She reached for his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. *Please don't let anything have happened to Pierre, not on top of Charlie Ingram and Gabriel's dad.*

Laure nodded quickly. 'Yes, he is fine, he is very fine,' she said, her normally impeccable English deserting her, a sign of her distress. 'He has a child, why wouldn't he be fine?'

There was a stunned silence.

'Pierre has a child?' Gabriel stuttered.

Laure nodded. 'It is what he says.'

'But—When? How? I mean, it's not possible.'

'It seems he had an affair.'

'He couldn't have,' Iris protested. 'He loves you.'

And Laure burst into noisy sobs.

TWO

Leaving Laure and Gabriel talking in the kitchen, Iris headed upstairs for a shower.

Yawning with tiredness, she pushed open the door to their bedroom, then stopped. The bed was a tangle of rumpled bed sheets. There was a mug on her bedside table, a magazine on Gabriel's pillow, and a mound of used tissues strewn over the floor. While one part of Iris's brain was telling her that Laure wouldn't have moved into their room when there were two perfectly good guest rooms, another part was reminding her that she'd stripped the bed before leaving for Scotland.

'Laure!' she called.

Laure came running up the stairs and burst into the bedroom.

'I'm so sorry! I was going to move out before you came back tomorrow! I felt so alone when I arrived, I couldn't stop crying and all I wanted was to hide myself away. I was afraid that if I was in the guest room at the front of the house, one of your neighbours would see the light on and I didn't want to have to explain why I was here. The room next to yours had stuff on the bed, and I didn't want to use Beth's room. And I know it's stupid but I felt closer to you in here.' Hurrying past Iris, she began pulling the pillows from their slips. 'I'll

change everything, it won't take me long. I'll move to one of the guest rooms.'

A wave of exhaustion took hold and Iris sank onto the bed. 'It's fine. It doesn't matter for tonight, we'll sort it out tomorrow.'

She was about to add that she would have her shower in the en-suite anyway – she'd mentally swapped the long bath she'd planned to have for a quick wash long ago, what did a luxurious soak matter when weighed against the devastating news of Pierre's infidelity? – when she caught a glimpse, through the open door, of towels piled on the floor and clothes slung over the edge of the bath. There was something familiar about the clothes and they reminded Iris of something that had distracted her when she'd first seen Laure at the top of the stairs, and which had continued to be a distraction even while she'd been listening, open-mouthed, to the story of Pierre's betrayal.

'Are those my pyjamas you're wearing?'

Laure's eyes welled with fresh tears. 'I didn't bring any clothes with me. I didn't think about packing a case, I just took my bag and passport, and left.'

Iris pushed to her feet and enveloped her in a hug. 'It's fine.'

Releasing Laure, Iris dug a pair of pyjamas from a drawer. When she turned back, she saw Laure by the window, looking into the night.

'How's Gabriel?' Laure asked.

'Still devastated. Charlie Ingram will be with him for ever, I think.'

'Was that his name, Charlie Ingram?'

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a nice name.’ She turned to Iris. ‘Can you turn off the light? Then we’ll be able to see the quarry and we can say a prayer for him.’

Iris turned off the light and moved to Laure’s side. Together, they stood looking out at the quarry, its walls gleaming white in the moonlight, and each in their own way, said a silent prayer for Charlie.

‘Tell me again why we’re sleeping in our guest room,’ Gabriel said.

Fresh from his shower, he had a towel wrapped around his waist and smelled of mint, a mix of shower gel and toothpaste. Before, Iris would have taken the towel off him and pulled him onto the bed. But not any more.

‘Exhaustion. I was too tired to help Laure change the sheets.’

He came to sit beside her and bounced up and down, testing the mattress.

‘It seems quite comfortable,’ he remarked. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever slept in here before.’

‘Once, when you had that awful bout of flu.’

‘Oh yes, I remember.’

Iris reached over and flipped back the covers on his side of the bed. ‘Come on, let’s get some sleep.’

He climbed in and turned off the bedside light. In the dark, they lapsed into silence.

‘What are you thinking?’ Iris asked.

‘That this bed isn’t as comfortable as ours.’ Sensing Iris’s smile, he sighed. ‘I’m thinking about Pierre,

about him having a child, a daughter. I'm thinking – when? How old is she? Did Laure tell you?’

‘Not exactly. She thought that maybe Pierre had some sort of mid-life crisis and that the birth was recent. But apparently, the daughter is older. He said it was a one-night stand. I can't work out if that's better or worse.’

‘Better for Laure maybe, but not for the child.’ Gabriel's voice was grim. ‘Has Pierre had any contact with his child, or the mother, since?’

‘Not since he discovered he was the father – at least that's what he told Laure.’

‘Then why say something now? Why not let sleeping dogs lie?’

‘Maybe he had a crisis of conscience.’

‘Or regrets. He and Laure never wanted children, did they?’

‘No. Well, Pierre didn't and Laure went along with it because she loved him. If he'd wanted ten kids, she'd have accepted it.’

‘Really?’ Iris sensed Gabriel frown. ‘Did she tell you that?’

‘Yes, last year, when she hit forty.’

She shifted closer to him, hoping he would put his arms around her and draw her close. But he moved too, rolling from his back onto his side, and lay facing the wall. It was new, this turning away from her. Before, they would start their sleep with him curled around her, his chin resting on the top of her head, his arm across her body, anchoring her to him. Now, she was the one to curl around him. Not only that, he'd

taken to wearing a T-shirt in bed, whereas before, he would sleep bare-chested. It was as if he hoped this thin material barrier would dampen any desire she might have for him.

Soon, his breathing deepened and to stop herself from worrying about him, about them, Iris turned her thoughts to Laure and Pierre. She and Gabriel had met them in the Bahamas twenty years before, where she and Gabriel had gone to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. Laure and Pierre had been on their honeymoon, and the two couples had hit it off immediately. Iris had been enchanted by Laure; petite in build, with straight brown hair that fell midway down her back in a glossy sheet and inky eyes framed by long lashes that almost touched her fringe, Laure was the epitome of a chic Parisienne. She had a neat nose that turned up ever so slightly at the end, and her lips were so naturally red it seemed she was permanently wearing lipstick. Once Iris got to know her, she'd been surprised to learn that Laure never wore make-up and realised it would be the equivalent of someone scribbling over a beautiful painting.

Their friendship had strengthened over the years, with a weekend visit every couple of months, and a holiday together once a year. They had keys for each other's homes. Pierre sometimes travelled for his job, and if Laure was joining him for the weekend, Iris would get a cheery email: *The flat will be free for the last weekend in the month, if you want a break in Paris.* Likewise, if Iris and Gabriel were going away, they would let Laure and Pierre know that their house was

free. It was why Laure had felt able to move in whilst they were in Scotland; Iris had messaged to tell them they'd be away. It was the first time they hadn't had any advance warning – *Yes, wonderful, thank you, we'd love to use the house for a few days!* – but Laure understandably had had other things on her mind.

Restless, Iris latched onto the rhythm of Gabriel's breathing, hoping it would draw her into sleep. But before it could, he moved quietly from her arms, slid silently from the bed and left the room, closing the door softly behind him. She listened to where his footsteps took him; along the landing, past their bedroom where Laure was sleeping, and down the stairs.

She fought the instinct to go after him. If he'd wanted to talk, he would have woken her.