

Chapter 1

Friday 9.25 pm

“Sometimes it’s better not to tell.”

“What do you mean?” Kate was curious. Maybe she didn’t know her friend as well as she thought she did.

“Look, some things are best kept in the past.” Annabel’s tongue was loose after the alcohol, still she beckoned to the waitress to bring another two glasses of the liqueur. She sat back on her chair. “Maybe I did go back to Nico’s room last night and had sex while you were with Brett!”

“Yeah, right!” Kate scoffed. “I think I know you well enough by now, my very married friend! And, besides, in the unlikely event that you did, you’d have told me. We spent the whole day together and, even after meeting him in Bayonne this afternoon, you never said a word to me!”

“Well, I *was* with him and I’m riddled with guilt, so don’t ask me any more about it!”

Kate stared at Annabel. She *did*, in fact, look guilty. It couldn’t be true! Could it?
“You’re kidding me, right?”

“No.”

The waitress placed two more liqueurs on the table before them.

“Thanks,” said Annabel and tossed most of hers back at once.

“I don’t believe it!” said Kate.

“What don’t you believe?” Annabel frowned.

“That you slept with Nico, of course!”

“Why?”

“Why?” Kate echoed, exasperated. “Because *you* just don’t do that kind of thing!”

“Wha’s this called again?” Annabel said, raising the glass of ruby-coloured liqueur to her lips in slow motion.

“Floc!”

“Well, Kate, I think – I’m flocked!” Annabel drained the glass and licked her lips. She ran a hand through her dishevelled long blonde curls and beckoned to the waitress again.

Kate took a gulp of her floc. “Come on! Tell me the truth! Did you really sleep with Nico?”

“Why d’you find it sho hard to believe?” Annabel was beginning to slur a little.

“Because: you’re married, you don’t play around, you’re the sensible one –”

“Hold ish right there!” Annabel held up a hand. “I’m the shenshible one?” Realising she was slurring, she paused and then made an effort to speak distinctly. “Oh, yes, of course. You’re the artistic one, the exotic one – I’m the dull one, the boring one –”

“I’m not saying anything like that!”

“Yesh, you are! I’ve always been the little mouse and you’ve been the – the –” she took in Kate’s long-limbed frame, jet-black hair and tanned skin, “the panther! Or sho you think!”

The waitress deposited another two flocs on the table.

“Well, Annabel,” said Kate, “the fact is, in all the years I’ve known you, even before you married Colin, you have *never* allowed yourself to be swept away with passion –”

“Thatsh what you think!” Annabel drunkenly pointed a finger in Kate’s face.

Kate pulled back and drained her old glass, before picking up the fresh one. “What do you mean by that?” she said, becoming irritated now at this nonsense.

“All I am saying is, maybe I have known passion, a great passion. Mush *mush* more zan anyone!”

“Oh? Is Colin on Viagra now or what?” Kate’s tongue sharpened the more she drank.

Something snapped inside Annabel. “I had my great moment! Before I ever met Colin! On the boat – with Damien – sho zere!” She was tired of Kate’s presumptions about her sexual needs and desires, and the experience with Nico the night before had awakened a new confidence in her.

“You dark horse!” Kate said, shaking her head. “You never told me about a Damien – who or when was he?”

“On the boat! Damien, it’s always been Damien. I’ve always loved him. Zat’s why it was so easy to marry Colin,” she said with another swig of liqueur.

“I don’t know any Damien from our past,” Kate declared, more than a little upset and agitated that Annabel had kept a secret from her for all these years.

“Damien . . . you don’t know Damien? You know him very well, Kate. You lived with him long enough!”

For a long frozen moment Kate stared at Annabel. Then her mouth dropped. She felt like she had received a sharp blow to her solar plexus. “My *dad!* You were . . . no, you couldn’t have been . . . were you in love with my *dad?*” Kate couldn’t believe she was uttering the words.

“I sure was, and he loved me too. On the ferry, in the storm, all those years ago.”

Kate felt like she was going to pass out. Was Annabel only talking rubbish with the copious glasses of wine and floc inside her or was she telling the truth?

“What happened on the ferry?”

“I made love to your father, Kate!”

