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EXIT PARTY

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

PICADOR

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PART 1

A-SIDE

1. HOMELAND

In the first spring after the collapse of the United States, the blossoming of the jacaranda trees felt to Ari like grace. The trees bloomed in the same week that international peacekeeping troops withdrew from Los Angeles, and the convergence of flowers with the absence of foreign soldiers brought a delirious kind of hope. Everyone in the spring of 2031 knew the city was one terrorist attack away from disaster, but that peril made the season more vivid, not less.

It was Ari's first spring outside of prison in nearly two decades, and she spent hours at a time walking the streets. Prison is a wasteland of sensory deprivation, and now the city was overwhelming. She kept expecting that the details of the world would cease to be extraordinary, but that kept not happening. No one around her seemed to notice the jacarandas, because in Los Angeles there are flowers every month of the year, but she walked streets where the trees were lit up by purple-blue blossoms and thought, *My god. This place.* She was forty-eight years old but felt younger, because so much of the world was new.

The United States had come undone following a coup d'état. Several states had seceded within a week of the coup, either alone or in alliances with neighbours, and war had broken out within the month. Now the fighting had subsided, for the most part, and Ari had been released into an uneasy aftermath.

"When I think of what the city was a year ago," Gloria said. Gloria was Ari's roommate in a very small apartment in Echo Park. She was about a decade younger than Ari, a refugee who'd fled fighting between rival militias in Tennessee. Gloria slept in the bedroom. Ari slept in the living room, with an old sheet stapled to the door frame as a makeshift door, and they met one another in the tiny kitchen. Gloria seemed to spend most of her time reading the news online, her eyes

wide and blank in the blue light of her laptop. What the city had been like a year ago was Gloria's favourite topic of conversation.

"I know," Ari said gently, although she didn't. Their experiences were not the same. A year ago, Ari had been imprisoned in what was now a different country and Gloria had been holed up in this apartment with a different roommate.

But tonight the curfew had lifted, and when Ari had gone for a walk earlier, her impression from passing conversations was that everyone in Los Angeles was going out tonight. Gloria was going to her friend Kareem's party, one neighbourhood over, and had invited Ari to come. But now, with dusk approaching, she'd settled into her familiar position with her laptop at the kitchen table, and showed no signs of getting ready.

"What time shall we leave for that party?" Ari asked.

"Oh, I don't know." Gloria often went a little vague when the subject of leaving the apartment came up, but Ari had hoped that tonight might be different. Gloria's gaze slid away, and Ari knew that she was listening to imaginary curfew sirens. "Maybe just you could go. I could text Kareem and tell him it'll just be you."

"I don't know your friends," Ari said. "It'd be awkward if you didn't come." This wasn't actually true—after spending most of her adult life in prison, Ari wasn't particularly intimidated by the social intricacies of a party in Silver Lake—but Ari had been beset all her life by premonitions, and she felt pulled toward that party by an invisible thread. They had to leave for the party because they were going to be at the party later, but of course she knew better than to try to explain this. Also Gloria had a dissipated look that worried her, an air of having spent too much time indoors. If something happened to Gloria—if she had a nervous breakdown, say, or faded into the wallpaper like some kind of cartoon ghost—then Ari wouldn't have a place to stay.

"It's just, what if going to the party jinxes everything?" Gloria said. "The last time I went to a party, it was the night of the Sacramento Accord."

The Sacramento Accord had formally established the Republic of

California, but it was also the night of the Highland Park attack, when a United States loyalist had blown himself up in the living room of a crowded house party. News of the attack had broken while Gloria was at a different party, some distance away. Gloria had mentioned that evening before, and now, as then, Ari was certain Gloria was lying about something.

"You can't think that way," Ari said. "That's magical thinking. You said you'd been to other parties at Kareem's place, right? Parties where nothing bad happened that same night?"

"Yeah. I know you're right." Gloria was quiet for a moment. "It's just, when I think about parties, I think about bombs."

