“Lulu, we have something very important to discuss.”

Willem looks at me solemnly, and I feel my stomach bottom out in anxiety over another unpleasant surprise.

“What now?” I ask, trying not to sound nervous.

He crosses his arms in front of his chest and then he strokes his chin. Is he going to send me back? No! I’ve already had that freak-out once today.

“What?” I ask again, my voice rising in spite of my best efforts.

“We lost an hour coming to France, so it’s after two o’clock. Lunchtime. And this is Paris. And we just have the day. So we must consider this very seriously.”

“Oh.” I exhale relief. Is he trying to mess with me now? “I don’t care. Anything except chocolate and bread, please. Those might be your staples, but they don’t seem particularly French,” I snap, not entirely sure why I’m so peeved
except that even though we’ve now walked several blocks away from Céline’s club, it’s like she’s following us somehow.

Willem feigns offense. “Bread and chocolate are not my staple foods.” He grins. “Not the only ones. And they are very French. Chocolate croissants? We can have those for breakfast tomorrow.”

Breakfast. Tomorrow. After tonight. Céline beings to feel a little farther away now.

“Unless, that is, you prefer crisps for breakfast,” he continues. “Or pancakes. That’s American. Maybe crisps with your pancakes?”

“I don’t eat chips for breakfast. I do occasionally eat pancakes for dinner. I’m a rebel that way.”

“Crêpes,” he says, snapping his fingers. “We will have crêpes. Very French. And you can be rebellious.”

We walk along, menu-browsing the cafés until we find one on a quiet triangle corner that serves crêpes. The menu is hand-scrawled, in French, but I don’t ask Willem to translate. After that whole thing with Céline, my lack of fluency is starting to feel like a handicap. So I stumble through the menu, settling on citron, which I’m pretty sure means lemon, or orange, or citrus of some kind. I decide on a citron crêpe and a citron pressé drink, hoping it’s some kind of lemonade.

“What are you getting?” I ask.

He scratches his chin. There is a tiny patch of golden stubble there. “I was thinking of getting a chocolate crêpe, but that is so close to chocolate and bread that I’m afraid you’ll lose respect for me.” He flashes me that lazy half smile.

“I wouldn’t sweat it. I already lost respect for you when I found you undressing for Céline in her office,” I joke.
And there’s that look: surprise, amusement. “That wasn’t her office,” he says slowly, drawing out his words. “And I would say she was more undressing me.”

“Oh, never mind, then. By all means, order the chocolate.”

He gives me a long look. “No. To repent, I will order mine with Nutella.”

“That’s hardly repenting. Nutella is practically chocolate.”

“It’s made from nuts.”

“And chocolate! It’s disgusting.”

“You just say that because you’re American.”

“That has nothing to do with it! You seem to have a bottomless appetite for chocolate and bread, but I don’t assume it’s because you’re Dutch.”

“Why would it be?”

“Dutch Cocoa? You guys have the lock on it.”

Willem laughs. “I think you have us confused with the Belgians. And I get my sweet tooth from my mother, who’s not even Dutch. She says she craved chocolate all through her pregnancy with me and that’s why I like it so much.”

“Figures. Blame the woman.”

“Who’s blaming?”

The waitress comes over with our drinks.

“So, Céline,” I begin, knowing I should let this go but am somehow unable to. “She’s, like, the bookkeeper? At the club.”

“Yes.”

I know it’s catty, but I’m gratified that it’s such a dull job. Until Willem elaborates. “Not the bookkeeper. She *books* all the bands, so she knows all these musicians.” And if that’s not bad enough, he adds, “She does some of the artwork for the
posters too.”

“Oh.” I deflate. “She must be very talented. Do you know her from the acting thing?”

“No.”

“Well, how did you meet?”

He plays with the wrapper from my straw.

“I get it,” I say, wondering why I’m bothering to ask what is so painfully clear. “You guys were an item.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Oh.” Surprise. And relief.

And then Willem says, ever so casually, “We just fell in love once.”

I take a gulp of my citron pressé—and choke on it. It turns out it’s not lemonade so much as lemon juice and water. Willem hands me a cube of sugar and a napkin.

“Once?” I say when I recover.

“It was a while ago.”

“And now?”

“We are good friends. As you saw.”

I’m not sure that’s exactly what I saw.

“So you’re not in love with her anymore?” I run my fingers along the rim of my glass.

