

Chapter 5

New York

Charlie was greeted in the arrivals hall at JFK Airport by a driver dressed in a black suit holding a small white sign displaying his name as Charles E. Sutton. On reclining in the back of the limo, Charlie asked to borrow the driver's mobile (needing a network sim card to use his own). He dialled Johnny to check in, and also discretely checked whether he needed to sort the driver out. Johnny said it was all taken care of, and the driver knew where he was going. Before hanging up, Johnny also made three requests of Charlie for the duration of his stay in his family's apartment, "No food, no shoes and you have to take the pillows on my parents' bed and store them in the linen cupboard."

The driver turned up the radio and Charlie asked for the name of the song. "It's Blink 182 I miss you, it's just out."

At Park Avenue, Charlie had some small trouble getting the pompous doorman to let him up to the apartment, who whined to Charlie, "I don't have permission in writing to hand over the keys." Charlie got Johnny on the concierge phone to resolve the issue. The doorman nodded on the call and he was then extra helpful. Charlie graciously thanked the doorman and padded down the oak-panelled hallway towards the elevator doors.

Johnny's family apartment was on the 27th floor of the building with a direct view of the Empire State Building, mid and downtown skyline. Charlie had it to himself. It had large

ornate windows, vintage bookshelves lining the halls of the main corridor and living room, and well-placed coffee table books including Slim Aarons, Once Upon A Time, which Charlie noticed on a side table. Lucinda had given him the same at Christmas.

Breathe, pace, breathe. Charlie paced up and down the ornate hallway. The newly released Blink 182 'I miss you' in his head. It was the rhythm of the song that kept him from hyperventilating. He kept breathing deeper and deeper, thinking that's the only way to stop the pacing, his mind was racing. Thoughts of Lucinda, the Russians, John Gatt-Taylor, his exit from Australia all flicking past. He felt claustrophobic.

Realising he hadn't eaten since LA Charlie thought better of not adhering to Johnny's first request and quickly showered and changed into jeans and a bomber type jacket, heading down the lifts and back out to the rolling taxis and limos of Park Avenue. He grabbed some spring rolls, cigarettes and McDonald's fries on Madison - it was hard to break his boarding school exeat weekend habits. He called Johnny's number from a payphone with the intention of arranging to head out, and was quietly relieved he didn't answer. On returning to the 27th floor, he adhered to the rule of no shoes before collapsing on a wide beige sofa thinking back and forth between his experience with Lucinda and that of other women, a conflicting emotion of contemplating a past characterised by the need for team with a present draw to the pursuit of fun. He couldn't sleep.

His mind was fixated on images of Lucinda entering a room with a beaming smile. Her dimples lit up like a spark. It made people sit up, Charlie was no exception. She would speak to him in her soft tone, he had felt like the only person on earth.

On Friday morning, looking across a vacant king-sized bed, Charlie's first thought was a comment Lucinda made over tea in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Melbourne as they discussed their wedding location. He recalled her dimpled smile was instead a quivering lip. She had felt "terrified, guilty and impossibly sad" on the thought of letting Charlie down. At the time he had interpreted it as her wanting to hold the wedding at her estate over his, yet now grasped it had been about the relationship itself.

Charlie took the deepest breath he could muster and the six downtown to Union Square. He headed to The Coffee Shop. Walking into the back room, a whiff of syrup and spiced apple reminded Charlie of his visit a few years before. He and his brother Harry, both incredibly hungover, had climbed into one of those booths on a Sunday morning and found themselves plastered on Bloody Mary's and against the humid stick of faux red leather seats. Today, Charlie grabbed a copy of the New York Post and sat at a table, reading about the horrific train bombing terrorist massacre in Madrid likely to have killed a couple of hundred people and injured a few thousand more. It sent shivers down his spine. He was almost overcome with a feeling of empathy and disempowerment staring at the images of traumatised bloodied faces.

Jonathan Brickwell was running late. Charlie was about to rummage for some coins in his coat pocket for the payphone outside when Jonathan strode through the door into the back room of the café. "Bricko!" Charlie announced as he stood up, connecting with a loud clap of a high-five before they embraced with some back slaps. Nothing had changed since their last encounter at an infamous party at the Caribou Club in Aspen.

Jonathan wore a long grey jacket which could have been mistaken as Burberry if it wasn't for the artsy tailored navy pocket stitch. With his ever-delighted expression, he looked like an approachable Quentin Tarantino, set with a lavish head of dark hair, holding it for a split second as they sat down in a booth.

