

A. YAMINA COLLINS

# THE LAST KING

LOVE.  
YOUR.  
ENEMY.



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## **Also by A.Yamina Collins**

*The Blueberry Miller Files*

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*Dedicate to the memory of the giants upon  
whose shoulders I stood:*

Devorice Jean Collins (1944–2010)

David Britton Collins (1913–1995)

Susie Mae Collins (1915–1998)

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## Epilogue

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*"Epic of the Hunted"* [From the Mesopotamian text,  
circa 2450 BC]

The First One came from the line of Man, weeping---  
Weeping for help, weeping in deep distress;  
If only he could keep away the Gates of the Netherworld  
If only he could turn his back on death  
Then he would be glorious! Then he would be divine!  
And death could not come and feast on him  
But he knew not where the Garden lay  
Though he staggered about and cried, "Help me! Help  
me! Help me."  
Searching for an entrance to Eden  
At last it was found, and so came his chance to be like  
the Master Shepherd.  
For a treasure had been discovered  
A gift had been given!  
Eternal life was finally granted

And yet . . . why did he feel no joy?

Why did a restless mourning fill his days?

Because a trumpet call had been sent out from the  
Master Shepard

The hand of the Almighty had been unleashed upon him:

"Return your immortality or perish," went the call.

But the children just laughed and laughed and laughed

And even now some of them live today:

Those offspring of the First One

Legends they are,


Legends of old

And the Mighty Hunter seeks them still!


*[Courtesy of the University of Sankore, West Africa;  
translated to English by Marvin Calhoun]*

# CHAPTER 1

## The Boogeyman



---



*It is doubtful the Master will ever hear about it,* Markus thinks, pushing aside a few strands of blond hair that have fallen over his eyes as he stands on the bank of this deserted lake; the branches on the trees around him sway peacefully, and the evening air hums a lullaby.

He does not suppose the Master will hear about it and, really, what difference should it make if he does? *It's just an old homeless man, anyway.* Markus feels no guilt about it, so how could his thoughts give him away?

Removing his hand from the old fellow's mouth, Markus already knows the poor fool is too stunned to scream---people are always speechless when they first see Markus's wings, stretched out as they are, twenty feet in length on either side of him and thirty feet high. Tonight the old man simply blinks and lets spittle hang from the corners of his lips.



Markus does not know the man's name, but the old man himself certainly knows it: Johnnie is what they call him, Johnnie Kubrick, and at present his very soul seems to have unzipped itself from his body and stepped outside of him. How he longs for this to be some terrible dream from which he will soon awake.

But this is no dream at all: there is a man standing before him who looks human, yet has yellow wings made of glass coming out of his back. The wings shimmer, like translucent gems, and they taper off to thin, razor-sharp edges, making the sound of metal crunching against metal as they flap---it is a harsh sound, a cruel sound, and yet the wings themselves do not frighten Johnnie so much as what is attached to the wings.

The old man's pale lips tremble.

"Wha---what are you?" he finally stutters. He does not mean to ask questions. He means to beg for his life, because he does not want to die in this manner---not in these shabby clothes, near a body of water where he can easily be disposed. He wants to die in a warm room,

with someone who loves him holding his hand. Johnny Kubrick wants to die with dignity, different from the way he lived.

The old man chokes on his tears, wishing he were important again, the sort of man who would be missed in death, and he tries to recall how he ever became the sort of person other people diverted their gaze from on the streets. How had he become nameless, faceless, and useless to the world? When he was a boy, he never imagined the day his red hair, so straight and neat, would be constantly matted against his head and the stench of his body would repel others.

Tonight, Johnnie wants his mother here with him, so he could take in the soapy smell that was always on her, and smile at the sight of her emerald green eyes. If his mother were still alive she would shield him from this boogeyman, and sing to him, like she did that Christmas morning long ago, when the cold of winter snapped at his bones and he did not get the shiny new firetruck he wanted.

For a moment, Markus thinks to reply to him, to answer that "what are you?" question that hangs in the air between them. It seems the decent thing to do on a night as beautiful as this one. But what is the point?

Fingering the old man's arm with his left hand, Markus feels for the bones under the skin and swiftly splits the flesh by pushing his thumb into the forearm. Blood streams down. The old man barely utters a sound, even as Markus plants his lips against the gushing wound.


"My blood---" Johnnie tries to explain, shaking his head. "You shouldn't---" he hopes explaining that the winged man will contract a disease should he taste his blood, might spare his life.

But Markus smirks and looks at him. "Shhhh," he soothes. "It's not your blood I want anyway." And now, he goes in for the kill.


*No one will miss a drunk, Markus concludes. And if I bury him deep, the Master will never know.*

# CHAPTER 2

## Emmy



---



Pull back the curtain in the village of Lake George, New York, on an afternoon like this one and you will find a young woman lying on her bed in the upstairs room of a two-story house. It is the month of May now, and outside the vernal joy of spring blooms in sharp contrast to the dull and somber mood that fills the woman's soul.

She has been up and about for a few hours today already, but the chores of the morning have worn her out, and now she has lain down again to rest.

Winching, she stares up at the ceiling and tries to feel the delicate details of her back and spine---all the vertebrae, skin, bones, sinews and tendons. Some days she wishes she could know what a herniated disk actually feels like to the touch; for it seems to her that if she could touch those things inside of her that are broken,

then maybe she could push them back together again and make herself whole.

Her name is Emmy Hughes, and for a long while she remains on her back, perfectly still, though her eyes now move from the ceiling to the padded back brace propped on a chair across the room.

She wears the brace off and on, depending on her level of pain on a given day, and although she has not minded it much in the past, the coming of the hot season makes her weary of putting it on; with spring soon ending and summer on the horizon, she wants to be rid of the contraption's sweaty embrace altogether.

How often she now recalls all the things she used to complain about while living in New York---the trains she had to wait for, the solicitous remarks men made to her when she walked down the street, and even the cramped space of her old apartment. Those complaints seem so strike her as silly, compared to her present condition!

Not so long ago, she was in perfect health, sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with Olana and

working at a local animal clinic. Emmy can hardly believe that was only six months ago.

These days, she is like a child again, convalescing under the watchful eye of her father, in the same house where she grew up. There is something humiliating about needing to be taken care of like this (she is twenty-eight years old after all!), yet it would not be so bad if only her mother were still alive.

Sighing, Emmy breathes and sits up. She has been resting for the last two hours and slowly, very carefully, she stands.

Walking is not difficult, but long periods of it are hard, and lifting things always aggravates the pain. Just the other day, for example, she tried moving a box into David's closet to make more space for her aunt in his old room, but one false move gave her a back spasm.

As she rests on the edge of the bed, Emmy's eyes fall on a photograph on her wall; in it, Jeannie Hughes is holding a plump and starry-eyed little Emmy up to the camera.

It is the little things she misses most about her mother: the girlish giggle, the sharp gaze Jeannie gave her children when they displeased her, and even the way she seemed to put cheese on nearly everything she cooked.

But most of all, Emmy misses her mother's protectiveness. She smiles even now when she recalls just how much she was at the center of her concerned attention. As a child, Emmy quickly came to learn why her mother was so guarded and sensitive about the things people said or did to her daughter.

Once, at a local pool, while Emmy sat on a bench in her bathing suit and drank from a bottle of juice, a little blond girl seated next to her turned and said, "Why is your skin is so dark?"

Emmy froze. She was only five years old at the time, but she could sense that the question was filled with both disgust and genuine curiosity. Still, she did not know how to answer the girl, or what to say at all for that matter, and the bottle of juice trembled violently in her hand. Pausing, she looked down at herself and

considered her own body in a way she never had before. It was possible that something was wrong her skin color, and she had indeed heard vague whispers before, people saying that her skin was as black as night.

"W---what about it?" Emmy asked nervously.

"Well, don't you mind?" the girl continued. "Aren't you sad your skin is so black?"

Emmy sat in confused silence while the little girl smiled at her. "I mean, you might have been pretty if it weren't so dark. But now you're not very pretty at all, are you?"

Emmy was embarrassed more than angry, and equally ashamed that she did not know if she was pretty. Was she? She supposed now that she wasn't, and to keep from crying she brought the bottle of juice to her quivering lips and stared straight ahead.

In her mind, she thought of running and hiding in the water, of sinking into the cool pool of blue and pretending the conversation never happened. If she floated away or closed her eyes and wished hard enough,



she might turn into a fish or a mermaid whose skin color no one ever wondered about.

But Emmy did not budge. She remained stiff in her spot, and only when Jeannie was standing right in front of her, blocking the sun from her view, did Emmy recall that her mother had been sitting just a few rows back on the bleachers, watching Emmy mingle with the other girls. Her ears, apparently, were keen to every conversation Emmy was engaged in.

Clutching her daughter's hand in her own, Jeannie leaned down toward the blond girl and whispered, "And you think you're pretty? Why, you're the ugliest little creature I've ever seen."

The girl's eyes widened in disbelief, as if it were unfathomable that someone would ever suggest she was not beautiful. But here were the authoritative words of Jeannie Hughes, contradicting her assumptions.

Emmy barely had a chance to be dragged away from the scene before the other girl's mother appeared, with a frightened look in her eyes as she called out, "Victoria, Victoria! Come away from them!"

And that was how the episode ended: with two mothers frantically dragging their daughters away from the corrupting other. Emmy could hear her mother muttering something under her breath as she pulled Emmy along: "Gone tell my daughter she's ugly? I wish she would . . ."

But although Emmy welcomed her mother's rescuing that day, her mind was nonetheless clouded with a sense of unease that had been awakened inside.

This was her first real comprehension that her darkness was actually a problem, a badge of dishonor to the world, and it also began to dawn on her that she did not quite resemble her mother in terms of looks.

"How come I don't look like you?" Emmy finally asked, once they reached the car.

"What do you mean?" Jeannie asked, looking down at her. "We do look alike."

"No," Emmy disagreed, shaking her head. "Your skin is light. Mine is dark. You're pretty and I'm not."

Jeannie gasped. "Don't you ever say that again! Do you hear me? Don't you---" It seemed to Emmy that she saw her mother's hands move toward her, as if she meant to take Emmy by the shoulders and shake her.

But instead she took a deep breath and knelt down to Emmy's level. "Sweetheart, you're beautiful just the way you are. Don't you think?"

When Emmy shook her head no, her mother blinked back tears, put Emmy in the car seat, and cried all the way home.

It was only later that night, when Emmy was getting into bed, that her mother seemed ready to speak again, and Jeannie lay down next to her daughter and traced the outline of her face with her fingertips. "Do you know why I married your father, Em?"

Emmy did not understand the question, for she was not of an age where she had ever contemplated why mommies and daddies married each other at all. "No," she answered.

"Well, I loved your daddy, to be sure, but I married him because I wanted chocolate-colored babies." And she smiled when she said this.

"You mean you wanted me to be this color?"

"Of course!" she exclaimed, miffed by the very question. "I was over the moon when you were born. How could I not be? I asked for you. Plus, you had the biggest set of eyes I ever saw. Didn't I ever tell you that? Huge eyes. Oh, I worried you were gonna drown me in those eyes, that's how beautiful you were."

And so it was, after this, that Emmy begin to consider that if her mother did not mind her color, maybe Emmy should not mind it either.

Jeannie was like a hawk, often on the lookout for unkind words against her little Emmy, yet at the same time, she was not always a woman who shied away from disturbing topics that her daughter might overhear.

One October evening, while Emmy and her brother were in the living room watching *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, Emmy went into the kitchen for some

juice and found her mother and her aunt Maybelline sitting at the table in some kind of heated exchange.

As Emmy was opening the refrigerator, her mother gestured toward Emmy and said, "You don't think I know how some people will treat her one day? Please, Maybel. But we're here and we're staying. Besides, if I went down south, some black folks might treat her worse."

"Oh, c'mon now---"

"I'm telling you, Maybel, colorism is the most unaddressed mental-health issue in our community. No one wants to admit it, but it's there---like a disease. And folks got the nerve to say she don't look like me."

"Well---"

"She couldn't look more like me if she tried, Maybel. People are just color-struck is all."

Emmy was only seven years old at the time. She got her milk and walked out, aware that she was now considered something that was a "mental-health issue."

She also sensed, for the first time, that her aunt thought the way that Emmy did; that is, Emmy honestly did not look like anyone else in her family. And while for a time, her mother kept insisting this was not true, eventually even Jeannie could not deny the fact. It was true that Emmy had learned character and discipline from her mother and father, but her physical appearance was uniquely her own.

Emmy's lips, for example, were fuller than those of her parents, and heart-shaped; her cheekbones were high and her neck was long, while Jeannie and Martin Hughes had short necks and no cheekbones at all. Emmy's nose was wide at the tip, and it had beautiful length to it, while her mother had a pug nose and her father's nose was wide from top to bottom. Emmy's large, dark brown eyes were shaped differently than theirs, too---hers were almond-shaped, not round or beady like theirs, and her lashes were so long that people often assumed they were fake. "You got 'em naturally," her mother once told her. "I have to go out and buy my lashes."

Meanwhile, Emmy's strong, square chin gave her face a handsomeness that was balanced by more delicate

features, whereas her mother had a pointy chin and her father had a round one. The firmness of Emmy's jaw gave her an arresting quality, and even her forehead, which was wide and smooth as stone, did not have that rough Hughes look about it that David inherited.

There was an interesting mix of softness and strength to Emmy's countenance, and her features were played up by the darkness of her skin, which did not always appear to be regular skin. Under certain light, it had a sparkling sheen to it, like that of diamonds, and as she grew Emmy's looks went from peculiar to pleasant to extraordinary. Even her older brother David, whose skin was light brown and who might have been inspired by his peers and the media to detest his sister's darkness, grew to be in awe of her, for she was breathtaking, and people often gawked at either her beauty or her darkness. Sometimes, in conflict of emotion, they gawked at both.

Jeannie Hughes taught her daughter to dress in clothes that accentuated her color; under Jeannie's watchful eye, Emmy had a wardrobe full of brightly colored clothes---yellows, greens, purples and oranges;

they were lovely materials, simple but feminine, and they made the intensity of her skin all the more startling.

Soon, however, it wasn't just Emmy's looks that were strangely at odds with those of her parents and her brother, but her height as well. By the time she was fourteen, Emmy had blossomed into something the family had not expected. Her father was only five-foot-six, her mother five-three, and her brother managed to reach five-seven, while Emmy had reached the staggering height of exactly six feet tall.

Certain relatives began to gossip that Emmy could not possibly be the daughter of Martin Hughes, but her determined father put a stop to such talk right away. He showed Emmy, and anyone who cared to see, a picture of Emmy's great-great-grandmother on his side of the family: Hattie Oakley had been a dark woman with a gorgeous face and a height that loomed well above most men of her time. Strangely, Emmy was almost the spitting image of her. To Martin Hughes, it seemed as if all of Hattie Oakley's looks had skipped three generations and willed themselves entirely into Emmy's lengthy body.



It was a body that seemed to belong to a dancer, even though Emmy did not dance. Both the movement of her long arms and the gait of her walk were graceful and easy, so that there was something soft and willowy about the way she moved---as if she were floating on her heels rather than standing on them.

Emmy Somali Hughes became a tall, black swan, lithe and graceful among a family of short, chunky ducks.

Perhaps it was the extraordinariness of her looks that encouraged her to sometimes regress into her imagination as she grew older. She had become quietly confident about her appearance, and because her head was so often in a book somewhere, Emmy liked to imagine herself a princess, in some other world.

Jeannie Hughes would have preferred her daughter improve her mind with more serious subjects. But she also reasoned that a child had a right to dream, and maybe the fact that Emmy could spend entire afternoons with a book in her lap was a good thing. After all, Jeannie's son David was far too gregarious for his own

good, so it was nice to have one child who did not mind being at home.

But at other moments, Jeannie Hughes had a hard time embracing her daughter's love of the fantastical, and she was especially displeased when Emmy, at age fourteen, saw the movie *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and got it in her head that she wanted her hair to look like that of Kate Blanchett's Galadriel---her Elf idol.

Partly it was the movie that transfixed Emmy, and partly it was the fact that she had grown tired of standing out. She felt that she was often too much for too many people: she was too tall, too dark, too brightly dressed---she wanted, during high school especially, to blend in a bit more, especially since her hair, much like her body, just kept growing and growing and growing.

Why shouldn't she have something in common with her classmates, Emmy soon reasoned. All of her friends had straight hair and most of it was of a lighter hue, so why shouldn't she?

Emmy's own hair had always been natural and kept at shoulder length, but it was big hair that had a mind of

its own and it stood up all over her head in a big puffy afro. Sometimes the taunts about her hair were worse than the comments about her skin.

It was called dirty and messy, and she was nicknamed Nappy Emmy and Kinky Emmy. Some folks insisted that it looked like a rat's nest sat upon her head, even though it was always clean and styled to her and her mother's liking. Jeannie was even in the habit of placing decorative pins and bows in it.

But Emmy saw that her hair was still foreign to everyone she grew up with, and she began pulling it back into a bun so as not to distract people or stir up their ire.

When she did this, the taunts became fewer and fewer and she realized that if she relaxed her hair she might really fit in.

But relaxers were not allowed into the Hughes house.

Emmy was miffed. She was fourteen now and a new streak of independence had emerged in her, giving

her the desire and (she felt) the right to experiment. She was certain she wanted long, straight, blond hair flowing down her back, and one afternoon she demanded it from her mother.

Jeannie Hughes was standing at the sink cutting up carrots and apples for a salad when Emmy cornered her and made her intentions known.

"You can blow it out," was how her mother responded, not turning around to face the girl.

Emmy practically stomped her feet. "I want it relaxed."

"Wear a wig."

"You wear a wig."

Her mother now turned to face her, getting that heated look in her eyes that always gave her children pause. "Excuse me?"

Emmy took a step backwards. "I---," she reconsidered her tactic. "I want to use my own hair."

"Those chemicals can melt a soda can, Em. And you're telling me you want that mess on your head?"

"I don't care."

"Well, I do!" her mother finally shouted, slamming the knife she was holding down onto the counter. "And this is the end of the conversation. Got it?"

Quietly, Emmy cursed her mother under her breath, forgetting that Jeannie Hughes, like most mothers, had a special way of seemingly hearing through walls.

