THE YEAR AFTER YOU

Nina de Pass

INK ROAD

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To Clem, with love

1

If I'd known the temperature in exile would be this low, I'd have found it within me to put up more of a fight. Even if there were anyone to hear me now, the time for protest has come and gone; I'm a very long way from home.

I allow the minutes to pass, watching as the soft, sticky snow is caught in the wind outside the taxi and, on its descent, is forced back high into the air.

The driver my mother arranged to meet me at the airport, perhaps mistaking my silence for fascination, seems to decide it's safe to speak. "Excited for your new school?" he asks, the words barely decipherable from his thick French accent.

I don't reply at once, allowing my finger to slide across the misted glass of the window. When I eventually do, I don't bother to curb the sarcasm in my voice, knowing that the language barrier will mask it anyway. "*Excited?*"

I don't know why I phrase my response as a question. I don't want to invite him to have a conversation with me, or for anything he says to be memorable. I want to forget him, just like I want to forget everything else.

He laughs nervously before continuing. “Is it your first time in Switzerl–”

The end of his question is lost. I watch in horror as he swerves out of the path of an oncoming truck and closer to the edge of the winding, narrow road up the mountainside. There are no barriers to the waiting abyss below, and I feel my body tense as I clutch at the door handle. Every muscle turns to glass as the car, losing its grip on the icy road, coasts to the right. I close my eyes, waiting for impact. Time converts to slow motion, and I wait to hear the screams. For the world to blur out of focus. For the eardrum-splitting pop of the airbags deploying. For the pain.

For a split second, I feel euphoric. Maybe I won't survive this time.

Instead, I feel the car veer back to the left, away from danger, and am drawn into real time as the driver resumes his nervous laugh. He sounds the horn too late, when the truck is a dot in the distance, and I catch him looking at me in the rear-view mirror. “Crazy drivers,” he says with a repentant smile.

I don't smile back, anxiously tracing my fingers over the frayed edges of the seat belt, and find my most unforgiving stare. “Just keep your eyes on the road,” I snap.

In the hour that follows, the driver tries again to engage me in conversation, but this time I ignore him, not bothering to disguise my hostility. I keep my eyes off the encircling Swiss mountains outside, focusing on bringing all of my fear-frozen limbs back to life. Trying not to think about

what could have happened. Or about the part of me that had momentarily welcomed it.

My mind is filled instead with a memory from eight months earlier, when I woke up one morning in the hospital back in California to the sound of voices. My mother and one of the nurses were trying – not particularly well – to speak in hushed tones.

"Your daughter's psychiatrist, Dr Burns, wants us to keep Cara in for a few more nights to observe her," the nurse said.

My mother, probably irritated by the inconvenience of my prolonged stay (the hospital was over an hour from where we lived), responded sulkily. "Why on earth would she need to stay? Her injuries are physical and, as the doctor said again this morning, relatively minor. The fact she escaped with just a broken arm is a miracle in itself. But she did – now she's healthy enough to go home, that's where she's going."

"That's the thing, though, Mrs Cooper –"

"Mrs Blair," my mother interrupted – as she always did when people called her by my father's name. It had taken her no time at all to remarry after my father left, and even in the interim months, as I like to call them, she reverted to her maiden name.

"Sorry, Mrs Blair," the nurse continued, "but Dr Burns isn't convinced that Cara *is* healthy. She's concerned that your daughter is having suicidal thoughts."

I can almost imagine my mother's eyes widening in horror at this, her glancing around to check no one we knew was in the vicinity. "My daughter is *not* suicidal!"

To her credit, the nurse's voice remained steady. "It

wouldn't be surprising if she were suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Cara has lived through a very distressing experience."

There was a long pause while my mother digested the nurse's words.

"It's a mental illness," the nurse continued.

"I know what it is, I just don't want to hear any more," my mother cut in. "I am her legal guardian, so give me whatever forms I need to get her out of this place. Mental illness. *Honestly*. She's in shock, not mentally ill."

