



my
second
life



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FAYE BIRD

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For Ruben and Rosa



my
second
life

prologue

THE FIRST TIME I was born, I was born Emma Trees. I was born to Amanda and Richard Trees. I was Emma. I was beautiful. People told me that. I had everything to live for. People told me that too. But I died. It was October 18.

1994. I was twenty-two.

And then I was born a second time, utterly against my will. Who knew you could be brought into the world twice, the second time only six years after you left the first time? Who knew you could be born again and know—and I mean know like you know how to pull in the air and breathe—that you’ve been here and done all this before?

I was born Ana Ross on June 28, 2000. A millennium baby. I was born to Rachel Ross, and someone called David Summers, who has never shown up, which is okay because if I had two parents, two people who loved me as much as Rachel Ross loves me, I really don’t think I could handle it. I feel kind of guilty that Rachel loves me so much and thinks I’m so completely wonderful, when actually I’ve been here

and done all this before with my first mum and dad. I do love Rachel. She just doesn't feel like Mum. Not to me. Amanda Trees is my mum, and she always will be.

The first time you're born it's pretty traumatic. A bit like being pulled out of a deliciously warm bath and plonked wet and naked in the middle of the highway in rush hour and someone saying, *"Get on with it then!"*

The second time I was born it was easier, because I knew the score. The rush of blind panic as you slip out, the first gasp of tight cold air, the hairy peering faces. I knew all that would pass, and that soon I'd be on the warm belly of someone I'd love for the rest of my life. Except when I looked up and saw Rachel, and she was looking down at me, smiling her tired puffy smile of love and exhaustion, all I could think was You're not my mum, before someone wrapped me in a towel and placed a plump nipple into my mouth.

And that was it. I was off. I was living my second life. And there was nothing I could do about it, but live.

So I did.

I followed the pattern of each and every day, but this time it was different, because this time I had a knowing sense of what was coming next. And I actually enjoyed childhood again a second time. It wasn't like I was bored or felt like I knew it all already. I mean, it's not like I knew everything—all the

world's knowledge and all the world's secrets—from my first life anyway. One life lived is just that: one life lived. It's not every life.

I was quick to talk, and that was when things changed. Once I talked, once I could express myself, life began to feel somehow more fragmented. For a start, no one seemed to know my name.

"I'm Emma," I'd say as Rachel called "Ana" across the park when it was time to go home.

"I'm Emma!" I'd say when she called me "Ana Ross" and told me off for sticking my fingers in the peanut butter jar.

"Emma," I'd say as she sang me my bedtime song. I'd let her sing "Hush, Little Ana" all the way through, and I wouldn't ever interrupt. I'd wait until the end, and then I'd say it. I'd tell her my name was Emma, not Ana.

"Ana," she'd say back. "Darling, you're Ana. Ana. Night night," and she'd kiss me on the forehead and I'd want my mum, not Rachel, and I'd lie awake because it all felt so wrong. The wrongness of it was all I could feel.

I have never called Rachel "Mum." As soon as I learned to speak I called Rachel "Rachel."

She didn't like it.

"Please, Ana—call me 'Mum'!" she'd say.

But I couldn't.

Because it hurt too much to say the word “Mum” and see Rachel’s face looking back at me, not my real mum’s face; my first mum.

Eventually Rachel sort of accepted me calling her “Rachel,” just as I had accepted her calling me “Ana,” not Emma.

In this we were the same at least.

So here I am. Ana. Only one “n,” which causes a huge amount of confusion throughout my life and generally draws attention in a way I really don’t like that much. I’m fifteen years old, and I’m named after a Spanish Ana who Rachel went to school with, and whose name it seems just stuck in her memory. I don’t know anything about Spanish Ana, but I do know that it kind of frustrates me that everyone is always spelling my name wrong, and I’m always having to correct them and spell it back, then explain about the Spanish Ana. It’s like a curse, or one of my curses anyway.

And being Ana, well, it has good days and bad days, just like being anyone. To be honest, whole years have gone by when knowing that this is my second life hasn’t even remotely bothered me. It is just how it has always been.

Until recently, that is.

Until I saw Frances.

And everything changed.

I’m not bipolar, in case you were wondering. I’m not manically depressed. I don’t hallucinate, and there are no voices

in my head. There is no Emma voice telling me to do stuff. I think I would know if I was ill, or someone would have told me, or suggested I see a doctor or a therapist or something. I've never been arrested for strange behavior in the street. I've never even had a detention. I think I'm pretty normal for a fifteen-year-old girl: I go to school; I do my homework; I've got friends—Zak, Hannah, and Jamie, a few others. I'm not one of those people who likes to hang out in a clique or a crowd. I had a best friend, Ellie, but she moved to the States. And of course I've got Rachel, and my grandma, Grillie. I fight with Rachel, but that's normal . . . right? To fight with your parent? And my vice? If you can call it that. Well, I've got a thing about Converse. I have three pairs—blue, purple, and green—and I'm aiming to own a pair in every color.

