



Girl A

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GIRL A

Abigail Dean



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Dedication

For Mum, Dad, and Rich.

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1

Lex (Girl A)

YOU DON'T KNOW ME, but you'll have seen my face. In the earlier pictures, they bludgeoned our features with pixels, right down to our waists; even our hair was too distinctive to disclose. But the story and its protectors grew weary, and in the danker corners of the Internet we became easy to find. The favoured photograph was taken in front of the house on Moor Woods Road, late on a September evening. We filed out and lined up, six of us in height order and Noah in Ethan's arms, while Father arranged the composition. Little white wraiths squirming in the shock of sunshine. Behind us, the house rested in the last of the day's light, shadows spreading from the windows and the door. We were still and looking at the camera. It should have been perfect. But just before Father pressed the button, Evie squeezed my hand and turned her face up towards me; in the photograph, she is just about to speak, and my smile is starting to curl. I don't remember what she said, but I'm quite sure that we paid for it, later.

I arrived at the prison in the mid-afternoon. On the drive I had been listening to an old playlist made by JP, Have a Great Day, and without the music and the engine, the car was abruptly quiet. I opened the door. Traffic was building on the motorway, the noise of it like the ocean.

The prison had released a short statement confirming Mother's death. I read the articles online the evening before, which were perfunctory, and which all concluded with a variation of the same happy ending. The Gracie children, some of whom have waived their anonymity, are believed to be well. I sat in a towel on the hotel bed, surrounded by room service, laughing. At breakfast, there was a stack of local newspapers next to the coffee; Mother

was on the front page, underneath an article about a stabbing at Wimpy Burger. A quiet day.

My room included a hot buffet, and I kept eating right up until the end, when the waitress told me that the kitchen had to begin preparing for lunch.

‘People stop for lunch?’ I asked.

‘You’d be surprised,’ she said. She looked apologetic. ‘It isn’t included with the room, though.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Thanks. That was really good.’

When I started work, my mentor, Julia Devlin, told me that the time would come when I would tire of free food and free alcohol; when my fascination with platters of immaculate canapés would wane; when I would no longer set my alarm to get to a hotel breakfast. Devlin was right about a lot of things, but not about this.

I had never been to the prison before, but it wasn’t so different from what I had imagined. Beyond the car park were white walls, crowned with barbed wire, like a challenge from a fairy tale. Behind that, four towers presided over a concrete moat, with a grey fort at its centre. Mother’s little life. I had parked too far away, and had to walk across a sea of empty spaces, following the thick white lines where I could. There was only one other vehicle in the car park, and inside it there was an old woman, clutching the wheel. When she saw me she raised her hand, as if we might know each other, and I waved back.

Underfoot, the tarmac was starting to stick. By the time I reached the entrance I could feel sweat in my bra and in the hair at the back of my neck. My summer clothes were in a wardrobe in New York. I had remembered English summers as timid, and every time I stepped outside I was surprised by bold blue sky. I had spent some time that morning thinking about what to wear, stuck half-dressed in the wardrobe mirror; there really wasn’t an outfit for every occasion, after all. I had settled on white shirt, loose jeans, shop-clean trainers, obnoxious sunglasses. *Is it too jovial?* I asked Olivia, sending a picture by text, but she was in Italy, at a wedding on the walls of Volterra, and she didn’t reply.

There was a receptionist, just like in any other office. ‘Do you have an appointment?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘With the warden.’

‘With the director?’

‘Sure. With the director.’

‘Are you Alexandra?’

‘That’s me.’

The warden had agreed to meet me in the entrance hall. ‘There’s a reduced staff on Saturday afternoons,’ she had said. ‘And no visitors after three p.m. It should be quiet for you.’

‘I’d like that,’ I said. ‘Thanks.’

‘I shouldn’t say this,’ she said, ‘but it would be the time for the great escape.’

Now she came down the corridor, filling it. I had read about her online. She was the first female warden of a high-security facility in the country, and she had given a few interviews after her appointment. She had wanted to be a police officer at a time when height restrictions were still in force, and she was two inches under. She had discovered that she was still tall enough to be a prison officer, which was illogical, but OK with her. She wore an electric blue suit – I recognized it from the pictures accompanying the interviews – and strange, dainty shoes, as if somebody had told her they might soften her impression. She believed – absolutely – in the power of rehabilitation. She looked more tired than in her photographs.