"It would be against medical advice," the nurse warned. "You'd have to sign a waiver."

My mother's response was curt, all attempts at whispering put aside. "Then get me that waiver."

In retrospect, two elements of this exchange stand out. Firstly, that my injuries were described as physical. The physical pain of breaking my arm in four places was nothing compared to the other pain I experience daily when I remember what else was broken that night – something metal bolts couldn't fix. Secondly, that this injury and the endless web of bruises that covered my body were described as minor. Nothing about the accident felt minor, and calling it so felt as though they were belittling it, making it seem as though it, in the grand scheme of things, didn't matter.

Now, however, I wonder if what I should have taken away from their exchange wasn't how it made me feel, but what was actually said. After all, what seventeen-year-old *wants* to die? All I know is I can't let myself be that person. I just can't.

My eyes stay glued to the seat in front. I don't want to risk

looking out again at the scene whipping past the windows. The fact that I have got this far in my journey is a near miracle. Even so, I'm at the limits of my endurance and am relieved when I register the car slowing. As soon as we stop, I fling myself out into the open, hiding my hands behind my back so the driver won't see they're still shaking.

"Your destination," he says, gesturing up to the large building.

It looks more like a Russian palace than a school: a flat-fronted, sky-blue façade of at least six storeys, with three golden domes on the roof. There are crumbling touches of the same gold paint around symmetrical, old-fashioned windows too, and on the ground-floor level, mint-green and white striped awnings protrude. I turn around, with the extravagant structure behind me, and look out at the view. There is a cable-car station to my right. I follow the wire supporting the still, suspended carriages until it is swallowed by a small town on a nearby mountainside.

Now that my feet are firmly on solid ground, the descent between the two peaks doesn't feel quite so perilous. Somehow the school itself does feel like a slight safety hazard, though; it's dangerously close to the edge of the mountain, with just a waist-high pale blue iron fence to keep everyone penned in. Even then, as I notice the elaborate twists of the metal, it feels more like a decorative feature than a precautionary one.

"Should I bring this in for you?" the driver asks as he unloads my luggage.

"I'm fine," I say quickly, pulling the one duffel bag I brought with me from his grasp and hauling it over my shoulder. At the

last minute I look back and murmur a hesitant, "Thanks."

He looks startled, so I turn away from him and head towards the entrance. As I get closer, two figures come into focus: a girl and a boy of around my age. The girl has a long stream of dark red hair that falls below her shoulders. Her skin is fair, like mine, but covered with freckles. The boy at her side is at least a head taller and lanky, but with a round, childish face and white-blonde hair.

"Let me take that," the boy says, gesturing to my bag. His words sound strange and unfamiliar, tinted with another accent – perhaps Scandinavian.

"I've got it," I say, then instantly regret it. This is exactly what my mother warned me not to do. *It'll be a clean slate for you*, she reasoned. *Nobody will know you there – you can go back to being yourself again*. Her words had extinguished what was left of my fight. Surely she knows as well as I do that there is no going back. Yet now, despite the fact that I can't fathom how I'll pull it off, I resolve to try to seem normal in front of these strangers. I can't smile, so I adjust my expression to the brightest one I know.

"Welcome to Hope Hall," the girl says.

2

"Everyone is in the conservatory – that's why it's so quiet," the girl says with the faintest hint of a French accent, barely distinguishable. "I'm Ren, by the way, and this is Fred." She gestures to the tall blonde boy, who starts to give me an awkward wave then pulls his hand down to his side as though he has thought better of it.

"Cara," I say, and they nod in unison. They know this of course: they're my welcome committee. I wonder quite how much they know about me.

"As I mentioned, everyone is doing prep, so it's the perfect time for a tour."

"Prep?"

