

TINKER, TAILOR, LOVER, TRAITOR

Chapter 1

My sister is late.

Her email was unexpected. Ten years of no contact. She briefly mentioned business like a casual cup of tea but nothing more. Only I found it worrisome. I push the thought away. Don't overthink it. Don't analyse every word, like I always do. Still, nerves tingle in my fingertips and I resist the urge to regurgitate every line she sent and dissect them like a surgeon. I sit across from my parents, spine straight, eyes ahead, my sister's empty chair like a phantom beside me. She'll be here any moment. Mum's dress is pristine, Dad's beard is trimmed and I polished my leather pumps with a toothbrush this morning. Normally, I clean all my shoes on Wednesdays but today is not a normal Sunday.

Today my sister is home for the first time in ten years.

The room smells of lunch: honey roast ham and freshly baked bread. Dill topped salmon and ricotta stuffed peppers. Crystal glasses and golden napkins. All of it untouched. Our dining room is like a show home, apart from my parents' seventeen university degrees mounted on the cream walls. Bifold doors lead to a trim and empty back garden. Even weeds don't grow here. Nothing is ever out of place.

Nothing except me.

I adjust my cutlery. The perfect two inches apart. I'd measure it if I could. The spread is going cold, the wine is getting warm and we wait. The dining room clock ticks closer to one.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

“What do you think her job is like? Out there?” Mum's voice layers with fevered excitement.

“She must be important,” Dad says. “I know it.”

Those last words are a whisper, like they're illegal to say out loud. I chew my lip and say nothing. I don't break the rules. Ever. We're forbidden to talk about my sister's life in the stars. The intergalactic empire she serves. Earthlings cannot know. That was their rule. Their one rule.

“Do you remember when she was a teenager and attended my seminar on Saturn's rings?” Mum switches the topic. “She asked better questions than my grad students.”

“At ten, she helped my PhD student put together a thesis.” Dad's face flushes with pride. “And she detailed the mathematics of string theory in her primary school assembly. Remarkable.”

My parents love my sister's brilliance but I remember the stolen chocolate bars and sunny trips to the beach, sunscreen claggy on my skin and sugar sweet on my tongue. How she'd plait my hair so kids couldn't pull it and that time she brought me new crayons when a bully snapped all of mine. She's always been brilliant. She'll always *be* brilliant.

I hope she's still kind.

"Will she like her bedroom?" Dad says. "I polished her old telescope this morning and put some extra RAM in that computer she built."

"How can she not?" Mum says. "It's exactly how she left it. We haven't changed a thing."

"Like a shrine," I say but they don't look at me.

On my sister's eighteenth, there was a silver pill on her bedside table that, when it came in contact with flesh, revealed a message only to us. An invitation to the five hundred most brilliant teenagers across the universe to compete in a prestigious, intergalactic competition. Unbeknownst to earth, there's an intergalactic nation in space and, as long as the competition remained our secret, my sister could be part of it.

I was eight when she left. I was the kid who told my classmates the NHS guidelines for how many sweets they could eat or pointed out when they didn't colour between the lines. My sister was my only friend. By the time she left, my future was set: a silver pill that hides a single invitation. One with my name on.

My bedside table was empty the morning of my eighteenth.

"She's coming on business," Dad says and my eyes lift to his face. Nerves tighten in my spine.

"Something trivial, no doubt." Mum waves a dismissive hand and dad nods. My lips press together but we say nothing more.

Even before my sister's eighteenth birthday, my family was good at keeping secrets. We've trained our entire life because I'm our biggest secret of all.

I'm not my father's daughter.

We never speak of that fact. We haven't told a soul. But to me, it's obvious. It was obvious when I didn't join MENSA at the age of five. It was obvious when I didn't interview for Oxford at the age of fourteen. It was obvious on my eighteenth birthday when my bedside table was empty.

Here's the mathematics of childbirth: two intelligent professors, who fall in love at the lab, will create one genius daughter. One intelligent professor and one tall and handsome mistake, who vanishes without a trace, creates a disappointment. Me.