Willem looks at me. “I never said I was in love with her.”

“You just said you fell in love with her once.”

“And I did.”

I stare at him, confused.

“There is a world of difference, Lulu, between falling in love and being in love.”

I feel my face go hot, and I’m not entirely sure why. “Isn’t it just sequential—A follows B?”
“You have to fall in love to be in love, but falling in love isn’t the same as being in love.” Willem peers at me from under his lashes. “Have you ever fallen in love?”

Evan and I broke up the day after he mailed in his college tuition deposit. It wasn’t unexpected. Not really. We had already agreed we would break up when we went to college if we didn’t wind up in the same geographical area. And he was going to school in St. Louis. I was going to school in Boston. The thing I hadn’t expected was the timing. Evan decided it made more sense to “rip the bandage off” and break up not in June, when we graduated, or in August, when we’d leave for school, but in April.

But the thing is, aside from being sort of humiliated by the rumor that I’d been dumped and disappointed about missing prom, I wasn’t actually sad about losing Evan. I was surprisingly neutral about breaking up with my first boyfriend. It was like he’d never even been there. I didn’t miss him, and Melanie quickly filled up whatever gaps he’d left in the schedule.

“No,” I reply. “I’ve never been in love.”

Just then the waitress arrives with our crêpes. Mine is golden brown, wafting with the sweet tartness of lemon and sugar. I concentrate on that, cutting off a slice and popping it in my mouth. It melts on the tip of my tongue like a warm, sweet snowdrop.


The playfulness is his voice is like an itch I just can’t scratch. I look at him, wondering if he always parses semantics like this.
Willem puts down his fork and knife. “This is falling in love.” With his finger, he swipes a bit of the Nutella from inside his crêpe and puts a dollop on the inside of my wrist. It is hot and oozy and starts to melt against my sticky skin, but before it has a chance to slither away, Willem licks his thumb and wipes the smear of Nutella off and pops it into his mouth. It all happens fast, like a lizard zapping a fly. “This is being in love.” And here he takes my other wrist, the one with my watch on it, and moves the watchband around until he sees what he’s looking for. Once again, he licks his thumb. Only this time, he rubs it against my birthmark, hard, as if trying to scrub it off.

“Being in love is a birthmark?” I joke as I retract my arm. But my voice has a tremble in it, and the place where his wet thumbprint is drying against my skin burns somehow.

“It’s something that never comes off, no matter how much you might want it to.”

“You’re comparing love to a . . . . stain?”

He leans so far back in his seat that the front legs of his chair scrape off the floor. He looks very satisfied, with the crêpe or with himself, I’m not sure. “Exactly.”

I think of the coffee stain on his jeans. I think of Lady Macbeth and her “Out, , damned spot,” stain, another speech I had to memorize for English. “‘Stain’ seems like an ugly word to describe love,” I tell him.

Willem just shrugs. “Maybe just in English. In Dutch, it’s vlek. In French, it’s tache.” He shakes his head, laughs. “No, still ugly.”

“How many languages have you been stained in?”

He licks his thumb again and reaches across the table for
my wrist, where he missed the tiniest smudge of Nutella. This time he wipes it—me—clean. “None. It always comes off.” He scoops the rest of the crêpe into his mouth, taking the dull edge of his knife to scrape the Nutella off the plate. Then he runs his finger around the rim, smearing the last of it away.

“Right,” I say. “And why get stained when getting dirty is so much more fun?” I taste lemons in my mouth again, and I wonder where all the sweetness went.

Willem doesn’t say anything. Just sips his coffee.

Three women wander into the café. They are all impossibly tall, almost as tall as Willem, and thin, with legs that seem to end at their boobs. They are like some strange race of human-giraffes. Models. I’ve never seen one in the wild before, but it is obvious what they are. One of them is wearing a tiny pair of shorts and platform sandals; she checks Willem out, and he gives her his little half smile, but then it’s like he catches himself and looks back at me.

“You know what it sounds like to me?” I ask. “It sounds like you just like to screw around. Which is fine. But at least own that about yourself. Don’t make up some bogus distinctions about falling in love versus being in love.”

I hear my voice. I sound like Little Miss Muffet, all goody-two-shoes and sanctimonious. So not like Lulu. And I don’t know why I’m upset. What is it to me if he believes in falling in love versus being in love, or if he believes that love is something the tooth fairy shoves under your pillow?

