

*Appetiser*

Charbroiled Oysters



*Freshly shucked oysters on the half shell, topped with garlic butter, breadcrumbs and Parmesan, and grilled until the cheese turns golden brown and the butter froths.*

## London: Max

Behind the locked door of the bathroom, Max took a swig of lager and contemplated how much longer he'd need to stay at Caroline's. He couldn't give less of a shit about the conversation happening at the dining table. So, the prodigal son was yet to return home, too busy drinking New Orleans dry, too wrapped up in himself to spare a thought for those he'd left behind. He'd been mugged, some cunt had chucked his shit into the bayou. So fucking what? The shirt was a mystery, but life was full of them.

Max swallowed the rest of his beer. He'd crunched the numbers: if he nursed each tinnie for thirty minutes, his supply would last until midnight. On the one hand, he didn't think they were likely to stay that late – he might even make it to the Hawley Arms before close – but on the other, no beer had the chance to grow warm on Max's watch. He had to pace himself.

He set the empty can on the cistern and turned to the sink. Caroline's hand soap smelled like a spa, frothed into heavily perfumed suds between his fingers. He rinsed his hands, dried them on his T-shirt and, under the cover of running water, opened the medicine cabinet for a quick snoop. Caroline was bound to have the good shit via private prescription – Vicodin, Valium, Xanax. Leftover pain meds from her accident last year, old pills she wouldn't miss. Something for later, to take the edge off.

Instead of anything useful, he found blister packs and pharmacy bottles of expired medication, dusty toiletries with retro

labels. He picked a cardboard box at random, the corners softened with age. Beta blockers prescribed to an Edward Dumortier. Caroline's father, he guessed. Weird, he thought, to still have shit like this knocking around after all these years. Could an expired beta blocker kill him? Best not find out. He slipped the box back into place.

Max had never thought much of Caroline, had always found her rather wet and dull, a piece of loo roll caught on the heel of her more charismatic brother, but he couldn't help but feel there was a heat to her now. Perhaps it was just the stress, he thought, but while in the past he'd always been indifferent to her attention, it now felt hard to endure, like sitting too close to a bonfire. She seemed angry, and he couldn't blame her: in her position, Max would be pretty fucking angry too.

A gentle knock on the bathroom door made him jump. He snapped the medicine cabinet closed, and a look of the devil returned his gaze in the mirror. He tasted acid, cleared his throat and swallowed a mouthful of water from the tap, but the flavour of bile lingered.

When he opened the bathroom door, Sage was waiting for him in the hallway. He could hardly stand to look at her. All the things he used to like about her, he'd grown to loathe: the awful red hair dye, the nose ring, the year-round festival gear, the pick-and-mix approach to spirituality.

'You were in there for ages,' she said, arms folded like she was about to give him a bollocking. 'Were you doing coke? Or just nosing through Caroline's things?'

'I was reciting ten Hail Marys while taking a shit,' he said, pushing past her.

'I heard you slam the medicine cabinet,' she called, as he made his way back to the ambient hum of the dinner party.

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The air in the flat had filled with the warm, spicy smell of stew. Max returned to his seat at the table, but he couldn't keep still. He jiggled his legs, a nervous energy animating his muscles. As he opened another can of lager, he noticed the psychic was watching him.

'I don't know,' Caroline was saying, chin resting in her hands. 'I woke up one morning, and he was gone. I thought he was on a night out, but he never came home, and then I realised a suitcase was missing. Dicky, darling, is there more wine?'

Richard jumped to his feet, a little dogsbody desperate to please his queen, and returned to the table with a second bottle of bougie-looking red just as Sage sat down next to Max.

'Your turn next,' Sage said, resting a hand on his arm that reeked of Caroline's fancy soap. She never could keep her hands to herself.

'Have you faced the tarot before?' the psychic asked him, scooping up Richard's cards and shuffling them back into the deck.

'Yeah,' he replied, forcing a nonchalant shrug. 'I don't believe in all that, though.'

Hazy memories of summer festivals, house parties in student digs, girls backstage with pints of cider in plastic cups. If she was fit enough, Max would let a girl do anything she liked, from mapping his birth chart to studying his palm to drawing his cards. He'd once let a girl give him a stick-and-poke tattoo of a snake eating its own tail, although now it had blurred to a black ring, an eclipse in reverse on his ankle. A permanent memory of a girl he'd quickly forgotten.

'You don't believe in it at all?' the psychic asked, with a serene suck on the white plastic vape.

'It's all a load of bollocks, babe. Sorry.'

Cotton vapour bloomed from the psychic's lips and draped the table in an ectoplasmic cloud of sweetened smoke. 'Why are you sorry?' she asked, unperturbed.

Max took a beat to consider this. 'I'm not all that sorry, to be fair. I actually think it's dangerous bullshit, if you must know.'

'Dangerous? That's an interesting word to use. Why do you think it's dangerous?'

'Well.' He fiddled with the ring pull of his can, flipping it one way and then the other until it popped off in his hand. 'It starts with crystals and horoscopes, and then it's homeopathy and refusing life-saving medication, and then it's all 5G this and chemtrails that.'

'Well, to be fair, 5G is destroying our minds and chemtrails are destroying our cities,' Sage said. 'Don't you remember when we used to look up and see a big, beautiful blue sky? You don't see that anymore. The sky's always hazy. They're dusting us with chemicals like crops.'

'See what I mean?' Max said.

'I discovered something interesting recently,' Richard said, appearing in the doorway with a fussy little tea towel thrown over one shoulder. 'Do you know what it means for a planet to be in retrograde?'

'Yes,' said Sage. 'It's a reversal of energy. Like, for example, Mercury is the planet of communication, right? So, when it's in retrograde, like it is right now, you can expect more misunderstandings, crossed wires, things like that.'

Richard listened with a faint smile. 'Okay, but where does that idea come from?'

Sage shook her head. 'I'm not sure.'

'When ancient astronomers traced the progress of each star, they noticed that occasionally, some appeared to change direction and move backwards. Hence, retrograde – a reversal. We now know the planets all move in the same direction as they orbit the sun, and this apparent reversal is just an optical illusion based on the different speeds of each planet's orbit, observed from a point in the galaxy that's also in motion.'

Sage blinked. ‘So?’

‘Oh, I just find it fascinating – the idea that people pin the unpredictable nature of life onto something so easily proved wrong. It would make just as much sense to blame the fae folk.’

‘Exactly,’ said Max, skimming the words but gathering the general point Richard was making. He drained his can. ‘In other words, it’s all a load of bollocks.’