He behaved like the stereotypical director, moving the table salt and condiments with effortless expression. Even as Charlie asked what they'd like to order, he exuded a warmth for the smallest ideas. Ordering French toast and flat whites, Charlie and Jonathan talked mostly movies; Jonathan told Charlie about projects that he was currently working on, and Charlie told Jonathan about his. Jonathan said to Charlie nonchalant, "You still have a creative spark about you." Charlie responded with more gusto, "Vice versa, Sir." Before too long Jonathan muttered that he needed to leave to meet a casting agent, standing up as he swivelled then downed the last of his flat white. He paused for a moment then gave a decisive nod, "Africa." Charlie grinned in response knowing the sentimental reference to where they had become friends. Then he was gone.

Charlie made his way across Union Square to the large Virgin Megastore to buy a pre-paid mobile phone, thinking how cool it was to have an Audiovox 8610 in New York. He hadn't possessed a mobile while living there previously. He hunted around for some clothes, looking in shops in nearby side streets without luck, then grabbed a subway uptown to meet Alexis Boyd outside her new work at the Christian Dior corporate offices on the Upper West Side - she had moved on from Ralph Lauren.

Alexis appeared at street level wearing a black bear fur coat, large black sunglasses and a sophisticated pair of long black boots, an urban style suited to her high cheekbone, combed

back hair, ex-model appearance. They went to a chic Italian restaurant full of businesspeople in smart navy and deep charcoal suits. Alexis steered the discussion, with no mention of Lucinda, she was seemingly fixated on getting a sense of Charlie's headspace.

The talk of match-making Alexis with Charlie's brother Harry in Africa crossed his mind, but that hadn't happened, and Charlie was glad, as he felt Alexis flirtatiously touch his hand with a throwaway line about how pleased she was to see him. The topic of 'hook-ups' in Africa was raised, Alexis mentioned she was one of only a few people who hadn't connected with someone. She removed her sunglasses to expose a longing set of hazel eyes, and placed a tip of her sunglasses frame in her mouth. Charlie picked up on the chemistry and openly responded, "It makes it easier, considering I find myself a little attracted to you." Alexis smiled, "Just a little?" Then pulled her smart grey leather purse out of her even smarter black leather bag. She insisted on paying for lunch, briefly kissing him on the lips as they went their separate ways.

Charlie wandered aimlessly stopping only at the pedestrian lights between the grid of Manhattan streets. The cross section of faces going about their business a sharp reminder of the 'deep pond' that is New York. To Charlie it was the most interesting of cities. It was the hard worn face of a jaded older man glaring at him that unnerved his spirit. He felt a tide rise through his upper chest as he quickly tried to reconcile, wondering if it was caused by the Russians, Lucinda, or both. He inhaled as much as he could while striding past the man. He thought to make his way to Park Avenue.

It was as though he was walking alongside Lucinda, regurgitating her words in his head from when they had strolled along a gravel road at Hillington Station. As he stopped at the traffic

lights, Charlie was taken back to the tremor he felt holding himself up on a post and rail fence on an intermitted stop. He knew from the way Lucinda had turned up that day it may be the last time he would see her. Besides the timing - during the window they agreed to be apart before the wedding which was far longer than a traditional window (on agreeing to it Charlie had thought it strange) - instead of her customary casual arrival throwing cheek there had been a sombre request over the phone to meet at the gate house for a walk. It would allow for privacy along one of the avenues off the main drive, and a low-key exit in her VW Golf without fanfare. Over the crunching sound of leather sole riding boots, her soft elocution started, "There is a feeling that has been growing inside me for some time, a feeling, no matter how much we love each other, no matter how wonderful it can be between us, we are just not meant to spend the rest of our lives together. It's something I can't quite explain, but instinctively know. I wish with all my heart it wasn't there, but it is...I have swallowed down the doubts I've been having... too frightened to explain how I felt. I couldn't bear the thought of hurting you and hoped over time these doubts would disappear... If I do continue to ignore these feelings it will eventually come back to haunt me, and us, so I need to make this decision..."

On entering the Park Avenue apartment building, Charlie's eyes were welling up. He recalled thinking of his deep shock and how brave it was of Lucinda to talk to him rather than send a note and disappear.

