

The Finishing School  
By Joanna Goodman

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Chapter One

“Of the not very many ways known of shedding one's body, falling, falling, falling is the supreme method, but you have to select your sill or ledge very carefully so as not to hurt yourself or others.”

- Vladimir Nabokov

“I love you, even if there isn't any me, or any love, or even any life.”

- Zelda Fitzgerald

*I want you to know the story of how you came to be and to understand why I had to do what I did. I know that some of the things I did were crazy. Some people thought I went too far, that I became unhinged. At times, I did too. But no matter how strange or surreal it seemed, there was, for me, a perverse logic to it.*

*I'm here to tell you it was worth it. You were worth it. And I would do it all over again if faced with the same choice. I challenge any woman in my shoes to walk away from the fortuitous opportunity that was presented to me, or to opt for defeat when a solution so miraculously landed in my lap.*

*I never saw myself as the kind of person who would stop at nothing to get what I wanted, but this last year has proved that's exactly who I am. I found within myself a selfishness and a relentlessness I did not know I had. Those traits are not always a bad thing, especially for someone like me. Someone who rarely staked a claim.*

*You brought that out in me; my desire for you prevailed over all else, including that need to please everyone and be approved of and always do the reasonable thing. Nothing about how I wound up here was reasonable. Nothing about your story to this point aligns with the woman I thought I was. You summoned me to fight, to do the inconceivable and be utterly dauntless about my ambition. Funny, the harder I fought – not just for you, but also for the truth - the more I began to like myself.*

*Turns out I'm not so different from Cressida after all. You have your life because of it.*

TORONTO - September, 2015 Ch. 1

Lille is dead.

Kersti rereads the letter, which arrived inside an innocuous envelope from her agent, Rona Sharpe. She tore it open, anticipating the usual royalty statement with Rona's familiar *for your records* scribbled at the top. But inside that envelope there was another letter, still in its sealed envelope. It was addressed to Kersti Kussk-Wax, c/o Rona Sharpe Literary Agency. There was a Connecticut postmark and the name *Robertson* printed on the back flap.

Kersti opened it and read the square yellow post-it stuck to the letter, which was from Lille's mother.

*Kersti, we found this letter on Lille's computer after she died. I had forgotten about it until I received an invitation to the Lycée's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Lille's letter is unfinished, but it may be of interest to you. Best, Jaqueline Robertson*

Kersti's mouth went dry. *After she died?* She unfolded the letter, her fingertips tingling. After all these years of silence, a letter? It made no sense.

*Dear Kersti,*

*Mwah mwah mwah. Three kisses for old times sake. I know it's been a long time, but I've been following your writing career and I've read your last two books and I'm so happy for you. My favorite was Moonset over Tallin. (I tried to order The Ski Maker's Daughter, but it doesn't seem to exist.)*

*I won't get to read your next one. I'm going to die soon.*

*After I graduated from the Lycée (I stayed to complete the year...where else could I go?) I was accepted at Brown, and managed to get a degree in Psychology. I briefly*

*entertained the possibility of becoming a Jungian analyst. Ha! In the end, I decided I couldn't risk further undermining the already fragile mental stability of my future potential clients. So I took some photography courses. I love photography. I even had a show at a small gallery in Williamsburg back in '99, but my confidence wasn't up for all that scrutiny – having my work displayed on the walls for people to judge. I even felt unworthy of the positive attention. Nothing sold. I wasn't very good anyway and continued to pursue it only as a hobby.*

*I've had an underwhelming life, even by my own standards. There was more I could have accomplished – there's actually a fairly sharp intellect in this warped brain - but my desires and ideas never seemed to match my output.*

*Fear. That was my problem. I've always felt like a child cowering in a corner. Oddly enough, the one thing I did not fear was death. I feared not being liked; not being good enough; not being worthy; not being respected; not being beautiful; not being happy or useful or productive; I feared being exposed, being abandoned, being seen, being judged, being rejected.*

*But I never feared death. (Good thing, it turns out.) Do you remember that book The Secret that came out a few years ago? Everyone was talking about the Law of Attraction and how you could manifest whatever you wanted in life just by thinking about it - but also that you could manifest whatever you didn't want just by thinking about it. The whole concept was oversimplified and exploited, but not without its truths. I believe the fear inside me eventually turned into a tumor and settled in my breast. Stage 4, at the time of my diagnosis. Seventeen lymph nodes infected. That's a lot of fear.*