‘See, this is why I like astrology,’ Sage said to the psychic. ‘It annoys men.’

‘You *would* say that,’ Max replied.

‘Just let people *live*,’ Sage said. ‘Our horoscopes and tarot cards aren’t doing you any harm.’

Max took a deep breath and steeled himself for another row, but the psychic intervened before he could respond.

‘I have a question for you, Max,’ she said. ‘Do you believe in God?’

‘Nah,’ he replied. ‘I was raised Catholic, but I’m an atheist now.’

‘So if you don’t believe in God, or anything spiritual, where do you get your morality from? How do you centre yourself?’

A crackle of electric tension ran through Max’s body, and he jumped to his feet and helped himself to another can of lager from the fridge.

‘Well, babe,’ he said, with a cocky grin as he snapped the ring pull. ‘I’m a lifelong member of the church of rock and roll.’

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Max had discovered live music when he was fifteen, because it was the only way he could have a cheap night out without a fake ID. The Garage, the Astoria and the Mean Fiddler were places of worship: the spotlights that dappled the show in jewel-coloured

light were the stained glass of church windows; the dry ice that clouded the stage was the swinging thurible that filled a cathedral with the sweet scent of frankincense. The braying crowd was the devoted congregation, and if the stage was their altar, the bands who stood above them, who put their blood, sweat and souls into their sermons, were closest to God.

Being there, in the moment, listening to the music, was somewhere between dissociation and euphoria. Nothing mattered; every worry faded to insignificance. Max found his problems dissolved like a Communion wafer on his sinful tongue as he spat the lyrics, each chorus repeated like a Hail Mary.

His CD collection, mostly shoplifted from HMV, was both his Bible and the soundtrack to his life. Listening to records was like dipping into his own memoir: each significant experience had a band or an album or even just a song attached to it, and those memories could be brought to life with a pair of noise-cancelling headphones and the right track: old friends, ex-girlfriends, holidays, house parties, hangovers.

Max wanted what they had, the bands: he wanted the talent, the fame, the adoration, the girls. Girls in miniskirts, girls who drank beer and burped, girls who played guitar, girls who loved the music, girls who knew the words. He wanted girls, because he didn't like an intrinsic truth about himself: that while he liked girls, his desire didn't stop there.

He couldn't afford a guitar, but he began writing songs when he was a teenager, terrible poetry and angsty, clichéd lyrics. By the time he turned twenty, he'd learned the basics on a borrowed acoustic, and would badger lads at house parties to let him have a go on their Fenders and Les Pauls. His mate Carl had the most beautiful guitar Max had ever seen: a cherry-red Gibson SG with a body that curved into devil horns either side of its slender neck.

'We should start a band,' Carl said, watching Max fingerpick a rough melody of his own creation on the coveted guitar.

*Let the Bad Times Roll*

‘Yeah, alright,’ said Max. ‘Can I borrow your guitar?’

‘Fuck off,’ Carl replied. ‘I’m the guitarist. You can learn bass.’

‘Nah,’ said Max. ‘Bass is for bitches. I’ll write the lyrics, so I’ll be the front man.’

‘You can’t sing for shit,’ Carl said, although that wasn’t strictly true. Even at twenty, Max had the voice of an angel who’d spent a lifetime smoking cigarettes, drinking whiskey and swallowing gravel.

They found a drummer, a psycho everyone called Sesh due to his propensity for chemicals, and a bass player called Mike. They practised in Carl’s living room, writing songs that mostly sucked but sometimes grew into tracks that weren’t half bad.

They had nearly made it, the Strangeways. They had so nearly made it.

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The psychic shuffled her deck, a soft ruffle that filled the silence, and placed the cards on the table in front of Max. Without instruction, he reached over and split the deck in two.

‘See, you’re a natural,’ she said. She dealt three cards face down on the table between them and flipped the first without ceremony.

‘Interesting,’ she said, drumming her nails against the wood. At such close proximity, he could smell the acerbic edge of wine on her breath. ‘The Fool.’

Sage snorted. ‘That’s rich.’

‘Fuck off,’ said Max.

The psychic offered a muted smile. ‘Don’t take it personally. This card represents your past. The Fool is all about childhood innocence, a sense of naivety. It shows a man at the start of a journey, full of optimism and unaware of the dangers that lie ahead. Does that resonate with you, darling?’

‘Surely *everyone* relates to this card,’ he said. ‘We’re all born innocent; we’re all full of the optimism of youth up to a certain point in our lives, aren’t we?’

‘And then the soul-crushing weight of adulthood squeezes it out of us,’ Richard said.

‘I mean, you’re not wrong,’ the psychic replied. ‘Let’s draw your next card and see if we can contextualise the Fool.’

She flipped the second card. It showed a man gazing down upon three overturned cups. Behind him, just out of his line of sight, were two more standing upright.

‘The Five of Cups. This card represents your present. I get the impression you missed out on something, a big opportunity or chance for success, and you’ve struggled to move on from it.’ She pointed to the two cups behind the downtrodden figure. ‘You’re missing out on new opportunities in the present because you can’t move on from past mistakes. Does that resonate with you, darling?’

Max frowned. Had they mentioned the Strangeways this evening? Yes – Sage had said something, hadn’t she? *He bounced between things. First, it was cinema. Then it was the band. A tragedy.*

‘Not particularly,’ he replied stubbornly. ‘No.’

Agile as a snake, the psychic changed tack: ‘How did you meet Daniel?’

‘Aren’t *you* meant to tell *me* that?’

The psychic smiled coolly. ‘That’s not quite how it works.’

Max realised he was clenching his jaw and forced himself to relax as she turned the third card. It showed a tower struck by lightning, people falling to their deaths.

‘Jesus fucking Christ.’ He forced a laugh, but sweat prickled his brow. The heat felt claustrophobic. The flat was too warm, and the smell of the psychic’s vape mingled with the acrid wine, scented candles and meaty stink from the hob. It was all too much, too overstimulating, and made him feel sick.

‘I’m going to level with you,’ she said. ‘This is a dark spread. It matches your aura.’

‘My aura?’

‘Your entire body is haloed with a blood-red aura. It’s almost difficult to look at you. I felt it as soon as I walked into the room, this spiritual putridity that clings to you. It’s overpowering, to be honest. Have you ever done a Ouija board, anything like that?’

Max blinked. ‘I have actually, yeah. A long time ago. In fact, it was the night I first met Daniel.’

‘That’s interesting. Could you tell us about it?’

‘Nah, there’s no story there. It was just a bullshit game when we were bored one night. I’m sorry, can we roll it back a second – I have a spiritual *putridity*?’

