

# Second Life

## Chapter One

I climb the stairs but the door is closed. I hesitate outside it. Now I'm here, I don't want to go in. I want to turn round, go home. Try again later.

But this is my last chance. The exhibition has been on for weeks and closes tomorrow. It's now or never.

I close my eyes and breathe as deeply as I can. I concentrate on filling my lungs, I straighten my shoulders, I feel the tension in my body evaporate as I breathe out. I tell myself there's nothing to be worried about, I come here regularly – to meet friends for lunch, to catch the latest exhibitions, to attend lectures. This time is no different. Nothing here can hurt me. It's not a trap.

Finally I feel ready. I push open the door and go in.

The place looks exactly as it always does – off-white walls, a polished wooden floor, spots in the ceiling that hang off tracks – and though it's early there are already a few people wandering around. I watch for a minute as they pause in front of the pictures, some standing further back to get a better view, others nodding at a companion's murmured comment or examining the printed sheet they've picked up downstairs. The atmosphere is one of hushed reverence, of calm contemplation. These people will look at the photographs. They will like them, or not, then they will go back outside, back to their lives, and in all likelihood they will forget them.

At first I allow myself only a glance at the walls. There are a dozen or so large photos hung at intervals, plus a few smaller ones between them. I tell myself I could wander around, pretend to be interested in them all, but today there's only one photograph I've come to see.

It takes me a moment to find it. It's hung on the far wall, at the back of the gallery, not quite in the centre. It's next to a couple of other shots – a full-length colour portrait of a young girl in a torn dress, a close-up of a woman with kohl-rimmed eyes smoking a cigarette. Even from this distance it looks impressive. It's in colour, though it was taken in natural light and its palette is mostly blues and greys, and blown up to this size it's imposing. The exhibition is called 'Partied Out', and even though I don't look at it properly until I'm just a few feet away I can see why this picture is in such a prominent position.

I haven't looked at it in over a decade. Not properly. I've seen it, yes – even though it wasn't a particularly well-used photograph back then it had been featured in a couple of magazines and even a book – but I haven't looked at it in all this time. Not close up.

I approach it obliquely, and examine the label first. 'Julia Plummer', it says. 'Marcus in the Mirror, 1997, Cibachrome print'. There's nothing else, no biographical information, and I'm glad. I allow myself to look up at the picture.

It's of a man; he looks about twenty. He's naked, shot from the waist up, looking at his reflection. The image in front of him is in focus, but he isn't, and his face is thin. His eyes are narrowed and his mouth hangs slightly open, as if he's about to speak, or sigh. There's something melancholy in the photograph, but what you can't see is that up until the moment before it was taken the guy in it – Marcus – had been laughing. He'd spent the afternoon in bed with his girlfriend, someone he was in love with as much as she was with him. They'd been reading to each other – Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, or maybe *Gatsby*, which she'd read and he hadn't – and eating ice cream from the tub. They were warm, they were happy, they were safe. A radio was playing rhythm and blues in their bedroom across the hall, and in the shot his mouth is open because his girlfriend, the woman taking the shot, was humming along and he was about to join in.

Originally the picture had been different. The girlfriend was in the frame, reflected in the mirror just over the man's shoulder, her camera raised to her eye. She was naked, blurred out of focus. It was a portrait of the two of them, back when photographs taken in mirrors were still unusual.

I'd liked the shot like that. Preferred it, almost. But at some point – I don't remember when, exactly, but certainly before I first exhibited it – I changed my mind. I decided it looked better without me in it. I took myself out of the picture.

I regret it now. It was dishonest of me, the first time I used my art to lie, and I want to tell Marcus I'm sorry. For everything. I'm sorry for following him to Berlin, and for leaving him there, alone in that photograph, and for not being the person he thought I was.

Even after all this time, I'm still sorry.

It's a long time before I turn away from my picture. I don't take portraits like that any more. It's families now, Connor's friends, sitting with their parents and younger siblings, jobs I pick up at the school gate. Pin money. Not that there's anything wrong with that: I put my best effort into it, I have a reputation, I'm good. People will invite me

to their children's parties to take shots of the guests to be emailed as souvenirs; I've even taken the pictures at a kids' party arranged to raise money for the hospital Hugh works at. I enjoy it, but the skill is technical; it's not the same as making portraits like this one – it's not art, for want of a better word, and sometimes I miss making art. I wonder if I still could, whether I still have the eye, the instinct to know when exactly to trip the shutter. The decisive moment. It's been a long time since I really tried.

Hugh thinks I should get back into it. Connor's older now, he's starting to live his own life. Because of his difficult start we both threw ourselves into looking after him, but he needs us less than he once did. There's more space for me now.

I look briefly at the other pictures on the walls. Maybe I will, soon. I could concentrate a little more on my career and still look after Connor. It's possible.

I go downstairs to wait for Adrienne. Originally she'd wanted to come with me, to see the exhibition, but I'd told her no, I wanted to see the picture alone. She hadn't minded. 'I'll just meet you in the café,' she'd said. 'Maybe we can grab a bite to eat.'

She's early, sitting at a table by the window with a glass of white wine. She stands up as I approach and we hug. She's already talking as we sit.

'How was it?'

I pull my chair under the table. 'A bit weird, to be honest.' Adrienne has already ordered a bottle of sparkling water for me and I pour a glass. 'It doesn't feel like my picture any more.'

She nods. She knows how anxious I've been about coming here. 'There're some interesting photos up there. Will you go and take a look? Later?'

