

I hope you enjoy this low-tech, full-text edition of *Fair Venom*.

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Reviews make a meaningful difference and help other readers discover the book.

Thank you for reading.

Guy



PS. I am a God-fearing man, but my novels tend to go their own way...

Although this one does not contain excessive violence or sexuality, it does include adult themes—violent situations and light erotica—and is intended for mature readers.

# fair venom



Guy Orgambide

I.....	Romy
II.....	Preeti
III.....	Eve
IV.....	Fair Venom

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# Romy

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## Chapter 1

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Romy knocked at the door for the fourth time, in such a frenzy that she scraped two of her knuckles. The heavy wooden panel did not squeak when it rotated on its hinges. A burst of light blinded Romy before flooding the night in which she had been pacing for several minutes.

“What is it?” growled a tall, broad, dark silhouette in the beam of light.

Disoriented, Romy looked for words. The door started to close on her. She stopped it with the palm of her hand.

“I need your help,” she said.

The silhouette did not react.

“My daughter just killed a man,” added Romy in a single breath.

The wood panel slammed closed, projecting Romy backwards with such force that she almost fell on the gravel. The bang popped the small bubble of courage that she had been struggling to keep alive for an hour. She tottered in the dark for a long moment, facing the tall, narrow house planted in a small clearing, two-thirds up a steep hill smothered by an old, musty forest. Only one of the windows was lit—on the first floor. When she walked back to her car, parked a hundred feet down the rocky trail that climbed to the house, she glanced at the back seat before taking her place behind the wheel, turning on the engine, and switching on the lights. She could not find the energy to shift the car to drive mode. She, too, was stuck in parking mode.

The dead did not scare Romy. She had seen so many corpses that she would have been able to eat her lunch in the hospital morgue with three or four of them lying down, nude, on high stainless-steel tables around her. But, that day, for the first time, she had seen a cadaver who belonged to her daughter and that one terrified her. A corpse should not belong to a girl due to celebrate her sweet sixteen three weeks later.

Romy had only discovered the body an hour earlier; yet, she was already out of options. Her master plan—her only plan—had just fallen through. If she now drove to the police station, her daughter would not come out of it with her. The thought crossed her mind, for the first time since the beginning of the ordeal, to call Rufus, her husband. By now, he would have returned from work, and he was probably wondering where they were. He hated dining late. If he had not digested his meal before going to bed, he would toss and turn for hours, whining and sighing all the while. Romy winced when she realized that if she called him, he would be the one to take them—her and her daughter—to the police. He loathed disorder and much preferred for others to clean it up.

When Romy's breathing accelerated without warning, her heartbeat turned frantic. Gasping for air, she rushed out of the car and dropped onto her knees before cupping her hands tightly over her face. The panic attack subsided within a minute and left Romy drained and wishing for a blackout. Anything to be elsewhere, if only for a minute, but she never passed out. Only when she lifted her eyes back up did she discover the tall, broad silhouette, immobile in the yellow beams of her car lights.

## Chapter 2

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The man did not say a word. After a swing of the chin to point to his house, he walked toward the front door, left open. Romy struggled alone to extract her daughter from the car and drag her all the way up to the front steps. They entered a room paved with large stone slabs and where dirty plaster walls showed here and there the lighter shadows of long ripped-off picture frames. The only furniture in the wide room was a scratched, varnished wood table with its six matching chairs. As they shuffled toward the table, Romy discovered her host's face. A square framework with jaws that seemed locked in a clenched position; dark eyes underlined with tight bags and capped with wing-shaped, thick eyebrows; a strong hawk nose that might once have been broken at its base. There was not a hint of softness on that face. A natural mask designed to be haughty and menacing at rest, like that of a bird of prey. Added to an imposing stature, altogether, the allure of a man whose house one may want to skirt from a distance, especially a 125-pound woman with her dazed teen daughter.

"Sit her down at the table," ordered the man after pulling out a chair.

Romy sat down next to her daughter, whose head bobbed slightly and whose wide-open eyes stared into the void. Her mother had to hold her by the shoulders to prevent her from tipping sideways.

"Name?" said their host as he took his place across the table from them.

"Excuse me?" replied Romy.

"Your name, and hers."

"Why?"

"Because I just let you into my house."

"Romy. My daughter's name is Lea." She paused briefly before adding, "Why did you change your mind?"

"I didn't hear your car leaving. When I looked out of the window, the driver's side door was open but no one was behind the wheel."

The man took a long look at Lea and leaned back in his chair before continuing.

"So," he said, "Lea killed a man, and Romy is covering up for Lea. Who did Lea kill?"

"A vagrant... I think," replied Romy, trying to ignore the man's eerie baritone voice.

"You think?!"

"Lea and I were busy cleaning our sailboat at the harbor. In the fall each year, we prepare the boat for—"

"I don't need your life story."

"No... Yes... Of course. I left her alone just long enough to get bleach at the nearby supermarket—half an hour at most. When I returned to the boat, I found

her prostrated, her clothes covered in brown streaks, sitting in a pool of blood next to a mangled body.”

“Did she speak?”

“For a short while before shutting down. Her explanation was very confused, but it seems that the man had stormed inside the cabin of the sailboat, jumped on her, and tried to rip off her dress. She managed to grab a frying pan and hit him in the face with it.”

“Good for her.”

“She went on... hammering at him. He no longer has a face.”

“It happens... She reacted out of panic. It’s still an act of self-defense. The judges will understand.”

“The man’s body is full of gaping wounds, on the chest, the arms, the thighs, and... the genitals. At least a dozen of them, knife cuts that—”

“Knife? What knife?!”

“A large fillet knife that we use to clean fish. It was still in her hand when I found her. She didn’t just kill the man; she massacred him. Will the judges understand that too?”

“It can be played...”

“Would you play it if she were your daughter?”

The man did not seem to hear the question.

“I’m assuming that you didn’t go to the police yet,” he said instead.

Romy shook her head.

“And of all the people who could have helped you—friends, husband, lawyer—you decided to come to me. Why?”

“They would all advise me to go to the police. It’s not someone *safe* that I need, just now...”

The man shrugged his shoulders with impatience.

“I’m a nurse,” Romy rushed to say. “I work at the local hospital. One night, over a year ago, I had to help out in the ER and treated a man who had been severely beaten. He was barely conscious, but he whispered twice, “The man in the forest...” before dying while I prepped him for surgery. I never mentioned this to the police because I thought he was delirious. Months went by until I heard someone in the supermarket talk about the weird guy who rented his house up in the forest.” Romy stiffened up before adding in a single breath, “The police case is still open...”

She had an instinctive start in response to the burst of laughter that erupted from the man facing her.

“And knowing this, you thought it’d be a really good idea to come blackmail me here, in the middle of the forest, in the middle of the night, with that vegetable for only backup?!” he said, pointing his chin at Lea.

Disheartened by his reaction, Romy dropped her guard.

“I didn’t come to blackmail you. I know that the police couldn’t do much with my information, so long after the incident. I came here because you are the only

person I've ever heard of who might be able to help us," she replied, turning to Lea.

The man curled his lips with disdain before standing up and taking a few slow steps away from the table.

"Even assuming for a second that your problem could be solved," he said without turning back, "what's to say that you won't fall apart in a few weeks, a few months, and spill the beans to the police?"

"That'd be signing an arrest warrant for my daughter. In light of what happened, she'd surely end up in a high-security psychiatric hospital," replied Romy. "In my job, I have been dealing with pressure and nasty little secrets for years. I can assure you that I won't cave in. As for Lea, though, I can't promise you—"

Romy stopped when her host calmly walked out of the room without a word. She stared for a long moment at the arch under which he had disappeared before slipping her arm under her daughter's. She was exhorting her to get on her feet when the man returned, carrying a glass of water. He sat back at the table, pushed the glass toward Romy, and laid a tiny purple pill next to it.

"What is it?" asked Romy and sat back down.

"An eraser," replied the man. "It'll wipe out the past twenty-four hours from your daughter's memory."

"That sounds like the rape drug! How can you even think for a second that I would give that kind of crap to my daughter?!"

"I'm not planning to rape her."

"You're mad!"

"*You* are the mad one if you think that there is the faintest chance that a teenager will be able to keep the secret of her crime to herself for more than a few days."

The statement shut Romy up for a long moment. As logical as the man's point might have been, the thought had not crossed her mind since she had found Lea sitting by a cadaver.

"She swallows the little purple pill, or you're on your own," the man pressed on.

Romy pinched the pill between her fingertips and examined it.

"There's no imprint on it, no symbol of any kind. Where did it come from?"

"Not from your friendly neighborhood pharmacist. Get on with it or get the hell out of my house!"

If the rictus of impatience on the man's face freaked Romy out, it also tipped her into automatic action mode. She pushed the pill through her daughter's limp lips before giving her a sip of water. The girl did not resist.

"It'll knock her out," said the man, "but seeing how lively she's been since she got here, I don't think it'll make much of a difference. Take her home and put her to bed."

"But what will I tell my husband when we get home?"

"The truth?"

"No!"

"I see... Is there booze on your sailboat?"

"Some. Why?"

"What kind?"

"The kind used to prepare cocktails. Vodka, gin—"

"Good. You'll tell your husband that when you returned to the boat after an hour at the store, you found your daughter plastered, an empty bottle of gin in her hand."

"He'll never believe me! Lea is his little princess."

"That's precisely why he'll believe you. He's been bracing himself for years for the little princess to turn into an out-of-hand fairy. Explain to him that you tried to sober your daughter up before taking her home, but it didn't work. That will account for your tardiness. Make sure to cover the girl's clothes with a blanket when you get home and take her straight to her bedroom. When your daughter wakes up tomorrow, tell her the exact same story. She won't remember a thing and her hangover—a side effect of the pill—will back up your story."

"What if she speaks when we get home, tonight?"

"She won't speak again today."

"You seem very familiar with the effects of these pills..."

"If I wasn't, I would not have given one to your daughter."

"No, of course not. I didn't mean—"

"Tomorrow, your daughter will be yesterday's little princess again. Nothing bad will ever have happened in her life, other than a bout of binge drinking, for which she will of course be punished. She'll just go back to school and eagerly tell her friends all about her little adventure. She'll be back on the tracks of her privileged, overprotected middle-class youth."

"But... what about the sailboat? It's full of blood! And there's a corpse in it!"

"Do you think that someone could have seen the vagrant climbing on board?"

"On a rainy, windy day, it's not likely. The only person I saw around that section of the harbor was the old watchman. He only does his rounds twice a day, early in the morning and mid-afternoon."

"Any security cameras?"

"No. The harbor management is too cheap to install any."

"Good. It looks like you have a unique opportunity here."

"Which is?"

"To get rid not only of the body and the weapon but also of the crime scene."

"I don't understand..."

"Tonight, your sailboat will be stolen."

“By whom?”

“I’ll take it out to sea and blow it up.”

“With explosives?”

“No, with a jar of Grey Poupon mustard.”

If the purple pill incident had frazzled Romy, the man’s sneer and the mere idea of explosives thrust her deeper into the bad, bad feeling that she had totally lost control of the situation.

“On this coast,” continued the man, “the seabed drops to great depths just a couple of miles away from the shore. It would take sophisticated and costly equipment to probe it. Not the kind the police would have access to. Just make sure that neither your husband nor your daughter go to the harbor in the next few days. The more time goes by between the disappearance of the boat and its report to the police, the less thorough the investigation will be. Cops know very well that after a few days, a stolen sailboat has already traveled far and has most likely been docked at a remote harbor where it’ll be reconditioned to make it unrecognizable.

“But if you sink the boat, how will you get back to shore?”

“I know how to swim.”

“In troubled waters...”

For the first time, the man grinned. A candid, almost childlike grin.

“In all sorts of waters,” he replied. “What’s the name of the sailboat?”

“The Underdog. It is docked —”

“I’ll find it.”

“What is your name?” asked Romy.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I just let you into my life.”

“Tarras.”

“Is that your first or last name?”

The man did not answer. He stood up and, this time, helped Romy to escort a comatose Lea to the car. Once the teen had been laid down on the back seat, he turned around and headed back to the house without a word.

“Thank you... Tarras!” shouted Romy, taken aback by his behavior.”

The man replied without looking back.

“Today is not the day you’ll thank me.”

## Chapter 3

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Everything went as predicted by Tarras. Totally out of it, Lea did not say a word between the time her mom helped her over the threshold of their house and the one she put her to bed. Rufus, shocked by the miserable condition of his daughter and the two words that Romy whispered to him—*binge drinking*...—did not even get up from the couch. Once Romy returned to the living room, he accepted her explanation without a single question. He even cut it short to head to bed and sulk.

The next morning, it took Romy a good fifteen minutes to scrape Lea off her mattress. She did, however, find some comfort in her daughter's snappish groans. The girl seemed more in hangover mode than in a post-traumatic state.

"Leave me alone, dammit!" cried Lea when her mother attempted to run a wet washcloth over her face.

Romy repressed an urge to slap her child. It was not the first time that she had to hold back in that way, but in this instance, she ended up smiling.

"Does bullying me amuse you? You need to get a life!" said Lea, when she finally sat on the bed, frowny and disheveled. "Why are you in my room when you should be ironing my school clothes? Didn't you see how wrinkled they were when they came out of the dryer yesterday!"

Oh, yeah, Lea was back to her bratty self! Thank God for *un-safe* men...

Since two of her girlfriends were to spend the following weekend at her house, Lea begged her parents to take them out to sea for the last time of the season. Romy argued that the weather forecast called for rain showers but after rallying her dad to her cause, Lea won the exchange. It was therefore a week after the drama that the group noticed the disappearance of the sailboat and reported it to the police. The only two police officers on duty that Sunday morning expedited the missing boat report with a grouchy attitude, amidst the din caused by a dozen rowdy hooligans who had gone on a drunken rampage after a soccer game the night before and had since been packed in the small station's only cell.

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"Relax, love, you're not cooking for the Queen of Sheba!" said Rufus. "It's just your sister, your brother-in-law, and your nephews. Why do you get so edgy every time they come over for lunch?"

Romy shrugged her shoulders and slammed the oven door closed.

"Is there something between your sister and you that I'm not aware of? You never seem very relaxed around her," insisted her husband.

“Stop that nonsense! You know I love my sister. She is the sweetest human being I know. She may be the youngest, but she’s always been there for me when I needed help—”

“When you were a troubled teen...” joked Rufus.

“I was never troubled! Just a bit of a handful, like many kids at that age. Anyway, it was a long time ago. Would you mind getting up and giving me a hand to set the table?!”

“This is the best tenderloin I’ve ever tasted!” said Corny, Romy’s brother-in-law. “My compliments to the chef!” he added, raising his fourth glass of cab in Romy’s direction.

“You’ve already tasted this dish, at your own house, cooked by your own wife,” replied Romy with a forced smile. “The sauce is our mom’s secret recipe. She promised to give it to each of us once we got married and that’s just what she did.”

“She did... for you, no doubt, but the one she gave Olivia must have been a decoy because when I eat her tenderloin, it’s like biting into a piece of slimy roadkill!”

Corny burst out laughing. Rufus smiled politely.

“Are you sure the slime didn’t come from your mouth itself, because Olivia’s tenderloin is a pure marvel,” snapped back Romy, with an affectionate glance at her sister.

“You may be on to something there, Sis...” pressed on Corny with a cheeky smile, “It’s true that I’ve gotten my share of slimy stuff in the mouth, but I’ve yet to hear a complaint from a woman!”

“Olivia, can you give me a hand with the crepes in the kitchen?” said Romy and stood up brusquely. “You’re much better than me at flambéing things. You should try it on your husband, someday!” she added, leaving the room under the mortified stare of her husband and the heckling of her brother-in-law, most amused by the jab.

“Olivia, how can you let Corny belittle you that way? It drives me crazy!” said Romy the instant her sister joined her in the kitchen.

“He doesn’t mean what he says,” replied Olivia. “His sense of humor is just a little quirky, especially after a couple of glasses of wine. He’s a good man, Romy, and a great provider. They love him at his work—he’s been promoted again, you know. He’s now supervising all the other sales guys.”

“But the man puts you down at every turn and cheats on you at every opportunity—”

“You don’t know that!” retorted Olivia under her breath. She had managed to keep her voice down, but had gripped her sister’s wrist with such might that Romy understood that it was time to back down.

"No, Olivia, I don't know that, but that's what he tells everybody, even in front of you."

"You know how men are... They like to boast about that in front of other men, but that doesn't mean that they actually do anything."

"Does he still do anything with you?"

"Of course, he does! I'm his wife. I make sure to attend to his needs."

"Is he attentive to your needs as well? Does he take good care of you... in bed?"

Olivia blushed slightly.

"Well... He's like all the other men when it comes to that."

"How would you know how other men are? He's the only one you've ever known!"

"He might be the only one but at least *I* picked a man, not a big, limp teddy bear who nods at everything everyone says, no matter how stupid or offensive!"

"Are you talking about Rufus?"

"Seriously, Romy, if a herd of looters rampaged your neighborhood, who would you rather have in your house to defend you and your daughter? Rufus or Corny?"

Tears rose to Romy's eyes. Olivia did not understand why. It was not the first time that they had gotten into a fight and her sister was not one to break down in the heat of battle. She reached for her hand.

"I'm sorry," said Olivia. "I got carried away. You know I love Rufus. He is such a sweet, caring man."

"Don't worry about it, Olivia. I had it coming, and it's not what you said..."

Romy was preparing coffee while the others enjoyed their crepes on the back porch when she sensed a presence behind her. She turned around and found Corny leaning against the doorframe of the kitchen, staring at her butt with a lewd grin.

"Yep... A fine tenderloin, indeed. A fine tenderloin..." he sneered.

"Do you need something?" retorted Romy and hastily wrapped an apron backwards around her waist to cover her leggings.

"Nope. I was just headed for the bathroom. The question is... Do *you* need something?"

"Like what?"

"Like a V8 man—for a change of pace from the electric Smart you've got at home. A man built to burn rubber and take you on a wild ride in the middle of the afternoon, every now and then."

"No. I'm all set. Would you please step out of the way so I can take this coffee outside?"

"You should ease up a bit on Corny," said Rufus as he and Romy watched her relatives drive off. "Not only does he love to get you going—so you're only

bringing out his worse side—but by shunning him, you’re hurting Olivia’s feelings. She was kind of down after lunch. Don’t forget that Corny is her husband, not a date that she could drop because you don’t like him.”

“I know... Every time they come over, I promise myself to be nice to him, but I can’t help it. He pushes my buttons!”

“And he knows how to do it, too!”

“It wouldn’t hurt if you stepped in sometimes...”

“What for? To make things even more awkward?”

“She could have done so much better for herself,” mumbled Romy.

“He isn’t that bad, just a bit rough around the edges. They have very comfortable lives, and the boys love their dad. Yes, she could have done better for herself, but then, you could say that of anyone—even yourself.”

Romy went back into the house without a word.

When she walked out of the hospital at the end of her afternoon shift that day, Romy still felt dirty from Corny’s pass. She needed air. Real air. Not antiseptic, not recycled, not filled with a man’s obscene laughter.

That night, for the first time, she would find herself lingering outside a lonely house deep in the forest.

## Chapter 4

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Romy parked the car behind a rusty, remote hangar, fifty yards away from the start of the rocky trail that led up to the house in the forest. On her first visit, she had been so determined that she had driven all the way up there without flinching. Only when she drove back down had she realized how treacherous the narrow, meandering path was, especially at night. The big, red “Private Property – Keep Out!” sign posted at its entrance did not do much to brighten up the place either.

Twilight was waning when Romy started climbing through the old forest. She had timed it so, for her first foray, she would make it to the top with some ambient light left. She walked along the track but at a distance, about thirty feet inside the forest, so she could easily hide from a vehicle climbing or descending the trail. After twenty minutes on a steep but mostly clear forest floor coated with a thick bedding of dead leaves, she reached her destination.

On the night of her first visit there, she had parked her car next to a tiny, decrepit stone shed located at the edge of the forest, just a hundred feet down from the house. She slipped into it with her eyes locked on the home to make sure that no one could see her. Once inside the shed, she almost fell into a large hole cut in the ground and rimmed by a single row of bricks—the shed was a cover for a water well. Romy shivered retrospectively after turning on her small flashlight and pointing it down inside the hole. The beam did not even reach the bottom of the well; she had come an inch from diving to her death.

Once she had settled her nerves, another form of uneasiness took hold of her, this time for a different reason—or two, actually. Her “official” explanation for not making it home on time for dinner was that her shift at the hospital was very short of staff and that she might have to help out there for a few hours some evenings. Rufus had not questioned her even once and had empathized with her, promising to take care of dinner on those days. Rufus was smart but also very gullible, and Romy hated taking advantage of that character trait. Adding to her guilt was the fact that she was lying to him for a bad reason: prying into another man’s life.

Sitting at the back of the shed, now under the cover of dusk, Romy could see through its narrow door the front of the old stone house and the side facing her. The windows were tall and narrow. The wood shutters of the ones on the second and third floors were all closed. On the first floor, only two windows were lit: the ones flanking the front door. They belonged to the living room in which Tarras had received her and Lea. The frantic heartbeat that had pushed Romy forward since the beginning of her ascent through the woods waned after thirty minutes in the darkness of the shed. Nothing was happening around or inside the house, not

even the gliding of a shadow behind the windows. It had rained for most of the day, and night had just added a layer of cool to a layer of damp. The scent of wet soil was heady and the humidity from the slab of cement on which Romy sat was already permeating the seat of her pants. When the first shivers rattled her skin, under her light sweater, she understood how ill-prepared she was for the stake-out.

Something crawly that had dropped down her neck kicked Romy out of the shed less than an hour after her arrival. This had been a stupid idea! She was freezing, she was almost sure that the crawly thing had made it under the collar of her sweater, and there had not been a hint of action by the house! If it so happened, no one was even there, and they had left the lights on just to ward off burglars. And to think that she had lied to her family for this! Playing Nancy Drew at nearly forty. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Romy had such a hard time climbing down the hill through the forest, by the meager glow of her flashlight, that she ended up walking down the rocky trail for the most part. Once she had finally slipped into her car, relieved and exhausted, she swore to herself that she would never act this foolishly again, sneaking out on her loved ones to spy on a man who had, after all, saved her daughter's life.

She was back the following night, despite the exhaustion from a long, busy day at work. With thick jeans tucked into warm boots, wearing under a thick leather jacket a pure wool sweater that Rufus had given her on their first—and only—ski outing, ten years earlier. The small backpack hanging from her shoulders kept bouncing as she stumbled over the large rocks on the trail, but the thought of hot chocolate, dried fruits, and small peanut butter sandwiches made up for the discomfort. The Nancy Drew in her had grown up overnight and she was now in control! So in control, in fact, that she fell asleep in the shed after eating and drinking all of her supplies during the first hour. When she woke up, drowsy and sore, she stared at the glowing needles of her watch. It was two in the morning—she had been out in the shed for over five hours! She took a quick peek at the house—nothing new—and headed down the trail, on which she slipped badly twice and fell on her butt once before reaching the main road. She drove home as fast as her poor night vision allowed her.

“At last!” mumbled Rufus, sitting on the sofa with puffy eyes. “What happened? You said you’d be back no later than twelve. I called the hospital an hour ago. They said they hadn’t seen you...”

Romy struggled to take her boots off.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she replied. “When I got there, the head nurse shifted me to the E.R. They were overwhelmed there. Over fifty cases of food poisoning—guests at the same wedding... bad oysters. I didn’t even get to my shift tonight!”

Rufus stood up clumsily and wrapped his arms around his wife for a long, tight hug.

"I swear... You scared me. I thought you might have run out on me and your daughter," added Rufus with a playful voice.

Romy patted her husband's back with a hint of shame.

"Let's go to bed. I'm dead!"

Luckily for her, Rufus went back out like a light when he hit the pillow, or he would have sensed his wife tossing and turning for several hours. She had already had her night; in a mysterious place better suited to fierce dreams.

On the third night, Romy lasted a couple of hours before falling asleep in the well shed. Now that she was dressed properly to stay warm and cozy, she found it nearly impossible to resist the spell of the soil-scented, cool night wrapping around her. This time, she woke up earlier, a few minutes before midnight. After a quick peek at the house, where the same two windows had been lit at night for three days now, she resigned herself to heading home. She could not take the chance of Rufus calling the hospital once again. Romy had only gone down the trail for a couple of minutes when a purring sound broke through the silence. At first, it sounded like it came from a vehicle down in the valley, but the purr quickly turned to a roar as two yellow beams appeared at a turn of the track, a hundred yards down from her. Romy switched off her flashlight and, in a blind rush to get off the trail, stumbled and dove head-first into a bush. Entangled in thorny strands, she panicked. The white rocks of the track already glowed from the headlights of the fast-approaching car and she was barely a few feet away from them. She ducked.

The beams brushed over her, but the loud, clunky van rushed past her without slowing down, leaving behind a wake of diesel fumes. Romy struggled to disentangle herself from the brambles and rushed up the hill, following the rear lights of the vehicle with her eyes for direction. She slipped and tripped several times but made it back to the shed just as the van maneuvered in front of the house. The front door opened but only light came out of it. The vehicle backed up all the way against the door frame, its rear wheels even climbing on the first doorstep so the back of the cargo space would be flush with the wall. Romy heard the rattle of a rolling door, immediately followed by whines and muffled cries. Less than a minute after the rolling door had opened, it slammed back closed, and the van immediately roared away in a blueish cloud. No one had stepped out of it. As it rushed downhill, the front door of the house was pushed closed. The silence and stillness of the building were instantly reset, as if the van had not been anything but a ghost chariot, ferrying some eerie payload between two realms.

The whines and cries had been faint and short-lived, but they still resonated between Romy's ears. Her nurse's instincts kept her glued to the house, even

though it was already past her curfew with Rufus. She felt totally off. Trained to line up one efficient thought after another in the face of an emergency, she was just bewildered by the situation. She sat, her back to the wall, and performed the 4-7-8 yoga breathing exercise that usually calmed her down. The thought of calling the police crossed her mind, but she did not have the first evidence of wrongdoing, and she would have to explain what she was doing, snooping around an isolated house in the woods at night. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that the sound of the house door slamming closed startled her. In the glow of the light seeping through the front windows, she recognized Tarras' imposing shadow moving away from the house. The crackle of his footsteps on the gravel grew louder as he walked straight toward the shed. Cowered against the back of the shed, Romy cursed herself for using scented laundry detergent. Fresh out of the washer, her jeans smelled of tropical sunrise, not even close to a forest scent...

Tarras passed three feet away from the shed without slowing down and headed downhill on the trail. Romy waited until his footsteps faded away and rushed toward the house before having a chance to talk herself out of it. She slowly opened the front door and peeked inside the living room. It was empty but a vague scent of ether floated in the air. She closed the door behind her and proceeded slowly through the arch at the back of the room. It led to a large alcove devoid of any furniture or decoration, and whose sole purpose seemed to host a massive wooden staircase. In one fell swoop, fear wiped away Romy's determination. She had no idea where Tarras had gone nor for how long he would be out—he had not even bothered locking the door. Romy was about to rush back under the arch when her trained nurse ear picked up a vague moan. It had come from upstairs; somewhere far upstairs.

The stairs did not creak. All Romy could now hear was her own breathing. Once she reached the second floor, she found herself at the end of a narrow corridor flanked with three doors on each side. She tried turning the knob on each one—they were locked. She pushed her ear against a couple of the doors but did not pick up any sound. After a brief hesitation, she returned to the staircase and climbed the second flight of stairs. The layout of the third floor was similar to that of the second one; a long corridor and six doors. The nearest door on the left side was ajar. A glance into it revealed a small metal bed with a bare, stained mattress as its sole furnishings. When Romy leaned to turn the knob of the door across the corridor, the wood panel gave in suddenly and she lurched into the room.

The white of the creature's eyes—wide open and staring at the ceiling—was the only natural color on her face. Her skin was a patchwork of red, yellow, and brown blotches painted over unnatural bumps and lumps resulting from the massive swelling of her eyebrows, nose, and cheeks. Blood hastily swiped off had left dark streaks across the landscape of her face. She lay on the bed in heavily

stained jeans and a sweater, as if she had been dragged through mud, even though her ankle boots were oddly clean and shiny.

Romy walked up to a chair pulled up by the bed and on which had been left a syringe and a small, brown ampule with a broken seal. She lifted the ampule to the light to read the small label printed on it. *Nimbex*. Romy shivered. She remembered the drug from a short internship in a surgery room several years earlier. The molecule was a paralytic drug that caused muscles to become unresponsive. It was administered to patients just before surgery to ensure that their body would remain still during the procedure. Used alone, it did not cause the patient to sleep, only paralyzed them. The woman lying on the bed was trapped inside her banged-up body, captive without ties nor chains.

“Don’t be scared,” whispered Romy while caressing the woman’s forehead. “I’m here to help you.”

She sat on the bed and grabbed the woman’s wrist. Her pulse was frantic. Inside that limp body, a heart was screaming with fear. Romy reached for the cell phone in the back pocket of her jeans. No signal?! She had four bars in the shed, just a hundred feet away! She switched off the phone in the fear that a notification sound would reveal her presence in the house and slipped out of the room. On her way up, she had noticed a landline phone on a small table, by the staircase, on the second floor. She went down the flight of stairs, picked up the phone and dialed 999.

“Hello...?” she whispered, “I need to speak to—”

“Please do not hang up, this is the 999 emergency line,” said an automated voice at the other end of the line. “An operator will be with you in one minute and twenty seconds.”

Romy stomped on the wooden floor with rage. She was trapped inside a godforsaken house with a butchered woman above her head—and maybe several more behind the locked doors next to her—and 999 had her listening to The Supremes! As the seconds passed, Romy grew more panicky, and she had to fight herself not to hang up and run out of the house.

“999 operator. What is your emergency?”

*“When I returned to the boat, I found her prostrated, her clothes covered in brown streaks, sitting in a pool of blood...”*

The two voices hit Romy’s eardrums at the same time. One out of the phone’s earpiece. One from downstairs. The first was a stranger’s voice. The other was her own.

## Chapter 5

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Romy hung up the phone as the 999 operator raised her voice to try to get a response. She slowly walked down the stairs. At the bottom of the staircase, on the tiles, lay a smart phone that played on its own.

*"She went on... hammering at him. He no longer has a face."*

*"It happens... She reacted out of panic. It's still an act of self-defense. The judges will understand."*

*"The man's body is full of gaping wounds, on the chest, the arms, the thighs, and... the genitals. At least a dozen of them, knife cuts that —"*

*"Knife? What knife?!"*

*"A large fillet knife that we use to clean fish. It was still in her hand when I found her. She didn't just kill the man; she massacred him. Will the jurors understand that too?"*

Kneeling by the phone, Romy could barely recognize the emaciated, livid version of herself on the video. Next to her, Lea, with a blank expression on her face, looked like a ventriloquist's puppet propped up on a chair at the end of the show.

"I'll give you a copy, if you'd like..." said the same baritone voice as heard in the video.

Tarras stood under the arch, his legs slightly apart. The stern expression on his face belied the casual tone of his voice.

"I made a couple of them. I can spare one," he continued. "After all, it was your big moment... and Lea's."

"You taped us?!"

"I live alone in a remote house. When someone bangs at my door at night, I like to have a record of what ensues, just in case I'd have to do something not so nice to protect myself from a threat."

"What would I have to do to get that tape and all the copies?" asked Romy, standing up.

"I'm not a blackmailer. Of course, if you call the police, they'll search this house and find at least one copy of the tape. It'll be up to you to explain to them what it means. As for me, all I want from you is what is owed to me in return for helping you out of a nasty situation. Nothing else."

"But you said that you didn't want to be thanked."

"I said I didn't want to be thanked *that night*."

"What do you want?"

"What did you see upstairs?"

"The beat-up girl on the third floor," replied Romy after a long hesitation.

"The one who's awake?"

"Why? There are more?!"

Tarras shrugged his shoulders with impatience.

"Yes, well..." resumed Romy, hastily. "The one I saw had her eyes open, but she couldn't speak or move."

"We suspected that she had a couple of broken bones. We had to keep her from moving, so she would not make things worse by trying to run away. We can't have her crippled for weeks."

Tarras' last words sent nervous spikes along Romy's spine.

"What are you planning to do? You can't just keep her on Nimbex!"

"That was just for the night. We didn't have anyone handy to fix her. It looks like you just solved our problem."

"I can't fix her bones! I'm not a surgeon! I'm not even a doctor!!"

"We aren't picky. You're a nurse, right? You have the two qualities that we need—enough medical skills to make a difference..."

"And the other quality?"

"You won't talk."

Tarras turned around and disappeared under the arch, leaving Romy confused. When she joined him in the living room, she found him at the table, writing on a large ledger.

"Tomorrow, you'll go to your work and grab what you need to work on our guest," he said without lifting his head. "After a couple of hours, you will pretend not to feel good, and you'll leave. Be here before noon."

"You can't leave the poor woman staring at the ceiling all night! Her pulse is through the roof. She could have a heart attack! You need to give her something to make her sleep."

"That, I can do."

"She also needs to be cleaned. She peed on herself."

"I'll figure out something," said Tarras and pointed his eyes to the door.

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When Romy drove up the rocky trail the next day, it was not because she felt forced to return to the house. For the first time in ages, she was filled with the fervor that had inhabited her at the onset of her career. Over time, her work at the hospital had turned into a cold routine. After being promoted from the E.R. to the cardiology ward, she had been handed even greater responsibilities as head nurse in the gastroenterology department. Feces had replaced blood and guideline documents had replaced resuscitation pads, as seniority slowly smothered intensity. She had even considered a sabbatical with Doctors without Borders to rekindle her spirit, but the prospect of their mother and wife in a war zone had freaked out Lea and Rufus so much that she had quickly dropped the idea. Now, as the wheels of her small SUV bounced over the large rocks of the treacherous trail, Romy felt as if she was riding up a rugged Somalian hill to deliver antibiotics to wounded civilians. She was headed right back for the frontline, even though she did not know the first thing about the war taking place there. All she cared

about was that near the top of that hill lay a badly injured victim whose only hope rested with her.

When she drove up to the house, Tarras was standing on the front steps. He welcomed her with a curt nod, escorted her to the third floor, and waited in a corner of the room as Romy put down her duffle bag and took out a box that resembled a large laptop case.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A portable X-ray device. It was used by our paramedic unit, but it's been replaced by a newer model."

"Can we keep it?"

"Why? Are you planning to keep on breaking women's bones?"

Tarras' chest swelled up as his eyes aimed to fry Romy's, but he did not reply. Romy took a look at her patient while unpacking her instrument. The woman was sleeping. When she lifted the thin sheet covering her, she found out that the woman was entirely nude.

"I cleaned her," mumbled Tarras.

"Yes, I can tell...," replied Romy. Would you mind stepping out while I examine her?"

Tarras shook his head with contempt but complied. Romy heard him pacing up and down the corridor during the hour it took her to treat her patient. As soon as she pulled the door open, Tarras walked right back in.

"So?" he said.

"She's very badly bruised," replied Romy, packing away her gear. "I've seen a lot of traumas in car accident patients but never this much bruising on every single part of the body."

"How about broken bones?"

"That's the silver lining—if you can call it that—two cracked ribs, a dislocation of the shoulder, and a hairline fracture on her forearm, but no displaced fracture. I reduced the shoulder dislocation and tightly bandaged her chest and her arm. When she's not sedated, she will feel like hell for a few days, but I'll leave a box of pain killers for you to give her."

"How soon will she be able to get up and move on?"

Romy hesitated. The *move on* part worried her. Move on to what? Here, at least, she could keep an eye on the girl and, aside from being drugged, there was no indication that she had been abused any further since her arrival at the house.

"It's too early to tell. I'll let you know in a couple of days," Romy ended up replying. A skeptical Tarras escorted her back downstairs. Just as she pulled the front door open, Romy heard a thump on the wood slats on the *second floor*, just above her head. She did not have a chance to turn back toward Tarras. He clutched her shoulder with his hand and firmly pushed her out.

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"You need to come back."

"It's four in the morning!"

"Hurry up!"

The caller hung up just as Rufus rolled toward Romy.

"What is it?" he mumbled.

"The hospital. I have to go," replied Romy instinctively.

"Oh, shit! What a crappy job..." said Rufus and rolled back to the other side of the bed.

When Romy reached the "Keep Out" sign at the start of the trail, a pickup was blocking it, lights on. Tarras stepped out of it.

"Park there, I can't afford to have you run off the trail at night," he said after approaching Romy's rolled-down window. She complied and wedged her car between the two tall bushes to which he pointed.

The ride was hellish. Tarras drove at forty miles an hour on a track that could barely stand fifteen. Romy was jolted right and left, bumping into him so hard that he ended up pinning her against her seat with his left arm and driving the rest of the way with his right arm.

"What was this wound made by?" asked Romy.

"A scythe," replied Tarras nonchalantly.

"A scythe... as in Death's scythe?!"

"Yeah."

Romy ran her fingers around the deep laceration on the thigh of the young man lying on the bed. He might have been past twenty, but the boyish, almost feminine features of his face and his thin build gave him the appearance of a scared teen.

"You need to take him to the hospital!"

"Not an option. Do your thing. You brought your stuff, right?" said Tarras, flicking his chin at the duffle bag Romy had brought back, alerted by the dire tone of Tarras' voice on the phone.

"Yes, but—"

"I'll wait in the corridor... again!"

Romy carried surgical needles and thread in her bag, but she did not have any anesthetic. She had never stitched such a long wound either. At the hospital, these were immediately referred to surgeons.

"Okay, try to relax," she told the lad. "This is going to sting a bit..."

The boy nodded and looked away. At the first needle puncture, he passed out.

"Nice," said Tarras looking at the stitches. "You could make a much better living out of stuff like this..."

This time, Romy was the one to shrug her shoulders at him, even though she was very proud of her work. She would never have thought herself capable of closing that type of wound and she already knew that the outcome of the treatment would be good. She had never concentrated so much, been this much *in the zone*. She knew that the antibiotic cream that she had smeared all over the stitches would be useless. There would not be any infection. Her work was perfect. Her personal best. Ever.

“Thank you,” muttered Tarras as she headed out.

“I’ll be back tomorrow to make sure that the wound is healing properly.”

Romy sensed that as long as she kept coming around, her two patients would be less likely to suffer further abuse.

“No,” replied Tarras. “You will not come back, tomorrow or any other time. That could end up bringing attention to us. We’ll take it from here. Consider your debt to me to be paid in full. You forget me. You forget this house. I forget you. I forget your daughter.”

He turned his back, walked back into the house and slammed the door behind him.

On the way home, Romy realized that she could, with a simple phone call to the police, get the wounded woman and boy to the hospital within the hour and end Tarras’ hold on her. Too bad the price tag would be her daughter’s future.

Besides, she did not really feel like calling the police.

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Preeti

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## Chapter 6

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“Where are you hiding my preeetty, preeetty girl? Master is here...”

Preeti smiled as she watched the man shuffle into her tiny room and lock the door behind him. She knew what would come next. It never failed...

*“I’m a little teapot  
Short and stout  
Here is my handle  
Here is my spout...”*

The plump, middle-aged man whispered with excitement the same nursery rhyme every Wednesday afternoon—during his wife’s weekly bridge game outing—when he sneaked into the attic. Yet, the young maid had never quite made the connection between the teapot’s anatomy and the quirky bulge inside the Master’s pants. She was just surprised that—with his small head planted on top of a chubby body—he would compare himself to the lullaby’s character.

*“When I get all steamed up  
Hear me shout:  
Tip me over  
And pour me out!”*

Preeti did get that part, because it was invariably the prelude to about thirty minutes of “funny business,” as her mother used to call it when she was still the one in charge of it. On the first Wednesday following her premature passing—two years earlier—the Master had visited Preeti in her room for the first time, even though she was already past twenty.

*“Now that your Mamma is no longer with us, sweet Preeti, you will also have to take over the only one of her tasks for which she had not yet trained you...”*

Since that day, the naughty teapot had steamed up her confined space once a week. After a few encounters with it, the pain had gone away, and she had grown used to that new chore. It was not as if it were totally foreign to her. On many a Wednesday, she had heard bumps, whispers, grunts, and even smothered laughs through the thin plaster wall that separated her bedroom on the top floor from her mother’s. Maa liked Paapubear—Paapubear liked Maa. It was obvious that master and maid had grown a special bond over the years, probably after unloading their respective romantic voids into each other’s hands.

Preeti was only allowed to refer out loud to the members of the family as *Mistress, Mistress’ Husband, Mistress’ Father, Mistress’ Son, or Mistress’ Daughter.*

Inside her head, though, she had given them names snatched out of her mother's family stories. It made her feel that she was a part of a real family. She had never renamed Paapubear—Mistress' Husband—after he had lost his fatherly status to the squeaking of her bed springs. Preeti did not mind his midweek visits to her room that much, even though they were a far departure from the passionate embraces in the British romance novels that she sneaked out of the Mistress' bedroom, and that enriched her academic English with some colorful expressions. If Paapubear was clumsy and eager as a teenager, he was also affectionate, and on occasion—albeit haphazardly—he would even manage to ring Preeti's happy bell for a few minutes before thrusting into her shiny den. The maid's only concern was that the Mistress returned early from her bridge game and discovered her puffing husband laboring on top of her.