‘It’s not your fault. Well, it’s probably not your fault. It’s perfectly common – some of my best friends are spiritually curdled, but I love them all the same. Have you considered an egg cleanse? Perhaps we could ask Caroline for an egg, see if we can clear some of that dark energy. You’ll feel ten pounds lighter – it’s like colonic irrigation for the soul. Have you ever had a colonic?’

‘Okay,’ Max said, cutting her off. ‘I’ll tell you about the night I met Daniel.’

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Max was twenty-five when he met the devil. He was seeing Melanie Matthews at the time, a peachy-arsed angel in vintage 50s. She worked at a wanky record shop in the dregs of Soho, but she let him hang out and listen to records whenever it was quiet and her boss wasn’t there, which was most days. Vinyl was in fashion, but everyone wanted to buy their records from the curated, painfully hip selection at Urban Outfitters.

Mel was different. She was into Elliott Smith, Bon Iver and Jeff Buckley. Serious men with delicate guitars: men who wrote

lyrics like poetry, wore their hearts on their sleeves. Max still couldn't hear the gentle strum of 'Needle in the Hay' without remembering, with both fondness and regret, the sweet taste of Mel's strawberry-flavoured lips. He should have stuck with Mel, but he was young and reckless, and the grass looked greener every time his head was turned, which was all the fucking time. He dropped girlfriends and jobs whenever the clocks changed, never happy with what he already had on his plate.

The Strangeways were gigging regularly, getting a bit of traction in the local scene, but once you factored in petrol, booze, fags and what Sesh liked to call 'party favours', they were spending more than they were making, and that wasn't very fucking much.

Time moves slowly when you don't have much to do. It was the hottest summer on record, but didn't they say that every year? Max took Mel to a screening of *Whiplash* at the Prince Charles Cinema, and she lent him paperbacks that he never bothered to read, the titles long faded from his memory. They listened to a lot of music, ate tangerines, and talked about the death All Tomorrow's Parties.

They were hanging out one night at Carl's flat in Camden, listening to Midlake and splitting an extra-large pizza that Mel had paid for.

'Sage is coming over,' Carl said from a brown corduroy bean-bag on the floor, eyes glued to his phone. 'That's cool, yeah?'

'Who's Sage?' asked Mel, using a napkin to sponge oil from a pizza slice before taking a small bite.

'Carl's *groupie*,' said Max, with a sly smile. Carl and Sage were sleeping together, although they always acted like they were done with one another until the end of the night, when they'd slink off arm in arm. Max gave Carl shit for it, but he respected Carl's dedication to getting laid.

Max liked to be the biggest personality in the room at any given time, but Sage took up more oxygen than anyone he'd

ever met. She held Carl back, weighed him down like an anchor, encouraged him to smoke less and drink less and go to bed early. Sage was, in other words, a fucking drag.

‘He mocks it because he wants it,’ Carl said knowingly, twisting two halves of a rosewood grinder together and releasing the soft, rotten scent of marijuana leaves into the air.

‘He gets it plenty,’ Mel replied. She was spicy like that, always had a good comeback. Max laughed and Carl rolled his eyes.

‘Christ, spare me.’

Sage turned up with some pretty boy in tow and immediately began to bitch about everything. ‘Christ, it stinks of pizza in here. And what’s with the sad old bastard music?’

‘Hey, don’t knock Midlake,’ Mel said.

‘Ignore her,’ Max said to Mel. ‘She wouldn’t know a decent song if it fucked her up the arse.’

‘You’re so disgusting,’ Sage replied, and then she turned to Carl, brandishing large bottles of Jack Daniels and Diet Coke. ‘This is Daniel, by the way. I didn’t think you’d mind, cos he bought the whiskey. Do you have any clean glasses?’

‘Like you don’t know where the glasses are,’ Max muttered.

‘Like I ever hang out *here*,’ she shot back, glancing at the damp curtains, the spaghetti of wires beneath the dusty television, the scatter of cans on the floor, the bong collection arranged like glass vases on the mantel.

‘And yet, here you are,’ Max replied, spreading both hands to indicate her overwhelming presence in the room. ‘Once again, here you are.’

Daniel reached for the laptop to scroll through iTunes, and as he did so, Max couldn’t help but notice the length of his body, the broadness of his shoulders. Without asking the room for permission, Daniel switched from Midlake to the mellow bongos of ‘Planet Caravan’. Max admired the tenacity, if not the music itself.

'Black Sabbath? Is that what the kids are listening to these days?' Carl teased, lifting his freshly packed pipe to his lips. He took a deep toke and narrowed his eyes against the wispy smoke rising from the bowl.

'You're a stoner, darling,' Daniel said. 'I'd have thought bongos would be right up your street.'

'Ozzy Osbourne's an energy vampire,' Sage said, nodding to the laptop and disappearing into the kitchenette. 'Did you know that?'

'What are you on about?' asked Max.

She reappeared with a trio of frothy Jack and Cokes. She gave one to Daniel, one to Carl and one to Mel, then headed back to the kitchen to collect two more.

'He's an energy vampire,' she repeated, handing a drink to Max. 'You ever see what he's like offstage? Hands shaking, can barely string a sentence together. Then when he's on stage, he comes to life – a totally different man. Where do you think all that energy comes from?'

'Uppers,' said Carl.

'It's coming from the audience – he *feeds* off the crowd.' She took a sip of her drink and winced at the ratio of bourbon to mixer.

'I thought he had Parkinson's or some shit,' Max said.

'It's adrenaline,' Carl said, shifting to make space for Sage on his beanbag. 'Performing to a stadium of dedicated fans who know every word to every song – what a rush, man. Can you even imagine?'

'That'll be us one day,' Max said.

'Oh, of course you're in a band,' said Daniel, as if it were the most boring and predictable thing in the world.

'Fuck off,' said Max.

'No go on, tell me. Is it a band like Midlake?' Daniel asked, eyes sparkling. 'Do you write poetry?'

'Who's this cunt again?' Max asked the room.

‘No, they’re much heavier,’ Sage said.

‘Rock ’n’ roll,’ said Carl, and Max surprised himself by feeling embarrassed.

‘Oh, listen to you.’ Daniel smiled affectionately. ‘No one listens to rock anymore, darling. Rock and roll is dead.’

The pipe circulated, and talk turned lazier, more muted, as the marijuana took hold. Sage mixed another round of Jack and Cokes, and Carl swapped Black Sabbath for Idles, then Sage swapped The Libertines for Kate Bush. She lit candles and snapped on a set of fairy lights that snaked around the corners of the room.

‘You can never just leave things as they are, can you?’ Max complained.

