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LIFE OUT OF ORDER

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PART ONE

LIFE OUT OF ORDER

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My name is Alba DeTamble and I was born a time traveler. We all are, of course, but most people only travel forward, slowly, creeping along by seconds and minutes that add up inexorably to a lifetime. My body makes mayhem of that: I lose my grip on the present and suddenly I am in another time and place, naked, disoriented, unready and fearful, resigned to losing hours or days in random time, worried about saying something I shouldn't, hoping not to cause a scene. A few genes have gone wrong in me in just the right way to produce this bad fit with the present, this maladaptation, this constant interruption.

I have loved time travel and I have wished to be done with it; I've seen what it did to my dad. He died when I was five. Time travel killed him and time travel keeps throwing him back into my life. It's confusing to hang out with my father, because he usually seems so cheerful. I never tell him what's coming for him. It would ruin our short time together, and what would be the point? We can't change anything. Time works around us; we can only do what we have done, we can only go along with what has happened, what will happen. We can't carry anything with us, no money, no clothing, only our memories. We can affect others, we can be injured or die, we can do and be and say, but nothing we do will alter something we know to have happened.

I am reckless by nature and have had to learn caution. My parents ask for news of each other, and I tell them what I can safely admit: *Dad and I ate ice cream in a shopping mall parking lot; Mama's hair is streaked with a little gray now; he taught me how to shoplift; she just had a retrospective at a big museum.* I don't say: *he lost both his feet to frostbite; she is desolate*

since you died and almost never leaves the house; Dad is worried about you; Mama is dating someone new but she feels guilty about it. I don't lie, but I don't tell everything, either, if I can help it. No one wants to know everything anyway, not even me. Time travel can be a form of regret. But the passage of time creates distance, and sometimes that's a balm.

Because I am unmoored in time, everything is lost and found all at once, everyone I love is alive and dead or not-yet-born; there are discoveries, revolutions, greetings and goodbyes, but not in the order most people would expect. I'm always starting in the middle and making mistakes.

Music is my antidote to this chaos. The logic of music, its patterns and systems, its power, subtlety, variety and infinite beauty command my love and attention and my presence. Music disciplines my wayward mind and grants me freedom to be in the moment, to lose myself in play instead of getting lost in time. I was given music as a child, apprenticed to the violin long before I could understand or choose. Perhaps my parents knew they were giving me an exoskeleton, a protective shell to retreat into and carry with me no matter where time dumps me. Music is my memory palace and my refuge. I've been shaped by music and time into a creature of the now.

Sometimes I get the feeling that it doesn't matter where I am, past, present or future, or who I'm with; I might look at Zach out in the backyard, mowing our mossy grass, and wonder, *Are you my anchor, my once-and-always husband? Would you still love me if you knew all my secrets?* Or, another day, I might wake up with Oliver beside me in bed, arrived during the night and somehow unfamiliar, an Oliver from some time not yet specified, and I might feel a pang of apprehension: *where did you come from, what do you know, can you spare me the details?*

If I had been a normal girl, I might have done all the normal things in the normal order: school, job, marriage, kids. I might have had one husband, or none, or one and then another, instead of two at once. Maybe I would have been less chaotic, less troublesome, but maybe also less loved; who knows? I look ahead and marvel at the near misses, the good intentions and lucky guesses. I look back and regret all the lies. I try not to hurt people. But mostly, I just try not to panic.

THE LAST PARTY

Monday, December 26, 2022, and Tuesday, December 27, 2022

(Alba is 21, 29, and 47, Zach is 22)

ALBA: It's Boxing Day and I'm at home, in my room, hiding in bed. Mama knows I'm in here; she called me to dinner, and when I told her I wasn't hungry she brought me a tray of Christmas leftovers and let me be. I ate the mince pie and some of the turkey, then felt guilty for being so antisocial and crawled into bed. I'm afraid to tell Mama that I don't want to go back to Northwestern. I don't care if I don't graduate. It seems obvious that I will never play in public again, and it is painful to be with people who are looking ahead to glorious musical careers. I would be happy if we could all just concentrate on the music; it's the career part that hurts.

When I was small and studied with my grandfather, there was always an uneasy push-pull between pleasure and anxiety; for a long time I played the violin to please him and because my parents told me it was "mine"—it was what I did, they were so sure I would like it, love it even: they could see into my future, and in the future I was a musician. So I continued through lesson after lesson, practiced until I cried, until everything hurt, until it was right, or as right as it could be that day.