So when dinnertime came and her father and brother got juicy steak for their meals along with a healthy green salad with carrots, radishes, onions, apples and candied walnuts, Emmy got a bloody, half-cooked steak and a salad peppered with bits of paper, plastic bottle caps and dirt.

"What's this?" Emmy cried out.

Jeannie methodically tapped her fork against the table and eyed her daughter vehemently. "Since you

insist on putting garbage on your hair, I say, why not have in your food, too?"

Emmy looked to her father to talk some sense into his wife, but Martin Hughes met Emmy's gaze head-on and shook his head. "I'm not backing you on this one."

Emmy never asked about a relaxer again.

And now today, she laughs about it, and thinks back on her mother with a fondness that makes her heart ache. Every little thing Emmy did to hurt that woman, intentional or not, fills her with a deep regret.

"You always tried your best, didn't you?" Emmy asks, looking one last time at the photograph, then turning her gaze away from it.


Even in its heaviness, she knows that life must go on, and she walks to her door, passes out of it, into the hallway, and makes her way to the stairs.

It's time to start dinner; Emmy promised her dad she would make some fried fish when he returned home from the airport. Yes, the house is quiet at the moment,


but soon that will not be the case once Martin Hughes steps from his car with Emmy's aunt Maybelline in tow.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Aunt May**



---



There is something tranquil about the Hughes home that pleases nearly everyone who comes to visit. It is two stories tall but still small, and has a very cozy feel to it, like that of a log cabin home.

Emmy listens to the creak of the wooden stairs as she makes her way down to the kitchen. She has a lot in common with the stairs these days, she thinks; sometimes she feels as creaky as they do.

In the kitchen, she pauses at the sink and glances out of the window at the front lawn. The house is surrounded by large, heavy-shouldered trees that almost

press their leafy arms against the walls, keeping the sun out, and making both the front and back yards feel like some dark, enchanted forest.

Emmy feels like she is her mother at times like this, standing at the sink like Jeannie did, slicing up a myriad of ingredients for different dishes. Today, Emmy adds bits of blue cheese, fresh plums and walnuts to her salad dish, and she chops up fresh oregano and thyme for the fish.

Around four, a car pulls into the driveway, and Emmy wipes her hand on a napkin and inches out of the kitchen, toward the living room door.

Martin Hughes is the first one out of the car, and then Emmy's aunt emerges, decked out in cool white pants and a flower-printed blouse.

Maybelline Jackson was last here six months ago, to attend her sister's funeral, and that visit had been a brief and very unhappy one.

*It need not be so unhappy this time,* Emmy thinks as she steps out onto the porch and waves.



Her aunt has a hard, pinched look on her face. Then again, Aunt May never smiled as often as Jeannie did, and since the loss of her husband Earl more than a year ago, she smiles even less now.

"Come give your auntie some love," she cajoles, breathing heavily as she closes the car door behind her. She is sixty-three years old and certainly not as spry as she used to be.

Emmy walks slowly down the porch steps and plants a tender kiss on her aunt's cheek.

Here now is her mother's older sister, alike in fairness of skin, but different in so many other ways. While Emmy has never seen a single wig on her mother's head, her aunt would not be caught dead without one; and whereas her mother always had full, bubbly cheeks that glowed like apples on her face, her aunt May's cheeks are thin, hollow and dull, and her neck and jaw were already sagging.

"How you getting along, Em?" Aunt May inquires.

"Fine. Just fine. And you?"

"Well, some days are better than others," she sighs heavily, looking her niece over. "But you look good."

"Thank you."

Aunt May pats her niece's face. "Yes siree, you just get prettier every day, don't you? Don't she, Martin?"

Her father is grabbing bags from the trunk that he now carries up the porch steps; Aunt May has apparently come to Lake George with everything she owns.

"Absolutely," Martin Hughes agrees, moving the luggage inside.

When Aunt May enters the house she pauses and looks around the living room, as if feeling the memory of her sister and relishing it. "You guys ain't changed much of nothing since Jeannie been gone, I see."

"No, ma'am." Emmy says. "No need to."

"Well, ain't that right," she agrees. "I guess I'm taking David's old room?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I guess I won't be seeing much of him since he got that new wife of his. He still fat?"

"Aunt May!"

"Oh, I like fat men. Don't mean no harm in saying it. Earl was big, wasn't he? Anyway, I guess them two lovebirds still like Brooklyn, no?"

"Same as I do," Emmy concurs.

Maybelline takes in the aroma in the air. "That catfish?"

"Red snapper."

"For me?"

"Of course."

"Well, home cooking sounds just fine to me. I need the bathroom."

"The downstairs one is broken," Emmy explains.  
"You'll have to go upstairs."

Aunt Maybelline sighs.

Emmy and her father glance at each other as she loudly bemoans the trip, and though Aunt May is not a large woman, the staircase creaks loudly on her way up.

"You're going to have fun this summer," Emmy's father whispers. "Honestly."

The sun soon begins to dip into shadows, and the beauty of the evening makes Mr. Hughes decide to break out a bottle of wine for dinner, with he and Emmy sipping on the pinot noir while Aunt May settles for iced tea.

"You getting out much these days, Em?" she asks, holding a forkful of salad near her mouth.

"Not too much, no. I've been doing a lot of reading."

The sound of salad crunching can be heard loud and clear, and when Aunt May finishes chewing, she remarks, "Well, you've always been a big reader. Yes, siree. But you should get out more if you can. Get some

air in those young lungs. In my day, I was always busy. Never had time to get sick."

"She's going out to lunch with friends on Friday, though," Martin offers. "First time in a while."

"Oh, well that's nice."

Emmy is conscious that the three of them are trying not to talk about sad things at the table tonight. There will be plenty of time for that later on. Instead, they are trying to be grateful for these moments, fleeting as they are. Emmy puts on an uneasy smile.

"Next week I'm going to a costume party," Emmy adds, in that small voice of hers that has never matched the largeness of her height.

"A costume party?" Aunt May frowns. "In the summer?"

"Why not?"

"Well, you'd think folks would save costume parties for Halloween, I guess."

"I told her I wasn't happy about it," Martin chimes in. "Too much standing around."

"I'll sit most of the time," Emmy assures him.

"I still don't like it," her father replies.

Maybelline glances at Martin. "Well, I don't like you leaving here for a whole summer to go to Africa with some folks you don't know."

"I do know them."

"Uh-huh. And what's their names again? The---the--  
-Waboobus?"

"Wutawunashes," he clarifies. "Husband and wife."

"And what you doing with them again?" she asks, crinkling her forehead. Aunt May is forever confused about her brother-in-law's adventures.

"He's going to fairs," Emmy explains.

"Not just fairs," her father corrects. "We're going to travel, see manufacturers, meet with players in the industry. "

"Work with visionaries," Emmy whispers.

"It will take a while," Martin concludes, "but we will bring the wireless market to an entire new region in Zimbabwe."

"And you think you gone make money that way?" Aunt May sprinkles salt onto her fish.

"That's the plan. But not just make money. Whatever we make, we're bringing a portion back to the people, to educate, to inspire, to help. The way I figure it," Martin explains, cutting up his fish with his fork and stuffing it into his mouth, "it's not enough for a few of us to be successful. True revolution only really matters when you take that success and pass it along to others."

"Oh, no," Aunt May mutters, "revolution this and revolution that. Martin, chew with your mouth closed!"

Martin Hughes winks at his daughter and smiles. He has never been one to be put out about Maybelline Jackson. Instead he laughs, and Emmy smiles along with him.

But Aunt May shakes her head. "I'da never given up a government job at your age, Martin. That was a steady paycheck. What's for dessert, by the way?"

"Apple pie. And Dad doesn't want steady paychecks anymore," Emmy interjects quietly, for she is proud of her father; to be in his early fifties, and to decide he wants to start life over again, seems to her a commendable thing. Her mother would have been proud, too.

"What's wrong with a steady paycheck?" her aunt asks, suspiciously.

"Daddy thinks black folks need to think more about being the employer rather than the employee," Emmy explains. "Isn't that right, Dad?"

Martin nods. "I worked for other people my whole life. I'd like to work for myself now."



Aunt May looks at her brother-in-law. "And if it don't work out, then what? If all that money you and Jeannie saved goes down the drain, at your age. . ." She shakes her head.

"If that happens," Martin contends, "then I've lived and learned. Life doesn't happen without risk involved."

Aunt May coughs, then finishes off her fish, muttering something as she eats. Finally, she pulls away from the table and rises. "You know, this traveling has done me in. I'll have dessert later."

They watch her leave.

So this is how it will be between aunt and niece for the summer, Emmy thinks. But Emmy can't say she minds the company. And anyway it's always been like this with her aunt. May rarely approved of the way Martin or her sister lived. But still . . . Martin Hughes would not feel comfortable leaving his daughter alone without a chaperone for so long a period, and Aunt May, at least, is willing to spend the time.

"I'll clean up here," her father announces suddenly, standing up and touching her shoulder. "Go on up and rest."

It's going to feel strange without him around. Emmy and her father have made good roommates these past several months. And yet she will feel relieved not to have him as her official caretaker anymore. This, after all, is not how she ever imagined herself with her dad: needy and slow.

Emmy hears him running the dishes under the water before he places them in the dishwasher. As she mounts the stairs to her room, Emmy knows what her father will do later on. He will go and sit quietly in his office and listen to music. It will be melancholy tunes mostly, the sort of music where he can close his eyes in the dark and allow his mind to drift on into sadness. And even if he should play a happy tune---an upbeat ditty from Earth, Wind and Fire, perhaps, with the horns blaring and the trumpets blasting---the song will be one his wife used to love, making it sad music all over again.

In her room, Emmy grabs the latest science fiction novel she has been reading from her bookshelf and clutches it under her arm. Sitting on her bed with her back against the wall, she lets the cool air coming in from the open window relax her, and soon she feels herself start to nod off.

A gentle knock half an hour later startles her. Emmy opens her eyes. "Come in!"

Aunt May peers in, looking around the quaint little room, which still has the two single beds on either side--one for Emmy, and the other for the dozens of stuffed animals that Emmy has long since outgrown but has never parted with.

May steps inside but pauses for a moment near the door. "Just wanted to check if you been running hot baths with that Epsom salt like I told you."

"Oh." Emmy sits her book down and pauses. "Yeah. I did."

"For how long?"

"Two weeks."

This answer does not satisfy her aunt. "Is that all? I keep trying to tell you. Soak in it every day for a month and you'll get that pain down a little more. A good half hour a day, too. Not just for a few minutes."

Emmy says nothing. There is no point in arguing. Her aunt seems to think Epsom salt can cure everything--toothaches, leg cramps and damaged backs. But Emmy knows it won't cure this kind of pain. To be fair, during the two-week stint the baths were momentarily relaxing, but not much else.

Besides, Emmy has taken medications, listened to options for surgery that only gave her a twenty-five percent chance of getting better, gone through acupuncture, been given epidurals, worn back braces, and walked with a cane. She has improved a little, but not exponentially, and Epsom salt will certainly not improve her plight.

Her aunt now closes the door behind her. "If you want me to run a bath for you---"

"Oh, no, I---"

"I can do it," May insists. "I used to run baths for Earl all the time, 'cause it seemed he could never quite get the right mixture in, you know? That's another thing. You have get the right mixture in the water."

Emmy nods as her aunt moves the back brace lying in a chair onto the floor, and settles herself into its old place. decides to seat herself in a chair. She glances up at her niece's bookshelf and mumbles something as her eyes roam along the spines of several books. Here then is what her niece has been filling her mind with: a vast assortment of fantasy books whose titles Maybelline is unfamiliar with, as well as the complete collection of *Harry Potter* books, *The Complete Works of Jane Austen*, *the Twilight series*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Wheel of Time*, *The New International Version of the Bible*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Fellowship of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *The Langston Hughes Reader*, and one title that causes Maybelline to snicker as she reaches up for it.

"When Aliens Attack," she reads. "Hmmpf. Well, you done read everything, ain't you? Earl liked to read a lot, too. Always liked them mystery novels. Remember?"

Emmy nods and considers her aunt for a long moment. "It's too bad he never wrote that book he claimed he wanted to write."

"Yeah, well." May shrugs.

"You must still miss him an awful lot."

"Oh, I'm used to it by now," Maybelline says, dismissing the suggestion. "I mean, he'd been sick for so long. I can't say I wanted him to stick around and suffer anymore."

A wetness comes to Maybelline's eyes, but she blinks it away, puts the book down and turns her attentions to a picture on Emmy's wall---Jeannie's high school graduation portrait.

"Well, I remember when she had this one taken," she remarks, standing now to gaze more closely at the

photograph. "I was grown by then, and outta the house, but I couldn't miss her graduation. Mama wouldn't hear of it. My! Where does all the the time go?"

And now she touches the picture and her hands tremble visibly. There is some great push of emotion that etches on her face, but finally, she does not weep, but only shakes her head and sighs.

"Funny how you forget all the little things that used to drive you crazy once they're gone. I used to hate all those ridiculous bowler hats Earl always wore!Hated them. But now---"

"Mama always thought he looked kind of handsome in them. Like a gentleman."

Her aunt gives her a quizzical look, as if wondering if maybe he did look all right in them. "Well, yes, I suppose . . ." and her voice trails off.

Emmy always considered her aunt May and her uncle Earl a devoted couple, though Uncle Earl was the more jovial of the two. He was a kind man, with brown little eyes, always ready to share some stupid joke or

cackle at yours, and it was not his fault if his attempts at refinery were sometimes off-target.

Earl stood nearly half a foot shorter than his wife, and Emmy never saw him in anything less formal than a suit, with a little bowler hat decorating his egg-shaped head. He had short, stubby legs and arms, and often a cigar could be found dangling from his mouth, even if it was more often than not unlit, for while he liked the feel of cigars in his mouth, his wife detested their assaulting smell.

It seemed to Emmy that Uncle Earl was agreeable with his wife about most everything, not because he honestly thought she was right, but because he preferred quiet to cantankerous fighting. Peace is what he really wanted, and Emmy never understood how he and Aunt May managed to get on decade after decade.

Sometimes she could only wonder about the quiet, unseen things that occur between a man and a woman, the intimate details kept behind the curtain, that no one else is privy to.



Aunt May has made her way back to the door again. She puts her hand on the knob, turns, and manages a weak smile. "I know you've got your friends and you grown, but maybe we'll have some fun together while I'm here. Get out and go shopping or boating, eh?"

"Sure."

Aunt May nods. "Don't forget that Epsom salt bath."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her aunt hesitates a moment longer at the door, as if another push of emotion is coming over her. Emmy has never really considered the fact that her aunt might feel alone these days, and she feels a touch of pain knowing her aunt and uncle never had any children of their own. Emmy has heard whispers that her aunt was not able to conceive, but she was never sure. Her mother never openly discussed her sister's personal business.

"G'night," Maybelline says, and Emmy can smell the peculiar mixture of talcum powder and perfume that trails behind her when she exits.

Tossing her book aside, Emmy now gazes out through the open window.

The night is growing darker, while the stars are getting brighter in contrast. On nights like this, she tries to be hopeful and thinks, *The world can be such a beautiful place. It really can be.*

But it can also be frightening, the sort of place where mothers die prematurely, women cannot bear children, and health is not guaranteed. Sometimes it is hopeless and bleak and fear hovers over the soul.

For all of her fears, however, what Emmy really wants from this world is that her life be returned to her to as close to normal as it was before.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Harry Puddifoot**



Officer Harry Mitchell Puddifoot is a nice enough man, has a wife and a grown son, and likes to contribute to charities when it suits his fancy, but sometimes, honestly, sometimes, he wishes it were perfectly legal to shoot civilians at will---the snot-nosed ones, that is.

He supposes what gets him thinking about this today is the batch of snickers he just received from a group of teenagers while standing in line for coffee and donuts.

Harry has always been sensitive about the image of the fat, donut-eating cop, especially since he himself is fat and loves donuts. He can't say that most of the other men and women in his department are like him.

Indeed, it hurts his feelings to know that among some of his own relatives and friends there is the assumption that he and his comrades sit around their desks all day long, or cruise about in their cars, clutching a cup of joe in one hand and picking their noses with the other.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. For even here in the small town of Glens Falls, New York, there

are drug arrests to be made, sex offenders to be apprehended, and the occasional murder to be solved.

Harry has been involved in numerous such cases, not to mention any number of traffic violations, which can be a serious threat to public safety.

He muses over this as he exits the donut shop this morning, still smarting over the little redhead's comment, "That's a cop for you," in reference to his ordering half a dozen donuts.

*Like it's her business anyway,* he thinks.

Not that Harry is blind. He knows he needs to lose weight---seventy-five pounds to be exact---but Betty is always cooking up treats for him at home, which means in a way his fatness is not his fault, but the fault of his wife.

Still, he reasons that one day he will do it. He will become as trim as he was in high school, and people will respect him more, especially the guys he works with, who keep plastering photos of Homer Simpson on his

locker door, then cracking up when he complains, "C'mon guys."

He always smiles when they do this, putting on a brave face while hiding the tightness he feels in his chest.

"Gonna do it soon," he mutters this morning, even as he shoves a glazed donut between his lips. "When the summer comes," he promises himself, walking to his car, "I'm gonna get buff."

Honestly, the donuts are a necessity today. The drive back home from Glens Falls to the town of Lake George isn't far, but Harry is feeling rather exhausted from the overnight shift, and the sugar rush and the buzz from the coffee should keep him awake until he gets home.

Hopping in his patrol car, he turns the engine on, and happily finds himself listening to Elvis Presley on the radio as he makes his way to the highway, heading north along Route 87.

"We can't go on together," he sings aloud, thinking happily of the trip he and Betty plan on taking to

Graceland at the end of summer, "with suspicious miiiiiinds."

This is just how he likes his life: uncomplicated, easy going and simple. He wishes every day were as peaceful and beautiful as this one. Harry's mind falls to the months ahead. He loves summers in Lake George, and even in Glens Falls. All the tourists do not bother him in the least. In fact, the summer population boom is something he looks forward to---at least there's more action during those months, even if a lot of it entails arresting drunk college kids and giving them a lecture on the perils of drinking and driving.

On the highway, a big rig truck passes him on his left side, and when Harry glances up, he takes note of the beautiful Asian woman seated in the passenger's side. She peers down at him for a moment, with her pitch black eyes and her smooth skin, and Harry nods in her direction.