‘God, can you just fuck off with your moaning for five minutes?’

‘I think it’s nice, actually,’ Mel said, an arm around his shoulders, leaning in to nuzzle his cheek. ‘It’s cosier like this.’

As the night wore on, though, Max couldn’t take his eyes off Daniel. The sweep of chocolate curls, the David Bowie cheekbones, the hint of hair on his chest as he fiddled with the laptop or ashed his cigarette. He smelled of smoke and amber, and every time he spoke, Max found himself leaning closer to listen to what he had to say.

‘I’ve got work tomorrow,’ Mel said, pulling on her jacket with a pout. ‘You coming?’

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘I’m on the late shift tomorrow.’

‘I thought you were staying at mine tonight?’

‘Well, I’m still hanging out, aren’t I?’ he replied.

Mel dithered for a moment, gaze darting from Sage to Carl to Max. Daniel, she all but ignored. ‘Call me tomorrow?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘Love you.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘See ya.’

She hesitated for a moment at the door, then left without saying goodbye to the rest of the group. Max never saw her again, although she sent a text when she heard about what happened, offered to come to the funeral. He didn't take her up on that, and they never spoke again.

'So, darling,' Daniel said. 'Tell me about your band. I can see you're *dying* to talk about yourself. Do you play the maracas?'

Max laughed, because it was true: he did want to talk about the band. He talked about their basement gigs and self-funded micro-tours to commuter towns, and Daniel listened and nodded and asked questions about merch, managers and record labels.

'We're not there yet,' Max said, swirling the whiskey in his glass. 'Studio time costs a fortune, and we need to hire a proper producer to help mix an EP. We have a shitty demo, but the sound isn't right – it's too DIY, and we're too heavy to pull off a lo-fi vibe. The layers all just bleed together. It just sounds ... well, it sounds shit, to be honest.'

'How much would it cost to record a three-song demo?'

'Not sure. I mean, it all adds up – time in the studio, mixing, mastering, distribution ... plus I guess we'd need an illustrator or a designer or something like that to pull together a decent cover. Maybe a few grand, all in? I'm not sure.'

'Jesus, that's a lot of money,' Sage said.

'No shit,' Carl replied. By now, he'd picked up his guitar, that enviable Gibson, and was strumming, a cigarette pinched between his lips.

'What do you do for work?' Daniel asked. 'Can't you just save up?'

'I work in a bar,' Max said. 'It's cool cos it's casual, so I can take off whenever we tour, but it sucks cos the pay's total balls.'

'Free booze, though,' Carl reasoned.

‘Yeah, free booze when I steal it,’ Max replied, with a smirk. ‘Anyway, no point worrying about that for now. Our bassist moved to Milton Keynes for work.’

‘Fucking sell-out,’ said Carl.

‘He said he’d travel down for gigs and stuff, but he never fucking does,’ Max continued. ‘I can play a bit of bass, but I’d rather just focus on singing.’

‘Daniel plays the bass,’ Sage said. ‘He’s amazing. You should ask him to join your stupid band.’

‘Yeah?’ said Carl, not looking up from his fingers as he strummed. ‘You been playing long?’

‘I learned classical guitar at school,’ Daniel said. ‘Switched to bass while I was at university.’

The night began to soften and blur, the weed and the bourbon fraying Max’s grip on reality. He wasn’t sure who suggested the Ouija board. Probably Sage. She loved Stevie Nicks, tarot cards, crap like that. She always carried a crystal in her pocket and threw salt over her shoulder whenever anyone spilled any.

‘Surprisingly, I don’t have a fucking Ouija board lying around,’ Carl said.

‘No problem, we can use this,’ Sage replied gamely, picking up the pizza box and tipping the bitten crusts onto the coffee table. She tore the flat box in two, and made Carl get up to find her a Sharpie.

‘Oh, I know,’ said Daniel, catching Max’s cynical expression. ‘Trust me, it’s easier to go with the flow and let her do whatever she wants.’

They watched in grave silence as she carefully printed the letters, numbers and words of a Ouija board on to the lid of the box, which was less greasy than the base. Next, she downed her drink, and placed the glass, still laced with a caramel-coloured foam, upside down in the middle of the makeshift board.

‘Okay, let’s do this,’ she said. ‘Put both your index fingers on the glass, like this, but just relax. Don’t press too hard.’

‘What if we conjure up an evil spirit, like a serial killer?’ Max joked.

‘You’re fine,’ Sage replied. ‘Just chill and let the board do its thing.’

She cleared her throat and shifted her tone, speaking in a soft, melodic voice: ‘Hello, is anyone there?’

Carl released a stoned giggle, and Sage glared at him.

‘Stop it – you have to take it seriously, or it won’t work.’

It was a laugh at first. Max manipulated the board to spell ‘COCK’ and then Carl steered the glass to spell ‘PUSSY’, but after a while, Sage began to get fractious, and they had to promise to play in earnest. No more expletives, no more cheating.

‘Is there anyone there?’ Sage asked. ‘Is there anyone in the room with us?’

When the glass moved, Max felt a chill in his guts because he wasn’t doing it, and he could tell by the expression on Carl’s face – a quizzical smirk aimed at Max – that he wasn’t doing it either. He didn’t have a handle on Daniel’s sense of humour, though. It could be him, he thought, as the glass drifted to the word *Hello*. Max had to admit it was a little spooky. Darkness pressed against the windows, and the candles danced in their jam jars, sending shadows flickering around the room.

‘Hello,’ Sage whispered, absurdly, to the glass. After a few moments of careful consideration, she spoke again in that same, soft voice: ‘How old are you?’

The fairy lights stuttered. A long pause, and then the glass drifted to number eight, and then to number four.

‘Eighty-four?’ Sage asked, eyes shining.

The glass responded again with a pregnant pause, and then it drifted serenely to *Yes*.

‘This is tripping me out,’ Carl said. ‘I don’t think I like it, man.’

‘Shh, be quiet,’ Sage replied, a hushed reprimand.

Beneath their fingers, the glass began to gently rotate until they were struggling to keep their fingertips in place. Soon it was twirling back and forth across the board in a gentle waltz. Daniel's face broke into a broad smile.

'In life,' he asked, 'were you a ballroom dancer, darling? A regular little Fred Astaire?'

The glass drifted and stopped. *Yes.*

'Oh my God,' Sage whispered. Tears twinkled in the candlelight. 'Wow. Do you miss it?'

Slowly, delicately, the glass twirled and stopped on the word *Goodbye.*

'Goodbye,' she said, smiling. 'Thanks for hanging out.' She wiped her eyes, and looked to her friends. 'It's important to close each session properly by saying goodbye to the spirit – we don't want them to linger.'

