

DREAM
ON

THE SILVER TRILOGY

BOOK TWO

DREAM
ON

KERSTIN GIER

Translated from the German

by Anthea Bell

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For Leonie. I'm so proud of you.



If you can dream it, you can do it.

WALT DISNEY





CHARLES REALLY HADN'T made it hard for me to find his dream door: it had a life-size photograph of Charles himself printed on it. The photo showed him wearing a broad grin and a pristine white coat, with the words *Charles Spencer, DDS* on its breast pocket, and under that: *The best dentist you can find for your teeth.*

However, I wasn't expecting the photo to burst into song when I touched the doorknob.

"Working hard to keep teeth clean!" it warbled with great ardor in a fine tenor voice, to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Startled, I looked around the corridor. Good heavens, couldn't it turn the volume down? I already felt I was under observation, although there was no one in sight except for me and the photo of Charles, only doors stretching down the corridor as far as the eye could see. My own door was just around the next corner, and in fact, there was nothing I'd rather have done than run back there and call off this whole operation. My guilty conscience was almost killing me. This was kind of like reading someone's secret diary, only much

worse. And I'd had to commit theft to embark on it, although opinions might vary on whether or not that was as immoral as it sounded. Legally speaking, yes, it was theft, but the kind of fur-lined trapper's cap with earflaps that I'd taken from Charles suited very few people indeed. Most anybody wearing one would look like an underexposed photo of a sheep, and Charles was no exception, so in that light, I'd even done him a favor. I only hoped no one would come into my room and see me lying in bed with that silly cap on. Because that was what I was really doing: lying in bed asleep. With a stolen trapper's cap on my head. But I wasn't dreaming anything nice; I was spying on someone. Someone who might well be in the process of breaking Lottie's heart, and Lottie was the best creator of crazy hairstyles, baker of cookies, dog whisperer, and comforter of susceptible teenage girls in the world. And as no one had a softer heart than Lottie (who officially was our au pair, by the way), that absolutely mustn't happen. So in this case, hopefully, the end justified the means. Didn't it?

I sighed. Why did everything always have to be so complicated?

"I'm not doing this for me; I'm doing it for Lottie," I said under my breath, just in case an invisible observer was listening in, and then I took a deep breath and pressed the door handle down.

"Now, now, no meddling!" The photo of Charles wagged its forefinger and broke into song again. "*Working hard to keep teeth clean, front and back and . . . ?*"

"Er . . . in between?" I suggested.

"Perfectly correct! Even though it sounds much nicer if I sing it!" And as the door swung open, Charles went on

warbling cheerfully. *“If I brush for quite a while, I will have a happy smile!”*

“I really can’t think what Lottie sees in you,” I murmured, slipping through the doorway, not without one last glance at the corridor. Still no one else in sight.

Luckily I didn’t find a dental practice waiting for me on the other side of the door, but a sunlit golf course. And Charles as well, in 3-D this time, wearing a pair of check pants and swinging a golf club. Greatly relieved that I hadn’t landed in some improper dream (according to studies, over 35 percent of dreams are about sex), I quickly adjusted my outfit to the scenario: polo shirt, linen pants, golf shoes, and—because I simply couldn’t resist it—a peaked cap. I strolled closer as casually as possible. The door to the corridor had closed gently behind me and now stood in the middle of the grass like a surreal work of art.

After landing, Charles’s ball went straight into the hole with a single elegant movement, and his companion, a man of his own age with strikingly good teeth, cursed softly.

“What do you say about that, then?” Charles turned to him with a triumphant smile on his lips. Then his eyes fell on me, and he smiled even more broadly. “Hi, little Liv. Did you see that? It was a hole in one. Which means I’ve won our match by a huge margin.”

“Wow, that’s great,” I said.

“Yup, it is, isn’t it?” Charles chuckled and put an arm around my shoulders. “Let me introduce you. The guy there looking so grim is Antony, my old friend from university. But don’t worry, he’s all right—he’s just not used to losing to me.”

“Too true.” Antony shook hands with me. “I’m the kind

of friend who's simply better at everything: I had better marks when we were training, I drive trendier cars, I run a more successful practice, and I've always had prettier girlfriends." He laughed. "And unlike Charlie here, I still have all my hair."

Ah, so it was that kind of dream. I felt even worse about having to disturb it.

As Antony ran the fingers of one hand through his luxuriant hair, the triumph disappeared from Charles's face. "Some women find a man with a bald patch very attractive," he murmured.

"Oh yes," I quickly agreed. "Lottie, for instance."

And my mom. After all, she was in love with Charles's bald brother, Ernest. Although presumably in spite of his bald patch, not because of it.

"Who's Lottie?" asked Antony, and I was just as interested in the answer as he was. Now we'd see if Charles was serious about Lottie.

At least he was smiling again when he said her name. "Lottie will—Hey, what's that?" He had been interrupted by a high-pitched sound suddenly ringing out over the golf course.

Now, of all times! "It's too early for the alarm clock," I murmured, and when Antony added, "Sounds more like a smoke alarm to me," I made for the door in a slight attack of panic. If Charles woke now, the whole dream would collapse, and I'd fall into a void, a very unpleasant experience that I wasn't keen to repeat in a hurry. As the high note went on swelling, while cracks were already appearing in the sky, I sprinted back to the door and grasped the handle just as the ground threatened to give way beneath me. With one last

stride, I was safely through the doorway and out in the corridor, closing the door behind me.

Done. But my mission had obviously failed. I still didn't know how Charles really felt about Lottie. Even though he had smiled at the mention of her name.

The photo of Charles on his door struck up its tooth-brushing jingle again.

"Oh, shut up," I snapped, and the photo of Charles fell silent, looking hurt. And then, in the sudden hush, I heard it: a familiar, unpleasant rustling only a few yards away. Although there was no one in sight and a sensible voice in my head told me that, after all, I was only dreaming, I couldn't hold back my fear. The feeling was as nasty as that rustling sound. Without knowing exactly what I was doing or who I was running away from, I took to my heels.



MY BREATHING WAS so loud that I couldn't hear anything else, but I felt sure the rustling was right behind me. And coming closer. I scuttled around the corner into the next corridor, where I'd find my own dream door. To call the sound a rustling wasn't quite right—that sounds more like a harmless rat, and this rustling was anything but harmless. It was the most mysterious rustling I'd ever heard, like a curtain being drawn back to reveal a hollow-cheeked chainsaw murderer with a bloodst—

I slowed down abruptly. Because there was already someone waiting for me beside my door. Luckily not a hollow-cheeked chainsaw murderer, someone much better-looking.

Henry. My boyfriend for the last eight and a half weeks. And not just in my dreams but in real life too. (Although it did seem to me that we spent far more time together in our dreams than when we were awake.) He was leaning back against the wall, as he so often did, with his arms folded, and he was smiling. The very special Henry smile that was just for me and always made me feel I was the luckiest girl

in the whole world. Normally I'd have smiled back (with what I hoped was an equally special Liv smile) and flung myself into his arms, but at the moment there wasn't any time for it.

"Nocturnal fitness training?" he inquired when I stopped in front of him and hammered on the door with my fist, instead of kissing him. "Or are you running away from something?"

"I'll tell you inside!" I gasped, still hammering. The flap of the mailbox opened, and someone pushed out first a piece of paper and then a pen, infuriatingly slowly.

"Kindly write down today's password, fold the note correctly, and post it back through the flap," my friend Mr. Wu said in dulcet tones from the other side of the door.

I cursed quietly. My security system was brilliant at fending off unwanted strangers, not so good when I wanted to get to safety in a hurry myself.

"There really are more effective methods than running away in a dream, Liv." Henry had taken a good look around the corridor and now reappeared beside me. "For instance, you can simply fly out of danger, or turn into something so fast that no one could catch up with it. For instance, a cheetah. Or a moon rocket . . ."

"Not everyone thinks it's as easy to turn into something else as you do, especially not into a stupid moon rocket," I snapped at him. The pen in my hand was shaking slightly, but my fears had subsided a good deal in Henry's presence. I didn't hear any more rustling. All the same, I was sure we weren't alone. Hadn't it turned darker? And colder?

"You were such a cute little cat the other day," said Henry, who didn't seem to notice anything different.