*The process of dying stirs up a lot of shit, Kerst. I'm not intending this to be a confession, but I've kept a lot of stuff to myself over the years. I wonder if I should have shared it, at least with a shrink. I imagine that all the crap I've kept to myself lives inside that tumor. (Have you ever read the story 'Hairball' by Margaret Atwood? After the main character has a tumor surgically removed, she stores it in formaldehyde, keeps it on her mantelpiece and calls it 'Hairball.') That's how I picture my tumors (I've got lots of them now – in my bones, my liver, my spine.)*

*I know this is a cliché of the dying person, but certain things in particular still haunt me:*

- 1. I don't believe Cressida 'fell' by accident.*
- 2. There's something incriminating in the Helvetians ledger. I think Deirdre has it (if not, where is it?)*
- 3. I wonder if Magnus saw anything (I saw him leaving Huber House that night)*
- 4. I wish I'd spoken up sooner*
- 5.*

The letter ends abruptly. Obviously, Lille had more to say. Maybe she got too sick; maybe she wrestled with how much more to confess and then died before a satisfactory answer ever revealed itself.

*Kersti realizes she's still standing at her desk and collapses heavily into the chair.*

*Lille is dead.*

She sits with that for a moment, a feeling of trepidation pulsing inside her. She hasn't seen Lille in almost twenty years, so it's not like there's a physical void, but there's definitely a heavy-heartedness, a crush of dread that has more to do with Kersti's

recollection of that entire era; of what happened to them that forever expunged their freer, more hopeful selves.

Lille was a strange, acutely empathic girl whose awkwardness and discomfort in the world was a palpable thing. Her sensitivity was an affliction, like an exposed nerve. Certain people dying young are not a surprise. Lille's death, though tragic, is one of those un-shocking deaths. She always possessed a certain sadness of spirit, a weary resignation about life that probably could not be sustained deep into old age.

Cressida was the opposite. She was life itself. She was beauty, vitality and possibility all breathed into an exquisite physical form. She was the embodiment of power, inner and outer. She was unforgettable, her impact no less potent in her absence.

They're both gone now and Kersti's long repressed grief over Cressida's accident is starting to fester and rise to the surface. She can feel it in her chest, her throat, her head. As she folds up the letter and shoves it in her top drawer - as though hiding it can keep the truth from encroaching on her life - Kersti already knows that hearing about Lille's death so soon after being invited back to the Lycée will be the inevitable catalyst that forces her to face the tsunami of grief and guilt she's been holding back since the age of seventeen.

The invitation to the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday gala is hanging on the magnetic board above her desk. She glances at it now, still undecided about whether or not to attend. Her years in Switzerland were the best of her life; the way they came to an end, the worst.

*You are invited to celebrate our 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on June 13, 2016 at the Lycée International Suisse. 1005 Lausanne, Switzerland.*

Inside the envelope there was also a letter.

*Dear Kersti,*

*In 1916, the Lycée opened its doors to a handful of students seeking the highest standard of education in the world. Since that time, we've been accredited by the European Council of International Schools and become one of a group of schools to be officially recognized by the Swiss Confederation. In 1925, our day school became co-ed and although we are proud of the great many achievements of our male alumni, as part of our centennial celebrations, we have selected 'One Hundred Women of the Lycée,' to represent the last century of our success in grooming young girls to reach their full potential and become thriving citizens of the world.*

*In 2016, the Lycée Internationale Suisse will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. We are delighted to inform you that you have been selected as one of our 'One Hundred Women of the Lycée' for your outstanding achievements in the Literary Arts. We invite you to be one of the keynote speakers at our 100th Birthday Garden Party on Saturday June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016...*

What would Cressida have thought of Kersti being chosen one of the One Hundred Women of the Lycée? She probably would have made Kersti feel like an idiot for feeling flattered.

When Kersti first got back from Lausanne after the accident, it was hard not to think about Cressida all the time. She became so depressed and reclusive she finally had to make the purposeful decision to *not go there anymore*. From that point on, she stopped living in the memories - the good, the bad and the surreal; stopped visiting that dark, deep place in her mind and forged ahead with her life. That meant she had to ignore all the unanswered questions that had been left dangling, which became easier and easier to do over the years. And yet here it is, that sleeping beast, gently waking after all this time,



claws extended, determined to pull her back there. She's not surprised. It takes outrageous arrogance to think one can successfully outrun the past, and Kersti has never been that arrogant. Cressida was, but not Kersti.

