

“That is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Rachel sat next to Allie at the kitchen table, a piece of toast lavishly coated in jam forgotten in her hand. The sunlight pouring through the window behind her glinted off her dark hair and illuminated her almond-shaped eyes. “They actually chased you through London? Where were the police for God’s sake?”

Rachel’s mum tutted from the Aga where she was scrambling eggs. “Police don’t just stand outside your house on the off chance you get into trouble, Rachel. Even in London you have to call them.”

It was late morning. Because she’d arrived so late, they’d let Allie sleep in; now she was ravenous.

“Your dad totally saved me,” she said, buttering a piece of toast. “Basically he’s a hero.”

As she piled eggs onto a platter that already held bacon and sausages, Rachel’s mother smiled. “He was just doing his job, Allie.”

“But he was so cool and calm, even with those guys running down the street at us,” Allie enthused. As the food was set on the table in front of her she added politely, “Thanks for breakfast, Mrs Patel.”

“You’re very welcome.” Turning to Rachel, Mrs Patel changed the subject. “After breakfast you’ll have to show Allie around the grounds. Isabelle says she’s going to be here for a few days. You two might as well have some fun before school starts again.” She turned back to Allie. “Do you ride?”

“Motorbikes?” Allie asked through a mouthful of sausage.

Rachel and her mother both giggled.

“I wish,” Rachel said. “She means horses.”

Allie flushed. "I haven't ever ridden a horse. There aren't a lot of horses where I grew up."

"We'll go down to the stable later," Rachel said. "If you want to try it out, Mum's horse is really calm. She can ride Sage, can't she Mum?"

Mrs Patel seemed to understand that Allie felt uncomfortable.

"Only if it's something Allie really wants to do, Rachel," she said. "Horses aren't for everyone."

Allie, who had been taking in this conversation, set her knife down slowly.

"You seriously have your own stables?"

Rachel nodded. "I've been riding since I was little. Let's walk down later and you can meet Angelica."

"Who's Angelica?"

"Rachel's horse." Mrs Patel smoothed her daughter's hair. "They love each other."

"It's true," Rachel said dramatically. "I'm in love with a horse. They say we can't be together. That cross-species love is wrong..."

"Eat your eggs," her mother laughed, turning away to stack dishes in the dishwasher.

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"So, how did things go at home? I mean, before the randoms in suits showed up."

Rachel and Allie were stretched out on lounge chairs beside a long, azure pool. If Allie had been impressed by the stables, the fact that there was a pool had been even more exciting.

“It was... strange.” Allie straightened the narrow straps of her borrowed blue swimming costume and squinted into the sun. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Start at the beginning,” Rachel suggested. “What happened when you first got home?”

That part was easy.

“At first, it was really, really good.” Allie rolled over onto her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows, pushing her shoulder-length hair out of her eyes. “My parents were super nice and everything was like, you know, ‘Yay Allie! You didn’t fail English!’”

“You made all As in English,” Rachel corrected her.

“You know what I mean.” Allie shot her a look and Rachel smiled.

“So,” Rachel said, “everything was aces, and then...?”

Allie sighed. “I knew I had to ask all the hard questions. Like why did you tell me my grandmother was dead when she’s not? And why are your old mates trying to kill me?” She paused for a second before adding, “And I knew that would ruin everything. So I didn’t want to do it. But after a few days I finally did.”

Rachel shielded her eyes from the sun so she could see Allie’s face. “And how did that go?”

“Awesome,” Allie muttered grimly.

“Tell me.”

“I thought it would be best if I talked to mum alone,” Allie sighed. “One day when dad was out I just went up to her and said, you know, ‘Hey, can we talk?’”

Her mother had been folding laundry at the time, Allie explained, but she'd stopped immediately and even smiled when Allie sat down on the chair across from her. Her smiles had been so rare in recent years that for a second Allie thought she couldn't bear to say what needed to be said. But there was no other way.