'Goodbye, darling,' said Daniel to the glass. 'Don't keep in touch, though.'

'Bye,' said Carl.

'See ya,' said Max.

'That was magic,' Sage said, with a pretty smile. 'That was really, really magic.'

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'So, the Ouija board worked?' asked the psychic.

'Of course it worked,' said Sage.

Max shrugged. 'We were all pretty wasted.'

'It's simple physics,' Richard said. 'It's called the ideomotor effect. Your brains were signalling your bodies to place an unconscious pressure on the glass, and uneven pressure from different directions caused the glass to move.'

'To *twirl*, though? Come on. We weren't doing that,' said Sage.

‘No, but after the first spin, Daniel planted the idea in your heads that you were talking to the spirit of a ballroom dancer, and you liked that, so you ran with it. You wanted it to be true, so you created a narrative, and then your bodies responded to that desire. It’s fascinating, but it’s just a blend of psychology and physics.’

‘Well, that’s what you think,’ Sage said. ‘But you weren’t there.’

‘I don’t mean to be disrespectful,’ said Richard, turning a candy shade of pink. ‘I just thought it was interesting.’

‘What happened next?’ the psychic asked.

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They continued to play with the board for a good hour, and each time the glass moved, it travelled at a different speed or in a different manner, mirroring the way handwriting varies from person to person. Once, it bounced from letter to letter with the alacrity of a teenager, and later it drifted mournfully around the board, refusing to make any sense.

‘Can I ask a question?’ Max interrupted. He could feel the energy in the room, a frisson of tension and excitement. ‘Are the Strangeways going to be famous?’

Carl snorted, but he didn’t take his eyes off their substitute planchette as it slipped gently across the pizza box.

Yes, said the board.

‘Knew it.’ Carl grinned. ‘I fucking knew it.’

‘Are we going to be millionaires?’ Max asked.

No, said the board.

He frowned. That was bullshit. Everyone knew famous bands earned a fortune from gigs and merch, brand deals and record sales. ‘Are we going to make *any* money?’

No, said the board.

‘But we’re going to be famous?’ he asked.

Yes, said the board.

‘So, we’re not going to make any money, but everyone’s going to know our names?’ Carl asked, with a perplexed frown. ‘Sounds shit, mate.’

‘Should Daniel join the band?’ Sage asked.

Yes, said the board.

‘Alright, very fucking funny,’ Max said.

‘It’s not me,’ Daniel said. ‘I swear, I don’t want to join your diminutive little rock band.’

‘Okay, how about this,’ said Max, speaking to the glass. ‘If I sold my soul to the devil, could I be rich *and* famous?’

‘Don’t even joke about that,’ Sage snapped. ‘Don’t even fuck-joke. That’s not funny. And look, if someone’s moving the glass, just stop it now; you’re freaking me out.’

‘I’m not doing it,’ said Carl, raising a hand in surrender.

‘I swear,’ said Max.

‘Wait a second,’ Sage said, leaning forward to speak to the glass as though it were a mobile on speakerphone. ‘How old are you?’

The glass meandered over the numbers, back and forth, back and forth, gaining momentum, moving faster and faster, a great sweeping arc, until it seemed to lose control. It flew from the pizza box and smashed against the wall. Shards of glass bounced across the carpet and sparkled in the glow of the fairy lights.

‘Fuck!’ shouted Max. ‘Dammit man, that ghostie was telling me my fortune.’

‘*Our* fortune,’ said Carl.

‘Right, yeah, sorry mate – it was telling us *our* fortune.’

‘I didn’t like that,’ said Sage, shaking her head and tearing the lid of the pizza box into pieces. ‘I really didn’t like that. Carl, can you turn on the big light?’

‘Hey,’ Daniel said, wrapping an arm around her. ‘You’re shaking, darling.’

‘I don’t think that was a good spirit,’ she said, and her teeth chattered together as she spoke. ‘And we didn’t close the session properly.’

‘It’s just the weed,’ Carl said, flipping on the big light and reaching under the sink for a dustpan and brush. ‘You just got a bit freaked out, that’s all. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Do you have any incense?’ Sage asked. ‘I feel like we need to cleanse the space.’

Max offered to mix another round of drinks, but the spell was broken. Sage swept up the broken glass, while Daniel ordered an Uber and regretfully vanished into the night. Carl put on an episode of *Freaks and Geeks*, but no one laughed at the jokes.

‘I think I need to leave,’ Sage said. ‘I really don’t like the energy in here right now.’

Carl made a vague noise of protest, but didn’t move from his spot on the beanbag.

‘Where do you live?’ asked Max.

‘I’m moored at Limehouse,’ she replied.

‘You’re what?’

‘I live on a boat,’ she clarified.

‘Of course you live on a fucking boat,’ Max said, pulling on his jacket. ‘I live in Shadwell – I can walk you home.’

It was Saturday night, and it was late: the late night bars and rock clubs were kicking out, flooding the streets with drunks in high spirits. Clubbers in skinny jeans swarmed the pavement, singing ‘Seven Nation Army’ at the tops of their lungs, cadging cigarettes off one another, asking for a light.

The pair walked through the moonlit streets, talking about the Strangeways and trying to shake the uncomfortable sense of fear that had settled on their skin like sweat after a stuffy gig.

‘Oh God, maybe I should have crashed at Carl’s. I really don’t feel like staying on my boat alone, either,’ Sage said. ‘It can be really spooky at night.’

*Hello*, Max thought.

‘Well, do you want to come over and hang out for a bit?’ he suggested. ‘You still seem really spooked.’

A girl in a pink T-shirt made them both jump as she passed, bellowing some attention-seeking crap about free hugs.

‘What about your girlfriend?’ Sage asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘What girlfriend?’ Max replied. ‘Oh – you mean Mel? Don’t worry about Mel. She’s cool, but it’s not serious.’

‘She said she loved you.’

‘She’s all talk.’

‘What about Carl?’ Sage asked. ‘I don’t think he’d like it.’

‘We’d just hang out, no big deal.’

‘What about Daniel?’ she asked, eyes twinkling. ‘You seemed quite taken by him.’

Fucking tease. Max swallowed. ‘I’m not trying to *fuck* you, you know. I’m just trying to be nice. I wouldn’t go near you with a fucking barge pole.’

‘Oh, fuck you,’ she snapped. ‘You know what, don’t worry about it. I’ll make my own way home.’

