

ANNA DOWNES

THE

SAFE

PLACE



# PROLOGUE

When the car bypassed the main terminal building and pulled up next to a sign that said *Private Jet Centre*, Emily breathed in so fast she almost choked.

‘You’re kidding me,’ she said to her driver (her very own *driver!*), who smiled and opened the door for her like she was Cinderella.

A security gate led her to a glass tunnel to a departure lounge so elegant it could have been a hotel lobby. Precisely no one rummaged through her luggage or even asked to see a boarding pass; instead, she was ushered straight out onto the tarmac, where two pilots and a flight attendant greeted her personally with shiny white smiles. The attendant took her passport and led her towards a small plane, sleek and bullet-nosed, with just six passenger windows and a little staircase that dropped from a door in the side.

Emily climbed the stairs into a glossy, leather-lined heaven. Suddenly regretting her choice of comfy flight-wear (black leggings, a Ramones T-shirt and a pair of old Converse sneakers), she stood gawping at the armchairs and full-length sofa, waiting for the crew to realise their mistake and escort her back to the terminal. *We’re so sorry*, they would surely say. *We thought you were someone else*. Or she would wake up in her shabby little flat, her lungs full of mould spores, to find that it had all been a dream. *Any minute now*, she thought.

But she was not asked to leave, and the plane did not shimmer and fade. It took off into the sky with no questions asked, and a measly one hour and forty minutes later they were back on the tarmac. This time, though, instead of London's neat network of buildings, Emily was looking at a low, barn-like structure with an unpronounceable name painted in large blue letters across the side.

She made her way off the plane and into the tiny terminal, where her suitcase and passport were waiting for her. The arrivals lounge was small and silent, and totally empty. The only other person in the room was a tall man with a tangle of dusty hair and a jaw full of stubble. Emily put her bag down on the floor and squinted at him. The man stared back with heavy-lidded eyes. From somewhere on the tarmac outside, there came a muffled shout and the slow, intermittent beeping of a vehicle in reverse. She hesitated, waiting for someone else to appear – perhaps a nice silver-haired gentleman with a peaked cap and a handwritten sign. But eventually she had to concede that this towering, glowering stranger was her ride. She gave him a tentative smile.

'Emily?' he said in a low, gruff voice. In a thick French accent, her name sounded more like *Ey-milly*.

She nodded.

'Yves,' he said. Then he reached out, grabbed her bag and strode off towards the exit, leaving her to trot after him like a puppy.

In the car park, Yves opened the door of an enormous black SUV, so tall that Emily had to climb up into it like she was mounting a horse. He stowed her bags in the boot, planted himself in the driver's seat and reversed out of the parking space without so much as a cough.

As they sped away on a flat stretch of road, Emily attempted conversation from the back seat. ‘It’s nice to finally meet you,’ she said. ‘Will we be working together much?’ But Yves didn’t reply, and seventeen minutes later he still hadn’t said a word, so she resigned herself to gazing out of the window in silence.

Road signs flashed by: *Avenue de Cordouan, Boulevard de Pontaillac, Rue des Platanes*. She tried them out, rolling the sounds around in her mouth. *L’Île d’Aunis. Saint-Marc-des-Fontaines. Beaulieu-les-Marais*. They tasted like poetry.

Green fields were punctuated by yellow sunflowers and rust-red roofs. White stone walls ran over hills striped with neat rows of grapevines. She saw farmhouses, rivers and tall spindly trees; pointed spires, crumbling churches and, in the far distance, a thin blue stripe of ocean.

Gradually, the roads became narrower and the trees became thicker. Then, with no warning at all, Yves swung the car onto a dirt track. Leaves brushed the sides of the car like fingers, and branches reached out to one another overhead, forming a tunnel of green. The bonnet dipped low as the track sloped downhill, giving the impression that they were burrowing deep into the earth.

They drove through increasingly dense woodland for what felt like hours. Twigs tapped at the windows and snapped under the tyres, and Emily tried to remember if the Frenchman had produced any actual evidence that he was who he said he was. Kicking herself, she realised that she hadn’t thought to verify his identity; she’d just followed him to his car and strapped herself in.

Her breath became shallow. She watched the man who called himself Yves. His eyes were locked on the road, his jaw clenched tight as he navigated the potholes. Furtively, she checked her phone: no service.

It became dark inside the car as the canopy grew thicker and daylight gave up trying to break through. Emily wondered how much further they would, or *could*, drive; surely they would hit the ocean at some point? She twisted in her seat to search for signs of civilisation, but the view through the back window was even less reassuring than the one in front. The land looked as if it had never seen a fence, let alone roads or buildings. They were in the middle of nowhere.

Finally, just as she began to weigh up the pros and cons of throwing herself from a moving vehicle, they began to slow. Peering through the windscreen, Emily spotted rods of black iron up ahead. A gate. As they came closer, she could make out letters in the design.

‘*Querencia,*’ she read aloud.

They pulled up next to a gleaming security panel and Yves opened his window, reaching through to punch buttons on a small keypad. ‘*Voilà,*’ he said, startling Emily so much that she jumped. ‘We have arrived.’

There was a buzz and a clank, and as the gates slowly parted, Emily’s mouth fell open, all thoughts of escape melting away. A wonderland of colour and sweet floral smells seemed to spill through the gap like paint: purple petals, emerald leaves, pink blossoms, orange butterflies, all pouring out of a pure blue sky. Even the light seemed different from any she’d seen before.

The SUV lumbered onto a sandy driveway. Rolling down her own window, Emily stuck her head out, eager to absorb as much as possible. Cicadas chirruped steadily from their hiding places, and somewhere to her right she could hear chickens clucking as well as a thin plaintive cry – a sheep, maybe? Pathways snaked off between sprays of lavender, and a hammock swung lazily next to

a cluster of tomato plants, each one bursting with bright-red fruit. Ahead, through branches and foliage, she glimpsed the sparkle of a pool, and beyond that yet more water, darker and flecked with white.

And then two houses rose out of the flora, one on either side of a sprawling circular lawn: two huge whitewashed castles standing sentinel over a fairy kingdom.

Emily gave a low whistle as the car came to a stop. She could feel it already. This was the kind of place where things could be different, where *she* could be different.

‘What *is* this place?’ she breathed.

‘You like it,’ said Yves, more a statement than a question. His face was turned away, his expression hidden.

‘*Like* it?’ She was lost for words. She felt like Dorothy stepping out of her monochrome world into the technicolour Land of Oz – so much so that she half expected Munchkins to crawl out from between the flowers and start singing. She shook her head, marvelling at the speed with which her life had changed. Rock bottom one minute, and the next minute ... this.

Tipping her face to the sun, Emily let the breeze trail across her face like a silk scarf.

‘I love it,’ she said, as the gates closed behind her. ‘I never want to leave.’