"Of course." Her mother looked at her expectantly as she continued folding shirts into neat fabric rectangles of white, yellow and pale blue. "What would you like to talk about?"

Allie lowered herself to the edge of a chair and crossed her legs, studying the newly painted magenta toenails that peeped out from the ends of her sandals.

"A lot happened over the summer," she said finally. "And we've never talked about it. I learned a lot... about us. Our family, I mean." As Allie had known it would, the smile disappeared. "I need to understand what it means. I think you're the only one who can tell me."

"What would you like me to explain?" Her mother's voice was even but Allie could see the tension in the way her hands tightened on the t-shirt she held.

"Isabelle says it's time for you to tell me about Lucinda," Allie said. "And I think she's right. Lucinda... She's my grandmother, isn't she?"

For a fleeting second Allie thought her mother would lie and if she had she would never have forgiven her. But after a second her shoulders drooped and she set the shirt down before sitting on the bed across from Allie.

She looked, Allie thought, almost relieved.

"I think I always knew you'd find out someday," she said. "Yes, Lucinda is my mother – your grandmother."

Since she'd been so sure that this would be the answer, Allie should have been ready to hear it. Instead she felt stunned. She leaned back a little on the chair and stared at her mother as if she'd never seen her before.

"But why? Why would you lie to me about something like that? My whole life I believed my grandmother was dead and you let me think that. We could have got to know each other..." her voice trailed off.

"I know it's hard for you to believe this," her mother kept her voice gentle, "but everything I have ever done was to protect you. To keep you safe."

"But that's a terrible thing to do," Allie protested. "To lie to your child."

Her mother took a sharp breath. "It is... it *was* a terrible thing to do. And I am sorry. I just didn't know what else to do. Maybe I should have just told you the truth – that we were estranged. But I was afraid if I did you'd insist on meeting her, and then everything would have been ruined."

"Ruined? How?" Allie asked, baffled. "How would my knowing my own grandmother have ruined everything?"

"Because then she would have had you," her mother said without hesitation. "And I would have lost you."

"Like you lost Christopher." Allie's words were more bitter than she intended and her mother flinched.

"I'm sorry," Allie said immediately. "That wasn't fair..."

"No." Her mother held up her hand to stop her. "Don't apologise. It was fair. It just hurts."

Allie didn't know what to say to that, so she waited, twisting her fingers together in her lap.

“Lucinda,” her mother said with abrupt anger, “is a powerful and dangerous person. She gets what she wants – it’s just how she is. Nothing gets in her way. I...” She stopped and thought for a moment; when she started again, her voice was quiet. “When I was your age, I was very different from her. She is a very controlling person, and she dictated my life down to the most elemental detail. What I wore, who I knew, what I studied, where I went – everything was decided by her. At first I accepted it, but as I grew older I rebelled. I didn’t want to be like her. I didn’t want to be rich and miserable. I didn’t want what she had. I wanted to be myself. To make my own decisions. Every second of my life was controlled by her until the day I walked away.” She looked at Allie searchingly. “I should think if anyone would understand that, it would be you.”

And Allie did.

“I would have run away too,” she announced, her tone emphatic. “If she was like that, then running away was the right thing to do. But lying to me and Christopher about it wasn’t right. I have to make my own decisions too. Just like you did.”

Her mother’s eyes dropped. “Isabelle says exactly the same thing. And I’m sorry for not trusting you.”

“Isabelle is your friend, isn’t she?” Allie asked. “You went to Cimmeria together.”

For a second her mother looked like she was going to deny it. Then her shoulders drooped a little. She nodded.

“You didn’t tell me that either,” Allie said pointedly.

The colour rose in her mother’s cheeks and she chose her words carefully.

“I... let you believe that Isabelle and Cimmeria were unfamiliar to me. That was selfish of me – I just didn’t want to explain everything.” She paused a moment before adding, “And I was angry at you.”

That surprised Allie. It hurt to know her mother felt vindictive towards her. But she kept her expression blank. There was more she needed to know.