She opens her desk drawer and removes Lille's letter again. She rereads it, finding herself stuck at the part about Magnus. *I saw him leaving Huber House that night...*

Lille's letter is a welcome distraction from her last, tense conversation with Jay. She gets up, leaving the letter on her desk, and goes downstairs to the basement, where she drags a box marked LYCEE out of the storage closet. In it, she's saved report cards, photo albums, yearbooks and a shoebox full of tokens and mementos - a coaster for Bière Cardinal...*moment d'amitié*; programs from the *Fête des Vendages* in Morges and the 1989 Holiday on Ice at the Palais de Beaulieu; lift tickets from every ski trip she ever went on, from Thyon to Gstaad; placemats from Niffenager's Brasserie (they called it Niffy's) and from *Café Pont Besiers* (they called it 2,50's, the price of a Chope;) her medals from the Vaud Volleyball Championships; an artsy black and white photo of the Molecular Structure; a paper menu from Pizza Chez Mario, which has a strong mildew smell; and a handful of photo-booth photos - Kersti and Cressida, Kersti and Lille, Cress and Raf; Lille and Alison; Kersti and Noa. All six of them. Serious, silly, smiling, tongues out, kissing, fake tans, frost-and-tipped hair, the nineties.

The sharp stab of nostalgia is piercing. She hasn't allowed herself to do this in almost two decades. Still, she kept everything. She was been happy there, truly herself.

The yearbook is unsigned by her friends. She left Switzerland before it was handed out to the students and it had to be mailed to her. Her 'Bequeaths' aren't even included. Neither are Cressida's or Lille's. She reads Noa and Rafaella's Bequeaths and

what surprises her now is that they were able to bounce back so quickly after the accident and compose their light-hearted summations of the school year. *I bequeath my tweezers to Komiko; raw brownies to Ali; the third floor bathroom to the 'Helvetians of '94.'*

Strange, given that one of their best friends had mysteriously plunged from her fourth floor balcony just weeks before the end of the school year. Kersti had a much harder time recovering. Maybe she never did. Not just from the accident, but from the friendship itself. Going through the yearbook again, Kersti can't help being transported back to that phase of her life that was both so brief and so deeply impressive. There she is in Stratford-upon-Avon, in Basel, at the Christmas Torchlight Descent, at Villars, Verbier, Chateau-d'Oex -

“Kerst?”

She looks up, disoriented. Jay is standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking disheveled and sleepy. He must have fallen asleep on the couch. She feels far away from him tonight, not just because of everything that's been going on between them – the stress, the arguing, the tension – but because her mind is in the past.

He looks older to her at this moment, as if she's looking at him through the eyes of her teenage self. He's just turned forty and has a wreath of silver in his dark hair, some lines indented in his forehead, which was as smooth as a candle's surface just a year or two ago. But she's being hard on him. She's in that kind of a mood. He's handsome and well-preserved, he makes an effort. If not for the silver wreath and the newish forehead lines, he doesn't look a day over thirty-five. Plus he's got a formidable upper body – broad-shoulders, slim-waist, great abs – that can be attributed to the flour and sugar-free diet he embarked on after his thirty-ninth birthday.

He takes a step towards her, but keeps his distance. “What’s going on?” he asks, running a hand through his hair.

“My friend died,” Kersti says, closing the yearbook.

“Who?”

“Someone from the Lycée. She had cancer.”

“Shit. That’s young.”

Not as young as seventeen, Kersti thinks, remembering something Mme. Hamidou once told her about Cressida. “Cressida is too brilliant to waste her talents on an ordinary life,” she’d said in a portentous voice. “She has a great destiny, which someday she’ll share with the world.”

Kersti had always believed that to be true. Everyone did. And Cressida *was* destined for something far bigger and more unimaginable than the rest of them. Her great destiny turned out to be tragedy.

“I might go back to Lausanne in the spring,” she tells Jay. “For that hundredth birthday thing.”