Now I can't face it anymore. I look at my violin in its case—my beloved Guarneri del Gesù that was my grandfather's—and I don't want to touch it. I want to stay in bed. I don't know what to do with myself, with all the hours I used to spend practicing. I've been reading a lot of novels: *Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch*, *The Master and Margarita*. In these novels people make bad choices, then they get things figured out. Or they jump in front of trains, or make deals with the devil. Whatever.

Nadia Kendrick texts me, trying to cajole me out of the house. I usually look forward to the Lamonts' Boxing Day party, but this year I have been dreading it.

party at nick and c-lora's
no
you promised
no
we need you
you'll be fine
don't let us down, alba

Of course it ends with me reluctantly climbing into Nadia's car. It's snowing and I was in the middle of *Madame Bovary*.

"Jesus, Alba, what are you wearing?" says Nadia.

"Clothes," I tell her.

"Those are jeans. You are not going to an event of this magnitude in jeans. You aren't even wearing lipstick."

"I might as well be naked," I say. I just want to get back into bed.

"That would be an improvement." Nadia makes a U-turn on Western Avenue and gets honked at by a bus driver. "You'll blow it for us all if you show up looking like a punk. You know they're expecting Imelda May, not Patti Smith."

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Back to my place. You need a do-over."

"There's no time, it's almost nine." Martial law still hasn't been lifted in Chicago, and curfew is in effect from ten to six—we need to be indoors in an hour. But as much as I don't want to go to this party, I don't want our plan to fail, either, so I grudgingly accept when Nadia insists we'll be quick.

Nadia lives in a tiny apartment in a huge building on Lake Shore Drive, near Belmont. In the elevator, I am forced to look at myself because all the walls are mirrored. I've gone through a few bouts of depression in the past, but now I realize that this time I've gone farther down the

rabbit hole than I knew: I look terrible, unwashed, slump-shouldered, ratty. Nadia looks great: her hair is bronzed and sprayed into a stiff chignon, her dress is dark red and poufy under her black cashmere coat. She has her heels in a zippered shoe bag and is wearing little fur-trimmed black boots. The elevator doors open and Nadia races down the hall, unlocks her door and drags me over to her bathroom. "Strip. Here's a towel. Go wash your hair." I obediently remove my clothes and hop into the shower.

Fifteen minutes later Nadia is blowing out my long black hair while I sit on her bed. She expertly puts up the front into victory rolls and uses a curling iron to make ringlets down my back. She holds out a slinky silver dress, stockings, lipstick-red four-inch heels. Nadia is curvy and I am not, but the dress fits well enough. "I can't wear these shoes in the snow," I say. She pops them into a shopping bag and I put on my Doc Martens. She hands me a clasp purse and I transfer my phone, keys and Carmex into it. "Oh, wait—sit," she says. She starts to powder my face. "No," I say, "I hate makeup."

"You have to, it looks wrong if you don't, with that dress."

"No one will notice."

"Submit," she demands. I do. It's easier than putting up a fight.

"Don't you get sick of spending so much time on hair and makeup?" I say peevishly. Then I feel bad; I know that hair and makeup is the least of Nadia's troubles. "It's almost over, if you don't fuck it up," she replies.

When she's done I look like a real rockabilly girl, with heavy eyeliner, dark lips and even rouge. She has tamed my thick eyebrows, and suddenly I look less homeless and more like a lady from a Klimt painting who has escaped from her gold background into Nadia's mirror. "Vast improvement," Nadia says, and I have to agree. She kisses my ear. "Come on, let's go."

We are running late, and by the time we get to Nick and Caralora Lamont's huge house in East Rogers Park it's almost ten thirty. This is a terrible neighborhood for parking—we drive around and around, Nadia prays to the Parking Gods with no results. I'm getting very nervous, but at last she finds a space two blocks away from the party and

we make a run for it. There's a beautiful, huge vintage car parked right in front of the Lamonts' house, obnoxiously taking up more than its share of parking space. Fargo Avenue is quiet; everyone has been off the street for half an hour, and all the deep boot prints in the snow are disappearing. Snowflakes flicker and whirl in the porch light as we run up the steps.

Caralora opens the door. "I was afraid you weren't coming," she says. "You're almost the last ones."