But she turns away.

How Harry misses those days when he was a younger man and younger women appreciated him. But

he supposes fifty-nine ain't so bad, and Betty feeds and appreciates him.

Harry picks up his coffee cup and takes another sip. In a short while, he will head off his exit and hit Route 9, right into the village of Lake George.

Any minute now, his exit will come up, but as he drives along, something about the big rig to his left catches his eye. The truck has moved ahead of him by this time, and he sees a jolting movement coming from inside the truck's massive trailer.

It is not just a slight movement, either. Something inside is pushing so powerfully against the walls that the truck jumps and shakes.

"What the---?"

Harry frowns.

Perhaps there are horses inside, or bulls. Then again, it seems to Harry that if there are living animals in the vehicle, then there should be some kind of opening or

vent to let them breathe. But this particular truck trailer is completely sealed.

The big rig speeds up now, not enough to violate any speeding laws, but the driver is certainly pushing it, and now the truck makes an exit toward Warrensburg, which lies west of Lake George.

Harry turns down the radio and decides to follow along, trying not to seem obvious, but he supposes he is obvious anyway, in his squad car.

Racing down the exit ramp, the truck slows down as it reaches a stop sign, then veers left and turns onto a quiet stretch of road. Harry again sees the outside of the truck being pushed from inside out, and this time a dent appears on the left side of the cargo trailer walls.

*There's gotta be a law against having anything living trapped in a closed-off space, Harry thinks. Don't they need a livestock trailer for this?*

He has not always been sympathetic to the plight of human beings (sometimes they cause their own suffering), but he has always had a bleeding heart for



animals---especially rabbits---and now as he turns left to follow the truck, he flips on his siren to signal the truck to pull over.

No animals are going to be improperly caged if he can help it.

The truck speeds up for a moment, as if about to make a run for it, but the driver seems to have second thoughts, and once again slows down before bringing it to a complete halt. The rig burps and sighs through its exhaust pipes as the engine is shut off.

Harry parks just behind the truck, and the stillness of the large vehicle now makes the jumping and thrashing taking place in the trailer all the more vivid.

It would not be a strange thing to call for backup, but then again, Harry is not exactly sure what the problem is. And calling for backup might prove to be an embarrassing thing to do if this is just some sort of mix-up or misunderstanding.

Still, he does call over a radio-run, to report his location and let the dispatcher know he has just stopped

a suspicious vehicle, whose license plate he now reads off. Then Harry opens his door and gets out.

Carefully, and with his right hand hovering near his gun, he begins his approach to the front of the truck. It's funny how distinctly he can hear the sound of his own breathing on a desolate road like this one; he can also make out a funny hissing sound coming from the trailer.

He wishes he had a stick of gum or a wad of tobacco to make him feel more manly at moments like this; the chewing motion always makes him feel like Hoss from Bonanza for some reason. Instead, he feels like a waddling penguin right now.

Slowly, he moves along the left side of the truck, parallel to the road, planting one foot haltingly in front of the other, for his ears are alert to a new sound of bumping noises going on inside; indeed, the funny hissing sound becomes wilder, more frantic, and there is heavy breathing going on, as if someone is being gagged but is trying to break free.

"What do you got in there?" Harry calls out, nearing the tractor part of the truck.

But no one answers him.

Cautiously, he edges forward more, his fingers twitching against the butt of his gun, and finally he comes upon the driver in the tractor.

Normally, Harry would confront a driver from slightly behind the side of the vehicle, allowing a possible suspect to remain in his car, because being in a vehicle limits a suspect's movement. But with a big rig, Harry is at a disadvantage. So he keeps his right hand straddling the butt of his gun, and with his left hand he reaches up and opens the truck door.

"Hey! Didn't you hear me?" Harry yells, and he finds himself looking up at a man who appears to be around forty years old; his nationality is not easy to discern, for he has a slightly Arabic look about him, though his eyes are a bit more of an Asian shape.

"Morning, officer," the man responds, nodding his greeting. "How can I help you?"

"What you got kicking around in that truck?" Harry asks.

"Hopefully nothing illegal," the man says with a smile.

Harry does not smile with him. He thinks to ask to see his driver's license and registration, but so far as he can tell, he is not going to be issuing the man a summons. "I'm gonna ask you to step out of the vehicle and open up the back of your truck."

"And I'm going to ask you," the man states, "to show me some proper I.D."

"Scuse me?" Harry says.

The driver nods toward Harry's car. "If you don't mind, I'd like to see some identification."

Harry is galled by this. Can the man not see his car and uniform?

Harry taps the badge on his chest as proof.

"That could be stolen or fake for all I know," the man insists. "Do you have an I.D. card?"

Harry grunts. It's moments like this that really take the shine off of his authority. He wants to dismiss the idea of complying with the man's wishes, just to assuage his own pride, but finally he relents.

Reluctantly, he keeps his right hand hovering near his gun holster and with his left hand reaches awkwardly into his right pocket for his wallet. It is a brown tattered thing, and still has an old jelly stain in one corner that Harry has been meaning to remove, but he can't be bothered with a small annoyance like that now.

Holding up his police I.D, Harry allows the man to look it over for a moment.

"Harry Puddifoot," the man reads, and Harry can now see how clear and gray the man's eyes are. "I see."

Snatching his I.D. back, Harry says, "Now step out of vehicle and do it real slow."

The man complies, and Harry soon finds himself standing next to one of the tallest men he has ever met; Harry notices not only his height, but the glow of his

skin---even with a few wrinkles around his eyes, there is something about him that just radiates.

*He probably eats a lot of vegetables,* Harry concludes. *I gotta get on that bandwagon, too.* And now he means to tell the Asian woman to get out of the truck as well, but as the driver steps down, Harry sees that the passenger's seat is empty---or rather, that it has been vacated.

"Where's the woman who was with you?" Harry demands.

"What woman?"

"The Japanese lady that was sitting in the seat next to you."

"Who?"

"Or the Chinese woman---whatever she was."

"There is no one with me, sir."

"On the highway I saw a woman with you," Harry insists.

"No, sir," the man repeats, shaking his head. "But there were a couple of other trucks on the highway with me. Maybe you got us mixed up."

There were only two trucks on the highway altogether, and Harry is sure there was no mix-up. It is true that he is very tired right now, but he knows his exhaustion has never produced hallucinations.

Bending down quickly, Harry looks to see if any legs can be seen tiptoeing away from the passenger's side of the rig, along the pavement, running toward the fields perhaps---but there is nothing and no one.

Straightening up, Harry narrows his eyes in suspicion. "Let's see some I.D.," he orders, and the man reaches in his back jean pocket and produces a New York State license: Pranish Byanjankar is the name on the card, and his height is listed as six-foot-seven.

"Where you from?"

"New York."

"I know that. I mean where were you born?"

"Nepal, sir."

Nepal. Harry has never heard of it before and he does not want to sound ignorant by asking for the country's location. But he wonders if there are terrorists in Nepal. If Nepal is anywhere near Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, Harry wonders, he might be a terrorist.

But there is no time to think about this, because Harry is once again interrupted by something moving again in the back of the truck. Only now he hears a new sound, like that of a hand smacking something hard and tough, and this sound is louder than the previous jumping, hissing and shaking sounds. Harry then hears a coughing noise, then something choking, and finally dead silence.

"What in the world you got in there, anyway?"

"Just some wild bulls, officer."

The way the man says it makes Harry think he's lying. "And where you headed with these bulls?"

"I'm headed here."



"Here where?"

"Here in Warrensburg. To Alden Avenue."

Harry knows that area vaguely. It's secluded, almost deserted, and only a couple of homes occupy the entire vicinity.

"What's at Alden Avenue?" Harry inquires. He doesn't know why he is asking. He supposes it is because he suddenly doesn't like the look or feel of this man.

"That's where my employer, Mr. Nabil Mooripar, lives."

"And you live near him?"

"With him, sir."

Harry frowns. "Let's see those bulls."

"I'm sorry?"

"The truck. Open it up like I asked."

The man's easygoing smile fades. "Actually, Mr. Mooripar would be very grateful if I got the animals home in time and---"

"Open it," Harry insists.

"Why? Is there a problem?"

"Yes, Pranish," a voice booms. "There is a problem. The problem is you've made this man, who is simply trying to do his job, unnecessarily suspicious."

Harry looks and sees a man approaching from his right side, having materialized out of nowhere apparently. But then Harry notes the car now parked behind his own police car. This fact puzzles Harry even further because it must be the most silent car in the world for him not to have heard it. Its engine must be barely a whisper.

What is not a whisper is the voice of the interloper--this is a voice that has authority to it, and vigor. But while it attempts to be charming, its charm is undercut by a firmness of tone and a hint of disdain.

Harry looks him over. "Who are you?"

There is something oddly similar about the two men. It is both the exactness of height that they share, and the similarity of their salubrious skin.

But whereas the driver is casually dressed, this man is dressed in a three-piece black suit and his skin is fair and white. The only thing that throws his professional demeanor off is the oddly contrasting shoes he wears---specifically, sandals. Pranish wears sandals, too, but on him---dressed as he is in a T-shirt and jeans---the look works. On this man, the shoes are oddly displaced.

"I'm Justin Luxembourg," the man announces, reaching out his hand to shake, and Harry guesses he is around thirty-six. His brown hair is combed back and inundated with gel.

Harry does not accept the gesture, because he is not in the habit of shaking hands with civilians he means to reprimand. Besides, he is pretty sure his fingers are still sticky from the donuts he was eating.

The man's eyes shift from Harry to the truck driver.  
"It seems you've stopped my driver."

"Your driver?" Harry asks.

"Actually, he's Mr. Nabil Mooripar's driver. My boss. And we have the paperwork for the possession of these animals."

*There is that name again, Harry thinks. Nabil Mooripar. Who is he, anyway?*

"Well, I need you to open up that truck regardless," Harry states.

"They're exotics," Justin says.

"Excuse me?"

"They're a rare breed of bulls, and it would be best if they were left enclosed where they are. In the meantime, I can assure you we've taken all the necessary precautions to ensure their safety and yours."

Harry pauses at hearing the word "safety."

As if understanding the meaning of Harry's raised brow, Justin says, "They're nothing harmful, I assure you. In fact, the animals are being given to a private zoo as a favor to the government. For research purposes. And Mr. Mooripar is keeping them until they can be properly transported."

Harry's stiff demeanor loosens a bit. "The government?"

"In the end," Justin nods, "your cooperation on this matter will be greatly appreciated by all."

At that moment, a voice comes in over Harry's radio. For a second, he thinks it must be the voice of the dispatcher, monitoring his radio-run and now giving a reply. Instead, he recognizes the voice of the chief of police on the other end.

"Harry," the voice says. "The vehicle you stopped is a federal secured vehicle."

"Sir?" Harry asks.

"Release the truck and let it go."

Justin folds his arms across his chest, and Harry wonders if he detects an expectant smile on the man's face.

*Let them go?* Harry thinks. But who is he to disagree with the chief?

"Yes, sir," Harry says, feeling more awake than ever now, mostly because fury is starting to rage in his blood.

There is something upsetting and humiliating about an encounter where he is ordered to stand down from his duties. Harry has never liked people who receive special permission to be above the law, not even diplomats, and he crinkles his nose in disgust.

But now he is curious more than anything: normally, the dispatcher would have called in to tell Harry to let the car go. Why did the chief of police have to intervene? Does he know these people somehow?

Harry shakes his head, desiring to do something other than just stand there looking foolish.

Justin smiles at him condescendingly. "You have a great day, officer."

It is the feeling of dismissal that irks Harry the most, and yet, what can he do? He can't fight with people he has been told to let go on their merry way.

Sticking his chest out, Harry keep his head held high and walks to his car with a pain in his heart. He can only hope this doesn't get back to the other guys, some twisted version of events that paints Harry as a dope.

Sliding into his car, Harry pauses, glances down at the remaining bag of donuts on his car seat, and sticks his hand in.

"What's the use?" he mumbles dejectedly as he digs in. He turns on his engine, backs up his squad car, does a U-turn and drives away.

Back at the truck, Justin marches to the trailer's closed door, taps it and whispers, "I told you this would happen."

"She's chained," a woman's voice responds.

"Yes, but she wasn't sedated, was she?"

"Why should she be?"

"Why should she be?" Justin mocks, mimicking her voice. "The master won't be pleased."

"He never is," she snaps back.

Justin says nothing for a moment. "How'd you get her to sleep?"

"I hit her."

Justin shakes his head. "Women," he mutters, as his cell phone rings. Picking it up, Justin says simply, "The officer is gone."

"Just the one officer, right?" the voice on the other end asks. It is a rough-sounding voice, with a hint of irritation to it.

"Just one, sir. Yes, sir."

"Did he see the cargo?"



"He tried to, but no. Your timing was good."

"You know I don't like having to make calls like that in a new place."

"I know."

"And yet I had to do it."

Justin does not answer him.

"Justin?"

"I'm here, sir."

"I'm told his name was Puddifoot."

"It was on his badge, yes, sir."

"Well, then. Send him something that will make them value the name of Mooripar here in town. Let him admire us rather than feel a need to question us."

"Done."

The voice on the other end pauses. "Why, by the way, was Pranish stopped?"

"Guess."

The voice grunts. "I'll talk to her when she gets home."

The phone clicks off, Justin grimaces, and seconds later he is looking up to find Pranish pulling up the truck gate.

"No, no, shut it!" Justin orders, even as Caroline is trying to slip out from the back. "And you, stay inside."

"I don't want to," she protests, thinking it uncalled for that she should be reprimanded when, in fact, she snuck out of the passenger's seat and fixed the problem in time.

"No one cares what you want," Justin sneers.

"But why isn't Pranish in trouble? He agreed to let her stay awake."

Justin suddenly turns and glances toward the car that Officer Puddifoot is now driving away in. "Back inside, now, you dumb fool. He sees us."

"Don't call me that!"

"Now!"

She glares, pulling her dangling legs up from where they hang over the side, all while sticking her tongue out at both men before being shut up into darkness.

Once the pitch black surrounds her, Caroline sighs and slumps forward, her forehead slightly touching the animal that does not move, and barely breathes, it seems, and in this moment she is reminded that sometimes she really hates Pranish and Justin---and the Master, too.

Down along the road, where Harry is about to swing right and make his way again onto the highway, he glances in his rearview mirror and catches sight of something that almost makes him press his foot on the brake: the gate door of the truck is briefly hoisted open by Pranish, and now the slender yet tall figure of an Asian woman can be seen trying to climb out of the compartment.

"That's her," Harry mumbles to himself, in astonishment, and it seems as if Justin has heard him

utter these words even from this distance, for Justin turns his head suddenly in Harry's direction, and then yells something at Pranish. Seconds later, the gate door on the truck is being lowered.

Under any other circumstance, Harry would be feeling the fire of injustice flow through him right now, for he does not enjoy being lied to, and he is equally insulted by the idea of people receiving special protection by those in power.


But Harry has little time to wonder at this, because his anger is soon superseded by his terror, for it is not just the tall Asian woman he sees sitting in the back of that truck.

Harry is certain that for the briefest moment, he catches a glimpse of what he can only describe as a beast, lying there on the truck floor, its eyes closed, its tongue half hanging out over the side of its lips, and he almost drives off the road at the sight of it - for it is a slimy thing, the largest animal he has ever seen, and he surmises that he himself could easily fit into its mouth, be swallowed up in that maw without being chewed up,

then be gurgled down with just a scream for a protest, disappearing down that throat like a cool cup of water.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Nosebleeds**



Here in Lake George, the most touristy part of town is called Canada Street, and it is peppered with shops, motels, restaurants and the like. There are places to buy taffy and ice cream, stores to purchase dresses and Native American garments, gas stations and a library, and even a couple of establishments set up to haunt and spook visitors all year round.

The month of May is not quite the busy season yet, but soon the town will awaken from its winter and spring hibernation, cars will move bumper to bumper along the road, and Lake George will roar to life.

Yet, for all of its variety, this is not the street where Emmy and her friends have chosen to congregate tonight. Instead, east of Canada Street, just off Beach Road, sits a boardwalk that runs parallel to a body of water actually called Lake George. And on this boardwalk is a karaoke bar and restaurant called the Hight Note that Emmy has often frequented.

Tonight, the sound of music bursts in her ears like a cat screeching in an echo chamber as she emerges from the second-floor bathroom. She can't help but laugh: someone is singing a warbled version of Frank Sinatra's "My Way" down below, and from the monitors here upstairs Emmy can see that the offender is an old man with a beer in one hand and a microphone in the other.

Giggling, she makes her way toward her table where her three friends are seated, but something stops her short: it is not Mercy gesturing wildly with her hands as she talks to the waiter, and it is not Shelby leaning her head against Sean's shoulders; nor is it Sean shaking his head in astonishment as he watches the monitor. It is, in fact, the waiter himself.

Even from behind, Emmy knows that shaved brown head, that lean, square body and that booming laugh all too well: it's James Mathis.

"C'mon, Mercy," she hears him saying. "You make it sound like I was sitting in a temple all day meditating. Naw, naw, naw. I was seeing everything---the world, in fact."

"Ah, the world," Mercy rolls her eyes. "Well, it shouldn't take a man two years to find himself through hiking."

"You're mercy-less," he laughs, then he turns and sees Emmy coming into view. "Yo, Em!"

He reaches out to shake her hand. "Long time no see."

She smiles brightly at him, accepting the gesture. "I didn't know you were back in town."

"Came back a month ago. Yep. "

James pauses for an awkward moment, and Emmy pauses, too, standing there head and shoulders above him. For a moment, she wishes it was she who was hovering over the Lake's chilly waters, instead of the music. She wishes she could hide somehow, but she can't.

Technically, James is not really her ex-boyfriend, because they only ever went out on six dates. But they have known each other for a number of years, and in the quiet places of her heart, she must admit that she once loved him. Maybe she still does. She is not sure.

A reprieve to the awkwardness is granted when the old man finishes singing and Sean loudly utters the words "Thank you!"

James laughs. Then he says, "I heard about your mom, Em."

"Ah."

"So sorry. She was a great lady."

"Thank you."



"So you're getting better, yeah?" he asks, scratching his now bearded chin.

"Slowly, but surely, yes."