"Oh, sorry! I always forget some of the words we use sound a bit odd," she exclaims with what seems to be genuine brightness. I can't help thinking she's unusually pretty – just not in an obvious way. Her porcelain cheeks are tinged with pink from waiting out in the cold, the only blemish on her otherwise flawless skin. She's petite, with a thin face and round, chocolate-brown eyes that make her look overeager.

"God, sorry, and now I'm making you feel more alienated for being new –"

"Ren, relax," Fred says. He's so tall that his height dwarfs her in comparison, and when he speaks he uses swooping hand gestures that teeter on awkward, like he doesn't quite know what to do with such long, spindly arms.

"Sorry," she says, "I always talk at a million kilometres per hour when I'm nervous –"

"Prep means homework," Fred cuts in, suddenly businesslike, relieving her of what I imagine would be a wordy explanation. "It's between seven and eight every evening. All year groups do it in the conservatory, so we'll have a free run of the place for the next forty-five minutes or so. I reckon we should probably get going. Leave your bag here, and we'll come back and get it in a bit."

Ren looks on gratefully as I let my bag slide off my shoulder and follow Fred further into the school.

Forty-five minutes isn't even close to being enough time to tour the place. We start on the ground floor, trawling across dark-stained floorboards towards the classrooms. Like my first impression of the school in its totality, there isn't anything generic about these rooms. Each is drastically different – a mishmash of odd, old-fashioned furniture and different arrangements of around ten desks per classroom. They seem to all contain a fireplace or log burner, giving out their last dregs of heat at the end of the day.

Everything is at odds with the associations of school that I am accustomed to – the metal detectors back home, the

routine locker searches, the plastic chairs and white hallways. It disorients me, tilting everything I've come to know and making my already fragile composure harder to hold on to.

We eventually walk out into a large, square courtyard, glistening with ice, at the back of the building. I see now that the school is built in an extended U shape, with this courtyard marking the centre of that U. It's framed on three sides by six floors of building, the fourth wall backing on to the ever-darkening grounds, a lit path just visible through a stone arch carved in the centre. I instantly realise what they meant by the conservatory. In the central arm of the building, the back wall has been replaced by a glass one, rising up to at least five storeys, made up of hundreds of individual panes. Every now and then, one of the clear glass panes has been swapped for a coloured one. Through the glass, lit up from the inside, I can see into a vast, old-fashioned library that hasn't been split into floors.

"The conservatory," Fred says.

I feel him watching me closely as I nod, turning away from the numerous other stares no doubt directed our way. "How many students are there here?"

"Just over two hundred."

"That few," I say. "There were more than that in just my year group back home."

"You'll find that won't be the only difference here."

"The sports hall is over there," Ren says, leading me over to the stone arch and pointing through to a modern structure in the distance, only partly visible through thick trees.

"And then, through here is the dining hall." She pushes hard against double doors, which don't budge. "Damn."

Fred jogs over to the conservatory window to get someone's attention, and I start rubbing my wrists against the bitter cold.

"It doesn't usually snow at this time of year," Ren says, gesturing to the light dusting of snow that floats lazily around us and is starting to collect on the window ledges. "Normally we get to November with a bit of green still showing."

Fred appears back at our side just as the door gives way.

A dark-haired boy holds it open for us. "Ah, if it's not our new inmate – the US transfer," he says, his voice low and oddly loaded. I slip past him inside to the warmth, only looking up properly at him when we're inside. He's tall with olive skin, high cheekbones and swampy green eyes. A flash of something like recognition floods through me, but I cast it aside as I definitely haven't met him before.

"You're from California, right?" he prompts, holding my gaze.

I tear my eyes from him, nodding once, and Ren is quick to introduce us. "Cara, this is Hector. He's in our year."

I mutter a brief and unenthusiastic, "Hi."

"Well, we should get on. We've still got to get to the dorms before prep is over," Ren says, and I'm pleased for the distraction. Even though the boy hasn't said anything else, I can feel his eyes assessing me. I briefly consider telling him that, with me, he won't like what he finds.