‘Alexandra,’ she said, and shook my hand. ‘I’m so sorry for your loss.’

‘I’m not,’ I said. ‘So don’t worry about it.’

She gestured back from where she had come. ‘I’m just by the visitors’ centre,’ she said. ‘Please.’

The corridor was a tepid yellow, scuffed at the baseboards and decorated with shrivelled posters about pregnancy and meditation. At the end there was a scanner, and a conveyor belt for your belongings. Steel lockers to the ceiling. ‘Formalities,’ she said. ‘At least it’s not busy.’

‘Like an airport,’ I said. I thought of the service in New York, two days before: my laptop and phones in a grey tray, and the neat, transparent bag of make-up which I set beside them. There were special lanes for frequent flyers, and I never had to queue.

‘Just like that,’ she said. ‘Yes.’

She unloaded her pockets onto the conveyor belt and passed through the scanner. She carried a security pass, a pink fan, and a children’s sunscreen. ‘A whole family of redheads,’ she said. ‘We’re not built for days like this.’ In her pass photograph she looked like a teenager, eager to begin the first day of work. My pockets were empty; I followed her straight through.

Inside, too, there was no one around. We walked through the visitors' centre, where the plastic tables and secured chairs awaited the next session. At the end of the room was a metal door, without windows; somewhere behind that, I assumed, was Mother, and the confines of each of her small days. I touched a chair as we passed, and thought of my siblings, waiting in the stale room for Mother to be presented to them. Delilah would have reclined here, on many occasions, and Ethan had visited once, although only for the nobility of it. He had written a piece for *The Sunday Times* afterwards, titled 'The Problems with Forgiveness', which were many and predictable.

The warden's office was through a different door. She touched her pass to the wall and patted herself down for a final key. It was in the pocket above her heart, and attached to a plastic photo frame, full of redheaded children. 'Well,' she said. 'Here we are.'

It was a simple office, with pockmarked walls and a view to the motorway. She seemed to have recognized this and decided that it wouldn't do; she had brought in a stern wooden desk and an office chair, and she had found a budget for two leather sofas, which she would need for delicate conversations. On the walls were her certificates, and a map of the United Kingdom.

'I know that we haven't met before,' the warden said, 'but there's something I want to say to you before the lawyer joins us.'

She gestured to the sofas. I despised formal meetings on comfortable furniture; it was impossible to know how to sit. On the table in front of us was a cardboard box, and a slim brown envelope bearing Mother's name.

'I hope that you don't think that this is unprofessional,' said the warden, 'but I remember you and your family on the news at the time. My children were just babies, then. I've thought about those headlines a lot since, even before this job came up. You see a great many things in this line of work. Both the things that make the papers, and the things that don't. And after all of this time, some of those things – a very small number – still surprise me. People say: How can you still be surprised, even now? Well, I refuse not to be surprised.'

She took her fan from the pocket of her suit. Closer, it looked like something handmade by a child, or a prisoner. 'Your parents surprised me,' she said.

I looked past her. The sun teetered at the edge of the window, about to fall into the room.

‘It was a terrible thing that happened to you,’ she said. ‘From all of us here – we hope that you might find some peace.’

‘Should we talk,’ I said, ‘about why you called me?’

The solicitor was poised outside the office, like an actor waiting for his cue. He was dressed in a grey suit and a cheerful tie, and sweating. The leather squeaked when he sat down. ‘Bill,’ he said, and stood again to shake my hand. The top of his collar had started to stain, and now that was grey, too. ‘I understand,’ he said, right away, ‘that you’re also a lawyer.’ He was younger than I had expected, maybe younger than me; we would have studied at the same time.

‘Just company stuff,’ I said, and to make him feel better: ‘I don’t know the first thing about wills.’

‘That,’ Bill said, ‘is what I’m here for.’

I smiled encouragingly.

‘OK!’ Bill said. He rapped the cardboard box. ‘These are the personal possessions,’ he said. ‘And this is the document.’

