

DREAM
A LITTLE
DREAM

THE SILVER TRILOGY

BOOK ONE

DREAM
A LITTLE
DREAM

KERSTIN GIER

Translated from the German

by Anthea Bell

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For E.

It's always nice to dream with you.



*What if you slept
And what if
In your sleep
You dreamed
And what if
In your dream
You went to heaven
And there plucked a strange and beautiful flower
And what if
When you awoke
You had that flower in your hand
Ah, what then?*

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE



DREAM
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THE DOG WAS SNUFFLING at my bag. For a drug-tracking dog it was a surprisingly fluffy specimen, like a golden retriever, and I was just going to tickle it behind the ears when it bared its teeth and uttered a threatening “Woof!” Then it sat down and pressed its nose hard against the side of my bag. The customs officer seemed to be as surprised as I was. He looked twice from the dog to me and back again before reaching for the bag and saying, “Okay, then, let’s see what our Amber’s found in there.”

Oh, great. Less than half an hour on British soil, and I was already under suspicion of drug smuggling. The genuine smugglers in the line behind me probably couldn’t believe their luck. Thanks to me, they could stroll through the barrier at their leisure, with their Swiss watches and designer drugs. What customs man in his right mind was going to pick a fifteen-year-old girl with a ponytail out of the line, instead, for instance, of that nervous-looking guy with the shifty expression back there? Or the suspiciously pale boy with tousled hair on the plane who had gone to sleep before

we even reached the runway to take off? No wonder he was grinning so gleefully. His pockets were probably stuffed full of illegal sleeping pills.

But I decided not to let myself get upset. Beyond the barrier, after all, a wonderful new life was waiting for us, with exactly the home we'd always dreamed of.

I cast a reassuring glance at my little sister, Mia, who had already reached the barrier and was bobbing impatiently up and down on the balls of her feet. This was only the last hurdle standing between us and the aforesaid wonderful new life. Everything was okay. The flight had gone smoothly, no turbulence, so Mia didn't have to throw up, and for once I hadn't been sitting next to a fat man stinking of beer and competing with me for the armrest. And although, as usual, Papa had booked us in on one of those cheapo airlines, the plane hadn't run out of fuel when we had to circle above Heathrow while we waited to land. There'd also been that good-looking dark-haired boy in the row in front of me on the other side of the plane, who turned around to smile at me remarkably often. I'd been at the point of saying something to him, but then I'd seen he was leafing through a magazine for football fans, moving his lips as he read, so I hadn't. The same boy, incidentally, was now staring rather curiously at my bag. In fact, everyone was staring curiously at my bag.

Wide-eyed, I looked at the customs man and smiled my very nicest smile. "Please . . . we're in such a hurry, the plane came in late, and we were waiting for ages at baggage collection. And my mom is waiting out there to meet my little sister and me. I promise, word of honor, there's nothing in my bag but dirty laundry and . . ." At that exact moment I remembered what else was in the bag, so I fell silent for a

second. “Well, anyway, there aren’t any drugs in it,” I finished in a rather subdued voice, looking reproachfully at the dog. Stupid animal!

The customs man, unmoved, heaved the bag up onto a table. A colleague of his unzipped it and folded back the top. Everyone standing around probably realized instantly what the dog had smelled. Because, to be honest, it didn’t really take a dog’s sensitive nose to place it.

“What in hell . . . ?” asked the customs man, and his colleague held his nose while he began clearing my clothes to one side with his fingertips. It must have looked to the spectators as if it was my things that stank to high heaven.

“Cheese from the Entlebuch Biosphere reserve in Switzerland,” I explained as my face probably turned much the same color as the burgundy bra that the man was inspecting. “Five and a half pounds of unpasteurized Swiss cheese.” Although I didn’t remember it smelling quite so bad. “Tastes better than it smells—honest.”

The silly dog, Amber, shook herself. I heard people chuckling, and you could bet the genuine smugglers were rubbing their hands together with glee. I thought I’d rather not know what the good-looking dark-haired boy was doing. Probably just feeling thankful that he hadn’t asked me for my phone number.

“That’s what I call a brilliant hiding place for drugs,” said someone behind us, and I looked at Mia and sighed heavily. Mia sighed too. We really were in a hurry.

However, it was naïve of us to think that only the cheese still stood between us and our wonderful new life—in fact, the cheese just lengthened the period of time during which we firmly believed we did have a wonderful new life ahead of us.

Most girls probably dream of other things, but Mia and I wished for nothing more fervently than a real home. One we'd stay in for longer than a year. With a room for each of us.

This was our sixth move in eight years, meaning six different countries on four different continents, starting at a new school six times, making new friends six times, saying good-bye to them six times. We were experts at packing and unpacking, we kept our personal possessions to a minimum, and it's easy to guess why neither of us played the piano.

Mom was a professor of literary studies (with two doctoral degrees), and almost every year she held a post as a lecturer at a different university. We'd been living in Pretoria until June, and before that we'd lived in Utrecht, Berkeley, Hyderabad, Edinburgh, and Munich. Our parents had divorced seven years ago. Papa was an engineer and as restless as Mom, meaning he went to live in different places just as often. So we couldn't even spend our summer vacations at one and the same place; it always had to be wherever Papa was working at the time. Right now he was working in Zurich, so this last vacation had been comparatively good (several trips to the mountains of Switzerland and a visit to the biosphere, home of the cheese), but unfortunately not all the places where we'd happened to find ourselves were as nice as that.

Lottie, our au pair, sometimes said we ought to be grateful that our parents' work meant we saw so much of the world, except, to be honest, once you've spent a summer on the outskirts of an industrial area of Bratislava, it's easy to keep your gratitude within bounds.

Starting this fall, Mom would be teaching at Magdalen College, Oxford, fulfilling a great dream of hers. She'd wished for a teaching post at the University of Oxford for

decades. And the little eighteenth-century cottage she'd rented just outside the city fulfilled a dream of our own. We were going to settle down at last and have a real home. In photos the house had looked romantic and comfortable, and as if it were full of wonderful, scary mysteries from the cellar to the attic. There was a large garden, with old trees and a summerhouse, and from the second-floor windows you had a view right down to the Thames, at least in winter. Lottie was planning to grow vegetables, make her own jam, and join the Women's Institute. Mia wanted to build a tree house, get a rowboat, and tame an owl, and I dreamed of finding a chest full of old letters in the attic and solving all the cottage's mysteries. We also definitely wanted to hang a swing in one of the trees—a swing made out of a rusty old iron bedstead where you could lie and look up at the sky. And we were going to have a real English picnic at least every other day, and the house would smell of Lottie's homemade cookies. Maybe of cheese fondue as well, because the customs officers had chopped our nice Entlebuch Biosphere cheese apart into such tiny little pieces that there was nothing else to be done with it.

When we finally got out of customs and into the main arrivals hall of the airport (incidentally, it turned out that there was no law against bringing a few pounds of cheese into Great Britain for one's personal use), it took Mom less than a minute to pop our dream of English country life like a soap bubble.

"There's been a slight change of plan, mousies," she told us after we'd all hugged and said hello, and in spite of her radiant smile, you could see her guilty conscience written all over her face.

Behind her, a man was approaching with an empty baggage cart, and without looking closely, I knew who he was: the change of plan in person.

“I hate changes of plan,” muttered Mia.

Mom was still smiling for all she was worth. “You’ll love this one,” she said, untruthfully. “Welcome to London, the most exciting city in the world!”