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Paapubear had a meek character and a gentle soul—Misses Paapubear had neither. On her good days, the Mistress was stern and cutting. On the bad ones, the slightest incident would propel her into wild rages that would send everyone in the house running for cover. To her credit, though, she never beat Preeti. She would, however, shake her so hard and so long that, after the scuffle, the maiden would seize the first opportunity to run back into her room to make sure that her nipples were still level and clinging high. Despite her thin build, the girl was quite bosomy, and after witnessing on a few occasions the sagging and lopsided fate of her mother's *chuchis*, she was very worried that any excessive motion might trigger the downward spiral on hers.

It never took long for the Master to complete his weekly performance. Since he was averse to any other form of exercise and totally out of shape, it did, however, take him a while to recover from the effort. He would lie next to Preeti for a half-hour, his face congested, half of his flabby body hanging out of her narrow bed. During that pillow time, he opened up to his maid without restraint. Early on, he had confided in her that he and his wife were water and oil. He came from a family of street vendors, while she was the heiress to one of the wealthiest oil families in the Persian Gulf. A gifted student, he had been the recipient of private scholarships and had been selected to enter one of the most prestigious engineering schools in the country. Combined with his hard work, that education had in all logic led him to a high-up position in the national administration. It was at an official function that he met the contemptuous young woman who would—just a few months later—trick him into marrying her so she could break free from her father's grip. Later on, she would revel in her newfound control over her environment, and she would never miss an opportunity to remind her husband of his lowly origins. She had, at last, become the mistress of the house.

A mistress whose first official act had been to get rid of the maids that her father had forced her to take along into the luxurious house that he had bought for the couple in the suburbs of the capital. The now emancipated daughter had arranged a special trip to India to pick a brand-new maid for herself. Her only criteria were for her to be an orphan and speak fluent English, which she had decreed would be the official language in her house. The heiress settled for a single mother from the suburbs of Jaipur, who had been raised in a Christian orphanage for girls and who—despite having been kicked out of it at sixteen after being found pregnant—had been recommended by the director of the institution with an odd insistence. The mother and her four-year-old daughter had followed the woman with the elegant silk abaya and matching hijab with unbridled hope. When they finally entered her house, in a far, far away world of orange dirt grounds and hazy blue skies, they were so astonished by the luxury of its furnishings that they did not hear the doors locking behind them.

Seventeen years later, Preeti's eyes had never traveled more than a hundred feet into the park which backed up against the twelve-foot wall choking the tiny backyard, or past the wall of the three-story mansion across the street, where the white curtains were always drawn. Like Mistress' parakeet on the perch of its cage, she never wondered much about the world beyond anyway.

## Chapter 7

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"I'll be glad to oblige, Madam," said the mortician, "but I'm confused... Wasn't your father a Muslim?"

"He was," replied the Mistress snappily, "but in his will, he made it very clear that he wanted to be buried inside a casket and not just inside a shroud."

"Why?"

"He had a phobia of being buried alive. He had read in a book how, throughout the ages, exhumations had revealed deep scratches inside the coffins, bodies facing down or folded in a fetal position, shrouds turned to shred, and hands clasped on clumps of hair."

A chill ran up Preeti's spine as a picture of her belated mother ripping her long hair inside her coffin zipped through her mind.

"I've done this job for twenty years and never come across any such story—"

"What you think is irrelevant! Just bring us your best coffin—today! Money is no object."

"Very well, Madam. I'll deliver it myself."

The black hearse arrived mid-afternoon and caused a bit of commotion when it parked in front of the mansion. Several neighbors came out of their houses and assembled around the vehicle. They were not hostile, just intrigued by the intrusion of the Christian contraption in their *hayi*.

Preeti could not help but feel quite excited at the unusual activity. Mistress' Father had been moved into the mansion five years earlier, after a stroke had turned him from an oil tycoon to an old baboon. The vascular accident had left him with what the doctor had called *phantom itch*, an odd condition that caused him to scratch endlessly and all over the body, even though he could not be diagnosed with any clinical skin condition. As if his gesticulations and the animal grunts that went with them were not annoying enough, the man had developed a quirky little habit. When the rest of the family was out—after making sure that Preeti and her mother were the only ones left around—he would stroll around the house, stilted and haughty, a gold-embroidered taqiyah on his skull, a matching pair of leather babouches on his feet, and... a whole lot of flabby skin in between!

Although his nudity sent the maids flying to their rooms on the first couple of occasions, they had soon been reassured by his total lack of interest in them, and they had learned to sweep and dust around him. At least, when naked, he did not scratch. The man moved slowly, he could not climb stairs, and his speech was slurred, but his mind was still quite clear. He never addressed the servants other than to bark orders at them and often complained to his daughter about them. When the Master had informed Preeti of the elderly's passing the night before, she had bowed her head very low and left the room hurriedly to hide the tears that would not come up.

As required by Muslim tradition, the burial had to take place as rapidly as possible. The body, which had already been washed and enshrouded by the time the mortician's crew arrived, was immediately transferred to the coffin.

"Wait!" said the Mistress as one of the aids lifted the coffin's cover.

The woman left the room without any explanation. When she returned, she carried a white, egg-shaped device, that she laid inside the coffin next to her father's head.

"May I ask what this is?" said the mortician.

"A baby monitor," replied the Mistress.

"Baby...? Monitor...?" repeated the man, baffled.

"Another one of my father's last wishes," said the Mistress with impatience. "He wanted us to listen to the inside of the casket for a month, in case—well, you know..."

"What's the range of the device?"

"A hundred and fifty feet. It's one of the most powerful ones."

"But the Muslim cemetery is at least five miles away..."

"That's why my father also demanded to be buried in a corner of our backyard. Enough with the questions, you... twit! Leave, now. My people will take it from here."

The burial took place at sunset and was only attended by members of the household. Because the use of a casket for a Muslim burial was *makrooh*, the imam had been reluctant to perform the service. He had eventually given in to the Mistress—whose influence in the community was too strong to be challenged—but he had kept the ceremony to a bare minimum and had fled the house after mumbling a vague blessing. The longer part of the event had been for the audience to wait for the deep hole in which the coffin had been lowered to be filled back in by the day laborers hired for the occasion.

When Preeti had returned inside the house, the Mistress had handed her a white device similar to the one that she had placed in the casket, but this one had a small handle and a built-in speaker that made it look like a portable radio.

"For the next month," she told Preeti, "you will carry this with you everywhere you go, even in your bedroom at night or inside the bathroom. It is the receiver for the baby monitor that went inside Mistress' Father's coffin. You should never—ever—be parted from it. If you ever hear it speak, bring it to me at once. Don't let me catch you messing this up!"

Preeti nodded and tried her best not to frown as she grabbed the ominous device. She had a vague idea of the function of a baby monitor—the Mistress had used one while she breastfed her second child. That did not help her come to terms with the thought that she was to carry everywhere a talking box whose microphone lay a couple of inches from the lips of... a corpse!

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Preeti pussyfooted into Master's study, located on the second floor in a corner of the house. She opened the French windows and placed in a corner of the balcony the receiver of the baby monitor, which—praise God and Allah—had remained mute for four days now. She straddled the balustrade to end up standing on the balls of her feet on the narrow ledge that skirted it. Without hesitation, she grabbed the sturdy pipe cleat that anchored a copper downspout to the wall and swung her body into the void before claspng her knees around the pipe. She slid down slowly until her feet touched the top of the twelve-foot cement wall that held the backyard captive. After a swift half-turn, she spread her arms and started scampering on top of the narrow wall, just like the tightrope walker that she had seen in one of the Mistress' magazines and had so mesmerized her. She ran back and forth along the U-shaped wall several times, even taking small leaps with extended legs when she felt further emboldened.

It had taken several years for Preeti to perfect what she called with delight her moon ride. Years made of short strings of minutes stolen each week from the masters when the whole family attended the mosque for *jummah* prayers on Friday evenings. After their departure from the house, Preeti waited impatiently for the light to dim enough so it would hinder her performance from the eyes of the neighbors, but not so much that she could no longer see the wall's edges. That was usually the time when the moon was ejected out of the collapsing day and would immediately smile upon Preeti's quick steps as she dashed along the edge of her universe. This was the closest she ever got to the outside world since her arrival at the house seventeen years earlier. She was barred from stepping into the backyard and, on the one time she had risked it, the two Dobermans in residence there had sent her flying back to the safety of the house. Her moonwalk, in the open air and out of reach of the hounds' fangs, was the high point of her week and a moment that left her exhilarated for hours after returning to her room.

That night, as always after her moonwalk, Preeti sat on the wall for several minutes to push back the moment when she would have to climb back up on the balcony and fly back into the golden cage. The moon was three-quarters full and unusually bright. It hovered just above the treetops of the small grove behind the house. Actually, just a cluster of five lonely Acacia trees against which the rear walls of three other mansions also backed up. The only purpose of that tiny, walled-up grove was to provide an illusion of greenery when tenants looked out of their back windows.

"Psst..."

Startled, Preeti nearly slipped off the wall. She turned toward the balcony, from which the sound had risen. It was empty.

"Are you alone, little moon ballerina?"

This time, Preeti noticed the tiny red light that flashed on the baby monitor, in synch with the words. She stood up on the wall and approached the balcony with apprehension, her eyes fixated on the device.

"Mistress' Father...?" she asked, even though the high-pitched, scratchy tone of the voice did not sound anything like the old man's.

"Mistress' Father is gone," said the speaker. "I've already sent him on his way."

"Are you... God?" asked Preeti and executed two swift signs of the cross for good measure.

"No, sweetheart. I'm just one of his helpers."

"An angel?"

"Yeah... that's just it... an angel. A sweet, handsome angel."

"Inside the coffin?!"

"Why would I be inside the coffin?"

"Because that's where the other half of the monitor is!"

"Oh, I see... No, I took it out with me after freeing the old man's soul. I'm now sitting behind the wall, at the end of the backyard."

"Really?!"

"I'd love to give you a hug and a little kiss on the forehead before flying away."

"Can you meet me on the wall?" asked Preeti, eyes fixated on the flashing red light.

"I can't risk anyone else seeing me. An angel of the Christian God, in this neighborhood... Just come down. You'll never get another chance to meet an angel down here, on Earth."

"But I'm forbidden to step outside of the wall!"

"It will take but a second. A light kiss and I'll give you a leg back up. We'll hear your masters' car if they come back early anyway."

The little red light died, leaving behind silence and an ever-thicker dusk. Preeti pulled out of her shirt the small cross pendant that her mother had offered her on her twelfth birthday and pressed it on her lips for a long moment, as if to draw energy from it. When she understood that the voice would not return, she stood back up and threaded very carefully to the end of the wall, the edges of which she could now barely make out. Despite the frantic beats of her heart that choked her breathing, she took a leap off the wall. A simple leap of faith. The instant Preeti's feet touched the ground, a powerful, elastic limb wrapped around her waist and lifted her back up into the air. Before she had a chance to scream, her body was swung around and a violent hit to the back of the skull knocked her out.



## Chapter 8

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It was just as dark after Preeti opened her eyes as before she did. She winced in pain as the motion of her eyelids lit up a sharp pain behind her forehead. Her most recent memory was that of being grabbed next to the wall.

“Oh my God, I lost my eyes!” she yelled in panic.

A callous, fleshy mass smothered her mouth.

“Shut up!” hissed a high-pitched, nasal voice very close to her ear.

Preeti wiggled to escape the muzzle and realized that she was lying on a cold, smooth surface and that her hands were tied up behind her back.

“Be quiet now,” resumed the voice in her ear. If the border guards hear you, I’ll break your neck before they have a chance to find you!”

Preeti stopped jiggling. She could hear other, muffled voices but the words were foreign to her. After a few minutes, the floor underneath her started shaking, amidst a racket of grinding and creaking sounds. The noise turned quickly into a dull rumble that pressured Preeti’s eardrums and was punctuated at regular intervals by metallic pulses that sounded like quick heartbeats. When the hand covering Preeti’s mouth was pulled away, she would have relaxed a bit had not it been for the awful smell that she had just come to notice. A blend of sour sweat, festering feet, and urine that saturated the stuffy air around her. Preeti started crying in silence. Fear was not the cause of her tears. Somehow, she just sensed that the fall she had taken from her moon ride to that putrid pit would not be reversible.

A burst of light blinded Preeti without warning. She squinted, then opened her eyes wide before launching into a scream so high-pitched that she covered her own ears in response to it. A slap on the cheek extinguished her cry instantly and left her with a gaping mouth, staring at a vision that only witchcraft could have summoned. Occupying half her field of vision, only inches from her eyelashes, was a face of epic ugliness. Jumping out of it was a long, crooked nose that hung between a set of beady brown eyes and pouty lips slightly opened on pointy teeth. Preeti would have been hard-pressed to read an expression on the creature’s face, but it still scared her, intuitively.

Floating in the background, behind the gargoyle’s head, were a dozen black faces, darker than the darkest Indian faces she had ever seen. Thanks to her mom’s teachings, Preeti knew of Africa, but she had never seen one of its inhabitants in real life. Her mom had made it a point to explain how they were just like her, but she had probably never envisioned that her daughter would one day be canned with a bunch of them—all young men—in a twenty by eight feet metal container without doors or windows.

"I will untie you," said the gargoyle while dimming the lamp by its side, "but stay close to me and button up your kurti. These boys haven't seen a woman in weeks and there's nowhere for you to run."

"Who are you?" asked Preeti while rubbing her sore wrists. "Why did you steal me?!"

"My name is Hijra—"

"That's a girl's name! Are you really a woman?"

"Shut up with that nonsense! I didn't choose my name and I'm certainly not a woman!"

"Where are we?" asked Preeti, disoriented by the smooth, shiny cylinder at the bottom of which they sat.

"We're inside an empty fuel tank, the kind used to resupply the gas stations."

"Like the ones that travel on trucks?"

"Yes, except that this one has been loaded on a train platform."

"So, all this racket is the train moving?"

"Hmm."

"Why are we in here? And with them?" asked Preeti and pointed her chin at their travel companions.

"The train will cross several borders and none of you has papers to get through those. The border officers will check everyone in the passenger compartments. They may also ask for the doors of the cargo containers to be opened, but they don't often go through the trouble of climbing on top of a fuel tank, opening the trapdoor, and inspecting the contents."

"But I don't want to cross borders! I just want to get back to the Master's house, where I belong!"

"There's no way back there. If you need to belong to someone, just think of me as your new master, for now."

"For now...? Are you taking me to someone else?"

"I'm taking you to a new life, very far away from the old one—"

"I don't want to go anywhere with you!"

"Don't play with me, little girl. I'll drag you by your feet, face down in the mud if I have to, but it doesn't have to be that way. Just go with the flow, you'll save yourself a lot of hardship."

Preeti stared at her abductor's face. He looked definitely more Indian than Middle Eastern, and definitely more male than female, despite his girly name. However, his prominent chin, big nose, and bushy eyebrows all clashed with his long hair tied up in a ponytail, his oddly plump and red lips, and the thick, dark lines around his eyes, which looked suspiciously like mascara. Now that she thought about it, his first name did align with hijras, outcast transgender men in India, who often played, in the fictional children's stories that her mom had told her, the role of the villain—the child kidnapper, the thief, the abuser, or the blackmailer. Yet, she could not bring herself to really fear the person in front of

her, even though he had kidnapped her and probably had more trouble in store for her, wherever he was taking her. He clearly claimed his manhood, which disqualified him as a hijra, and the goofy appearance of his face tended to take the edge off the creepy side of her situation rather than add to it.

"How did you get a hold of the baby monitor that was in the coffin?" Preeti asked Hijra. That point, which had just crossed her mind, did spook her a bit.

"I stole it from the coffin, before the burial, when everyone was out of the room."

"You went inside the house?!"

"Yeah."

"And the dogs didn't bark?"

"The dogs have known my scent since they were puppies. I often work in my yard just on the other side of the wall."

Preeti thought it wise not to comment on the man's body odor, which managed to stand out from the ambient stench.

"Had you been in the house before?" she asked.

"Inside, no. I just stayed outside, looking in through the windows."

"At me?"

The man nodded.

"Why me? I'm not nearly as pretty as the Mistress' daughter."

"You were the one I had to get out of there, not anyone else."

"Did someone send you?"

"No. I just saw what was going on."

"How much of me did you see?" asked Preeti. "You did not see me naked in my room, did you?"

"Not only naked like a loaf of dough but kneaded and baked by your Master as well!"

Preeti blushed down to her hair follicles.

"You were behind my window for that?!"

"*That*, my dear, is what brought me to your Master's house, but you don't have to be embarrassed. You always handled your little teapot with much care and dedication!"

"I don't want to talk about that! Tell me instead why you robbed the baby monitor."

"Getting behind your windows to look in was a piece of cake. Extracting you from that compound, on the other hand, was tricky since they never let you out of it. I couldn't come up with a good plan until the old fellow passed away. I was standing on the wall—by a window that had been cracked open—when the Mistress spoke to the undertaker about the baby monitor. I figured out on the spot how the device could help me lure you out of the compound. I jumped in and took it out of the coffin. The guys who nailed the lid on didn't notice. After that, it was easy. I had seen you dance on the wall several times before, always at the same time, on Fridays. You know the rest..."

“You knocked me out!”

“That was an accident.”

“Why did you work so hard for me? There were so many women more beautiful than me in the neighborhood!”

Hijra shrugged his shoulders and handed Preeti a bottle of water.

“Drink some water. I can’t have you pass out from dehydration. The trip will last another sixteen hours or so, if everything goes well, and there’s no leaving this tank until we get to our destination. I’ll get you some food once we arrive. There’s no crapping in here—it stinks enough as it is—just a pee bucket behind you if you need it. Try to get some sleep. I’ll do the same.”

Just before Hijra turned off the lamp, Preeti looked at the haggard, staring faces of the young men who sat a few feet behind him. Between these shadows and her, for hours to come, would only lie a sleeping freak.

## Chapter 9

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Preeti lay down on her side and dozed off a few minutes after the light went off, but not for long. Her heart beat to the rhythm of the train wheels pounding on the rails. Her lungs wheezed under the brush of the hot, fetid air that stagnated inside the stainless-steel chamber. She noticed, a few feet above her head, a tiny crescent of starry night sky where the lid of the tank had been propped open to allow for a little fresh air to seep in. As she wiggled around to find a more comfortable sitting position, she froze in response to a light touch on one of her breasts. The touch became a light tapping that traveled up her neck and ran all around her face and down her arm. Once it got past the elbow, the tapping turned to a warm sheath that slid down to her wrist and pulled it away from her body. Something long and warm was laid into the palm of her limp hand and a fleshy clamp forced her fingers to wrap around it. Preeti did not resist; she simply closed her eyes as tight as she could, so as to wish herself away.

It worked. All forms of contact with her body vanished; touches, taps, sheaths, or clamps. She was left holding what felt like a short, warm cylinder. She cautiously approached it to her nose and recognized the smell of grape leaves and dill weed. By rubbing the ribbed surface of the soft body, she confirmed that she was holding a dolma, one of her mistress' favorite wraps, which she had prepared on many occasions by stuffing grape leaves with seasoned meat, vegetables, and rice. Even though she was starving, Preeti first took a tiny bite off the end of the wrap. It was only filled with plain rice but tasted fine. She gobbled the rest of it and drew a hasty cross on her chest with her thumb. She would now be able to sleep. Among the dark faces trapped with her in the stainless-steel cage rested at the very least another one of God's children.

Preeti drifted in and out of consciousness for hours on end, often nudged out of sleep for a few seconds by the flash of a match, as one of the African boys fumbled in his duffle bag, or another staggered to the pee bucket behind her. The flickering match light cast strange reflections on their faces, rendering their stares even spookier. None of them approached Preeti again. A couple of them addressed a faint smile at her from afar but it was more of a wince from exhaustion and distress. She returned their smile without hesitation, convinced that one of them was her dolma angel. The ever-thinning air in the tank was the other cause of her sleep disruptions. She would wake up gasping for oxygen so badly that, in one instance, she grabbed the front of her abductor's sari. Disturbed in his own sleep, Hijra uttered a string of colorful insults, pried Preeti's hand off his garment, and rolled over to turn his back to her. Somehow, his rude, casual attitude quieted down Preeti's racing heart and after a few deep breaths, she was able to snooze again.

“Wake up, girl! Wake up!”

Preeti felt her body shaking, but her drowsy mind refused to snap out of the deep sleep into which it had finally sunk.

“What is it?” she mumbled in the dark.

“We’re approaching the entry point of our destination country.”

She recognized Hijra’s nasal voice and pulled herself away from him as he patted her on the head to speed up her waking.

“We crossed several countries without having to submit to border controls,” he said, “but this time, we’ll have to make it through customs and that’s not a walk in the park. We’re in Calais, on the north coast of France. Dozens of illegal immigrants, like the ones here with us, try every day to cross this border to make it to England through the underground railroad under the Channel. Controls here are very tight and most of these guys fail. I’ll need you to be awake and very quiet. We couldn’t have you scream because of a nightmare. And remember what I told you when we started; if you try to alert the border officers, I’ll break your neck before they get to you. Do you understand this clearly?”

“Yes... sir.”

Preeti had added the *sir* instinctively. Although Hijra did not scare her, she read in his voice that he would carry out his threat as casually as she would wring a quail’s neck in response to her mistress’ dinner orders.

The train brakes screeched for what seemed an eternity before the convoy came to rest in a final jolt. Inside the stainless-steel tank, everyone had frozen in the dark. Outside its walls, after a few minutes of complete stillness, screams tore through the silence, which grew closer and closer before fading away in the opposite direction. Some of them of panic, some of them—running close behind—of anger. Men were chasing men. Before silence even had a chance to reset itself, a loud metallic object banged against the wall of the tank.

“Ladder!” whispered Hijra and, against all logic, turned on his portable light.

Despite their frazzled stares, the African boys did not oppose any resistance when Hijra motioned them to sit down and turn their backs to him. Preeti would be the only one to witness the scene that would follow. Hijra dragged her behind his back, up the ladder, until he stood under the trapdoor of the tank. He tilted his head back to face the lid and pushed the flashlight against his chin so the light would flood his face.

The lid was flung open with a loud clang and the face of a middle-aged man popped into the opening, bleached by the glow of Hijra’s lamp. His round eyes were trapped between dark, bushy eyebrows and purple, swollen bags. They immediately locked onto Hijra’s face. After a brief wince of bewilderment, they became transfixed and his face relaxed. He ran his flashlight across the whole space of the container—around Hijra’s face—slowly scrutinized the backs of the African migrants and took a final stare at Hijra’s face. He disappeared as he had

appeared, leaving behind him the crescent of night sky as he propped the trapdoor back into its original position. No one moved for several minutes. Hijra kept staring up. Preeti kept staring at Hijra staring up. The boys kept huddling at one end of the tank. The train first shivered, then coughed, rattled, and vibrated in all directions as it resumed its journey. No one moved for several minutes.

“You may party now...”

Hijra’s duck voice had somehow managed to cover the train’s din. Preeti stepped down the ladder. The boys turned around, one at a time, and stared at the man whose face, still trapped in the beam of the flashlight, flashed a cocky smile at them. It was the ugliest, brightest smile these boys would ever remember. It was their freedom smile. As the train fast gathered speed, its vibrations were amplified by the reverberations that they created against the tunnel walls under the Channel. Many of the boys were not educated. Their sole capital was their determination to better themselves and they had spent nearly all of it crossing deserts and treacherous cities on their way. They knew they had very little left. Just enough to finish crossing the Channel. Beyond it, they’d find a charging station. Friends or relatives who had been praying all along for their safe passage. They might not have been educated but they knew enough to figure out two things: they should have been stopped in Calais, and not everything can be explained by knowledge. The ugly excuse for a woman who stood in front of them had saved them from the first and confirmed their beliefs in the second. One of the boys walked up to Hijra and kissed his hand as he would have the hand of the king whose country he was about to enter as a free man. As soon as his lips touched the freak’s skin, the other boys rushed to them and engulfed them in a huddle that would last for most of the trip under the sea. Preeti stayed back.

Now, Hijra scared her.

## Chapter 10

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At the station, everything went very fast. Not even two minutes after the train had stopped, the trapdoor of the tank was flung wide open, and the ladder was propped up. The Africans insisted that Hijra go first. Before he reached the opening, he ordered Preeti to follow him. As she descended a rope ladder set up outside the tank, Preeti took a hasty look around. She only saw an array of trains—most of them loaded with large shipping containers—dimly lit by neon bulbs dangling here and there from the arch of sheet metal that covered the rail yard. Not a dock in sight. Not a sign of life. Their endless run through Europe had come to a stop in a gigantic, silent warehouse.

Hijra clutched Preeti's wrist and started dragging her away. She managed a hasty wave at two African boys who were climbing down from the tank. One of them responded with a victory finger sign before looking nervously in all directions. As Hijra pulled her under the couplers of successive trains, Preeti noticed that they were following a shadow twenty feet ahead of them. After clearing the last train, they landed on the grassy shoulder of a deserted service road. The shadow was already slipping behind the wheel of a white van parked in the middle of the road. He turned on the engine and headlights as soon as Hijra pushed Preeti in between the two front seats and took his place next to her. The driver was a young, pale man who stared straight ahead with an absent look on his face. He smelled as fresh as Hijra stank. They sandwiched her tightly between their shoulders. It was not necessary; the last thing on Preeti's mind was to try to run away in a rail yard. She was not even sure which country's night was outside the windshield.

"Where are we going?" Preeti asked the driver and patted his thigh to get his attention. The lad jumped with a squeal as the car swerved onto the road shoulder. He managed to bring it back onto the asphalt and swore under his breath without looking at a confused Preeti.

"In an hour and a half, your journey will be over," answered Hijra in his place. "Tonight, you'll sleep in a real bed."

"Whose bed?"

"You'll be alone in it, if that's your worry. Relax now."

"What about the African boys? Weren't they with you?"

"No. We just shared the hideout to cross borders. They came a long way to make a better life for themselves here—"

"How come the man who looked into the tank did not see them when his flashlight was right on them?"

"I worked in a circus when I was a teenager. They taught me a little magic trick called hypnosis. It doesn't always work like that, though. We were very lucky."

"I forbid you to ever use that trick on me... for any reason!"

"Don't worry, I'm not that kind of man."

"Then why did you knock me out and drag me here? To give me a better life, too?"

"My job is to shift your life from one set of rails to another. As to whether it'll be happier in the near future, I wouldn't bet on it."

The northbound ride went through sleepy little towns separated by pitch-dark countryside. Half an hour into it, Hijra instructed the driver to exit the highway at the first available rest area. A few minutes later, the van entered a small oasis of light only inhabited by a tiny convenience store and two gas pumps. Hijra stepped out of the vehicle and motioned Preeti and the driver to follow him as he walked briskly through the empty parking lot. They walked up to the front door of the store—it was locked. A handwritten sign directed visitors to another rest area; this one opened all night, fifteen miles up the highway.

"Shit!" hissed Hijra and kicked the glass panel before addressing Preeti. "I need to do my business. Turn around and face the truck." Preeti complied for a few seconds before sneaking a peek behind her. The two men stood side by side by the grassy edge of the parking lot, legs widespread, their backs turned to her. Without a second of hesitation, she swung around, ran to the younger man, and kicked him in the groin from behind with all her strength. The lad did not so much as squeal. He dropped down on his knees and rolled to his side in a fetal position.

"Are you nuts, girl!?" yelled Hijra while hastily pulling up his pants.

Preeti hesitated. With his quick reaction, Hijra had foiled her plan to floor them both before making a run for the highway. After a scan of Hijra's pudgy figure, tight sari and loose, worn-out jutis, she went for it. No way he could ever chase her. Halfway through the parking lot, she threw a glance behind her. Hijra had not moved. He was just slowly raising his arm in her direction, an expression of dismay on his face. She turned back around just as she was about to skirt the rear of the van—at full running speed. She did not realize that the back door had been left open and did not understand the head-on collision that pulled her body from underneath her.

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When Preeti came out of her blackout, she felt as if a witch had switched her eyes to a frog's. They felt like bulges from which only a slit could crack open. Through that slit, she discovered a small room where faded, pinkish wallpaper came undone near the ceiling to form wide, hanging tongs. A corner of the space was occupied by a kitchenette and a round wooden table. Next to the sofa where Preeti was lying—still fully dressed under a dark blanket—was a narrow bed occupied by a young woman, entirely nude, entirely pale. If it had not been for the constellation of red dots nestled at the fold of her elbow, she could have been a

brilliant work of black-and-white photography. Her long, raven hair framed the pallid skin of her shoulders and chest. It was matched by the pitch-black, erect nipples of her small breasts and dense bush at the branching of her thighs. The girl's face was as youthful and dainty as it was flushed and tense, as if she had not slept in days. When she heard the springs of the sofa squeak, she stopped staring at the ceiling and turned a set of feverish eyes to Preeti.

"Do you have anything..." she asked, with a wheezy voice.

"Anything...? Like what?" replied Preeti, struggling to pull her eyelids further open.

"Pills... Anything to snort... Grass even."

"Hmm... I'm sorry, but I'm not a healer. Are you ill? Maybe I can find you some herbal tea in here..."

"Never mind," said the girl with a pout of dismay, before taking a long look at Preeti's face.

"Did he bash your brains in?" she asked.

"Bash...? "

"Did the man who brought you in hit you?"

"No. I ran into a door... I think."

"A door? Yeah. Lots of girls run into doors in this neighborhood. Stay away from the mirror for a couple of days. It's not pretty. Does your face hurt?"

"No. I just have a bad headache," said Preeti and slowly pulled herself up into a sitting position. "How about you? Are you ill?"

The girl caught Preeti's stare at her charcoal nipples.

"You've never seen body artwork?"

"On hands, yes, but never... there! How long does it take for the henna to go away?"

"Where do you come from?! This is not henna. This is a real tattoo, you know, with ink injected under your skin with a needle—"

"A needle? On your choochuks?! Why in the world would anyone want to do that to themselves?"

The gothic creature had a disenchanted smile.

"To erase their *choochuks*."

"I don't understand."

"What's your name?"

"Preeti. And you?"

The girl hesitated an instant before replying.

"Ann."

"Where are we, Ann?"

The girl went back to staring at the ceiling.

"Is this your place?" insisted Preeti, as her eyes scanned the wall closet and kitchen cabinets, all open on empty shelves.

"Not really," replied Ann with a dragging voice. "This is where I work... used to work."

"You worked from home?"

"In and out of home, yes."

"But there's nothing here. Not even a pencil."

"I didn't need a pencil. I was a pencil sharpener. Men brought me their pencils down there, in the street, and I brought them up to sharpen them here."

"Pencil sharpener? That's a job here?"

"It's a job everywhere. The oldest in the world, they say."

"And you stopped?"

"Three days ago, a shrouded woman burst in here with a combat knife and scared my best customer all the way out into the staircase. I managed to lock myself in the bathroom. When I came back out of it, half an hour or so later—when it had all gone quiet on the other side of the door—the apartment was empty. My work clothes and shoes, my jewelry, my... tools, my snacks in the kitchen, my booze. The bitch had taken everything away, even my fucking... injectable vitamins," ranted Ann before pointing to the constellation of brown dots at the fold of her arm.

"Did you know the woman?" asked Preeti, more confused by the idea of injectable vitamins than by the weirdness of Ann's account.

"I'd never seen the freak before. She didn't say a word to me either. It's like she came here to expel a tenant who didn't pay her rent, kicked all of her things out, and locked her up inside before leaving."

"We are locked up in here?!"

"What do you think, *Bollywood*? That she's running a hostel for young Christian girls?!" shouted Ann and jumped off of the bed. She marched on to the door and kicked it with her bare heel. The shock rattled her frail body, kicking the black pasties on her small breasts into a brief swirl.

"I don't understand..." murmured Preeti, unsettled by Ann's sudden agitation.

"The door is locked! What's there to understand?! Food comes twice a day, around eleven in the morning and six in the evening. A young guy brings it, not always the same. What time is it, by the way? The motherfucker should be here already!"

"It is only a few minutes past six. I'm sure that dinner will be here soon—"

The door swung open just as Preeti realized how useless her words were to quell Ann's nerve storm. A young man with a darker complexion and shoulder-length raven hair walked in, carrying two translucent plastic bags filled up with disposable Styrofoam containers and plastic bottles.

"How many times did we tell you not to bang at the door," he yelled, staring at Ann's nudity with disgust.

Before he had a chance to put down the bags on the table, Ann snatched a small plastic bottle filled with a bright red liquid from one of them. She rushed back to her bed, lay down and gulped the contents of the bottle in one go.

The lad shook his head with contempt and slammed the bags on the table. Preeti headed for the door, left wide open. The boy grabbed her by the collar.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he said.

“Back to work. I’ve already been gone for too long. My masters will be really mad at me. Back home!” replied Preeti before wrestling herself out of the boy’s grip and heading back to the door. This time, he jumped in front of her, shoved her back toward the window, and slapped her with such force that she bounced off the sofa and ended up on her knees. She looked up to him and whispered, with the patronizing tone of a headmistress: “Oh, no. No... no... no... You, young man, are not the boss of me! Not you, not anyone—ever,” before punching him in the crotch with the craft of the woodpecker and the might of the kangaroo. The boy’s eyeballs rolled up in a cartoonish way, as he dropped and rolled up on the wooden floor without so much as a whisper.

Preeti stood up and towered over him for a few seconds. When she realized that he would be gathering his balls for a while, she rushed to Ann, grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her off the bed. A suddenly sluggish Ann barely managed to stand up and stagger behind Preeti as she pulled her down the stairs.

“But... I’m naked...” said Ann, slurring her speech as they reached the second floor.

“Do you need clothes to run?!” replied Preeti and grabbed her wavering companion by the waist.

Ann did not have a chance to reply. Preeti froze and pulled Ann tightly against her hip. Two flights of stairs separated them from the building’s hallway. They could see the glow of the outside light seeping through the front door. Only two flights of stairs away. Two flights of stairs, a snap blade, and a screwdriver away. The weapons in the hands of two boys who could have been the brothers of the one lying upstairs. They had heard Preeti and Ann coming down the stairs and clearly had for a purpose in life to reverse time if it did not fit them. They started climbing the stairs, blade and screwdriver first.

## Chapter 11

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Preeti hurried Ann back up the stairs and closed the door behind them, just making it back into the cage from which they had just fled. In the apartment was a very disoriented young man, staggering about. They shoved him out before slamming the door closed once more. Preeti dragged the small kitchen table behind the door, with little hope. The girls heard the boys arguing for several minutes behind the wood panel, before the door was locked and the voices faded down the stairs.

"They have gone..." said Preeti to a livid Ann, who seemed to have snapped back into a healthy fearful mode.

"As if the big lock on the door wasn't enough, she had to leave three watchdogs with us as well," she said.

"She? Who are you talking about?" replied Preeti.

"The woman who locked me in here. Who else?"

"A woman controls these hoodlums? What makes you think they work for her?"

"Because if they didn't, they'd have burst in here and smacked us up into oblivion."

Preeti smiled. She was just glad her roommate was back to herself. It was better than being alone. Anything in her world was better than being alone in an alien place.

"You're something else, Bollywood, though..." said Ann before lying down on her bed—small white butt up—and going straight to sleep.

No matter the circumstances of her life, Preeti always ate with a ferocious appetite. Food—any food—had the power to quell her angst just as it could fuel her happiness. In the greasy brown bags brought by the boy, she discovered grilled sandwiches stuffed with shredded meat, runny cheese, and a bright, orange-colored sauce that looked anything but natural. After quite a bit of sniffing around the edges of the bread, she took a cautious bite into one of the ends... before devouring the rest of the sandwich as fast as she could swallow! The fries that came with it disappeared at the same speed, helped down the hatch by large gulps of soda. At the end of the feast, she lifted her kurti with content to verify that her belly had popped back out and slightly protruded again from her otherwise slim figure.

If the meal had lifted Preeti out of her condition for a few minutes of pleasure, she was plunged right back into it when her eyes landed on Ann's scrawny body, which lay pallid and like disarticulated on top of the bed cover. Preeti did not understand what was wrong with her roommate, but she knew that she needed help, and she appeared to be the only one who could provide her with some support.

Preeti opened the window; it did not offer any resistance. A puff of cold air stinking of fried food and gasoline rushed in, and with it the roar of the street. She leaned forward and smiled. Faces, outfits, food stands and jewelry displays, down there, on that foreign street, were not all that different than those on the Middle Eastern street that she had spent countless hours observing from behind the glass of her attic window back home. With half of her body hanging beyond the window seal, she felt almost free already, almost home. Only problem: one of their young guards—the one with the blade—was pacing back and forth by the door of the building, just a few yards up the street. If she started screaming for help, he would get to her first.

Preeti jerked herself back inside the room and scanned it for a moment before reaching inside the second bag of food. She ran back to the window and looked for a target, preferably an Indian or Arab woman, more likely to act with some reserve and to seek help without alerting the lad. Preeti picked a mature woman in a black abaya and matching scarf, who was waiting for a street vendor to bag her order. She threw a French fry at her, aiming for her head, but missed by a yard. The woman did not notice anything, but a nearby pigeon rushed to the fry within seconds. Preeti repeated the operation with two other fries—with the same outcome—to the delight of the pigeon. Frustrated, she grabbed a half-dozen fries and projected them all at once toward her target. As the handful of fries glided toward the Arab woman, a portly man in a white djellaba suddenly called out to her and approached the food stand. The cluster of fries hit him right smack in the face. After a brief instant of confusion during which he stared at the fries lying by his sandals, the man swung his head up and squinted as his eyes scanned the façade of the building. The second he spotted Preeti—whose left hand was still clutching another bunch of fries—he started screaming at her. Preeti did not understand a word he was saying, but his congested face and his gesticulations left little doubt as to the general nature of his words.

A glance at the lad by the door confirmed Preeti's fears. Like most other passersby on the sidewalk, he had been alerted by the man's loud shouts and was now staring at her as well. The stern expression on his face scared Preeti into pushing forward with her plan. As the victim of her fry attack went on spewing insults in her direction, she threw the second batch of fries at him, which rained on his bald skull, shutting him up. Before he had a chance to resume screaming at her, Preeti started yelling insults at him, in Hindi, which she concluded with a loud, thick glob of spit in his direction. The spit did it. Without a word, the man rushed toward the building entrance, as the woman by the food stand—probably his wife—covered her mouth and rolled her eyes. The lad let the Arab man through the front door but rushed inside right behind him.

“What are you doing?” asked Ann with a drowsy voice as she sat on her bed. “We are not supposed to open the window! Close it, quick, before they notice!”

“They already know,” replied Preeti and ran to the door, leaving the window wide open. She heard screams rising up the staircase, but only for a few seconds before complete silence was reset. Preeti returned to the window just in time to watch the Arab man hurry down the street, his wife trotting behind him. Shortly after, two of the young men guarding the hallway burst into the apartment, toppling over the table behind the door. The blade-wielding lad stood by the entrance while the one that Preeti had kicked in the groin earlier tied together the metal handles of the old, double-casement window with a zip tie to prevent it being opened again. They did not say a word but as they left the room, the mean one stared at Preeti while running the tip of the long, thin blade of his knife lightly around his neck to simulate a beheading.

Ann had gone back to sleep right after the ordeal, this time under the covers, since the fresh air from outside had seriously cooled down the room. Preeti, most unsettled by the silent threat cast at her by her warden, sat on the bed for as long as the day took to withdraw entirely from the room. When the streetlights took over, she undressed down to her underwear and lay down on the sofa under a dirty blanket. At some point during the night, she crawled out of sleep for a few seconds to see Ann’s shadow warming up her sandwich in the microwave, but she let herself sink back into sleep. She did not care much for her new world.

The sound of glass shattering very close by snatched Preeti out of sleep for good. The morning light was already seeping into the apartment. She was about to stand up when the sight of glass shards on the wood slats all around the sofa stopped her feet in mid-air. Ann, also alerted by the noise, was sitting on the bed, looking all around the room like a spooked chicken.

“Watch out, Ann!” warned her Preeti. “There’s broken glass all over! Wait till I sweep the floor before standing up.”

The girls saw the small stainless-steel box at the same time, by a foot of the kitchen table. Its cover bore a small red cross and was tightly held in place by a rubber band.

“Oh God, let it be what I think it is!” yelled Ann as she jumped out of bed and ran to the kitchen to pick up the box from the floor.

“Oh, Ann... No...” murmured Preeti upon discovering the smears of blood left behind by her roommate’s bare feet as she hurried back to the bed and feverishly snapped the rubber band off the box. After popping the cover off, Ann rushed to the window and screamed out of the broken pane.

“Thank you, my love! Thank you!!”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Preeti as she slipped on her sandals. “Get back on the bed. You’ve cut your feet badly enough already!”

She did not have to insist. By the time she got up, Ann was already sitting on the bed, reading a small note she had pulled out of the box. When she noticed that her roommate's eyes were tearing up, Preeti went to sit close to her on the bed.