"Great. Great." He nods as his dark brown eyes squint up at her. "You know, I've been meaning to call and check in on you, but---"

"Oh, I know you're busy," she says quickly. "No big deal," and it hurts her to lie like that. She wishes she would not do that. But she reasons that she cannot place a burden of caring onto a man who does not have it in him to care.

"He's going to law school," Mercy announces.

"Are you?"

He nods. "Yeah. I start in the fall over in Albany."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks."

Mercy clears her throat. "All right, all right. Can we get an order going on here? Em, take a seat. We got drinks. What do you want?"

"Oh. Just an iced tea."

"Get this woman an iced tea," Mercy declares. "And add a little extra something in my drink," she winks.

"Cool," James says. "Coming up, then."

Mercy runs a hand through her red hair as he walks away. "I didn't know he worked here, Em," she says. "Sorry." Then: "By the way, I thought we were gonna have to send a search team into the bathroom to find you. How long were you in there?"

"Oh, give her a break," Shelby says, raising herself up from Sean's shoulder. "She's a cripple."

"I'm not a cripple," Emmy counters, miffed.

"Yeah, Shelby," Mercy says. "What kind of talk is that?"

"You know what I meant."

"Way to make it worse. No, but seriously, Em. You *are* slower than my grandpa these days."

Emmy laughs at this. There has always been something about Mercy's saltiness that has never offended her. In fact, as they grew up as friends, Mercy's sharp tongue was always one of the things Emmy admired about her, perhaps because she herself was the antithesis of Mercy---quiet verses forceful, feminine verses tomboyish, even tall verses short. Plus Emmy had always been sympathetic to Mercy's home situation, which used to bring Mercy to tears when they were younger.

At present, Mercy removes a pack of cigarettes from her flannel shirt pocket and places it on the table.

"Speaking of grandpas," Shelby remarks, "how do you stand smoking when your grandpa has emphysema?"

"Because, my little Asian Audrey Hepburn," Mercy sneers, "we're all going to die anyway. So why not smoke?"

"But you can't smoke in here," Shelby reminds her.

"*'You can't smoke in here,'*" Mercy mimics. "I know that. Duh."

Sean just shakes his head and pecks Shelby on the forehead. "She's a steamroller," he whispers.

"But I do have my soft side," Mercy counters.

"Do you now?"

"In fact," she says, in that deep, raspy voice of hers. "I had to put it on earlier today, yes."

"Uh-oh," Emmy remarks suspiciously, thinking how great it is to be out of the house and having this conversation with her friends. "Why?"

"Because it just so happens that the most gorgeous man I have ever seen walked into the gas station."

Sean shakes his head. "Can you choose a normal guy instead of all these 'most gorgeous man in the world' types? I'm saying this to help you. You're too rough, and hot masculine guys would never date you."

"Sean!" Emmy protests.

"What?" Sean asks, innocently. "I love Mercy. She knows I love her. But she has a rotten attitude, she reads too many romance novels to have any clue about normal men, and she dresses like a truck driver."

"If I'm so awful why do you hang around me?" Mercy pesters him.

"'Cause you're funny---"

"Thank you."

"You're witty."

"Right."

"And we grew up together."

"Do keep all that in mind," Mercy instructs. "And let me finish my story. Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, so this dude, first of all, was *massive*---"

"I'm going to start talking about all my comic books from now on," Sean interrupts, but Mercy waves him away.

"I mean, he was like six-six or something, I don't know. And he was close to our age, maybe early thirties? Built, too. But not like over built, just solid. And man, did he have the bluest eyes you ever saw."

"And you love blue eyes," Emmy comments.

"Only problem is, he wore glasses. But on him, it was geek-hot, like he was the Thor version of Superman. Plus, he looked like he had money, too, if you ask me."

"Ah, money," Sean remarks, with a snort. "Can't a man just be average and earn a *responsible* living? Is that so awful?"

"So he comes in, right," Mercy continues, gesturing now for Sean to go away, "and he puts sixty down on pump number four, then he looks at my name tag and says, 'Hey, Mercy,' just like that. Like he knew me or something."

"Did he know you?" Emmy inquires.

"Of course not. You think I'd forget a face like that? But anyway, I said, 'Hey, yourself. Didn't catch your name.' And he just smiles and says, and I quote, 'I'm Doctor Markus Alexander.'"

"He's lying," Sean insists. "Markus Alexander sounds like the name a doctor would have on a soap opera. And you said he was thirty *and* a doctor?"

"Early thirties," she corrects.

"Give me a break. He uses that line to pick up chicks. What kind of car did he have?"

Mercy pauses. "Actually, his car was pretty boring. And it was dirty, but---"

"Exactly," Sean affirms. "'Cause he can't afford anything else."

Mercy sticks her tongue out at him and turns to face Emmy in her chair. "I'm only going to tell Em the rest of this story, 'cause she listens. So, Em, then I said, 'You

visiting?' And he goes, 'No, I moved here.'" Mercy pauses. "He *lives* here, Emmy. In town."

Emmy nods.

"Which means," Mercy clarifies, "that I am going to stay sick for the rest of the year."

Shelby checks her makeup in the mirror of her compact. "I bet he didn't ask for your number," she says.

"I bet he did," Mercy retorts.

"Did he?" Emmy asks.

"No. But in time, in time."

"Yes, in time," Sean mocks.

"All I'm saying is don't anybody hate me if I become a doctor's wife."

As Sean and Mercy debate the merits of Mercy's encounter, Emmy notices that just behind her, at the next table, James holds their drinks on a tray in one hand, and is talking freely to two young men he seems to be



acquainted with; one of the guys is black and the other one is perhaps Latino or Italian. Emmy's ears find themselves attuned to their conversation.

"So you gonna give me her number or what?" she hears James laugh.

The larger one, the Latino fellow, grunts. "I thought you only liked blondes, Jay."

"Nah, nah, it's cool," he responds. "Spanish chicks are hot, too. She's light-skinned, right?"

"Green eyes and long hair, you know it."

"Just the type of woman I need," James says.

Emmy pauses, blinks several times, and from her peripheral vision she can see the other African-American gentleman hold out a fist for James to bump. "Righteous, man," he concurs, and James bumps him the fist.

Now, Emmy glances even harder at the menu - or at least, she pretends to. She also pretends that she has

heard nothing, but somehow James's words bounce around in her head like a ping-pong ball.

She shifts in her chair. The others don't seem to have been listening (thank God) but for Emmy there is that familiar sense of dread now rising in the hollow of her stomach---that uncomfortable horror that reminds her that she is once again too much for far too many people; she is too tall for some men, and her hair is too kinky for others. But, of course, it is her darkness that is so generally disliked, and her heart shrinks within her as she reflects on this.

All the confidence in the world does not rid one of pain. And although such talk over skin color has never decayed Emmy's spirit, she can't deny that the brutality and fire of their meaning still burn in her somewhere.

Of course, she always knew she was a difficult pill for James to swallow during their brief time together; or rather, she saw that for all of her beauty, conflict shone in his eyes.

He *wanted* to like her, but something held him back---or maybe he held himself back. His mind and

experiences had already dictated to him what was acceptable in a woman, and what was beautiful, and he could not overcome the prejudices of a society that had spent four hundred years instilling fairness of skin as a prize. And so, Emmy was lovely to him, in some respects, yet repulsive in another. He *struggled* about her, that's what it was. No, he never said as much to her face, but she knew.

And now, sitting here tonight, her eyes slightly downcast, Emmy thinks of how society expects her to be strong in the face of constant rejection---and to be used to it. She is a black woman; should she not be used to pain? But she is not strong. At least, she is not a superwoman, and she has never borne hurt well.

Her mother once commented that Emmy had an uncanny ability to let go of bitterness, and yet was still fragile and vulnerable, like a flower, "and flowers whither when they're handled recklessly," Jeannie said.

*That's it, isn't it?* Emmy thinks to herself now. *I have strength, but I can break. I can break so easily.*

In a moment, James returns to their table, and Emmy looks up at him as he stands there.

"Here's your drinks," he says, passing them around. "You all ready to order?"

Emmy nods. "I'll just have calamari and a Caesar salad," she states, with a smile, because she smiles easily by nature---but she also smiles when she wants to hide.

The others order, too, then return to some topic of conversation whose beginning Emmy must have missed while eavesdropping on James.

"Tell them," Shelby is insisting, rubbing Sean's arm, while Sean tries nudging her to silence. But Shelby will not be deterred. "It was *funny*."

"What was funny?" Mercy asks, narrowing her eyes.

"C'mon," Shelby says again. "Your dad is *adorable*."

"You think that's adorable?" Sean whispers, frowning.

"We love your dad, Sean," Mercy encourages. "And your mom, too. They're special people."

"Special being the operative word," he murmurs, interpreting Mercy's hidden insult.

"Oh, c'mon," Mercy encourages. "I *wish* I had your parents instead of the losers I got stuck with. At least yours were around. Go on. Give us the story. What did Pop do this time?"

Sean hesitates. "He claims he saw a monster."

"Eh?" Emmy asks.

Shelby giggles.

"Okay, first let me add this caveat," Sean says. "Remember, my folks are writing a science fiction novel. And they have this weirdo teacher who's encouraging them to see the magic in everything, as she says. On your average person, I wouldn't mind that kind of advice. But on my parents?" He shakes his head in a mix of disbelief and frustration.

"But what happened?" Mercy prods, not certain if she is already bored by the story.

Sean takes two sips from his beer, then burps. "So my dad goes to the emergency room the other day 'cause he ran his car into a pole after work 'cause he was trying to race home to tell my mom about some people he pulled over in a truck the other day, and---"

"Wait, wait, wait," Emmy interrupts. "Is your dad all right?"

"Fine, fine, fine. Yeah," he nods. "He came out with a minor concussion, that's all. Anyway, he pulls this truck over to the side of road 'cause he claims there was this monster in it; like, at first, he thought there were bulls or horses in it, but then he got this feeling it was something strange, and the person driving the truck was odd and there was something about the government being involved, and this Asian woman was hiding in the back---"

"Huh?" Mercy laughs.

"I know. It's convoluted. I told my mom, 'Remember, he just ran into a pole,' and she goes, 'Oh, but sweetie, I think he really saw a sea monster sitting in the back of that truck.'"

"A sea monster?" Emmy asks.

"Didn't he call it the Loch Ness monster?" Shelby corrects.

Sean murmurs something under his breath, like he is peeved at Shelby for having brought up the story in the first place.

"So you don't believe him?" Emmy inquires.

"Em," Mercy points out, "his folks once thought they saw Jim Morrison working in a bodega back in '96. Remember?"

Sean nods. "Though, to be fair, they were both high at the time."

Mercy bursts out laughing suddenly. "Love your folks."

Sean winces and grunts before slowly cracking a smile of his own.

Mercy's laughter proves to be infectious, for now Shelby is snickering and Emmy starts to giggle too, with that snorting laugh she has always possessed (so much like her mother!). But in the midst of her laughter, a choking sound stops her.

Sean's hand hovers over his beer. "You all right?"

"Fine, yeah, I---" Emmy stops and makes a choking sound again.

"Oh, no!" Mercy says, standing up as if to grab her from behind to do a Heimlich maneuver.

"But she hasn't eaten anything yet, has she?" Shelby asks nervously. "She can't be choking."

Emmy waves Mercy away, indicating that it is not her throat that is tightening, but her head. And yet, she cannot tell anyone this, because she cannot speak. Pressure, like air bubbles, seems to be filling up in her brain, and she can't find her voice.



She makes a choking sound a third time, and suddenly even the table next to them notices her struggle. A panic has ensued around her table, but the voices around Emmy seem to be fading out.

All she can think is that she does not want anyone to touch her on the back because she cannot stand the pain. But now---*now* the pain in her head feels greater than anything she ever felt in her spine, and two little bubbles of blood spew from her nose.

"Eww----" Shelby yelps, as the little bubbles become clumps that thud onto the table---thick and round, like coagulated little balls.

Emmy gasps, placing a hand over her nose, wanting to drop her jaw in horror at the sight. But she has no time to judge the situation - for the blood begins to flows with ease, like a faucet being turned on at full blast. It soaks her chin, the table, her clothes, and catches between her teeth. As Sean calls for help and Mercy tries to hold Emmy's head up, all Emmy can finally do is slump forward in her seat as everything around her go black.

It is 8:13 at night.

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Downstairs, outside of the High Note, the boardwalk is strewn with only a few people, some of whom wander about looking for a restaurant to sit and relax in, and some of whom stroll about, staring out onto the lake or admiring the moon; two of the strollers are even the ones being admired, if for nothing else than the sheer largeness of their size.

It is not that people have never seen men of their stature before---after all, basketball courts on television are filled with players of their magnitude---but to see two ordinary men up close like this proves daunting to even the most casual observer.

Yet what is most startling about the two men on the boardwalk is not their height, but rather the *congruency* of their heights. Each is an almost replica of the other in size and looks: well-built and athletic, wearing sneakers,

jeans and a T-shirt; both are even decked out in smart-looking eyeglasses.

Indeed, they could be mistaken for twins, if not for the fact that one of them is as blond as a Ken doll and the other man is black. Aside from this, it is only in observing them that one sees the contrast of their personalities: the blond one laughs and gestures wildly with his hands as he walks, as if he means to break out into a song or dance, while the black man registers no smile at all and seems as stiff as a board.

"What's wrong with a dog?" people overhear the blond one suggesting. "A nice big sort of animal. I vote yes to a dog."

The other man does not answer him.

"Ah, I know what you're thinking," the blond one continues, whispering now so that no one else can hear. "You're thinking Reon will eat it."

"Of course, she will."

The blond man laughs. "Well, everyone has to die one way or another," and now he pauses in front of the High Note, wincing at the off-key singing coming from the open door. "It's as if they're trying not to sing well. Don't you think?"

The black man pauses beside him, but does not respond.

Intrigued, the blond one strides to the door. "Coming in for a minute? It's early. Not even eight o'clock yet. No? Well, *I'm* going in."

It is a funny night to the man who remains there on the boardwalk. The air here does not feel right against his skin, and he frowns. He has never felt *that* before: since when does the air make his flesh tingle?

In a moment, he can make out the raucous laughter of his companion coming from inside the restaurant, and he means to walk to the door and tell him that he is going home. But something stops the man; a strange buzz starts to germinate in his head, like the soft hammering of metal at the center of his brain. He creases his brows and makes a sudden choking sound.

"Huh?" he says to himself, startled.

Then he sneezes. Once. Twice. And now three times.

*It cannot be*, he thinks, trying to remember the last time he had a cough or cold: *not since Father sat on the throne.*

And then it hits him, like a virulent jolt, this rapid sense of air bubbles rising in his head, like so much pressure in his brain.

His breathing accelerates, heavy and out of control, and a ruthless kick of pain hits him in his chest and stomach. To his shock, he doubles over suddenly, and finds his vision blurring.

The tall man shakes his head to focus, and looks down to see his hands trembling violently of their own volition. It is not just his hands that shake, either. Something deeper inside of him shakes as well---the very sinews and muscles in his body, and even his own heart.

"You all right, mister?" someone asks him, hesitantly.

The black man nods, and the inquisitor follows up his first question with a second one: "You got a cigarette I can borrow, mister?"

The black man can smell the liquor on the other man and brusquely waves him away. Then he tries to straighten up, but falters. Anger crowds his face: all that power in him, all of that strength, and he cannot steady his hands, straighten up, or keep from feeling like he is about to choke?

The very idea of it all is insulting to him, and he curses God. Then he remembers that he cannot let Markus see him this way, staring about wild-eyed, confused and out of breath.

In a moment, Markus steps outside of the High Note, laughing wildly and clapping his hands. "We should do karaoke with Dad," he calls out. "We should--" He pauses, standing over the bent figure before him. "What are you doing, Gilead?"

Gilead hides his trembling hands behind his back and manages to bring himself to his full height. "Just--- thinking," he responds. This is all the excuse he can formulate at the moment, for even his tongue aches.

"Since when do you hunch over to think?"

"Since---now."

Markus frowns. "Your heart sounds---"

"It's fine," Gilead insists. He means to smile his assurance, but there is no point in smiling because he never smiles. Indeed, smiling would only stimulate Markus's suspicion, not diminish it.

"Let's go," Gilead instructs, walking forward as coolly as possible, refusing to wince, even as a myriad of thoughts flood his mind, chief among them that it is not possible for him to be sick. It does not and cannot happen.

As he recalls, the last time he experienced any sort of pain or sickness was the day he died.





A. YAMINA COLLINS

# THE LAST KING

LOVE.  
YOUR.  
ENEMY.



# **The Last King: Book I**

## **Episode #2**

To read episode # 1, please [click here](#).

**by A. Yamina Collins**

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*Dedicate to the memory of the giants upon  
whose shoulders I stood:*

Devorice Jean Collins (1944–2010)

David Britton Collins (1913–1995)

Susie Mae Collins (1915–1998)

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## **CHAPTER 6** **Chess**



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"My sister wouldn't be happy about this," Emmy hears her aunt May say disapprovingly from the kitchen. "Not one bit---"

"Now, don't start . . ." Martin begins, but although he tries to sound unaffected by the chastisement, Emmy can hear both the guilt and irritation in his voice.

"---I just don't get why you can't wait another week before you leave."

Opening her eyes fully, Emmy raises her head off the pillow and listens in for a moment.

"The doctor said she's fine."

"Well, doctors don't know everything, do they?" Aunt May sneers.

"Neither do relatives from Virginia," Martin counters.

Emmy half smiles at this remark. *Good for you, Dad*, she thinks, as she sits up slowly.

She has been resting on the couch in the living room all afternoon and must have dozed off; the book she was reading---the colorful picture book on ancient warriors and their weapons---has fallen to the floor, and now she leans over to pick it up.

"Oh, so I'm a fool now? Is that it?" Aunt May demands.

Things are about to get heated: Emmy clears her throat suddenly, and calls out weakly, "It was only a nosebleed. Don't---don't go on about it."

Seconds later, her aunt appears in the doorway that separates the living room from the kitchen, her hands on her hips. "Only a nosebleed?" she mocks. "Since when does passing out in a restaurant, and bleeding all over the place constitute as *only* a nosebleed?"