She raises her wine. 'Maybe.' I know she won't, but I'm not offended. She's seen my picture before and isn't bothered about the others. 'Cheers,' she says. We drink. 'You didn't bring Connor?'

I shake my head. 'Definitely too weird.' I laugh. 'He's busy, anyway.'

'Out with his mates?'

'No. Hugh's taken him swimming. They've gone to Ironmonger Row.'

She smiles. Connor is her godson and she's known my husband for almost as long as I have. 'Swimming?'

'It's a new thing. Hugh's idea. He's realized his fiftieth is next year and he's dreading it. He's trying to get fit.' I pause. 'Have you heard from Kate?'

I look down at my drink. I hadn't wanted to ask the question, not so soon, but it's out now. I'm not sure which answer I'd prefer. Yes, or no.

She sips her wine. 'Not for a while. Have you?'

'About three weeks ago.'

'And...?'

I shrug. 'The usual.'

'Middle of the night?'

'Yep,' I sigh. I think back to my sister's last call. Two in the morning, even later for her, over there in Paris. She'd sounded out of it. Drunk, I guessed. She wants Connor back. She doesn't know why I won't let her have him. It isn't fair and, by the way, she isn't the only person who thinks Hugh and I are being selfish and impossible.

'She was just saying the same old thing.'

'Maybe you need to talk to her. Again, I mean. When she's not so—'

'Angry?' I smile. 'You know as well as I do how much good that's likely to do and, anyway, I can't get hold of her. She won't answer her mobile and if I ring the landline I just get her flatmate, who tells me nothing. No, she's made her mind up. Suddenly, after all this time, all she wants in the world is to look after Connor. And she thinks Hugh and I are stopping her for our own selfish reasons. She hasn't paused, even for a moment, to wonder how Connor might feel, what he might want. She certainly hasn't asked him. Once again, it's all about her.'

I stop talking. Adrienne knows the rest; I don't need to carry on. She knows the reasons Hugh and I took my sister's son, that for all these years Kate has been happy with the situation. What neither of us knows is why that has changed.

'Will you talk to her?' I say.

She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes. For a moment I think she's going to tell me I have to sort it out myself, I can't come running to her every time I argue with my sister; it's the sort of thing my father used to say to me. But she doesn't, she just smiles. 'I'll try.'

We order and eat our lunch. We discuss our mutual friends – she asks me if I've seen Fatima recently, did I know Ali has a new job, she wonders whether I'm planning on going to Dee's drinks party at the weekend – then she says it's time she left, she has a meeting. I tell her I'll catch up with her on Saturday.

I can't resist going through the gift shop on my way out. They'd wanted to use my picture of Marcus on the cover of the brochure but I never replied to the email and instead there's a picture of an

androgynous-looking guy sucking on a lollipop. I didn't reply to the requests for interviews either, though that didn't stop one of the magazines – Time Out, I think – running a piece about me. I was 'reclusive', they said, and my picture was one of the highlights of the exhibition, an 'intimate portrait', both 'touching and fragile'. Bullshit, I wanted to reply, but I didn't. If they want 'reclusive', I'll give it to them.

I look again at the lollipop guy. He reminds me of Frosty, and I flick through the book before moving over to the postcards arranged on the display rack. Normally I'd buy a few, but today I just get one, Marcus in the Mirror. For a moment I want to tell the cashier that it's mine, that I took it for myself, and that, though for years I've actively avoided it, I'm still glad they used it in the exhibition and I've had the chance to own it again.

But I don't. I say nothing, just murmur a 'Thanks' then put the card in my bag and leave the gallery. Despite the February chill I walk most of the way home – through Covent Garden and Holborn, down Theobald's Road in the direction of Gray's Inn Road – and at first I can think of nothing but Marcus and our time in Berlin all those years ago. But by the time I reach Roseberry Avenue I've managed to move on from the past and instead I'm thinking about what's happening here, now. I'm thinking about my sister, and hoping against hope that Adrienne can make her see sense, even though I know she won't be able to. I'm going to have to talk to Kate myself. I'll be firm, but kind. I'll remind her that I love her, and want her to be happy, but I'll also tell her that Connor is almost fourteen now, that Hugh and I have worked hard to give him a stable life and it's important it isn't upset. My priority has to be to make her realize that things are best left as they are. For the first time I allow myself to consider that Hugh and I probably ought to see a lawyer.

I turn the corner into our road. There's a police car parked a few doors from the house, but it's our front door that's open. I begin to run; my mind empties of everything but the need to see my son. I don't stop until I'm in the house, in the kitchen, and I see Hugh standing in front of me, talking to a woman in a uniform. I take in Connor's towel and trunks, drying on the radiator, then Hugh and the officer turn to look at me. She's wearing an expression of perfect, studied neutrality, and I know it's the way Hugh looks when he's delivering bad news. My chest tightens, I hear myself shout, as if in a dream. 'Where's Connor?' I'm saying. 'Hugh! Where's our son?' But he doesn't answer. He's all I can see in the room. His eyes are wide; I can tell that something terrible has happened, something indescribable. Tell me! I want to shout, but I don't. I can't move; my lips won't form

words. My mouth opens, then closes. I swallow. I'm underwater, I can't breathe. I watch as Hugh steps towards me, try to shake him off when he takes my arm, then find my voice. 'Tell me!' I say, over and over, and a moment later he opens his mouth and speaks.

'It's not Connor,' he says, but there's barely enough time for the relief that floods my blood to register before he says, 'I'm sorry, darling. It's Kate.'