‘Fine, fuck off then,’ he spat, and he watched her walk away until she was swallowed by the darkness. Who the fuck did she think she was? He hadn’t been *taken* by Daniel. Sure, he’d enjoyed his company, but that meant jack shit.

That familiar feeling came over him, that sense of pent-up energy and nowhere for it to go. In his anger, he kicked a wheelie bin, and then swung a balled fist that connected with a lamp post. He yelped in pain as the proximal phalanx of his index finger cracked.

As the sun rose, he climbed into bed, and fell into a restless sleep. He dreamed that a blood-red snake had coiled itself around his arm and was sinking its needle-sharp fangs into the flesh of his finger. In the morning, the finger was swollen, the joints stiff and painful to touch. He couldn’t

bend it at all, as though the bones had been replaced with a lolly stick.

He leaned his head over the side of the bed and vomited all over the dirty clothes that pooled on the carpet, and then he messaged Carl.

*Fell over and fucked my finger up. Can't play bass.*

*Dickhead, Carl replied. lets ask sages mate to play tomorrow. if good maybe he can cover you on tour???*

*K, Max replied. you ask him.*

\*

The sun had disappeared beneath the horizon, and Caroline switched on a lamp. The honeyed light brought Max back into the room, back into the present.

'So, did you guys get signed?' asked the psychic.

'No,' Max replied darkly. 'Daniel joined the band, but it didn't work out.'

He took a long sour swallow of Camden Hells that burned the back of his throat, made his eyes water. He didn't like thinking about what happened next, and yet it haunted him, followed him like a devil on his shoulder, whispering reminders of the role he'd played in the downfall of his band.

After a long pause, Caroline spoke. 'There was an accident.'

\*

The crowd were lively, full of bravado and banter, and when the bar kicked them out, they all piled back to Carl's place for an afterparty. The flat was packed and the booze was flowing – cans of Red Stripe, bottles of Jack Daniels and Jägermeister, little white wraps passed between sweaty hands. Girls were hanging around Daniel like flies around shit, trying to figure out if his

sister Caroline was his girlfriend, or if any of the many boys who brought him drinks might be his lover. Max did his best to avoid Daniel's eye, to snub the warmth of his attention.

Sage was ignoring Max in turn. She was wearing a loose green summer dress that made her blood-red hair pop against her milky skin. Every time she squeezed past him to refill her glass or go to the bathroom, he found his hands fit beautifully on the dips of her hips, and although she didn't acknowledge his touch, she didn't discourage it, either. Once, Max felt sure she had carved a desire line through the crowd to pass him on purpose, and when she did so, she placed a small, warm hand on the flat of his belly. Carl seemed oblivious, but Max was sure Daniel was paying attention, watching this performance with a knowing look on his face.

Sesh was on one that night, snorting lines from the back of a CD and downing shot after shot of sambuca, talking a mile a minute to anyone who'd listen.

'Everyone thinks three's the magic number,' he was saying, gurning and chewing his lips, eyes wild. 'Three musketeers, three little piggies, three wise men, three primary colours.'

'Yeah, yeah – what's your point, man?' said Carl, lighting a spliff.

'It's bullshit, mate. Bullshit. *Four* is the magic number – the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Mötley Crüe, the Red Hot fucking Chili Peppers. Who else, mate, come on, who else? Blur, The Stone Roses, Joy Division, right? Who else?'

'The Strangeways!' a drunken voice called out, and Sesh clapped his hands together with alacrity and pointed in the vague direction of whoever had spoken.

'Fuck yeah – *fuck* yeah. That's what I'm saying. Four. Four's the magic number. Me, Carl, Max and Daniel – it's written in the stars. We just need to scrape together enough cash to get a demo out there, and the rest will come together like *that*.' He snapped his fingers. 'We need a sponsor. We need a motherfucking sponsor and

a motherfucking manager, and then we'll be on our way. Sold-out gigs, world tour, our mugs on the motherfucking cover of *NME*.'

'You should ask Daniel to cover it,' Sage said to Carl. 'He's rich as fuck. His parents were millionaires or something.'

Across the room, Max saw that Caroline had tuned in to their conversation.

She was a strange girl. After that first encounter with Daniel, she was always there, turning up to their rehearsals and hanging around from soundcheck to encore at gigs. Daniel knew a lot of people, always summoned a crowd to their shows, but Caroline seemed to place herself to one side, happy to observe without joining in.

'Tour first,' Max said quickly. 'Let's see how the tour goes, and then we can worry about the demo.'

'What tour?' Caroline asked. She was wearing an oversized blazer, the shoulders drooping, making her look like an eleven-year-old on her first day of secondary school. She was pretty enough, but she was often sober and serious, always listening and never smiling.

'We've got ten shows coming up,' Max said. 'Pretty decent ones, actually. There's going to be a scout in Manchester, and we're supporting Extermination Event in Sunderland. If that goes well, they might take us on their European tour.'

'Wow,' said Caroline, although she didn't seem particularly impressed. 'How long will the European tour be?'

'A month?' Max guessed. 'Six weeks, maybe? I don't know, really. We're just taking it one show at a time, seeing what happens.'

'Yeah, but if that goes well, maybe we'll build a fanbase abroad, get to do a European tour of our own,' said Carl.

'Are we out of beer?' someone said.

The party had thinned, but those who were still going were going strong. It was unthinkable to continue the night without another drink.

'I'll walk to the supermarket,' Max said. 'There's a Sainsbury's on Chalk Farm Road.'

'It'll be shut now,' Carl said. 'It's gone two.'

'Time to call it a night?'

They all laughed.

'There's an offie by the tube station,' Sesh said, picking up his car keys. 'I'll whiz there and back in, like, five seconds. Five seconds, I'll just whiz there and back.'

'You're smashed, mate,' Max said. 'We can just walk, it won't take long.'

'Fuck no – it'll take like half an hour to walk there, and half an hour to walk back.'

'Will it fuck. Twenty minutes round trip.'

Max felt a prickle of attention, and there was Daniel meeting his eye from across the room. He lifted a finger and touched the centre of his lip. It was the tiniest of gestures, the smallest moment of connection, but Max's heart responded, beating a rhythm of desire in his chest. There was some debate, the car keys passing from hand to hand, and when they seemed to land in Carl's grasp, Max didn't protest. In fact, he encouraged it.

'You should definitely go,' Max said. 'He's way too fucked to drive.'

'It's cool, I've only had a few beers,' Carl said. 'Anyway, I drive more carefully when I'm stoned.'

'I'm going downstairs for a smoke,' Max said, and when Daniel said, 'I'll come,' he knew things were about to change, things were about to happen. There was a frisson between them, an electric anticipation in the air like the moments before a storm.