"You're right," says Fred, turning to pat the other boy on the shoulder in a brotherly gesture. "Thanks, Hec."

Hector doesn't turn back as he stalks towards the conservatory, instead holding a hand up in the air in dismissal. He keeps his voice at the same volume, which strikes me as very self-assured, like he doesn't have to question whether his words will reach us as he says, "For you, Fred, anything."

I turn back to the dining room, relieved that he's gone. The walls are adorned in thick, dark panelling and dozens of circular tables, covered in blue and gold tablecloths, are dotted around, already laid out for breakfast. I look around, wondering where the serving area is, expecting to see piles of trays, cash desks … anything familiar. I might as well be in a restaurant.

Fred clears his throat. "We eat at eight a.m., twelve thirty and six p.m. Oh, and afternoon tea is in the conservatory – which, if you ask the headmaster, is non-negotiable."

I raise my eyebrows.

He flashes me his first, brief smile. "You'll see. Anyway, Ren will show you the dorms – I'm not allowed in the girls' wing – but I'll see you around."

"Okay, thanks," I say limply.

When he's out of sight, I feel an empty sort of dread. Now the tour is almost over, the reality has begun to set in. And the reality of all these new people, places and rules is unavoidable. Back in the front hall, I grab my bag from inside the door and follow Ren towards an old-fashioned lift, a gilded cage in the centre of a grand staircase, that circles up and around it like a spring. At the last minute, I freeze, catching her attention as she calls the lift.

"Everything okay?" she asks.

"How many floors up are we going?" I keep my gaze fixed on the stairs. "Could we not …" I let my words trail off, embarrassed.

She looks confused for a moment then, in time with the clattering of the lift's arrival, gestures to my bag and says, "Hand me that and we'll send it up in the lift." She pulls the gated doors shut on it, and we watch as it travels up above our heads.

She starts trudging up the stairs, and I follow her in admiration. How many other people wouldn't have asked why I won't get in the lift? I decide to try to seem a bit nicer, even just for her, when she doesn't complain as we climb six flights right up to the top floor.

"Left side is for boys," she says, her breath heavy as she collects my bag. "Right side is for us."

We turn into the girls' corridor, a long, blue-carpeted gangway, with doors lining either side. A typed card with the names of the inhabitants is stuck in the centre of each door. Ren leads me right to the end of the corridor where my name has been hastily scribbled underneath a solitary name: *Berenice de Laure*.

"You're with me," she says, examining my reaction closely. "I hope that's all right?"

"Short straw for you then," I say flatly. It is a lame, half-hearted attempt at a joke.

She ignores it. "I have to help the younger years get ready for bed. I'll leave you to unpack, but I'll be back in a bit."

I watch her go, deflated. I hadn't considered that I would be sharing a room. I go inside and feel like I've stepped into

a chalet. There are two raised single beds across from each other, with wooden ladders leading up to them and desks carved into the hollows underneath. My side is empty bar a neat pile of school uniform. Ren's side is chaotic – a cork-board over the desk is covered with photographs that branch out past the frame and onto the wall. I trace the faces in the pictures with my finger. Fred is a common feature, as is the other boy, Hector, who let us into the dining room. In centre place on the desk is a silver-framed photograph from which two people, presumably Ren's parents, stare out at me. I turn away, realising how different my side of the room will be when I've unpacked. I've brought only one photograph with me. It's not one I'm willing to put on display.

I take my time unpacking, feeding my trousers through coat hangers and matching up my shoes so that they sit exactly level with each other in the bottom of the wardrobe. From the loud, unguarded chatter seeping through the cracks in the door, it is clear that prep is over.

About half an hour after Ren leaves, there is a firm knock on the door, which is pushed open before I can answer. A round, elderly woman enters.