"Look at what he sneaked into the box!" said Ann and swiftly wiped her eyes before unrolling a black ball into a long piece of stretchy, lacy material.

"What is it?" replied Preeti as Ann was already wiggling her skinny, pallid body into the lace garment.

"He gave me this bodysuit last year on his birthday, so I would wear it for him. He loved me in it and would even ask me to wear it, sometimes, under my casual clothes when we'd go grocery shopping! It gave him a kick to be the only one aware of how sexy I was... underneath!"

When she had slipped into the full-body stocking, Ann jumped onto her feet on the bed cover, facing Preeti with her arms wide open and shouted "Ta-Da!"

"It's torn..." said Preeti and looked away. She was more embarrassed by Ann's nudity, as cast by the racy lingerie, as she had been by her nude body.

"Where?" asked Ann, looking, inspecting her outfit.

"Right there... in the middle... by your *yonis*."

Preeti was pointing at Ann's crotch with her finger, eyes still turned away. Ann burst out laughing.

"You're so silly, Bollywood! That's how it's supposed to be! And I have just what's needed to go with it. The witch didn't see these when she stole everything else!"

Ann dove onto the bed and leaned out of it to reach underneath. She brought up a pair of red patent stilettos that she slipped onto her feet, oblivious to the blood that kept seeping out of her soles. She went to stand behind the window for a long moment, in silence, staring out, exposed.

"You can read the note, you know," she finally said.

Preeti picked up the piece of paper.

*"You know I'll always be as close to you as they'll let us, my love. In this box is your magic costume and your wings to fly to me. I am waiting for you... Josh."*

The words did not make much sense to Preeti and the presence of a syringe and a small glass vial still inside the metal box did not do anything to ease her sudden discomfort.

"Josh is your boyfriend?" she asked.

Ann answered with a soft smile and returned to bed.

"And this, in the box, is it that medicine you were telling me about? The one the woman took away from you?"

Ann was already tying up a flat, tan-colored rubber band around her arm, above the elbow.

"Yeah," replied Ann, whose breathing had suddenly accelerated.

“How about the red drink that they brought with dinner last night? There was only one of those—the one you drank. Was that medication for you also?”

“The methadone? That crap is what they’ve been giving me in place of my medication. I guess they were trying to clean me up before putting me up for sale.”

“You know, Ann, most of the time, I don’t understand a word of what you say—”

“Don’t worry about it, Bollywood! All that matters is that now I’ve got my real medication, the one that will take me to Josh. I’ll see you when I return.”

Preeti watched with repulsion Ann inject the contents of the vial into the fold of her arm and her body slowly drop on its side, held together only by its black lace envelope.

While Ann slept, Preeti tasked herself with sweeping the glass shards off the floor with a broom found in the otherwise empty closet. Since a pan was not available, she shoved the stained glass into a pile in a corner of the room. When she passed by the bed on her way back to the sofa, she noticed the thin stream of blood running down one of Ann’s pumps. She went to the sink and drew water into a saucepan—the only container available. She added a few drops of dishwashing detergent to it and grabbed a bunch of toilet paper from the bathroom. Taking great care not to wake Ann up, she very slowly popped her shoes off... to expose two eerie hives created by the blood that had artfully filled the smallest grooves of her lacy soles. When Preeti started cleaning them with soapy damp paper, she realized that her procedure was only speeding up the seeping of blood, which soon soaked the lace to the point that she could no longer see its black fibers. When she saw the crimson stream turn into a meek river diving into the bed cover, Preeti panicked. The last thing she wanted was to bleed her friend dry during her sleep! She rushed around the bed to wake Ann up and ask her for help. She made it just as far as it took for her to see her brand-new friend’s eyes wide open, staring at a soiled wall where the pink wallpaper tongs seemed to invite her to a last, lurid exchange. Preeti did not try to shake Ann’s shoulders. She had recognized her stare at first sight. It was the same as her mother’s on her deathbed. She ran to the front door of the apartment and banged on it relentlessly until the lads came. Two of them.

“Shit...” said one of them after a quick look at Ann’s face.

Ann’s eulogy had been told. The lads rushed out of the room, locking Preeti back in it, with the corpse. Nothing would happen for the next two hours, other than decency. Decency in Preeti peeling off the obscene, lacy shroud from Ann’s corpse. Wrapping her inside one of the white sheets that she had so seldom used. Decency in kissing Ann’s forehead. In kneeling by the bed. In praying by the bed.

When the lady in the blue burka came, the thin dark grids hiding her eyes faced Preeti for a long moment. When she lifted Ann’s body off the couch, onto her cloaked arms, without any apparent effort, Preeti remained on her knees and

watched her steal Ann out of the apartment. She closed the door behind her and went to lie down on the sofa.

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# Eve

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## Chapter 12

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Eve was the only passenger to step down from the train at that stop. The platform was deserted; so was the tiny station building, even though the air conditioning was cranked up all the way inside it. When she stepped out, Eve had to squint to adjust to the glare of the descending sun. The station was planted in the middle of the village, on a narrow street that climbed gently toward a town square, not even fifty yards away. When she hauled her suitcase onto the cobblestones of the square, the rattle of its wheels only triggered a few detached glances from the few passersby and shoppers going in and out of the grocery store.

As she headed toward the three outdoor tables of the pub, a shadow swept the stones in front of Eve's footsteps at the same time as something small and warm was forced into her free hand. Startled, Eve turned around. A short-haired woman in a plain beige dress and flat shoes was already walking away. She moved fast, despite her stubby build, and disappeared into a small alley cut between a clothing store and the hair salon. Only when Eve sat down under the umbrella of the pub table did she look at the object in her hand. She had not been scared by it; she had been expecting it. Its delivery had just been a bit more abrupt than anticipated. She inspected the bulky, garish turquoise and silver ring for a long moment before slipping it onto her finger.

The man arrived in his dusty overalls shortly after five and threw a cocky stare at Eve, to which she responded with a playful smile. He walked into the pub and came out three minutes later, holding a pint of beer and a glass of white wine. Without asking for permission, he sat at Eve's table and pushed the glass of wine in front of her. The tanned, brawny middle-aged man spoke loudly and without reserve. He was a smooth operator, despite the frequent slips of his eyes into Eve's generously exposed cleavage. She did not seem to mind. She laughed at his lines and glanced at the biceps bulging out of his short-sleeved shirt. She even offered him a second round of drinks and went inside to get them. Equally roused by the long sips that he took out of his second pint and the warm response of the woman to his barrage of flatteries, the man now felt increasingly optimistic about the odds of banging her in his van before heading home. He launched two small probes to test the waters. She did not flinch when he caressed her forearm with the back of his hand, and she met him halfway when he leaned toward her for a light kiss on the lips. No doubt possible; the cougar was as ripe as a tired Walmart avocado, and he was about to explode his personal record for tie-down roping a chick. They had not even been sitting at the table for thirty minutes!

The man excused himself for a bathroom trip. Once in the lavatory, he took his time to prepare for the next round of the rodeo. After a day out on the construction site, he was well-marinated. The woman might have been a slut, but

her fancy outfit and uptown postures probably called for a bit of freshening up. He used paper towels and hand soap from the dispenser to perform ablutions, brushed his teeth with his index finger, and trashed his stinky socks before slipping his bare feet into his safety shoes.

By the time the man returned to the pub's terrace, Eve had already boarded the next train—the first to depart. He died a few hours later, in his sleep, with his eyes shut. Next to him, limp on the banged-up bed, lay his wife, eyes wide open in the dark.

Free.

## Chapter 13

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The bedroom door opened. Eve did not move. She felt two arms wrap softly around her from behind. One under her breasts, the other close to her neck.

"I thought I heard your voice," said the man. "Were you talking to your invisible friend again, little girl?"

Eve looked at her husband's reflection on the windowpane. Even after thirty years, Henry's beautiful, manly face got to her, just like the fact that he had never ceased to call her *little girl*. Maybe because it helped him cope with the fact that she was the only little girl in the family, or child for that matter. A couple of years after her marriage to Henry, following a miscarriage with serious complications, Eve had been notified on a hazy, warm day that she could never get pregnant again.

"How did your trip to Cardiff go?" asked Henry. "You're not too tired, are you? We've been invited to the mayor's annual dinner today, remember?"

"No. I'll be fine. I took naps on the train going and coming back."

"Were there many people at your aunt's funeral?"

"No, just a handful. She was not a very sociable person."

"How come you never mentioned her? I thought your dad was a single child."

"He was. The lady who passed away was a war orphan that my grandparents had raised with him. She had left home around the age of twenty to hide a pregnancy that she'd not been able to terminate and only sent cards for Christmas. I'd never met her."

"How come you were invited to her funeral?"

"The notary who managed her estate—a few pieces of worn-out furniture—needed a signature to close the file and I was the closest relative he could find."

"You look flushed. I'll understand if you'd rather stay home tonight."

"I couldn't do that to you. I know how much you enjoy these black-tie affairs and the cuisine of the mayor's chef. I'll be ready in an hour."

The Bentley glided through the pitch-dark Welsh countryside with a purring sound. Henry had been unusually quiet since they had left the house. In that cocoon of walnut wood and leather, tightly wrapped in her long alpaca wool coat, Eve had to bite her lips not to doze off. She had not spent all that time putting on her best face to get there with puffy eyes! Just as she cracked the window open for a few seconds to flush the cabin with chilled air, the car slowed down and stopped, right in the middle of a long, straight stretch of deserted road.

"What happened?" asked Eve. "Are you okay?"

Henry did not respond. He maneuvered the car back and forth several times in between the two ditches flanking the asphalt to turn it around and headed back at twenty miles over the speed limit.

“Did you forget something?” Eve tried again, a knot fast-forming at the pit of her stomach.

Once more, her inquiry was met with silence. Henry stared into the yellow beams of the car with an absorbed look on his face. Eve knew better than to insist. When her husband went into mute mode and took his head light years away from her in a second, she just prayed that it was linked to work. Henry owned and ran the largest Welsh luxury goods company. He did so with an iron fist in a velvet glove and hated delegating. As a result, he was both the brain, heart, and guts of the company. He had total control over its course, which also meant that he could single-handedly crash it with an ill-advised move. As Henry had not reached for his cell phone since he had reversed course, Eve guessed that he had probably made a mistake and had to correct it himself as fast and discretely as possible in his home office, in front of his personal computer.

Once they reached home, Henry parked the car in front of the doorsteps, got out, and hurried inside the dark house. Eve was more relieved than worried. Only a few hours earlier, she had received a message that her mission, the day before, had been successful. She was not really in the mood for small talk with a bunch of inebriated officials and their phony spouses.

In his haste, Henry had not even bothered to turn on the hallway lights. She proceeded up the stairs in the glow of the streetlights filtering through the tall windows. On the first floor, she noticed that the door of her husband’s study was closed. She proceeded to the second floor. When she reached her bedroom, she pushed the door and fumbled for the light switch. When she turned it on, nothing happened. She flicked the button up and down several times without success and withdrew her hand brusquely in reaction to three loud, evenly spaced knocks on the ceiling. Above her head was an unfinished attic that had been empty since the day they had moved into the house, six years earlier.

Unsettled, Eve hurried down the stairs and stormed into her husband’s study. It was empty. Her calls to him echoed throughout the dark house in vain before being answered by another three forceful thumps coming from the top level of the house. Eve resisted the urge to call the police and started slowly climbing the stairs. On the third floor, the staircase ended on a sliding, frosted glass panel. A vivid, yellow glow filtered through the pane. This time, Eve shivered; during the construction of the house, the electricians had forgotten to run a power line to the attic, and they had never returned to correct the problem. Eve slid the glass panel to the side and felt that one of the cables suspending her brain inside her skull had finally snapped.

Eve’s entire field of vision was flooded by a stage from the past. Everything was there, in its exact place. The ugly brown carpet designed to endure the

shenanigans of college tenants. The huge magnolias on the faded wallpaper that had managed to hug the walls since the 70s. The bright orange sofa—a hand-me-down from an old uncle—on which she crashed with delight after a day of classes to watch an episode of Dawson's Creek. The tiny gray TV with its rabbit ears—cable was not an option on her tiny student budget. Her tall halogen lamp, her outdoor plastic table and matching chairs in the kitchenette area... Even the Formica cupboards and the blowing wall heater that dried her skin into parchment in winter had found their way there from 1996! And in the middle of that time bubble, the same man, a little older, much more confident, wearing a burgundy smoking jacket instead of a Liverpool F.C. hooded sweater, but with the same mischievous smile.

“Welcome home, Bébé,” said Henry, finally.

Eve did not even pick up on the nickname that he had not called her for three decades.

“But... how is this possible?” she said, under her breath.

“If it was possible thirty years ago, why wouldn't it be today?”

“Because... *this was thirty years ago!* The wallpaper, the furniture, the little TV box...!?”

“Thirty years ago, you're right. Thirty years ago exactly today, That night, I snuck up into your studio apartment, cooked you dinner—”

“And at dessert, proposed to me with this ring,” said Eve while caressing with the tip of her finger the small diamond ring stuck on her left hand, between the ruby that would flank it on their ten-year anniversary and the sapphire that would follow a decade later. She walked up to the sofa and sat down on it with caution, as if it were not real.

“You did not remember the date, did you?” asked Henry.

“Honestly, I'm amazed that you did, but not as amazed as I am to see this furniture again, though. I thought you had sold it for me after we got married and I moved in with you. You even gave me the cash from the sale at the time.”

“No one ever answered my ad in the college newspaper, and I didn't want you to be disappointed. One of my friends' dad owned a farm. He offered to keep the furniture for me at the back of a hangar for a few weeks. We both forgot about it and three months became thirty years. My friend called me two months ago after his dad's passing. While clearing all the hangars to sell the farm, he found the furniture under a tarp and asked me if I wanted it back. That's when I thought of recreating the studio apartment from your college years in the attic, so you'd have a time bubble in which to hide when you felt down.”

“That is such a wonderful thought! Such a wonderful thought... But what about the wallpaper? It's exactly the same as I had in the studio. I recognize the brown magnolias and the blue clouds!”

“That was the toughest part. Luckily, I had several pictures of us, with friends, taken in the apartment. I contracted an interior decoration company to finish the

attic and recreate the studio in its smallest details. They were excellent, as you can see, and even managed to find the exact same wallpaper in a vintage decoration catalog.”

“But... when did they work?!”

“During our Bermuda vacation, last month.”

Tears came to Eve’s eyes as she stared at her husband with a strange melancholy.

“Thank you, Henry. Thank you...”

Visibly troubled himself, Henry walked up to Eve and extended his hand to her. When she stood up, he wrapped his hands around the sides of her neck and let them slip down over her shoulders to push back the coat that she had not yet taken off. It fell in a wooly ring around her high heel sandals. Henry’s lips lightly brushed the edge of Eve’s ear as he leaned against her to unzip the back of her skirt. He always started there, as he knew that it boosted Eve’s confidence at the onset of intimacy. Although self-conscious about her breasts, whose full globes had been weighed down by the years, she was proud of her perky long legs, which had defied the winds of time. Henry stared at them with fascination before lightly brushing Eve’s vulva with the back of his hand. She never wore panties when they were invited to a high-ranking official’s house. Henry had made that request to her a long time ago and even though she did not understand why, she had complied with it ever since. After he unbuttoned her blouse, and slid it off, he reached for the clasp of her lace bra.

“Leave it on,” whispered Eve.

This time, it was her husband who complied without understanding, even though he was used to the request.

Henry made love to his wife as if she had been made of porcelain—only in reverse. He first painted her in short strokes with the tips of his fingers, then polished her with the palms of his hands, before kneading and molding her with his entire body when she encouraged him by synching her breath to his. She sometimes felt like a pile of clay on a potter’s wheel. Henry had always been a gentle and attentive lover, even if Eve could have used a bit more edge at times in order to get worked up—especially since she had turned the corner of menopause. Regardless, now as always, Eve had to feel blessed. Thirty years earlier, as a starving college student, she had met an uptown boy, so handsome and kind that all her girlfriends envied her. He had become an uptown man, so handsome and giving, that all the other wives envied her.

## Chapter 14

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– Telegram messenger, 13:47 –

“It’s been seven days. I’m getting in touch as agreed. First of all: thank you, Eve. Thank you on my sister’s behalf and mine. It is now your turn. Do you have a setup in place?”

“Not yet,” replied Eve with nervous taps of the fingertips on her phone. “I’ll get back to you by this time tomorrow.”

“I’ll be ready when you push him my way. Just make sure the plan is clear for me to understand and execute.”

Even though Eve used a secure messaging app that did not store any of her messages and destroyed them after they had been read, she always used minimal, cryptic language. Since the woman on the other side did the same, an observer would have been hard-pressed to figure out the meaning of their exchanges, even if they had managed to intercept the messages. As soon as Eve put down her phone, she sneaked into her husband’s study and looked at his online calendar. For a long moment, she scanned the colorful patchwork of meetings, task reminders, and business lunches to identify the appointment that she was looking for. It would take place at eleven in the morning on the following Monday. Eve winced with apprehension. She had a bad vibe about the upcoming weekend and had been hoping to go into action mode before it crept up on her.

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– Telegram messenger, 10:17 –

“Would Monday, around lunchtime, work for you?”

“Where?”

“Singleton Hospital, in Swansea”

“Yes. I can be there. The plan?”

“I’ll send it in short texts over the next hours. I’ll set each message to self-destroy one minute after you open it. When all the messages have gone out, I’ll send you a photograph of my husband.”

“O.K. I’ll contact you if something is not clear.”

– Telegram messenger, 10:23 –

He, too, has a heart condition. Six years ago, an ICD—a cardiac defibrillator—was implanted in his chest. On Monday, at 11:00, he is scheduled for a routine check-up at Singleton Hospital, with Dr. Fender, cardiology ward, second floor, room 128. He’ll be there fifteen minutes early to fill out the paperwork. During the

session, the doctor will “wake up” his ICD to download the data it has recorded since the last visit and program in new parameters.

– *Telegram messenger, 11:53* –

At 10:55 that morning, I will wait for you in the bus shelter in front of the hospital. I’ll have a blue, leather handbag next to me on the bench. As soon as you sit down, I’ll leave to meet a girlfriend for lunch in town. Take the blue bag with you to the waiting area for room 128 and wait for him to come out of the exam room. Follow him out. When he drives off, keep your car close to his. This is critical. \*You must remain within a hundred yards of him at all times\*. On that day, he’ll be driving his BMW, and he can be an aggressive driver. If he gets away from you—even just once—by more than a hundred yards, just turn around, go home, and text me.

– *Telegram messenger, 13:37* –

Inside the blue bag is a device the size of a small notebook, with an antenna. It is designed to send periodic “pings” (electronic signals) to the ICD to prevent it from going back to sleep after the visit and keep it in the programmable state set by the doctor. As soon as you get in your car, place the device facing up on the passenger seat and extend the antenna fully. That will give you the hundred-yard range of transmission that you’ll need to keep sending the pings to the ICD once on the road.

– *Telegram messenger, 15:09* –

After the hospital visit, he will head home where he is to meet a contractor at noon. About twenty-five minutes into the ride, he will cross the Brecon Beacons National Park, on a narrow, winding road flanked by big old trees. It is a service road for forest rangers. He uses it as a shortcut to avoid driving around the park on the main road. There should not be any traffic on it. As soon as he enters the wooded area, start tailgating him. He cannot stand that; it drives him nuts. He will accelerate like a madman to leave you in the dust and within seconds, you’ll have him driving eighty miles an hour on that narrow road. Before he puts more than a hundred yards between his car and yours, slam your hand on the large, black push button on the device, then immediately turn around, discard the device and the bag in a dumpster (wipe off any fingerprints first), and return home.

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Henry and Eve left the restaurant early. The three couples with whom they had shared a fancy dinner were taken aback by their sudden departure. Eve was

not. She was familiar with her husband's sudden "bouts of indigestion," as well as with the pale complexion that came with it. They did not exchange a word all the way home. Once inside, Eve headed straight for the bedroom while her husband parked the car in the garage. She sat on the bed and hastily removed her earrings, necklace, and bracelet.

"We could be so happy, you and me..." said Henry and removed his jacket before hanging it neatly on a chair. "Why do you need to do it every time we go out?"

"It is not there, Henry. It is just in your head. It is not there!" replied Eve with a haggard stare."

"The furtive gazes between Frederick and you? Your loud laughs at his stupid jokes? Were those in my head as well?"

"I've known Frederick since junior school; he's like family to me. There never was any kind of romantic bond between—"

"And his foot reaching for yours under the table and inadvertently bumping into mine, was that in my head as well?"

"It may not even have been his foot! How can you tell it wasn't his wife just stretching her leg?"

Henry walked calmly past Eve, opened the closet, and reached for the highest shelf. When he handed Eve a bright red boxing headguard and a matching chest protector vest, she slipped them on, stood up, and looked away.

The first blow, delivered to the side of her face, sent Eve bouncing on the bed before crashing onto the carpet. Henry always opened with that swing. Once he had her at his feet, he would gently extend his hand to help her up. She tried not to cry—she knew that her tears were gasoline to his flare-ups—but once the panic took hold, she was as out of control as he was. Once she got up, her husband pushed her against the wall and pummeled her stomach and chest with his fists. The chest protector—which diffused the blows just enough to prevent bruising—converted each punch into a body quake that reverberated into her skull. When he sensed that her knees were about to buckle, Henry would grab her by the throat and shove her to the bed where he would sit her down and slap her face back and forth until he ran out of breath. That night, after punching his demon out of her, Henry carefully removed Eve's headgear and vest, undressed her entirely, wrapped her into a blanket and carried her to the attic, where he laid her down on the yesteryear's stained sofa before turning off the lights and walking out.

Eve's relief smothered the nausea, the disorientation, and the pain as she stared at the darkness. She had survived this time again. It was Henry's last chance to kill her. He just didn't know it.

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Two days later, the transfer of the ICD controller to her accomplice in the bus shelter in front of the hospital went smoothly. From the corner of her eye, she noticed the formal business attire of the woman who sat down next to her blue bag, but she did not look at her face. She returned home just before noon. The instant she crossed the threshold, a massive wave of anxiety smothered her.

Her husband had left the house around five, like every day. If everything went as planned, he would not return—not that day—not ever. The problem for Eve was at least one hour of waking life before Henry's eyes would snap closed at the foot of a tree in Brecon Beacons National Park, and a couple more before she would get notified of his abrupt end. Lunch was not an option for her knotted stomach. She resolved to drink a small shot of bourbon to take an edge off that already threatened her resolve to let the day run its countdown without calling Henry to stop it. Since Eve hardly ever drank alcohol, the spirit went straight to her head and wrapped her mind into a warm, fuzzy blanket. She sat in a deep armchair by the tall windows and stared at the drizzle for hours. Every time her mind hinted that it might emerge from the torpor, Eve pushed it back down with another shot of bourbon.

In late afternoon, a staggering drunk Eve opened the door to a police officer.

"I'm really sorry, Ma'am," said the young officer, taken aback by the slight bobbing of Eve's head, "but your husband was involved in a car crash, shortly after noon."

The words echoed at a distance for Eve, as if she were sitting at the back of her skull, a hundred feet from the openings of her eyes. She patiently waited for the officer to complete his notification protocol.

"He's severely injured, and he has been admitted to the intensive care unit of Singleton Hospital. They just contacted us to let us know that there's a chance that he'll survive, so we could at least bring you a little hope. He is suffering from multiple fractures and deep burns, but the major organs may have been spared. He was dazed but conscious when the medics got on-site. He explained that his pacemaker... huh, defib thing—I forgot the name—had shocked him multiple times, causing him to lose control of the car. He was still in surgery half an hour ago, but I'd be happy to call you a cab to take you there and wait with you until—"

Eve slammed the door closed in the officer's face, walked back to the armchair by the window, like a robot, and passed out the instant she crashed into it.

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# Fair Venom

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## Chapter 15

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Romy had always struggled with authority. She felt that her self-imposed standards for righteousness and work ethics far exceeded those a haughty teacher or a cocky surgeon might have wanted to impart to her. Let alone... an arrogant male! Little did Tarras know that when he had forbidden her to come back, he might as well have invited her to move in.

On the second evening following her banishment from the house in the forest, Romy snuck back into the well house. Tarras had been candid about his eagerness to *move* the battered woman as rapidly as possible. Now that he had been reassured that she was not suffering from a terminal injury, it was just a matter of days before he took her on the road. All the way up the hill, Romy had muttered about the two shifts of night duty at the hospital—real ones, those—that had kept her away for a couple of days. The sight of the beat-up van parked by the side of the house reassured her a bit, but Tarras appearing, just a few minutes after her arrival, carrying a small suitcase and a pair of crutches to the vehicle, threw her into a whirl of confusion. The transfer was tonight—was... now! And her car was a good fifteen-minute trek downhill! If Tarras loaded her patient into the van and took off with her, by the time Romy made it to her wheels, all hopes of tailing him would be far gone, and with them, her protégé!

The instant Tarras walked back into the house, Romy found herself running toward the van. At the hospital, in the face of a life and death situation—which, she was certain, this was for her patient—she had learned to allow her instincts to override her reason. She jumped into the back of the vehicle and immediately looked for a hide-out inside the stuffy, windowless metal cabin, which did not even have a small opening to the driver's bay. What had probably been a delivery vehicle at some point had been fitted with two stretchers of which long metal legs were welded to the floor. The space underneath the stretchers could be enough to accommodate Romy's body but not to conceal it. The slamming of the front door of the house startled her. She turned around and was about to jump out of the van—scared enough to outrun Tarras down the forest—when she spotted a third cot, this one made of a thin mattress wedged into a small metal frame that overhung the rear door of the van. Pressed by the faint crackle of footsteps on gravel, she managed to secure her foot onto a thin ledge running along the wall of the van and haul herself onto the hanging bed, praying at every move that the metal parts did not squeak under her weight. They did not. The next sound would be the slamming of the van's rear door, which deafened her just as total darkness blinded her. The gas stench inside her metal coffin fueling a spell of claustrophobia, she fought with herself not to panic. In the sudden roar of the engine, it was either too early or too late to lose control. Tarras had not loaded anything into the back of the van, but she could still hope that he had installed her

patient on the front seat, in which case, she was still on task. If he had not, she had just thrown her best card on the table at the worst possible time, this in a game that could prove very treacherous.

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The ride in the twilight was not long. Just over an hour—according to the cell phone that Romy had almost forgotten to set to mute. Once her lungs had been saturated with the vapors of gas seeping from the van’s rusty floor, Romy found herself unexpectedly relaxed. Rocking gently on top of her squashy nest, she even dozed off for a few minutes on a couple of occasions. Only when her auditory landscape became denser, with the roar and honks of other vehicles, did her anxiety return. After a few minutes in what sounded to her like rush-hour traffic, the van swung to the right before coming to a full stop. The engine was shut off and the passenger door squeaked open before slamming closed. Romy jumped down from her perch and felt her way to the back door. She almost immediately located the exit handle and cracked the door open. Behind her, under a chaplet of streetlights, stretched an endless queue of parked cars. Under the cover of semi-obscure, she sneaked out of the van, nudged the door closed, and immediately worked her way to the passenger side window. A sneak peek through it doused her last hopes. The cabin was empty. Her patient had never been in the van. As to Tarras, Romy spotted him across the street, walking under the arch of a tall, wide building branded “Singleton Hospital”. Somehow, that reassured her. The dicey ride in the dark had taken her to a familiar place. She had performed two rounds of training in that hospital at the beginning of her career and she knew Swansea like the back of her hand. Better yet, there was something unexpectedly human in Tarras visiting a patient. That rekindled both Romy’s curiosity and her sense of purpose there. She raced across the street and cursed the squeaky automatic glass door as she sneaked into the building. Luckily, Tarras leant over the receptionist counter and turned his back to her. After a brief exchange with the attendant, he hurried up a broad staircase to which she had pointed.

The hospital was not exactly bustling with activity. Had Tarras turned around only once, he would have seen Romy tailing him, even though she remained as far from him as the layout of the building would allow her. So far, in fact, that she barely made it into a long corridor in time to see Tarras entering one of the patient rooms flanking it. She slowly approached its swing door and pushed it ajar. Tarras’ imposing silhouette—strapped in a black, three-quarter-length leather coat—towered over a bed on which lay a blistering, nearly purple, nude human body hooked to a life monitor and covered with glistening cream.

After taking a long look at the patient’s chart, Tarras leaned over him and murmured a few words into his ear. He then extracted from the inside pocket of

his jacket a round, black container that resembled a dusting powder box. He unscrewed its cover and carefully picked from it—between his thumb and index finger—a reddish object that Romy could not identify. He pushed it into a tuft of hair left on the patient’s motley skull and tapped it repeatedly with his finger for a few seconds. The patient, eyes wide open, did not as much as blink. When Tarras fished out the object from his hair and placed it back inside the box, Romy rushed down the corridor. Less than a minute after she had sneaked back into the van—and climbed onto her perch in it—the back door was swung open. Along with a puff of faint light, something dark flew in that Romy could not identify because the door was immediately slammed closed again.

The van slid down the street for a couple of minutes before stopping again. Overhead speakers praising the virtues of a new blend of biofuel, soon followed by the familiar purr of a gas pump, left little doubt as to the fact that Tarras had stopped to refuel. Romy did not move. She simply pointed her phone’s built-in flashlight at the floor of the van. Tarras’ jacket had been thrown onto one of the stretchers. In the folds of the leather were nestled a roll of stretch band and three plastic bottles that Romy immediately recognized as clinical chloroform. Tarras had probably lifted these from the hospital on his way out. The purpose of these medical items did not really arouse Romy’s curiosity. Something else, now within her reach, had all her attention. She climbed down from her bed and, to save her battery, immediately cracked open the back door. The van was moving at a slow pace in heavy traffic and the streetlights were enough to cast a halo of light around her. Holding the door with one hand, she crouched, reached for Tarras’ jacket, and extracted the round black box from its pocket. She held it between her knees while unscrewing the lid. She had not fully lifted it off when something ran down her thigh and dropped onto the van floor before crawling swiftly into the dark area of the van. Romy pulled the van door closed and fumbled her way back up to safety. Once back on her hanging mattress, terrified, she rolled into a fetal position.

She was not sure whether scorpions could climb cold, smooth metal walls.

## **Chapter 16**

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Romy’s mind was going round in broken circles, like the diamond needle of a turntable over a scratched vinyl record. Whenever an embryo of reasoning started forming, it only nudged her terror to tipping point, and she had to hit the switch to reset what was left of her sanity. Every sensation of a faint itch or light brush—real or not—sent her legs and arms twitching frantically to flick off the potential predator caged in with her. She had only had a fleeting peek at it, but it had been enough for her to pair it with a slide from a toxicology class. Her new roommate was an Indian red scorpion—a tiny member of the family but the most lethal of all. If not immediately treated, most victims who were stung would succumb to pulmonary edema and heart failure. This was the creature that Tarras

had placed on a charred man's skull before infuriating it with finger taps. It was not hard to guess how the insect had reacted. The already severely compromised patient could never resist the poison. He would die hours after Tarras' visit, and of causes totally in line with the severity of his third-degree burns. A clinical execution. The night shift attending physician would not blink an eye at signing the death certificate.

Up to that point, Romy had, somehow, kept a small hope that there would be, in the end, a rational explanation for Tarras' bleak activities. She was now realizing that by placing her daughter's future into the man's hands, she had climbed onto the devil's lap. The thought of jumping out of the van never crossed Romy's mind. She was paralyzed—body and mind—by the presence, just feet away, of two lethal predators. Paralyzed by a fear so maddening that her mind saw fit to activate the emergency shut-down system. She suddenly felt light-headed and passed out—or fell asleep—or something in between.

Romy was ejected from her comatose state by the clanking of the van's door and strong, white light flooding into the cabin. When she leaned slightly over her mattress, her eyes dove onto Tarras' nape and broad back. He was bending over to lay a long payload wrapped into a bed cover onto the empty stretcher. He then turned back toward the door, as if to exit, but froze before reaching it. He crouched, picked up something from the floor, and lifted it to his eyes. Romy stared at the frantic wiggling of the scorpion's legs and contortions of its tail as it tried in vain to sting the fingers pinching its body. After a long look at the insect, Tarras shrugged his shoulders and locked it back into the round box that Romy had dropped on the floor. He slipped the box back inside the jacket pocket and stepped down from the vehicle, closing the door behind him.

The van took off and was soon traveling again at high speed. Reassured that her crawly predator was no longer loose, Romy slipped down from her hiding place. After turning on her phone's light, she opened with some apprehension the flaps of the comforter wrapped around the bundle of the stretcher. She uncovered a middle-aged woman dressed in a well-cut pantsuit, whose face, although slightly puffy and devoid of make-up, did not show any sign of harm. Romy took her hand; she did not react. Gentle taps on her cheeks did not produce any more of an effect. The woman's heart was strong, her breathing regular, but she was deeply unconscious. Romy sat next to her, took her hand again, and pressed its palm against her cheek. She needed a human touch as much as that woman needed an ally.

Twenty minutes into the ride, Romy finally realized that even though she was being moved at high speed inside a black box, she could find out with two finger taps where she was and where she was headed simply by turning on the GPS on

her phone! So much for the street smarts that she had so often used to further justify her plans of humanitarian work in developing countries... She switched her phone back off immediately after assessing the van's position and the direction it was going. They were on the M4 highway, heading west. Romy, whose religious spirit had all but died after a few years of medical practice, found herself filled with a need to pray. To pray that the madness stop. To pray that she be spared a breakdown that had started simmering inside her since she had found the scorpion. To pray that this chariot from hell would take her back home. Now.

It did. After a chaotic ride up a slope, during which the engine was revved up to its maximum, the van came to a stop. Romy rushed back up on the top cot. The rear door swung open, and Tarras jumped in. He casually threw his jacket on top of the unconscious woman before scooping her up from the stretcher and carrying her out. Only when she heard a wooden door slam at a distance did Romy resolve to slip out of the van, the doors having been left wide open. She instantly recognized Tarras' house and fled across the clearing and into the forest. As she rushed downhill, the light on her phone died without warning. Trapped again in a dark and cold space, she froze and broke down in tears—tears of frustration. It took her a few minutes to calm down and feel her way, step by step, down the rest of the hill. As soon as she made it inside her car, she turned on the dome light and kept it on during the whole drive back.

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"And you drove straight here from that... place?"

Romy nodded. It was close to midnight when she had walked into Dr. Reiner's office. On her way back from Tarras' place, she had felt as if every nerve on her skin had snapped out of its groove. She sensed herself perilously out of bounds in her head and, for the first time in her married life, hated the idea of going home. She remembered seeing, earlier in the day, Dr. Reiner's name on the roster for the night shift in the psychiatry ward of her hospital. Romy had lent a hand to his team several times over the years, and she appreciated the respect that he had always shown her. She had even invited him for dinner a couple of times at her house. If someone could help sort herself out, he was the one, even though he had winced several times during her account of the evening and now looked openly worried.

"Shouldn't we call Rufus? It's getting late..." he suggested.

"That's okay," replied Romy curtly. "I told him I'd be working late."

"You lied to him?"

"With all due respect, Doctor, this has nothing to do with my husband."

The physician stiffened up in his imposing leather chair.

"I guess not," he said. "Since you are a healthcare professional—one of our best nurses—I will not beat around the bush. You know I must ask: Are you currently taking drugs, prescription drugs or... otherwise?"

"Of course not! You know that every hospital employee has to take a drug test once a year. I took mine just three weeks ago. You can check!"

The psychiatrist acknowledged the answer with a caring smile.

"Have you suffered a traumatic event lately, something that could have left a bad scar on your mind?" he insisted, undeterred.

"No!" lied Romy—she had not mentioned how she had come into contact with Tarras in the first place—"What's the meaning of these—"

"Any family history of mental illness?"

The question instantly quenched Romy's irritation.

"My grandmother..." she replied after a long hesitation.

"What was the problem? What kind of condition?"

"Paranoid schizophrenia."

"Early onset?"

"In her forties..."

"What were her symptoms?"

"I don't know. She went downhill fast. She killed herself a couple of years after the first signs of the disease had surfaced. I was very young and my mother refuses to talk about it."

"And your mother is—"

"Fine."

"You understand why I have to ask."

"Yes, but everything I told you about tonight is real and verifiable."

"Verifiable?! You spoke to me about some sort of Bluebeard den packed with banged-up captives, of some charred guy being killed with a scorpion... I'm sorry, Romy, but there isn't a shred of evidence to support your story. You can't even tell me where that house in the forest is supposed to be located!"

"If I tell you that, you won't have any choice but to call the police."

"If women are held in that house against their will and you don't feel that you have to call the police, then it's another institution that I'll have to recommend to you..."

"I'm not nuts! I do realize how weird my story is, but it is as real as it is strange. It's making me sick, but I'm not nuts! I just need you to help me cope with the situation, so I can continue to take action myself until I find a way to help these women."

The physician looked down for a moment before spinning his laptop on the table to face Romy.

"I'd like you to do me a favor," he said. "Can you pull up Google Maps and locate on the map the house in the woods, just for yourself? I won't look and you'll be able to erase your browsing history afterwards. I suppose that you know how to—"

“Oh, please...!” snapped Romy and snatched the mouse from the doctor’s hand before pulling up a map of the coastal region of Western Wales.

In a few clicks, she located the hangar, just off the M4, by Treffgarne Lake, behind which she parked her car before walking across rusty railroad tracks and trekking east uphill into the forest for twenty or so minutes to end up in the clearing harboring Tarras’ house. By switching to the satellite mode, she immediately spotted the dark green patch of forest surrounded by the patchwork of fields of all shades of green that occupied the valleys flanking the hill.

*Okay, eastbound, 20 minutes, half a mile up the hill...* Romy was confused. The elongated forest was dense and homogenous in its dark shade. Not the slightest splash of brightness in it for a clearing—let alone any kind of roof or rocky trail uphill—even when she zoomed down to the point of seeing individual tree crowns. Zooming up and down, with rising agitation, to make sure that she had the right forest, Romy surveyed the whole area back and forth, up and down, for a good ten minutes before looking up at Dr. Reiner with a wan face.

“All of this is covered by medical confidentiality, right?” she asked bluntly. “Can you give me a hand here?” she continued before the physician had a chance to answer.

He stood up and pulled a chair by Romy’s side so they both could face the screen.

“What are we looking for?” he asked without malice.

“The house! The house in the woods!!” replied Romy, trying hard not to shout.

For the next half-hour, Dr. Reiner, to whom Romy had relinquished the control of the mouse out of frustration, patiently analyzed the images of the forest, from edge to edge, from top to bottom, in a scientific manner, along virtual horizontal lines, almost tree by tree. He did so thoroughly and without a word, sensing that Romy was wound up like the spring of an antique clock. You know that this is a protected natural area, right?” he finally said before letting go of the mouse and straightening up with a faint grunt.

“So?” replied Romy.

“Let’s stop here. The resolution is not very good, and part of the house may be hidden by the tree canopy. I do know that forest, though. It was made into a protected tree area so they could take school kids there for biology field trips. You can’t cut a single tree in it. I tried foraging for mushrooms there once. I’d only been in there for fifteen minutes when a ranger came out of nowhere and asked me to leave. Are you sure that’s the place?”

Romy stood up, threw a haggard stare at the doctor, and walked out of his office. This time she drove home, very slowly, very erratically. Everyone was asleep when she got there. She sat on a hard chair by the kitchen table and spent

the night there, terrified that if she closed her eyes, she may have let go of the last string of sanity that kept her tethered to her world.

## Chapter 17

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“Mom... Mom!”

A persistent tugging at the sleeve of her sweater dragged Romy out of her comatose state.

“Whatcha doin’, Mom? Where’s my breakfast? The school bus will be here in fifteen minutes. Hurry up!”

Romy stood up painfully. Her back was a wreck, as if she had been physically bounced between the demented thoughts that had crept into her semi-conscious night on the kitchen chair. Without a word or look at her daughter, she pulled a bottle of milk out of the fridge and a box of cereal out of the pantry and placed them on the table before leaving the room.

“But Mom...” whined Lea’s voice behind her, “You know I don’t eat cereal!” And she added, under her breath, “Poor gal, already getting senile...”

The long, scalding shower did little to turn the lights back on inside Romy’s skull, but it did, however, reset her ability to communicate. She nearly bumped into Rufus in the corridor.

“You’re up already?” he said and kissed her cheek lightly before heading to the kitchen. Floating in a suit two sizes too large, his hair smothered with Nivea cream, he looked and smelled like a nerd on school picture day.

“The academic inspector is auditing me today, remember? How do I look?” he asked.

“Very nice,” replied Romy without looking. “Do you have time for coffee?”

“Nope. I want to get to the school in plenty of time. The inspector is nice enough but fussy. I want to greet her when we open the doors.”

He grabbed his leather bag and stepped out of the kitchen to head out.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” heard Romy as the handle of the front door squeaked. “I noticed that the fridge wasn’t cooling last night, so I called Corny. He said he’d take a look at it. He’ll be here this morning around nine!”