Yes, very true. But in the first place, I'd wanted to turn into a large, dangerous jaguar, not a cute little cat, and in the second place, no one had been following me. Henry and I had just been trying a few things out for fun. It was a mystery to me how you could concentrate and turn into something quickly if you were threatened by a terrifying, invisible creature and your knees were knocking with fright. I guessed Henry was so good at all that transformation stuff because he was never afraid. Even now he was grinning, without a care in the world.

Gritting my teeth, I had finally scribbled *Felt slipper pom-pom* on the piece of paper, folded it into a triangle, and posted it back through the mailbox.

"Not as neatly written as it might be, but correct," said Mr. Wu from inside the door, and it opened. I grabbed Henry's arm, hauled him in through the doorway, and slammed the door behind us. Then I breathed a sigh of relief. We'd made it.

"Could you be a bit faster next time?" I hissed at Mr. Wu. (I'd never have dared to hiss at him in real life.)

"The tortoise can tell us more than the hare about the road it travels, Miss Olivia." Mr. Wu bowed to me (and the real Mr. Wu would never have done that) and gave Henry a brief nod. "Welcome to Miss Olivia's Dream Restaurant, young stranger with shaggy hair."

We really did seem to be in some kind of restaurant, as I couldn't help noticing, a rather unattractive one with black Formica tables, bright-red runners on them, and orange lanterns dangling from the ceiling. But there was an enticing smell of fried chicken. Only now did I notice how hungry I was. It had been a stupid idea to go to bed without any supper, because that made it harder for me to control my dreams.

Henry was staring at Mr. Wu, baffled. “Is he new here?”

“I am the guardian at the gate tonight,” explained Mr. Wu solemnly. “I am called Wu, the Tiger’s Claw, protector of orphans and the needy. Give a hungry man fish, and he will satisfy his appetite. Teach him to fish, and he will never be hungry again.”

Henry chuckled, and I realized that I was blushing. My dreams were sometimes rather embarrassing. The proverb-quoting Mr. Wu also wore shiny black silk pajamas with a tiger’s head embroidered on them, and a three-foot-long ponytail hung down from the back of his head. His real-life model, my first kung fu teacher, would never have gone around like that, even at Halloween.

“Okay,” said Henry, still chuckling.

“Thanks, Mr. Wu,” I said quickly, abolishing Mr. Wu and the entire restaurant with a wave of my hand. Instead we were now standing in the little park in Berkeley Hills, California, where I’d taken Henry in my dreams a couple of times before. It was the first place to spring to my mind. You had an excellent view of the bay from here. The sun was just setting over it, flooding the sky with wonderful colors.

All the same, Henry looked rather annoyed. “It smelled delicious in that restaurant,” he said, “and now my stomach’s rumbling.”

“Mine too, but however much we’d eaten we wouldn’t have felt full.” I let myself drop onto a bench. “After all, this is only a dream. Damn it, I ought to have given Mr. Wu a new password. Who knows—someone might have been looking over my shoulder just now when I wrote today’s down.”

“I was. *Stuffed kipper coupon* is a very creative password.”

Was Henry laughing at me again? “I mean, no one would guess it easily.”

“It was *Felt slipper pom-pom*.” But now I was laughing myself.

“Honestly? Your handwriting’s a terrible scrawl,” said Henry, sitting down beside me. “And now I’d like to know what you were running away from. And why I didn’t even get a kiss.”

I sobered up at once. “It was that . . . that *rustling* sound again. Didn’t you hear it?”

Henry shook his head.

“Well, it was there. An invisible, evil presence.” I realized, listening to myself, that I sounded as if I were reading a bad horror story aloud. Too bad. “A rustling and whispering that came closer and closer.” I shuddered. “Just like that time when it followed us, and you got us to safety through Amy’s dream door.”

“And where exactly did you hear the sound this time?” Unfortunately Henry’s expression didn’t tell me what he was thinking.

“In the next corridor on the left.” I gestured vaguely toward the sea. “Do you think it was Anabel? I’m sure she’s brilliant at turning invisible and making nasty rustling noises. Or maybe it was Arthur. There’s nothing he’d rather do than scare me to death.” Not that I could blame him. After all, I’d broken Arthur Hamilton’s jaw almost exactly eight and a half weeks ago. I know that sounds bad, so I’ll just say (to avoid getting too long-winded and complicated) that he deserved it. Although I’m afraid it didn’t do me much good at the time, because out of our whole group of friends at school, his girlfriend, Anabel, was the rotten apple in the barrel. Or

anyway, as it turned out, the crazy one. To be politically correct, I should say she suffered from “acute polymorphic psychotic disorder with symptoms of schizophrenia,” which was why she was now in a closed psychiatric hospital well away from London, where she couldn’t do any more harm to anyone—except in her sleep. Anabel was firmly convinced that a demon had given us the ability to meet in our dreams and shape those dreams deliberately—an evil demon from pre-Christian times with nothing less in view than ruling the world. Luckily for me, however, its attempt to take over the world had failed in the nick of time, just as Anabel, assisted by Arthur, was about to shed my blood as part of the necessary ritual. (I told you it was a long, complicated story!)

Belief in the demon was part of her sickness, and I was very glad that this demon existed only in Anabel’s deranged imagination, because I had a problem with supernatural phenomena in general and demons in particular. Not that I could really come up with a conclusive explanation for the entire dream business. For the sake of simplicity, I mentally filed it away under the heading of “psychological and scientific phenomena that are perfectly capable of logical explanation, but can’t yet be fully understood in our present state of knowledge.” At least that made more sense than believing in demons. Even if my conviction had been slightly shaken again by that rustling sound just now . . . But I wasn’t going to mention that to Henry.

He was still waiting for me to go on with what I’d been saying. “In the next corridor on the left,” he repeated. He didn’t mention Anabel and Arthur. He hated talking about those two, because until that incident on the evening of the Autumn Ball eight and a half weeks ago, they’d been among

his best friends. “And you were there because . . . ?” He gave me an inquiring glance.

“Because there was something I had to do.” Feeling uncomfortable, I rubbed my arm and automatically lowered my voice to a whisper. “Something totally immoral. I wanted to . . . no, I *had* to spy on someone’s dreams.”

“That’s not immoral, just very practical,” said Henry. “I do it all the time.”

“You do? Whose dreams? And why?”

He shrugged his shoulders and briefly looked away from me. “Well, it can sometimes be useful. Or entertaining. It all depends. And whose dreams did you . . . er . . . *have* to spy on?”

“Charles Spencer’s.”

“Grayson’s boring old uncle, the dentist?” Henry looked rather disappointed. “Why him, for goodness’ sake?”

I sighed. “Mia”—Mia was my little sister—“saw Charles in a café with another woman. And she swears they were exchanging sappy glances and almost holding hands. I know that Lottie and Charles aren’t officially an item, but he flirts with her like crazy, and they’ve been to the cinema together twice. A blind person could see that Lottie’s head over heels in love with him, even if she won’t admit it. She’s been making him a pair of felt slippers for Christmas, so that in itself . . . Don’t grin in that silly way! This is really serious. I’ve never seen Lottie in such a lovelorn state over a man, and it would be terrible if he’s just toying with her feelings.”

“Sorry!” Henry was trying, unsuccessfully, to keep the corners of his mouth under control. “At least now I know where your password . . . Okay, carry on.”

“I had to find out what Charles really feels for Lottie—it was urgent. So I took his silly trapper’s cap and broke into his dream tonight.” It struck me, yet again, that at this very moment I was lying in my bed with the cap on—probably my hair was all sweaty by now. And presumably, also at this moment, Henry was thinking what I must look like in the trapper’s cap with earflaps. He was going to start laughing again, I knew he was, and who could blame him?

But he responded to my glare with an innocent look suggesting that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. “I get that. So how did you do it?”

I didn’t see what he meant, and frowned. “Well, I went through his dream door.”

“Yes, but as who or what?”

“As myself, of course. I had a peaked cap on because the dream was on a golf course, so I had to wear the right outfit. I’d just brought Charles to the point where he was going to say something about Lottie, only then his stupid smoke—” Horrified, I clapped my hand over my mouth. “Oh, shit! I completely forgot! The smoke alarm! It went off, and all I thought of was how to get out of the dream super fast before Charles woke up. I’m a terrible person! I ought to have woken myself and called the fire department.”