Emmy has no answer. She looks down at the piece of tissue in her lap she was using to dab her nose with earlier. The bleeding has pretty much stopped since last night, but occasionally a small trickle of blood still leaks down her tender nostrils.

"What I mean," Emmy states, "is that it only happened once. And maybe it's connected to the accident."

"That accident was six months ago," her aunt scoffs.

Maybelline does have a point here: how does a car accident from December affect Emmy this way six months later?

But what else could it be? She has never suffered a nosebleed before in her life.

Her aunt seems to think that neither Emmy nor her father are worried. But it's not true. They have just decided to take things one day at a time; perhaps, in a way, they have become used to suffering lately and this is just another episode to endure.

In Emmy's mind, the worst of it all is the uncertainty of her condition, not the incident itself, though it was shocking - like witnessing a downpour of red liquid that soaked through her clothes, forcing her to be carried out of the restaurant on a stretcher.



Her subsequent visit to the emergency room last night left the doctor baffled as to the cause, and her personal physician, whom she visited this morning, seemed equally perplexed by it; this is to say nothing of the embarrassment she felt about bleeding on someone else's property like she did.

She knows it's ridiculous to have anxiety about how she looked while she was passed out, but it honestly concerns her---what does James think of her now? And why should she even care what he thinks?

At the end of the day, however, hearing her aunt make a scene about it, isn't helping anyone.

Folding her hands in her lap, Emmy looks at her aunt and simply says, "Well."

"Is that all you got to say about it? 'Well'?"

Emmy cannot produce any real sense of worry. She has never been a hypochondriac and she feels certain that last night must have been one of the fluke things that happens in a person's life that just can't be explained.

"I'm only a little fatigued," Emmy states, as firmly as possible. "But that's all."

"No, that is not all," her aunt insists. "You look awful. You were already slender enough, but now you look like you done dropped ten pounds in one day. That oughtta concern someone in this family. Tell me I'm wrong, Martin."

Before Emmy can respond, her father walks out from the kitchen and stands in the living room doorway, looking at his daughter.

"Tell her, Martin," Maybelline repeats. "She does not look okay."

Her father seems so drained at this moment. He cups a fist to his chin, and says reluctantly, "You do look a bit---odd."

"Sick," aunt May states. "You look sick. And you're lucky you didn't mess up your back even more. Imagine if she had. Just imagine it!"

Emmy sees that father's face says it all: yes, Emmy *could* have fallen to the floor, and someone *could* have handled her the wrong way and aggravated her condition and it is possible that something is gravely wrong with her.

And yet . . . yet---for all of Emmy's troubles, she has already informed everyone how much her back improved in the last twenty-four hours.

That's what Emmy doesn't understand. That's the part that thrills her enough to not be so frightened about last night. The constant throbbing she must usually endure has moved away from her lower back and upward around her shoulders. But even the pain in her shoulders has been dissipating throughout the day; Emmy has been sleeping with little discomfort.

Maybe her body flushed out some kind of toxins when the bleeding happened. Maybe that's why her pain has eased up. She has no answers, but knows that while she may not look her best, she feels better. And isn't that what really counts?

At present, her aunt just shakes her head and returns to the kitchen where she has been sizzling up a steak and some vegetables for dinner. Martin remains in the living room, and states, with great resignation, "I'm going to stay."

"And do what?"

"Take care of you."

"You've done that already: I've lived off of you for the last six months."

"It's my job to take care of my children."

"But, you can't fix me, dad."

Unhappily, he shifts from one leg to the other and grimaces.

Emmy is right. What can he do about her condition? Not a thing.

And as far as Emmy is concerned, his new business venture has given him a spark of something to achieve---a goal for him to be challenged by and she cannot see

herself holding him back from that. There is no need for him to prolong his trip.

"If I were a child you would need to stay," Emmy comments. "But I'm not. And I'm not an invalid either. And more importantly, I don't need two grown people hovering over me all the time. It's annoying."

This last comments captures Martin's attention. "Oh."

He drums his fingers against the wall he is leaning against. Then, walking slowly to the couch, he sits at one end of it and feels Emmy's feet touching his back.

"Your mother . . ." he begins. But that's all he says. He has never been a big talker, and words fail him when he gets emotional.

Scooting up beside him, Emmy presses her cheek against his. When she was a girl, he used to do this with her if something had upset her. Now she feels like it is her place to return the comfort.

"If you stay, " Emmy explains, "I'll go out every night drinking at a bar until you hop on a plane and leave."

Though her mouth is stern, her voice smiles.

Her father remains perfectly still. "You don't drink."

"I can start."

He snorts.

"Oh, go and be free, Dad," she whispers, so that only he can hear, and now she smiles. Slowly, he smiles too, and somehow they both know he is getting on that plane tomorrow night.

"Besides," she adds, "if I have the energy, in a few days there's a lecture I want to attend. So see? I'm already looking for ways to get outside and be left alone."

Her father frowns. "What lecture?"

"About neuroplasticity."

"Neuro--what?"

"I came across it on Doctor Zimmer's wall this morning, and I saw a notice about it a week ago when I was googling events in town. I'm not a hundred percent sure how it works," she clarifies, "but from what I understand, it has to do with how the brain can and does change."

"And what does that have to do with you?"

"I guess," she continues, unsure of herself, "I guess I've been wondering if how I *think* about my injury has been slowing my progress. If I can improve just a little bit more, I'll be perfect."

"Em---" he starts.

"---the pain has eased up, but what if it comes back? So if I attend the lecture---"

"Your body got broken, not your mind. *That* works fine."

"Well, I'd like to ask questions anyway," she says, unaware that she is no longer speaking in a whisper. "The faster I heal, the better. Don't you think I'm dying to get back to Brooklyn---don't you think I'd even like to go to that costume party next week?"

"What?" her aunt calls out from the kitchen.

"Oh, no," Emmy mumbles.

Maybelline steps back into the room. "Wait a minute. You been at home all these months and now that *I'm* here suddenly you want to go and parade yourself all over town and have me worried?"

"You can't make me stay in," Emmy decides, trying to make her soft voice sound firm.

Maybelline shakes her head. "You know what? Maybe I'll stay out all the time, too. That way you can cook for yourself while I'm gone, and you can fall out all over the place while you're at it. I mean, if you're not sticking around why should I?"



The agitation in May's voice trails behind her as she retreats again into the kitchen.

Emmy can't say she wishes her aunt had not come. She knows it will comfort her father to have someone around in his absence; and she knows how easily unglued her aunt can become when she feels no one is listening to her.

In a couple of days, she will calm down, Emmy is sure of it. And she might even come to see things the way Emmy and her father do - hopefully.

*Otherwise, I can't endure her, Emmy thinks. But she is mommy's sister. God, help me get used to her for the summer.*

It is only during dinner that May tries to control her surliness. But once she gets wind of Martin's firm plans to leave the next day, the snide remarks continue. Martin excuses himself from the table and heads to the den, while Emmy and May finish their dessert in silence.

"Matter of fact, maybe I'll go out and take up that writing class, too," May picks up in a minute, eating the

last of her cake and trying not to eye her niece so obviously.

Emmy can forgive the tirade. She just keeps telling herself that her aunt means well.

"---keep myself outdoors all day long like everyone else." May finishes.

The doorbell rings.

"Well, who is that at this hour?"

Emmy looks at her watch. It's eight o'clock.  
"Probably Mr. Barnes."

"Who?"

The women hear Martin heading to the front door to open it. Sure enough, standing on the porch is their neighbor Mr. Barnes. He steps into the living room with a chess board tucked under his arm and the men clasp hands.

"Well, hey there miss Emmy," Mr. Barnes nods, peeking into the kitchen.

"Hello."

He looks at May. "Ma'am," he says.

But Mr. Hughes beckons him away. "Come on."

Once the men have shuffled off to the den, Maybelline inquires, "Who is he again?"

"Our neighbor. He moved in next door a few months ago. Military guy and dad's new chess buddy."

With dessert over, Emmy goes to retrieve her blankets from the living room, and she can hear the men opening up beer bottles and setting up their game in the den.

Aunt May remains in the kitchen, tackling the dishes and still muttering complaints beneath her breath. But after a while, her complaining revolves into the pleasant humming of a tune.

Emmy grabs her weapons and warriors book from the living room floor, mingles it with her blankets and

slowly starts to make her way to the creaking stairs case. The mens' voices float out from the den as she heads up:

"Now, some folks say the greatest chess game was 1999, Topalov against Karpov," Mr. Barnes is saying. "But not for my money. To me, the greatest game ever played was in 1983. That's when Pete 'Snugglepup' Johnson beat Bill Carmine."

"Who?"

"Old war buddies of mine. Pete knew Bill, see?"

"Uh-huh."

"Now, you ain't always gonna know your opponent--know his thinking patterns and his fears and temperament. But Pete knew Bill inside and out, and that was his advantage. Ten-hour game it was."

"Not ten."

"On my mama's grave."

"Hmmmm."

"Tell me: your kids play?"

"David's good, but Emmy---" Before her father can finish his sentence, Mr. Barnes has already misunderstood him.

"Well, you oughtta teach her ," Mr. Barnes suggests.

Mr. Hughes laughs. "Em's been playing chess since she was four."

"Oh, she's good?"

Emmy's fatigue grows as she reaches the top of the stairs.

Her father makes a snorting sound. "Em is all rays of sunshine on the outside," she vaguely hears him say, "and in a chess game she uses that against you."

"Plays it innocent, eh?"


"Yeah, innocent," Mr. Hughes confirms, and Emmy can imagine her father nodding as he talks, even smiling at the memory of one of the old chess games she used to

beat him at. At last, Emmy reaches the door to her room, puts her hand on the knob and yawns.


"That's why she always wins," her father finishes.  
"That's how she goes in for the kill."

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Family**



---



"Who's got the door open?" Nabil Mooripar demands, making his way down the opulent staircase to the living room, the train of his robe dragging along behind him. But no one answers.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, he sees Markus sitting on the floor, leaning against the long silver-colored that sits couch across from the fireplace. His eyes are closed. Next to him is dark little Winnie sitting

in a plush white chair, her feet tucked under her, a remote in her lap and a book in her right hand.

"Hello?" Nabil repeats, angrily. "I'm talking to you guys."

They both look up at him now and gesture toward their left: across the expanse of the living room, beyond the vestibule, the front door is wide open and a lone figure stands in the doorway, hands in his pockets, facing the outside.

Markus mouths the words "bad mood" and points.

"Well, bad mood or not," Nabil murmurs, "it's hot in here."

And now he walks to the center of the room, his olive skin matching the golden color of his robe, and he hugs his arms across his chest, waiting.

"Honestly," he says.

The lone figure does not respond at first. Then come the words, "It's fifty-five degrees out."

"Exactly. It's an inferno when you keep that door open and let that heat in."

Gilead neither turns around nor closes the door.

Winnie sighs and set her book down for a minute. "It's the smallness of this place," she offers quietly, to Nabil. "That's why you feel everything. Not enough room here. Not like the last house. But, ah, well."

"All I know," Markus adds, slouching further against the sofa, "is that in a couple of years I want to go back to Morocco. I already hate it here."

"Morocco!" Nabil yelps. "So you want us to burn up even more? You're a trifling soul. Don't expect the rest of us to suffer just because you like to sweat."

"I don't like sweating at all," Markus protests. "Just Morocco. And don't complain about heat when you refuse to wear your proper clothes."

"Proper," Nabil spits out. "Proper and lacking in style - jeans and T-shirts. Bah! You'd think Annaka



would be a top designer by now. I say---my skin is frying in here!"

Moving out of the doorway, Gilead shuts the front door, but remains outside.

Now it feels like just the three of them alone together on this night: Markus, Nabil and Winnie---plus the six, half-closed yellow eyes near the fireplace.

"What's he in a mood about, anyway?" Nabil asks. "He's been a mute since last night."

"Well," Markus starts, sitting up. He seems about to speak, but then changes his mind. "Who knows."

"You should know, that's who. You were with him last night, weren't you? Everything's fine?"

Markus nods, now turning his body around to face the couch and kicking his legs up on the sofa's arm. "Fine, of course. Everything's always fine, ain't it?"

Nabil steps toward the couch, sits down and looks at the fire.

The fireplace has never bothered him because real fire does not come from it. The flames that burst out tonight, and every night, are only a trick of the eye, perfectly cut strips of orange silk that wave in the air, creating a fiery illusion; Nabil supposes that tonight is a good night to be entertained by them.

Wrapping his silk robe tighter around him, he stretches out and lies down.

No one else in the house is ever so fancily dressed as he is. The others prefer slacks, tennis shoes, T-shirts and even slippers. Even Winnie, with her thick braided hair falling down past her back, and her love of dresses, only wears a T-shirt and shorts tonight.

But Nabil---whose exact Eastern ethnicity few can ever fully identify---has never tired of the opulence of his roots.

He glances above the fireplace, where an enormous television screen is affixed to the wall. "Where's the remote?"

Winnie removes it from her lap and hands it to him. Everyone knows what he is about to do now - he will resume the Bollywood movie he was watching earlier. It's like he never tires of it.

But even when the television is turned on, the sound is practically mute - just the way everyone in the house enjoys it. Nabil Mooripar settles into a relaxed position.

But in a moment, something distracts him: "Why are you making all that bloody noise, Mattie?"

"'Cause I'm working!" A voice calls out from the kitchen.

"Well, you move like a freight train," he murmurs.

In a moment, Matilda O'Graedy bounces into the room, her blond bobbed hair flying, and in her arms are three large golden bowls that are piled high with raw, chopped up meat.

"Don't concern yourself with how I move," she responds in her deep voice. And then she says, "Come,

babies," to the three panthers lying in a circle near the fireplace.

Reon, Pegasus and Ahaz rise from their spot of contentment like a trio of eager children. As Matilda hums one of her favorite Gaelic ditties, they follow her into the vestibule, where she places the bowls near the front door; it is here that the floors are made of wood rather than carpet, so that cleaning up any mess is easier to do. Besides, she just moped and waxed the kitchen floor.

"Yes, yes, here we go, dears," she coos, making a clicking noise at them with her tongue.

If she were a normal woman, she would be terrified of them, for Reon, Pegasus and Ahaz are a sight to behold, each of them nearly ten feet in length. Their bodies are heavy and thick, their long tails as dense as rope, and their legs are pure muscle. They show their pointed white teeth as they approach their food, and their claws make a loud sound against the wooden floor in the vestibule.

In a moment, the sounds of their teeth ripping at flesh can be heard throughout the house.

Gilead opens the front door and steps back inside. Pausing for a moment, he watches the animals eat.

"Good of you to join us," Nabil observes, lifting his head from the couch's arm.

Gilead does not answer, but looks at Matilda. "How much are you feeding them, anyway?"

"Much as they need," Matilda responds.

"They've had four meals today."

"I say hard work should be rewarded. That's right. Eat up, sweeties. By, the way, ya shoulda seen that beast out there, hissing at me like it was mad. Like it thought it was gonna eat me. Yes, it did! But I don't think that fat old clod ever saw the likes of Matilda O'Graedy in its life."

"Ha," Markus rolls his eyes. "It saw the likes of Caroline already."

Matilda smooths down a wisp of hair that has fallen over her eyes and cuts an angry glance in his direction. "Always got something to say, don't ya? Oh! But look here, Markus James Alexander! How many times do I gotta tell ya not to put your feet up on the furniture? You think I like cleaning up after ya all day?"

"I should think you do, yes."

Matilda moves out from the vestibule now, pointing a finger at him. "Why's it always something with you, huh?" she hisses. "Someone shoulda killed you in a war while you were still a man."

"Aw, now don't be mad at me 'cause I'm sloppy," he says. "Really, it's not my fault."

"You're not sloppy," she scolds. "Just delib'rately lazy, that's all---with your nasty footprints everywhere. Master! Make 'im take his grimy paws off my clean furniture, if it pleases ya. Not that Matilda O'Graedy asks for much in this world, but she does ask ta have her work respected. Just because it's my turn to be the maid doesn't mean he needs to rub it in."

Markus smiles. "Your turn to be the maid, Mattie? But it will always be your turn, won't it?"

Winnie looks up from her reading and frowns.

Clenching her fists, Matilda marches to the fireplace mantle, takes down a vase---

"No, I like that one," Nabil begins---

---and she throws it at Markus's head.

"Oh, you've hurt me," Markus giggles. "Help, help, help."

The cut that should be just above his eye has already vanished, and now he holds his stomach to still his mirth.

"Don't make me cut you," Matilda warns.

"Oh, you want to fight, do you, my sweet?"

"Where's a knife?"

"Yes, go on then," he encourages. "Get it over with, if you must."

Matilda rushes into the kitchen, cursing as she goes.

Nabil sits up. "Honestly," he murmurs. "That's enough for tonight!"

But Matilda has already returned, brandishing a large carving knife. "Where do you want it, you stupid pig," she demands. "Huh? Where do you want it?"

"Right in the kisser," Markus says casually, then with a mocking tone, "If it pleases ya."

At this, Matilda leaps over Nabil, misses hitting Winnie, and lands full on Markus, toppling onto his chest. In an instant, she thrusts the blade into the center of his right eye, yells, "take it, take it!" and then gives the eye three more quick jabs. It is on the fourth jab that she pushes the blade all the way in, until it reaches through to the floor.

"Don't be mean," Markus hollers, pushing her off. But rather than remove the blade from his eye socket, he



grabs her right arm with his massive hands, twists it behind her back and pins her to the floor. In a moment, he sits on her.

"Lemme go, you dumb fool!" she protests.

"Ah, now, but you stabbed me," he whispers, "and that wasn't nice."

With his smooth face next to her wrinkled skin, he smiles and takes the knife out of at last, tosses it aside and pecks her on the cheek: if only there was blood to be spilled, Matilda would be happy.

"I hate you!" she screams.

"Such violence," Markus murmurs. "I never understood it. Then again, it's all in a day's work for the Eunich crew."

Winnie blinks, shuts her book and gets up from her chair. "I'm going upstairs," she announces, sighing.

"Oh, now I've lost Winnie, too," Markus observes, his eyes following her as she exits up the stairs. He giggles.

"Maybe," Gilead's voice booms suddenly, interrupting Markus' laughing fit, "you should just take your feet off the furniture next time. It would be so much easier than all of this."

Markus smiles. "Maybe I should. What do ya say, Mattie?"

