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# Fall 2024 Debut Fiction Sampler

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دختر خوب

# Good Girl

"A no-bullsh\*t,  
must-read debut."  
—Kaveh Akbar

a novel

"Kaleidoscopic,  
full of style and soul."  
—Raven Leilani

# Aria

HOGARTH



WINNER of the Whiting Award

# Aber

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## One

**T**HE TRAIN BACK to Berlin took seven hours, and the towel in my suitcase was still wet from my last swim in the lake, dampening the pages of my favorite books. I took the S-Bahn and then the U-Bahn home to Lipschitzallee and walked past the discount supermarket, the old pharmacy, and the Qurbani Bakery with the orange shop cat lounging outside its door. In our building's elevator, an intimate odor assaulted my nostrils: urine mixed with ash. *Hello, spider*, I said, looking at the cobweb in the corner. The ceiling lamp twitched, turning alien the swastika graffiti. My key, fastened by a pink ribbon, turned in the old lock. Nobody was home. I kicked off my shoes. The cat meowed for food, its dander floating in the air. My room was merely all it had been for so many years: a suffocating box with a tiny window, pink sheets, and that Goethe quote I'd painted in golden letters above my desk. The popcorn ceiling seemed lower than before. I wiped the kitchen counters, walked into my parents' bedroom, opened their closet, and pulled out my mother's cashmere frock. Maybe I cried, maybe

I didn't. What I did was lie in bed and sleep until dark, covering my face with her dress.

IT'S BEEN OVER a decade now, but the colors of that summer day are as precise as yesterday: I was eighteen when I returned from boarding school, and my sense of melancholy was even more overwhelming than I anticipated. My cousins called me pretentious. The Arab boys who loitered outside the shisha bar sneered at me. *You changed*, they said, meaning my relative lack of vernacular and my newfound obsession with eyeliner.

Back then, I still wanted to be a photographer, a small Olympus point-and-shoot knocking around in my backpack. In my first days back, Berlin bloomed at the seams with rotten garbage. Ants crawled out of the sockets in my father's living room, a small street of them always leading up the wall and out the window; no matter how much poison we sprayed into the electrical outlets or taped them shut—they just returned. And though prophesied to soon be extinct, the bees were also everywhere. They covered the overflowing trash cans in the city, or you'd see them lazily dozing on outdoor café tables, where they fattened themselves on crumbs of sugar or lay unconscious next to jars of cherry jam. I brushed the dirt out of my hair and rinsed it from my face and all I could hear, even in the early morning, was the howling of sirens over the frenzied songs of birds, which chirped and chirped and chirped.

In August, I enrolled at Humboldt Universität for philosophy and art history, not because I wanted to study but because I wanted the free U-Bahn pass. And so I let the glittery, destructive underworld of Berlin sink its fangs into me, my solitude alleviated only



when I went out at night and got lost in some apartment with tattooed men and women who did poppers underneath a framed picture of Ulrike Meinhof. Then I went home, my nose bleeding, my hair smelling of cigarette smoke, and was confronted by that disappointed look on my father's face, my grandmother's suspended in a perpetual frown. I had been lifted out of the low-income district of hopelessness and sent to one of the best schools in the country, and yet here I was, my mother was dead, soon the city would be covered in snow again, and I was ravaged by the hunger to ruin my life.

AUTUMN WAS SHORT and humid, and then, overnight, it was winter. On the news, I saw middle-aged men with pearlescent smiles and young blond TV anchors in starched suits reporting about the financial crisis, the lack of jobs, the jammed Eurotunnel, snow collecting on the spires of basilicas in Northern Italy, and somewhere, everywhere, a missing girl, or an Arab man detained for terrorism, or a building with asylum seekers set on fire. In Berlin, the cathedrals' stained glass was covered with frost, and most days, I put on my red hat and my black coat and walked out into the crunchy snow to my job at the jazz café in Kreuzberg, the kind of place with red-painted walls and old leather seats, which tried to present a facsimile of a gone century. I served old German couples, and sometimes they were so close to me I could smell their shampoo, the salt on their skin, and despite myself, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up in desire. To pass the time, I imagined the men touching me while their wives watched. Instead, they ignored me or, when I bowed down to serve their burgers, asked which God I

believed in. How old I was. Where I was from. And occasionally one of them would trace my earring or touch my butt when I passed, and my body surged with repulsion.

I FINISHED MY shift and walked to the most famous club in the city. Staggering past the tree-starved DDR-style council blocks on the Straße der Pariser Kommune, the wind slapping my face. The ghosts of the East were still present between the buildings, shadows filtering through every snow-covered crack. Now only foreigners lived in the high-rises, people who looked like me and who congregated in sweatpants in their courtyards, smoking cigarettes and chatting about casinos. The high-rises and council blocks were the same everywhere. I hated them. I hated everyone who had the same fate as I did. So when I walked past a group of Moroccan men on the corner of Rüdersdorfer Straße, I avoided making eye contact. Of course, once they computed I was no one's little sister, they whistled. They whistled and called me degrading names, because the philosophers were wrong and the meaning of life is not that it ends but that your one job on earth is to make everyone as miserable as your own sad self.

IT WAS HARD to keep my eyes open in such severe cold, and the line for the club was long. In front of me were two Spaniards in expensive clothing: black leather, dark platform shoes. They were of a different world than I was, and still, because of naïveté or boredom, I inserted myself into their conversation about Kate Moss's cellulite, and we bantered until they offered me one of their blue

Nike ecstasy pills for six euros. The blue Nikes had started appearing that summer and, according to safe-consuming websites, consisted of 183 milligrams of MDMA, probably laced with 2C-B—guaranteed to roll for ten hours, fifteen if you were lucky. I took only a quarter, washed it down with a gulp from their flask, and kept the rest for later. The Spaniards were turned away at the door, and I shouted a thank-you after them; then it was my turn.

THE GATEKEEPERS OF techno were unpredictable despots. Large and legendary as Cyclopes, they had fully tattooed faces, other lives in which they made art and literature, and, despite their intellectual curiosity, they liked to stand here in the snow exerting power based on prestige and exclusivity. Although I had been coming here since my sixteenth birthday, I had been turned away a handful of times. It always presented a gamble. Tonight I wore a cheap, oversized faux-fur coat and smelled like pizza grease and popcorn, but I was a girl, and so I smiled the dumbest smile I could come up with.

“Are you alone?” they asked, and exchanged a suggestive glance.

“What do you think?”

“Be careful out there, doll.” They waved me in. A girl can get in almost anywhere, even if she can’t get out.

THE BUNKER WAS a shock of steel and concrete, glass and chains, with sixty-foot ceilings. A wall of warm air and muffled techno battered me, and within a minute my dress was lined with sweat,

but the club was dark, and darkness was an authority to which I submitted. The music seemed to come from somewhere deep inside the earth, as if pulsating through the magmatic core—there was a logic to abrasive bass and insistent drum machines, but 138 beats per minute never cohered unless you were grinding your neural pathways to a prehistoric pulp, so I hoped for a swift high. I threw my jacket into the corner and climbed the stairs to the dance floor, every step under me vibrating to that familiar bass line. My legs still functioned, even if they were shaking: soft, soft lows, like seasickness. I pushed my way past a group of wannabe goth models, babes in chunky white sneakers, and emaciated, androgynous trendsetters in mesh and leather. Their bodies were warm next to mine; they smelled of patchouli. Photographs and mirrors were not permitted in these establishments, rendering my desire for representation obsolete. And yet, images reigned: The first time I came here, I saw a man in a safari hat with a toothbrush.

“Toothbrush?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “I’ve been here for three days.” I saw him every time.

“What a high ponytail,” a young Black man in a dog collar whispered to me in American English. He wore contact lenses that turned his irises red, and when he smiled, there was the flash of golden braces.

THE CLUB WASN'T really called the Bunker, but that's what I will call it, because that's how we experienced it: a shelter from the war of our daily lives, a building in which the history of this city, this country, was being corroded under our feet, where the machines

of our bodies could roam free and dream. A place like the Bunker attracted an eclectic mixture of gestalts, and I liked them all. But mostly I liked the strange bald men whose political affiliations, checking-account balances, and sexual preferences you couldn't categorize. They were from Detroit or Freiburg or Dublin; they spoke of Rilke and shared the last dregs of amphetamines with you at sunrise. Their eyes were large and full of secrets and a bit watery by the end of the night. They were the first to come and the last to leave. They were always here, the ones who actually used the darkrooms. You could tell by their leathery faces that they were professionals at this business of techno, of living a double life in the city's underbelly, because they truly didn't care what anyone thought. No audience for them, no performance: No, this was their life. Yet there was a tenderness to their carelessness. They had been partying since before my birth, since before the wall even fell. And, most important, they never judged you, no matter what kind of fool you made of yourself.

NONE OF MY friends were there. Not that I had many—I dumped Felix, my first boyfriend, the second I moved back from school, because technically I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend, and he was bad in bed. And Melanie had moved to London to study textile design. The only people left were Anna and Romy, with whom I'd also gone to school and who moved to Berlin for university. Lately they'd been telling me to slow down, but they didn't understand the accelerating feeling in my chest, this race car of a heart that I couldn't stop. Anna had promised to come to the Bunker, but her text message predicted an arrival time of an hour from now. So I

did a line in the bathroom with this peroxide-blond girl whom I would never see again, then went upstairs to the other dance floor, where the house beat was slick with synth and soulful samples. I stood at the bar, hoping that my aloneness was not betraying my insecurity. I played with my hair, trying to look arrogant and unapproachable.

I noticed his smell before I saw him: pink pepper and smoke. There he stood, Marlowe Woods, all six feet three inches of him, wearing a battered leather jacket. I usually liked my men blond and severe or dark as tar, but Marlowe was neither, somewhere smack in the middle, with a square jaw and dimpled chin, the nose of an emperor. Greasy hair that fell in almost girlish waves down to his chin. I kept my composure when he put his hand on my shoulder, even though I was almost nauseous with attraction. He was chewing gum, and I noticed a small spider tattoo pulsing on the side of his neck. He stood with his back to the bartender, his elbows leaning on the counter. Looked at me from the side with a sly smile.

“Hey. I’m Marlowe.” Everybody knew who he was: the American writer who always carried speed. He had published a book in his early twenties, which was translated into a few languages. I had seen a picture of him in a magazine feature on Berlin artists. Though I couldn’t remember the details, I’d never forgotten his face in that glamorous photograph. Windswept and serious, a cigarette between his lips. The picture alone had exercised a strange pull on me; his blue eyes pierced the page with intelligence. I had seen him before, in some club by the water, where the sun turned the dance floor into a laceration of light and the sound was happier than here. Of course, he hadn’t noticed me. He was a prince who

moved through rooms as if they belonged to him, surrounded by a large group of friends, among them his blond girlfriend, who in my memory always wore a Sonic Youth shirt.

“I’m Nila.” I shook his clammy hand, a surprisingly formal gesture.

“By the way, you lost this.” He stretched out his palm and, in the strobing lights, I saw a small gray lighter.

“Not mine.”

“Yes, it probably fell out of your pocket.” I shook my head, and he laughed, his smile all gap-toothed and dimpled.

“Well, I think you should keep it.” His breath warm against my neck, he slid the lighter into my tote bag, and there was this feeling of a pinprick in my heart.

“Okay,” I said, unable to meet his gaze. “Do you have speed?”

“Can I buy you a drink first?”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER he pushed hard against me in the bathroom stall, everything sticky with grime and sweat. He stubbed out his cigarette on the wall right next to my face, and I believed I could smell the faint sulfur of scorched hair.

“I’m sorry, it’s just so tight in here,” he said. Against the visual noise of stickers and tags, I studied the rest of him: V-neck of his green shirt, golden necklace with a coin that refracted the light. So this was him, the glamorous man from the magazine. Grinning, he blew on my face, and I calculated how far I was ready to go in exchange for a line, but after he got out the little folded-up flyer of speed from his pants pocket, he only asked me where I was from.

“Berlin,” I said, which was the truth. But he did the dreadful

thing I always feared people would do—he asked again, he asked where I was really from, and because my head was a structureless melting pot of serotonin and my jaw was behaving like a carousel horse, or because even here I was afraid, I said, “My parents are from Greece,” which was a lie but seemed like an approximate explanation for my dark and aquiline face, my unruly curls. Sometimes I lied that I was Colombian; sometimes I was from Spain or Israel. I didn’t want to speak about what had brought my parents over from Kabul or tell him that he had probably met my uncle driving a taxi in which he sat in the back seat feeling sorry for that dark man in front of him broken by all the things he had to leave behind. Or say that I was not even allowed to be here, that my being here was a big, ugly secret. Here, truth had no place. And anyway, nine times out of ten, it was easier to tell a lie than to watch pity distort someone’s face. I didn’t want to be pitied. He seemed intrigued.

“Greece,” he repeated. “Interesting.” The speed was wet and potent, and when I snorted the line, the burning sensation unblocked my sinuses, and I forgot the low yank of the lie.

“I do this only for research,” I sniffled, and he laughed. It was so easy to make men laugh. It was the easiest thing in the world. “I’m writing a paper on it for class.”

“I’m American. I would believe anything,” he said with that gentle lull in his voice.

“I know.”

“Well, then, I need to come up with other facts about myself to surprise you.”

“Why is your German so good?” I countered.

“Because I am . . . I had a girlfriend. And I studied it in high school.”



“Really? You retained your high school German?” I willfully ignored the part about the girlfriend.

“And my mother was German, technically speaking.”

“Technically.” I tried to compute that this man had a German mother—where was her family from, what flavor of German was she?

“My turn. Why is your English so good?”

“Bilingual school,” I said, and let him believe what he wanted to believe. I knew what it made me sound like—someone who came from money. When I returned his flyer, my hand lingered on his for a moment too long. We stared at each other, charged by the disorderly pulse of the air. I took the square red-tinted sunglasses from his head and put them on; the lenses were smudged. He touched the hollow between my collarbones, and I closed my eyes to the warmth and subdued techno drifting from the dance floor, snippets of Spanish and German in adjacent booths.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said. I started laughing and threw my head back, because I had never been beautiful. I had a strong, regal look to my face due to my high cheekbones and my almond-shaped eyes, and maybe I was young, but I knew what beauty was. I had a different quality, what my mother had wanted to slap out of me and my father spat at. What men love. Beauty was a tragic virtue often abused because we are fooled by it, but I emanated something darker, something uglier. Like a fraught hunger for life, like a voice that said I would do anything.

“In America we say thank you to compliments,” he said, and grabbed the sunglasses from my face.

I grinned. “Thank you, sir.”

SMALL TALK, SHOUTING across the bar, distorted faces in the corridor. Laughter. We couldn't hear each other because the music was too loud. Marlowe's hand on the small of my back or on my shoulder, speaking loudly in my ear about the importance of places such as these. I smiled and nodded, because illusions were frail and had to be kept intact. I drifted behind him, and we sat down on one of those dingy leather couches, his fingers drumming on my knee. Slurped the melted ice of my mojito, the sugar filming my teeth. I did not see his kind-of girlfriend, and I did not have to think anymore. Slowly, the real world faded away, like the color of a memory I successfully repressed. Or ink when it got into contact with water—it was still there but smeared. I could barely recall below-freezing temperatures or the fact that I owned a phone. Finally, Anna: Her face hovered above me.

“It's snow,” she giggled. “I have snow in my hair.”

“Where were you?” I kissed her cheek. I introduced her to Marlowe, and she pointed at the group of people she came with, no one I recognized. She had a doll's face, and the entire time she spoke, her breath was perceptible as a cloud, and I wanted to cradle her in my arms. Was it very cold? I loved her. I was home, finally. . . . Marlowe's face appeared again, telling me to open my mouth, and he planted a crumbling pill on the center of my tongue. Uncritically, I swallowed.

“Oh my God,” Anna said. “Your pupils. They look like dinner plates.” Then there was this loud noise, incredibly loud, like a thousand fire alarms ringing in my ears.