The idea that Charles’s apartment might be on fire didn’t seem to worry Henry. He smiled at me and stroked my cheek with his fingertips. “Liv, surely you realize that in their dreams people don’t necessarily have to be honest, right? In my experience, most of us tell even more lies in dreams than in real life. So if you want to find out the truth about someone, it’s no use just strolling around in his dream and asking

questions, because he'll tell you exactly what he'd say if he was awake."

That did sound plausible, of course, and to be honest the idea had occurred to me already. Looking at it that way, I'd stumbled into Charles's dream without any sensible plan, no subtlety in my approach at all, simply because I wanted to protect Lottie. "But how else could I have done it? And don't tell me I ought to have turned into a moon rocket."

"Well, it's always best if they don't notice you're there at all. As an invisible observer, you can learn a lot about people in their dreams, just from watching and listening. In fact, with a little patience, you can find out all about them."

"But I don't want to know *all* about Charles," I said, disgusted at the mere idea. "I only want to know if he's serious about Lottie. Because if he isn't, then . . ." I clenched my fists. No way were Mia and I going to let anyone hurt Lottie, certainly not Charles. Mia already thought it would be better to marry her off to the good-looking veterinarian in Pilgrim's Lane. "On the other hand—maybe poor Charles is dead of smoke inhalation by now because I didn't call the fire department, so in that case everything's settled."

"I love you," said Henry abruptly, pulling me closer, and I immediately forgot Charles. Henry didn't exactly throw those three magic words around lavishly. He'd said them exactly three times in the last eight and a half weeks, and for some reason, every time he did I felt terribly embarrassed. The only proper, universally valid reply to that was *I love you too*, but somehow I could never get it out. Not because I didn't love him, far from it, but because *I love you too* doesn't carry nearly as much weight as an *I love you* coming out of the blue.

So instead I replied, “Even though I can’t turn into a moon rocket or make myself invisible?”

Henry nodded. “You’ll learn all that. You’re immensely talented. In every possible way.” Then he leaned forward and began kissing me, so it turned out to be a really nice dream after all.



THE DISADVANTAGE OF these lucid dreams by night—dreams when you were fully conscious—was that you never really felt you’d slept well in the morning. However, over the last few months, I’d developed methods of making up for my lack of sleep: a hot shower, then gallons of cold water for my face, and finally a quadruple espresso for my circulation, disguised with a topping of frothed milk so that Lottie wouldn’t go lecturing me on the sensitivity of young people’s stomachs. The Italian coffee machine that ground fresh beans and frothed milk at the touch of a button was one reason why living in the Spencers’ house wasn’t so bad. Lottie might think that no one should drink coffee until they were eighteen at the earliest, but for Mom there were no such age limits, so I had unlimited access to caffeine.

Halfway to the kitchen, I met my sister. She had been out walking our dog, Buttercup, and put her ice-cold hand to my cheek. “Feel that!” she said cheerfully. “They said on the news it might even be a white Christmas this year, and the coldest January for eleven years . . . and silly me, I’ve gone

and lost a glove. One of my gray polka-dot pair. You haven't seen it anywhere, have you? Those are my favorite gloves."

"No, sorry. Have you looked in Buttercup's hidey-hole?" Buttercup had rolled over on the floor in front of me and was looking as cute and innocent as if she'd never dream of dragging gloves, socks, and shoes away and bringing them out again only after they were chewed to bits. I tickled her tummy at length and talked to her in baby language (she loved that!), before getting up and following Mia toward the kitchen, or rather toward the coffee machine. Buttercup followed me, not that she was after coffee. She had her eye on the plate of cold roast beef that Ernest had just put on the breakfast table.

We'd now been living in London for almost four months, in this large, comfortable brick house in Hampstead, but although I really liked the city and for the first time in years I had a large, pretty room all to myself, I still felt rather like a guest.

Maybe that was simply because I'd never learned to feel at home anywhere. Before Mom met Ernest Spencer and decided to spend the rest of her life with him, she'd moved house almost every year, along with Mia, Lottie, Buttercup, and me. We'd lived in Germany, Scotland, India, the Netherlands, South Africa, and of course in the United States, where Mom came from. Our parents had divorced when I was eight, but Papa was no keener than Mom on staying in one place. He was always glad when his company sent him to a new job in a country that he didn't know yet. Papa was German, and at the moment he and his two suitcases (he used to say no one needed more stuff than would fit into two suitcases) were living in Zürich, where Mia and I were going to stay with him for the Christmas holidays.

Was it surprising that all these years we'd wanted nothing more fervently than to settle down in one place? We'd always dreamed of a house where we could stay put and have all our things around us. A house with plenty of space, a room for each of us, a garden where Buttercup could race around and play, and an apple tree to climb. Now we were living in a house almost exactly like that (there was even a tree to climb, only it was a cherry tree), but it wasn't quite the same, because it wasn't *our* house: it belonged to Ernest Spencer and his two children, the seventeen-year-old twins Florence and Grayson. As well as the twins, there was also a friendly ginger cat called Spot, and they'd all three lived their whole lives here. But however often Ernest repeated that this house was now our house, it didn't feel like it. Possibly because there were no notches in any of the door frames with our names beside them to show how we'd grown, and because we couldn't connect any stories with the dark patch on the Persian rug or the cracked kitchen tile. Because we hadn't been here seven years ago, when a napkin suddenly caught fire while the family was eating fondue, or in the case of the tile, when Florence, aged five, had been so furious with Grayson that she threw a bottle of fizzy water at him.

Maybe it would just take a little longer. But we certainly hadn't left any traces behind us or created any family stories in the short time we'd been here.

Mom was already working on that problem, however. She'd always insisted on the three of us having a big breakfast together early on Sunday mornings, and she'd lost no time in introducing the same custom to the Spencer household, much to the annoyance of Florence and Grayson, particularly today. Judging by Florence's expression, she was in the mood

to throw another bottle of water at someone. The twins had been out at a party until three thirty in the morning and couldn't stop yawning, Florence with her hand in front of her mouth, Grayson with no such inhibitions about yawning widely in front of us all and making sounds of exhaustion. At least I wasn't the only one having to fight off my weariness, although our methods of dealing with it differed. While I gulped great mouthfuls of coffee and waited for the caffeine to get into my bloodstream, Florence spiked orange segments on a fork and carried them elegantly to her mouth. She obviously thought vitamin C was the answer to tiredness. I felt sure the shadows under her caramel-brown eyes would soon go right away and she'd look as immaculate as ever. As for Grayson, he was shoveling mountains of scrambled eggs and toast into himself and had no shadows under his eyes at all. But for the yawning, no one would even have noticed how tired he was. He badly needed a shave, all the same.

Mom, Ernest, and Lottie had obviously slept well and were beaming at us cheerfully, and for once Mom was fully dressed and had done her hair, instead of coming down to breakfast all a mess in a revealing negligee, as she often did on a Sunday morning. Relieved, I smiled back.

Maybe I also smiled back because Mom's happiness was kind of infectious, and everything was so homey and Christmassy. The winter sun shone through the bay windows, which had wreaths decorating them; the red paper stars shone in the sunlight; there was a scent of melted butter, orange, vanilla, and cinnamon in the air (Lottie had been making a great mound of waffles that were smiling at me from the middle of the table); and Mia, sitting beside me, looked like a rosy-cheeked little Christmas angel in glasses.

Not that she behaved like an angel.

“Are we at the zoo here or what?” she asked as Grayson almost dislocated his jaw for about the eighth time, yawning.

“Yes,” said Grayson, unmoved. “Feeding the hippos. Pass the butter this way, would you?”

I grinned. Grayson was another reason why I liked living in this house; in fact, he was an even better reason than the coffee machine. First, he could help me with my math when I got stuck (after all, he was two classes above me); secondly, he was a really cheering sight, even when he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep and was yawning like a hippopotamus, and thirdly . . . well, he was just nice.

His sister wasn’t quite so nice.

“What a shame Henry didn’t have time for the party last night . . . again,” she said to me, and although her voice was dripping with sympathy, I could hear the malice behind it. It showed in the way she left that little pause before saying *again*. “You two really missed something. We had such fun, didn’t we, Grayson?”