"You're always thinking everything is so funny," she answers. "Ha ha ha. All the time---ha ha ha. Get off of me!"

Gilead steps fully into the living room now and Nabil watches him as he passes through. "What's with that worried look on your face?"

"What worried look?"

"That's what I'm asking you," Nabil says. "Isn't it?"

Reon, with her sleek gray fur, raises her head from her meal and looks toward Gilead, her yellow eyes narrowing in his direction.

Gilead hesitates. "Is there ever anything to worry about?"

"I'm thinking," Markus declares offhandedly, even as Matilda still squirms underneath him, "that Gilead has been under a lot of stress lately. Moving always stresses you. And he hates the hospital."

"Not any more than usual---"

"Which brings me to my proposal for the night," Markus says smiling. "And that is, why don't we take out the chariot for a spin tomorrow?"

"Don't ask about the chariot," Nabil tells him.

"Why not? We just got it! Let's use it."

"It's showy," Gilead states.

Markus throws up his hands. "We live in a stone mansion with three panthers. We can't avoid being

showy," and with that, he turns and smacks Matilda on her rear. "Oh, stop moving around, you old hag."

Gilead places his hands in his pockets and heads toward the staircase. "I'm going to a lecture tomorrow, anyway. So no chariot. Ok, let her go."

"A lecture?" Markus inquires. "About what? How to be less moody in sunny climates?"

"About neuroplasticity, you idiot."

*"About neuroplasticity, you idiot,"* Markus mimics.

"Now, now," Nabil interjects.

"Come on, off of her," Gilead insists. "Now!"

Markus finally sits up and rolls off Matilda.

She slaps him across the face the second she is free of him. "One day, I ain't gonna be here no more," she declares. "No more Matilda O'Graedy for any of ya. One day, I'm getting a place o' me own and you'll miss me!"


"That'll be the day---" Markus laughs.

Gilead scratches his chin as he feet hit one step at a time, his thoughts consuming him, his mind flashing back to twenty-four hours ago.


*It cannot be*, is what he quietly tells himself, glancing back at Reon, whose eyes still follow him with concern. But Gilead nods his reassurance: *never mind, friend. It is nothing*, he thinks. *Nothing at all.*

## CHAPTER 8

### Her



---



Gilead Knightly already knows, the moment he steps into any room, that he's likely to be the tallest person present. And he knows what will happen once people get a good look at him, because it is the same thing that always happens---people stare. Openly. Some display a fear of him, and others offer their awe, but they always stare.

It's been this way for him and everyone in his family since he can remember - from Markus to Pranish to Winnie. The scenario never changes and tonight will be no different.

For a moment, his six-foot seven figure fills the doorway of the auditorium, and he looks out at the dozens of people already in their seats, or milling about.

He steps fully into the room and immediately captures the attention of a young man and woman who are standing near the back, talking.

They pause, start to converse again, and then pause a second time.

Gilead can hear their whispers, and feel that "pop" that goes off like a lightbulb in their brains, that "wow, wow, wow!" sentiment that makes people wild-eyed and curious.

He pays them no mind. They are little and insignificant and anyway, he hates people in general. Even the ones he does not know, he loathes.

Sometimes, his hatred is so strong that it seems impossible for him to go on feigning kindness, even where he works, at the hospital.

Making his way down the aisle, he debates whether he should sit in a middle row or not. But if he sits near the middle, someone, most likely a woman, will attempt a conversation with him, and he is in mood to talk.

So he pivots around and walks to the last row. He thinks to slouch in the seat, so he can hide, but he knows that's impossible. He has never been a sloucher to begin with, but though he wants to be one this evening, the length of his legs prohibits the action.

Instead, he sits up straight and tall and keeps his long arms folded in his lap.

Soon more people enter the auditorium. Most walk toward the front to find a seat, some move towards the middle, and only one older gentleman sits in the back.

Closing his eyes, the voices in the room bother him, as always.

A couple of women to his right, over in the next section, are already discussing him.

"---do you see his arms?"

"---I know."

"---*huge*."

And now they giggle and take their seats. Here it is then, the same story repeated; *they're like cattle, all of them*, Gilead thinks. *Foolish and giggling*.

A voice enters his head: *be kind*, it says.

It is not a voice of conscience. He has no conscience. It is, instead, a well-rehearsed memory of what he *should* be, and how he *should* behave.

*Be kind*, the voice says again. *This is how the game of normalcy is played*.

And yet, sometimes, it's all he can do to keep from yelling out, "I can't stand hearing you people talk. I can't even stand the sight of you!"



He wonders if he should just go home. He's not sure why he bothered to come to this lecture in the first place. After all, he has read up on everything he can about neuroplasticity. It's not even a new concept. Just new to these people, in this generation.

Honestly, he should leave.

The sound of feet shuffling up on stage causes him opens his eyes. Two men sit down at a long table, while a third man approaches the podium.

"Good evening," the man at the microphone begins. "I am so glad you all could join us this evening for our fourth Faith and Reason discussion of the year---"

Gilead looks around the room, frowning. What kind of group is this?

"---Today, we have two distinguished men who will be talking about the fascinating topic of neuroplasticity. My name, by the way, is Pastor Derrick Krakowski, and I am hoping you will bear with me as we embark on a journey that I believe puts science and religion not at

odds with each other, but in harmony with one another, as God intended them to be."

Gilead rolls his eyes. He would not have come to this lecture if he had known it was going to be some kind of religious discussion. *And what, he wonders, does the topic of neuroplasticity have to do with faith?*

The man on stage continues. "You know, there is always this talk of things not belonging together. Trust me, as a Jewish Christian, I know firsthand about that notion. But, sometimes, the very things we think shouldn't mix, can surprise us, and challenge our assumptions---"

Gilead digs into his back pocket and looks again at the flier advertisement for this lecture. He notes, sure enough, the words "Faith and Reason Series" tagged at the bottom of the page.

Odd. Why did he not catch that part before? Details like that never escape his attention.

"---Now, there has been lots of talk these past few decades about predispositions. For example, if you're an

alcoholic, too bad; that's how you're born and that's how you'll die. But I am reminded of a verse in Romans 2:12 where God says, 'Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing *the way you think*.'

A woman enters the auditorium at that moment and Gilead becomes vaguely aware of her tall, slim figure moving carefully down the aisle.

He grimaces. Gilead hates latecomers. People ought to be either early or on time to an appointment, but never late, even if it is only a minute late. He has little patience for imperfections such as these, and he watches the woman's flop of natural hair, a rather large amount of hair at that, bounce slightly as she walks. She moves as if she is in slight pain.

"---and so, ladies and gentlemen---"

Gilead coughs slightly. Once. Then twice. And now a third time.

"---it is my hope that the study of the human brain will bear this fact out as we find new and amazing

discoveries about the changeability of this magnificent 'machine'. So tonight it is my privilege to present to you two acquaintances of mine, doctors Alan Felix and Baron Escher."

A polite round of hand clapping erupts.

Gilead feels a tightening in his chest and coughs a fourth time.

"Thank for you having us here, Derrick," one of the two men at the table says, speaking into the microphone placed in front of him. "My name is Dr. Alan Felix---"

Gilead winces. For some reason, the man's voice suddenly pierces his ears like an off-key note in a song and Gilead clutches his ears and shuts his eyes for a second. The man's voice is growing louder and louder, and so is the sound of the lights buzzing above and the flapping wings of the fly on the wall in the far side of the room.

"What the---?"

He lets out a low groan, bites down on his teeth and then---absolute silence.

Removing his hands from his ears, he hears no buzzing or voices or flapping of wings, only a single sound that softens the madness. It is a whisper, gentle and unsure of itself:

"Excuse me," the sound says. "Is anyone sitting here?"

It is a voice, not just a sound, and it soothes his heart like a cooling agent against a burn. Gilead frowns. It is coming from several rows up ahead of him.

With everyone's back facing Gilead, he cannot be certain who is speaking, but he assumes it must be the woman who just entered the auditorium.

"Oh, sure," another voice responds (this second voice is jarring, and crude). "Go right ahead. No one is sitting here."

Now a funny sensation creeps over Gilead's body and something inside of him literally starts to vibrate.

His heartbeat picks up to an unusually rapid pace. He cannot hold his shaking hands still.

*It cannot be*, he says to himself. *No!*

Half bent over, he rises from his seat and moves out of the row. The older gentleman seated near him glances back. Gilead must be making noise as he moves. Usually, he is so quiet, but tonight---

If he can just make it home---maybe all of this will go away.

Glancing forward, however, he catches sight of the woman who asked for a seat. He sees her taking off her light sweater, and when she turns around to hang it on the back of her chair, he can see part of her face. It is mostly hidden in the dark, because the light is behind her from the stage, but something kicks him in his gut as he looks at her.

Unable to control the vibrating in his limbs, a choking sound now erupts from him. Apparently the gagging reverberates in the room, because suddenly

people turn around and look at him, and even the speaker onstage pauses.

*No, no, no*, Gilead thinks to himself, finally moving out into the aisle. *No!*

The loud noise picks up again as he makes his way to the door, pushing against the metal bar handles. He rushes out and into the empty hallway and feels himself wanting to vomit.

He can't quite catch his breath.

Placing his hands against the wall and leaning his head against hi, he closes his eyes and tries to still the sensation of bile rising in his throat.

What should he do now? Call someone from the house? That's no good. He can't let anyone even suspect that a Glitch is around. *That's what she is after all, isn't she? That's what that thing in there is.*

All these years, he has been perfectly safe. Why now?

He had hoped the curse might skip him. He had even begun to suspect that the Game had been canceled altogether, a relic of the olden days. After all, no one had been forced to play it since his brother John played three centuries ago - and John, like a good soldier of defiance, won that match.

*Kill her*, a voice in his head tells him.

*Yes, of course*, he responds.

And how should he do it? Should he follow her home when the lecture is over, come up behind her in her driveway, or wherever she lives, and snap her neck?

Whatever he does, he needs to be cruel. He needs to teach her and the One who sent her a lesson. Yes, that's it. He will do to her what his brother Micau did to his own Glitch: something so physically twisted that it would make the ears of any human who hears about it and finds her remains, shutter.

Slowly he starts to straighten up, and just in time. The door to the auditorium now swings open suddenly, and out *it* walks.



He cannot make out her whole face because her hands are covering her mouth and nose, but he can see her big eyes, and the alarm on her face.

Two other people are following it - following *her*, and making a commotion behind her.

"Hold your head back, honey," one of them is saying, trying to still the bleeding woman's franticness.

But blood has already seeped onto her white dress, and Gilead can hear her saying, "Not again, not again," as she rushes past him.

*Not again.* Gilead thinks. *So it's happened before.*  
*Of course it has*

It happened outside the restaurant, didn't it? She was somewhere around the vicinity that night, near the boardwalk, wasn't she?

In a moment, the woman, looking a bit disoriented, now disappears into the bathroom with the two people still following her. Gilead bites his lower lip and closes his eyes.

Now he knows why he missed the fine print on the flier, and why he had a desire to come to this stupid lecture in the first place.

*It's Him.*

Gilead curses under his breath; curses Him with everything he's got.

*Her?* he thinks, in disgust. *Against the greatness of me? That simple-looking thing?*

It's insulting!

Opening his eyes, he takes the opportunity to move toward the exit. A few new comers enter the building. It's all Gilead can do to appear as normal as possible to them---he forces himself to stand up straight and not clutch his stomach.

"I will break her," he mutters to himself. Thinking this is his one new comfort. "If I have to rip off her whole face, I will break her."

Outside, he takes in several quick breaths of air.

Why should he fear her? He doesn't. Not one bit.

If he can just get clear-eyed and focused he will be all right - for he knows that once he makes up his mind to reach a goal, it's as good as done.

He will kill her tonight. He will not be like the Great Ones before him who hesitated and lost. He will make Mother proud.

But before he can contemplate how to execute his plans, he cups a hand over his mouth, rushes toward a nearby bush, and vomits onto the leaves and branches.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **Aunt May's Magical Mystery Writing Tour**



Maybelline Jackson does not know that her niece is having another nosebleed this evening, or that Emmy is spending her time in the bathroom of an auditorium, passed out on the floor while an ambulance is being summoned.

All Aunt May knows is that she is nervous, sitting here in the back room of the local Lake George library. Apprehensively, she looks up at the clock on the while balancing a pen and pad of paper on her knees.

She hums a tune to herself, but it's not a happy tune. Instead, it is a tune of determination and will power.

The back room of the library presently has fifteen chairs placed in a semi-circle for the evening's Writers' Workshop, and only three of the chairs are presently occupied---one by Maybelline herself.

The workshop is supposed to start in twenty minutes and May is here early, hoping to meet the teacher before class starts.

"Are one of you the teacher?" she says to the two women sitting across from her in the semi-circle.

Both women shake their head.

A few more people trickle in until 5:55, when all the chairs become occupied.

Maybelline notices that the people here are the casual sorts; old hippies who probably smoked too much in their day and middle-aged nerds; yoga-looking types, too and women showing up in tennis shoes, sandals and shorts.

Aunt May has shown up in her Sunday best. Maybe that was a mistake.

She studies the interactions of the others: many of the folks seem familiar with each other and numerous hellos are exchanged while handshakes are offered freely.

Maybelline does not mingle, which is fine by her. She has come to learn, not to make friends.

Yet there is still no sign of the teacher.

Opening her purse, she takes out her glasses and places them neatly on her face. Growing up, she was a

good student and was always prepared. Neat and orderly is how she likes things and it is how life ought to be.

Now it is three minutes past six o'clock. Maybelline taps her feet impatiently on the floor. She does not like tardiness in an instructor. This is not a good sign.

Then at four minutes past the hour, a thick-waisted woman carrying two books and what appears to be a manuscript comes marching into the center of the circle.

"Velcome!" the woman shouts.

Aunt May winces.

The woman is short, maybe fifty-five or sixty years old, with wild, gray hair that almost looks like a white person's afro; but the strands are thinning and fine - as fine as gossamer - and her eyes are watery. She seems to stick her chest out as she stands.

"For zhose you don't know me, I am your teacher, Miss Hortensia Haultafritzfydeski."

What did she say her name was again? She speaks rather fast and Maybelline, for some reason, imagines her out on a farm somewhere, milking cows or cutting cheese in a stone-earth kitchen; she learns forward to try and catch the teacher's words.

"---I was born and raised in Poland, zho zhat is of no consequence to you, is it?"

Something about the woman's accent kind of sounds German to Maybelline - not that she can be sure because she has ever traveled outside of America before.

"However, zhere is no need to call me Hortensia Haultafritzfydeski," she explains, throwing her books onto the floor. "Zhat is too much to remember. Simply call me *Frau* Haultafritzfydeski---"

"But that's just as long," Maybelline mutters under breath. "Isn't it?"

"I---vait!" the woman narrows her eyes. "I hear someone speaking--you!"

For a second, Aunt May thinks the teacher is talking to her. But in a moment, the instructor points to a man of about forty, seated near Maybelline, and talking to another man. "Young man!"

He looks up startled.

"Young man, would I go into your home while you were eating, bazzing or sleeping and diss-rupt you?"

The little red-headed fellow pauses, uncertain how to answer. "I guess not."

"Zhen I demand zee same respect from you. Now, where vas I? Ah. I vill be your teacher for zhis summer workshop. I vill be your priest, too, iff I must be. And, yes, for some of you, I vill be your lover, too---"

Aunt May raises her brows.

"---in fact, I vill be your *god* during zhis class, and you vill like it. Understood? Now! Who am I, you vant to know? Vell! I am zee author of two Edenite bess-sellers in my home town---"



"Two *what?*" Maybelline starts to say, but the person to her left puts a hand on her knee to silence her: "The teacher is speaking," the person mouths.

"No interruptions, when I have zee floor! Now, I heff my books here for you to look. Iff you vant to purchase zhem, you may pay me tonight and I vill bring your copy to zee next class. Cash or check is accepted, zho cash iss always preferable. No, you ask, vhy am I a bess-seller and you, my pupils, are not? Because I use my imaginay-sion. I let myself go free. I allow my mind to explode! Like, boom! Zhat is vhy zhere are many returning students here from lass vinter. I am especially pleased to see Betty and Harry Puddifoot heff returned--"

A couple to the right of Maybelline wave cheerfully. The are both fat, and have buck teeth like rabbits, with wide, eager eyes. "Hi, Frau Haultafritzfydeski," they call out in unison.

"Yes, yes, zhose who have taken my vorkshop know zhat zhis is no er'dinary class. Zhis iss zee greatess vorkshop ever. Tell yourselves zhis, believe it, and you

vill produce incccccrcdible vork. I expect all of you to come up viss int'resting ideas. Indeed, some of you heff already vitten numerous chapters in your books, yah? Please, some one, share viss zee new people vhat you started vitting about a few months ago."

A few hands shoot eagerly into the air.

"You," the teacher points.

"Well," one man begins, "I'm working on a detective story that takes place in the late twenty-first century---"

"---yah---"

"---and it involves the President of the United States being hypnotized to assassinate the British Prime Minister who is actually the President's twin brother---"

"Very int'resting. I liked your idea from zee start. Did I not say zhis?"

Another hand stretches into the air: "You! Speak."

"Um, I'm doing a book where the detective investigating the murder is actually the murderer---"

"Zhat iss good, too. Not *new*, but good. In fact, I may shteal it from you ven you are done viss it."

There is polite laughter from everyone in the room except Maybelline: since when did the threat of plagiarism become funny?

Another person raises their hand.

"You! Go ahead."

"Well, my story showcases a lead detective who doesn't wear any clothes, so it's hard for him to go outside and actually solve most of his crimes---"

"I should expect so!" Miss Haltaufritzfydeski barks out. "I do not like profanity or nudity. I told you zhis and yet you are still in my class, invading my space, like a naughty boy. And yet, how can I get rid of you?"

The man smiles at this observation.

"But, ah," the teacher continues, "it vill pro'bly be a big hit. People like anything where zhere are no clothes involved. Moving on. Ve heff Harry and Betty Puddifoot once more. Always raising zhere little fingers. Speak!"

The couple with the rabbit teeth seem delighted to have been chosen.

"Well, you know, we've seen some stuff in our time," Betty Puddifoot starts. "That's why we're writing the truth about aliens and stuff. We don't have our plot fully developed yet, but it's getting there. And we're gonna add some fresh material dealing with a certain, shall we say, encounter my husband had recently."