And that's it.

That's me—Ana.

I'm Ana.

And it's just that I was Emma, before. So I know more about the world than I should for a person my age. I guess you could say that's a shame, but what I know is so random, mixed up, that until I saw Frances it really didn't matter what I knew. It was just the varied stuff of a life that had been lived before. So I know what it feels like to taste Kalamata olives and unripe avocados before I put them into my mouth . . . and I know what it feels like to down pints of cider and black out . . . The thrill of hailing a cab in New York . . . The utter joy of a first kiss with someone you've been waiting to touch

and to hold and be held by. But it doesn't ruin life knowing these things. It hasn't ruined it at all.

Because even when life has been full of recognition, there's still always been room for discovery. And I thought that was a good thing. But when I saw Frances in the hospital, my whole life fell apart. It disintegrated like lit tissue paper in my hands. Because in seeing Frances I remembered what I did in my first life.

And what I did was kill a person. And to discover that—to discover the ugly memories of that—to remember some of what you did, but not all that happened—it is hell. And it is what happened to me.

monday



1

"WE'RE GOING TO SEE Grillie later. You have remembered, haven't you?" Rachel shouted through the bathroom door to me as I stepped out of the shower.

"Yes! What time is her operation?"

"They said it'll be sometime this morning. I can call at mid-day and we can go over after three. I'll pick you up from school."

"That's fine!" I shouted back.

Except I remembered that I'd said I'd meet Jamie after school. We'd arranged to go for a coffee. Jamie was my friend, but I'd liked him for ages. For months. He'd been going out with this girl in my year, Melissa, over the summer, but when we got back to school last week there were rumors going around that they'd broken up. I was there when Zak asked Jamie what had happened—he had just said Melissa was "no fun." I could have told him that and then he wouldn't have had to go out with her. But I didn't say anything. I just laughed, and then quickly suggested we go to the café after school the

next day. And now I'd have to text him and let him know I couldn't make it. I wanted to see Grillie after her operation, but not seeing Jamie was gutting. Really gutting.

I sighed, wrapped my towel around me, and opened the bathroom door and found myself face-to-face with Rachel more suddenly than I'd anticipated.

"Didn't realize you were still standing right there!" I said impatiently as I nipped past her and made my way into my room.

She tutted and started to head downstairs.

"I'll meet you at the gates, okay?" she shouted back.

"Okay!"

I picked up my phone to text Jamie.

Can't make the cafe today. Got to see my gran. Tomorrow? Ax

Grillie—my grandma Millie—was old. Eighty-two years old. When I was younger I would sit on her lap for hours on long weekend afternoons, and I would stroke her soft cheek and sing with her, and wonder whether she'd ever lived before. It was only because she was old. And wise. The oldest and wisest person I knew.

They say that wisdom comes with age, don't they? I worked out in the shower this morning that between my two lives, my cumulative age was thirty-seven. Weird. Thirty-seven years of living, and really I was none the wiser.



When Rachel picked me up after school she was really anxious. When we got to the hospital she pounded the corridors as we followed the signs toward the ward.

“Are you okay, Rachel?”

“Yes, yes. I just want to see her, that’s all.”

“It was just a routine operation, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but she’s eighty-two. There are always risks when you’re eighty-two.”

“What did they say when you phoned earlier?”

“They said it went well.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re thinking that’s what they always say . . . You never really know until you get there.”

Rachel slowed her pace and looked at me. “Exactly,” she said, and she stroked my hair as we walked and I wanted to pull away from her as she touched me. It just made me want Mum even more when she touched me. Her loss was like an endless ache when I was with Rachel. It was something I’d always lived with. It was with me almost all the time. But today I let Rachel stroke my hair. I didn’t pull away. Because I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Not now when she was so worried about Grillie.

When we walked into Grillie’s room she was sitting up in

bed. She smiled when she saw us. I could see it was a struggle to smile. Even though she was propped up she didn't look all that comfortable. She had a crinkly gown on and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She was pale but calm. I knew she wasn't going to die. Not today.

"How are you?" Rachel said, leaning forward to give her a kiss.

I wanted to give her a kiss too, to say hello, but I was nervous. I didn't want to lean in and press down on her in all the wrong places.

"My throat's a little dry," she said.

I jumped to it. "Here, I'll pour you some water." There was a plastic jug on the side with a flappy white lid and a small plastic cup.

"Thank you, lovely," she said.

I sat down gently on the side of the bed, passing her the cup. She took a drink and then she set the cup down and took my hand.

"You've got the room all to yourself, Grillie! You've lucked in!"

"Well, yes. For now," she said. "So how was your day, lovely?"

"Oh—not much to tell. Just school," I said.

"But you like it, don't you? It's a good school. Rachel's always telling me how well you're doing."