Grayson just yawned again, but my mother leaned forward and examined me in concern. “Liv, darling, you went to your room without having any supper yesterday evening. Should I be worried?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Mom just went on. “Anyway, it’s not normal to spend a Saturday evening hanging around at home, not at your age, and going to bed early. Just because your boyfriend doesn’t have time to go to a party, you don’t have to act like a nun and stay home yourself.”

I cast a dark glance at her through my glasses. That was typical of my mom. We were talking about the birthday party

of a guy two years ahead of me at school. I hardly knew him, and anyway I'd been invited only as Henry's companion, so I'd have looked pretty silly going on my own. Aside from the fact that, whatever Florence said, I probably hadn't missed much. Parties were all the same: too many people in a small space, too much loud music, and not enough to eat. You couldn't talk except in a shout, a couple of people always drank too much and made fools of themselves, and if you danced, other people were poking their elbows in your ribs the whole time—it really wasn't my idea of fun.

“What's more,” said Mom, leaning a little farther forward, “what's more, if Henry has to babysit his little brother and sister, which naturally I think is very nice of him—who's to say you can't go and help him?”

To my annoyance, she'd hit the bull's-eye, right at my most sensitive spot. In the eight and a half weeks of our relationship, Henry had often come here to see me: we'd spent time in my room, in the park, at the movies, at parties, in the school library, in the corner café, and of course in our dreams. But I hadn't been to his house once.

The only member of Henry's family that I knew was his little sister, Amy, aged four, and I knew her only from dreams. I knew that he also had a brother called Milo, who was twelve, but Henry didn't often talk about him, and he almost never mentioned his parents. Recently I'd wondered whether Henry was keeping me away from his home on purpose. I'd found out most of what I knew about his family not from him, but from Secrecy's blog. I'd learned that his parents were divorced, his father had already been married three times, and he was now planning to make a former lingerie model

from Bulgaria wife number four. As well as Milo and Amy, according to Secrecy, Henry also had a whole crowd of older half brothers and sisters.

Mom winked at me, and I hastily thought about something else. When Mom winked, it was usually suggestive, and therefore embarrassing.

“I always had no end of fun babysitting. Particularly when the babies were asleep.” She winked again, and now Mia put her knife down in alarm. “In particular I remember the Millers’ sofa. . . .”

So much for a homey, nearly Christmassy mood.

“Mom!” said Mia sharply, and at the same time I said, “Not now!” We already knew about the Millers’ sofa, and no way did we want Mom talking about her experiences on it over breakfast.

Before she could take another deep breath (the worst of it was that she remembered not just one embarrassing experience, but she had an almost inexhaustible supply of them), I added quickly, “I stayed home last night because I felt like I was coming down with a cold, and anyway I had a lot of work to do for school.” I could hardly say that I’d wanted to go to bed early on a secret mission, wearing the incredibly ugly trapper’s cap that I’d stolen from Charles. Of course we hadn’t told anyone what we did at night in our dreams—and presumably no one would have believed us anyway. We’d have been carted straight off to join Anabel in the psychiatric hospital. Of everyone at the breakfast table, only Grayson knew about the dream business, but I was fairly sure that since the events of eight and a half weeks ago, he hadn’t once gone through his own dream door, and I also guessed he thought we’d all keep away from the dream corridors. Grayson had

never felt happy going into other people's dreams; he thought it was all creepy and dangerous, and he'd have been horrified if he knew that we simply couldn't leave it alone. Unlike Henry, he'd definitely have condemned my operation last night as immoral.

Incidentally, I'd had to wash my hair twice to get rid of the smell of sheepskin from that cap, but there was still something the matter with it. When Lottie, who had gone to get herself a second helping of scrambled eggs, passed behind me, my hair crackled audibly and stood on end, only to lie back against Lottie's pink angora sweater. Everyone started to laugh, one by one, even me once I'd glanced in the mirror above the sideboard.

"Like a porcupine," said Mia as I tried smoothing my hair down on my head again. "We really might as well be at the zoo this morning. Speaking of zoos, who's the extra place for?" She pointed to the empty plate beside Lottie. "Is Uncle Charles coming to breakfast?"

At the sound of his name, Lottie and I jumped almost at the same time. Lottie presumably in excitement; mine was more of a guilty start. As if on cue, we heard the front door open, and I tried to prepare myself for the worst. But the singed smell that suddenly rose to my nostrils came, to my relief, from my slice of toast.

And the energetic footsteps click-clacking along the hall didn't belong to Charles either, but to someone else. They were unmistakable. Mia groaned quietly and cast me a meaningful look. I rolled my eyes. I'd really rather have seen a singed Charles. So long as he was only slightly singed at the edges, of course.

The last of the warm Christmassy feeling seemed to leave

the room, and there she stood in the doorway: the Beast in Ocher. Also known as “the she-devil with the Hermès scarf,” in ordinary life Philippa Adelaide Spencer, or Granny, as Grayson and Florence called her. Apparently her friends at the bridge club knew her as Peachy Pippa, but I wasn’t going to believe that until I heard it with my own ears.

“Oh, I see you’ve started without me,” she said instead of *hello, good morning*, or anything like that. “Are those American manners?”

Mia and I exchanged another glance. If the front door hadn’t been left unlocked, then the Beast in Ocher had a key to it. Alarming.

“You’re over half an hour late, Mother,” said Ernest, standing up to kiss her on both cheeks.

“Really? What time did you tell me?”

“I didn’t,” said Ernest. “You invited yourself yesterday, remember? You said you’d be here for breakfast at nine thirty.”

“Nonsense, I never said anything about breakfast. Of course I had it at home. Oh, thank you, darling.”

Grayson was helping her off with her (ocher) coat—a fox had given its life for the fur collar—and Florence beamed and said, “Oh, you’re wearing your (ocher) twinset; it really suits you, Granny!”

Lottie, sitting beside me, had tried to get to her feet as well, but I held her firmly down by the sleeve of her sweater. Last time she had bobbed the Beast a curtsy, and no way was I having her do that again.

Mrs. Spencer Senior was a tall, slender woman who looked a good deal younger than her seventy-five years. With her graceful, upright posture, long neck, elegant short hairstyle,

and the cool blue eyes that she turned on each of us in turn, she'd have been the perfect casting for Snow White's wicked stepmother—in a *Thirty Years Later* special.

I'd better explain that we hadn't always been so hostile. At first we'd seriously tried to like Ernest's mother, or at least understand her. At the end of August, she'd set off on a three-month around-the-world cruise, and when she got back at the end of November fit and well, with a good tan and loaded with souvenirs, she found that her favorite son had moved his American girlfriend into the house, along with her daughters, their au pair, and their dog. It wasn't hard to see why Mrs. Spencer had been horrified at first, and so surprised that it rendered her speechless. But unfortunately not for long, because then she let fly, and to this day she hadn't stopped.

Her main object in life seemed to be insinuating that Mom was after Ernest for his money and had used all sorts of nasty tricks to catch him. She combined that with attacks on Americans in general; she thought they were uncivilized, stupid, and vain. She wasn't a bit impressed by Mom's two academic doctorates. After all, she'd gained those degrees in the United States and not in a civilized country. (She studiously ignored the fact that Mom was now teaching and lecturing at the University of Oxford.) The only people that Mrs. Spencer thought were worse than Americans were Germans, because Germany had started the Second World War. Among other things. So she thought Mia and I were not just uncivilized, vain, and stupid (on Mom's side) but also naturally nasty and underhand (on Papa's side). As for Lottie, who was German on both sides of her family, she was just nasty and underhand, and when it came to our dog, Buttercup—well, Mrs. Spencer didn't really like any animals at all unless they were on her

plate, cooked and covered in gravy. Or if she was wearing them around her neck.

We really did try hard to overcome her resentment and get her to like us—but it was no use. (Okay, maybe we didn't try all *that* hard.) And by now we'd given up the attempt. What was it Lottie was always saying? Call out into the forest, and the same sound comes echoing back. Or anyway, she had a proverb along those lines. We were part of a pissed-off forest, anyway, or at least Mia and I were. Mom was still hoping for a miraculous change of heart in Ernest's mother, and as for Lottie—well, Lottie was a hopeless case. She firmly believed that there was good in everyone, even in the Beast.

The Beast now stared at Lottie and said, "I'll just have a cup of tea. Earl Grey. Black, with a dash of lemon in it."