“Tell me you’re joking, Annabel. You couldn’t possibly have slept with my father!” Kate’s head was shaking frantically.

“I sure did and I’ll never forget it.” Annabel was relieved to be telling Kate the truth at last. “I need more drink – where’s zat waitress gone?”

Kate remained expressionless – unable to respond. If what Annabel was saying was true, she had been deceiving her for most of their friendship.

“I feel mush better after telling you at last, Kate – it’s been hard keeping it from you all this time.” Annabel gave a little hiccup. “I’m glad I did.”

Kate wasn’t able to drink any more. She put the napkin up to her mouth and pushed her chair back slowly.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said, finding it difficult to catch her breath.

She quickly walked over to the toilets. Her stomach was churning inside and her heart was racing. There was no way – Annabel and her father! She couldn’t hold the raclette back. She felt her dinner rise back up her throat and she spewed its contents into

the bowl. Her head was dripping with sweat and she felt as if she were being choked by a pair of imaginary hands.

Standing in front of the mirror, unable to wash her hands they were shaking so much, she stared at her reflection and the tears sprang to her eyes. How could Annabel do such a thing? To her mother as well, who had been so good to her! And how could she have kept that secret all those years, despite all the memories they shared together? They'd never had a true friendship. Annabel had made a fool of her. She could never trust her again.

Walking on trembling legs, she made it back to the table but had to steady herself before taking her seat.

Annabel gave a lopsided smile, apparently oblivious to the effects her revelation was having on Kate. She looked a lot drunker than when Kate had left her only a few minutes before.

Kate leant across the table, gripped Annabel's hand hard and stared straight into her bleary eyes.

Annabel blinked, startled.

"Annabel," said Kate slowly, deliberately. "I'm really upset. I need to know if what you're telling me is true."

"Ish true."

Kate took a trembling breath. "You had sex with my father on that ferry crossing – in the storm – all those years ago?"

"Yesh."

"You've been in love with him ever since?"

"Yesh, I have. Thash why I married Colin."

Kate let go of her hand. "But you never told me?"

Annabel's eyes widened. "How could I tell you something like thash?"

It was true, thought Kate. This horrible thing was really true.

"I need to go to the loo now, you took ages," Annabel grinned. She wobbled slightly as she stood up and went off in the direction of the restrooms.

Kate was feeling numb. She thought quickly and knew she had to get away. Digging down deeply into her bag, she took out sixty euros. She threw the notes down on to the table – anxious to be gone before Annabel returned from the toilet.

She didn't want to have anything to do with Annabel Hamilton again for as long as they both lived.

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Nico was finished his dinner first and anxious to be on time for his arrangement with the Irishwomen.

"You're jumping around like a hare, Nico – relax and finish your beer," Brett said with a shake of his head.

"I told the girls we would meet them in Desperados," Nico said reluctantly.

"I wish you hadn't included me in your arrangements. One night with them was enough." Brett took a sip of his beer. "Anyway, we have Frank with us this evening."

"Hey, I don't want to get the blame for Nico missing out on his fun," the scrawny Londoner laughed.

"He already had his fun with this bird last night," Brett grinned. "That's the bit I can't understand."

Nico felt awkward. Usually one night would be enough – the guys were used to picking up women all over Europe as they went from beach to beach, but Annabel was intriguing.

He took another drink from his glass and scanned his watch. Nine forty-five – they weren't the type of women to sit around waiting.

"Will you have another beer, mate?" Frank asked Nico.

"Not right now," he replied sullenly, making sure not to make eye contact with Brett. "I'm going out to get some fresh air." He pulled his chair back from the table.

"Tell the truth. Are you going to Desperados?" Brett asked.

"I'm going to tell them that we can't make it. It's only around the corner – I'll be back in a minute."

Brett shook his head scornfully and continued his conversation with Frank.

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Kate tossed the clothes into her holdall with great urgency. She didn't want Annabel to catch her packing. It wouldn't take her long to realise that Kate had left the restaurant and return to the hotel, and by then Kate needed to be well out of Biarritz.

The receptionist was startled to see her return to the desk and pay her bill at such an hour.