The clock ticks towards half one and my mouth turns dry. Right now, I want to be upstairs, checking the neat rows and columns of this week's schedule, highlighting relevant paragraphs in my maths textbook and then scrubbing every inch of my room with the new spray I bought. I'd polish the desk too, if I had the time.

There's a shuffling sound behind the dining room door and the air in the room turns static. Our spines grow stiff. Our gazes skim from one another like trapped rabbits. Dear beneath headlights. The breath holds in our throats and nerves hum like flies between us.

The door eases open.

A pale face, thinner than mine, with the same high cheekbones and grey eyes. Navy blouse. Light brown hair, cropped to shoulder length, curly like mine. Pressed jeans and a cream rucksack. My mouth drops open. My breath stalls.

“Abi.” Mum’s across the room before I can even register that she stood up, dad on her heels. They fold my sister in a hug, the three of them clinging tight like the soul survivors on a shipwreck. They’ve waited ten years for this moment.

I ease to my feet, panic tugging at my gut and every failure I’ve collected in the last decade flashing through my mind. That time I got a B in my maths homework. When I took too many classes and they made me drop A-level physics. The empty bedside table. That completely empty bedside table.

Sweat pools in my palms and my head turns light. I tug on the sage fabric of my already straight dress. I need to get out of here. I need to—

“Paige?” My sister steps around the table, leaving my parents and coming to me when I should be going to her. I’ve failed. I’ve failed in this too.

My mouth flops open. My mind blanks. I—

My sister pulls me into a hug. She smells of machine oil and metal dust. Of electric fires and chemicals I can’t name. She smells of places far away in one’s out of reach. And somewhere, beneath it all, she smells of that sunscreen we wore to the beach.

We stand like that for a long moment, letting the world turn and the universe stagnate. That feeling, the horrible sinking feeling, recedes from my gut. The weight lifts from my shoulder. A smile pricks my cheeks.

Abi steps back and cups my chin. “I missed you.”

“You too,” I say, voice thick.

“And you’ve grown!” She motions to me like a prize to behold. “You were eight when I left. Tiny.”

My cheeks flush with heat and the question sits on the tip of my tongue. Why, after ten years, is she here?

“We've prepared Sunday lunch,” Mum says and we turn. My parents stand at the table, the banquet ready, eyes fixed on Abi.

“You didn't need to go to all this trouble!” Abi's eyes sweep across the feast.

“Of course we did.” Dad's glowing with pride. “You deserve the best.”

We take our places at the table, the same ones we commandeered ten years ago, and I can't help but smile. We've had guests at this table before, visiting professors or prize winning scientists, but this is the first time in ten years it's actually felt full. Complete.

“How's your job, love?” Mum spoons potato salad onto my sister's plate as dad carves the ham.

“Amazing.” My sister's smile is as wide as the Cheshire cat's. “I've learnt so much and the things I've seen— you wouldn't believe.”

I layer slabs of ham on my plate. “Have you flown a spaceshi—”

“What's the work like?” Dad interrupts. “Do you build stuff or is your field more research?”

“Mostly maintenance actually but the odd bit of research.” Abi turns to me. “Once. It was terrible. I flew straight into an asteroid belt, panicked, and the co-pilot took over. Haven't flown since.”

“Hardly a useful skill.” Mum waves the story away with a swish of her fork. “You must go into research, Abi. It's where the world changes.”

“But maintenance is good too! People need things maintained,” Dad says.

“Of course.” Mum nods. “But we're both in research. Abi, you must angle yourself for research projects in your field.”

“I'll keep it in mind.” My sister sips her elderflower spritz and turns to me. “Have you picked a university yet? You've just finished school, right?”

“Bristol.” My face glows with heat and the room quietens to only the sound of cutlery scraping against plates. You could cut the tension with a knife. “I plan to live at home.”

The words are meek and the story's uninteresting. The University of Bristol Freshers brochure is stuffed upstairs in my desk drawer, unopened. UCAS was always my plan B. My backup. The whole universe was plan A.

“Your father won a Crafoord prize.” Mum cuts into the silence.

“Daphne! That was three years ago!” Dad shakes his head. “Hardly current affairs.”