"Never fear," Nadia says as we leave our boots with all the others by the front door. She hands over our tribute of booze. "You look magnificent," she tells Caralora. C-lora is studying urban planning and models part-time; she and Nick are identical twins. She has outdone herself tonight and looks impossibly glamorous, wearing a strapless glittery red gown and magenta eye shadow. I always feel inadequately feminine when I'm with C-lora. She air-kisses me and I half hug her. Before Caralora transitioned we used to date, but that seems like some other life now. We're never quite confident with each other these days.

"Coats upstairs," Caralora says. We run up in our stocking feet like children. I love this house; I've been to a hundred great parties here. At the landing I look down over the crowd. The place is packed with people I don't recognize. If I didn't know better I'd think that Nick and C-lora have made a new set of friends—whiter friends, friends who dress like their own great-grandparents, lots of crew cuts and sharp suits, vintage dresses and bright lipstick, with a smattering of shaved heads and unpleasant tattoos. I wonder where all these people came from—did we hire actors?

Mr. and Mrs. Lamont are in Paris. We leave our coats in the massive pile on their bed and put on our party shoes. "We'll never find these coats again," Nadia says. Every coat is black; the pile is like a big hunk of negative space in the middle of the bedroom.

As we slowly navigate back down the stairs in our heels, I can hear the band tuning up. We elbow our way into the kitchen. Nick Lamont is mixing cocktails. Nick and Nadia clasp hands briefly, surreptitiously, then we all glance around to see if anyone noticed. They have each sacrificed so much to make this night possible.

"Ladies," Nick says, bowing to us slightly, each in turn. He looks sharp in his purple suit and slicked-back blond hair. He's grown a thin mustache since I last saw him. When I look closer I realize he's drawn it on with eyebrow pencil. He winks at me. I love Nick.

"Where's Junior?" Nadia asks him.

"In the living room." Nick smiles and blows Nadia a kiss for luck as we turn to leave the kitchen. "Lookin' good, Alba." I find that I like this new glamorous me, at least for tonight. It's nice to attract attention if I don't have to live up to it. Nadia takes my hand and leads me through throngs of strangers into the living room. A tall Christmas tree blinks and shimmers; in years past there would have been strings of Hanukkah lights turning our faces blue and a Kwanzaa kinara on the mantelpiece for good measure, but tonight all that must have been hidden in some closet as soon as Mr. and Mrs. Lamont left for the airport. Junior Olson, Nadia's ostensible boyfriend and the object of this evening's operation, is holding court from the sofa, and he makes room for us. Nadia seems perfectly calm as she snuggles against him and Junior puts his arm around her. She isn't small, but Junior is massive: with his facial tattoos and air of menace he looks as though he's been working his way through college in the WWE. I avoid him whenever possible; I hate pretending that I'm okay with all his bullshit.

I try to sit primly next to Nadia, mindful of my knees jutting up because of the heels. I press them together and tilt my legs to the side. It's strange to be bossed around by clothes; in these clothes I'm more girly and much less casual. Now that we are here, with Junior and his friends, the potential consequences of what we're about to do run through my mind and I feel the familiar grip of stage fright. Nadia takes my hand; hers is clammy. *What now?*

ZACH: Nadia finally arrives, to my enormous relief. I was beginning to think she wasn't coming, that something had happened to her. I'm sitting in an armchair that's almost obscured by the Christmas tree, so I can see everyone without being seen. I feel jittery—things are in motion and out of my hands. When Nadia sits down beside Junior he relaxes, he softens. I almost feel sorry for him.

There's a girl with Nadia, someone I don't know. She looks a little spooked, like a Victorian governess who thinks she's losing her mind, with her enormous, heavily made-up eyes and her unnaturally white face. Has Nadia ever mentioned this girl? There's something about her, a fey wildness that's disturbing but attractive. The last thing I need tonight. I wonder who she is?

ALBA: The band launches into "Let's Have a Party," and some of the guests head into the parlor to dance. The music is loud enough that we have to raise our voices to converse. Nadia tells Junior she's thirsty.

"Get the ladies a drink, Buddy," commands Junior. A short, long-haired guy in an *Infernum* T-shirt looks up from his phone and asks, "Whadulya have, girls?" "Zombies," says Nadia. Buddy slouches off. Junior says, "What's the good word, darling?"