"Vhat encounter?" the teacher inquires.

"Well," Betty begins, "his sergeant doesn't want him talking about it, but we feel we can share about it, in a vague way, with our literary friends."

"Too much back story."

"Oh. Sorry, " the woman says. "Anyway, Harry has seen creatures from the deepest parts of the sea. And the ocean is like a second outer-space."

Her husband clears his throat. "Sergeant's probably in on it. That's my thinking, 'cause it was some spooky stuff, I saw here in town. But the sarge don't want me to talk about it or ask questions. Anyway, that's all I can confess."

Miss Haultafritzfydeski strokes her chin. "Zee world is not always as it seems, my children. I like your conspiratorial fears. Paranoia is good material for any artist. Yet, do I believe you haff seen spooky stuff? No! You heff seen vhat you wanted to see. I, on zee other hand, am special. I heff heard of zhings, and seen zhings, no one in zhis room could even imagine."

Aunt May taps one foot impatiently on the floor while everyone else leans forward in their seats, eager to hear more.

"But now!" the teacher yelps, dashing their hopes with a sneer. "On to practical matters. Rules about zhiz vorkshop: vee meet here only vun day a week. So, of

course, zee real vork must begin at home, vich is vhy vee vill be breaking into smaller groups, viss two or sree persons per group. Zhis vill allow more time for reading and critiquing for everyone involved. Understood?"

"Yes," the class concurs.

"You vill read to each ozer in your small groups and zhen, you vill hand me your stories and novels for my personal feedback. And you vill love my feedback. Yah?"

"Yes," several voices call out in agreement.

"As for tonight," she continues, "vee shall focus on a simple exzercise of holistic creeee-ativity. You shall use your whole body and mind to vite. You vill let yourself go. If you must sit on zee floor to vite, so be it. If you must hold one leg up in zee air vwhile you twirl around in order to be more creative, how can I stop you? You vant to focus on zee *pleasure* of creeee-ativity. So it must be an original two-page story, and it must be completed by zee end of zee class tonight. You heff twenty five minutes to do zhis vwhile I contemplate wonders of zee world in my head. And---go!"

Pens are removed from backpacks and purses, pieces of paper are borrowed or taken out, complainers are told to hush, and a flurry of writing begins.

Maybelline just sits there, confused. She has never heard of a workshop being run like this before. It seems kind of disorderly.

For the last twenty-six years, before she retired, Maybelline held down a desk job at a cookie company and everything had order to it; there was always a schedule to follow and rules to adhere to, but this---this class has no order to it, and it astounds her.

Her expression must show her annoyance, because in a moment, the teacher approaches and bends down, so that her eyes are level with Maybelline.

"Who iss to be zee hero or heroine of your little story tonight?"

Mayelline can smell cheeses on the woman's breath. "Well, this is my first class and you ain't really explained---"

"Answer me!"

Aunt May blinks. "You don't have to yell."

"Poo-poo," the teacher yawns. "Are you going to cry?"

Maybelline looks at her perplexed. "Now, I don't know who you're used to dealing with but---"

"If it is for zee good of my students, zen I must yell. *Now!* What is your idea?"

A few eyes glance up from their papers to peer at Maybelline.

Feeling put on the spot, Aunt May bites her tongue, closes her eyes to keep herself calm, and says, "I don't have an idea. I just got here."

"Oh? So, I heff a rebel in my midst."

"Rebel?"



"Ideas come at your command. A true writer does not wait for zee idea to come to her, she comes to *it*! No, no. Don't just sit zhere looking baffled, black lady---"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't mix my words. Zhat is what you are, no? A black lady?"

"First of all, the name is Maybelline Annabel---"

"Boring, boring, boring," the teacher says, rolling her eyes. "Tell me! Vhat brings you here?"

What kind of question is that? Obviously she came here to write.

"I am vaiting!"

"I came here to write," Maybelline states, tilting her chin up proudly. "I got a book in me."

The teacher laughs. "Who doesn't? Zee problem is, most of zee books should stay in zhose persons! Unless a person hass a way of bringing zhat book out from zee soul. Can you bring a book out from zee soul?"

"I---don't---huh?"

"Vhat is your full name?"

Now *everyone* in the room is watching their exchange. Aunt May hates to make a fool of herself.

"Maybelline Annabel Jackson is the name."

"From?"

"From Virginia."

"Does anysing good come out of Virginia, Maybelline Jackson? Or vill you write about baby daddies, mama babies and thugs?"

Maybelline gasps. Of all the---all the racist things to say! She can't believe what she's hearing. "Now, hold up a minute---" she starts, shaking a finger at the teacher.

"Oh, I suppose I heff insulted you?" Miss Haultafritzfydeski teases. "Vhat vill you do about it? Vill you leave? Vill you stand up and run?"

"You know I could report you---"

"To whom vill you report me?" the woman sneers. "Who cares about me? I am a little vitter, standing in a library, scaring a woman who should not be scared. Why don't you sue me for hurting your feelings while you're at it? Oh, poo-poo. Cry, cry. Only problem iss, I heff no money. I already spent zee money everyone paid for zee class. And even if you do decide to sue, I vill plead insanity and call you a liar."

Maybelline gapes.

"Vhat have got zhen? Nada. You heff wasted your time when you could heff been viting."

"It's pronounced *writing*, not viting," Aunt May states in frustration.

"Oh, poo-poo. Cry, cry."

Aunt May narrows her eyes at the little women.

"I am difficult, no?" the teacher smiles. "And you hate my guts, yah? You zhink I am cruel? Vell, all I care to know iz if you heff zee chops to be a great artist. Huh? Vell, do you?!!!"

Maybelline licks her lips. Really, she ought to quit this workshop right now. And yet---yet it galls her to think she might be the only person to give up. But she's not a quitter - never has been and never will be. That's not how her folks raised her.

The teacher claps her hands together sharply, shaking Maybelline out of her wandering memory. "I can zee you are lost. Vell, here iss vhat I'm going to do for you, Maybelline Jackson. I'm going to pair you up viss my best disciples---zee Puddifoots."

"I don't take orders about who I---"

The teacher ignores her protestations. "You will be in zheir small group and you vill learn vat it means to expand your mind towards brilliant insanity. I heff said it. It must be so!"

"Now you must vite," Miss Haultafritzfydeski instructs. "Everyone must vite. *Now!*"

And just like that, the sounds of pens and pens scribbling against paper can once again be heard throughout the back room.

Someone taps Maybelline on her shoulder. "She's a writing dictator," Betty Puddifoot whispers. "But it works. All writers should live in fear."

Fear?

If only Early were here. He would tell her it's all right if she walked out in the face of such insults. Wouldn't he?

Or maybe he would---would he scold her? Would he say, in that cackling voice of his, "Sugarplum, you got to calm down and take your lumps."

Maybelline hesitates.

If she leaves now, what is she going to do for the summer? Helping to care for Emmy seems an unlikely scenario - already that child has plans to fly the coop as much as possible.

May sits and reflects on why so many people have returned to this workshop for a second time. Perhaps this class really does help in creativity? Or could it be that

the people are masochists who have come to to feast upon some kind of abuse?

May glances down at her blank sheet of paper. Then she looks at her thin hands. Her palms are sweating a bit. Probably from embarrassment more than anything else. She gets sweaty palms when she's angry, too.

Looking around the room, she notices that no one seems to have any problem doing the exercise. At the least, they're all *pretending* to write something worthwhile.

Picking up her pen, she holds it stiffly in her right hand, and jots down the first thing that comes to mind---

*It was a dark and stormy night . . .*

Wait, that's been done before.

("Do not censor yourselves!" Miss Haultafritzfydeski yells. "Just vite. Vite.Vite!")

Maybelline keeps hoping a staff member from the library will come back and order the teacher to hush up! But no such help is forthcoming.

Finally, Maybelline manages to string together a few paragraphs that tell the story of a polish woman who dies of thirst in the desert - then gets eaten by worms.

*It's not so bad*, May thinks, looking the piece in surprise. Maybe all she needed was a little motivation.

Then, before she knows it, class is over.

Maybelline hardly has a chance to put her pen back in her purse before the teacher comes and snatches up her story. "Hey, wait a minute!"

But the teacher is already snatching up other papers, too. "I vill read zhese and laugh at zhem over a bottle of vine tonight."

Putting away her reading glasses, Maybelline shakes her head and starts to gather up her purse.

Someone taps her on her shoulder again "What days you want to get together?" Betty Puddifoots asks. "Since we're assigned in a group and all."

Betty reminds May of what Mrs. Santa Claus might look like if she were real: jolly and good natured, with a big stomach, and bright, clear eyes.

"I'm not sure you'll be getting me in your group---" aunt May explains. "I don't take well to yelling."

"Oh, she's harmless. But if you change your mind," Betty starts. "Harry, write our address and phone number down and give it to the black lady---"

"Excuse me?"

" That way, you can call us if you change her mind. You know, my husband and I, we're having a blast writing our book. Plus listening to Frau helps fuel our imagination. Oh, there's more to her than meets the eye. Once you get to know her, you're gonna love her. Did you know her great-grandfather used to be a real life Edenite hunter?"



"A what?"

"We haven't finished the second book yet," Harry explains, handing Maybelline a slip of paper with their personal information on it, "but she's got these creatures in her books that come from the Garden of Eden."

"They ain't creatures, Harry," his wife corrects.

"Well, they're sort of human but---anyway, her great-grandpa actually met one---"


"Hunted one," Betty corrects a second time.

"That's what I mean."


It's all Maybelline can do to extract herself from them as quickly as possible. *Poor fools*, she thinks to herself. *Poor, sad fools*.

# CHAPTER 10

## Pleased To Meet You



---



It has been three weeks since *that* nosebleed. That second one that proved worst than the first and rendered Emmy unconscious for what paramedics said was more than an hour.

In fact, when her aunt finally made it to the hospital that same night, fresh from the writing class she was taking, she found her niece hooked up to an oxygen machine, and Emmy's lips purple with cold.

But the doctors claimed she wasn't dying - not that anyone knew exactly what was wrong with her, either.

Yet, while her aunt fretted and called up Emmy's father over seas, Emmy had the most peculiar dream that night in the room.

She saw visions of a man walking through a lush garden wearing a jacket made of precious stones - pale

green stones, blue stones and white ones. His face was human but his limbs were made of solid gold.

In the dream, she felt it was in her best interest to try and see the man's face, but just as he cocked his head to the side to look back at her, a large hand materialized out of nowhere - a hand larger than the man himself - and it grabbed him and twisted him and smashed him into dust, until his remains flew away like powdered gold.

Waking with a start, Emmy looked to find her aunt sitting in a chair across from her bed.

"I called your father," Maybelline started. "Dear, God, look at you."

It was Emmy who had to rectify the panic by calling her father back and assuring him that she was all right.

"The doctors can't find anything wrong," she told him in a weak voice, "and besides, David is coming up to see me."

Having her brother at her side gave everyone a bit more comfort, and it was he who advised his sister get more than one doctor's opinion.

In the course of a week, while David was in town, Emmy visited three doctors of varying experience, and it was agreed upon by all of them that nothing, technically, was wrong with her.

But these conclusions did little to comfort aunt May. "I wish you could see my doctor in Virginia," she sighed. "That man always finds something wrong with people."

For all of May's uneasiness, however, the one thing *did* comfort her a great deal was the undeniable proof that her niece continued to walk better each passing day. The pain in her back improved again after this second nosebleed, and within two weeks, Emmy was walking like the old Emmy they all knew back in early December.

"Chalk it up to a miracle," her orthopedic doctor assured her, though he did not smile. And Emmy could tell that the improvements bothered him doctor more than they impressed him. Still, he asked Emmy, "How do you feel?"

Emmy felt scared to go outside, that's what she felt, for she had a growing concern that the bleedings would occur again if she ventured out doors.

"That isn't true," her brother observed. "You've been outside to a bunch of appointments this week, and you haven't bled, have you?"

Why did her brother always have to be so logical? Why did he always have to point out the obvious? Her aunt, at least, indulged her fears.

It was Davie who pointed out, even before he returned home to the city, that Emmy was beginning to look less gaunt, and more rejuvenated. And it was he who suggested something Emmy had already wondered herself. What if the nosebleeds had been a way for her body to rid itself of toxins? How else to explain how her back improved after each incident?

And now, here it is, three weeks later, and she has blossomed into to her old self again; so much so that here today, in the middle of June, she smiles at herself in the mirror and stands tall.

She loves afternoons like these, when every thing outside is yellow and bright and shining and the day makes her feel courageous and hopeful.

Forget any nosebleeds.

But to think! It had crushed her three weeks ago to know she would be missing the costume party held in late May. Yet what luck she had when she learned it had been rescheduled (not on her account) to the middle of June.

And that's what today is. June sixteenth!

She is going to that costume party tonight as Legolas, with her bow and arrow, her her tunic and cape, and of course her hair.

Her hair.

She will blow it straight later, just before she and Mercy get picked up by Kirk and Anders.

In the meantime, Mercy has agreed to stop off to Canada street with Emmy to look for some tan boots to

complete her outfit. Emmy could easily use her old brown boots, but they are worn and fading, and she'd like something shiny and new to wear tonight.

"But why do you insist on wearing the outfit in the middle of day?" Mercy asks, an hour later, as Emmy parks the car across the street from Tulane's.

"Cause I like it."

"Aren't you hot?"

"Warriors can't concern themselves about the elements."

Mercy rolls her eyes. "Already in character, huh? I just hope you don't bleed all over yourself tonight. Oh, come on. I'm kidding."

Neither of the women notice a pair of dark eyes following them into the store.

Gilead drums his fingers against the car steering wheel, takes the keys out of the ignition and opens the door.

He does not cross the street right away, but waits several minutes at the corner, pretending to be on the phone. Then he walks across the street when the light turns green, and pauses on the sidewalk just in front of Tulane's.

The phone is still pressed against his ear, and he ignores the open stares of pedestrians. He finally moves to the window of the shop and peers in unobtrusively - well, sort of unobtrusively. Nothing about him is ever really unnoticeable, but. . . .

He shouldn't be doing this and he knows it. It always makes the match harder - it makes the kill more difficult.

But he wants to take a closer look at his enemy's face before he does what he has to do. He'd like to know just what kind of game has been sent to him.

He lingers near the window for several more seconds and then, to his great annoyance, someone laughingly bumps into him.



"Hey!" It's Markus, standing there like he hasn't got a care in the world. "What'cha doing?"

Gilead stealthily puts his phone in his back pocket. He doesn't want to get caught *not* talking to someone on it. But why does Markus always show up at the most inconvenient times?

"Saw your car," Markus announces. "Thought I'd say hey."

Gilead does not answer him.

"Why are you standing in front a woman's dress shop?"

"Is there something you want?"

"No."

"Then go away."

"Hey, it's a free sidewalk, man."

Gilead makes a funny noise in the back of this throat, a feral sound that makes him curl his fist into balls. It is a sound that Markus knows all too well.

"All right, already, " Markus huffs, indignantly.  
"I'm leaving."

He pivots around, walks a few feet down the block, but glances back and sees Gilead still staring into the window.

Retracing his steps, Markus quickly approaches.  
"I'm sorry---but what are you looking at?"

Gilead straightens up, but it is too late. Markus is already peering into the window with him.

"Are we on a spying mission?" he asks in a conspiratorial tone, almost giggling. His glance falls to the two women standing at a clothing rack. "Who are they?"

"Who?"

"The women you're staring at."

"I'm not staring at them."

Markus starts to laugh. "Aside from the sales clerk, they're the only two people in the store, right?"

Gilead flinches.

It is the odd guilty look on his face that captures Markus's sudden attention and makes him stop laughing. Gilead is never guilty about anything. Nor does he ever have a need to explain himself to Markus. But today there is a sort of 'caught' look in his eyes.

Markus glances back into the window. "Wer ist sie?"

"Who?"

"The woman," he states in all seriousness. "Unless you've been planning to buy yourself woman's clothing."

Gilead turns and starts to head back to his car.

Markus follows. "You're not answering."

"Since when do I answer to you?"

"Well, can I ask you something?"

"No."

"I didn't make a big deal about it before." They are standing at the street corner now. "But I swear, you got sick the other week on the boardwalk."

Gilead faces him, in fury. "I did not get sick."

"I heard---"

"You heard nothing."

"You think I doubt my own ears? I did for a while. But now I see you standing here today, looking at *one* of those women like it's the first time you ever saw a female before."

"Don't go spreading that lie, " Gilead demands.

"---which means you know what I'm going to ask you---"

"There's nothing to ask."

"Is one of them---?"

"I said no! *Don't* ask that question." And now Gilead comes so close to Markus that their noses almost touch. "If you start that rumor, I will kill you."

They become aware of people watching them, and Gilead backs up.

If only they were at home, they could fight, but never in public. . . .

"Then how come you can't tell me what you were staring at?" Markus demands. "It's not a complicated question."

Gilead's mind feels so muddled. He has always been quick on his feet, so to speak, always so in command of any given moment. But today. . . .

He clenches and unclenches his fist, wishes he had something to kick at, and then hesitates. "You get everything backwards, Markus. All the time. Now, I have to tell you what I didn't want to."

Markus waits.

"I'm looking for an addition to the house."

Markus unfolds his arm across his chest. He seems more baffled then concerned. "Huh?"

"You heard me."

"From those women in there?"

"Possibly."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

Markus walks back to the store and peers again into the window. The women have now moved to another rack of clothes. He frowns.

"But, they look average. Well, wait - the black one is sort of interesting. Pretty. And look at all that hair! But she's not important, is she? Does she run a country I don't know about?"

"Maybe."

"Please. It takes women forever to adjust anyway. Look at Mattie. No, I say, we get a new pet instead. Like a big dog---"

But before Markus can protest further, Gilead walks to the door of the shop and pulls it open.

He must be light in his mood from now on if he wants to continue fooling Markus. And he must show no open hostility towards the one called Emmy.

"No pets," Gilead reminds Markus, stepping inside. "You already have one. And she would eat any dog you get."

In the near left corner of the store, Mercy is laughing about a blouse she has picked off one of the racks. "How do people come up with these designs?" she asks. "Are they drunk when they think of them?"