Immobile behind the kitchen window, Romy resentfully watched her husband get into his car. How could he ask Corny over when she was going to be alone? He knew perfectly well how she felt about her brother-in-law! It was the anger that ended up lighting her mind back up, one neural node at a time. Her frustration crystallized around that rather insignificant incident, layer by layer, to build up into a hatred of the world that she recognized instantly. During her two internships in the E.R. department of a grossly understaffed small hospital in a barren suburb of Cardiff, as a fledging nurse, she had endured back-to-back shifts in a constant onslaught of human misery. Traffic accidents, victims of gang violence, horny drunkards, roughed-up prostitutes—the whole spectrum. As the hours went by on the floor, the relentless pressure combined with her sleep deprivation to create a monster in the lower part of her stomach. A monster that

she could hold back for days, as she dressed up bullet wounds, washed poisoned stomachs, and held the hand of lone elderly patients close to the end. But when the monster had fed for long enough on her revolt, her distress, and her fear, and processed these emotions into a compost of hatred for the world, she knew that she had to stop and purge herself.

Like many of her single coworkers there—nurses and doctors assigned to that hospital because they were still too young to say no—Romy would purge herself of her monster through sex. Not conventional sex. Conventional sex did little to reset her wrought stomach. What was needed to expel a putrid monster was an emotional discharge, a body-wide convulsion of *bad*. What triggered that liberating mudslide best was raw, impulsive sex; the kind that surges from the gut without asking the brain for take-off clearance first. The partner hardly mattered—a patient still fresh enough to be horny; a cocky, sweaty doctor at the end of his shift; a foreign custodian in stained overhauls... Young or old. Fit or fat. Her panties just had to be pulled and snapped back to eject from her chamber the bullet that threatened to go off on her at any time.

Even though she was unattached at the time, Romy now looked back at these stormy days in the E.R. with mixed feelings. She was ashamed of some of her sexual encounters, especially those in which she had allowed herself to be treated like a whore. She also remembered with a little shiver in her lower abdomen some exchanges during which she had pushed her boundaries enough for an exhilarating, wide-eyed experience without going as far as to make her uneasy afterwards. She even recalled, with an odd blend of fondness and regret, her fleeting intimacy, one hectic night, with a soft, shy female nurse just as confused by the ambient pain as she was.

Behind the window of her kitchen, host again to the hatred monster that she had long thought gone, she winced several times when an odd idea germinated in her mind, but did not resist it for long. She was soon disrobing in her bedroom and pulling a purple box down from the highest shelf of her closet. She opened the lid for the first time in years and rummaged through its contents to extract a pair of high-heeled fuzzy slippers, a black and purple corset with garters, and lace top gray stockings. Combat gear purchased on an impulse and that had never made it to the battlefield due to the lack of a worthy enemy... She planted herself in front of the mirror, pulled her hair back into a tight bun, and painted her eyelids with dark gold and her lips with cherry red. She grimaced briefly as she pushed the thick wire of her large hoop earrings through the nearly healed holes in her ear lobes. After a brief inspection in front of a full-size mirror, which drew a faint sneer on her face, she lay down on her bed and closed her eyes.

It was not yet nine.

A light brushing sensation on the inside of her thigh startled Romy back into consciousness.

"There, there, sweetie... It's just Uncle Corny. I see you've been expecting him!"

Romy cringed at the sight of her brother-in-law sitting by her side on the bed, a smirk on his face, but she managed to hide her repulsion.

"I knew it!" he went on with excitement. "It's always the proper ones... All pouty and haughty when the hubby is around, but the instant he is out of sight, they drop their knickers like chicks at a sorority shindig!"

"Take off your clothes and lay down on the bed," intimated Romy and stood up to tower over him.

"Hey, hey...," he replied while clamping his arms behind her waist and jerking her toward him. "You're not dealing with your house-broken kitty today. Start purring, honey, 'cause you're gone hear some real roaring under this—"

Romy whacked Corny's forehead with the palm of her hand. Out of surprise more than pain, he let go of her.

"Whoa... *kinkay!* he sneered. I knew you were a spicy one! I can do spicy. I can totally—"

"If you want this, you'll just do as I say. You shut up, you get naked, and you lie down on your back."

Romy's injunction wiped Corny's grin away. He rubbed his forehead, stood up, and undressed with the clumsiness of a horny teenager. Romy held back a grin as his hefty tube man sprung out of his 70s white kangaroo pouch underwear. Once naked, he took his position on the bed as instructed. From under the pillow, Romy pulled out a scarf that she had placed there earlier. When she stretched it and approached Corny's eyes with it, he turned his head to the side.

"It's my way or no way, remember?" whispered Romy.

Corny closed his eyes. His breathing accelerated as Romy blindfolded him. Only seconds later, he felt a wet substance dropping onto the middle of his chest, immediately followed by the gliding of fingers through the long hairs blanketing it.

"That oil smells strange..." he said, nevertheless flexing his muscles in reaction to the caresses.

"Shhh... It's a musk oil. A woman thing... It only works with a real man. I kept it for a special occasion. I'm glad you came, Corny..."

Roused up as much by the contact of Romy's warm hands as by the slight rasp in her voice, Corny tried to reach for her thigh, which was brushing against his. She calmly pushed his hand back.

"Not quite yet, darling, not quite yet. Once I have you oiled up from your toenails to the root of your hair, I'll be ready for you."

After patiently massaging Corny's muscular and altogether quite engaging body, Romy started running concentric circles around the one area that she had eluded all along, despite his faint whines and silly contortions to trick her hand into landing on the pulsating lighthouse erected on top of his twin peaks. On the tightest circle, the last one before actual contact with the genitals, Romy stopped and pulled his hand.

"Now I'm ready," she murmured in his ear. "Stand up and keep your blindfold on; I'll guide you. I want it now and I want it raw, on the kitchen table, just like in *The Postman Always Rings Twice!*"

Corny was shivering with lust as he tip-toed behind his hostess down the long corridor. When they came to a stop, she let go of his hand. After a faint squeak, which he assumed came from the kitchen table on which she was taking her position, Corny received a violent jolt on his shoulder blades that sent him stumbling forward. Stunned, he ripped off his blindfold just in time to watch the front door of the house slam closed in his face. He looked around in panic as a cold draft already started biting at his flanks. As he lowered his eyes to look for something to cover his nudity, he realized with horror that he was red. All red from top to bottom. A bright, orangy red! It looked so creepy to him that he freaked out at the sole thought of someone else seeing him in the front yard. He turned to his car before realizing that he had locked it up. His phone and keys were inside the house. He fought back an instinct to shout and bang at the door—any loud sound would really carry down the narrow, suburban street. Instead, he pressed the bell button by the door over and over, whispering "Romy, have you gone mad?! Open the door. Open the door!! Please... open the door."

At that instant, Corny could have snapped the neck of the bitch who had thrown him into such a humiliating situation. Especially since an elderly woman across the street had stepped out on the doorsteps of her house to make sure that she was not having a senior moment. She pulled her cell phone out of her apron pocket while staring at him. He would have the hardest time explaining to the cops—and later to his wife—how he had ended up entirely nude and looking like a giant red pepper outside his sister-in-law's house!

The bitch he cursed under his breath lay on her bed, curled up in her lingerie. Her mascara dripped down her cheeks as if she had been crying tiny streams of gold. Her body bounced on the mattress to the rhythm of her convulsive cries. Her plan had not worked. Not only had it failed to produce the discharge of adrenalin on which she had counted to clear her confusion; it had also added a slimy layer of guilt to her torment. She just started realizing what she had done to her cherished sister's husband. How could she ever face her again? When preparing to teach Corny a lesson, she had poured into a half-empty jar of massage oil the contents of an old bottle of mercurochrome—an antiseptic widely used in the past on kids' cuts and whose bright red color took up to a week to clear off the skin. At

the time, it had seemed like a deliciously devious idea. She had never planned to throw him naked into the street. That had just been the extra touch of evil that had landed her in trouble several times in her youth.

When her eyes landed on Corny's clothes by the foot of the bed, Romy sprung up and grabbed them. She ran to the living room, opened the window facing the street, and threw the bundle of garments out as far from the house as she could before slamming the window closed. She watched a pathetic red Corny scramble to gather his clothes, extract the car keys from his pant pockets, rush into his shiny Audi, still naked, and take off like a spooked squirrel. Only seconds later, the siren of a police car was turned on just as it rushed past Romy's house. They had spotted him.

The screams of the siren instantly sobered Romy up. They would catch Corny. He drove a fast car but for all his cockiness, he could never hold a car chase with the police for more than a few seconds. He would spill the beans about their encounter after five minutes of questioning. Yes, the police would return to her house as soon as they heard his story. That thought was unbearable to Romy. How could she ever explain her actions to Rufus? Worse yet, to her daughter?! At that moment, the hate monster dropped out of her lower stomach and her mind cleared up in the seconds that followed, as always when she needed to take urgent action. She rushed to her bedroom, changed into jeans, a sweater, and trekking sneakers, and proceeded to stuff a backpack with a change of clothes, three pairs of underwear, socks, her wallet and passport, a flashlight, and a box of matches. In the laundry room, she pulled out from under a thick layer of laundry detergent powder the emergency cash envelope that Rufus buried down there every time she brought a new box. On her way out, she took the time to scribble a note that she left on the kitchen table.

*"Dear Rufus and Lea,  
I messed up. I need a little time to sort myself out and come back to beg for your forgiveness.  
Please don't encourage the police to look for me. I will come back on my own after a few days and I'll set things straight with them as well.  
I love you both more than anything in my world.  
Romy."*

When Romy jumped into her car, she knew the police would not put much effort into going after her. It would not take long for them to understand how much of an ass Corny was and besides, the last thing he would do was to press charges against her. As for Rufus, she had just left him off the hook. He would wait politely at home for her to return.

She had her back covered. What lay ahead was another matter...

## Chapter 18

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Was it her lack of experience of life in the wild? Or some residual fear that the police might try to track her down after all? Romy did not check into a hotel nor go to a friend's place. She spent the rest of the day in her car, stationed in parking lots around town, changing neighborhoods every couple of hours. She alternated napping and listening to BBC Radio 4, her favorite radio station. She had often planned on dedicating a whole day to immersing herself in its rich programming, but her schedule had never allowed that plan to unfold. Cocooned into a fleece blanket, inside her vehicle, parked in the most densely crowded area of the parking lots, Romy listened avidly to every word of *Woman's Hour*, *World at One*, *The Afternoon Drama*, and other daytime programs, as if they hid a secret code to help her move to the next step.

As the day started winding down, the theme of *The Archers* brought a smile to her face. The decades-old radio soap set in Ambridge, a fictional village in rural England, featured the little dramas and stories of its residents, most of them farmers or tied to the countryside world. As a child, she used to hate sitting through the daily thirteen-minute episode, just before her parents—sheep farmers—would finally allow her to turn on the TV for the evening, but she had recently been listening to random episodes. The show never failed to include, in the background, some wren tweets and sheep bleats that set off her nostalgia of a soft childhood in pastoral scenery. That evening, the dispute between Elisabeth and Shula—over a fling between their respective teens—sounded as real to her as if they had been family. The end theme tune came too soon and too loudly, bursting Romy's bubble and throwing her into the harsh reality of those without a home when night begins to fall. In response to a nervous shiver, she started her car and pulled out of her parking spot. Coming out of the strip mall, she instinctively turned right. Somewhere down there, the sun was setting over Tarras' house. Or lack thereof?

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After carefully parking her car behind the rusty hangar, so she could see the entrance of the rocky trail leading uphill without being noticed, Romy turned off the radio. In a few minutes, she had grown so edgy and turned inwards that she could not stand any sound that pertained to an otherwise normal world. Several times, she blocked from her mind the impulse of climbing the hill to Tarras' house. If she did not, *this time*, find it there, she would be forced to admit to her delusion. If something or someone came down from that rocky trail, she would still be able to cling to some physical evidence of her story and, through it, to the hope that she was not yet due to climb into grandma's cuckoo's nest.

Dusk did not give Romy a break. It let her shiver with hope at the sound of every car engine—invariably from a passing vehicle on the main road—and tremble with cold, despite her fleece blanket, in the somber cabin of the car where she kept the engine turned off. To make matters even worse, her phone started ringing back-to-back. Her husband—her daughter—her husband—her daughter... They had returned home. She ended up switching the phone to mute. Dusk received from twilight a very perturbed Romy—almost ripe to drive home to end her angst—and took pity on her. A roaring sound that slid down from the hill reverberated all around her. The yellow beams of two headlights surged out of the rocky trail to jump onto the road. Their glow allowed Romy to make out the bulky shape of Tarras' old van. She patiently counted to ten, turned on her car's engine, and set out to tail the van. When it merged with the M4 highway and headed East, she assumed that its occupants were heading back to the area where Tarras had picked up the uppity middle-aged woman a few days earlier. She was soon proven wrong. The van flew past Swansea, then Cardiff and Newport, without ever leaving the M4. Hands locked on the steering wheel, despite her phobia of bridges over long stretches of water, Romy was forced to follow the van at high speed over the Bristol Channel. Entering England did not do much to settle her nerves. She had traveled a few times around Europe but had never visited her English neighbors. Entering a foreign land at night—alone and on the tail of bad guys—without any perspective of respite from what had been a shitty couple of days was wringing her intestines at the worst possible time. She prayed for the van to make a pit stop by a gas station, so she could at least park by the end of the parking lot and get some relief behind a bush, but the clunky, smoky gas guzzler never as much as slowed down, as if it was powered by hell's fumes.

It was past midnight when the van entered London. Romy nearly lost its tail when it swerved without warning into the leftmost lane to branch out onto a different highway heading North. Only a couple of miles later, it exited again—this time East—to end up on a narrower street. The swift moves finally disoriented Romy, who had been struggling all along the way with her poor night vision and the blinding glares of incoming cars. Although the sides of the road on which she now traveled were fairly open at first, the pavement quickly narrowed as it was aspirated between two walls of row houses, most of which were occupied on the first floor by small shops and restaurants. Despite this wealth of nightlife opportunities, the sidewalks were all but deserted. The few forms of life to appear here and there as Romy moved down the street were young men, just standing, alone, staring at passing cars.

Three vehicles behind the van, Romy took advantage of the slow pace to look up her position on Google Maps. "Southall" was the only word displayed in large enough letters on the screen of her phone for her to pick it up before a car honked behind her. The name was enough to send chills up her spine. Now she

understood why there were not any passersby on the sidewalks and why the few restaurants still open were empty. A year earlier, a former colleague and friend of hers who lived in London had offered to host Lea for a couple of weeks during the summer, so she could spend some time with her own daughter who was the same age and visit the city. Romy had researched the neighborhood where her friend lived and found out that it bordered the Southall borough, which was stuck between Heathrow Airport and the city center. The area was essentially home to an immigrant population from South Asia—mainly India and Pakistan—and was labeled in several news articles as *one of the areas of London with the highest rate of violent crime*. She had declined her girlfriend's offer using a vague excuse.

Her hopes that they would travel through the neighborhood and leave it behind were dashed when the van pulled over and raced down the ramp of an underground parking lot where the narrow entrance was wedged between an immigration lawyer's office and a halal butcher's shop. Romy parked by the curb just twenty feet from the entrance, locked her car, and ran down the narrow sidewalk that hemmed the ramp. The parking lot was protected by a thin automatic barrier—no attendant, not even a security camera on the wall. The dimly lit, stuffy underground area smelled of burned car oil and could not have hosted more than a dozen cars.

The white van was maneuvering to slip into a narrow parking space, by the far wall, near the elevator. Hidden behind a cement pillar in a darker area, Romy patiently waited for the driver to come out. When he did, she was flustered to discover the young lad whose thigh she had stitched at Tarras' house of horrors. He looked around in both directions before being swallowed by the elevator. Despite a bad feeling that she had been tailing the wrong rabbit for half the night, Romy rushed across the parking lot. She hoped to catch the number of the floor at which the lad would get off but ended up staring at an old-style needle dial that only showed two levels: "B" and "1." She waited for the sound of the elevator doors closing somewhere above her head and pressed the up arrow insistently. The elevator cabin smelled of urine mixed with a dash of Pine-Sol cleaner. Luckily the ride only lasted a few seconds. The doors opened onto a hallway where the neon lights blasted Romy's eyes. They adjusted a few seconds too late for her to press the down button. The wide-open elevator door was already hiccupping into the palm of a hand, in vain attempts to close. The young man behind it was scanning her from top to bottom with a lewd grin. Romy stepped out of the cabin to move past him, only to be stopped by two of his friends, just as young, just as slim in their skinny jeans and tight black tee shirts, who blocked her path to the staircase and to the door to the street. None of the teenagers could have been more than sixteen but Romy instantly recognized the chilly, callous stare of street-raised kids, the same as she had often seen in the eyes of the young thugs she had

attended to during her Cardiff hospital internship. She had learned how useless words were with them and never to turn her back to them.

In a sudden thrust forward, she managed to break through the two boys facing her but one of them grabbed her ankle just as she set foot on the first stair. She screamed for help as she fell and latched on to the post of the iron handrail. Her cries echoed in the staircase as the timer of the hallway lighting went off. By the glare of the elevator light, one of the hoodlums slammed his foot onto Romy's hand. She let out a long scream after releasing the rail, as she was dragged on her stomach toward the elevator, where the door was still held open by the first boy. She struggled with her assailants as they shoved her into the cabin with raucous laughs. She knew that if they got her down in the basement, her fate would be sealed. In the struggle, one of the guys had already slipped his hand under her sweater and yanked her bra down. Romy managed to free one of her arms and took a punch at one of the thugs' nose. He squealed, which immediately triggered an onslaught of scorn from his friends, to which he responded by clamping Romy's throat with his bony fingers. The elevator door closed just as she started choking.

"She's with me."

The grip around Romy's neck instantly loosened up. The boy who had straddled her to choke her with greater force looked back in the direction of the voice, as the elevator door finished opening behind him. Romy recognized the blazing neon lights of the hallway—the elevator had never left the first floor. The thugs stared at one another. They seemed confused, torn between their eagerness to go on with their business and an uneasiness that did not suit them.

"She's with me," repeated the soft, muffled female voice.

After a last stare at each other and without a word, the hooligans reluctantly walked out of the elevator cabin. When the last one stepped aside, Romy discovered the silhouette of her savior, cut out in the harsh light. This time, she screamed on the inside, a second before passing out.

## Chapter 19

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Romy opened her eyes in reaction to a heady scent of jasmine. Yet, there was not a single hint of oriental elegance in the room where she had landed. Clearly, a small, cheap rental apartment worn out from the threadbare carpet to the ceiling adorned with constellations of fly droppings. One of the cupboard doors in the kitchen area was unhinged and dangled half open. The only furniture in the room consisted of a scratched wooden table with its two chairs, and the brown sofa on which she lay. When a touch of color finally slid into Romy's field of vision, she startled. A finely pleated, Persian blue column of fabric, capped by a matching veil glided toward her. This time, Romy processed the eerie sight. She had recognized a burka; the long, loose garment covering the whole body and face of some Muslim women. She tried to make eye contact with the dweller inside the silky shell, but the small black mesh that occupied the center of the veil did not reveal the slightest hint of the person's face, even though she was standing right under the ceiling light.

"Am I... in your apartment?" asked Romy to break the tension.

"It is not my apartment, but you are safe here, if that's your concern."

The calm voice and uppity British accent of the woman somewhat appeased Romy.

"Did you carry me up the stairs?" she said.

"Yes."

Romy had a contrite smile.

"I'm sorry I made it even harder for you to help me. I'm usually the one at the other end; the strong one helping others. I'm a nurse, you see. I've never fainted before, even during my training years, but this time, when I first saw you, in the backlight of the hallway, after being choked, I thought that you were... I thought that I had..."

"Died? You couldn't possibly have."

"Why? Weren't those kids as bad as they seemed?"

"They were. They would most likely have gang raped you, and possibly strangled you afterwards, before making sure that no one ever came across your remains."

"But you just told me that I could not possibly have died..."

"It wasn't your time."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You didn't die, did you?"

Romy took a long look at her ghostly hostess. Her cloaking, her poise, her elegant pronunciation, all contributed to dehumanizing the woman and keeping her out of reach.

"Won't you get... comfortable, now that we are alone?" asked Romy. "Alone between women, I mean."

"Does my outfit bother you?"

"No, it doesn't... really. I certainly didn't mean—"

"Would it make a difference to you if the person who saved you from a most dire situation was beautiful or ugly?"

"No, of course not," replied Romy, flustered by the logic. "I'd just like a chance to know you better."

"You'll get to know me best if I remain myself, won't you?"

"I suppose so, yes. May I know your name?"

"You may call me Masrae. Does your hand hurt?"

From the detached tone of her hostess' voice, Romy understood that she would never know as much as the real name of the woman inside the blue cage.

"The bruise makes it look worse than it is, said Romy as she sat on the bed. It's just sore, like the rest of my body. I guess the guys gave me a good workout."

"Why were you following the white van?" asked Masrae.

"How do you know—"

"I was looking out the window when the van went down the ramp and you rushed out of your car to follow it."

Romy looked around the room. Unless her sense of direction was as messed up as everything else, the apartment faced the opposite direction to the street. She chose nevertheless to play the honesty card.

"I had been trailing the van all the way from Wales. I thought that someone else was inside it."

"Who?"

"A man who calls himself Tarras."

"You didn't come to London in vain. He is here."

"You know Tarras?!"

"The young lad who drove the van is some sort of helper to him. He came here to pick him up. Once Tarras gets what he came for, I suppose they'll all ride the van back to his hideout."

"I need to return to the basement," said Romy and stood up with a wince of pain. "I need to stay behind them when they take off. I'm not sure at all that they'll go back to the house in Wales. Do you think that the thugs are still—"

"*The house in Wales? What house?!*" interrupted Masrae. The fabric of her cloak waved as her arm swung underneath. It was the first time that she had expressed any kind of emotion, even though her voice had only risen slightly.

Romy did not answer. Her mind was rushing to figure out whether honesty was still the best policy with Masrae. There appeared to be a connection between Masrae and Tarras—a high tightrope onto which she felt she had just been pushed. Both characters were shady—at best—and that was about the extent of Romy's understanding of the forces at play. She was seriously indebted to both of them

and by giving one an edge on the other, she could very well precipitate her own downfall.

"I'll head back to the basement, now," she said and stepped toward the door.

"That's not a good plan," said Masrae. Your three young friends are still hanging around the building. Regardless, the van will not leave until Tarras returns and when he does, we'll hear his footsteps on the staircase. He is not the quiet type."

"He'll get past the thugs?"

"I gave him clearance. If I hadn't, it is the boys' lives that would have been at risk, not his," replied Masrae in an amused tone of voice.

"And he'll come here?"

"Here? Probably not. He rents the apartment across the hall. That's why I took over this one."

"Are you spying on him?"

"No. I'm just holding something for him."

"What is it?"

"Lie back down on the sofa and get some rest. Tarras probably won't be back until morning. I'll wake you up when he does. The bathroom is over there," said Masrae and pointed to a narrow door, "and there's plenty of food in the fridge if you're hungry."

The woman walked out of the room before Romy had a chance to reply. She slipped into an adjacent room and closed the door behind her.

After getting a chance to use the bathroom—finally—Romy set out to do something she had not done in years: drinking too much. She grabbed a half-empty bottle of rum that she had spotted on top of the beat-up fridge in the kitchenette area of the room. After all, it was not very likely that her devout hostess would ever miss it. Craving release, she filled three-quarters of a glass with the liquor, topped it with warm Coke, and drank half of the mix in a single stride. She sat down at the kitchen table, unlaced her sneakers, and kicked back any of her mind's attempts to review the insanity of the past twenty-four hours. To ignore the dirty walls, chipped linoleum tiles, and stained sofa, she stared at the swirls of her tar-tinted cocktail as she would have at a filthy lava lamp.

As she sipped her second glass of rum and cola, a cry erupted from Masrae's room. A savage, melodic cry—at full blast. A cry that Romy—a Pink Floyd fan since her teenage years—recognized instantly: Clare Torry's *Great Gig in the Sky* agonizing cry, which so vividly expressed the full spectrum of a woman's emotions, from despair to orgasm—or was it the other way around? How could a woman who, with an act of extreme self-denial, erased herself inside a silk cage, dare to listen to such a primal, brazen litany? Did she, at the end of her day, let the woman out of her shroud to now lie nude on her bed? Or was she clad in the exciting lingerie that Muslim women were supposed to display under their

gloomy cages for their husbands' exclusive pleasure? When the thought of cracking Masrae's door open to peek inside crossed Romy's mind, she realized how intoxicated she was getting. Hating the idea of being returned too soon to a dire reality, she devoured a ham and cheese sandwich and gulped a bottle of water as fast as she could, so her buzz would not wear off before she crashed on the sofa. She knew that without it, she would never fall asleep.

## Chapter 20

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Romy woke up peaceful and rested, just as if she had been laid back down on a soft cushion of present after riding a wild nightmare. A quick scan of the room instantly burst her bubble. She frowned and sat down. She did not exactly smell fresh as a daisy after sleeping with her clothes on. The door to Masrae's bedroom—the only bedroom—was open. Romy called out her name a couple of times before entering it. Everything looked as if no one had lived there. The bed was made, the closet doors had been left open on empty shelves, and there was not as much as a toothbrush on the bathroom counter. The only objects in the whole bedroom area were an old boom box—with a Pink Floyd cassette tape inside—a bottle of body soap and a towel. Romy verified that the front door of the apartment was locked before taking a quick shower. As she brewed coffee and buttered up some toasts, she was very uncertain as to her next step.

Masrae, her sole local support, appeared to have deserted her, and if the past night was any indication, this was not a good place in which to linger. On the other hand, she was terrified to walk past the hoodlums in the hallway. Her salvation came through the laughs of young girls that echoed somewhere up the stairwell. She waited for them to pass in front of her door and immediately stepped out to follow them. In school uniforms, with big backpacks dangling from their frail shoulders, the girls seemed excited to go to school, where a dance was to take place after classes. Once they had reached the first floor, Romy shadowed them as they passed in front of two stern teenage boys. One of them was the one who had held the elevator door open all along her ordeal there the night before. The other one, whom Romy had never seen, stared at her before addressing an inquisitive stare at his friend, who, in response, shook his head to signify he should ignore her.

When she set foot outside, Romy felt as if she had been, during her sleep, transported halfway across the world. The grim, barren street on which she had landed the night before was now host to an onslaught of sounds and colors, as if someone had blasted a dam somewhere upstream. Cars and double-decker buses crossed each other in a cacophony of loud engines and impatient honks, as pedestrians flowed in droves around the food stands and jewelry and clothes displays that had spilled out of the stores flanking the narrow sidewalks. As far as she could see in both directions, Romy was the only white person in that world. Some women wore bright sarees or long tunics over colorful pants, while others were dressed in djellabas of subdued black and gray tones. Many of them also wore Muslim headscarves or head-covering shawls. In the span of a few minutes, two women in burkas showing only their eyes walked by. Like many Westerners, Romy could not help but associate these outfits with smothering forms of radical Islam and she feared these caged women more than she felt sorry for them.

When she finally spotted a small group of western-looking women chattering around a rotating display of gold bangles, Romy found the courage to move away from the building and walk down the street. She passed the white girls—Australian tourists, based on their accent—and worked her way upstream of the crowd. At the turning of a street corner, a tall, broad old man wearing a red turban and a white robe surged right in front of her. As startled as he was, the man first rolled his eyes at her before blasting a very big, very white smile at her! Romy returned the favor. She could not help but stare at the man's long white beard, neatly parted in the middle, which made him look like a magician in a fairy tale. He had also been the first person to acknowledge her presence on the street. Most of the others had ignored her, a couple of them had already thrown a disapproving stare at her, and she was not sure what her offence might have been. By any standards, the Sikh man was a beautiful creature, and his heartwarming smile acted on Romy a little like a shoehorn. As she watched him walk away, she felt herself easing into that world that was all but a fit for her.

"Hello... Romy? Romy?? Are you there?!"

At the end of a greasy lunch in a small kebab restaurant, surrounded by a motley, animated crowd, most of Romy's nerves had finally snapped back into their grooves and she had gathered enough courage to turn her phone back on. Seventeen text messages—fifteen from Rufus and two from Lea—and five voice mails—all from Rufus. Romy immediately drew three conclusions: Rufus was panicked, Lea was pouting, and neither one of them had yet told close family or friends about her little episode. Romy had dialed Rufus' cell almost automatically. He had picked up after the first ring. At the sound of his voice, Romy hesitated for a long moment.

"Yes, Rufus, I'm here," she finally responded.

"Thank God! Are you okay?"

"I'm perfectly fine. You and Lea should not worry so much. I'm just taking a little breather."

"Without us?"

"I screwed up badly... with Corny. I was so fed up with his shenanigans that I wanted to teach him a lesson, but it got out of hand. Before I come back home to you both, I need to figure out for myself how I could have let it go so far, so I can explain—"

"But it's okay, honey. We aren't mad at you. We just want you back!"

"If things were okay, Rufus, I would not have blown a fuse like this. It was a long time coming. At work and at home, things were getting thornier and thornier for me. I was feeling totally out of sync..."

"Feeling out of sync... at home too? What do you mean?"

"Are the police looking for me?" replied Romy to dodge the question.

"No. Why would they? After reading the note you left, we didn't feel that we had to involve them. Only Corny came by, that night."

“What for?!”

“To apologize to me. He said that while working on the fridge, he had heard you in the shower. His senses had gotten the best of him, he had cracked the bathroom door open to take a peek at you. You blinded him by throwing some red liquid from a bottle in the medicine cabinet and shoved him all the way out of the front door—”

“Is that what he told the police?”

“Of course, since it was the truth! And since they never heard from you on that day and no one else filed a formal complaint, they just recorded his name and address and a summary of the incident, and let him go at the end of the day. He just got away with a hefty fine for not stopping fast enough when chased by the police car.”

*I'll be darned*, thought Romy. The sleazy bastard had taken all the blame and even fixed things up for her at home. She had never liked the guy but promised herself to give more credit to her sister when she praised her husband's qualities. Romy did not bother to ask her husband how he had reacted to Corny's act of contrition. There was nothing Rufus loved more than nipping an uncomfortable situation in the bud. He had probably asked Corny to dine with Lea and him. The relentless pursuit of peace was one of *her* husband's qualities.

“So... Where are you now?” asked Rufus hesitantly.

“I'm in England, at a friend's. Just a few hours' drive from you guys, so don't worry. I'll be home soon.”

“At a female friend's?”

“Does it make a difference whether a friend is male or female?” retorted Romy, taking a page from Masrae's book.

“No... I guess not. Will you come back later today?”

“Today? No. In a few days. Let me say hi to Lea.”

“But she's at school right now.”

“Oh, right... I lost track of the day of the week.”

“Since you'll be home soon, why don't you just send her a text? She is quite upset with your disappearing act, you know. You were supposed to go shopping with her for a prom dress two days ago, remember? It was important to her.”

“Lea is very important to herself; I know. I'll text her and I'll sort things out with her when I get home.”

“I love you, Romy, you still know that, don't you?”

“I do, Rufus. I do... I'll be home soon.”

Romy hung up and immediately texted her daughter a warm message and a short apology about the shopping spree. She did not expect a reply. She did not get one.

## Chapter 21

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Before leaving the restaurant, Romy called the hospital and requested two weeks of sick leave. After hanging up, she felt eerily light. Work-free, family-free. Duty-free in a world of strangers who did not need a thing from her, and, for the most part, did not want anything to do with her.

She felt beyond free, as in exile. Had it not been for her gnawing concern for Tarras' victims, she would have felt almost carefree. Dreading returning to an empty apartment, she hopped from shop to shop for an hour before realizing that, in the morning, she had not checked that her car was still parked on the street. She hurried back, only to find, in the spot where she had left her car, a massive, black SUV. Quite a few triggers could instantly light up her fiery temper; something happening to her beloved car—purchased with her first salary fifteen years earlier—was definitely one of them. Enraged, she walked up to her building and pushed the door wide open—without entering—with such force that she sent two of the three thugs standing in the hallway running for cover in the staircase. The third one, the one from the previous night, reached behind his back but slowly returned his hand to his side when he recognized her.

“What did you do with my car?” shouted Romy.

“Even a nice bit of crumpet like you shouldn't burst in here like that,” replied the teen. “Here, the fast and furious will end up slow and dead pretty fast.”

“Where's my car?” insisted Romy, keeping the door wide open on the street.

“In the basement.”

“Did you move it there?”

“Yes.”

“Who gave you the right—”

“The blue ghost.”

Romy instantly recognized the uneasy expression on the teen's face.

“You mean the lady who helped me out last night?”

“Mmm...”

“Why did she do that?”

“She said she might need your car later and she didn't want it to be stolen.”

“And of course, you didn't need my keys to unlock it.”

“What *ya* think?”

“Did you take anything in it?”

“We don't mess with anything that belongs to *her*.”

“That car and everything in it is mine, not hers!”

The guy shrugged his shoulders. His two friends, slightly younger, came back out in the open with defiant attitudes, despite their less-than-glorious behavior a minute earlier.

“Is it safe for me to go down to the basement?” asked Romy.

“You’re fine as long as you’re under the protection of the blue ghost,” replied the leader. “The second she leaves for good, you’re ours.”

Romy tried to convince herself that the guy was boasting to save face, but the calm tone of his voice and the stillness of his stare still sent a chill up her spine.

“Okay, I’ll get my things from the car. I’ll be right back.”

When she stepped out of the elevator, the boys let her through without as much as a glance. As she was about to turn the knob of the apartment door, she froze upon hearing, above her head, the clicking of sharp heels on the wooden stairs. Pretending to fumble inside her bag for keys, she waited for the owner of the heels to come down to her level. She was most curious to find out what the thugs downstairs guarded. She suspected that one of the apartments on the higher floors was a drug store—literally—but for the little time that she had spent in the building, she had not noticed any of the customer traffic, up and down the stairs that would have gone hand in hand with such a business. Yet, two or three boys, most likely armed, monitored the downstairs hallway at all times. From the sound of pointy heels, Romy now expected a young woman in a skimpy outfit—the other business possibility—to appear. That was exactly the girl who came down the stairs. A young woman, whose nude body was encased in a see-through nylon bodysuit that ended inside red patent stilettos. It was not the stilettos that tapped the wooden planks of the stairs. The stilettos floated in the air, as the girl wedged into them lay inanimate on the arms of a creature covered from head to toe in a turquoise blue shroud... with clicking heels underneath it, somehow.

Masrae walked past Romy without a word. Romy watched her walk effortlessly down the stairs despite her burden. She was so mesmerized by the vision of these two women—the subdued one carrying the erotic one—that she instinctively followed them down the stairs. She did not get very far. When the procession reached the first floor, the boys let Masrae and her prey through but closed the path right behind her. Romy did not insist and retreated to the apartment. She felt like a small mammal in the wild, for whom lethal threats were a natural element in the daily forecast. She did not cave in to the pressure but craved a break from the chaos and spookiness. Once in the apartment, she convinced herself that all the eeriness of the past month had not been real; that she was just her grandma’s faithful heir, for better and for worse, and just needed a bit of help. She lay down on the sofa and closed her eyes. When she woke up, she would call Rufus back. He was such a gentle, caring elf. He would make it all okay... all okay...

A pungent scent of fried onions and garlic pulled Romy out of her comatose state. She sat down and looked in the direction of a sizzling sound. Masrae was facing the gas range, fully shrouded but barefoot.

“You’re back,” murmured Romy as if addressing a ghost.

“And so are you, finally,” replied Masrae while stirring the contents of a frying pan.

“What time is it?”

“Five-thirty.”

“Oh... it’s almost nighttime! I can’t believe I napped for several hours.”

“It’s five-thirty... *in the morning.*”

Romy jumped to her feet and instantly regretted the sudden move. Her whole body was a wreck. It had not appreciated over fifteen hours of stillness on a beat-up sofa. She felt embarrassed to have spaced out so badly and her clothes, which reeked of a blend of sweat and roasted garlic, did not exactly comfort her.

“I’ll take a shower and wash my clothes,” she mumbled and dragged herself to the bathroom. She had just finished undressing when the bathroom door swung open, startling her.

“The washer and dryer are in the basement. You can wear this to take your clothes there; the lads won’t bother you.”

Romy grabbed a long black garment that Masrae was handing to her and held it against her nude body. Masrae walked away, leaving the door wide open.

Romy’s trip to the basement indeed went without a hitch. When she descended the stairs, the teen wardens pretended not to see her. That only enhanced the cocooning feel that her bare body experienced inside the soft, jasmine-scented, black burka. Had it not been for the fabric grid in front of her eyes that fragmented her vision, she could almost have forgotten her contempt for such a garment.

“Sit down,” said Masrae when Romy walked back into the apartment. The kitchen table was already set with two plates, filled with sautéed vegetables, scrambled eggs, small wraps, falafels, hummus, and rolled chapatis.

“Thank you for... all this, Masrae,” said Romy as she sat across the table from her host.

“I just prepared the veggies and the eggs; the rest is from the market,” replied the woman.

“I took the liberty of crashing here last night again. I didn’t know whether you’d come back after...”

“After?”

“The girl you carried down the stairs yesterday... was she dead?”

Masrae nodded before slightly lifting the bottom of her niqab and sliding a forkful of vegetables under the fabric. The fork came back empty and shiny, as if by an act of stage magic.

“Where did you take her body?” asked Romy and dug into her own food.

“To my mosque. She’ll be buried today.”

“But... by the way she was dressed, she couldn’t have been a Muslim.”

“I was all she had, with the exception of the stupid boyfriend who gave her the drugs that killed her.”

"Was she your friend?"

"No, only my prisoner."

Stunned by the comment, Romy just watched, for a long moment, Masrae routing food over and over under her face cover. She was the one to break the silence.

"I had been sent here to poach Ann—that was the girl's name—away from a prostitution ring run by two local families. They kept a close watch over her, especially since they had learned that she was fooling around with a boy from a white gang. As for Ann, they had gotten her badly hooked on PCP, so even if I managed to snatch her from them, I'm quite sure she'd have run back to them at the first opportunity."

"So, how did you take her from them?" asked Romy.

"Fear and greed. I asked to meet with the patriarch of one of the families and convinced him that I was the representative of a local terrorist cell. I explained that we were on the market for a young Caucasian woman for a suicide bombing setup and offered him money. I didn't have as much cash as he demanded to let go of Ann, but he wasn't keen on messing around with Islamists—not good for business. He ended up agreeing and even granted my request to have a couple of his boys stand guard at all times in Ann's building so she couldn't escape until we left."

"Why couldn't you leave right away?"

"I had to wait for a shipment..."

"Another girl?"

"We were to convey them together."

"Did Tarras' lad have anything to do with that?"

"He was the driver to get us out of here."

"So, you were to deliver these girls to Tarras?"

Masrae stood up, took her empty plate to the sink, and proceeded to wash it.

"What exactly do you know about Tarras?" she asked after a long silence.

Encouraged by Masrae's candor, Romy opted for the same attitude. She did not want to go home, and her shrouded companion was her best bridge to re-entering Tarras' circle.

"Now, I understand why you are still buzzing freely around us," said Masrae, who had sat back down across the kitchen table from Romy. "Telling on Tarras would mean telling on your daughter. He wouldn't gain anything from *neutralizing* you and he'd lose a valuable asset in the process. In our line of business, having a nurse at our beck and call is a real blessing, and you wouldn't believe how hard it is for us to find that kind of help."

"You don't expect me to go on fixing your victims, do you?!"

"It looks like, for the foreseeable future, you won't have that much of a choice."

"You know I won't talk! What prevents me from walking out of here and driving off?" replied Romy.

“First, in your place, I wouldn’t bet on making it to the door. If your job is to cure people, mine is often to stop them. And even if you managed to reach the staircase, a simple whistle from me and the boys downstairs would rush to stop you. Your medical skills are the safety pin on the grenade you strapped around your neck the day you made a deal with Tarras. By refusing to help us and trying to run away, you could just be yanking that pin off...”

Livid, Romy stared at the dirty knife she had left on her plate. Masrae calmly reached across the table and dragged the dish back to her side.

“There’s still room for patience, Romy,” she said softly. For now, just go with the flow. Once you get unstuck from this dark corner and move forward again, the scenery will change for you.”

Masrae left the table and headed for the front door.

“Go get your clothes back from the basement and wait for me here,” she said. “I need to have a word with Tarras’ lad. I won’t be long.”

The knot in Romy’s stomach was so tight after she put her own clothes back on that she resolved to try to dissolve it with a cup of very strong tea laden with a large swig of rum. It worked miracles. Within minutes, her abdomen relaxed, and her brain settled back down. She chose to remember only Masrae’s last words about moving forward and started writing on a napkin what she knew of Tarras’ operations. Once done, she realized that the summary brought up more questions than answers. The next line on her napkin was written a few minutes later, as she sat on the bathroom toilet. The door, which she had not even locked, burst open, exposing a stocky man with a darker complexion whose raven mustache pulsed in synch with the twitching of his eyes. More startled by the man’s animated face than by the revolver he was pointing at her, Romy jumped to her feet and tried to pull up her tight jeans. The man uttered a few words in a guttural language while waving his gun to urge Romy to raise her hands and step out of the bathroom.