"You must be Cara," she says in an Australian accent. Her voice is stern and gravelly. For a second, I wonder whether she's going to be one of those hateful teachers from the books I read as a child. Then, as we make eye contact, something about her softens. Her eyes are a brilliant periwinkle blue, youthful and conspiratorial despite her lined face and short crop of thick grey hair. "I'm Madame James, your house-mother. I'll be in charge of your pastoral care while you're

here with us. I'm sorry I wasn't here to welcome you when you arrived – hopefully Ren and Fred did the tour with you."

"Yes."

"Ren's a good one to have around. She'll look after you." Madame James gestures to the pile of clothes on my desk. "I see you've got your uniform – that's good. Ren'll take you through everything else. But if you have any questions, or are worried about anything at all, come and find me. My room is directly below this one, on the fifth floor, and my door is always open." She tilts her head, appraising me with something close to pity in her expression; I immediately look away. "What I want, above everything, is for you to be happy here. We don't have much time with you, so we'll have to make the most of it."

"I'm here for an entire year," I say, still looking away from her.

"It'll fly by, dear. A year is nothing at all."

I feel my face fall. A year is *everything*. If I think about all the things that have happened in the last year … If I think about how long the last few months have felt …

Ren pushes open the door, and Madame James takes this as a signal to leave. I sense them having some form of silent exchange, so I turn my back and begin unfolding and refolding my uniform. There are two navy moleskin skirts that I expect will fall to just above the knee as Ren's does, four white scallop-collared long-sleeved shirts, two round-necked navy jumpers and several pairs of dark blue tights.

"It's a good look," Ren says with a wry smile, moving up beside me. Her expression softens. "You probably want

a bath after such a long journey – come on, I'll show you where the bathroom is."

I follow her back into the corridor. This time it's full of girls, loitering and chatting with their doors propped open. When we pass, their laughter quietens, and I feel a host of curious gazes dog my steps. Ren pulls open a door halfway down, not paying them any attention. At least ten sinks line one wall opposite a row of baths without any curtains. The lack of privacy unnerves me; I'd expected cubicles at least.

As we enter, two girls wrap their towels tighter around themselves. "You could have knocked," one of them says in a haughty American accent.

"Sorry," Ren replies, not sounding particularly apologetic. "This is Cara; I'm just showing her around."

The girl who spoke looks between us with an expression I can't quite decipher.

"I'm Joy," she finally says. "This is Hannah." She gestures lazily to the other girl, who looks on unsmilingly.

They both have eerily straight black hair, and I recognise them as the girls you find in every school – the popular ones. Seeing them here, and judging from their stares, it is clear Ren is not one of them. Strangely, I feel an immediate, instinctive loyalty to Ren, so instead of trying to make friends, as I'm sure would be the thing to do with everyone at this point, I stare back and pointedly say nothing.

I see them for who they are – after all, who'd know them better than me? Up until nine months ago I was them. It's vaguely reassuring to find that five thousand miles from home

some things never change. Yet now, something about their sense of superiority – their sense of entitlement – repulses me. I know how this works: they're waiting for me to answer so they can judge where I sit in the pecking order, whether it's worth befriending me or not. When I don't, the first girl Joy's eyes narrow.

I turn to Ren. "Are there no showers?"

She shakes her head. "I could guard the door?"

"Well, the two of you holed up in here will give us all something to talk about," Joy says, beckoning the other girl to follow her into the corridor. As she passes, she puts a hand on my arm in what I guess is supposed to be a gesture of camaraderie. I pull it back, cradling it possessively. She shrugs. "Or maybe you're into that sort of thing …"

I turn to Ren, whose chocolate brown eyes are wide and nervous as the door clicks closed. "Your response to that was a test," she says in a quiet voice, "and you just failed."

I shake my head with indifference. "Don't waste your time worrying about me."

After a very quick bath in which Ren dutifully sits with her back to me reading, feet pressed against the door to prevent anyone else entering, we get into bed. Our light is already off before Madame James comes round for lights out at eleven.