“Abi hasn't heard our news for ten years!”

“Quite right.” Dad turns to my sister with a grin. “Your mother won The Shaw Prize. Eight years ago. No one else on her research team was even nominated but she won! Just like that!”

“That's great!” Abi beams at them both and then me. “You're all doing so great.”

My eyes drop to my empty plate and my stomach twists. The meal continues in fevered excitement and snatched pieces of advice. My sister's answers are vague. My parents advice is pointed. My few responses are short. Still, I don't know why she's come, and it feels rude to ask. I'm just grateful she's home.

Finally, Mum leans over and takes the empty plate from Abi's placemat. “How long are you staying, love? Your dad and I are due back at the lab this afternoon.”

“Research waits for nobody.” Dad pushes his chair back with a screech. “You'd be welcome to a tour.”

“I've got some things to polish off then I'll head. Do you mind if I work at the kitchen counter?”

“Have the office if you want.” Dad hums as he loads the dishwasher and mum's already pulling on her lab coat in the hall. How quickly reality returns. We all hug goodbye. My sister promises to visit more, my parents say they're proud and I head upstairs, ready to keep out of her way while she works.

In my room, I change into a sports bra, a pair of leggings and throw a hoodie over the top. I take off my earrings and necklace and find someone who looks a little more like me in that full length mirror. Untameable nut brown curls and a tall frame. Grey eyes and a freckled face.

If I could, I would live in my hoodie and leggings, tucked away in my room, reordering my highlighters and dreaming of the secret nation who lives beyond the stars. And if I really could have anything, I'd turn back time, and be seventeen again and still cling to that tiny slither of hope that I might join their ranks. And if I really really really got one wish, it'd be for that cream envelope. On my bedside table. Waiting for me.

But people don't get wishes, they get chances. I blew mine.

My bedroom door eases open and the muffled sound of the dishwasher churning downstairs grows louder. Abi steps into the room and presses the door shut behind with a thud.

“Hey.” Her smile is small and her voice is soft. “You've changed?”

“I'll go to the gym later. Have you finished your work?”

“My work is never finished.” My sister flops onto my immaculately made bed, face up.

“Bet it's interesting though.” I climb on the bed next to her and flop onto my back. Usually I have a strict ‘no outside clothes on the bed policy’, but today is a free pass. I can change my sheets tonight.

“You didn't take them off?” Abi points upwards. There are fluorescent stars stuck on my ceiling. The kind that lights up when it gets dark. Abi put them up there on the day she left, because as long as I could see the stars I could see her. That was her promise.

“What's it like?” I study those plastic stars but I'm picturing the night sky, with its incredible expanse of beauty. The pinpricks of light and stardust and all those ancient stories held between them. “Are there other planets like earth?”

“Nowhere's like earth.” My sister rolls onto her side to face me. “But some places are better.”

I roll to my side, too, so we're face to face, like little kids hiding in a den, and my throat grows tight. My voice turns thick. All of these things I'm missing. All of these things I'll never see. But still, I whisper: “I'm glad you found them. These ‘better places’.”

Those words hang in the silence between us, like a fairytale everybody knows. An ending we both recognise. When the step sister goes to the ball, nobody thinks about the sisters left behind. Nobody thinks that, in the end, all she wanted was to dance.

“Take me to your gym.” Abi sits up in one fluid motion and climbs to her feet.

“What?”

“Your gym.” She studies my timetables and schedules tap to the orange walls. Orange like the sunrise. Orange like the start of a new day or the promise of a clean slate. “Show me your world.”

I ease to my feet, nerves coiling in my gut. “It's small. Unexciting.” Unimportant, but I don't add it.

My sister pins me with a pointed look. “Does it include a lecture on the value of research?”

“No.”

“Then I'm sold.” She bites her lip. “Unless you don't want me to go? I don't want to intrude.”

“No. Obviously not. I'll lend you some clothes.” I pull leggings from my cupboard and an oversized spare shirt, all neatly ironed and pressed, of course. Show me your world.

Show me your world. I hand her the clothes and force a smile. Showing her my world will only make her own shine brighter.