

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

**Motherlight – a novel**

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**Doctor of Creative Arts (Creative Writing)**

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**This Thesis has been completed as a requirement for  
a postgraduate research degree of the University of Winchester.**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Keywords: Novel, Ukraine, Kiev, Motherhood, Alienation, Communism, Independence, Forgiveness

'Motherlight' is a literary novel arising from experiments in writing for children, memoir, short stories and flash fiction, each one focusing on aspects of female experience, Russian folktale and the conflict between agrarianism and a capitalist market economy. It is composed of fragments – isolated scenes – sifted, re-written and re-ordered in pursuit of a narrative whole.

The novel is set entirely in Ukraine and opens in September 1992, one year after independence. Frances, a young English mother, joins her journalist husband in Kiev. Terrified of the apartment's balcony, she develops obsessive rituals to keep their baby safe. Her difficulties expose her to a struggle between Elena Vasilyevna, the old caretaker, and Mykola Sirko, the racketeer. Frances is the interloper, ignorant yet culpable. As consequences bear down she seeks out Zoya, her husband's caustic-tongued fixer, and Olek, the roller-blading boy who is paid by Mykola to spy on them all.

'Motherlight' is about motherhood and alienation. Its intention is to raise questions about what endures and what might be cast aside, as well as the nature of forgiveness. The time frame is one year, moving from one harvest to another, following the shift from the birth of a 'new' country to seemingly intractable paralysis and also the development of the child Ivan from newborn to toddler. It contributes to the canon of fiction about the ingénue abroad by focusing on a young mother who is outside the 'action' – the antithesis of the male adventurer. Baby Ivan appears in almost every scene in the novel; the 'domestic' is unleashed rather than confined and motherhood (in its many guises) is revealed as a central preoccupation for secondary characters Zoya, Mykola, Olek, Elena and Suzie. Frances, meanwhile, understands that her impact on those who remain in Kiev, ultimately, is negligible, yet they have enabled her to move beyond her own stasis as a daughter and as a mother.

## LIST OF CONTENTS

Declaration and Copyright Statement	1
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
List of Contents	4
'Motherlight' – a novel	5

“I am talking about mercy,’ Woland explained his words, not taking his fiery eye off Margarita. ‘It sometimes creeps, quite unexpectedly and perfidiously, through the narrowest cracks.’”

From *The Master and Margarita*, by Mikhail Bulgakov

## Chapter 1

*Kiev, September 1992*

High up on the fourteenth floor, a boy steps onto a balcony. He is twelve, maybe thirteen with slender limbs and shorn hair and he is naked apart from a pair of faded underpants. He scratches the bloom of eczema on his hip as he squints towards the neighbouring apartment block. No one is watching him. The steel hulk of the Motherland monument glints from her hillock across the valley, but she is a statue and her eyes are dead.

The boy moves to a pile of junk in the corner and yanks at a rusting bicycle until it breaks free from the chair leg that is jammed between its spokes. The bicycle's chain has snapped, so he props it against the waist-high wall and hoists himself onto the seat, side-saddle, with one foot on a pedal. Now, perched there with his narrow shoulders hunched forward, one arm hugging the ledge, he waits.

Below him, the air hangs still between the tower blocks and the strand of fractured tarmac that winds down towards the Dniepr. His pale eyes flick across the hazy crenellations of the industrial zone on the horizon. He ignores, to his left, the green and gold canopies of the monastery of Lavra-Pechersk with those silent, rotting dachas like windfalls at its feet. Instead, lizard-like, he is watching for movement: the cadets playing basketball between crooked hoops on their rectangle of parade ground inside the military academy, the dogs gnawing their rumps in a corner of the car park and the women spilling out of a tram like spores down on Staronavodnitska Street.

The spores work their way across the waste ground along concrete paths that intersect at sharp angles. Here comes Elena Vasilyevna, the caretaker for Block Number Four. The boy waits. Then, when Elena's dark form has disappeared between the dump bins far below, he shifts on the saddle, leans out and cups his free hand to his mouth. One deep breath, then his jaw juts forward and he makes a sound like a dog's bark from the back of his throat. For a moment the sound splits the emptiness before it drops down the side of the building. The old woman reappears, her face turning in the wrong direction. The boy smiles, pleased at the effect.

Then, just beneath him, he notices something else.

The balcony on the floor below is glazed, unlike his own, and the glazing abuts the base of his balcony, which forms a roof. One of the windows is open and the smell of a cigarette rises up towards him. Freshly lit – a Camel.

The boy stands up on the pedal and leans further over the edge. He can't see in through the glass below because the white sky is reflecting back at him, but a man's left forearm dangles out through the opening, fingers flicking ash.

Someone has moved in.

He studies the man's hand. The skin is pale with golden hairs. His shirt is unbuttoned at the wrist - white cotton with thin blue checks. His watch is analogue with a leather strap, not metal. This man is western, but probably not German or American. He wears a gold wedding band and when the arm withdraws, a stream of smoke is blown out into the stillness.

The man says something, his voice muffled by the interior. Then a baby starts crying. Its mewls are a new sound, yet within seconds they seem to stake a claim on the building, seeping into the walls, travelling up through the concrete, the steel and the spaces in between.

This is the last day of summer. Tonight, the temperature will plummet and people will wake in the morning, sniff the wind and dig out their winter hats. For now, though, the boy remains balanced on the bicycle, a memory of warmth on his skin as the leaves drop silently from the rowans by the tramline, and the air cools, and the Englishman at the window below mutters to himself and lights another cigarette.

The foreign journalists say the city is holding its breath, but for Olek, it is one long exhalation.

\*

Lucas, the golden-haired Englishman, and Frances, his wife, are standing in the kitchen of their flat in Building Four, Staronavodnitska Street. It is a narrow room with a small table at the far end, in front of the window. The floor is covered in shiny brown linoleum and the walls are papered with a pattern of orange swirls. The veneered chipboard cupboards look new and there's a small, freestanding stove in one corner.

Lucas is holding a Geiger counter.

'The batteries *are* charged,' he says, frowning at a leaflet. 'The switch *is* on.' A pause. 'Nothing showing yet.' He waves the device in a circle through the air before pointing it at Frances. 'So that must be good?'



Frances stops biting the skin around her thumbnail and stares up at the ceiling which is covered in the same swirling paper as the walls. There's a noise above her head, a faint squeaking sound that travels backwards and forwards from the window to the hallway like the wheels of a hospital gurney.

'Frances?'

Frances turns her gaze to her husband. 'I thought they gave you some training,' she says.

'The training was for Pripyat and Chernobyl.' Lucas risks a smile. He has already spent five months in Ukraine as a radio journalist on a monthly retainer for the BBC World Service. Everyone agrees that it is perfectly safe for foreigners who weren't in the danger zone when the reactor exploded back in 1986. 'Trust me, Fran, I wouldn't have brought you and Ivan out here if there were hotspots in the city.'

Frances stares at the gap beneath the stove. It is dark there, too dark to see underneath. This is her first day in Kiev. She arrived from London in the morning, frayed after the flight with their fifteen-week old son. The airport felt hostile: people pressing all around, the threat of disease or some muttered sanction on their breath. The drive from Boryspil in a car with no seatbelts had done nothing to reassure her.

'What about seepage underground? Try pointing it at the tap. The water comes from somewhere else.' She leans across the stainless steel sink and presses the lever. Water gushes, then slows to a brown trickle. There's a clanking sound in the pipework under the counter. Frances makes a noise through clamped lips and folds her arms beneath her swollen breasts; her eyes are rimmed red with tiredness and Lucas tries not to notice the dark patch that is spreading across her shirt. She's leaking again.

'Hey,' he murmurs, reaching for her hand. 'It'll be okay. I'll get Zoya to go through the instructions. I'll get the caretaker to sort out the taps. Until then we've plenty of bottled water.' He looks down at his young wife, at her sad, soft face with its high forehead and crooked nose and gently receding chin and feels, not for the first time, a flutter of panic in his chest. They haven't seen each other for nine weeks because of doctor's appointments and immunisations. Now he wishes she'd tell him what she's really thinking: that she can't bathe their baby in brown water, even if it's not radioactive; that the cot in which little Ivan has finally fallen asleep won't pass any British standards of safety; that an amber-coloured cockroach scooted under the bath when she went for a pee; that the flat is on the thirteenth floor and he shouldn't leave her to go out with his journalist friends tonight so that he can catch up on what he's missed while he's been fetching her from the airport. Perhaps nine weeks was too long. Or not long enough. She's only been in Kiev for six hours and she's shutting down already. The thought makes him flap at the net curtains above the windowsill until he finds his cigarettes.

‘Come out on to the balcony with me,’ he says. ‘You’ve not seen the view yet. Come out.’

Frances remembers staring up at the block of flats when Zoya, Lucas’s fixer, had driven them here earlier. The grey concrete balconies looked like something she’d once made for a school project, with matchboxes that fell off as soon as the glue dried.

‘I need to change my shirt,’ she mutters, pulling away.

Then the doorbell rings.

\*

Once upon a time, Frances told Lucas a story. She was a little drunk, a little careless and she told this handsome, suntanned student who looked like a famous cricketer or a polo player or maybe the Marlboro Man with his long limbs and blue sleep-with-me eyes that when she was eight, she thought she was having a baby.

Lucas tried to sit up, though the beanbag he was sprawled across made this difficult.

‘What happened?’ he asked, tipping sideways until he could fix the girl with the wonky nose and the large, slightly bulging eyes and the nice arse in his sights.

‘Oh,’ she said, surprising herself as the words came skipping out. ‘I was in love with a boy at my primary school. His name was Charles. But my dad was an engineer and we moved to Swansea for a year for his job. So I had this old box of After Eights – you know, the chocolates with the little waxy envelopes? Well the chocolates were all gone, so I wrote ‘I love Charles’ on little bits of paper and folded them up and tucked them inside the envelopes. Then I took the box to Swansea and hid the notes all around our new house.’

Lucas held his wine glass up to his face and peered at her through its smeary double lens. ‘Funny girl,’ he said, wanting to touch her, but she hadn’t finished.

‘My bedroom was at the end the corridor, away from my parents. I used to lie in bed at night, listening to my stomach gurgling. And I knew that if you loved someone, you had a baby. So I thought I had a baby in my tummy.’ She paused, her mind re-focusing on the soft green light she’d made when she closed her bedroom curtains and the silence she’d made when she held in her breath. ‘I couldn’t tell anyone, of course, because eight year old girls who weren’t married weren’t supposed to have babies, so I made a cot for it out of a shoe box and kept it under the sink. I thought it would come out of my belly button.’

‘Oh deary me,’ said Lucas, who hadn’t expected to find her quite so entertaining. He leaned across and kissed her. The wine glass toppled over, spilling its dregs into the beanbag. Frances felt a wet patch under her hip but it didn’t matter; these things often happened at parties.

\*

The doorbell keeps ringing and ringing.

Lucas is still fiddling with the locks at the far end of the hallway when Frances emerges from the bedroom, yanking a clean top down over her bra.

'Quick!' she pleads. 'Before they wake Ivan!'

At last the bolt shoots back and the lever drops but as Lucas pulls open the front door, Frances sways. She puts her hand out flat against the wall as if the tower block has shifted sideways. Or maybe she's a little feverish.

'Oh, and here you both are!' says a woman's voice, in an accent that might be Canadian. Frances sees two figures moving forward from the gloom of the landing. Lucas has mentioned his friends often: Vee, the Harvard-educated correspondent for a Canadian daily who speaks Ukrainian in the old-fashioned way, and Teddy, the photographer from Michigan. Lucas hangs out with them a lot, he's told her. They have fun together. Now Frances can, too.

Lucas moves aside and Vee steps in across the threshold. She is tall, slender, with dark hair cropped short, red lipstick, mannish glasses and a face more striking than beautiful. Frances tries not to stare.

'Where's the baby, Lucas? Where's little Ivan? He's not sleeping, is he?' Vee pouts, clownishly. 'Dammit, I just *knew* he'd be sleeping...'

'Hey,' says Lucas, grinning. 'Frances, this is Vee. And Teddy.'

Frances attempts to shake Vee's hand.

'Oh, I want a kiss!' says Vee, pushing her glasses to the top of her head and pulling Frances towards her. 'Teddy wants one, too! I told him your witchy-faced caretaker downstairs needed a cuddle but he's too too shy, aren't you, sweetie?'

This is clearly a joke, for Teddy isn't shy at all. He makes a great show of embracing Frances, arms pretend-flapping like a penguin. When he stands back he's grinning, his brown eyes set just a little too close together, faint acne scars stippling his dark, stubbled jawline in a lived-in kind of way. He is wearing a faded Lou Reed t-shirt under an old sheepskin jacket. Vee, too, has an air of not trying too hard and Frances is aware of her own slack-waisted skirt, the hint of something sour-smelling on her shoulder, the thick, lumpy breastpad she's slipped inside her bra. Her vision blurs a little. Perhaps the tower block is swaying after all. Really, she cannot tell.

Vee is still talking. 'We've been desperate to meet you!' she says, walking into the living room with its shiny parquet flooring and its white October light that filters through the large net-curtained window and the glass door that leads out onto the balcony. 'We're sick of Lucas moping around,

waiting for you to arrive. I thought you might not come at all, or that he'd get crazy for some real news and head off to Bosnia. Jesus, this flat is amazing! It's so empty! Where's all the crap you had in that other place, Lu? Hey, a three-piece suite!

'It's more than we can afford,' says Lucas, ducking down the hallway to the narrow kitchen wedged in the corner between the living room and the bedroom. He raises his voice so that they can still hear him. 'But I promised Frances we'd have a bit of space, and Ivan will be crawling before we know it. My old flat was a death-trap.' He reappears, grinning and eager with three beers in one hand and a bottle opener poking out of his shirt pocket. 'Oh.' For a moment, his mouth slackens in confusion until he remembers what has changed. 'Hang on, there are four of us!'

'Not for me,' says Frances, with a shake of her head.

Lucas slides an arm around her waist and gives her a squeeze. 'My beloved wife also demanded a lift. And a washing machine!'

'Oh, well then,' declares Vee. 'That's it. You'll never see the back of me! I'll be camping out in the foyer with my bundles of dirty laundry...'

'We haven't got one yet.' Frances's voice is flatter than she intends; her veneer of sociability is tissue-thin. 'I'll rinse things in the bath.'

Vee raises one of her finely arched eyebrows. 'That won't be easy – with a baby,' she says. 'Hey, you must let us see him – I bet he's adorable. Is he talking yet?'

'Are you kidding?' laughs Lucas, handing round the opened bottles. 'He's not even four months old! Feeds, sleeps and leaks from every orifice. But you *really* need to see this view...' He sweeps aside the net curtain, revealing the balcony beyond. This time, a shadow drifts downwards across Frances's vision like a dust particle trapped on her cornea - tiny limbs, curling fingers, a flopping head. She wants to shake her own head, erase the image of the falling child before it can take hold but Vee is watching her, the tip of her tongue just visible through her teeth. Frances extricates herself from Lucas's arm and moves back towards the sofa.

'Oh - my - god!' exclaims Vee, turning her gaze from Frances and stepping through the glass door with Teddy. 'The river, the monastery, that crazy Statue of Liberty looky-likey... Poor old maiden aunty Baba, they call her, Brezhnev's dildo, waving her sword for the Motherland. Always looks like surrender to me. I filed a colour piece for *The Economist* when I arrived. Assholes didn't run it.'

'They didn't have the right image,' remarks Teddy, his voice low, the base notes to Vee's contralto. 'Now, up here, at dawn, long exposure, the smog a little blue in the background...'

Lucas glances back at his wife and takes a swig of his beer. 'Frances used to be a picture researcher. Travel books, that kind of thing.'

'Really?' says Teddy, smiling at her through the doorway. 'Who for?'

Frances smiles back, though her brow is creasing into a frown. 'Just a small press. You won't have heard of it.'

'They used author's own pics, mainly,' says Lucas. 'Tightwads. It's the same problem at the BBC. My lousy World Service retainer nails me to Bush House for all of three hundred pounds a month. I'm sick of peddling short bulletins that get knocked off the schedule. I need a story I can sink my teeth into – get a couple of solid half-hour features under my belt, something for Radio Four or a piece in the Sundays.' He leans out through the window and peers down so that Frances can no longer see his head. Sometimes, in her first weeks alone with Ivan, the fact of her husband had wavered. She would wake in the night when her son moved or murmured, unable to remember how she had arrived in that empty bed in the ground-floor flat with the trains rumbling and the wild, abandoned whoops of the sirens.

'Smells like burning plastic down there,' Lucas mutters, pulling his shoulders back inside and turning round to face Vee and Teddy. 'So, what are you two working on now?'

This, Frances knows, is not the right question. Her husband seems jumpy, vulnerable in front of his Kiev friends. Here they are, Frances and Lucas, saying things, stabbing at things, both, in different ways, out of their depth.

Vee, on the other hand, gives nothing away. 'Oh, you know,' she says, twisting the silver necklace she wears. 'The President and his cronies threatening rule by decree. The World Bank's latest doom-mongering. Drach and the rest of his so-called reformers whining about whether foreign films should be dubbed in Russian or Ukrainian - all talk and no action while the grandmas protest outside St Sofia's and war vets starve along the boulevards. There's a press conference tomorrow. They're printing bigger denominations.' She reaches into her handbag and pulls out a pack of Marlboro Lights. 'One hundred kouponi, these cost me - and they're counterfeit. See? The foil's too smooth. Now that's a story that won't end well for some hapless new kid who tries to follow the money.' She flips the lid with a glossy fingernail and holds the pack out to Lucas. He hesitates, until she turns and looks back apologetically at Frances. 'Sorry. God, that's stupid of me. No smoking around the baby!'

'Don't worry about it,' says Lucas, quick with his lighter. 'It's fine out here. If we shut the door.' And Frances sees now why he chose the flat with the balcony where he and his fellow journalists can puff away all winter, guilt-free, even though he promised to give up when Ivan was born. But this is his city, his job. These are his friends. Anyway, there are some things that only she knows. Ivan is stirring in his cot in the bedroom and immediately her breasts start to tingle as the let-down reflex floods the vessels behind her nipples. If she doesn't go quickly, the pads will leak.

Lucas twitches briefly as Ivan breaks into his high-pitched cry, though she's already in the hallway.

'Can we see him? Will you bring him in here?' calls Vee.

'Sounds like an appetite!' adds Teddy.

'I have to feed him in the bedroom,' murmurs Frances as she slips down the hall.

'We don't mind – truly!'

Frances is already closing the bedroom door.

\*

Ivan's face is turned inside out. His eyes are squeezed shut and his mouth is a red cave with its glistening, quivering uvula and hard ridges of gum. When Frances lifts him away from the urine-soaked cot sheet he stops crying, but his lips are searching and she must be quick. She sits on the bed with her back against the flimsy headboard and her fingers rummage for the clip on her bra. As soon as she peels off the sodden, sticky pad, milk spurts forward and hits Ivan's cheek. She hesitates only for a second, then bites down on her lip and brings his head towards her.

When Ivan clamps on, she catches her breath and resists the urge to scream. The cracks in her skin re-open and she can see by the dribbles at Ivan's mouth that the milk is blushed with blood. It's the pink of her mother's gelatinous salmon mousse that always made her want to gag. She closes her eyes, her head bent low over the baby as if this might ease the dragging, the burning. And it does ease, after a few minutes, as the pressure lessens and Ivan's saliva softens the fissures and the scabs.

Ivan is a big feeder and will drain her to the last drop. When his sucking flattens out into a more contented rhythm she brings her knees up to cradle him and leans her head back once more. Milk from her other breast has pooled across her stomach. She doesn't wipe it away because she doesn't care, in here, in this private space and besides, every second is precious now, when the pain is fading and she knows she has two or three hours before she must endure it again. Her own breathing settles. The voices outside are forgotten. Time to sleep, the midwife would say in her sensible, seen-it-all tone. This same midwife told her to put Ivan on the bottle; that she needed to heal before she took her baby to a place with no emergency numbers, no guarantee of antibiotics. But formula milk means using sodium-rich mineral water that might poison her child, or that brown stuff from the tap in the kitchen.

No, the midwife hadn't understood. Frances is staying awake. She needs to do the inventory.

She starts with the bed. It is two singles pushed together; chipboard covered with a yellowish-brown veneer like every other piece of furniture in the flat. The mattress is hard and uneven. The blankets are heavy, boil-washed. Behind the bed, a large rug hangs on the wall. Not an 'ethnic'

piece from Kazakhstan or the Caucasus but a factory-made brown rug with pink and red flowers. Opposite stands a wardrobe with her few clothes hanging neatly, not touching, where she'd placed them just two hours before. Lucas's shirts hang beside them, with underwear hidden in a drawer. Ivan's vests and babygros are folded on a shelf.

Now she turns her head to the two small bedside cabinets. The one nearest Frances contains her evening primrose cream and her breast pads and contraceptive pills, neatly spaced on the shelf. On top sit two books: her copy of *Baby's First Year* full of words such as 'weaning', and a novel, *Jurassic Park*, which she found on the plane. She isn't in the habit of picking up other people's things, yet no one else seemed to want it. She will read ten pages a day, she's decided. This will take five and a half weeks. The calculation helps her relax.

Her eyes shift to the floor. The bedroom, the hallway and the living room are all coated in the same thick, uneven layer of varnish that reminds her of peanut brittle. Lucas says the landlord had it done so that he could raise the rent. The residue clogs up the gaps beneath the skirting.

The floor brings to mind things she cannot see. Under the bed is a pull-out drawer. If she leans over she can reach it, though you always save the best to last if you know what's good for you so she resists the temptation and focuses instead on the large window. This window doesn't bother her, despite the fact that the glass is smeared, veiled with a sagging net curtain. There's no balcony on this side of the flat.

Frances looks down, still amazed, still bewildered by the sight of her white arms cradling her son with the small brown spot above his right ear that will one day be a mole, his eyelashes like tiny scratches and his pink, almost translucent nostrils. Earlier, in the living room, while the others talked and smoked on the balcony she had glimpsed Ivan falling. Such visions, she knows, must be dismissed with a sharp shake of her head before they can fix themselves like premonitions, like memories, but Vee had been watching her and so she hadn't moved. It's a long way down from the thirteenth floor. Five seconds, she thinks. Maybe six, though the velocity would be different for a small thing. And, as the calculation freefalls at the back of her eyes, her heartbeat starts to race and the impulse to lean over the side of the bed is something she can no longer ignore.

Without detaching Ivan she stretches out her arm and gropes under the bed for the drawer. Out it slides, smooth on its castors and she is ready to weep with relief. The nappies sit exactly as she'd placed them: one hundred and twenty-six Pampers in twelve neat piles; four full packs she lugged over from England. Lucas has bought lots of cheap nappies, rigid and scratchy, imported from Latvia or Poland but they're not as white or as soft or as absorbent and their tapes don't stick and she suspects that, even now, a seepage of Ivan's runny yellow faeces is flowering up his back. She'll eke

out the Pampers as she'll eke out her reading: one nappy per night. Lucas won't be allowed near them. He can change Ivan with the cheap ones.

From the hallway beyond the door she hears footsteps. With a swift tap she rolls the drawer back under the bed. Quickly she wipes the sticky milk from her stomach and pulls her shirt across her chest. A soft knock, and Lucas's face appears.

'Asleep?' he mouths. Frances nods. Her husband slides into the room, closing the door behind him with exaggerated care. He's holding something in his hand. Dark green, rectangular, covered in shiny cellophane: a box of After Eights.

'Vee brought them,' he whispers, balancing the box on top of *Jurassic Park*. 'For you. Can they come in and have a look?'

Frances eyes the chocolates with suspicion.

'You didn't tell them, did you?'

'Tell them what?' asks Lucas, staring her down, not blinking in the way he always does when he's guilty. Of course he's told them. He's always telling people how when she was eight she tucked love notes inside the little waxed envelopes and hid them all around her parents' house in Swansea before convincing herself that she was having a baby. He thinks it is funny, and charming; at their wedding reception he turned it into his story, the story of how he knew she was the one he wanted to marry. 'Christ, Fran! What's your problem? It's just a box of chocolates! People want to meet you, they want to get to know you!' He sighs, walks over to the window. 'Look, I know you've had a tough time – you're exhausted. But what else should I say? Just tell me what you want me to say.'

Frances stares at her husband's back, and strokes the little plaster on Ivan's thigh that covers the site of the immunisations he had at the clinic near Clapham Junction only two days before.

'You're still going out then?' she asks, removing Ivan from her breast with a scoop of her little finger. In her head the question seemed conciliatory, disinterested, but these aren't the sounds that come out of her mouth.

'Yes, I'm still going out. You could come too, bring Ivan – Zoya could give us a lift in the car. No one would mind.'

'Or you could stay in. I've only just arrived.'

'This is my job, Fran,' says Lucas, quietly. 'This is why we're here.'

'Right,' mutters Frances. She doesn't look up until he's gone.

\*

Once upon a time, Frances and Lucas told each other a story.



'We are going to live in garret,' said Frances, as the wind outside the tent whipped across the guy ropes and pummelled the flysheet. 'In a crumbly old building with mice scratching in the eaves. I will make soup and sing at the window.'

'And I will pull on my felt boots and go out to bring the news to the people and come home with black bread and bacon. It will be hard,' said Lucas.

'We will be cold,' agreed Frances, 'but I'll learn to knit. And we'll have a stove that I'll feed with kindling -'

'Kindling!' Lucas roared with laughter and pulled the sleeping bag up closer over their heads. 'What sort of a word is 'kindling'?'

'Well,' said Frances, undeterred. 'It's a fairy tale word. It's Dostoevskian. It's... who wrote *And Quiet Flows the Don*?'

'Sholokhov,' said Lucas.

'Then it's Sholokhovian!'

Lucas put his hand up her fleece.

'You're nothing but a peasant underneath that prim exterior... a grubby little Cossack.'

'Yes,' said Frances, as he rolled her over. 'A Cossack. That's *exactly* what I am.'

\*

Frances wakes a little after three a.m. and listens to the click as the front door closes down the hallway. She doesn't move. Ivan is asleep in his new cot at the end of the bed; it took her two hours to settle him after his midnight feed. By the time her husband slides between the clingy nylon sheets her body is rigid with tension.

'Are you awake?' whispers Lucas. His hand brushes her shoulder. A nick of his dry skin catches on her t-shirt. 'Franny?'

Frances says nothing, her thoughts pinning her down. If she responds, he'll want to have sex. They haven't made love properly since Ivan was born. She was too sore from the stitches, too tired. Then he flew back to Kiev. Anyway, sex might wake Ivan. This is what she tells herself. This is the story she'll tell him.

Lucas, however, is drunk and alcohol makes him persistent.

'You're all warm,' he murmurs, nuzzling his chin against her cheek, moving his hand down her breastbone towards her stretchmarked belly. At this, she flinches, turns away from him, fingernails digging into her palms.

'I love you, Fran. I've missed you.' His moist lips wheedle. Soft words. She's got to decide. Her body is recoiling yet her mind still toys with a different version of herself – a hazy, generous version, intent on pleasure, spreading her legs. Let go, Frances. She knows it shouldn't feel like being someone else, turning around, unbending, letting his fingers circle her breasts. Maybe she can do this; it's what couples do and they are a couple. Outside, dogs are barking. It's only natural – don't overthink it. Or think yourself into it.

As Lucas pushes on she shuts her eyes and tries to relax, tries to block out the squeaking noise she hears, not from their bed but wheeling somewhere up above their heads. It's the same noise she heard earlier, in the kitchen. Back and forth it rolls. Up and down. Round and round and round.

## Chapter 2

Lucas and Frances were going to conquer Eastern Europe. So said the best man at their New Forest wedding, the messages in the leaving cards from colleagues and the friends they'd accumulated along the way. Lucas's mother, a twice-divorced reader in Renaissance studies at a northern university, teased her youngest son about his pale-faced bride who couldn't possibly imagine what she was getting herself into. Frances's mother, on the other hand, accepted Lucas as a *fait accompli*, seemingly relieved that her secretive daughter with her silent, strangled rebellions was now off her hands.

Lucas, went the story, was a golden-haired adventurer in pursuit of the exotic, the Slavic, the surreal. Frances, the soft-chinned picture researcher, was swept up in his wake. She wasn't a Romanian spymaster's daughter or a dissident-cum-catwalk model or an almond-eyed soloist from the St Petersburg conservatoire, though this was never discussed openly among the junior sub-editors and fledgling lawyers with whom the couple mingled back in London. She liked Cornwall, and expeditions to the National Portrait Gallery, and drinking cappuccinos in cafes along Northcote Road. No one considered that she might long for somewhere else. Running away was what her father had done, and he was a feckless deceitful bastard in anyone's eyes, most especially Frances's mother's.

Then, one night, a little drunk, Frances had tried to catch a pigeon in Old Compton Street, scooting along with her hands sweeping forward, swearing she'd pluck it and bake it in a pie. Lucas, who felt he was on the cusp of something and might otherwise, at some not-too-distant moment, have ditched her, made a mental note, along with the After Eights story and the Cossack in the sleeping bag and other minor adventures he'd committed to memory. He confessed to his debts, raised a glass to the future and eleven months later, they were married. When he told everyone his new wife was pregnant, eyebrows were raised but really, no one had any idea what this might mean. She'd never made much of an impression.

Now, Frances has a fever. She doesn't leave the apartment for a week – a week in which every day stretches out, each minute an hour. Instead she shuffles up and down the echoing hallway, waiting for the unfamiliar antibiotics that Vee has sent over to ease the infection in her milk ducts. When Ivan is feeding, she lets out a little scream because if she clamps her mouth shut she might bite off her tongue. When he is sleeping she bends over the yellowing bath to scrub the faeces off his clothes so that her breasts hang down, burning and engorged. Then, when the chores are done

she lies on her back and reads *Jurassic Park* slowly, ten pages a day, measuring each word from the first deadly mauling to the infants bitten by strange lizards as she sucks on the wafer-thin chocolates by her bed. Luckily it is an extra-large box, the sort they sell in the airport Duty Free to shell-suited *mafiosi* or liquor reps or the new apparatchiks or maybe foreign journalists with a sick wife holed up in the flat on the thirteenth floor.

Lucas doesn't know how to help her. So he closes the front door behind him and strides about the city, looking for ways to make money, ways to make his name or career, anything to convince himself he's made the right decision and settle the panic in his chest. Radio bulletin after radio bulletin is filed down the wires, grey as President Kravchuk and just as unremarked upon. The revolutions are over and there's no interest at home in the government sackings, the strikes and the price rises, the endless press conferences with their blank officialise and incomprehensible squabbles. Editors want colour, Lucas reckons, a nation's quirks and curiosities served up in ninety-second segments, so he walks down blind alleys, filing short fillers about girls in bright headscarves selling jars of *smetana* outside the monastery or the men in blue overalls who move along the boulevards stripping leaves off the trees. He'll have to be quick: autumn is a day's work in Kiev. Along the wide streets and beneath the market archways, women queue to buy bags of buckwheat flour. They lug them up dark stairwells and mix the flour with water to make a thick grey paste. Newspaper is stuffed into window frames, then daubed with the paste which dries into a tight, brittle seal. The city is sucking itself inwards.

Elena Vasilyevna, caretaker of the apartment block on Staronavodnitska Street, awakes from her nap, and watches to see if the foreign woman on the thirteenth floor will know what to do. She doesn't hold her breath, for the woman doesn't show herself for a week; she certainly doesn't go shopping for the right kind of flour. Instead, when she finally emerges from the lift with her fat little baby in that flimsy foreign buggy, off they dawdle past the kiosks on Kutuzovska Street as if there's no such thing as winter. The baby isn't dressed properly and shouldn't be outside. Elena has tried telling her, but the woman just pulls an ugly face and leaves the lobby door wide open. The buggy makes marks on the floor.

Really, someone needs to put her straight and it's not going to be that lanky husband of hers. He carries a rucksack, for crying out loud. Elena knew a journalist once. He wore a blue serge jacket and a black leather cap. The cap made him look serious – someone who meant business. When they hanged him from the second floor window of the post office it had fallen to the pavement like a fat drop of ink. No one dared touch it for a week.

\*

There are birds in the roof of the Universam. Starlings, or house martins, or maybe some middle-European species. They don't chatter, though their sudden wing-beats startle Frances as she stands in the cavernous state-owned store less than half a mile from the flats on Staronavodnitska Street. She's not sure what's for sale at the counter but a small crowd is milling and someone is pushing behind her and if she circles round to take a look she will lose her place. Some recent advice from Vee still echoes round her head. New deliveries don't stick around for long. Never ignore a queue of more than five people.

It took her ages to find the shop, or market or whatever she is supposed to call it. The antibiotics have muddled her. She felt the same when finally she left the hospital with Ivan. Everything beyond its shiny mint-green corridors seemed unfamiliar, and unreal. This is a hairbrush, she would tell herself. This is a kettle. This is your front door and this is your newborn son.

The Universam is a round concrete bunker with grubby grey and blue tiles tessellating its mushroom-shaped roof like a spaceship from *Star Trek*. It squats in the middle of a courtyard off Kutusovska Street, half hidden by the surrounding horse chestnuts and bourgeois-era apartments with their iron balconies and the scrambling vines that have colonised this part of the city. Rotting leaves gather in its curves. Inside, most of the shelves are bare apart from a row of zinc watering cans and several pyramids of purplish sausage on the opposite side of the store. Despite the lack of goods, women in nylon shop coats lean against the counters that ring the central foyer. Two of them bring out buckets and start to mop the floor. It must be quite a job, with all the bird droppings. The mopped area spreads like a stain.

Frances squints at a one word sign on the wall in front of her. The letters are orange, rounded. She sounds out the Cyrillic characters to herself – 'dee-ay-tee' – and lessens her grip on Ivan's buggy handles as she realises this is a word she knows: 'Children'. Perhaps they'll have some baby wipes. She has been using loo roll dampened with water since her two boxes of Johnson's ran out. It is making Ivan's bottom sore.

The man in front of Frances is blocking the view. He's middle aged, she guesses, wearing a cheaply-finished blouson jacket and stiff, stonewashed jeans. His neck is red, almost raw, and dandruff speckles his shoulders. When he raises a hand to smooth his thinning hair she pulls Ivan's buggy back to avoid any falling flakes. Ivan kicks out his stubby little legs and waves an arm as if he's cranking himself up for something. No one is talking. The air tastes fusty, like an empty church, like the shrines at the monastery on the hill that she passed as she tried to find the dollar shop that Lucas has told her about. The Universam isn't a dollar shop. Its empty symmetry, its hunched silence leach the vapours of a stagnant collective past.

The queue is moving slowly. Someone pushes up behind her. She looks over her shoulder. A young woman in her twenties, about the same age as Frances but with blue eyeshadow and dyed black hair, is nudging her forward. She is licking a slab of white ice cream wrapped in a piece of paper.

*'Ezveneetyie -'* ventures Frances. Excuse me. Her voice sounds louder than she intends and the words aren't the right ones; she only remembers a handful of phrases from the Russian classes she struggled to attend before Ivan was born. She points to the front so the young woman with the eyeshadow will understand that she's asking about the items for sale. The woman, however, sees the buggy and leans around Frances, offering her ice cream to Ivan.

*'Nyet!'* exclaims Frances, putting a hand in front of his mouth. The woman straightens up and frowns as Ivan's arms stick out and he starts to whimper. The man with the dandruff turns around and finally the counter is revealed and Frances can see that the items for sale are not baby wipes but plastic push-along toys, crudely moulded with gurning Donald Duck faces.

As she stares, the aproned clerk behind the counter sucks in her cheeks and pushes out her lips. It is Frances' turn, apparently, despite the other queuers milling. Now she has two choices; walk away, or buy the toy. She takes out her purse.

*'Skolko?'* How much?

Already she knows this is the wrong question. There's no till here, no cashbox. Where does she pay?

The clerk has no time for idiots. She rolls her eyes and beckons to the young woman behind Frances to take her place. Only the man with the dandruff takes pity on her. He turns his head and says something to the clerk, who doesn't look at him but reaches for a pad of thin grey paper and a pen attached to the counter by a piece of string and scribbles down two words. She tears off the slip of paper and pushes it towards the man, who hands it to Frances.

*'Spaseebo,'* she murmurs - thank you - still not sure what to do next. The man nods gravely and points towards a counter a few yards away near the door. The sign above says *Kassa* – cash desk. Of course. She must take the chit and pay at the desk and return with a receipt for the goods. That's what everyone else has been doing. If the man had offered the merest hint of a smile she might have wept.

Ten minutes later, Frances emerges from the Universam with a Donald Duck push-along toy dangling awkwardly from the handles of the buggy. She feels conspicuous, outlandish even, yet no one else seems to notice as she walks back to the apartment block. The old caretaker, thankfully, is absent from the foyer and there's never anyone on the landing, coming and going from the other two flats on the thirteenth floor.

Lucas is in the kitchen when she struggles through the front door. ‘Your first purchase!’ he says, sticking his head into the hallway. ‘Impressive! Shopping like a local! Tomorrow you should walk up through Tsarskoye Selo – the Tsar’s Village. Visit the monastery. You’ll love it.’

Frances opens the cupboard next to the bathroom and pushes the toy inside. ‘Why is it called the Tsar’s Village?’

‘Oh. It’s probably something to do with the monastery and its old Imperial connections – the catacombs beneath were rumoured to stretch all the way to Moscow. Or maybe it’s a dig at those wooden cottages around the hill. Zoya says they were built for Communist Party apparatchiks – a taste of suburbia for local flunkies of one sort or another. Most of them wrecks now, of course.’

Indeed, the cottages of the Tsar’s Village are wrecks. Frances peers at them from the kitchen window. They cling to the slopes that lead up to the thick walls and golden domes of the monastery, little more than wooden shacks, one room upstairs and one room downstairs, a bit of land, broken fences, stray dogs and rusting dump bins.

The shops aren’t really shops, either, though Frances counts five kinds over the next few days as she maps out the neighbourhood with Ivan in his buggy. There’s the Universam, of course, echoing with its empty shelves plus a few household cleaning items such as wire wool and mops and bags of indeterminate powder that might be detergent or flour. There’s the dollar store, called the kashtan, with its jars of out-dated baby food and packets of thick tan tights. Shiny loaves of white bread are baked and sold from a hole in the wall near the Universam, or perhaps it is part of the Universam – Frances isn’t sure. Then there are the concrete kiosks where she can buy dusty yellow packets of Liptons tea, Tampax, stretchy hairbands and sugary drinks from someone with a midriff but no face as the darkened window is always at the waist height of the person inside. Lastly, sometimes, she stops by the old women squatting outside the peeling green doors of the monastery with their meagre displays laid out on cloth squares: a trio of wrinkled lemons; a string of onions or jars of pickled cucumbers that float like grey turds.

Frances practises her Russian: *two, ten thousand, twenty thousand, how much, thank you*. The old women don’t look up. They just stare at her shoes.

\*

Lucas is out on the living room balcony. He is fixing his map of Ukraine to the side wall with pieces of chewed gum. It is taking him a long time to secure it; the gum won’t stick to the tiles.

‘Fran!’ he calls. ‘Fran!’

Frances is sitting on the floor in the kitchen. She is giving her son his first taste of solids. Ivan is semi-upright in his bouncy chair in front of her with a bib under his chin and a panicky look in his eyes. Frances is panicking too. She has memorised the chapter on weaning in *Baby's First Year*, poring over the photographs of messy kitchens and smiling, hippy-ish parents in high-ceilinged Victorian semis so impossibly distant to her now. She has sterilised the spoon, boiled the water, measured out the baby rice she brought with her from England and mixed it to the texture of sloppy wallpaper paste.

'Come out here, Frannie! I want to take a photo of you and Ivan.'

Frances wishes Lucas would go to his press conference. She nudges Ivan's chair a little further away from the open doorway with her foot.

'It's too cold,' she says over her shoulder.

'It's not cold!' shouts Lucas. 'January will be *cold*.' A pause. 'You haven't been out here at all yet.'

Frances halts the plastic spoon in mid-air but she can't blink away the falling baby, the splayed limbs, the flopping head. 'The height makes me feel dizzy,' she murmurs, listening as the balcony door closes and her husband's footsteps approach along the hallway.

'I'm sorry you're not keen on the flat,' he says, leaning against the door frame. A rare memory stabs at him, swift and bright: Frances, his new fiancée on a weekend away in Paris, stretching her arms up into the air from a viewing platform on the Eiffel Tower, flushed and teasing, pretending to fling his passport over the top of the safety barrier. She'd not been dizzy then, he thinks, though his head had been reeling. 'We can't move again. I've paid the year up front. We wouldn't get it back. Anyway, you should have seen the cockroaches in my last place, and the wiring was lethal. This place is brighter, and safer. In the spring we can put a table on the balcony, get some pots, grow some herbs like proper Ukrainians.'

Frances nods, slowly, as if her husband has helped her to accept something she hasn't previously understood, as if this is the last time he needs to mention the subject. She waits for Ivan to open his mouth, then slips the spoon between his lips.

'He doesn't like it much!' says Lucas, peering over Frances's shoulder. 'He's just spitting it back out.'

'He's feeling it with his tongue,' she murmurs, leaning forward and using her little finger to scoop a dribble back into her son's mouth. 'He's not used to anything that doesn't come from me.' These are words she has memorised. They are easy to say. Easier than words about choking, turning blue, not breathing. She doesn't know where the nearest hospital is. Lucas doesn't know if there's an English-speaking doctor and she wouldn't be offering her son solids at all if he didn't scream for milk every two hours. Her body needs a chance to heal.



Lucas straightens up, goes to the window, sees the nearly empty box of After Eights on the windowsill.

‘When did you eat these?’

Now Frances really wants Lucas to leave. She wipes Ivan’s chin with his bib.

‘I thought your press conference was at twelve.’

Lucas is wandering round the little kitchen now. He opens the fridge and peers inside; fingers the packet of baby rice. Then he picks up her copy of *Jurassic Park*.

‘Oh, I’m getting a lift so there’s no rush.’ He flicks through the pages. ‘Christ, you’re not still reading this...’ He doesn’t know about her ten-pages-a-day habit. He doesn’t know that six days ago she reached the part where the newborn’s face is gnawed by baby raptors who climb in through the clinic window while its mother sleeps in the next room. Sometimes, when she’s finished her allotted words she goes back and reads that page again, three, four, five times, tapping each word with her finger, counting its beats to keep her own baby safe. ‘Look,’ he turns towards her, unsure how to tackle his wife’s withdrawal, her silent non-compliance. ‘I know it’s tough for you. You’ve been ill and you’re knackered and you’re doing everything for Ivan, washing his clothes, feeding him yourself, getting up in the night. I really think it would help if you went out more, maybe come to the office sometimes, go into town or up to the monastery or something. You’ve been here over two weeks and barely left the flat.’

‘I do go out,’ she mutters, letting Ivan suck on her finger. He judders slightly and his eyes half close, his whole body focused on satisfying this need; she feels the familiar tingling in her breasts. ‘I found the Universam. And I go out every day for bread. People stare, though - as if I shouldn’t be there. Where are all the other babies?’

Lucas looks at his watch. ‘The population is in freefall,’ he says. ‘I guess couples who do have a child keep them tucked up at home. So - next week I’ll take some time off. We could go to a restaurant. Drive to a park. No – I tell you what – we’ll all go out this afternoon. In the car, down to Kreschatyk. I’ve got some recording to do at the central market and we’ll visit the dollar store near the office. We need to normalise things – find ways to make you more independent. Kiev is an incredible city once you scrape beneath the surface. There’s so much I want to show you.’

He stoops, rubs his hand across her shoulders. Frances fixes her eyes on the curve of her son’s cheek.

‘It might help...’ he falters, still searching for the right words to express an unfathomable doubt. Then the doorbell rings and they are both spared.

It is Zoya, his fixer, of course. Zoya always likes to be at press conferences forty minutes early. She learned English from the World Service and identified herself as the BBC’s eyes and ears in Kiev

long before Lucas arrived. Now she is relegated to errands-runner, translator, driver of the office car. She's a small woman of thirty-six whom Lucas assumes to be at least a decade older because of her bleached yellow hair and the grey teeth she only shows when she's picking them. She pokes her head into the kitchen, her shiny forehead creased into a frown.

'The *dezhornaya* is angry,' she says. 'Dirty nappies are coming down the rubbish chute. They make a bad smell. If you must use the disposable you will have to carry them down to the waste bins yourself. I am passing the message to you, however I am not your messenger. Now, please, the car is downstairs and we must not be late.'

Lucas rolls his eyes at Frances, then he and Zoya are gone, both lighting up before the front door shuts behind them.

Frances doesn't notice, until she looks for it later, that Lucas has taken her book.

\*

'How is your wife enjoying Kiev?' asks the Finance Ministry's press officer.

Lucas turns round. As predicted, he is early for the press conference; the drab room with the usual nylon backdrop rucked in dusty folds behind the podium is only a quarter full. Vee and Teddy are talking near the exit; their heads are angled towards each other. He pulls distractedly on his ear. They look like they're discussing something interesting.

'Oh, it's all good, good...' he murmurs, wondering how the man with mousy flat hair and watery eyes knows about his wife. Maybe Vee's been talking. What's his name? Torin? Tarin? Zoya would know, but he's sent Zoya off to buy more batteries for his tape recorder.