I looked at Grillie. This was the same conversation we always had. She was tired. Her usual feisty chat dulled by the painkillers. She was slow, placid.

"I'm going to go and find a nurse. See if we can get you another pillow," said Rachel. "I'll be back in a minute."

"How long do you have to stay in for?" I asked.

"Not sure just yet. See how I go. If all is well I'll be out by the weekend, I think."

"I'll come again tomorrow, okay? Bring you a magazine or something."

"Yes. I'd like that," she said, and then her hand slipped its grip from mine and she sank quickly into sleep. I knew it was the drugs but it still surprised me.

Rachel came back.

"She's asleep," I whispered.

"Oh—is she?" Rachel said. I could see the disappointment in her face as she pulled the pillow she'd just found for Grillie toward her tummy. She was hugging it for comfort.

"I'm sure she'll wake up again in a minute," I said. I wanted to make it better for her.

"I don't know. She must be tired. And all the drugs . . . she needs to sleep."

I stood up to let Rachel sit where I had been sitting on the bed, and I watched Rachel put the pillow down and take Grillie's hand, and as she held it in her own she looked into Grillie's face with such love. I had never felt love like that for Rachel. Because all I have ever wanted is my mum. My real mum. I wanted to cry and call out for her now, to come to me. But I couldn't. Because no one would have come. The room suddenly felt hot.

Too hot.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should go.” I said to Rachel, picking up my bag from the floor. “We should let her sleep.”

I had to get out. Find some fresh air. I had to get out, to breathe.

“Yes,” said Rachel, and she picked up the pillow she’d left on the end of the bed and plumped it before putting it back, and then she kissed Grillie on the forehead, so gently, and we left.

We walked through the hospital in complete silence. I didn’t know why I felt so bad. Maybe it was just the hospital. There was a smell of illness in the air. A place where you went to get better should smell of good health—of a rich, dark earth and a fresh spring wind—but this place smelled sterile and poisonous. I kept walking, fast, trying to get Rachel to walk faster with me. I could tell she was worried, thinking hard. Her pace was much slower than when we’d arrived. And as I walked I looked at the walls, the signs, the people here visiting family, friends . . .

I could see a rush up ahead: a couple of doctors with a stretcher jogging it along the corridor, people parting ways. An emergency. *Just let me out. Let me out . . .* That’s all I could think as I kept walking. The stretcher was coming closer now, and I could see there was an old woman lying on it, crying, her arms stretched high on a pillow above her head, her head turned to one side. Crying. Wailing. I stopped. I had to. I was forced to. And as much as I didn’t want to look, I did.

And that's when I saw her—Frances. She opened her eyes as she passed me, and we were locked together in a moment—

“Frances Wells . . .,” I said, out loud, as they wheeled her away.

“What's that?” said Rachel.

“That was Frances Wells!”

I knew her . . . I knew her face.

An image flew through my mind: a child, a small child, with her eyes open wide . . . wet and wild . . . her body, still . . . cradled by a mass of twigs and branches in the water . . .

I thought I might pass out. I took a deep breath in.

“She didn't look so well, did she?” said Rachel, utterly mishearing me. “Let's go, come on. Let's get fish and chips.”

And as we walked out into the cooler air I could feel that something had changed. There had been a shift—in me—and I had this feeling. A feeling that I had done something so wrong . . . so very wrong that I didn't dare to name it . . . And I was afraid.

tuesday



2

I WENT BACK to visit Grillie the following day. She was better: less pale, her eyelids less droopy. She was offering me strawberries and interrupting me all the time, so I knew she was on her way to being well again. And she was impatient to tell me all the details of her new roommate.

“The one next door,” she mouthed in a theatrical whisper, pointing in the direction of the next bed. I nodded to stop her pointing and mouthing the words. “She’s in a terrible state. Terrible. Been up all night crying with the pain.”

I stood up and pulled the curtain around the bed quickly, to give us some privacy. I could tell Grillie was kind of enjoying the drama of it all and I didn’t want the woman in the next bed to hear her talking on. “Did you sleep all right, though?” I said.

“Me? Oh yes. Fine. I woke up a couple of times, you know, with the noise”—and again she pointed—“but generally I slept fine. Can’t wait to get home now. Get back into my own bed. And the food is pretty awful.”

“Rachel’s made a pie for when you get home. Chicken. It’s in the freezer.”

“Oh, lovely,” she said. “I’ll look forward to that.”

We sat in silence for a moment. I could hear a voice, a doctor, talking to the woman in the opposite bed. Something about tests and needing to go down to the ground floor, and an aide coming in about an hour.

“Open the curtain a little, lovely. Just in case the doctor’s got anything to say to me too.”

I stood up to open the curtain and smiled to myself. I knew Grillie just wanted a good nosy at her roommate. I didn’t blame her. There wasn’t much else to do, and I’d forgotten to buy the magazine I’d promised.

“Shall I go down and get you that magazine?” I said.