“Who is Lucinda anyway?” she asked. “Everyone seems to think she’s some huge big-wig. What is she... the other prime minister? The Queen? God?”

“Not quite,” her mother said. “But close.”

Something in her mother’s tone gave Allie a strange sense of trepidation. “What does that mean?”

Her mother spoke very deliberately. “Her last name – and my maiden name – is Meldrum.”

Allie gasped out loud.

“No. Way.” She’d looked at her mother in disbelief.

“It’s the truth.” Her mother held up her hands helplessly. “Lucinda Meldrum is your grandmother.”

As Allie finished saying the words, Rachel sat up straight on the lounge chair, her face a mask of astonishment.

“Get out of town.” She looked at Allie with suspicion. “This is a joke right?”

“Afraid not,” Allie said. “Lucinda Bloody Meldrum is my grandmother.”

“Who’s Lucinda Bloody Meldrum?”

The piping voice came from behind them, and they both turned to see a girl with a heart-shaped face and a mass of dark curls sitting on a bench nearby, her chin in her hands. A beach towel and inflatable yellow duck rested at her feet.

“Mina, you little spy!” Rachel said accusingly. “I thought you were at your violin lesson.”

“I finished. Mum said you were at the pool and I should come down too.”

The ten-year-old wore a terry swimsuit cover with a design of big pink daisies scattered against a white background. Her tone was defensive but Allie smiled at the way she stood her ground against her elder sibling.

“Allie, meet my sneaky little sister.” Rachel sighed.

Mina turned her wide brown eyes towards Allie. “Who’s Lucinda Meldrum?”

Rachel answered for her. “You’ve seen her on TV, Midget. She’s the lady with the grey hair who’s always being interviewed about money. You know – the one who wore that green silk jacket you liked with the dragon on it.”

“Oh that one!” the girl smiled as recognition dawned. “I do like her. Why do they always talk to her about money?”

This time Allie answered. “She’s like an expert. She ran a bunch of banks, and then she was... What do you call it?”

“Chancellor,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, the first woman Chancellor. And now she’s head of the thingamajig.” Again she turned to Rachel.

“The International Banking Committee,” Rachel said automatically.

“Yeah, that. She’s super famous for being really clever,” Allie said. “All the important people go to her for advice.

“She has pretty hair,” Mina said.

“She *does* have pretty hair,” Allie agreed.



“This is ridiculous,” Rachel muttered. “We can’t have a real conversation while Midget’s here.”

“Yes you can!” Mina looked wounded. “And don’t call me Midget.”

“Of course we can,” Allie said. “You can tell me what your grandmother’s like. Is she like mine?”

“No! Mine’s not as pretty and she lives in Yorkshire.”

Rachel sighed dramatically but Allie, secretly glad not to be talking about her own family any more, pretended not to notice.

“Tell me all about her.”

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“So, what are you going to do?”

It was late that same night, and Rachel and Allie were sitting on the bed in Allie’s room in their pyjamas, talking quietly.

“I don’t know.” Allie nibbled her thumbnail nervously. “I mean, I know that she knows about me because I found that note from her in my student file. So it seems like... if she wanted to meet me she’d have done something about it.” She pulled her feet up closer and wrapped her arms tightly around her knees. “I mean, she’s *Lucinda Meldrum*. She can do whatever she wants.”

“Yeah, but...” Rachel leaned back against the footboard, wrinkling her nose as she thought.

“...she and your mum probably have some sort of an agreement that she won’t try to meet you. Seems to me your mum is pretty much president of the Anti-Lucinda Brigade. So maybe she’s just honouring that agreement until you get in touch with her.”

Allie rested her cheek against the top of her knees and looked out the open window. A cool breeze fluttered the pale yellow curtains.

“Knowing I have a living grandmother makes me want to meet her. Does that sound weird?”