'The BBC is a fine broadcaster,' says the press officer, resting an arm on the back of the neighbouring chair. 'Reputable. We are glad to have you here.'

Now Lucas sits up a little, leans forward, drops his cigarette on the floor. He's heard this sort of thing before, reported by colleagues on recces to Belarus or stints in Moscow or Berlin. It's usually the preamble to some sort of threat. Empty, these days, but old habits die hard. It might make a good opening for a FOOC - From Our Own Correspondent. He needs an angle that'll interest Radio Four, not just the World Service.

'I see you like popular culture.'

'What?' Lucas frowns.

'*Jurassic Park*.' The man is pointing to the inside of Lucas's jacket. 'I know this book. Steven Spielberg is making a film.'

'Oh!' laughs Lucas, sheepish, loud enough for Vee to look over. 'It's not mine. I don't read that stuff. It's my wife's, actually.'

The man nods, as if expecting Lucas to say as much.

'Well, my country has faced many difficult times. There is more bad news today. I, however, like to swim against this tide. *Ukraina* has a brighter future.' The man isn't looking at Lucas; he's looking at the back of his hand, his fingers flexed, as if admiring a new ring on his finger. 'We can work together. On a strong story. A good story. There is someone I would like you to meet.' At these words the man leans in and though Vee is still watching, and might even be strolling over, Lucas doesn't move, doesn't catch her eye because already he is thinking he'll save this one for himself.

### Chapter 3

Zoya is driving down the broad, straight carriageway of Lesi Ukrainsky towards the city centre. Lucas sits in the front passenger seat, one long arm slung around the base of Zoya's headrest. Frances sits behind Zoya with Ivan on her knee. Her arms are clamped tightly around him.

Frances looks out of the window at the spindly plane trees and the grey buildings and the shop signs that use the same kind of blocky orange Cyrillic letters. The words are in Russian, not Ukrainian. She spells out the sounds she recognises: *kee-no-tay-ah-ter* – cinema; *khleb* - bread; *kee-nee-gee* – books; *sok-ee* - she doesn't know that one. The beat of each word takes her mind off the fact that Lucas has taken her book. She needs it back, but must wait until they are alone.

'*Ffsh,*' whistles Zoya as they approach a large pot hole. A broken-down trolley bus on the right means she cannot avoid it. As she slows and eases the car across the fractured tarmac, Frances looks up and sees ten or twelve white faces all looking down at her from the stranded bus.

Zoya is wearing a fur hat with the ear flaps down, even though it is only the middle of October and the heating is on full blast. The ear flaps bounce above her peroxidised bob as the car bumps and sways. Frances can see that she is a careful driver. She doesn't know if this is because Zoya is concerned about the baby, or because she fears for the beige Zhiguli's suspension. The car smells quite new, yet it has the character of something already past middle-age with its sagging ceiling, its friable plastic fittings and creaking underbelly.

Frances doesn't care about the car. She can't stop thinking about her missing book.

'*Ree-sta-ran,*' she whispers into Ivan's soft ear. '*Too-flee.*'

'Zoya,' says Lucas. 'I need you to do some research for a feature I'm working on. What do you know about Pavlo Polubotok? You know – that legend about the Cossack leader's hidden gold?' He winds his window down an inch or two.

Zoya checks the rear-view mirror as she does every fifteen seconds or so, actually moving her head in the way that Frances' driving instructor told her to do before she took her test. Then she indicates and turns right. Only when the car is settled into its new course does she respond.

'Hetman,' she says. 'The hetman's gold. It is a fool's dream. In this country there are many fools.'

Lucas nods, undeterred. 'Well, okay, like I said, it's a legend, but it stands for something, doesn't it? I mean, it stems from some kind of historical fact. Polubotok was a real Ukrainian hetman, right? In 1723? And no one has managed to disprove the claim that he smuggled two barrels of gold across

to London for safe keeping when he thought he was in trouble with the Tsar. So, what I'm interested in is the contemporary response. He promised that the gold would be returned when Ukraine was finally free. I heard some nationalist poet took up the story and after making a few calculations about compound interest on the back of an envelope, declared that it was now worth sixteen trillion pounds sterling and that this money belongs to all true Ukrainians.'

Frances sees Zoya's eyes narrow momentarily in the rear-view mirror. Zoya catches her looking and, embarrassed, Frances lowers her head.

'That madman has been discredited,' says Zoya, braking carefully for a red light.

'Yes,' says Lucas, fingering his pack of Marlboro. 'Obviously. But it's the *effect*. It's a metaphor for the state of the place, the way people are thinking. The dream of rightful ownership, denied for so long, a pot of gold, reclaiming past glory, a nationalist resurgence...'

'There is nothing new to report. The news is old.'

'Okay.' Now Lucas is getting annoyed. He shifts in his seat, puts an unlit cigarette in his mouth then takes it out and tries again. 'But it's not the legend itself I want to focus on. There's going to be a film made about it - some young director at the Dovzhenko studios. I've been given exclusive access.' He twists round and rolls his eyes at Frances, looking for an ally, someone who will be as delighted as he is with the prospect of a scoop. 'It's got everything, this story, Frannie - the revival of Kiev's film industry, arts, big finance, local colour and great actuality. I might even get one of the Sunday supplements interested, or syndicate it and start earning some proper money. Definitely a half hour feature for Radio Four.' He hesitates. 'We've got to be discreet, though, Zoya, okay? I'm not sharing this one.'

Zoya, however, is shaking her head. 'Why do English people use this word "story"?' she grumbles, turning the wheel and pulling into a space amongst some haphazardly parked trucks. 'Stories are for children.'

'Christ,' mutters Lucas, so that both women can hear. 'A little enthusiasm wouldn't go amiss.'

\*

The Bessarabsky market hunches beside a noisy interchange at the western end of Kreschatyk, downwind of Independence Square. When Frances climbs out of the Zhiguli, the cacophony of cars and trucks and trolleybuses takes her by surprise; this is her first proper trip downtown and it takes a moment to remember how she has pitched up here. Then she sees a dirty white building with a domed glass roof like a railway station and MINOLTA in large Latin letters above the entrance. There are people everywhere, rustling up business through the exhaust fumes: boys washing cars with

filthy pieces of rag, aproned women in a line selling jars full of every shade of honey along with bunches of wilting herbs; two khaki-coated men sitting down to beg except she sees that they're not sitting, exactly. They don't have any legs.

Lucas slings his rucksack over his shoulder and starts unfolding the buggy. 'This is the Bessarabsky,' he explains. 'It's unregulated, pricey, but they bring in fresh produce from Kazakhstan and the Caucasus – so no contamination problems. Fruit, meat, eggs, cheese...'

*Ree-nok, ree-nok*, thinks Frances, not moving. Before she goes inside, she needs to find out about her book. Then, just as she begins to frame the question, her husband starts waving at someone.

'Hey Lucas!' calls a female voice, assured, Canadian. Vee is emerging from an archway with Teddy in tow. 'And Frances! How are you? Did the drugs help? Look at this little fella! Hello beautiful boy... It's so nice to see you out and about! Now, Frances, I've got to tell you, there's an English woman living in the block next to you. Actually I think she's Scottish. Or should that be a Scot? You can be friends! I've got her phone number somewhere. Someone at the Finance Ministry passed it to me.'

'What are you two doing here?' asks Lucas, who can see Vee's notebook poking out of her shoulder bag.

'Oh,' says Teddy, smiling at Frances and holding up a jar of lumpy soured cream. 'Vee always hunts down the best *smetana*.'

\*

Frances stands inside the entrance, waiting for Lucas. She is watching a man arranging apples. First he takes one from a crate and spits on it. Then he rubs it with a rag until it gleams. The glossiest fruit is placed at the front of a pyramid he is building, alternating green with deep red. She doesn't want to watch him; she wants to knock his pyramid down because the red and green apples shouldn't touch each other but Ivan's big grey eyes are staring from beneath his knitted balaclava. The fruit is keeping him quiet. Or maybe he's listening to the croaky tirade from an old man by the entrance, or the flapping of wings in the domed roof overhead. Frances looks up and sees white dust drifting down from the skylight. It isn't feathers though, or snow. It is tiny flakes of paint.

'Hey,' says Lucas, stepping up behind her. 'Shall we get some fruit?' He's still fiddling with his tape recorder. The microphone is sticking out of his pocket.

Frances looks over his shoulder. The tall woman in brown overalls he was talking to is now loading jars of yellowish soured cream into a box. She bangs the box down on the back of a hand-cart and wipes her hands across her chest.

‘I’m all done,’ says Lucas. ‘The women weren’t very talkative. Vee’s already done a piece, apparently. I should have known she wasn’t just shopping. Nice of her to remember about that Scottish woman though – great for you to start to make your own friends here.’ He taps out a cigarette from the pack in his hand. ‘At least I’ve got some actuality for my sound library. Background chatter. The domed roof makes for some interesting acoustics.’

The apple man is leaning over his pyramid, offering Lucas a slice of green apple on the end of his knife. Lucas takes it. ‘*Spaseebo*. You never know when you’ll need stuff like that. When you’re up against a deadline.’

Something swoops suddenly, almost skimming Lucas’s shoulder. Frances ducks her head but it is only a small bird. ‘Where’s my book?’ she asks, her voice harsher than she intends.

‘What book?’ asks Lucas.

‘The book I was reading. The book in the kitchen this morning. You took it. *Jurassic Park*.’

Now Lucas remembers. His face is a picture of dissembling.

‘Oh – you weren’t still reading it, were you?’

‘Where is it?’

The apple man is stretching between his pyramids, offering a piece of red skinned apple to Frances.

‘Lady, Lady? You like? *Krasni yabloki, ochen kharoshi...*’

Lucas waves the man away. He’s going to have to brazen it out.

‘I’m afraid I haven’t got it. One of the press officers asked if he could read it. The one who told me about the new film, actually. Sorin, or Sarin... He’s a fan of Spielberg. I could hardly say no.’

Frances can taste something sour at the back of her throat; her palms prickle with sweat. She needs to stay calm yet all she can think about are the pages she hasn’t read, the ten pages she must read before the night comes.

‘You – you *gave* it to him?’

‘Well, yes. I thought you’d finished it. Come on, Frannie, it’s just some crappy airport novel!’

Lucas has no inkling. He doesn’t know what he’s done. Frances needs to make good the ritual, a ritual that has been nudging, soundlessly, at the edge of her consciousness but which now snaps into focus.

The balcony is waiting. Ivan is not safe. She is going to have to compensate.

\*

When Frances was fourteen she answered an ad in the local paper. Babysitter wanted, it said. For a girl and a boy aged six and three. One pound an hour.

The house was an old rectory and Frances thought it beautiful, despite the spiders. The garden was rambling, the wallpaper on the stairs was sprigged with yellow roses, the bathroom had actual beams in it. When the parents went out for the evening, for drinks or 'supper with friends', she moved through the rooms, touching the comfortable furnishings, stroking the family's chocolate Labrador and all the while thinking how, one day, she would have a home like this one. The children had dark hair and blue eyes and she was bewitched by their fierce stares and quick fingers and high, mercurial voices.

'You're not the leader,' said Alice, the six year old, on Frances' first visit. 'I am.'

Then one afternoon she was asked if she'd mind staying overnight. The parents were driving up to London and wouldn't return until two or three in the morning, too late really to run her back home. They'd pay her for her time, they said. She jumped at the chance to sleep in the cosy little guest room. Her own mother didn't object.

So, that evening, Frances chased the children round the garden, to tire them out. She fed them fish fingers, though they didn't put salad cream on theirs. She bathed them in the sloping bathroom, dried and dressed them in their brushed cotton pyjamas and gave the little boy, William, a piggyback to the bedroom their parents called 'the nursery'.

Then something bewildering happened. Frances had left her watch in the bathroom and as she went back to fetch it, she heard the nursery door close behind her. When she returned, the door had been locked from within.

'Alice,' she called, jiggling the door knob. Now she could hear whispering and the sound of bed springs from the other side. 'Let me in.'

Alice didn't answer. Frances knelt down and put her eye to the keyhole. She couldn't see anything – the key was still in the lock.

'Alice, please come to the door and turn the key. You've locked me out! You told me you wanted a story!'

'You're not my mummy or my daddy,' said Alice, as if from far away. That was all Frances could get out of her.

For the first hour or so she tried to reason with the siblings, bribing them with biscuits they weren't supposed to eat but Alice wouldn't let William approach the door. Then, when William started crying and his wails mounted in distress, Frances banged on the old pine panels, pushed against them with her shoulder as disaster piled on imagined disaster.



'Please, Alice. William is frightened. You're being mean. Please, Alice. You can both sleep in my bed. *Please...*'

William's cries faded to dry shudders. By about eleven, the sounds had stopped altogether and Frances tried to block out images of him lying on the floor, slowly strangled by a sheet or stabbed through the eye with one of Alice's carefully sharpened colouring pencils. The children's parents had left a phone number downstairs yet she was too scared to make the call because they were sixty miles away and this would set events in motion that she didn't want to contemplate. No, she was on her own.

She sat down on the floor, leaned her head against the door and made a loud sobbing sound. It wasn't difficult; she was close to tears, anyway. After some minutes, Alice turned the key. She opened the door and stared down at Frances.

'Why are *you* crying?' she asked.

Frances took the key and placed it on top of the fridge in the kitchen. When morning came, the father drove her home in silence. She was never asked to babysit at the old rectory again.

\*

Zoya drops Lucas at the office and drives Frances and Ivan back to Staronavodnitska Street. All the way back up Lesi Ukrainski, Frances leans against the window and mutters syllables under her breath. *Kee-nee-gee; ree-nok; kee-no-tay-ah-ter, sok-ee...*

Back at the flats, Frances wills herself not to look up to the thirteenth floor, towards the blank windows and the balconies. The sky is darkening like a child's charcoal smudge. She walks slowly up the steps with Ivan in her arms, leaving the buggy in the boot for Lucas to fetch later. Inside, the foyer is gloomy; she can't see if the caretaker is sitting in her cubicle, though she feels the old woman's judgement upon her, her dislike of her behaviour, her presence here and her baby's foul detritus.

The strip lights aren't working and neither is the lift. As Frances passes the pock-marked metal post boxes she smells burning paper.

*Adeen, dva, tree, chityrie, pyat* she counts as she climbs the stairs.

When Ivan is asleep, Frances pulls the empty After Eight box out of the bin in the kitchen, sits down at the table and opens the lid. She removes the corrugated lining and stares at the dark waxy sleeves, lined up like gills, still smelling faintly of peppermint.

She plucks out one of the sleeves, rubs it between her fingers, then, gently, squeezes its sides. The opening gapes a little. She wants to put something inside.

Slowly, frowning, she picks up a biro and writes some words on a scrap of squared paper.

*The tropical rain fell in great drenching sheets.*

She knows these words. She read them in the book that Lucas lost. She puts down the biro and folds the piece of paper three times, scoring the edges with her thumbnail. Then she slots it into the After Eight sleeve and tucks it between the others in the box. There.

The note is well hidden but all the same, it bothers her. After a few minutes she picks up the box and carries it into the hallway. Out on the shared landing, she shivers. Her reflection looms in the window by the rubbish chute. The iron handle is cold to touch and even before she pulls it towards her she can smell the sweet stench of rotting vegetables and the soiled nappies she's thrown away earlier. As the dark interior gapes, a rush of cold air blows up from below. The chute door clangs and she frowns as her deposit tumbles all the way down to the bin at ground level, to the caretaker who will finger it in the morning, sniff its strangeness no doubt, then toss it on the little fire she tends beside the cracked concrete path.

Back inside the flat, pipes grunt and cough. The girders above Frances's head stretch and creak and the squeaking, rolling sound like trolley wheels on a hard floor has started up again. Ivan murmurs in his cot, awake and round-eyed, but as she bends to pick him up she sees her hands letting go of the After Eights box and she knows that she must protect her child from such a fate, so she carries him to the kitchen instead of the living room, then pulls up a chair and stares through the darkness down to Staronavodnitska Street with its shrieking, sparking tramline and on to the river where the floodlit titanium bulk of the Motherland statue raises her sword to the heavens. Yes, she thinks as she raises her shirt and grits her teeth when her son's gums clamp on: that statue is another hollow thing in this black night.

\*

'Dedush?'

Zoya's voice carries across the tiny hall and into the dimness beyond. Her grandpa doesn't answer. No one answers. For the past seventeen years it's been Zoya's name on the papers for this left bank apartment, across the river on the outer edges of the industrial zone in Dornystia, yet still she cannot enter without calling out, as if asking permission. She closes the door behind her and sniffs the sharp scent of the blackberry leaf tea her neighbour brews to disguise the smell of urine. As she unzips her boots by the coat stand, then removes and hangs up her skirt, she considers

making a cup for herself, but instead pushes open the door to her left, the only room, apart from the cramped cubby holes that serve as kitchen and bathroom. There is no sound from the bed that takes up most of the floor space, though a dull glow from the fringed lamp on the table shows a figure lying motionless beneath the covers. 'I'm home, Dedush,' she says. 'I'll just wash my hands.'

In the bathroom, Zoya switches on the light and counts the sheets bunched up on the cracked tiles by the toilet. Two. It used to bother her that Tanya, her neighbour, wouldn't rinse them out. Now she doesn't think about it. Tanya might drink her tea and forage in her drawers but without her daily appearances, Zoya wouldn't be able to go to work at all. She unhooks the shower head and turns on the tap. Water trickles out; at least it is warm this evening. She breathes in the chemical smell of the soap powder and stands there in her nylon slip, eyes closed, water pattering on the sheets as if they are a row of blackcurrant bushes outside her back door.

When the sheets are hung, dripping, over the bath, Zoya pulls on a faded floral housecoat and shuffles back to the kitchen in her slippers. She is too tired to cook but there's cold soup on the stove and she eats some straight from the pan before decanting a little into a bowl, taking care to remove the soft lumps of cabbage. As she turns to look for a spoon, a note, scrawled on the back of an envelope and left underneath a bottle of yellow medicine on the windowsill catches her eye. 'Going to my sister's,' it reads. 'Back Thursday.' So, Tanya is taking a break. Zoya can't go to work tomorrow. She'll have to call Lucas, and tell him the car's got a problem, that she's taking it to her cousin's to get it fixed and he'll grumble about how that's what happens when the BBC gives them a tin can in a city full of pot holes.

She places the bowl of soup on a tray, along with a slab of white salo cut from a plate in the ancient refrigerator and a few slices of pickled cucumber. Then she takes two glasses and pours water in one, before filling the other with vodka from a bottle she keeps under the sink.

'Here we are, Dedush,' she murmurs, carrying the tray into the bedroom.

The air above the bed smells of old skin and stale breath and when Zoya sits down on the only chair, the figure beneath the bedclothes releases a feeble stream of wind. 'Dedush,' she whispers, bending down to kiss the top of his bony head. She tends to him then, cajoling him into raising his head, easing him up onto the bolster, bringing a spoon of soup to his mouth, wiping his chin with the bib that Tanya has left there while her grandfather's facial muscles strain and his tongue feels for the shapes of the words he can no longer find.

'I saw someone else doing that today,' she tells him. 'The English woman, trying to speak words in Russian. Not as beautifully as you, though, my darling.' And when the soup is done, and she has eaten the salo and the pickle and drunk some of the vodka, she dips her little finger into the glass and pokes it, so gently, between his lips.

## Chapter 4

Elena the caretaker is pickling beetroot. Her arthritis is playing up now the weather is colder and her shoulder joints grind, bone on bone, so she has enlisted the help of Olek, the boy from the fourteenth floor. Olek's job is to hold each jar steady while she stands on a stool and ladles in the soft purple heads. When the lids are secure and the jars wiped clean she will store them beneath the sink in her lean-to kitchen on the hill in Tsarskoye Selo, along with the bottled pears and tomatoes, the trays of chitting potatoes and the onion seeds in their twists of yellowed newspaper.

Olek screws up his face as the steam rises in vinegary clouds. He wants payment, of course, and he has a taste for preserved cherries but he will have to make do with twenty *kouponi*. Elena knows about hunger. Winter is coming. You must hold on to what you've got.

## Chapter 5

Frances is standing in a stranger's apartment. She shifts Ivan onto her hip and turns her head slowly, eyes skimming from one object to another as her brain realigns itself to the changes in tone, texture, scale.

'It's so white,' she murmurs. 'Everything is so white.' The tasteful shades of pale envelop her within their seductive, muffling depths. She wants to sniff the cream leather armchair, sink her toes into the sheepskin rug, run her fingers across the Egyptian cotton tablecloth and even slip into the silky white blouse her host is wearing as she pours coffee into milk-smooth porcelain cups. The lack of blemish reminds Frances of her mother's precious face cream. Elizabeth Arden – Visibly Different. For years she had watched her mother apply soft white dabs every night, frowning at the mirror, massaging her cheeks in slow, careful circles. Yet when Frances, aged nine, had tried it for herself, sliding a fingerful under her vest and rubbing it across her stomach and chest, her mother had been furious. Such pleasures were only for grown ups.

Suzie, the Scottish woman Vee told her to call, straightens up and pushes her long ash blond hair back over her shoulder.

'White is so easy, don't you think?'

Frances has been staring too long, but she can't help it. The only white things in the flat on the thirteenth floor are the Pampers, though the pile is depleting daily. Even Ivan's once white vests and cot sheets are stained a greyish yellow. She can't quite believe the existence of this pure, untainted space on the eighth floor of the neighbouring building.

'It's beautiful,' she says, to Suzie.

'Well, it's easy for us. Rob just brings it all in through Finland.'

'What does he do?' asks Frances.

'Do?' Suzie rolls her carefully mascaraed eyes. 'Pisses about, mainly. Don't they all? He's got lorries. Leases them for cross border imports. Sofas, freezers, all that stuff. You can't get anything decent down on Kreschatyk. A few folksy linens; painted trays and lacquered boxes – nothing you want to *keep*. If you're planning to stay you'll have to bring in your own furniture. Our things here are mainly Swedish though I made him bring out a few pieces from our house back at home.' She walks over to a lime-washed bureau, picks up a photograph in a plain silver frame and hands it to Frances. The photograph shows a beautiful clap-boarded cottage with green wooden shutters and

the sea, blue and hazy, in the background. 'That's us. Suffolk, near Aldeburgh. Where they have that music festival.'

Frances blinks. This woman, this Suzie makes it all seem so effortless. Of course her *real* home is a cottage in Suffolk. There are other pictures, too: a bridal couple in a village churchyard, soft focused, all daisies and cow parsley; a broad-chested man in a wetsuit, the top half peeled off, drinking a beer on a beach. This is how people live back in England, she thinks. Where things are nice.

Ivan bumps his head crossly against her shoulder blade. She remembers that her back is aching. 'Do you mind if I put Ivan down?' she asks. 'I've got a change mat in my bag in case he leaks.'

Suzie is slicing into some freshly baked apple cake. 'Of course.' She puts a plate beside Frances and sits down, her right hand encircling her left wrist. 'Sometimes I think I'd like a baby. Rob's adamant though. Not happening.'

'Oh...' Now Frances doesn't know what to say. She lies Ivan down on his vinyl sheet and glances again towards the photograph of the man in the wetsuit.

Suzie laughs. 'It's okay. Hard to imagine a child in this flat. It can't be easy. For you, I mean. With a baby, *here...*'

Ivan is kicking his legs on the mat, staring up at the recessed lights in the ceiling. Here, in this apartment where she feels like she's floating, even though it's on a lower floor than her own, her son looks just like any other baby - all the babies she ever saw before she had one herself. Her head is full of words she might speak: it's fine, everything's fine, nothing is fine; millions of women have done it before her and in markedly more difficult circumstances; the health visitor told her it wasn't safe to come though she had to come, had to escape her own mother with her bitter jibes and injunctions - she's lucky to be here at all; sometimes she wishes she'd never had a baby, never met Lucas. The balcony crumbles, the baby falls, she raises her arms above her head and flings her son into the void but not if she remembers that her sole task is to keep him away from the edge...

'Lucas says I get a bit obsessive,' she says, surprising herself. 'I do worry though. I keep getting infections, and I don't know any doctors. What if he gets sick?'

'Oh there are nurses at most of the embassies, and I've heard there's a British doctor coming soon. Don't go near a local hospital - dark ages and all that. You can always fly back to London. What about your mum?' Suzie pauses, waiting, but when Frances remains silent, she breezes on. 'God, if I had a baby, my mother would be on the first plane out. And then Rob would leave me!' She laughs again, a throaty laugh like the laugh of a smoker, and Frances notices a little loose skin beneath her chin - she's probably nearly forty, though her body is toned and her limbs are slender.

‘Look,’ says Suzie, turning up the sleeve of her blouse to reveal a thin elastic band around her wrist. ‘My shrink told me to do it. Every time I feel stressed about something I give this a ping.’ She pulls it away with her other hand, then lets it go so that it snaps back against her blue-veined skin. ‘It stopped me craving carbs, stopped me getting lazy... Maybe it’ll stop me wanting kids.’

When they have finished their coffee, Suzie shows Frances around the rest of the flat. There are two bedrooms, one with a rowing machine set up on the floor. The main bedroom contains an ornate limed oak sleigh bed with a mound of white bedlinen piled up in the middle. Frances admires the way Suzie doesn’t care about her seeing the unmade bed. She notices the expensive toiletries, the half-open wardrobe revealing soft sweaters and pressed shirts. There are white towels in the bathroom; a gleaming white Kenwood Chef sits on the counter in the kitchen.

‘We should do dinner,’ says Suzie, when it’s time to slide Ivan back into his snowsuit. ‘Sometime next week. Rob would love to meet you both. He’s keen on some new restaurant near Andriyevsky Spusk. The food is terrible of course, but it’s fun.’

‘Okay,’ says Frances, thinking this is how it’s done – you have coffee with someone, you introduce your husbands and then you are friends. Maybe things can be smoothed, made white and safe with pings from an elastic band.

Lucas will be pleased.

\*

When Lucas returns that evening, Frances is reading her copy of *Baby’s First Year*. She has reached page sixteen. No skim-reading; she’ll have to start again if she fails to enunciate every single word in her head. This book, she knows, will never carry the compensatory power of *Jurassic Park*, yet it offers some distraction. Reading out loud is permitted, though only if Ivan is awake. Right now he is dozing in his bouncy chair which she taps with each new syllable.

‘The line’s out in the office,’ says Lucas, walking into the kitchen before Frances can turn her page. ‘Just when I’m ready to file. I’m going to have to do it here.’

Frances closes the book and places it on the table. She hasn’t worked out what to do if a page cannot be completed but the memory of Suzie’s elastic band still pricks sharp and bright. Just a pinch for now, then. Her finger and thumbnail pluck at the pale skin on the inside of her wrist.

‘What, in the living room?’ She pushes the book against the wall behind the fruit bowl and places the salt cellar on top of it.

‘No, in *here*. The acoustics are cleaner – less echo - and the phone cable is long enough to reach from the hall.’ Lucas squats down and squeezes Ivan’s stubby foot. ‘If the quality’s okay then London doesn’t care where I file from and I could spend a bit more time with you two, maybe. It’s

all coming together now, Frannie – there’s an Interior Ministry trip to Lviv next week – just a day - and the news pieces are coming in so I can’t avoid the press pack, but I can do most of the background for the film feature from home.’

He looks so convincing; Frances’s visit to Suzie’s has made her feel like someone else and so, for a few minutes, with her book tucked away and while her husband sets the kettle on the stove, then untangles wires and fetches a black metal box from the hall with plastic knobs and little dials before stepping onto the freezing balcony for a smoke while he reads through his notes, Frances believes him. She believes he is a good journalist, a serious journalist who thinks on his feet and understands what is required and how to get it done. This is his profession and she is his wife and the mother of his child to whom he comes home and for whom he makes coffee and smokes out on the treacherous balcony.

She watches him set up his microphone, adjust the levels. She even feels a little guilty that he can’t light up in the kitchen while he works. Maybe tonight it will be all right, if he is gentle, if his piece is well-received and they can play at being this straightforward couple a little longer. Crisp white sheets. Photos on the side table.

‘I went over to Suzie’s today,’ she says. ‘You know, the woman who lives in the other block. Vee put me in touch with her. She’s invited us for dinner next week. To a restaurant.’

‘Great!’ says Lucas, but he is absorbed now, pressing one side of a set of bulky headphones against his ear and dialling the number for the newsroom at Bush House. And this is okay, too, so she retrieves her book, picks up Ivan in his bouncy chair and decamps to the bedroom.

‘You won’t make a noise, will you?’ she whispers as she sits on the bed, opens her shirt and puts Ivan to her breast. ‘Daddy’s busy.’ She shuts her eyes, bites her lip until the pain subsides, then listens to the low, modulated sounds from the kitchen and drifts off for a few minutes to the rhythmic squeaking that comes from somewhere above the ceiling. Daddy’s busy Daddy’s busy Daddy’s busy Daddy’s busy.

The mantra doesn’t work.

She opens her eyes. Lucas is shouting in the kitchen.

‘What’s the matter?’ she calls, leaving Ivan asleep on the bed.

‘Bush House won’t use my piece! They say they can’t strip out that noise from upstairs! That squeaking! I’m going up there. Some randy wanker... how am I supposed to get anything done in this place?’ He marches down the hall; slams the front door behind him.

Now Frances doesn’t know what to do. After a few seconds, she decides to follow him. Out she goes, onto the stale grey landing, past the rubbish chute and through the heavy door to the concrete stairs. Not the lift.



The fourteenth floor feels strange. There are three doorways, the usual locks and quilted sound-proofing, spyholes, but one door has a rubber doormat outside while another has a complicated bell. Lucas is already knocking. Frances stands a little way behind him, not sure now that she wants the squeaking noise to stop. Nevertheless, she doesn't intervene.

They hear a low muttering. Lucas knocks again. This time, a cough, then suddenly the door swings open and an older man steps out.

'Sto?' he says, aggressively. 'What?'

Frances doesn't catch her husband's reply. In the rectangle of electric light behind the man's sagging outline she looks down a hallway that is exactly like their own. The floors are bare, the same over-varnished parquet and she can tell that all the doors in the flat are open because more light spills out from them and into that light swings a boy on rollerblades. He is tall, with a child's narrow chest and he is naked apart from some old cotton pants that don't cover a flaky red patch of skin on his hip. He looks twelve, maybe thirteen and she realises she's seen him before, perhaps in the lift or loitering near the kiosks by the Eternal Flame. He glides towards the old man's back and just when she thinks he is going to crash into him he executes a sharp, squeaking turn and stumbles a little before pressing his hand against the wall and pushing off back down towards the bedroom.

The old man heaves up his trousers with his thumbs. '*Kalyeny!*' he shouts over his shoulder before turning back to Lucas. Frances catches his eye, though she doesn't mean to, and at that precise moment she realises her arms are unencumbered - she has left her son on the bed downstairs instead of in his cot and she cannot recall if the door was shut behind her. Her chest constricts, she imagines him falling, down through the parquet and the concrete and the joists, down like the nappies in the rubbish chute, crumpling and flopping and broken.

She utters a soft cry, turns and clatters down the stairs.

\*

The boy, Olek, sees two faces beyond his uncle's shoulder. Two faces like pale moons in the vestibule's darkness. The man is angry, affronted. The woman flees, but first she looks. He spins on his toe and pushes off from the wall with his hand. Too late, he remembers to bend his knees and he knows he will be chastised. So be it. The rollerblades squeak on the parquet as he glides back to the bedroom. That woman, he thinks, is being beaten by that man. Some days he hears her crying and, once, a muffled scream.

Mykola will want to know, he thinks. Mykola wants to know everything.

## Chapter Six

'Restoran Beggi' doesn't have a sign - not one that Frances can see. She steps back across the pavement of the little side street that runs northeast from Kreschatyk towards St Sophia's and peers up at the stone facade. It looks like all the other downtown apartment buildings in the darkness: everything a little larger than it needs to be with its chunky corner blocks, chiselled grooves and deep, frowning doorways. Like the sets from *Batman*, she thinks: the mocked-up Gotham of a Saturday night TV show, except this stone is solid, and cold.

'The new restaurants like a bit of mystery. Gives them an air of exclusivity,' says Lucas, throwing away his cigarette and pointing down some narrow steps. 'We're in the cellar, apparently. Here - give me the pushchair.'

Frances wheels Ivan's buggy over to the top of the steps and lets her husband grasp the sides. She wants to get Ivan into the warmth. The temperature has dropped to minus two or three and a feathering of hoar frost makes the steps dangerously slippery. She is concentrating so hard on conveying her son to safety that she doesn't see the figure at the bottom until Lucas backs into him.

A short burst of Russian ensues, with some halting protestation from Lucas who can't set the buggy down while the man, hands in the pockets of his bulging leather jacket, bars the way.

'For crying out loud... He says we can't take the pushchair inside!'

Frances reaches out and grips the handles, easing the wheels of the buggy back onto the top step. She has already half-imagined that something like this would happen. Changing her clothes in the bedroom, tugging her pre-pregnancy silk shell top over her head, adding her blue lambswool cardigan with its slight pilling under her breasts and digging out a pair of dangly earrings that she hasn't worn since the night she left her job with the travel publisher - it is easy to find herself not passing muster. Anyway, Ukrainians don't like babies; she's witnessed it herself dozens of times - the stares, the refusal to make way, the casual acceleration of cars when she crosses the road with the pushchair. The men are as bad as the old women.

'He says the baby is okay, but not the pushchair,' translates Lucas, clouds of breath rising out of the stairwell as he huffs his exasperation. 'How does he think that's going to work? Fucking ridiculous.'

'I'm not leaving it outside,' says Frances.

'Of course not,' says a low, lilting voice. Frances turns to see Suzie looking down into the darkness. 'It's all right,' continues Suzie. 'Rob will get it sorted.'

As she speaks, a stocky, square headed man in a black padded jacket moves past her. At the bottom of the steps he murmurs quietly to the doorman. Nothing changes hands - no tip. Just words. Then they are all waved inside as though the problem has never existed.

'Nicely done,' says Lucas, as the four of them introduce themselves in the little foyer, shake hands. 'You've been here before?'

Rob smiles as he helps Frances and Suzie off with their coats. He has heavily lidded eyes, freshly barbered hair and thick, short arms beneath his jacket. 'Sure,' he says, so that Lucas and Frances both know this is his night and he is in charge of everything that may or may not unfold.

Ten minutes later, the four of them, plus Vee, who has persuaded Lucas to invite her, are seated at a smallish central table behind a brick pillar. Frances asked Rob if she could tuck Ivan's buggy in somewhere unobtrusive, but Ivan was having none of it and started crying, so now he is propped up in her lap.

'Where's Teddy tonight?' asks Lucas.

'Oh, Teddy...' says Vee, with her faux-mournful, teasing voice. 'Doing his thing, night-stalking, looking for sleaze...'

Rob laughs. 'I hope he can afford it,' he says.

'You should see him!' exclaims Vee. 'He never pays.'

The restaurant is cramped, overheated, with tables and chairs of shiny pine and some folkly artefacts arranged around the walls. A harsh electric light is supplied by two fake-wooden candelabra that dangle from the ceiling, and the room feels both too bright and oddly dull. Rob quickly arranges for the lights to be switched off and some candles lit instead. It isn't busy - two dark-suited men sit in the opposite corner, and a couple of heavily made-up young women sip cokes near the door. Three half bottles of Stolichnaya are delivered to the table by a silent young waitress in a tight black dress, along with some imported beer and little plates of cured salo and sliced pickle. Frances sits facing the pillar, Lucas on one side, Vee on the other. Suzie, opposite, rests her hands on the table and smiles, Rob on her right. She looks beautiful in the low light, thinks Frances. Her cheekbones are dusted with some shiny powder and her hair is scooped up into a soft pile. Frances can't see Suzie's elastic band - her wrists are covered by her creamy angora sweater. She keeps glancing around at Rob, then back to Lucas and again across to Frances. She seems happy to have them all there together.

'Right,' says Rob, leaning across and pouring the chilled, oily vodka into five glasses. He is wearing a navy polo shirt with the collar raised up at the back. 'There's no menu, but the mushrooms are excellent and they don't overcook the pork.'

'And welcome to the cutest baby in town!' says Vee, laughing as Ivan clutches at Frances's wrist and smiles with his mouth open, his soft chin shiny with drool. 'This little guy's got to get out more often!'

As the young waitress brings iron pans of mushrooms in garlicky melted cheese to the table and the others talk about what it is like to work in this city with its excise restrictions and corruption and the petty vendettas in parliament and the catastrophic inflation that is screwing the population to the floor, Frances sips her vodka and feels the liquid burn her throat. While Vee entertains Ivan, she wonders at how all this might actually be real - restaurants, meeting people, talking and eating and drinking. Why shouldn't it be real? She smiles across at Suzie and nods and composes her face as if she belongs here, for a while.

Lucas and Vee are describing their latest visit to Chernobyl.

'It's a kind of hyper-reality,' says Lucas, stabbing at a mushroom. 'Pripyat more so than the reactor itself. I'm not saying it's surreal because we're all tired of that cliché, but it's weird to walk through those buildings and look out over the old playgrounds, the schools with everything either shattered or looted. Silence and stillness aren't great for radio, mind you. I recorded some footsteps walking through one old gastronom, through snow, then broken glass, then stopping and talking so you get this great echo in the old Hall of Sport and Culture.'

'What about safety?' asks Suzie in her soft Edinburgh voice. 'Was it safe?'

Lucas shrugs. 'We had all the gear on. Overalls and slip on shoes and disposable caps. I took the Geiger counter and they keep tracking the hot spots. One Russian guy – some kind of scientist - told me he wore a lead undergarment. I didn't ask to see it, but maybe I should have – must've chafed!'

'You've got to change vehicles when you reach the restricted zone,' says Vee. 'That's the funny part. We all totter off the rusting press bus and get allocated seats in the limos that haven't been allowed to leave the area. So I'm being driven through Pripyat in this crazy fucking Zil – the only time I'll ever get a ride in one of those.'

Rob is wiping his mouth with his napkin.

'That restricted zone is a waste of time,' he says. 'It's arbitrary, out of date and it's holding back my trucks. There's a good road cuts round to the west, clips the north east border of Belorus and then straight down to Kiev but because of some Ministry knee-jerker back in '86 they set up this 30 kilometre thing and we all have to live with it.'

Frances pushes away her mushrooms, worried suddenly about where they were grown. Has Lucas been careful? Has he brought back any radioactive dust to their flat? Don't be selfish, she tells herself as the vodka washes through her. The damage is done already - those children in bleak hospitals, those sick little babies being born, those recent spikes in thyroid cancer that Lucas tells her people have been protesting about. Their mothers had been trapped within the radioactive zone.

'Well I'm not sure I'll go back,' says Lucas, as the dishes are cleared and the pork cutlets are delivered with their garnish of limp dill. 'Not unless I get a commissioned piece and interest will most likely die down now until the tenth anniversary unless there's another big leak. That's the trouble with this place. Everything looks backwards - to Chernobyl, to the Soviets, to the Great Patriotic War. There's a line between real news and digging over old bones dressed up as analysis that frankly, sometimes, feels gratuitous.'

Vee rolls her eyes, comically. 'It's your job, you dick. You love it so stop pontificating.'

Lucas leans forward. He won't be put off. He's out to impress one of the new breed, thinks Frances. He is making it up as he goes along.

'I'm after a story that looks to the future,' he continues. 'Something to develop, get my teeth into that's not already being recycled by every junior anchor on the ten-day tour of former satellite states.'

He stops to pour himself another vodka. Now Vee is grinning.

'Hey,' she teases. 'Mister Loo-cas! Dontcha geddit? History's all we got!'

'I'll leave the diaspora to you, Vee,' says Lucas. There's a hint of petulance about him, like a boy caught trying out different versions of himself. 'I'm looking ahead. I've got some leads.'

'Great,' says Vee. Then, widening her eyes for Ivan and raising her voice to a cartoonish pitch: 'Hey little buddy - your daddy's gonna scoop us all!'

Half an hour later, once the vodka has numbed their nerve-endings and the plates have been cleared, the two men are telling stories. Rob recounts some trouble with the Hungarian border police over a shipment of chrome bar stools that concluded with the officers each taking a stool home, while Lucas makes everyone laugh with a tale about an angry old man shouting 'knees!' in his underpants. It takes a minute or two for Frances to realise he is talking about the encounter with the boy and the man from the flat on the fourteenth floor. When Lucas tells the story, it sounds like something else – a story about an idiot or a pimp. He makes it sound funny.

Vee has moved her chair over to the top end of the table so that she can smoke away from the baby. Frances, meanwhile, is trying to nurse Ivan. She has draped a shawl around her shoulders in an attempt to be discreet, but he keeps waving his arm and pushing it away. It doesn't seem to matter. The two men at the small corner table can't see her and the pillar provides some screening

from the young women, now joined by a trio of pasty-faced youths dressed in shiny nylon shell suits and branded trainers. The youths order a bottle of Chivas Regal and drink it with frowning intensity.

'So,' murmurs Suzie, leaning forward to catch Ivan's flailing hand. She pats it a little. 'I'm dying to know. What is it like to have a baby?'

Frances looks up, pulled out of her reverie. Rob, she remembers, won't let Suzie have a baby.

'Oh,' she says, 'you know. Pretty amazing. Tiring. And amazing.'

Suzie smiles, frowning at the same time, as if she's puzzling over something. 'Yes. But how does it *feel*? What did you feel when you first held him in your arms?'

Right now, Frances is starting to feel dizzy. The pillar behind Suzie has split into two, the sides moving in and crossing over like a Venn diagram. She focuses instead on Suzie, at a tiny white scar just below her left eyebrow. Something in Suzie's earnest, searching gaze makes her want to speak honestly, to reach for something true. Or maybe it is the vodka.

'It was a shock,' she says. 'I had a shock, the night Ivan was born.' She bends her neck and brushes her lips against Ivan's downy head. 'It wasn't the pain, or the mess, or caring about what Lucas thought seeing me that way. The shock came afterwards, when I'd stopped shaking and the stitches were in and the blood was washed off.' Frances pauses. She remembers the bright light being turned off above her head; the midwife lifting her feet out of the stirrups and pressing down on her uterus to expel the afterbirth. 'Lucas had gone home to our flat, and the ward was as quiet as it was going to get and the lights had been dimmed and the nurse had finished her checks or obs or whatever they call them. Ivan looked so peaceful in his cot beside my bed, and I didn't love him yet, but the antenatal classes had been very reassuring about all of that and I suppose I felt happy and proud and ready to learn. There was just one more thing to do before I could sleep and that was to go and brush my teeth.'

Suzie nods, as though all of this is as she expected.

'And you got up and went to the bathroom?'

Frances thinks back, trying and trying to catch hold of what it was she had done.

'No. I pulled my gown around me, and checked that my sanitary pad wasn't leaking, then swung my legs over the side of the bed. I felt a bit wobbly I suppose, but I decided I'd be all right. Then, just as I stood up, Ivan made a squeaking sound and moved his head so that his nose was pressed against the mattress. I didn't know how to turn him over without hurting him, so I picked him up and held him across my stomach, which felt all spongy and strange. The nurses were busy at their station you see, and I didn't think I could walk without dropping him so I leaned there, against the bed until my arms were stiff and aching. Tears were falling down my cheeks and onto Ivan's head

and I remember they pooled in that little hollow that new babies have – where their skulls haven't fused.'

She stops, the sickly scent of baby powder and her own sweat returning, afloat on a tide of fear.

'And?' presses Suzie.

'Then a midwife came by. I think she took the baby. She kept asking me what I was trying to do.'

'What did you tell her?'

Frances falters again; she tries to pin down the formless things that waver in her mind's eye.

'I don't know. I... I didn't know.'

She raises her head and sees Vee and Lucas and Rob and all of them are listening. Lucas is looking down, tracing the curve of a plate very slowly with his finger. Rob has his hand under the table. The little green Lacoste crocodile on the front of his shirt inches back and forth as he kneads his wife's thigh.

'Excuse me,' murmurs Frances, standing up so that Ivan's lips start twitching for her breast. She hands him to Lucas who, she knows, longs for her to tell a funny story like everyone else, something that would make her seem a little kooky and unpredictable and desirable and so explain her presence here, with him, in this restaurant in this city. 'I just...' She searches for the words that keep floating out of her reach. 'I'll be back in a minute.' With her shawl pulled tight across her chest she weaves her way between the tables and chairs towards the bathroom. A man with a thick moustache sits at a table in the corner. He has to uncross his legs and, as she passes, he turns his head with a small frown that might express concern or irritation, though Frances can only discern the latter. She pushes her way into the cubicle, locks the flimsy door and turns on the tap, because the man outside is only three feet away.

Ten minutes later, after her racing heartbeat has slowed and she has dried her tears on a sheet of waxy toilet paper, she returns to the restaurant. The man in the corner has gone, and Lucas is jiggling Ivan ineffectually against his shoulder. She slides back into her seat beside her husband. Vee is saying something to Suzie and Rob, more vodka has been poured and there is a stiffness now, a new wariness around the table.

'... It pays quite well,' finishes Vee. 'So, how about it?'

Rob's head is moving up and down in a series of tiny nods as if he's thinking about what Vee has just said. 'Thanks, but Suzie doesn't need a job,' he replies, carefully.

Vee raises an eyebrow. 'It's only three days' work.'

Now Rob exhales. 'Hair, nails, all that stuff. They're full time, aren't they baby?' He picks up his wife's hand and lets his own rest between her legs.