"Coming right away!" There was no holding Lottie now. She jumped up, and the sleeve of her sweater almost tore because I was still clutching it firmly. Grayson did say, "I can make you a cup of tea, Granny," but Lottie pushed past him. We had already explained to Mrs. Spencer, several times, that Lottie was not our maidservant (and besides, she had every Sunday off), but our explanations had fallen on deaf ears. It was her opinion that if you paid someone a salary, she couldn't be your friend at the same time.

"In a proper teacup, please, not one of those thick mugs that you all use for your horrible coffee." Mrs. Spencer sat down. As usual, in her company, I suddenly felt that I didn't have enough warm clothes on. I wanted a nice thick cardigan. And some more coffee, in one of those thick mugs.

"*Boker*," Mia whispered to me.

"What?" I whispered back.

“Short for *the Beast in Ocher*. Let’s just call her the Boker.”

“Okay.” I giggled. It really suited her.

The Boker glared at us. So did Mom and Florence—and it was true that whispering and giggling at meals didn’t exactly suggest we were well brought up. But then, I guess the Boker decided it wasn’t worth her while to tell us off.

“Grayson, darling, where’s dear little Emily?” she asked instead.

“Still in bed asleep, with any luck.” Grayson helped himself to yet more scrambled eggs, and spread butter on another slice of toast. At a rough estimate, it was his seventeenth slice. It was incredible how much he could shovel into himself without ever putting on an ounce of weight. “Dear little Emily,” he said quietly.

Did he sound a tiny bit sarcastic? I stared at Grayson with interest. Emily was his girlfriend, also in the top class at school, editor of the school magazine, a prizewinning dressage horsewoman, and she was neither dear nor little. The Beast in . . . er, I mean, the Boker had obviously taken Emily to her heart. When she mentioned her, and she often did, it was obvious that she thought Emily was the bee’s knees, and she was always praising Grayson, too, for his excellent taste in women, which, apparently, he hadn’t inherited from his father.

Now she sighed indignantly. “Oh, I was hoping to see her here. But obviously the only guests you’ve invited to breakfast today are the domestic staff.”

“Lottie lives here,” said Mia, not going to the slightest trouble to sound friendly. “Where else would she eat breakfast?”

Mrs. Spencer raised her eyebrows again. “As far as I know,

my granddaughter has had to give up her rooms on the top floor to your *au pair*—goodness knows there’s more than enough room there.”

Here we went again.

“Mother, surely we’ve discussed that quite often enough. Can we *please* talk about something else?” Ernest wasn’t looking at all happy anymore. And Mom was clutching the tablecloth as if she were afraid that if she didn’t, she’d jump up and run away.

“All right, I’ll change the subject: you must come and put new batteries in my fire alarms, Ernest,” said Mrs. Spencer. “Charles’s alarm went off in the middle of the night last night because the battery had run out.” (Oh, good. Then he was still alive!) “I’d have a heart attack if such a thing happened to me.” She ostentatiously put her hand to her ocher twinset at roughly the spot where her pacemaker would have been fitted if she’d had a weak heart, which she didn’t. She had the constitution of an ox.

“A nice cup of tea.” Lottie put the teacup down in front of her. “Earl Grey, with a dash of lemon.”

“Thank you, Miss . . . er?”

“Wastlhuber.”

“Whistle-whistle?” repeated Mrs. Spencer.

“Oh, just call me Lottie,” said Lottie.

Mrs. Spencer stared at her, horrified. Then she said, “Certainly not!” emphatically, and began rummaging in her handbag, probably looking for smelling salts.

“Oh, loosen up, Boker,” muttered Mia under her breath.

The Boker let a little sweetener drop into the tea from her personal pillbox and stirred the cup. “Why I’m really here

is . . . well, as you know, I always have a little Twelfth Night tea party in January.”

“*Little* is good,” murmured Grayson, but his remark was drowned out by Florence’s enthusiastic, “Oh, I just love, love, love your Twelfth Night tea parties, Granny!” As if they were the grooviest occasions of all time.

Mrs. Spencer smiled faintly. “Well, I was hoping that I wouldn’t have to, but as my friends are always asking, and clearly none of you here are going to come to your senses”—at this point she cleared her throat and looked sadly at her son—“I can see I have no option but to extend my invitation to your new entourage, Ernest.”

When no one reacted—Mia and I because we weren’t sure what *entourage* meant, and were trying to work out whether it was something nasty—she added, sighing, “That means that I would”—once again she cleared her throat, and this time she fixed her eyes on Mom—“that I would be very glad, dear Ann, to welcome you and your two daughters to my house.”

It was remarkable the way she managed to make that sound like an order. And you could bet that no one had ever looked less happy than she did when she uttered the words *very glad*.

Ernest thought so too. “If you . . .,” he began, frowning, but Mom put her oar in before he could go on.

“That’s so nice of you, Philippa,” she said warmly. “We’d love to accept your invitation, wouldn’t we, girls?”

It took us a couple of seconds, but because Mom was looking so hopeful, we finally managed to smile and nod.

Okay, so we’d be going to an English tea party on Twelfth

Night, to have a lot of old ladies look at us curiously. We'd been through worse.

Mrs. Spencer, satisfied, sipped her tea. She'd certainly have swallowed the wrong way if she'd known that Twelfth Night was to be the day when Mr. Snuggles died, and she had just invited his murderers to her house. The murderers themselves hadn't the faintest idea who Mr. Snuggles even was. Without any forebodings at all, we reached for the cinnamon waffles.

TITTLE-TATTLE BLOG

The Frogal 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.



25 December

Merry Christmas, everybody! Enjoying the holidays? And did you find exactly the presents you wanted lying under the Christmas tree this morning? Not in the Porter-Peregrin household, I'm afraid. Persephone wept buckets because she unwrapped a little Cartier watch instead of her heart's desire. But what were her poor parents to do? I mean, they could hardly have done Jasper Grant up in gift wrap for her, could they? In fact, I can understand her. I miss Jasper myself. It simply won't be the same without him! A whole term in France, just to get a better French mark on his final school report—did he spare a thought for us? Who, may I ask, is going to provide the really good scandals at parties now that he's not here? And how are the Frogal Flames going to win their games without their second-best man? They're already suffering because Arthur Hamilton was voted out as team captain. And no, I still haven't the faintest idea what exactly happened after the Autumn Ball, or why Arthur argued with Jasper, Grayson Spencer, and Henry Harper,

so do stop sending me e-mails about it. I'll soon find out—and when I know, I'll tell you right away. That's a promise!

It's fairly quiet in London at the moment. Mrs. Cook the headmistress is in Cornwall, like half the school (hey, is there anyone who DOESN'T have a holiday cottage in St. Ives?), and Mrs. Lawrence has flown to Lanzarote. Just like Mr. Vanhagen, by the way. Funny coincidence, don't you agree?

How about the rest of you? How are you spending the holiday season? Are you staying home in the warm, like the Spencer twins? I'd love to tell you what I'm doing, but then you'd only go trying to find out who I am again—and that would be such a bore. You'd better reconcile yourselves to the fact that you'll never know.

See you soon!

Love from your very Christmassy-feeling Secrecy

PS—Speaking of Christmas: Liv and Mia Silver are away with their father in Zürich for a whole ten days—but I doubt Henry is missing his girlfriend much. I guess it's more of a platonic relationship between those two—they've been an item for months, and they still haven't slept with each other. Only making out and holding hands . . . Hmm, what do you make of that? Seeing that we all know Henry Harper isn't exactly famous for holding back, it must be something to

do with Liv. Is she a prude? Frigid? Or does she belong to some kind of religious community where sex is forbidden before marriage? Then again, maybe she's just a little slow for her age, poor thing.

4

I FELT FOR Mia's hand as the plane prepared to land, because as we came in, losing height, it did a couple of violent little jumps suggesting it was about to crash. But then we slid through the clouds and saw the Thames below us, and London in the snow, and the queasy feeling inside me turned to anticipation.

Mia pressed my hand. "Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to us. But next time you're welcome to make a will leaving everything you possess to your little sister, if it makes you feel better."

"First, if we crash, you'll be as dead as me, and second, I'm afraid I don't have anything to leave."

"You're forgetting your guitar and Aunt Gertrude's Christmas present." Mia giggled.

"No, sorry, I want that buried with me in my casket."