She raised her head to meet Rachel’s eyes. “I mean, my parents kind of suck right now, even though I get that they’re trying. But Lucinda could be ... like, amazing, for all I know. But at the same time, I want her to want to meet me. I don’t want to go to her like...” she held out her hands as if they were holding an imaginary bowl, “Can I have some more grandparents, please miss?”

“I hear you,” Rachel said. And I don’t know what I’d do if I were in your shoes.”

“Your feet would hurt because they’re much bigger than mine,” Allie said.

“Whatever. You know what I’m saying.” Rachel didn’t smile, and Allie made an apologetic face. “I’ll tell you one thing,” Rachel said, stretching out her legs. “I wish you’d let me talk to my dad about this stuff. He knows everything. And you can totally trust him.”

Allie shook her head vigorously. “No! I mean, well, not yet.” She softened her tone. “Has he said anything about what’s going on at school? Do they know more about where Gabe is?”

Rachel shook her head. “Not a lot. Jo’s story was confused – he obviously didn’t tell her everything. But they think he’d been working with Nathaniel for quite a while. Apparently he would sneak out when he was supposed to be doing Night School stuff, and go meet with Nathaniel.”

“What a complete arse,” Allie fumed. “I mean, he betrayed people he’d known his whole life. He put his own girlfriend’s life in danger. How do you just... do that?”

“The thing is,” Rachel said, “Dad’s said some things that make me think Gabe didn’t act alone.”

Allie felt a chill run across her skin. “I don’t... What do you mean?”

Leaning forward, Rachel lowered her voice to a whisper. “One night I heard him talking to Mom. He said Gabe’s not the only one who agreed with Nathaniel.” A line creased Rachel’s forehead and her eyes looked worried. “There are others.”

“What?” Allie was whispering now too. “At school?”

Rachel’s voice was barely audible. “And on the board.”

Allie stared at her. “But they wouldn’t... you know... do anything. Would they?”

Shrugging, Rachel held up her empty hands.

“What can we do?” Allie asked.

“I think if we told Dad you knew about Lucinda, he’d probably tell us more – he might be able to help. Then we wouldn’t just be in the dark.”

Rachel sounded confident and Allie had to admit she made sense. But Carter had been completely opposed to including anyone else in the information they’d gathered over the last weeks of the summer term.

“Let me think about it,” she said.

“Think fast,” Rachel said.

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Over the next few days, though, Allie found it increasingly easy to put Gabe, Nathaniel and all of the things that had happened in the last few weeks out of her mind as she slipped easily into the Patel family life. Sunny afternoons were spent by the pool, or watching Rachel and Mina ride horses. Rainy afternoons were filled with reading books and playing games.

Sometimes Allie would see people dressed in dark clothes flitting between the trees that surrounded the house. Catching a glimpse of them out of the corner of her eye made her jump. But she knew they were Mr Patel's security guards. And after a while she got used to them. Soon she didn't really notice them anymore.

Meal times were raucous affairs of animated conversation on endless topics. Sometimes Mrs Patel would propose a subject at the beginning of the meal and it would be discussed until the dessert dishes were cleared away. One night they spent an entire evening discussing whether eating meat was justifiable. ("I love chickens," Mina said at one point, frowning fiercely. "But I love roasted chicken *just as much!*") In the end they decided they were all omnivores (after Mrs Patel explained what omnivores were), but Allie and Mina agreed they would never eat deer because they were too beautiful, and Rachel said she would never eat octopus because they were too intelligent.

"Omnivores," Mrs Patel had laughed, "with borders."

On her last full day with the family, Allie stood close to Mrs Patel at the edge of the paddock as Rachel saddled docile Sage.

"She's a lovely horse," Rachel's mother assured her. "Very gentle."

Allie nodded and focused on breathing normally. All week long she'd watched the others ride. It looked easy enough.

*But up close the horses are ... huge.*

With a coat the colour of mahogany and a jet black mane and tail, the plump mare waited patiently as Rachel tightened the girth and lengthened the stirrups with quick, expert moves. Nearby Mina was holding the reins of the other two horses.