Vee blows cigarette smoke over her shoulder. 'And how is that for you, Suzie?' she asks. Her voice sounds cool, neutral. She picks an invisible speck off her lip.

'Oh, this takes work,' says Suzie, pulling her hand away from Rob and holding it up to reveal her immaculately manicured nails. 'I do my aerobics for ninety minutes a day. Besides, the apartment has taken months to get right. I'm not looking for a job.'

Lucas shifts in his seat. Ivan starts to grizzle: warning signs. Frances takes the baby from him, hoping someone has asked for the bill but Rob, it seems, still has things he wants to say.

'My wife,' he says, raising his glass. 'She has everything she needs. She likes to look good. But do you know the best thing about her? No? Well I'll tell you. It's her triangle of light.'

'Her what?' Vee narrows her eyes.

'Her triangle of light. You know – between a woman's legs? I couldn't be with a woman who doesn't have one.'

'Oh *please...*'

'That's just it,' says Rob, leaning his elbow on the table and pointing a finger at Vee. 'You think I'm making some kind of sick joke because I don't talk a lot of righteous crap like you lot. But I know what I want and that's the deal and Suzie understands that. See?' He tugs on Suzie's arm. Instead of pulling away again Suzie rises jerkily to her feet, turns around and thrusts out her backside. She is wearing a pair of white jeans that stretch across her buttocks and pull tight between her thighs.

'You bastard,' says Vee. 'Time to go.'

'I'll get the bill,' says Lucas, thickly. He waves to the waitress but she is staring at the wall. The man with the moustache has gone.

Frances looks at Suzie, and fear fills her throat for Suzie's face has changed; it is closed and brittle now as she turns back towards her husband.

'It's sorted,' says Rob and he takes the bottle of vodka, pushes back his chair and heads over to the table where the shell-suited young men are sitting. 'Jesus,' he mutters over his shoulder. 'Why don't you journalists fuck off to Sarajevo.'

\*

'You could do it,' says Vee, who seems remarkably cheerful after their sudden departure from the restaurant. She is sitting next to Frances and Ivan on the back seat of the fume-filled Volga she flagged down to take them home.

'Do what?' asks Lucas, trying to turn round in the front passenger seat. He gives up and slumps back. The driver, a young man in a Dynamo Kyiv bobble hat, is hunched behind the wheel, eating



sunflower seeds from a bag on the dashboard. His gearstick is sporting a jaunty crocheted cover and Frances wonders if his grandmother made it for him, or maybe his girlfriend.

Vee yanks on Lucas's scarf.

'The cost of living survey! For the UN! The job I was telling Suzie about. I thought she was going to say yes until that prick gave us the benefit of his misogyny. I should have thought of Frances first.'

'What?' Frances raises her head from where she was resting it against the freezing window. The night outside is dark and mysterious beyond the steady repetition of the streetlamps. They remind her of a zoetrope she once saw as part of a touring exhibition that came to the library in Lyndhurst. You were supposed to focus on the flickering pictures, yet all she saw were the shadows in between.

'You're a mom!' persists Vee. 'You need that stuff in the survey, and they'll pay you five hundred bucks. Just visit a few stores and write down prices.'

'Oh. The survey. Yes, I suppose so.'

'Great.' Vee sits back. 'I'll tell the woman at the mission to call you. They've been trying for ages to find to find a third party. You're what they call an impartial expatriate.'

'Okay,' murmurs Frances, but she's not thinking about the survey. She can't get Suzie out of her head. Suzie who bakes apple cake and wears white angora and speaks with a gentle Edinburgh accent. Refined Suzie. Except she isn't those things at all. Or at least, she wasn't tonight.

The apartment block is quiet when she and Lucas return. The lift appears when summoned and there's no sign of the *dezhornaya*. Back on the thirteenth floor, Lucas disappears onto the balcony for a smoke while Frances feeds Ivan and settles him into his cot. In the bedroom, the full moon slides through the gap in the curtains and across the shiny parquet. Frances undresses slowly; she hasn't drunk as much as the others but two modest shots of vodka leave her reeling a little. Her skin is white in the moonlight. She pulls open the wardrobe door and stands in front of the mirror in her knickers. Her stomach rolls over the top of the elastic and stretchmarks gleam their silvery trails across her hips. She turns, looks over her shoulder, twisting her neck but all she sees is the drooping shadow in the overhang of her buttocks. There's no thigh gap. No triangle of light.

'Hey,' says Lucas, stumbling in from the hallway as she climbs into bed. 'We should do that again.'

'I don't think so,' says Frances, wondering if her husband had even registered what Rob had said.

'I don't mean see *them*. I mean just – go out. Meet people. Eat. I worry about you, Frannie. You need friends, especially when I'm away.'

'What?' Frances raises her head, twisting round. Lucas has his back to her as he peels off his socks.

‘Oh Christ, I didn’t tell you. I meant to tell you before dinner,’ he says. ‘The Ukrainian Service editor called – she wants voices from the regions. I couldn’t say no. It’s only a week – commissions guaranteed. Looks like I’m going on a trip.’

## Chapter 7

The first proper snow falls on the morning of Lucas's departure. While he packs, then shaves, stooping in front of the small mirror in the bathroom, Frances pulls back the nets and stands at the bedroom window with Ivan in her arms. She watches as the shapes below her soften, the concrete paths become white ribbons and a small lorry fantails across the tramlines. When snowflakes drift out of the greyness they don't always fall, she thinks. Sometimes, they rise. When you are already high in the sky, the air currents lift you and push you up against the building and out and round again. Perhaps you never reach the ground.

'Lviv tonight and tomorrow,' calls Lucas, above the whirring of his razor. 'Zoya has the phone numbers. Then three days in the Donbas and a couple in Crimea. More if she can get me a permit for Sevastopol. The Russians are still rattling their sabres.'

Ivan is in the shuddering phase after a prolonged bout of screaming. His eyelids droop, his damp head lolls from the exhaustion of his assault upon himself, yet every time Frances turns towards his cot the crying begins again. So she turns off the lamp and rocks him in the strange blank snow light, swaying from one hip to the other in a movement that sometimes she continues even when she isn't holding him; when her body, no longer weighted, tries to float up into the air.

'Once upon a time,' she whispers, 'once upon a time there lived a little old man and a little old woman in a hut in the middle of the forest.' She pauses, brushing Ivan's ear with her lips. There's a story about the snow buried deep in her childhood. If she thinks too hard she won't remember, but if she speaks it, she might. 'They had enough to eat and plenty of kindling for the fire and they had each other yet still this wasn't enough. They longed for a child.'

The whirring sound stops in the bathroom.

'Then one winter,' she continues, pressing her forehead against the cold glass, 'when the snow lay deep and thick on the ground, the old couple went outside and made a child out of snow.'

'I know this story,' says Lucas from somewhere behind her. 'Snegurochka, the little snow maiden. She melts in the spring. Mind you, these days poor little Snegurochka is most likely some blond with plaited hair extensions handing out free samples of Coca Cola in a spangly cape down in Independence Square.'

Frances stops swaying. She thinks she can see a figure far below – a smudge, really, sweeping the path that leads away from the flats towards the road. Is it the caretaker? She looks like a small grey crab, jabbing and flailing.

‘Sometimes the caretaker comes up in the lift and leaves Ivan’s dirty nappies on the doormat,’ she says.

‘*What?* Oh Jesus, that old witch is such a communist. I’ll get Zoya to put her straight.’

‘Zoya says it’s not her job,’ Frances reminds him. ‘Anyway, she says the caretaker hates nappies because they can’t be re-used. Plastic, cardboard, food waste is all good. But not dirty nappies.’ She rubs her nose with her free hand, seeking reassurance in the familiar contours of cartilage and bone. ‘Do you think we could buy a washing machine soon?’

Lucas packs his aftershave into his holdall and steps over to the window. Small words can open deep chasms, he finds. He never knows what might set her off these days, or cause his wife to retreat into the dull silence that made him put that call in to his editor at Bush House. It’s just a short trip, just so he can clear his head. ‘Maybe,’ he answers, cautiously. ‘We’ve maxed out on Visa but this trip should earn some money. Then in the new year I’ll focus on my film project.’ Another pause. ‘Vee says she’ll call you. But if you’re worried, I mean, worried about anything – the snow, Ivan - you could use the emergency office dollars. Zoya can always book you a flight. You could go back to the UK and spend Christmas with your mum. I bet she’s missing you, even if she’s crap at showing it.’

Frances has been waiting for this. She knows it would be the sensible thing to do – the midwife, her GP, the few acquaintances she can call on in London would all agree. The prospect cannot be allowed to distract her. Fear, ever-present, makes Frances grip Ivan more tightly. Instead she recalls her parents’ fifties bungalow: her old bedroom with the stained hand basin in the corner and the pyrocanthus scratching at the window; the cramped porch where her father used to smoke before he went on a golfing holiday to Singapore and never came back. Her mother blamed Frances, the child who had made her tedious. Frances pictures her now, slicing carrots in the kitchen, fist gripping the knife, hammering it down on the red formica worktop, never looking her daughter in the eye, never asking the right question.

‘I like the snow,’ she says, counting Ivan’s ten toes with her fingers, the ten days that Lucas will be away, each with its five separate parts: sleeping, feeding, washing, shopping, reading. Truly, when she parcels it up like that it’s not so bad. ‘And anyway, we can’t afford the flights. Though if you see any Pampers in Lviv... the sixteen to twenty-four pound size?’

‘I know!’ says Lucas, with a look that might be relief, or disappointment. ‘I know! Top of my list!’

\*

Once Lucas has left and the tail lights of his taxi have vanished into the weather, Frances attends to her routines. First she shunts the sofa up against the balcony door. Next she moves the telephone, setting it up on the shiny veneered vanity table with the three-sided mirror at the far end of the hallway. Now she has no need of the living room. At midday she mashes a little stewed carrot into Ivan's flaked rice; she washes all the bedlinen in the bath and hangs it to dry on a clothes rack in the bedroom, then realigns the depleted pile of Pampers in the drawer beneath the bed, despite her nagging awareness that Ivan has outgrown the size she brought with her from London. In the afternoon she takes her son outside in the pushchair, piling on the blankets to protect him from the disapproving glare of the caretaker as much as the cold. She learns to dislodge the build-up of slush around the wheels with a quick jab of her boot, and counts the strange, floating balls of mistletoe in the tops of the bare trees. At night, she re-reads chapters from *Baby's First Year*, staring at the photographs of cluttered British homes, their chaos carefully constructed and cropped to put nervous new mothers at their ease. Sometimes, when the squeaking starts up, she thinks about the roller-blading boy and the old man in the flat above her head but she meets no one on the landing.

Then, one day, as she stoops to remove the dirty nappy that, yet again, the caretaker has deposited on the mat outside the front door, she finds a note tucked underneath it, written on a piece of thin squared paper that looks as if it has been torn from an exercise book. The note consists of two words:

*Close windows!*

Clearly the caretaker knows a little English, but Frances doesn't understand. Is this a warning, or an admonition? The windows aren't open. She picks up the nappy, places it back inside the rubbish chute and slams the steel door shut with a clang that makes her teeth rattle.

Later that afternoon, as she draws the curtains in the bedroom against the creeping dark, the telephone rings. Its harsh vibrations repeat along the parquet. Frances scoops up Ivan, who is trying to pull himself along, knees beneath his hips, ready to crawl. His head bobs against her collarbone as she hurries from the bedroom. His grubby fingers clutch her shirt but he is quiet. As Frances bends down to lift the receiver from its cradle she sees her reflection in the three-sided hall mirror – a triptych of mother and child, strangely familiar, like a painting in a church.

'Hello?' she says, then '*Allo?*' as Lucas has taught her. It can only be one of three people: Zoya, Lucas or Vee. There is no reply. Frances clears her throat.

'Adeen, dva, tree...' she counts.

The silence presses against her ear.

\*

When Frances was nine, her mother caught her thinking. Frances was sitting on the swing in the narrow garden behind the bungalow. Her legs were a little too long already for the height of the seat so she'd tucked them under as she rocked back and forth, gently scuffing the toes of her sandals on the paving slab her father had placed there.

'Frances?' shouted her mother from the kitchen window, hidden from view behind ragged stems of buddleia. Frances didn't know what her mother wanted, but she knew it would be a chore of some sort so she slid off the swing and lay down on her side by the hedge, hoping no one would find her. She was just beginning to relax, enjoying the sensation of looking at the swing from a new angle while her lips formed the shape of the swear word she'd gleaned from the older children next door when her mother shouted again.

'Don't think I don't know what you're up to, trying to hide. Come inside now!'

At any other moment, her mother's words might have washed over her and meant nothing but instead they came at a particular moment; at just the right moment to spark a new thought in Frances's mind.

At teatime that evening, as her mother piled spoonfuls of mince and onions onto three plates and then drained the peas, Frances stared at the back of her head and tried to enter her thoughts. *If you can read my mind then that's a horrible thing to do and you had better stop it because it's not fair and thoughts are PRIVATE and I HATE you.*

'Is the salt on the table?' asked her mother, without turning round.

Yes

'Frances – did you hear me?'

YES

Now her mother looked over her shoulder.

'Oh for heaven's sake – what's got into you? It's right under your nose!'

*Stop pretending you can't read my thoughts. I know you can and you should STOP IT RIGHT NOW.*

Her mother put her plate of food down in front of her and turned back to the counter. Frances would have to be careful. Her mother was very sneaky.

\*

The phone isn't dead – Frances can hear a sort of fizzing on the line. Lucas has told her all about phone taps. He says they are still in place all over the city, though of course no one listens any more. Frances ought to replace the receiver, but she hesitates. That woman downstairs, the caretaker, the *dezhornaya* - isn't it her job to spy on them all? She sifts through their rubbish. What if she is listening? What if she's been trained and what if she can hear Frances breathing and Ivan snuffling with a headset clamped to her ears in her little cubbyhole downstairs? It's possible – so, why not?

'*Parooski Angliski?* Do you speak English?' she tries.

More fizzing.

'All right then,' she says, feeling bolder. 'Here is a message for you. Pass it up to Sorin or Sarin or whoever it is who stole my book. Tell President Kravchuk if you like. People should be allowed to have private thoughts and private conversations. Maybe you've been spying for so long you've forgotten to stop, down there with your earpiece in and your nasty prying eyes. So, what exactly would you do if I said I had a really big secret – a secret about the Russians or nuclear missiles or NATO or an awful terrible thing I might do, up here where you can't stop me?'

She pauses to catch her breath and stares at her thighs and stomach mirrored three-fold in the glass and Ivan's dangling leg which is all she can see of him at this angle. Her heart is thumping beneath his downy head. Perhaps it is her reflection that is speaking, another version of herself.

'I bet you'd do nothing, because you are pointless and no one would care.'

Silence. Of course, silence. Frances breathes in the waxy smell of Ivan's scalp and brushes his forehead with her lips. She is just about to replace the receiver when she hears another click.

'*Allo?*' says a voice.

She freezes.

'*Allo.* Good afternoon. Am I speaking to Mrs Porter?' The words, faint at first, emphasise the P as if it is being punched out of a Dymo machine.

'Yes...' whispers Frances. 'Who is this?'

'Good afternoon,' repeats the voice, a woman, her articulation too precise to be British. 'My name is Lizbette Solwein and I am deputy director of human resources at the UN mission in Kiev. Mrs Porter, I have been given your name as someone who might be willing to undertake an independent consumer survey on behalf of our international staff. May I ask, do you hold a UK passport and is this something that might interest you?'

Frances breathes, in and out, in and out. This stranger can't have heard; she *can't* have heard...

'Mrs Porter? Can you hear me? Mrs Porter?'

'Yes,' she manages. 'Thank you. I see.'

\*

The survey is delivered three days later by a driver in a silver Volvo. It is a fat slab of computer paper in a black ring binder. Eight hundred and seventy items, neatly tabulated, each one requiring a price from three different stores. Frances tries not to be deterred by the impossibility of 'Brie, French, 400g' or 'Sandwich toaster, Breville, model A530, silver' and instead resolves to start with what she knows how to find: tea and onions.

'Come on, Ivan,' she says as she packs her son into his snowsuit and his mittens and his balaclava and belts him into his pushchair. 'Let's go shopping.'

Down in the foyer, she hurries past the caretaker's booth without looking in. They set off for the kiosks and she hauls the pushchair over the tramlines, then up the lane past the decaying wooden houses with their skeletal cats and their arthritic trees to the ancient monastery of Lavra-Pechersk, at the top of the hill.



## Chapter 8

Today there are no onions for sale at the roadside. Fortunately the concrete kiosks with their barred windows stuffed with cigarettes and lighters and plastic combs have plenty of Liptons tea bags; they oblige Frances with three different prices. She finds bananas, too – or rather, one banana, lying next to some frost-blackened carrots and a trio of cabbages on a crate outside the high walls of the monastery. The banana and the vegetables are crusted with snow. So is the tiny woman with a wrinkled face and cheeks like toothless caves who squats on a low stool beside them. Her hands, bound loosely with strips of cloth, grasp an empty pickle jar in her lap.

*'Dobrey'den. Ah, skolko?'* asks Frances, a stray snowflake landing in her lashes as she points at the single piece of fruit. She needs a kilo price, so she'll have to do the maths.

Before the woman can answer, Frances hears a click from somewhere to her left. She turns and there is Teddy, Vee and Lucas's photographer friend, in a halo of white breath. He lowers his camera.

*'Don't worry,'* he tells her. *'You're not in the shot.'*

*'Oh hello!'* she says, dismayed. She would rather not be found by this grinning American purchasing a solitary banana from a woman with bandages instead of gloves. He is wearing an oversized hat made of rabbit fur, with the ear flaps dangling round his jaw. The fur is patchy and matted, as if the hat is diseased. Then she remembers something. *'You speak Russian, don't you? Would you mind asking where I can buy onions?'*

Teddy smiles and exchanges a few words with the woman.

*'She says there's a stall inside the monastery. And the banana is yours for twenty-five kouponi.'*

Frances hands her a dollar. She wants to give the woman her thick thermal gloves as well, but Teddy is watching and she worries he might object.

*'Shall we go in?'* he asks.

*'They don't like the pushchair,'* says Frances, turning away with the banana in her pocket. *'I've tried it before. If I go into a church they shoo me straight out. Sometimes they hiss. They think I'll damage the floors.'*

*'Ah,'* says Teddy, with an exaggerated frown. *'The Baba Yagas.'*

*'Pardon?'*

'The Baba Yagas. The old witches. These days they sit in dark cubbyholes in churches and museums, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting mothers, but any child will tell you the story of the *real* Baba Yaga, the witch who lives in an old house that struts about on chicken legs. She rides around the woods in a mortar, with a pestle for crunching babies' bones.' He sucks his cheeks in, comically, and Frances finds herself following as he leads her beneath the dark archway with its icons and flaking plasterwork where the snow is trodden down and slippery. He helps her lift the pushchair through the small doorway and out into an open courtyard.

The monastery is starkly beautiful in the snow. Frances has peered through the gates on previous walks; Lucas has told her about its miracles and shrines, its concussion-inducing catacombs crammed with the remains of dead saints preserved in their coffins, fingers exposed at the hems of their shrouds like thin, shrivelled dates, now closed to visitors while bureaucrats twiddle their thumbs over urgent repairs. She lets go of Ivan's pushchair and turns around, taking it all in. The whiteness blankets the cracked paving, the scrappy verges and instead draws her eye upwards to the green roof tiles, the gold domes and the black bell at the top of the delicately tiered bell tower. Even the stark, bare-brick ruins of a church directly in front of her seem picturesque. Two pairs of monks process from one doorway to another, their skin bluish beneath their dark beards. Women in tight headscarves scrape the paths with ancient spades, and crows congregate in silence around a neat pyre of rubbish, each playing their part as if directed by an unseen hand.

Teddy finishes putting away his camera.

'Don't you want to photograph this?' asks Frances. 'I feel like I'm in a painting.'

Teddy grins. 'Nope. Already got my picture.'

'What about the ruined building? It looks like it was bombed.'

'Not bombed. Blown up. In 1941. The retreating NKVD laid explosives in the cellars. Two years ago UNESCO made it a world heritage site. Now, the pilgrims and the tourists are returning. Orthodoxy's back.'

Teddy seems so at ease here, she thinks. He leans over a table a few yards from the entrance. The table is laid out with matrioshka dolls, each curved wooden body taken apart with five or seven or even ten smaller dolls lined up in descending order. Traditional models in brightly painted folk dress pout their red lips, the brushstrokes a little rough in places, but cheerful enough. The old man behind the table tries to tempt Frances with what is clearly his most expensive item, a fancy ten-piecer with licks of gold paint. Teddy, however, is more interested in a series of Russian leaders. He counts them down for her: Yeltsin, Gorbachev, Chernenko, Andropov, Brezhnev, Khrushchev, Stalin, Lenin, Tsar Nicholas II and a tiny little figure no bigger than her finger nail with a black moustache and fierce, slanting eyes.

Teddy picks it up and shows it solemnly to Ivan.

'Your namesake, The Terrible!' he says, laughing as the old man flaps a mittened hand and scolds him for touching.

Frances watches with an unexpected flush. She finds herself noticing how Teddy is not the same as Lucas. His eyes are brown. His hands are smaller, broader. His voice has a wider register, at ease with the notes at its disposal. She wants to count these differences, sort them and hoard them.

'Look, there are your onions,' he says, pointing to a basket in the snow beside the table. Then, while she asks the price per kilo, and the old man sticks up four fingers and she adds what she hopes are the right number of zeros, Teddy wanders off.

When she has completed her purchase, she turns to see him standing a dozen yards away in the lee of the bell tower. He is talking to someone else - a young man, slightly built - Ukrainian, by the look of his bleach-spattered denim jacket and his sharp eastern cheekbones. Teddy brushes a snowflake from the man's arm. They seem close, almost lovers. Their heads tilt together and their breath mingles in clouds about their heads.

Oh, she thinks, they *are* lovers.

Teddy beckons her over.

'Meet Karl,' he says, smiling. 'Karl, this is Frances, Lucas's wife. And this is their baby, Ivan!'

Karl nods, and smiles down quickly at Ivan but he seems more serious, more reserved than Teddy.

'Nice to meet you,' says Frances. 'I must be getting back. Ivan is getting cold.'

'This is not a good place to buy vegetables,' says Karl, his Kiev accent strong, pointing at the bunch of onions she has hooked over the pushchair handles.

'No.' She recalls the banana seller's bandaged fingers and tells herself that next time, when she is alone, she'll definitely give away her gloves. 'But I am doing a survey, you see. A consumer survey. And I have to find three prices for everything.'

Teddy is grinning again. 'Ah, the UN! Vee put you on to this, didn't she? You'll be the most popular expat in town if you hike up the dollar prices. Everyone's been waiting. The diplomats, the execs from the internationals - you're setting the hardship allowance for the next three years. Just imagine the bribes...' He stops, sees Frances staring, round-eyed. 'Hey, I'm joking. Three prices? That won't be easy.'

'I have to find dishwashers,' she says. 'Max Factor lipstick. One hundred per cent Arabica coffee beans.' Suddenly, the enormity of the task overwhelms her. She shivers, and wishes she is back in the flat. She wants her rituals, her pages.

'You're freezing. Come with us,' says Teddy. 'We know a warm café.'

Karl looks up, contemplates the grey sky. 'And Max Factor,' he says.

\*

The café is in a cellar in Podol, so Karl flags down a Lada saloon to take them there. The driver glares at the buggy with its dirty wheels and Ivan with his runny nose and his bright red cheeks but Teddy feeds a dollar through the half-open window and soon they are bumping along the cobbles in the old part of the city, past the small huddle of protesters waving their placards near Independence Square, past the ragged line of schoolchildren at the top of the funicular and through narrow lanes that have wound their way down to the river between the merchants' wooden warehouses since the days of old Kiev Rus.

'Welcome to my gallery,' says Teddy, once the three of them are seated on stools in a low-ceilinged back room with a stove blasting out heat in the corner. Photos line the smoke-stained walls: some in clip-frames, most just tacked up with tape. The images are of people, mainly, in washed out greys and greens, shot so that only part of each face is showing, unsmiling, a single eye staring away from the lens as if there is something far more important happening outside the frame.

Teddy seems pleased by the attention Frances gives them. 'So, I think Ivan is the first baby to come here. He's definitely the first *English* baby.'

Frances hugs her son protectively on her knee. He gazes upwards, eyes bright, seemingly enchanted by the lampshade that dangles from the ceiling. She wipes his nose with a paper napkin and rubs his cool hands in hers.

'People in Kiev don't seem to like babies,' she murmurs.

'We love babies,' says Karl.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean...'

'We love babies, but there are problems, and the cancers. Many cancers. Also diphtheria. Everywhere there is sickness and no one is paying the doctors. People are afraid for any little ones. You are a foreigner, protected from danger. So they are angry with you.'

'Oh.' Frances frowns as she processes this logic.

'Vee says *you've* been unwell,' says Teddy. 'But here you are, out and about, no Lucas in tow, doing your thing, getting a job...'

'It's not a proper job,' says Frances. 'Only collecting prices. It seems a bit pointless, really. They'll have changed again by tomorrow.'

'Dear Frances,' says Teddy, mock sighing, rolling his eyes. 'You're already infected.'

'What do you mean?' asks Frances.

'I mean you've picked up Expat Disease. It's the wall we all hit. And then you have to decide. You can sink into the system, tie yourself up in red tape and grow cynical and sticky with all the misery and corruption, even when you tell yourself you're above it all.'

'Or?'

'You say fuck it, and have a good time!'

Frances is silent for a moment. 'I just meant the price rises,' she says.

'Ha!' Teddy smiles. 'But this survey. You ought to be careful. If I were you I'd just make it all up because the stores with imports are run by the mafia and everyone's on the take. You've seen them – the thugs in their shell suits, the money men in fancy tailoring and cashmere coats. No price tags or bar codes. I mean,' he glances at Karl with just the hint of a wink - 'take a Max Factor lipstick. Eight bucks back home in Kalamazoo. Here, twenty, thirty? And it's still fake.'

'I'm supposed to give a store name, or at least a location,' says Frances.

Now Teddy is leaning back and reaching into a drawer behind them. He rummages a little, then extracts a shiny black cylinder of lipstick and places it on the table in front of her. The Max Factor brand name is embossed in gold on the lid.

'Special for you, thirty dollars, Café Karl!' says Teddy with an exaggerated salesman's drawl.

Ivan lurches forward and grabs hold of the lipstick, almost hitting his chin on the edge of the table. Frances prises it from his hand before he can jam it in his mouth, then puts it down, out of reach.

'Shame it's not my shade!' she says, brightly, needing to know that Teddy is still joking.

His eyes barely flicker.

'Sure,' he says. 'That little tyrant looks hungry. Let's get you home.'

\*

By the time Frances returns to Staronavodnitska Street, Ivan is howling. He's thirsty, his nappy is bloated and sagging inside his snowsuit and she prays that the lift is working, that she won't have to climb the stairs.

She navigates the double doors of the entrance by pushing backwards with her hip and rocking the buggy wheels over the metal grate. As they rattle into the foyer, she remembers she's forgotten to knock the snow off the wheels. Clumps of blackened ice drop in her wake as she hurries across the floor. She'll have to be quick so that the caretaker won't catch her. Ivan's wails echo around the walls but the lift is ahead of her now, yawning open, its interior empty like the vertical box that the magician's assistant climbs into before the door is locked and swords are thrust through the slits in

its sides. It's all right, she thinks, we'll make it. Then, as she approaches, the toneless bell pings and a weak light glows above her head. Someone above her is calling the lift, so she shunts the pushchair quickly over the threshold. This is a mistake. The brown veneered doors make a grinding noise and judder towards each other. Before she can pull back, they clamp against the metal frame. The pushchair is trapped.

Frances tugs, so hard that an onion from the string dangling down from the handle breaks off and rolls out into the middle of the foyer. She stabs at the buttons on the control panel as her mind floods with visions of her son's head crushed beneath the lintel as the lift starts to rise. Then sense kicks in and she stoops forward, releases the straps and lifts Ivan out of his seat. Holding him over her shoulder, she yanks again at the pushchair. The frame is stuck tight. She bites her lip and frowns. Perhaps she should simply abandon the pushchair and take the stairs. But what if someone else takes away the pushchair? She cannot manage without it. There is only one thing to do. She'll have to find the caretaker.

The caretaker. What was it Teddy said? Baba Yaga – the witch with the house on chicken's feet. Well, Frances doesn't believe in witches, though the old woman clearly sees herself as some kind of spy. In the old days, she thinks, the caretaker must have been paid to listen and watch and poke through the rubbish. If you spoke against the Party, she'd have heard it. If you hoarded fuel, she'd have smelled it and if you took a lover, well, she'd have sniffed that out, too. Now, of course, no one is rewarded for whispering any more. But what if other people's business is all you know, and searching out weakness is what makes you feel strong? That old *dezhornaya*, she sits in her little cubbyhole across the foyer and purses her lips whenever Frances walks by, wagging her finger like a stick to beat the bad wife who dares to leave her flat and flaunt her baby like she's proud of him, proud of what she's done. They're everywhere, these crones, barren with secrets, berating her on the trolleybus or in the bread shop or murmuring and crossing themselves outside the cathedral, tugging at her hair when she doesn't cover her head and kicking the pushchair when she wheels it across the courtyards to show Ivan the candles at the back of those dark, cloying shrines....

Ivan has stopped crying. The only sound is her breathing, shallow and rapid. Frances turns towards the caretaker's cubicle. It has a glass front, and a curtain strung on a length of drooping wire is drawn across the window.

'*Allo?*' she calls, her own voice unfamiliar in the empty, echoing space. '*Dobry'den?*' There is no reply. Shifting Ivan round to her hip, his head peering over her shoulder, she walks over to the cubicle. The door is partly open. She steps closer, sees a chair with a worn, flattened cushion. It appears empty; all the same she thinks she must knock, so she taps her fingers lightly on the glass. At her touch, the door swings wide and now she can see further inside – a cheap desk, a heavy

brown telephone and some yellowing notices stuck to the window frame and pinned along the back wall.

The smell from Ivan's nappy is sharp and sour. Frances knows she needs to get him upstairs, that the ammonia that is forming will burn into his flesh. She needs either to abandon the pushchair, or exit the building and go round outside to the steps that she thinks must lead down to the basement, but instead she's distracted by the objects in that space: the brown and white patterned tea cup and saucer placed to one side of a stained ink blotter; the calendar, hanging from a nail, with its image of a teenage girl in folk dress, and there, pushed into a corner, a small pink plastic hairbrush with its nest of grey hairs. Their muteness both repels and moves her and she holds herself in for several seconds or even a minute until, finally, her eyes register something else. On the shelf behind the chair is a slim cardboard carton, rectangular, dark green, a little crushed. The gold clock is still visible on the side.

A box of After Eights. Her box – the one she threw down the rubbish chute.

Carefully, she lies Ivan down on his back across the desk and stretches over the chair to reach it. She raises the dented lid, runs her forefinger across the waxy sleeves. There's no folded slip of paper, no hidden note; just a soft rustle like shifting sand and a fusty smell that mingles with a trace of peppermint.

'Sto?'

Frances jumps as the word rings sharply behind her. In the same moment she sees two arthritic hands in fingerless gloves reaching forward. The hands pick up her son who grabs hold of the teacup, and when Frances turns round the caretaker is clutching Ivan to her chest and Ivan is opening his mouth to bawl so she lets go of the box and all three of them look down to where dark squares are fluttering and thousands upon thousands of tiny black seeds are spilling and spinning across the cold floor.

Frances needs her baby back, but the old woman is holding him tight. Her wrinkled face is no longer a mesh of disapproval. Instead, her mouth is open and her eyes are aghast. Something terrible is happening here. Something terrible has already happened.

\*

Dreams bleed into memory and memory sinks into dream. Later that night, dogs bark as the old caretaker moans in her sleep. She sees dark water, thin bodies moving in the dusk. They are fishing, or trying to, for they have no lines or nets.

Her sister is crying. That foreign baby is crying, while his mother makes strange noises, opening then shutting her mouth.

Elena should have told her. The river cannot feed them. The fish are all gone.



## Chapter 9

Lucas wakes on the morning of the twenty-fifth of December to find his legs trapped in a tangle of bedsheets. When he rolls over he pushes a solid object with his foot. It lands on the floor with a dull thump. His head is hurting, his mouth tastes of sick and something that feels like a strand of hair is caught at the back of his throat. He tries to bury his head under the pillow and hide from the cold light that is seeping under the fringed curtain but a question nags him back into consciousness. What has he kicked off the bed?

He levers himself up, sees that he is alone and peers over the side of the mattress. On the floor is a dark shape, like a lumpy forearm or a badly packed Christmas stocking. With a grunt he reaches out and scoops it up. There's a label attached with an elastic band. 'To Daddy,' it reads. 'xxx.' It is a stocking.

'Frannie?' he croaks. His voice isn't working so he puts his hand into the top of the sock – not a thick sock, just one of his black work socks with a small hole in the heel. The contents, as he pulls them out, seem rather apt, in the circumstances – a bottle of imported Heineken, a six-pack of Bic lighters, a handful of walnuts in their shells and, in the toe, a shiny pair of nail clippers. The lighters make him want a cigarette and he contemplates an illicit one in bed until the fact that he is now a father breaks over him once again. Instead he leans back, opens the beer on edge of the headboard and tries to reassemble the events of the night before. He didn't get back from Crimea until eleven and he hadn't been through the door for more than three minutes before it all kicked off.

They'd had sex, him and Frances – he is almost certain of this. The details are hazy – he remembers worrying that the two mattresses pushed together might suddenly separate and land them both on the floor. He takes a swig of his beer and then he feels guilty. They'd argued for a long time beforehand, Frances weeping because he'd not brought any Pampers, then because he'd lost that pulpy novel she'd picked up from somewhere and she might even have cried something about a Baba Yaga, though he'd probably dreamt that part. Anyway, he'd been too busy insisting that it was impossible to buy what wasn't for sale and that this was a crap homecoming.

The problem, of course, was that while the crap might be true, it was also true that he'd had a great time away from Kiev. What was it Sorin had said when the omnipresent press secretary had popped up at some junket vodka reception in Dnepropetrovsk? 'A man must know when to be with his wife, and when to stay away.' Straight out of the dark ages, and just the sort of Slavic macho

anachronism Lucas could riff with in a slot on *From Our Own Correspondent*. All the same, he knew what Sorin meant. He'd smoked in the hotel bathroom, jacked off when he felt like it and, most important of all, he'd felt like a journalist again, wandering around, asking questions, observing and speculating without worrying about how to justify his actions.

He tries to crack a walnut with the nail clippers but the shell is a bugger.

Things start to look up when he smells coffee and French toast.

'Hey Frannie, Merry Christmas!' he says, walking in to the kitchen and kissing her on the mouth with the smell of beer on his breath. He produces an over-priced store-wrapped silk scarf, a box of German lebkuchen and then an enormous plastic binliner with a Russian-made baby carrier inside. 'Don't read anything sinister into it,' he pleads. 'I just want to make life a little easier for *both* of us.' The baby carrier is rigid, square, with thick shoulder straps, an aluminium frame and a simple canvas hammock for Ivan to sit in. Lucas had to leave it outside the front door the night before so that Frances wouldn't find it.

'Thank you,' she says, knowing she has been unreasonable about the Pampers. Lucas would have bought them if he could.

Frances's gift to Lucas is a set of mugs she bought in a craft shop in Podol. They are rough to the touch, like sandpaper, with an unusual dark grey glaze lining the insides. One of them shatters as soon as she pours hot water into it.

There is a parcel, too, from Lucas's mother that she'd sent to the office. Socks for Lucas, gloves for Frances and a hat and mittens set for Ivan. 'Cashmere! Hand wash only!' says the scrawl in the card. Highly impractical, as her own mother would remark, but Frances strokes the gloves along her cheek and drinks in the pale amethyst colour.

Nothing has arrived from Frances's mother.

'Why don't you give her a call?' suggests Lucas. 'She's been harsh, I know, but you can't stay incommunicado for ever.'

'Maybe,' murmurs Frances, vaguely. She didn't expect a present. She hasn't sent one herself – just a postcard with a bland greeting in Russian she bought at a kiosk near the monastery. She and Lucas had spent the previous Christmas with her mother. It hadn't gone well.

At midday Lucas nips out to the office. He needs to check in with Zoya, who isn't answering the phone.

'Odd,' he says. 'She told me she wouldn't take holiday in December. I thought she was saving it for the new year holiday next week. Hey do you want to come too? You could give that baby carrier its first outing.'

Frances shakes her head. 'Ivan's coming down with a cold,' she says. 'I'll practise indoors.'

Lucas's hand is on the door catch.

'You are okay, aren't you?' he asks. 'After last night?'

'I'm fine,' she says, with a quick smile. 'I'm glad you're home. I'm fine.'

\*

In the evening, Vee comes for dinner. She brings a festive litre of Stolichnaya with a red ribbon tied round its neck, and a knitted toy with stuck-on googly eyes for Ivan that he'll chew and choke on if Frances doesn't remove them first. Lucas fusses over the chicken he picked up in the Bessarabsky market, while Frances slips the toy into a drawer and looks after the rest of the meal – carrots, red cabbage, onion stuffing, bread sauce made with UHT milk and some last-minute spaghetti. The potatoes she'd left under the sink have gone rotten in the middle.

Lucas jokes that Vee has turned up because she wants to fleece him for stories. Vee jokes that she's come to see Frances and Ivan, not him.

'So, have you started the survey yet?' she asks Frances, to prove her point.

'Sort of,' says Frances, draining the spaghetti by tipping the saucepan and holding it back with a knife. A few pale strands slip over the top and threaten to take the rest with them in a slimy cascade. 'I've done the basic fruit and veg and some dried stuff like this pasta... toothpaste and baby wipes of course, but electrical goods and furnishings – I don't know where to start.'

'A new place has just opened down off Kreschatyk,' suggests Vee. 'A basement store, plenty of stock, German brands.'

Frances turns to the kitchen table and starts plating up.

'Teddy says those places are all run by protection rackets.'

'You've seen Teddy? God, I thought he'd vanished to some love nest with that new boyfriend of his. Well, he's right, but honestly, don't let it worry you. Those mafia guys aren't threatened by an expat consumer survey. Just get Zoya to run you there, check a few tickets and say you're looking for the washing machine that your husband has so far failed to provide!'

'Shut up,' says Lucas, grumpily, as Vee picks at a tail of spaghetti that has stuck to the pan, then dangles it above her mouth and drops it in. 'Anyway, Zoya, it appears, went A.W.O.L. while I was away. I couldn't get hold of her today, and London aren't happy because we missed a technical inventory, so she won't be running Frances around any time soon.'

'Oh dear.' Vee smiles at Frances as she is handed a plate. 'Then why don't you fire her?'

'I can't fire her. When she's on form, she's the best. Trouble is she knows it and takes the piss. She'll be moonlighting somewhere, probably translating for one of the Nordic embassies...' Lucas

takes a sharp swig of his beer. 'Anyway when she is around she's always so disapproving, questioning my story ideas. She's ambitious. Probably wants a Ukrainian Service job at Bush House, but if she expects a good word from me she's going to have to start providing some proper support.'

'So,' says Vee. 'If I take Zoya out and get her drunk, will she tell me what you've been plotting with Sorin?'

Lucas pulls a face of mock pity.

'Good luck with that. I don't think she drinks. Or if she does, she'll drink you under the table. Anyway, I had a great time on my travels, thanks very much for asking.'

'So what did you discover? Did you go down a mine in Donbas?'

'I did. The lift was terrifying – you leave your stomach behind and it's so fucking *deep* and black though of course everything else was stage-managed as usual and I didn't need to go all that way to hear them deny the stats about stillborn births, unpaid wages and the rest. The whole of eastern Ukraine is an environmental disaster zone but the old guard aren't about to roll over and die. Crimea was more fun. I got some ranting vox pops from ethnic Russians and several bottles of sticky Massandra wine, as well as a few bulletins about the Black Sea fleet. It's a weird mix – shifty, militarised with a seaside café culture. We should fly down there for a weekend, Frannie – maybe in the summer. The coastline is to die for. We could stay in one of the state sanatoria, take Ivan for a paddle.'

'Nice diversion, Lulu,' says Vee, waving her fork, notching up a stroke on an invisible tally. 'I've not forgotten there's something you're not telling me. You've got a story you're keeping secret!' She turns to Frances. 'Hey, you okay? You're not eating! I hope you're not on a diet. Have you seen how skinny that Suzie woman is getting? I bumped into her husband at the Interior Ministry, knee deep in shit, I bet. What a creep.'

Frances remembers something about Rob and his trucks coming in from Finland. Suzie had told her he could get hold of anything. Perhaps he could find some Pampers.

'I'm not hungry,' she says. 'Have some more chicken.'

'Did you call your mum?' asks Lucas.

Frances pinches the skin on the inside of her wrist. 'I forgot.'

\*

'Pregnant.' Frances's mother had expelled the word like a pip or a piece of eggshell.

Frances kept her hands in the washing up bowl, pushing them down so that her palms pressed flat against the base, the warm water her only comfort as its soapy meniscus clung to her forearms. Her mother's irritation would expand, she knew, in the silence.

'How far gone?'

'Thirteen weeks,' murmured Frances, conscious of the way her still-flat abdomen brushed against the edge of the sink.

'Well. You can't take a baby out to a place like that. Your husband has to concentrate on his job. You'll have to stay here.'

Frances hated the way her mother said 'your husband'. She gazed out of the window, across her mother's grey December garden to the bare, diminished shrubs and the bonfire patch with its tide of sticky ash where her father used to burn hedge trimmings and leaves. Lucas was out there, having a smoke by the compost bin, flicking the butt into a pile of vegetable peelings.

'I'm going to have the baby in London,' she said. 'St Thomas's. I've already had two scans. Lucas will come back for the birth, and then we'll travel out together.'

Her mother hadn't moved, despite the fact that the dining table was still only half-cleared; the turkey carcass was waiting to be stripped and the Christmas place mats needed wiping.

'You're not being sensible or responsible. You'll be nursing the baby. You won't get any sleep. The baby will need immunisations – polio, whooping cough, all of that. Honestly, you've no idea – you never have. I'll have to clear out your old bedroom. You don't know the first thing about bringing up a child.'

'Mum,' said Frances, suddenly angry. 'I'm going to Kiev. I'm going to love this baby. I'm not like Dad, or you.' She half turned, already sorry but her mother was stepping up close, her thin hand gripping the gravy boat with its dark residue congealing around the sides, frowning, always frowning.

'I can't help you, out there,' she said.

Frances rinsed the last plate and set it on the draining board. 'Don't worry. I won't ask you.'

\*

While Vee and Lucas go through to the living room and out onto the balcony to smoke, Frances stays in the kitchen to give Ivan his night-time feed. Breast-feeding is more efficient, now - automatic even, and almost pain-free. Ivan pushes his shoulder up against her ribs with his dense, solid warmth. His hand rests proprietorially. His eyes roll back and his lids droop.

As she holds him, her eyes rest on the Christmas card from Lucas's mother. The picture is a painting by one of those old Dutch masters – Brueghel or Van something – a skating scene.

Ivan doesn't know about Christmas, thinks Frances - her baby, who came out of her, who is now so completely and utterly separate in his difference, his view of the world and everything he will ever experience or feel or understand. When she was a teenager, she used to lie on her bed beneath the window and look up at the sky through a frame she made with her fingers. Sometimes the square of sky was grey. Sometimes it was blue, or black. But she didn't think you could tell, just by looking, whether it was ice cold and freezing, or hot and burning. You might be a girl in Eastleigh or a penguin in Antarctica or her dad in Singapore, or maybe the sky wasn't blue at all in someone else's head, but red, or yellow or some other colour she couldn't even imagine. No one could be sure. No one could see what she saw.

Now her baby must live in his own version of the world, just as she does. The thought is unbearable to her, and she wants to share something with him, help him feel less alone, even if it is the tired tropes of Christmas trees and carol singers and glowing log fires in pictures on cards, so she starts to sing, hesitantly, rocking him in her arms.

*Silent night, holy night*

*All is calm, all is bright...*

She can't remember the next line, so she tries something else.

*Oh come, all ye faithful...*

Again the words are swallowed by the louder voice in her head, or maybe she never really knew the words at all, but instead sang them without thinking from a dog-eared hymn book in the school hall, rocking back on her heels, cheeks flushed red as she bellowed the last two lines.

*Oh come let us adore him,*

*Chri-ist the lord.*

\*

Frances and Ivan are both dozing off when the doorbell rings, making Ivan's arms fly out and his newly erupted tooth clamp into her flesh. She hears Lucas open the door and say goodbye to Vee, then other voices murmur. Perhaps it is Zoya, she wonders, but next she hears some rapid Russian, and a boy's voice speaking in halting English.

After a minute or two, the front door closes and Lucas walks down the hallway.

'Hey,' he says, as he sits down and peels off the fingerless gloves he wears for smoking on the balcony. 'It's cold out there. Vee asked me to say goodbye – she didn't want to wake Ivan. Happy Christmas.'

'Who was at the door?' asks Frances.

'The *dezhornaya*,' says Lucas. 'She doesn't seem to realise that it's past midnight, or that it's Christmas in some parts of the world, or that I speak Russian. She brought that sulky-looking boy from upstairs with her to translate.'