“Don’t bother, honestly. I can’t really concentrate on anything for too long at the moment. Reading just sends me to sleep. I’m fine. Just open the curtain some more. Get the light in here. I’d have liked a bed right next to the window. Lots of light. But they put me here. A bed by the window would have been nice, wouldn’t it?”

“A room with a view,” I said, smiling. “Yes, that would have been nice, Grillie. Very nice.” And as I walked the curtain all the way around the bed and pushed it firmly against the wall I saw the person in the bed next to Grillie’s—next to where I stood. Frances Wells. She was still, motionless. I was close enough to reach out and touch her.

My body tensed up until all I could feel was the pain as

my muscles contracted hard under my skin. If I could have pulled myself inward and retracted, into nothing, I would have done it. A sickness was rising up from my belly, slowly, steadily.

She'd been the one wailing all night. She'd been the one in pain. It was Frances Wells. And she didn't know that I was here—now—that I had been Emma.

My chest pounded as the sickness traveled upward toward my throat. I tried to swallow it down, and as I did I was filled with a stark and vivid memory. I was outside a house. A big house. Frances was inside. I could see her through the window. She was younger, smiling, happy . . . She wore a navy dress with red stitching and red buttons and a shiny thick black belt. Her hair was tied back, but strands were hanging down in front of her ears and around her collar. She was pretty. She stood in a large front room. There were dark green sofas, and bookshelves, a fireplace . . . There was someone else in the room with her. A man. He was standing behind her and she was talking to him, telling him something. They were laughing. And she stepped forward and she closed the curtains. Her neat, slim waist was the last thing I saw through the final gap of the closing material in the window as she turned away from me and disappeared into the depths of the room. I didn't want her to close the curtains. I could feel anger pulsing in my chest . . . She'd shut me out. Why had she shut me out?

"Ana?" Grillie's voice broke through.

I hung on to Grillie's bed. I grasped the cold metal bar on

the headboard until it hurt all the way up my arms. I couldn't let myself be sick. Not here. Not now. I tried to swallow again and my mouth was wet, too wet. I could feel the rising lumps in my throat, the banging in my ears. I screwed up my eyes, and I opened my mouth wide to gulp some air, and as I did my shoulders sank down and I felt the banging in my body begin to slowly subside. I let go of the bed and looked down at Frances again. I couldn't help myself looking.

She was an old woman. She lay on her side sleeping. Her body now wider, heavier with age, her hair shorter, colorless, wiry, although it still settled on her neck like it used to. It was her. It was Frances. I knew her. It was actually her.

"Ana? Are you okay?" Grillie was shifting in her bed behind me. I could hear the sheets slipping around her as she moved.

I looked at Grillie and I tried a smile.

"She doesn't look well, does she?" Grillie said, motioning toward Frances with her head.

"Have you talked to her?"

"Yes," Grillie said. "She's in a lot of pain."

"Has she had any visitors?" I whispered.

Grillie shook her head. "No one."

I looked over my shoulder again. I wanted to make sure Frances was still asleep, that she couldn't hear a word of what we were saying.

"Lost a husband to cancer, and then a daughter. The child drowned. She was only six years old."

I nodded. I didn't feel like I could speak. I swallowed and my throat felt thick again, like it was swelling, but this time with tears. I didn't know where to look so I walked away and took a chair from under the window. It gave me some time to breathe, and then I brought it over to sit next to Grillie on the other side of the bed.

Guilt.

All I could feel was guilt.

It was uncoiling itself inside me.

"She told you that?" I whispered.

"I only asked whether she had any children. I wondered if she was going to have any visitors. That woman across the hall, she's got people coming in left, right, and center. It's like a bloody bus station . . ."

I nodded again.

" . . . She told me she had a daughter, and I jumped in and said how nice that was and that I had a daughter and a granddaughter, that you were both coming in later and what a blessing it was . . . And then she said she'd lost her child, her daughter. I felt terrible. I mean, how was I to know? Terrible. And then she told me very matter-of-factly that the girl had been drowned, when she was only six years old . . ."

I took Grillie's hand. "You couldn't have known, Grillie."

"I know that, but I felt awful . . . and then the worst of it was I couldn't think of anything else to say. Shut me right up, it did. Until I started gabbing to fill in the awkward silence. I ended up inviting her to bridge. I wish I hadn't. So I'm glad

to see you, Ana, because I haven't been able to talk to anyone else today but her. Maybe you should go and get me that magazine, lovely? Something gossipy and fun."

"Did she say anything else? About her daughter?" I asked.

Grillie was fumbling with her purse, trying to find some coins. "No, nothing else, lovely. And I didn't like to ask. Now here, get yourself something too. Some chocolate or something."

I took the coins and walked down to the shop. I glanced back at Frances's motionless body as I went. This was the closest I had ever been to my first life, and I didn't know what I was meant to do. But in that very moment I was glad of the space to think, of the opportunity to be walking away.