“Welcome home,” said Mr. Change of Plan in a deep, warm voice, heaving our bags up into the cart.

I hated changes of plan too, from the bottom of my heart.



ON OUR FIRST NIGHT in London I dreamed of Hansel and Gretel. Or, to be precise, I dreamed that Mia and I were Hansel and Gretel and Mom had taken us into the forest and left us there. “It’s for your own good!” she said before she disappeared among the trees. Poor little Hansel and I wandered helplessly around until we came to a mysterious gingerbread house. Luckily I woke up before the wicked witch came out of it, but I felt only a second of relief, and it occurred to me that my dream wasn’t all that far from the truth. Mom had said, “It’s for your own good!” about seventeen times yesterday. I was still so furious with her that I felt like grinding my teeth nonstop.

I did realize that even people over forty have a right to a full and satisfactory love life, but couldn’t she have waited until we were grown up? A few years weren’t going to make much difference to her now. And if she absolutely had to spend time with Mr. Change of Plan, wouldn’t a weekend relationship be enough for her? Did she have to turn our whole life upside down? Couldn’t she at least have asked us?

Mr. Change of Plan's real name, incidentally, was Ernest Spencer, and he had driven us here in his car last night, making conversation all the time in such a cheerful, casual way, you'd have thought he didn't even notice that Mia and I were so disappointed and furious that we were fighting back tears and didn't say a word. (And it was a long drive from the airport into the city.) Not until Ernest was taking our baggage out of the trunk of the car did Mia get her voice back.

"Oh no," she said, with her very sweetest smile, handing him back the plastic bag with the dismembered cheese in it. "This is for you. A present from Switzerland."

Ernest exchanged a delighted glance with Mom. "Why, thank you both. That's really nice of you!"

Mia and I grinned at each other quite happily—but that was the only good moment of the evening. Ernest went home with his stinking, ruined cheese, after kissing Mom and assuring us of how much he was looking forward to tomorrow evening. Because we were invited to his house then, to meet his children.

"We're looking forward to it too," said Mom.

You bet your life.

The moment we first laid eyes on him, we were suspicious of Ernest I'm-just-like-my-stuffy-old-first-name Spencer. He'd even brought presents, which showed he was in dead earnest about Mom. Normally the men in Mom's life don't show any interest in sucking up to Mia and me—far from it. They'd always done their best to ignore us as much as possible. But Ernest had brought me a book about secret messages and codes and how to decipher them, which really did look very interesting. Only with Mia he didn't get it quite

right; he gave her a book called *Maureen the Little Detective*, but now that she was nearly thirteen, she was a few years too old for it. However, the mere fact that Ernest had asked about our interests made him different.

And Mom was besotted with him—don't ask me why. It couldn't be his looks. Ernest had a large bald patch, enormous ears, and teeth that were far too white. It was all very well for Lottie to insist that Ernest was a handsome man; we just couldn't go along with her opinion. Maybe he did have nice eyes, but with ears like that who was going to look into his eyes? Not to mention that he was ancient—over fifty. His wife had died more than ten years ago, and he lived in London with his two children. Mia the little detective and I had Googled to check up on him at once. Google knew all about Ernest Spencer because he was one of those star lawyers who are always getting into the papers, whether it's outside the Royal Courts of Justice or on the red carpet at a charity gala. And his late wife had been two hundred and first, or something like that, in line to the throne of England, so he moved in the top circles of society.

By all the laws of probability, Ernest and Mom should never have crossed each other's paths. But a mean trick on the part of fate, and Ernest's special subject—international commercial law—had taken him to Pretoria six months ago, and he and Mom had met at a party. Idiots that we were, we'd even encouraged her to go to it, so she'd have a nice evening and get to know people.

And that had landed us in this mess.

"Keep still, dear!" Lottie was tugging at the hem of my skirt, but it was no use; it was too short.

Lottie Wastlhuber had come to us twelve years ago as an au pair and stayed on ever since. Which was a good thing, because otherwise we'd have had to survive on sandwiches. Mom usually forgot about meals, and she hated to cook. Without Lottie, no one would have braided our hair into funny German styles, but then again, no one would have given birthday parties for our dolls or decorated the Christmas tree with us. In fact, we probably wouldn't even have had a Christmas tree, because Mom didn't think much of customs and traditions. She was also terribly forgetful, the very image of an absentminded professor. She forgot absolutely everything: fetching Mia from her flute lessons, the name of our dog, and where she'd parked the car. We'd all have been lost without Lottie.

Not that Lottie was infallible. She'd bought my school uniform a size too small, the same as every year, and also the same as every year, she was trying to blame it on me.

"I just don't see how anyone can grow so much in a single summer," she wailed, doing her best to button the blazer up over my breasts. "And then there's all *this* up here! You did it on purpose!"

"Yes, sure!" Although I was as cross as I could be, I had to grin. Lottie might have congratulated me. "All *this* up here" might not be especially impressive for someone nearly sixteen, but at least I wasn't flat as a board anymore. So I didn't think it was so bad if I had to leave the blazer unbuttoned. Along with the skirt being too short, it gave me kind of a cool look, and it did show off as much of my figure as possible.

"It looks much better on Liv," complained Mia, who was already dressed in her own outfit. "Why didn't you buy mine a size too small as well? And why are all school uniforms

dark blue? And why is the school called Frogmal Academy when it doesn't have a frog on its crest?" She sullenly patted the embroidered crest on the breast pocket of her blazer. "I look dumb. Everything here is dumb." She turned slowly on her own axis, pointing to the unfamiliar items of furniture around us and saying in an extra-loud voice, "Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. Right, Livvy? We'd been looking forward so much to the cottage in Oxford, and instead we end up *here*. . . ."

"Here" was the apartment where Ernest had dropped us off last night, on the third floor of a rather grand block somewhere in the northwest of London. It had four bedrooms, gleaming marble floors, and a whole lot of furniture and other stuff that didn't belong to us. (Much of it was gilded, even the sofa cushions.) According to the nameplate beside the doorbell, it belonged to some people called Finchley. They obviously collected china ballerinas. There were ballerinas all over the place.

I nodded. "We don't even have our favorite things here," I said in a voice just as loud as Mia's.

"Shh," said Lottie, glancing anxiously over her shoulder. "You both know perfectly well that this is only temporary. And the cottage was a catastrophe." She had given up tugging at my uniform. It didn't do any good.

"Yes, so Mr. Spencer says," said Mia. (We were supposed to call him by his first name, but we pretended we'd forgotten.)

"Your mother saw the rat with her own eyes," said Lottie. "Do you two really want to live in a house where there are rats?"

"Yes," Mia and I replied in chorus. First, rats are better

than their image (we'd found that out when we saw *Ratatouille*), and second, you could bet the rat was just as much of an invention as the rest of it. We weren't as dumb as all that—we knew exactly what was going on here. Mom had laid it on just a tiny little bit too thick to convince us last night. Apparently the cottage had smelled of mold, the heating didn't work properly, there'd been crows nesting in the chimneys, the neighbors had been rude and noisy, and the surroundings looked dismal. Furthermore, public transport wasn't good, and the school where we'd originally been going to go had a bad reputation. That, said Mom, was why she'd had to back out of the rental agreement and find this apartment instead—on a temporary basis, of course. (Like everywhere else we'd ever lived.)