“Come, come, we need to go now.” Marlowe took not my hand but my wrist—I remember this unusual gesture—and led me through the murky, dancing mass, through people whose expres-

sions glowed then wilted in the strobe lights, face after face like a photograph. He guided me down the next stairway, through groups of leather-clad men and women in rhinestone-studded mesh, through the door, past the Cyclopes, past the walk of shame of those who did not get in, into the icy morning air, into a car, and it took one minute or ten, I don't remember, but what I remember is that none of my uncles was driving the taxi.

## Two

I DON'T RECALL IF there was an actual fire alarm or if it was a sound effect of the music, because we didn't talk about that. In the cab, we were laughing, as I had forgotten my coat and my shoulders were nude and freezing, but we were too high to carp about the cold, and he cracked open a window and let the snowflakes enter the car, and one could see the holiday lights on some of the solemn trees blur into the dark-blue light of dawn. It was the first weekend of November, and the city was still very much asleep. Germany has a habit of respecting the departed sanctity of Sundays, and I was grateful for that as we rolled into Warschauer Straße. He paid and slipped his leather jacket over my shoulders when we climbed out of the cab. I stood there in front of his building for a second, hesitating to go in. *My life will change*. Suddenly I was sure of it, and the anticipatory recognition made me freeze.

“Are you coming?” He held open the blue door.

“Yes.” I breathed in and followed him. We walked through the courtyard, then into the back building, five stories up, and I touched the walls that hundreds of people before me had touched,

before the first war even began. His apartment, I realized immediately, was a statement of contradictions—it wasn't the loft that people said it was. It wasn't even really the apartment of a grown-up, and yet it exuded the kind of rugged sophistication of a place that I imagined Edie Sedgwick would live in. There was no hallway; the door opened immediately into the living room. High ceilings, gold light fixtures, and a coffee table that I now know to be cherrywood but then only suspected to be expensive and rare. Clothes were scattered everywhere; the scent of cold ash and incense filled the air. Records were stacked on the floor, and, as in every bachelor apartment within a fifty-mile radius of Berlin, there stood a high table with two Audio-Technicas. Pioneer mixer. Bottles and cans cluttered the surfaces, and a giant canvas with off-white paint leaned against the wall. Long linen sheets hung from his windows, in a powdery blue that tinted the light. I remembered, in some ancient part of my heart, that I was supposed to be with Anna at the Bunker right now. But it didn't matter. It was hours like these when even my name seemed to be a completely arbitrary measure, and nothing could contain or define my essence. I could have been anyone and wanted anything, and I wanted to be with him. My neighborhood was vacuumed away. Friedrichshain, the Oberbaumbrücke, Kreuzberg behind the water. I lay down on a rug pockmarked with cigarette burns, still wearing his jacket. Heard the trains rumble on the bridge close by, and the apartment floors started moving.

“I didn't realize you could hear the floors move, even here, so high up.”

“The building breathes. It's alive,” he said as he walked into the kitchen.

“Put on some music,” I shouted from the shag carpet.

“What do you want to listen to?” His voice was tinny in the other room.

“Anything.” My ears were full of the techno from the club, and everything sounded fuzzy and distant. “Anything, really. I can hear my thoughts.”

“Oh, we don’t want that,” he said, and though I expected a house track, it was Bowie’s “Rebel Rebel” that bloomed in the air. I smiled to myself: It was one of my favorite songs. He returned with two White Russians mixed with soy milk, a popular drink at the time. “They don’t even taste like booze. Which I love.” He was still wearing those red-tinted sunglasses. From where I lay on the carpet, he looked ridiculous.

“Come down here,” I said.

“Not yet.” He made an awkward gesture with his hands and disappeared back into the kitchen. “We need to refresh our nasal passages with some amphetamines first.” I got up to take a sip of the creamy, bitter drink and walked over to his bookshelf. American and Russian novels, books on architecture, photography, obscure philosophy, and fantasy novels with whimsical covers. Three copies of his own book, *Ceremony*, two in the original English and one in the German translation. I traced his name, embossed on the spine of the green hardcover. I had never read it. On the top row of his bookshelf there stood an old SLR camera—a Canon—and a small animal skull I couldn’t identify.

“You take pictures?” I asked when he returned carrying a blue tile with little white maids painted on it. He had put on a brown sweater, and his shoulders looked broader and bulkier than before. My desire, though nascent, already felt so profound that it seemed close to hatred.

“Not really,” he said, then snorted a line from the tile. “Not

anymore. I'd rather play music these days. But jobs are not that important, are they?"

"So you've stopped writing?"

"Why do you care so much? I like you party girls because, usually, you do not care."

"I guess I'm curious."

"Work is for the weak. I don't believe in it."

"But isn't what we do outside of parties the most intimate thing? That's why we're there, anyway. To forget about what bothers us."

"I disagree. You have it all wrong—the party is what I live for." He smiled a sheepish smile and pulled the necklace out from under his turtleneck. "In a capitalist society, being unemployed is the most radical thing you can do. And the party—the underground of the world—is where we unleash the id and present our truest desires. What is more authentic than your base desire? Fuck-ing strangers in the dark—now, that's interesting."

"So you're unemployed."

"Very witty," he said. "I'm working on a book about architecture."

"That sounds cool."

"Does it?"

"Well, I love buildings," I said stupidly. I sat down next to him, on the worn spot of the sofa. When I lowered my head over the table to snort a line, I noticed he was wearing dark-gray slippers. As always when I was unnerved by the vulnerability of another person, I made a joke, but he ignored me.

Drawing a circle on my forehead, he asked, "And what is the darkness in there?"

"Oh, I don't speak about that."

“You’re trying to be mysterious.”

“No.” I smirked. “I’m just a student. Philosophy and art history.”

“Hmm. And you’re a real Berliner, then?”

I nodded.

“How was it growing up here?” I recalled the broken elevator lamp with the cobweb. Insects, incredibly, alive in that lightbulb’s orifice. And days of waiting in line at offices and job centers, where I had to translate documents for my parents. The flurry of silverfish alive in our bathroom; waiting in the blue light of the bus stop in the snow; the sound of my mother’s voice, like a star irradiating the country of childhood.

“Good,” I said. “It was good.” It was a disease. The lies bubbled out of me: I told him we lived in a house in Rudow, that my father was happy and healthy, that we had a garden. The fabrications were interspersed with true facts like boarding school, the girls’ matte Longchamp bags, the Latin teacher who was obsessed with *deus ex machina*, weeping willows, canals, and the ancient, dying priest who always called me *Nina*. The sprawling meadows around Rosenwald, the cobblestoned streets leading from one gothic structure to another—our medieval school building, once a cloister to Catholic nuns. He laughed, comparing it to his own public high school with linoleum floors and metal lockers, and then we talked about European architecture.

“I love the idea, but architecturally, socialist housing was a huge mistake.” His fingers glided over my black dress, the cheap satin of it. “I mean, where is the beauty? Who would want to live in a brutalist square?”

“No one.” I omitted the fact that I came from exactly those



brutalist squares. He slipped off part of the jacket, revealing my shoulder. I tried out the sentence in my mind before it even happened: *I slept with Marlowe Woods*. Marlowe Woods, the infamous writer. Touched his jawline and moved closer so that I could smell the chewing gum on his breath, the pink pepper of his perfume. That putrid sweetness of alcohol.

He put a hand on my leg, stroked my inner thigh with his fingers.

“Oh,” I said, and sank deeper into the couch. His hand wandered up my waist and he started circling my nipple through my dress.

“How old are you?” He was mumbling, pulling my ponytail down with his other hand.

“Turning nineteen in a week.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Do I need to show you my ID?”

And, as he drew me closer by my hair, he said, “I just need you to know that I’m thirty-six.”

“It’s okay.” I was surprised by how small and hoarse my voice sounded. I had never slept with an older man, but everyone I knew had—and I felt it was the rite of passage into adulthood. “It’s attractive.”

THE LIGHT WAS blue, and he touched my face, and I let him. We made out, in that gooey, haphazard way that you do when you’re high, and I slipped out of the jacket and my dress. I was wearing mismatched underwear—a red lace bra I had stolen at H&M, and black cotton panties under my tights—and he took a minute just to

study me. It was the look from the photograph in the magazine again, and his eyes were charged with something hungry and unashamed. I was waiting for him to undress, but the only thing he took off were the slippers.

“You shouldn’t be at a party like that,” he said. “It’s not good for you.” His long fingers were everywhere—on my face and waist, my thighs. He breathed on my neck and pushed the length of his hand down my throat. I let out a low moan.

“Shut up.” I wanted to die. Marlowe wasn’t the first person who had touched me—there was Felix, of course, who made me read Adorno and only rarely wanted to have sex, and men in the back seats of cars and in dingy, sticky club toilets, and the girl with incredible breasts who shared her humid sheets and orange shampoo with me for one summer—but this was unlike anything else; the substances enhanced every sensation. That slow, deliberate pace of his movements. Feverish, I slithered from his touch, but when I reached for his belt buckle, he pushed my hand away.

“No,” he said. “I decide when I want to fuck you.” I felt excited and reckless all at once.

“Okay,” I said, surmising that my role was to yield. He wasn’t like Felix with the low libido, who thought my incessant hunger for touch was disgusting. But he wasn’t like the guys with whom I cheated on Felix either—the young men who ripped off their pants and treated sex like a drive-through. No, Marlowe’s withholding was suggestive. Refined, almost, were it not for that grin. Unsure whether I was a participant in his fantasy or he in mine, I smiled.

“You’re such a good girl,” he said. The humiliation burned in my cheeks. “Just wait.”

A few minutes later he got up, and his face darkened, as if nothing transgressive had happened between us, and I understood that

he expected me not to talk about it to anyone. That this was our secret now. Then, slowly, my thoughts came back to me, and with them an awareness of my body. I was embarrassed and went into the bathroom to get dressed. I had always felt that getting dressed was more intimate than getting undressed—I wasn't ready for him to see me put on my armor. Back in the living room, he was dancing in slow motion to a song he said was by Cream. "One of the best records ever made." I had never heard the album and just nodded. He was awkward, his movements too sluggish, resembling a modern dancer on sedatives, and the silence between us swelled, viscous with guitar strings.

"I think I should go," I said, as I was beginning to feel useless.

"Don't you dare. I'm not done with you yet." It was what I had hoped to hear. I thought maybe we would have sex now, so I sat down on the couch and waited. He walked out of the room and I heard his cough, the shuttering of doors. There was a second level in this apartment, connected not by stairs but by a white-painted ladder. It was the kind of architecture I loved—crown molding, old hallways that smelled of musk and dust, a front building, and a back building. It was still true that the front in most prewar buildings was more expensive. In the middle was the courtyard, just big enough for a horse-drawn fire engine. Sometimes I thought I could smell it, the perfume of those who lived here over a hundred years ago, when carriages were still a part of the city. The phantom hooves, the triste trash cans and playgrounds, so much like the drawings by Heinrich Zille: *You can kill a person with an apartment as with an ax.* . . . When I startled out of my daydream, I felt warm and soft. He placed a glass of wine on the table. The window blinds were open to a light snowfall.

"Let me tell you something," he said. "I had never seen snow

anywhere except on a mountain until I was fifteen years old.” He told me he grew up in Northern California. He’d always wanted to be a writer, but then his mother died, and he had trouble forming a sentence. He had periods of bohemian bliss, insecurity. But here he was, in his own apartment. “I bought it with my savings,” he said. He told me he was sixteen when his mother died, and when he was twenty-one, his father died. A few years later, in a haze, the writing impulse of childhood returned: He wrote *Ceremony*, his only book, about their troubled marriage, his father’s alcoholism, his mother’s cancer, the horses, the fables he grew up reading. German was the only other language he spoke, except for snippets of Spanish. The camera was hers: She was a hobby photographer, always documenting their lives. His inheritance from her was what had allowed him to come here. The success, he said, was unexpected. For three years he didn’t have to work, lived off royalties and interviews. He moved from California to London, then to Spain, then Berlin.

“And now what?”

“You have to be creative . . . and I have an advance for the next book.” A dim memory floated through my mind, of having read in an Internet forum that Americans thought it coarse to speak about money.

When I told him that my mother was dead too, that she died when I was sixteen, his face opened with a kind of bruised sympathy I had detected in other orphans and half orphans too, as if we had been ushered through different exits into a shared reformatory of grief. Perhaps it was true—maybe we really did all share the same kind of ordinary sorrow.

“It unyokes something from you. But you have already under-

stood that. I can see it.” He didn’t say much after that, and I was grateful for it.

“You know,” I said, trying to change the topic, “I’ve never seen the ocean. Or the sea. I went to Italy with my school once, to Rome. But I’ve never seen the sea. Not even the North Sea. It sounds childish, I am aware.”

“We can rectify that.” He winked. “And it doesn’t sound childish at all. Only provincial.”

“Great.”

“And what are you going to be when you grow up? A philosopher, yes?”

“Funny you should ask. I actually want to be an artist.” Nothing in my life I said with as much earnestness as this; for nothing was I so ridiculed. Everybody wanted to be an artist, especially the boys my age that the cool Berlin girls dated. Boys who had gained some fame in Germany over the last few years—the kind who listened to the Smiths and wore skinny jeans and kept battered copies of *Steppenwolf* in their tote bags and cheated on all their girlfriends. But I had the idiocy of the very inexperienced, which made me believe in my own greatness. And perhaps I wanted to prove myself to him. “I am going to be a photographer.”

“I believe you,” he said, and I laughed loudly again, because I was not used to people taking me seriously.

“You should come up with me,” he said after a while. “I’d like to take your picture. Time to be a muse.” I climbed the white ladder, which led to a large bedroom with slanted ceilings. The floorboards were painted white. There was a mattress on the floor, next to a stool that functioned as a nightstand, on which I noticed a Proust book, earplugs, a glass water bottle, and a beer can. On one

side of the room there were dressers, a small desk. He retrieved another SLR camera and told me to sit down on the mattress.

“Nice Minolta.”

“Who taught you about cameras?” He removed the lens cap and played around with the settings.

“Oh, no one.” At the foot of the mattress, I crossed my legs and thought of my father, who also used an old Minolta, which was still under his bed, collecting a film of dust. He came over, pushed up my skirt all the way, and told me to turn my head to the side.

“I hate my nose.”

“I don’t care.” He took three or four shots. No flash. The quiet click of the camera shutter. Motionless, I shuddered and closed my eyes for the last one. Then we switched positions, and I took pictures of him standing in front of the bed. He looked away, didn’t smile. He cocked his chin to the right. He was still and controlled, as if he too were composing the image. Then, through the crosshairs of the viewfinder, I saw him walk toward me; just before the shutter clicked for the last picture, he snapped the camera out of my hands.

“Enough.” He sighed and walked over to the window. Opened it a crack, cold air entering the room. Side by side we looked at the city from his apartment, high up above everything else. The view was spartan—other roofs, the courtyard, some bicycles, the balconies shining blue and gray—but he said it was the idea that counted, that the absence of the city implied and amplified its power, that a part was representative of its whole. Eight hours: Eight hours had passed since I’d come here, the amount of time it took for the first known photograph to be completed, and I thought of it, Niépce’s *View from the Window at Le Gras*, light etched on a heavy pewter plate coated in bitumen of Judea.

“I wish I could write about this,” he said. “Nothing is as perfect as snow.”

“You could still write about it.”

“Oh, bunny.” He touched my hair. “You say this because the world hasn’t broken you yet. But it will, trust me.”

“Sure thing,” I laughed.

“But look at this whiteness,” he said with a strange urgency in his voice. “One could do anything to it, it’s so defenseless.” Of course, I didn’t know what he meant back then.





A black and white, close-up photograph of a woman's face and shoulder. She has long, wavy hair and is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a soft, contemplative expression. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on her face and shoulder, and deep shadows elsewhere. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Set My Heart on Fire

A NOVEL

Izumi Suzuki

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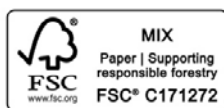
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# I'm Your Puppet

I arrived at a friend's place. I jumped into his empty bed and kicked my legs about.