Our American great-aunt had excelled herself with this year's choice of presents: she had given Mia a Barbie coach (suitable for Shaving Fun Ken?) drawn by a pink Pegasus,

and me a set for breeding primeval crustaceans. We could really use those things.

However, we'd long ago given up expecting much in the way of Christmas presents. For some reason, Santa Claus didn't seem to like us very much. Once again he hadn't brought the smartphones we so urgently needed to replace our Stone Age cell phones. Although we did get very stylish Stone Age cell phone cases, handmade out of felt by Lottie.

"I wonder why I have to write that stupid wish list every year, when we never get what we wish for," said Mia. "At least, I don't remember putting *plastic horse with wings* on my list. Or *near-death experiences on a ski lift*."

"Or *bruises all over me*," I added.

"What's so difficult to understand about night-vision aid, bugging set, and red wig with bangs?" Mia snorted sadly. "Instead we get sweaters, pillows, DVDs, and a skiing trip! And then we have to pretend to be grateful! Think how many smartphones Papa could have bought for that amount of money!"

"One would be enough for me," I said. You couldn't even phone to another country with my cell phone. Which meant I hadn't heard Henry's voice for ten days. At least, not on the phone.

The last time Mia and I had been on skis was eight years ago. So it was exciting when Papa took us to the top of the slope on our very first day. He thought skiing was like riding a bicycle: you never forgot how to do it. We could now refute that theory. I guess I was the first person ever to come down the entire World Cup slalom course at Adelboden on my behind. Papa had laughed like crazy and kept on asking

solicitously about my poor bruised bum. That reawakened my ambition, so on the second day I spent only half as long lying in the snow. By the end of the vacation, I could ski faster than Papa, but I'd paid a high price for it.

At least I wasn't still limping as we came through the arrivals gate with our baggage. My stiffness was beginning to wear off.

We heard Mom's cries of "Yoo-hoo! Here we are!" before we saw her, and funnily enough it didn't bother me at all to see that Ernest was with her. By this time, I'd obviously not only gotten used to the idea that he was part of our lives now—at some point in the last four months I must have begun to like him. I was only a tiny bit disappointed that Henry wasn't there, when he'd said that he would meet me at the airport.

"You two look as if you've had a good time," said Mom after she'd hugged us. "As fresh and rosy-cheeked as two Swiss girls straight from the Alpine pastures."

"That's frostbite," said Mia. "With luck, we'll never need to use blush again."

Mom laughed. "Oh, how I've missed you!" she said. She looked fantastic, even though she'd been back to the hairdresser who gave her a style like Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall's. I hoped I'd look as good as Mom did at her age—aside from the hairstyle, of course.

But however hard I looked for Henry, there was no sign of his untidy shock of dark-blond hair anywhere. I was now more than just a tiny bit disappointed. Maybe he was waiting at the wrong airport.

Ernest, very much the English gentleman, took charge of our suitcases. "Haven't you brought any Swiss cheese back this time?" he inquired with a twinkle in his eye.

“We did get some Toblerone for you and Mom, but Mia ate it while we were waiting for our flight.”

“Tattletale!”

“Better a tattletale than a greedy pig!”

“Watch out or I’ll kick your poor bruised bum,” said Mia.

Mom sighed. “Now that I come to think of it, it’s been really peaceful without you girls. Come along! Lottie was going to bake sweet rolls filled with jam, her granny’s recipe; they’re called *Buchteln*, and she says they’re best eaten warm.”

We’d missed Lottie’s food, so we hurried to the car. Eating cheese fondue every evening can be boring. While we’d been in Switzerland, Lottie had gone to visit her family and friends in Bavaria, and whenever she came back from there, she always had lots of wonderful new recipes and couldn’t wait to try them out. We were happy to taste them for her.

On the way home, Mom and Ernest told us all the news (there wasn’t actually any of that, but they talked thirteen to the dozen all the same), and Mia told them all the adventures we’d had skiing. She exaggerated a bit—we hadn’t been stuck in the ski lift for half a day, only fifteen minutes, and it hadn’t been dark by the time the mountain rescue outfit got it going again with a winch; the lift had started moving again in the normal way of its own accord. And there hadn’t really been any avalanche dog coming to our rescue. But, hey, it was more interesting than what Mom and Ernest were saying, so I let her talk away while I switched on my cell phone and looked for any texts from Henry. I found a message from my network provider telling me that I was now back in the United Kingdom, and eleven texts from Persephone wittering on about Jasper, not yet her boyfriend but maybe he would be

someday, and calling down curses on all the French school-girls he'd be meeting. But nothing from Henry.

Hmm. Did that mean I ought to worry?

We hadn't met in our dreams as often as we'd agreed to over the last ten days. That had been my fault, or at least the fault of my unaccustomed mixture of exercise, fresh mountain air, and Swiss cheese, all of them taken in large doses. I'd usually slept so soundly that in the morning I couldn't even remember seeing my own dream door. Henry might well be mad about that. On the other hand, I'd also waited outside his door and never seen anything of him. You couldn't agree precisely when you'd meet in a dream—I mean, who dreams a detailed timetable?

He'd given me one of those Japanese lucky beckoning cats for Christmas. Which would have been fine if I hadn't spent about a thousand hours laboriously making him a music box that played "Dream a Little Dream of Me" and had a photo of me stuck inside the lid. It was star-shaped. Maybe that had been a bad idea. The music box was as good as shouting *I love you!* while I wasn't so sure what a battery-driven souvenir costing six pounds ninety from the Asia shop said.

I stared through the window and thought of sending Henry a text—*I'm here, where are you?*—but then I decided not to. From the plane, London had looked like a scene in one of those kitschy snow globes, with glittering white powdered sugar all over the rooftops, trees, and streets—down here, however, there wasn't any glittery sugar to be seen. Slush isn't in the least romantic, and if I'd had to describe my mood, *slushy* would have been the right word for it. I'd arrived at the airport feeling cheerful and full of anticipation, and I got out of the car in a really bad temper when Ernest finally parked it

in the drive of his house—I mean, our house. Matters didn't improve when the front door was opened by Grayson's girlfriend, Emily. She was the last person I wanted to see at that moment.

"Oh, there you are," said Emily, looking about as pleased as I felt. Objectively considered, she was a very pretty girl with gleaming, smooth brown hair, nice skin, a tall and athletic build, but I couldn't help it: to me she always looked like the stern governess in an old movie, like the one in *Heidi*. And like a horse. A kind of governess horse or horsey governess. She seemed much older than other eighteen-year-old girls, and it wasn't just because of her high-necked, severe clothes, but also because of the superior, know-it-all expression that she turned on everyone. For a split second I was tempted to turn around then and there and march away again. But then Buttercup came into the front hall with her ears flapping, and behind her were Grayson, Florence, and Lottie.

And someone with bright-gray eyes and dark-blond hair standing out in all directions. I almost burst into tears of sheer relief.

Henry.

He simply pushed Emily aside and took me in his arms.

"Hey, there you are again, my cheese girl," he murmured into my hair. "I've missed you so much."

I wound my arms around Henry's neck and held him much closer than was strictly necessary.

"You smell nice," I whispered. It wasn't precisely what I wanted to say, but it was the first thing to come into my head.

"That's not me; it's the stuff with the unpronounceable German name that Lottie's been baking." Henry made no

move to let go of me again, and as far as I was concerned, he never had to, but stupidly we weren't alone.

"You're all invited to try them," cried Lottie. She was wearing the felt slippers she'd originally made as a Christmas present for Charles, but at the last minute she'd decided not to give them to him after all. Because there are many people who don't appreciate the value of a homemade present, she'd said. And that had been a wise decision, because the day before Christmas Eve, Charles had given her a foil-wrapped chocolate Santa Claus. A *small* foil-wrapped chocolate Santa Claus. My beckoning Japanese cat was a one-carat diamond by comparison.

"It's a surprise welcome home party for you snow bunnies!" Lottie beamed at us. If she was suffering from unrequited love for Charles, she hid it well.

"And we'd have made up a welcome song, I'm sure," said Emily, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in her voice. "Only, what on earth rhymes with snow bunny?"

"Jar of honey?" suggested Grayson.

"Don't be silly!" said Emily, and without even looking, I could tell what kind of face she was making.

"No, *silly* doesn't rhyme with *bunny*. But *very funny* does," said Grayson, and I chuckled into Henry's sweater. Oh, it was good to be home. "And *plenty of money*."