When I look up, Willem’s eyes are half lidded and smiling, like I’m his court jester here to amuse him. It makes me feel covetous, a toddler about to tantrum for being refused something outrageous—a pony—she knows she can’t have.
“You probably don’t even believe in love.” My voice is petulant.
“I do.” His voice is quiet.
“Really? Define love. What would ‘being stained’”—I make air quotes and roll my eyes—“look like?”
He doesn’t even pause to think about it. “Like Yael and Bram.”
“Who’s that? Some Dutch Brangelina? That doesn’t count, because who knows what it’s really like for them?” I watch the herd of models disappear inside the café, where they will no doubt feast on coffee and air. I imagine them one day fat and ordinary. Because nothing that beautiful lasts forever.
“Who’s Brangelina?” Willem asks absently. He reaches into his pocket for a coin and balances it between two knuckles, then flips it from knuckle to knuckle.
I watch the coin, watch his hands. They are big, but his fingers are delicate. “Never mind.”
“Yael and Bram are my parents,” he says quietly.
“Your parents?”
He completes a revolution with the coin and then tosses it into the air. “Stained. I like how you put it. Yael and Bram: Stained for twenty-five years.”
He says it with both affection and sadness, and something in my stomach twists.
“Are your parents like that?” he asks quietly.
“They’re still married after nearly twenty-five years, but stained?” I can’t help but laugh. “I don’t know if they ever were. They were set up on a blind date in college. And they’ve always seemed less like lovebirds than like amiable business partners, for whom I’m the sole product.”
“Sole. So you are alone?”

Alone? I think he must mean only. And I’m never alone, not with Mom and her color-coded calendar on the fridge, making sure every spare moment of my time is accounted for, making sure every aspect of my life is happily well managed. Except when I pause for a second and think about how I feel, at home, at the dinner table with Mom and Dad talking at me, not to me, at school with a bunch of people who never really became my friends, I understand that even if he didn’t mean to, he got it right.

“Yes,” I say.

“Me too.”

“Our parents quit while they were ahead,” I say, repeating the line Mom and Dad always use when people ask if I’m an only child. We quit while we were ahead.

“I never understand some English sayings,” Willem replies. “If you’re ahead, why would you quit?”

“I think it’s a gambling term.”

But Willem is shaking his head. “I think it’s human nature to keep going when you’re ahead, no matter what. You quit while you’re behind.” Then he looks at me again, and as if realizing that he has maybe insulted me, he hastily adds, “I’m sure with you it was different.”

When I was little, my parents had tried to have more children. First they went the natural route, then they went the fertility route, Mom going through a bunch of horrible procedures that never worked. Then they looked into adoption and were in the process of filling out all the paperwork when Mom got pregnant. She was so happy. I was in first grade at the time, and she’d worked since I was a baby, but when
the baby came, she was going to go on an extended leave from her job at a pharmaceutical company, then maybe only go back half time. But then in her fifth month, she lost the baby. That’s when she and Dad decided to quit while they were ahead. That’s what they told me. Except even back then, I think I’d recognized it as a lie. They’d wanted more, but they’d had to settle with just me, and I had to be good enough so that we could all pretend that we weren’t actually settling.

“Maybe you’re right,” I tell Willem now. “Maybe nobody quits while they’re really ahead. My parents always say that, but the truth is, they only stopped with me because they couldn’t have any more. Not because I was enough.”

“I’m sure you were enough.”

“Were you?” I ask.

“Maybe more than enough,” he says cryptically. It almost sounds like he’s bragging, except it doesn’t look like he’s bragging.

He starts doing the thing with the coin again. As we sit silently, I watch the coin, feeling something like suspense build in my stomach, wondering if he’ll let it fall. But he doesn’t. He just keeps spinning it. When he finishes, he flips it in the air and tosses it to me, just like he did last night.

“Can I ask you something?” I say after a minute.

“Yes.”

“Was it part of the show?”

He cocks his head.

“I mean, do you throw a coin to a girl at every performance, or was I special?”

Last night after I got back to the hotel, I spent a long time examining the coin he’d tossed me. It was a Czech koruna,
worth about a nickel. But still, I’d put it in a separate corner of my wallet, away from all the other foreign coins. I pull it out now. It glints in the bright afternoon sun.

Willem looks at it too. I’m not sure if his answer is true or just maddeningly ambiguous, or maybe both. Because that’s exactly what he says: “Maybe both.”