When everything was in place, Rachel gestured for Allie.

“Good luck,” Mrs Patel whispered, giving her hand a squeeze.

With her hand on the pommel, for a brief second Allie hesitated. Everybody was watching her – Rachel and Mina, Mrs P leaning against the fence nearby. Even Sage had turned her head as if to see what the fuss was about.

“Just put your foot here,” Rachel explained, tapping the stirrup. “Then swing yourself up.”

*I can do this, Allie told herself. I'm not going to be afraid of a horse.*

Placing her left trainer-clad foot in the metal and leather stirrup, she sprang into the saddle. It was easier than she'd expected – in a second, she was in place. For the first time she felt the odd sensation of a horse beneath her – warm and alive. And moving. Every movement Sage made seemed to throw her off balance. As the horse shifted her feet, Allie clung to the pommel as if that tiny movement could send her hurtling to the ground.

With a last few words of encouragement, Rachel handed her the reins and walked over to Angelica, a big grey mare with a pure white mane. Mina had already hopped lithely onto Petra, a small bay who pawed idly at the straw on the ground.

Angelica walked up beside her, Rachel looked relaxed in the saddle; Allie held the reins and the pommel in a death grip.

“The key is to relax and to trust Sage. She'll never hurt you.” Rachel's confidence was so complete, Allie felt like an idiot for being scared. “Hold the reins like I do and just move with

her. Try to loosen your shoulders a bit – keep your back straight and hold on with your legs, not your hands. Trust her.”

Reluctantly Allie loosened her grip on the pommel. Shaking her shoulders to loosen the tight muscles, she held Sage tight with her thighs. She took a deep breath and then nodded at Rachel.

“I’m Ok,” she said.

Reassured, Rachel and Angelica ambled ahead.

Leaning forward, Allie stroked the horse’s dark mane, coarse and silky beneath her fingertips.

“Ok, Sage,” she whispered, “Rachel says to trust you, so I’m trusting you. Get me through this alive and I will give you the most beautiful carrot you have ever seen in your life. Also sugar cubes. And hay.”

Sage’s long ear’s twitched and she chomped at the bridle with her huge square teeth. Allie smiled, and for the first time she did relax, just a little.

“Let’s go,” Rachel called, twisting around in her saddle to see Allie and easing Angelica into a slow walk. “Once around the paddock first, then we’ll try the field.”

As Sage instinctively followed Angelica, the unfamiliar swaying caught Allie off guard and she grabbed the reins. Sage pulled up, shaking her head unhappily, and Allie rocked forward in the saddle, clinging to the pommel.

“Hold her with your knees,” Mrs Patel called out from the side of the paddock. Gritting her teeth with determination, Allie loosened the reins and touched the horse with her heels the way Rachel had done. Sage took a tentative step forward. This time Allie was ready for the movement, and she gripped with her legs.

Slowly the three horses made a full circle of the muddy paddock. When they'd completed it, Mrs Patel unlatched the wooden gate and pushed it to one side. Rachel walked through first, holding Angelica to a slow walk. Mina pranced through next, and then Sage lumbered slowly by.

"You're doing well, Allie," Mrs Patel said, giving Sage a gentle pat on the neck as she passed.

"Thanks Mrs P," Allie said, her brow furrowed with concentration.

Rachel circled back to ride next to Allie.

"How's it feel?" she asked, surveying Allie's posture with a critical expression.

"Good, I think." Allie panted from the exertion of hanging on to Sage. "But so far I have to say I'm not sure what you see in it."

Rachel laughed. "Give it time. It's like..." she thought for a moment, "skating. The first time you skate it's not a lot of fun, but it gets more fun the more you do it."

As the horses padded out into the green grass of the pasture, Mina kicked Peter into a trot and dashed ahead. Rachel held Angelica back to keep pace with Allie but, looking after Petra with interest, Sage sped up on her own. Allie found the faster pace smoother, and looked over at Rachel and smiled.