"Wrapped up in a five-pound note, like the Owl and the Pussycat when they went to sea," added Mia, "in their beautiful pea-green boat." She patted me on the back. "Hey, you two are getting between us and Lottie's jam buns."

Lottie's new recipe did indeed turn out to be for large, fluffy, very light yeast buns with a plum jam filling and a crisp crust, and life was downright perfect for the next twenty

minutes. Sitting in the kitchen with the people I loved best in the world, drinking hot chocolate and eating the delicious jam buns—at that moment I couldn't imagine anything better. Everyone was talking at once, Mia telling more tall tales about our skiing expeditions, Florence planning the party she and Grayson would have for their eighteenth birthday in February, and Lottie describing the Bavarian cream pudding she was going to conjure up for us tomorrow. I didn't even have to let go of Henry, because we went on holding hands under the table, laughing and exchanging meaningful looks with each other, and after the second jam roll, I felt sure I was about to burst with happiness. Well, maybe not just happiness—those rolls might seem as light as a feather, but once inside you, they swelled to twice their original size. I felt a blissfully satisfied smile spreading over my face entirely of its own accord.

And then the perfect twenty minutes came to an end.

"I'm really impressed to see how sporting you are, Liv," said Emily, who was sitting opposite me. She had eaten only half a jam roll, with a knife and fork, which showed that she and Grayson had *not* been holding hands under the table. "I'd really never have thought it of you. My respects."

What was she talking about? "Well, we Silvers have our good points," I cautiously replied. "But I don't think I can manage a third yeast roll. It's Grayson you should be impressed by. If I've counted correctly, he's on his fourth."

"My fifth," said Grayson with his mouth full. "I already had one before—"

Emily cut him short. "I wasn't admiring you for the number of calories you can consume, Liv, I was admiring your nonchalance."

Nonchalance—the Boker had used that word recently (when she complained that she didn't have any herself these days, in view of the fact that Ernest and Mom were an item), so I knew what it meant; it meant being casual and unconcerned, not minding. Hmm. "Nonchalance about what?" I asked suspiciously.

Henry held my hand a little tighter and started getting to his feet. "Why don't we go upstairs and . . . well, unpack your suitcase?"

Emily returned my glance without batting an eyelid, totally unimpressed by the fact that Grayson was looking at her as if he'd like to jab his fork into her.

"Em," he said menacingly.

"What? I'm only saying I admire her." Emily was still looking me straight in the eyes. "I don't think most people would be so happy to have their sex life discussed in public." She added with a thin-lipped smile, "Or rather, their lack of a sex life."

Henry groaned quietly and stopped pulling at my hand, and Grayson dropped his fork on his plate with such a loud noise that Mom, Lottie, Florence, and Ernest, who were all deep in conversation at the other end of the table, fell silent. For a second you could have heard a pin drop.

Then Mia, speaking instead of me, said, "*What?*" I was very grateful to her for taking over. "Who's been discussing Liv's sex life where?"

"Sex life?" Mom echoed her. It was always a cue for her to be wide awake.

"Oh, I suppose someone at Frogal Academy." Emily leaned back, crossing her arms. "Someone with nothing else

to do. If it's any consolation, most people don't think you're really frigid."

"What?" said Mia again. And once again Mom, too, echoed Emily: "Frigid?" I swallowed with difficulty.

Florence sighed. "Em! Presumably Liv hasn't seen it yet." She was looking at me sympathetically. "Or did you go on the Internet while you were away skiing?"

I shook my head slowly. Nonchalantly, you might say.

"Oh, I see." Emily allowed herself to give that thin-lipped smile again. "I thought Henry would have told you about it ages ago."

No. He hadn't. Whatever *it* was.

"I haven't had a chance yet," said Henry. "And by the way, Liv is standing right here. It's only silly gossip. No one will be interested."

"No, of course not. Secrecy only let two hundred and forty-three readers add comments to her post," said Florence.

Mia jumped up and snatched Lottie's iPad off the sideboard. She was right. It was about time I gave up my wonderful nonchalance as well. I let go of Henry's hand and stood up.

"Like I said, it's only uninteresting gossip," Henry repeated.

"Dead boring," agreed Grayson. "May I have another of those jam bun things, Lottie?"

"Oh," said Mia, staring fixedly at the iPad. "Oh no. Oh. Bloody. Hell."

I took the thing from her and skimmed Secrecy's post. One nasty dig after another, which was typical of her blog. There was the bit about Henry and me at last, in the

postscript: *they've been an item for months, and they still haven't slept with each other.*

Well, in fact, that was true. How did she know? Or was she simply guessing?

Only making out and holding hands . . . Hmm, what do you make of that? Seeing that we all know Henry Harper isn't exactly famous for holding back, it must be something to do with Liv.

What did she mean, Henry wasn't exactly famous for holding back? I didn't think he'd been all that restrained. Or me either. But you didn't have to go rushing into things.

Is she a prude? Frigid? Or does she belong to some kind of religious community where sex is forbidden before marriage? Then again, maybe she's just a little slow for her age, poor thing.

Oh well. Huh. If that was all. Maybe I really was a little slow for my age. So what?

Almost relieved, I raised my head and grinned at Henry. "You and Grayson are right. It really is dead boring, uninteresting gossip."

Henry grinned back, and with a cheerful grunt, Grayson helped himself to another roll. Emily's thin-lipped smile was looking a little sour now, but maybe I was wrong there—after all, her natural expression was grumpy. And Florence, Mom, Ernest, and Lottie went back to their conversation as if nothing had happened. I was so relieved that my appetite came back. Surely another little jam bun wouldn't do any . . .

"Don't rejoice too soon," said Mia, putting her forefinger on the screen. Among all the other comments, Secrecy had spoken up again. *Don't be too hard on poor Liv—she's new to the role of a girl in love. Not so long ago she was still the kind of student who got her head dunked in the toilet. Poor thing, she could*

tell you all about the insides of the toilet bowls at her school in Berkeley, California. . . .

“How does she know about that?” asked Mia quietly.

“No idea.” But I wasn’t grinning now. Secrecy and the whole school could assume whatever they liked about my sex life, for all I cared, but the Berkeley story was a secret. Apart from the four girls who had attacked me in the toilet, only Mia and Lottie knew about it.

And . . . *Henry*.

As I slowly turned my head to look at him, his cell phone began to ring.



IN MY DREAM, I was walking through Frognal Academy with everyone staring at me, giggling and whispering. Emily, looking elegant on a purebred bay horse, trotted past me in the stairwell and called, “Don’t be too hard on poor Liv. She can’t help it if Henry doesn’t want to sleep with her.”

Luckily I spotted a green door in the wall of the corridor at that moment, so I knew I was just dreaming.

“She’s simply rather underdeveloped physically and mentally,” said Emily. It annoyed me that she had the nerve to insult me in my own dream. Fundamentally, didn’t that mean that my own subconscious mind was saying these mean things about me? I wasn’t letting it get away with that. With a wave of my hand, I abolished the horse, and Emily fell to the stone floor with a thud.

“Ouch!” she said indignantly.

“Are you crazy, Liv?” Florence helped her friend up. “She could have hurt herself.”

“My dream, my rules!” I said, reaching for the doorknob. “And I really couldn’t care less what people think about me.”

A snap of my fingers, and Emily, Florence, and all the rest of them turned into soap bubbles. They floated through the stairwell and burst, one by one, with a series of quiet pops. Satisfied, I slipped through the green door into the dream corridor outside.

“Activate Security Protocol Mr. Wu mark three,” I said quietly. If no one was listening, I liked talking to the door as if I were on the starship *Enterprise*. Weirdly, and although I hadn’t done anything to it myself, it had changed quite a lot over the last few weeks. While at first, it had looked like the door of a cozy cottage in the Cotswolds painted deep green, it now had two columns, one on each side, and an extra skylight above it. It was still green, but not such a dark green, more of a fresh minty color, and as it now looked, it suited a mysterious Victorian villa rather than a cottage in the country.

I connected the changes that had happened to the door with those I had gone through myself. I’d noticed the same thing happening to other doors in this labyrinth. Some just changed their color; the paint on others was peeling away; some changed their size and shape entirely. I suspected it had something to do with the owners’ states of mind. It was impossible to keep it all straight, because in addition, the doors were always changing places with one another.