He slid the envelope across the table and I tore it open. The will said, in Mother’s trembling hand, that Deborah Gracie appointed her daughter, Alexandra Gracie, as executor of this will; that Deborah Gracie’s remaining possessions consisted of, first, those possessions held at HM Prison Northwood; secondly, approximately twenty thousand pounds inherited from her husband, Charles Gracie, upon his death; and thirdly, the property found at 11 Moor Woods Road, in Hollowfield. Those possessions were to be divided equally between Deborah Gracie’s surviving children.

‘Executor,’ I said.

‘She seemed quite sure that you were the person for the job,’ Bill said. I laughed.

See Mother in her cell, playing with her long, long blond hair, right down to her knees; so long that she could sit on it, as a party trick. She considers her will, presided over by Bill, who feels sorry for her, who is happy to help out, and who is sweating then, too. There is so much that he wants to ask. Mother holds the pen in her hand, and trembles in studied desolation. Executor, Bill explains: it’s something of an honour. But it’s also an administrative burden, and there will need to be communications with the various beneficiaries. Mother, with the cancer bubbling in her stomach, and only a few months left to fuck us over, knows exactly whom to appoint.

‘There is no obligation for you to take this up,’ Bill said. ‘If you don’t want to.’

‘I’m aware of that,’ I said, and Bill’s shoulders shifted.

‘I can guide you through the basics,’ he said. ‘It’s a very small portfolio of assets. It shouldn’t take up too much of your time. The key thing – the thing that I’d bear in mind – is to keep the beneficiaries onside. However you decide to handle those assets, you get your siblings’ go-ahead first.’

I was booked on a flight back to New York the next afternoon. I thought of the cold air on the plane, and the neat menus which were handed out just after take-off. I could see myself settling into the journey, the prior three days deadened by the drinks in the lounge, then waking up to the warm evening and a black car waiting to take me home.

‘I need to consider it,’ I said. ‘It’s not a convenient time.’

Bill handed me a slip of paper, with his name and number handwritten on pale grey lines. Business cards were not in the prison’s budget. ‘I’ll wait to hear from you,’ he said. ‘If it’s not you, then it would be helpful to have suggestions. One of the other beneficiaries, perhaps.’

I thought of making this proposal to Ethan, or Gabriel, or Delilah. ‘Perhaps,’ I said.

‘For a start,’ Bill said, holding the box on his palm, ‘these are all of her possessions at Northwood. I can release them to you today.’

The box was light.

‘They’re of negligible value, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘She had a number of goodwill credits – for exemplary behaviour, things like that – but they don’t have much value outside.’

‘That’s a shame,’ I said.

‘The only other thing,’ the warden said, ‘is the body.’

She walked to her desk and pulled out a ring-bound file of plastic wallets, each of them containing a flyer or a catalogue. Like a waiter with a menu, she opened it before me, and I glimpsed sombre fonts and a few apologetic faces.

‘Options,’ she said, and turned the page. ‘If you’d like them. Funeral homes. Some of these are a bit more detailed: services, caskets, things like that. And they’re all local – all within a fifty-mile radius.’

‘I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding,’ I said. The warden shut the file on a leaflet featuring a leopard print hearse.

‘We won’t be claiming the body,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Bill. If the warden was perturbed, she hid it well.

‘In that case,’ she said, ‘we would bury your mother in an unmarked grave, according to default prison policy. Do you have any objections to that?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t have any objections.’

My other meeting was with the chaplain, who had requested to see me. She had asked me to come to the visitors’ chapel, which was in the car park. One of the warden’s assistants accompanied me to a squat outbuilding. Somebody had erected a wooden cross above the door and hung coloured tissue paper across the windows. A child’s stained glass. Six rows of benches faced a makeshift stage with a fan and a lectern, and a model of Jesus, mid-crucifixion.

The chaplain was waiting on the second bench back. She stood to meet me. Everything about her was round and damp: her face in the gloom, her white smock, the two little hands which clasped around mine.

‘Alexandra,’ she said.

‘Hello.’

‘You must be wondering,’ she said, ‘why I wished to see you.’

She had the kind of gentleness which you have to practise. I could see her in the conference room of a cheap hotel, wearing a name badge and watching a presentation on the importance of pauses – of giving people the space to talk.