Later, Johnny in his trademark blue sports coat with a fine red stitch on a lapel buttonhole, was waiting impatiently in the downstairs lobby of the Park Avenue apartment building. He checked his Rolex and chatted intermittently to the doorman about a series of odd topics including the reupholstering of the lobby furniture, the Yankees, and his insistence there be

no more unnecessary complaints when parking his Jaguar in an unobstructed car space out the front. Charlie having managed a short siesta waltzed into the lobby with unkept hair in faded grey jeans, an Italian army paratrooper's shirt and sneakers. They took a taxi to Johnny's place in the Meatpacking District. It was a sizeable warehouse apartment with a rooftop, enormous upstairs party room and a massive living room downstairs. Johnny threw Charlie shorts and a T-shirt. They went for a run along the Hudson River down to the World Trade Center site; the devastation was so much greater than Charlie had imagined, and, like many people, he experienced a strange, eerie feeling. There were so many buildings with scars, not to mention people. Charlie looked at the vacant area through steel bars and thought how this put so much into perspective. He thought a memorial would be an important initiative and felt a little helpless wondering what he could do.

Johnny and Charlie jumped in another cab having decided to get some Italian food in the Village for the dinner party Johnny had agreed to host in LA. It was nearly closing time, so they called ahead with an order. On arriving at the shop, it was packed with people, wall to wall, even though it was past closing time. Charlie handed his credit card to Johnny and suggested, as the local, he navigate the pick-up. Johnny didn't need any encouragement shuffling his tall self through the dense queue saying he'd ordered ahead. Instead of the anticipated New Yorker push back, patrons joked with Johnny as a familiar local identity. An Italian American affectionately yelling out "Johnny J-walks the line," a reference to Johnny J-walking. Johnny self-deprecating quipped, "Johnny J-feeling awfully bad walking the line here, Johnny J coming through," high-fiving various customers, some backslapping him or clapping while allowing him to get to the large paper bags waiting at the counter.

In the taxi driving back to the apartment, Johnny - as considerate as ever - offered Charlie his mobile suggesting they ring his brother, Harry. So, Charlie called Harry, who was with their mother on the way to a country wedding in Australia. Any talk of weddings was going to be a hit to the heart, so the conversation didn't last long, aside from Charlie expressing how pleased he was that his mother was well enough to attend.

As Johnny handed a \$20 note to the cab driver and leapt out with the paper bags, Charlie announced, "I'll be up in a sec", taking a moment to light a cigarette, contemplating his wedding cancellation, while walking slowly up the street. Lucinda's voice entered his head, "This is less about you, it's more so I have realised I can't live my life not doing what's right for me. I want you to be happy and I want to protect you from feeling pain... I can see myself being too afraid of hurting you for so long then down the track these feelings exploding making us both miserable. I can't let this go any further, you deserve so much more..."

After a shower at Johnny's, Charlie headed down the lift and down the street to Pasties, an open bar with mosaic floors, a mix of booths and tables with a line of empty bar stools for Charlie to choose from. He found a spot opposite a mirror with specials written on it and ordered a large pint of German beer listening to Maroon 5 She Will Be Loved in waiting for two of his best New York girlfriends to arrive. Alexandra Baker and Emily Lenard, two blonde and blue-eyed New Yorkers, entered through the singing wood panelled door, both in long wool coats, Emily in black, Alexandra in navy. They were beaming with joy on seeing Charlie who gave them both a kiss before they took off their jackets and placed them on the bar. Alexandra wore a white button-down long sleeve Ralph Lauren cotton shirt and jeans with short black boots, Emily a silk white shirt and pink pants. Charlie quickly ordered a round of drinks, G&Ts for the ladies, another pint for himself. Alexandra and Emily had been

invited to Charlie's wedding and Charlie was close to their brothers who had also been part of Gilly's Africa trip. Although Charlie was particularly attracted to Emily some years ago, he now saw them both as nothing other than friends. Alexandra joked with Charlie about his Italian army shirt, asking if he'd enlisted in the military due to a quarter life crisis. Charlie joked they had both turned 'sophisticated' with their wool coats. Their quick response, 'that's a compliment', indicating they had always been so and remained down to earth. Charlie was breathing easy, and it wasn't long before he was feeling extra good, not only as he'd downed three pints, but also as A, a childhood friend, unexpectedly turned up. A was a chiselled guy with a dark complexion. He had super short hair with a cool sense of self wearing a plain linen shirt and cotton pants which said he had no one to impress. Charlie hadn't seen A since spending time with him in Baltimore where A had graduated from college in 2000.

Charlie noticed his virgin mobile light up, so they finished another round and bounced back to Johnny's warehouse for the dinner party. The living room was buzzing. The long table set was surrounded by familiar faces around the room - drinking, laughing, waiting.