I WAS MEETING JAMIE at four thirty.

I couldn't stop thinking about Frances Wells as I walked to meet him at the café.

I walked, and I thought.

I was a good person, wasn't I?

There had been times when I was desperate to tell someone how I'd lived before, but I never did. I'd held on to my secret to protect the people I loved. That was good, wasn't it? That had been the right thing to do? I was trying to be a good person. But now—Frances—and these memories—this feeling of shame, and guilt—I didn't know what to do with that—

42 The Avenue.

It came to me, as I walked, like someone had posted a letter to my brain.

42 The Avenue.

It was there, suddenly.

42 The Avenue.

An address.

Frances's address.

I was sure.

Jamie was late.

It shouldn't have mattered. Going out with Jamie for a coffee after school was actually pretty normal. But now that Ellie had moved away and Zak was going out with Hannah, our gang had dwindled to almost nothing. Now there was just me and Jamie and it felt, well, awkward. I liked him too much. Way too much. And I wasn't sure I could hide it if the others weren't there.

I ordered a hot chocolate with whipped cream, marshmallows—the lot—and sat down on the sofas next to a low table by the window. I played with the spoon, looking up every now and then to see if he'd arrived. I picked up my phone. No messages. I flicked through my photos, my contacts, and then I opened up a Web search and put in "42 The Avenue Frances Wells." I didn't remember where I'd lived before. Frances being here, now, didn't give me anything to go on. Not really. I could have lived anywhere before. But I put in London anyway. It seemed like a good place to start. I scanned the pages. Nothing. A few people called Frances who'd lived on Avenues. Of course. What was I thinking? Like it was going to give me some kind of information on . . . what? What was I looking for exactly? I didn't know . . . Some proof, I guess—that Frances was who I thought she was.

“Sorry, I know I’m late.” Jamie was here.

“Hi!” I said, overenthusiastically, putting away my phone.

“I’m gonna get one of those too!” he said, pinching a marshmallow off the top of my mug, and then he walked up to the line to order.

I looked over at him and popped a marshmallow into my mouth and sucked it soft while I waited for him to come back and sit down. He looked nice.

“So, you all right?”

I felt awkward.

“Yeah, yes,” I said.

“How’s your gran?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, she’s okay. She’ll be home soon.”

“That’s good,” he said, spooning whipped cream into his mouth. “Mmm, this too.” He looked up and smiled at me, his eyes sort of holding mine. I wasn’t sure whether to look away or carry on looking back at him, but somehow I couldn’t let go of his gaze.

“What did you do last night then?” I asked, racking my brains for something—anything—to say.

“Went to Zak’s, played Xbox . . .”

“That’s all you two ever do!”

“No, it’s not!” he said. “Anyway, I didn’t hang around for long—Hannah turned up.”

If Zak wasn’t playing Jamie on the Xbox then he was basically pretty much guaranteed to be hanging out with Hannah.

“You should come to Zak’s next time,” Jamie said. “You’d make me feel like less of a third wheel.”

“Yeah, right!” I said. “Thanks!”

“What?”

“Well, that’s not much of an invitation! And you know how much I love Xbox . . .”

Jamie smiled.

I quickly looked at my phone—I wasn’t sure why—then at Jamie again.

When he looked back at me I felt a rise and fall. It was as if he’d lifted me up and then gently set me down again. But I hadn’t moved at all. He’d done that with his eyes. I felt hot inside.

“Have you heard from Ellie?” I said, trying to change the subject, break the moment.

“Nah,” he said. “It’s been what, a couple of weeks?”

“Four,” I said. “Nearly five.”

“She’s probably busy. You know, settling into her glamorous new life in the US of A.” He grinned at me as he said it.

I smiled.

“I’m sure you’ll hear from her soon,” he said.

His eyes were blue, more blue than I remembered. Beautifully blue.

“So are you going out tonight?” he asked.

I shook my head and picked up my mug, staring into the bottom of it. It was virtually empty now; I took a sip of foamy air.

“What’s up, Ana?”

“Nothing . . .”

“You don’t seem yourself.”

I wasn’t being myself. I knew that. He knew that.

“I’m fine, really.”

“So come out then,” he said. “Come out with me and Zak. We’re going over to Sammy’s tonight.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’ll have to check with Rachel. It’s a school night—”

“Tell her you’re coming to my place, to study.”

“Yeah—maybe—”

As I broke off I could see he was hanging on for my answer, searching my eyes for a “yes,” and I wondered for a split second whether I could tell him. Could I tell him that in the hospital bed next to my Grillie there was this seriously old woman I’d known before from my first life, the life I’d lived before this one, the life only I knew about, the life that I’d kept a secret from him, from Ellie, from them all? I was desperate, suddenly, to say it out loud, to tell him, there and then, and just shout it, scream it—

And there it was again. The little girl’s face in the water. She was in a river. Pale, still, her eyes open and wide—the river so dark it was black—her clothes so bright in the water. She was floating.