'I've been summoned.'

'She twigged?' This pal was a comic-strip artist. He lifted his face from his tilted drafting desk. 'I did say you should have been sneakier.'

'But these things always come out of the woodwork anyway. Even if it just happens once or twice.' I pretended I was swimming on the bed.

'How much have you been seeing each other?' He was deftly cutting up tracing paper.

'For the past month and a half. He plays a gig on Saturdays and comes over afterwards.'

'He's seen you both on the same night before, right?' He was annoyingly cool about it.

'Yeah. Twice, I think. He borrowed money from Etsuko and spent it on a taxi to mine.'

‘Cheeky scamp. A nineteen-year-old playing two older women.’ He taped some tracing paper over a drawing.

‘Uh-huh. Some would call it shameless.’ I looked up. Some, but not me.

‘So this lead guitarist boy’s decided to pack it in with Etsuko.’ He slipped his work into a large envelope.

‘Seems like it. She started to suspect something after all.’

‘If it was me, I’d keep seeing the pair of you for a while. You’ve got the energy for it at nineteen.’ This pal was twenty-one.

‘But they’re doing all this publicity at the moment, he’s busy.’ It sounded almost like I was covering for Foo.

‘Actually, I did see Diana on TV. They really gave it something. Is he the meek-looking one with a Stratocaster? The one playing the white guitar?’ He swivelled his chair to face me.

‘Fender, two hundred and ten thousand yen. He saved his wages to buy it. Told me you can become a pro if you practice for six months.’

‘I’m more of a Gibson man myself. I mean, the Green Glass guitarist used an SG. I guess different Fenders sound different, too. You’ve got Telecasters, Stratocasters . . . The Tele’s nice and tight. Stratocaster’s more bluesy.’

He took out a Hope cigarette and a little sleeve of cardboard matches.

‘God, what should I do!’ I lay back and writhed about on the bed.

‘You just never think ahead.’ He plucked off a match and lit his cigarette. ‘Oh no, I just set my Hope on fire!’

‘Look, if it works out in the end, it’s all good to me. I take it as it comes.’

‘Well then, all sorted.’ He laughed, teasing me.

‘Except that later it develops into trouble.’

‘To me it just looks like you’re baiting bother. You’re seeking it. You like it, the commotion, the fuss.’

‘I don’t even understand it myself.’

‘You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that. I’m too repressed. I’m a wimp, I could never do what you do. You were born destructive. You’re drawn to the bad, you follow it compulsively.’

‘Listen, it’s at three o’clock. What should I do?’ Etsuko told me to be at a café near Shinjuku station. In a rock-hard voice, needless to say.

‘First of all, I’ve got to eat. I’ve been up all night and haven’t had a thing.’ He stood up and stretched, fished out a small note and some change. ‘Well, I’ll get paid once I take these drawings in. I could eat a goddam horse.’

I offered, without thinking, to fetch some ingredients and cook something.

‘What? You can cook?’ He paused. ‘Wait, you did make tempura last time I was at your place. You don’t look the type at all, it’s totally at odds with your demeanour. Easy to forget.’

‘I made this outfit myself, too.’

‘You should make more of these skills in front of men, you know.’

‘What, let them know I’m domesticated? But I hate housework. I only do it when I have to.’

‘Yeah, actually, being really good at cooking or making clothes usually means you’re not a homely type. Plenty of domestic women can’t do sod all either. The girl I was seeing until recently was like that. She was so psychologically stingy.’

Hoarded and saved everything. She remembered every single thing I did, every single place I went. Ask her what happened on our third date or whatever and she'd give an abnormally detailed account, compare me then to how I am now. She made a note of every last damn detail. It's a form of control.'

He stood up and went to the porch to put some trainers on.

'Why did you break up with her?'

'She hoarded and saved too much fat in her body.'

Once he'd worked his heels in, he tightened the laces. He opened the door and turned back around, laughing.

'Accumulating stuff seems to be important to women like that.'

I put on my high-heeled sandals while he waited outside. It was a clear, bright morning. Light coated everything like a powder. The greens were rich.

'This girl I'm seeing at the moment is quite clever. But not like an intellectual. That lot only understand the world through knowledge, right? But this one's really intuitive, she uses her senses. Got both her brain and her body switched on.'

'Is she a good person?' We linked arms.

'I think so, I don't know. She's a total egomaniac, though. Really selfish. It's a bit shocking. But at her core she's honest, no funny business.'

'And she's a looker?'

'Yeah, she is. You know how you get some ugly ones who just seem beyond help, their hearts totally warped by inferiority complexes or something.'

'I've got this theory. Beautiful people have beautiful hearts. Once I decided to stop judging people by their looks and ended up dating a guy with stunted legs.'

‘Like me, you mean?’ He laughed.

‘Look, you’re short, so everything’s in proportion. This guy was about ten centimetres taller than me, but we had the same length legs.’

‘Should I take that as a compliment?’

‘Come on. Anyway, whenever we met, he’d say stuff like, “I’ve got such a bad figure.” Honestly I wanted to agree with him, right? It was true. But I had to say no, it’s not bad, you know, reassure him in spite of myself. It happened every single time. “How ugly is my face,” blah blah. He expected me to deny it. Relied on me to encourage him. In the end I just got sick of it, and told him that everything he said about himself was true.’

He laughed out loud. ‘But once you’ve said it, that really throws a spanner in the works. The truth’s suddenly out. Your entire history together gets turned over. What did he do?’

‘He just stood there, didn’t say a word.’

‘I’m sure. But those sorts are weirdly persistent. I bet he called you over and over afterwards, am I right?’

‘He announced to me that he’d found someone new. God, this guitarist boy is far better.’

‘Quick to compare, aren’t you?’

‘Don’t you do that too?’

‘Yeah, I suppose I do. Yes. But I cover it up, I don’t tell people about it.’

‘Maybe I’m just a bad person then.’

‘You’re not a bad person, you’re just ruthless.’ He angled his head towards mine and laughed.

We turned a corner and I asked, ‘What do you want to eat?’

‘Not bread, not noodles. I don’t have a rice cooker, though. So not rice either.’

‘You can cook rice in a saucepan, that’s what I do. I’ll buy you some rice. How about grilled fish? We need tofu and soft seaweed for the miso soup. And spinach for a side dish.’

‘Where’s all this kindness coming from? Do you get cosy with people you’re not dating?’

‘I’m like this with everyone. Apart from people I don’t like.’

‘Even with the guy you’re seeing?’

‘Yeah. And I’m so pushy about it, I even get sick of myself.’

‘I’m petrified you’ll have a sudden change of heart. I can’t predict that with you. Why don’t you keep all that kindness just for me?’

‘A cold-hearted guy like you would get fed up if you always saw me like this. We’re good as we are.’

‘Maybe, maybe.’

It took me half an hour to get everything ready to serve.

‘That was quick. You cut any corners?’

He laid the table. We sat facing each other like newly-weds. I scooped up a big helping of the rice as it was still settling.

‘Wonder what it’d be like being married to you,’ he said.

‘Listen. You don’t lie to friends, right? But you need to deceive each other if you’re going to be lovers.’

‘Even with me?’ he asked.

‘That’s why we’ll never be together. Where’s the fun if you understand each other and feel at peace right from the start? I’ll marry someone I can conduct psychological warfare with.’



I've known that since my first year at high school. Ever since I read *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

'You're a romantic. But not in the way girls usually are.'

'I do want to fall in love and get married, though.'

'You're joking,' he said, then turned serious. 'I reckon you are a girly girl, after all.'

I didn't say anything.

He looked up. 'This lead guitar guy, does he treat you well?'

'Very.'

'I can't shake the feeling that you're tricking some young kid. Why is that? Usually with women it's either the guy making her do something or she does something for his sake, right? Then she cries about it afterwards.'

'I cry, too.' I reached for his empty rice bowl. 'Got an appetite, haven't you?'

'I'm pretty sure you cry only after you've judged it's crying that'll have the most effect.'

I thought through an idea, then put it into words. 'It's a waste of time to try and understand men. Lots of women say they know everything about their man, understand him so totally that they just have to be by his side forever. They feel reassured. But that's when men run away. It's a very arrogant mindset.'

'Because a person can only understand what's within their own capacities,' he said. 'Misunderstanding is the basis of communication, after all.'

'That's why it's about tricking one another,' I said. 'Though maybe it's strange to call it that.'

‘Listen,’ he began, ‘I want to come with you later, but I need to get some sleep after taking this to the publisher. Don’t think I can last much longer than noon.’

I pouted. ‘Okay, fine.’

He tried making up for it. ‘What happened with the cameraman you were seeing till recently?’

‘I called it off.’

I’d have to go to where I’d been summoned, alone. I felt the shakes coming on.

‘How come?’

‘He’s just a plain old idiot. Couldn’t be arsed chatting with him, pissed me right off.’

‘Just a plain old idiot!’ He chuckled. I glared at him. He kept up his good-mood sham. ‘In that case, same with a plain old womaniser. A lost cause, unless there’s something else going on.’

I kept quiet and ingested a large quantity of food.

‘Did you treat him to the talk?’

‘Yes. The theme was “it’s for your sake”.’

‘No one breaks up with someone for the other’s sake.’

‘I know. But it was good enough.’

‘Your break-up talks come in grades too. Standard, advanced, super-advanced . . .’

‘Got to tailor it to the guy. I had a break-up fight with this one boy who was preparing for his entrance exams and he ended up failing. Serves him right, he wasn’t smart enough anyway.’

‘Ruthless.’

‘He did have long legs, though.’

Speaking of which. Joel.

‘Nothing special face-wise?’ he asked.

‘Nope.’

Those wide, green eyes.

‘Actually, I reckon you’re quite psychologically involved,’ he said.

‘What do you mean, “actually”?’

‘Well, your behaviour makes you seem very carnal. But things are always psychological for women, in one way or another. Even when it seems trivial from the outside.’

He finished eating. I took the dishes to the sink.

‘Wow, you’re doing the washing up too? Listen, I’ll pay you back for this sometime. Once I get paid next month, let me buy you a swimsuit. Like a black one-piece. I hate bikinis, you know that? They cover up bad figures. Divide the body horizontally like that and you can’t see the proportions properly. One-piece swimsuits show you a body just as it is.’

‘I can’t swim.’ I kept my back turned. I wondered how Etsuko was going to act.

‘You don’t have to swim! Just wear it around the house or whatever.’

He grinned. I didn’t answer. Etsuko could be a formidable opponent if you got on her wrong side. She definitely wasn’t a plain old idiot.

‘I can’t get rid of the oil from the fish,’ I said. ‘I need some washing-up liquid.’

‘It’s fine, leave it. I’ll do it later.’

I had my back to him. We said nothing for a while. When I turned around again, he was staring at my waist. He quickly picked up a dish towel for me.

‘I got hard just now. Did you notice?’ Not a flicker of embarrassment.

‘How on earth could I have noticed?’ I shooed him away.

‘Better off not sleeping with you, right?’

I didn’t answer. Maybe she’d slap me in the face. No, Etsuko was too proud. She’d never do something shabby like that, whether anyone else was watching or not. She might even act like she didn’t care.

‘You’re too fond of destroying relationships,’ I heard him say.

Maybe that’s why she’d summoned me. To show me how unaffected she was.

‘Once things seem to be going well, you smash it all up.’

‘Right, I’m off.’ I looked up.

‘We’ve still got loads of time.’

‘It’s not like you’re coming with me.’

‘Come on, have a cigarette with me. To cap off the meal.’

I nodded, leaned against the bed and did as I was told. I thought about how to deal with Etsuko. It wasn’t the first time I’d swiped a friend’s lover. But I was less close to those previous friends. After it had happened, we’d act normally and gradually grow apart. That wouldn’t play this time.

‘She’s done so much for me, been so kind. And look how I’ve gone and betrayed her.’

‘You’re a terrible woman,’ he said, suppressing a grin.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if I got myself murdered one time. Well, I suppose you can’t really get murdered two times.’

‘What a pathetic thing to say,’ he jeered.

Suddenly I saw red and threw the nearest magazine at him. He ducked in time and it hit the wall, falling lamely to the floor.

‘What the fuck? Come on, why are you like this all of a sudden?’

‘I was holding it in till now. You’re full of shit!’

That was a lie. But it started to seem like the truth once I’d said it. I flew to the door and tried to put my shoes on. One of the clasps wouldn’t close.

‘Where’s this filthy mood come from?’ He came closer and stood near me.

‘Such a boring prick! I’d rather die.’

I managed to close the clasp while maintaining my tirade. I could barely catch my breath. Once I hit that stage, I get fully crazy with rage. Wonder why. Even I didn’t know.

‘I’m never coming to an ugly shithole like this again!’

Why did I say things like that?

‘Hey, why are you so angry? I’m truly worried, you sound as if you hate me or something.’

‘I do! I hate you!’ It just slipped out.

‘Because I won’t come with you?’

‘No! Because I can’t look at your face a moment longer!’

I shot down the stairs at terrifying speed, slamming the door shut. Anger like this chases away any fear. I ran to meet Etsuko.



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"Can a brilliant filmmaker be as good on the page? Yes! Ed Burns delights in the printed word. So wrap yourself around this book and give yourself a warm hug with a good read."

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## A KID a novel FROM MARLBORO ROAD



*To my mother and father, and to their parents and  
grandparents, who crossed the Atlantic with nothing in  
their pockets but hopes and dreams.*



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# 1

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We went to Pop's wake today. It was an open coffin service which means exactly what it sounds like. I'd never seen a dead person before. You wait on line to take your turn going up to the casket so you can kneel and say a prayer. My mom was already there, standing next to the coffin and flowers, with her brothers Mike and Mark and her stepmother Gilligan. I couldn't even look at her because she was so upset. I'd already been crying for two days now and didn't want to start again in front of all these strangers.

The place was packed. There were forty rows of chairs and every seat was filled. There was a line of people waiting to pay their respects that went all the way out the front door and onto the sidewalk. It wasn't only our family and Pop's friends from the Bronx. There were hundreds of the sandhogs, guys who must have come straight from work because they were still wearing muddy work boots and dirty work pants and had greasy work gloves stuffed into their back pockets and hard hats in their hands. There were cops in uniform and detectives in nice suits. There were old Irish biddies dressed in black who sat quietly praying with their rosary beads and other old Irish

biddies who cried out loud. There were the men from the bar where Pop used to drink every night and the sole surviving friend from his kitchen who used to sing and dance with Pop on Saturday nights.

“You see this crowd, that’s the sign of a well-liked man,” my dad said.

“So it is,” I replied, trying to do Pop’s Irish accent.

My father smiled, took my hand and held it. It felt good even if his hand was sweaty. I’m not embarrassed to hold his hand in public today because it’s a funeral and I’m sad and no one makes fun of a kid at his grandfather’s funeral. He kept holding it until someone started talking to him and pulled him away, leaving me and Tommy alone on the line. Tommy seems like a different kid since we got the news that Pop died. He’s not a dick anymore. He’s nice to my parents, asks if he can help out around the house, and even said he could look after me when we’re at the wake. But the weird thing is I haven’t seen him cry at all. I was watching him when we got close to the coffin and he didn’t even look that sad.

“Do you know what to do?” I asked him.

“Yeah, you just go up there and kneel down and say a prayer.”

“Do you want to go up there together?” I asked.

“Yeah, maybe we should,” he said.

So that’s what we did. After we knelt down, we did the sign of the cross and bowed our heads. I was having a tough time thinking of a prayer to say because I was too busy looking at Pop’s face. I mean, it looked like my grandpa, and it didn’t. It’s hard to describe. It’s almost like he looked fake and not dead but maybe that’s what a dead person looks like. He was also wearing a suit and tie and I had never seen him dressed up before.

When Tommy finished his prayer, he reached out and touched Pop's hand and said, "Let's go." I couldn't believe he touched him. Now I wanted to touch him too, but Tommy had already stood up and said, "Come on, people are waiting." So I had to get up. I hate to admit this, but I was jealous he got to touch a dead person and I didn't. I'm sure it's a sin to think that. Remember, the God knows!