I press my palms to my face in the darkness, wondering if now is the time I'll finally find tears. Predictably there are none, yet the sadness is so acute it may choke me. I squeeze my eyes shut in another pointless attempt to block it all out, but instead hear Ren's breaths level and fall into a steady

rhythm as she is pulled into the haven of sleep. I'll be there soon, I promise myself. It won't be long until I'm enveloped by the painless nothingness. Yet, sleep doesn't feel close enough here; my mind is whirling, packed with questions. How will I be able to disguise my sadness here? How will I answer their questions about why I have arrived for just the final year of school? What happens if we have to go somewhere by car again?

I can't. I can't. *I can't*.

I push myself down the ladder and as silently as possible sift through my washbag. The sleeping pills the doctor gave me back in California aren't here; my mother must have taken them out after I packed them. I fight the urge to scream, before eventually – furiously – finding my way back to bed.

Blurred shapes come to life through the thick cloud of night in the dorm. When I let my eyes adjust, I count ten turquoise glow-in-the-dark stars fixed to the ceiling above Ren's bed. I begin to count them again and again, like I used to count imaginary sheep as a child, soothed and bored by the monotony.

After what feels like hours of empty time, the blackness finally swallows me.

3

My sleep is surprising: fitful and temporary. Before I arrived here it was always all or nothing. The nothing came first. Some days there were moments, just after I woke up, just before the world came into focus, when I felt almost peaceful. That was before the wave, before the crashing realisation of what had happened bore down over me. The other days were worse. The days when I woke straight from the dreams, the reconstructions of that night.

Those days I woke up screaming.

When I got home from the hospital and had to sleep without any of the pain medication, I quickly decided I couldn't put myself through either outcome, instead losing a whole chunk of my life to never sleeping for fear of remembering, for fear of having to go through it all again. But not sleeping didn't help: being awake for so long distorted everything. There were moments when I was sure I was going mad – mad enough for my mother to take me back to the emergency room, where I was given sleeping pills that were

heavy-duty enough to ensure my sleep was dreamless. And, after a while, dreamless sleep became a place to hide. There was infinite beauty in not remembering, never having to face what my life had become. Even though my mother took to rationing the pills, sleep was my place of solace.

But today, as the morning sun begins to seep through the cracks in the curtains, I abandon all attempts at sleep. Waking up is easy. Perhaps it's jet lag, or perhaps it's uncertainty? All I know is I can't lie here for much longer.

I look down at my bare arms on top of the white duvet, pinning me inside. In the dimly lit room my scar is all the more acute; a jagged burgundy line from wrist to elbow; a reminder that I am here, and I was there. This I will have to cover at all costs. It was dark when Ren and I put our pyjamas on last night, but still it was careless of me. I look at Ren's untroubled sleeping form and think of her kindness last night. I mustn't let my guard down with her, or anyone else, otherwise there will be no point at all to this experiment of my mother's.

It's early, but still I dress quickly and head to the bathroom. As expected, it's empty; yet, even though I'm finally – properly – alone, I feel claustrophobic. I open the window a crack and let the icy air trickle into the room. The radiator beneath the window is on, so I sit with my back to it and turn on my phone for the first time since the flight. It buzzes for at least a minute, filling up with messages. I scroll through them absently; they're all from my mother. Of course they are. I've long given up hope they'd be from anyone else. I delete the voicemails without listening to them and pull up the final text.

I've spoken to the school. They say you arrived safely. A little acknowledgement of my messages wouldn't go amiss, Cara. I know you're there xxx

I write a quick reply to sedate her.

I'm here, as you already know. What more do you want me to say?

She knows as well as I do, there is *nothing* left to say.

I press send before I have time to overthink it and go through the earlier messages, shaking my head as they become more and more urgent.

Are you there yet?
Send me a message when your plane lands.
Darling! Where are you?

I delete every one. *Don't forget you sent me here, Mum. How does your concern correlate with banishing your only daughter over five thousand miles from where you are?*

Now my inbox is clear of my mother's messages, only one thread remains. The last message I received was in December last year.