"I think I'm getting this," she said.

"Keep going," Rachel called, speeding up a little to keep Mina in sight.

Allie loosened the reins further, and leaned over to whisper to Sage, "You can go faster."

As if she'd heard her, Sage broke into a trot. At first, Allie felt like a ragdoll in a washing machine, holding onto the saddle and Sage's mane, but then she remembered to cling with

her legs and move with the horse. Suddenly the ride felt smooth and safe. She laughed from the sheer exhilaration of it.

Back at the stables later, as she climbed down to the ground she threw her arms around Sage's sweaty neck.

"Thank you," she whispered, breathing in the bittersweet scent of the horse's skin. "I owe you one freakin' massive carrot."

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"Is that everything?" Raj Patel survived the tightly packed car boot, his expression dubious.

"I think so." Rachel looked around to see if she'd missed anything.

"It better be." He shoved the lid down until it locked reluctantly in place. "There's not enough room in there for another sandal."

"Oops. Forgot my sandals!" Rachel said, sounding panicked. When he shot her an exasperated look she giggled. "Just kidding, dad."

Watching the teasing exchange, Allie smiled. During the week she'd spent sheltering at the Patels sprawling farmhouse, she'd grown to love the way they interacted, with a kind of casual affection. It was clear it never occurred to any of them that the time might come when they didn't adore each other. Even when they were irritated with each other, they hugged.



It was so different from her own home life... Thinking of how little time she'd spent at home before Nathaniel's men showed up, she frowned. Who knew when she'd get to go back there again. Then again, did she really want to go back?

"Come on, Allie!" Rachel's voice dragged her back to reality. "Quit glowering at nothing and get in the car."

"I'm not glowering at nothing," she responded mildly as she reached for the car handle.

It had been a good week, but now it was time to get back to school. The air was heavy with morning damp, and the sky was an ominous dark grey. The wind blew from the south, and she could smell the horses on the air – an earthy, warm scent. Autumn was on its way.

"I'm going to go tell your mother we're ready to go," Mr Patel said, heading to the front door.

"I wish we could stay longer," Allie said as he walked away.

"It was good, no?" Rachel said. "But I've gotta say I'm kind of looking forward to getting back. I want to see how the repairs are going after the fire. Besides, I need more reading and less of Dad trying to convince me to join Night School."

"He does really want you to join." Allie gave her a sideways glance. "Aren't you ever tempted?"

The look Rachel gave her was withering.

"I'm not trying to make you join." Allie held up her hands in surrender. "I just wondered why you never did."

Looking up at the house as her parents walked out the front door, her sister Mina trailing behind, Rachel shrugged.

“That cops and robbers stuff just isn’t for me,” she said in a low voice before stepping away from the car to tickle Mina who giggled hysterically and pulled away.

“See you later, Midget.”

“Not if I see you first, Giant,” Mina replied impishly.

Allie was watching the sisterly interaction with a touch of melancholy when Rachel’s mother interrupted her thoughts by wrapping her in a hug.

“We’re going to miss you,” she said.

“I’m going to miss you guys, too, Mrs P.” As Allie hugged her back, fingers against the soft cashmere of her cardigan, she was surprised to feel tears prickling the backs of her eyes. She cleared her throat. “Thanks for having me.”

Mrs Patel held her firmly by the shoulders. “You are welcome here any time.”

As Rachel and her mother said their goodbyes, Mina walked over and slipped a paper into Allie’s hand.

“Mum took it. I wanted you to have it so you’d remember us and come back,” the girl whispered conspiratorially.

Looking down, Allie saw a photo of herself atop a horse, reins loose in her hands, laughing. Seeing the image of herself, confident and happy, the tears that had threatened all morning spilled over and she wrapped the girl in a quick fierce hug.

“Thanks Mina,” she whispered, striking the tears away. “I love it. I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”