After we got up, we went to the receiving line and first said hello to Uncle Mike, who was standing next to the coffin. Uncle Mike is big and strong and wasn't crying. He shook our hands and gave us a hug and told us Pop is in a better place. Uncle Mark was next to him and he looked like he'd been crying but he made a joke about how funny we look in our cheap suits. He didn't shake our hands or give us a hug but instead pretended to punch Tommy in the stomach and messed up my hair. My mom was next on the receiving line. The minute I saw her, I grabbed her around the waist, squeezing her as hard as I could, and started crying. I don't know why that happened but I couldn't control it. She tried to tell me everything's OK, but she couldn't because she was crying too and was probably having trouble speaking because I was squeezing her so hard. That's when Tommy decided to be a dick and just walked out of the funeral home, not even saying anything to our mom or Gilligan. I wanted to kill him.

After mom wiped the tears from my face and I gave Gilligan a hug, I walked through the crowd looking for Tommy and I was getting so mad that I said to myself, *When I find him, I'm not gonna say anything to him, I'm just gonna walk up to him and punch him in his mean face.* Then I saw him. He was sitting in a chair in the middle of the back row of the funeral home. He

was stuck between two old biddies in black who were saying their rosaries and he was crying, like really crying with a red face and his whole body heaving up and down.

After the wake, we all walked across the street to a bar and everyone was in a much better mood. Even my mom was smiling and laughing as she told everyone about Pop taking her to the bars on Third Avenue while he had his pints and sang his songs, so he did, and she would sit on the bar and wait for him to finish his antics and throw her onto his shoulders so they could head uptown to the next bar. Everyone laughed and toasted and shouted Pop's name and they drank their drinks and told more stories.

The one sole surviving Irish musician from Pop's kitchen sing-alongs, Brady, the fiddle player, raised his glass and said, "Let this be for the soul of Pop McSweeney."

Everyone raised their glass.

"May it be received," they responded before they drank.

Gilligan told everyone that she thought Pop must have known the Lord would be calling for him soon.

"Wouldn't you know, when I went to look for his suit to be buried in, I couldn't find it anywhere until I closed the bedroom door and there it was on the hook and it had just come from the dry cleaner's a few days earlier," Gilligan said. "Mind you, this is a suit he hadn't worn in twenty years, and why would a man get the urge to send a suit that he hadn't worn in twenty years to the dry cleaner's unless the Lord had given him a sign and touched his shoulder and whispered in his ear that the suit was in need of a press? Because if you're going to be meeting our savior you can't be wearing a wrinkled suit."

There was silence after she told that story and all of Pop's friends and family nodded. My Uncle Mark then turned to me and asked if I'd like to say a few words or tell a story. I shook my head.

"Come on, kid. If you can't tell a halfway entertaining story about one of the funniest men you'll ever meet then you've got no right to stand at this bar or be part of this family." I looked to my dad and he shrugged.

"Your Uncle Mark is right. Tell us one thing you remember about your grandfather."

I couldn't believe my dad was doing this to me. I didn't know most of these people and wasn't even supposed to be allowed in the bar, but I had no choice.

"OK," I said. "There was this one story Pop told me that he thought was so funny, he told it to me a bunch of times. He said the night my dad proposed to my mom, he and my mom went out to celebrate and they were sitting in a booth at a bar and my mom was crying."

Uncle Mike jumped in, "She's always been given to the tears, hasn't she?" The people that knew her well all nodded.

I said, "But this time she was crying because she was happy. But then somebody told you guys, her brothers, that they saw your sister in the bar down the street crying. So, you two ran in there and didn't ask any questions—you grabbed my dad and dragged him outside and were about to beat him up when my mom ran out screaming at you to stop, and she had to show you the ring to prove that she was crying happy tears and not sad tears. And then all four of you walked up the block to the apartment to wake up Pop and tell him the good news but he was out drinking. So, you had to go to every bar in the Bronx

to find him and when you finally did, he looked at the engagement ring my dad gave my mom and he just shook his head and said, 'That won't do, so it won't.' And you all walked back up the Concourse to the apartment and Pop took out Grandma's old engagement ring and gave that to my dad, even though it wasn't as nice as the ring my dad got my mom because Pop got Grandma that ring when they still lived in Ireland and were really poor. And then my dad had to re-propose in front of all of you in the kitchen and that's it. That's all I remember."

I didn't get any laughs because it's not really a funny story, but I was told I was allowed to stick around. My mom then had to show everybody the ring and as she did the smile from their wedding album returned to her face.

# 5

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Something has been going on with my mom. She's down in the dumps almost every day. There's the normal sadness she gets when she talks about her childhood and all the things that are different now, but this summer seems different, and it started even before Pop died. My dad says it's nothing to worry about, that's just the Irish in her.

"We've got no talent for happiness," he says.

I guess the first time I noticed her sadness was a few years ago when I moved out of the room I shared with Tommy because he was hitting puberty and needed his space.

We still had our toys and books and stuffed animals from when we were really little on the dresser shelves and my mom was asking us what we wanted to donate to the poor and what she should box up as a keepsake. As she was standing on a chair, reaching up to take down some stuffed animals from the top shelf, she started crying suddenly. Me and Tommy didn't know what to say, so we said nothing. We just looked down at the floor and hoped she would stop, but she didn't. She just stood there, up on this chair, holding this little stuffed animal bear we called Balboa and cried. When she was done, she spoke.

“I don’t know where the years went.”

Again, me and Tommy didn’t say anything. Then she stepped down off the chair and sat next to me on my bed and handed me Balboa.

“Do you remember when you got this?” she asked.

I shook my head and that made her cry too. She told me that we were having Easter dinner at Grandma from the City’s apartment and Tommy had thrown me across the room and I slammed my head on the edge of a desk and we had to go to the hospital to get stitches and that’s why I have that scar above my right eye.

“You really don’t remember that?”

“No,” I say.

“What about you?” she asks Tommy.

“I guess,” says Tommy, but he doesn’t look up when he says it.

“We ran you down into the car with Grandma and she insisted on taking you all the way across town to Flower-Fifth Avenue Hospital instead of St. Clare’s which was only a few blocks away because she worked at Flower-Fifth Avenue and she and I fought the whole way through Central Park because you were bleeding all over me and all over the back seat of the car and your Grandmother kept telling me not to worry, it’s just a little blood. You don’t remember that at all?”

“No,” I say again.

But I’ve heard this story a thousand times because every Easter we go into the city to go to Mass at Holy Cross on Forty-Second Street where my father and his brother were altar boys, and then we walk over to Tenth Avenue to where my father grew up, and he and his mother tell us all the old stories about hanging out on the stoop and all the trouble he and his brother used to get into,



and isn't it a shame that the neighborhood is so dangerous now with these new Irish upstarts that kids can't hang out on stoops all night long and now have to worry about getting stabbed or shot, and my dad jokes that the neighborhood wasn't safe back then and that the only difference was they used to know who the bad guys were. But before we can go up for Easter dinner we have to walk to Thirty-Eighth Street and stand in front of an old garage and Grandma tells how her husband's father, my great-grandfather, was such a great man, a Pioneer, don't you know, and how he took the pledge as a young man to not be a drunk—a "Pioneer" is what they call someone who promises not to drink—and how he started his own trucking company, owned five of his own trucks, and even owned this building we're standing in front of, but his son—her husband, my dad's father, my grandfather—was such a disappointment and a drunk and a fool, that the great man, the Pioneer—the one they called the Big Guy because he was tall as a building and as strong as an ox, whose own father couldn't read or write when he came to this country and yet the Big Guy built his own trucking company—don't you know, he chose not to pass the family business on to a no-good bum of a son, but instead sold it to a friend. We then walk to the Landmark Tavern on Eleventh Avenue and everyone sits at the bar and we toast to all the dead including my grandfather, even though just a minute before we were cursing his name, calling him a louse and a skell if ever there was one who didn't deserve a piece of his father's trucking company because of his wicked drunken ways, but it's Easter and it's a time for forgiveness and that's what you do. Finally we walk back to the apartment at 441 Tenth Avenue, climb the stairs to the fifth floor, and after we have our Easter dinner, Grandma

tells the story of when Tommy threw me across the room into the desk and we went to Flower-Fifth Avenue to get stitched up and if we had gone to St. Clare's like your mother wanted to you'd have a much bigger scar because everybody knows the best doctors are at Flower-Fifth Avenue.

I don't remember any of it, but I guess on the way home from the hospital with my eyebrow stitched up, I was still so upset and wouldn't stop crying that we stopped to get ice cream on Third Avenue before going over the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge and there was the cutest toy store next to the ice cream shop and this little teddy bear was sitting in the window and I begged my mom to get it even though it was pretty expensive and my dad didn't want to because the kid's already got a stuffed animal, doesn't he, and what does he need another one for, but my mom insisted because only that precious cute bear would make her little Kneeney feel better. My dad then insisted we call the bear Balboa because the kid's eye looks like he just went twelve rounds with Apollo Creed and if I have to shell out seven dollars for a stuffed animal he doesn't need then I should at least get the naming rights.

"And the minute you held your little Balboa, you finally stopped crying. You don't remember that at all?" she asks me again and I want to tell her I do remember because I know that's what she wants to hear, but I don't. At that time, I still lived in fear of breaking the Ten Commandments, so I couldn't lie to her.

Then she asks, "So, I'm assuming you want to keep Balboa?"

"No, not really," I say.

Big mistake, I know. That's a time when I'm sure even Jesus woulda said it's OK to lie because she gets so mad at me that

she throws Balboa in the garbage can, storms out of the room, and doesn't talk to me for two whole weeks. When my mom gets that pissed, she doesn't say anything, she just gets quiet. "The Queen of the Silent Treatment" my dad calls her.

"Another blessing of an Irish upbringing." He then adds, "As the late Pop McSweeney would say—the rug is there for a reason, so it is."

My dad can tell I don't understand what he means by that. "It's where we sweep all the shit we don't want to talk about."

A few months later when I go up to the attic to get our Christmas lights for the tree, I find Balboa packed up in a cardboard box with all my other childhood stuff. Kinda like the shit under the rug, I guess.

## FAMILY PHOTOS

I grew up hearing my parents talk about their childhood and the stories they passed down from my grandparents and great-grandparents. The characters in *A Kid from Marlboro Road* draw from the people I knew growing up. In the following pages of Burns and McKenna family photographs you'll meet some of them.



**Coming from Ireland.** My grandfather Mike (on the left, holding my Uncle Jim) is the inspiration for Pop McSweeney. Like Pop's wife in the book, my grandmother Mary Catherine, seated in the middle front row, died in the Bronx when my mother was three years old.



FEAR  
THE  
FLAMES

• A NOVEL •

OLIVIA ROSE DARLING

*Fear the Flames* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## PROLOGUE

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THERE ONCE WAS A PRINCESS BORN ON A CRISP WINTER night with enough fire in her soul to rival the frost that covered the earth. The sky wept as she did, and the stars burned brighter when she opened her eyes for the first time.

Dragons had not been seen in Ravaryn since the gods walked among mortals, or so the legends say. The gods had been resting for five hundred years, and yet the souls of dragons came alive and created light where there was once darkness.

The princess with hair nearly as dark as the night and eyes like two embers reflecting the fire within was a small thing, nothing anyone would believe could alter the fate of the world. But is it not the most unsuspecting people who do the most extraordinary things?

On her first birthday, the king and queen of Imirath held a celebration in honor of their daughter. They finally had an heir after trying for several years and cherished their baby wholeheartedly. Following the long-established tradition, they invited the rulers of Galakin, a kingdom far across the Dolent Sea, to join in the festivities.

They arrived, along with their retinue, bearing dragon eggs that some would see as tragedy wrapped in a bow. The queen of Galakin brought her seer to issue a piece of good fortune for the child, as was their custom. The seer claimed that the gods came to her in a dream and informed her that the dragon eggs that had been passed down through generations belonged to the princess. The eggs were so old, they were considered fossils, but they began rumbling on the night of

the princess's birth. When the eggs were placed before the princess, five vibrantly colored baby dragons sprang free and perched around her cradle.

The princess and her dragons were one.

They were tethered by their souls.

If the seer had stopped there, perhaps all would've been well, but not all stories have happy endings. The seer proclaimed that the princess's soul was forged from the fire of the gods, creating a link to the five dragons that could not be broken by any mortal or god, and that she would be either the ruination or the glory of her kingdom.

The child grew, as did the dragons, and she could often be seen walking about the castle speaking to or cuddling with the tiny beasts. They slept where she slept. They ate when she ate. When she played, so did they. They were inseparable. Their love was like no other.

People are often threatened by love when they realize both the absence and power of it. What is love if not the one thing in this world that defies logic? Love is the emotion that can make someone run toward danger, but those threatened by it sometimes become the danger.

One day, nearing her fifth birthday, the princess threw a fit over dressing for a dinner, and her maid fetched the king. Surely he could calm down his precious daughter. But the king had become consumed by the prophecy, watching his daughter and her dragons with suspicion, fear, and jealousy. When she continued to defy him, he raised his hand to her, and the green dragon sprang forward, biting off his pinkie.

In that moment, the castle became a prison.

Shackles were locked around the princess's wrists, and the dragons were plucked from the air and shoved into cages when they refused to leave her side. The princess fought with all her might, slicing her wrists open on the metal, scarring her for life as she dug her nails into the floor to get back to her dragons.

Those who had treated her with kindness and deference became those who beat her for treason.



The bond was a curse to Imirath, but no matter what happened, that little girl never saw it as anything other than a blessing. The princess was everything to her parents . . . until she became their biggest regret. And in the dungeons of Imirath, the happy child became a creature of darkness. She morphed into her father's personal monster but never lost her kind heart, even if it was damaged. She gathered all the pain that was dealt to her and forged herself into a weapon that she vowed to one day turn on the kingdom, forcing them to suffer her wrath for all they had taken from her.

Vengeance is a promise signed in blood, but the princess believed that the blood of the dragon flowed through her. The dragons were her kin, and there was not a line she wouldn't cross to liberate her family.



*Part I*

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# THE DEAL



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## CHAPTER

# ONE

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**R**AIN AND WIND WHIP AGAINST MY CHEEKS AS I URGE MY horse to run faster into the dark forest with only moonlight and lightning to aid my vision. Thunder rumbles throughout the sky in tandem with horse hooves pounding the dirt. There are many reasons for a mission that requires riding through dangerous conditions—secrecy, desperation, curiosity, revenge, and haste, to name a few. I stopped trying to dissect my intermingling emotions years ago but can't deny the overwhelming sense of curiosity that courses through me tonight.

The steep mountainside resembles a maze of fallen trees, uneven paths, and slick rocks. My cloak does little to keep the chill from seeping into my bones, and several strands have ripped free from the braid that falls down my back, sticking to my face as if they're coated in syrup. But I'll never pass up an opportunity to gain information about the tension brewing between Vareveth and Imirath.

Hatred coils through me and a grimace contorts my face when I think of my imprisoned dragons. King Garrick will pay for what he's done in blood, and even that won't be enough. The patrol I sent out informed me of a sighting of soldiers from my father's enemy kingdom, and I want to know what they're doing so far from home and traveling in one of the most dangerous parts of the continent.

The Terrwyn Forest is filled with beasts, bandits, and several

poisonous plants, and the mist that leaks down from the mountains is enough to send even the most seasoned explorer plummeting off a sharp cliff. If you keep your wits about you and follow the faint sound of trickling river water, you'll find my kingdom, Aestilian, hidden in a valley beside the Syssa Falls.

Finnian's horse increases its pace and strides beside mine. His ginger curls lie flat against his forehead, and his porcelain skin almost glows through the darkness. "Are you going to tell me why you ran into the house and dragged me out like a deranged goblin?" he shouts over the storm.

Technically I never told Finnian why we left, but we stopped clarifying details with each other years ago.

Wherever I go, he goes.

Wherever he goes, I go.