Frances cradles Ivan's head with one hand as she rummages under her shirt for the clip on her bra strap. 'I met her – the other day. I think she knows a little English. The lift was stuck.'

Lucas looks alarmed.

'Were you okay?'

Frances doesn't know how to answer this question. The old woman caught Frances trespassing in her cubicle. Frances spilled her seeds all over the floor. The old woman cried, Frances had run up the stairs with Ivan, then later the abandoned pushchair had appeared by the front door, a little dented, but otherwise still serviceable.

She nods.

'Well, anyway,' says Lucas. 'She says she needs to come in next week to do something with the windows. The boy didn't explain it very well - apparently it's a condition of our rental.'

Frances remembers the note left outside on the mat, under the dirty nappy. *Close windows!*

'I might be out. The survey...'

'She said she'd only come up when you are in.' Lucas peers over the table piled with dishes, sees Frances's exposed breast, Ivan's saliva still glistening and a milky dribble on his lips. 'Come on, Frannie, I'm knackered. You're knackered. Let's both go to bed.'

\*

Zoya is sitting on the back seat of the Zhiguli. Ice is forming on the windows in curiously symmetrical patterns, intricate, like the leaves of a fern, uncurling and spreading out across the glass. It is cold outside, colder than usual, a bitter, frozen, silent cold that will kill the homeless and the drunks caught out tonight, but her own breath swirls warmly around her face; she's been cleaning vigorously for the past half hour.

She finishes her scrubbing and rests for a moment. This is where Lucas's wife sits, she thinks. Frances sits here with her baby on her knee and stares at the back of her head. Zoya breathes in

through her nose, and sighs. The interior still stinks of fecal matter, layered now with the astringency of the lemon Jif she has used on the plastic seats. She wonders if she should leave the windows open, just a crack, to air it overnight, but car thieves are everywhere and while they'd steal the Zhiguli without any assistance, she doesn't want to make their job easier. Besides, she thinks, the windows will have frozen solid by now. She ought to get out before the door freezes too yet the car is strangely calming, despite the smell. It is a space she knows intimately, like any driver, yet without the engine running, its silence seems to wrap her in something like comfort. Outside, the street is empty, inhospitable; a street light flickers weakly as the cold descends.

Up in the bedroom in Zoya's apartment, Dedush is sleeping at last. If she hadn't brought the car home with her the previous week she would never have been able to drive him to the clinic when his temperature started raging, when his lips turned black and when, stretched out on the back seat of the Zhiguli with his thin legs folded up and his head against the door, his insides had started pouring out in a hot, steaming torrent.

Zoya has only been to the clinic once before. It is a private practice near the Dynamo stadium, with a receptionist and a waiting area and nurses in white rubber clogs. If she'd taken him to the public hospital near the bridge, he would almost certainly have died. When she arrived at the clinic with Dedush they took samples and put him on a drip, but as soon as the diarrhea slowed and his temperature dropped she signed his discharge slip and brought him back to the apartment. When Tanya came out to help carry him upstairs she told Zoya she ought to have left him there. Tanya thinks she's made of money because she works for a foreigner, but the daily rate at the clinic is a whole week's wages. The new pills in the box with the German brand-name cost even more. In the end, though, it's not about the money. This is the man who made her pancakes when she came home from school; the man who washed her knitted tights when she started menstruating and who tried to hide her grade papers when she told him she wanted to study English at the university, because English meant American and those people were lascivious, not to mention dishonest and duplicitous with their claims about who won the war. He had fought with the Red Army at Zaporozhye in the autumn offensive of '43. No one leaves a man like that with a nurse in white clogs. He belongs at home.

The car door has frozen up already. Zoya rams it with her elbow until it flies open and she almost falls out. She collects her cleaning materials and kicks out the bag with the soiled nylon seat covers so that it lands at some distance from the car in the snow. If the car smells in the morning, there's nothing more she can do. She can always blame it on Lucas's baby. He should never have brought his child to this place.



## Chapter 10

Frances leans her head against the cold kitchen window and peers down towards the car park. The sun is bright for early January, glancing off the windscreens and burnishing the snowbanks. She has been standing like this for the past hour, waiting for the caretaker to leave the building and make her daily pilgrimage across the tramlines, then up the lane that rises between the cottages of the Tsar's Village. Only then can Frances go out without being intercepted. This is how spies operate. You watch, you are patient, you learn your mark's routines. Then you do what you must. The new year has brought new resolve. She will source a supply of Pampers via Suzie, finish the survey, and recover her copy of *Jurassic Park*.

The problem, of course, is that no one with a baby could ever be a spy. When the caretaker finally leaves the building, Frances lowers Ivan into the new baby carrier. She almost tips sideways as she swings it across her shoulders, but already she is learning to bend her knees and take the weight across her hips. Outside, as her breath condenses in pale clouds and she picks her way past the empty bottles of new year vodka that lie strewn like curling stones across the black ice of the car park, her son's legs find purchase against her ribs and he bobs up and down in his padded snowsuit, murmuring his appreciation.

All the same, when Frances spots the boy from upstairs she wavers a little. He is loitering on the steps to Suzie's apartment block. He stares at her, his hands in his jeans pockets, shoulders hunched inside a hooded nylon anorak. Then, suddenly, he leaps in the air and executes a kind of pirouette before sliding away from her, like a figure skater on a rink. He's just a child, she tells herself, yet he still gives her the creeps.

Frances takes the lift up to Suzie's. When she knocks, the door opens almost straight away.

'Hello, Suzie –'

'God, I thought you weren't talking to me.'

Suzie is wearing a dove grey suede skirt and a pale, silky blouse. Her eyes are accented with mascara and her hair is arranged in a perfect French plait. She pulls Frances inside and shuts the door.

'Don't worry,' she says. 'Rob's out. By which I mean, he didn't come home.'

All at once, Frances is sorry she hasn't followed through with Suzie. She abandoned her after that night at the restaurant; she'd been frightened, but Suzie on her own is a different person, open, self-

deprecating. Suddenly she wants to sit down on her soft leather sofa, drink her coffee, chat and laugh about how stupid things are and how they might be.

‘I’m sorry I’ve not been in touch,’ she says. ‘Lucas went away, and I’ve had this survey to do and then it was Christmas – ‘

Her excuses sound hollow though Suzie doesn’t seem to notice; she is busy helping Frances with the baby carrier and then taking her coat. Frances kicks off her snowboots and pads after her into the living room with Ivan in her arms.

‘Shall I get a blanket for Ivan to lie on?’ asks Suzie.

‘Oh, no thank you.’ Frances sets Ivan down on the rug. ‘Look, he’s sitting now. If I just put a couple of cushions behind him...’

‘He’s growing up so fast!’ exclaims Suzie. ‘Look at you, wee man!’ Ivan is leaning forward, clutching at the long fibres of the rug, tugging them towards his mouth. Suzie goes into the kitchen to put the kettle on and while she’s gone, Frances wipes the drool off his chin. ‘Wee man!’ she whispers, trying to make the words fit.

When Suzie returns, she sits down on the sofa and smiles.

‘Rob can be a prick sometimes, but I don’t want that to stop us being friends.’

Frances takes a deep breath. ‘He goes to Finland quite a bit, doesn’t he?’

‘Yes, though I hope you don’t feel we can only see each other when he’s out of the country!’

‘No, no, what I meant was, do you think he could do something for me?’

Now Suzie is surprised.

‘Like what?’

‘I – well, I really need some Pampers – Ivan needs them. A dozen packs would be great. I brought some with me but they’re too small now, and the local brands...’

‘What size?’ asks Suzie, quickly.

‘Oh, well, the large ones – one size below Junior. I’ll pay whatever it costs, plus the shipping...’

Suzie smiles and nods. For the next half hour the two women moan about the snow and the shopping and Frances tells Suzie about the white goods shop she’s on her way to visit and Suzie tells her to visit a pharmacy in Lipki where they sell Nivea hand cream and Tylenol. Yet when Frances gets up to leave, she knows they have both been play-acting. She came because of nappies, and Suzie is nobody’s fool.

\*

The white goods shop is in a basement down a side street to the south side of Kreschatyk. There's no sign, but the new-looking steel shutters are raised and Frances can see lights in the large picture window that rises up to the level of the street. This is the place Vee told her about; there's a Hotpoint sticker on the glass and another for Bosch. The names, so familiar, startle her with their confidence, their branded superiority. She shunts Ivan's carrier higher across her shoulders and reaches up to check that his mouth is clear of her scarf.

'Washing machines!' she whispers over her shoulder, as if they are visiting Santa's grotto.

The steps down to the doorway have been swept clear of snow but there's a shiny grey mass of impacted ice on the pavement at the top so Frances treads carefully in her thick-soled boots, still adjusting to the baby weight she carries on her back. The doorway is lit from overhead and there is a security alarm instead of the usual dented sheet metal and here again she hesitates. In this shop they'll speak the smooth, sleek language of microwaves and spin cycles. The queuing, the spitting, the grit on the floor and the women saying *nyet* – she won't find those things here.

Imposter Syndrome – that's what Lucas calls it. He thinks it's a joke.

A buzzer sounds as Frances pushes open the door. Ivan starts to grizzle beneath his balaclava but she is already distracted. The shop is full of machines. Some are encased in shrink-wrap plastic. A few are still boxed, others stacked up to the ceiling in twos and threes. Recessed lighting spreads its soft sheen over the ceramic plates of an electric hob, the curved glass door of a tumble dryer. No harsh fluorescent strips here. Frances pulls off a glove, ready to touch.

'*Dobred'yen!*' A young woman, skinny in a tight black dress with dyed hair and pale, pearlescent lipstick, appears from behind a row of air conditioning units. Frances hides her hand in her pocket.

'*Dobred'yen...*' she says, her nerves returning. 'Do you speak English?'

The young woman frowns. 'Mykola!' she calls, not looking away.

'You see I'm doing a survey, a consumer survey. It's for the UN and I wonder if you'd mind...'

The woman has disappeared; Frances is now talking to herself. She peers around a box with 'INDESIT' on the side. A door is ajar but she cannot see anything beyond. It must lead to a back office because there's no desk that she can see in this part of the shop, no telephone, no paperwork; just the appliances, some packaging and a bentwood stand in the corner from which hangs a man's dark overcoat and a lozenge-shaped hat. The hat is made of black fur that undulates in silky soft waves like the coat of a newborn lamb. Astrakhan, or something like that. Ivan would clutch it in his fingers, bring it to his mouth. She moves nearer, stifling the urge to run her forefinger along its rippled crown.

Then a man's voice exclaims from close behind her.

'A baby? My god, a *malinki malinki* little baby!'

She tries to turn around but someone is scooping Ivan out of his carrier and the sudden loss of his weight makes her lose her balance.

‘What a beautiful little *pirozhki*... a boy, no? So tiny... and it is so cold this afternoon!’

With a sharp shrug, Frances shucks off the baby carrier and twists round to see Ivan in the arms of a man in his early forties, perhaps – slim, balding, not tall, with a thick moustache and dark eyes with full lashes. He looks vaguely familiar, though this might be because there are many dark men with moustaches in Kiev. He’s wearing a suit, an expensive one and already Ivan is crushing his lapel in his chubby little fist.

‘Please,’ she says, aware that this is not the first time she’s had to ask a stranger to stop touching her baby. However, this man isn’t like the caretaker. His eyes register her distress and he passes Ivan back to her straight away.

‘A baby needs his mother,’ he says, his voice deep, heavily accented despite his evident pleasure in speaking English. He nods at the baby carrier. ‘It is good to visit places together. So,’ he stands formally, heels touching, ‘in what way may I help you?’

‘Oh.’ Frances blinks. ‘Do you have a price list you can show me? I’m doing – I am conducting a survey.’ She fumbles with the flap of her bag, tugs her other glove off with her teeth and produces the thick file of paper. ‘It’s for the UN. A consumer survey to help them establish the cost of living for their staff in Kiev. I have to find three prices for everything. Food items, services, soft furnishings, electrical goods...’

The man doesn’t move. He is smiling at Ivan, who is wriggling, straining away from her as if he wants to be put down. Frances forgets the rest of her carefully prepared speech.

‘So you work for the UN?’ he asks, holding out his finger so that Ivan can grasp it.

‘No,’ she says, hoping Ivan won’t pull it towards his mouth. ‘I’m – ’ there is an official phrase but the words veer away from her – ‘a third party. The UN always asks a third party to do the survey.’ She feels embarrassed now, just as she knew she would. It sounds so ridiculous, saying words like ‘the UN’ as if she’s their spokesperson or something. She isn’t remotely credible, standing here with a baby, feigning competence and importance in her snow boots. This man, this Mykola will see right through her and send her straight back out onto the street. ‘My husband works for the BBC,’ she adds, knowing before the words come out of her mouth that this sounds even more ridiculous.

Mykola doesn’t show it, though.

‘Ah,’ he says, nodding. ‘BBC. World Service. Very good. Good to have you here in *Ukraine*. And the United Nations. Also very good. Kiev, London, New York. You respect us and we respect you – joint enterprise, START treaty... That is how it is now. But a survey...’ he reaches out and takes the

file from Frances's hand. 'A survey is a special thing. Prices are a delicate matter. With inflation, with our *kouponi* – as a wife, as a mother you know how it is. Viktoria!'

With a flick of her hair the young woman returns. The man in the suit hands her the survey, murmurs something in Russian.

'She will make a copy. One for you, and one for me. Okay?'

Frances stares helplessly as the woman retreats back behind the door. She hears a beep, then a wheezing sound as a photocopier warms up.

'So,' he says. 'In a few minutes we can talk about this survey. First, some coffee? No? I can see you are interested in appliances. You are new here. You have apartment, a baby. You need things! What do you like? Bosch? You like German I think?'

Frances tries to concentrate on what the man is saying, but now she is aware of another difficulty. A sweetish smell, cloying and rancid, rises up from her son. Ivan is filling his nappy. The odour is already problematic, and with his nappy rash he'll soon start to scream. She'll have to get him out, find somewhere she can change him, though of course there's nowhere but the snow.

'The survey...' she says, her eyes flicking to the back office door. 'I'm sorry, I have to go – my son...'

The man's dark eyes look concerned, sympathetic.

'Your son needs some attention, I think. Please, there is no need for you to leave. Viktoria will help you. Here –' He doesn't touch her; instead he guides her towards the doorway and pushes it open. 'Take your time.'

Viktoria is standing beside a new-looking photocopier. She looks up, glances at the man and there's only the faintest flicker of disgust before she steps aside. There's a desk, a computer and not much else but the grey carpeted floor is clean and Frances is grateful, absurdly grateful as she kneels down, lays Ivan on the floor and unzips his snowsuit. Viktoria retreats, and the man speaks to her softly from the shop which is just as well as Ivan's bottom is as ghastly as Frances fears – pale faeces already leaking out of the soaked nappy, caking his skin, soiling his clothes. When she lifts away his vest, the stench fills the airless room. She finds some baby wipes and a spare nappy in her bag but the sores are inflamed, weeping craters. Ivan whimpers as she cleans him, turning his head and arching his back. Quickly she secures the straps of the new nappy, removes the stained vest and returns him to his clothes. If she was back in the apartment she'd feed him now but she can't do that here so instead she licks her little finger and inserts it into his mouth for him to suck, greedily, his grey eyes fixed on hers.

'I will take that.'

'Oh...' Frances looks up. The man has picked up the soiled nappy. She should have shoved it back into her bag. Now he has touched it and she feels dizzy with panic even though he is smiling, he's found a plastic bag and the nappy is disappearing. She struggles to her feet. 'I'm so sorry...'

Mykola watches her for a moment. His dark eyes are like a weight upon her, but he is holding Ivan's dirty things and she cannot hold his gaze.

'A mother with a baby should never apologise,' he says. 'Nevertheless, you are worried. This survey – the UN are paying you well, I hope, because I think you do not have a washing machine.'

Frances is startled.

'How do you know that?' she asks.

Mykola touches her now, takes the hand that is not supporting Ivan.

'Your hands are rough. The vest has many stains. This is bad and it must change. I want to give you something.'

Frances pulls back her hand. The room is very quiet. She realises that the soft hum and shush from the photocopier has ceased. The newly duplicated survey sits silently in the tray.

'I must go,' she says.

'Of course you must go. First, I want you to have something every mother needs. A gift. Not one of these – ' he waves towards the shop – 'but good, nevertheless. I have machines that are a little older, maybe a dent or two, guarantees expired. I cannot sell them – my customers want everything to be perfect; it is natural. You see, I can help you with this.'

'I have no money,' says Frances, slowly. Her head is spinning again. She knows she ought to take the survey, both copies, and leave, but the sense of unreality overwhelms her and if this is not real then nothing she can say or do will feel worse than walking away.

'I do not ask for money,' continues Mykola. 'Journalists – they are never paid enough! I know these things. Your little boy – so sweet. Let us agree it is a gift for him.'

'I couldn't possibly...' murmurs Frances.

'Tell me where you live,' says Mykola.

Frances stares blankly for a moment.

'For the delivery! I will send someone to install it.'

'Oh,' she says, again. And then, even though something is ringing in her head, a kind of warning tinnitus, the words come tripping out. 'Staronavodnitska Street. Building Four.'

Mykola has turned his head. She can see a mole above his left temple. His mother must have stared at that when he was a baby, she thinks, when she held him to her breast.

'Apartment?' he asks as he picks up the baby carrier, holds it while she slides Ivan's legs inside. He lifts it carefully onto her shoulders and opens the street door.

The bitter chill almost steals her voice. 'Thank you,' she whispers as he offers her the survey, now in an opaque plastic folder. She tries to take it but he doesn't quite let go.

'I understand your caution,' he says. 'You are a mother. It is difficult.'

Frances knows she'll start to cry if she stands there any longer. Let him be a good man, she thinks. Why can't he be a good man?

He releases the folder. It is enough.

'Apartment thirty-four,' she says. 'But the lift is broken.'

\*

Later that afternoon, behind the thick walls of the monastery, a man removes his lozenge-shaped hat and stoops beneath a doorway. The space inside is dim, the air heavy with the grease and smoke from burning tapers, with the smell of bodies sweating beneath thick layers of clothing. The man knows that with a flick of his hand he could have the little Church of the Nativity of the Holy Mother of God to himself. Two monks stand ready to shoo away other worshippers, but the crowd, he believes, is his penance, so he moves to an alcove to cross himself, kneel down on the cold tiles and mutter his prayers. The monks in their black robes wait behind him. Only when he raises his hand do they step forward, bearing a wooden icon between them, a triptych, though it is small enough to be carried in one hand.

The icon itself is dull and faded – its colours worn almost away. There are hints of red, brown, some blue, a suggestion of gold in the halo around the Holy Mother's head and along the edge of the veil that she holds out, shielding the man-baby who sits upright in her lap and the upturned faces of the saints and martyrs ranged like tiny dolls on either side.

The man bows low over the icon. His lips touch the edge of the wood, then he shuffles backwards on his knees and prostrates himself before it, lying face down on the floor while the grey forms of his fellow worshippers murmur and step over his legs.

Twenty minutes later, when the man reemerges into the twilight and replaces his hat, a skinny boy with close-cropped hair wearing jeans and a nylon anorak slides up to meet him.

The man in the hat does not like to see a boy with his fingers tucked inside his trouser pockets in this holy place. The boy, however, whispers quickly, and the man is placated, pulling out his wallet and rewarding him with two ten dollar bills. Satisfied, the boy slides away, pushing his feet across the snowy cobbles as if he is wearing ice skates or cross-country skis. He doesn't look back until he reaches the corner, at which point he spins full circle on his toes and makes a sign of the cross,

touching his forehead, breast and each shoulder with his first two fingers, then pointing them at the man as if to say *I see you, Mykola Sirko.*

The man in the hat turns away. *Perhaps, he shrugs, we see each other.*



## Chapter 11

The day after Frances' trip to Mykola's shop, the caretaker knocks on the door. Frances has been telling herself that Lucas might have got it wrong, or that the promise to come and find her was an empty one. You fool, she thinks, grimly, as she moves back from the spyhole and wonders whether she can pretend to be out.

The boy from upstairs is with the old woman again and this time he shouts.

'*Dezhornaya* is here!' he announces. 'Open door. It is condition of lease!'

Frances gives in and pushes down on the handle. 'Yes?' she asks, hoping she sounds annoyed.

The caretaker is standing on the doormat with two bulky string bags in her hands. The boy is behind her, clutching a bucket full of old newspapers. He is wearing an anorak that is too small for him, and a pair of plastic trainers.

'*Dezhornaya*,' he repeats. 'Elena Vasilyevna. She come to do windows.'

Elena. This is the name of the midwife in *Jurassic Park*, the one who leaves the nursery window open on page twenty-seven so that the baby raptors climb in. Frances shakes her head. There was a note – it said 'Close windows!' on squared paper left on the doormat.

'Doesn't she speak English?' she asks.

'No.'

'Will it take long? I am very busy...'

The boy shrugs. 'Now I go.'

'Wait!' says Frances, panicking. She's not sure which is worse, being alone with the caretaker or inviting the boy to stay too. 'What if I can't understand her?'

The boy stares for a moment, then steps into the flat, brushing past Frances. Elena Vasilyevna follows. He opens the living room door and walks straight across to the window. 'She will do here and here,' he says, pointing at the window frame and the edges of the balcony door. 'All rooms. Leave for spring.' He looks around the room, sees a pack of Lucas's chewing gum on the side table and picks it up. 'I take?'

'Yes, thank you, please go,' says Frances, quite clear now that she does not want this boy in her flat.

'Ciao!' he says, as he saunters out.

Frances closes the door behind him. Her palms are sweating. When she turns, the caretaker Elena is already shuffling into her kitchen.

When Frances catches up with her, the newspapers are on the table and Elena is emptying a kilogram bag of rough brown flour into the bucket which is sitting in the sink.

'*Pazhalasta...*' begins Frances, wanting to ask her how long it will take and why she needs flour, but Elena turns and passes her a green overall she has brought with her. She waggles her fingers, motioning Frances to put it on. Then she opens a kitchen cupboard, rummages until she finds a suitable saucepan and passes this, too, to Frances.

'*Seychas,*' she says, '*davai rabotat.*' Now, work.

\*

Frances's job, it seems, is to sit on the red chair in the living room and tear sheets of newspaper into rectangles the size of a small matchbox. The first pieces are too small, so Elena takes the newspaper from her with a tutting noise and demonstrates the desired proportions. The rectangles go into the saucepan, while Elena turns her attention to her bucket of flour and water. She mixes it with immense concentration, testing it on her tongue and squeezing it between her fingers before pressing the mixture into the gaps between the window and its frame. As soon as she finishes one side, she wipes her hands on her pinafore and begins to layer the newspaper pieces neatly over the paste to create a seal.

Frances finds the work strangely calming, despite the presence of the old woman in the apartment. Ivan chews on a breadstick in his bouncy chair at her feet, perfectly content as long as she rocks it regularly. There is no need to speak. The television news hums softly from the set in the corner. Pictures of a forest. Two trucks full of soldiers. A square-jawed commander in a peaked green cap striding down a hillside. She notices how, when the old woman frowns, her twisting black eyebrow hairs tangle above her nose. Her ancient hands shake a little as she works, but there is no point in signalling for her to stop. Elena, she can tell, will complete this task, even to her last breath. If Frances were to try to prevent her, she would never have the courage to cross the foyer downstairs again. So she doesn't intervene when Elena moves across to the balcony door and seals that up, too. On the contrary, the glued door offers immediate relief from her struggles with the building's outer fabric. She doesn't care what Lucas will say. He promised to stop smoking and he hasn't. She jogs the bouncy chair with her foot and leans forward to smile down at her son. Elena is a common enough name, she tells herself. Practically universal.

'*Seychas!*' says Elena, loudly. She is pointing at the television. '*Simplemente Maria.*'

Frances doesn't understand.

'*Simplemente Maria!*' Elena moves over to the television and mimes the action of turning up the volume with sharp flicks of her wrist.

'Oh.' Frances rises to her feet and does as she is instructed. She's noticed *Simplemente Maria* before, bemused by the Russian dubbing of what appears to be a Mexican soap from the early eighties. The station airs it at least three times a day, in between the aerobics workouts with young women in uncomfortably tiny leotards, so perhaps it is popular. After all, it isn't hard to follow. Maria the maid gets seduced by the polo player. His shirt is very white against the straw. His long black boots stay on. She still gets pregnant though. They always show the birth in the closing credits.

This time, however, the plot seems quite complicated; it involves a young girl who is either Maria's child or Maria as a child or the child of her employers. In the next scene Maria seems older, still with long raven plaits, dispensing sugary *churros* as the cameras linger on her tear-filled eyes and brave half-smile.

As the episode unfolds, Frances looks over at Elena who has finished working at the window and instead is leaning back against the wall, arms folded across her shapeless, sagging breasts. Her face bears the same expression of deep concentration she wore as she tasted the flour paste; narrow lips pushed out, frowning, eyes flicking from one character to another. Frances turns her attention back to the screen, curious about what so enthralled her and soon she is equally absorbed, puzzling over whether Maria has been penetrated by the family patriarch as well as his playboy son.

So when the doorbell rings, both women jump.

Elena straightens up, muttering, disconcerted perhaps to be caught so far from her cubicle downstairs. Frances moves more slowly; she isn't expecting anyone. Perhaps it is Zoya. She hopes it isn't Zoya, who will most likely sneer at both the nature of the drama unfolding on the television and Frances's latitude with the caretaker. She moves out into the hallway and puts her eye to the spyhole. Something is blocking the light. Then the view clears and she pulls her head back sharply.

The little fish eye lens has shown her the face of a madman.

'*Privyet!*' shouts a voice. A fist bangs twice against the door. '*Steeralnyu machine zakazuvali?*'

Elena comes hurrying.

'*Sto? Steeralnye machine?*' She glares at Frances suspiciously, then takes hold of the little stool that sits by the phone and hauls it over to the door so that she, too, can peer through the spyhole. A stream of Russian invective ensues, mainly from Elena, with one or two angry words from the madman. The caretaker keeps glancing over her shoulder with a look of increasing fury until Frances understands that it isn't the madman she is appalled by so much as Frances's own ineptitude for somehow making him appear. As she absorbs this new discovery, Elena climbs down from the stool

with a huffing noise and begins working both locks with her misshapen fingers and knuckles like gristly chicken bones.

'Don't!' implores Frances. It is too late. The door is open and the madman isn't a madman at all but a man with a horribly damaged eye, the eyelid so bruised and swollen she cannot see his eyeball. Next to him sits a huge cardboard box that reaches up to his waist. She sees the picture before she forms the words. A square with a circle inside it. A washing machine.

'Mykola!' says the man, helplessly, at which point Elena falls silent.

Mykola. Frances recognises that name, but before her emotions have time to rearrange themselves, the man shrieks and puts his hand up to his face.

Elena has spat at his black eye.

\*

Frances knows all about consequences. As a child, these consequences had a physical presence; they bore down upon her like giant transport lorries, loads strapped down beneath flapping tarpaulin. Her friends didn't seem to fear them; indeed, Frances would not have been surprised to learn that this nightmare was hers alone.

When she was six or seven, her parents went away. She wasn't sure where, exactly; to a funeral or on a holiday or perhaps they simply disappeared, walking out of her existence for a week. They left her in the care of some friends, a middle-aged couple with five children of their own, all of them older than Frances. The family lived in Portsmouth, one street back from the sea and while the two oldest boys were told not to let Frances swim out of her depth, the restrictions were few. The children spent hours roaming along the promenade.

The sun was hot, that week she stayed there. It must have been the summer holidays as the narrow beach was teeming with families and every day she and the others were given ten pence for a Ninety-Nine from the ice cream van near the entrance to Billy Manning's. But the others didn't spend their money on Ninety-Nines. Instead they ran underneath the Ferris wheel and made a beeline for the long, low shack on the far side of the funfair. The shack was called Tam's Treasure Trove and when Frances first stepped underneath the peeling sign she felt swallowed up by its darkness after the glare of the concrete and the bright, sharp shingle. The air smelled like a tidal cave and straight away she fell in love with the buzzes and bleeps, the flashing lights and the grownups huddled, intent over the machines. They didn't care about her.

A sudden jangling crash to her right made her jump but the others just laughed and winked at each other.

One of the boys showed her how to hand over her ten pence piece to a man with purplish-green tattoos all over his forearms. The man sat up high on a stool in a narrow booth by the door and when Frances pushed her coin under the window he gave her ten pennies without looking up. The older boy immediately took three of the pennies out of her hand and she followed him towards a long, brightly lit machine with revolving trays of money inside: thousands of copper pennies she could watch if she pressed her face against the sticky, curving glass.

The boy pushed one of her pennies into a slot. It rolled down a chute and spun on its axis for a second or two before the tray above it moved forward and knocked it flat. Frances quickly understood that the penny needed to fall in just the right place, at just the right moment, if it was to be shunted onwards with any chance of toppling onto the tray below and perhaps starting a waterfall of pennies like the one she had witnessed when they first entered. All around her, people were scooping up coins from the dark holes underneath and pushing them back in. The jangling sound made her skin tingle and she wanted it to happen for herself. No luck, though. One penny in particular seemed to defy the laws of gravity as it hung lop-sidedly over the edge. She longed to see it fall. It wasn't fair.

When her money was gone she wandered towards the back of the shack where the smell of mould and vinegar made her want to pinch her nose and the machines only took five pence pieces. A woman in an orange dress leaned over a tall machine in the corner so that it lit up her thin face and made her cheekbones stick out. The woman muttered something, then gripped the central rim with her fingers and rammed her hip against the glass. The machine tipped slightly and released its bonanza with a plashing cascade.

Frances returned to her machine. She tried copying the woman, and when her child's weight couldn't shift it, she gave it a kick. The kick hurt her bare toe and still the coins wouldn't budge, yet the man in the booth had seen her and he started banging on his window and shouting that he'd call the police. As she fled the arcade, Frances saw him climbing down from his stool. She didn't stop running until she got back to the house and though the others didn't tell on her, she spent the next four days in bed, fear pushing her down into the mattress and under the pillow while she cried about a stomach ache and listened for the policeman's knock at the front door. When no policemen came, she concluded that they hadn't known where to find her. They were probably still searching, house to house. Those were the consequences. There is no such thing as an empty threat.

\*

Now things are complicated. Elena has pushed Mykola's black-eyed delivery man into the stairwell and sent him on his way. She strips the old green overalls off Frances and picks up her bucket before disappearing after him herself. Frances doesn't know what to make of any of this, but she knows she hasn't heard the last of it.

Lucas bumps into the machine when he comes home that night. He catches his hip on one corner and Frances hears him cursing as he fumbles in the darkness by the front door.

'What the hell is that?' he asks as she steps out of the bathroom, still brushing her teeth.

'It's a present, I think,' she mumbles, wiping her mouth. 'A washing machine. From Mykola, the man I met in the white goods shop. I don't know how they got it into the lift.'

Lucas is not feeling so open-minded.

'A present? If you didn't pay for it, and I hope to God you didn't as there's nothing left on the Visa card, then it's a bribe. Jesus, Frannie, it's a fucking great bribe. He hasn't even tried to disguise it. Something for the wife – very clever. Well, it's going right back to wherever it came from. Just as well you didn't let him bring it in – then we'd be in receipt.'

Frances lowers her toothbrush.

'I don't think it is a bribe,' she says. 'It's only a second. Some Russian make.' She thinks of Elena, spitting at the delivery man, his black eye. And then she remembers how Mykola had looked at her, how he had put his hand on her son's head.

Lucas knows none of this. Alarm is twitching across his face. No one gives washing machines away for no reason. Not even a damaged one.

'What exactly did this Mykola guy say to you?' he asks. 'He doesn't expect us to pay him for it, does he? And how did he know where to bring it?'

Behind Frances, the day's washing drips from the nylon line above the bath. Lucas's shirts, Ivan's yellowing vests and her own knickers and stained nursing bras. She wants the machine, she wants clean laundry but she doesn't understand what Mykola wants.

'We don't have to keep it,' she says, following Lucas into the living room and flicking the light switch so that the night view beyond the windows is obscured by bright reflected light. 'I didn't pay anything. I didn't sign anything.'

'Okay,' says Lucas, taking out a pack of cigarettes. 'I'll get Zoya to call the shop. You've got to be careful, Fran. You don't know how these people operate – starting small, finding your weakness, inveigling their way in and then suddenly I'm expected to reciprocate in some way. Christ. What's this?'

Lucas is peering at the balcony door and before Frances remembers to stop him he puts his hand on the handle and gives it a yank. The door makes a sticky sound like an Elastoplast being pulled off a knee. Lucas has broken Elena's freshly made seal.

So, her reprieve is only temporary. The door swings open and cold air rushes in. Consequences, she thinks, as the lorries start thundering towards her. Now, tomorrow, or sometime. She cannot shut out the balcony. The balcony will not be shut out.

## Chapter 12

The winter freeze deepens throughout January, as an Arctic front sinks down from Siberia and dead crows drop out of the sky. On the afternoons when it snows, when the apartment blocks are shrouded and tiny flakes like ice splinters whip across the road, muffling the shrieks of the trams and swirling in dim halos around the streetlights, Frances stays indoors and watches her son as he grins lopsidedly at her skirt hem and practises his rolling on the bedroom floor. She rocks him on her hip in front of the mirror by the front door when his erupting gums make him whimper, or distracts him with a mobile made from bottle caps when his nappy rash flares up and he howls for three hours at a stretch, but she never takes him into the living room. On days when the skies clear and the thermometer won't nudge over minus ten, Frances dresses him in five or six layers, with little zip up bootees she found at the Universam and a pom-pommed balaclava on his head. Then she bumps him down the steps in his pushchair with the see-through rain cover pulled around him to keep out the worst of the cold that burns her nostrils and makes her eyes sting, and they walk around the car park or take a trolleybus to the ramshackle BBC office, where Zoya frowns her disapproval and Lucas lets him play with his keys.

The washing machine is still sitting out on the thirteenth floor landing. At first, Lucas tries to get Zoya to visit the shop to have it returned, but she tells him she won't do his dirty work and besides, everyone knows about Mykola Sirko's dealings with the new racketeers and his shop is almost certainly used to launder their money.

'Exactly!' says Lucas, exasperated. 'Why do you think I want it out of my hallway?'

Elena Vasilyevna, on the other hand, cannot leave the washing machine alone. She climbs the stairs almost daily, arriving just before midday to watch the next episode of *Simplemente Maria* on Lucas's TV. She'll skip it if Lucas is at home, though most of the time he's out and when Frances opens the door to let her in, Elena bangs on the washing machine with her fist and mutters some curse in Russian.

The TV sits in a corner of the kitchen, now – it is too big for the narrow space, but Frances has balanced it on a box opposite the stove, telling Lucas it is too cold in the living room. Besides, she doesn't want Elena to notice the broken seal on the balcony door. She is still wary of Elena, and assumes the old woman wants to nose around the apartment and peer at her private things. Nevertheless, she is learning that Elena's visits offer a crucial, if temporary, reprieve from the fear



that, on some days, makes Frances lock herself in the bathroom while Ivan naps. When Elena is around, her son is safe from harm - safe from treacherous hands that might pluck him from his cot, carry him to the open balcony window, dangle him out and let go. Soon, Frances finds herself anticipating Elena's impatient rattle of the door handle. They cannot speak to each other, and Elena wants the volume turned up loud which always wakes Ivan, but when he's fed, and sitting in his bouncy chair or sliding around on the kitchen floor, the caretaker tickles him with the toe of her felt slipper. Ivan giggles, and sometimes he brings up his mashed potato or coughs on his breadstick, but mostly the three of them settle down to a tolerable silence.

One lunchtime Frances finds herself offering Elena some coffee. The next day, she opens a packet of biscuits.

\*

Frances wakes in the night to the sound of dogs barking. She can hear them through the double glazing, thirteen floors down; they sound as if they are fighting, their yelps and snarls echoing between the buildings and across the valley. Lucas isn't home yet; he is filing late from the office and as Frances stares into the darkness, the sounds seem to get louder until she imagines the dogs are on the balcony, though she knows this can't be true.

In the morning, Lucas has returned. Frances sees him from the hallway, looking tired and unshaven. He is smoking out on the balcony.

'Christ,' he says, opening the window and peering down. 'Those dogs have murdered each other.'

'What dogs?' she asks, willing him to pull his head back inside.

Lucas straightens up and takes a long drag on his cigarette. His chest expands with the inhalation and he holds it in for three or four seconds before breathing it out.

'Two of them, down by the bins. They'd been tied together by their back legs. They must have attacked each other, or died from exhaustion. Horrible. The caretaker is dealing with them.'

'Oh.' So Frances hasn't dreamt it. 'Did you see them last night? The dogs?'

'Yes, when Zoya dropped me off.' Lucas flicks his stub over side of the balcony and steps back into the living room. 'I couldn't untie them, before you ask. They would have gone for me. They were half-crazy already. It's a mess down there. Don't look.'

\*

Lucas and Vee are lounging on leatherette sofas in the bar of the Slavuta.

‘So how’s Frances?’ asks Vee. She stubs out a cigarette and pushes her fingers through her hair. ‘Did she finish the survey already?’

Lucas lifts his glass of beer, checks it in the dull, flat light from the chandelier above their heads and takes a sip.

‘The survey’s done, though it took quite a while. Don’t worry – I fed her some numbers. Kiev is a hardship posting, no question. Your diplomat buddies will get their allowance.’

Vee sighs. ‘Did you hear the Finns are opening an embassy in the building next to mine? Sorin told me, though I don’t know why he bothers. Maybe he wants me to get him into some parties.’

‘Hmm.’ Lucas thinks of Sorin accompanying Vee to a party, brushing the small of her back with his bureaucrat’s palm, staring at her cleavage. He can see the serpentine curve of her right breast as she leans back against the sofa and yawns without covering her mouth. What would she do if he made a pass? He’s been playing this game more often lately, eyes fixed elsewhere so as not to betray the inevitable direction of his thoughts – how it would go, how it would feel. Not that anything would happen; if visions appear uninvited in his head, then he is hardly to blame. Besides, Vee would be scathing.

Or maybe she wouldn’t.

‘How about a proper drink?’ he asks. ‘Vodka?’

‘Kicking back, are we?’ Vee smiles, raises an eyebrow. ‘Then you should call Frances, get her to join us. She must be going crazy in that flat.’ She leans forward, her blouse falling open a little. ‘How does she do it? I mean, with Ivan, and *you*, for chrissakes...’

Lucas looks over his shoulder, searching for a waiter but the bar is deserted and a man exits through the revolving door of the lobby, into the darkness. No one he knows. ‘Yeah, well, it’s been hard for her. Not just Kiev, but being a mother. Her focus has shifted. She worries about stuff. She’s promised me she’ll see that new embassy doctor.’

‘Philip Alleyn?’ Vee pushes her hair back from her head. ‘Seems like thorough kind of guy.’

‘Right.’ Lucas frowns at her choice of words. ‘Anyway, it’s funny – all of a sudden she’s friends with the *dezhornaya* – the one who’s been complaining about Ivan’s nappies. She comes up most days to see Ivan, and they watch TV together. Frannie says it’s good for Ivan to be around someone else, though I have to say I’m surprised. She makes it pretty clear that she hates the crap out of me – the *dezhornaya*, I mean. What is it Teddy calls her? The Baba Yaga -’

‘Hey!’ says Vee, sitting up. ‘That reminds me.’ She slips her hand into the shoulder bag on the seat beside her and pulls out a red-bordered copy of *Time*.

Lucas glances across, sees the full-page image of an outdoor market stall. It is a familiar Kiev scene, though only the vendor’s hands are showing: old hands, slightly blurred, fingers bound in

dirty fabric, held out as if in supplication. Most of the frame is taken up with the meagre vegetables for sale: a couple of wrinkled carrots, a few black potatoes and, in sharp focus in the foreground, a single banana, dotted with flakes of new snow. The text beneath reads 'Ukraine – crisis or stasis?'

'Nice,' he remarks, to hide the dismay that rushes up each time he sees a Ukrainian story that someone else has written.

'The pic's one of Teddy's,' says Vera, smiling, pinning him down with her blue-eyed gaze. 'Clever boy. He's made the front cover.'

\*

Frances is sitting on a hard chair in the new doctor's office at the British Embassy on Desyatynna Street. Ivan wriggles in her lap and she reaches nervously for his hands. She hasn't seen a doctor for over four months.

'So, baby first, then you,' says Dr Alleyn – Philip - as he has asked her to call him, though she would prefer him to maintain his professional distance. He looks like a doctor, she thinks, with his wiry grey beard, dark, bright eyes and a tweedy tie that swings forward as he manoeuvres around his over-sized Soviet-era desk and lifts Ivan out of her arms. When he speaks, his vowels curl at the edges, the hint of a past life in Australia, perhaps.

'Let's get him undressed. Six and half months, hey? He's a good weight! Had all his jabs, I take it, eating well...'

'Shall I do that?' asks Frances, rising to her feet as the doctor lies Ivan down on the narrow consulting bed and starts to unzip his snow suit.

'No need. Means I can check his joints and his reflexes... You sit down, have a rest.'

Frances does as she is told.

The consulting room is taller than it is wide. There is a long, wooden-framed window behind the desk and freshly-hung net curtains, still with their horizontal creases, open slightly so that Frances can see a small courtyard beyond and the trunk of a plane tree with its patchy bark like a skin disease: impetigo or psoriasis or another of those words that used to fascinate her as a child. There's an austere quality to the room – the thin February light, the pale blue walls, the high ceiling with its airy cornicing – that lightens the weight on her shoulders, opens up her lungs. She takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly.

'Nasty rash,' says Dr Alleyn, as he opens Ivan's nappy. 'I'll give you something for that. But the best treatment is plenty of fresh air. Put him on a mat on the floor and let him go commando.'

‘Okay,’ says Frances. Here is the doctor, she thinks. He is telling her how to look after her baby. This is what she has been missing. This is what she needs.

‘He’s sitting well. Pulling himself up to stand, yet? Wouldn’t be surprised if he’s a late walker. He’s got long legs. Higher centre of gravity. Super chap!’

Frances smiles, nods. She remembers the way the security guard had squinted at Ivan’s passport photo when they arrived. The photo had been taken when Ivan was six weeks old. The photographer had lain him down on a white sheet on the counter in the shop near Clapham Junction, then stood on a step ladder above him. When the flash went off, Ivan’s arms and legs had shot out in surprise. The result was an image of a moon face – white, hairless, eyes half-closed and that wide, searching mouth. He looks quite different, now, she thinks, as the doctor hands her son back to her, nappy re-taped, vest flapping about his long, strong thighs. Ivan swings his torso forward, fists open, reaching to grab something from the desk. She glances down to see what has caught his attention and notices a copy of *Time* with a picture of a snow-flecked banana on the front cover.

‘Look, Ivan!’ she says, as a memory flickers. ‘Banana.’

‘Likes them, does he?’ asks Doctor Alleyn, washing his hands at a sink behind a curtain. ‘You’ve done well to keep breastfeeding. Those journalists are a tough crowd – not like us coddled Foreign Office types! But you – well, not many western wives and mums out here, I shouldn’t think. Everything else all right?’ He turns off the tap and pulls a paper towel out of a dispenser before returning to his chair behind the desk and writing something on a pad of paper. A silence settles around the room. Frances realises she is expected to answer.

‘I’m fine.’ She chews her lip. ‘My back aches a bit. We don’t have a washing machine so I do the laundry in the bath...’

Doctor Alleyn looks up at her.

‘Quite.’ He frowns a little; just enough to suggest sympathy, should she need it. ‘Are you sleeping?’

‘Well, yes, mainly. The dogs wake me sometimes. And I still get up twice a night to feed Ivan...’

‘Try letting him cry. Tough love, and all that. It’s not easy, but it works. Are you eating properly?’

She thinks of the soft folds of flesh across her abdomen that won’t shift, despite all the walking and lifting and bending. ‘Yes. Too much, probably.’

‘I shouldn’t think so.’ He notes something down, then regards her with a calm, practised gaze. ‘Do you ever feel weepy? I mean, cry for no particular reason?’

A pause.

‘No.’

'Are you more irritable these days? Do you feel more angry or more lethargic than before you had your baby?'

'I don't think... No,' says Frances, carefully, as she realises, too late, where these questions are heading.

'Don't mind me asking. I'm sure you are on top of things. Anyone who brings a child to Kiev must be pretty resilient...'

Frances, however, is struggling to concentrate. The room's height, its airy spaces are pulling her away from her chair, her heavy stomach, the baby on her lap. If she stands now, he'll fall to the floor and the magazine he is grasping will fall too. *I know this picture, says the voice in her head. I've seen those bandaged hands, I was there, this is Teddy's photograph taken outside the monastery and Ivan and I are just out of shot, beyond the red border...*

'I have to ask...' The doctor is still speaking. 'It's all part of the service – no stone left unturned. Have you ever had thoughts of harming yourself or your baby, Frances? Even for a moment?'

Frances looks up and sees that one of Dr Alleyn's eyes is not quite level with the other, as if an invisible finger is tugging at the side of his face. She resists the urge to laugh, though she must bite the inside of her cheeks if she is to remain composed. A lie isn't always a lie. Sometimes you simply nudge the camera sideways.

'Everything's fine,' she says, pushing Ivan's legs into his snowsuit. 'I'm just tired. Thank you so much for seeing me. You've been very reassuring.'