I waited.

‘I spent a lot of time with your mother in her final few years,’ she said. ‘I had worked with her for longer than that, you see, but in the final years I saw the changes in her. And I hoped that you, today, might take consolation in those changes.’

‘The changes?’ I said. I could feel myself starting to smile.

‘She wrote to you many times in those years,’ she said. ‘To you and to Ethan and to Delilah. I heard about you all. Gabriel and Noah. Sometimes she wrote to Daniel and Evie. For a mother to lose her children, whatever sins she committed – she had lost so much. She would bring me all of the letters, to check her spelling and the addresses. She kept thinking that the addresses must be wrong, when you didn’t reply.’

The tissue paper cast a fleshy light down the aisle. I had assumed that the windows had been an activity for the prisoners, but now I could imagine the chaplain, balanced on a chair after hours, dressing her kingdom.

‘I wanted to see you,’ she said, ‘because of forgiveness. For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you.’

She rested her palm against my knee. The warmth of it seeped straight through my jeans, like something spilt. ‘But if you do not forgive others their sins,’ she said, ‘your father will not forgive your sins.’

‘Forgiveness,’ I said. The shape of the word lodged in my throat. I was still smiling.

‘Did you receive them?’ the chaplain asked. ‘The letters?’

I received them. I asked Dad – my real father, you understand, and not the rot in my bones – to destroy each one when it arrived. They were easy to identify; they came resealed, with a stamped warning of correspondence from an inmate at HM Prison Northwood. Soon after my twenty-first birthday, when I was home from university, Dad came to me with a confession and a box, and all of the fucking letters stuffed inside. ‘I just thought,’ he said, ‘that in the future – you may be curious—’ It must have been the winter holidays, because the barbeque was in the garden shed; he helped me to wheel it out, and we stood in our coats, him with his pipe and me with a cup of tea, and posted them into the fire.

‘I think that you’re in the wrong story,’ I said to the chaplain. ‘There’s a narrative – you see it a lot – which builds up to a prison visit. Somebody inside, they’re waiting for somebody else to visit. To be forgiven. The visitor’s been mulling it over for years, and they can’t decide whether to do it. Well. In the end they go. It’s usually a parent and a child, or maybe a perpetrator and a victim – it depends. But they go. And they have a conversation. And even if the visitor doesn’t *forgive* the person, exactly, they at least take something from the whole thing. But, you see – my mother’s dead. And I never did visit.’

I had the mortifying sense that I was going to cry, and I pulled my sunglasses down to hide it. The chaplain became a lumpy white spectre in the darkness. ‘I’m sorry that I can’t help you,’ I said, absurdly, and stumbled back down the aisle. The sun was finally starting to soften, and now it was time for a drink. I thought of a hotel bar and the weight of the first glass, settling heavy across my limbs. The warden’s assistant was waiting for me.

‘Are we all done?’ she asked. Our shadows were long and black on the tarmac, and when I reached her they became one strange beast. Her shift was probably over.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I should go.’

In the car, I checked my phone. *Is there such a thing*, Olivia had texted, *as too jovial?*

I held Mother’s cardboard box in my lap and lifted the lid. A ragtag of possessions. There was a Bible, predictably. There was a hairbrush. There were two clippings, sticky with tape, which had been torn from magazines: one was an advertisement for beach holidays in Mexico, and one was for nappies, with a little row of clean, happy children laid out on a white blanket. There was a newspaper cutting about Ethan’s charity work in Oxford. There were three chocolate bars, and a lipstick which was nearly finished. As usual, she gave nothing away.

The last time I saw Mother was the day that we escaped. That morning I woke up in the soiled bed and knew that my days had run out, and that if I didn’t act then this was where I would die.