“Just tell her we need to work on a presentation or something,” Jamie said.

And I looked back at him.

“I can’t, Jamie. I wish I could but I can’t.” And as I said it, I thought I saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes, reflecting the disappointment that I knew was crouching quietly in mine. But all I could think about in that moment was Frances Wells and the shape of her body between the curtains in the dusk, and my anger, my fury, that she’d shut me out—that she’d left me outside the house, that she’d left me outside to play—and that there was no one I could tell. There was no one.

wednesday

4

DOUBLE PERIODS OF CHEMISTRY. Double periods of math. Wednesday was officially the worst day of the week.

I pretty much doodled all the way through chemistry. Well, perhaps not all the way through. I took down the notes, copied out what I needed to, but I didn't actually think about any of it, or answer any of the questions. Instead, I doodled. And I did the same in math too. I was trying to block out the image of the dead girl, lying faceup in the water, her skirt puffed out around her sides. It didn't matter where I put the pencil on the paper; I just kept drawing lines that turned into trees and branches that turned into reflections on the river that turned into her hair as it floated outward from her little head. I'd turn the page and start again and all I could see was her wet hair spread out against the bank, her face pale, open and shocked. She was dead, but somehow still alive enough to look like she might, at any moment, simply sit up and blink, and ask me why . . . why had I killed her.

Because I had. I'd killed her.

I'd killed that little girl.

I felt a pain so clear and sharp in my stomach that I thought I was going to be sick. "I feel sick. Can I go?"

I stood up.

"Do you think you are actually going to be sick, Ana?" asked Mr. Roberts.

I nodded and started walking toward the classroom door so Mr. Roberts had no choice but to let me go.

I'd killed her.

I didn't remember how or when, but I could see her face, as I'd seen it then, and I knew she was in that river because of me. I might not have remembered leaving her to cough and splutter as her lungs filled up, until there was not a breath of her left, but I knew right down to my core that I'd killed her, that I was guilty. And I couldn't get the image of her face in the water out of my mind.

I didn't go to the toilets. I walked straight out of school and into the street, and I just kept walking. I wasn't really sure where I was going. I felt less sick now that I was outside. I guessed the school would call Rachel once they'd realized that I had gone. I'd never ditched before. I didn't really know how these things worked. I had been in for registration. Maybe no one would notice that I had gone. I looked at my watch. It was just after midday . . .

It was just after midday and I had killed a person.

I had to keep going, keep walking toward the Tube, get away. It was all I could think to do. The pain was there again. I held on to my side and I felt my heart speed up.

I had killed a person. A child.

I got to Richmond station, jumped onto the Tube and sat down.

There was a buzz in my pocket. A text. Rachel.

Just got a call from the hospital. Grillie's checking out. Going to pick up some things for her and then to hospital to take her home. See you this evening. x

I put my phone away. She didn't know I'd ditched. Not yet.

I changed at Gloucester Road. I got on the Circle line and tried to lose myself looking at the route. All trains lead to Edgware Road All trains lead to Edgware Road All trains lead to Edgware Road . . . I could feel my eyes getting heavier . . . It was soothing here . . . safe . . . I could feel normal here . . . I was just sitting on the Tube like everybody else . . . and wherever I went I would never be lost . . . I would never be lost . . . I would never . . .

The little girl was wearing black patent shoes and white tights. The tights were new; they were clean and bright and stiff at the seams. They were poking out through the gaps in her shoes. I helped her with the shoes. She said she didn't like the way they felt. So I took them off and I straightened the tights. I tucked the seams under her toes, and slipped the

shoes back on her feet. She looked so pleased to be dressed up, but still so uncomfortable. A red skirt and a cream blouse, with a cream ribbon at the neck. Nothing like anyone would wear these days. Her clothes were prim and straight and a bit static. Her hair was parted in the middle and clipped up high above her ears with tartan bows on each side. I could see her, looking at me, smiling.

“You look silly dressed like that, Catherine.”

That’s what I said to her.

Catherine.

I was in my favorite outfit. Dungarees and a long-sleeved Snoopy T-shirt. We were across the road from the house on The Avenue, standing on the Green opposite number 42. A redbrick house with a clean white tile hung on the porch wall, decorated with glazed red numbers—42. There was a pretty pattern around the edges of the numbers too. It was raised, bumpy. I remembered running my fingers along its swirls and curls—

“You okay there?” I’d fallen asleep.

“Where are you going?”

It was a woman with bright red lipstick and severe bangs. Her face was way too close to mine. For a minute I couldn’t see where I was. She was touching my shoulder, trying to wake me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks,” I said.

And I saw I was at Edgware Road. I had to change. I stepped off the Tube and crossed over to the next Circle line

train waiting on the opposite platform. I'd go around. I'd go right around and back to Gloucester Road again.

I closed my eyes.