"A deranged goblin?"

"Yes." He clears his throat, and I already know he's about to imitate my voice. "*Finnian, make haste! Get your ass on a horse! A corpse moves faster than you!*" His voice cracks on the last word, which only increases my laughter.

"Vareveth soldiers were spotted at a tavern here, and it's a bit of a hike for a pint."

We slow our horses while passing through the weather-worn gate, their hooves sloshing in the muddy road. The scent of salt lingers in the air that wafts off the sea. I've been to this village before, but the dark wood houses, shops, and taverns look even drearier while shrouded in gloom.

I follow Finnian toward the rowdy establishment packed with soldiers, and we tie our horses off on a post. It's best to keep them close in case anything goes wrong. We're lined with weapons but no armor, for the sake of blending in as travelers. Knives adorn my waist corset and down my legs until they reach my boots; the only hint to my identity is the two dragon daggers I never go without.

Lantern light dances across Finnian's freckle-dusted cheeks. "What's the plan?"

“You stick to the lower levels and see what you can find out from the soldiers who are too deep in their pints. I’ll spy through the floorboards on those of higher ranks.”

He nods, straightening out his red tunic before disappearing into the tavern.

A few minutes later, I’m encompassed in a sea of off-key musicians as the creaky door falls shut behind me. I’ve never been a fan of noisy places, but Finnian thrives in them. It’s what makes us a good pair. I peer through the crowd and spot him sitting at the bar, surrounded by several dark green cloaks. He throws his head back in a boisterous laugh, and even though I can’t hear him, the song of his laughter is a melody that’s stitched into my brain.

I steady my footing on the uneven floor while making my way to the dark staircase in the corner, keeping my head down as I weave through the mismatched tables filled with soldiers playing cards or shouting for another round of drinks. Nobody turns toward me. They’re all too absorbed in whatever is in front of them.

The tavern is as plain on the inside as it is on the outside. There’s no point in fuss and frills when everyone comes here for a single purpose—to get drunk while passing through. Wooden beams shoot up toward the ceiling to support the second floor, and the walls are completely bare aside from the rusting lanterns with hardened puddles of candle wax beneath them.

My eyes water as I walk through thick clouds of pipe smoke that waft through the small space. I stick to the shadows along the wall and take my first step up the rickety staircase. It creaks so loudly that if I hadn’t done this ascent countless times, I would think the wood isn’t strong enough to hold any weight. But I continue my journey without a second thought, dodging cobwebs along the way.

I pause at the top of the stairs, straining my ears for any signs of movement or breathing, but nothing reaches me. The open attic is filled with bags of grain, barrels of wine and ale, dust-filled furniture, and anything else the tavern may need. It’s the perfect place to escape for dalliances in the dark. The only light infiltrating the space comes

from moonlight trickling through holes in the roof and lantern light rising from cracks in the floorboards.

My steps are light even though nobody will be able to hear them over the noise. The last thing I want is dust raining down on one of their drinks, giving me away before I've even had the chance to acquire any information. I navigate the floor while picturing the layout of the tavern in my mind—maneuvering to the section where I know the generals sit, hoping they'll reveal something worthy of squatting in an attic. I cringe while looking down at the dirt- and dust-covered floorboard I always press my ear to. It's far dirtier than usual.

I take a knife from my thigh and rest my head against the small crack after wiping it with my cloak. The familiar steel is a welcome presence in my palm. Ever since I escaped Imirath, I've never gone a single day without a knife—even before I knew how to use them. I close my eyes and let all other noises disappear, zoning in on the conversation that drifts into my ears as smoke rises through the air.

“King Egor may be a pushover sometimes, but he won't give up on this,” a deep male voice rumbles.

“He knows this is in Vareveth's best interest, and Cayden won't let him,” a sharp feminine voice answers.

*Cayden.*

Cayden Veles, Commander of Vareveth, is both the most feared and youngest warlord on the continent at only twenty-nine. He's as rich as a greedy god paired with the morals of a demon. Many even refer to him as the demon commander, or demon of Ravaryn.

“He's tired of losing soldiers at the border in pointless skirmishes. Tension's nearly at a boiling point already.” The same male voice cuts through the music.

“Yes, but this war will be over before it even begins if King Garrick finds a way to control the dragons.” My eyes snap open, and shock surges through my body. My heart pounds so rapidly that I worry it's knocking like a fist against the floor. Garrick doesn't let anything slip about the dragons. The only reason I know they're alive is that I would have felt their death. The bond I share with them would have broken,

and it would be excruciating. The mere threat of the dragons keeps all of Ravaryn from his borders.

When I was born, my parents threw a ball in celebration of the Atarah heir, and all kingdoms were invited, including Galakin. Queen Cordelia brought her court seer to offer my parents a piece of good fortune in honor of their baby princess. Dragon eggs that should've been no more than stones were laid at the foot of my cradle, and five dragons sprang free.

The prophecy stated that my soul is forged in flames and bonds me to five dragons, and that I would either destroy Imirath or bring it immeasurable glory.

I was four when my dragons were ripped away from me and I went from being a princess to a prisoner overnight.

Shaking my head, I refocus on the conversation below me.

"Cayden has a plan for that. You know he's always scheming or plotting," the male voice says.

"Well, let's see what happens. Maybe Princess Elowen truly is out here." A chill creeps up my spine, and I inhale a breath so sharp that my face mask clogs my airways. One of my hands tightens around the hilt of my knife while the other pulls the mask below my chin.

Vareveth soldiers are here . . . because they're looking for me.

"Hear anything interesting, little shadow?" a deep voice drawls from the top of the stairs.

I pull my mask up before pushing myself to my feet. My eyes peer across the space, taking in a large male figure leaning against the entrance. He pushes off the doorframe and slowly walks in my direction, the wood creaking under his heavy footsteps.

"Not really." I shrug while twirling the knife.

"Do you often gasp at idle gossip?" he asks, coming to a stop a few feet in front of me. A shard of moonlight dances across one of his angular cheekbones as if it longs to reach out and touch him. A jagged white scar littered and framed with red stretches from the corner of his right eye, across his cheek, and ends close to the corner of his full lips.

“I saw a spider,” I answer. He’s dressed like an assassin in a black leather chest guard, and a cloak, pants, and boots to match. His staggering frame is clad with weapons. Several knives line his legs, a short sword and axe are strapped to his waist, and a broadsword rests across his back.

“Hm,” he muses. “It’s too bad I know you’re lying, considering I know who you were listening to.”

*Fucking gods.*

“Perhaps you should go back to them. Surely they’re missing you much more than I will.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice you?” he asks, ignoring my previous suggestion.

Nobody ever noticed me before.

Even Finnian has commended my ability to move like a ghost through a crowd.

He’s standing between me and the only exit from the attic. My only other option is the window. I’ve jumped from higher, but Finnian is still downstairs, and there are too many soldiers between him and the tavern exit. I assess his size, still twirling my knife . . . he’s tall enough to make me tilt my chin up, but I’ve taken down monsters.

My hand tightens around the hilt, and I advance on the man a split second before he advances on me. I slam my fist into his jaw and ignore the throbbing sensation in my knuckles that follows. He hardly even flinches and grips my wrist. I shove my leg forward to knee him between his legs, but he senses my move and shifts away from the hit. He takes advantage of my off-balanced stance and pries the knife from my hand. Tossing it aside, he yanks me toward him, takes my other wrist, and slams my back into the wall.

“Now that we got that out of the way, what did you hear?” The light is just strong enough for me to make out an arrogant smirk and the intensity that laces his gaze.

“I think you should have pinned me to a wall in a bigger room. I don’t think it’s large enough to accommodate your ego.” I strain against his hold.



He quirks a dark brow, and his smirk grows. “Knives, spying, and a sharp tongue. You’re playing a dangerous game because I’m intrigued.” His eyes dance over my face again but snag on my mask. “May I take that off?”

My heart skips a beat, but I don’t let it show through my eyes. I already know the game he’s playing. If I refuse, he’ll know I’m a person who doesn’t want to be identified, which isn’t entirely true. I simply want to enter the game on my own terms, and I know he’s part of the battalion looking for me.

“You have me pinned to a wall, and yet you’re asking permission to remove my mask?”

“Chivalry’s not entirely dead.” He presses against me harder and angles his head closer to mine. If he thinks I’ll crumble, he’s sadly mistaken.

He slides my hand against the wall, bringing it closer to my right. His grip on me loosens, and I yank forward, breaking his hold and shoving him back. I knee him where it will hurt him most and swipe his legs out from under him, praying nobody below us heard him fall.

I climb onto him and cage his torso between my legs. We’re still shrouded in darkness, but his calculating gaze blazes through the shadows. I grab another knife from my thigh, hold it to his throat.

“I much prefer this position.” I place my free hand on his chest and lean forward to hover above his face.

“I can’t complain.” He lazily tucks a hand behind his head, and his voice is void of any anxiety one might have with a knife against his neck.

I ignore his comment and continue in my pursuit. “What does your commander want with the Atarah heir, soldier?”

His face shows no emotion. “Why would I tell you anything my commander wants?”

“You don’t know the Atarah heir; I do. It’s a rather simple concept if your brain can manage to work that hard.”

He tucks his tongue into the side of his cheek. “The heir could be useful in the upcoming conflict.”

“How?” I push the knife farther into his skin but not hard enough to draw blood yet.

“You said you know her?” His right brow rises slightly, and his scar moves with it.

“Yes.”

“Would she be willing to meet with my commander?”

A tangled ball of curiosity, anxiety, and excitement clangs through me. I could have a meeting with the Commander of Vareveth—my father’s enemy.

But what if it’s to ransom me?

“Not yet.” His eyes narrow, and he waits for me to name my terms. I open my mouth to list them, but I’m cut off by an inhuman growl coming from the roof. It’s a sound I’m unfortunately familiar with.

A netherwraith.

The deadly creature drops into the attic from the largest hole in the corner of the roof. They can smell human blood from five miles away, and they crave it more than they crave water. It’s a giant beast covered in thick white fur with blood-red eyes. As the netherwraith grows, so do two curved horns on top of its head, and they’re sharp enough to pierce you if it decides to charge. A forked tongue hangs from its mouth, dripping in a frothy venom. It’s a beast of nightmares, as are all the beasts that prowl the Sweven, Terrwyn, and Seren Mountains.

I scramble off the soldier and press my back into the wall while he rises to his feet. He unsheathes the broadsword from his back and a throwing knife from his thigh as his predatory gaze tracks the beast.

“Name your terms,” he states without taking his eyes off the netherwraith. It prowls forward with its sights set on the soldier. I slide against the wall and move closer to the stairs. I need to get to Finnian.

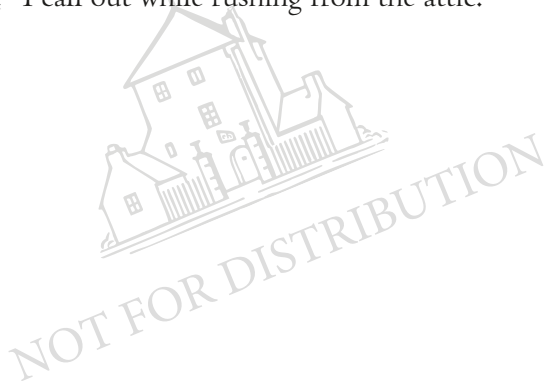
“There’s a clearing where the Fintan River meets Lake Neera. Meet me there tomorrow night with a token of good faith.” The beast moves past me, still dead set on the soldier.

“A token of good faith?” He snickers. “My minuscule faith isn’t placed in things many deem *good*.”

“I won’t send the heir to you only to be ransomed. Show me you’re willing to work with her, and I’ll judge whether you get to meet her. I’m not particularly fond of you so bring your charm next time, soldier.” I now stand directly behind the netherwraith. It’s the diversion I need to escape, but I can’t let him die before finding out what Vareveth wants. I throw the knife in my right hand; the beast shrieks as the blade sinks into its back leg. I turn away, sprinting the rest of the way toward the stairs.

“There isn’t a single place in this world where you can hide from me, you understand?” His tone makes me pause. I crane my neck in time to see him raise his sword toward the beast as he crouches into a perfect defensive stance. “If you run, I’ll find you,” he declares, taking one last look at me before swinging his sword at the beast that springs in his direction.

“Come alone!” I call out while rushing from the attic.





# ELEANORE OF AVIGNON

*Evelyn*  
of Novel

ELIZABETH DELOZIER

"Emotionally riveting and exquisitely told, *Eleanore of Avignon* is an unforgettable exploration in story form of who we become when all that we love most hangs in the balance. A powerful and compelling debut. I loved it!"—SUSAN MEISSNER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Only the Beautiful*



DUTTON

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This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

## Chapter One

✧ November 1347 ✧



he sun is low by the time I reach the woods. I pause at the crest of the hill and look back the way I came, pulling my cloak tighter against the wind.

The river below winds a ribbon of molten gold around the city walls. The bone-white steeple of Notre-Dame des Doms reaches over the rooftops like a scolding finger, the scaffolding of the Palais Neuf rising daily beside it. Even from this distance, frantic hammer blows and the shouts of stone masons echo across the water. When Pope Clement VI arrived in Avignon five years ago he was not sufficiently impressed with the newly built palace of his predecessor, Benedict XII—no, Clement’s palace must be the largest in the world, the most elaborate.

It is a blessing to be out of the city, to breathe the sweet smell of earth instead of urine and woodsmoke. I step off the cart-rutted road into the dappled shadows with my empty basket swinging.

I could sleepwalk this invisible path my mother trod through ancient oak trees, past crumbling Roman walls and forgotten olive groves.

Dusk comes early to the woods this time of year; I must work quickly to be back before the city gates are locked at nightfall.

Under the cool shade of the oaks, comfrey grows. I spot the tiny purple flowers and kneel, pull my knife from the waistband of my skirt, and slide it through their slender stalks. I review my mental list: comfrey for Anes's swollen knees, fennel for the baker's fussy baby, pennyroyal to keep the fleas at bay. They are relentless since the rain started, and Margot keeps me up all night with her scratching.

The thought catches like a canker sore. *Margot.*

Our argument from the morning plays in my head, the words worn smooth as river stones with repetition.

"Why must it be him?" I'd demanded, pacing our room like a cat. "You could have anyone, Margot. Any merchant or solicitor or physician. Why must it be Erec Dupont?"

My twin sister sat on our bed, spine straight and hands folded. "Because I love him," she said simply.

"And it doesn't hurt that he is rich," I retorted.

"That is unfair," she said, the color rising in her cheeks. "You know I do not marry him for his money."

In a few short months she will leave me and our comfortable home in the rue des Lices for the echoing Dupont mansion, where her future mother-in-law presides like a pale, spiteful spider. From our family pew I shall watch the back of my sister's dark head bent meekly beside the other merchants' wives with their wealth evident in the lace at their cuffs and the jewels in their ears. And I will patch my skirts, dry herbs and brew tonics, make ointments for kitchen burns and set broken bones. It will be my fate to care for my father as he ages, watch as my own reflection becomes tired and lined.

"All those years when you and Mother were together in the woods, or making house calls, or bent over your medicines, where was I?" There was no anger in the turn of her mouth, only a surprised kind of hurt.



The memory of a hundred mornings came rushing back like something dreamed: Mother's knuckles against the Duponts' elaborately carved front door, Erec's pale hair glinting in the gloom of the hall. Before we could afford to hire Anes, Margot spent many days in that cold house.

"You had Mother," my sister continued. "And I had Erec."

"You could have come with us," I said, holding the guilt away. "We asked you, I remember. And you did come, once or twice." But even as I said the words, they sounded hollow. I saw Margot as a little girl squeezing her eyes shut, clutching Mother's skirts with bunched fists, sent to wait outside with the other children while Mother and I pulled their new brother or sister into the world.

"You know I was never much for blood, Elea," Margot said. "But I did like holding the babies."

And most of all I dread the day when I am called to Margot's bedside as her midwife. I pray she will not die as Mother did, with the blood soaking the fine down of her marriage bed and I helpless, again, to save her.