"Alba is sulking, Junior. We have to cheer her up."

Junior tries to look concerned. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's having an existential crisis."

"Well, a couple of zombies will fix that, no problem."

Nadia simpers. "Is that the best you can do?"

"Buddy is a *chemist*, these will be the most *effective* zombies you've ever had."

"No," Nadia decides. "She needs to dance."

"No," I interject. "I do not." I can hardly walk in these shoes, let alone dance.

Nadia and Junior ignore me. "Hey," says Junior. He waves his hand as though he's summoning a taxi. "Zach. C'mere." All this while, someone has been sitting in the corner of the living room almost out of my peripheral vision, obscured by the Christmas tree. He awkwardly rises from a deep armchair, and keeps rising: my first impression is that he's unnaturally tall and thin. Junior reaches across Nadia and cups my elbow in his hand and gives me a little boost, as though he's trying to propel me toward this Zach person. I turn to refuse, I don't want his matchmaking, but I see that Junior's smile is genuinely kind, that he really is trying to please me; he smiles like a bad student who knows the

right answer for once. Nadia tilts her head in the direction of the door: *Go ahead, it's okay.* I look up and Zach is bending over me, offering his hands, and I give him mine and he pulls me up, all wobbly. "Hey, beautiful girl," he says, easily. Suddenly our faces are inches apart; in these heels I am tall, too. He's wearing a midnight-blue suit, a green tie, and horn-rimmed glasses with a pretty strong prescription. His face is kind. He is so good-looking that I gasp, and Nadia and Junior laugh. "He has that effect on everybody," says Junior. "Alba DeTamble, meet Zachary Purcell. Please go dance now, please."

Zach has let go of my hands, and he gestures toward the parlor. I can hear "Mystery Train" and the rhythmic stomp of shoes on floor. As we edge through the crowded hallway, Buddy reappears and hands me a pink drink. I take a sip. It's super strong and sickly sweet. We are standing by the stairs, hemmed in by people. "I'm afraid I'm going to spill this," I say.

"Let me take it," says Zach. "In real life I'm a waiter." He reaches over my shoulder from behind and lifts the drink out of my hand. Zach begins to say something but he's jostled from behind and the zombie almost ends up on his suit.

"Nice save," I say. "Let's go upstairs."

He raises his eyebrows but doesn't comment, and I realize too late how forward that might seem. He follows me and I'm conscious of my legs, aware that I didn't take care when I rolled on the stockings. The seams are most likely askew. At the top of the stairs, there's an open door and I glimpse the bed full of black coats. "It'll be quieter in here," I say.

I walk around the bed and sit beside the giant coat pile. Zach hands me my zombie, throws a bunch of coats to the other side of the bed and sits next to me. We aren't touching, but our knees are only a few inches apart. The room is lit with lava lamps that color our faces green and orange, the zombie an unappetizing brown. I pull the cord of the bedside lamp, and the room fills with warmer light.

"Thank you," I tell him. "That was very professional." I feel quite shy. Zach is looking at me attentively and I return his attention: his eyes

are brown, he has a narrow, off-kilter nose, his lips are full and turn up slightly at the corners. He has a longish, light brown quiff with the sides and back cut very short. He's so crisp and smooth-shaven that I have to stop myself from stroking his perfect jaw. I don't know anyone who looks like this in real life. I realize that I'm staring at him, but he doesn't seem uncomfortable. He must be used to it.

"How do you know Junior?" I ask him.

"I don't, actually. He's a friend of a friend, I'm just staying with him over the Christmas break. I didn't want to go home this year, my parents are getting divorced and I just, I dunno, I couldn't face it. And the dorms are closed, so Junior said he'd put me up. He's a good guy."

Now I'm confused; Zach seems too sincere and eager to be hanging out with Junior. I wish I could ask Nadia which side he's on. "Where do you go to school?"

"University of Chicago. You?"

"Northwestern." I look at my hands. My nails are bitten to the quick, a clue to my usual slovenly style. I fold my hands together self-consciously. "But I don't think I'll go back."

"How come?"

"It's been hard. I'm not good with stress, and music school is nothing but stress." Of course, the real problem is time travel: I get stressed out, then I end up in some other time, I miss class or the audition or the performance, I have to make excuses and I get more stressed and the whole thing goes around and around.

"What do you play?" Zach asks.

"Violin."