They stood in the shadows, and watched a curious fox sniff a bin bag on the other side of the street.

'Listen, I have money,' Daniel said, offering Max a fag. 'I can cover the demo, the tour, whatever you like.'

'Yeah?'

‘Sure,’ said Daniel. ‘It’s not a big deal. You need a new guitar, too – I’ve seen the way you look at Carl’s Gibson. Like a teenage girl in love.’

‘That’s kind of you, man,’ said Max. ‘Sweet.’

‘I can be kind, can’t I?’ said Daniel, almost teasing. ‘And I can be very sweet.’

They smoked less than half a cigarette before Daniel summoned a taxi, and in the back seat of the car Max watched the city lights roll across his face, too shy to touch him in front of the driver.

Daniel tasted of smoke and bourbon, of late nights and jazz bars. Max took him to bed, and the inevitable fuck was nothing like he had ever experienced before. Sex with Daniel was euphoric, his masculine smell and broad, hard body a heady aphrodisiac, moving to the rhythm of the night, a metronome that kept perfect time with the beating of Max’s heart, until finally, blissfully, he closed his eyes and experienced true nirvana for the last time before everything turned to shit.

\*

In the pale morning light, Daniel was an angel with a messy halo of brunette curls spread across the pillow. Lying flat on his back, one arm was thrown over his eyes, the other stretched across a soft, pale stomach towards the elastic waistband of a pair of black boxers. His nipples were rosy-pink pennies against milky pectoral muscles, and he smelled warm and familiar, like stale sweat, alcohol and a lingering thread of expensive cologne. He sighed in his sleep, a gentle *Hmm*, lost in a dreamworld.

A heavy, nauseating cloud of regret settled over Max. He wondered if Daniel would agree to keep this on the down-low, if he’d recognise what was at stake. He gently tugged the duvet to cover Daniel’s exposed skin, and then he slipped from the bed for a coffee and a cigarette while he gathered his thoughts.

*Let the Bad Times Roll*

It was a cool spring day, the sky an overwhelming blue. He'd have to make something up, he thought. Damage control. He'd have to say he'd picked up a girl, she was all over him, that he was drunk and she'd practically followed him home, practically begged him for it, that she was good to go, and what red-blooded man could turn down a sure thing after a few too many beers? He'd say she was a shit fuck anyway, another broad banged and forgotten. Daniel would understand this couldn't happen again. It wasn't part of Max's plan.

It would all be okay. He flicked his cigarette butt into the breeze, and looked for his phone.

\*

Sesh was killed instantly, pitched through the windshield and crushed beneath the tyres of an oncoming truck. Carl was wearing his seatbelt, but he failed a breathalyser test and was arrested on the scene for drunk driving. It was all over the news, and every headline mentioned the band in one way or another – *The Strangeways guitarist arrested in fatal car crash; Strangeways drummer killed in drunk-driving incident* – and every newspaper ran the same picture of the original lineup, their old bassiest Mike in lieu of Daniel, lifted from their website.

Max gave Daniel the cold shoulder, stopped returning his calls. He disappeared inside himself, withdrew from the world. When the case went to court, Max was grateful for Sage's presence by his side, and when the judge sentenced Carl to ten years for causing death by dangerous driving while under the influence, it was Sage who held Max's hand. It was Sage who took him home, coaxed him into the shower and made him milky tea and buttered toast.

He poured his grief into Sage and she poured her love into him, and for two years that's what they did. Two years of tea and

toast and sex and tears, and rabid fights that caused the neighbours to bang on the walls and threaten to call the police. He wrote song after song about the band, about the accident, about prison, about Daniel, until he had enough material to record an album, but still no fucking cash to cover costs.

‘Ask Daniel,’ Sage said. ‘You’re friends, right? He’ll lend you it, I’m sure.’

‘We kinda lost touch,’ Max said.

‘He loves you,’ Sage said. ‘He’s always asking after you. I’m sure he’d be open to reconnecting.’

Max started throwing parties again, trying to gather a new crowd. Daniel came from time to time, always dressed in black with a bottle of red wine and a pack of cigarettes that he chain-smoked. Max made a special effort to talk to him, to ask him questions about things he could remember Daniel mentioning the last time they’d spoken, but a light seemed to have died behind Daniel’s eyes, and Max resented him for it. What had *he* lost, exactly? A jaunt around Europe, a bite-sized taste of fame? He was a middle-of-the-road bass player, didn’t deserve to be there in the first place.

Whenever Daniel and Sage popped by the bar, Max would undercharge them or slide them free drinks, and eventually their friendship progressed to more intimate hang-outs – pub lunches, beers after work, trips to the cinema with his stuck-up sister Caroline to watch long, dull films in which nothing happened.

‘Darling, this is why we love you,’ Daniel said, accepting a large glass of red for the price of a lime and soda, and Sage grew pink with pleasure, perhaps at the thought of her best friend and her boyfriend finally becoming friends in their own right.

\*

Shame crept over him now, at the memory of how it had all unfolded. Max had invited Daniel and Sage for drinks in Camden,

and as they passed the stretch of road that took Sesh, ruined Carl and destroyed the band, talk naturally turned to the accident.

‘We were so close to getting signed,’ Max said, which wasn’t strictly true, but he knew Sage wouldn’t correct him and Daniel wouldn’t question it. ‘We could have gone all the way, man. Manager, record deal, sell-out shows, the whole fucking lot. And one stupid decision took it all away. Fuck. Sometimes, I don’t think I’ll ever recover from it.’

‘It’s tragic, darling,’ said Daniel, pushing open the door to the Oxford Arms. He was wearing a pair of black aviators and a black granddad shirt and, Max thought begrudgingly, looked more like a rock star than Max did.

‘You’re still on your healing journey,’ Sage said, catching the barman’s attention with a wave. She was always full of shit like that, and Max bristled but didn’t rise to it. ‘I do think you should see a therapist, though, work through some of your grief with a professional. I know this amazing crystal healer called Poetry, and she—’

‘Music is my therapist. I’ve been writing songs about it, actually. Some of them are pretty decent. No – some of them are excellent.’

‘Good for you, darling,’ said Daniel.

Sage ordered a bottle of red and a pint for Max, and they took their drinks to find a table in the beer garden.

‘I’m desperate to record a demo,’ Max said, licking lager froth from his upper lip.

‘You should,’ Daniel said, pouring red wine into two glasses and handing one to Sage. ‘What’s stopping you?’

‘I don’t have the money,’ Max said. ‘I need at least a couple of grand, I reckon, to make a decent go of it.’