Pants still stuck just under her buttocks, she shuffled into the bedroom as the man kept shouting at her. She shrugged her shoulders to signify that she did not understand, which, for some reason infuriated the man. He grabbed her by the hair, pressed the barrel of his gun onto her cheek, and forced her into the living room where he shoved her onto the sofa, with such violence that it nearly tipped backwards. Then ensued a long monolog from the visitor, punctuated by increasing facial tics as the man got more agitated, and nervous pokes of the gun into Romy’s face. He finally stopped, an inquisitive expression on his face, clearly expecting an answer from Romy. She was frozen, body and mind. She did not even feel the pressure of the barrel on her skin anymore. When he realized that she would not speak, the intruder shook his head with dismay, moved the gun to her temple, and began slowly chanting words, one at a time, with long silences in between. Romy understood that he was counting. Counting the final seconds of her life. Instinctively, she counted along with the man, in silence. When she

reached a count of nine, the click of the hammer of the revolver being pulled back numbed her whole being instantly, like an injection of propofol. She let her eyelids slowly close.

## Chapter 22

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The blast never came. Instead, a brief crackling noise zipped through the silence, followed by a long, faint gurgling sound. Romy opened her eyes onto the revolver, now pointed away from her and held down by a hand, itself pinned down to the carpet by the heel of a woman's pump. The owner of the hand lay on his back, his legs twitching, the back of his head banging repeatedly against the floor. Two small darts were stuck in his neck; they were connected by thin wires to a toy-like plastic gun lying on the floor five feet behind him.

"Let's go!" ordered Masrae and kneeled by the man's side to pry the real gun out of his hand. Romy barely managed to grab her bag as Masrae dragged her toward the door.

"When I tell you, take a deep breath and run down the staircase as fast as you can. Hold your breath until we step outside—that's very important. Then, just follow my lead," whispered Masrae as she lifted the hem of her burka well above her knee. She reached underneath the fabric and brought back a translucent glass egg. She leaned into the void at the center of the spiral staircase and let the egg drop. She waited for a few seconds after the sound of shattering glass and screamed "Now!". Romy ran behind her down the stairs, holding her breath as instructed. Three inanimate bodies lay on the dirty tiles of the hallway. The women had to step over one of them to get through to the front door.

Romy felt dizzy as she struggled to keep up with Masrae, who was headed for the access ramp leading to the underground parking lot. As they descended the ramp, a van stormed out of the parking lot, forcing them to jump on the narrow sidewalk.

"Wanker!" shouted Masrae.

Despite the commotion, Romy noted that next to Tarras' lad, behind the wheel of the van, sat the ugliest woman she had ever seen.

"Your car keys, quick!" shouted Masrae.

She snatched the key chain from Romy's hand, unlocked the vehicle, and plunged into the driver's seat. She barely waited for Romy to take her place on the passenger seat before pulling off.

Masrae drove like a maniac—to the point of passing a slow delivery truck by climbing on the sidewalk—until she caught up with Tarras' van, a few hundred yards down the street.

"Good!" she said. "Now we can chill a bit."

"I don't feel so good," complained Romy. "I feel very woozy."

"You must have gotten a small whiff of the gas. Don't worry, it'll wear off in less than an hour."

"What kind of gas was that?"

"Warfare grade nerve gas. Think of Raid for bad guys instead of mosquitos."

Romy closed her eyes and dozed off. When she came back to her senses, they were still tailing Tarras' car but, this time, in a countryside scenery.

"Do they know that you're following them?" she asked, pointing at the van. "Where are they going?"

"Back to your hometown," replied Masrae.

"You mean back to Tarras'."

Masrae remained silent.

"Who was the man who attacked me in your apartment?" said Romy.

"The guy who sold me Ann. It seems like he didn't receive the second installment of my payment, so he decided to come by and collect it in person. I saw him going into the apartment. I sneaked in while he was counting you down."

"He could have killed me!"

"No. I was listening at the door. I came in when he started counting. The guy had never seen me outside of my burka. He must have thought you were me. And he got really mad when you refused to speak."

"I didn't understand a word he said!"

"Well, no need to cry over spilt milk. They must all be back on their feet by now."

"A taser, nerve gas... What else do you carry around your waist?!"

"A tube of glossy lipstick, a machete, a tampon, and a small Kalash. Everything a girl needs to make it into a man's world!" replied Masrae and burst into a high-pitched laugh.

Romy was not amused. She would have loved to believe that her cloaked companion was joking.

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It was drizzling on the trail that led up to Tarras' house in the woods and the tires of Romy's car slipped on the wet gravel. At times, Masrae had to rev up the engine into the tachometer's red zone in order to keep the vehicle climbing. Once they made it to the top, she parked next to the van, which was empty, its rear doors wide open.

"Wait in the car," said Masrae, "I'll talk to Tarras first. It may take a while. Don't leave."

Within a few minutes, the car cabin chilled and the windows fogged up. Romy could only see pearls of the outside through the tiny lenses formed by the droplets of rain clinging to the windshield for a few seconds before sliding down. Despite the frenzy of the past two days and the threat now hanging over her head, she felt at great peace. Her thoughts wandered to her husband and daughter. Why had they felt so removed from her since the beginning of that ordeal? She loved her only child more than she could ever love anyone else; that would never be a question to her. The problem was that since she had turned twelve, Lea had given

her very little air to feed and grow that love. Loving her had become like crossing a long, freezing pool in apnea. Despite all her motherly efforts to raise a good teen, Romy had, pretty much overnight, been handed a self-absorbed, caustic brat. Dealing with her was a daily calvary and Romy could not help but relish the weekends Lea would spend at a friend's. As for Rufus, he had been the reasonable choice; the default choice after three other, more exciting options had fallen through. Rufus was a woman's ideal sidekick. Dependable, unconditionally caring and supportive. Lovable as a Labrador. As such, he would, no doubt, be a perfect companion with whom to grow older after Lea left the nest. That prospect, though, was too far down the road for a late-thirties Romy in search of a second wind to power the next stage of her youth.

Romy's feelings for her family cell rose and crashed in turn as she evoked the tenderest of moments or the scathing frustrations with her husband and daughter. At the end of a long contemplation, it all came down to a single question: Did she feel like going home or not? The answer came with disarming ease: Yes—but not now. Since she had removed herself from her life as a wife, a mother, and a nurse, she had experienced an onslaught of emotions, good and bad, that had made her senses stand tall and her past ideals jump out of their sarcophagus. Like Ulysses, she would go home, but not before riding this odyssey to the end.

Masrae came out of the house after a good half-hour. She ran to the car and swiftly got in, leaving the passenger door open.

"Tarras said that you should feel free to go home," she said. "You'll never hear from him—or any of us—again as long as you keep quiet on your end."

"What if I'm not ready to go home?"

Masrae's head turned toward Romy. Tiny droplets of water clung to the black mesh that concealed her eyes.

"Then, come with me," she said and stepped out of the car.

Tarras was alone in the living room, reading a document on a chair by the fireplace. When the women walked in, his eyes briefly brushed over them before dropping back onto the sheet of paper in his hand. Romy followed Masrae up the stairs, all the way to the third floor and into a bedroom at the far end of the corridor. Its furnishings only consisted of a metal bed, on which had been thrown a thin mattress of a questionable off-white color, a narrow nightstand and an old chair.

"I know it's a bit rough, but we had not planned for you to stay. I'll ask you to stay in this room for the rest of the day. Alan will come by later to—"

"Alan?"

"Tarras' lad. He'll bring you some food, as well as a pillow and a blanket."

"What about the bathroom?"

“There’s only one, on the second floor, and Tarras does not want the guests to be roaming the house tonight. You’ll find a temporary solution in this room.”

“How long is *temporary*?”

“Tomorrow, all guests will be called downstairs. Tarras will speak to you.”

“About what?”

Masrae turned around and walked out of the room. She closed the door behind her, but Romy noticed that she had left the key inside the lock, on her side of the wood panel. Even though she was not locked in, Romy rapidly felt claustrophobic between the walls, devoid of windows and reverberating the crude light of the bare bulb. She looked under the bed for the bathroom “solution” mentioned by Masrae—a bedpan branded *Birmingham Children’s Hospital*. Of all the hosts under whose roof you wanted to spend the night, those who stole supplies from kid hospitals surely had to rank near the top...

The lad came by shortly after nightfall, carrying a food tray, wearing a rolled blanket around his neck and holding a pillow under one of his arms. He blushed at the simple sight of Romy before laying down his goods on the bed and hustled back out of the room after a contrite smile. The fish and chips did not have a chance to stink out the room, as Romy devoured them in a flash. They had not been very generous with the portion size, but had been more liberal with the drinks: a quart of mineral water and a whole bottle of French cabernet. Equally yearning for more calories and a whiff of escape, Romy overlooked the fact that the lad had not brought any glass—or silverware for that matter—and took long sips of wine, straight from the bottle, after a short struggle with the twist-off cap. After lying down on the bed, the bottle of wine gently tucked between her breasts, Romy listened to the house. Between long stretches of dreadful silence, here a rattle, there a few dull footstep sounds. Short bursts of life springing from different compartments of the house, a few on the same floor, but most on the floor below. Romy pictured the rows of small bedrooms flanking the corridors on both levels and quickly brushed away the image of a bruised captive in several of them. The wear and tear from a rocky day combined with a string of short sips from the cab bottle to tip her into a warm snooze.

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The music was loud and distorted after echoing throughout the house. Its vibrations finished waking up Romy. She sat on the bed, puzzled. How could music have sprouted inside such a place of doom? That thought and that thought alone pushed her barefoot into the corridor and down the staircase. As she tiptoed down the stairs, the music sharpened up. The crisp notes of an accordion surfed over a blanket of melancholic strings. It was a spirited melody with no hope. A tango.

They faced each other in the middle of the grimy room, immobile, arms floating by their sides. A stiff, rugged man and a fluid, gauzy creature. His suit was wrinkled; the knot of his tie had been loosened an inch down. He stared at her with angst. She stood encased in her blue shroud. Had it not been for the very slight trembling of her fingers, one could have thought her petrified. Yet, she was the one to break the stillness of their face-off by starting to sway slightly to the rhythm of the strings. When he took two steps toward her, she took two steps back. When he stopped, she stepped back up to him. They locked their left hands. Her right hand wrapped around him to lie flat on his shoulder blade. His right hand wrapped tightly around her waist. They began dancing. Their bodies told a very different story, even though they moved perfectly in sync. His body tried to seize, restrain, and embrace his partner's. Her body escaped his hold like sand slips through fingers. She accompanied every one of his steps but broke free, swirled, glided, and bent away from him, without ever letting go of his hand. At every kick of the lower part of her legs, her sandals furtively escaped the silk cage, and their long heels drew complex geometrical figures into thin air and over the bare stones. He ended up being the moving pole around which she flew, supporting her body with his arms, his abs, his thighs. He thought he was leading when he was only accompanying her rounded figures and containing her sudden moves. He had lost the struggle of man to gain dominance over the woman. He had started as an owner; he had ended up as a partner. When she wrapped her leg around his thighs to pull him tightly against her, she planted her final banderilla. Never had the tango been embodied more strikingly by two dancers. Because when the man ended up engulfed in the shroud, he had been embraced by death when he had set off to conquer her.

When the back of Masrae's hand caressed Tarras' cheek, Romy suddenly felt uncomfortable. No matter how dangerous, how sinful that man and that woman might have been, she did not have any right to violate their intimacy. She retreated to her room and lay down very uneasy. She had, this time voluntarily, trapped herself in a house in which she would not be able to predict what might follow a passionate tango dance. Love, lust, or violence.

## Chapter 23

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Three knocks on the door woke up a vaguely nauseous Romy.

"Come in," she mumbled.

"Please join us in the living room," replied a hesitant male voice on the other side of the door. It was the first time Romy had heard the lad's voice. She downed half the bottle of water, tidied up her hair, and hand-brushed her clothes in a vain attempt to iron out the deep wrinkles on her pants. When she reached the last flight of stairs, she paused for a brief instant upon discovering the motley crew sitting at the living room table.

"Come on," pressed Tarras. "You're the last one. Take a seat at the table."

Romy complied and took her place next to Masrae, who sat to Tarras' right in a slightly darker, but still blue burka.

"Enough with the musical chairs, for God's sake," said the classy mature lady that Romy had discovered inanimate, a few days earlier, in Tarras' van. "Is someone going to finally tell us—"

"This is not open mike night!" roared Tarras. "Everyone, sit down and shut up! I'll do the only talking. My job is to ferry you to the next stage of your journey, not to answer your questions."

He scanned the audience briefly before continuing.

"You've all met me. Each one of you has also met some of the other people at this table, but no one has met all of them. Therefore, I'll make some introductions so you can at least call each other by name."

"Masrae is my partner in this venture," said Tarras. "I couldn't tell you where she comes from. I've met her in some of the most barren places around the world. If you need assistance and I am unable to help you, she'll take over. If you get the bad idea of straying and I am unable to bring you back in line, she'll also handle that for me..."

The threat in Tarras' voice all along his tirade clearly outlined Masrae as his first lieutenant.

"Hijra comes to us originally from India but recently settled in the Middle East. This fine man and I have also shared many missions in faraway lands. Just to be perfectly clear: don't let Masrae and Hijra's soft appearances fool you. I would myself think very long and hard before challenging them at a duel with any weapon."

*Soft?!* thought Romy. A fully hooded woman and a creature that even God would have a hard time recognizing as one of his creations! Hijra's sari resembled an Andy Warhol rendering of the explosion of a paint factory and he wore what appeared to be dark eyeliner. Hijra was the "ugliest woman" of whom Romy had caught a glimpse when the van had stormed out of the parking lot in London the day before.

“And last for the staff; my assistant, Alan, who you have all met by now.”

The lad wriggled on his chair with embarrassment and blushed to the roots of his blond hair. Tarras then pointed to the youngest woman at the table.

“Preeti was also born in India, but she joined us straight from the Middle East—”

“Joined?!!”

Tarras raised his hand in front of the young woman’s face to shut her up. She hesitated and opted for silence after a defiant shrug. Of all the people at the table, she seemed to be the only one not to feel Tarras’ weight. Romy looked at her with immediate fondness, and that had very little to do with the girl’s endearing face. Every feature on it was very cute individually—her eyes, her nose, her lips—but as a set, they seemed slightly misarranged. This, in combination with fairly large and pointy ears, gave the girl an endearing troll-like appearance.

“Eve has lived all her life an hour or so from here, save for the occasional trips to five-star resorts in paradise islands.”

The mature woman introduced in that way by Tarras reacted with a clenching of the jaws but did not as much as look in his direction. Everything in her demeanor evoked class, from her posture to her elegant black pantsuit and matching pumps.

“Romy is the latest addition to our group. She will be your attending nurse should you need any medical support or assistance. And speaking of medical assistance, Alan...?”

The lad stood up and hurried across the room and up the stairs. No one spoke as his footsteps echoed upstairs, soon followed by the faint squeak of a door opening. When he descended the stairs a couple of minutes later, it was at a slow pace, as he held under his arm a woman that Romy instantly recognized. Since she had first treated her at Tarras’ house two weeks earlier, she had often thought of her. In her mind, she referred to her as “The Nimbex Girl.” The swelling on her face had gone down and the bruising had somewhat faded, but the poor girl had a hard time standing up despite the lad’s help. She winced with pain at every step. Romy stood up and held the woman under her second arm to ease her walk to the table.

“Catina is the final member of our group. She, too, is from these parts. She walked the streets quite a bit, but it never took her very far down the block.”

Disgusted by Tarras’ description, Romy gently rubbed the girl’s back. She did not react. She just stared at the table, her head faintly bobbing.

“Now that we are all acquainted, I will share with you a few details regarding the journey ahead. Before I start, let me repeat that this is not a forum. You will follow us to your next destination, either willingly or hog-tied, your choice. It will take us a while to get there, so it could get uncomfortable, maybe even hazardous if you choose the second option. We will leave immediately after this meeting—”

“Without breakfast?!” exclaimed Preeti.

“Everyone here looks tired,” said Romy before a fuming Tarras had a chance to scold Preeti for interrupting. “It’d only take a few minutes for us to prepare some sandwiches. A quick shower, at least for us ladies, would be good too.”

“I showered this morning,” jumped in Masrae. “I’ll take care of the sandwiches while you bathe.”

“Bathe?!” yelled Tarras. “Why not a massage while you’re at it? Okay, fine for the sandwiches, but the women who want to take a quick shower will have to go all at the same time. If you’re not out of the house in twenty minutes, I’ll drag you out of it!”

Tarras stood up and stormed out of the front door.

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“I don’t have any clean underwear,” whispered Preeti as she, Eve, and Romy headed to the bathroom—Catina had declined to join them.

“Neither do I,” replied Eve. “The bastard ripped me out of my house before I could grab a thing. Thankfully, I was dressed to go out, or I’d have ended up here in my nightie.”

“I had some changes of underwear but they’re now all dirty,” added Romy.

The three women undressed swiftly in the bathroom—there was no time for manners or modesty—and showered together. Romy could not help but notice the striking difference in caliber between Preeti’s bombshells, which clung to her otherwise slim figure like dense, blown-up fruits on the frail stem of a GMO plant, and Eve’s small breasts, whose long nipples quivered like springs every time she brushed them with the washcloth. As they toweled themselves down, Masrae’s covered arm popped through the door. In her hand, three pieces of fabric, brightly colored—one purple, one golden, and one red. Romy grabbed them.

“Do you have a color preference?” she asked her bath mates.

“What is it?” said Preeti with a suspicious frown.

“I cannot believe this...” replied Eve before grabbing the purple garment and slipping it on.

Preeti slowly circled around her, a look of sheer disbelief on her face.

“Why did you do that?” she asked. “It looks like a band-aid for the *yoni* and floss for the bum!”

Despite a situation fraught with tension, Romy and Eve burst into laughter. It took them a while to convince Preeti that slipping on the G-string was still a better

option than going commando, especially since the girl's sari was faintly see-through when she stood in front of the bathroom's bare bulbs.

The women made it out of the house just in time to prevent an outburst from Tarras, who was already pacing in front of the van. He had left to Masrae the dirty job of telling them that they would have to travel inside the cargo space of the vehicle—which was devoid of any window—while the men would sit in the front cabin. Romy, whose previous experience in that cloistered space was still fresh in her mind, negotiated that the back doors would be kept a couple of inches ajar with a string.

The ride was short; half an hour, at the most. The van doors swung open onto a desolate, rocky landscape battered by a rainstorm. When they stepped out of the vehicle, the women realized that it was parked by the edge of a small cliff, fifteen feet above the crashing waves. In a small creek flanked by massive boulders dangled a long, gray dinghy. A hundred yards off the coast, a thirty-foot or so sailboat bounced off the waves, all sails drawn. Preeti, whose thin tunic had gotten drenched in seconds started shivering frantically. When Tarras ordered the group to follow him down a groove in the cliff that led to the shore, she ran back into the van and locked herself in. Hijra motioned the rest of the crew to keep going and headed back for the vehicle. Everyone had already boarded the dinghy when he reappeared on the shore, carrying an inanimate, dripping Preeti in his arms.

Despite Alan's surprisingly skillful handling of the dinghy and its roaring engine, the quick ride to the sailboat was as treacherous as the transfer of the passengers between the two boats. This time, Tarras led the maneuver, hauling each person onto the deck of the sailboat as if they had been beanbags, even the stocky Hijra. Everyone swiftly found refuge from the rain inside the small cabin. Tarras closed the door behind them. Through the small window cut into it, Romy saw him take his place on the stern, raise the sails, and grab the ship's wheel.

"What did you do to her?" she asked Hijra after a quick examination of Preeti, who still lay unconscious on a small sofa.

"She'll wake up soon," he replied, with a much lower tone of voice than Romy had expected. She did not even think of insisting.

The ship's sails were fully deployed in the rainstorm, which caused it to violently pitch. Eve got sick first and had to flee onto the deck to give a second life to the sandwich she had eaten in the van. Romy soon followed suit. The drizzling of freezing rain on the back of their necks as they leant in turn over the railing only worsened their nausea. Luckily, an hour or so into the sailing, both wind and waters tapered off and they were able to return inside the cabin. Their stomachs had leveled off, but they all trembled inside their soaked, clinging clothes. Romy looked at her watch. They had been sailing for a while already and the gentler but

steady wind pushed the boat along at a good speed. She tried to guess its heading—South... Southwest maybe? She had never been very good at orientation. Preeti had not yet awakened; she breathed peacefully, a faint smile on her face. Hijra sat on the sofa next to her and often glanced at her, as if guarding her sleep. From his post, Tarras checked constantly on his passengers, his stare often pausing on Romy's face. Masrae, who—despite her heels—moved on the rolling ship with the same fluidity as she did on firm ground, visited him periodically. They did not appear to speak. She just stood next to him, looking ahead, for a few minutes before returning to the cabin.

The journey lasted nearly six hours, during which the passengers hardly exchanged any words, even when Masrae passed around a battery-operated blow-dryer that she had found in a small chest tucked in a corner of the cabin. Eve first dried Preeti, who was just starting to emerge from her comatose state. The girl stared at the cabin roof and did not reply when questioned. Under the caress of the blow-dryer, she slipped back into sleep. The penetrating heat had a similar effect on Romy and Eve, who leaned against each other on the bench and dozed off a few minutes after helping one another dry their clothes. Romy's snooze was one of the best ever. In her drift, she was reunited with her high-school sweetheart—who had died at the age of twenty-one from alcohol poisoning at a frat party—and they were moving in together into Romy's beloved grandmother's countryside house.

When firm pressure on her forearm snatched her out of her sleep, her first thought was to wonder why such an enjoyable dream could never come her way when she slept alone in the comfort of her home after an overnight shift at the hospital. The other occupants of the cabin were already awake, including a frowning Preeti. Their faces were washed out by the glare of the roof light. Masrae instructed them to step out. The ship barely swayed as they complied to end up on the deck, smothered by a thick pillow of night. A couple of hundred feet ahead, a string of dangling, bare bulbs illuminated a short, flimsy wooden pier. Once again, Tarras transferred every passenger to the gray dinghy by their wrists, with blunt contempt for Eve's complaint that he had bruised her the first time around. Luckily, a small ladder was available at the other end of the dinghy ride to help passengers climb onto the pier on their own. Romy stepped onto the wooden slats first and, immediately taken in by what lay ahead, did not wait for the others. She proceeded toward the shore as she would have walked into a nightmare, when turning around is never an option.

## Chapter 24

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The pier continued onto a path paved with wooden pallets, some of which sank into the underlying mud when the ground dipped slightly. The narrow walkway was flanked on both sides by shipping wood crates, each six feet long by three feet wide and tall. They were laid on their side, with the opening facing the “street,” flushed against each other, and stacked on two levels to resemble a two-row beehive. Inside each compartment, in place of a bee, a man. Usually a young man. Usually a man of darker complexion, ranging from tan to very dark. They stared at the newcomers passing by with disturbing intensity. If she could not tell whether their glares were tinted with hope or hostility, Romy recognized the most frequent ethnic types, which she had treated during her internship in the hospital of a poverty-stricken suburb of Cardiff: North African, Middle Eastern, and sub-Saharan. Even though it was barely six in the evening, most men lay idle on a bare mattress that occupied the back of each container or sat on it while grilling fish on small camping gas heaters. The only lighting came from bulbs dangling from a wire stretched over the walkways; a blunt light that cast hard human shadows inside the beehive cells.

As the group moved swiftly along the walkway, they crossed three intersecting alleys of the same nature, also flanked with two-row arrays of wood crates. They were walking by a freaky, endless, edge-of-the-world Advent calendar. Not a single one of its residents had said a word to them. Not a single note of music had seeped out of any of the cubes. The alley that they followed for two hundred feet left the crate village to meander in a spread of low bushes before ending up on a large, rugged three-story wooden house made of unstained planks and pierced with small windows. As they approached it, Romy stepped aside to let Tarras lead the way. She followed him into... a grocery store. Most of the first floor was occupied by an array of metal shelves covered with food products. As Romy strolled past the shelves from one end of the room to the other, she realized that none of them held anything but canned and boxed goods. The only items vaguely related to fruits or vegetables were juice cartons and canned soups. Not a cut of chicken or beef. The only fresh item was water, stored in gallon-sized jugs stacked up against the walls.

“Let’s go!” intimated Tarras and led the group into a long, blind room furnished with three folding tables lined up and a dozen plastic chairs.

“What’s this God-forsaken land?!” asked Preeti, back to her feisty senses.

“Sit down like the others!” growled Tarras. Preeti pouted before complying. “This,” continued Tarras, “is the only real construction on the island. The first floor, as you can tell, is a food storage space, and this is just a small eating area. On the second floor, there are five rooms. One serves as a medical examination lounge,

another one is a very basic surgical suite, and the remaining three each host two hospital beds for the sicker and recovering patients. On the third floor—”

“Is this an island?” cut in Preeti while wriggling with impatience on her chair.

“On the third floor,” resumed Tarras after a stern glance at the girl, “are a bathroom—with a cold shower that uses rainwater collected in a tank on the roof—and five small bedrooms, each fitted with two camping cots—good quality ones,” he added, looking at Eve. “That’s where you’ll stay. Alan and Hijra will take the one at the far end of the corridor. Eve and Catina will share the next one. The third one will go to Romy and *the girl!*” he added without looking at Preeti.”

Tarras stopped there. No one dared to ask about the assignments for the two other rooms.

Eve raised her hand slowly.

“Yes?” responded Tarras.

“Thank you for these details,” said Eve with poise. “Now, could you tell us where we are and why we are here?”

Tarras hesitated and turned his eyes to Masrae, who nodded slightly.

“You are on a very small, deserted island—”

“Deserted?!” interrupted Preeti once again.

“A one-by-one-mile rock that only hosted birds and small wild animals until a couple of years ago,” continued Tarras without taking his eyes off Eve. “It is now a repository for migrants whose project to sneak into England by sea has been cut short.”

“By *repository*, do you mean a storage area or a burial place?” asked Romy, trying to match Eve’s calm and detached tone of voice, which had seemingly unlocked Tarras’ account.

“That’s something that you will figure out for yourselves once you get more involved,” replied Tarras.

“Can you tell us how these young men got here?” asked Eve.

“These men—most of them are young, but not all—are migrants who started their journey all the way back in Africa or the Middle East. They attempted to cross the Channel between the north of France and the southmost point of England. They paid smugglers a hefty fee to embark on dinghies like the one we used today to board the sailboat. Only a few make it across this way and many of them die every year trying. Of the ones who fail, the luckiest ones are picked up by ships chartered by private humanitarian organizations and dispatched to rescue them in the middle of the Channel.”

“And they bring them here?!” reacted Romy.

“No. The legitimate rescue missions take them to camps on the British or French coasts, where the ones who are entitled to a political refugee status will be given a chance to apply for it.”

“And the others?”

“The ones who do not qualify for refugee status—most of them economic migrants—will usually be slapped with a deportation order, but only a small portion will actually be sent back to their country of origin. Most of them will vanish within the country before being deported and will stay illegally in England or France where they will work and live almost regular lives. These, too, will in the end have attained their European dream.”

“So, who are the ones who ended up here?” insisted Romy.

“These have fallen off the grid. They, too, were picked up from their dinghies in the middle of the Channel by a rescue ship. Only the ship was a fake rescue vessel whose destination was this remote island.”

“Couldn’t the migrants tell it was a fake?”

“No. Once pulled on board, they found there the same caring staff and benefits as on the rescue ships they had heard of. They may have preferred to get to the British coast on their own, rather than go through a refugee camp, but after a big scare on the ocean, they were just happy to be safe.”

“For how long? Are they safe here?”

“They felt safe on the ship that led them here; that’s why none of them ever opposed any resistance to being disembarked on the island, especially since, like for you, the arrival always takes place at night and via a dinghy. By the time they realize where they are, the ship has gone.”

“Don’t the ones already on the island try to warn them before they disembark?”

“The unloading does not take place by the pier. It is done at random along the coast of the island. The migrants can see the camp lights from anywhere on the rock. They just walk toward them and once they get to the camp, the ones already here help them to get set up for lodging and for food.”

“Who put together the stacks of living boxes? Who brings the food?”

No one in the room dared to jump into the exchange between Tarras and Romy for fear of halting the briefing.

“The same people who run the fake rescue ship. The shipping box village and this house were built before the first migrant was brought in. As for the food and water, they are drop shipped by a helicopter every week.”

“Who are these *people*?”

“People who want to divert the flow of migrants away from England.”

“What happens to the migrants who land here? They can’t keep them living like that forever.”

Tarras stared at Romy in silence.

“It’s not like they could even form a colony here,” she continued, undeterred. “I didn’t see a single woman when we crossed the camp, nor child for that matter.”

“The people who run this gig do not touch women or children. Before their fake ship approaches a dinghy, they scan the passengers. If it contains a single

woman or kid, they move along and leave them to be picked up by a real rescue vessel.”

“Or to drown...”

“Or to drown.”

The bubble of silence that filled the room after that dire discussion did not linger for more than a few seconds. It burst in the fracas of the front door being slammed open and the crashing of a metal shelf being toppled over. In response, four of the people in the conference room froze and three jumped into action. Tarras and Masrae stormed out of the room. Hijra immediately took up a position in the door frame of the lunchroom, facing out, arms crossed. After a brief hesitation, Alan stood up and found a place behind him. During the following two minutes, the whole place was saturated by a scream. A high-pitched, primal scream. Even Romy, who was accustomed to emergency room situations, was petrified by the shriek, which only yielded, from time to time, to brief, frantic gasps for air. Within seconds of its eruption, Preeti had covered her ears as Eve bowed her head and closed her eyes. Only Catina and her blind stare at the wall seemed immune to the dreadful vibration of the air.

The scream stopped abruptly after a door slammed. No other sound had disturbed it. Not a word had been spoken.

“This is not open to discussion,” said Tarras as soon as he and Masrae stepped back into the room. Tarras’ voice was as stern as ever, but his breathing had altered and Masrae’s chest was swelling and collapsing in rapid pulses under her burka. “Masrae and Hijra will show you to your rooms. Feel free to grab some food and water from the food store later on but return immediately to your respective rooms. Don’t even think about leaving the building and its immediate surroundings. There are over a hundred men held captive out there, mostly young men. You are the first women they’ve seen in weeks, if not months. I don’t have to draw you a picture, do I? We’ll get together at eight in the morning in the lunchroom to continue your orientation.”

The unwilling guests in the wooden house only exchanged a few practical considerations while hauling food and water up the stairs and getting settled in their rooms. Constant monitoring by Masrae et Hijra discouraged them from addressing the million and one questions boring through their minds. Back in the room, Preeti devoured in silence the two bags of chips and the slab of beef jerky that she had picked from the food store, despite the availability of healthier alternatives. Romy did not try to talk to her. She sensed the girl’s suspicion toward her, and everyone and everything around. Preeti was in survival mode. As soon as they had finished making the beds with the sheets and covers left on their thin but clean mattresses, Preeti only took off her shoes before lying down on hers, facing the wall.

Even though the house and its surroundings were silent, Romy tossed and turned without end. More out of frustration than need, she slipped out of the room and headed for the bathroom by the meager moonlight seeping through the small window at the end of the corridor. As she tiptoed past the unassigned bedrooms, she overheard muffled voices in the one facing the staircase.

"I'm glad you accepted to join me for this lot, Masrae. The older one and the battered girl shouldn't be too much of a problem, but the Indian girl is a free spirit. She might respond to you best."

"How about Romy? You haven't told me why you brought her along, Tarras. She is strong. She won't be easy to maneuver either. Or do you think she might... respond best to you?"

"Don't be a fool, Masrae! Romy is strong, yes, but she is first and foremost a good nurse and you know how badly we need medical support here. She was already involved, and I have leverage over her. She won't cause any trouble."

Tarras' statement was followed by a ruffling sound that sent Romy rushing back to her room. If the exchange she had overheard had all the trimmings of a bad omen, she nevertheless fell asleep within a couple of minutes of lying down. At least, she knew why *she* was there.

## Chapter 25

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Before Tarras had even mentioned sleeping arrangements, Eve had spoken to him about her desire to take Catina under her wing during their stay on the island. Glad to unload the care of the catatonic girl to someone else, Tarras had assigned them the same bedroom.

On the first evening, when Eve went to bed, Catina was already asleep, entirely buried under the covers. The foul smell in the room was so thick that Eve had to crack the window open to let some chilled air in. Despite all the tumbleweeds of thoughts rolling through her mind, she fell asleep in minutes. She was awakened in the morning by ruffling sounds. Catina was getting dressed, very slowly, stiff as a robot. Eve got up and put her hand on the young woman's arm.

"Wait, sweetie," she said. "You need a shower first. I'll help you."

Catina looked away but did not oppose any resistance when Eve undressed her, wrapped her in a towel, and escorted her to the bathroom. She did not react when Eve lathered her back and scrubbed her from the neck down to the heels, not even when the soapy washcloth rubbed the area between her butt cheeks. It was Eve who, when she rotated Catina's shoulders to have her turn around, reacted with a start. The sight of the girl's body, which she saw for the first time from the front, shocked her. It was not so much the scrawniness of the figure or the yellow patches marbling her skin. She had expected old bruises and other signs of abuse. What broke her heart was the sight of an old body on a woman who could not have been more than thirty-five. One of the deflated, saggy breasts bore two small, round craters probably resulting from old cigarette burns. The flabby stomach was barred by a rough C-section scar and the pubic hair was graying even though the woman's hair was pitch black. Under the vigorous rub of the washcloth, Catina instinctively pushed her pelvis into Eve's hand, as if to force an even harsher cleansing. Surprised, Eve swiftly moved the cloth to her thigh. Only when she dried the girl's shoulders with a towel did their eyes cross briefly. Catina's reflected some confusion, as if she did not understand why Eve was treating her with such care—or what she might be preparing her for.

Romy stepped out of her bedroom as Eve came out of the bathroom, arms wrapped around Catina's shoulders.

"Can I have a word with you?" she said.

"Of course," replied Eve and ushered Catina back to their room.

"Thanks for doing that," said Romy as Eve walked back to her. "I noticed the smell last night at dinner. I was planning to give Catina a shower today."

"Do you know her?" asked Eve.

"No. I just took care of her as a nurse a couple of times at Tarras' house. I've no idea where she comes from, or what her story might be. I found her on a bed

there, immobilized by a paralytic drug. I'm not even sure that Tarras wasn't the one who beat her to a pulp."

"Did she ever speak to you?"

"Not a word. I don't know if she refuses to talk or if the blows to her head damaged her sanity."

"I'll try to get through to her. Maybe with a little patience... Any advice?"

"You're probably more qualified than I am for this. Medical care is no longer what she needs most. When I asked Tarras about you, he just said that you and Catina were two peas from the same pod. If that's true, your chances of unlocking Catina are greater than mine," said Romy with an empathic smile.

The unlocking did not happen that day. Catina went through the motions without a word. She remained in bed all morning. Eve had decided to give her space. She took advantage of the situation by washing the girl's clothes and drying them by a fire set up outside by Hijra to grill fish. When she went to ask Catina to come down and help prepare lunch in the kitchen, the girl complied like a well-behaved child and peeled a boatload of potatoes by herself. During lunch, she picked at her food without a single look at her tablemates. As soon as she was done helping with the dishwashing, she took a brief stroll around the shelves of the food store, grabbed a box of cookies and went back to the bedroom. By six o'clock, she was already buried under the sheets. Eve did not have the heart to drag her down for dinner. It was just as well, since the meal was marred by a heated argument between Romy and Masrae regarding the burka, and whether it was a woman's choice as an expression of her faith or an instrument for men to erase women in public spaces. Both were fierce debaters, passionate, and quick on their feet, but the exchange was a bit surrealist. It looked like Romy was firing her points into a blue speaker—the eyehole grid of Masrae's burqa—from which return fire was delivered with equal might. Eve was also troubled by the carnal grin on Tarras' face as he closely followed the match between the two women.

## Chapter 26

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“Who’s behind the fake rescue ship, this camp, the whole operation?”

Different types of cereals, canned milk, hot tea, white and whole wheat bread, butter and jams, and even sliced ham and scrambled eggs... If Tarras and his associates had hoped for a smooth start of the day by having Alan set up a nice breakfast table in the conference room, their strategy was blown to pieces by the question Eve fired at them as soon as she sat down.

“Who?” insisted Eve, as Tarras had ignored her question.

“Women,” mumbled Tarras while smothering a piece of bread with butter.

“Women?! You must be kidding me! It would be the first time in history that women set up a whole organization to deceive, deport, and trap people like cattle—”

“Not people. Men.”

“Okay, men, it doesn’t matter. I can’t imagine what kind of women could be that perverse.”

“A fairly new kind. The kind that’s prepared to engage in a dirty fight to protect their rights and conquer new ones, at any cost.”

“Mighty Amazons?” ironized Romy.

Tarras ignored the poke.

“They call themselves the Onomaris, in reference to an ancient Celtic female leader. They’re a small group of young women—a hundred at the most—but they are very well organized and, most importantly, very well-funded.”

“By whom?”

Tarras winced with annoyance to indicate that he would not answer the question.

“Well-funded enough to charter a ship?” pushed on Eve.

“They own the ship, just like they own the helicopter used to drop water and food here every week. If you dig a bit underneath the shell conglomerate to which this island is registered, you’ll find out that it belongs to their organization as well.”

“What do they plan to do with the men they’ve trapped here?”

Tarras nodded at Masrae to take over, before standing up and leaving the room.

“We don’t know what their plans for the migrants might be,” said Masrae. “They might not know it themselves.”

“Why do they go through so much trouble to bring them here, then?” asked Romy.

“The goal of the Onomaris is not to help, nor even exploit these migrants. It is to prevent them from reaching the coast of England.”

“Why? Are they white supremacists?”

“No. They were all born in the UK, but they come from various ethnic backgrounds. They do not hate migrants, and as Tarras suggested before, they do not stop women or children, just men.”

“They don’t like men?” said Preeti between two mouthfuls.

“They don’t *want* men from countries that they view as dominated by a strict patriarchal system to enter British society. They fear that they might import that way of life and threaten long-standing women’s rights. They look at them as Romans looked at barbarian invaders—”

“I think we’ll all agree that migrants are first and foremost victims, Masrae, but that doesn’t mean that the fears of the Onomaris are misguided,” cut in Romy, ruffled up by Masrae’s sardonic tone of voice. “There are countless neighborhoods across Western Europe that have been taken over by various communities of immigrants, legal or not. And it is a fact that life for women in many of these areas is not easy.”

“Life in these places is not easy for men either. Poverty is to blame, not men. You’re relaying extreme right-wing tactics, using the condition of women as a handle to pass your xenophobia under the pretense of caring.”

“Extreme right-wing?! Xenophobia?! Well done, Masrae, you just executed one of the favorite maneuvers of radical progressists: turning a simple observation that you couldn’t dismiss into a racial slur. Next time I have to work in the emergency care service of a hospital located in one of the neighborhoods we are discussing, I’ll invite you over. You’ll see men insulting or dismissing the nurses trying to attend to their wounds, or taking their wives—bent in half with pain—home because no female physician is available to attend to them—”

“You think you’re speaking for all women, but you’re forgetting that these women have chosen that way of life, a way of life that meets their beliefs and their culture.”

“I’m sure that some made that choice. From what I’ve seen, you’re most certainly one of them, but what percentage of the women hidden from the world by an outfit like yours have truly chosen to be invisible?”

“We are only invisible to your world. We’re perfectly alive in ours.”

Nearing her boiling point, Romy stared at Masrae’s hands, clasped on the table. A trick passed on to her by a teacher in nursing school. Looking at an exasperating patient’s hands was supposed to stimulate the caregiver’s empathy, a little like taking a glance at a baby’s feet would trigger anyone’s desire to protect them. It had often worked for Romy. It did once more. The crispation of Masrae’s long, gracile fingers, hinted that she might not have been as firm on her position as she wanted to appear. Romy chose not to pursue the debate. Eve took advantage of the cease-fire to jump back in as Tarras returned to the table.

“Okay, so we know a bit more about the history of the island and its inhabitants, but the question remains: What are *we* doing here?” she asked, looking at Tarras.

“We’ll speak to you about this in a few days,” he replied and sat down. “In the meantime, I’m asking you to be patient and to contribute to life here. Are there any decent cooks among you?”

“I’ve done quite a bit of cooking at home since we often had guests over,” replied Eve.

“Good, so I’ll ask you to handle the cooking for our group. Lunch and dinner. People can figure out breakfast for themselves with what’s on the shelves.”

“I may need some help preparing the ingredients. Can Catina be my assistant?”

“Sure, among vegetables, she’ll be with family!”

Eve shrugged her shoulders. Tarras turned to Romy.

“As for you, your job is clear. You’ll be in charge of all things medical, from taking care of the sick and wounded—among our group, but also among the migrants—to keeping an inventory of the medications and surgical supplies. Make a list of what you need, and I’ll try to arrange for it to be included in the next drop shipment from the Onomaris.”