Charlie was met with a barrage of smiles, winks, high-fives, kisses, back slaps and hugs. For him it was like he'd walked into a party in Melbourne with old friends except it was in New York City. He met a few new people, chatted a lot, and drank more. Then his breathing momentarily stopped as he looked over at Georgia, A's sister, who turned up. Her attractiveness was in an effortless calm as she walked through the dinner party, placing her bag and coat over the back of an armchair. Charlie knew she worked for MTV and noticed she looked a little more alternative than when they'd last met in Boston back in 1996. Charlie thought he'd wait to chat with her, continuing his conversation with a group of half a dozen people as he told the story of the bear he'd met in Montana.

Charlie went to introduce his friends to Johnny's, but most seemed to have met each other previously. New York, like Melbourne, was a small town in some ways. Brickwell turned up in a tailored leather jacket with a short collar and so did James Baker, Alexandra's brother, who towered at 6'5 with his wavy blond hair. It was timely as they all converged on the long table, sat down, raised glasses and shared a delicious pasta and Pinot Noir. Charlie paused from the head of the table as the laughter, ad-hoc speeches, and side talk amongst friends was like a soothing melody of upbeat energy. A fleeting thought of Lucinda would have caught hold if it wasn't for a vibe from his left. She had dark blonde hair and wore a cleverly designed long olive coloured dress (her eyes were a similar colour) with a v down the middle of her small chest. She sat casually with one arm on the seat back with the other holding a glass of wine undeterred that she was absent of conversation. Charlie caught onto her unaffected demeanour thinking she was cool and pretty so he introduced himself. Her name was Annabelle. It was short lived as Georgia soon intercepted having made her way around the table, kneeling next to Charlie. Then one of Annabelle's friends, who Charlie just met, was standing next to her. He felt a need for space so excused himself with a nod to Brickwell who got the message to get up as well.

Brickwell and Charlie made their way to the roof top area. Brickwell pulled out a joint the size of a large cigar and lit it standing on a bench as they looked over to the scattered lights of the Meatpacking district. Brickwell went to hand the joint to A who had turned up, but he didn't smoke. Unlike his sister, Charlie thought he seemed more conservative than when they last met. Brickwell passed the joint to Charlie.

Downstairs, Charlie lit up a cigarette to one or two raised eyebrows before he made smoking acceptable in the apartment. OutKast - Hey Ya! was playing and the mood had lifted.

Alexandra reached her hand over to Charlie to get him off the sofa, so he got up and danced with her and Emily with cigarette in mouth, and hand. The rest of the party were either doing the same or chatting and laughing. Everyone seemed to be having a lot of fun.

Charlie gravitated to the flawless Scandinavian look of a confident young woman - Kate from Texas. She had a chic country dress sense, wearing a tailored jacket with elbow patches. The button of the jacket was done up which accentuated her relatively large chest. Her tight jodhpur like pants complemented her extraordinarily sexy figure. She had the most amazing long eyelashes and striking blue eyes. On meeting her, Brickwell with a stroke of playful arrogance said to Charlie, as though she couldn't hear, "You have her." She responded as quick as a whip, "You may have me, but I have kids." They all laughed.

Johnny signalled to Charlie with his thumb that it was time to leave, and Annabelle must have caught on as she was standing close to Charlie as a group piled into the lift, including Thomas, Johnny's brother, Brickwell, Annabelle and Charlie. On their way down to ground, Thomas remarked on the fun of the dinner party and Charlie emphasised the exceptional quality of the guest list. They headed along the Meatpacking streets. The area was buzzing even for a Friday. Annabelle led the way to the Soho Club, grabbing Charlie by the hand to ferry him through the entrance as the others followed.

As they made their way inside the club Annabelle released her grip on Charlie's hand before he bumped into Alexis who gave him an excited kiss as he noticed Annabelle disappearing into the energy of the club. Amongst the scene of A-list attitudes and chic threads to match

Charlie cruised with Brickwell finding themselves leaning against a bar, talking anecdotes, movies and trash.

Annabelle was soon back and perched her head into the conversation. Brickwell put his hand through his lavish dark hair and moved off laconically, flagging there was someone he needed to see. Annabelle wasted no time in grabbing Charlie by the hand again, this time ferrying him to the lift to leave the Soho Club. Charlie thought to return the interest and spontaneously kissed Annabelle in the lift.

There was an almost seamless roll from the elevator into Annabelle's bullet proof looking black stretched limo parked directly out the front. She directed her driver to take them to Bungalow Eight. It was a short ride before they once again seamlessly rolled from the limo into the club, bypassing the long queue with the bouncer waving Annabelle inside. Bungalow Eight was dimly lit, about the size of half a tennis court with a single bar.