She stands quickly, holding Ivan against her hip. Doctor Alleyn stands too.

'Take my card,' he says. 'For emergencies. I have to tell you I won't be in Kiev for most of the summer, though I can recommend a good private clinic...' He hesitates, but Frances is in control of herself now and her grasp, when he holds out his hand, is swift and firm, as if to say *you do not know me, I am not what you think and now I am going to step back outside the frame.*

Outside on Desyatynna Street, Frances breathes in the freezing air. Ivan is still grasping the copy of *Time*, the top corner damp and ragged where he has mouthed it. She takes it from him and taps on the window of the security guard's concrete booth.

'For Doctor Alleyn,' she says, pushing it under the glass.

The guard looks at her strangely.

'Your baby is bleeding,' he says, touching his own lips.

Frances checks her son. There's no blood, just flecks of red magazine paper round his mouth.

She wipes them away with the back of her glove.

## Chapter 13

Lucas once told Frances that he loved her for her secrets. They were lolling beneath a tree on a prickly stretch of New Forest heath, gazing at the clouds piling up like over-yeasted dough and eating cherries from a bag. He said that Frances had hidden depths and he wanted to be the one to plumb them.

Frances had laughed. 'My head is empty,' she said. 'I'm just an airhead. Any thoughts pass straight through me, and out the other side.' But even as the words slipped from her lips, both knew this was a lie.

\*

One afternoon, just after lunch, the telephone rings in the apartment. Frances, folding washing in the bedroom, thinks it must be Lucas. It isn't Lucas. It is Zoya, her voice flat and tinny on the poor local line.

'A driver wishes to deliver six boxes of nappies. I told him we cannot take them at the office.'

Frances's grip tightens on the receiver. She closes her eyes. Suzie has done what she asked.

'I *said*,' repeats Zoya, 'a driver wishes...'

'Sorry,' says Frances, collecting herself. 'Sorry. Are they Pampers? Is Lucas there?'

'Yes, and no,' says Zoya. 'Lucas has an appointment at the Ministry of Finance. This is why I am calling you.'

'Right.' Frances is already imagining the nappies with their neat folds and self-sealing fastenings, their soft elastics and velvety, leak-proof coating. She wants to touch them. Count them. 'Can you ask the driver to send them up to Staronavodnitska Street? And pay him, please – use Lucas's emergency dollars. I'll pay it back.'

'I have told the driver to return tomorrow. He has no paperwork. No invoice.'

'Zoya!' Frances tries not to shout. 'I need them now! Tonight!'

'Then I tell him to come back. Lucas can drive them up later.'

Frances is still absorbing the fact that the nappies have arrived at all. Lucas doesn't know about the order. He'll hate the fact that she's buying them from Rob, but she won't let him refuse to take them like he refused the washing machine.

‘Zoya, listen. Lucas is trying to save money, but I need those nappies and I ordered them without telling him. Please can you drive them here for me? I –’ she hesitates – ‘I can give you ten dollars if that helps.’

Zoya doesn’t reply, and the phone goes dead. Frances assumes she has gravely offended her and weeps at her own stupidity until forty minutes later when the doorbell rings and she spies Zoya standing on the landing with several cardboard boxes balanced on top of the washing machine.

‘I have done this for Ivan,’ says Zoya, when Frances opens the door, still blowing her nose. ‘Clearly, if you don’t receive Pampers, you will become insane.’ The two women stare at each other, Zoya frowning as she always does, her plucked eyebrows a line of rebuke, a line that will not stand a challenge, yet perhaps can bear a truce.

‘Thank you,’ says Frances.

\*

At five o’clock Lucas returns home with a slab of pork wrapped in newspaper. He seems buoyant, in the way he used to be, before he and Frances came to Kiev.

‘I’m going to the Dovzhenko studios tonight.’ he says, jiggling Ivan’s bouncy chair. ‘They’re doing some voice edits for *A Golden Promise*.’

‘For what?’ Frances looks up from the button she is sewing on to an old denim shirt.

‘*A Golden Promise*. That’s the title of the film. The one I’m writing about.’ He grins, too fired up to care that his wife doesn’t remember. ‘It’s the perfect time to get some background sound for my feature, and Sorin says the director has guaranteed an interview. He’s been hard to pin down so I’m not going to miss him. I’m sick to death of churning out bulletins from Parliament when all London wants is the nuclear story.’

Sorin, remembers Frances. This is the man who took *Jurassic Park*.

‘Will he - Sorin - be there?’ she asks.

Probably. He seems kind of star-struck. I bet he’d love to hook up with an actress or two. Hey, why don’t you come with me?’

Frances considers the possibility that she might recover her book. ‘What about Ivan? We can’t take him to a sound recording.’

‘Why not?’ Lucas opens the fridge door and pushes the meat inside. ‘It’s a huge place. You can wander round with him while I get what I need. I’ve got the car tonight. Zoya says she’ll meet us there.’ He sucks his lips into a pretend pout and tries out a fake Russian drawl. ‘You, baby, should be star of blockbuster film - screen goddess and wife of Hetman!’

Frances has just secreted sixty four perfectly pure Pampers nappies in the drawer under the bed, and hidden the other four boxes under a blanket on top of the wardrobe. Their value is incalculable to her; they help keep the danger at bay. Now, if she could get her book back – if she could only complete the ritual - then all might be well.

She looks at her husband. Go with him, she tells herself. Don't overthink it. In fact, don't think anything at all.

\*

Lucas is driving with the interior light on. He is holding a street map above the steering wheel and peering at the blank-faced buildings that flicker past them like a spool of Kodak Super 8 as the light fades and the still bare trees crowd in.

Frances, sitting in the back of the Zhiguli with Ivan on her knee, is struggling to read her husband's script in the gloom.

What does freedom mean to Kievans doing a little late shopping down on the city's main street, Kreschatyk?

*[clip: demonstrators chanting]*

Some say they write poetry, while others join the singing in Independence Square. A few daub nationalist slogans, while many simply apply for a passport, rent out their flat or cross themselves as they pass their local church.

*[clip: get some nationalistic music here – folk singers outside St Sophia's?]*

But if you are a true Cossack you revive a legend. Everyone here knows the story of Hetman Polubotok, who in 1723 deposited 200,000 gold coins in the vaults of the Bank of England and bequeathed them to an independent Ukraine. Now the poet Volodymyr Tsybulko has done the maths. Last year he declared that the interest amounts to sixteen trillion pounds sterling. According to his calculations, every man, woman and child from Donetsk to Lviv is owed precisely thirty-eight kilograms of the Hetman's



treasure. Director Viktor Lukyanenko has been quick to seize on the story for one of the first post-independence film to be produced at the Dovzhenko studios here on Peremogy Prospekt. Mr Lukyanenko, I'm told you are describing the film as a romantic epic...

*[clip: interview with Viktor Lukyanenko]...*

'So, what do you think?' he asks.

Frances is trying to catch hold of her husband's breezy tone.

'Great,' she says, nodding. 'Great!'

'It's just the intro,' says Lucas. 'A bit of scene-setting. I need to interest different audiences, not just the World Service lot.' He yanks on the wheel so that the car turns sharply left. 'Peremogy Prospekt. Over there.'

Frances drops the script and grasps sleeping Ivan more tightly. The Zhiguli bumps over the fissures in the concrete and comes to a halt outside some sort of warehouse. She peers out of the window. The building might be a gymnasium or a House of Culture or a hospital or a market – they all look the same from the outside with their closed-up, peeling frontages, their lack of lights and signs. She thinks of the old amusement halls down at Southsea and mouths the Cyrillic letters that hang lopsidedly above some padlocked doors until she makes the right sounds.

'Dov – Dovzhenko *keenostudio*...'

The passenger door is wrenched open.

'Why have *you* come?' asks Zoya, peering in with no trace of their earlier complicity.

'She's an extra!' says Lucas, grinning.

Frances climbs out with Ivan in her arms and follows Lucas and Zoya across the icy crust of the car park towards a steel door. The metal is dented, as if someone has given it a kicking. Zoya stops to stamp the snow off her boots.

'Ready for your debut?' Lucas asks.

Frances hears Zoya grunt, but as they step inside beneath a flickering strip light and walk down a narrow corridor, she sees that Zoya is wearing eyeshadow. Green eyeshadow. She hasn't changed her clothes; she's still in her padded coat and fur hat with the flaps and her heavy, lumpen boots. Yet the eyeshadow changes her. It makes her look younger. Or older. It makes her look something.

The corridor is long and smells of molten wire. Ivan is wriggling inside his snow suit. Frances pulls off his balaclava as they turn a corner, and soon they are passing open doors and stepping around

old women sitting on stools with their spongy, swollen knees and slippers on their feet. A man in brown overalls squeezes past carrying an old-fashioned suitcase.

'In here,' says Zoya, nodding towards a side room on the left with shiny green walls and a single lightbulb dangling from its flex. There's a curtained recess at the far end, and people are pushing in and out, creating a bottleneck. She hands Lucas a neat coil of cable. 'Don't lose this – you have no spare.' Then off she goes, swallowed up by the huddle. Lucas slings the cable over one arm. He takes Ivan from Frances and holds him up above his head as they push their way through.

'This is the sound stage,' whispers Lucas, as they emerge into a cavern-like room the size of a school gymnasium. Its high roof is crisscrossed with pipes and drooping wires. In the centre is a big tent made from swathes of grey fabric suspended from the ceiling. People mill everywhere, some in small groups while others form a line that snakes around the walls. A couple of fringed lamps on tables seem out of place, as if they are in an old-fashioned cloakroom or a seedy sort of club. At one table, men are playing cards. At another, two women count out bundles of coupon notes and place them in piles. The line of people shuffles forward.

'Are they filming this?' asks Frances,

'I shouldn't think so,' says Lucas, grinning. 'It's pay day! Those people must be crew, or extras.' He hands Ivan back to Frances and points at a man wearing headphones, standing half way up a ladder near the tent. 'There's the director, Viktor Lukyanenko. He's the one I'm here to interview.'

As Lucas finishes speaking, the man with the headphones raises his arms and sweeps them twice through the air. Immediately, the hum of conversation pulses more intensely. Then he presses one hand down and Frances realises that he is orchestrating the sound, directing small clumps of queuers whose voices rise and fall in response to the signals he gives them. They are being recorded, even while they line up to collect their wages.

Lucas raises his eyebrows and turns to talk to someone – a woman with short, silver hair wearing owlsh glasses and a crumpled cotton jacket. He gestures towards the tent and starts uncoiling the lead for his microphone. Frances steps out of his way. It doesn't seem like the right time to ask him whether he has spotted Sorin.

A young man with thinning blond hair pulls gently on Ivan's foot.

'*Malchik?*' he asks, smiling.

Frances knows this word. *Boy*. She nods. The young man puts his head on one side.

'Amery-can?'

'Oh no,' whispers Frances. 'English.'

'Engleesh,' repeats the young man, grinning. His forehead is inflamed with acne, its surface like the woodchip that lines her mother's front room. 'London. Film London.'

She nods again, but now the director on the stepladder is speaking, his voice the top notes to the crowd's swelling chorus. It is only when the chatter reverts to its usual formlessness that she realises the segment is over. Lucas has disappeared, so Frances watches while two women clear a space in front of the tent, shooing people away and frowning. Inching sideways, she sees that an old-fashioned microphone is suspended from wires just inside the tent. She stands on tip-toe as a shortish man steps forward and positions himself beneath it. The director signals to the crowd to stop talking. At this point, however, few people are watching, so he claps, twice, his palms cracking like a starting pistol. Instantly, everyone falls quiet.

It is the silence that upsets Ivan, not the clapping. He is seven months old, already settling into the life-long yearning for pattern, the fear of the broken rhythm. Silence jolts him into self-awareness. He makes a fretful, droning sound. Frances, alerted, pushes her finger into his mouth but he doesn't want a pacifier. He wants milk. She looks around, eyes searching for an exit. Not now, she thinks. Then, *of course now*. Anxiety prickles along her arm and provokes her son still further. The more she bounces him on her hip, the more his limbs resist. Ivan leans back, arching away and then, before she can raise her hand to stop him, he smashes his forehead into her cheekbone. The blow is so sharp that Frances actually stumbles sideways. She utters a short cry, then clamps her mouth shut and tries to move back so she can steady herself against the wall. She knows what is coming. Ivan's eyes are wide with shock. His throat is opening.

He screams.

\*

'So,' says the man from the white goods shop as he leads Frances down the passageway. 'I will take you to a quiet place. Here it is, to your left.'

'Mykola,' she mouths, her skull still pounding. She is unsure whether she is speaking out loud but relieved she has remembered his name. At least Ivan's cries have slowed; he hiccups and starts to suck his fingers, calmed by the dim lights and his mother's steady pace. The man opens a door, and inside she sees a small store cupboard with shelves and a mop and bucket in one corner. Two middle-aged women with dyed hair sit on stacking chairs with a picnic laid out on their laps.

'Ezvenitye,' says Mykola, motioning to the women to continue with their meal. He turns to Frances. 'Your baby is hungry.' He gestures to a third chair. 'Sit.'

Frances looks at this man with the rounded shoulders and dark, soft eyes. She wonders why he is here, but the stillness envelops her and the warmth from a small electric heater makes her sigh and sit down.

‘You will not be disturbed,’ he says, placing his hand on the door handle. ‘I will wait outside.’

Frances looks at the two women. They are laying out strips of pickle. ‘Thank you. I’ll be fine.’

‘You are safe here.’

‘Yes...’

He nods, then closes the door with the softest of clicks. She doesn’t hear a key turning, but neither does she hear his footsteps retreating. Even Ivan has fallen silent. A strange kind of peace settles across her shoulders, like feathers, soft and weightless. As the two women politely incline their heads, then dip their black bread in a little pot of salt, chew their sausage and wipe their fingers on yellow cotton napkins, she opens her jacket and feeds her son.

\*

Forty minutes later, when Ivan is asleep and Frances’s head keeps nodding with tiredness, Lucas opens the door.

‘Hey! Are you okay?’

Frances looks up. The two women have gone. There is no trace of their picnic, no heater, no yellow napkins. They must have slipped out while she was dozing.

‘Yes, yes, I’m fine.’ She tries to remember who else entered the room. ‘Did you see anyone else come in – or go out?’

‘No. I’ve been tied up with Lukyanenko for the past hour. Got a great interview, though we all heard Ivan bellowing. *Sto kashmar!* as the babushkas say. Mind you, I’ll probably keep him in my piece. These sound accidents often create a more authentic audio experience.’ Lucas walks over and lifts Ivan out of Frances’s arms, settling him into his shoulder. ‘Your first brush with fame, son of mine! Just as well you managed to tuck yourselves away in here. Hey, what happened to your cheek?’

Frances touches her face, wincing where her skin feels tender, then stands up and checks Ivan’s forehead. His skin is white, unmarked.

‘Ivan head-butted me.’

‘Ouch – that’s quite a bruise,’ says Lucas. ‘This’ll make you feel better. Sorin brought it.’ He fishes something out of his pocket with his spare hand – a paperback, with a silhouette of a T-rex on a yellow disc and a familiar white crease across the cover. Her copy of *Jurassic Park*.

Frances takes the book in both hands, gripping it, testing its density, its solidity beneath her thumbs. Her arms tremble but she will not lose it again. She pushes it quickly into the inside pocket of her coat.

'Thank you.'

'Thank Zoya,' says Lucas, hoisting Ivan a little higher. 'She told Sorin you needed to know who gets eaten at the end.'

\*

One hour later, in the flat on the thirteenth floor, Frances settles Ivan into his cot and runs a bath while Lucas steps out for a smoke. Lying in the tepid water with the door locked, the back of her neck against the unforgiving rim, she takes up her book and turns the pages, her lips mouthing the numbers as she counts the words, the now-familiar see-saw of anxiety and release pulsing across her synapses.

After forty minutes, when the letters start jumping and the terror of dropping Ivan over the balcony is temporarily in retreat, she is almost too cold to stand up and rub herself dry. She shivers on the edge of the toilet seat with a towel wrapped around her and closes her eyes.

Things happen for a reason, she reminds herself. You see a man. You find your book. Mykola is a real person. Yet it is also possible that tonight she conjured him up.

## Chapter 14

The cold snap breaks in February. Grey clouds barge across the sky, northwards now, and the mounds of shovelled snow soften like ancient boulders worn smooth by the passing of millennia.

Lucas is relieved that Frances seems more settled. Every Sunday, news permitting, he takes his wife and son on an outing. Family time, he calls it, and laughs at how they have arrived at something so suburban. Sometimes they take a trip in the car to the Architectural Park where they stroll around the little wooden huts and the drinks kiosks and show Ivan the life-size blue whale made of concrete. They wander amongst the displays of cheaply made t-shirts and sweatshirts proclaiming 'Hugo Boss' or 'Gucci' beneath drooping plastic awnings at Respublikanski Station, or they hop on the 62 bus along the river, then take the stately funicular past the Barbie sign and up the hill to St Andrew's or St Sophia's. When Lucas catches Frances staring into crowds or turning her head towards strangers, he assumes she is merely curious. The two of them talk about Ivan, or about Lucas's work, but they don't discuss the future or their shared past. Those places are fraught with danger. Sex is a rare midnight fumbling; Frances goes to bed before Lucas gets home and she's up with Ivan at six. Anyway, Lucas needs his sleep. The agencies want news of disarmament treaties and the Black Sea Fleet but instead there's just rumour, stalling and a nudge off a sub-editor's schedule. Each short bulletin takes its toll. He tells Zoya he'll hold back his feature about Lukyanenko's film until *A Golden Promise* is released. Then he can tell the whole story, with reaction direct from the premiere.

Frances, meanwhile, sticks to her routine. After breakfast she soaks the washing in a bucket with water boiled on the stove. Next she takes Ivan out to the universam or rides down to the shops along Kreschatyk, trawling the Bessarabsky market or the empty booths of the central department store in its grand carapace on the corner of Bohdana Khmel'nyts'koho Street. She marks her path across the city by tearing off the little handwritten slips from notices pasted to lampposts and walls: adverts for language lessons or prostitutes or pleas for lost children – she has no idea. Soon her pockets are full of telephone numbers.

After lunch, Ivan naps while she keeps him safe by counting her words at the table in the kitchen, and at three Elena knocks on the door for their daily dose of *Simplemente Maria*. Sometimes she brings a gift for Ivan – a musty-smelling balloon, a teething ring made from hard baked dough or, once, a pair of red nylon socks with a border of little yellow hens. Frances wishes she could speak

Russian or Ukrainian. She's learned a long list of nouns, but conversation is much harder. There are things she wants to ask the caretaker.

Then, one afternoon in early March, Lucas comes home for dinner with twelve dark red roses in a crackly cellophane bouquet.

'Happy International Women's Day!' he says, kissing Frances on the mouth with the tang of his last cigarette still strong on his breath. The roses aren't fully opened, yet already their heads droop on flaccid stems, petals browning at the edges. 'I couldn't move on the trolleybus – wilting flowers everywhere. The woman who sold me these swore they'd been flown in from Tbilisi this morning! I bought chocolates for Zoya. She'd have sulked for a month if I hadn't arrived at the office with a box of cherry liqueurs the size of a small table, and you can bet the *dezhornaya* was watching to make sure I'd remembered flowers for you. I suppose I should have bought some for her.'

Frances unwraps the roses and trims the ends from the stems before placing them in a tall jug of water. 'They might revive,' she says, touching the velvety blooms, fragile and yielding as an old woman's skin, surprised to find she cares about a custom in which scowling, sheepish men do their once-yearly duty by their mothers and wives and female employees.

Lucas tickles Ivan in his bouncy chair and peers into the fridge.

'We should go out of course, but I'm working again tonight. There's interest in my *Golden Promise* feature from Radio Four. I've been speaking to a couple of programme editors.' He pokes at a tray of eggs. 'Have we got enough eggs for an omelette? Good to see the washing machine has finally been taken away -'

Frances turns, sharply. 'What?'

'The washing machine. It's gone.' Lucas straightens up, a carton of UHT milk in his hand. 'Didn't you notice? Your dodgy dealer must have had second thoughts – or found a buyer.'

Sure enough, when Frances hurries along the hallway and pulls open the front door, there's nothing next to the doormat except a square of unwashed lino. Has Mykola been here to remove his troublesome gift? The space left behind leaves her strangely hollow inside, and she stands there in her stockinged feet, wondering what would happen if she stuffed her husband's grimy shirts and her own rancid nursing bras into the rubbish chute and sent them tumbling down to Elena.

Nothing escapes the caretaker. She will know who took the washing machine away.

Then something else occurs to Frances. Maybe it hasn't moved as far as Lucas thinks.

\*

The next morning, Frances scoops up Ivan and takes him downstairs in the lift. The day outside is dull and misty. She can't see the river from the windows in the foyer, and even the Motherland statue is shrouded from view. The snow on the ground is grey streaked with charcoal, like a Lowry painting with hunched women on their stick legs at the tram stop. The Siberian freeze may be receding, but winter has not yet left for good.

Elena is not in her cubicle. Her chair is pulled out and the dregs of her morning coffee sit darkly in the bottom of her usual cup. A newspaper lies flat on her desktop with lists of Russian words scribbled in the margins, and on the shelf beneath the window sit a neat row of plastic yoghurt pots from Finland or Sweden or somewhere, each filled with soil. One or two seedlings are just starting to poke through, their pale backs still bent, still bearing the burden of the seed case from which they have just emerged.

'Elena?' she says, not loudly, for the empty foyer is full of echoes. Ivan starts kicking her thigh. Da, he says, da-da, like a good little Ukrainian boy. She kisses his head and wishes she had brought him down in the baby carrier. Instead she wraps her thick cardigan around her son's shoulders and ventures outside.

Frances has never been down to the basement. The door is round the side of the apartment block, down a little service stairway with a broken metal rail and lumps of congealed salt on the concrete. She taps on the metal door, which drifts open at her touch.

'Elena? It's Frances...'

Her voice is drowned by a sudden acceleration of sound, a deep, juddering roar. Ivan's back stiffens, his fists grasp her shirt, pinching her skin. Elena and another figure are standing beneath a flickering strip light with their backs to the door. Lines of nylon rope strung from the ceiling pipes droop with strange, disembodied articles – dresses, trousers, grey, sagging pants. And there, in front of a stainless steel sink plumbed against what must be the bottom of the lift shaft, sits the familiar bulk of the washing machine, shimmying sideways across the floor as its spin cycle peaks.

The figure next to Elena turns, and Frances sees that it is Zoya, her arms full of soiled sheets.

\*

We are all compromised by the washing machine, thinks Frances, as she extracts another load of clean vests and pillow cases from the drum. She and Zoya have both lied to Lucas, who believes she still soaks the washing in the bath, then takes it down to the basement for drying purposes only. Elena, too, appears to have buried her disgust with the machine or with the man who sent it, or both, and twists the dial to set the cycle as if she has been doing this for years. Ivan, meanwhile,



watches the spinning washing from his bouncy chair with studied fascination before the rhythmic churning and plashing send him off to sleep. Frances's back no longer aches at night, and her clothes smell fresh – fresher than before, at any rate, now that she's discovered some Swedish brand of washing powder with a picture of a fjord on the box at the black market kiosks near the football stadium. Nevertheless, the box is emptying at a rapid rate; Zoya seems to get through an inordinate quantity of sheets. Frances wonders if she's taking in her neighbours' washing on the side.

'Do you have children, Zoya?' asks Frances one day, a couple of weeks after the washing machine is moved.

Zoya shakes out a pair of nearly dry jeans. The fabric cracks like a whip.

'No.'

'Any family at home?'

'One relative, yes.'

'Your mother? Father?'

'No.'

Frances gives up and hands Ivan a bread stick. When he sits on a blanket on the floor he leans forward at the hips and reaches for the plastic pegs that the women have arranged for his amusement, his chubby knees splayed out for ballast like a little Buddha. He is safe like that, close to the ground. His trunk is sturdy but already he is pulling himself up if a chair is placed next to him, and soon he will be crawling, or walking.

'What about Elena, I wonder?' asks Frances, peering into the gloom near the electricity boxes where Elena stands at a workbench, tearing up sheets of newspaper for something. Elena!' she calls, softly, adding the Russian word for children as a question. '*Dyeti?*'

Zoya stops sorting clothes and looks up, folding her arms beneath her breasts.

Elena carries on tearing. '*Nyet,*' she says.

Frances frowns, frustrated by her inability to communicate. 'What's the word for niece, or nephew?' she asks, turning to Zoya, but Zoya isn't in the mood for conversation.

'There are plenty of underpaid teachers in this city,' she says. 'You should take some lessons.'

## Chapter 15

On the evening of Lucas's twenty-seventh birthday, Vee throws a party. Her own birthday falls in two days' time so she calls it a joint celebration and invites all her friends. Teddy and his boyfriend will be there, and the usual crowd - journalists, plus a scattering of diplomats and European Bank types that Vee always seems to attract.

Frances digs out her dangly earrings and washes her hair in the sink, but she worries about taking Ivan, about the smoking and the noise and the fact that he'll be up past his bedtime.

'The smokers will stay in the kitchen,' says Lucas, as he takes two bottles of cheap Russian fizz out of the fridge and sticks a litre of vodka in his jacket pocket. 'Vee has promised. And Ivan can sleep in her bed when he gets tired.'

'You know that won't work,' chides Frances.

'But it's my birthday,' says Lucas, only half-joking. 'And that means everyone does what I say.'

Vee's apartment is at the top of the stairwell in a brown building near the Dniepro Hotel. The invitation was for eight o'clock but Frances and Lucas are late. Frances wanted to bathe Ivan first and get him into his pyjamas. She is already peeling him out of his snowsuit as Lucas presses the bell. The landing smells of garlic and dill, and there's a handwritten sign stuck above the spyhole in Vee's shiny steel door.

*'Shh! Baby sleeping!'* it reads, in thick, cartoonish letters.

'So thoughtful!' says Lucas, tapping it when Vee opens the door. Vee puts her fingers to her lips and pulls a Betty Boop face, then laughs. She is wearing a clinging top over jeans and stylish high-heeled boots. The hallway behind her is jammed with guests, and the clamour of voices rises over a pounding europop beat.

'Happy Birthday!' she shouts, waving them inside. Lucas shrugs off his coat, then, while Frances removes hers, he lifts Ivan high up on one shoulder and ploughs into the crowd.

'Don't let him get over-excited -' murmurs Frances. It is too late. Ivan's eyes are wide and bright, his legs kick enthusiastically and his fists reach out towards every passing thing. The apartment is warm with bodies and breath, there's a string of gold tinsel dangling from the ceiling light and Vee is passing round plates of blinis with baby gherkin, sour cream and a dollop of red caviar, holding them high over everyone's heads.

'Hello!' says a man with a beard as Frances inches past a wardrobe in the cramped hall. It is Dr Alleyn from the embassy. Frances, startled, slips into the dim cave of the living room that doubles as Vee's bedroom. Lucas passes his wife a tumbler of sweet *champanskoye* and points past a couple trying to dance in a tiny space in front of Vee's dressing table, to where Teddy and his boyfriend Karl sit clutching their knees on the bed. They are talking to an older, balding man in an open-necked white shirt.

'What's Sorin doing here?' Lucas mutters, before turning to greet an acquaintance from Interfax. Someone has given Ivan a bread stick. More guests squeeze in through the doorway – no one Frances recognises. The near-darkness in the living room, the crush of bodies creates a cocoon of anonymity. She tips back her glass and drinks.

\*

An hour or so later, Frances is clutching a bottle of beer and squatting on the floor next to Teddy.

'Where have you been?' she asks, her eyes re-focusing on Ivan who has fallen asleep in the crook of Karl's arm. He looks so perfect, she thinks, so trusting and fragile.

'Oh you know,' says Teddy, rubbing his hand down his shin. 'In the café, mostly.'

The café. Now Frances remembers – the photographs of figures standing still in the street, carefully positioned like statues or chess pieces, each staring at something outside the frame.

'I want to ask you,' says Frances. 'I mean,' her head is a little fuzzy, 'about that picture you took at the monastery, the one on the cover of *Time*...'

'It was shit,' says Teddy, pulling a face.

'No it wasn't...' soothes Karl, touching Teddy's knee.

'It was shit,' insists Teddy. 'A cheap shot. Old woman, snow, banana. State of the nation. God – I hate it all – hate the way we *tell* a story, as if it is just waiting for us to come along and scoop it up. Because story is king, right? Let's all worship the story king.'

'I hated it too,' says Frances.

'Exactly,' says Teddy. Then, after a moment, 'What did you hate?'

Frances takes a sip of beer and wipes her fingers across her mouth.

'I'm not sure – maybe that Ivan and I weren't in it. We were there, we were part of that scene as much as the old woman.'

Teddy looks taken aback. 'You *wanted* to be in it?'

'No,' says Frances. 'I don't know, maybe. You made it look like she was begging, but I bought that banana and took it home and Ivan ate it. You didn't show that. It sounds stupid, now...' She peeks again at her sleeping son. 'I like your gallery pictures better.'

'It is not stupid,' says Karl, stroking Ivan's soft cheek. 'You two should be on all the front covers.'

\*

A few minutes after midnight, Teddy climbs on a chair in the hallway to get everyone's attention and Karl hands him a tray bearing a large pink iced cake.

'Vee made me hide it in the bathtub,' he says, laughing. 'Happy Birthday, Lucas!'

'You're too late!' shouts a voice from the kitchen. 'It's already tomorrow!'

Then someone starts singing 'Happy Birthday' in a comically deep tone and someone else turns the music down while a handful of others join in. Soon they are calling 'toast!' and looking round for Lucas, because no one has seen him for a while, but then Frances hears the front door open and sees her husband walk in. Behind him steps Vee.

'We were *smoking!*' she cries. 'Not having sex in the lift like you two, you squalid pair!' She throws her pack of Malboros at Teddy and Karl, and everyone laughs. Frances laughs too, and strokes her sleepy son on the bed because she is at a party with lots of different people and her fear is waiting quietly on the landing behind the door. By the time she has knocked back another shot of vodka, the music has been turned up once again.

Later, as the night drifts towards its denouement, when Teddy and Karl are curled around each other like two brown mice and Sorin is drinking Johnnie Walker with Lucas in the kitchen, Frances opens her blouse and gives Ivan a discreet feed. A young stringer from *The Spectator* sits next to her, his hand resting in a bag of pretzels; he has round, wire-framed glasses and an earnest expression and he doesn't know where to look, so he shuts his eyes and reels off the latest IMF statistics.

'Fifty per cent by the end of the month,' he intones with a slow shake of his head. 'You can't shift from a command economy overnight...' and Frances nods while her gaze wanders to the doorway. Vee is standing there, her lips still matt and red and she is listening to a woman whose bleached hair forms a frizzy halo in the light from the hall. Frances shuts her eyes for a moment, to make sure she is seeing correctly though it's Zoya all right, dragging on her cigarette and blowing smoke past Vee's ear as she talks in English before switching to rapid Ukrainian.

Ivan stirs – he hasn't finished his feed – but Frances doesn't waste time adjusting her blouse. Something has happened – a murder or a strike or another presidential stand-off. The journalists are reaching for their coats. The party is over.

\*

It is past two a.m. when Zoya drops Lucas at the office, then runs Frances and Ivan home as Lucas has instructed. Once her passengers are safe indoors, she sits still for a moment as a few drops of sleety rain splatter across the windscreen, then she reaches beneath the passenger glove compartment for her wipers and climbs out of the Zhiguli to attach them. A stray dog – brindled and leggy – sidles across the car park. Zoya bends down to give him a stroke. His coat is rough, one of his eyes is infected yet his ears are silky smooth. Out in the darkness, another dog barks. She looks up. It sounds as if the animal is high above her head, on one of the apartment balconies, maybe. Her grandfather used to keep an Alsatian on the balcony. The dog ate rat poison when Zoya was fourteen, but he didn't die. In the end, a brain tumour killed him.

The trolleybuses have stopped running when she pulls out onto Staronavodnitska Street, and on impulse she turns left and drives up towards Lesi Ukrainsky rather than right towards the river. She stops at a red light, the engine ticking over as she waits, though there are no other cars at this time of night on the junction. On green she turns right, puts the gear stick into neutral, switches off the engine and coasts down the hill, alone on the six-lane boulevard, carried by the silence of the buildings and the trees. To save petrol, she might say, if anyone were to ask, but at this hour she would rather listen to the wind, when there is no one to make crude gestures because she is a woman driving a car, no one to shout insults or say she cannot do this thing or that thing.

Back on Kreschatyk, the prostitutes in their shiny leggings lean against the wall that leads down to the metro and a black Mercedes winks as it jumps the lights. The Zhiguli coughs after free-wheeling, then soon it is passing the new Seagrams store with its marble pillars, its Canadian maple panelling and blue satin presentation boxes of cognac costing two hundred dollars apiece. The stores of the new elites take their places between the book shops and the bread shops and the shops selling machine-embroidered tablecloths and hand-daubed plates. Bribes flow like vodka and the suits and the watches may look different but their visibility makes her job easier, in a way, guiding Lucas round the pot holes, keeping him safe. Frances is a different matter. She is secretive, like most mothers, though her cow eyes and her way of watching the world without looking straight on unsettle Zoya. Frances counts buildings. She asks questions without purpose. Sometimes, she walks as if she is afraid of the floor.

The river is black as Zoya crosses over. In summer, the old communists and the young and the foolish who have stopped caring about radioactive contamination picnic on its islands, and bathe. Now, though, the lights on the bridge are too dim to light up the water. On she drives, past the cement works and the tower blocks, past the schools and the Houses of Culture and the stretches of

waste ground with their rusting see-saws and leaning slides until finally she reaches her own neighbourhood.

Upstairs in the little flat, her neighbour Tanya is asleep on her sofa.

'Wake up,' says Zoya, giving her a shake.

'He's crapped himself,' mutters Tanya, reaching for her coat. 'You need to get some diapers.'

Zoya, cleaning her grandfather, holds her breath against the stench and grips his leg just a little too hard. Sometimes, the need to squeeze and crush overwhelms her. The old man groans, and she releases her grip and wipes her hand, relieved that she can still let go.

'Forgive me, Dedush,' she whispers, as she dabs at his thighs with a towel. 'Forgive me.'

## Chapter 16

Lucas, who has stayed out all night, phones the next morning to say there's an Interior Ministry briefing and did Zoya mention anything as she hasn't turned up for work and he hasn't seen her since she drove Frances home from the party.

'No,' says Frances. 'What happened?'

'A leak at Chernobyl.'

Fallout, thinks Frances. Seepage. Half-lives. She takes a quick breath. 'Is it dangerous? What should I do?'

'What? Oh no. It's contained. More of a PR disaster than anything. Not what Kravchuk needs while he dithers over nuclear warheads.'

Frances is silent. She has lots of things she wants to say to her husband – things like 'come home' and 'don't come home' - but sometimes it is as if there is a fine mesh in front of her mouth, catching her words. She tries to single out one question, push it through.

'Will Vee be there? At the briefing?'

'I should think so, if her hangover can stand it. Why?'

'Pass on my thanks for the party.'

'Right. I'll see you later. It's going to be busy.'

\*

When Frances goes down to the basement mid-morning with her laundry bag in the backpack and Ivan on her hip, she expects to find Zoya, and Elena too. Neither is there. It doesn't matter. The basement calms her. It feels safe to retreat to below ground level, surrounded by concrete, earth, tarmac. No vertiginous balconies. No radioactive cloud. No journalists with their high heels and complicated laughs.

She flicks the light switch, but the fluorescent tube spits and fizzes and won't settle down so she turns it off again and instead moves towards the desk lamp Elena keeps on the workbench for such eventualities.

The bare bulb's glow illuminates Elena's sheets of newspaper and a couple of pencils in a chipped cup. It reaches into the shadows, exaggerating concrete uprights and draped washing and the warm, humming bulk of the boilers. Almost immediately, Frances knows she and Ivan are not alone.

'Allo...' she says, cautiously, as something swings backwards and forwards along the far wall, half-obscured by a pillar. Then she hears the sound of tearing paper. Elena must be here somewhere. 'Elena?'

'Good morning,' replies a strange voice – a boy's voice – that lingers over the first syllable of 'morning' as if savouring its unfamiliarity. 'Ciao baby!'

Frances blinks for a moment, gripping Ivan so that he wriggles and complains. She knows this voice - Olek, the boy from upstairs who stares at her and laughs at things that aren't funny.

'I'm sorry...' She takes a step backwards. 'I didn't know anyone else was down here.'

Olek doesn't speak for a moment; instead Frances hears a rustling sound, and then the sudden *sheesh* of a sneeze. From her new position she can see him; he is sitting on a tall metal stool, swinging his legs and fiddling with a packet in his hands. As she watches, he lifts the packet up to his mouth and jiggles it to dislodge its contents. She can smell something too – a sickly strawberry smell, synthetic, that takes her back to a formica kitchen table in her childhood.

'Baby, want some?' he asks, offering the packet.

He's been sitting in the darkness, thinks Frances.

'No thank you. I'm – I have to go.'

'Why go, Mum?' The boy swings himself off the stool and strolls towards her. He passes three of Ivan's vests dangling from a line and she wants to leave, she wants to tell him not to call her 'Mum' but she also wants to take the clean washing with her. 'You bring clothes here I think. This is your – ah, *steeralnye machina?*' He nods at the washing machine, with its tubes attached to the taps of the sink like a cow in a milking parlour. 'I know that shop. Okay for shop, but no for Elena Vasilyevna. She like machine, she don't like shop. She don't like man in shop.'

Mykola, thinks Frances, remembering how Elena had spat at the delivery man.

'You seem to know Elena Vasilyevna quite well...' Frances dips quickly under the line and bobs up next to the vests.

'Quite *well*.' Again, the boy lingers over the second word, as if he is tasting it in his mouth. Frances, uncomfortable, changes the subject.

'And you aren't rollerblading today?'

'No. It is difficult. Before I train in Soviet system, compete with many countries. Now, no money. No travel. No competition.'

Frances fumbles with the pegs – she is still holding Ivan.



'What about school?'

'No school. I leave school.'

'But your... uncle - '

'He not my uncle. He, ah – coach.'

Olek continues to stare, though his cheeks slacken for a moment. Lucas is right, thinks Frances. The old man is his keeper, or worse. She tries to imagine how difficult Olek's life must be and how abandoned he must feel and she wants to reach out to him, even though he is already reverting to his habitual brazen grin.

'What will you do?' she asks, but Olek is speaking too, stretching out his arm, offering Ivan the packet he's been holding. Before she can stop him, Ivan grabs it and brings it towards his mouth and she sees that it is a packet of Bird's Angel Delight, the pudding her mother used to make every Saturday, whipping the pink powder with milk until the lumps disappeared and the mixture thickened. There were other flavours – peach and butterscotch – but her mother only ever bought the strawberry.

Frances wants to believe that Angel Delight is another of those branded products that wash up, by some circuitous route, in the kiosks by the war memorial. Yet already she understands - she *knows* - that this boy is stealing parcels sent from England by her mother.

\*

The line crackles and pops. Frances pushes the receiver closer to her ear.

'Mum?'

'Who's that?' asks her mother.

'It's me, Frances.'

'Frances? What a terrible line. I'm watching the one o'clock news.'

'Mum... Thank you for sending me things. I'm sorry I haven't called. I didn't know.'

A pause.

'Someone else was opening them. They didn't reach me.'

'I see. I thought you must have given me an incorrect address.'

'No, they arrived, but - I had no idea you were sending packages.'

'Well I thought perhaps Customs were stopping them. You can't tell.'

'I'm sorry Mum. How are you?'

'I'm very well. Playing golf twice a week now. How is my grandson?'

'Sitting! He sits, and - '

'He ought to be crawling.'

'He is, nearly...'

'You'd better bring him home soon. I don't know what you do out there. I never see your husband on the news.'

'He's not that kind of journalist, Mum. He's radio. Not TV.'

'Well you know what I think; you should never have gone.'

Now it is Frances who says nothing. Instead she makes pictures in her mind's eye, the old habit from childhood, in case her mother can still invade her head. The fifteen hundred miles between them really isn't so far. *Here I am going to lots of parties. See? I have friends here. I am living a grown-up life.*

'Is this call expensive?' asks her mother. 'It must be expensive.'

Frances clears her throat. 'Thank you for the Angel Delight...'

'I shan't send any more. Not if someone else is opening it. Is that the baby sneezing? He sounds like he's getting a cold. You'd better go.'

'Well - okay Mum.'

'Yes. Bye-bye.'

The line clicks as her mother replaces her receiver. Frances can almost hear her sighing as she reaches for her cup of tea and settles back to watch her programmes. She stares at her three reflections in the mirror above the telephone, at her sagging corduroy skirt with its creases across her hips, then looks down at her son who is pulling himself up against the low table, legs apart, fingers gripping the veneer, a bubble of saliva shining on his lip.

'That was your grandma,' she says, scooping him up before he knocks his chin. There is something about his wide eyes, open, trusting, that reminds her of the hand-written notices on the lampposts on the road up to the monastery: all those flaps of paper, waiting to be torn off, waiting for someone to call the number on the slip, waiting for a connection. 'She used to be a mind reader,' she whispers, into his soft ear. 'But not any more.'

\*

A couple of days after Vee's party, Frances wakes up to a ringing sound.

'Do you hear it?' she asks Lucas, as he sits on the side of the bed to pull on his socks.

'That's tinnitus,' he says. 'I used to get it on night shifts when I was subbing. Like a worm in your ear. Bloody annoying.'

Frances shakes her head. It is as if someone is standing by her shoulder, running a wet finger around the rim of a crystal glass. She thinks of Olek, for some reason – the boy who stole her packages – though this is no squeak from a pair of rollerblades. When she descends in the lift, the ringing fades, and when she walks outside, into the dense grey fog that has rolled up from the river, it stops altogether. The sound isn't irritating, but it does confuse her. Voices recede beneath its clarity. 'What?' she says to Lucas as he grabs his jacket and says goodbye. When Elena arrives to watch TV, Frances turns up the volume, which in turn wakes Ivan from his nap. Elena draws a circle with her finger next to her temple, in a gesture straight out of *Simplemente Maria*. 'Vesna,' she mutters as Frances pads off to the bedroom. 'Loco'. And perhaps Elena is right, perhaps Frances has inhaled a little spring madness, because later that afternoon, before she can think twice, she is digging out the credit card that Lucas has asked her not to use, and taking a trolleybus down to Kreschatyk to buy a pair of imported jeans from the place Suzie calls the 'hookers' boutique' under the stone archway. She can't try them on because she has Ivan in the baby carrier, so instead she shakes them out, holding them against her legs and inspecting the seams, frowning and tutting like the women she has watched buying clothing in the musty corridors of the central department store. However, these jeans are not the cheap bleached denim that everyone wears but a darker blue, good quality fabric, with tiny metal studs in the shape of a curvy 'S' on each back pocket.

'One hundred twenty dollars,' says a bored-looking young saleswoman with pushed up breasts and piled up hair.

Frances's hand shakes a little when she hands over her card; she must wait as the woman picks up the phone and reels off the long number, rolling her eyes at the incompetence of the operator down the line or maybe Frances herself, who ought to know better than to waste her husband's dollars on a tired, sagging backside.

Back at the apartment, the jeans button digs in to the soft flesh of Frances's stomach and the fabric strains tight across her thighs. Nevertheless, when she squints, she looks taller. When she closes her eyes, she hears the high, ringing note, and imagines she is a Mexican polo player's mistress, or a kohl-eyed violinist or a journalist throwing a party and smoking out in the hallway with someone else's husband.

## Chapter 17

The fog lingers across Kiev for five whole days. Like a cocoon, thinks Frances, opaque and animal. When the sunlight glimmers through, the landscape is already metamorphosing. A slick of green spreads between the apartment blocks. The lilacs that grow through the chain link fence by the military academy are in bud, and the air smells of wet earth and oily potholes and a more ancient smell – last winter’s thawing detritus, or maybe a little gas from the catacombs that burrow beneath the streets. Either way, the ground is sloughing off winter.

Lucas barely notices beyond groaning about the mud by the dump bins. His story about *The Golden Promise* is snagging – the general release has been pushed back to July and Lukyanenko won’t let him sit in on the editing. He’s asked Teddy to take pictures for an *Observer* feature he’s been told he’ll be considered for, but Teddy has problems of his own. Karl’s café has been vandalised, disgusting, offensive graffiti daubed on its walls. The two of them are thinking of shipping out to the Balkans, or so he tells Lucas one evening at the apartment on Staronavodnitska Street. The story in Bosnia isn’t fixed yet, he says. He wants to document a more fluid, less predictable story.

‘The story’s not fixed here, either, unless we make it so!’ says Lucas.

‘Everyone make it so,’ argues Teddy, with uncharacteristic sourness. ‘Politicians, editors, readers. Journalists are the worst. I want something else.’

Frances, meanwhile, is preoccupied with Ivan. When she takes him outside, he throws off his mittens and his hat, again and again, chuckling like a maniac, playing the game that always gets her into trouble with the babushkas on the trolleybus. He is starting to look more Ukrainian with his cowlick of blond hair, the vests with strange fastenings and some woolly leggings made in Korea. He is crawling now, too – a sort of lop-sided scoot. One moment he is under her feet in the kitchen, and the next moment he has vanished along the hallway, pulling out the drawer from under the bed and flinging nappies across the parquet with frowning concentration. She keeps the living room door shut, of course, and when Lucas is out she wedges a chair under the door handle to be sure.