Well, yes, Mom admitted, all that had happened behind our backs, but only because she hadn't wanted to spoil our vacation with Papa. Anyway, she said, it was for our own good—she'd be commuting to Oxford every day so that we could go to an excellent school here, and also—"to be honest, mousies!"—wouldn't it be cooler to live in London than out in the country?

Of course none of this had anything at all to do with the fact that Mr. I-know-what's-good-for-you Spencer just happened to live in this part of London himself and wanted to have Mom as close to him as possible. Also entirely by chance, the school we'd be going to now just happened to be the school where Ernest's own children went. The kids we were going to meet at dinner tomorrow.

There was nothing short of a disaster on the way, that was clear. The end of an era.

"I don't feel well," I said.

"You're only nervous." Lottie patted Mia's shoulder reassuringly with one hand while she put a strand of hair back behind my ear with the other. "That's perfectly normal on your first day in a new school. But believe you me, there's no reason for you two to have an inferiority complex or anything. You're both very, very pretty girls, and clever as you are, you don't have to worry about keeping up with your studies." She smiled lovingly at us. "My wonderfully clever, wonderfully beautiful, blond elfin girls."

"Yup, wonderfully clever, wonderfully beautiful, blond elfin girls, and me with braces on my teeth and nerdy glasses and a nose much too long for me," muttered Mia, ignoring the fact that Lottie was feeling so emotional that her big, brown, round eyes had gone a little damp. "Two girls of no fixed address."

And with a totally deranged mother, probably the oldest au pair girl in the business, and a whole heap of shattered dreams of life in the country, I added silently, but I couldn't help responding to Lottie's smile. She was so sweet, standing there beaming at us, full of optimism and pride. Anyway, none of this was her fault.

"You'll only have to wear the braces for another six months. You'll easily see that through, Mia-mouse." Mom had come in from the next room. As usual, she'd heard only the part of the conversation that she wanted to hear. "Those are really attractive school uniforms." She gave us a sunny smile and began rummaging around in one of the moving company's boxes labeled SHOES.

Of course Mom's shoes had arrived in this stuffy old apartment, while my crates of books were gathering dust in some container belonging to the same firm, along with my secret notebooks and my guitar case.

I glared at Mom's slender back. It wasn't surprising that Mr. Spencer had fallen for her. She looked pretty good for a professor of English literature. She's a natural blonde, long legs, blue eyes, great teeth. She was forty-six, but you wouldn't guess that except in bright daylight when she'd drunk too much red wine the evening before. On good days she looked like Gwyneth Paltrow. Although her new haircut was frightful. She must have been to the same hairdresser as Duchess Camilla.

Mom dropped the shoes she didn't need on the rug behind her. Our dog, Butter—full name Princess Buttercup, formerly known as Dr. Watson (the name Dr. Watson dated from before we'd realized that she was a girl)—snapped up a jogging shoe and dragged it off to her improvised sleeping place under the coffee table, where she began chewing it with relish. None of us stopped her; after all, she wasn't having an easy time either. I bet she'd been looking forward to the cottage with the garden as much as we had. But of course no one had asked her opinion. Dogs and children had no rights in this household.

Another jogging shoe hit me on the shin.

"Mom," I said fretfully, "do you have to do that? As if it wasn't chaotic enough here already?"

Mom acted as if she hadn't heard me and went on rummaging in the box, while Lottie gave me a reproachful look. I stared grimly back. If I wasn't even allowed to speak my mind anymore, this really was the end.

"There they are." Mom had finally found the shoes she

wanted—a pair of black pumps—and held them triumphantly aloft.

“That’s all that matters, then,” said Mia venomously.

Mom slipped the shoes on and turned back to us. “Right, as far as I’m concerned we can go,” she said cheerfully. She didn’t seem a bit bothered that Mia and I were looking at her in a way that could have curdled milk.

Lottie hugged us. “You’ll be fine, dears. I mean, it really isn’t your *first* first day at school.”



I RAISED MY CHIN and straightened my shoulders as well as I could in the tight-fitting blazer. Lottie was right—this really was not our first time at a new school. We'd been through much worse already. At least this time we knew the language of the country and could speak it, which had not been the case in Utrecht, for instance. Although Mom insisted that anyone who knew German and English could understand Dutch as well (yes, sure, and the Earth is flat, Mom!).

Because people could speak English almost everywhere our respective parents took us, they'd decided to turn Dad's German surname of Silber into Silver for Mia and me, and that was one thing at least to make life easier here in London for us. And we certainly needn't be afraid of meeting a millipede in the toilet, like in Hyderabad. (I still sometimes dreamed of that creature—it was longer than my forearm, and worse than that, it had looked at me with its horrible millipede eyes.) No, everything here was so hygienically germ free that you could even sit on the seat of the toilet without worrying. The Frognal Academy for Boys and Girls

was a private school in Hampstead, a posh part of London, which meant that the kids didn't have to be searched for weapons in the morning with metal detectors, as in the junior high I attended in Berkeley, California, three schools ago. And certainly there must be nicer students here than the girl who'd been assigned to show me around, who was staring at me as if I smelled bad. (Which I didn't—I'd showered for quarter of an hour longer than usual on account of that cheese.)

I could only hope Mia had a nicer "big sister" to show her the ropes.

"Is Liv short for Livetta or Carlivonia?" mine asked.

Is it what? Was she trying to make a fool of me? No one in the world was called Livetta or Carlivonia, were they? On the other hand, her own name was Persephone.

"Olivia," I said, feeling annoyed with myself because, under Persephone's critical eyes, I kept wishing Lottie had bought my school uniform in the right size after all. And that I had my contact lenses in, instead of wearing the nerdy glasses that, along with my stern ponytail, were supposed to correct the impression given by the too-short skirt and the too-tight blazer. Which they did.

The headmistress had wanted Persephone to be my big sister because, as a glance at our schedules showed, we had almost all the same classes. Just moments ago, in the headmistress's office, she had been giving me a friendly smile; in fact, her eyes had been positively shining when the headmistress told her that I'd lived, among other places, in South Africa and the Netherlands. But the light in them went right out again when she asked were my parents diplomats or did they own a diamond mine and I had to say no, neither of those was right. Since then she had switched off the smile

and kept wrinkling up her nose instead. She was still wrinkling it up. She looked like one of those grumpy monkeys in Hyderabad who stole your breakfast if you didn't watch out.

"Olivia?" she repeated. "I know at least ten Olivias. My friend's cat is called Olivia."

"Well, you're the first Persephone I've ever met." *Because that's a name you wouldn't even call a cat.*

Walking on, Persephone tossed her hair back. "In our family, we all have names out of Greek myths. My sister is called Pandora, and my brother is Priam."

Poor things. But a lot better than Persephone, all the same. Since she was looking at me as if she expected an answer, I said quickly, "And all your names begin with *P*. How, er . . . practical."

"Yes, and they go with our surname. Porter-Peregrin." Persephone Porter-Peregrin—good heavens above!—tossed her hair back again and pushed open a glass door that had posters and notes stuck all over it.

A glittering movie poster in particular caught my eye. The film was called *Autumn Ball*. Under the gilt letters of the title, a couple were dancing through a sea of colorful leaves, he in white tie and tails, she in a pink tulle evening dress. The showing was on October 5, and tickets could be bought at the secretary's office. I loved movies, but I wasn't going to waste my money on silly high school romances like that. You always knew how the film was going to end after five seconds.