It was like the dinner party had found its way to Bungalow Eight with Georgia, A, Johnny, Alexandra and Emily sitting around a large round table drinking Espresso Martini's and Champagne. Charlie felt hammered enough so was content without a drink, parking himself next to Johnny in the booth. Johnny grabbed his attention, "You know Annabelle is the daughter of that famous novelist, Danielle Irons." Charlie paid little attention to the comment, instead telling stories of his previous encounters meeting Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson. The table started to split, the party going in every direction, Charlie hanging out with Annabelle until she grabbed her bag and intimated to the door with Johnny joining them in her limo which she directed to her place.

Annabelle's apartment was modern with new grey carpet and clean white lines. Charlie thought it didn't have much charm as he looked over to see Johnny and Annabelle doing coke on her kitchen table. Charlie rolled a large joint with the papers and dope from her kitchen draw. On smoking it with the others he became ripped, thinking little else but life was super-funny. He was having a seriously good time.

A few of Annabelle's friends who had been at the dinner party arrived and Johnny seemed to be flirting with Annabelle. He complimented her on her long olive coloured dress, but his eyes were rolling. He was completely gone. Annabelle soon turned her back on him and the others which was code for the party is over.

Once people had left, Annabelle pulled her dress up, so she was able to straddle Charlie who was leaning back on the sofa. His hands moved to hold her under each arm as they kissed. Their breathing became deeper, and Annabelle softly moaned as her thighs held tightly against his hips. Charlie held her head with his left hand as he kissed her across the opposite cheek until her ear lobe was between his teeth. It was all too intense for the sofa. Annabelle dismounted and grabbed Charlie's hand with twice the tension of earlier. She led him into her bedroom. He kicked off his shoes. Annabelle and Charlie fell to the white bed spread of her Californian king-sized bed.

They were lying next to each other, lips clashing, hands locked until it became apparent to Charlie she was too wasted, and he decided he didn't want to go any further. He pulled back the bed spread and put her inside as she passed out. Charlie closed his eyes next to her and fell asleep before waking up to see one of Annabelle's friends from the dinner party, naked and with unkept hair, also in the bed.

Charlie cobbled himself together, put his sneakers on while doing up the top couple of buttons of his now ripped army shirt. He walked into a cloudy New York day back to Johnny's place. The aroma of French toast on the go gave Charlie a lift in his hungover step as he walked into Johnny's now tidy living room. His maid had been cleaning up while he cooked breakfast. On seeing his ripped Italian paratrooper's shirt his maid insisted he take it off so she could sew it together again.

Late morning, they walked into Soho and the Village seeking to ease the shakes from a brutal hangover which had them both in dark sunglasses. It was near Sixth and Bleeker that they coincidentally bumped into a group of about half a dozen girls from the night before, including Annabelle, also sporting dark glasses. She was not backward in coming forward and gave Charlie an affectionate kiss on the cheek while her friends smiled. He thought how mature that was and potentially brave amongst a group of girls, labelling it the epitome of cool to Johnny as they continued their walk.

They came across a group of crazy rappers in Washington Square Park near NYU. Charlie pulled out his Canon Digital IXUS which had annoyingly run out of batteries. A radical busking performance followed involving children as volunteers. Charlie and Johnny loved the somersaults, and spinning manoeuvres until Johnny said his head was spinning, so they walked back to the Meatpacking District.

Charlie was in his own head and Lucinda was in there too. That last conversation with Lucinda was back, Charlie thinking of his attempt to speak on a few occasions, breathless as they found themselves back at the gate house. Lucinda stood at the door of the car as Charlie

trembled. They embraced in a firm hug, Charlie's eyes in disbelief. Lucinda had reassured him, "The only way I can be truly good to you is to let you go. I want you to be loved completely, that is what you deserve. You need to be with someone who loves you unconditionally, 100%, and without any hesitation... The fact that I have not been able to be this person is neither of our faults...nor is it something either of us could ever have imagined or predicted. Please know that I only ever wanted to give you everything as you did for me, it just isn't meant to be for us. There is nothing we could have done to prevent it. We gave it our all and I wouldn't take that back, nor the time we have spent together, for the world."

At Johnny's place they sat on benches on his rooftop both sipping a cup of English Breakfast tea, Charlie simultaneously inhaling a cigarette, until Johnny decided his shakes were serious enough to warrant a steam chamber. So, they walked to the subway at West 14th Street. On entering the station, they heard the uptown train from the stairwell and ran to catch it. They jumped the turnstiles, leapt down the stairs, landing on every fifth step. Johnny made it through the doors in the nick of time. Charlie was left with his hands on his head puffing on the platform. He had no idea where they were going, and which stop he was meant to get off at - a fitting metaphor for his travels.