The Green was a piece of common land, with some trees. I could see it so clearly in my mind. The houses on The Avenue overlooked the Green, and beyond it, the Thames. The Avenue was a quiet place. A quiet road with twenty or so houses, the common land, and direct access across the Green down to the river. It was peaceful.

"We're going to the river, Catherine. We'll play hide-and-seek by the river."

I'd said that.

And all the time I was waiting for my dad. I wanted my dad to come and play, like he'd said he would. But he never came. And I could still feel the anger that I felt because he never came.

My heart started beating faster.

I felt hot.

I coughed and opened my eyes to check where I was.

We were moving slowly through a tunnel. I closed my eyes again.

I willed for something more to come. Nothing.

I could feel a pain—in my head—a pressure, building.

Where was my dad?

I looked up again to see where I was.

I couldn't settle.

The pain was hovering over my eyes now, crawling over my scalp.

Embankment.

I'd killed her.

The little girl. Catherine. I'd killed her.

I held my hands up to cradle my head . . . to soothe the pain.

I could just about see the sign. Embankment. It was definitely Embankment.

I was a good person, wasn't I? I'd always been a good person.

Did I have to pay for what I'd done?

I screwed my eyes shut.

Is that why I was here again? To pay?

I squeezed my eyes shut—tighter still—there was only pain.

I had to get rid of the pain. I had to.

My head felt like it was going to explode. A constant high-pitched tone in my ears was drowning out the rattle of the Tube. Every movement of the carriage hurt me . . . every rock and turn . . . I'd seen Frances—and now this. Was it only ever a matter of time? Frances and the memories, the feelings, this knowledge—that I'd killed Catherine—it must have all been sitting there, like a tumor growing quietly on the brain. And now—now I had to find a way to stop it, to nuke it, shrink it, make it go away . . . I wanted to scream out with the pain,

with the fear, with the feeling that I might just explode into a thousand tiny pieces if I did nothing. If I just sat there and did nothing . . .

Gloucester Road.

A voice told me it was Gloucester Road.

I had to change.

I had to go now.

To the hospital.

I had to see Frances.

It was the only thing I could do.

And as soon as I had the thought—as soon as I decided that I would go and see her—the pain lifted slightly, and I was certain that it was the right thing to do.

THE CLOSER I GOT to the hospital the more sick I felt. The pressure had lessened in my head, but the black feelings, they were all still there. When I walked up to the nurses' station in the ward my hands were visibly shaking. I didn't want to see any of the same nurses I'd seen when I was here visiting Grillie.

"Who are you here to see then, my love?" the nurse said. She was new. She didn't know who I was, and as I went to answer my mouth was dry as a pit. The words felt like they were stuck to my lips.

"Frances Wells . . . I'm her niece," I lied.

The nurse said how nice it would be for Frances to have a visitor, how Frances hadn't had any visitors since she'd been in, and the nurse kept on talking as we made our way through the ward to the room. No one had taken Grillie's bed yet, and I was only half listening to the nurse because I could see Frances now. She sat strong and upright in bed, reading. She looked better, better than she had before. She glanced up at

me and then back at her book, smoothing a cloth bookmark between her fingers as she read.

She didn't look up again.

She clearly hadn't seen me, or recognized me, but then she had been asleep when I'd visited before.

I wished she would recognize me. If she recognized me—if she saw something in me that reminded her of Emma—then she would be more likely to believe me. I was sure of that. I wasn't as beautiful as Emma. I knew that. People told me I was beautiful when I was Emma. They didn't do that now. But maybe, just maybe, something—my eyes, my voice—would remind her of Emma.

"I'm not sure that she'll recognize me," I said to the nurse as we neared the bed. "It's been quite a long time."

"I'll leave you to it then, my love," she said, and she left.

"Hello," I said.

Frances looked up at me. She didn't speak.

"I'm Millie's granddaughter. Millie who was here, in that bed next to you," and I pointed.

"Yes," she said. "I know Millie." She was very clear, very definite with her words. I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

I felt so nervous. I'd never felt this nervous about anything before.

There was a pause.

"You know Millie's gone home now, don't you?" she said.

"Yes, yes I do. I . . . I came to see you."

I was stumbling over my words now. I swallowed, to try to calm myself down, to get some saliva in my mouth.

"To see me?" Frances said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

My legs started to shake uncontrollably. "Can I sit down?"

Frances nodded to the chair next to her bed. There was a white plastic bag full of wool and needles on the chair. "Move that bag—here . . ." She motioned for me to pass it over to her, then set it down on the bed and put her book on the bedside table. Everything she did was very slow, ordered. She didn't take her eyes off me once, and her fingers, resting on the edge of the sheet, were constantly rubbing the material between her forefinger and her thumb, as if for comfort.

"Do I know you?" she said.

And my heart beat so loudly when she said it that my chest shuddered in response.