There was no more peace and quiet on the other side of the glass door. We were suddenly surrounded by students all streaming through the halls at the same time. At Frognal Academy the lower, middle, and upper school were all under the same roof, and I automatically looked for Mia's shock of

blond hair. It was the first time in years that we'd been at the same school, and I'd made sure to impress upon Mia that she ought to mention, in passing, that her big sister could do kung fu—just in case any of the students tried anything funny.

But Mia was nowhere to be seen. I had some difficulty following Persephone through the crowd. The personal part of our conversation seemed to be over now; obviously she didn't want any more than necessary to do with someone who shared her friend's cat's name, and whose parents weren't diplomats and didn't own any diamond mine either.

"Lower school canteen." Now and then she pointed somewhere and cast words over her shoulder in a singsong tone, without bothering about whether I heard them or not. "Middle school and upper school cafeteria both on the first floor. Toilets there. Computer rooms are lilac. Natural science labs, green."

Another glass door covered with posters. Once again, the words *Autumn Ball* stood out with tasteless prominence. This time I stopped to take a closer look. Yes, it looked like a film of the worst kind. The girl in the picture was looking soulfully at the guy she was dancing with, while he seemed to be forcing a smile, looking a little envious of the tiara she was wearing, when all he had was a nasty side-parted hairstyle.

But maybe I wasn't doing the film justice and it wasn't the usual high school garbage with the malicious blond cheerleader, the charming but superficial football captain, and the impoverished, beautiful outsider with a heart of gold. For all I knew, *Autumn Ball* was a spy thriller and the pink tulle dress, the soulful smile, and the silly tiara were just camouflage so that the girl could outwit the boy with the side part

and get the key to a safe full of secret papers that she could use to save the world. Or else the guy was a serial killer and had it in for high school girls. . . .

“Forget it!” Persephone had obviously noticed that I wasn’t behind her anymore and had come back. “The ball is for the upper school. If you’re younger, you only get to go if someone invites you.”

It was a few seconds before I caught on to what she meant (I had to come a long way back from the serial killer). Persephone used the lag time to take a lip gloss out of her pocket and pull off the top.

God, how silly of me. *Autumn Ball* wasn’t a movie but plain reality. I couldn’t help laughing at myself a little.

Beside us, a few of the students began playing with a grapefruit, throwing it back and forth. “It’s a traditional ball to commemorate the year when this school was founded. Everyone has to wear Victorian costumes. I’ll be going, of course.” Persephone was touching up her lips. At first I admired her for doing it without a mirror; then I realized that it was a colorless lip gloss, so it didn’t matter if she smeared it right up to her nose. “With a boy who knows my sister. She’s on the ball committee. Hey, stop that, you idiots.” The grapefruit had shot past overhead, just missing her. What a pity.

“But there’s a Christmas party for all the classes,” Persephone added graciously. “You and your little sister can . . .” At this point she stopped talking—indeed, she stopped breathing. She just stared past me, like a Hyderabad monkey turned to stone while putting on lip gloss.

I turned around to find out what had made her stop breathing. Well, at least no UFO had landed. Instead I saw a group of older students, all standing out from the crowd in a

similarly striking way. They were four boys, and almost everyone in this corridor was staring at them. They were deep in conversation, and while they were strolling casually along, they did so in step with each other, as if in time to music that only they could hear. All they needed was slow motion and a wind machine to blow the hair away from their faces. They were coming straight toward us, and I wondered which of them had turned Persephone into a pillar of salt. As far as I could judge at first glance, it could have been any of them, provided she fancied the tall, blond, athletic type. (I didn't, myself. I had a weakness for dark-haired, brooding guys who read poetry and played the saxophone and liked to watch Sherlock Holmes films. So far, unfortunately, I hadn't met many like that. Oh, all right, I hadn't met *any* boy like that yet. But they must be out there somewhere!)

The most conspicuously good looking was the second from the left, who had golden-blond curls framing a perfectly proportioned, angelic face. Even at close quarters, his face might have been made of porcelain, without any pores showing in his skin—in fact, unnaturally perfect. Compared with him, the other three looked more normal.

Persephone uttered a hoarse, “Hi, Japsrsch.”

She got no answer. The boys were much too absorbed in their conversation to honor us with so much as a glance. And presumably none of them was really called Japsrsch.

The grapefruit came flying back, and it would certainly have hit Persephone Pillar of Salt right on the nose if I hadn't lunged forward to intercept it. To be honest, it was more of a reflex action than a deliberate good deed, and the stupid thing was that one of the guys from the Club of Casual Blonds (the one on the extreme left) had the same idea or the same reflex

himself, so our shoulders collided in midair as we jumped to catch it. But it was in my hand that the grapefruit landed.

The boy looked down at me. "Not bad," he said appreciatively. His sleeve had slipped up as he reached for the grapefruit. He quickly pulled it down again, but not quickly enough for me. I'd read the words tattooed inside his wrist: *numen noctis*.

He grinned at me. "Basketball or handball?"

"Neither. I just felt hungry."

"I see." He smiled, and I was about to rethink the kind of guy I fancied and throw him over in favor of the tall, tattooed type with pale skin, tousled honey-blond hair, and slate-gray eyes, when he added, "You're the cheese girl from the airport. What sort of cheese was it again?"

Okay, so I didn't rethink. "Entlebuch Biosphere cheese," I said with dignity, stepping away from him. He wasn't all that good looking anyway. His nose was too long, there were dark shadows under his eyes, and his hair looked as if it had never known a comb. I knew who he was too: the guy who had fallen asleep so unnaturally fast on the flight from Switzerland. Although he now seemed wide awake. And extremely amused.

"Entlebuch Biosphere cheese. That's right," he repeated, with a mean kind of chuckle.

I looked past him with deliberate lack of interest.

The porcelain angel had moved away, but one of his friends had stopped beside Persephone. He looked familiar to me too, but I had to stare at him for at least five seconds before I worked out why, and then I almost squealed out loud. Incredible! It was Ken standing in front of me! The life-size, flesh-and-blood version of the Barbie doll's boyfriend that

our great-aunt Gertrude had given Mia for Christmas. Shaving Fun Ken, to identify him properly. (Aunt Gertrude's presents were always good for a laugh. She'd given me a set of iron-on beads.)

Persephone, anyway, had come around from her rigidity far enough to be able to breathe and roll her eyes again. Her cheeks were unnaturally red, but whether with anger or lack of oxygen I couldn't tell. The boys who had been playing grapefruit-ball had deliberately disappeared.

"New friend of yours, Aphrodite?" inquired Shaving Fun Ken, pointing to me.

Persephone's cheeks went a little darker red. "Oh, hi, *Jasper!* I only just noticed you," she said in a voice that sounded almost normal (in her case, that was tremendously blasé), only a little shriller than before. "My God, no! Old Cook the headmistress gave me the job of keeping an eye on her. New student—Olive something or other. Her parents are missionaries or some such thing."

Or some such thing. I looked at her incredulously through glasses that were evidently suitable for a missionary couple's daughter's glasses. Was that the only alternative to diplomats and diamond-mine owners that occurred to her?