A howl cuts through the cold air.

I freeze. I scan the woods around me, alert as a rabbit, but nothing moves between the dark trees. Images of wolves from some book of chivalry spring into my head, but no wolf has been seen in Avignon in decades.

The animal howls again, low and desperate, ending in a whimper.

It came from the meadow.

I reach into my basket, pull out the battered tin spoon I use for digging up fennel bulbs and hold it before me like a weapon. I walk forward, aware of my raucous breathing, the suck of my boots in the wet ground. Ten steps. Twenty. Thirty. I reach the thin trees and pooling golden light at the edge of the forest.

Long ago, some industrious peasant hewed this clearing out of the woods. In the middle of the meadow sits the skeleton of a cottage,

crumbling walls with no roof and vines creeping through the stones like ladies' hair. It was my mother's favorite place. And at the side of the cottage, where the wild fennel grows, stands a wolf.

I step reflexively behind an oak with my pulse tripping. Did it see me? Should I run? I am about twenty paces away, but if I step lightly . . .

The animal whimpers, a pathetic canine sound that tugs at my chest. Ignoring my wiser instincts, I peer around the edge of the tree.

The creature has not noticed me. Its great head is bent, worrying at something in the grass. I examine the ridges of its loose body, the powerful haunches, the shape of its head. A dog, not a wolf—but unlike any dog I have seen. This is an animal caught between its wild ancestors and the friendly creatures that lie beneath tables and beg for scraps. Its black hair stands like quills between ridged shoulder blades, its face is long and angular.

The dog cries out again. With a sinking feeling in my belly, I realize its leg is caught in a trap.

I have seen the victims of poachers on Queen Joanna's land—rabbits, foxes, the occasional genet—but never, before, alive. They lie with glassy eyes, their muzzles stained with blood from trying to gnaw off the trapped limb, their precious pelts picked by vultures.

I say a prayer, return the spoon to my basket, and abandon my hiding place for the brassy light of the meadow.

The dog swings its head toward my sudden movement. It jumps back, yelps as the iron bites deeper. I steady the blood thrumming in my ears and put a hand on the oak trunk. I reach out to the dog the way my mother taught me, imagining the words and actions in my mind.

*Hello, brave creature. I am sorry you are in pain. I will not hurt you. I can help, if you let me.*

The dog stares back at me, ears flattened against the long skull. I note the powerful muscles, the thick pointed claws. But he—yes, it is a he—is still. He is listening.

*I can open the trap and release you. But you must trust me.*

His wild eyes hold mine for the space of ten heartbeats. Then, slowly, he inclines his head. When he lifts his gaze again, the wolf is gone. Only the dog remains.

I hold my breath and step through the dead grass.

Just out of his reach I kneel down, bring my face level with his. I am not my mother. Once free, he could rip out my throat, leave me to bleed out on the leaves beside him.

Inch by inch I raise a hand, stretch it toward him. His breath is hot on my face, my nose fills with the wet wool of his coat. He flinches as my hand meets his breastbone. Through the thick fur and muscles his heart throbs in its cage of bones.

He takes a deep breath. His shoulders relax, ears soften. Beneath my fingers his heart slows, and he is still.

“Good,” I whisper. “Good dog.”

Satisfied he will not hurt me, I turn my attention back to the trap. Under the dog’s paw, at the center of the device, there is a pin. If I can free it from its coupling, I should be able to wrest it open. Gently, carefully, so slowly, I place my left hand on the base to steady it. With my right hand I grab the end of the pin; it is slippery with blood, caught in the metal. I wrap the hem of my skirt around it, twist and pull. The pin starts to move. I slide it all the way out, take another breath, and wrench the jaws of the trap apart.

The dog cries out again as the iron teeth separate from his leg, pulling dried blood and fur with them. He lifts his paw out gingerly. It hangs limp at the end of his leg, white bone visible through the gore. He tries to put weight on it and yelps. Without thinking I reach my hands out toward him. He turns and runs, limping, into the trees.

I stand up, shaking, and call to him in my gentlest voice. I unwrap the loaf of bread Anes insisted I pack, hold it high so the breeze might bring the scent to him. I walk a wide circle around the cottage, hoping he will reappear. But he is gone.

He would have come back to my mother. He would have placed his

head in her lap, allowed her to stroke his ears. He would have followed her home.

Animals do not love me, not the way they loved her. When I am out in the woods, I never look down to find a snake wound around my ankle, as though enjoying the way my skin feels under its scaly belly. Deer do not disentangle themselves from the shadows to rest their velvet noses in my open palms, as if I am the priest at Saint-Agricol, my hands holy water.

But sometimes, I feel someone following me and glance over my shoulder to catch a cat curling around the corner with his tail high. Or watch a bird land too close, then hop closer, bright black eyes surveying me with interest. It always ends the same, though: the cat runs off with a hiss, the bird flies away, chirping a warning to her friends. I am not who they thought I was.

I try to shake the ache in my chest that accompanies memories of my mother. It comes unheralded: I'm washing dishes with Anes or walking between the market stalls with Margot and suddenly I remember. *My mother is dead.* It sweeps through me like the winter mistral and blows out all the candles I have lit against it.

Two hollow years have passed since she was here, swinging her skirt, humming a ballad, touching my arm to point out some growing thing and explaining its use if it had one or why it should be avoided. *Everything is strung together,* she said. *Once you know that, you are never alone. Look around you. The earth is calling.*

And if it weren't for Mathilde Dupont, Erec's mother, she might be beside me now.

The wind picks up, hurrying dark clouds across the sky. On the ground along the south wall of the ruined cottage, shielded from the wind and coming rain, I lay the loaf of bread and two apples from my basket. Thinking of the dog in the wet night with his wounded leg, I pull the cloak from my shoulders and fold it into a neat square

against the wall with a prayer to Saint Francis that he will find this offering.

I turn back toward Avignon, to Father and Anes. And, for a bit longer, Margot.

I am almost to the road before I realize I forgot the pennyroyal and curse under my breath. Another week of flea bites for Margot and sleepless nights for me.



The wind reaches cold fingers up the cuffs of my sleeves and down the neck of my dress as I join the press of people entering the city from the Pont Saint-Bénézet. The flags mounted over the gate snap in the wind: the red-and-white triple tiara of the pope, Queen Joanna's blue-and-white fleur-de-lis. The scarlet-uniformed guards stare straight ahead, sword handles and scabbards glittering in the last of the light.

Inside the walls, the sounds of the city eclipse all thought: voices call in greeting or advertisement, dogs bark and mules bray, cartwheels clatter over cobblestones. Townspeople scurry through the narrow streets with hats clutched to heads against the wind. I turn onto the rue des Lices as the first blaze of lightning splinters the sky.

Voices carry from the open windows of the house on the corner along with the smell of cooking meat. A booming laugh—Father. A light contralto—Margot. And a third voice, mellow and masculine. Erec.

I want to run back to the woods.

"There she is!" Father says as I enter our home, getting to his feet with some difficulty; his bad leg bothers him with the change in weather. He is a slight man, an athlete in his youth, the fastest runner, the surest swimmer, all wasted when his horse sunk a foot in a rabbit burrow and trapped Father's leg beneath him. My parents met when

Mother's father—a physician, she his young assistant—came to treat my father. He is balding now, but his face is still handsome, still sun-tanned and youthful despite the hours hunched over the pope's ledgers by candlelight.

Margot and Erec stand across from him, their coloring a pretty juxtaposition of dark and light. I always forget how tall Erec is: although he is eighteen, a year older than me and Margot, in my head he is still eight, or ten, or twelve, throwing apples at passersby from the roof, knees scraped by tree trunks or smeared with river mud. This broad-shouldered man in fine black wool is a stranger. Only his hair is unchanged since childhood, the same pale gold as his mother's.

"You're late," says my sister, a frown clouding her forehead. "We feared you would be caught in the rain."

Although identical at birth, after the age of three or four no one mistook us. Our eyes are Father's, wide-set and hazel, our noses narrow and straight above small mouths. But under Mother's dark widow's peak, Margot's skin is pale and creamy as milk, mine as brown as Father's and freckled across nose and cheekbones. When my rough hands bump against my sister in sleep, I am always surprised at her softness, the fine grain of skin and flesh beneath her chemise.

I hold out my arms to show I am dry. "As you see, I have returned unscathed."

"Where is your cloak?" Margot asks.

I think quickly. They would not understand the feral dog, how I knew he would not hurt me. Only Mother would.

"It was warm in the meadow," I lie. "I hung it on a branch while picking herbs and forgot it."

"That was foolish." Margot looks through the open window at the low sky, her hair gleaming in its complicated braid. "It will be ruined by tomorrow. You can use Mother's until I have time to sew you a new one."

I can tell by the set of her jaw that she is still angry with me from this morning, but she makes her voice pleasant for Erec's sake.

“We are celebrating!” says Father exuberantly, gesturing to the wine jug and cups on the table.

I raise my eyebrows in a question, although in the twisting of my guts I know the answer.

“Margot and I have set a date,” Erec says.

My sister turns to him, happiness spreading over her face like a sunrise.

“We will marry in spring, when my father returns from Paris.”

I had feared they would marry sooner. But it is set. Funny, to dread spring.

They are all staring at me, and I realize I have not responded. I bare my teeth in a smile.

“That’s wonderful news,” I say. “Congratulations.”

Father sits ungracefully on the bench. “Take a seat, Elea,” he says, pouring more wine.

I shift the basket on my arm as though it is heavy, although it contains only a few sprigs of comfrey. “In a moment,” I say. “I’ll unpack my basket and see if Anes needs help with supper.”

Without waiting for a response, I cross the hall and turn down the narrow passage that leads to the kitchen.

Anes bends over a pot on the fire with her back to the door, sampling the contents with a wooden spoon. I step over the threshold and drop my basket on the scrubbed oak table with a thud.

Anes starts, bumping her head on the low mantel.

“Oh! Sorry, Anes.” I hurry over to where she stands, rubbing her forehead.

“Saint’s blood, child,” she snaps. “You nearly sent me into the fire!” I wipe away the smear of soot on her temple and inspect the pink skin beneath.

“I expect you shall make a miraculous recovery,” I say solemnly, kissing the spot.

She pushes me away. “Those carrots need peeling.”

Grateful for the distraction, for something to do with my hands, I get to work.

Anes cooks like she does everything, with the Provençal love of simplicity partnered with a passion for perfection. She hovers around the kitchen like a plump fairy, tasting and salting and spicing with abandon. The results are always delicious.

At ten, Anes lost her entire family to the pox. She was left no money—her parents had been tenant farmers—so she was shipped off to the nearest, poorest convent to be raised by nuns. But she always had a gift in the kitchen. At sixteen she left the convent with a young baroness whose family plucked her from religious life to marry a wealthy wine merchant. The girl could rescind her lifelong vows of chastity, but she could not live without Anes's tarts.

Anes moved from house to house across the city as fortunes waxed and waned. When Margot and I were eleven, she came to live with us and quickly became a member of the family. Despite the countless hours spent in the kitchen with her, I have none of her culinary magic. When she was sick last winter, I made chicken soup—something I have helped her cook countless times—but when I brought her a bowl, she took one spoonful and spat it out. My concoction tasted like soap.

I look up now to see Anes surveying me, hands on wide hips.

"What's the matter with you?" she demands, looking me up and down. "Why so glum?"

"Nothing," I mutter. "I'm just tired. I walked up Mount Andaon."

"Not just today. The past few weeks. Since the engagement."

"It's all the rain," I lie, placing the last naked carrot in the bowl. "Tomorrow I'll brew a tea against melancholy. What else needs to be done?"

Twenty minutes later we emerge, sweating, from the kitchen, each bearing a heavy tray. Anes made pork and apple pie, the flaky golden crust decorated with pastry leaves and egg wash, boiled carrots tossed in butter and thyme, and courgette and onion soup.



“It smells delicious, Anes,” Erec says, lifting the tray lightly from her hands. She beams at him.

We take our places at the table: me beside Father; Erec across from me, beside Margot. Anes cuts and serves us each a generous slice of pie, then excuses herself. As always when we have guests, she will eat her supper in the kitchen.

Father fills the cups without watering down the wine for me and Margot. It is his finest, deep red and complex, reserved for the specialest of occasions. Father is exuberant. The only son of the city’s wealthiest wool merchant: a better match than he could have prayed for. Beautiful and accomplished though she may be with her Latin, her household accounting learned at Father’s side, her perfect needlework, Margot is still the daughter of a papal notary and a dead midwife. Every burgher’s wife and even some of the minor nobility clambered to match their girls with Erec Dupont. But for him, there has only ever been Margot. He will dress her in velvet and silk, keep her larder full of sugar and spices, buy meat for the table every day of the week. Never mind the madwoman upstairs, filling her head with poison.

Father bows his head to say grace. “Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts, which we receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord.” He pauses. “And thank you, Lord, for the forthcoming union of Margot and Erec. May their lives be long and happy, and may they be blessed with many children. Amen.”

“Amen,” we chorus, crossing ourselves.

I sip my wine, taste the grapes ripening in the hot summer sun, the dark rich soil in which they grew, and swallow the image of Margot, lying pale and sweat-soaked as blood blossoms between her legs.

“What news of Allistair?” asks Father after a few appreciative bites of pie.

Allistair Dupont, the eldest son of a middling cloth dyer, was blessed with a head for numbers and an eye for a good bargain. At the age of sixteen he took over the family business and quickly expanded a

small storefront in the rue des Teinturiers to a successful trading company with holdings in Paris, Bruges, and Lille. His marriage into Mathilde's family—one of the oldest in Provence—gave him connections in Navarre and Aragon when King Philip's war made it impossible to buy cheap wool from England. He is haughty, loud, and self-important. My mother quietly despised him.

"Father is well," Erec says, setting down his fork. "He is in Navarre, finalizing a contract. Then he travels to Paris. These rumors of illness and unrest have been good for business—people are buying wool as though the world is ending."

"And Mathilde?" asks Father.

I feel Margot's eyes on me and busy myself with my plate.

Erec takes a long sip of wine. "Mother is weak and feverish," he says, "which is not uncommon for this time of year. Dr. Laurent has been by to bleed her daily. He says she will improve when the weather turns. But the fever will not break."

"You did not tell me," says my sister, concerned. "I would have visited her."

"I did not want to worry you unnecessarily, my love. She is so often ill. But this affliction seems different." Erec turns, unexpectedly, to me. "I was hoping that Elea might come by to examine her."

The food turns to chalk in my mouth.

"The fever will not break," he repeats. "She passes in and out of reality. Today, she called for Bietriz."

My mother's name sends a shiver through me.

I glance at my sister, see my own disquiet mirrored in her face. Two years have passed since the last time I saw Mathilde Dupont, twisted in scarlet sheets. *I know what you are.* And my mother, in her deep, understanding love, forgave her.

"I am not my mother," I say, meeting Erec's blue gaze. "If her condition is as serious as you say, you should send for another physician."

He shakes his head. In the worried angles of his face, I catch a glimpse of the boy I knew. "We have had three physicians examine her. Father even brought one from Paris. The only medicines that made a lasting difference were Bietriz's."

"Elea," says Father, his mild voice laced with a warning. "I'm sure your other patients will understand. Madame Dupont's illness sounds serious."

"I realize what I ask," Erec interrupts gently. "And would not ask it if the circumstances were not grave."

In their yearlong courtship I have done my best to avoid Erec, turned from the door when I heard his voice as often as I could without drawing attention. He has never mentioned what transpired between our mothers. Their sisterly bond broken in a night, the poisonous rumors that followed. Father, like Mother, forgave Mathilde, called her slipping mind a tragedy, and when Erec first asked to walk Margot home from mass on Sundays, Father welcomed him with open arms. But Erec must guess what I think of his mother.

I glance around the table, meet my sister's pleading eyes and Father's disappointed ones.

"She asked for Bietriz," Erec repeats. "Please."

And suddenly my mother's voice rings through my head as clear as a bell, speaking the words she spoke that night.