His adventures are one thing, but Frances dreads the times when he sits on the bedroom floor and his eyes spill swollen tears. Already his brain has moved beyond the immediate moment and has a sense of the future. Perhaps, when she opens the cupboard door and slips behind it to stow his vests, she might disappear like Lucy Pevensie, away to Narnia, and never return.

She tries playing peekaboo with the door, yet Ivan won't be tricked. When he cries, he can howl for hours. The only remedy is to take him out in the baby carrier or the pushchair, down across the waste ground, over to Podol by way of the river or up through the Tsar's Village to the monastery with its winding cobbled paths.

\*

'Do you know of any parks?' Frances asks Zoya, next time she sees her collecting her laundry in the basement.

'Parks?' Zoya snorts. 'Are you not looking? There are parks everywhere in Kiev.'

'I know,' says Frances. 'But I want a quieter space, away from all the kiosks and monuments.'

Zoya turns and mutters to Elena, who is potting seeds at her workbench, who never seems to sit in her cubicle upstairs any more. Not that she ever has anything to do there, other than twitch her curtain and bang on the glass whenever someone forgets to wipe their feet. She and Zoya are becoming friends, it seems; Frances often finds them talking together – not chatting, exactly, but murmuring and nodding with their arms folded across their chests. Now, when the old woman hobbles forward, her fingers are caked in soil and the deep pockets of her overalls are actually full of the stuff that she's dug up from somewhere.

'You could try the Botanical Gardens,' says Zoya. 'Though you'll have to pay. They charge tourists...'

Elena is interrupting her, her eyes bright in the lamp light. '*Botanicheskiy sad?*' She grips Frances's arm. '*Avtobus – pyat adeen shest. Pyat. Adeen. Shest.*'

Frances nods, this time understanding.

Take the five one six.

\*

As the creaking trolleybus approaches the stop on Kutuzovska Street, Frances, waiting on the pavement, lifts Ivan out of the pushchair, folds it down and picks it up with her spare hand. Ivan is becoming too heavy for her to manage in the baby carrier for more than short periods. She hopes the Botanical Gardens live up to Elena's enthusiasm. She is in no hurry to return to the flat.

The bus is crowded, as the buses always are. She climbs on board and stands near the front, wedging the concertina'd pushchair between her hip and the edge of a seat. The man sitting there balances a pale green porcelain toilet bowl on his lap. His arms are folded across the rim; its weight

must surely press into his thighs yet the man's eyes are closed and his head lolls and he doesn't notice when Ivan tugs off his knitted hat and drops it past his ear, into the bowl. Frances will have to fish it out, but the woman behind her makes a sucking noise with her teeth as if to say this bare-headed foreign *malchik* will now catch pneumonia or scarlet fever or whooping cough and this will be its mother's fault for no baby should be out without its head covered and at least one sour-faced babushka in attendance. Frances blows a soft raspberry on Ivan's forehead, to spread a few more germs. The watery sunlight glances off the car windscreens outside and the bus sighs and heaves its way into the flow of traffic. We are off on an outing, she thinks, and no one can stop us.

At first Frances doesn't see the man sitting five rows back. However, while she looks out of the window, ticking off the junctions, counting the plane trees that line the boulevard, he stands and presses his way forward along the aisle.

'*Pazhalasta,*' he says, quietly, to the man with the toilet bowl.

Frances looks over her shoulder. She recognises the standing man straight away, but it takes her a moment to realise that his thick black moustache, his dark eyes are real and not a silent conjuring in her dreams. This time he is wearing his Astrakhan hat and from his shoulders swings a camel-coloured coat that is probably cashmere. 'Oh!' she exclaims. 'Mr...'

'Mykola,' he reminds her, flicking his hand to let the man know that he should vacate his seat. The man says nothing. After the briefest hesitation he locks his hands together around the toilet bowl and stands so that Frances can slip into his place.

'No!' she protests, though it is pointless. Mykola is leaning in and his hand is on the pushchair. The man with the toilet bowl shows no expression. He shifts his feet further apart, his arms grip his burden and she wishes he would rest it on the floor.

'Good afternoon,' murmurs Mykola, smiling down at Frances.

'Why are you here?' she asks, then quickly looks down; the question seems a little too direct.

Mykola, however, has no problem avoiding an answer.

'It is a beautiful day,' he says. 'Your little boy, he is well? You are well?'

'Yes, thank you,' she replies, as Ivan wriggles on her lap. She lifts him up so that he can stand on her knees.

'I am glad to hear this. Spring has come. So much better for mothers and their children. But you, you were not afraid of the cold!'

Frances would rather not make small talk. People are staring, and Mykola and the man with the toilet are blocking the aisle. She doesn't know if she'll recognise the stop for the Botanical Gardens. She is hoping to see something that looks like a park, but her view is obscured by the woman sitting next to her.

‘Tell me,’ says Mykola. ‘The washing machine I sent to you. Is there a problem? You have not yet installed it in your flat?’

‘Oh, no.’ She bites her lip, wondering how he knows this. ‘Not in the flat. My husband - he wasn’t sure...’

Mykola puts up a hand as if to say she doesn’t need to explain.

‘Of course. These things can be difficult.’ He smiles at Ivan, yet doesn’t try to touch him. ‘Now, I think you must be going to the Botanical Gardens. We will arrive there in one minute, God willing, but it is better if you stay seated until the bus has stopped. Don’t worry about this,’ he adds, as the bus makes a sudden lurch and Frances reaches out for the pushchair. ‘I am getting off myself. I will look after it.’

And when the bus wheezes to a halt and the doors jerk open, this is exactly what happens. Mykola even retrieves Ivan’s hat from the toilet bowl and nods politely to its owner before following Frances down the steps and standing a little apart on the pavement while she settles Ivan with a bread ring and clips him into his safety belt.

‘Well, thank you again,’ she says, straightening up and looking around at the road lined with horse chestnuts, their sticky buds swollen and ready to burst. The tower blocks have given way to older buildings, three storeys only, and a wall made of concrete panels snakes into the distance. Frances wonders what business Mykola has in this part of town and she wonders if he, too, is going to the Botanical Gardens, or whether this has now become his aim. Her sense of freedom is fast evaporating.

‘This way,’ he says, indicating that she should walk in the direction of the disappearing trolleybus. ‘It really isn’t far.’

A dozen or so yards along the road, before Frances has worked out how to part company politely, they arrive at the entrance to the gardens. Several other people walk through a gate in the wall, and then it is their turn. They pass in front of a small kiosk and straight away a woman behind the little glass window flicks it up and demands 200 kouponi. Frances worries that Mykola will offer to pay but he stands back and admires some bird wheeling high above their heads while she fumbles for her purse and hands over the money. A hand-written ticket is passed back to her, and then they continue on. Mykola, Frances notices, doesn’t buy a ticket. Indeed, no one else passing into the gardens is stopped at the kiosk. She is the tourist. Tourists pay.

Because Mykola is walking beside her, his strides measured, the sound of his leather soles discreet yet persistent, Frances doesn’t at first take in the view that opens out up ahead. She sees the long brown flower beds with some tulip leaves starting to push their way out, the fissured tarmac paths, the ever-present horse chestnuts and some spindly, still bare birches. She sees a dirty

yet ornate greenhouse to her left and a fountain with no water to her right and it is only slowly, after five minutes or so that she notices the way the gardens stretch downwards across the hillside, paths winding and criss-crossing through clumps of newly flowering cherry and magnolia and some with little steps that lead to benches with views across the bright grey-blueness of the Dniepr. Green onion domes peep above the railings. Gold crosses. There's a church down there somewhere.

'It's beautiful,' she says, stopping for a moment. The sun feels warm through her coat and on an impulse she shrugs it off and slings it across the handles of the pushchair. It occurs to her that this is the first time she hasn't worn a coat outside since she arrived six months before and she breathes a long sigh of relief because now Mykola is walking away and she thinks this is fine, this is where he leaves her and she can discover this place on her own.

Except Mykola isn't leaving her. He is standing in front of a budding lilac bush and is breaking off a bough that is almost in bloom, its cone of purple buds quivering as he snaps it clear.

'For you,' he says, walking back towards her. 'In Kiev, spring means two things. The horse chestnut - as we say, the *kashtan* - and the lilac.'

The buds and the heart-shaped leaves tremble on their stems.

'We probably shouldn't pick things here,' she says, nervously.

Mykola laughs and shakes the flowers for Ivan's amusement.

'Why do you think all these people come?' he says, gesturing towards a woman in a headscarf tied at the back of her head. She is crouched low in the middle of a flower bed. Frances shades her eyes with her hand and sees that the woman is in fact digging with a spoon around the base of a scrappy-looking corm only recently emerged from the snow. Where are the gardeners? Where are the babushkas shouting *nyet*? The woman discards the spoon and starts to dig with her fingers, feeling around the corm's roots and then prising it out with a grunt. She wraps it in a sheet of newspaper before pushing herself slowly back up to her feet.

'There's plenty to go round,' says Mykola. 'Maybe in a year, two years, the flowers will be gone but in Ukraine we grow things and their descendants will live on – though perhaps not here.'

Frances thinks of Elena, with her seeds and her pockets of soil and the earth beneath her fingernails.

'Did you follow me here?' she asks, suddenly, surprising herself.

Mykola stops smiling.

'I saw you get on the bus,' he says. 'I come here often. Sometimes, things happen that way.'

Ivan whimpers. She looks down, sees that he is fidgety and starts to push him again, slowly, with Mykola walking beside her. He is still holding the spray of lilac that she wouldn't accept and she knows she has upset this man with whom she has spoken only once before. Or twice, if she counts



what she still thinks was a dream of him at the film studio. She isn't afraid, though – not yet. There are plenty of people around, strollers, lovers, young men lounging on benches, legs splayed, and old women wielding pruning knives in the bushes.

'Elena,' she says, 'our *dezhornaya* – she spat at the man who delivered the washing machine. Do you know her?'

Mykola doesn't answer straight away.

'Elena Vasilyevna.' When he does speak, he says her name as if it is something he hasn't spoken for a long time. 'You must not approach her. You must not let her touch your child.'

'Oh but she is much kinder than she seems!' exclaims Frances. 'At first I thought she was a dreadful old witch – she was so cross and unfriendly and the spitting is disgusting but really she's just lonely, and she's helped me with the flat, and -'

'You invite her into your apartment.' Mykola interrupts her sharply. He is not asking a question. He stops walking, so that she must stop too. 'You must not let her in. Frances, you are a beautiful mother, your child is your gift to the world. I have allowed much, too much and this I cannot overlook. Promise me - do not let her in.'

Now Frances is afraid. Mykola doesn't touch her, indeed he is standing a clear two yards away from her but she sees the anger in his eyes, feels it in the distance he maintains so carefully between them. She hasn't told him about the basement, she remembers. Yet he knows that they haven't installed the washing machine in the apartment. In which case, he must know it has been moved downstairs.

'I will be honest with you,' he says. 'I noticed you some months ago in the restaurant where you ate with your husband and your friends. You were nursing your baby. You wore a *pokrov* - a veil.'

He sweeps his hands across his shoulders, and Frances realises he is talking about the shawl she wears when breastfeeding in public. *You were in the corner, by the bathroom*, she thinks. *You heard me crying*. She glances sideways and takes in the wide path to her right that leads back towards the entrance. There are people here, she thinks, though they might not help her. Her heart is racing. Her legs feel heavy, as if some great swell of water is pressing against them.

'The veil protects, you see. Our Most Holy Lady holds out her veil, and shelters her people. But who protects her? Who protects our Blessed Mother?'

'Please leave me alone,' Frances murmurs, gripping the pushchair's handles. 'I don't know what you want. I can't help you and I want you to leave me alone.'

Mykola remains still for a few seconds. Then he nods, once, and walks away, down the hill towards the gold domes of the church. When Frances turns the buggy round to push it in the opposite direction she sees the lilac branch laid carefully across Ivan's lap like an offering, or a warning.

## Chapter 18

'Zoya,' says Frances, the next morning, when she has checked to make sure they are alone in the basement. 'What do you know about the man who gave me the washing machine?'

Zoya is folding sheets but she's in a hurry, swinging her arms out and back in and flapping the green polycotton into submission.

'Mafia,' she says. 'Bad money. Black market. Corruption. Extortion. Sometimes violence.' The words snap like flicked tea towels and Frances realises she must tell Zoya, that Zoya is the only person she can tell.

'He came to the Botanical Gardens,' she says. 'He might have been at the film studios. He said strange things about me being a mother.'

Zoya shakes her head.

'Probably you are imagining it. You are -' She concentrates, searching for the right expression. 'Tightly strung.'

'No,' says Frances, firmly. 'He sent me the washing machine, remember? And yesterday he actually followed me to the Botanical Gardens. I think he's spying on me. He warned me to stay away from Elena.'

'Elena Vasilyevna?'

'Yes, Elena,' repeats Frances. 'Why would he do that? How does he know her?'

Zoya drops the folded sheet into the laundry basket on the floor, but her face is a mask in the dim light and for a few moments the only sounds are the sighs and the soft clunks from the pipes that lead to and from the boilers.

'I will try to find out something. Do not tell Lucas. He would not handle it well.'

'I know,' says Frances. 'He would be a nightmare.'

\*

'Opposites attract!' laughed Lucas's mother when Lucas and Frances announced their engagement. And it was true, in a way, for both were curious about the other. Sometimes, though, in the first weeks of their marriage, Frances felt herself peering into the cracks between them, fearing what she could not see.

Once they had a fight about a lottery. They had gone to Spain for their honeymoon. Not the package version, but somewhere Lucas called 'undiscovered Spain', the north west corner, because Frances had expressed a wish to visit the end of the world and he had a yen to indulge her. The fog hadn't lifted since their arrival. They had stopped for breakfast in a café on the outskirts of Vigo, where the streets stank of cooking oil and diesel.

'Christ,' said Lucas, folding the copy of *El País* he was attempting to read and stabbing at an article with his finger. 'People here go crazy for the lottery. "El Gordo", they call it. The Fat One!' He leaned back and stretched his legs out under the table, which wobbled and made Frances's pen jump across the postcard she was writing.

She looked up. 'Pardon?'

'The lottery. It's plastered all over the place – posters on the windows, ads on beer mats... a throwback to Franco, maybe... give people a little hope, stops them thinking about the big stuff.'

Frances nodded. Nodding was becoming a habit.

'There's an old boy here who won a million pesetas,' continued Lucas. 'He died of a heart attack the next day. Poor bastard! Never even got the chance to buy a decent bottle of Cava.'

'Oh, that's awful!' murmured Frances, looking out past the peeling posters on the window that was spattered with salt-slick from a recent storm and across the street, through the mist to the looming grey cranes of a storage depot and thinking that what she really wanted to see was a sun-drenched beach. 'I'd never buy a lottery ticket.'

Lucas put his arms behind his head; regarded her.

'Wouldn't you? Why not?'

'Well, I'd never be able to decide what to do with the money if I won.'

'Yes you would. A big house, straight off.'

Frances frowned. 'I suppose...'

'I know what I'd do,' said Lucas, beckoning the waiter and sliding his cigarettes back into his shirt pocket. 'I'd invest in a couple of properties, give some to both our families and put some in trust for our kids.'

'Well where would you draw the line?' asked Frances. 'I mean, how much would you give your family? And where does 'family' end? You've got all those second cousins!' She tried smiling but Lucas was busy rummaging for coins.

'There'd have to be cut-off, obviously. You'd have to be professional about it – get proper advice. A pot for personal use, a pot for family, a pot for other stuff.' Now Lucas looked at her, ready to deliver his *coup de grâce* – 'Because wouldn't it be great to make a difference, you know? Give to worthwhile causes; give to charity?'

The waiter wasn't bringing the bill. Lucas waved again, making a little signing gesture with his hand though Frances wasn't finished: all sorts of thoughts were tumbling around. Couples were destroyed by this kind of thing – you read about it all the time. Wills causing disputes; disagreements between siblings or parent and child – why didn't you give *me* a bigger share? Why aren't *my* needs as important as theirs? It was human nature, to want more, to have more. Money is power, and power corrupts, as her O-level history teacher had never tired of repeating as he scratched his litanies across the blackboard.

'I wouldn't claim it,' she said, turning towards the window again, watching a young man in a leather jacket that glistened with damp saunter past, his hand at his crotch, quickly checking his flies. 'Or I'd give it all away. I'd have to do it quickly.'

'Oh thanks!' said Lucas, rolling his eyes. 'Never mind your poor old husband, pissing peanuts all day long to keep you in cappuccinos!' He stood up, scraping back his chair so that an old man at a seat in the corner looked across, then looked away. 'We're going to have to abscond to get that guy's attention...'

He walked over to the woman at the bar who was re-filling a tray with some greasy-looking pastries in between flipping eggs on the griddle behind her. Frances, meanwhile, looked around for a loo, not knowing how long it'd be before they found another.

The cubicle was tucked away at the back of the bar. When she re-emerged, Lucas was impatient to leave. As he held open the door he pushed something into her hand.

'Here,' he said. 'I got you one. If you win, I want half!'

Frances looked down in dismay at a slip of paper with a drawing of a church in coloured ink and the number 700321 above the words 'Loteria Nacional'.

'I don't want it,' she said, but he wouldn't take it back.

'If you win and don't claim it would be an abdication of responsibility.' He was teasing still – grinning and needling. 'Think of all the anti-malarials it could purchase. Think of all the prostitutes you could keep off the streets or the slum children you could educate! Or maybe you'd rather do nothing? Now that would be something to feel guilty about.'

Frances scrunched the ticket in the palm of her hand and thrust it into her shoulder bag. Lucas was right and he knew it and was already forgetting, moving on to the next thing, striding across the road, peering through the fog to the hire car. She, on the other hand, was culpable now, whichever way she looked at it.

The ticket stayed in her bag until the weekend when she checked the numbers at a roadside kiosk in La Coruña without telling Lucas. When she discovered she hadn't won anything, she almost cried with relief.

\*

Frances is watching *Simplemente Maria* one afternoon when the phone rings in the hall. Elena has not joined her today – she has missed a few episodes lately but Frances tunes in, regardless. She doesn't care about the storyline – Maria's eyes fill with tears, Maria wears a jacket with big shoulder pads, Maria's old love comes calling with flowers. The routine helps her breathe inside the flat. It helps calm the ringing sound that pulses about her head.

'Hello Frances!' says a soft voice. It is Suzie. The two have seen each other once or twice for coffee since Suzie sent the nappies, always at Suzie's flat – never on the thirteenth floor. The nappies aren't a secret, exactly, but Frances tells herself that because they aren't paying for them, Lucas doesn't need to know.

Today, Suzie has some news.

'We're moving!' she says, brightly. 'Not far – to a little old house in the Tsar's Village! It's rotten and full of mice and God only knows what but we're going to do it up – the full *remont!* The rent is a ludicrous amount – I could see the dollar signs popping in the owner's eyes. Rob will beat her down. You must come and see it. I want your opinion!'

A house, thinks Frances. Not a flat up in the sky, but a house on the ground.

'All right,' she says. 'I'd love to.'

'Next week,' says Suzie. 'When Rob says it's ours.'

\*

Frances meets Suzie in the car park and they stroll across the tramlines together, Ivan in the pushchair, no need for his snowsuit today. Suzie is wearing grey wool trousers that show off her slender legs, and a cream ski jacket with a neatly cinched waist. Frances is wearing her new jeans, even though she told herself she'd save them for parties. The sun is shining. A few petals of pink apple blossom float above the dump bins. It's a beautiful April day.

'He's growing so fast!' observes Suzie, as Frances stops to pick up the hat Ivan has pulled off and dropped. 'Soon he'll be walking, won't he?'

Frances remembers what Dr Alleyn told her. 'He's tall,' she says. 'So he has a higher centre of gravity. Maybe not yet.'

She and Suzie pick their way past the burnt-out Lada on the corner and on up the lane through the Tsar's Village. Frances has walked here countless times, up and down from the monastery and the kiosks by the war memorial at the top of the hill. She has counted the wooden gates hinged with

twists of wire and the battened and boarded cottages, each with a single upstairs window like a blank eye peering out from under the steeply angled eaves. Some are more dilapidated than others, clearly abandoned, with a skeletal cat lying on the steps or ragged netting hanging uselessly from untended trees. A few show signs that there may be people inside, though Frances never sees anyone – a lick of paint on the shutters and the fretwork above the doorways, a bright piece of sanitary ware sitting under a tree or a freshly concreted path, shovelled hastily, with crumbling edges. Others appear uninhabited, shutters tightly closed, though their gardens suggest otherwise: neat rectangles of tilled earth beside the steps, green shoots just emerging; fruit trees showing signs of recent pruning, their bare stumps painted a dark, alarming red.

‘Can you imagine?’ says Suzie. ‘Me, in one of these? Rob says it’ll take three months to make it habitable, and then I can decorate it how I like, but you know me, it’ll be white, white, white!’

‘Fairy-tale houses,’ says Frances, thinking of witches, and Baba Yagas, and woodcutters and trails of breadcrumbs. ‘You’ll be like Hansel and Gretel.’

Suzie laughs - her smoky, throaty laugh. ‘Oh I was thinking more Sleeping Beauty! Ivan’s my prince. Look, this is us!’ and she pulls Frances down a stony track between two cottages, towards a more isolated house at the back, with a mansarded roof, a long, thin orchard to one side, the first dabs of blossom, and a peeling waist-height picket fence painted the usual faded blue. There’s a figure bending over by the steps, but Frances knows it isn’t Rob because Suzie has promised her that he is out of town. Besides, the figure is too short, an old woman, wearing baggy trousers with her thin scraps of hair tucked beneath a sort of knitted beret.

The old woman straightens up slowly, as if it pains her, as Suzie and Frances approach.

‘That’s the woman we’re renting from, some old communist,’ whispers Suzie. ‘I didn’t know she’d be here.’

Frances, however, needs no introduction. ‘It’s our *dezhornaya!*’ she says, taken aback, for she realises she has never asked where the caretaker lives, assuming it to be a one-room flat somewhere past the monastery, or even a dark corner in the basement. ‘Elena, *privyet!*’

For a moment Elena seems bewildered before her eyes narrow and she nods to them both.

‘*Dobrey’ ootra,*’ she says – good morning - a rebuke to Frances’s over-familiarity. Ivan bounces with excitement, stretching out his arms. The old woman leans forward, then checks herself and pulls back, rubbing at the dirt on her hands. She and Suzie converse awkwardly in Russian while Frances unclips Ivan from his pushchair and settles him on her hip. Clearly, Elena is unhappy to meet them here, and this makes Frances feel uncomfortable. She wonders if the deal is distasteful to the old woman, or whether it is the interruption she objects to. Then she remembers what Lucas said about the houses being built for Party officials. Perhaps Elena had been a spy, as Frances first

suspected, though she struggles to believe this now that she knows her a little. Elena's face and body language give too much away.

Elena is waving her hand towards the front door.

'She doesn't want us here,' whispers Frances, as she and Suzie climb the steps.

'Too bad!' laughs Suzie. 'It's ours! Rob got his lawyer to draw up a contract and we've paid for the first year in cash! She asked for used dollars, which wound him up no end.'

Despite her misgivings, Frances finds she is curious about the house. There isn't much to see: a living room with an old table pushed against the wall and a couple of beaten-up chairs; a lean-to kitchen with an ancient wood oven and a sink, a downstairs bathroom with cracked tiles and a piece of curling lino. The bedroom upstairs is spacious enough, but the bed is a single mattress on the floor and Frances cannot imagine how the old woman manages to heave herself up from it each morning, or how she escaped being frozen to death in the winter. There are few personal touches; no photographs. Elena's cubicle at the apartment block seems more homely. Suzie, meanwhile, chats about her plans for the *remont*: an imported kitchen with a little extension for a utility room; recessed lighting, roman blinds, a shower room off the bedroom and a fully glazed veranda around two sides of the house.

'Rob wants a sauna in the garden,' she says. 'That's why we're moving. The house itself will still be smaller than the flat.'

Frances still feels like she is trespassing.

'It's a lot of work,' she says, 'for a place you're just renting.'

'Oh Rob says that Ukraine's property laws aren't fit for purpose. He'd rather buy it of course. We should be in by August, if the workmen pull their fingers out. Rob's got them on a penalty for late completion.' Suzie smiles, her eyes bright, full of trust that all will be well, that white goods and white walls will prevail. 'Then you can bring Ivan to toddle around the garden.'

'Where will Elena go?' asks Frances. 'Do you think she's lived here for a while?'

'No idea. Now though she can afford somewhere nice,' says Suzie, her brow creasing in a brief flash of anxiety. 'We're hardly throwing her out on the street.'

No, thinks Frances, but she'll stop working at the apartment block. No more *Simplemente Maria*. No more tea in the kitchen, keeping Ivan safe.

As they leave the house, Frances looks over her shoulder towards Elena who is now working at the far end of the orchard. The old woman bends down over the ground, digging up the deep-rooted dandelions, her legs planted firmly apart, her back rounded like a seedling as it emerges, inexorable, from the earth.

## Chapter 19

Everything changes when the warmer weather comes. As the sticky buds of the horse chestnuts burst into leaf and their creamy candles reach up to the light, as the breeze wafts the scent of lilac along the boulevards and the dandelions flower for a day, people pour onto the streets. Secrets are hard to keep without winter coats and fur hats. Arguments leave the stale one-room apartments and step out onto balconies. Lovers roam the sidewalks and drunks lie spread-eagled on the benches. Even the man playing tennis with his son at the edge of the car park thrashes him openly with his racquet when he fails to demonstrate his commitment. By the first week in May, when the schoolchildren on the trolleybuses sneeze from the drifting pollen, all things are laid out, laid bare, made open and exposed. This is how it is in Kiev's summer months. This is how it is for Lucas and for Vee.

'So,' says Vee, one night, as she and Lucas sit on stools at the bar of a shiny new place in a back street behind the Foreign Ministry. 'Have you booked a room?'

'What?' asks Lucas, looking stricken.

'Of course you have,' says Vee. 'But there's something I must tell you first. I've been sleeping with Sorin, and he has told me everything about your secret story, and you know what? It's a good one! Don't look so surprised.'

Lucas, of course, doesn't know what to think, so Vee helps him.

'We could have sex,' she says, pushing the slice of lemon in her vodka tonic under the surface with her finger. 'And it would go badly because you would feel guilty and I would despise you for that. We might meet again, but I would sleep with other lovers and you would be angry and hurt and then Frances would find out and she'd go crazy and try to jump off the balcony or leave you or something much worse and then you'd be in pieces and follow her back to England and your career would be finished.'

'That's funny,' says Lucas, his heart pumping so loudly he fears she might hear it. 'You're funny.'

'I know,' says Vee. 'I'm pretty hard to take.'

Lucas is silent for a while. His drink is too warm; the bar needs a new refrigerator before the weather gets hot, and he wants to scream at someone – the skinny waitress who poured it, or the bandit on the door or maybe just that weird guy in the corner with the moustache and the



Astrakhan hat like a po-faced Omar Sharif - but instead he stays silent, knowing he must ask a question, hating how it is going to make him sound.

‘Don’t use my story,’ he says, trying not to beg.

Vee licks the finger she used to stir her drink, then reaches up to trace the line of his eyebrow.

‘Stop frowning,’ she says, solemnly. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m not a total bitch.’

\*

On Victory Day, the ninth of May, Zoya buys her grandfather three red gladioli and places them in a vase by his bed. She pins his Order of the Patriotic War, second class, to his pyjama jacket, even though tourists can buy them for a dollar apiece outside the metro at Arsenalnaya. She pours two glasses of vodka, raises one toast to the heroic survivors, another to the glorious fallen, and drinks them both before checking her watch. She’s due to meet Lucas at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in an hour. He is hopeful the communists will make a showing, waving their pension books and their framed pictures of Stalin, though this isn’t Moscow, as she never tires of pointing out; there’s no front page story being orchestrated in the hills above the Dnieper. In nationalist Lviv the holiday has been cancelled altogether.

Tanya arrives quarter of an hour late. Zoya, irritated, picks up her bag and yanks the door shut behind her. She doesn’t say goodbye, but two minutes later Tanya is opening the window and shouting down to her in the street.

Her grandfather isn’t breathing.

Zoya drops her bag and runs back up the stairs.

\*

Elena Vasilyevna stays away from the commemorations on the hill, though the long finger of the war memorial is only a few hundred metres from her cottage down the lane in Tsarskoye Selo. Today she has her possessions to pack up and a new flat to occupy. The flat she is moving to is on the second floor of the apartment block on Staronavodnitska Street. It’s been empty for a while. The locksmith who helped her gain entry didn’t ask questions. She has always been the caretaker, ever since the block first opened two decades before. The racketeer Mykola can threaten her – he can send his thugs to torture dogs as much as he pleases and replace her with someone else whose brother or son owes him money - but Elena isn’t going anywhere.

Elena has enlisted some help with the removals. The boy Olek will arrive soon with the handcart from the basement at the apartment block. Her belongings are few, all things considered: a mattress, some bedding, two chairs, a chest of drawers and a couple of lamps. There are pots and pans, some crockery and barely a plastic bag full of clothes. She rolls her old fur coat with care – the coat she hasn't worn since 1953, given to her by the same man who drew up papers in her name for this house with its strip of earth for growing vegetables, for planting fruit trees. She has already wrapped her gardening tools in neat parcels of newspaper after oiling them the night before.

Then, as she folds a blanket, another memory rolls across her like the dark waves of the Dniepr. This memory belongs to a time before the war, when she was still a child. It washes over her, blocks out the present moment and takes her breath away so that she must sit down on the stairs.

The blanket in her mind is knitted from rough yarn – grey and moth-eaten, her own. She can feel the looped wool now between her fingers, and sniff again the smell of sickness and mould. At dusk she takes it down to the river with her sister. The two girls wade out through the shallows until the current pushes up against their hips. They stretch the blanket out between them, gripping its corners in their fists and they stand there for hours, thin bodies numb with the cold, even though it is summer, arms aching, then burning, then dropping with exhaustion, waiting for a fish.

There are no fish. As the sun rises they stumble out of the river and lie in the mud. When their mother comes to find them she falls down and weeps, and they gnaw at the blanket, gagging and sucking because the great famine is upon them and their stomachs contain nothing but leaves.

Memories are burdens. Elena, old now, sits on the stairs for some time, the blanket clutched in her fingers. She has never wept for her mother and her sister. When they died, they were saved.

\*

At last Olek arrives with the handcart and helps Elena to her feet.

'Come on,' he says, in Ukrainian, impatient to load up the mattress and the chairs.

As they trundle down Panfilovtsiv Street, the faint strains of piped military music start up on the hill behind them. The tramlines at the bend on Staronavodnitska Street prove tricky; they almost lose a serving plate but finally they reach the apartment block and Olek carries her possessions up the steps, then stacks them in the foyer by the lift.

When Elena gives him a fifty dollar note, he sniffs it before stepping back outside and inspecting it in the sunlight.

'*Eto vse,*' she says, more to herself than to Olek. *That's it.*

\*

Across the tramlines and up the hill, in the lee of the Motherland statue, Frances and Ivan are out with the crowds. There's a fresh breeze and it's chilly in the shade, yet the sun itself is hot. Faces grow pink while the ice cream sellers and the *kvas* trucks are making a killing. Ivan is having the time of his life, shrieking at the bouquets of tulips and gladioli, the dandelion seeds that tumble across the concrete, the uniforms with their burnished buttons, the sense of occasion. Frances buys him a pretzel to suck on, even though it is stale and full of salt. She walks slowly, one hand on the pushchair, watching the old men leaning on a grandchild or a great grandchild – the boys in v-necked jumpers, lugging their replica assault rifles and the girls' hair tied back with patriotic blue and yellow pompoms. Really though, she is looking out for Mykola. She's been seeing him everywhere since her trip to the Botanical Gardens. Zoya hasn't told her anything, and now it is as if his face carries something archetypal, something only she seems to recognise in the expression of every man she passes: a glance, the twist of a mouth, the shadow of a moustache. She wanders for ages, yet he doesn't materialise and this both relieves and dismays her. He is watching, she decides, but he is concealed.

Instead she glimpses Lucas in the distance, striding about, bending down to speak with someone, trying to balance his notebook on his knee. He starts to shake his biro up and down and she almost goes to him, almost reaches into her bag for a spare, but then a family strolls across her sightline and he is gone. Anyway, she won't interrupt him while he is working. She certainly doesn't want to talk to him.

Up ahead she spots a bench in the shade, one half unoccupied. She sits down next to a middle-aged couple, neither one in uniform, and fumbles in Ivan's nappy bag for his lidded beaker. The beaker is a new innovation. She bought it at the House of Children in Lipki and Ivan hated it at first, banged it against his head, screamed, threw it to the floor and splashed the water Frances had carefully boiled and cooled all over the wall. Now, with the warmer weather, he is thirstier, and glugs at it noisily, gripping its two handles with his moist pink fingers, eyes rolling slightly. The sight of him sucking triggers the let-down reflex in Frances's breasts and she pulls her thin cardigan across her chest.

The couple next to her are talking in low voices. The man, wearing brown polyester trousers and a carefully pressed short-sleeved shirt, holds the woman's hand and the woman presses her knee against his leg. They seem sweet, to Frances – demure, unshowy in their solicitude. They smile at her child, and make encouraging noises, and the man reaches forward and gently pats his head.

Then the woman leans around her companion and speaks directly to Frances in a quick burst of Ukrainian.

*'Ne panimayu,'* says Frances, shaking her head apologetically. 'I don't understand.'

Her response seems to agitate the woman, who says something to the man. They both point at Ivan, who has kicked off his knitted slipper and is grinning at the pantomime these strangers are performing for his amusement.

*'Fut!'* says the woman, then again, more sharply, *'Fut!'*

'Oh,' says Frances, smiling politely, though with no intention of covering up his toes. Her new strategy for batting off the injunctions from every woman over forty is to gabble at them in a language they cannot decipher. 'It's a lovely day,' she says. 'Bare feet won't kill him. In England, unlike your country, we know about germs and vitamin D. We know how to bring up our babies quite safely in the fresh air, with no hat on, with no boots on and, sometimes, with no clothes at all!'

This time something is wrong. The man looks angry. He stands, and so does the woman.

'Then consider yourself fortunate,' he says, in precise English. 'My wife wished only to help you. I did not expect an insult in return.' And with that, the couple move away.

Frances gets up too, a low mood upon her, exposed and ashamed by her outburst. She wants to be at home now, she wants to read her pages and she wants to hang her washing out in the basement, straight lines, tightly pegged, as tight as she can possibly stretch the towels and the vests and the sheets. She picks up the dropped slipper and hurries away from the park, out through the gates, across Lavrska Street and down the lane towards the tower blocks on Staronavodnitska where Building Number Four broods like a standing stone with its ringing, its sighs and its inexplicable compulsions. As she passes into its shadow, she looks up as she always does. This time, as she raises her head, someone throws something from one of the balconies. Whatever has been thrown falls clumsily, straight at first, then wheeling and unfolding as it approaches the ground. Frances sees it is a piece of cardboard or some packaging of some kind. She swallows down the bile that has risen in her throat and hurries inside, wishing that Elena was here to shout and hurry upstairs to bang on the door of the offending apartment.

This time, however, when Frances walks across the foyer there's a different old woman sitting in her cubicle.

*'Gdye Elena Vasilyevna?'* she asks.

The woman shrugs and scowls at the pushchair's dirty wheels.

\*

Lucas marches along Kreschatyk, too much energy in his legs. There's a pink flush below his cheekbones and he wants all the strollers around him to get out of his way. This city is too much,

sometimes – the queues at the kiosks, the endless holidays, the wide, blank faces. Take Zoya, who didn't show up at the War Memorial today. He wants to find her, to tell her straight that he is getting someone else, that he'll be paying someone else to do the job instead of her. She thinks she's so good he won't fire her, and that's his problem, of course, because he does need her. Back at the office he took a call from Sorin. There's an obstruction with some of the permissions he needs for his film feature. He could go ahead anyway, but he doesn't want to upset the director at this point in production – he needs to be at the premiere, now scheduled for July.

He passes a woman pulling along a grizzling child, and thinks of Frances, which doesn't help. Her silences, her deliberateness, her superstitions depress him. When she was pregnant, he loved her softness, her needs. Now, everything is weighted and weighed – a touch, a caress – nothing is gifted to him, nothing is free. He needs to act. He needs to take control of their lives and the emptiness he feels instead of attention and ardour. All the same, he wishes Frances would decide to go back to England without his urging. Nothing permanent - not yet. He'd miss Ivan of course but a break would allow them both to breathe. There's the cost of the flight, though if she stayed with her mother it needn't be too expensive.

He'll try to steer her round over dinner.

\*

In Frances's dream she neither flies, nor falls. Instead, she sits on a chair in the middle of the living room, looking out beyond the balcony to the white gauze of the sky. In her dream, everything is still. She sits still; her bones inside her skin rest lightly, her feet skim the surface of the parquet.

When she wakes, she is disoriented. The furniture spins around her with a speed she cannot match. She sits up and *Jurassic Park* slides off the bed to the floor. She must have fallen asleep, counting. Ivan isn't in his cot, and now she hears noises – the opening of a cupboard, the judder of a tap. Lucas is home. She looks at her watch. Seven-thirty.

Her husband is standing at the kitchen counter with his back to her when she reaches the doorway. He is hacking at a pimply-skinned chicken.

'Coq au vin,' he says, with a wave of his knife. 'I wanted to do chicken Kiev, but I couldn't find a recipe.' On the table sits a bottle of plastic-topped wine and some vegetables – carrots, onions – along with a sizeable heap of peelings. Ivan is sitting underneath, waving a thin coil of potato skin. Frances scoops him up, presses her lips against his hair and stares at the mess, still dazed from her nap. Back in London, Lucas sometimes made dishes like lasagne or shepherd's pie. He always

wanted her to guess the secret ingredient he'd added – fennel, or coriander, or something just as unfamiliar.

'How did things go at the War Memorial?' she asks. 'Did you get what you needed?'

Lucas grunts dismissively. 'There was no story. Just the usual reminiscences, rose-tinted recollections of comrades. Even the protests were half-hearted. People don't want to remember the truth. There's no mileage for me in that kind of self-delusion.'

Frances thinks of the set faces on the trolleybus, the sagging shoulders and shuffling in the queues and feels a ripple of affinity with the city's pensioners.

'Elena has moved,' she says. 'The caretaker – she's rented out her house to Suzie and Rob. She's not working here anymore.'

'So I heard. Funny to think of her as the landlady for those two. You did pretty well to get on the right side of her. She always looked like she wanted to murder me.' He turns around. 'Dinner will be a good hour or so. If you stick Ivan in the bath I'll bring you a beer. I won't do any more work tonight. We should talk.' He pulls a long face for his son, then smiles, and Frances sees that this costs him, which makes her both sorry, and wary.

'Okay,' she says. Then, when she's sitting on the loo seat with her feet on the edge of the bath and Ivan is kicking his legs in the yellowish water and shrieking with delight at the sound of his own echo bouncing off the tiles, she tugs her lip and wonders what he has planned.

Sure enough, when Ivan is asleep and the chicken has been eaten, Lucas asks her to come out onto the balcony while he has a smoke.

'It's a beautiful evening,' he says. 'Come and talk to me. Look at the stars.'

'You know I don't like the balcony,' replies Frances, trying to keep her voice even. Nevertheless, Lucas, who already has deviated from the script he has rehearsed, can't leave it there.

'I'm not asking you to take Ivan outside. Just us two. For five minutes.'

Frances doesn't move, doesn't uncross her legs. This is what happens when you fall asleep, she thinks. When you don't read your pages.

Lucas scrapes back his chair, gets up, paces down the hall to the living room, then returns to the kitchen. 'Look,' he says, his voice tight. 'I get the fact that the height gives you vertigo. Never mind that the balcony is perfect for some fresh air and sunshine, and that maybe it would be nice to sit on a couple of chairs and drink a beer and not have to leave you to go out by myself for a smoke – I get that you don't want to.'

Frances stands up now. She has to do something so she puts the kettle on the stove, tilting her head as she tries to settle the ringing sound behind her left ear. Lucas ploughs on.

‘But what I don’t want is for Ivan to grow up with your - issues.’ He sucks in some air as if drawing on a cigarette before blowing out the next words in a rush. ‘I don’t want him to be afraid of heights. I don’t want him counting shops or lampposts under his breath and I don’t want him getting a headache if something isn’t in a neat pile. I want him to be normal, and healthy, and happy. Why don’t you just do it? Why don’t you make yourself stand on the balcony? Fetch Ivan, do what any new-agey counsellor would tell you and take him out there, for all our sakes, Frannie! I mean, what exactly do you think is going to happen if you do?’

Frances’s fingers grip the kettle handle. Ivan, she tells herself, is safe in his cot in the bedroom; she remembers closing the door. A vision of her mother’s hardboiled egg slicer rises unbidden in her mind. You place the naked, glistening egg in the little hollow and push down the handle and the row of fine wires presses in to the whiteness and all the way through. What you hope for is a perfect cross-section – no grey rings – just white and sunny yellow, still slightly warm, the fanned segments cradled by a leaf or two of lettuce, a dab of salad cream.

‘Things are fucked up,’ says Lucas, quieter than before. ‘I’m sorry – I know it sounds harsh, but maybe you should go back to England for a while.’ He clears his throat, as if a cough might, even yet, make everything clear and right. In the old days, Frances would be crying by now. Then he could go to her – he’d know what to do, knowing she wanted it too. Now though he keeps pushing on, saying they both need a break and maybe she should patch things up with her mother.

‘You could think this whole thing through,’ he continues. ‘Ivan ought to play with other children. You could stop nursing him, get your hair done, see some friends. Then, when you’re ready, we could work out what comes next.’

‘What about you?’ asks Frances, when he stops talking, when her hand is steady and she can set the kettle safely on the hob and turn around to face him.

‘Me?’ he adjusts his expression as he retreats to safer territory. ‘I’ll work, of course. I’ll get my feature out, work twenty-four-seven, start making some decent money so that you – we – have some options.’

‘What if I don’t want to go?’

Lucas stares at his wife, uncomprehending.

‘I’m not going to force you!’

‘Then I’ll stay here.’

Lucas doesn’t say anything for a while. He opens the kitchen window and leans out as the first cannon booms from the war memorial.

‘Why put ourselves through this?’ he mutters, as the night air trembles and gold and green and purple fireworks near the Motherland statue start to flower, then pop.

Why indeed? Frances's closest acquaintances are Suzie and Zoya and Elena. There's Teddy and Karl of course and she might even count Mykola, as he knows so much about her. These people aren't her friends, though sometimes they seem more real than her own husband.

But they are not why she cannot retreat from her struggle with the balcony. They are not why she needs to stay.



## Chapter 20

Elena shows up a week after Victory Day. She knocks on the door of Frances and Lucas's apartment one lunchtime as if nothing has changed - as if she isn't now a landlady with Suzie and Rob's hard currency to spend. When Frances, surprised, lets her in, the old woman squeezes Ivan's chubby calves, fishes her slippers out of her string bag, then accepts a cup of tea and a seat in the kitchen to watch the latest episode of *Simplemente Maria*.

Later, while Frances feeds Ivan and Elena rinses the cups in the sink, the two of them manage, through the usual mix of mimed verbs and stabbing nouns, to establish that Elena is not living across town but has in fact moved into a flat downstairs.

'*Kharasho!*' says Frances, nodding vigorously to express the rush of relief she feels. Elena, who quickly tires of Frances's attempts at conversation, shuffles into the bedroom and strips Ivan's dirty cot sheet before moving to the living room and folding the crumpled bedding she peels off the sofa. Frances peeks in from the hallway, dismayed that Elena should find evidence for the disharmony between herself and Lucas, but Elena doesn't seem to notice. She stuffs the laundry into a basket and puts her shoes back on before indicating that Frances must take it downstairs to the washing machine.

When Frances is alone with Ivan once again, she wedges a chair against the living room door, tidies the bedroom and fetches *Jurassic Park* from under the bed. Everyone is busy in their separate spheres, it seems. Zoya doesn't bring her sheets to the basement anymore - perhaps she is working elsewhere, as Lucas has so often suspected. Suzie, meanwhile, is preoccupied with the renovations of Elena's old house. Lucas is out most of the time, chasing interviews or drinking or confessing his sins to Vee or maybe just walking the streets. His absence allows him and Frances to put further confrontation on hold. Instead they move around each other with a determined solicitousness, meeting only in the hallway or at the threshold of the bathroom or in the wedge of electric light in front of the refrigerator.

## Chapter 21

In the kitchen of the flat across the river in Dorniyitsa, Zoya sets the telephone's receiver back in its cradle and sits down at the table.

She can guess at the identity of her caller. The man had told her in his low, soft voice that he knew a great deal about her. He knew, for example, that her flat was still registered in her grandfather's name, that she'd had three abortions in the mid-1980s and that she had been questioned about the provenance of her car at a road block the previous winter. 'So what?' Zoya had said, ready to cut him off. Then the man said he had copies of her grandfather's medical records, that he knew about the morphine levels in his blood and his urine, that such things could be misconstrued if she was not more careful, if she continued to sniff like a bitch around the private affairs of legitimate business men, or discuss this conversation with the likes of that dried up whore Elena Vasilyevna.