*LAUSANNE – September, 1994 Ch. 2*

Kersti and her mother arrive at the train station in Lausanne on a brilliant September morning. The air is muggy when they step out of the *Gare*. Most of her luggage was shipped to the school ahead of time so she only has one suitcase to manage. Facing the Macdonald's across the street, Kersti's first impression of Switzerland is that it looks just like Toronto. It's nothing like all those pictures of green valleys and pristine lakes and snow-capped mountains. It's traffic, fast food, sour faces rushing to work. It could be any generic city, which bothers Kersti because what's the point of coming all this way?

Her mother hails a taxi. Kersti gets in and slumps against the window while her mother drones on about the fondue she used to have at some café in Place St. François. Her mother went to school at the Lycée when she was young and always wanted her daughters to have the same experience. The "privilege" has fallen to Kersti because her sisters didn't have the grades to earn the Legacy Scholarship. Kersti had the grades, though not the inclination; but being her mother's last hope, she didn't have much say in the matter. Everyone thinks it's some marvelous gift but the truth, Kersti knows, is that her parents are sending her away because they're exhausted.

Kersti's mother was forty-five when she had Kersti, which makes her the age of most kids' grandmothers. She's got faded blue eyes and her pale blond hair has yellowed over the years, like discolored paper. She's still slim, but her angles and lines are softening into old age. Kersti has always resented having older parents. From an early age, it was obvious to her that their energy and enthusiasm had been used up raising her

three older sisters; she could sense they were tired and a little disinterested. Shipping her off to boarding school feels more like they're giving up than bestowing a privilege.

"After you settle in," her mother chirps, her Estonian accent even more grating than usual, "We'll walk down to Place St. Françoise for a hot chocolate and a ramequin. You haven't had hot chocolate until you've had one here."

Kersti continues to stare out the window, remembering bits and pieces from the dozens of Lausanne brochures her mother gave her before they left. The city is built on the southern slope of the Swiss plateau, she recalls, rising up from the lakeshore at Ouchy. As the taxi climbs the steep cobblestone streets, a dramatic panorama of the Alps comes into view and the city begins to look distinctly more European than it did down by the train station.

Her new school is in a suburban section of Lausanne, set back from the street, enclosed by a black wrought-iron gate and hidden behind a fortress of leafy trees. Kersti notices the black bars on the windows and can't help comparing the school to an eighteenth century women's prison. She can't believe this is where she will be for the next four years.

There are half a dozen buildings that make up the campus, the two largest connected by an enclosed foot-bridge. All the buildings are white with carved green dormer windows and red-tile roofs. A sign at the entrance announces LYCÉE INTERNATIONALE SUISSE. *BIENVENUE*.

Kersti hauls her suitcase inside Huber House, which her mother tells her is the main building that houses both the dining room on the first floor and the dorms on the second, third and fourth. The other houses are Frei, Chateau and Lashwood.

Inside Huber House, it's dark and drafty, shabby. It reminds Kersti of the Estonian House back home. Everywhere is dark wood – the long dining tables, the chairs, the floors and ceilings, the crown moldings, the stairwell and banister. The drapes are dark green velvet, puddled on the floor. A carved plaque in the foyer proclaims the school's founding mission statement: *Preparing Young Women to Become Citizens of the World since 1915*. The corridor smells of beef stew and cigarette smoke.

“Ah, the smoking,” her mother says, with a nostalgic sigh. “I miss Europe.” Her big complaint about Canada is that no one smokes anymore.

A small, dark-haired woman wearing a red blazer with dwarfing shoulder pads, a matching red pencil skirt and bright white Reeboks greets them in the foyer. She looks somewhere between forty-five and fifty-five, but it's hard to tell. She isn't very attractive – her hair is cut in a blunt, mannish style, very unflattering, as though she did it herself with kitchen scissors – but there's something warm about her brown eyes. Or maybe it's the way she smiles, like she's absolutely thrilled to see you.

“I'm Madame Hamidou,” she says, giving Kersti a hard handshake. “Welcome to the Lycée and to Huber House. I'm your house mother.”

She has a wiry, athletic body which she propels up the stairs, taking two at a time in her pristine running shoes. “You'll be in good shape by the end of the year,” she calls down to them. Kersti can't figure out her accent. She speaks perfect English with only the faintest trace of something European – possibly French or German. “Here's your room,” she announces, throwing open the door. “Your roommate is Cressida. She's a returning student so she can show you the ropes.”

“When did she start?” Kersti’s mother wants to know. “I was here from fourth grade until I graduated.”