*Take pity on her, Elea. She knows not what she does. She is a prisoner of her own mind.*

I think of the dog in the trap, who would have gnawed through the bones of his own leg to be free.

I have all the herbs for feverfew tonic. For Margot, who will soon live under Mathilde's roof; for my mother, who would want me to ease her friend's suffering, I will try.

"I do not know that I can help," I say, already regretting the words, "but I will make the medicine and come by tomorrow."

"Thank you," Erec says, relief bright in his face. "Thank you, Elea."

Lightning flashes through the open windows, followed by a boom of thunder. The clouds finally release their burden of rain.

Margot and I jump up and hurry to the casements to draw the mulioned panes together. As I drive the iron fastening home, Margot reaches out and covers my hand with hers. I pull my fingers free, not ready to make peace.

We settle back to our meal. For a few moments there are no sounds but the rain on the stone shingles and the scrape of cutlery.

“There is news of Queen Joanna,” says Father lightly.

Margot and I lock eyes, the tension between us momentarily forgotten. Joanna, queen of Naples, Sicily, and Jerusalem. Countess of our own region, Provence, through her Capetian blood, and the great-great-great-great granddaughter of my namesake, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Fierce, famously beautiful, a woman in a man’s world, she was Mother’s favorite, the heroine of our bedtime stories.

“She has married her cousin Luigi of Taranto—”

Margot gasps.

“Without the pope’s dispensation.”

I choke on my pie.

“Pope Clement is so furious that he has been confined to his bed all week with indigestion, and Surgeon de Chauliac is at his wit’s end for how to cure him,” Father finishes, refilling his cup happily.

Three Septembers ago, Queen Joanna’s first husband, Andreas of Hungary, was murdered. Strangled and hung from a balcony with his genitals mutilated, to be precise. Everyone believes Joanna arranged his death. The only reason she married him in the first place was to stave off a Hungarian invasion of Naples; Joanna was always supposed to hold the true power in the region. But petulant, childlike Andreas decided he wasn’t content as royal consort and must be crowned king.

I understand why she might have done it: there are few ways out of an unpleasant marriage. But I would have counseled more subtlety in the execution.

“What will Pope Clement do?” asks Margot. “Will he excommunicate them?”

Father laughs, swirling the wine in his glass so it catches the light. “Oh, no. He will do nothing but seethe in his chambers. The papacy only makes its home in Avignon at her pleasure. Clement can excommunicate them and limp back to the crumbling ruins of Rome to be murdered like Boniface VIII, or he can stay put in his ridiculous new palace and bide his time. It is said that there will be a trial.”

“A trial?” Margot and I repeat together.

Father nods. “Queen Joanna and her new lover will come to Avignon to stand trial for the murder of her husband.”

“But Andreas died years ago,” I say. “Why is the queen being prosecuted now?”

Father shrugs. “The pope did not want to choose a side. But Louis of Hungary, Andreas’s brother, has forced his hand; Naples will descend into civil war if he does not announce a verdict.”

Margot’s face is pink with excitement. Our fearless queen, in our city, *her* city, for the first time. There will be a parade. We will see her.

“Joanna needs the vocal support of the papacy,” Erec cuts in. “Louis has sworn vengeance upon her. He and his army have already taken Alba.” The words sound rehearsed, likely his father’s. “And it is said he will take Naples by winter. Unless the pope declares her innocent, the Hungarians will ransack the city and execute both the queen and her lover.”

“Luigi of Taranto may be fair game,” agrees Father, happy to be discussing matters of the world with a man. “But Queen Joanna cannot be murdered. Louis of Hungary knows this. He is the upstart king of a kingdom of peasants. He has neither the heft nor the pedigree to change the course of Europe’s future.”

The talk shifts from Queen Joanna to France’s endless war with England, to the rumblings of earthquakes and illness in the East. I allow my attention to drift in and out, lulled into a stupor from the wine

and food, and try to ignore the dread gathering in my mind like the storm clouds above. Tomorrow I will see Mathilde. Father throws back his head to laugh at something Erec said: a low belly laugh I haven't heard in ages. Margot watches Erec, her skin glowing like the moon.

Anes shuffles in to clear the plates, and Father pushes back from the table. I realize how late it is, how deeply tired I am.

"Please accept my thanks for tonight," says Erec.

"A match such as this deserves celebrating," Father replies, getting to his feet unsteadily. His wine cellar is emptier than it was this morning. "When Allistair returns, we must all dine together. It has been too long." He clasps Erec's hand, then he turns and walks carefully up the stairs to his room.

Erec takes his cloak from its hook beside the fire and says good night to my sister. I busy myself clearing the plates, trying to ignore their aching eyes, the way their hands meet like a drowning man reaching for the shore.

I take my time helping Anes in the kitchen in the hope that Margot will be asleep and I might crawl into bed beside her without talking. The dishes are washed and dried, the flagstone floor swept, and tomorrow's bread left to rise by the fire when I finally climb the stairs.

A ribbon of candlelight flickers under our door. I turn the handle and enter.

Margot sits up in bed with Mother's dog-eared copy of *La Commedia* open in her lap, her unbound hair tumbling over her shoulders like raw silk. I sit heavily in the chair in the corner and unlace my muddy boots.

"Thank you," says my sister quietly.

I tug a stockinged foot free and avoid her eyes. "If three licensed physicians couldn't cure Mathilde Dupont, I don't know what an herbalist will do. Despite what your soon-to-be mother-in-law may believe, I have no unnatural powers save Mother's tinctures and common sense."

Margot closes her book. "What is the matter with you?"

I don't reply. I pull off my second boot and shove it under the chair.

"Ever since Erec and I announced our engagement you have been horrible to me. You're behaving like a child."

"And you're behaving like a hound, waiting for her master at the door."

A mean hit. I regret the words even as they leave my mouth.

"Is it Erec you despise?" Margot asks, her voice climbing higher. "Or is it Mathilde? Because I've told you over and over again that Madame Dupont is to be pitied, not feared. You are holding on to this hatred because it feels good to have someone to blame. It's not her fault that Mother died, Elea. And you know it."

"It is her fault that Mother died without the care of a physician or midwife," I retort. "With no one but a frightened girl to help her."

Margot sighs, turns her eyes to the ceiling in the expression of the long-suffering. In the uneven light she looks so much like Mother that my chest aches. "We've been through this a hundred times. No one could have saved her. The baby was too big."

"And Father Loup?" I snap. "Did he not repeat Mathilde's lies when he stood over her deathbed and cursed her?"

I see the priest's long, curled spine, his reek of unwashed old age eclipsing the smell of rain and lavender and blood.

*If she were not already dying, I would burn her myself. And you, girl. Your time will come. The devil has his claws in you, I see it.*

I look up to find my sister watching me. The expression on her face suddenly makes me feel very young.

"He's gone." Margot's voice has lost its heat. "Shipped off to Arles, remember? Maybe dead. You know what Mother would say. Cut out this hatred before it poisons you. It is time to let the past go."

A voice deep inside me whispers that she is right. But Mother is not here. Her body lies beneath the stones of Saint-Agricol; her unshriven soul, if the priests are to be believed, wanders the flat plains of purgatory.

Margot snuffs the candle and curls under the blankets. I sit stupidly in the dark for a moment, then stand and shuck my clothing, my skin prickling under the thin chemise. I lift the bedclothes and lie with my back to Margot, taking up as little of the mattress as possible.

Across the cold inches between our spines, my sister slips into sleep. I listen to the step of the heart that, for three seasons, grew beside mine in the red sea of our mother. *Home*, it whispers. *Home. Home.*

I will miss her like the dead miss breathing.



“Unpredictable...This will have you on the edge of your seat.”

—SOPHIE HANNAH

# THE INHERITANCE

A NOVEL

TRISHA SAKHLECHA

VIKING

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Set in Baskerville

*Designed by Alexis Farabaugh*

*I didn't think it would end like this.*

*The dense, black woods smother me as I run through them.*

*The pelting rain drowns out all sound except the pounding inside my chest.*

*A bramble twists itself around my ankle, its thorns digging into my flesh. I yank myself free.*

*There is no time to waste.*

*I run.*

*A crack of lightning pierces through the darkness and my eyes flick up to the winding path in front of me, to the faint outline of the house, its silhouette bleeding into the tree-choked horizon.*

*Where the rest of the family are asleep, safe from the storm, blissfully unaware of what's happened.*

*I take a sharp, quick breath and force myself up the path, my trainers pushing into the damp earth, leaving behind a trail of mud-sucking footprints.*

*Another crack of thunder as lightning rips through the sky.*

*I slow down as the house comes into view, illuminated only by the moonlight filtering out through the clouds. Disconnected images flash past my eyes. The celebration, the announcement, the hike.*

*The dead body.*

*I stop. I need to focus. I can't afford to make any more mistakes.*

*I wonder how long it takes for a body to go cold. For the limbs to go stiff. The lips to turn blue.*

*I force myself up the final few feet and ease the door open. I'm trying to decide what to do next but the choice is snatched from me.*

*I freeze as the lights come on and two sets of eyes take me in, flicking past the scratches on my face, skimming across the ripped jeans and the trainers that are no longer white, before coming to rest on the stains that not even the relentless Scottish rain has been able to wash off.*

*Blood.*

*But not mine.*

*I look around the room. How did this happen? The decorations that had felt festive last night look menacing in the pre-dawn light. The family photos we had laughed over just hours ago now seem saturated with foreboding.*

*The words are barely a whisper but they ricochet around the space, bouncing off the walls, filling my ears. An echo from the past.*

*What have you done?*

*In this family, there's only one cardinal rule. Family first.*

*Always.*

*I grit my teeth. I know what comes next.*

*I don't have a choice anymore.*

*Perhaps I never did.*

1.

## ZOE

I twist onto my side and burrow deeper under the duvet, trying to drown out the sound of Aseem's voice. He's been on the phone with his sister Aisha for at least twenty minutes, his words punctuated by the short sighs and long silences that I have come to associate with my husband.

Aisha's been swanning around in LA for the past three months. The last time we spoke, she told me she was extending her stay, which is why I'd been surprised when my mother-in-law told me that Aisha would be joining us on this week-long trip. Aisha detests family holidays—understandably so—and I find it hard to believe that she would willingly swap her Malibu villa for a week on a Scottish island, irrespective of how important this week really is. But I've long since given up trying to untangle the knot that is the Agarwal family, so when my mother-in-law, Shalini, told me that Aisha would join us in

London, I kept my disbelief to myself. Aisha was supposed to meet us at Euston station an hour before the overnight train to Fort William.

As expected, she didn't show.

Her phone was switched off and the airline staff were adamant that she had never checked in for her flight to London from LA. With no way to reach her, Aseem, his parents, and I boarded the train carrying between us a vast range of emotions; everything from panic, worry, concern, and irritation rolled up and tucked in between us as tightly as the theplas and parathas that my mother-in-law had packed into her carry-on.

"That is not the point, Aish." Aseem's voice drifts in through the thick duvet. "Do you have any idea how worried we were? The least you could have done is called."

A few beats go by and in the muffled silence, I let my breathing slow down, focusing on the rhythmic sound of the train pushing against the tracks, letting the shunt and roll of the carriage lull me back to sleep. My eyelids have just begun to feel heavy when Aseem speaks again.

"Oh, come on. You know how much this trip means to Mama. And Myra's been planning this for months."

I roll onto my back and peel my eye-mask away, acutely aware of the queasiness building in the pit of my stomach. Aseem is sitting next to me, eyes closed, head leaning back, but I can tell just looking at the set of his shoulders that he's anything but relaxed. With everything we have going on, it's a stance I've seen him assume far too often over the past couple of months.

Aseem's voice, when he speaks, is measured, and once again I am reminded of the inner calm that he's able to navigate back to no matter how chaotic his surroundings. His unflappability has always been the thing that I love the most about him. And often, the thing that frustrates me the most.

"It's an island, Aisha. You can't just rock up whenever you want."

I inch closer to him and tug the curtain open with my toes. Dappled sunlight dances across our tiny cabin as the train winds its way through the glen, deeper still into the Highlands. I am tempted to click a quick picture for Instagram, but I doubt I can avoid catching my own reflection in the window and if there was ever a day for a “woke up like this” selfie, it’s not today. I’ve barely slept all night, I *know* my face will betray all the tell-tale signs of exhaustion and sleeplessness. I’m sure as hell not going to give the keyboard warriors who have been harassing me for months any more ammunition.

I imagine Aisha’s voice on the other end, the unimpeachable tone she seems to reserve for her family, the charming excuses she always has tucked up her sleeve, and then I watch Aseem melt, as usual giving in to his little sister. It’s annoying, yes, but there’s never been any point arguing with Aisha.

If there’s anyone in this family who can get away with murder, it’s her.

“Fine,” he sighs. “I’ll handle things here. *This time*. How quickly can you get to the airport in LA?”

I sit up and curl one arm around my husband, pressing myself into him as I lean over to reach for the bottle of water on the fold-down table. Three years of marriage and I still can’t keep my eyes—or my hands—off him. I snuggle up next to him, bottle of Highland Spring in hand.

I look at Aseem when he finally finishes the call, my eyebrows raised.

“She missed her flight,” he says, running a finger along my cheek.

“And her phone—why was it switched off?”

Aseem shrugs, unwilling to reveal the details of whatever latest escapade his sister’s been on. I don’t press him on it. I’d rather get the *real* story—no doubt involving an entirely inappropriate man and a few bottles of tequila—from her later. “She’s getting on the next flight out. But first,” he says, pulling me close and kissing me. I feel the anxiety from

earlier dissipate as his hand slips under my T-shirt and his fingers work their way up my back, massaging my neck, my shoulders . . .

The knock on the door feels so intimate, so startling, that we both jump apart. Almost on cue, my mother-in-law's voice filters through and Aseem scrambles out of bed, getting up to slide the pocket door open.

I remind myself that I love his attentiveness.

“Nashta?” my mother-in-law asks. Breakfast. One of the first Hindi words I picked up when I moved to Delhi. I ignore the flicker of irritation—it's barely seven a.m.—and climb out of bed.

It's just one week. I can do this.

“We'll be right there, Mama,” I say.

I straighten my T-shirt and wriggle past Aseem into the en suite. I shower as best as I can in the tiny space, then squeeze myself into the pair of jeans and jumper I'd packed for today, carefully applying my makeup in the moving train. I dab on an extra layer of concealer, plaster on my best smile, and step out of the cabin, determined to make this work.

Despite the early hour, the dining car is packed. When Myra first suggested we take the newly revamped overnight train to Scotland instead of flying, I'd pictured the epitome of luxury and #slowtravel: mahogany paneling and tartan furnishings, observation cars with overstuffed sofas and table service. But the Caledonian Express is more *Slumdog Millionaire* than *Murder on the Orient Express*. We spot Mama and Papa at the far end of the carriage and thread our way through the group of Chinese students who seem to have no concept of personal space.

I slip into the window seat opposite my mother-in-law, watching Aseem as he pushes his way to the bar with our rather large breakfast order.

It's only when I tear my gaze away from my husband that I realize



Mama's eyes are on him as well. Other than the black kohl rimming her eyes, her face is devoid of any makeup, her skin dewy and almost translucent in the early morning light. I make a mental note to book in with her facialist—her biweekly appointments at Aura Spa are the only thing more sacred to her than her astrologer—and considering the fact that at sixty she can easily pass for a forty-five-year-old, maybe she's on to something.

"He looks tired," she says, turning to face me after a moment.

Of course he does, I want to say. Aseem took a step back from his own start-up and took over the family business when Papa had a stroke four years ago. Ever since then, he's been working himself into the ground trying to turn a product he has zero interest in into something profitable. But there's little point in saying anything. The company, PetroVision, and the petrochemicals it manufactures, is Papa's pride and joy, and the last thing I want to do right now is to upset him, what with his retirement and the transfer of the shares looming.