Zoya lights a cigarette and blows smoke towards the open window. She doesn't fear for herself, but Elena is another matter. She is going to have to be careful.

## Chapter 22

June arrives like a pulsing heart, pink and glistening. There are swift thunderstorms, sudden showers, and afterwards the city's wet streets expand beneath the trees to accommodate the makeshift stalls with their blushing radishes and tender carrots, strawberries, *smetana* and liquid honey. Meanwhile, the hot water is turned off for a fortnight's maintenance in the apartment block on Staronavodnitska Street. As the pipes bleed they make sad sounds, like whale song. Lucas starts shaving at the office while Frances boils pans on the stove and holds Ivan as he splashes in the sink. Sometimes she takes him to Suzie's, whenever Suzie wants Frances to finger her swatches of fabric samples or discuss the merits of recessed lights or moan about the fact that the old woman who leased them the house still appears every evening to water the vegetable patch. Most of the time, however, Frances walks, and as she walks she stares at passers-by who seem, every day, both more strange and more familiar.

One afternoon, as Frances watches a man buy raspberries from a fruit stall on Kreschatyk, Teddy spies her from across the street. He runs over, dodging a truck with flapping tarpaulin sides that beeps its horn and makes Ivan shriek.

'Hey,' he says, planting a kiss on her temple. 'Raspberries! The first of the season. I want some.'

'Do you think they're safe to eat?' asks Frances, who knows that if she asks the stallholder, he will swear they've been grown in the Caucasus.

Teddy grins. 'I hope so. I've given up worrying.' He glances at Ivan. 'Seriously, it's too early in the season for them to have come from the exclusion zone. Don't they smell fabulous?'

They both pause for a moment, waiting as the man at the front of the queue eschews the little newspaper cones offered by the stall holder and instead opens up his peeling vinyl briefcase so that she can heap the soft fruit inside.

'I should have brought a bag,' says Teddy. 'They'll mess up my pockets...'

Frances pulls a pastel blue nappy sack out of her handbag. 'Would you like one of these? They're quite hygienic. I use them all the time.'

'Frances,' exclaims Teddy, 'you are beautiful *and* resourceful! We must have raspberries with ice cream. And meringue – Karl loves a Pavlova. I'm going to tell Vee that's what I want at my leaving dinner. Not cherry dumplings. Dumplings are for winter.'

Frances feels a little unsteady on her feet. She grips the handles of the pushchair.

'Are you leaving?'

Teddy looks down at her, surprised. 'Didn't Lucas tell you? That boy is something! Well, I'm off to Bosnia with Karl. New adventures! Hey, don't look so sad! We're having a last supper at Vee's. Next Saturday. You better come – I refuse to sit next to anyone else!'

'Dinner is difficult...' murmurs Frances. 'With Ivan – now he's older it's harder to take him out at night.'

'So let's find you a babysitter,' says Teddy. 'How about that caretaker of yours – the one who's retired with a suitcase of cash? She's fond of Ivan, right?' He smiles, rueful, sympathetic. 'Lucas needs to show you off.'

'Lucas wants me to go back to London.' The words rush out of Frances before she can stop them and for a moment she doesn't recognise the woman holding a nappy bag by a fruit stall discussing her husband with a man she barely knows. But this is Teddy, she reminds herself. Not Mykola.

Teddy rubs his chin.

'Then please come for my sake. And yours.'

\*

Frances thinks about Teddy's suggestion as the trolleybus rattles up the broad boulevard of Lesi Ukrainsky. She doesn't want to leave Ivan with anyone, but neither does she want Lucas to visit Vee's flat without her. Teddy knows something.

Then, as she pushes Ivan across the waste ground, she spies Olek. He is lounging in the grass; she can just see his shorn head and shoulders through the tangle of stems and weeds. He is with his uncle or his coach or whoever he is. That they might be outside is not, Frances reminds herself, so unusual. These days, she often encounters bodies sprawled in the sunshine. Sometimes she passes lovers grappling silently, like molluscs, or she steers the pushchair round a pair of mottled legs sticking out across the path. Old men slump on the benches and chat softly or stare down at their hands. Young girls with their skinny arms and bright hair accessories sit cross-legged and play clapping games or chalk neat rows of sums on the concrete, and several times she has seen the same middle-aged couple enjoying a picnic of gherkins and sausage laid out on a blue handbag amongst the dandelions.

She could skirt around Olek. She could remain out of sight. But today Olek's lassitude galvanises her. She wants to speak to him and it is better to do it here, out in the open, than down in the basement or in the shadows on the stairs.

As she approaches, she wonders what the pair are looking at, for Olek's shorn scalp and his uncle's bulging neck both bend towards the ground. She is almost upon them when she sees the chick. It is golden brown and fluffy, and it makes little cheeping sounds as it shuttles between them in the space they have flattened out in the grass. Yet what strikes her most is not the chick itself, but the way the two of them use their bodies to fence in the tiny bird. Olek makes a wall with his legs while the older man is squatting. His splayed knees remind her of a broody hen.

'Ciao!' says Olek, raising his head. '*Cik cik!*'

'Hello,' says Frances. She is facing the sun and puts her hand up to protect her eyes.

'You want to look?' he asks. 'Show your baby?'

Frances glances down at Ivan, who is nodding off in the shade of the pushchair's canopy. 'He's sleeping...'

The older man doesn't acknowledge her. He is wearing a grey vest and a pair of shiny tracksuit bottoms and the skin around his elbows sags like rough hide. He mutters a few words, then puts his hand to the ground, palm up. The chick, obligingly, steps onto it.

Frances grips the pushchair handles and addresses herself to Olek.

'Have you seen Elena today?'

Olek shrugs.

'Well, when you do, will you please give her a message from me? Can you ask her if she would look after Ivan on Saturday evening? At eight o'clock. We're – going out.'

Olek breaks off a stalk of grass and sticks it in his mouth like a drawing she once saw of Huckleberry Finn.

'Okay Mum.'

Frances frowns, irritated, but before she can correct him, the older man lifts his hand off the ground and curls his fingers up around the little chick.

'Don't!' says Frances, stepping forward, imagining the crushing of a breast, of tiny bones.

Olek's uncle takes no notice. Carefully, gently, he places the chick behind him in the long grass and lets it topple off his hand.

'*Cik cik!*' repeats Olek as the chick shakes itself off and scoots out of sight.

Now Frances wants Olek to go after the chick and rescue it, for it won't survive alone in the killing fields of the waste ground with its starving strays and sharp-beaked crows, but Olek doesn't move.

'I've been meaning to ask you,' she says, trying to sound confident, 'why did you open that parcel addressed to me - with the packets of pudding mix? Have you opened other parcels, too? I don't understand why you would do that.'

Olek sticks his tongue between his bottom lip and his teeth.

'Someone tell me to,' he says.

This is not what Frances is expecting.

'Who? Who told you?'

'I don't say,' says Olek. 'Not someone. I make it up, like story.'

*Don't lie*, thinks Frances. She is still distracted by the chick, still looking for movement in the weeds behind him. 'Was it Elena? Or someone called Mykola?'

Olek shrugs. 'No one!'

'Him?' she presses, nodding at the older man. 'What else have you stolen?'

For the first time, Olek looks surprised.

'Not stolen, Mum. I looking.'

Frances feels the heat spreading across her neck. 'Don't call me "Mum".'

'Okay,' says Olek. 'Queen Mum. Mrs Mum. Not you. You not Mum. I tell Elena Vasilyevna. Eight o'clock, Saturday.'

Frances, sensing she is being dismissed, stares, exasperated as Olek lies back in the long grass and drapes his arm across his face. The older man grunts and rolls onto his side.

It isn't until she regains the path that she sees something skitter through the grass towards the shadows beneath the dump bins and hears its plaintive cheep.

\*

Elena is walking up the hill to the Universam when she notices the car slowing to a crawl beside her. She doesn't turn to look; rather, she does her utmost to ignore it. It is a foreign car – silver, with a long sloping bonnet and windows you can't see through. A gangster car.

Elena isn't feeling so well today. Her hips ache and now her stomach is upset. She doesn't want to be out for too long in case her bowels loosen. It's the new flat, she tells herself, with its strange echoes and hard floors. She keeps the windows open, despite the flies, because she knows how the vents work in these apartment blocks and she doesn't want to breathe in air that has incubated its germs in the lungs of a stranger.

The lights are green at the busy intersection but the silver car doesn't accelerate. Instead, it continues to creep forward beside Elena, keeping pace with her slow shuffle, holding up the traffic behind so that other drivers lean on their horns. When the lights turn red it doesn't brake either, staying abreast of the pedestrians as they flow across the street.

Elena keeps walking. She needs oil and scouring powder, and perhaps a bag of bread rings for the little boy, but the afternoon is warm and her feet feel swollen and heavy. She turns right down a side street and the car glides right too, hugging the curb, nosing level with her legs.

Now she is beginning to feel breathless. The city is full of fumes and each day the walk to the Universam gets a little harder. She stops for a moment and steadies herself beneath a plane tree. The car stops moving too. The passenger window slides down with a soft electric hum, though in the shade of the tree she cannot see who sits inside. It doesn't matter. She never sees, never looks. She bends down as if she is about to pluck a weed out of the soil but instead she scoops up something in her hand and quickly, awkwardly, throws it into the car – a dog turd, not as fresh as she would like, yet still stinking.

\*

On Saturday night, when Elena taps at the door of the flat on the thirteenth floor, Lucas is shaving in the bathroom and Frances is having second thoughts about going to Vee's without Ivan. She has more or less decided to send Elena away, but when she opens the door, Elena thrusts a small carton of peach juice at her and slips quickly inside, divesting herself of her thick cardigan and shoes, smiling and shuffling down the hallway as if she is some kind of housekeeper, or fairy godmother.

'Ivan is sleeping,' says Frances, cutting her off at the kitchen, pointing to the closed bedroom door. She switches on the television, keeping the volume low. Elena nods and sits down at the table while Frances, unsure what to do next, sets the kettle on the hob and puts biscuits on a plate. Ivan won't wake, she reminds herself. He's become a deep sleeper, like his father.

When Lucas appears, she asks him to explain that they will be back at ten-thirty and if anything is wrong she must call Vee's number which is written down on a sheet of paper next to the telephone.

'Ten thirty?' mutters Lucas. 'This is Teddy's leaving party! I suppose Zoya can bring you back earlier.'

Frances doesn't risk a last peek at her son. She closes the front door softly behind her, and for a moment the building plays its old trick, shifting sideways.

'Come on,' says Lucas, stabbing at the button for the lift. 'I don't want to be late.'

\*

Frances stands in the hallway of Vee's flat, staring at the homemade bunting that hangs along the wall. Each triangle is cut from a photograph of Teddy, or Karl, or both, laughing, with Vee, with

other people, sometimes posing, sometimes caught unawares – snapshots of lives that are busy and sociable, that mean something.

‘Look, here’s a picture with you in it,’ says Vee, pointing at a dark image, a little out of focus, showing Frances with her eyes half shut next to Karl and Teddy on the bed at Lucas’s birthday party.

‘It’s a nice idea,’ murmurs Frances as she glances along the row and sees a picture of Lucas, smiling through a cloud of cigarette smoke, one arm around Teddy, the other round Vee. What was it they used to call themselves? The *Troika*. Frances, guessing the dress-code for the night would most likely be ‘expensively understated’ is wearing the jeans she bought with her credit card and a pale blue shirt, carefully ironed. Tonight, however, Vee is wearing a low-cut dress made from some silky, stretchy material that clings to her hips and shows off the creamy lustre of her breasts. Lucas keeps glancing towards her as he chats to Karl and Teddy in the kitchen doorway.

Vee has dragged her kitchen table through to the bed-living room. As Frances looks in and sees candles, linen napkins, counts places laid for eight, the doorbell rings. Vee’s other guests have arrived, and Frances is surprised to find she recognises all three of them – Sorin, Dr Alleyn from the embassy, and Viktor Lukyanenko, the young film director, who pulls Vee close and kisses her on the mouth.

\*

Vee serves black caviar with the bottle of proper Champagne that Sorin has presented to her. Frances, squeezed between Teddy and Dr Alleyn, isn’t feeling very hungry. She needn’t have come, she thinks. Vee has moved on to someone else. Her husband, sitting opposite between Karl and Lukyanenko, looks wary in the glow of the candlelight, and for a few minutes Frances pities him.

‘Our hostess is spoiling us!’ stage-whispers Teddy as he scoops up a spoonful of the sticky beluga eggs and smears them across a freshly-made buckwheat blini.

‘Ah, but I have a friendly supplier who gives me a discount,’ laughs Vee.

Dr Alleyn raises an eyebrow. ‘Of course she does,’ he says, to no one in particular.

‘Well, I should like to raise a toast to these intrepid adventurers - Teddy and Karl!’ says Sorin, waving his glass at the end of the table.

‘To Teddy and Karl!’ repeat the others. ‘*Nazdarovye!*’

The main course is a platter of fresh perch along with baby potatoes and herb butter. Wine and vodka appear, and before long the table has divided into two or three conversations all happening at once. Dr Alleyn talks to Sorin about isotopes and river contamination while Teddy tells Frances



about Bosnia, and how he and Karl hope to get into Sarajevo, despite the fact that it is under continual bombardment.

‘There’s a tunnel,’ he says. ‘From UN controlled territory right into the city. Paid for with cigarettes, I heard.’

‘But it’s too dangerous, surely?’ asks Frances as she picks through the fish on her plate. She thinks of the mortar bombs and the weeping civilians she has seen on the news.

‘Maybe,’ says Teddy, serious for a moment. ‘But I’d rather take my chances there than get my head smashed in by some queer-basher down by the Dnieper.’

Frances is shocked. ‘Has something happened?’ she asks.

‘No,’ says Teddy, though his glance over to Karl makes her wonder. Karl is quiet tonight, which isn’t unusual, but now she sees how one side of his face is slightly yellow. He seems to be holding himself in, his left arm crossed over his chest. She takes in a breath, ready to probe further.

‘Shh,’ whispers Teddy, watching her carefully, holding a finger to his lips. ‘Out of the frame, remember?’

Opposite, Lucas seems to be getting into a discussion with Vee and Lukyanenko about the film industry and the progress of his feature. Lukyanenko is talking about financing, his face serious, his tone sombre, yet he is holding Vee’s hand and they are pushing against each other’s thumbs, each bending the other’s back with real force. Suddenly Lukyanenko’s thumb gives way and he laughs.

‘What’s funny?’ asks Lucas, clearly unsettled.

Lukyanenko sits back, now caressing Vee’s fingers. He isn’t the kind of man Frances expects Vee to partner. His face is too pointed, his head too small but his expression is intense, and Frances finds herself staring.

‘Everything is funny,’ he says, looking round the table. ‘Here am I, eating dinner, sitting next to my – ah, that phrase – “whip-ass” girlfriend. Yet my movie is very far from secure. Everything is paid for – wages, post-production, PR - ’ he nods at Sorin – ‘yet I depend on the... *protection* of my backers to ensure the film is released and is shown in our cinemas. Now I have a problem. Someone is making threats.’

‘Who?’ asks Lucas quickly.

Vee leans back, studies Lucas from behind Lukyanenko’s head. ‘See there’s the real story, Lucas. Haven’t I always said so? It’s not the production you should be interested in, but the money flow, the gate-keepers... I know a guy with a white goods store. Nothing too fancy - take a look at his sort if you want to dig deep. He’s connected, all the way. Not even Sorin here can touch him!’

Sorin is grinning, uncomfortable, but Lucas looks horrified. ‘The film will be distributed, won’t it? On general release? The premiere -’

Lukyanenko turns to him and now there is no trace of irony. 'I want you to have your story,' he says. 'Good for you, good for my movie, good for our industry. You will come to the premiere, I think, and I hope you bring your wife, though maybe not your little boy, whose performance I remember at the sound stage!'

'Oh god!' Vee laughs, offering cigarettes around the table. 'The kid's adorable, but what a responsibility! Frances has managed amazingly with him here.' She turns and her eyes fix on Frances in the candlelight. 'Gotta love him, but it's great you found a babysitter. It must be quite a deal, leaving him at home for the first time.' She raises her glass, still holding Frances's stare. 'Now it's my turn to make a toast. To all moms. To Frances!'

'To Frances!' echoes Teddy, then Karl and Sorin.

Frances, however, isn't feeling well. A painful pressure has been building at the back of her eyes since Vee's mention of the owner of the white goods store. The ringing sound has returned, for the first time away from the apartment block. She shouldn't be here, she thinks. Mykola – he warned her not to leave her child alone with Elena. She drops her fork on the floor.

'Hey,' says Teddy, instantly attentive. 'What's wrong? Do you need some air?' He looks over to Dr Alleyn. 'She's kind of pale – do you want to lie down?'

'I need to go home...' she mumbles.

Dr Alleyn pushes back his chair with some reluctance.

'It is a little warm in here.' He reaches out for her wrist, tries to feel her pulse. Frances tugs her hand away.

'I need to go home. Lucas, I have to go now.' She stands, leaning against the table so that glasses wobble. Lucas stands too. 'Please. I'll wave down a car...'

'Don't be stupid,' says Lucas, aware of everyone watching. 'I'm sorry, everyone. We'd better go. I'll come back later if I can.' His dismay increases as murmurs of 'no, stay with Frances' pass around the table. Teddy and Vee see them to the door.

'Call us!' they urge as Lucas follows Frances down the stairs. But Frances has already forgotten the party.

Her baby. She needs to save him. She needs to reach page twenty-seven before it is too late.

\*

*The tropical rain fell in great drenching sheets.* All the way back to Staronavodnitska Street, Frances mutters under her breath, sentence after sentence, line after line, see the words, count the words, miss nothing. She pays no attention to the driver who stares in his mirror or her husband who keeps

asking her what's wrong. When they arrive at the car park, she scrambles out before the car has stopped moving and Lucas is still fumbling for the fare. Inside the building, the light shows the lift is stuck on the sixteenth floor but Frances is already running up the stairs, gasping for breath, lungs breaking, counting and counting, don't miss, don't repeat, page twenty-five, three hundred and twenty, page twenty-six, two hundred and ninety-two. Her legs are stronger than she knows yet weaker than she needs, failing her on the last flight so that she half crawls to the landing.

The key is in her pocket where she left it. She fumbles and almost drops it. Finish page twenty-seven. Finish it. She needs to see.

As she enters the apartment, Frances bites her tongue until her mouth tastes of blood. She must be quiet now, so quiet, for the living room door is gaping wide and all the lights are on. The breeze is cool on her face and she knows the balcony door is open on the other side of the net curtain. A figure is out there, diffuse, indistinct against the darkness of the night. Frances must slow her own heart and the high pitched ringing in her ear and not raise the alarm. Like a ghost she moves across the floor of the living room. She hears the old woman murmuring to herself, sees her stoop down. A squeaking noise, something scraping on the lino – *what is she doing...*

On the threshold of the balcony, poking through the net curtain, a face appears - a plastic, gurning face from a TV cartoon, rolling on wheels. Frances stares, first in horror, then bewilderment as an old, arthritic hand pulls the curtain aside. Ivan, her baby, is standing in the doorway, gripping the handle of the Donald Duck baby walker Frances bought at the Universam all those months before. Elena is bending over him, ready to catch him should he fall.

'Privyet!' says the old woman, looking up, and then her face falls and her bony hands shield the child's mouth and eyes because Frances is leaning over, retching and retching, all the sickness pouring out onto the living room floor, spattering across the shiny parquet along with little spots of caviar and some half-digested perch.

## Chapter 23

Things happen, dreams Frances. You say, it was like this, and so it becomes that way. You think something, and then it gets stuck if you don't blink it away. But the stories you tell yourself, they are not fixed, they can be unmade. Anything might happen, or not, or maybe. Not knowing is something you fall into and falling makes you weightless. It doesn't hurt – not much. Sometimes, when you fall, the wind lifts you up like a puff of white dandelion seed and then you are clean again, and new.

The ringing has stopped. There is silence, then there is noise but nothing is constant. Squeaking from the ceiling, a baby crying, a balcony door opening – these things start, they stop and they start again. Elena is there, bringing peppermint tea. Ivan, her child – she can hear he is near.

Frances tries to sit up. There is someone she must speak to. The man with the black hat made from unborn baby lambs – where is he?

\*

Frances is sick for three days. Her fever is high, her body is wrung out yet still she leans over the side of the bed and retches into a bowl.

'Food poisoning,' says Dr Alleyn, who pops over to the flat on the second day. 'Not the worst, but bad enough. Call this number if she's not better by Wednesday.' He tells Lucas his wife needs a holiday back home and a visit to her GP when she is up on her feet, and leaves his card with some sachets of Dioralyte.

'Must have been some ropey perch,' murmurs Lucas, from somewhere near the window.

Frances is too weak to tell him it wasn't the fish.

\*

'Hey,' says Lucas. He lowers himself onto the edge of the bed near Frances's feet. 'You're looking better.'

Frances nods, carefully. It has just taken all her strength to shuffle to the bathroom and back again. 'I feel empty,' she says, and it's true, she is empty – her milk is all gone. She hasn't nursed Ivan for three days, and now there's nothing left. Lucas shows her the powdered formula he bought from

the pharmacy in Lipki – some American brand she’s never heard of, but the date on the base of the tin is still good and Lucas read the instructions, boiled the water for ages, and even found the sterilising tablets Frances kept beneath the sink.

‘He didn’t like it at first,’ Lucas tells her. ‘But he hasn’t been sick and now he slurps it up from his beaker like a pro.’

Frances rests her head back against the pillow. Ivan is sitting on the floor by Lucas’s feet, brandishing a rope of cotton reels that Elena has made for him. Her hand reaches through the space until she touches the top of his head. This isn’t how she wanted to wean her son. In truth, she hadn’t known how she would do it, and the loss leaves a physical ache, as if a piece of string is knotted beneath her sternum and someone is tugging but it catches between her ribs. Ivan is separate from her now, and yet, unexpectedly, the ache of separation is tempered by relief. He survived out on the balcony, away from her. If she were to die now, he would live.

‘Where is Elena?’ she asks.

‘Elena? No idea. She was here earlier though. I know you weren’t sure about leaving her with Ivan, but she’s been a godsend while you’ve been ill. She’s taken the washing away, gone for walks. Of course, I’ve told her not to take him out on the balcony.’

‘It’s okay,’ says Frances. ‘I don’t mind.’

Lucas is taken aback. ‘Really? I thought it would upset you...’ He doesn’t know about Mykola’s warning, or the gravity-invoking weight of her own fear though none of this matters to Frances anymore because Elena has taken her baby out to the edge and proved them all wrong.

‘Look,’ continues Lucas. ‘I’ve been thinking. I said some stupid stuff before you got ill, and I’m sorry. I really am. But you do need to go back to England for a couple of weeks – nothing more, I swear – just a bit of time for a rest and some food that won’t poison you.’ He takes her hand. She doesn’t pull away. ‘I’ve got behind with work while you’ve been ill. Not your fault, of course. So I’ve booked you a ticket. Next week.’

Frances blinks, quickly, the old habit, to push away difficult thoughts.

‘Anyway,’ continues Lucas, ‘when you come back, my story will be finished and we can take a holiday together, maybe down to Crimea like I promised at Christmas. I could get a feature out of it – make it pay for itself.’

‘I suppose.’ So many other things are stretching, twisting, re-forming, their new shapes as yet unclear. For the first time in months, Frances peers out at a pressing, insistent future. England, and the fact of its continuing existence, is beginning to reassemble itself.

## Chapter 24

On the morning of Frances's departure, she wakes early and stands in the kitchen in her bare feet. The sun is already high above the river. She can feel its warmth on her face as she sips her tea. Her suitcases are packed. Ivan's change bag is ready and the cupboard is full of dried pasta and tinned tomatoes so that Lucas won't starve. Soon she will wake Ivan, give him his morning milk and dress him for the journey, but she won't move until she hears Lucas pull the light switch in the bathroom. Her own stillness calms her. In a few hours she will be in England, knocking on her mother's door. She hasn't told her mother she is coming. Neither has she mentioned this fact to Lucas. Baby steps, she thinks. First one foot, then the other.

Lucas, however, doesn't go into the bathroom. Instead he steps in behind her and stands just an inch or two away. She can feel his bed heat between them. She can smell his morning breath. He can't take her to the airport, he tells her. Lukyanenko has called a breakfast press conference. Lucas wasn't given any warning. He has to go, he is sorry but this is big and soon he is dressed and gone, just an awkward kiss next to her ear, a plea that she call the office number from Heathrow when she lands.

Frances watches from the window as he strides across the car park. Soon he is a tiny figure like the other tiny figures, moving across the road, milling at the bus stop, combining and separating, impelled by some law of mutual proximity. She stows her copy of *Jurassic Park* in the bottom of Ivan's change bag and waits for Zoya.

\*

When Zoya arrives, Frances tells her how sorry she is to hear about her grandfather.

Zoya is wearing a green shirt today, tucked into the high waist of her jeans. She looks different – more casual – dressed for the park instead of her usual skirt and boots.

'My grandfather was old,' she says, with a quick shake of her head. 'Dying is all he had left.' She spots Frances's suitcase. 'Let's go. You have your passport, your ticket, your purse?'

'Yes, thank you.' Frances clips Ivan into his pushchair and loops the change bag over the handles, and when she closes the front door behind them and rattles it to make sure it is locked, a shiver

passes through her, a sense of severance of sorts, as if the time she has spent here is shaking itself out. She will be back in two weeks, she tells herself. Nothing will have changed.

Downstairs in the foyer, Elena is waiting to say goodbye. She bends forward to give Ivan a kiss and a squeeze. When she straightens up she is smiling, but her eyes are watery with tears. Zoya speaks to her quickly in Russian, and Elena bows her head.

‘What did you say to her?’ asks Frances, as they exit through the door.

‘I told her to stay out of your flat.’

‘What?’ Frances looks back at Elena, who is already retreating up the stairs.

Zoya sighs. ‘Your flat. She has a key. Lucas gave her one while you were ill.’

Frances thinks about this for a moment. ‘I don’t mind if she lets herself in for a bit,’ she says.

‘Lucas wouldn’t like it, but he gave her the key. Imagine – he comes home, and Elena is sitting on the sofa watching *Simplemente Maria!*’ She starts laughing, surprising herself, while Zoya rolls her eyes.

\*

Frances’s mood changes as they drive out of the city. She sits on the back seat of the car with Ivan on her knee and winds down the window. Zoya glances in her mirror and tuts, but Frances takes no notice. The day is calm, and warm, with a high blue sky and the smells of scythed grass and tar competing with the exhaust fumes along the boulevards. The trees are in full leaf, now, and the sun glances off the empty windows of the shops announcing *Khleb* or *Kneegi* or *Myaso* so that people walking past in the shade look blurry, like the figures in Victorian photographs who don’t stand still while the plate is exposed. Everything in Kiev is strange to Frances – the cars, the people, the noises, the language, the smells – yet it feels more real to her than anywhere else.

‘I don’t want to go back to England,’ she says, softly, to the back of Zoya’s head.

Zoya studies her in the rear view mirror.

‘Then don’t go.’

The wind is blowing Frances’s hair across her face. She pushes it away. ‘What are you doing today? I mean, after you’ve dropped me at the airport. Are you going to the office?’

‘No.’

Frances is used to Zoya’s curtness. She adjusts her son’s legs – he is falling asleep and she tries to make him comfortable. However, just as she resigns herself to silence, Zoya takes one hand off the wheel and winds her own window down a little way.

‘As a matter of fact,’ she says, ‘I am going to my grandfather’s place in the country.’

'Oh.' Frances tries to imagine Zoya in the woods; she struggles to picture her anywhere but the city. 'Do you grow things there? Can I come with you?'

Zoya snorts. 'I have things I must do. You have a plane to catch.'

'Well, you said "Then don't go," and I don't want to.' Frances leans forward, gripped by the possibility that she might change her mind. 'We could go back and fetch Elena. She'd love a day in the country – she must be missing her little house in Tsarskoye Selo!'

Zoya says nothing for a while. She drives around a pot hole, then pulls over beneath a hoarding and eases up the handbrake.

'You don't belong here,' she murmurs, not unkindly.

'You may be right,' says Frances, as a flush burns across her cheeks. 'But you are not the one who decides.'

\*

The little Zhiguli sways and bumps along the track, away from the road, around the edge of an unkempt field and on into the straggle of birch wood where the light flickers through the leaves and the air smells of moss and something vaguely medicinal, like wintergreen. Elena sits beside Zoya in the front, while Frances remains in the back with Ivan dozing in her lap and Olek beside her. No one says very much. Perhaps, thinks Frances, they are as surprised as she to find themselves here, together, on a jaunt to the country. Elena almost cried again when they drove back to fetch her, and Olek – well, he was loitering by her door and Elena said he must come too, despite Frances's head-shaking. Zoya stopped at a roadside kiosk a few miles out of Kiev to buy a picnic of *kvass*, rye bread and sausage, but otherwise they've come as they are, Elena with a heavy cardigan around her shoulders, Olek in a blue tee shirt and his skimpy footballer shorts. His narrow thighs jut outwards so that Frances must point her knees towards the door.

'Are we nearly there?' she asks, breaking the silence. Her words echo childhood trips to the seaside, never knowing whether the blue-grey plate of the English Channel lay just beyond the next hill or whether, in fact, she would never arrive, lost in the chasm between home and away. It mattered to her, as a child. It still does.

Zoya doesn't answer, no surprise there, yet as Frances looks about her, the track widens and the spindly trees thin out. A wooden dacha appears, pretty, with carved shutters, but they don't stop beside it, and neither do they stop at several others that follow, all in varying states of upkeep, with panelled fences and low, drooping roofs. There is no one about, though a couple of rusting Tavrias



are pulled up along the roadside and Frances hears the crowing of a cockerel from someone's back yard.

Just as the little settlement begins to peter out, Zoya slows to a halt and turns off the engine. She says something to Elena in Russian, then opens the door and steps onto the verge.

'There are ticks,' she says, eyeing Frances through the open window. 'It is good you are wearing trousers. Push the legs inside your socks.'

'What about Ivan?' asks Frances. 'And Olek? They've both got bare legs!'

Zoya is tying a scarf around her head. It makes her look like a woman in a Soviet propaganda poster – a factory worker or a peasant. 'You will see if something crawls onto your son,' she says.

'I burn them so they *pik, pik!*' adds Olek, flicking his fingers.

'I will take tweezers and pull them out,' warns Zoya.

Frances tries to open her door without waking Ivan. 'Where is the house? Is it far?'

Zoya sighs. 'If you get out of the car, I will show you.'

\*

Frances sits Ivan on her hip and picks her way along an overgrown footpath. Olek is behind her with the bottles of cloudy kvas, while Zoya walks ahead with Elena, who treads carefully, shuffling along in her outdoor shoes, nursing the sausage wrapped in newspaper. After a few minutes they leave the line of trees behind and descend into a valley. A tin roof protrudes beyond some reeds, and now Frances can see that the house is not a house at all. There are no shutters, there is no veranda, no mansarded roof, no quaint fretwork. To Frances, it is a shed – a single room dwelling, raised on breeze blocks, with thickened plastic sheets for windows and a metal door that has clearly been salvaged from somewhere, cut and welded to fit. There is no sign of a toilet, no plumbing, not even a pump.

Zoya makes the rules clear straight away.

'If you need to answer a call of nature, climb back up the hill and go in the woods. Bury, please.' She yanks out a small spade from the space beneath the steps.

'What do you do out here?' asks Frances, as Olek pulls his trainers off and hops across the stones and rough grass towards a shallow stream.

'Do?' Zoya looks amused. 'We sit. We drink and eat.' She turns to watch Elena, who is hobbling around the side of the building, inspecting some remnants of soft fruit bushes and an ancient plum tree with thick branches that twist outwards like flailing arms. 'My grandfather used to grow things here. Many things – fruit, vegetables – sometimes even flowers when I was a child. Elena won't like

the way everything is now wild, but I could not manage it when Dedush was sick.' She pauses, her twitching smile gone, her face empty.

'I'm sorry...' says Frances, wishing that she had better words to offer. She is an interloper, standing uselessly in the freshly-trampled grass with Ivan wriggling in her arms. She shifts him up her hip and looks around. 'What can I do? Can I help with anything?'

Zoya is fiddling with the padlock on the door. 'You can help me find the vodka.'

\*

The five accidental *dachniki* eat lunch on Ivan's nap blanket, spread out in the long grass. The sausage is full of chewy lumps of gristle, though Frances finds she is hungry and the salty fat isn't so bad. Ivan eats two yoghurts, and for dessert Frances raids her son's change bag for biscuits and some sliced pear and apple. Elena sniffs the fruit and won't touch it, but she takes several biscuits and slices the sausage with a small paring knife Zoya found in the hut, managing surprising well with her broken teeth and a jaw that folds in on itself as she masticates each mouthful. Zoya then insists they all drink the vodka she has brought out from its hiding place in the hut. They have no glasses, and by now Olek and Elena seem convinced that Ivan's change bag is a cornucopia of abundance and usefulness, so once again Frances burrows amongst the nappies and fishes out Ivan's spare beaker. She takes off the lid and pours a finger's depth for Elena and herself, while Zoya swigs straight from the bottle. The vodka is unfiltered, slightly gritty and it burns Frances's throat and oesophagus as it slides its way down. Elena takes a sip, then passes the cup to Olek.

'I am baby!' jokes Olek, picking up the lid and pushing it back onto the cup.

'No!' pleads Frances, helplessly. To her mind there is something repulsive about watching this teenage boy suck vodka from the spout, though Zoya is smiling at her prudishness and Elena is laughing so much that tears squeeze out of her eyes.

And so the day gently unravels, as Frances lies back in the grass and closes her eyes while Ivan pulls up handfuls of weeds in his chubby fists or tries to catch the flies gathering on the greasy crumbs, and Elena naps, snoring, then shuffles off towards the rear of the hut to rummage amongst the bolting vegetables and broken canes in search of something to prune back, or harvest. Time slows, memories fade, the sun inches across a soft blue sky. Frances feels her son scrambling over her hips. She puts her hand out, touches his dense, warm skin. This is real, she thinks, this bond of blood and birth and survival. Today they are all saved and she could lie here forever with Ivan's head on her stomach, pinning her down, his legs twitching gently against her own, even the weight of his wet nappy a reassurance that now, right now, she has everything she needs.

\*

She wakes with a jolt when Ivan bashes something hard against her collar bone. Her head is spinning a little, from the sunlight or the blood-rush or possibly the vodka, but as her eyes readjust she sees that he is clutching the pot of Sudafed she always kept in her handbag. Other items lay strewn across the blanket: keys, a couple of tampons, a pen with the ink starting to seep into the fabric. And her well-thumbed copy of *Jurassic Park*.

Zoya is lighting a cigarette on the steps behind her.

'I remember that book,' she says, blowing smoke towards the stream. 'You were reading it when you first arrived. Then Lucas gave it to Sorin, and you wanted it back.'

'Yes,' says Frances, frowning.

Zoya stretches out a leg and pushes the book with her foot. 'Dinosaurs. The dangers of men playing god with science. You read it a lot, but what does it say? I think it is rubbish.'

Frances wishes the book had stayed in the bottom of the change bag. She picks it up and flicks the pages, slowly, as if the book is unfamiliar, until she finds a page with the corner folded over. The fold is on page twenty-seven, marking the part where Elena the midwife leaves the window open at the clinic and the baby raptors climb inside and eat a baby's face. She must have counted the words of that section fifty or sixty times, at least.

'I thought I needed this book,' she murmurs.

'And you have changed your mind?' Zoya's tone is neutral, but her questions, Frances knows, are always loaded.

'Elena helped me,' she says. 'I don't need it anymore.'

'Then get rid of it.'

Frances thinks for a moment. Ivan is safe. Now when she looks at the cover it seems ridiculous.

'All right,' she says. 'I'm going for a walk in the woods. You can come if you like, though I warn you, I'm taking the spade.'

Zoya offers a hand and pulls Frances to her feet.

Up beneath the trees, the air is still and cool. They have left the wasps behind them and the ground is springy, made soft by decades of leaf fall. Light pools haphazardly between the birch trunks that stand white and straight like postulants stopped in prayer. Frances feels as if she has stepped into a church.

Ivan, whom she has carried on her hip, is trying to get down so she sits him on the weedless grass and looks around her.

'Anywhere will do,' she says, taking the spade from Zoya. She thrusts it into the earth near a small anthill. 'Here.'

When a small hole is dug, and the ants are scattering amongst the pale tree roots, Frances tips her book inside, quickly, as if now she cannot wait to be rid of it, as if burying it is part of the ritual she never wanted, never craved. As an afterthought, she bends down and removes Ivan's sodden nappy which she drops on top of the book.

'There,' she says, aware that Zoya is watching her.

'You are killing two birds with one stone,' remarks Zoya, dryly.

'Multi-tasking,' says Frances, as she kicks the soil back into the hole with her foot. 'When I was little, we used to say "good riddance to bad rubbish".' She pauses. A memory comes back to her, those love notes to the boy she'd left behind, hidden the little waxy sleeves. When her mother discovered one, Frances had collected up all the others and pushed them down amongst the chicken bones and broken eggshells at the bottom of the dustbin. 'I hope it rots quickly.'

Frances scoops up Ivan and the two women turn and walk back to the edge of the trees where the sun is strong and bright, the air full of heat. They raise their hands to their eyes and squint down the slope towards the little hut and the stream. The place appears deserted, but then a small movement to the left catches Frances's attention and she sees Olek peeing, directing the arc of his urine at a flat stone near the edge of the reeds.

Zoya sees him, too.

'He likes to win, that one,' she says. 'If there's no one to play against, he competes with himself.'

'He seems very attached to Elena,' says Frances.

Zoya snorts. 'She gives him money.'

'Oh.' Frances remembers how the boy looks at her sometimes. She wants to feel sorry for him yet he doesn't make it easy. 'He steals parcels from my mum. He eats the stuff she sends me. Why did you let him come with us today?'

'Why not? I let you come.' A pause. 'I thought I would be here alone. Then you wanted to come and I thought, okay, but not just you. You are too much for one person by yourself.'

Frances is never sure if Zoya means to offend her. 'Well you know how to wind Lucas up,' she says. 'And I have to listen to him afterwards. So perhaps that makes us even.'

'Ah, Lucas!' Zoya lifts the spade and lets it rest across one shoulder. 'He runs around Kiev, looking for his stories, listening in the wrong places...' she stops, eyeing Frances as if to gauge whether or not she has said too much.

Frances is nodding her head, slowly. 'That's exactly what Vee says...' Her voice tails off. She hasn't thought of Vee or her husband all afternoon. She should have found a way to call Lucas. She should have left him a note. Her flight would have arrived at Heathrow by now.

Somewhere through the trees, perhaps nearer the village, a bird screeches a warning.

'Vee is a magpie,' says Zoya.

'Magpies steal.'

'And this is what frightens you?

Frances blows a little soil out of Ivan's hair. Without his nappy he feels lighter, his bottom small and bony, like a bird's. In Frances's mind, her husband has re-solidified. His longing for something better is like a dead weight in his boots, pulling him under.

'I'm not frightened of Vee,' she says. 'But I should probably go back to Kiev.'

'Now?'

'Soon. After I've dipped Ivan's feet in the stream. His first paddle.'

'*Tak,*' murmurs Zoya, as Frances sets off down the hill. 'At first I did not like you. Now I do.'

## Chapter 25

Zoya has been driving for half an hour. Elena, sitting beside her with a bunch of cornflowers across her knees, snores gently, her chin bobbing against her chest. Olek is sleeping too, his head against the dusty window on the back seat next to Frances.

Frances's arms ache from holding Ivan; her left elbow is wedged between the seat and the door and the basket on her right is digging into her thigh. Elena actually managed to unearth some self-seeded carrots, thin and misshapen with feathery tops. Their smell is strong and earthy and her stomach rumbles. Boiled and mashed for Ivan or chopped into a soup... She could live on soup quite happily if she had to; a few onions, a little garlic, some potatoes. A pan on the stove, tipping scraps in – a pinch of pepper or some of Elena's homegrown herbs...

Ivan stirs, whimpering. His thigh, she notices, is marked with pinpricks of bright pink. Not ticks, though - ant bites. She licks a finger and dabs the raised skin.

'Oy!' mutters Zoya, pressing on the brake in her careful, measured way, though they haven't yet reached the city.

Frances peers over her shoulder. There's a vehicle about fifty yards in front but it isn't moving; instead it straddles the single-lane road. It is a silver car, sleek and foreign. It looks out of place in the birch woods.

'Is it an accident?' she asks, squinting as the late sunlight glances off the bonnet.

'Maybe they have run out of fuel,' says Zoya, slowing the car to a stop. She eases the handbrake upwards, turns off the ignition.

Frances hoists Ivan over her shoulder, wincing at the stabbing pins and needles in her hand. This car is blocking their path but she isn't nervous – not until a man steps out of the trees near the car and walks towards them. His hair is dark; he has sloping shoulders, a measured gait. She recognises him straight away.

'Mykola. What's he doing here?'

'Mykola?' repeats Zoya, turning her head a little as if she might have misheard. Olek opens an eye, yawns, pushes his knees into the seat in front so that they leave dents in the vinyl. Elena stirs also, muttering something as she wakes. She covers her eyes with one hand and gathers the cornflower stems with the other. The skin on her knuckles is stretched thin like tracing paper as she clutches the stalks. Frances remembers how she spat at the man who'd delivered Mykola's washing

machine. She remembers Mykola's warnings. There is unfinished business between these two, she thinks. Zoya will know what to say. All the same, her heart is racing. He should not be here.

Mykola is skirting round the Zhiguli's bonnet.

'Lock the door,' instructs Zoya but Ivan is in the way and Frances is too slow. It is already being opened.

Frances shuffles herself towards the middle of the car. 'Hello Mykola,' she offers, keeping her voice bright. 'Has your car broken down?' Zoya glares at her in the mirror.

Mykola peers in. He is wearing a white shirt, no jacket. His head is bare. 'Good afternoon Frances,' he says. He looks at Ivan before staring briefly at the other occupants. 'Please get out of the car.'

Frances doesn't move. 'Is there a problem?'

'Yes,' says Mykola.

'No,' says Zoya, though she doesn't look round. 'Stay where you are.'

Now there are two people telling Frances what to do. Zoya sounds strained, furious. Mykola, on the other hand, remains impassive, despite the fact that Ivan has woken up and is grunting softly, flexing his stubby legs.

'These are bad people,' he says, his dark eyes upon Frances. 'The boy, I know him. I have no problem with him, if he keeps his mouth shut. But your driver, and *her* – ' he pauses, raising his chin towards Elena, though his gaze doesn't shift. 'You must come back to Kiev with me.'

The car is silent. Outside there is light and air and insects buzz across the windscreen yet inside, even Ivan is quiet. Frances's head feels thick and stupid; she cannot think straight. Olek has turned back towards the window and is blowing soft clouds on the glass, while Elena just stares down at her lap, her grey hair sticking out and her shoulders hunched forward. She is still gripping the cornflowers, though their baby-blue heads are beginning to wilt.

'Zoya and Elena are my friends,' says Frances, carefully. 'You are upsetting them. I don't know what you want - I never have. Stop following me. Stop interfering.' She reaches out to shut the door, but Mykola holds the handle and isn't letting go.

'All right,' he says, his voice like a sigh. 'If you will not come with me, then I shall tell you about *her* because she is a mother, like you, yet also nothing like you.'

'No. What - ' Frances stops. Who is he talking about? Zoya once told her that Elena had no children. No one else reacts. She looks at Olek; his face is turned away but she catches the reflection of his eyes in the glass and though he is looking out towards the woods it is as if he holds her gaze, his pale eyes unreadable, unreachable.

The liar. She wants to slap him, and Zoya too. They think she's too stupid, or doesn't need to know. She wants to reach forward, press down on the accelerator and ram the car into the trees but of course she cannot do any of these things because Mykola has taken one of Ivan's chubby fists in his hand and he is stroking his finger across the sweet soft skin.

'You think that Kiev is a hard place; you pity us for what you imagine we have endured,' continues Mykola. 'The women, you believe they have seen too much and that is why they shout and scold when you appear with your fat healthy baby. Yet *she* is not part of this story of yours. *She* is outside all of that and I can see that you won't ask why because you are afraid. Well, a mother should never be afraid. You will hear what I have to say. You will hear what she has done.'

Frances wants Mykola to stop touching her son's hand. He has dropped his voice. Now it sounds as if he is telling a story.

'Once, there was a woman who had a baby. She was unmarried, but that is how it goes, sometimes. When the war came, she took up with a partisan who promised what he could not deliver. Then the fascists arrived. They pulled her lover out of the cellar where he hid and they marched him to a place outside the city to be shot. Well, the woman did not want to lose what she desired. So she pleaded with the soldiers to take her baby, to swap her baby for her lover. The guards laughed at her at first. Then they tossed her baby to her lover and while he held the infant they murdered him and he was the first to fall into the pit. The child was buried alive.'

When Mykola stops speaking, Elena is still staring into her lap. She cannot understand the words, of course, but her lips are pushed forward and Frances almost cries out as Elena's fingers twitch and she sees what the old woman is really gripping amongst the flowers. A knife - the small paring knife from the hut, sharp enough for slicing through thick, fatty sausage. Zoya sees it too and reaches across, covering it with her own hand. How did this happen, wonders Frances. An old woman holds a knife while a man touches her son and tells a story no one asked to hear? His words don't belong in Zoya's car and she buries them hastily, already grieving for what has been lost: the warmth by the stream, the picnic, the stroll up to the trees. What remains is impossible, unfathomable.