‘Surely you can find that somewhere,’ Daniel said.

‘I work in a bar, mate,’ Max replied, forcing a laugh to keep the mood light.

‘We aren’t all trust-fund babies, you know,’ Sage teased.

‘I’m not a *trust-fund baby*,’ Daniel said. ‘But I could probably lend you a couple of thousand pounds. I’d need to check with Caroline, though – she holds the purse strings.’

Elation flooded Max. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yes, I’m a kept woman – but I’ll see what I can do,’ Daniel replied. ‘No promises.’

The sun was low in the sky and the beer garden was getting busier. Daniel got another round in – a bottle of red for himself and Sage, and a pint for Max – and life seemed long and the world seemed generous. Max couldn’t help but feel things were finally looking up.

When Sage went to the bathroom, Max decided to take the plunge and atone for his sins.

‘Look, Daniel, I just wanted to say I’m sorry,’ he said, in a low voice in case anyone could hear them. ‘About what happened between us. Before. It was just a one-off, but I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.’

‘Oh, darling,’ Daniel replied, laughing with a shade of pity. ‘Bless you. It was lovely, but do you honestly think you ever stood a chance with me?’

\*

‘Did you keep in touch with Daniel?’ the psychic asked.

‘Yeah, we hang out from time to time. I last saw him about a month or so ago. We went to see a band in Camden.’

‘How did he seem?’ Caroline asked. ‘Did he say anything unusual?’

Max took a long swallow of beer, thinking back to that day. ‘Yes, actually. He tried to give me a guitar. A cherry-red Gibson SG, like the one Carl had.’ Max shook his head at the

memory. ‘Such a sweet guitar, man, but I said no. It was too much; I couldn’t take it.’

‘So, you’d accept thousands of pounds off him to record a shitty demo, but you draw the line at a cheap guitar?’ Caroline bristled.

‘It’s not a cheap guitar,’ Max said, with a hollow laugh. He picked up his phone and tapped at the screen. ‘It had a mahogany body, rosewood fingerboard and a maple neck.’ He turned his phone to show them a picture of the guitar, pulled from an online retailer. ‘Brand new, it’d be way over a grand.’

‘That’s Daniel’s guitar,’ Caroline said quietly. ‘He bought it when he joined the Strangeways. I didn’t understand why he needed such an expensive guitar when he played bass, but he’s like that, isn’t he? Spends money without really thinking.’

A swell of sorrow rose within Max as he returned his attention to the picture on his phone screen. It was such a handsome instrument. He’d have to remember to thank Daniel next time he saw him, and apologise for refusing it. Apologise for everything.

‘Maybe he wanted to rekindle the band,’ Sage suggested.

‘Did you guys ever play together again?’ asked the psychic.

‘Nah,’ said Max. ‘It was too painful. All I could think about was Sesh, and Carl, and what might have been.’

‘That’s awful,’ said the psychic, in a muted voice that paired well with tragedy.

‘I never recorded a demo,’ Max said. ‘Never went on tour, never got signed.’

‘You still play, though,’ said Sage. ‘You were at a festival last year.’

‘That was bullshit,’ he replied, his mood darkening. ‘Just a pity gig, organised by my ex.’

The psychic turned to Sage, eyebrows raised, and Max rushed to correct her assumption. ‘Nah, not Sage – Sage dumped me years ago.’

‘Don’t say it like that,’ Sage said, kindly. ‘I didn’t *dump* you. We grew apart, that’s all. It was mutual.’

‘I strongly recommend an egg cleanse,’ the psychic said again. ‘When I was in New Orleans, I had my tea leaves read by a psychic, and she recommended one to me. I didn’t do it right away, and I came to regret it.’

‘Was Daniel travelling with anyone in New Orleans?’ Caroline asked. ‘Did he say he was meeting anyone?’

The psychic shook her head. ‘No, he was definitely by himself.’

‘The strange thing,’ Caroline continued, ‘is that he never bought a plane ticket. He obviously made it to the States, but I don’t know how. We can’t trace the payment.’

‘Well, he obviously stuck the flights on a credit card or something,’ Richard said.

‘I don’t particularly want to discuss my family finances with you,’ Caroline replied, ‘but Daniel doesn’t have a credit card. There’s no need. I invested my inheritance and bought this flat, but Daniel lives off his. I suppose it’ll run out eventually, but for now he’s very comfortable.’

‘Must be nice,’ Max said.

‘The police checked his bank account,’ Caroline continued, ignoring him. ‘He withdrew cash in London and New Orleans, and he used our joint account to book a hotel in the city, but no flights. We thought perhaps he was meeting someone out there, and they’d paid for his plane ticket.’

‘He was travelling alone,’ the psychic said. ‘I’m sure of it.’

Max took another swig of beer to hide the sneer on his face. Caroline and Daniel were the richest people he had ever met, more minted than a pack of gum. Rich people always had credit cards, and multiple bank accounts with huge overdrafts. When you had money, there were always doorways to more money at your disposal.

‘Tell us more about New Orleans,’ Sage said. ‘After that first night, how did you meet Daniel again?’

‘It was the funniest thing,’ said the psychic. ‘We crossed paths in the French Quarter, spent the next five days hanging out, and then it turned out we were staying in the same hostel. For a while, anyway.’

‘Daniel was staying in a hostel?’ Max said, surprised. Daniel had once phoned him, incredulous, to ask if he’d ever stayed in a Travelodge. ‘I mean, at least motels are camp,’ he’d said. ‘There’s a kind of tragic beauty in a roadside motel. But a Travelodge? Darling, I’m telling you – it’s the Pizza Express of hotels. The only thing worse would be one of those ghastly backpackers’ hostels where you have to share a room with twenty unwashed strangers.’

The psychic met Max’s gaze with an almost imperceptible frown. ‘Yes – like I said, it was one of those beautiful moments of synchronicity.’

‘Wasn’t it the Hotel Monteleone?’ Caroline asked.

‘No, it was called the French House.’

‘Was it a fancy hostel?’ Sage asked. ‘Like, boutique or whatever?’

The psychic shrugged, sucked on her white plastic vape. ‘It was a backpackers’ hostel. Cheap and cheerful, I guess. Very New Orleans, but I wouldn’t call it fancy.’

‘When we were planning *our* trip, Daniel wouldn’t let me look at anything below four stars,’ said Sage. ‘He has expensive taste.’

‘Yeah, when we were talking about going on tour, he was a total snob,’ Max said.

‘I don’t know what to tell you,’ the psychic said. ‘It was just an ordinary backpackers’ hostel, and Daniel was staying there.’