I'll pick you up at 8.

I call her. It goes straight to voicemail, her voice trilling out, a mixture of laughter and embarrassment. *Hi! You've reached G.*

I'm not here – obviously – but you know what to do. Beep. I hang up. Then dial again. After the tenth time, my hands shake so much I have to put the phone down on the floor. I let my head rest on my knees and take deep, long breaths as one of my many therapists taught me. I saw a string of them last year. My mother, a firm alumna of the school of self-help, had finally relented at my stepfather's request. I'd heard his pleas: *It's not healthy for her to spend all that time alone in her room. She hasn't even cried since it happened, has she? She needs someone – anyone – to talk to, seeing as she won't talk to you and me*. So off I went, packed off to spend the first of a series of unbearable hours in front of a therapist set on chipping away at my guard, desperate to figure out what was going on inside my head.

The sessions taught me a few things.

1. Therapists want progress, and you can fabricate progress.
2. Therapists are disposable, and since my mother doesn't believe in them anyway, it became easy to get her to give up on one when I'd had enough.

And finally:

3. Sometimes, just sometimes, they say something of note and it works. Like put your head between your knees and breathe deeply until you regain control.

However, to maintain points 1 and 2, it's crucial that point 3 is kept secret from said therapist in order to avoid another wave of psychoanalysis. And psychoanalysis must be avoided at all costs.

There is commotion in the corridor. I glance back at my

phone, lighting up the screen. It's 7.30 a.m. – much later than I thought. I shakily pull myself off the floor and, as I head back to my dorm, I run straight into Madame James.

"You're up early," she says brightly, banging on one of the dorm doors with her fist. "Wakey wakey, girls!" Her eyes flick down to the phone in my hand. "Ah, I'm afraid you'll have to give that to me. I should have got it from you last night. We have a no-mobiles policy here, but there is a phone box in the common room that you can use if you need to make a call outside school hours."

I hand it over freely. In fact, a part of me feels relieved.

"Do you want to jot down any numbers you might need before I take it?" she asks in surprise. Most people probably put up more of a fight. But then again, most people probably have people they want to stay in touch with. I shake my head. "Okay, then. Have a good first day!"

I try to adjust my expression to replicate her enthusiasm, then go to find Ren.

I've grown up in a household where breakfast is a time for quiet. It is the only time my mother, who will happily witter her way through the remainder of the day, cannot utter a word. And so I have always thought of it as a sacred time, a time where even the smallest notion of conversation is met with a death stare. Here, however, those rules don't apply. The dining room is packed and alive, and as I pass by noisy tables with my head bowed, I can't help but feel out of my depth.

We stop next to an empty table for four, and I choose

the seat facing the window, where I'll have my back to the rest of the room. Ren points to the dark, panelled walls that, since last night, have been adorned with bunting made up of miniature French flags.

"I thought the primary language here was English?" I ask, alarmed. This was, after all, my first defence back in California. I told my mother I couldn't possibly go to a school in Switzerland. I'd never been any good at languages – did she really care so little about me that she'd send me somewhere I wouldn't understand anyone?

"It is," Ren says calmly, "but there are students here from thirty-one different countries. Each week is dedicated to one of those cultures. There are special activities, and the kitchen staff theme their menus accordingly. This week it's France." She smiles gleefully at me. "The best."

I stare down at the table, and sure enough a basket of croissants and mini brioches sits in prime place. I try to locate the source of them, but, like last night, there is still no sign of a serving area or trays – or any familiarity at all. A woman wearing a pale blue apron meanders between tables, refilling the emptying baskets from a silver serving platter balanced between her arm and hip.

"We don't have long," Ren says, smothering a croissant with apricot jam. "We have to be in the auditorium at eight fifteen, so I'd grab something while you can."

"What's happening at eight fifteen?" I ask tentatively, pouring myself a glass of juice to give my hands something to do.

She takes a large bite of her croissant before speaking.