"Oh, wow, I always wanted to learn to play violin."

I laugh. "That's what everybody says."

"Can you do that, though? Just not go back to school?"

"It's not a prison. Of course I can not go back." I haven't given the practicalities any thought, but now I feel stubborn. *I won't go back. No one can make me.* I sip my drink, make a face.

"Would you like something else?" Zach asks. "I was just wishing I had a beer, I could take that back to the kitchen for you . . . ?"

"Um, yeah. A Coke?" One thing I am noticing about this guy: he is very helpful. I give him the zombie and in a few minutes he's back with a little bottle of Coke, an IPA and two glasses, one with ice. I hold the glasses; he opens and pours. "You actually are a waiter?"

"Yeah. Why would anybody claim to be a waiter if they weren't?"

"Good point. But what are you studying?"

"Um, English. Creative writing."

"So between the two of us we have no practical skills?"

"Waiting tables is very practical." Zach looks a bit morose.

"You know what I mean."

Zach looks at me more carefully. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"And how old were you when you started playing the violin?"

"Four."

"But aren't your parents going to be kind of pissed off if you drop out of college after seventeen years of playing the violin?" I open my mouth to answer and Zach continues, "Because, don't you have to be incredibly good to even get into Northwestern in the first place?"

"You have to be good."

"So isn't it a waste, to just—stop?"

"I can still play . . ."

"But how are you going to keep *learning*?" Zach sounds as though he has suddenly morphed into my grandfather. I am getting upset because he's getting upset, and I forget that we don't know each other and we are sitting on a bed full of coats in a house full of fake Nazis and a few real ones and I say, more loudly than necessary, "What's it to *you*, buddy?"

He laughs. "Nothing. Not a thing." He sips his beer and looks at me with interest. "Seriously, though. You're just going to walk away from this thing you've been doing your whole life?"

"Yes." The idea fills me with joy, I want to say.

"I get it. I was writing a novel, but I quit, too. It wasn't very good."

"What was it about?"

"It was kind of autobiographical. About my fucked-up childhood.

But the more I wrote, the more boring it became. I figured if I was bored by my own terrible teenage suffering then no one else was ever going to read it. I put a zombie apocalypse in it but it was still crap. Actually, I've been thinking of bailing on the whole writing thing altogether." Zach reaches into his inside suit pocket and then stops himself. "Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Good. Neither do I. At least, I just quit."

"When?"

"About an hour ago. I ran out of smokes."

I laugh. "So you gave up on your novel?"

"Yeah. I burned it."

"That's melodramatic."

Zach beams at me. "You're the first person I've told who wasn't horrified."

I shrug but am secretly pleased. "You've got a copy on your computer, right?"

"Deleted, trashed."

"Backups?"

"Nope. It's 'not only merely dead,' it's 'really most sincerely dead.'"

"Manuscripts don't burn."

Zach says, "That's my favorite book." Okay, huh. Bulgakov is an interesting choice for a friend of a friend of Junior's.

"I've always wanted to have a cat named Behemoth," I say. "If you're not going to write, what are you planning to do instead?"

"That's a secret," he says.

"Tell me anyway."

"Maybe later," Zach says.

"How much later? I have a short attention span."

"When we're driving away from our wedding in a car covered in shaving cream." He sounds momentarily sincere. He doesn't know I can't marry anyone with his haircut. I laugh, and we smile at each other. "I shouldn't even joke about that, I'd probably be a terrible husband," Zach says. "My parents are ridiculously awful, they should have gotten

divorced years ago, and now that they're finally doing it they can't agree on anything. They're fighting over my sisters, the dog, even things neither of them want, like Tupperware. My mom broke all the dishes last week because he'd said she couldn't have them."

"Jeez."

"She did it by throwing them out the window. She lives on the twelfth floor."

"Did anybody get hurt?"

"No, it was a miracle. But the police came. Are your parents still married?"

"My dad died when I was five."

"Oh, dang, I'm sorry . . . Do you remember him?"

"Yeah . . ." He's caught me out, without even trying. I can't tell him I just saw my not-dead-yet dad last week, or that we hang out sort of regularly in random times, that my dad is a presence in my life even though he's never going to make it to his forty-fourth birthday. It isn't a complete secret that I time travel; people who know me know that about me. But I'm in the habit of not telling new people, and if they stick around and become friends it's awkward to tell them and eventually it seems like a bigger deal than it should.