However, the doorknob in the shape of a lizard was still there, and it winked at me when I quietly closed the door behind me. Just in time to see Henry’s untidy blond hair disappear around the next corner. I was going to call his name, but then I didn’t—who knew how loud the echo might be in these corridors, and who or what might be enticed into investigating? Furthermore, where on earth was Henry off to? His door was directly opposite mine, and we’d been going

to meet each other. Right here. And if I had my way, right now.

I decided to go after him. After all, I had better things to do than stand around here looking stupid and waiting for him. Like finally talking, for instance. And really talking, not just canoodling.

Keeping quiet—I was barefoot—I followed him. We hadn't had a chance to discuss how Secrecy could know the story of the school toilets in Berkeley. Henry's cell phone had rung, and he had left in a hurry to go and collect his little brother. From a friend's house, he had said.

"Can't your mum do it?" Emily had asked, and I was really glad I hadn't asked that question, because I don't think I'd have survived the cold, contemptuous look that Henry gave her.

Not that it bothered Emily at all. When Henry had left, she turned to Grayson. "I thought Mrs. Harper had dealt with that problem?"

"Em!" said Grayson with a strange sideways glance at me.

"What's the matter?" Emily had shaken her head as if baffled, while Grayson took her by the elbow and led her into the next room.

That problem? What problem?

That was when I realized it was high time for me to talk to Henry. It was one thing that I knew so little about my boyfriend. Or rather that he told me so little about himself. But the fact that even Emily was better informed than I was hurt me more than I liked to admit. Now and then I'd thought of probing, asking Henry all the questions that had come into my head as time passed, but then I didn't ask them after all. In movies and books, the hero's girlfriend who always wants

to know everything usually turns out to be a silly cow and a control freak, and pretty soon she's the hero's ex-girlfriend. Or, depending on what kind of story it is, she's the victim of a terrible crime and everyone is secretly pleased. But control freak or not, I was beginning to feel I just had to know where I stood with Henry.

The corridor into which he'd turned seemed to be empty, but I thought I heard footsteps in the corridor branching off to the left behind an imposing red door, so I went faster. I'd soon catch up with him.

Talking, no making out, I reminded myself again to be on the safe side. Repeating it like a mantra couldn't hurt.

"Ouch!" I'd bumped into something hard, or rather into someone turning the corner, just like me but in the opposite direction. At first I thought it was Henry.

"Good heavens, Liv!" exclaimed the someone, obviously as startled as I was.

It wasn't Henry; it was Arthur Hamilton. The Arthur Hamilton whose jaw I had broken and whose crazy girlfriend had tried to cut my throat last fall. The Arthur that I'd seen only at school since the disaster in the cemetery, and then I'd kept my distance. If our paths did happen to cross, we'd stared at each other like two enemy generals meeting off the battlefield, demonstrating strength and lasting hostility.

I jumped away from him as quickly as I could. However, it was too late to assume an intimidating expression—I was afraid I was gawping at him more like poor scared Bambi.

Arthur had recovered from the shock faster than I had, because he was smiling.

No doubt about it, he was still the best-looking boy in the universe, with his symmetrical features, big blue eyes, his

porcelain complexion, and his angelic golden curls, but something in him had changed. Not outwardly; there wasn't even a scar left from his injury, although his jaw had been wired for several weeks. No, the damage was under the surface, as if last fall's events had affected the mysterious aura of a born winner that used to surround him. And his smile had clearly lost something of its hypnotic charm. "Very smart outfit, Liv Silver."

I didn't have to look down at myself to know what I was wearing—it was what I actually had on at that moment: a pair of baggy pajama bottoms with blue polka dots on them, and an old T-shirt of Grayson's that I had rescued from the donation bag because I thought the panda in a pink tutu on the front of it was funny. The wording under the panda said **TOO FAT FOR A BALLERINA.**

Hell. Why was I roaming around these corridors in pajamas? I ought to have turned into a jaguar. Then maybe Arthur would have shown a little more respect. "Thanks," I said with all the dignity I could muster up. "Have you seen Henry? He ought to be somewhere around here."

"I wonder why I'm not surprised to find you still haunting this place?" Arthur smiled faintly. "Well, it was obvious that you weren't going to give that up. What are you after? Getting into your teachers' dreams in the hope of better grades?"

Not a bad idea. "As a matter of fact, I'm not so fond of spying on other people." I could sound condescending myself if necessary. Even in pajamas. "How about you? What are you doing here yourself? Paying a visit to your old friend the demon? What was his name again? Something beginning with *L*. Sounded like *more water on the sauna stove* in Finnish. Lelula? Lilalu? Luleli?"

Although that was really funny—*löylyä* actually does mean “pour more water on the sauna stove”—as I knew from a nice Finn called Matti who was friends with Lottic when we were in Utrecht. He taught us any number of things that we didn’t really need to say in Finnish. But Arthur wasn’t laughing anymore.

“Oh, I remember,” I said slowly. “Of course, the demon wasn’t real. Just an invention of Anabel’s.”

“Anabel,” repeated Arthur, and he sounded as if saying her name hurt him physically, “Anabel is sick.”

“You don’t say!” I replied as callously as possible. I mean, was I supposed to feel sorry for Anabel? When she’d lured me into a trap and hit me over the head with an iron torch holder? Never mind that after that she’d tied me up so that she could cut my carotid artery at her leisure. The stupid thing was that I *did* feel sorry for her. As we now knew, Anabel had spent the first years of her life with a weird sect that worshipped demons, along with her mother, who had committed suicide later in a psychiatric hospital. No wonder Anabel herself was totally mental.

Arthur was inspecting me attentively, as if he could read my thoughts. I swallowed and tried to look extra grim. All I needed now was Arthur thinking I could understand his ex-girlfriend. Or him, come to that. Although—well, he had loved Anabel, and everyone knows what crazy things you can do when you’re in love. And now she was in a psychiatric hospital herself, his friends weren’t speaking to him, and he wasn’t captain of the basketball team anymore. Poor Ar—no, stop that! The hell with poor Arthur! Next thing I knew, I’d be feeling guilty about breaking his jaw.

“She did some bad things, but . . .” Arthur hesitated for a

moment, and once again I felt a surge of sympathy. “But she didn’t write that book herself.”

He meant the grubby old notebook where Anabel had found her rituals for conjuring up demons. The book had been burned on the night when Arthur and Anabel had lured me to the Hamiltons’ family vault in the cemetery, intending to free Anabel’s imaginary demon from the underworld with the help of my own far-from-imaginary blood.

Whether Anabel was traumatized or not, her knife would have killed me if Henry and Grayson hadn’t turned up in the nick of time. So that was quite enough sympathy and understanding, thank you.

“True. Someone just as nutty as Anabel wrote the book,” I said firmly.

“Could be,” admitted Arthur, and he said no more for a second or so. Then he made a gesture that managed to be helpless and arrogant at the same time as it took in the whole corridor. “So how do you explain all this, then?”

I’d asked myself the same question often enough. I shrugged my shoulders as casually as I could. “Well, how can I be here in London and talk to my grandma in Boston at the same time? How come the garage door will open if I press a button while I’m still a mile away? How can people visit each other in their dreams? So far as I’m concerned, to be honest, those are all phenomena I can’t explain. But just because I don’t understand them, it doesn’t mean they have to be the work of demons. There’s a scientific explanation for everything.”

Now Arthur had his superior smile back. “Oh, is there? Think what you like if it makes you feel better, Liv Silver. My regards to Henry.”

“Thanks, and mine to the demon Lilliburlero when you next see him,” I snapped back with my most hostile enemy-general expression as I turned to walk away. “I must be going. See you sometime—I’m afraid.”

Arthur nodded. “Yes, I guess that can’t be avoided.” And he added under his breath, “But be careful, Liv. We’re not alone in these corridors.”

I resisted the temptation to turn around and tell him what he could do with his pretended concern and/or concealed threats, and I marched away, well knowing that he was watching me, probably with his eyes fixed on my polka-dot pajama bottoms. For a moment I was tempted to make a more elegant departure by turning into a jaguar, even at this late stage, but there was always the danger that once again it wouldn’t work, and I’d be scurrying away as a silly little kitten, so I didn’t run the risk.

And where the hell *was* Henry? He was never around when you needed him.