Shaving Fun Ken looked me up and down, rubbing his stubbly chin. I absolutely needed to show him to Mia: the likeness was astonishing. (*Ken has a date with Barbie. His three-days' beard is bothering him. Help him to shave it off.*)

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Didn't you hear her? Olive Something Or Other," I said. (*Barbie is rather annoyed by the way Ken is behaving. He normally has better manners and doesn't look quite so lecherous. So she has no intention of telling him her real name.*)

Once again he stroked his chin. "If your parents are missionaries, I bet you're still—"

"We'd better get moving," the boy from the plane interrupted him, taking his arm quite roughly. "Come along, Jasper."

"I suppose it's okay to ask." Obviously Shaving Fun Ken could hardly take his eyes off me. "Nice legs, anyway. For a missionary's daughter."

I opened my mouth to say something (as if he was likely to know a single missionary's daughter, the big show-off), but before I could, Persephone had clutched my sleeve with her hand. "We'll have to get moving ourselves. We have chemistry with Roberts, and she won't like it if I'm late on the very first day."

I stumbled as she hauled me forward, but all the same I was glad to be moving, because I couldn't think of the perfect put-down of an answer.

TITTLE-TATTLE BLOG

The Frogmal Academy Tittle-Tattle Blog, with all the latest gossip, the best rumors, and the hottest scandals from our school.

ABOUT ME:

My name is Secrecy—I'm right here among you, and I know *all* your secrets.



3 September

School has begun again—so welcome back, all my regular readers. And for anyone new to this blog: Don't even try to find out who I am, because so far no one has managed it.

So now the annual mystery at Frogmal Academy begins again: Who's going to the Autumn Ball, and who with? Since the ball committee has done away with the election of a Ball King and a Ball Queen (Did any of you ever understand why? It's not as if an election like that has anything to do with discrimination, does it?), I've decided to carry on that fine old tradition and have an internal election here. You're welcome to send me your suggestions by e-mail at secrecy.buzz@yahoo.com.

Of course, the burning question is, who will get to go as Arthur Hamilton's partner? For you new students, Arthur is the best-looking boy in this school—or, for all I know, in the entire Western Hemisphere. And now that Colin Davison has left, he's also the new captain of our basketball team. Officially,

Arthur is going out with Anabel Scott, who did her A levels last year and just left for finishing school in Switzerland, but—boys, please skip this bit; it's only for the girls—unofficially he's definitely up for grabs. And I don't say that just because, in principle, I don't expect long-distance relationships to last. Okay, her relationship status on Facebook is still the same, but be honest: Have any of you seen the two of them together since the end-of-term ball? And why does Anabel always look as if she were about to burst into tears?

But who'd be surprised if she did?? Not me, anyway. By now everyone must have realized that since the tragic death of Anabel's ex-boyfriend Tom Holland, Anabel and Arthur have no longer been the dream couple who could make any of us green with envy just from looking at them. For new students: Oh dear, what a lot of this story you've missed! Poor Tom died in a car accident in June. And never mind ex! I've suggested here, more than once, that the electricity between him and Anabel was still working. Everyone saw it too, except maybe Arthur. But when Anabel had that dramatic outburst of tears at Tom's funeral, he must have noticed. (And incidentally, it wasn't Arthur who comforted Anabel, it was Henry Harper—just to refresh your memory and confuse you a bit more. 😊)

So what do you think? Who will be Arthur's new girlfriend? Bets taken here!

See you soon!

Love from Secrecy

4

“MY BIG SISTER’S NAME is Daisy Dawn Steward!” said Mia, and crumbs flew out of her mouth with every consonant. “Her hobby is Taylor Lautner, and she talked about him and nothing else all day.”

I could easily trump that. “*My* big sister is called Persephone Porter-Peregrin. And she didn’t talk to me at all after she’d dragged me off to the first classroom. But I guess that wasn’t so bad, because her hobby seems to be wrinkling up her nose.”

“Funny sort of names, like racehorses,” said Lottie. She didn’t say anything about having Taylor Lautner for a hobby—she’d hung up a poster of him herself the year before last. On the inside of her wardrobe. She said it was because wolves are so cute.

In spite of the tartan curtains with gold thread running through them, and the china ballerinas everywhere, it was quite comfortable in the kitchen of the strange apartment. Late summer rain was beating against the window, and the air was full of the comforting smell of vanilla and chocolate.

Lottie had been baking our favorite cookies: vanilla crescents made to her grandmother's recipe. Along with the vanilla crescents, we were drinking hot cocoa with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles on top. Lottie had also given us towels to rub our hair dry after the rain had drenched it. The full charge of loving care, butter, and sugar really did cheer us up for the time being. Lottie obviously felt sorrier for us than she liked to admit. Normally it was against her principles to bake Christmas cookies before December, and she was very strict about the traditional Christmas stuff. Too bad if anyone so much as hummed "Silent Night" in June. Lottie was having none of that. It brought bad luck, or so she said.

For some time we were happy enough filling our faces with cookies and doing a running commentary on imaginary horse races: "Persephone Porter-Peregrin instantly takes the lead on the inside. She's won almost all the derbies here at Ascot this year. She leaves her rival Vanilla Crescent behind her right away. . . . But what's this? Daisy Dawn, starting number five, comes up to the front—this is thrilling—on the straight she's neck and neck with Persephone and—yes! You wouldn't believe it! The outsider Daisy Dawn wins by a nose!"

"It's not as if vanilla crescents were Christmas biscuits like gingerbread, strictly speaking," Lottie was muttering in German, more to herself than us. Way back when she first came to us, Papa had insisted on a German au pair so that we'd learn to speak his mother tongue better. That was because when he spoke German to us himself, we were inclined to reply either not at all or in English (well, I was; at the time Mia couldn't say anything except "dadadada"), and that was

not his idea of a proper bilingual upbringing. As Lottie could speak hardly any English at all at that time, we always had to do our best to speak German to her, and Papa was delighted.

“So you can eat them all the year round.” Lottie was still rather afraid that Baby Jesus might bear her a grudge over those vanilla crescents. “But only in exceptional cases, of course.”

“We’re very, very exceptional cases,” Mia assured her. “Two kids in a one-parent family, no home and no hope, totally lost and strangers in this big city.”

I’m afraid she wasn’t exaggerating all that much. We’d found our way home only with the help of some friendly passersby and a nice bus driver. As we didn’t remember the number of the building where we were to live for the time being, and all the buildings around here looked the same, we’d probably still have been wandering around in the pouring rain, like Hansel and Gretel in the forest, if Buttercup hadn’t been standing at the first-floor window barking like crazy. Now the clever dog was lying on the corner bench in the kitchen with her head on my lap, hoping that a vanilla crescent would find its way into her mouth by some miraculous means.

“It’s a fact—you two don’t have an easy time,” said Lottie, sighing deeply, and just for a moment I had a guilty conscience. To make Lottie feel better, we could have told her that it really hadn’t been too bad at school. Our first day at school in London had gone a lot better than, for instance, our first day in Berkeley, California, where a girl gang had threatened to force my head into the toilet. (It had only been threats on the first day; on the fifth day they actually did it. That was also the day when I signed up to learn kung fu.)

Today's first day hadn't been at all like that or like various other memorable first days at assorted new schools. Apart from Persephone and Shaving Fun Ken, none of the Frogmal Academy students had struck me as unpleasant, and even the teachers seemed to be okay. I didn't have the feeling that I wouldn't be able to keep up in any subject, the French teacher had praised my good accent, the classrooms were bright and pleasant, and even school lunch had been quite good. The girl who sat next to me in French had taken over from Persephone, entirely unasked, in showing me around, took me to the cafeteria at midday, and introduced me to her friends. I learned from them that the mushy peas were better avoided and that the Autumn Ball would be cool because after the stuffy, official part of it there was going to be a band playing that unfortunately I'd never heard of before. Anyway, as first days at a new school go, mine had been pretty good. Mia's too.