“Can I visit the migrants’ camp to evaluate people?”

“Absolutely not! None of you—women—is to leave the immediate surroundings of the house, except for Masrae of course. The migrants have elected an elders’ council to organize the community, enforce some living rules, and manage food distribution. I will speak to its members, and I will bring here, to the house—one by one—the guys that they feel are in need of medical attention.”

Romy nodded.

“What about me?” jumped in Preeti. “Don’t even think about turning me into the cleaning lady! I wasn’t dragged halfway across the world to end up being the maid again!!”

Tarras repressed a smile.

“I would not dare hand you a broom, you’d fly away on it!” he said.

Preeti frowned but did not reply. She sensed that Tarras was mocking her, but she had not understood his joke.

“You and Alan will distribute the food, here, in the store, to the elders’ council. We’ll show you how to work with them. You will also be in charge of setting up a large vegetable garden at the back of the house,” continued Tarras. “That means lots of clearing, weeding, and tilling by hand before we can plant seeds in spring. Alan and you are the youngest; your energy will be valuable there.”

“Great, I was promoted from maid to peasant!” said Preeti under her breath before pouting.

“I’ll give them a hand,” intervened Hijra. “Since I’ll be in charge of security around the house, I’ll have plenty of extra time for that.”

“Sounds good,” replied Tarras. “As for Masrae, she’ll handle security inside the house. Both of you will also help me with the logistics of the island and administrative stuff. Any questions?”

“We’ll play along for now, but we’ll look forward to your next talk, *in a few days*,” said Eve with a stilted attitude.

## Chapter 27

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Night had already fallen when Eve left the dinner table and headed upstairs. To avoid waking Catina up, she left the bedroom door ajar to undress by the light seeping from the corridor. Once she had laid down in bed, she was surprised not to hear the faintest breathing sound coming from Catina's side of the room. She tried to convince herself that her roommate was fast asleep under the covers—in vain. She ended up getting out of bed and, this time, turning on the ceiling light. Catina's bed was neatly made. She was not in it.

After throwing her clothes back on, Eve checked the bathroom and every bedroom on the third floor. All the rooms on the second floor were locked; Catina could not have gone into any of them. Eve rushed downstairs. She peeped into the dining area—everyone else was still sitting at the table—and looked in vain in all the aisles of the grocery store. At that point, Eve started panicking. Her first reaction would have been to alert Tarras and the others about Catina's disappearance, but she did not know how Tarras would react. He was a double-edged sword, with, as far as she could judge, one edge clearly sharper than the other. Going against her best judgment, Eve sneaked outside through the front door. Reluctant to move away from the building, she whispered "Catina... Catina!" The silence was dreadful, especially since she was standing only fifty yards away from the shipping container village. Eve moved away from the building just like she would confront her husband's spells, by throwing herself into harm's way to get it over with as quickly as possible.

As she slowly walked toward the ocean on the muddy wood pallets, by a minimal quarter moon glow, Eve kept whispering Catina's name, but with little hope at that point. She had recognized the type of situation in which she was: the kind without a better way, just some sort of outcome. The lights of the beehive cluster ahead were getting brighter. Fear was tightening her hold on her. One of her feet popped out as her shoe got stuck between the boards of a pallet. She kneeled to prop it loose and just as she slipped it back on, a fleshy mass smothered her mouth. It reeked of greasy, grilled fish.

"Shhh! Don't scream, don't make a sound; I just need to talk to you. I won't harm you," whispered a voice into her ear. The words were spoken in English, with a strong accent.

Petrified, Eve could feel the warmth of her assailant's body against her back.

"I'll let you go now," he continued, "but if you call for help, then other people like me will rush here and they might not be as nice as me, understand?"

Eve shook her head into the hand, which slowly released its hold. She remained still as a slim shadow slid in front of her.

"There's a girl from... you people, who walked into our camp. A weird one, she doesn't talk. Luckily, my box is one of the first ones on this side and I was able to drag her into it before anyone else could see her. I tied her up to a hook and gagged her—"

"What did you do to her?!" reacted Eve, raising her voice.

"Shhh! I did that to protect her! Do you know what would happen to a woman who walked into a bunch of young men who hadn't seen one in months?!"

"Just because they are migrants doesn't mean they are beasts!"

"Who are you, lady? Another NGO do-gooder? Of course, we're not beasts. We're just a group of people like any other, with its good guys and its bad guys. Do you want to let her figure out on her own which is which?"

"And you would be..."

"The guy who's trying to send that girl back where she came from while we still can. Look at me! Do you think I'll be able to hold the others back if they see her?"

Eve did not reply. All she knew about the shadow in front of her was that it was tall, slender, and that its face did not pick up any of the moon's glimmer.

"What do you propose?" she asked.

"What do *you* propose?! I just want the girl out of my box and into a safe place. She is yours; you tell me."

"Can you bring her back here?"

"I'll try, as long as she doesn't scream..."

"She won't."

"Okay, stay right here."

It never crossed Eve's mind that the shadow might come back with Catina chased by a herd of testosterone-crazed guys. Danger was an old acquaintance of hers, but she was only familiar with its white-collar incarnation. It only took a few minutes, during which she had already assumed Catina's safe recovery and prepared an explanation to give Tarras in the event he caught them on their way back to the bedroom. When the shadow returned, it dragged behind him another dark shape, this one with a faint glow for a face. Eve took Catina into her arms for a tight hug.

"Go back! Go back now!" urged the male voice. "I heard someone say that they smelled a woman's perfume."

As Eve dragged Catina back toward the house, she swung her head back and asked "What's your name? Where are you from?"

"Kofi. Ghana."

"Thank you, Kofi. I won't forget you."

"Why wouldn't you? Everyone else already has," replied the shadow as it melted into the darkness.

Eve was so eager to drag Catina back to safety that she did not react to the young man's words. They would just come back to haunt her later that night and for years thereafter.

Catina followed Eve back without any resistance. They made it up the stairs just as chairs in the dining area rattled. Once in their bedroom, Eve undressed her protégée and put her to bed. Only then did she notice the faint scent of expensive perfume that was oozing from her. Eve could not fathom where Catina might have found that perfume—in Masrae's things maybe?—nor what had pushed her to sneak out of the house to walk into a shantytown packed with sex-starved men. She just sensed that the girl would do it again—whatever her motives were—and that she could not be left alone for as long as they were within a stone's throw of the slum.

## Chapter 28

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“She did *what?! You did what?!*”

The echo of Tarras’ deep bass voice in the storage room, where she had found him inspecting the shelves, instantly made Eve regret her decision to speak to him.

“Well... It’s done now and everything is fine. I just need your help figuring out how to confine her to the building, for the time being. The others will—”

“She needs to go! I thought she might snap out of whatever messed-up state she’s in, but it’s not happening. She needs psychiatric help. This is not a safe place for a nymphomaniac loony! She could trigger a riot!”

“We don’t know for a fact that she is mentally deranged! She just doesn’t talk. She may be in shock. Where did you find her?” said Eve, resisting her first instinct to ask: *What did you do to her?*

“We found her at a tea party at the Duchess of Wales’,” replied Tarras with a sardonic grin. “What do you think?! She has street curb stamped all over her. Hijra and I saw her lying on the sidewalk as we crossed a rough neighborhood in London one night. She was unconscious and covered with bruises and blood. When we realized that she was still breathing, we threw her in the van and took her back to my house.”

“For what purpose?”

“She no longer belongs to some violent pimp or vicious customer. Isn’t that enough of a purpose for you?!”

Tarras turned around and started walking away.

“What do we do, then?” asked Eve.

“Talk to Masrae. It’s more her department,” said Tarras and walked away.

“We’ll just put her back on Nimbex.”

Masrae, who was still sitting at the dining table, had listened to Eve’s account and replied without even turning her head.

“I heard Romy say that it was a very potent drug!” reacted Eve. “It surely can’t be used for days at a time.”

“Monitoring her 24/7 is not an option—we all have things to do here. It’s either Nimbex, or we’ll let her have her little slum party with the migrants and *que sera sera.*”

“Whenever I’m not around her, I’ll lock her up in our bedroom. She is not the type to become hysterical if left alone. The room is on the third floor; she won’t be able to sneak out of the window.”

Masrae shrugged her shoulders, closed the notebook, and stood up.

“Sneak out, no, but what about throwing herself out of it?”

“That’s a chance I’m willing to take. Putting her back on Nimbex would simply be kicking the can down the road. If we keep her conscious, we may have a chance to get through to her and help her.”

“Go ahead and try. Your responsibility.”

Masrae's last statement caused Eve to toss and turn for hours that night. Handed straight from the hands of a domineering father to the fists of a controlling husband, she had never been exposed to real responsibilities. What if she had made the wrong call regarding the best way to care for Catina? Masrae might have been hard and cold as steel, but she clearly had more experience with edgy situations. Her approach may just have been the wiser option in the short term. What if Catina really was mad and ended up throwing herself out of the window? Eve finally found some peace in the thought that she would do her best, considering the circumstances. She would help Catina with her morning toilet, would take her along to the breakfast table, and lock her back into the bedroom until she—or Catina herself—figured out something better.

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Eve climbed the stairs apprehensively. During the day, she had checked on Catina on several occasions, taking advantage of two of them to take her to the bathroom. The girl was unresponsive as ever, staring straight ahead whether she lay down or walked down the corridor. Eve was relieved that she had not attempted to hurt herself despite being locked up, but night had just fallen on the island, and with it a gloomy vibe. As she was about to insert the key into her bedroom lock, she heard whispering voices coming from inside the room. After checking that the corridor was clear, she lay down the plate of food that she had brought up and pushed her ear against the door.

"Did you spend all day in this room? Did you eat something?"

"Yes, the woman takes care of me."

"The woman who was looking for you last night?"

"Yes. She is not a bad person."

"You mean she is nice to you?"

"Yes, I think..."

"But where did you come from and why did you come here?"

"I came from a bad place. Like you, I think..."

"I don't come from a bad place, just a very poor place, but it is full of good people."

"Not me. I come from a bad place full of bad people."

"Did some of these people come with you here?"

"No. I don't know the people who brought me here. They are weird. I don't know what they want, but they did not do anything bad to me."

"They are not the ones who sent you to the shanty last night?"

"No."

"Then, why did you go there?"

"My dad always said that everyone must do their part, every single day, and that's the only thing I'm useful for."

“By *that*, you mean...”

“Emptying bollocks.”

A long silence ensued. Eve had recognized one of the voices on the other side of the door. The other voice, frail and a bit raspy, had to be Catina’s. Worried by the turn taken by the conversation, she shoved the key into the lock, rushed in, and pulled the door closed behind her. Catina and Kofi’s faces swung toward her. Catina lay on the bed; Kofi sat next to her, but he instinctively stood up once the initial surprise had worn off. He was a thin man in his late twenties or early thirties, not very tall, with a dark complexion. Despite the cold weather outside, he only wore two T-shirts, one on top of the other, and jeans ripped in two places—not as a fashion statement. His slightly droopy eyes and thin mustache softened the emaciated look of his face.

“What are you doing here?! You have no business with her!” said Eve, brushing off an instinctive feeling of compassion for him.

“What are you afraid of? If I was the kind of a man looking for business with her, it would have been much easier for me last night!” retorted Kofi.

“How did you get in?”

“Through the window. I saw her,” he said pointing to Catina, “staring out of the open window. She looked strange, like someone about to do something stupid, so I climbed up the wall and pushed her back in.”

“And just like that she started speaking with you?”

“Not *just like that*. I sat with her and talked to her. Since she wasn’t responding, I quickly ran out of things to say, so I started telling her an old tale from Ghana, my country. She didn’t seem to care at all and kept staring at the ceiling, so I stopped. I was about to leave—I didn’t want to get caught here—when she said “So, did the spider die?” So, I finished my story for her, and we started chatting, just a few minutes before you came in.”

Eve turned to Catina.

“Catina, why did you not speak to me? You knew then that I was trying to help you.”

“Because you were with *the others*,” responded Catina without looking at Eve. “I don’t know what they want from me. People have been nice to me before, only to trick me better.”

“I see... Well, if it is of any comfort to you, they took me away as well and I have no idea why.”

“Really?” Catina sat on the bed and, this time, stared at Eve. “Aren’t we there for the men in the shanty?”

“No! Well... I certainly hope not! I’d kill myself before—”

“I don’t think that’s it,” intervened Kofi. “I overheard two of our elders talk. They were pissed that women had been brought onto the island. According to them, it was never supposed to be the case, and it was a big threat to the handling of the workers.”

"How so?" asked Eve.

"The workers have not seen a woman in a long time, some for more than a year. This building is off limits to us, but if a group of the men decided to take over the house, and the women with it, who could stop them? There's no police here, just a system."

"What kind of system?"

"Do you know how we got here?"

"I think so; it was explained to us. Fake rescue boats pretending to take you to the English shores and dumping you here instead?"

"Yes."

"But what then? Are they planning to take you back to Africa or somewhere else?"

"I don't know. I think that this is the final stop."

"You are not brought here to be killed, are you?" asked Eve with a skeptical tone of voice that she immediately regretted.

"Not directly, but we will never leave the island, and we will be buried here, some of us alive."

"What do you mean? I don't get it. You referred to yourselves as *workers* earlier. What kind of work do you do?"

Kofi had a bitter smile and stared at Eve for a long moment before replying.

"I'll leave now. I don't want to get caught here. They don't play with that. Okay if I come back tomorrow?"

"Yes!" jumped in Catina.

Surprised, Eve looked at her. She had not expressed any hint of joy, but her eyes, pointed at Kofi, seemed alive for the first time.

"That's fine," replied Eve. "Just make sure that no one sees you. You did not answer my question about your job, though..."

"I couldn't give you an answer that you could believe."

## Chapter 29

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A blend of screaming, rattling, and slamming extracted Romy from a heavy sleep that she had struggled to reach for over two hours. It came from the second floor. She jumped out of bed and shoved her feet into her sneakers before rushing down the stairs. On the first landing, Tarras, bare-foot, bare-chested, bare... everything, had clamped the neck of a man to the wall with one hand, high enough for the guy's toes to float two inches above the floor.

"Let him go!" cried Romy.

Tarras did not react. He stared without a word at his victim, a skinny middle-aged man with a copper complexion, whose eyes were already bulging. Romy rushed to Tarras and latched onto his forearm with both hands, pulling down with all her weight. The arm did not flinch.

"That's fine, Tarras. I'll go fetch the elders. You know he'll pay anyway."

Masrae's voice, surreally calm amidst the commotion, melted Tarras' biceps. He let the man drop to the wooden floor while Masrae came down the stairs.

"What happened?" said Romy, as she attended to the victim, who was curled up on the floor, wheezing heavily.

Tarras towered over the man in silence until Masrae came back with four middle-aged men with African and Middle Eastern facial features. They stared at Tarras' nudity with a blend of fear and bewilderment.

"I caught that son of a bitch trying to sneak into the surgical room!" said Tarras to them. "He was probably trying to steal the drugs and medical supplies. He is an outcast; he was kicked out of the group a month ago for choking one of the older workers to death and stealing his belongings. He shouldn't have come back. You know what to do..."

The four men looked at the thief as one. In response, he crawled into Tarras' room and locked the door behind him. Tarras kicked the door open and motioned the elders to go in. They dragged the kicking thief out of the room and took him down the stairs and out of the house. Alerted by the thief's screams, Eve and Preeti had come halfway down the flight of stairs leading to the second floor.

"This man will be cast out again and left to die?!" said Romy.

Before heading back into his room, Tarras took a long look at Romy. An odd stare.

This time, despite the commotion, Romy went back to sleep right away. She did, however, wake up with the sweats less than an hour later. The good sweats. The kind that will make one feel cozily warm in a freezing, humid room such as the one she slept in. The kind radiating from a central heating system whose furnace is nestled in an alcove by the junction of the thighs.

The moment her consciousness had receded, Romy's mind had been swept up by a high-impact, penetrating dream in which she danced a passionate tango

with Tarras. A nude, strapping Tarras whose towering might sent her twirling against warm thighs, dipping onto flexed arms, and crashing against a cushioned chest. Now awake but still dazed by the residues from that dream, Romy started reliving the earlier drama from a new angle. In the heat of the moment, she had only reacted to the violence of the situation, but her psyche had since been slowly infiltrated by visions of Tarras' body. That tall, wide, savage body, with the abs, pecs, and biceps of a centaur, all raised against the enemy he pinned to the wall. While tending to her nursing duties, Romy had seen many a body, from the most neglected to the most alluring, but none had ever triggered in her a physiological response... Last and far from least, another high-impact sight that kept her simmering came from the lower angle she had been at when she had squatted to help the thief on the floor. There, just two inches from her temple, pointed a turgescient protuberance that had clearly decided to take part in the fight and flex its power like a real muscle. In hindsight, Romy was troubled by the question of whether that appendage was in full action mode, in which case it would have delighted the greediest of women, or just at rest, in which case she would have been well advised to run away really fast before it ever woke up!

Tossing and turning over and over while pondering the delicate matter slowly morphed Romy's "gentle heat" into a full-blown fever. The next day, she did not remember getting out of bed, tiptoeing down the stairs, and slowly turning the handle of Tarras' bedroom door. She did, however, remember very clearly being stopped from pushing the wood panel by a whisper.

"Did you know that your T-shirt is see-through when you stand against the light?"

The whisper was soft, but the burka from which it had seeped, just a few feet down the corridor, added a poisonous tinge to it. Romy let go of the handle and headed back to the staircase.

"Just one more thing..." said Masrae.

Romy stopped but did not turn around.

"Do you really think that a man used to driving a Maserati on the Autobahn could enjoy a little ride in a bumper car?" continued Masrae.

Romy returned to her room without a word, slipped back into her bed, and fell asleep right away. The shame would be for the next morning. So would the fear of now being at odds with a lethal creature.

## Chapter 30

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On the evening following Kofi's first visit, Catina answered Eve's questions. Her replies were curt and cold, but candid. Eve sensed that her roommate still had mixed feelings about her, but at least, she no longer refused to communicate. Catina's story was all too common. A runaway at fourteen, she had landed in the net of a sweet talker. A Prince Charming who had, in a few weeks, turned her from a princess bound for the city lights to a hooker on a gloomy sidewalk. She had never known freedom. She had never sought freedom. Eve realized that Catina, although not mentally deficient, was unable to think outside the cage that men had carved for her. She was programmed to perform a function, just like a lawn mowing robot, and if stopped from performing that task, she would just bounce on the obstacle until one of the jerks nudged her aside and allow her to resume her course.

"Is that why you went to the shanty last night?" asked Eve, hoping for a logical answer.

"Yes. I was needed there."

"Needed for what?"

"To empty bollocks. That's my job."

*Again, that horrible expression, thought Eve, must be the only command her brain has recorded.*

"But you didn't have to! You no longer have to do that now. You could have been hurt! Why in the world would you destroy yourself that way?"

"You should know..."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard that for many years you lived with a man who beat the crap out of you."

Taken aback by Catina's argument, Eve took a deep breath before replying.

"My husband was my first man. I never spoke about his bouts of anger to anyone, so I had convinced myself that dealing with these was part of being a wife. He was a very nice partner the rest of the time, and he gave me a comfortable life."

"Many of the men I deal with are nice too and they make me feel comfortable for a while."

"But what about all the others? The ones who are not nice?"

"Well, it's a tougher part of the job, like scrubbing toilets for a cleaning lady. At the end of the day, I go home with my work done, good and bad, just like her. Can I go to work now?"

"No! Not now, not tomorrow, not ever!" snapped Eve. She stepped out of the room and came back with the tray of food. She shoved it into Catina's arms. "Now you eat, then bathroom, and then sleep!" she said before locking the door and slipping the key into her pants pocket.

When she lay down on her bed later on, Eve did so with a cocktail of confusion, anger, and tenderness swooshing inside her skull. For the first time, she had experienced a vague sense of motherhood, and that confused her the most.

A tapping noise dragged Eve out of sleep shortly after she had finally drifted into it. Drowsy, she got up, turned on the night lamp by her bed, and walked to the window from which the sound had originated. All she could see in the windowpane was her reflection. The instant she lifted the window to crack it open, two sets of black fingers grabbed its bottom edge to push it open all the way and a hooded man crawled through the opening before dropping to the ground. Eve jumped back and was about to scream for help when the man pushed his hood back.

“Phew! It was time. The ledge is so narrow. I was about to let go and drop back down!”

“Kofi...?! Are you crazy?! You scared me to death! And what gives you the right to barge into a woman’s room like that, in the middle of the night?!”

“I’m sorry, Mam, but I knocked, and you opened. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Kofi’s poised, whispering voice, put Eve’s fears to rest, but not her anger. She checked herself to make sure that her female perks did not show through her T-shirt and took a peek at Catina—fast asleep—before replying.

“We had agreed that you’d come back tomorrow,” she said. “Why are you here at this hour?”

“I changed my mind about talking to you about our work.”

“Why?”

“Because none of us can leave this island, but you, a white woman, might. If you see what’s going on here, maybe you’ll speak about it when you return to the world, and maybe they’ll come for us.”

“Couldn’t this have waited for tomorrow?”

“If I’m going to take you to our worksite, it can only be at night, and tomorrow, you could be gone.”

“You work in the middle of the night?”

“We work anytime we want; there are no rules. Some of us go there during the day; others prefer to work at night.”

“What if we get caught?”

“There are no foremen, no guards. We handle our own policing.”

“Then, why couldn’t we go during the day?”

“For the same reason we didn’t let her walk into the campsite last night,” replied Kofi, pointing his chin to Catina.

“I see...,” said Eve. “I’m sorry, but I won’t go with you. These past weeks, too many disturbing events have turned my life upside down. I’m concerned enough about what may happen to me here as it is. My nerves are a mess. I just couldn’t take any more risks.”

“Even if you might be the only chance for hundreds of migrants trapped on this island till they die?”

“I’m sorry, Kofi, but I’m not a heroine, and I am Catina’s only chance too,” argued Eve, looking down at her roommate to dodge Kofi’s eyes.

The silence filled the room. Defeated, Kofi could not find the resolve to leave. Ashamed, Eve could not find the resolve to ask him to leave. Only after a long moment under that thick, muted pressure, did she seek a way out.

“Maybe Romy would go...”

“Who’s Romy?” asked Kofi.

“She is a nurse who came with us. She is strong. She is used to tough situations. Maybe I could ask her to go with you.”

“And she won’t tell on me to your leader, the tall guy who brought you here?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Go then...” said Kofi after a brief hesitation.

Eve managed to wake Romy up and lead her into the corridor without alerting Preeti, who was snoring like an old Persian cat. The tough part was explaining the situation to her. Romy was not as naïve as Eve. Her biggest concern was that Kofi might be up to something underhand, such as kidnapping a woman to serve as a bargaining chip to negotiate his transfer to England. “Men with nothing to lose always worry me...,” said Romy as Eve tried to convince her to get involved. It was not any of Eve’s arguments that won Romy over; it was her own inability to resist the prospect of putting herself on the line to rescue hundreds of souls in one fell swoop. She went back into her room to get dressed, slipped into her pocket a small foldable knife that she had pinched from the kitchen, and walked to Eve’s bedroom. Once there, she just scanned Kofi from head to toe before ordering “Let’s go down the stairs. Quietly.”

## Chapter 31

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Romy shadowed Kofi all the way to the shanty, which they skirted without a word, before following the shore on a narrow, muddy track. Despite the poor lighting produced by bare bulbs dangling from a wire every thirty yards or so, Kofi walked fast. On several occasions, Romy had to grab the back of his t-shirt to slow him down. Her sneakers were soaked with water and kept slipping in the mud. The freezing rain and increasing distance from the camp further aggravated her worry. After half a mile or so, the track made a sharp turn inland and uphill, before becoming rocky. This time, Kofi slowed down on his own. His breathing was turning to loud wheezing.

“Are you okay?” asked the nurse in Romy.

“Yes,” replied Kofi.

“Would you like to stop for a moment?”

Kofi kept going without a word.

Near the top of the hill, several light bulbs were out. Kofi grabbed Romy’s hand and led her through the last hundred feet. When he suddenly stopped, he let go of her hand and stepped aside. The scenery displayed in front of Romy’s eyes blew away the cold, the rain, the mud, the worry. It threw her into a state of confusion as she tried to figure out whether she was facing a huge meteorite dropped from heaven or a shard risen from hell.

A hundred yards in front of them rose a tall, triangular hill made of solid rock, dark and spiky. The strings of dangling lights that meandered from its base to its top made it look like a gigantic Christmas tree. Its ornaments consisted of clusters of circular holes, three to four feet tall at most, cut into the rock, from most of which seeped a festive yellow glow. High-pitched, metallic sounds that came from the inside of the structure only added to the eerie and yet festive atmosphere.

“Here...” said Kofi and shoved a small pair of binoculars into Romy’s hand.

Romy pointed the lenses at the Christmas tree and enjoyed the light show for a few seconds, until she noticed that the light oozing from some of the round holes was flickering. She increased the magnification of the binoculars to focus on the cluster in which most of the flickering took place. The scene instantly reminded her of the depiction of hell in a haunting painting by a Dutch painter whose name she had forgotten. What caused the flickering was the brief obstruction of the entrance of the holes by human bodies contorting to crawl in or out of them. Those spat out by the mountain sat on the ground for a minute or so before going back into the same, or another hole. Once swallowed by the rock, their headlamps would create dancing lights inside the hill. Romy watched the human ant farm for several minutes before lowering the binoculars and shaking her head.

“What in the world is going on there?!” she asked Kofi, without turning around. “Why are these people going inside the holes?”

“It’s a rat-hole mine,” replied Kofi.

“A mine?!”

“Yes, workers use pickaxes and digging bars, then hammers and chisels, to carve out horizontal burrows in the rock, just wide enough to enable them to crawl into them on their bellies.”

“What are they looking for?”

“Tiny gold veins that are usually found ten to thirty feet deep into the rock.”

“But it must be very dangerous!”

“On most days, it’s okay. You just breathe a lot of dust when hammering at the rock deep inside the tunnel, and you have to come out often for clean air. The real danger comes from small earthquakes that shake the island once or twice a week. If a burrow goes through a softer layer of rock, it collapses and crushes or traps the worker inside.”

“What do you do then?”

“Nothing. If we dug the hole back to try to get the man out, by the time we got to him, he would have choked to death anyway.”

“And there are no power tools here? No heavy equipment?”

“Just hand tools.”

“How about medical help if someone managed to get out and is hurt?”

“All there is for us here is food, shelter, some clothes, and basic tools. No phone nor radio signal, no link to the world. We lose two or three guys every week, to illness and accidents, and sometimes, suicides. It’s good that most of us are young and strong; otherwise, it’d be much worse.”

“Who is exploiting you in this way? The girls who trapped you here? The guy who brought our group here?”

“No one is exploiting us. The girls from the fake boat just dumped us here. I suppose that they are the ones who had our camp set up and who drop food and clothes from a cargo helicopter every week.”

“Then... what about the mine?”

“I wasn’t there when work started, but I was told that the malin helped the first groups of migrants set it up.”

“The malin?”

“That’s what we call the tall man who brought you here—one of our elders from Morrocco named him that way. He said that in French, *malin* is just another word for the devil. He and his friends, the ghost and the ugly woman, come here from time to time. We all fear them. They are heavily armed and there’s something spooky about them. They work with the elders’ committee to make sure that the food and clothes are received, set up in the store, and distributed properly. I think that they communicate with the people who trapped us here, because if we need more of something—say tools or food—we tell them, and these supplies will be found in the next drop shipment.”

“What if some of the workers break into the store and steal the best foods?”

“They’ll die.”

“Excuse me?!”

“There’s nowhere for a thief to run here. Anyone who steals someone else’s gold, food, or clothes will be banned from the group. On this small island and cut off from our food reserves, he’ll die within days.”

“That’s very harsh!”

“Without that kind of discipline, the group could not function, and we’d end up killing each other. We have to live with each other and for each other.”

“You spoke about people’s gold. Do the workers get to keep the gold they find?”

“We all mine for ourselves, except for those who are injured or sick. To help these, each one of us contributes what he can.”

“And no one from the outside ever tried to come to the island and mine the gold?”

“It wouldn’t be worth it. From what I understand, a survey company sent by the owner of this island detected these gold veins about twenty years ago. They were too few and too small to justify any kind of investment. The island was not inhabited before they came. It remained that way until it was sold to the girls. Now, we’re here. We can’t leave the island, but we are free to mine it.”

“What use is your gold if you can’t take it out of—”

A loud siren cut Romy off. It came from the direction of the mine.

“Quick!” said Kofi and latched onto Romy’s hand. “We need to go back!” They ran back downhill. Shortly before hitting the shoreline, they heard clamoring coming their way. Kofi dragged Romy twenty feet off the trail and forced her to squat. Three headlamps floating on shadows rushed by them, heading uphill. Once the lights had disappeared, Kofi led Romy back to the trail and rushed her all the way back to the door of the house.

“What was that siren for?” asked Romy.

“Someone hit a new gold vein,” replied Kofi, struggling to catch his breath. Most guys from the camp will head there to start digging their own holes in the same area. I need to go, too!”

“Thank you for showing me what your life is here, Kofi is it? I don’t know how I might be able to help you guys, but I give you my word that I’ll try.”

## Chapter 32

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Romy was so wound up about what she had discovered during her trip to the mine with Kofi that she did not even think twice about knocking at the door of Tarras’ bedroom, despite the late hour. He invited her in with a thunderous “Yes!” The room was larger than the others, but it did not contain a bed, just an army cot shoved in a corner. Tarras sat behind a long, wide wood board propped up on trestles, on which were scattered a few books, binders, notebooks, and manilla folders. Even though electrical light was provided to all the rooms in the building

by a large wind turbine in the backyard, he used two thick candles to illuminate his desk. The flickering flames played tricks on his face, turning it into a fluid, ever-changing landscape. He wrote in a notebook, impassive, waiting for her to speak.

"I went to the mine," said Romy—she had never been gifted with introductions.

"And..." replied Tarras.

"And I cannot figure out who, or rather *what* you are."

"If you came here for a psychoanalysis, you knocked at the wrong door. I have work to do. Make your point or get out."

"Why did you make it possible for the migrants to mine and keep gold if they can't leave this island?"

"That has the merit of being clear. I will speak about this to all of you tomorrow."

"Could you tell me now? If I am to challenge or upset you, I'd rather do it in private."

Tarras slowly laid his pen down and looked up.

"Sit down," he ordered and pointed to the cot.

Romy complied, but when she realized that Tarras would be looking down at her, she stood back up.

"I'd rather stand," she said.

"A better position to challenge or upset me?" commented Tarras with a sneer.

"Yes."

"That's fine. Back to our business. I've already explained to you how the migrants get here."

"The Onomaris' boats."

Tarras nodded.

"The Onomaris are very well organized up to that point, but they don't know what to do with the migrants once they've dumped them on the island. Since they are not totally devoid of humanity, they provide food and minimal shelter for them."

"But they can't seriously keep piling them on here forever! Or just count on them dying in droves because of the bad living conditions and lack of medical care."

"They've been at it for over a year, and they have been unable to come up with a longer-term solution for the migrants. Two factions within the group are clashing on the subject. One side supports shipping the migrants to a remote location on the coast of Africa, but that creates obvious problems. Once returned to civilization, the migrants will tell their story, and humanitarian organizations will rush to have the Onomaris' operations shut down and their leaders brought to justice. In addition, most of the young men sent back will only have one thing in mind, trying their luck again in the U.K., which will negate the Onomaris' actions."

“What do the other faction want?”

“Attrition. That would be the safest way for them to secure their operations in the long-term and make them more *effective*.”

“Letting the migrants die here of natural causes would be the surest way to ensure that they’d never try to cross the channel again.”

“Natural causes, or not so natural... Overpopulation of the island as time went by would cause instability and would drive men to fight each other for resources.”

“How did you find out about this situation?”

“One of Masrae’s girlfriends tried to convince her to join the Onomaris.”

“Would she be the kind of person who would condone tricking and trapping migrants?”

“Masrae is a globe-trotting storm. Only she knows what she condones or hates. She might swell the sails of a ship to get it to safety faster, or she might tear them up to keep the ship on the path of the next hurricane. Like a storm, she is sheer power, not good nor bad, just a powerful life force.”

“I’m starting to think that this description would suit you just as well.”

Tarras shrugged his shoulders with contempt. Romy moved on quickly for fear of losing him.

“So, you, Masrae, and Hijra came here to see firsthand what was going on?”

“Masrae had instantly turned down the offer, but she wanted to check the situation here—”

“She came alone?”

“The first time, yes.”

“But I keep hearing that some of the migrants would jump the first woman they see!”

Tarras burst out laughing.

“Jumping on Masrae?! Might as well play hopscotch on a minefield! I’m sure one or two tried, I doubt that they’ll ever try again... with any woman!”

“How did you come around?”

“When Masrae realized how dire the situation here was, she asked Hijra and me to come for a visit.”

“Are the three of you a team of some sort?”

“We are not a team. Each of us has their own purpose in life. We just come together from time to time to take action when a need is identified.”

“Take action, as in killing in cold blood, kidnapping defenseless women, or sending migrants into rat holes?”

Tarras stared at Romy for a long moment before replying.

“Killing cold-blooded people who hurt others over and over, taking away women who are defenseless against them, giving migrants a chance to turn a rat life into a hope... When the need arises, yes.”

“Two wrongs making a right...”

"It's not about right or wrong. I know that you're a nurse, so I won't question your caring skills, but what did you ever do against vicious men? What did you ever do to help abused women or desperate migrants?"

Romy took the hit in silence.

"We may not be *good* men and women, but, at least, doing nothing has never been an option for us," continued Tarras.

"But look at the mess around you! You have on this island men surviving in a slum—some of whom die every week— and women who you snatched from their lives and wonder what you'll do with them or *to them* in this dreadful place."

"The real roots of that mess are poverty and violence; our goal is not to eradicate them. We just try to dampen their impact on specific people. The Onomaris fear that Western culture might be overrun by ancestral or religious traditions of domination of women by men is founded. Try to take a walk in a skirt, not a mini-skirt, just a business-style one, in some neighborhoods of London populated primarily by recent immigrants of Middle Eastern or North African origin. At best you'll get heckled. Chances are that you'll also be threatened for non-respect of some cultural or religious codes, not even to mention the possibility of direct violence."

"That does not excuse the way the Onomaris treat the migrants!"

"It doesn't, but when no one in power acts to solve a serious problem, it leaves the doors wide open to vigilante action."

"Instead of arranging for the migrants to slave in the gold mine, why couldn't you really help them, get them off this island and offer them a decent future? You seem to have major means, or don't you?"

"It's not about means. We are not angels whose job it is to right a wrong. Who's to say who's right or wrong? The Onomaris defend their territory from a perceived predator. Like every other animal in nature, they are uncompromising and unsettlingly violent when needed. Our job is not to judge them. We just looked for a way to mitigate the consequences of their actions without undoing them."

"But can't you feel the distress of these young men?!"

"Western societies have been slipping voluntarily into straightjackets woven with feelings and emotions. The world now belongs to those who don't feel so much and can still act. "

"Couldn't a more positive act be to charter a boat to take the migrants stuck here back home?"

"So they can die in droves trying to cross the channel again on dinghies and other boats of fortune? Where would the solution be in that, for anyone?"

"Where's the solution in your plan?"

"It's not a solution. It's just a way to help both the migrants, as well as the women that we brought here, to achieve a more positive outcome in the short term."

"How so?"

"I'll explain this to you and the rest of our group in the morning. Now, I need to get back to work. Good night."

Romy started heading for the door but turned around.

"Tarras?" she said.

"Yes?" he replied, looking at Romy with surprise. It was the first time she had called him by name.

"You said that you and your friends all had different purposes in life. What is yours?"

"To stay away from curious little girls," replied Tarras and dove back into his notebook."

## Chapter 33

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“Why would you need me to be there when you tell Eve that her husband is dead? Are you concerned that you might break her neck while trying to restrain her if she has a nervous breakdown?”

Tarras sneered at Romy.

“You love to flap your lips, don’t you, Romy? It’s not your best side, you know. Luckily for you, you’ve got other, more perky features that give you much better angles, especially against a bright light...”

Romy blushed, half from embarrassment, half from anger.

“Why would Eve have a fit?” continued Tarras. “She planned her husband’s death. A well-deserved death, I’ll say that in her defense, and a very smart hit execution. I don’t think that she’ll roll on the floor in desperation when we tell her.”

“Still, I spoke to her two days ago and when she mentioned her husband, I did not sense any hate in her voice.”

“I don’t think she hated him. She just needed him dead in order to survive. He would have killed her sooner or later, or turned her into a vegetable. She’s a smart lady; she knew that.”

“She could have left him.”

“She knew him better than both of us. He would probably never have let her go alive. Wherever she went, he would have found and killed her. Court records are full of men like him, who’d rather go to jail than let their spouse free herself from them.”

“Let’s say that she planned her husband’s accident, as you claim—”

“She did. She traded kills with another woman, so no one would suspect them in the death of their respective husbands.”

“Even if that’s the case, she might have ended up being glad that he didn’t die in the accident. Maybe she would have preferred to have him back. Maybe he would have changed after that near-death experience. Women are more complicated than men.”

“Oh please... A disfigured wife beater would suddenly stop being jealous of smooth skin rivals?!”

Finding herself short of a rebuke, Romy attacked on a different front.

“Will you tell her that you killed her husband?”

“What do you mean?” asked Tarras, suddenly stern.

“I was there when you did your little scorpion number on him.”

“Were you working in *that* hospital on *that* day?”

“No, I sneaked into the back of your van and shadowed you all day.”

The weather in Tarras’ eyes went from foggy to stormy to cloudy to sunny, all in a matter of three or four seconds.

“Bravo!” he exclaimed. “I knew you were probably one of a kind, but I bow to you. Trapping the trapper. Not too many people can claim having done that to me... and lived to tell the story!”

Romy’s resolve was shaken by the man’s sudden excitement—and candor. Some men are better never excited.

“I saw you placing the scorpion on the man’s head and tapping several times on it so it’d sting,” she said nevertheless.

“I didn’t tap several times. I tapped twice. I would not have tapped a third time. God decided at which tap the scorpion would sting. The first, the second... or the third.”

Romy realized how alien to her world these people were. Hijra, who found it perfectly honorable to knock out and kidnap a young girl. Masrae, who scared bad boys to death and carried the lifeless body of a young girl in her arms. Tarras, who played Death and then claimed God’s justice. So alien and yet so logical, somehow. She felt so far from Rufus’ world of reason, so far from her daughter’s world of need. These villains, whose enterprise she had agreed to join, were into action. Not action for the well-off, action for those in need who would never get help otherwise. She did not understand the cogs of their benevolence, but she could witness their results. Eve had not been beaten up since meeting them. Catina’s vagina had been virginal since her encounter with them. Preeti had not been submitted to any servile demands since she met them. Were Tarras, Masrae, and Hijra poster children for vigilante justice? Were they God’s envoys when he got pissed with the convoluted ways of his standard do-gooders? They were not angels, for sure, but they just got His job done. And Romy was now one of them, for better and for worse. She did not care as much about her inner angel. She liked more and more... getting the job done.

Eve did not react when Tarras announced that her husband had died *from his wounds* at the hospital.

“Was he buried properly?” she just asked.

“Yes,” answered Tarras. “His side of the family took care of everything.”

“And mine is probably looking for me.”

“Probably...”

“Is that all?”

Tarras nodded. Eve walked out of the room.

Romy could not tell whether her unresponsiveness to the news was her way of hiding grief or relief. Maybe neither. She might already have moved on to a new world; a world of her own, at last.

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“Don’t you miss your daughter?”

Romy cursed herself for not closing the door of the examination room in which she was doing her Pilates exercises.

"How would that be anyone's business," she replied to Eve's out-of-the-blue question.

"I apologize," said Eve, and stepped into the room nevertheless. "Here, we are so removed from the conventions of a normal life that I just blurted out a question that had been running through my mind for a while. I see you day in and day out helping everyone, but you never speak about your family."

Romy abandoned her shoulder bridge position, stood up, and wiped the back of her neck with a small towel.

"I know what you mean, Eve," she said. "We are all going back to primal mode. I didn't mean to snap at you. My daughter—Lea—is sixteen. I miss the two-year-old Lea. I miss the five-year-old Lea. I miss the ten-year-old Lea. Do I miss the sixteen-year-old Lea? No. I know that she is safe with her father. It'll be good for him to play bad cop for once. It'll also be good for Lea to start fending for herself a bit. It's not like I'll never see them again. I'm just taking a break from their needs."

"How is that possible? How can a mother in such a risky situation not care that her daughter may never see her again?"

"If women had to worry about the hazards of life, there wouldn't be any room for female cops, firewomen, or women in construction work. We'd all be back to being housewives."

"Like me..."

"Oh, there's no problem with that, as long as it's a choice and not an expectation. Do you have children, Eve?"

"No. I had... an accident, as a young woman. I could not—"

"A *domestic* accident, I suppose?"

"I see... Tarras spoke to you."

"I overheard a conversation between Tarras and Masrae one evening. It sounded like your husband might not have been a gentle man."