“Un taxi, s’il vous plaît,” Kate asked, and the receptionist obliged.

Kate's plan was simple – she would spend the night in one of the many hotels in Bayonne. The Ibis would certainly have plenty of rooms available this time of year. The drunken Annabel was not her responsibility and she couldn't look her in the eyes after their conversation.

Suffering as she was at being betrayed by her best friend, Kate's thoughts had now swung to her father. Her insides twisted at the thought of him. How could he have done it? How could he have done it on her mother? The night of the storm. No wonder her father didn't pass any comment when she was missing from her cabin all night – Annabel was curled up under the covers in his. The thought repulsed her so much she felt dizzy and had to sit down in the small foyer. She wanted to be at home in her small house under the gaze of the Pyrénées.

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The waitress came over with the receipt on a saucer as Annabel returned from the ladies'.

“Where's Kate?”

“Your friend, Madame? She has left.”

“Left?”

“*Oui*, Madame.”

Why did she do that? Annabel sat down heavily and felt around under her seat until her hand fell on her bag. *Where did she go?* This was odd. Annabel was anxious to continue her discussion about Damien. Her mind was a dizzy haze of twinkling lights and

aromas from the kitchen. She'd had too much to drink and needed a coffee to bring her back to normal. She reached into her bag and put some money on the table.

"Your friend paid, Madame," the waitress said.

Annabel stood up on unsteady legs and felt around for her coat that had fallen off the back of her chair. *This was most strange.*

"Would you like a coffee?" the waitress asked Annabel, noticing her condition.

"No, thank you, I really have to go," Annabel said carefully and slowly made her way to the door. She had flashes of her conversation with Kate. She had taken it very well, considering. There were no outbursts or condemnations – *but where could she have gone to?* She carefully stepped out on to the street, anxious not to fall but felt the ground swaying up to greet her. She couldn't remember the way back to the hotel but the steady roar of the ocean called her to take a left.

"Annabel!" a voice called but she ignored it.

She hobbled down the road, the cobblestones feeling like stones in her shoes. A strong arm grabbed her from behind and she turned to see deep brown eyes stare back at her.

"Nico!" she exclaimed and flung her arms around his neck. Her legs went from under her for a second and he carefully held her up with his arms gripped around her waist.

"It's lucky I found you, Annabel," he whispered. "You should not be on your own with so much to drink."

"Have you seen Kate?" Annabel was disoriented and her memory had turned to mush.

"I was on my way to Desperados," Nico said, surprised to find her in such a state. Where was her friend? "I will take you back to the hotel."

The receptionist had seen some sights that night already but was shocked when Annabel was assisted up to the desk only a few minutes after her friend disappeared into the night in the taxi.

"What is your room number, Annabel?" Nico asked.

"Can't remember," Annabel said, her head slumping under its own weight.

"*Vingt-sept,*" the receptionist replied, handing the key over to Nico, judging that Annabel was in no fit state to make it to the second floor on her own.

Annabel was getting heavier with every step. Nico negotiated the bedroom door like a fire-fighter and plonked her down on the bed where she collapsed in a heap. She moaned and flipped over to the other side of the double bed.

Nico put the key down on the dressing-table and left the drunken woman in her slumber. Maybe he had been wrong about her after all.

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A few hours later the sun beamed through the window and burned onto Annabel's closed eyelids. She ruffled around the bed, unsure of her surroundings. She raised her head with some difficulty. The room was empty. She floundered around, looking for her watch. 8.02 a.m.

Where's Kate? What happened last night? How did I get back?

It was all incredibly vague – she had only snatches of memories to cling to.

But she remembered telling about Damien. Why did she do that?

She went to the bathroom in search of her friend but all of her belongings were gone. She looked for Kate's bag but that too was gone. A sinking feeling ran through her stomach. It was a nightmare. She looked around for her handbag and was grateful to find her mobile phone still sitting in the pocket. She dialled Kate's number but it rang out for a few seconds before stopping suddenly. This was serious. She really needed to find out where Kate went last night. And she only had a couple more hours until her flight back to Dublin.

She wished she could turn the clock back. Just forty-eight hours back and everything would be as it was, as it should be.