So we really ought to have told Lottie all that, but it was nice to have her so sympathetic and concerned for us—especially as the day wasn't over yet. The worst still lay ahead of us: dinner at Ernest's place, when we were going to meet his son and daughter. They were seventeen-year-old twins, and if you believed what Ernest said about them, they were models of talent and virtue. I hated them already.

Lottie seemed to be thinking of this dinner date as well. "I've hung up your red velvet skirt and white shirt for this evening, Mia. And I ironed your mother's blue tea dress for you, Liv."

"Why not go the whole hog and make it the little black dress with fake gemstones all over it?" I said sarcastically.

"Yes, worn with kid gloves and all," agreed Mia. "Oh,

come on, this is only a stupid dinner. On a perfectly ordinary Monday. I'm wearing my jeans."

"You're doing no such thing," said Lottie. "I want you two showing yourselves in your best light."

"What, in Mom's blue tea dress? What are you wearing, then, Lottie—your Sunday-best dirndl?" Mia and I giggled.

Lottie looked majestic. She wasn't taking jokes about traditional dirndl skirts and dresses any more than she'd have us go against Christmas customs. "I would, because you can never go wrong in a dirndl. But I'm staying here with Buttercup."

"What? You're making us go on our own?" cried Mia.

Lottie didn't say anything.

"Oh, I see—Mr. Spencer hasn't invited you," I concluded after working it out, and I suddenly had a sinking feeling inside me.

Mia widened her eyes indignantly. "That stupid, snobby . . ."

Lottie immediately began defending Ernest. "It wouldn't be the right thing to do. After all, you don't take the nanny to a . . . a *family occasion* like this."

"But you're part of our family!" Mia was crumbling up a vanilla crescent, and Buttercup hopefully raised her head. "Talk about arrogance!"

"No, that's not it at all," Lottie contradicted her. "Mr. Spencer's behavior toward me is always perfectly correct. He's very nice, a real gentleman, and I'm sure his feelings for your mother are genuine and honorable. He really did his best to find a solution when it turned out that the cottage wouldn't do. We wouldn't have found this apartment without his help, and you'd never have been accepted by the Frogmal

Academy—it's said to have a waiting list miles long. So you'd better start liking him." She looked sternly at us. "And you'll dress properly this evening."

The trouble was, Lottie couldn't look stern any more successfully than Buttercup could look ferocious. They both had such cute brown eyes. I loved Lottie so much at that moment, I could have burst with it.

"Okay," I said. "If you'll lend me your dirndl."

Mia had a fit of giggles. "Yes, you can never go wrong in Lottie's dirndl."

"I didn't say you can't go wrong in *my* dirndl, I said in *a* dirndl." Lottie turned up her nose, threw back her brown curly hair (it looked just like Buttercup's), and went on in her native German. "I don't want to disillusion you, my loves, but you simply don't have enough on your hips to look good in a dirndl, understand?"

I wanted to laugh, but somehow it just turned into a funny snort. "Oh, Lottie, I do love you!" I said, much more seriously than I meant to.

5

I'D EXPECTED ERNEST SPENCER to live in a bigger, more showy sort of house, and I was almost disappointed when the taxi stopped outside a comparatively ordinary sort of brick building in Redington Road. Traditional-style sash windows with white frames, several gables and bow windows, hidden behind tall hedges and walls, like most of the houses here. It had stopped raining, and the evening sun was bathing everything in golden light.

"It looks very pretty," whispered Mia in surprise as we followed Mom up the paved path to the front door, past flowering hydrangeas and box trees clipped into globe shapes.

"So do you," I whispered back. She did; she looked good enough to eat, with the cute braids on which Lottie had insisted, in exchange for the jeans that Mom, much to Lottie's displeasure, had said we could wear. Probably, for one thing, because she wanted to wear her freshly ironed blue dress herself.

Mom had pressed the doorbell, and we heard three

melodious notes inside the house. “Please be *nice*, you two! And try to behave yourselves.”

“You mean we’re not to throw our food about the way we usually do, belch, and tell improper jokes?” I blew a strand of hair away from my face. Lottie would have braided my hair too, but I had deliberately spent so long in the bathroom that there wasn’t enough time for it. “Honestly, Mom, if any of us has to be warned to be on our best behavior, it’s you!”

“Exactly! *We* have perfect manners. Good evening, sir.” Mia bobbed a curtsy to a large stone statue beside the front door, a mixture of eagle (head down to rib cage) and lion (the rest of him), and rather stout into the bargain. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mia Silver, this is my sister Olivia Silver, and the one with the heavy frown looking more like a wicked stepmother is our real mom, Professor Ann Matthews. May I ask whom I have the honor of addressing?”

“This is Frightful Freddy, also known as Fat Freddy.” The front door had been opened, without a sound, by a tall boy a little older than me, wearing a long-sleeved black T-shirt and jeans. I heaved a sigh of relief. Thank goodness Mom had put the silly tea dress on herself; I’d have felt totally ridiculous in it.

“My grandparents gave him to my parents as a wedding present,” said the boy, patting Frightful Freddy’s beak. “Years ago, Dad wanted to move him to the far corner of the garden, but he weighs about a ton.”

“Hello, Grayson!” Mom kissed the boy on both cheeks and then pointed to us. “These are my two mousies, Mia and Liv.”

Mia and I hated being called mousies. It was as if Mom was letting everyone know that our front teeth were a little too large, which was possibly true.

Grayson smiled at us. "Hi. Good to meet you."

"I bet," I muttered under my breath.

"You have lipstick on your cheek," said Mia.

Mom sighed, and Grayson looked a bit baffled. I couldn't help noticing that he looked very like his father if you took no notice of his hair. The same broad shoulders, the same self-confident bearing, the same noncommittal politician's smile. That was probably why he seemed so familiar to me. Admittedly he didn't have ears as enormous as Ernest's, but they might yet catch up with his father's. I'd once read that ears and noses are the only parts of the body to go on growing into old age.

Mom walked energetically past Grayson, as if she knew her way around the house very well. There was nothing we could do but follow her. Only, we stopped in the corridor, at a loss, because she had disappeared.

Grayson closed the door behind us and passed the back of his hand over his cheeks. In fact, Mia had invented the lipstick bit.

"Is there at least something delicious to eat?" asked Mia, after we had stared at each other awkwardly for a couple of seconds.

"I think so," said Grayson, smiling again. I've no idea how he managed it. I couldn't bring myself to smile back, anyway. Stupid show-off. "Mrs. Dimbleby has left quails on a baking tray ready to go into the oven."

Exactly what we might have expected! "Mrs. Dimbleby?" I repeated. "I assume she's your cook? And Mr. Dimbleby will be your gardener, I'm sure."

"She's our cook and housekeeper." Grayson was still smiling, but from the way he looked at me (one eyebrow slightly

raised), I could tell that he'd registered my ironic undertone. Incidentally, he hadn't inherited Ernest's blue eyes. His were light brown, a striking contrast with his fair hair. "As far as I know, Mr. Dimbleby sells insurance. Dad does the gardening himself—he says it's relaxing." The eyebrow went a little farther up. "And I hear that you girls have a nanny. Is that right?"