"He was a *gentleman*, to all, even to me, most of the time. He even came close to acting like a gentleman when he beat me up into unconsciousness."

"And yet, you killed another man—one you had never met before. I understand that you *traded kills* with another battered woman, so neither one of you would be suspected of their husband's death."

Eve nodded soberly, without lowering her eyes.

"How did you know that the man you were targeting would be at the pub on that day?"

"His wife had told me that her husband stopped by the pub every day right after he quit work—at five—and spent a good two hours there before heading home, drunk. I planned my train rides in and out so I would spend the minimum amount of time in the village."

"I heard something about a poison-containing ring...?"

"The ring contained the powder from twenty crushed pills of a beta-blocker."

"That's not a poison..."

"It becomes one when you overdose on it. The husband had a few episodes of tachycardia in recent years. He'd been prescribed a beta-blocker. Since he usually took it before dinner, he was already drunk and popped the pills without paying attention to the doses. He had already experienced two episodes of lightheadedness and blurry vision after slightly overdosing. His wife had asked the doctor to come over each time."

"So, she knew that no one would be surprised if the same problem occurred again and that's why she chose to have him killed in that way?"

"Exactly."

"Is she the one who gave you the ring?"

"No. Her sister did."

"And you dropped the powder into the guy's drink..."

"Yes. I went inside to order a new round of drinks and dumped the contents of the ring inside his beer before returning to our table."

"Do you realize that you killed a man?"

Eve walked up to the bedroom window and stared at the drizzle that dashed the countryside. She felt cold just looking at it from behind the glass.

"I made a choice. I saved a woman. To answer your question: No, I don't feel wrong. Just like you with the 16-year-old Lea."

Romy decided not to push the matter further.

"So, it looks that on this God-forsaken island and all of its mess, we have both still found a temporary escape from the hidden pressures of what many would consider a privileged life," she said. "I heard you talk quite a bit with Catina, especially at night. The walls are very thin here. Are you trying to mentor her?"

"I'm doing my best, yes. That's why I asked Tarras to assign us to the same room. From the day I met her, I realized that she needed someone to care for her. I've since learned that she had always been like driftwood, a foreign body in a hostile medium, tossed around by vicious currents. Believe it or not, she came from a fine family—loving, educated parents. She doesn't appear to have a learning disability. I'm afraid that her intellectual abilities are simply limited. She brought home disastrous report cards, and her parents attributed her lame performance to laziness. They started pressuring her and grounding her so often that she could not enjoy a normal teenage life with her friends. At fourteen, she ran away from home and took a train to London, where she didn't know anyone. The rest is easy to imagine..."

"From the fragments of conversation I heard, she seems to be responsive to your guidance."

"Very much so. She asks so many questions! I think that intuitively, she is trying to resume her growing up, even though she is past thirty."

"Is her relationship with Kofi interfering with your advice?"

“On the contrary, Kofi and I are on the same wavelength. He is a smart young man—God knows what he sees in Catina at this stage.”

“Sex?”

“Not at all. He came to me a couple of days after they’d started seeing each other. He seemed quite embarrassed, but I convinced him to open up. It turns out that he wanted me to speak to Catina about her constantly trying to throw her body at him. In her mind, that’s the only thing she has to offer, her only asset in life. No doubt several generations of pimps applied the same therapy to her. Kofi is a conservative man and a devout Christian. His interest in Catina is genuine, even though I told him very clearly where she came from. He is yearning for a companion, not a sexual partner. You can tell that he is a giving person. We agreed to work together to give Catina a chance, and to give their relationship a chance as well. I have since tried to coach Catina on how to build some self-esteem and grow a positive relationship with Kofi, step by step—”

“It’s a beautiful endeavor, Eve, but what happens when we return to the real world and you’re no longer by her side to finish her education.”

“The three of us already have agreed on a plan. When we—*if* we—ever manage to leave this island, we will head to a country in Southeast Asia, to which I moved most of my personal funds shortly before my husband’s... accident. That’ll be plenty for us to resettle and live comfortably for as long as it takes for them to build new lives there.”

“As a family...”

“Hopefully.”

## Chapter 34

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“Wind and rain, and rain and wind, and wind and rain! That’s all we’ve seen since we got here. I’m cold and I’m tired of this!” exclaimed Preeti and threw on the ground the hoe she was using to weed the vegetable garden area with Alan.

Alan stared at Preeti in silence. He was mesmerized by the girl’s ballistic knockers. In his defense, Preeti wore a tight-fitting saree, stood straight as an arrow, and pointed her bosom to the world for the same reason that Russia pointed its missiles to the West: just to be clear on assets. If Alan was not, by far, the first man to fall in love with a woman’s perks before her personality, he may have been the one least able to hide it. He seized every opportunity to hang around Preeti, too enamored to say anything remotely smart, too naïve to guess her real needs. He had even mustered the courage to ask Tarras to be assigned to the same tasks as her.

Preeti was equally puzzled and annoyed by that *gora* who kept circling around her like a hungry chick and trying to catch a glimpse of her chest down the collar of her sari every time she bent over. She could not ignore the fact that the boy was quite handsome—in the delicate style of the white boy models in *Mistress’* British fashion magazines—but he was so wide-eyed, clumsy, and awkwardly silent that she could not make anything out of him. By her standards, he was not a man, so he could not be much else. He did, however, bring her one benefit: he interfered with Hijra’s hold onto her. Hijra had been her dark shadow since the day he had snatched her from her home. He, too, had obviously schemed to be assigned with her to the store and garden, even though he showed very little interest in these activities. He was exasperated by Alan’s sticky eyes around his girl, but since the boy appeared to be one of Tarras’ protégés, there was not much he could do about it.

Alan had been in such agony the night before over the right time to finally wow Preeti that a swollen, white-crowned pimple had claimed the center of his forehead. Luckily, if he had wiped his moist hands a dozen times before coming down, he had not looked into a mirror before approaching her by the shelf where she was stacking boxes of white rice.

“You are so pretty and well-turned that you remind me of a spinning top my mother gave me when I was a kid,” said Alan, in a single breath.

“A spinning top? What’s a spinning top?” replied Preeti without looking at the lad.

“Well, it’s a toy with a little stick on top and a wide body that you can spin around with a twist of your fingers.”

“So, you like women with tiny heads and fat bodies that you can wrap around your fingers?”

"No... No! It's not like that at all! It was meant as a compliment."

"To a big woman with a little head..."

Alan was so red-faced and confused that even the pimple on his head took pity on him. It created a diversion by waving its wobbly self at Preeti who had just turned around.

"You need to rub a lemon on that nipple on your face. It looks like it's ready to poop!" she said.

"Pop," corrected Alan, before walking away, head down.

To Alan's credit, he was resilient to humiliation and rejection. He patiently waited for the next opportunity to attack the Preeti front. When Tarras called for Hijra inside the house the next day, Alan, who had been planting potatoes with him and Preeti in the garden, waited patiently for a second chance. It was delivered to him by a clumsy Cupid who made Preeti trip on an old stake that was sticking out of the ground. She fell heavily on her side.

"Are you hurt?!" asked Alan and rushed to her side.

Preeti took several deep breaths before replying.

"It took the air out of my lungs a bit and my ankle is... not happy."

Alan kneeled and lifted Preeti's leg by the calf. He cautiously removed her muddy slipper and proceeded to massage her ankle with frenzy.

"It's not there, boy" said Preeti. "A little lower..."

Emboldened, Alan went on to knead Preeti's tan, supple, warm foot. Preeti smiled. The boy treated her like a loaf of Masala bread but here and there, between the squishes and the near-bruising squeezes, there were a few tickles and caresses that did not feel half bad... Alan, who scrutinized every reaction on Preeti's face got emboldened by her stare. He went on rubbing the girl's calf, higher and higher, till he reached the knee. Amused, Preeti nevertheless kept up a wince of pain on her face to see how far her improvised medic might attempt to go. She didn't have to stop his hands. They stopped on their own at her knee's edge like a mousy smuggler in front of the border. Alan lowered the hem of her saree back onto her ankles and stood up. He extended his hand to help her up. At that moment, for the first time, Preeti looked at him for more than a second.

## Chapter 35

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By nine in the morning, Masrae had rounded up everyone from the group at the long kitchen table. The only one who had dragged her feet was Preeti, who had clearly decided to fight the power. The others seemed eager to see what Tarras had to say, even Catina, who appeared less out of it than usual.

"Sit!" shouted Tarras at Preeti, who stood by her chair, straight as an arrow, when the others had already sat down. She complied slowly, staring at him with a defiant pout. Tarras, sitting at the head of the table, looked at Masrae and Hijra before starting.

"I know you are all wondering why you're here," he started. "This is why—"

"No!" jumped in Preeti. "We don't care why we're here. What we want to know is why you kidnapped us! We were free women before you came into our lives!"

Tarras jumped to his feet, sending his chair flying backwards.

"Free women?! Are any of you stupid enough to think that you were a free woman in your little corner of the world?"

Preeti was about to open her mouth when a firm squeeze on her arm stopped her in her tracks. Romy, who was sitting next to her, had sensed that Tarras was already nearing his boiling point.

"You, there," he went on thundering, and pointed his finger at Catina, "how many construction workers did you *oblige* every day in your pimp's on-site van? Twenty...? Fifty...? Did you enjoy being a free woman?! Well, call us insensitive, but after stumbling upon your situation, we just thought that your fanny might welcome a little sabbatical!"

Catina bowed her head.

"As for you," he continued, staring at Eve, "how many blows to the head did you take from your husband in twenty years of marriage? A hundred? A thousand? How good was it to be that free woman? Well, call me callous, but when a friend of yours revealed your situation to us, I thought you might want to take a leave of absence before your spouse got you shaking like the old Muhammad Ali!"

Eve winced slightly but did not lower her eyes.

"And now, you, the Angela Davis from the East!" said Tarras, leaning over the table to get his face closer to Preeti's. "From what Hijra observed, you were your mistress' house slave and her husband's pipe cleaner. Did you really enjoy that accomplished free woman's life?!"

A second squeeze on the arm discouraged Preeti from fighting back. The girl did, instead, fire a nasty glance at Hijra, who looked away.

"For the time being, neither one of you might be that comfortable, but none of you is being abused," went on Tarras. And while stranded here, you won't have a

chance to run back to your beloved abusers. This is a temporary situation until you wean yourself off them on your own.”

“How long will you keep them here?” asked Romy.

“The time it takes for them to show that they can point their lives in new, more productive directions.”

“It sounds like a re-education camp.”

“You heard where each of them came from. Are you willing to bet that Catina won’t run back to her pimp, Eve to a toxic relationship with a man, and that one to her Arab owners?”

Romy slowly shook her head sideways after looking at each of the women.

“Once again, this is not a solution,” stepped in Masrae. “Hopefully, it’ll be a step in the right direction, that’s all,”

“But there’s nothing to do here. How can we be *productive*?” asked Eve.

“That was the initial purpose of this meeting,” replied Tarras with a calmer voice before sitting back down. “We already spoke to you about the way migrants get stranded here after being deceived by the Onomaris. The purpose of all of these men in trying to reach the U.K. was simple: to make a better life for themselves, but also, and most of all, for their families in their home countries. We have given these men a chance to mine here, on the island, small amounts of gold. Romy will give you the details on that later. It’s been working quite well. They got organized and disciplined, and most of them accumulated some gold ore. Not a fortune by any means, but enough to make a huge difference to their families’ lives back home. In short, despite being prisoners of this island, they could achieve a major goal of theirs, and this until a more long-term solution can be found to their situation. Masrae will now explain to you what our plan is and how each of you can help.”

Masrae stood up and started strolling around the table.

“Right now, the migrants do not have any way of trading their gold for money,” she said, “and even less of a way to get money to their families. What we plan to do is to sell the gold ore for them on the continent and wire the money to the people of their choice at home. Tarras, Hijra, and I can take care of this. Where we could use help is in managing communications between the migrants and their families.”

“Can’t you just mail letters when you go back to England to sell the gold?” asked Catina with a faint voice. Everyone looked at her with surprise.

“And what would these letters be about, Catina?” replied Masrae. “How great their life in England is? They might even send pictures of themselves in front of the Manchester United stadium, or sipping a pint in a pub?”

“Oh...” muttered Catina, blushing.

“As you see, this is the tricky part. What we would need would be for the three of you to serve as public writers for the migrants—”

“You mean censors...,” said Eve.

“More like editors. The migrants would love to reassure their families, to let them know that they survived the journey and are doing well enough to send them the money. We can make that a reality but with very strict boundaries.”

“They can’t tell the truth.”

“Right.”

“But the world wouldn’t come to an end if they did. Humanitarian organizations would come to rescue them and if they wanted to risk their lives again afterwards to get to England, after all, it’s their choice.”

Masrae stopped walking and turned to Tarras. They stared at each other for a long moment, at the end of which he nodded. Masrae turned back to Eve.

“We weren’t planning to tell you this, but the point does deserve an answer.” Masrae sat back down before continuing. “Think of this island as a mushroom head linked to the seafloor by a thin stem of rock. It is a rare, unstable volcanic structure, which is why there are so many earthquakes here. Masrae’s friend among the Onomaris told her that members of the most radical branch of the organization had placed a huge explosive charge somewhere on the island, fitted with a detonator controlled by satellite. Should the word get out about what is going on here, they would immediately send the island down to the ocean floor. Even if a few artefacts were left floating at the surface of the water, the currents around here are so strong that they’d be immediately scattered all over. No evidence, no crime.”

The dreadful silence that followed Masrae’s words spoke volumes about the state of mind of her audience. Romy was the first to react.

“As exciting as it is to sit on a bomb,” she tried joking, “I think that’ll be enough information for today. The ladies will probably want to digest all of this before giving you an answer.”

“Yeah, that’s the gist of it,” agreed Tarras and stood up. “Let’s reconvene at five this evening. Just make sure to be clear on whether you are willing to help us or not.”

“What if we are not?” asked Preeti.

“Then, you’ll just hang around for a while and we’ll eventually drop you at some very remote place in the inhabited world, so it’ll take you a good while to get home. That’ll give you time to figure out whether it really is a home for you.”

After the other members of the group left the room, Romy stayed behind with Tarras and Masrae.

“How come you didn’t mention me after your little tirade about Eve, Preeti, and Catina?” she asked.

“We did not plan to bring you along,” replied Tarras. “You sort of invited yourself.”

“Does that mean you’ll take me back to England whenever I ask you to?”

“Is that what you want now?”

"No," replied Romy instinctively.

"Then, we can definitely use you here. Can you make an inventory of the few medical supplies that we have in store and a list of all the ones that could help you treat the migrants when they are ill or get hurt? Masrae will arrange with her Onomaris friend to have them dropped along with the food."

"Okay. I'll also ask for menstrual pads and other feminine hygiene products for the girls."

"No. Just give me the list and we'll pick these up ourselves on our next trip to the mainland. And let's not go overboard. No need for depilatory cream or make up thingies. The woollier and unattractive the chicks get, the safer they'll be here."

Masrae chuckled under her hood. Romy was not amused.

"How are you going to ensure the safety of the women, especially if you travel back to England to sell the migrants' gold?"

"Masrae will stay here. She is fully equipped to cool off a bunch of horny blokes. We're also working with a small group of migrants who are a bit older and respected by the others—an elders' council of sorts. They help us with the management and distribution of the resources sent by the Onomaris. We also worked with them to organize the mining operations. They have implemented very tough discipline in the migrant community and only a few of its members have dared stray from it."

"And they died for it..." said Romy.

"Yeah. There's no place here for redemption. The risk posed by a few bad seeds to such a small, isolated community is too serious, especially with gold floating around."

"Did you talk to these elders about selling the migrants' gold and having the money sent to their families?"

"We did yesterday, for the first time."

"Did they agree?"

"No. They were very suspicious. They would never advise their members to hand their hard-earned gold to people who may just run away with it. We ended up offering them a stepwise process. In the first round, we'll try to convince a couple of volunteers to hand us their gold. We'll sell it and have the funds sent to their families, along with a letter handwritten by them under our supervision. The letter will ask for specific news from their relatives and a confirmation that they received the money and are—"

"Where will the families send their replies?"

"They'll be asked to reply in a letter—"

"Why not by email or by phone text using a satellite phone at this end? Virtually everyone in developing countries now has access to smartphones, either directly or through organizations. That would make the exchanges between the migrants and their families much faster."

"That's precisely what we want to avoid. We have to filter each piece of messaging that goes in or out of here. We could not handle endless conversation

threads. The letters will be overnighted to the address of a non-profit organization that we run in London. I'll pick them up and bring them back here. We'll hand their letters to the guys who gave us their gold to sell. They should be able to authenticate them. Letters also have the advantage of the migrants possibly recognizing their relatives' handwriting and being comforted by us delivering on our promise. Once they've validated to the others that the money was indeed handed to their family, we'll invite other migrants to participate in the program with all or part of their gold. Little by little, we should be able to get most of them on board. It's not like they have a choice. They know that they are not leaving the island anytime soon. What good would their gold be here when it could do so much for their families? That was one of their main goals when they left home."

"I might be able to convince one of the migrants to take that chance," said Romy.

## Chapter 36

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Preeti, Catina, and Eve all agreed to help with the migrants' communication with their families. Preeti did not even drag her feet over that plan. In fact, the three women were relieved. The group meeting with Tarras and Masrae earlier in the day had shed brand-new light on their situation. Up to that point, they saw themselves as victims of a kidnapping perpetrated by creepy characters. If Tarras had been truthful, they had instead been extracted from hazardous or humiliating situations for their own benefit—albeit by force—and there was no indication that he would try to harm or exploit them. If they remained wary of his true motives, the scariest prospects seemed to fade in the background, at least in the short term.

During the follow-up meeting, Tarras and Masrae gave them specific instructions on how to guide the migrants when they wrote their letters home. The main guidelines were simple: not a word about the island nor what was going on there. The migrants would be encouraged to make up a nice story describing how they had been set up in England and how they had got a job there. The ones who were supposed to have already met up with a member of their family in England would have to come up with a good explanation of why they had not yet done so, despite being there for weeks, if not months. For tricky situations like that one, Tarras had written different scripts that they could use. Each of the three women would be assigned a specific migrant, so that, as correspondence went on, they would be able to ensure that the exchanges were consistent in content and chronology.

*“My dear Mom,”*

Romy had convinced Kofi, who had managed to sneak into Catina's room again the night before, to take part in Tarras' project, despite the warnings he had received from the elders. It had been a long discussion between Romy and Kofi to get to that point, but the fact that the nurse had trusted him on the night of their visit to the mine had eventually swayed his decision. Being very hard-working and somewhat lucky, Kofi had been able to accumulate more gold ore than most of his peers. He had agreed to hand half of it to Tarras and to draft a letter to his mother according to the guidelines specified by Romy.

*“I am so ashamed about not writing to you sooner. It has been two months since I last spoke to you on the phone from Northern France, just before crossing the Channel to reach England. At that time, I spoke to you about my difficult journey from Ghana to Tripoli, the capital of Libya, over the Mediterranean Sea. Going through Burkina Faso and Niger was scary enough since we were already in the hands of armed smugglers to whom we had paid high passage fees, but crossing the Sahara Desert was the most painful experience of my life. Still under the control of the smugglers, we had to partly travel on overloaded*

*trucks, and partly by foot in crazy heat and with little water or food. I lost two friends there. The one who had started the journey with me in Accra got so dehydrated that he became delirious, jumped off the truck, and broke his neck. The other, who came from Sudan and had joined us when we crossed Niger, was shot during a struggle with a smuggler who he caught trying to steal his money while he slept.*

*“Like I said before, crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Tripoli to the Italian island of Lampedusa took nearly two days but that’s the part of the trip that went well for us. Many migrants die on that crossing. We were lucky that the weather was good all along. Lucky also that the people we had paid to get us there put us on a boat that did not fall apart in the middle of the sea. From Lampedusa, the Italian government moved us to a detention center on the continent, but it was so overcrowded that it was easy for us to escape and cross into France.”*

Romy paused reading Kofi’s handwritten letter aloud and looked at Eve and Catina, who had been sitting on their beds in silence.

“Everything okay so far with you, girls?”

“Yes,” replied Eve. “Nothing in that part can be tied to the island.”

“Yes...” sighed Catina. “Kofi speaks and writes English so well!”

Eve smiled at her as Romy resumed reading the letter.

*“On the north coast of France, we stayed for three weeks in a sort of slum in the forest, until we could connect with a new group of smugglers that would help us cross the Channel to England. They took all the money I had left, and I ended up with at least thirty other guys like me on a dinghy, on a rough sea, in a rainstorm. Just a few minutes into the journey, many of us started to panic. The screaming was insane. Vomit was being blown on our faces. You just felt like jumping off, but no one did. We just clutched the safety rope and prayed. We would not have made it, but a rescue ship from an NGO called Onomaris rescued us and took us ashore —”*

“I don’t think he should mention the name Onomaris,” cut in Eve. “I doubt that they are registered anywhere as an NGO. Even if they are, under false pretenses, it could get thorny if Kofi’s family were to contact them to thank them.”

“Exactly, Eve. Good job!” said Romy and smiled. “We’ll ask Kofi to cut that bit out.”

*“I know I was supposed to go to Uncle Emmanuel’s in Manchester, but a small environmental organization offered to file the legal paperwork to give me legal residency in England if I accepted a job for a couple of years on a very small island off the East coast. It’s a nice and easy job that is to do with nature preservation. The only downside is that there is no phone nor internet network here, so for the time being, I can only communicate through letters that the guy who brings me supplies every week will carry.*

*"I make a good living with most of my expenses paid. That's why I am able to send you this money today. I know that you'll need every penny of it to take care of the family, but please take everyone to the restaurant at least once to celebrate my success. I will send more funds soon. With my love to you, my dear Mom, and to my beloved brother and sisters. Kofi."*

"Well, he surely played by the rules," reacted Eve as Romy folded the letter back.

"Yes, he did," replied Romy. "I'll ask him to remove the name Onomaris and I'll hand the letter to Tarras, along with Kofi's gold. I don't think that we'll get another migrant to participate in this first round, so I know Tarras will want to rush the money and letter to Kofi's family, so we get feedback from them and other migrants can start trusting us."

Romy noticed Catina's teary eyes.

"What's wrong, Catina?" she asked.

"What if Tarras doesn't come back? Kofi has already suffered so much. This would destroy him."

"Tarras is not the kind of man to run away with a tiny amount of gold. If he wanted to steal all the migrants' gold, he wouldn't jump through so many hoops. He, Masrae, and Hijra are heavily armed and not afraid to use violence as a means to an end. I suspect that their day job requires that—"

"Mercenaries?" jumped in Eve.

"The thought crossed my mind, too, but I really don't know. They are not yoga instructors, that's for sure. I'm sure Tarras will do what he said. We just have to pray that nothing prevents him from doing it."

"Like what?"

"Like a shipwreck. Their sailboat is quite small and the currents around the island are vicious."

Romy had handed Kofi's gold to Tarras in the evening, after getting him to agree to a clause that Kofi had negotiated with her: the right to visit Catina every day without having to climb through the window. Tarras had reluctantly approved, provided that Kofi was very discrete and did not mention that privilege to anyone else in the camp. He would sail off for Wales first thing in the morning, accompanied by Hijra. They would then drive to London, and he planned to have the gold ore sold by the end of the day. He would wire the funds and overnight Kofi's letter to a friend of his in Accra, who would hand deliver the cash and the letter to Kofi's mother. The man would wait for her written response and overnight it back to Tarras in London. If everything went according to plan, Tarras would be back with the mother's letter within three or four days, five at the most.

Romy heard Tarras and Hijra's voices on the staircase just after daybreak the next morning. When the front door of the house slammed closed, she got up and

walked to the window, which was battered by a rainstorm. She watched the two men head for the beach and shivered as she realized that she was about to place the dreams of a desperate young lad into the hands of a man he thought to be evil, and of elements that truly were.

## Chapter 37

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“Could you please ask him to stop moving?!”

Kofi translated Romy’s directive as she debrided a gash on the arm of one of his fellow countrymen.

“This is the third severe miner wound I have to treat this week, and this one is deep,” said Romy. “I’ll have a hard time stitching it up. What is it this time? A rock that fell in a mine hole or a fight at the camp?”

Kofi shook his head with embarrassment.

“It’s a good thing we got another set of medical supplies in the last drop shipment,” continued Romy as she threaded a surgical suture needle. Pass on the world at camp that if knife fights continue, Tarras will pay them a visit to address the problem.”

“Please don’t involve him. I heard that he killed two miners before I got here when they tried to break into the house to get to the hooded woman. He twisted their necks as he would have done with a chicken. Most of us think that he’s evil and that the hooded woman is the devil’s wife. Did you know that her name means *death* in Arabic?”

“Well, I’m not sure yet that they are wrong, but since I’ve been here, I’ve mostly seen good-willed actions from them.”

“Both the Lord and the devil work in mysterious ways...”

“How did you get to speak such good English, Kofi?”

“It is the official language in Ghana—”

“Oh, sorry, I forgot! But then, how come he doesn’t understand me?” asked Romy looking at her patient.

“He comes from a remote village in the southeast of the country. He probably never went to school, which is where we start speaking English.”

“How long were you in school?”

Through high school. I also went to a university there for two years on and off.”

“Why did you stop?”

“When my father passed away, in a farming accident, my mother and younger siblings started struggling. I tried finding work not too far from them, but there were hundreds of young applicants for every decent job. That’s why I decided to leave for Europe, to try to help the whole family from there.”

“I heard that migrants must pay hefty fees to the smugglers. How did you get the money?”

“I borrowed it.”

The tone of Kofi’s curt answer discouraged Romy from digging further.

“It must have been a terrible feeling for you to be stranded here, unable to reassure your family,” she said, instead.

“The worst part is to be unable to help them, as I had promised them.”

"Let's cross our fingers that Tarras' plan works out. We should know something by the end of the week."

Kofi nodded and stared at Romy's hands as she stitched up the wound.

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Hijra snuck behind Alan, whose face was pushed against the keyhole of the bathroom door and pulled him into a tight headlock. The scuffle caused the door to swing wide open... on Preeti glistening from all angles under the shower stream. Alerted by the commotion, she turned around and let out a shriek as loud as it was short-lived.

"You, idiot!" she yelled at Hijra, once she had a chance to take a better look at the two-headed beast. "I thought you'd cut off his head!"

"I caught him peeping through the keyhole..." replied Hijra, as his and Alan's eyes scanned Preeti's figure from top to bottom.

"And you thought it'd be a good idea for *both of you* to just come in?! Close the bloody door!!"

The sight of Preeti's curves was to sizzle constantly on Hijra and Alan's retinas from that day on. Having both, on numerous occasions, imagined them under the folds of her sari, they now felt a bit like Vasco da Gama discovering the long-fantasized coast of India for the first time.

The incident would turn the latent tension between the two men into all-out rivalry for Preeti's attention. Determined not to leave any opportunity to their opponent, Hijra and Alan kept a close eye on Preeti from the moment she left her bedroom in the morning until she retired for the evening. If she were at any time found in the company of one of them, the other would join in within minutes. Inevitably, the men would automatically contradict each other, even on trivial matters such as the depth at which to plant bean seeds. Hijra, who had on several occasions shown his ice-cold self-control and mastery of martial arts in the face of migrants having a breakdown or trying to sneak closer to one of the women in his group, was clumsy and often pathetic in his attempts to seduce Preeti. Conversely, Alan became emboldened and smoother as the days passed, and Hijra often had to threaten him with a show of fists while the object of their desire had her back turned. Preeti, who was increasingly annoyed by the clingy and aggravating attitude of her suitors, was not able to shake them off. The colder and more dismissive she became toward them, the more titillated and competitive they grew. As it was often in big and little history alike, it was a minor incident that would totally remodel the lay of the land between the three of them.

One of the tasks assigned to Preeti, Hijra, and Alan was to receive the large bags filled with food that were air-dropped by the Onomaris near the camp and

dragged up to the house by the migrants. As they stacked the cans and boxes on the shelves of the makeshift store on the first floor, Preeti dropped a box of rice on the ground. In their hurry to pick it up for her, Hijra and Alan jostled each other and bumped into Preeti, who lost her balance and fell backwards, tipping over an empty shelf and landing on it. Instead of helping her back up, both men had the same reflex. They each grabbed one of the slippers that the girl had lost in the commotion and crawled up to her feet to put them back on. Before they had a chance to do so, Preeti slapped each man on the cheek with the soles of her bare feet—at the same time—in a single tweezer move that could have earned her a medal in floor gymnastics at the Olympics!

“That’s it!” yelled Preeti as she extracted herself back from the shelf and massaged her lower back. “Get up and drop my shoes!”

Still red-faced from the foot slapping, the men complied and stood to attention in front of Preeti.

“I have had it with you two, *abey yaars!*” said Preeti. “You have been annoying me ever since we got on this island. As if you guys had a chance with me!”

Preeti started looking at Hijra and Alan in turn, as if watching a tennis game, and started firing at them:

“You’re too old—You’re too young. You’re as chubby as a nursing maid—You’re as skinny as a starved peasant. You smell like a goat—You smell like a little girl. You’re way too ugly—You’re way too pretty!”

Preeti stopped to place her slippers back on.

“You are not my type of men at all and will never be,” she resumed. “I like tall men with big chests and muscles everywhere. I want to throw myself under a fire truck, not a moped! There’s one man on this island who would qualify, but he’s taken, and I wouldn’t want to mess with his girl! Anyway, if I can’t have beef, then I’ll have chicken. A girl has needs after all! I was used to being serviced once a week and now it’s been almost a month without any funny business. Since you are both much less interested in this...” —with her hands, she mimicked a box around her face—“than this...” —this time she made the hand box around her chest—“then, I will give you a chance to get it out of your system.”

Hijra and Alan looked at each other, wondering if the fall had knocked some of her mind’s bearings off.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Preeti...” said Alan finally.

“I’ll give you one night each,” replied Preeti without hesitating. “It’s not a big deal after all and if that’s what it takes to get you off my back for good, so be it. After that, I don’t want you bothering me anymore because there will not be a second night for either one of you.”

“One full night, with you...?” mumbled Hijra.

“One full night? I didn’t say that! If your technique with a woman is to jump on her, shove your *toto* into her *pucchi* for two minutes, and fall asleep, then don’t

count on a long night. You'd better be prepared to hit at least one six in that game or you'll be kicked out of the cricket field faster than a stray dog!"

Hijra stared at Preeti with wide eyes. Alan bit his lip.

"First of all, you..." said Preeti, pointing at Hijra, "will bathe for at least one hour in the ocean and scrub yourself with a rough rag and plenty of soap just before you come to me. You will brush your teeth and use deodorant if you can find some. You will wear freshly cleaned clothes, and that goes for your undies too—especially your undies—okay?!"

Hijra blushed like a schoolgirl before nodding. Preeti turned to Alan.

"Same for you, and don't use that perfume that makes you smell like a fruit cake! Once you get close to me, try to act like a man and not an altar boy. I have no intention of playing your wet nurse, remember that!"

The boy joined the red-faced party before nodding as well and lowering his head.

"I'll let each one of you know when and where. In the meantime, find yourselves some condoms—no jacket, no wicket!" added Preeti before walking away.

Standing at the top of the stairs, overlooking the store area, Tarras chuckled as he watched Preeti disappear into the kitchen, leaving behind her two suitors turned to stone.

## Chapter 38

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Thinking that it would be a softer reanimation for her *pucchi* after weeks of hibernation, Preeti had decided to give Alan the first pass at it. She had instructed him to meet her at midnight—at which time everyone had retired into their quarters—in an empty examination room by the end of the second-floor corridor. The boy walked into the room right on time. His stern determination to “act like a man” burst out upon the discovery of a Preeti lying down on the narrow medical bed, covered by a very thin, very clingy white sheet that molded every nook and cranny of her nude, rolling landscape.

“You may get undressed and join me,” said the girl with the attitude of the duchess speaking to her gardener.

Alan removed his shirt to expose a narrow, hairy chest from which clung two long, pale, scrawny arms. Preeti’s slight pout in response to the scene finished stressing the poor boy. In his panic, he became entangled in his pants while removing them and ended up jumping on one foot around the room, trying desperately to keep his balance.

“Shh...! You’ll wake everybody up!” said Preeti, now repressing an urge to laugh. Mercifully, she lifted the sheet to invite Alan to join her once he had finally undressed down to his white briefs. As soon as he had slipped into the bed, he launched his arms around her, much in the way of the survivor of a shipwreck reaching for a loose floating plank. He shoved his head between Preeti’s boobs and started humping her leg frenetically.

“What...?! Stop that!!” she ordered. “Is that a way to treat a lady?!”

The boy was already too far down the path of his horny run to be reined in. If anything, the sound of his partner’s voice further increased the speed and pressure of his friction, to the point where he gradually nudged Preeti toward the edge of the bed. His premature climax coincided perfectly with the loud thump of Preeti falling on the wood floor. She grimaced while rubbing her tailbone before standing up. She stared in disbelief at her *lover* lying across the bed with his stained underwear, arms and legs spread wide open, and sporting a dumb, ecstatic grin.

“That was great!” he exclaimed. “And don’t worry, love, there’s plenty more where that came from. Just let me rest for a few minutes.”

When Preeti smiled and started leaning down toward him, he puckered up and closed his eyes. He got a clearer grasp on the moment when a sharp pain arose from his scalp and his eyes opened to a wrist pointing to the top of his head.

“You, moron!” screamed Preeti, as she dragged Alan by the hair, out of the bed and toward the door.

“Ouch! Ouch!! Please stop, Preeti! What’d I do? Didn’t you have a good time? It was just the first round. You were my first, but we worked well together, didn’t we...? Ouch!”

Preeti only let go of the boy’s hair to kick him in the butt all the way into the corridor. She threw his clothes at him before slamming the door. Sitting on the

floor two doors down the corridor, Hijra laughed loudly at his rival before heading back upstairs.

Alan's scathing expulsion from Preeti's chambers had delighted Hijra, but as soon as he lay down on his bed, he realized that he was next in line. The pressure was on, and it would only be amplified the following day by a small note from Preeti, informing him that his *interview* was set for two nights later. Much scrubbing and grooming took place in the hours preceding the event. The floor of his bathroom was littered with nose hairs—and a variety of other hairs—as well as toenail clippings by the time he was ready to slip on the black, embroidered, silk sherwani with matching pants that he always packed in the event of a surprise funeral.

When he walked into the examination room, the static sheet put on for him the same show as it had for Alan, but Hijra's stern face did not flinch. His eyes were transfixed, as if staring at a far horizon, similar to those of some athletes before a crucial competition. He calmly removed his clothes and laid them down neatly on the back of a chair. When he approached the bed, he ignored the corner of the sheet that Preeti held up to invite him in. He simply stood up straight and looked down at Preeti solemnly.

Preeti was baffled. Where she had expected a plump, flabby body—based on the odd shapes that Hijra's loose clothes always adopted—was displayed a shapely but tight body. It seemed to be built with half-spheres of different sizes. His pectorals and stomach were round but not flabby. His arms and legs were on the short side but they bulged quite handsomely on all segments. Hijra had for the occasion pulled his long hair back into a tight bun and omitted the eyeliner. The man who now stood in front of Preeti was half-buddha, half-samurai, and Preeti found herself shying away from looking directly at his cute, yet mighty sword.

Paapubear, her one and only reference in this particular matter, would manage, from time to time and haphazardly, to ring her little buzzer. With Hijra, Preeti felt that the buzzer had grown into the massive bell of Notre Dame and that Quasimodo was frantically riding its clapper! No matter what move Hijra pulled on her—most of them unsophisticated but terribly effective—he made her resonate loudly. After reciprocating with a couple of maneuvers of her own, she decided to lay her body down onto his surf and enjoy the ride. It was late into the night when she crashed onto the shore, so deeply that she did not even hear Hijra leave. It was the second time that he had knocked her out, and this one had decidedly been more pleasant! It was a grinning Tarras who, close to noon the next day, woke her up and told her that everyone was looking for her.

On the days that followed the *interviews* of the suitors, Preeti realized that she had only managed to distance herself from one of them. Alan was now worse than ever, following her all day like a sickly dog, asking for forgiveness for... —he was not sure what —and for another chance to prove himself. Preeti took pity on him and avoided scolding him, but she grew very tired of that routine.

Hijra, on the other hand, was giving her space. He would smile softly at her when they crossed paths and chat politely for a moment with her when they worked side by side. He never alluded to their night together, nor became more familiar with her. The only change with him was that he was now cleanly groomed every day and that he smelled like soap. If Preeti's mind was perfectly comfortable with that distance, her body started yearning for Hijra's, especially after dark.

## Chapter 39

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Kofi detected the sailboat as soon as it broke through the horizon. He had been spending most of his time sitting on the pier since Tarras had left with his gold. Although many of his fellow migrants silently shared his hopes, some of them had started snickering when passing by. The instant Tarras and Hijra disembarked, all of them flocked to the pier. Tarras motioned Kofi to follow him with a curt nod and broke through the crowd with a stern attitude.

Everyone in the house was sitting at the lunch table when the trio walked in. Catina jumped to her feet and offered her chair to Tarras. Hijra sat in it without a look at the girl, while Tarras took his place at the head of the table. He opened a small briefcase and invited Kofi to take a seat. The young man, straight as an arrow, declined his offer.

"I have a letter for you," said Tarras and pushed it across the table. Kofi looked at it for a long moment before picking it up. His hands did not tremble when he pulled the letter out of the envelope.

"If it's not too personal, would you mind sharing it with us?" asked Eve.

Kofi quickly scanned the letter before reading it out loud.

*"My Dearest Kofi,*

*"Mom has been crying ever since the ferenji came to our house to deliver your letter and gift. Since she is too emotional to write right now and the man is waiting for an answer to take back to you, she asked me to write on her behalf.*

*"When she saw all the money that came with your message, she got very upset. We have heard so many stories here about local boys surviving their journey to England only to fall into the hands of drug dealers who take advantage of their desperate situations to enroll them in their dirty business. Mom could not believe that you could already have made enough money in a decent job to send us over 40,000 cedis in cash. She tried to give the money back to the ferenji and kick him out, but he was very patient and ended up convincing her that the money and your job were perfectly legitimate. That's when she started reading your letter.*

*"You know how much your gift can do here. On the bright side, we did have food. The terrible drought that hit us this year again left us a few cows, and enough of a crop harvest to feed the family for at least half a year. Thanks to you, Mom will be able to repay a \$400 loan from the microlending organization Kiva, which enabled her to buy a dozen goats.*

*"On the family side, the little ones are attending a small school set up in the village by an NGO. The teachers come from the UK, and they change all the time, but they work well with kids. Abeba's English is almost perfect by now (even her British accent!) and she*

*is very good at biology and math. Neberu, like most boys, is not as focused, but his English is fair and he loves history, especially war stories!*

*“As for me, I offered Mom several times to look for a job in the city, but she said that the only jobs I could find in Denan would only bring us shame. Since Dad passed away and you left, she has been pushing back on several persons who try to convince her to marry me off to the old guy who owns the land we work. She knows that it would be just as bad for me as ending up on the street in Denan. Maybe that’s why Mom is crying so much today; thanks to you, she might be able to stop fighting everything and everyone.*

*“Now, there’ll be plenty of your money left and I’m sure that Mom will give me a chance to start taking classes at Qabri Dehar University. My records from high school are very strong and I have been perfecting my English for the past two years by listening to the BBC almost all day and chatting with the NGO teachers most evenings. I will let you know as soon as Mom decides something.*

*“I don’t want to hold the ferenji back so I will stop here for today. Mom, the kids, and I love you, Kofi. Thank you so much for being God’s angel in our lives. Take good care of yourself and please write again soon!*

*“Your sister, Ama”*

Kofi kept staring at the letter, which he held with both hands, immobile, as if turned into stone.

“What’s a *ferenji*?” asked Eve to break the tension.

“A white person,” murmured Kofi and swung around to head toward the door.

“Will you talk to the others?” asked Tarras.

Kofi’s head and shoulders shook violently; he rushed outside. A teary Eve turned to Tarras and nodded to him.

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The Kofi experiment triggered a fast and massive chain reaction. Not even thirty minutes after Kofi had headed back to the camp, the group, which was still discussing Kofi’s letter around the lunch table, heard clamoring coming from the front of the house.

“Hijra, go talk to them. No one comes inside the house! Ask them to send a couple of delegates.” Tarras turned to Masrae, “You might want to put on your jewelry...”

Masrae slipped out into a small backroom while Hijra headed to the front door. The burka came back first, adorned with a very becoming Kalashnikov hanging around the neck and complimented by a thin leather belt bearing three patterned grenades. The scene somewhat put a damper on the previously cheerful atmosphere in the lunchroom.

Hijra walked back into the room flanked by two of the middle-aged migrants who had already helped mediate the situation with the thief two weeks earlier. They stopped instinctively upon seeing Masrae, who had taken a position against the wall, opposite the door.

"I suppose that your guys outside now all want to send their gold to their families?" said Tarras and motioned them to take a seat.