“Cressida’s been here since second grade.”

*Second grade?* Kersti looks at her mother in a new light of gratitude for not having shipped her overseas at the age of seven.

“The welcome luncheon is at twelve-fifteen,” Hamidou says. “Students only.”

Kersti steps into the room and looks around. It’s weird and old-fashioned; nothing matches. There are two single beds side by side, with tall brass headboards and matching comforters in a 1960’s gold paisley design. The furniture is of a heavy oak – a bedside table between the beds, two twin desks, a bookcase, two behemoth dressers. There’s a garish carpet with a design of brown, mustard and rust medallions, faded floral wallpaper in pinks and greens, dingy eyelet curtains in the windows, and a porcelain pedestal sink in the corner that may have been here since the school was built in 1916.

“Is this what forty thousand dollars buys?” Kersti asks, going over to the bed and touching the disgusting comforter. She knows what a year at the Lycée costs because she overheard her father complaining about it. He didn’t want to send Kersti here even on a scholarship, but her mother can be extremely forceful.

“Wait till you sleep under it,” her mother says, unzipping Kersti’s suitcase. “It’s filled with goose down.”

Kersti would be happy with her old polyester quilt from home. She wanted to go to a regular high school in Toronto and have her own room with her own things. She doesn’t need to ski the Alps and sleep under goose down or learn French to make her well-rounded. She opens the large bay windows overlooking the back of the school

grounds and here at last is the postcard she's envisioned – clusters of red-tiled roofs and church spires descending into shimmering, opalescent Lake Geneva, which stretches out towards France and the majestic Alps.

“That's Evian over there,” her mother says. “Isn't it breathtaking? I remember the day I arrived...”

Kersti tunes her mother out. The view is nice. It smells good, too. Like clean laundry. But it's not home.

At lunch they serve thick brown stew and strange noodles that look like fried white worms. Nice warm rolls, hot chocolate and kiwi. Kersti eats in silence, seated beside a giant German girl with a crude bowl haircut, clothes from the seventies and a strong body odor that wafts across the table. According to the sticker on her chest, her name is Angela Zumpt. The smell is so pungent Kersti can't turn her head in that general direction without feeling queasy.

The teacher at the head of Kersti's table is Mrs. Fithern. She has curly brown hair and slightly buck, overlapping front teeth. She tells them she's from England and asks them where they're from, what grade they're going into and how they like Switzerland. Kersti is grateful to be halfway down the table so she doesn't have to answer. She isn't like the rest of these girls. She's only here because she got some obscure scholarship.

Her roommate doesn't turn up for the welcome lunch, nor is she there when Kersti's mother drops her off after dinner. Curfew is ten. *Ten!* Kersti hasn't gone to bed at ten since third grade. She sits by herself in her new room, staring out at the Alps, feeling completely alone. She already misses her mother. How does a mother just drop



her child off in another country and leave, she wonders? How did all the mothers of all these orphans do it?

Kersti imagines the kind of mother she'll be to her own children. Loving, nurturing, fun, present. She will never ship them overseas. She'll be hands on, devoted; she'll *want* to be with them. And she'll have them before she's thirty too, so she can be full of energy and enthusiasm. Eila will be her first daughter, Elise her second. She doesn't like anything for a boy yet, but she probably won't have boys anyway.

Close to ten, Mme Hamidou sticks her head into the room and interrupts Kersti's fantasizing. "Cressida will be here tomorrow," she says. "It gets better, Love."

Hamidou turns out the lights and closes the door behind her. Kersti can hear her running downstairs to the lounge, one floor below. She can smell the smoke from Mme. Hamidou's cigarettes. She closes her eyes and lies down, succumbing to the jetlag. She sleeps like a baby under the fluffy down duvet with the fresh Swiss air blowing in from the open dormer window.

The next morning, Kersti comes back from the shower to find her roommate, Cressida Strauss, unpacking a box of books. Kersti's breath catches; she's never seen anyone like her.

"Hi," she says, shoving a handful of books in the bookcase.

Kersti is wrapped in a towel, naked except for her flip-flops and a streak of blood on her shin from where she cut herself shaving. Cressida is wearing a chambray Polo button-down tucked into faded Levi's, with riding boots, completely casual. But on *her*... She looks like she's just ridden in on her horse, fresh-cheeked and wind-blown, posing

for a Ralph Lauren ad. Her suitcases and a number of boxes are piled on the floor at her feet.