"Well, we . . ." Bloody hell. Luckily Ernest interrupted us, with Mom clinging to his arm as if it were a life preserver. Just like yesterday he was beaming at us as if we were the best things he'd ever seen.

"Good, Grayson's already taken your coats. Welcome to the Casa Spencer. Come along through. Florence is waiting with the starters."

Neither Grayson nor Mia and I explained that we didn't have any coats with us. (How could we, when our fall and winter clothes were still in the moving company's crates somewhere?) Mom cast us a last warning glance before we followed her and Ernest in silence through a double door into the living and dining room. It was a pretty place, with wooden floorboards, windows down to floor level, an open hearth, white sofas with embroidered cushions, a piano, and a large dining table from which there was a lovely view of the garden. It looked spacious but not enormously large, and surprisingly . . . well, *comfortable*. I'd never in my life have thought of Ernest having such unstylish sofas, getting on in years a bit, with covers torn at the edges and brightly colored cushions that didn't match. There was even an amusing fur cushion in the shape of a ginger cat. The cushion stretched as we passed it.

"This is our cat, Spot." A girl had just glided past us to

put a plate down on the dining table. She had to be Grayson's twin sister; they had the same light-brown eyes. "And you must be Liv and Mia. Ann's told us so much about you. That's a lovely way you've done your hair." She seemed to smile as easily as her brother, but it looked better on her, because she had dimples in her cheeks, a snub nose that went with the dimples, and a pretty, freckled complexion. "I'm Florence, and I'm really pleased to meet you." She was small and delicately built, but with voluptuous breasts, and her face was framed by shining, chestnut-brown curls falling in ringlets to her shoulders. Mia and I could only gawp at her. She was simply stunning.

"What a pretty dress, Ann," she said to Mom in a voice as sweet as honey. "Blue suits you so well."

Suddenly I seemed to myself not just dry as a stick, long-nosed, and plain simplistic in the way my mind worked but also dreadfully immature. Mom was right: we were being downright bad mannered. We'd hit out with dark looks and said rude things just to punish her. Like naughty toddlers flinging themselves on the supermarket floor and throwing tantrums. Meanwhile Florence and Grayson showed no weak spots but were behaving like grown-ups. They didn't react to our rudeness. They were smiling, paying compliments, and carrying on a polite conversation. Maybe they really were glad that their father had met our mom. Or maybe they were just pretending to be glad. Whichever way it was, they were doing far better than we were.

Feeling ashamed of myself, I decided that from then on I'd be just as well brought up and polite. Although that, as it turned out, wasn't going to be so simple.

"There's only something small for a starter." When

everyone was sitting down, Florence smiled warmly at Mia and me from the other side of the table. “Mrs. Dimbleby bought far too many quails. I hope you like quails with celeriac purée.”

Oh no—here we went. Celeriac. Eeugh! “That sounds . . . interesting,” I said in as politely adult a tone as I could manage. *Interesting* was always a useful word.

“I’m afraid I’m a vegetarian,” claimed Mia, proving cleverer than me, as she often did. “And I have this silly allergy to celeriac.”

Also, you’re stuffed full of Christmas cookies, I added silently.

“Oh dear, never mind. I’ll make you a sandwich if you like.” Florence smiled so radiantly, it positively hurt your eyes. “You’re staying in the Finchleys’ apartment, aren’t you? Is Mrs. Finchley still collecting those charming china figurines?”

I wondered whether I could say “Yes, they’re so interesting” again without sounding negative about it, but once again Mia had chipped in ahead of me. “No, these days she’s collecting the most dreadfully vulgar-looking dancers.”

I quickly looked down at the plate with my starter on it, so as not to giggle. What on earth *was* the stuff on it? I could identify the thin, red slices as some kind of meat, but what was the mushy pile beside it?

Grayson, who was sitting beside me, seemed to have read my mind. “Chutneys are Mrs. Dimbleby’s specialty,” he told me quietly. “This one is green-tomato chutney.”

“Oh. Ah. Interesting.” I put a lavish forkful into my mouth and nearly spat it all out again. For a moment I forgot my good intentions. “Are those *raisins* in it?” I asked Grayson incredulously. He didn’t reply. He had taken his iPhone

out of his jeans pocket and was looking at the display under the table. I'd have looked too, purely out of curiosity, but I had enough to do swallowing the weird chutney stuff. As well as raisins, it contained onions, garlic, curry power, ginger, and—yes, no doubt about it, that was cinnamon. And something that, when I bit it, felt like crunchy buttons of some kind. Mrs. Dimpleby had probably stirred in everything that needed to be used up. If that was her specialty, I hated to think what the thing she didn't cook so well would taste like.

Mia grinned at me maliciously as I washed the chutney down with a gulp of orange juice.

"But aren't the Finchleys coming back from South America next month, Dad?" asked Florence.

"Yes, they are. They'll be needing their apartment back from the first of October." Ernest glanced briefly at Mom and took a deep breath. "In fact, that's exactly what we wanted to discuss with all of you this evening."

The display of Grayson's iPhone flickered. When he noticed me looking curiously at it, he held his hand farther under the table, as if he was afraid I might read the message with him. I wasn't even particularly interested in his text message. I thought the tattoo on the inside of his wrist was far more intriguing. Black lettering, half hidden by the sleeve of his T-shirt.

"You're one of that blond boy group from school," I whispered. "That's why I thought you looked familiar."

"What?"

"We've met before. I saw you and your friends in school today."

"Really? I don't remember that."

Of course not. He hadn't so much as looked at me. "Never

mind. Pretty tattoo.” *Sub um* . . . Unfortunately I couldn’t make out the rest of it.

“What?” His eyes had been following my glance. “Oh, that. It’s not a tattoo, only felt pen. Er . . . notes for Latin.”

Yes, sure. “Interesting,” I said. “Show me!”

But Grayson wasn’t about to do any such thing. He pulled the sleeve of his T-shirt down over the “notes” and turned back to his iPhone.

That was *really* interesting. Without thinking, I put another forkful of chutney into my mouth. Bad mistake—it tasted even worse the second time. But at least I could now identify the crunchy buttons as walnuts.

“You see, it’s like this. . . .” Ernest was looking solemn and had taken Mom’s hand. Mom was smiling in a forced way at the pretty arrangement of blue hydrangeas in the middle of the dining table. No doubt about it—something serious was coming.

“Ann . . . your mother . . . well . . .” Ernest cleared his throat and began again. This time he wasn’t stammering. Instead he sounded as if he were addressing the Economic and Social Committee of the European Court of Justice. “Ann and I have decided to take the fiasco over at the cottage as a sign from Fortuna to consolidate our relationship and dispense with the problem of who lives where by, so to speak . . . merging.”

After this announcement there was silence for a good five seconds, after which I had a terrible coughing fit, because as I gasped for air, a raisin had gone down the wrong way. It was some time before I had dealt . . . no, sorry, *dispensed* with the coughing fit. My eyes were streaming, but I could clearly see that Florence, sitting opposite me, had stopped

smiling. Even the sun had stopped shining in through the window, having disappeared behind the roof of the house next door. Grayson, to be sure, was still busy with his cell phone under the table. He was probably Googling the meaning of *consolidate*, although it was only too obvious.

“Lottie says you should always explain yourself as simply as possible so that people can understand you,” commented Mia.