"Kofi told us what happened with his family," said the older of the two men. "The others now want to do the same, and they all want to go first. It's very tense out there; it could get bad."

"Go back and tell them that we will not leave until each and every one of them has had a chance to hand their letter and their gold to us."

"That'll be a lot of gold in your hands..."

"I know what you're thinking, old chap. Don't worry, we will not run away with your petty cash. I make more in a single mission in my job than all the gold in your men's hands. If our goal had been to take it, we would not have jumped through so many hoops. My friend alone here could walk into your camp and wipe out all of your men's objections in a couple of minutes," replied Tarras as he pointed to Masrae.

The delegates looked at each other, nodded, and walked out.

Tarras had requested all hands to be on deck in the lunchroom at 3 p.m. and asked Kofi to communicate the plan to the other migrants. They started forming a line outside the door an hour earlier, without any shoving or arguing. The presence of Hijra, now in full "jewelry" apparel himself by the front door, added to the migrants' innate fear of Tarras, had come a long way to pacifying the crowd. They entered in small groups when prompted by Hijra and walked up to the lunch table to sit at one of the six stations set up to receive their materials. A few instances of shoving and pushing occurred near two of the stations. Masrae, for some reason, was the most popular and migrants jostled each other to sit in front of her. Tarras was the least sought after and migrants jostled each other to not sit in front of him. The applicants also sat with some reluctance in front of Catina, Preeti, and Alan, while they treated Romy and Eve with deference. The assessors verified each letter to the family for compliance with the non-disclosure clauses explained to them by Kofi—no hint as to their true situation, no mention of anyone specific. Most of them used the environmental organization and remote location alibi devised by Kofi in his own letter. Tarras' crew also carefully weighed the gold ore handed to them by each migrant, recorded the amount, and double-checked the name and address of the family member to whom the sale proceeds were to be delivered.

The process lasted until the early hours of the morning. The few incidents that took place, either between migrants or as a result of an argument over the contents of a letter or the weighing of the gold, were quickly put out by Tarras slamming

his hand on the table or Masrae just standing up. All but a dozen of the migrants handed over their ore. The ones who elected not to do so either distrusted the process or preferred to keep the valuable material to themselves.

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“I want to go home.”

Tarras, Masrae, and Hijra looked at each other with surprise. When Preeti had asked to meet with them, they had guessed that she was going to ask them to keep Alan away from her, as they had noticed him constantly buzzing around the girl. That she would ask to go home, as if she was at a boring party just down the road from her house, was quite disconcerting.

“But... that’s not an option, Preeti,” replied Masrae softly.

“Why isn’t it? Why are you keeping me here?” reacted Preeti. “At first, I thought that you were bad people who were going to turn me into a street girl somewhere, but the more I see what you do, with Catina, with Eve, with the migrants, the more I wonder what you plan to do *with me*.”

“We are helping you to break free from a world in which you were exploited and to which you’d run back if we didn’t give you some time here to detox yourself from it for a while.”

“And then what?” retorted Preeti. “Once I’m *free*, I’ll have a chance to join your nice little world? The one where a beautiful girl—like the one in whose room I was first dumped in London—dies at twenty from the drugs her lover gave her? The world in which a Catina is trashed to the point that she thinks that she can only be useful as a whore? The one in which an Eve takes her husband’s beatings for years, so she’d hang on to a beautiful house? The world in which young women dump desperate men on a deserted island, so they won’t disturb their little lives? The one in which people like you three kidnap a young girl on the other side of the world because they are so sure that their way of life is so much better for her?!”

“You can also have a beautiful, free life as a young woman on this side of the world, Preeti,” said Masrae.

“I may not have been born as free as you were, but I love my culture. I take it with its good and bad sides. I know who I am, and I like myself. I don’t wake up every day wondering if I am happy or not. I enjoyed my life before you felt you had to rescue me from it!”

“And you would go back to that compound in the Middle East from which you hardly ever came out?” asked Tarras.

“I don’t know what *he* told you,” replied Preeti with a fiery glance at Hijra, “but I never asked to be saved from that place. These are the people I grew up with. I have my place in that family. I belong there, and if one day I don’t feel that way anymore, I’ll just jump over the wall! I’ve never felt like traveling the world, and from what I’ve seen these past few weeks, I didn’t miss much. See, I never was a victim, until you tried to turn me into one!”

Tarras stood up. Feeling threatened, Preeti did the same and faced him from across the table with a defiant stare. Tarras took a long look at the girl before speaking.

"No, Preeti. You are not a victim. You never were. You have proven that on many occasions since you... *joined* us. You are feisty; you are resilient; you are freer in your acts than any other woman we ever helped, than most Western women as a matter of fact."

Surprised by Tarras' soft tone of voice, Preeti sat back down.

"You do not belong here and if your wish is to return to your world, then we will help you get back there."

"He is the one who took me," said Preeti, pointing at Hijra. "I want him to take me back." Tarras turned to Hijra, who nodded.

"Very well, then, Preeti. You'll come along with Hijra and me tomorrow when we go back to the mainland to sell the miners' gold. Once we get there, Hijra will take you back home."

Preeti looked at each of her misguided benefactors and ended up smiling at Tarras. A frank, respectful smile not unlike the one a boxer would have addressed to a defeated, but worthy opponent. She stood up and left the room without a word.

"First one we lose this way..." said Masrae.

"First one of her kind..." replied Tarras with a grin.

"I know that expression, Tarras. Tomorrow, you'll ask her to join our group, won't you?"

"Not tomorrow. She's strong, she's smart, and she is fearless. She'll make a great recruit once she has a chance to mature a bit more. In the meantime, in between missions, Hijra will keep an eye on her."

"My house is next to her compound," confirmed Hijra soberly.

"Something tells me that the two of you will grow on each other..." teased Tarras with a couple of pats on Hijra's back.

Tarras, Hijra, and Preeti sailed off the next morning, with all the letters and gold ore samples in a large duffle bag. Tarras had asked Kofi to inform his peers that the turnaround time would be longer this time, as he was planning to use the global network of a large NGO to have the funds and letters delivered to the families. To prevent tensions among the migrants, he would only return after having collected all the letters from the families confirming the proper reception of the money. As Tarras walked through a long corridor formed by the migrants on the beach, Eve, watching the scene from afar, wondered whether they meant it as an honor or a threat. She ended up praying that the rough seas did not sink their hopes, as they had for so many of their comrades.

## Chapter 40

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Tarras' plan for the migrants to send gold to their families turned out to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, within a month of handing their ore to Tarras, all migrants but three who had participated in the program received enthusiastic feedback from their families. Fired up by a new sense of purpose for the first time in months, they went back to mining with renewed energy and a staunch determination to provide more for their families. That new energy, brought from the outside world, also quickly began to disintegrate their tight community. Up to that point, the migrants had been bound by their treacherous voyages in search of a better life and the injustice of their incarceration on a barren island. Now, each migrant worked to support his struggling family back home, and that preempted any other kind of bond. The refugees soon started fighting over the ownership of the best mining galleries. One of them was found bludgeoned to death in one of the tunnels. Theft, which was very low before, increased to the point that the elders' committee now spent most of its days trying to sort out who did what. Convicted thieves were no longer asked to leave the camp, as there were too many of them. They were just ordered to return the stolen ore and compensate the victim with some of their own. Luckily, a majority of honest miners could still enforce the rules.

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"It's getting worse every day," said Tarras who had convened Masrae, Romy, Eve, Catina, and Alan in the kitchen. "It's just a matter of time before some of the guys organize themselves into a gang and start exploiting the others—or worse. We will soon become a target for them as well since we control the food and hold the weapons that they would need to subdue the others."

"I propose that we arm Romy, Eve, and Alan," said Masrae. "We need to be stronger as a group."

"I agree," replied Tarras. "Please distribute handguns to them after the meeting and show them how to use them."

"How is that a solution?" protested Romy. "We can't just hide in the house like in Fort Alamo!"

"No, we can't. The only solution is to leave the island before the situation blows up."

"I'm not leaving without the migrants!" replied Romy.

"Me neither!" seconded Catina with unusual vigor.

"That goes for me as well," agreed Eve. Only Alan remained silent. He had been pouting ever since Preeti's abrupt departure from the island. He had even hidden from her, out of spite, on the day she had left, when she asked for him to say goodbye.

“We had no intention of leaving them behind,” retorted Tarras, raising his voice. “Masrae and I brainstormed at length on this last night. One option would be for us six to go back to England, alert an NGO about the refugee situation, and ask them to charter a boat to come get them—”

“But it’d be nearly impossible to keep the whole thing a secret,” intervened Masrae. “NGOs form a tight network, with people often moving from one to the other. There would always be one of their members or an overzealous journalist to leak the information. The moment the Onomaris heard about it, they’d blast this island to get rid of any incriminating evidence.”

“They wouldn’t dare kill all these men!”

“Yes, they would. I know them well. They view their mission as a war to defend their country, their culture, and their rights as women. For them, it is no different from Churchill’s resolve to fight the Nazis. They have a contingency plan in place and the explosives that they hid on the island can be triggered by satellite from their headquarters. The island is fragile. It would probably sink without a trace and the strong currents around it would scatter any floating remains in a matter of hours.”

“So, what do we do?” asked Romy. “Why can’t we use the sailboat to start moving the migrants to the mainland a dozen at a time?”

“The Onomaris monitor the island with another satellite. Whenever our sailboat leaves here, they follow it to its destination, and they send one of their members to discretely monitor who gets off it in the harbor. Masrae negotiated a deal with them so we could go back and forth between the island and the mainland—which has enabled us to help the migrants so far—but if we carried a single refugee back, they’d blow up the island as a precaution.”

“In that case, is it possible to break into the Onomaris’ headquarters in London and deactivate the satellite link to the explosives?”

“We wouldn’t know where to start, and keep in mind that these women function like a paramilitary organization. It’d be a very hard nut to crack. Masrae and I came to the conclusion that the only option to save the migrants and preserve the evidence of their confinement here is to deactivate the ignition mechanism on the explosive charges.”

“We don’t know where to find the bomb,” pointed out Eve. “This island is not big, but I assume that the Onomaris didn’t leave the device in plain sight. It’d be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

Tarras took a long glance at Masrae. He replied after she nodded.

“On my last trip to the mainland, Masrae’s friend inside the Onomaris organization called me. She overheard a conversation that suggested that the explosive charge might not be on the island, but below water, attached to the narrowest point of the rocky stem that holds this piece of land above water. From a strategic standpoint, that would indeed be the surest way to sink the island.”

“How would you go about looking for the bomb down there?” asked Eve.

"We've got diving equipment on the sailboat, but it is likely to be a tricky venture. If we want to be successful, it will take two divers, so we can cover more ground and watch out for each other. I can go, but Masrae has a little issue with water deeper than three feet—her Achilles heel. Since Hijra has left, I'll have to find someone on the mainland to—"

"I can go," interrupted Romy.

"Excuse me?" said Tarras.

"I'm certified to dive down to forty meters. Will that be enough?"

Tarras stared at Romy with a dubious expression.

"Forty meters... That's quite advanced. Where did you train?"

"When I graduated from nursing college, I took a few months off in the Caribbean. I trained and got certified there so I could teach others and pay for my stay. Will forty meters be good enough?"

"It'll have to do. That's my cutoff as well. Going lower would require the use of special gas mixtures, and I don't have any experience with that either. Anyway, if the activation signal comes down from a satellite, it's most likely activating a low-frequency radio signal transmitter on a buoy somewhere, which in turn contacts the underwater ignition mechanism. Since low-frequency radio waves cannot travel more than thirty meters in salty water, we should be in the range."

"When should we go?" asked Romy.

"Now," replied Tarras.

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"Shit! Where are the wet suits?"

Tarras' whole group had boarded the sailboat for the expedition, under the stares of the migrants who had remained at camp for the day.

"They were there a few days ago, Tarras. I even went snorkeling for some fresh fish in one of them," said Alan.

"Darn! The outcasts must have stolen them for use in their attempts to leave the island and rally the mainland on makeshift rafts. Lucky for us, they didn't touch the diving gear."

"What will we wear for the dive?!" asked an already edgy Romy.

"What else?" replied Tarras. "Our underwear! Loose clothes are not an option."

Romy huffed and said: "Fine! That'll be such fun in these cold waters! Everyone, turn away while we get ready, then."

She did not look at Tarras while they geared up. He did not appear to pay her any attention either, but he was first to take a giant stride into the water and she could see his goggles pointed at her and a wide grin on his face when her turn came.

The pair had agreed on a plan of action ahead of time. The sailboat would be stationed two hundred yards off the beach, and they would try to dive under the island until they reached the rocky stem that was supposed to hold it. They would then split and circle it in opposite directions in search of clues for the explosives. The water was freezing, but Romy felt perfectly at ease with her diving technique, and she swam vigorously enough to keep her body warm. Tarras was gliding alongside her and hand-signaled to her a couple of times to confirm that she was okay. Only a few minutes into their dive, they had to gradually increase their depth in order to follow the beveled rocky edge of the island and continue their progression toward the center of the geological structure.

Romy rapidly tensed up. She had always dived under open skies, never beneath a massive lid of rocks. A sensation of claustrophobia setting in, she had to pause for a moment to collect herself. Tarras moved to face her and massaged her shoulders with an appeasing smile on his face. It did the trick. After a few seconds, she tapped one of his forearms and pointed her finger forward to signal that she was okay. After a few minutes, the rocky bevel leveled off and they were able to continue their dive at a constant depth nearing twenty meters. Tarras kept a close eye on his wrist compass and led the way. Romy tailed him closely, now feeling slightly light-headed—a sensation that she recognized as normal at that depth and that helped her to cope with the tension.

They reached a point where the rocky ceiling above their heads suddenly bent into a long downward arch before diving straight down. Tarras turned back and raised his thumb to indicate that they had found the stem of the island. Romy reacted by signaling that she would circle the stem counterclockwise while he went the opposite way. Swimming alongside the underwater cliff, she pointed her flashlight up and down, looking for any kind of fissure or hole in which the explosives could have been placed. The craggy rock face was devoid of any life; even fish did not roam its surroundings. The nooks and crannies that dented its surface were either empty or too small to harbor any sizeable device.

About ten minutes into her examination, as she went around a bend, Romy was startled by a beam of light shooting out of the rocky wall, only thirty feet ahead. She kicked the water with both swim fins at the same time and let herself glide toward the light...

## Chapter 41

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Romy would occasionally experience lucid dreams— especially when sleeping in the morning after a night shift at the hospital—but never while awake! She spent a good minute treading water into place, trying to make sense of the vision challenging her sanity. There, sixty or so feet under ocean waters, rested a *dry bubble*. A ten-foot tall alcove carved into the rock, the size of a small examination room, and into which surrounding waters were somehow prevented from flowing. Standing tall in the center of the cavity stood Tarras, in all of his glorious anatomy, a younger Poseidon without the trident, which he probably stored in his briefs, considering the size and shape of the protuberance they hosted. He faced in her direction, looking down as if he had been waiting for her. His wide, square, prominent pectorals pulsated randomly, as if infused with a life of their own. The two chiseled columns of abs on which they rested could probably have stopped a young buffalo running at full speed. The mighty thighs onto which the whole edifice was propped up could have strangled the same buffalo in the wink of an eye. The human anatomy towering over Romy was not just incredibly healthy, it was also stamped with the stigmata of adventure. Below Tarras' right breast, two small round depressions in the skin looked suspiciously like bullet holes, and a long, thin, white scar ran across his right thigh.

Romy hoisted herself into the cave.

"What in the world...?" she mumbled, looking around at the rocky walls.

"My thoughts exactly when I found it," replied Tarras. "You can remove your breathing tube and your goggles; the air is fine here."

Romy complied cautiously and took two slow breaths. They increased her lightheadedness a bit and she instantly felt her body warm up. The air smelled like the copy machine when it ran a bunch of pages at once at the hospital. Suddenly relieved from the tension of their underwater journey, Romy stretched, sat down, and smiled candidly while looking around.

"What is this?" she asked.

"An underwater cave," replied Tarras, amused.

"I can see that! Is it natural?"

"I have never seen an air-filled cavity so deep under sea level. It's a bit like a bubble stuck at the end of a straw, at the bottom of a glass of water. The quality of the air is such that it is probably forced through some sort of long, natural siphon in the rock."

"How did you get here so fast?"

"I only swam for a couple of minutes after we split and ended up here. How long did it take you to get here? Ten minutes?"

"That seems about right."

"And you went all around the stem, no shortcuts?"

"None. I just followed the rock face."

“That’d mean that you went for, say, five hundred meters. Add to this about a hundred meters on my side. That would make for a circumference of the stem of around six hundred meters, hence a diameter of about two hundred meters.”

“Six hundred feet?!”

“Yes. The island on which we have been standing for weeks is nothing but a disk held on a slim stick by a Chinese plate spinner! I understand now how easy it’d be to sink it.”

“Oh, I forgot about that... We haven’t seen any sign of the explosives.”

“You’re sitting on them.”

“What!?” exclaimed Romy and jumped to her feet. She looked at the dull rock on which she had been sitting and threw an angry stare at Tarras.

“Behind the rock...” he said.

Romy cautiously leaned over the boulder and discovered a pyramid of sticks—the size and shape of large bratwursts—each in tight, white wrapping bearing the label “Superpower 90”.

“What are these? There must be over a hundred of them!” exclaimed Romy.

“Blasting gelatin, a very powerful explosive commonly used in mining.”

“Enough to blast the stem of the island?”

“At least enough to damage it to a point where it would no longer be able to sustain the weight of the land mass. Can you see the detonator, on the ground, by the side of the pile?”

Romy bent forward further and saw a shoe-box-size black container from which popped out a large loop antenna. A small red light flashed lazily on its surface.

“Do you have an idea of how to deactivate this?” asked Romy.

No answer. Alerted, Romy turned her head back and found Tarras staring at her rear end with a gourmand expression on his face.

“Do you mind?!” said Romy and swung around.

Tarras looked her straight in the eyes before letting his gaze scan her body all the way to the tip of her toes. Instinctively, Romy’s eyes followed the same path, and she was horrified to realize that her thin underwear, when wet, was entirely see-through!

“This is a precious moment, Romy,” said Tarras. Two essentially nude, healthy bodies cocooned in an oddly warm bubble sixty feet under sea level. It would be a tremendous waste not to live this instant as it deserves to be lived. Like going to the fair and walking away without as much as a candied apple or the echo of your own screams at the highest point of the Ferris wheel. What do you say? What happens in the bubble stays in the bubble...?”

Be it the slight warmth of the cave after a near-nude swim in freezing waters,  
Be it the lightheadedness resulting from the pressure of kilotons of water above her head,

Be it the thought of being stranded two feet away from a massive charge of live explosives,

Or be it simply the raw desire of a healthy female for a commanding male specimen,

Romy walked up to Tarras and laid her hands on his pecs before letting them glide down slowly, until her thumbs bounced lightly on his abs. When she laid her hands to rest just above the waistband of his briefs, she looked up at him. Tarras was no longer grinning. His facial expression had switched to one of intense concentration, like that of a sailor who suddenly discovers a fast-approaching storm. His stare and the density of his flesh under the palms of her hands gave Romy the panicky feeling that she might have bitten off more than she could chew, a feeling that was immediately extinguished by a slow caress that ran down from the nape of her neck to the groove in her lower back. Romy's body reacted instantly to the light stroke by relaxing where it did not matter and tensing up where it did. She let her gaze drop to confront Tarras' artillery; it was not fully armed yet, but definitely on standby for imminent action.

Even years later, Romy would have a hard time trying to describe to herself the lovemaking that took place in the bubble under the sea. The closer that she would come was by comparing it to a long waltz with a masterly gladiator. Tarras was as attentive a lover as he was powerful. He knew to embrace without crushing, to lead without domineering. In the embrace, Tarras was not an alpha male; he was more of a mystical creature, a strapping, unbounded, crafty centaur who sprinkled in equal parts the divine and the devilish onto and into the crucible in which he had turned Romy's body.

Romy had never been a woman to be owned. She had experienced a diversity of intimate partners before marriage, and with every one of them, regardless of their personality, she had always ended up taking charge of the sparring. As the alpha female that she had always been, she never surrendered to Tarras' charges. She instinctively countered them when surprised, evaded them when playing, guided them when yearning. Their long, slow waltz resembled more in the end the mating ritual of the male and female lions, part assault, part play, part pure carnality. An ancestral dance fueled by a cocktail of adrenalin and pheromones. Romy finally chose to crash and finish burning by laying her face on Tarras' panting chest, a move that she had always rejected with prior lovers as an act of submission. This time was different; there would not be a winner or a loser after the embrace, just a bond of a very new kind.

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“Finally! We thought you had drowned down there,” shouted Masrae as Tarras and Romy climbed back on the sailboat. “How could you stay that long? Your gas bottles were only designed for one-hour dives, it’s been over two hours!”

Tarras explained their discovery of the air bubble with great poise and that it had taken longer than expected to deactivate the explosives. In reality, it had taken him less than fifteen seconds to cut the two wires linking the detonator to the explosives. A very simple setup—the Onomaris had not expected anyone to ever discover the bomb.

Romy’s flushed face and vacillating stance ended up convincing Masrae, who set the sailboat on course for the shore, as Romy and Catina hugged with joy, and Alan engaged in a few dance steps while claiming that he was now only a few hours from his next pint home.

Tarras and Romy sat on the guardrail by the stern to dry their underwear, silent and looking straight at the island where a very uncertain future was to resume for them. The enchanted bubble had burst.

## Chapter 42

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As soon as the group reached the shore, under the inquisitive stares of migrants who had not gone to the mine, the events started unfolding at a whirling speed. Tarras instructed one of the miners to find Kofi and ask him to come to the house. Once the young man arrived, he joined Tarras and his party around the kitchen table. When Tarras made him aware of the explosives under the island, of their owners, and of their intended purpose, Kofi's expression switched from one of tension to one of alarm. Tarras' words of reassurance regarding the deactivation of the device did little to ease his angst.

"I understand that this may come as a bit of a shock to you," said Tarras, "but I brought you here today to share some good news with you."

Kofi pursed his lips.

"After this meeting," continued Tarras, "I will sail to Plymouth and contact the local representative of Neptune's Nest, a non-profit organization that specializes in the rescue of migrants who try to cross the channel on dinghies. I expect that it'll take a little time to get them to believe what happens on this island, but if needed, I'll bring in a journalist, a good friend of mine who works at The Guardian, to help me. I'll ask for Neptune's Nest to dispatch a couple of their rescue boats to bring the miners back to the mainland."

"The Onomaris will detect these boats. Are you 100% sure that they won't be able to blow up the island?" asked Kofi.

"If I wasn't, I would take my friends with me," replied Tarras. "I did my job under the island, and I'll make sure to do it again once I get back to the mainland. Now, we all need you to do yours."

"How?"

"You will have to prepare your mates for the arrival of the rescue ships. I expect that the news will shake them up quite a bit too. Very important: don't mention the explosives. This could only rattle them further and we don't need reactions of panic. Just tell them that we found a way to get them off the island thanks to a humanitarian organization."

Kofi first looked at Catina, whose teary eyes confused him, then to Eve, whose peaceful smile and firm nod comforted him.

"Okay," said Kofi, turning back to Tarras. "I'll speak to them tonight."

"Masrae and Hijra will accompany you, in full battle gear, just for crowd control. The last thing we want is last-minute scuffles with some migrants trying to rob others of their gold in order to reach England with better resources. They'll hang around the camp until the boats arrive."

A heavy silence set in, as everyone pondered the sequence of events that had just been uncovered, which Romy brought to an end.

"There's one more thing..." she said. "Eve, would you like to make your case?"

Eve grabbed Catina's hand before explaining her plan to take the girl, along with Kofi, to Vietnam. She spoke to both Tarras and Masrae.

"Why Vietnam?" asked Tarras.

"Before my husband's accident, I had moved some of my personal funds there, because I didn't know... how the chips would fall. I have an aunt who lives there. She has already spotted a house near hers that I could buy. I'd like to share it with Catina and Kofi until they find their own path forward."

"We can arrange for your trip there," said Tarras. "Catina surely could use some motherly guidance. Our goal was to get her out of her pit; having someone to lead her forward would be a good follow-up. As for Kofi, he took a chance on us, it'd be only fair that we return the favor. He'll head back to England with us, on my sailboat. We'll stop in Plymouth where I know of a very obliging cargo ship company. We have used them before to discreetly move special... *equipment* from the UK to other continents. Each of their ships has a few guest cabins. Given the right incentive and even if that means a couple of transfers on the way, they'll get you to Vietnam—"

"I can pay," said Eve.

"Don't worry about it, we have a standing account with them. They're always eager to please," replied Tarras with a smirk. "I'll call them as soon as we get within cell phone range, and I'll arrange for you to get on board one of their ships after it leaves the harbor. That way, Kofi will never have to enter and get out of England. It'll also be easier for you to enter Vietnam under the radar."

Kofi stood up slowly and extended his open hand to Tarras, who shook it with a wink.

The rescue boats arrived two days later. The migrants had lined up on the shore, immobile and silent. Kofi's announcement had been met with unexpected iciness. Since then, the refugees had been mostly lying on their couches, with minimal interactions, as if stunned by the sudden turn of events and the questionable future it brought with it. Like prisoners, they had adjusted to a hostile environment and lost most of their initial illusions regarding a normal life in England. They stared at the approaching rescue vessels with squinting eyes and stern faces, as if blinded by the light, just like an inmate suddenly released into a world that was now cold and empty for him. A dozen of them had elected to stay on the island to continue mining, after getting assurance from the Neptune's Nest crew that they would provide support for them there for at least a few months. The others held tightly on to their few belongings as they boarded the rescue ships. None of them said a word to Tarras nor anyone in his party. Despite Kofi's statements about their role in the rescue, they questioned why Tarras had arranged for their escape from the island all of a sudden—and not before—and suspected an ulterior motive. Romy, along with the other members of Tarras' group—plus Kofi—watched their tightly packed shadows on the deck fade away with emotion.

Despite having contributed to saving thousands of lives at the hospital, since nursing school she had never felt such a fulfilling sense of purpose.

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Eve, Kofi, and Catina chattered all along the trip back to the mainland, making plans for their resettling in Asia. The sailboat approached Plymouth harbor just after nightfall and remained a couple of miles offshore, Tarras reached the cargo ship company with his cell phone, and they immediately dispatched a dinghy to collect Eve and her protégés. While it was on its way, Eve requested a private meeting with Tarras in the cabin. When the door opened half an hour later, both Eve and Tarras appeared shaken and their last stares as the dinghy took the trio away were for each other.

The last leg of the sail, back to London, felt a little like a return from vacation. Everyone was silent. Tarras held the helm with his eyes far into the horizon. Masrae sat next to Romy and painted her toenails with a small kit that she had pulled out of the case of her Kalashnikov. She hummed “My Lady d'Arbanville” under her hood and looked front time to time in Tarras’ direction. Her routine unsettled Romy. Why would she paint her toes when her burka covered her feet at all times? For whom? For someone in London for whom she would peel off her cloak to expose her killer lingerie? The sudden recollection of Tarras and Masrae’s sensual tango dancing weeks earlier only added to Romy’s discomfort. She did not want to admit to herself that she might now feel a hint of jealousy. She just conceded that the thought of Tarras wrapping his arms around another woman’s body bothered her. Especially if the woman was Masrae. Not because she disliked her; she was fascinated by the creature. Romy’s imagination went wild when she imagined Masrae in front of a lover. How could anyone ever compare to such a cryptic, venomous *femme fatale*? Even the meek Alan grew fire in his eyes just staring at her feet.

After docking the boat in a London marina where he had reserved a berth, Tarras called a cab and took everyone to a downtown hotel. The outside of the brick building looked dull and old, but the inside decoration was classy. Before they entered the lobby, Alan excused himself and indicated that he would not need a room.

“See you in a few weeks at home,” said Tarras nonchalantly as the boy walked away.

“Home?” commented Romy. “Whose home, yours?”

“Alan is the keeper of my house on the hill. He lives with his mother in a nearby village. I spend a lot of time away, so I need someone to maintain the place and make sure that squatters don’t move into it.”

“Is he headed back there now?”

“No. He’s going to enter the first pub he finds and get plastered. Beer is his main hobby. After closing time, he’ll probably catch the last train home.”

“I wish I had known that. I didn’t even say goodbye.”

“He didn’t say goodbye to you. When he has beer on his mind, not much else matters to him.”

“Do you think that he still has Preeti on his mind?”

Tarras shook his head with a jaded smile.

“Who knows... The boy has never left the teens. Let’s all get some rest and meet in the hotel restaurant at nine for dinner,” instructed Tarras after booking three rooms.

“I have some shopping to do,” said Masrae. “I won’t be around until then. Call me if you need me.”

As soon as she walked into her room, Romy nearly had a panic attack, a condition that she had never experienced, even during the worst situations at the hospital. She calmed herself down by gulping a tiny bottle of vodka from the minibar. Once her nerves sank back under her skin, she realized that her anxiety was fueled by an all-too-sudden return to normality. For weeks, her brain had rewired itself to face the most outlandish, challenging situations. In doing so, it had done away with many connections to real life, the least of which not being the ones to her family. If she could figure out a story to explain her long absence to her hospital superiors, how could someone tell a husband and a daughter that they did not feel the need to call them—if only to reassure them—for over two months? A very big, terribly domestic mess to face with its onslaught of cries and shouts, when all she wanted was to continue hiding in the forest at night, rescuing outcasts’ lives, and deep diving with a brawny maverick in a quest for explosive moments. She was not even sure whether Tarras and Masrae would still be around when she went down the stairs later in the day. They had brought Romy back inside her resident world, a world that they just crossed in between two missions. If Masrae got to show her new frills and thrills to Tarras before the evening, she certainly had the power to whisk him away from a potential rival. Romy suddenly felt drained, empty, and woozy from the alcohol. She let herself sink into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 43

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"Isn't Masrae joining us?" asked Romy when Tarras walked into the restaurant half an hour late.

"No. She sends her apologies, but she had other plans for the evening."

Romy felt relieved and embarrassed at the same time. Relieved because she would be able to have a candid face-to-face conversation with Tarras before they parted. Embarrassed because Tarras had come to dinner dressed in a sharp black suit while she wore a cheap-&-dull dress and black ballerinas from a second-hand boutique that she had found two doors down from the hotel. She had limited herself to small purchases that she could make in cash for fear that the use of her credit card might trigger a cascade of uncontrolled events.

"You look nice," said Tarras with apparent sincerity.

"You don't look too shabby yourself," replied Romy. I always had a weakness for the wolf-in-sheep-clothes look of rugby players at formal events."

Tarras stared at her trying to decide whether to smile or growl. He chose the first option.

"Good, let's play ball then!" he said. "Have you already had a drink?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for you."

Tarras waved at a waiter.

"Why don't you order for me?" he told Romy.

"I don't know what you like!"

"Well, how do you see me?"

Romy mulled the matter over for a few seconds before turning to the waiter.

"I'll have a Pink Lady and for my friend here, a Vodka Martini, *shaken, not stirred.*"

Tarras laughed.

"Excellent answer, my daredevil nurse. Excellent answer!"

The room was warm, fragrant, and elegant. A shocking contrast to the places Romy had roamed during the previous weeks. She could, however, have done without the smooth jazz oozing at a low volume from the ceiling speakers. A face-to-face with Tarras was always a roll of the dice. She did not want the ambience to presume its outcome. As they reviewed the menu, Romy peeked over hers to steal a glimpse of Tarras and she caught him... doing the exact same thing.

"Who will be across the table from you at dinner tomorrow?" he asked to dispel their embarrassment.

"You really have a way with small talk, don't you?" replied Romy, taken aback by the question.

"Okay, let's save that one for after the drinks. Why don't you kick off the small talk, then?"

"Have you heard from Hijra? Did he and Preeti safely make it back home?"

"I spoke to both of them this afternoon. I called Hijra and Preeti happened to be with him." Tarras smiled. "Yes, they are both back in their respective homes

and it seems like Preeti jumps the wall of her masters' mansion from time to time while they are napping to visit Hijra. They seemed very cozy; they might just have rekindled the fire..."

"Fire? What fire?"

"The one they started on the island. You didn't know?"

"Preeti and Hijra?! I cannot believe it! Well, I guess that's kind of... cool."

"In a Beauty and the Beast kind of way, yes. One thing is for sure, they are both quality people."

"I didn't get to know them very well, but they struck me as very decent, indeed, each in their own way. Hopefully, we'll get some good news from Eve, Catina, and Kofi in a few days as well."

"They've embarked on a safe passage; they'll be fine."

"What did you and Eve talk about yesterday, just before they left us?"

"She wanted to thank me."

"For kidnapping her and killing her husband?"

"For canceling what could have been a very tricky outcome for her and enabling a better one. She called me "a strange and powerful catalyst". I must admit, I looked up catalyst in the dictionary today to find the meaning of that remark."

"Is that what you are? A catalyst? A tiny grain that triggers a strong chemical reaction and determines its outcome?"

"I like the image. A battered woman tries to kill her tormentor; the man doesn't die; the police may suspect foul play if he talks again—a bunch of corrosive chemicals at play there. Time will tell whether I stirred the reaction in the right direction, but that was the goal."

"How did you hear about Eve's situation in the first place?"

"Under the cover of a non-profit that we set up in London. We have an online mailbox in which anyone can report a case of woman abuse, anywhere in the world. Obviously, we can't intervene in every case that is reported, so we tend to act on the most serious ones near the zone in which we are located at the time. Masrae and I were in London, in between missions; that's why we chose to intervene in Eve and Catina's situations, as well as the one of the young girl whose body you saw Masrae carry downstairs at the apartment building. We dropped the ball on that one; we didn't anticipate the role of the boyfriend."

"And Preeti?"

"Hijra dropped her case anonymously in the online mailbox himself. Since he was in the same area as her, he offered to take the case. He confessed later to Masrae and me that he knew her, that she was a neighbor of his whom he thought was abused by her masters, and that he had a personal interest in her."

Romy took a long sip of her cocktail. As Tarras' explanations lifted some corners of the curtain behind their joint adventure, she started feeling at the center

of the world again. As a small catalyst herself; a catalyst by association. As soon as they placed their meal orders, she rekindled the discussion.

"You said several times that you, Masrae, and Hijra were 'in between missions'. So, I guess that rescuing damsels in distress by any means necessary is not your primary occupation?"

"It's not."

"What is it, then?! What are you? Mercenaries? Spies? Contract killers?"

"Will you join us tomorrow if I answer your question? Masrae and I are leaving for a new mission. Hijra will join us there."

"From that answer, I'm assuming that after joining you, your activities would commit me to silence as well."

"Will you join us?"

"Tomorrow? No."

"Going back to the nest?"

"I have to. On the night I first met you, I was at the end of my rope with my daughter. A very difficult teenager, a weak father... I had been on parenting burnout for months. Lea's... *incident* with the vagrant—"

Tarras frowned at the euphemism.

"Lea's *ordeal* with the vagrant," corrected Romy, "pushed me over the edge with her. Once I had been reassured that your treatment with the red pill had returned her to a normal life course, I felt a huge need to get away for a while and leave her father to deal with her a little."

"In a way, you were an abused woman yourself, like many parents of teenagers these days. You needed some fresh air."

"And I certainly got some with you guys!"

Tarras grinned.

"And now, the time has come for you to return to your own, normal, life course. You will be home just in time for Christmas."

"Christmas...? Oh, are we at the end of December yet?! Christmas is my favorite time of the year, and yet, when we crossed London earlier today, the Christmas decorations didn't even register with me. After such a long time—three months, was it then?—in darker places, they just felt to me like bright city lights!"

"It must feel good to return to a brighter place for someone not used to the darker ones," said Tarras with a candid smile.

"It's not that. I just miss my daughter, and she needs me badly. She isn't done growing up and in her rare moments of lucidity, she admits it and thanks me for walking by her side. Two years from now, once she goes to college, then I'll be free..."

"Will you join us then?"

"I'll definitely call you then. Once you tell me about your activities, I'll finally be able to tell whether you are an angel dropout trying to redeem himself in his free time, or a sorcerer's apprentice who stirs up people's lives for fun. In any

event, I doubt that Masrae would jump with joy at the idea of adding me to your group?"

"You're wrong. I would not have offered you to join us if I hadn't first run the idea by her, Hijra, and a few other members of our organization. Masrae, like the others, was fully supportive. Having a gutsy, competent nurse in our ranks was a valuable asset. She respects you. I'm not sure why you'd think that she doesn't care for you. Have you had a spat with her that I'm not aware of?"

"No. I respect her as well. I don't understand her at all, but she is an amazing creature. I just assumed that she did not care to join us for dinner, so she wouldn't have to say goodbye to me."

Tarras laughed.

"Masrae doesn't talk much, as you know, least of all in any kind of emotional situation. She never says goodbye. Believe me, you should be happy she didn't. When Masrae says goodbye to someone, that person's future becomes really short-lived! She didn't come tonight because she had to get ready for..."

Tarras stopped abruptly and scanned the room casually as if done with his sentence.

"To get ready for...?" insisted Romy.

Tarras pretended not to have heard, just like a child who doesn't want to answer.

"To get ready for something that will take place later in the evening?" persisted Romy.

Tarras winced, seemingly annoyed at himself for his slip of the tongue.

"Your small talk skills are not that great either, Romy," he finally replied with a tense smile. "Let's eat, this looks great!"

Romy and Tarras ate their meals in relative silence, as if they both needed a break from the sparring, but the two glasses of a mighty Malbec that went with the food soon launched them back onto the ring. Romy opened fire first.

"Tarras, I understand that you won't talk to me today regarding what you do during your *missions*, but there's something I'd like to know, so I have a chance to reflect on it during the next two years."

Tarras nodded soberly.

"I saw you kill a man in cold blood, and with a scorpion as a weapon furthermore. Is it a routine part of your *missions* for you, Masrae, and Hijra to kill people?"

"In most missions, some people will die at our hands, yes," replied Tarras while tackling his lemon pie. "We do, however, pick our missions very carefully, so the targets that we will likely have to hit are bad guys whose existence is a threat to innocent ones. I won't lie to you, though, some good people get caught in our net sometimes, even though we try to minimize collateral damage."

"Doesn't that collateral damage haunt you at night?"

“Not if the net result of the mission is a positive one and we left the world a better place in our wake. Take Eve’s husband, for instance. He was badly burnt, but doctors still thought that there was a chance that he might pull through. If he had, he might have sent Eve to jail, and if not, Eve would probably have felt compelled to care for her tormentor for the remainder of his days. Yes, she wanted him dead, but not to suffer alone for years. A small scorpion decided both their fate—it is God’s creature after all—and now Eve finally has a chance to fulfill her lifelong dream of founding a family while her husband will no longer suffer. I call that a net positive.”

Romy sighed, a bit overwhelmed by the nonchalance of Tarras’ philosophy. If she had dedicated her life to saving others’, she could never have envisioned taking a life in cold blood, even from a bad guy, and to save a hundred other lives. His approach reminded her of his lovemaking: a crafty, terribly efficient balance of care and force which, she had to admit, left a high net positive in its wake...

“What happens in the bubble stays in the bubble...” whispered Romy to herself, as her mind dove sixty feet under the Atlantic Ocean’s surface. She blushed like a schoolgirl when she realized that Tarras had heard her and was grinning.

“Okay...” he said, clearly amused, “Is that something we’ll discuss too? Something you’d like to reflect on for the next two years as well? Till we meet again?”

“Don’t be an ass!” replied Romy, vexed.

This time Tarras laughed loudly, before calming down as Romy picked furiously at her iced chocolate soufflé.

“Don’t be mad, Romy. What happened in the bubble was for me a moment of exception in an incredible setting with a fascinating lover. Even seasoned adventurers have their favorite peaks in life. This was without a doubt one I’ll treasure. That bubble belongs to us, in space and in time. I’m afraid we will never be able to recreate it, but I’d lie if I said that I would not want to try one day.”

Romy’s spoonful of melted chocolate remained suspended in mid-air. The angry stare that she had fired at him when he had started his declaration—which she thought to be a joke—had turned to an intense gaze as he went on and she realized that the man was sincere.

“Thank you,” is all she could answer.

Without warning, Tarras stood up and grabbed a business card from his pocket that he handed to her. When she took it, he wrapped her hand inside his.

“I will expect your call, Romy.”

Romy meant to stand up, but her legs felt numb and she was afraid of falling... into the moment. She simply smiled and nodded. When Tarras walked away, she looked at his card. It only bore his name—first or last, whichever it was—and a phone number.

Alone at the table, the insides of her skull swirling in a cocktail of words from a lover, ethers from a wine, and dopamine from chocolate, Romy no longer minded the thought of Tarras knocking at a door behind which Masrae had prepared herself to deliver to him another peak. She ordered her favorite liquor—Armagnac VSOP—the one that promised her a light, distant, and exciting night...

Back, for now, on the other side of the wall.

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Thank you for reading this far!

If the story resonated with you, I would be grateful if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or your preferred platform.

The Amazon page for this novel is at:

<https://www.amazon.com/Fair-Venom-Guy-Orgambide/dp/B0FG2J5K5C>