"He's been up since four a.m. talking to the consultants," I say instead. Though Aseem's been running the company since Papa's illness, Papa's still the chairman and, most importantly, the sole shareholder. It's important he realizes just how hard Aseem's working on this deal. "Something to do with the payment terms for the sale."

"Can't your lawyer handle all this while we're on vacation?" Mama says, looking up at Papa, her finely arched eyebrows giving her a look between worry and disdain.

"It's a three thousand crore deal, Shalini. The buyer is my oldest rival," Papa says, barely looking up from his newspaper. "And Aseem's the COO. So no, the lawyers can't handle this."

As Papa carries on about how he built PetroVision up from scratch, how he didn't even have an assistant, let alone a lawyer when he first started, I tune out. It's a story we've all heard countless times before.

Three thousand crores. Roughly three hundred million pounds, just fifty million shy of the King's estimated net worth. The King.

It's a number that would have seemed completely unfathomable to me just a few years ago.

A number that *still* gets my heart racing.

And judging by how quickly everyone agreed to this trip, I'm not the only one. Ever since Papa announced his retirement, we've all been waiting for him to reveal his inheritance plan.

I let my gaze drift back to the window, to the amber sun slanting across the snow-capped Munros. Once the sale is complete, Aseem won't have to play by Papa's rules any more.

*We* won't have to play by Papa's rules.

We'll finally be free.

The atmosphere in the carriage changes as we pass a particularly dramatic stretch. There's an audible holding of breath before people scramble to the right-hand side, cameras in hand. I press my phone up against the window to snap a few photos as the train skirts along the edge of a cliff, the slowly rising sun bathing the valley and the loch at its heart glittering orange. Despite the obvious beauty, there is something unsettling about the landscape, a harshness that makes it seem unforgiving. Hostile. I put on a goofy grin and scrunch my hair, making sure I look a little sleep deprived and scruffy, then take a few selfies. My #instaperfect life relies on my looking imperfect.

I scroll through the pictures and pick the two best ones, carefully tweaking the color and temperature before posting it on Instagram with the hashtags accidentaladult, offgrid, and discoverscotland. My followers love me for my spontaneity, but the irony is that I only found success as an influencer when I stopped being spontaneous and started paying attention to who my followers are and what they respond to: adulting. My followers are expat millennials with Peter Pan syndrome,

so I've now got Excel sheets of hashtags and prewritten captions that give everything from fashion to travel a life advice spin. Everything about my seemingly off-the-cuff posts is planned to a military level of detail, snippets of my life tweaked and calibrated to appeal to my specific brand of followers.

It's exhausting.

But it's paid off. In less than two years, my account, *Accidental Adult*, has amassed half a million followers. I've progressed from being just another twentysomething trying to make it big online to being recognized and respected in the influencer space.

I'm busy responding to comments—close to a hundred in the space of five minutes—when Aseem returns.

“Did you close?” Papa asks him before he's even sat down.

“Not yet. Malhotra's being difficult about the earn-out period,” Aseem says, carefully lowering the plastic tray with our hot drinks onto the table. He slides the second tray, stacked high with croissants and fruit pots, across the table before squeezing in next to me. He picks out Mama's breakfast—yogurt and some fruit—and places it in front of her before helping himself to a banana. “But I've straightened him out. We should have the paperwork tomorrow.”

Papa nods. “We need to get this done. Keep checking in.”

“I will,” Aseem says between bites. “I'm handling it, Papa.”

I reach for a croissant. I know as soon as I've had my first bite that I'm not going to be able to stomach the whole thing. I set it down on a plate and take a tentative sip of the orange juice instead as the conversation pivots back to Aisha.

I try not to dwell on how much the last-minute flights—first class, of course—would have cost while Aseem fills his parents in. Aisha will arrive at Glasgow airport tomorrow to find a chauffeur waiting for her at arrivals, ready to escort her to the port at Mallaig, from where she

will be picked up and brought to the island. You'd think Aisha is a helpless teenager, not a twenty-seven-year-old "adventure-seeker" as she likes to call herself. I am half-expecting Papa to ask Aseem to stay back at Fort William so he can go and pick Aisha up himself, but he just sighs and turns back to his paper.

I glance up as an announcement crackles over the speaker and people start trickling out of the dining car. I gulp down the remainder of my juice and slide out of the seat.

Ten minutes to arrival.

This trip is meant to be a celebration. A family gathering to mark Papa's retirement and Mama and Papa's fortieth wedding anniversary. But the truth is we're all here for one thing and one thing only: the biggest piece of the pie. After the sale of PetroVision goes through, the family trust will be worth over three hundred million pounds. Up until now, Papa's been the sole trustee, doling out money to Aseem, Myra, and Aisha based on their needs and his whims. But thanks to a tax strategy that I can't quite wrap my head around, the terms of the trust are being amended to change it from a discretionary trust that Papa controls to a specific trust within which the shares of each of his three children will be fixed.

That's the real reason we've all dropped everything to be here. It's payday.

I push my shoulders back. Like Aisha, I'm not a fan of family gatherings, and if there is one thing that's more complicated than being on a family holiday, it's being on a family holiday on a Scottish island with no one to talk to except your in-laws and three hundred million pounds hanging in the balance.

But unlike Aisha, I don't have the luxury of bailing out. At least not yet. I need to make this trip work.

My entire future depends on it.

# MYRA

I squint as I carry the flowers into the kitchen, blinded by the unexpected winter sun pouring in through the picture window. I set the vase down on the dining table and rearrange the flowers one final time—freshly picked hydrangeas, lilies, and roses bristle against hawthorns and long tendrils of grass in a vintage crystal vase—the effect is spectacular, at once luxurious and rustic, much like the estate itself.

I pick out a few stray leaves from the vase and drop them in the bin, glancing briefly at the stack of unpaid bills on the kitchen counter. I shove the papers in a drawer for later, trying to ignore the words FINAL REMINDER and skim through my to-do list instead.

*Welcome baskets*

*Fruit*

*Make-up beds*

*Wrap presents*

*Wine delivery*

*Flowers*

I cross off *flowers* and move from room to room, plumping cushions, straightening pictures, rearranging bookshelves, until every corner of the house looks perfect. Effortless.

I allow myself a brief moment by the living room window when I am done. The sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows is casting the room in a warm glow that, deceptive as it is, is wonderfully refreshing after months of gray skies and relentless rain. Beyond the glass, the icy waters of the loch glitter and sparkle in the midmorning sun.

I still find it incredible that I live here.

When Owen first showed me the advert, I'd rolled my eyes. We were looking for a townhouse in Edinburgh, somewhere we could start a family, not a private island that cost ten times as much, had no heating or Wi-Fi, and was a nightmare to get to. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to live in a place so completely cut off from the world. But over the next few weeks, I'd found myself returning to the listing again and again, poring over the details until I had them memorized. Three beaches, two lochs, an old boathouse, an eleven-bedroom main house, and six crumbling old cottages. Two thousand acres of wilderness.

It was nothing like what we were looking for. And yet, it was everything I wanted.

Where earlier, I'd seen two thousand acres of inconvenience and damp, I now saw open fires, long hikes, and vast open spaces for the kids to run through. I saw adventure. I snuck a glance at Owen, snoring softly beside me.

I saw hope.

Eighteen months and several lawsuits later, Owen and I were on a boat en route to our own island paradise. We'd spent a few blissful hours talking and discovering and planning, our ideas knotting together into a shared vision that shone so bright, it completely eclipsed the dark history we'd spent months grappling with.

By the time we met with the developer a week later, I knew exactly what I wanted. A hideaway that could rival Necker Island in its luxuriousness and Chatsworth in its charm. On the cards was a full refurbishment of the main house and the six cottages, a brand-new spa and infinity pool by the loch, a helipad, and a cluster of modern, self-contained apartments for the staff. The plan was to run the estate as a luxury retreat in the months that we weren't using it ourselves, and though we were stretching ourselves, neither Owen nor I was worried about the costs. It was far more important to get the vision right.

The vision that nearly five years later still lies half-developed before my eyes.

I turn at the sound of footsteps behind me. The housekeeper, Lorna, stands silhouetted in the doorway.

"The canapés are in the fridge and the lasagna is in the freezer. Fifty minutes should do it," she says, her Glaswegian accent still as hard to decipher as the first time I met her.

"Thank you," I say. "Has the wine arrived?"

I had given Lorna a long list of supplies to order in from the mainland last week. Everything from essential groceries and fresh fruits and vegetables to cases of wine and champagne and plenty of cold cuts and cheese to see us through the week. The food delivery arrived yesterday but the wine merchant had been running late.

Lorna nods. "Stu picked it up this morning. I've popped a few bottles of bubbly in the fridge and the rest is stacked in the cellar," she says, handing me the invoice.

I can't help but flinch when I see the bill. I take a breath, reminding myself that the small fortune that I've spent to host this holiday is not an extravagance. It's an investment.

And if it pays off, I'll never have to worry about money again.

I run through the invoice, checking to see that all the family favorites

I'd ordered have arrived. I'm halfway through the order summary when my heart sinks.

"What is it?" Lorna asks.

"The Pinot Noir."

She peers at the receipt.

*Calera Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir 2016.*

"I asked for the 2014 Pinot Noir," I add, silently cursing myself for trusting Lorna with the order. I love Lorna but her idea of a celebration is splurging out on some sweet potato fries and a bottle of Sainsbury's own brand Prosecco.

Lorna takes the piece of paper from me, tucks it into a folder full of invoices sitting on the marble coffee table. I resist the urge to straighten it so the corners line up. Technically, Lorna's an employee, the first person Owen and I hired after we bought Kilbryde, but over the past couple of years, she's become a friend. Quite often she is the only person I speak to all week. She knows more about my life now than some of my closest friends.

"These people are your family," she says. "They love you. They will not care what wine you serve."

"I know," I say. "I just . . . I need everything to be perfect this week."

The wrinkles around Lorna's eyes deepen as she fixes me with a look. "And it will be. Look how glorious it is . . . sunshine in March!"

Trust Lorna to always find the silver lining. "Are you looking forward to going back to Glasgow?" I ask her.

"Aye. It'll be good to see the lads. And my mother could do with a wee visit," she says, her face breaking into a smile as she fills me in on her plans for the week. Dinner with her son and his family, a trip to Edinburgh to see her newest grandchild, tea with her mother. It all sounds so simple. Uncomplicated.

I follow Lorna out through the kitchen and to the front door, where



Stu's loading her bags into the quad. I can't help but wonder if asking both Stu and Lorna to take this week off was a mistake. I dismiss the thought as soon as it occurs. Convenient as it would be to have the staff here to help, I don't want Stu or Lorna hovering in the background, hearing things they aren't supposed to. Or worse, letting slip one of the many small secrets I've kept from my family. I'd much rather slum it for one week.

"Right," she says, cocking her head. "Best be off or Stu won't be back in time to take you to the jetty. Sure you don't need anything else before I go?"

"I'll be fine," I say, forcing my lips into a smile. "Enjoy the time off."

I lean in for our usual double kiss but Lorna pulls me into a tight hug instead.

"Try to relax. Nothing's going to go wrong," she says, before spinning around and climbing into the quad next to Stu. I wait till they disappear from view before going back inside.

I'm not usually the nervous type but there is just too much at stake right now. Mama and Papa's anniversary. All of us together for the first time in ages. And a three hundred million pound payout to split between us.

There's plenty that can go wrong.

I take a deep breath and head back into the kitchen. I switch on the coffee machine, my mind going back to the phone call with Papa nearly a decade ago as I slot a pod of Aged Sumatra in. *The business is yours. Come home. Save it.* And I had. I'd dropped everything and flown to Delhi to fight the environmental damage lawsuit that had threatened not just to bankrupt the business but to completely annihilate it.

I indulge in another look out of the window as I wait for the espresso machine to spurt to life.

The layer of ice that has covered the loch for the best part of the

winter is starting to melt, individual shards breaking off and floating on the surface, sparkling under the spring sunshine, their gleaming edges as sharp and lethal as a knife's edge.

We'd settled the billion-dollar lawsuit for a few hundred grand. Pennies, really. I'd saved the company, and our family, from financial and professional ruin. That's not something that's easily forgotten.

I *know* it's not.

So why does the knot of anxiety in my chest feel so heavy I can barely breathe?

## ZOE

Two chauffeur-driven Range Rovers are waiting for us outside the station. No sooner have we set off than Aseem and I turn to our phones, spending the two-and-a-half-hour-long, insanely picturesque drive to the jetty maximizing every last bar of 4G.

I still remember how people had looked at me when I quit my marketing job to focus on my Instagram account. You're going to be an influencer, they'd asked, the contempt barely concealed behind the wide smiles and knowing glances Aseem's family and social circle seem to specialize in. The response had bothered me, as had the unspoken conclusion that despite my assertions to the contrary, I was really no more than a bored twenty-five-year-old housewife. But less than two years and five hundred thousand followers later, I've proven them wrong. My work hasn't just provided me with a sense of community in a foreign country, it's given me a sense of purpose.

And yet, all it takes is one notification for my sense of pride to slip away.

*NB\_lurker wants to send you a message.*

Fuck. *Fuck.*

I tap on the alert and reread the string of messages that has been haunting me for weeks, the sour feeling in my stomach growing stronger the further I scroll.

Par for the course, my agent had told me when I first mentioned the trolling, advising me to ignore the threatening comments and messages that come with being a woman on Instagram. And for a long time, that's exactly what I did. Growing up with an abusive father and silent mother is a remarkable way to develop a thick skin. I let the snide comments about my weight, my sartorial choices, my husband roll off me. But the mild trolling that started when I hit a hundred thousand followers has taken a darker, infinitely more sinister turn over the past couple of months. The messages don't feel like empty threats from strangers anymore. They feel intimate, a torrent of hate from someone who knows me or at the very least knows *about* me. I wake up more and more frequently from nightmares built on fragments from those messages, words and phrases twisting deep into my subconscious and reminding me of a past I've moved continents to forget. *Bitch. Cunt. I know what you really are. Stop selling yourself. Whore. Fraud.*

Outside our car, the single-lane track winding through deep valleys and thick woods has given way to open skies and sparkling turquoise waters. As we slow down and turn onto a steep gated path leading to the jetty, I force myself to put my phone away. I've spent far too many sleepless nights worrying about *NB\_lurker*, unsuccessfully trying to work out who might be hiding behind the private account and anonymous profile picture. I will *not* worry about some random middle-aged man who doesn't even have the courage to use his real name. Every job has its limitations and in mine, the benefits far outweigh any drawbacks, nasty as they may be. When I first mentioned the trolling to Aseem, he said it was an indicator of my success as an influencer. He's

right. The fact that people care enough to react with such vehemence means my content is doing what it's meant to: dividing opinions and creating conversations. It means that my voice matters. That I matter.

I reach for Aseem's hand and focus my thoughts on the week ahead. Myra's already warned us that other than a dial-up connection in her office, which is reserved strictly for business emails and emergencies, there is no Wi-Fi or cell signal on the island. For the next few days, I'll be on a forced digital detox, and come to think of it, perhaps that's a good thing. I can't afford any distractions, not right now, and ultimately, that's all that *NB\_lurker* is. A distraction.

Though I grew up quite close to the borders, I've never traveled beyond Edinburgh, and as we all climb into a small boat for the crossing, I am reminded why. My idea of a holiday isn't stormy skies and gales so powerful they can throw you off a cliff, thank you very much. As mellow as the day looked from the safety of the car, the reality is quite different. The sun has disappeared behind thick clouds, bleeding all color out of the ocean and turning the water into a menacing slate gray. Frothy white waves rise up in front of us, constantly moving barriers that push us back a few feet every time we inch forward. At the front of the boat, the groundskeeper, Stu, is bent over the steering wheel, trying to exert some control over the boat as it lurches over one wave and jumps straight into another. There is something eerily familiar about the tattoo peeking out from under his jumper, a swirl of black ink dancing across the back of his neck. As he turns around to grab a bottle of water, I see him look me over. His eyes travel across my body, taking in my Barbour coat and Hunter wellies, resting on my face a beat too long before he slowly turns back to the wheel.

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