'This woman is a murderer,' says Mykola. 'I tell you this to keep you and your son safe.'

*Safe.*

No, not here.

'Go!' Frances forces the word into Zoya's ear as she tugs her son's hand away from Mykola's caress. Zoya needs no further encouragement. She twists the ignition key, revving the engine before ramming the gear stick into first. As she drops the handbrake the car lurches forward so that Ivan's head rocks back into Frances's chest and the knife clatters to the floor by Elena's feet. The door is hanging open, and Mykola stands back as Frances leans out to grab the handle. She yanks it shut as



the car skids across the pot holes, spitting up stones from its wheels. The silver saloon looms up ahead – Zoya doesn't slow down and instead spins the steering wheel to the left so they career across the verge, through the narrow gap between the car and the trees, crushing a sapling that seems to catch on the front bumper. When they finally regain the rutted concrete in a swirl of summer dust, Zoya is shouting and even Olek is leaning forward, urging her on.

Frances, staring back over her shoulder, glimpses Mykola's white shirt and dark hair on the other side of his car. He is standing still but his hand is raised, and while he might be swatting away a fly it looks like a parting gesture of some kind, one she doesn't understand, as the road dips and he disappears from view.

\*

The little Zhiguli shakes and rattles onto the dual carriageway. Zoya leans over the steering wheel, her head almost touching the windscreen; she doesn't slow down until they reach the outer suburbs. The car is making a dull thudding sound from the right side, towards the rear. She mutters under her breath, then brakes to a stop by the tramlines and leans over the back seat to open Olek's door.

'*Ubiraysya*,' says Zoya, to the boy. *Piss off.*

'*Nyet!*' intervenes Elena, the first word she has uttered since getting into the car. The two women start to gabble in Ukrainian. Zoya shakes off the old woman's hand.

'Stop arguing,' pleads Frances. 'Mykola might be following us! Why did he say those things? Tell me what's going on!'

'I am not moving until that boy gets out!' shouts Zoya. 'He is spying on us!' She slumps down in her seat, the anger suddenly gone out of her. 'Elena still protects him. She says if I abandon him, I abandon her, too...' Her hands fumble with her cigarettes. She lights one and sucks hard, her eyes flicking to Frances in the rear view mirror as if she can't make up her mind what to say next. Sweat glistens in the creases above her nose and when she speaks again, her voice is low, hoarse. 'You know what I discovered when I tried to find out about that gangster? He looks at my hospital files, at my grandfather's files. He pays the doctors, he pays the typists, the officials, the boys like Olek, then he calls me at my home and says I must be punished.'

'Why? What for?' Frances looks at Olek who is scratching his hip, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. Stop it, she thinks, but he doesn't.

'Abortions!' says Zoya. 'Two – three – why not more? It is not a crime, the state allows, and why would I want a child to be born who was made in our poisonous air? But my grandfather – well, I tell

you that Mykola of yours is a liar, a disease. He says I am the one who killed him - my own grandfather! With black market morphine. He thinks he is a god – the one who decides, the one who passes sentence but is he the one nursing his *dedushka* who shrieks with pain in the night and shits himself in the only bed while his neighbours' children grow sick with cancer of the thyroid or cancer of the blood? Why does he think he must protect you – *you* - who does not know a single thing? Do not believe him, Frances. He wants to control you.'

Frances cradles Ivan close to her chest. He is starting to cry, upset by the distraught voices, the car that isn't moving. She wants to get him home, to feed him and bathe him and rock him to sleep and then count her pages, except that she has buried her book amongst the tree roots in the woods...

'He is not my Mykola,' she murmurs. 'He can't control me. Please, let's go.'

Olek shifts in his seat, his bare legs making a sticking sound against the plastic. 'You can not go,' he says, to Frances. 'There is broken tyre.' He shrugs. 'Maybe Zoya want to wait for Mykola to fix it?'

His provocation galvanises Zoya, who jumps out of the car, reaches in to the back seat and hauls the boy out onto the sticky tarmac by his t-shirt. While he sits there, pulling faces, complaining, she inspects the rear tyre, then thumps her fist on the roof.

'Out! Out!' she shouts, waving her arm at Elena and Frances. '*Bystro!* I cannot change the wheel while you sit there.'

Frances struggles out of the car with Ivan on her hip. He is grizzling now, leaning backwards and she almost loses her balance. She can feel the heat from the road on her legs as she reaches into her bag for her son's hat. The tram stop is no more than a sign – there is no shelter, no tree, just a long, etiolated shadow cast by the concrete post. Zoya is muttering, rummaging in the boot for the jack and the wrench and the spare wheel as lorries behind her thunder past, creating blasts of dry wind. Elena, however, isn't moving. The flowers and the knife still lie on the floor but she stares straight ahead, through the dusty windscreen as if she is in shock.

'Elena - ' cajoles Frances, opening her door for her. She touches the old woman's arm, and is taken aback by the feel of bone beneath the skin. No muscle, no fat. Mykola said she'd had a lover and a baby - that she watched them both die - or worse. Mykola was speaking in English so Elena can't have understood him, yet Frances sees he has eviscerated her, nevertheless. He has reached in and trailed her insides across the concrete, intimate, vulnerable, stinking.

Zoya stops what she is doing and leans in through the driver's door to murmur something to Elena. 'Come here,' she says to Frances, as Elena slowly swings out one leg and holds onto the door frame, refusing Frances's hand. 'Elena must hold the baby. You and Olek must help me take off the wheel.'

Indeed, fixing it requires them all to work together. Frances hesitates for a moment before handing Ivan to Elena, who hovers back from the verge, holding the child stiffly, not looking at him as if she doesn't know him or is afraid to rest her eyes on him, instead peering off to the left in the direction of the village from which they have come while Zoya jacks up the car, positions the wrench and Olek steps onto its jutting arm, gripping Frances's shoulder for support, jiggling up and down until the nuts loosen so that Zoya can prise off the wheel and bolt on the spare.

By the time the damaged wheel has been stowed in the boot, all four of them are done in.

Zoya returns them to Staronavodnitska Street, driving carefully, saying nothing, checking her rear view mirror without moving her head. The sun has dipped behind the apartment block and the car park is gloomy in the shade. Olek slips out before Zoya has turned off the engine and disappears behind the dump bins in the direction of the waste ground. Elena moves more slowly, pulling her cardigan around her before hobbling towards the steps.

Frances hauls her suitcase out of the boot, too tired to do anything except drop it onto the tarmac. Nevertheless, she is reluctant to leave Zoya without some sort of reckoning.

'I am sorry...' She stops, seeing Zoya's scowl.

'*Sorry?* For what? This isn't your business. I have already told you so.' Zoya hooks out the pushchair and shuts the rear passenger door. 'You are a good mother, Frances. Believe this, look after your little boy, but stay away from Elena, yes? Or Mykola will hurt her.'

Frances sucks in a breath, remembering the knife and the way Elena gripped it. 'Why? Why would he do that?'

'Because he wants to control everything! I will stay with her tonight. What she did in the past, we don't know. You understand that, don't you? She cares for Ivan, and she cares for Olek too, though I cannot think why when that little shit betrays her. Now, go upstairs. Find Lucas.'

It sounds so simple, when Zoya dismisses her this way. No mother, Frances reasons, would weigh up a lover's value over that of her child. Mykola is telling lies. He is too young – he was born after the war so he couldn't know what happened. None of them know what torments Elena suffered. The war was a different time. A terrifying time. Frances tells herself she has no right to judge.

And yet, as Frances lugs her case and Ivan's pushchair up the steps, as she waits for the lift, as she puts her key in the door of their apartment, she counts the floors, counts the walls, and though she has buried her book, she comforts herself with the fact that its pages are filed like an insurance policy in her head.

\*

Lucas doesn't yell, or make a fuss, or even get up when Frances parks their sleeping son's pushchair in the hallway. She finds him sprawled on the floor in the bedroom, curtains pulled against the early evening sun. He is lying on his side, blowing smoke rings under the bed, with the half-empty bottle of Vee's Christmas Stolichnaya near his ear.

'You didn't go then,' he says, tipping his head back to see her. 'I called your mum. She said you hadn't told her you were coming, so I phoned the airline and they said they couldn't tell me whether you had checked in.'

'I went to the country with Zoya.' Frances looks at her husband, at his half-closed eyes and supine limbs stretched out on the parquet at her feet. He is blocking her path to the wardrobe. She wants to tell him to move, to stop smoking; she wants to feel his anger towards her for not catching her flight, yet his torpor makes her hesitate. Something has happened. She moves silently to the kitchen to prepare Ivan's milk.

As the water coughs, then spurts from the tap into the kettle, she hears Lucas kick the wardrobe door.

'Frannie,' he calls, his voice thin and hoarse. 'Frannie!'

'I'm here,' she says, turning off the tap.

'The film has been cancelled. Lukyanenko announced it this morning, then set fire to the master reel on the steps of the House of Artists. There won't be a premiere, or any distribution. Nothing at all.'

Frances leaves the kettle in the sink. She wasn't expecting this. She steps back to the bedroom and stands in the doorway.

'Why?'

'Some politician said it was incendiary, an incitement, so no licences, then the backers started pulling out. Vee knew it was going down the pan but she fucking lied to me. She's just published a piece in *The Washington Post*. She must have been working on it for a week or two at least. Maybe longer. Maybe from the start.' Lucas's voice rises like a child. 'She's gone for the corruption angle. She even mentions me: "A naive English freelancer", like she's writing my epitaph...'

'Lucas...'

'She played me,' he says, groaning and rolling onto his back. 'Lukyanenko must have known. I can't stay here now. I can't work here. I need to get out. This place has been a disaster. I've not made any money, I've got no credentials, I'm sleeping on the sofa...' He twists his head to look up at her but he is facing the wrong way and Frances realises it must seem as if she is towering over him.

'Shh,' she says, stooping to pick up the vodka bottle. Lucas flails, grasps her wrist. His eyes struggle to focus, he stinks of cigarettes and alcohol and she recoils a little, yet he doesn't let go.

Hold on then, she wills him. Hold on. He is hiding nothing from her, though the day has been full of betrayal: Vee, but also Olek, Mykola, not to mention that terrible revelation about Elena. Zoya has always insisted that Frances and Lucas don't belong in this city, with these people. Lucas, on the other hand, knew Frances before she became a mother. He had loved her when she was still a girl.

'Shhh,' she whispers, softer now. There is a kind of release in solace, in the comfort of the familiar, even if that comfort is more like the caress by a mother of her child. Lucas is willing, and soon he is eager. She is cautious at first, but then she unzips his trousers and holds him in her hand and she knows she could do anything at this moment - anything – and he would acquiesce. When she moves down to brush her lips against his skin, faces appear: Mykola in his white shirt, staring through the rear window; Zoya at the edge of the birch trees, watching her when she doesn't think Frances can see her; Elena, Olek, her mother, even Lucas, until finally she blinks away these spectres, blocks her ears to their voices and, for a few charged seconds, has no memory at all.

## Chapter 26

The first time Frances kissed a boy, she felt the strangeness within her – her lips felt different, her tongue was not her own. She was changed by it, she thought. It wasn't like kissing a doll, or the mirror, or the back of her hand, even when she'd licked it. The first time she slept with Lucas, she felt different again. His stubble chafed her skin and he made her insides burn.

How many times can that happen, Frances wonders. Once, or twice, or hundreds and thousands of times? You feel something, you remember the feeling and it becomes a story. Yet the story changes; all the time, it changes. The end, as it approaches, is never really the end.

\*

Once Lucas is sober, once the wound of Vee's betrayal is found not to be fatal, he tells Frances it makes sense to see out the year's rental on the apartment. It takes him a few days to recover his equilibrium, but money must be earned, there are news bulletins to file, political in-fighting to comment on and a spike in interest from British news desks about a burgeoning doomsday cult that is rumoured to be brainwashing children in the oblasts south of Kiev. Enough to keep a freelance journalist busy through the dog days of July and August.

Zoya no longer translates for Lucas, though she still drives them occasionally, when the mood takes her, when she's not working on her own stories or poking at the margins of Mykola Sirko's business affairs, trying to find a weak link or a disgruntled official who might slip her a lead. At night Zoya stays with Elena, in the flat on the second floor, though Frances rarely sees the old caretaker anymore. Indeed, Frances concludes that Elena is avoiding her. The thought troubles her as she does her laundry in the basement by herself, though she doesn't go looking for her. No more *Simplemente Maria*, no more biscuits or extravagantly mimed enquiries about whether Ivan is eating properly, sleeping well. Of course, she would ask Elena in if she came knocking on the door. Elena doesn't.

Lucas notices a change in his wife. When he brings up the subject of what they will do when they go back to London, she doesn't give him the cold shoulder but talks of playgroups and getting in touch with a couple of estate agents. He can barely recall the girl he once knew, or what he once saw inside her – something hidden that stirred him and made him wonder. Motherhood has

changed her, he decides. She seems more practical now that the difficult post-birth months are over. She tries new recipes – cooks proper meals rather than chewy pasta added to whatever she can find at the market. She visits Suzie to drink coffee and hear the latest about the house along the lane in the Tsar’s Village, including how Rob wants to buy it outright from Elena before the refurbishment is complete.

At the end of July, Lucas suggests they fly down to Yalta for a weekend. To the seaside, as he puts it - their first holiday as a family. It is easy to arrange. They stay in a sanatorium built for communist party chiefs. White-uniformed staff trained in balneotherapy and calisthenics feed Ivan soupy *kasha* flavoured with cherries and guide his limbs into geometrical shapes beneath the modernist chandeliers. The sea reminds Lucas of Brighton, while the tunnel down to the beach is like a set-piece from *Dr No*. One night he and Frances make love on the unforgiving mattress of the big walnut bed, and if his wife keeps her eyes closed then surely this is because she is taking pleasure for herself and he can give her that, he thinks. They can work on that. He pushes Vee out of his mind - it isn’t hard, now that she’s been offered a job in DC and has flown over for a look-see. Despite his setbacks, he feels lighter, more optimistic. He has applied for a job in Alma-Ata. Another starter post, but this one comes with a house. He won’t tell Frances just yet. The interview is at Bush House on the fifth of September. They’ll leave for London three days before.

When Lucas wades into the Black Sea with Ivan, Frances picks up a pebble, smooth and grey, a souvenir for their son to remind him where he’s been.

‘Take a photograph!’ he shouts, exultant as he dips Ivan’s legs into the lapping waves.

Frances clicks the shutter on her little instamatic. She won’t tell her husband that she has already blessed their son’s feet in the stream at Zoya’s grandfather’s hut. She lets the foam splash over her bare toes, and scrunches them into the shingle.

\*

Back at the apartment block on Staronavodnitksa Street, Elena steps out of the lift. The doors clank shut behind her as she shuffles across the thirteenth floor landing, one hand gripping a brown Jiffy envelope, the other hand fumbling in her pocket. Her joints are stiff this evening. Her fingers won’t respond as they should, but she manages to grasp the key and push it into the lock.

As the door swings open, she pauses, catching her breath. Light from the living room window floods the passageway and she feels its warmth on her face. No one is at home – she knows this, she should have made this journey sooner but she couldn’t face the young mother, Frances. She couldn’t face her own shame.

She slips off her shoes before making her way along to the bedroom. The curtains are drawn; there is no air in the flat but she isn't staying long. A light brown cockroach flees beneath the wardrobe as she bends down, wincing, and rolls the drawer out from beneath the bed. The padded envelope looks out of place amongst the nappies. It can't be helped. The drawer is the only place where the husband of Frances won't rummage.

As Elena leaves the flat, closing the door firmly behind her, a shadow passes in front of the window by the rubbish chute and blocks out the light. She peers, and her heart flinches. A man stands in front of her. She knows this man, or thinks she does. This is the gangster who drives the silver car, the man who has threatened her, the man she would have stabbed if she could on the way back from Zoya's hut.

*'Zdravstvuyte, Mama.'*

Finally, everything she has hidden, everything she has buried she now sees in those dark eyes.

*'Aleksandr...'*

She has dreamed of her son every night for forty years. Her shoulders drop. She breathes out. She waits.

\*

When Frances was ten, her parents took her to Poppit Sands, at the mouth of the Teifi Estuary. Not for a holiday or anything – just the afternoon. Her mother packed Shippam's beef paste sandwiches and a thermos of tea which she stowed in a string bag along with Frances' vest and knickers rolled up in an old bath towel. Frances' father drove; it wasn't sunny, exactly, but watery shafts of light pointed down towards the bay like God's fingers, and the beach swept round in a picture postcard curve, so that was all right.

The nearer you got to the water, the greyer it became. Frances faced the sand dunes and inched in backwards. The wind whipped up the spray and she screamed when a wave crashed without warning across her shoulders. She could see her mother, sitting on her coat, watching her, lips pursed against the salt. Her father was busy in the hollows behind her. She could only make out his top half, but she knew he was wriggling into his trunks in that special way beneath the towel.

Frances' father dived clumsily through the surf. He wanted to teach her backstroke but his touch was unfamiliar and she didn't like the way the waves broke over her face, so after a few minutes he left her to jump through the waves on her own. The water lifted her, pounded her, pushed her off her feet. She stayed in the sea for longer than was good for her. Her legs became numb. Her fingers turned blue. At lunchtime she ate her sandwich with chattering teeth.



Later, while her mother thumbed through her copy of *Good Housekeeping* and batted away the sandhoppers, Frances followed her father up into the dunes. He hadn't changed out of his swimming trunks and wore an aertex shirt that barely covered his thin haunches. His collar flopped open and his wet hair flopped down, which made him look different, like someone else's dad. He seemed different, too. He pointed and named things, he squatted and peered. She tried not to think about the bald patches on the bulge of his white calves, and instead placed her feet in the hollows and landslides left by his salt-marked sandals.

Then, in a muffled incline, downwind of the beach, Frances' father turned and said 'Let's make a fire.' When he stooped to pick up a curved rib of driftwood and produced a box of matches from his breast pocket, she felt a tingle low down in her stomach. The smoke made her cough, the crackle of the dried marram grass made her jump but soon she was running about, searching for anything that would burn and feed the flames.

When Frances' mother discovered them, she put an end to the nascent conspiracy. Frances was marched to a public toilet to shake the sand out of her knickers while her father kicked over the embers and jangled his keys. In the car park, her feet were checked for tar. They didn't stop for ice creams; the traffic into Cardigan was already building.

Now, though, Frances remembers. She remembers the way her father lay down in the sand, frowning with concentration as he cupped his hands, then grinning at her as the fire took hold, his body shielding it from the wind's worst excesses. She remembers the way the flames licked and leaned, and the way she'd placed her forehead against the window on the way home to cool her windburnt skin.

Six months later, Frances's father was gone. This didn't surprise her. At Poppit Sands she'd learned that people could be more than one thing.

\*

On their last morning in Yalta, while Frances and Lucas eat breakfast in the sanatorium's cavernous circular restaurant, Lucas is asked to take a call at the central reception desk.

It is Zoya.

'Elena is dead,' she says down the crackling, popping line. 'Please tell Frances. This morning. Olek found her.'

'Christ,' says Lucas. Then, 'What happened?' He readjusts his voice, aware that the young woman behind the desk is listening. Zoya, he thinks, might have waited until they got back to Kiev.

'A leak of some type in the apartment building. Down in the basement.'

'Was it gas?'

'It would seem so. The police have been in.'

'Christ.'

'Please tell Frances. She will want to know.'

'Sure – of course.'

It is only when Lucas has replaced the receiver that he thinks of all the things he should have said, like how sorry he is, and will the apartment block be safe, and who the hell is Olek.

\*

'That was Zoya,' says Lucas, when he rejoins Frances at their table. 'Some bad news, I'm afraid.' He frowns, unsure how his wife will react. 'The old *dezhornaya* – Elena - has died.'

Frances turns her head and looks out of the window, down past the tops of the ornamental yuccas and the oleander bushes of the formal courtyard gardens to the white marble paving below.

'Frances?'

'How did it happen?' She turns her head back to her husband, her thoughts separating, re-grouping. 'Where was she found?'

'Basement,' says Lucas. 'Do you think she did it herself? Someone called Olek discovered her.' He checks his watch. 'It's shocking news – I'm sorry. I know you'd become fond of her. Did she have any relatives?'

'I don't know,' replies Frances, her voice far off, like an echo. Then she changes her mind. 'I heard she had a baby, but she lost it.'

\*

When Frances and Lucas return to Staronavodnitska Street there is nothing to show that a death has occurred. The basement door is shut, as is the door to the flat where Elena had been staying. All that time, thinks Frances, when she'd been so fearful of a fall or a push or a chance letting go from the balcony on the thirteenth floor. Elena had shown her how foolish she'd been. Perhaps Elena had always known the threat came from somewhere else.

She doesn't find the package until the evening, as she puts Ivan to bed. It is tucked in the drawer between the nappies - a brown padded Jiffy bag, addressed to her in her mother's insistent scrawl. When she peers inside she finds a small pot of face cream. The silver lid gleams as she takes it out. Her mother has sent her a jar of Visibly Different. She sits down on the bed, rubs her thumb across

the raised EA for Elizabeth Arden, and twists off the lid. It has been opened already; the surface bears the mark of someone else's finger but it doesn't matter now as the scent of her mother's skin rises until once again Frances is an eight year old girl, standing in the bathroom doorway of the bungalow, watching her mother dab small dots along her cheekbones, pulling at the slack folds beneath her jawline, her lips drawn tight to keep the cream out of her mouth, those fierce eyes in the mirror, angry with ageing, with her daughter, with herself.

Frances puts the jar down and studies the package's postmark – 5<sup>th</sup> December. Her mother sent it in time for Christmas. There is no card to accompany the gift, nothing for Ivan or Lucas. While the three of them have been in Yalta it has arrived here amongst the nappies.

'Only for grown-ups,' Frances's mother had scolded her.

Elena had a key. Lucas gave her a spare when Frances was ill.

Truth flashes and shimmers like a fish in the reeds. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you may grasp it.

\*

'Mum,' says Frances, when her mother answers the telephone.

'Frances – is that you?'

Frances catches the notes of an advert's upbeat jingle before her mother turns off the television.

'Yes Mum. It's Frances. I'm coming home. On the third of September.'

'I see. Right.' A pause. 'I'll have to make up the spare room...' Her mother's voice wavers with questions.

'I got the face cream, Mum. It was delayed – in the post. But I've got it now.'

The line pops softly like a bronchial chest.

'Well, it was meant for Christmas. The cold weather never did your skin any favours.'

'Thanks Mum.'

Frances, pressing the receiver to her ear, waits, and at last she hears the sigh that is not an ending, though it is a release.

'I'll make the bed up. And the cot. For Ivan. I can put him in your old cot.'

\*

The next day, Frances carries Ivan downstairs on her hip and goes outside in search of Olek. She can't find him at first, but eventually she spots him squatting in the long grass near the fence by the

military academy. He is red-eyed, still dressed in the football shorts and grubby plastic gym slides he'd been wearing the last time she saw him. He doesn't move when she approaches.

'You found Elena in the basement,' she says, at a loss for a better way to begin.

Olek looks down. He is scratching in the dirt with his finger.

'That must have been awful for you,' she adds.

Silence.

'Can you tell me what happened?' Ivan wriggles in Frances's arms. She bends down and sits him by her feet. 'Olek?'

Now she sees that Olek's shoulders are heaving. He makes a high-pitched sound through clenched lips, he buries his head between his knees and she winces at the inflamed patch of eczema that flowers up from the waistband of his shorts. His distress is so pitiful, so raw, that Frances knows she ought to put her arms around him, this troubled child, who has no one to comfort him.

'Where is your... uncle?' she asks. 'That man you live with?' She steps forward, her hand out, and rests her fingers lightly on his wrist.

'Not uncle,' he mutters, pulling back his hand and wiping the snot from his nostrils. 'You not my mum. Go leave. I don't know why Mykola think you special.'

'What?' Frances has been worrying about how to raise the subject of Mykola. She isn't expecting Olek to do it first. 'You shouldn't talk to that man.'

Olek rubs his nose across his thigh. 'Elena, she give me money, then Mykola, he give me more. But I tell you, Elena is better.' He sobs silently for a few seconds. 'She say you not special.'

Frances squats down next to her son. Olek's words are muffled, difficult to hear, though she feels them like a stone thrown at her face. All the same, she knows what she must ask.

'Olek, tell me, does Mykola know Elena has died? Was he there when it happened?'

'You not my mum. Go your mum. Go away.'

Ivan, sensing an opportunity, starts to crawl through the grass towards the boy who has curled up like a woodlouse. There is dog mess everywhere, so Frances leans forward and scoops up her son. Ivan arches his back, not wanting to be held. Frances must rise to her feet if she is to keep her balance. She wills Olek to look at her but he won't move his head because there is a river between them, one she has never attempted to cross until now, when perhaps it is too late. After a minute of standing there amongst the weeds, her son struggling, starting to wail, she turns and retreats across the waste ground, into the shadow of the building and back up to the apartment.

When she peers out of the kitchen window, she thinks she can see him, a dot by the chain-link fence.

An hour later, he is gone.

\*

'You have been sitting in the sun,' says Zoya, scrutinising Frances across the little table in the café along Lesi Ukrainsky where they meet. 'You should wear a hat, like Ivan. You will have brown spots. Skin cancer.'

Frances rubs her nose and fishes the camomile teabag out of her waxed paper cup. Ivan is sitting on her lap, testing his teeth on the cap of the plastic bottle of mineral water he is clutching. She called Zoya to see her one last time on her own – to say goodbye - but of course there is so much that remains unspoken. 'I like your sunglasses,' she says. 'Very Marilyn Monroe.'

Zoya, poker-faced, touches the shades perched on top of her head.

'So, will you stay with Lucas, or divorce? I think you will divorce.'

'Zoya!' Frances tries to sound outraged, but what comes out is an uneasy laugh. 'Don't you ever hold back? Bite your tongue?'

'Yes of course,' says Zoya. 'More than you know.'

Frances sips her tea. It tastes of sticks. 'Well, you don't know everything. I can't think about the future in Kiev. I need to go home - let things settle. Then we will see.'

Zoya snorts. 'Oh yes. You will see. Already you know what you will see.'

'He needs me, I think. He wants to make plans. I never expected - '

'He needs you to know when to go.'

Frances wonders if anyone else in the café can hear them. She glances around, but the café is nearly empty apart from a young woman sitting by herself at a table near the door, her arms folded, legs crossed, one foot pushing against the base of the table as if she has been waiting just a little too long. Frances lowers her voice. 'Well I didn't come to talk about Lucas and me. I want to ask you something. Will you keep an eye on Olek? Look out for him I mean.'

Now Zoya leans back and stares out of the window. 'That boy? He knows how to look out for himself, don't you think?'

Frances follows her gaze, half expecting to see Olek peering in from the pavement. Instead she sees a kvas truck with one wheel stuck in a pothole. It is blocking a lorry that is trying to turn left across the boulevard. A horn blares, but the kvas truck won't shift. Cars are backing up. 'Elena really cared about him,' she says. 'And he cared about her. He's just a child. I should have helped him –'

'So!' Zoya taps her packet of cigarettes on the table for emphasis. 'You feel guilty. Well, I don't. Olek betrayed Elena. He will do anything for five dollars, or ten. He spied for Mykola Sirko, and,' she barely hesitates, 'I will tell you something, now - something you need to know. Of course Mykola was telling a lie when he told us what Elena had done – a very big lie. She was not a mother when

the Germans invaded. But later she did have a son – Aleksandr - born in 1952. She couldn't keep him - the father was a local Party boss who caused a problem for the high-ups in Moscow. Well, he was removed. Shot on the street one day not far from here. I expect Elena thought she would be next. Her family did not survive the famine and she had no one else. So Aleksandr grew up in a home for children whose parents are dead - '

'An orphanage...' Frances blinks, as if blinking might help her absorb what she is hearing.

'An orphanage - across the river. They gave him a new name.'

'Mykola Sirko...'

'And when he was a young man Mykola tracked his mother down – he must have paid a bribe for the information, or blackmailed – but he never told her who he was and instead he taunted her, leaving cruel messages, renting empty flats for his businesses right under her nose. Then you moved in to the apartment block. Well, Elena did not know what he was saying when he stopped us in the car, but I think he told you that lie to make you hate her.

'She didn't guess who he was?'

'I don't think so. He was registered at the orphanage when he was six weeks old.'

'That's terrible.' Frances whispers the words. 'Do – do you think she killed herself?'

Zoya shrugs.

Frances presses her free hand across her eyes, shutting off the tears that are forming beneath her lids. Elena's child did not die in those Nazi murder pits on the edge of the city, in a time of monsters, once upon a time.

She gave away her son so that he could live.

'How did you find out?'

'Elena told me she had a child,' says Zoya. 'One afternoon while we were folding sheets. So I started looking. It was difficult, but I know who to ask. And this man was following her. I made the connection that Elena could not. He left horrible things on her doorstep. He tied dogs together to make them bark all night, or paid Olek to do it for him.

'Olek?'

'Stop repeating. Of course Olek. He does anything for money. He is spy!' Zoya makes a sour face. 'Well, I have Elena's rent money, she left it in a box under her bed, five thousand dollars, and you know what I am going to do with it? I am going to buy a lawyer who will dig up the crimes that Mykola Sirko has done. He does not deserve your pity, you understand?'

'Shh, Zoya, please...' Frances sees a baby in her mind's eye, falling, falling. Maybe it is Mykola, or maybe another. She blinks. 'It is Olek I wanted to talk to you about. Look after him. Elena loved him, like a grandson. We can't abandon him.'

Now there is a grim glint of triumph in Zoya's eye. 'You can.'

Frances's heart is thumping. She fights back the urge to count the cars, count the passers-by. In three days she will be on a plane. In four days she will visit her own mother, the same daughter, though this time with different knowledge inside her. She takes a breath. 'Sometimes you say I have no business being here; then you say I am wrong to leave. Well, I didn't ask for things to happen, but there are consequences, they pile up even when I do nothing. And if I ask for your help, that's something, isn't it? It's not everything. I am leaving. But it's something.'

Zoya turns her head and looks out of the window. She is frowning, as usual, and in the glare of sunlight Frances sees a woman who might be thirty, or fifty, with dark roots showing through her bleached yellow hair.

'I won't give him Elena's money,' says Zoya.

'That's not what I meant - '

'So you might as well know. Olek is already sleeping at my flat. In my grandfather's bed. He tells me it smells of piss. Ha! I tell him it is better than the other.'

## Chapter 27

The day before Lucas and Frances are due to leave Kiev, Frances goes for a walk. It is the first day of September, a Sunday. The summer has been hot and dry since the early rain in June; already the horse chestnut leaves are starting to curl at the edges. There is a tang in the air, almost acidic - a whisper of coolness. Ivan doesn't want to be in the pushchair, but it is after lunch and he will sleep soon – precious time she ought to use for packing. She isn't ready to leave though. Not until she has taken one last stroll. The pavements and footpaths are woven through her now, their circuitous routes bound to her nerve-endings.

At one of the new craft stalls outside the monastery, Frances pauses. The table is laden with wooden toys, some brightly painted and varnished, gleaming in the afternoon sunshine, while others are plain, cheaper, the do-it-yourself variety of stacking dolls – one for papa, one for mama, one for baby, two or three. She is tempted by a bell-shaped figure with intricate gold and blue patterns on its skirt that tinkles when she lifts it.

Ivan reaches forward, his sunhat tipping back from his head as he strains at the belt of his pushchair. His clothes are summer thin and he isn't wearing shoes so the woman behind the table scowls disapprovingly but Frances doesn't care. She asks the price of the toy, counts out the right money and pops it into her bag, a souvenir for her son who is too young to remember their walks, the things they've seen. It will help keep him entertained on the plane.

She turns the corner and heads along Lavrska Street, towards the top end of Tsarskoye Selo.

\*

Mykola crosses himself three times as he emerges from the little church in the Lower Lavra and exits the monastery via a gate in the wall. His car is parked near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – he prefers to approach and leave the monastery on foot, to spend a few minutes alone to consider his petitions to Our Lady of the Dormition. His bodyguard, loitering in the trees, flicks away his cigarette when he sees him, and Mykola tries not to show his irritation as he climbs the steps at the edge of the park. The practicalities are distasteful to him, but security has become a necessary evil. These days, paying the hospital bills of the local police chief's daughter won't keep rats in their drains and someone has opened a file on him down at the Justice Ministry.



Today he has business to attend to, an appointment in town. Lavrska Street at the top of the hill is full of trucks and trolley buses and it takes him a few seconds to adjust to the traffic, though he doesn't resent the pollution or the sense of organised chaos that is always good for cash-flow, for progress.

Then, just as his bodyguard opens the door of his Lexus, he notices a woman with a pushchair on the opposite side of the street.

He gestures to his man to wait for him at the car and walks south-east, in the direction of the river.

\*

As soon as Frances turns into Panfilovstiv Street, Ivan starts wailing. He wants to walk, his new obsession, but he likes to touch everything and there is broken glass amongst the weeds along the fences.

'Let's go to Elena's house,' she murmurs, unwilling to return to the apartment just yet, and as she pushes her son down the rutted lane that dwindles between the cottages, as the noise from the main road fades and the stones beneath the buggy's wheels crunch and pop, he sits up. Eyes wide, he grips the sides of his buggy like an infant prince to whom all things – the insects, the overhanging branches, the weeds in the potholes before him – are both fascinating and unworthy.

The house, when they stop in front of it, is no longer a ramshackle cottage, of course. A triple-glazed veranda runs along the front, with white wicker furniture just visible beyond the toughened glass. The path to the front door is paved with some kind of marble, and security lights stare, blankly, from their steel mountings beneath the eaves. To the right sits a brand-new garage, door open, empty, a dark maw. Beyond it, Frances can see the tiled roof of the sauna. The workmen haven't quite finished yet; their tools and some bags of sand or cement lie beneath a tarpaulin.

The house itself is quiet. Deserted, even. The upstairs shutters are closed. If Suzie were here, Frances would be embarrassed to be found outside, uninvited, but the stillness convinces her that no one is home. Turning left, she pushes Ivan slowly alongside the old blue-painted picket fence that marks out the property's perimeter. The fence seems out of place now. Frances recalls talk of a wall or something more secure, more private. She peers at the once-neat vegetable beds, already a tangle of bolting carrots and leeks, and wonders when these, too, will be concreted over.

Her gaze shifts towards the five or six fruit trees that huddle a few yards away in the lower part of the garden.

‘Pears!’ she says, unbuckling Ivan, lifting him up to her hip. Each piece hangs from its branch like a gift, yellow and speckled, the result of careful pruning and thinning out, now waiting to be plucked and gorged fresh from the tree or steamed, preserved or pickled. ‘Apa!’ repeats her son, kicking his legs and beaming. All that hoeing and weeding, all those pots on the windowsill, those tiny black seeds. Elena would laugh at Ivan shouting at her fruit, but she never wasted food. She would want him to eat some.

A pear drops to the ground with a soft thump. Wasps bob and dip around the disturbance; the long, thin grass in the shade beneath the trees is littered with windfalls. Some of them are rotting already, the skin covered in brown circles and bruises, puckered and concave with a dusting of velvety spores. Others look perfect, almost as if a careful hand has placed them there. They won’t last long. The worms and the ants are already advancing.

Frances hoists Ivan into the air and sets him down on the other side of the fence. Then, hitching up her gathered denim skirt and holding on to a post, she stands on the seat of the pushchair and swings a leg over. The seat slips from under her and she scrapes the inside of her knee before landing awkwardly next to Ivan. Now the pushchair lies on its side a few feet beyond the fence, one wheel slowly spinning. As she frowns, something moves in the lane to her right but it’s nothing, just a cat, so she turns away and ducks beneath the branches of the nearest tree.

The first two windfalls she slips into the pockets of her skirt. Their warm weight bumps against her thighs, yet the urge to take more is too great and with no bag to hand, Frances tugs off her old cardigan and spreads it on the ground. Soon, she has collected a small pile. The scent from the fruit is heady – not sharp and cidery, but dense and honeyish. Insects crawl over her hands – ants, mainly, and the odd wasp though they don’t sting. When she shakes them off they swoop drunkenly or lie on their backs in the grass, waving their antenna. She glances towards her son who has grasped a fence post with one hand and is tugging at plantain heads with the other. She won’t give him a pear until they get back to the flat. The wasps will go straight for the sugar.

It is hot work, gathering fruit. As Frances ties the arms of her cardigan into a bundle she thinks she hears a noise behind her so she steps out from beneath the trees and looks up towards the house.

Nothing.

No, something.

A yelp to her right – a child’s shriek of protest. Frances turns to see a figure straightening up on the other side of the fence. A man in a suit, grasping Ivan beneath the armpits. Bare legs dangle in the sunshine. Mykola Sirko is taking her son.

‘What are you doing?’ she asks, bewildered. ‘Give him to me.’

Mykola regards her with his dark, sad eyes. ‘You should not be here.’

A cry catches in Frances's throat. She has dreamt about this man, she has looked for his face on a crowded street, she has recoiled from his accusations and his horrible inferences but she has never believed that he might harm her son. Ivan isn't crying, though she sees how Mykola clutches him. He doesn't know how to hold a child.

'Give him to me,' she repeats, her own voice strained and unfamiliar. Ivan stops wriggling and stares at her, seeking clues. She steps towards the fence without taking her eyes off her son. *Stay calm*, she tells herself. *Don't frighten him*.

Mykola moves backwards, keeping two arms' lengths between them. He leans sideways and grasps the overturned pushchair with his spare hand, setting it upright.

'Be careful. There are wasps.' His voice is low, soft. He looks at Ivan, as if wondering what to do with him.

'Mykola - ' He seems different to the man she last saw on the road in the birch woods. Less steady on his feet. Her ribs press against the pickets. 'Ivan's thirsty. And hungry. I need to take him home.'

Mykola inclines his head. 'Of course. But I cannot let you feed him anything the old whore has grown. You must leave the fruit.'

*The old whore*. Frances's heart is pounding. Her child is wearing the little socks with the hens – the ones Elena bought him. She wants to feel his hot damp feet in her palms. She is breathless with the pull of him, the longing to draw him close. She remembers the cardigan she is gripping in her hand and drops it to the ground. Pears spill and tumble across the grass.

'I won't take them. I don't want them.'

Mykola doesn't react.

'Elena was kind to me,' she goes on, rushing her words. 'Whatever she did before – I know she regretted it. She helped me. She must have been desperate to give you up. She must have thought she was keeping you safe - giving you the best chance.'

Mykola raises his free hand and rubs at the skin between his eyebrows. 'Frances,' he murmurs, his gaze switching to the house, 'your friends have told you some things. The past, you should know, holds many stories. I told you one myself. Nevertheless, a mother should never break her bond with her child.'

Ivan keeps twisting his head. A wasp buzzes near his shoulder.

'You're right,' says Frances, willing it to stay away from her son. 'But when you have no choice, like Elena - '

'No!' Mykola's voice rises at the end of the word as if he is instructing a child. 'She had a choice. Elena Vasilyevna's lover, my father, worked for the Kiev Regional Committee. His barren wife

wanted a baby, so Elena agreed to exchange me for this.’ He waves towards the house, then the fruit trees. ‘Problem – the wife did not like me. Other problem – the NKVD did not like my father. Some minor disagreement, someone else after his position... He was shot in the head on Lavrska Street, where you walk. Outside the monastery. Well the monks took me in but they could not keep me. Elena Vasilyevna knew, yet she chose to compound her crime. She did not take me back. Instead she locked her gate and tended her garden. Potatoes, onions, pears!’ He is shaking his head, as if he still can’t believe it. ‘No one took her name off the papers, so now it is mine and I will destroy it and burn all the trees.’

He starts walking towards the gate that leads to the house. He is pressing Ivan against his shoulder with one hand, while the other drags the pushchair behind him. Frances follows, parallel with the fence, steady, steady, not shifting her gaze.

When they both reach the gate, Ivan strains against Mykola’s grasp and starts grunting from the back of his throat in short, staccato bursts. Frances can’t bear it any longer.

‘Please...’ She breathes the word out, willing it enter this man, for him to show his mercy.

Mykola parks the pushchair in the long grass and turns to observe her, his head tilting slightly.

‘You are afraid, Frances.’

‘I want my baby.’

‘Like a good mother. The mother I know you to be.’ He rests his free hand on the latch and frowns. Then, with a soft, slow ‘*tak*’ of resignation, he opens the gate and gives up the child.

Frances, her body shaking, pulls Ivan into her arms, greedy for his weight as he wriggles and burrows, pressing her lips against his neck. She brushes past Mykola and takes a few hurried steps towards the lane before she sees the wasp on her son’s thigh, but when she tries to flick it away it stings the back of her hand. The pain is instant and intense, like a shard of scalding ice, like the anger that unexpectedly grips her.

She stops, looks back.

Mykola is still gazing towards the house, arms loose at his sides.

‘She might have loved you,’ she says, no longer caring if she provokes him. ‘If she’d known who you were. You should have told her!’

‘She did know – at the end.’

‘How?’ Frances is almost shouting. ‘Were you with her when she died?’

‘She was leaving your flat.’

‘And you followed her? You should have left her alone! So what if she visited? We gave her a key! She was returning something that belonged to me!’

‘You did not listen to my warning. I have struggled to forgive you.’

In the silence that follows, no more than a moment, truth rises like dark water, cool and liquid between them.

'You killed her,' murmurs Frances.

Mykola's head drops. He won't look at her now; he is shrinking back into the shadow of his abandonment.

'At the end she did not need me. Even for that.'

\*

Frances, half running, is almost at the end of the lane when a horn blares, short and sharp. Ivan's nails dig into her arm as he starts to wail, then a black jeep turns in from Pantfilovstev Street, stones crunching beneath its tyres.

The jeep fills the narrow lane. As it slows to a crawl and its chrome bumper inches level with her thigh, the wing mirror snags an overhanging branch, bending it back. Frances shields Ivan's head with her stung hand and presses herself against a hedge that pokes through the fence to her left. The vehicle's windows are tinted; she can't see the driver but the passenger window glides down and a woman removes her sunglasses.

'Hello! Where are you doing?'

It is Suzie. Her eyes are red-rimmed, the skin beneath them puffy and white. Frances is too tired to explain about Mykola, about Ivan's distress, about her throbbing knuckles.

'I came to pick windfalls. From your garden.'

'Oh – you should have called...'

Now Frances sees Rob in the driving seat. His broad shoulders and square head fill the space beyond his wife.

'Sounds like trespassing,' he mutters sourly, his mirrored shades catching the sun's glare from the bonnet. He flicks off the air conditioning and leans forward over the steering wheel. 'Who the fuck is that on my driveway?'

Frances looks at Suzie, at her strained face, at the elastic band peeping out from her sleeve. 'I'm sorry,' she says, for the trouble that will come, though it is too late now. She must concentrate on the narrow gap that leads round the back of the jeep and towards Pantfilovstev Street beyond.

'Who *is* that?' persists Rob, thick thumbs pushing on the horn so that Frances jumps and Ivan stiffens with the shock.

'Mykola Sirko,' she says, yanking her skirt free of the hedge.

'Mykola Sirko - that cunt. I told him to stay out of my business...'

Ivan is struggling to get down. Frances realises she has left the pushchair by the gate but there's no going back. 'He's Elena's son. Your new landlord!' she shouts, her hand pressing against the rear window as she clammers round the bumper. The street ahead curves away to the right. Its trajectory pulls her forward – her tired feet, her arms that ache and throb but which will always now be strong.

*I am leaving*, she thinks as the trapped branch whips forward and the two windfalls in her pockets bump like soft fists against her thighs.

\*

Once Frances has left the Tsar's Village behind her, once she has crossed the tramlines on Staronavodnitska Street and avoided the dogs idling beneath the rowans, she slows down and lets Ivan walk a little. His fingers grip hers as he struts and goose-steps across the car park; with every stride he seems more confident of the ground beneath his feet. When they reach the entrance to the apartment block, she lifts him up and carries him through the heavy doors, then directs his hand so that he can push the button to call the lift.

*'Adeen, dva, tre, chitirye,'* she counts, right up to thirteen, in a funny voice that makes him giggle.

Upstairs on the dark landing, in the open doorway of the apartment, she pauses. Lucas is at the office, packing up his equipment, shredding old files. The rooms are silent; the ceiling is silent above her head. She closes the front door behind her and sets Ivan down on the parquet before moving to the kitchen to bathe her hand. Only then does she slide the stolen pears from her skirt pockets, sniff their musty sweetness and take a knife out of the drawer to cut away the bruised flesh. She saves the pips in a saucer. The remaining fruit she carries to the living room and shares with her son.

The afternoons are growing shorter already. Soon the women spilling from the trams will dig out their winter hats, yet for now the warmth lingers and Frances stands at the balcony window long after the pears have been eaten, listening to the slap of Ivan's bare feet as he cruises down the hallway, gazing at the trees and roofs of Tsarskoye Selo as the sun draws itself over the back of the apartment blocks until the silver ribbon of the river, the gold domes of the monastery and, finally, the glinting sword tip of the Motherland statue lose their lustre, and sink into shadow.