“I’m Cressida,” she says, as ordinary as can be. But she’s far from ordinary. She has a beautiful, unruly mane of hair, spiraling out in all directions. Her head is just slightly too big for her slender body, but she’s dazzling, with pale green eyes, exquisitely long lashes and a prominent, arched brow. Kersti is literally awe-struck by her perfect pink complexion, no doubt from all that good clean Swiss air. Her posture, her height, her long legs – all of it together a masterpiece of teenage magnificence.

Staring at her, practically with her mouth agape, Kersti hates, worships and wants to *be* her in one sweeping, exhilarating moment. She feels suddenly dwarfed in her presence, diffused. Cressida is on a whole other level of beauty. She’s in another realm.

“Where are you from?” Cressida asks, shoving books onto the shelf.

“Canada.”

“With a name like Kersti Kuusk?”

“My parents are Estonian but I grew up in Toronto.”

“Great. No language barrier. My last roommate was from Japan. Didn’t speak a word of English.”

Kersti can’t help noticing the books she’s lining up in their communal bookcase: *Ulysses*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Tender is the Night*.

“Do you want to go get a Chope?” Cressida asks, Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* in her hand.

“What’s a Chope?”

Cressida smiles. Gorgeous teeth, gleaming white, straight.

They go up the street to the Café le Petit Pont Bessières, a fluorescent-lit saloon full of old Swiss men drinking beer for breakfast. Cressida orders two Chopes, which are barrel-sized steins of Cardinal beer. “Welcome to Switzerland,” she says, clanking her mug against Kersti’s. “What do you think so far?”

“The students seem kind of strange,” Kersti admits. “Everyone smokes and speaks a bunch of languages and wears shoulder pads in their sweatshirts.”

From what she gathered at yesterday’s luncheon, most of the kids at the Lycée have grown up in European boarding schools. Their parents are princes, princesses, famous designers, actors, oil barons in the Middle East. “I like the name Cressida,” Kersti says. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“My mother is a Shakespeare buff,” Cressida explains. “Of course she had to name me after one of the most obscure and misunderstood of all his plays.”

She waits a beat and, realizing Kersti has no idea what she’s talking about, says, “Cressida was a traitor, the archetype of female duplicity. She betrayed her supposed true love Troilus, a Trojan, and aligned with the Greeks. And then she was basically forgotten.”

“My name means ‘follower of Christ,’ which is ironic since my parents are both atheist.”

Cressida laughs and Kersti feels a sudden crushing desire to impress her new roommate, to hear that laugh again and again.

“So what’s your story?” Cressida asks her.

“I don’t think I have one.”

“If you’re here, you’ve got one.”

Kersti thinks about it for a moment. She feels unsure of herself, more than the usual low hum of insecurity. The beer is making her queasy. Everything is whirling – her mind, the room, her sense of balance.

Cressida hands her a cigarette from her pack of Marlboro Lights.

“I don’t -”

“Right.” Cressida lights one for herself. “Give it some time,” she says confidently.

“Smoking is like breathing here. I started at twelve.”

“My parents are European. They both smoke.”

Cressida exhales perfect smoke donuts above Kersti’s head. “You met Claudine?”

“Who?”

“Madame Hamidou. Our mother-away-from-home.”

“Yes. She seems nice.”

“What does your dad do?” Cressida asks her, jumping from one question to the next.

“He owns a travel agency.”

Cressida raises an eyebrow.

“I’m here on scholarship,” Kersti says.

Cressida tips her head and fixes her aquamarine eyes on Kersti, as clear and brilliant as two perfectly round gemstones.

“My mother is an Old Girl,” Kersti explains. “Her parents had money, but they cut her off when she moved to Canada with my dad.”

“That’s romantic.”

Nothing about her parents' marriage strikes Kersti as romantic. It's true Anni Lepp came from a fairly affluent family – by Estonian standards - and gave it all up to be with Kersti's father, Paavo, but having grown up in their home, under the dark cloud of their mismatched union, Kersti can only describe her mother's decision as impractical and misguided. Romantic, *never*.