The party was walkable from their apartment, barely. A hot day had subsided into a humid evening. They walked down the hill to Sunset Boulevard, where California Republic soldiers with bomb-sniffer dogs had formed a gauntlet on the sidewalk. There were still terrorist attacks from time to time—some from United States loyalists trying to destabilize the breakaway republics, some from Shasta County Protectorate operatives trying to bring the border war into the cities—but the last bombing had been months ago. Ari and Gloria stood still while the dogs sniffed at them.

"You're good," a soldier said, after a few seconds. A cool breeze was breaking through the heat, and the boulevard felt alive. They passed the Walgreens that had been taken over by the Red Cross to house displaced persons fleeing fighting in the interior, families congregating in the parking lot with their music and their card games, half-feral kids playing tag and battling over toys. Entrepreneurs had set up taco stands. A group of teenagers was having some kind of dance-off, and Ari and Gloria stopped for a moment to watch them before they continued west.

They were on a stretch of Sunset now that Gloria had warned would be desolate, but it seemed to Ari that Gloria had been describing a previous version of the city. There were so many more people in Los Angeles now. Shantytowns had sprung up in previously vacant

lots. The strip malls down on Sunset had sprouted tents on their roofs, plywood staircases running to the top between stores. After a while they climbed a hill into a quieter neighbourhood of large houses, steep terraced gardens, but even here there were more people than before. The wealthiest Americans had fled overseas or to Mexico or Canada, but that population had been replaced several times over by refugees fleeing more violent places in the interior of the former nation. A soft rain was starting to fall. There was a tent in seemingly every driveway, the streets clogged with parked cars. Ari heard children's voices from inside most of the tents. A few people were cooking dinner on camp stoves and barbecues out front.

Ari and Gloria walked slowly, following a route on Gloria's phone, from the sidewalk to a flight of public stairs. Gloria was gasping for breath by the time they reached the top.

"You should get outside more," Ari said.

"I like being inside."

The rain had been falling for a while, and there were streaks of light on every surface, on cars and streets and Red Cross tents. Of all the beauty Ari missed in prison, rain on city streets was one of the beauties she'd missed most. Gloria had put something in her hair to make it shine like lacquer. Her lip gloss gleamed too, and the sequins on her shirt reflected the streetlights, so it was like walking through the shining city with an animate piece of the shining city. Ari admired the effect. But Gloria was walking slower and slower, while Ari pretended not to notice, until finally Gloria stopped.

"Come on," Ari said. "It'll be good for you, being around people again." Was that true, though? When had being around people ever been good for Ari? She stifled the thought.

Gloria nodded. She glanced at her phone, put it away, looked at it again. Ari thought that a kinder person might suggest skipping the party and going home, but she wanted to go to the party and she wanted Gloria to come too.

"Hopefully it won't be like my dreams," Gloria said, with a little laugh that was meant to be lighthearted but absolutely was not.

Gloria had dreams where she was talking to someone in a dimly lit room, quite close, just the two of them. Then the other person told her that someone here was wearing a bomb vest just like at Highland Park, and then, in the dream, Gloria realized that actually she'd misjudged the situation entirely and it wasn't just the two of them at all. She and this other person had been talking in the middle of a packed room with one door, crowds blocking the path to the exit. She fought her way through the gauntlet of people, but any second now there was going to be an explosion—she could hear a clock ticking—and *she couldn't get out*. In the dream Gloria sank into a blind panic and sometimes woke up shouting, which was how Ari knew about the dream.

"It won't be like the dream," Ari said.

Gloria nodded, once, then continued onward with a grim expression. The address turned out to be a house clinging to the hillside, the second floor lit up. They ascended the side stairs and knocked, and Kareem opened the door, resplendent in a green silk shirt.

"You're *here*," Kareem said. This was a gift of his, this quality of making you feel like exactly the person he'd most hoped to see. "Come *in*." His apartment was both cramped and glamorous. He'd gone to some effort. There were flowers everywhere.