I hear my name being called from behind the pile of coats. The Gomolinskis have arrived.

"Woo-hoo, Alba! Look at you!" Rosa comes around the bed, ducks past Zach and kisses me on both cheeks. "Hi, who are you?" she says to Zach, and to me, "Is he yours?"

"He came with Junior," I say. "But Nadia has diverted him to me." I haven't told Rosa what she wants to know (is he ours?), because I am increasingly unsure; he looks like one of theirs, but he talks like one of us. Zach seems like a good guy, or at least he would if this was some other year in some other place.

Zach stands up awkwardly. Rosa is petite, but her voluminous skirt seems to take up the whole room. Her brothers shake hands with him. The Gomolinskis are half Polish and half Filipino; Rosa has gorgeous black hair and light blue eyes, and Joe and Max are medium height but

broad and muscular; they both work as bouncers in a blues club. "This is Zach, he's a friend of a friend of Junior's. These are the Gomolinskis, Rosa, Max and Joe. I've known them since I was tiny."

"Pleased to meet you," Max says, but he and Joe are glowering at Zach, who looks a little startled. I shake my head slightly—I don't need their protection at the moment.

"Come on, let's go find Nadia," Rosa says to her brothers. "Give 'em room to rhumba." The three of them vanish as suddenly as they appeared.

"They're running around kinda late," Zach says as soon as they are safely out of earshot. It's getting on toward midnight.

I lower my voice. "Their dad is Alderman Gomez. Jan Gomolinski, 50th Ward. So no, they don't get stopped."

"Huh. Nice to be them, I guess."

"Where are you from?"

"Tulsa. I moved to Chicago four years ago."

"Did you have curfew in Tulsa?"

"Yeah, but only for the under-eighteens, not for everybody like it is here," he says.

"It cuts down on the murders. That's the excuse, anyway." I wonder if I should be talking about politics with this guy.

"People don't enjoy shooting each other in the daytime?"

"I don't think martial law has changed the murder rate much, it's just different people doing the murdering now."

"Oh well. I don't mind being in all night." He grins. "It's like our own *Decameron*, we'll stay in here and amuse each other till it's safe to come out. Tell me a story."

"What kind of story?"

"Any kind. Tell me something that happened to you when you were a kid."

"Ugh, I'm terrible at this," I say, flustered. "My mind's gone blank. You tell me something."

"Give me a prompt."

"The house you grew up in?"

"Ah. Okay. Have you ever been to Tulsa?"

"Nope."

"There's a neighborhood in Tulsa, it's full of all these wonderful Craftsman and bungalow houses people built back in the day, and they were all derelict, nobody had lived in them for years. And my parents are both architects, and they fell in love with these houses, and started buying and restoring them one by one. They'd restore it, we'd move in, then they would buy another one and once that one was done they'd sell the one we were in and move into the next. Then the neighborhood caught on and my parents couldn't afford to keep doing that, so we stayed in the last one until they split up this year. Now my mother lives downtown with my sisters and my dad still has the house."

There's something very calming about Zach, as though his low, resonant voice is creating a little island, just the two of us, a lava lamp, and the pile of coats.

"So it was disorienting," he continues, "like those dreams where things are familiar but you've never seen them before, or you are looking for something and you never find it. You know?"

I do know; he's describing time travel. Times and places layered and torn into strange configurations; the everyday and the unexpected juxtaposed. "Yes," I say. "I understand."

"It was hard to feel at home," Zach says, matter-of-factly. "Home was us, my family. Now my sisters say they don't live anywhere."

"How old are they?"

"Seventeen and thirteen. RaeAnn and Suellen." Zach fishes his phone out from the inside pocket of his suit, taps and swipes. "Here." The photo shows Zach with two girls, standing together under a huge tree on a sunny day. "This was for her prom," says Zach. "Taken right before the big bang, when we all ended up living apart."

I hand him back his phone. His hand brushes my fingers as he takes it from me and I feel warm all over. *Get a grip, Alba.*

"What happened?" I ask him.

"The usual thing. Affairs. RaeAnn and I think there were always other people, but it was my mother who got caught, and now he's gleefully trying to take everything and leave her with nothing. It's all horrible." Zach grimaces. "Anyway. Tell me about your family."

"Yeah, um. I'm an only child. So, my dad died when I was five and