“Yes, what, exactly, are you saying, Dad?” Florence’s voice was no longer sweet as honey. It sounded rather like the way the chutney tasted. “You mean that you and Ann are looking for a *shared* apartment? Now? At once? But you’ve only known each other for six months.”

“So to speak . . . well, no, not really.” Ernest was still smiling, but tiny beads of sweat were standing out on his bald patch. “After thinking it over at length . . . At our age, time is a precious . . .” He shook his head, obviously furious with himself for being so tongue-tied. “The house is large enough for us all,” he said at last, firmly.

“And you two grew up here,” said Mom to Grayson and Florence. The corners of her mouth were quivering slightly. “We didn’t want to ask you to face moving house in your last year at school.”

No, sure. Moving house wasn’t good for the emotional balance of young people. Anyone could tell that from Mia and me. Mia made a funny sound, like Buttercup when you stepped on her paw by accident.

“We’re supposed to move into *this* house?” she asked quietly. “And all of us live here together?”

Ernest and Mom, who were still holding hands, exchanged a brief glance.

“Yes,” said Ernest firmly. Mom just nodded.

“But that’s ridiculous!” Florence pushed her plate away. “This house is only just large enough for us—where do you think we can put three extra people?”

Four! I felt like saying. She’d forgotten Lottie. But I could only get out a kind of croak—there was still something lodged in my throat.

“This house is enormous, Florence,” said Ernest. “It has six bedrooms. If we move around a bit, we’ll all fit in perfectly well. I thought Grayson could have the gable room at the front of the house, you can have your old room back again, and then Mia and Liv can—”

“What?” Florence’s voice wasn’t far from being a screech now. “Those are *my* rooms up under the roof—I’m certainly not giving them up and sharing a bathroom with Grayson again. Grayson! Say something, why don’t you?”

Grayson was looking confused. He hadn’t even looked up from his iPhone. Imagine that, when the world was coming to an end up above the table! He certainly had strong nerves! “Er . . . yes,” he said. “Why can’t Florence stay on the top floor under the roof? There are plenty of rooms on the second floor.”

“Grayson, have you been listening *at all*?” Florence stared at him, stunned. “They’re planning to *move in here* next month! Tell them we don’t have room for them! The gable room is Granny’s room, my old room is Dad’s office, the corner room is our guest room, and I’ve put all my winter clothes in the built-in cupboard in your room. . . .”

“Flo, darling, do please listen.” The beads of sweat on Ernest’s forehead seemed to have grown a little larger. “I

can understand that you feel you won't have quite as much space to yourself, but—"

"But *what?*" spat Florence.

Even in all this upheaval, I couldn't help being grateful to her for having stopped being so grown-up and polite. I liked her a lot better with that hysterical voice and eyes flashing with fury. Mia and I were looking back and forth at her and Ernest as if they were playing tennis. Mom fixed her eyes firmly on the flower arrangement again, and Grayson was staring at his iPhone as if spellbound. Maybe he was Googling "patchwork family" and "first aid."

"—it wouldn't be forever," said Ernest. "Look, this time next year you twins will be moving out to study somewhere, then you'll be home during university vacations at the most, and—"

Florence interrupted him. "And so you won't be lonely you're bringing a woman and two substitute children into the house? Can't you wait until we've left?"

Yes, or even a few years longer.

Now it was Ernest's turn to sound chillier. "I realize that you have to get used to this new situation, as we all of us here do. But I have already made up my mind." He passed the back of his hand over his forehead. "We just have to move things around a little. If Grayson moves into the gable room—"

"Which belongs to Granny!" Florence was shouting in such a loud voice that the ginger cat jumped off the sofa and several feet into the air. He was quite a fat cat. "Have you told Granny about your plans? No, of course not! She's on a cruise on the other side of the world—very practical, isn't it?—and she doesn't know the first thing about all this!"

“Florence—”

“Where’s she going to sleep when she comes to stay?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Your grandmother lives twenty minutes away—she doesn’t need a room here at all. She can simply drive back to her own house after visiting us. But if you like, you can have the gable room, Grayson can just stay in his old room, Mia can have the corner room, and I’ll clear the study out for Liv.” Ernest smiled at Mom. “I work much too hard anyway. I’ll avoid doing that at home in future.”

Hesitantly, Mom returned his smile.

“Wait a moment—if Liv and Mia are going to be on the second floor too, then who gets my rooms in the attic?” Florence looked penetratingly at Mom. “You, by any chance?”

“No,” said Mom, sounding scared. “I don’t need much space. Honestly, as far as that goes, I can manage with very little. All I have is a few crates of books. No, your father thought the rooms up there would be just right for Lottie.”

At this Florence went right off her rocker. “The *nanny*?” she cried shrilly, digging her forefinger into the air so hard that she almost poked Mia’s forehead. “These two are far too old for a nanny . . . and I’m supposed to give up my attic rooms to her and share a bathroom with three other people? Honestly, this is the end!”

“Lottie is much more than a nanny. She also does almost all the housework, the shopping, and the cooking,” said Ernest. “And as . . . well . . . a very important emotional factor, she cannot, at the moment, be excluded from these considerations.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that we need Lottie,” I said quietly.

“Not forever, of course,” Mom made haste to say. “You are quite right, Florence. Mia and Liv are indeed much too

old for a nanny. Maybe Lottie will stay another year, maybe only six months. . . .” She saw Mia’s lower lip beginning to tremble and added, “We’ll just have to see how much longer we need her.”

I reached for Mia’s hand under the table and squeezed it. *Don’t cry*, I begged her silently. Because I was afraid that if Mia started crying, I’d have to join in too.

“And how about Mrs. Dimbleby?”

“Mrs. Dimbleby has been wanting to work shorter hours for years,” said Ernest. “She’ll be glad if she’s needed here for only one or two days a week.”

“Grayson! Did you hear that?” cried Florence.

Grayson raised his head. He actually was still busy with his iPhone. “Yes, of course,” he said.

But Florence didn’t seem to believe him. Once again, at high volume, she summed up the evening’s revelations for her own benefit. “Dad doesn’t just want Ann and her children to move in here, all of us to clear out of our rooms, *and share a bathroom between four of us*”—at this point her voice rose to such a pitch that I felt as if the windowpanes were beginning to rattle—“he also wants to fire Mrs. Dimbleby and give her job to Ann’s nanny instead! And the nanny is getting my rooms up in the attic.”

“Oh,” said Grayson. “That’s not a great idea. We’d have to go through her bedroom to get to our billiard table in the attic.”

Florence groaned. “Don’t you understand what Dad just said? They’ll be moving in here in three weeks’ time. . . .”

“Two weeks’ time, to be precise. I’m taking a day off work for it,” said Ernest. “And there are some painting jobs to be done first.”

“They’ll be moving in here, bag, baggage, and nanny!”

“And dog,” added Mia.

“And dog,” repeated Florence. She seemed to have exhausted her strength; she wasn’t shouting anymore. The word *dog* came out as hardly more than a whisper. But as if on cue, the ginger cat arched his back in front of the dining table and mewed out loud. Florence’s shouting seemed to have attracted him rather than putting him off.

Ernest smiled. A little wearily, maybe, but it was definitely a smile. “That’s all clear, then. So now we can fetch the quails in from the kitchen, can’t we, Spot? Will you lend me a hand, Ann?”

Mom stood up with such alacrity that she almost brought the tablecloth with her. “Nothing I’d rather do,” she said.

The cat followed them into the kitchen.