What Ari would remember for the duration of her life was that from the moment Kareem swept her into the room, the party carried an electric charge. *All those people*. It was overwhelming in the way that stepping into a grocery store for the first time after nearly twenty years in prison is overwhelming, a sensory-overload explosion. The air was warm and the mood was ecstatic. There were lilies in vases, roses spilling out of glass bowls. Either Kareem had sprayed a quantity of expensive air freshener around, or the flowers had caught the mood and were on some kind of fragrance overdrive. The air by the windows was soft with rain.

"I thought the curfew would last forever," someone was saying, as Ari poured red wine for herself and Gloria.

"Here," Ari said to Gloria, who was looking a little strained.

"I mean, I just never wanted to be a part of history," someone else said, quite near to Ari.

"Thanks." Gloria accepted the glass. "I'm going to go out to the terrace."

"Where's the terrace?" But Gloria was gone. "Hi, I'm Ari," she said to the man who didn't want to be a part of history.

"James," he said.

"So," a woman near her right elbow said. "How's the collapse of the country going for you?"

"Oh, you know," Ari said. "Could've been worse."

"Sounds about right," the woman said, and launched into a story about the morning she realized the country was really breaking apart, that one strange day when Texas seceded in the morning and Arizona followed in the afternoon, the day her sister called to say she'd pulled her children out of school and maybe there was going to be a war, then the woman went to fill up her car and the gas line extended around the corner, and that was how she knew it was real. It was a boring story that Ari had already heard in a dozen variations.

"What about you?" the woman asked finally. "When did you know it was real?"

"I don't think about the past at all," Ari said.

"That's it," James said approvingly. "Face the future head-on, right?"

"Only way to live," Ari said.

"I'm just trying to *connect*," the woman said, and it looked to Ari like she was about to cry, so she relented.

"Okay," Ari said, "I was living with a few other people, and then one night I woke up and someone was listening to the radio."

"See, I'm a Taurus, so I can't live with other people," a man said. "You had a lot of roommates?"

"Yeah," Ari said. "A *lot* of roommates." She'd been drifting in and out of sleep that night, because her cellmate was listening to a radio tuned low in the lower bunk, but then she woke up and caught the words. Troops, militias, secession, shots fired. What Ari remembered of that night was lying unblinking in the darkness and thinking, *At least this is finally something new*. Her life had been unchanging for

so long. When had she last felt any excitement or any dread at all, about anything? The murmured radio voices followed her into sleep and became dreams of dark streets and faceless soldiers.

"The problem is we didn't know anything," the woman said, "like how does a person prepare for something like that? But I'm a Virgo, so, you know, *logic*, so I just went to the gas station and filled my car, then went to the bank and withdrew most of my chequing account and went home." Ari nodded. She was trying to look interested. James was standing by her side. He wasn't paying attention to her, just looking at his phone, but she was extremely aware of his presence, the warmth of his body so near to hers. When the woman stopped talking, he leaned in close.

"You know what I didn't expect about living in a dramatic historic moment?" He was speaking softly, hot gin breath in her ear. "How unbelievably boring it is, because everyone around you lived through the exact same thing and they all need to process their complicated feelings."

Ari smiled. "You read my mind."

"Where were you living with all those roommates?" he asked. "DP camp?"

"No," Ari said. "Do you know where the terrace is?"

"Right this way. I could use some air myself." The party was so crowded now. Ari was trying to remember when she'd last been in a room with so many other people. No, it wasn't that, she'd been in crowds in the recent past, but what was dazzling was the way everyone in *this* crowd wore different colours, fabrics of different textures, instead of a sea of prison-issue beige. There was a pretty woman with soft lips in a silver dress like tinfoil, a thousand tiny pleats; Ari admired the effect as she brushed past. She would have liked to kiss the woman.

The terrace was a balcony on the side of the building, with a view of a hillside, trees, distant glimmering lights. A handwritten sign forbade smoking. There were a few people out here, Gloria and Kareem among them. "Okay," Gloria was saying, "yeah, that was crazy, but you remember that night with the double graduation parties?" and