"Yes. I think so," I said. "That's why I came back—to see you. Because—because I think I know you. I mean . . . when I saw you here, lying in that bed . . . I knew who you were."

"Right," she said. And I felt cold now. So cold I was shivering. But I had to keep talking. I had to.

"You lived on The Avenue, didn't you?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "I still do."

My heart bashed my chest again. I could feel the blood rushing around my body, or was it adrenaline? Whatever it

was, I didn't like it. I pressed my hands together in my lap to stop them lifting up toward my heart. I wanted to protect my heart, cup it, soften the bashing, make it slow. If Frances still lived there now in the house I remembered, and she was in hospital here, then The Avenue couldn't be that far away.

If I was this close to Frances, to where she had lived, where she still lived now, could I be close to my mum too? Could I be close enough to find her? To see her? And Dad?

"You've lived there a long time," I said, trying to hide the weakness in my voice.

"Forty-five years next April," she said, and she looked at me with a stare that was utterly unreadable. And I realized that the whole time we'd been speaking she hadn't blinked. Not once. "Do you live nearby? I've never seen you. I'm quite sure."

I shook my head.

And I said it—

"I knew your daughter." I just said it.

And I held my breath, after I did, to hold on to the sob that was rising in my chest.

"Millie told me that she lives on Connaught Gardens. That's close by. Perhaps we've seen each other, in the street."

"No—I knew your daughter!" I cried out, standing up as I spoke.

Frances paused before she answered, her eyes still firmly fixed on mine.

"I heard you the first time," she said. "Now sit down." I sat automatically, at her command.

"I . . . I know it sounds like the most unlikely, most unbelievable thing you've ever heard," I said, "but—"

"My daughter died thirty-three years ago. Thirty—three—years." She repeated the words, pronouncing every syllable, as if the pain of all those years was encapsulated in each and every sound.

"I know, but . . ." I had to tell her I was Emma. I had to tell her. If I couldn't tell her, then there was no one I could tell. No one.

"I'd like you to leave now," she said.

"Don't make me leave!" I said. "I've got to talk to you." Suddenly, I was desperate.

A nurse approached the bed with a fresh water jug and said how nice it was that Frances had a visitor and how she must be pleased. Frances just nodded and smiled. I waited for the nurse to leave. It felt like an age, but eventually she went. And then Frances spoke again.

"Memory is a strange thing," she said. "I'd say you've seen me before, around and about, but you just haven't remembered, until now."

"No! That's not it—it's not—" My voice was getting louder now.

"Your grandma lives near me. You've probably seen me somewhere in Teddington when you were visiting her."

"No!" I said again. "It's not that—"

"My memory plays tricks on me all the time," Frances said, interrupting me, slow and strong. And as she spoke she cast her eyes around the ward as if she were looking for someone to call over, to raise an alarm. Was she going to call security? Was she going to get me removed? I panicked.

"Please—please," I said. "I want to talk to you about Catherine—" and my voice cracked as I said her name. "Please—" I was leaning forward now, speaking in an urgent half whisper. "Please—"

Frances turned her head back toward me and looked straight into my eyes. It was a hard look.

"I was Catherine's mother," she said. "Once. A very long time ago. But as I told you, she died."

"I know," I said. It was all I could think to say.

"Did Millie tell you?" she asked

"What?"

"About Catherine."

"She told me you'd lost your daughter."

"And that's why you're here?"

"Well, yes . . . no . . . I knew already . . . That's why I'm here. Because I knew."

"I don't know how you could have known Catherine. I don't even know how you know her name. I never told Millie her name." And she looked suddenly pale, pale as paper, and I was scared. I didn't want to hurt her. I didn't want to make her ill again.

I shouldn't have come. What was I thinking? I panicked.

"I shouldn't have come," I said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." And I stood up and reached out and touched her hand, to try to make better what I'd said, what I'd done by coming here, and as I did I was shocked by a sudden tightening in my chest. I felt like I was being squeezed from the outside in, tighter and tighter, and I opened my mouth to try to pull in some air, but the air, it was less and less clear to breathe. I couldn't grasp a breath, not even one, and I thought my chest would cave in with the trying. I pulled my hand away from Frances's—and a breath came to me. I felt the oxygen seeping back into my lungs, my chest, rising and falling in relief. The panic subsided.

"I have to go," I said.

Frances didn't speak. She just watched me. She watched me as I walked out of the ward, out of her sight, and as soon as I was, I broke into a run. I ran through the corridors, down the cold stairwell, and I didn't stop until I was outside in the bright and natural light of day.

I sat on the wall in front of the main entrance of the hospital and put my head between my knees. I was immediately and urgently sick, all over the pavement between my feet. I raised my head to pull my hair out of my eyes and to wipe my mouth. People walked by, but no one came over, and I was glad. I didn't want to see or speak to anyone. I just wanted to be alone, to be away from everyone. To cry and cry and cry.

But the tears, they wouldn't come.