"The Monday meeting. It's like an assembly: the whole school gathers together, and the headmaster runs through anything of note for the week ahead." Another opportunity for the whole school to gawp at the new girl, then. Ren must notice my expression change because she adds, "Don't worry. We'll keep a low profile."

True to her word, when we leave the dining room and make our way outside, through the stone archway in the courtyard and along the path I glimpsed last night, Ren doesn't do anything to draw attention to us. We advance towards the sports hall, skirting around it at the last minute and into another modern structure right at the edge of the mountain. Like the sports hall, it's hidden from sight by thick evergreens that look like they've been dusted with powdered sugar. I wonder if these two modern buildings are purposely concealed so they have no impact on the otherwise old-fashioned feel of the school.

My breath catches in my throat when we enter. The auditorium is a semi-circular room three times the height of a normal building. Its curved edge is made completely out of glass, a vast window through to the precipice and mountains beyond. The space is unimaginably bright; the sparkling white mountains reflect the sunlight back through the glass. I have to squint to see the stage in front of the window.

Ren gestures up to the top of tiered seating facing the stage. "Let's find a seat at the back."

I nod and follow her up a set of metal stairs, our footsteps echoing loudly, announcing our presence. I force myself

to climb faster, wanting to disappear, to just melt into the background. We sit for a while in silence, watching the rest of the auditorium fill up, until a figure vaults up the stairs towards us.

"Why weren't you at breakfast?" Ren asks the boy I met last night, Hector, when he stops at our row.

"You know what Mondays are like," he replies with an air of resignation, taking the empty seat next to me. "Always tricky to get his majesty out of bed."

He pokes his thumb in Fred's direction; he is tramping up the stairs towards us at a much slower pace. When he comes into focus, he is bleary-eyed, with hair that definitely hasn't seen a brush. He gives us all a silent nod as he slumps down in the seat next to Hector.

A rustling sound draws my attention. Hector casually unwraps three croissants from a paper napkin on his lap. He twists in his seat; I feel his deep green eyes considering me for a moment, then he points between the napkin and me. "Pain au chocolat?" he says in an over-exaggerated French accent. I shake my head. "One of the only good things about French food, if you ask me."

Ren leans forward in her seat and looks at him with a half-amused, half-exasperated expression. "No one is asking you, thankfully."

He presses his lips together, the corners twitching provocatively, but at that moment, quiet starts to filter up the seating.

A tall, slim man with mousy hair and thick, black-rimmed glasses walks towards the stage.

"That's Mr King, the headmaster," Ren whispers.

Mr King moves centre stage and starts speaking French, which even I can tell is pretty basic. He flicks into American English with an apologetic expression and starts to acknowledge the week's events. I hear mention of a boules tournament taking place that evening, a French film screening on Thursday for anyone interested. I glance sideways to where Ren sits very upright, listening politely. On my other side, Hector seems to be paying more attention to the pains au chocolat that he's now sharing with Fred. I zone out from all of them, picking out a faraway spot in the distant mountains and project all my focus on to it.

"So what's your story?" Hector asks when the headmaster steps down from the stage and the room is filled with chatter again. I sense his gaze boring into me again, trying to work me out.

"My story?" I repeat with engineered indifference, and for a moment I'm distracted by his face. I hadn't realised how good-looking he is – someone who probably would have affected me before. "There's really nothing to say."

I force myself to look at him while I say this, keeping my face blank and unreadable. I underestimate the force of eye contact. I have been mostly alone for so many months, and there is something oddly intimate about the way he holds my gaze.

"Sure," Hector says, his voice a deep drawl, and I know my answer isn't good enough for him. As we start to trudge down the metal steps, he lowers his voice so only I can hear him, "I will get it out of you, you know."

My stomach knots itself together and I supress the urge to flee.

"You won't," I murmur back with a fierceness that hasn't been around for a while.

He gives me a swift, searching look, but I just shake my head. *Really, you won't.*