Anni was from the Old Town of Tallinn, the daughter of a successful architect. She claims to have had a good childhood. They lived in a modern house facing a vast pine forest and her fondest memory is of putting on her cross-country skis inside the house every morning, and then skiing down the stairs right into the woods. When she was nine, her father sent her to school in Switzerland. It was 1944 and he wanted her to be safe and also to have better opportunities than she would have had in a poor country like Estonia. She ended up staying there almost a decade. Her father also sent his money to Switzerland, stashing it there for safe-keeping during the war, which is how he managed to hang onto it when most people lost everything. When she graduated from the Lycée, her parents sent her to Canada to live with second cousins, always hoping she would have a better life than Estonia could offer.

Paavo was a poor working class guy from Kalamaja in Northern Tallin. He was not educated and had no obvious skills or ambition. He worked on the assembly line at the cross-country ski factory. In 1948, when he was eighteen, he went to Canada on the S.S Walnut - a boat full of Baltic refugees fleeing the Soviet invasion. Paavo had nothing of real substance to offer a girl like Anni Lepp, but he was extremely handsome and charismatic, and she fell in love with him at an Estonian Youth Club dance. He'd already

been in Canada five years but was still doing odd jobs in factories. He hadn't managed to build anything.

Her parents were furious. All their hard work and sacrifice to ensure a good life for their daughter had led Anni to a blue collar Estonian barely eking out a living. When she married him, they cut her off.

Four decades later, Kersti's parents have the kind of terrible marriage that is marred not by vicious fighting, but by frequent, long, punishing silences.

"Does she ever regret it?" Cressida asks Kersti.

"Marrying my dad?"

"Sacrificing the family money."

"We don't talk about that stuff."

"Parents rarely do," Cressida says. "They're too afraid to let us know they make mistakes. God forbid we would ever find out they're human."

"What are your parents like?" Kersti asks her. "How come they sent you here when you were so young?"

"It was the best thing for me," Cressida says, as though she's said it a million times before and believes it. It's a canned response, even Kersti can tell. "My mother's a stage actress and my father is a producer. She's British and he's back and forth between L.A and New York all the time. They're never in the same city for very long. They felt boarding school would give me the most stability."

"Did it?"

"Oh, sure."

Kersti can't tell if she's being serious.

“What difference does it make if I’m here on my own, or if they’re fucking me up in closer proximity?” she says rhetorically. “It all evens out in the end.”

She finishes her chope and flags the waiter, who doesn’t seem to care how old they are.

“Do you do this every Sunday morning?” Kersti asks her.

“And Saturdays after lunch.”

“Is there anything else to do?”

“Besides skiing? Sometimes we go to Ouchy, down by the lake.”

The waiter brings over the chope and Cressida speaks to him in perfect, melodic French. They laugh and he pats her shoulder affectionately.

“What else can you tell me about Kersti Kuusk?”

Kersti wants to tell her something dramatic and shocking that will impress her, but she doesn’t have much in her arsenal. Her father drinks too much. Whose doesn’t? She’s a virgin. It’s the usual adolescent alienation and sense of impending doom. “I’m pretty ordinary.”

“You must have some little juicy secret.”

“My family’s nickname for me is Ônnetus,” Kersti offers.

“Which means?”

“Accident,” Kersti replies. “My mom got pregnant with me after her tubes were tied, seven years after what was supposed to be her last kid. I don’t really get along with any of them.”

“Didn’t they adore you and smother you? Isn’t it always like that when the baby of the family comes along late?”

“Not in my family. They were pretty indifferent to me. It’s kind of like I’m not a real Kuusk because I wasn’t supposed to *be*. I think that’s the real reason they sent me here. They don’t have the energy to parent me.”

“I knew you had a story,” Cressida says triumphantly.

“I don’t think about it much.”

“That’s a lie. I bet you think about it a lot.”

Cressida is right. Kersti does think about it a lot. Cressida already understands that about her, which is really quite thrilling. No one has ever gotten her before, or for that matter, really seen her and accepted her anyway. Cressida doesn’t seem to give a shit about Kersti’s lack of credentials, or who she has to pretend to be for the world, or what she looks like, or her silly bravado. She’s dug her hands right inside Kersti and she’s feeling around in there, looking for something she can get hold of, something dirty and real she can grasp. That’s what she’s really interested in - the gory truth - which is utterly freeing.

“What about you?” Kersti says. “What’s your story?”

“It’s only our first date,” Cressida answers, smiling. “Too soon for my dark secret.”

Kersti suspects Cressida has more than just one.