Sometimes, in my head, I visit our little room. There are two single beds, pressed into opposite corners, as far away from one another as they can be. My bed and Evie’s bed. The bare bulb hangs between them, twitching at footsteps in the hallway outside. It is usually dull, but sometimes, if Father decides, left on for days. He has sealed a flattened cardboard box against the window, intending to control time, but a dim, brown light seeps through and grants us our days and our nights. Beyond the cardboard there was once a garden, and beyond that, the moor. It has become harder to believe that those places, with their wildness and their weather, could still exist. In the peaty glow, you can see the two-metre Territory between the beds, which Evie and I know better than any other. We have discussed the navigation from my bed to hers for many months: we know how to traverse the rolling hills of plastic bags, bulging with items which we can’t remember; we know that you would use a plastic fork to cross the Bowl Swamps, which are blackened and congealed, and close to drying out; we have debated the best way to pass through the Polyester Peaks to avoid the worst of the filth: whether to take the high passes and risk the elements, or to pass through the tunnels of rotting materials beneath them and face whatever may be waiting there.

I had wet myself again in the night. I flexed my toes, twisted my ankles, and kicked my legs as if I was swimming, as I had done every morning for the last few months. Two. Maybe three. I said to the room what I would say

to the first person I met when I was free: My name is Alexandra Gracie, and I am fifteen years old. I need you to ring the police. Then, as I did each morning, I turned to see Evie.

We had once been chained in the same direction, so that I could see her all of the time. Now she was tied away from me, and we both had to contort our bodies to meet eyes. Instead I could see her feet and the bones of her legs. The skin burrowed into each groove, as if searching for warmth there.

Evie spoke less and less. I cajoled her and shouted at her; I reassured her, and sung the songs which we had heard when we still went to school. 'Your part,' I said. 'Are you ready for your part?' None of it worked. Now, instead of teaching her numbers, I recited them to myself. I told her stories in the darkness and heard no laughter, or questions, or surprise; there was just the quiet space of the Territory and her shallow breathing, rushing across it.

'Evie,' I said. 'Eve. Today's the day.'

I drove back to the city through the early dusk. A thick golden light fell between the trees and across the open fields, but in the shadows of the villages and the farmhouses it was already dark. I contemplated driving through the night and hitting London before sunrise. Jet lag made the landscape bright and strange. I would probably end up asleep on a roadside in the Midlands; it didn't seem such a good idea. I stopped in a lay-by and booked a Manchester hotel with vacancies and air conditioning.

In the first bad year, we had talked only of escape. This was in the Binding Days, when we were only restrained at night, and gently, with soft, white materials. Evie and I slept in the same bed, each with one wrist attached to a bedpost, and our other hands holding. All day, Mother and Father were with us, but we went about our lessons (heavy in biblical studies, with some questionable world history), and exercise (laps of the yard, in vests and pants; on one occasion, some of the children from Hollowfield clambered through the nettles at the back of our property just to see us, and to guffaw), and mealtimes (bread and water, on a good day), without any restraints at all. Our famous family photograph was taken at the end of this period, before the Chaining commenced and we ceased to be portrait-ready, even by my parents' standards.

We talked of tearing the bindings with our teeth, or of slipping a knife from the kitchen table into a smock pocket. We could build up speed during a

lap of the yard, then keep running, out through the garden gate and down Moor Woods Road. Father kept a mobile phone in his pocket; that would be easy to snatch. When I think about this time, I feel a terrible confusion, which Dr K – with all of her reasoning – never managed to resolve. It was on the faces of the police and the journalists and the nurses, although none of them could ever bring themselves to ask it. Why didn't you just leave when you had the chance?

The truth is, it wasn't so bad. We enjoyed each other's company. We were tired, and sometimes we were hungry, and on occasion, Father would hit us so hard that an eye was bloodshot for a week (Gabriel), or there was a guttural crack just below the heart (Daniel). But we had little knowledge of what would come. I have spent many nights combing through the memories, like a student in a library, wiping the dust from old volumes and examining each shelf, searching for the moment when I should have known: ah – there – it was time to act. This book eludes me. It was checked out many years ago, and never returned. Father taught us around the kitchen table, mistaking submission for devotion, and Mother visited us last thing at night to make sure the bindings were in place. In the early morning, I woke beside Evie, and the warmth of her body glowed against me. We still talked of our future.

It wasn't so bad.

I spoke to Devlin first, and asked to work from London for a week. Maybe more.

'Probate drama,' she said. 'How exciting.' It was early afternoon in New York, but she had answered right away, already half-cut. Around her, I could hear the hum of a civilized lunch, or a bar.

'I'm not sure if that's the word I would use,' I said.

'Well, take your time. We'll find you a desk in London. And some work, no doubt.'

Mum and Dad would be eating, and could wait. Ethan's fiancée answered the phone; he was attending the opening of a gallery and wouldn't be back until much later that night. She'd heard that I was in the country – I should come to visit them – they would love to have me. I left a voice message on Delilah's phone, although I doubted that she would call me back. Last, I spoke to Evie. I could hear that she was outside, and somebody near her was laughing.

'So,' I said. 'The witch is dead, it seems.'

‘Did you see the body?’

‘God, no. I didn’t ask to.’

‘Then – can we be sure?’

‘I’m quietly confident.’

I told her about the house on Moor Woods Road. About our great inheritance.

‘They had twenty thousand? That’s news.’

‘Really? After our resplendent childhood?’

‘You can just see Father, can’t you? Squirrelling it away. “For my God will meet all your needs” – whatever it was.’

‘The house, though,’ I said. ‘I can’t believe that it would still be standing.’

‘Aren’t there people who enjoy those things? There are some tours – in LA, I think – murder sites, celebrity deaths, stuff like that. It’s pretty morbid.’

‘Hollowfield’s a little isolated for a tour, no? Besides, it’s hardly the Black Dahlia.’

‘We’re a little more downmarket, I guess.’

‘They’d be giving the tickets away.’

‘Well,’ Evie said. ‘If there’s a tour, we should certainly go on it. We’ll be able to impart some real gems. There’s a career there, if the law doesn’t work out.’

‘I think Ethan’s already cornered the market,’ I said. ‘But really. What the hell are we meant to do with the house?’

Again, somebody laughed. Closer, now. ‘Where are you?’ I asked.

‘At the beach. There’s some kind of concert this afternoon.’

‘You should go.’

‘OK. I miss you. And the house—’

The wind was picking up where she was, whipping the sun across the ocean.

‘Something happy,’ Evie said. ‘It should be something happy. Nothing would annoy Father more.’

‘I like that idea.’

‘OK. I’m going to go.’

‘Enjoy the concert.’

‘Well done, today.’

The plan was this:

Like undercover agents, we had been tracking Father's footsteps. In the Binding Days, we had kept a record, noted in our Bible with a stump of school pencil (Genesis, 19:17; back then, we still had a taste for melodrama). When we could no longer reach the book, I committed Father's day to memory, the way Miss Glade had taught me when I still went to school. 'Think of a house,' she said. 'And in each room of the house, there is the next thing that you want to recall. Franz Ferdinand is slumped in the hallway – he's just been shot. You walk into the living room, and you pass by Serbia on the way out, running. They're terrified: war's coming. You find Austria-Hungary in the kitchen, sat at the table with the rest of its allies. Who's with them?'

And Father occupied our house; that made decoding his days even easier. After so many months in a single room, I knew the sound of each floorboard, and the flick of each light switch. I could see the bulk of him moving through the rooms.

We had done several all-night stake-outs from our beds, so we knew that he woke late. Even in the winter, it was already light when we heard his first, slow footsteps through the house. Our bedroom was right at the end of the hallway, and he was two doors down, so a night-time attempt would be no good; he slept lightly, and he could be on us in a few seconds. Sometimes I would wake to find him at our bedroom door, or crouching beside me, in contemplation. Whatever he was considering, he always resolved, and in time he turned away, into the darkness.

He spent each morning with Mother and with Noah, downstairs. The smell of their meals permeated the house, and we heard them at prayer, or laughing about something which we couldn't share. When Noah cried, Father took to the garden. The kitchen door slammed. He exercised: the grunts of it carried up to our window. Sometimes, just before lunch, he visited us, radiant, his skin sodden and red, a barbarian just done with the battle, wielding his towel like an enemy's head. No, the morning wouldn't do: the front door was locked at all times, and whether we went downstairs through the kitchen or right out of the window, Father would be waiting.

This was a point of contention between Evie and me. 'It has to be through the house,' she said. 'The window's too high. You've forgotten how high it is.'

'We'd have to break the lock on our door. We'd have to go through the whole house. Past Ethan's room. Past Mother and Father. Past Gabe and D.