Emmy smiles. The brightly colored blouse decorated with the painted face of a reindeer is certainly

a laughable choice - especially here at the start of summer.

"Now all we gotta do is find some brown golf pants to match it," Emmy says.

"Yes, with patches at the knees. And we could---" Mercy stops. "That's him."

"Huh?" Emmy follows Mercy's gaze.

"That's the guy at the gas station I was telling you about, remember?" Her voice catches in excitement. "And whoa! He brought his brown twin. One for you and one for me."

Emmy peers at the two men who have just entered the store. She does not mean to stare, but she does. They are probably two of the tallest men she has ever encountered. And while they aren't twins, they *do* seem like replicas of each other - they both wear glasses, and there is something about the way they carry themselves, about the centeredness of their walk, that is similar to the other.



"Can I help you?" the sales clerk says to the men.

"Just looking," Gilead responds.

"Well, is there anything in particular that you're looking for?"

"Just looking," Gilead repeats, his eyes darting towards the women.

"I see. Well, if you need any help---"

"Shhh!" Gilead responds. The clerk hushes up, and steps back, bewildered.

"He's having a bad day," Markus assures the woman in a whisper. "We'll just have a peek around."

Gilead nudges him. "Why is the blond one talking about you?"

"Eh?"

"She said, 'that's him, Em, the guy at the station I was telling you about.' Has she met you before?"

Markus looks in their direction. The blond one does look a bit familiar. And now it comes to him: "Oh---right. A few weeks back. I said hi to her somewhere I think."

"Well go and say hello again."

"Why?"

"You're a friendly guy, aren't you? Be friendly and make yourself useful---"

Across the room, Mercy is giggling despite her best effort to keep calm. "I hate it when I get goofy," she whispers. "Shoot! He's looking over here, Em. How do I look?"

"Fine."

"I should have worn my costume like you. What man doesn't drool over Wonder Woman? Okay, he's walking over. I'm calm. I'm calm. I am---"

"Hey," Markus says, approaching.

"Hi."

"I think we met before, right?" He smiles brightly at the women.

Mercy nods. "At the gas station."

"Gas station? Oh. Right."

"About a month ago."

"Yeah."

Mercy smiles and Markus pauses.

"So."

"Huh?"

"What are you doing here? In a woman's store?"

Markus laughs. "I saw you through the window and thought I'd say hello."

Mercy turns red. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Wow."

Emmy watches Markus with her peripheral vision. Is it her imagination or does she notice his eyes shifting back and forth between she and Mercy, as if he is trying to detect or read something in them?

Mercy lets out a nervous laugh. "I'm Mercy by the way. Mercy Wexler. And this is my friend, Emmy Hughes."

Markus nods in Emmy's direction. "Markus Alexander," he returns, not offering his hand to shake. "I'm sorry: *doctor* Markus Alexander is the name."

Mercy's smile broadens, and Markus's eyes shift quickly to the blouse in her hand.

"I hope you aren't planning on buying that," he scolds.

"Oh. No!" Embarrassed, Mercy hands the blouse to Emmy, who is standing closer to the rack. "I wouldn't--- we were just laughing about it."

Glancing around the store, Emmy notices that the other fellow, the tall black one, has gone off into a

corner somewhere, out of view, and now she places the blouse back on the rack and watches Mercy and Markus in silence.

Doctor Markus Alexander reminds Emmy of those Greek and Roman statues she has seen in pictures. He has a strong structure to his nose, his large leg muscles are detectable even through his jeans, and his arms look like they were dreamed up by Michelangelo.

But he is also kind of stiff, as if he is busy calculating something in his mind, and his heart is not present.

Emmy frowns: it's not that this man could not like Mercy (Mercy has her good qualities), it's that Emmy hopes he is not playing games with her.

Indeed, it would be nice if someone as seemingly well put together as him loved someone like Mercy--- Mercy with her boisterous nature and tough way of talking, Mercy with her drug addict mom and wheelchair-bound grandpa. Why shouldn't she have someone decent in her life?

But this guy seems a bit out of her league. He sort of seems out of everyone's league. Not because of his looks (geek hot, is how Emmy would describe him), but because there is something distinctly "up there" about him.

Emmy is not aware that she is staring until she catches herself, well, staring, and now she steps back from the clothing rack, turns around and bumps into a concrete wall that was not there a moment ago.

"Ouch!"

Her nose and her teeth hurt from the impact and when she looks up, she sees that it is not a wall at all, but the other gentleman who walked in with Markus.

Emmy passes her tongue over her teeth to cool the pain. Why is he standing directly behind her in the first place?

"Sorry," he says, but there is something distinctly insincere about the way he says it.

Emmy is tempted to think he is some pervert, trying to feel her up in a dress shop. But he is not looking at her with even the slightest hint of admiration.

"I'm looking for something for my mother," he explains out of the blue.

"Huh?"

"That's why I'm standing here. If you're wondering."

"Oh." She supposes that explains his closeness.

And now he takes a step backward, and moves out of her way.

But before she passes him she quickly notes again how similar he is to Markus; their build is the same, their arms are of equal size and there is that same quality of muscle in the legs you can detect through their jeans.

Yet there is something more present about this one, something more grounded, and more masculine.

There is something more frightening about him, too. Perhaps it has to do with the slight flare of his nostrils, and the way his eyes gaze down at Emmy with such focus.

At least they are beautiful eyes. Emmy has never seen eyes quite like his before - ink black, raven black, eyes that have seen the world.

An awkward moment passes. She edges past him so he can have a look at the blouses for his mother.

As she walks by, however, she hears him mumble something indistinct; something that sounds like "I'll win," though she isn't sure of the words.

But anyway, it has nothing to do with her.

She moves along and makes her way to the back of the store where the shoe racks are located. At last, she must get her boots.

Gilead taps his right foot impatiently on the ground as he shifts through the clothes rack. Standing in front of a row of blouses for women is the last place in the world



he wants to be, but at least the action buys him some time to think.

He mostly got a look at her eyes; large, round eyes that blinked up at him and sort of sparkled. *Women and their fake charm*, he thinks.

He wrinkles his nose. The little beast is wearing perfume, too; something with sandalwood, rose and amber and it settles in the air around him. It isn't a bad smell, but it is there nonetheless - a manufactured gimmick.

That's a woman for you, he gripes. They must always draw attention to themselves and bat their eyes, and douse themselves in the stench of perfume so that they can be flattered and courted and taken out dancing. And if they don't get those things, then they die of bitterness and jealousy and resentment.

The little fakers. They disgust him.

Gilead looks up and watches her hobble her way to the back. It is a light hobble, almost undetectable (she tries to cover it up with the fluid movement of her arms

and her gait) but he knows about it because he knows about her accident and her injuries.

*Look at her,* he thinks as his lip twitches. *She is weakness defined.*

He bites down on his teeth and grinds them. How comforting it would be to just walk up to her, place his hands around her brown, slender neck, and squeeze it to death.

Yet this is not the time or the place to do it, so he must be practical.

Gilead stops pretending to look at the clothes, and glances at Markus who is doing a good job of keeping the other woman distracted.

Hesitating for a moment, Gilead saunters to the back of the store. To do what, he still has not decided.

Perhaps he will accidentally bump Emmy and aggravate her back pain. One light "oops" shove from him would send her back to the hospital and give him a good laugh.

Wouldn't it?

Well, he has to do something. Already, three weeks have passed, and he has found himself sitting on the sidelines doing nothing. He cannot be like the Great Ones before him who failed and found themselves in the pit of Sheol - the land of forgetfulness.

Across the room, Emmy picks up a pair of tan, knee-high boots to inspect and is relieved to find them on sale.

She wants to think about her outfit right now, and how the shoes will compliment her costume and how she will wear her hair tonight exactly. She even wants to think of the fun she will have pretending to shoot arrows at people, but she cannot seem to concentrate.

Her mind keeps racing back to those pair of inky black eyes that she knows are still in the store somewhere.

"What's wrong with your back?" A voice to her left makes her turn her head.

Startled, Emmy sees the tall black man standing beside her. And yet, he isn't just beside her: there is something about the way his body is positioned that makes her feel like he is surrounding her.

She frowns.

How come she didn't hear him when he walked up?  
How is able to move so stealthily?

And why is he following her?

That's the more pressing concern.

If Emmy thought he were trying to ask her out on a date, she might be flattered and feel beautiful. But she does not get that feeling from him at all---he does not want a date. He wants something else, though she can't begin to know what that might be.

"Nothing is wrong with my back," she replies.

"Most people can't see it. But you walk a little---off."

"I walk fine," she insists.

They lock eyes for a second and it dawns on Emmy that he might be some sort of doctor, like Markus. Maybe that's why he can detect the slight hobble of her movements. And her hobble is *slight*, isn't it?

She hopes it is. She doesn't like people bringing up the issue of her condition, especially since she no longer has a condition - not really.

"You don't walk a hundred percent fine," Gilead insists. "That's a lie."

She is not sure she understands the meaning behind his statement; but she feels angry at being called a liar, even as his own words seem to chase some point of irritation.

"You were in an accident," he now states.

"Excuse me?"

"A car accident," he continues. "Funny how *certain* accidents happen at *certain* times. Just before we meet *certain* people."

Something isn't right about this moment, and Emmy knows it. She feels it. But she doesn't have the courage to just drop everything and go running out of the store, either.

How foolish would she look?

"Before you get nervous," he clarifies. "I saw you the other week - in that lecture hall."

Emmy blinks.

"You had a nosebleed," he points out.

Slowly, she begins to resurrect an image of him. It was only a brief second that she saw him, but yes, yes, he was that big man leaning against the wall in the hallway when she rushed out to the bathroom.

"Oh. Right."

"I asked after you because it looked bad. And it's a small town, right? So since I'm a doctor---"

"Oh." She was right. He is a doctor like Markus and she wonders how the two men are connected to each other.

"Do you get them often?" he inquires.

"Huh?"

"Your nosebleeds?"

Slowly, Emmy's apprehension begins to fade.

Is that what this is about? Is he simply curious about what happened that night? Is that why he is following Emmy around right now?

But how did he end up in here in Tulane's? Did he walk into the shop coincidentally with Markus before he spotting Emmy?

"No--just twice," she answers.

"Yes, twice," he nods, like he knew she would say that. "And you're better now?"

She nods.

His eyes shift from her face to her body.  
"Well, enough, I see to dress up as a man in a bad costume."

Emmy pauses and looks down at her clothes. Odd that she should feel so self-conscious about them now.  
"I'm not dressed as a man."

"You're dressed as Legolas from *Lord of the Rings* aren't you?"

"Yes. But, I'm the female version of him."

"Ah."

And her costume isn't bad, either, she wants to say. It's not the greatest, but it's decent enough.

"Your choice of a weapon then," he continues in a low voice, his black eyes narrowing, "is a bow and arrow."

She does not know why she is still engaging him. But something inside of her feels like she *ought* to engage with him, so she nods.



"Until one day, " he murmurs, "you change it into a sword."

"Huh?"

"On that day," he whispers. "On *that* day I will win."

She heard him say that before, and it had no meaning. It still has no meaning, and yet she steps backward.

Emmy's fading apprehension stops fading.

There is, she is sure of it now, something creepy about this man, even about the way he is watching her. He has not come to find out how she is getting along since the accident in the lecture hall.

He has come to...she doesn't know what he has come here for.

All she knows is that she feels unsafe; all she comprehends is a compulsory urge to use her tan boots as a weapon.

*Leave.*

It's her gut talking to her. It's something primal and instinctive.

Their lock eyes again and Emmy throws the boots down and practically run towards Mercy.

But Mercy is so deep into conversation with Markus, that she does not hear her.

It is Markus who's concentration is easily broken. "Leaving so soon, ladies?"

"No---" Mercy begins.

"Yes," Emmy counters, glancing suspiciously at Markus. He might not be as creepy as the other one, but somehow, Emmy feels unsafe around him, too. "Our dates are picking us up soon."

Mercy tosses Emmy an angry glance. "They aren't our dates. They're just some friends . . ." and already she is writing down her phone number and handing it to Markus.

Emmy marches to the front door and does not look back.

Outside, the day is growing sleepy. The sun is drifting off over the horizon and the tranquility of early evening will soon approach. Emmy paces on the sidewalk, her arms folded across her chest, as she waits impatiently for Mercy.

What was that all about?

And who was that guy anyway?

A touch of agitation grows inside of her. She feels a bit claustrophobic. She feels like her blood is going to burst out from inside of her . . .

Nose.

Panicking, she touches her nose in fear, but finds no sign of blood anywhere.

Thank God.

Mercy walks out of the store now. "You didn't have to rush me, Em. That's my future husband in there, you know. And why did you mention our dates?"

"Because that's what Kirk and Anders *are*. And we're going to be late."

"In fact, we're gonna be early."

"No. I need to blow out my hair and that takes forever."

"Whatever," Mercy mumbles, too excited to take notice of anything wrong with Emmy. "Weren't they great though? What did you and Gilead talk about?"

"Who?"

"What do you mean *who*? The man you were speaking to - that's his name."

Emmy says nothing for a second because her temples ache, and she senses the onslaught of a headache coming.

"Em?"

"What?"

"You all right?"

"Fine."

"And you guys didn't talk about anything?"

"No."

Mercy smiles broadly. "Well, Markus and I talked, and *he* said---"

Emmy can't focus.

Cars thunder past them as they wait to cross the street. A slight breeze picks up in the air. It is a breeze that would feel soothing it weren't for the odd sensation of words scratching themselves across her brain, as if an invisible hand were etching the words on her forehead, stamping them in thick, black ink: *You are mine*.

She shutters at the vividness of the sensation, then steps out into the street as the traffic light turns green.

**Stay tuned for episode # 3 of [The Last King](#), coming next month.**

A. YAMINA COLLINS

# THE LAST KING

LOVE.  
YOUR.  
ENEMY.



# **The Last King: Book I**

## **Episode #3**

**by A. Yamina Collins**

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*Dedicate to the memory of the giants upon  
whose shoulders I stood:*

Devorice Jean Collins (1944–2010)

David Britton Collins (1913–1995)

Susie Mae Collins (1915–1998)

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## CHAPTER 11 What Was That?

---

Gilead made a mistake, and he knows it. The blunder galls him as he exits the shop, feeling Markus's eyes upon his back as he marches across the street to his car.

"What was that back there exactly"

Gilead ignores him. But Markus has a point.

It was the *way* Gilead spoke to Emmy that set off alarms for Markus, and the language he used. Gilead talked to Emmy as if she were someone he needed to beat in a game, and not someone he was feeling out for membership among them.

Markus heard the entire exchange! If only Gilead could take it back. But he can't.

"You sounded hostile back there." Markus is walking closely behind him, and his voice full of questions

"No.

"Yes. You kept saying 'I'll win.'"

Gilead whirls around to face him. "Is there something you want to ask me?"

Now comes a question Markus hesitates to put forth. "Is she a---a Glitch?"

It's such a nasty topic to bring up, and hasn't their family been spared of this evil so far? Sure, two of Markus's uncles and their children have endured it, but no one in this family has.

"What did you say?" Gilead's eyes flare at the mention of that word.

"I think you heard me."

Silently, Gilead suffers under a striking question: Why isn't he confessing the truth to Markus? Why not act with celerity instead of procrastinating? Why deny the whole thing? And why even bother making the acquaintance of that little beast back there in the first place?

Because he's biding his time and thinking things through, that's why. The fact is, he will never end up like the Great Ones before him, who failed.

He removes the car keys from his pocket. "She's not a Glitch."

"Well, you sounded uptight in there," Markus expounds. "You sounded threatened."

"Don't you think I'd tell you if she were? How many times do you want me to say 'no'?"

Markus pauses. "You passed on Tippeo Tib, Gilead. You have up on Moshesh, Chaka, the Mahdi, and yet--- yet you want *her* as our sibling? I don't understand."

Gilead opens his car door. "Did I ever tell you my theory about why Rome fell?"

Markus says nothing. He can only guess where is this going.

Gilead does not smile. "Rome fell because she didn't keep enough order. She wasn't cruel enough to her

subjects. She let foreigners in; foreigners who questioned her judgment and wanted to do things their way. If I had been a caesar, if I had been ruler, I would have executed more people. Dead subjects don't cause trouble. And Rome would have had her peace much longer."

He gets in the car and starts the engine as Markus steps out of the way, moving to the sidewalk.

The day cannot seem to make up its mind. A moment ago it was sunny and bright, but now clouds pass overhead. Markus runs a hand through his long blond mane and watches the car disappear down the street. "Understood," he mumbles.

In the car, Gilead is grimacing. For all the beauty of quiet towns, he hates having to follow rules and he hates quaint little streets like these. If he were on the open road, where police were scarce, he would push the car to its limit. For the fun of it, he might even drive it off a cliff somewhere, just to feel the rush of wind all around him and taste the thrill of fire on his skin.

If only he had the Chariot with him. . . .

As it is, he remains in the speed limit with his little black car, and he stops at red lights like a good civilian.

*Markus, he thinks, has always been too curious.  
What to do now?*

The only way to prevent any of this from becoming a problem is to get rid of the woman; that silly thing that stood there before him, all tall and delicate, and perfumed in her idiotic costume.

What a ridiculous way to challenge a man! Why could it not be a real fight? Why not put him in an arena with beings of his own kind and let them beat each other to death?

Now *that* would be worth something. Let the victor be the last one standing. But don't let it be some game using the weak flesh of a woman!

It's insulting. But soon, he is calm: that thing will never get the opportunity to stand against him. Tonight, he thinks---smiling with relief---tonight, he will place his



hands around her neck and crush those eyes right out of her head.

In one quick gesture, he will be rid of Emmy Hughes before his head hits the pillow tonight, and then all his troubles will be gone.

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Emmy wishes Mercy would stop talking, at least until the pressure building in her head subsides and the nausea in her stomach ceases. But Mercy, sitting now at the wheel of the car, just keeps yapping away.

"Should I stop off at a store and grab something? A ginger ale maybe?"

Emmy shakes her head.

"Is that why you ran out of the store? Were you feeling sick in there?"

Actually, Emmy hadn't been feeling sick at all in the store---at least not physically sick. She had, however, been aware of a different, more frightening sentiment that took root in her senses in the dress shop.

What was it exactly, anyway?

As to the vomiting, it caught Emmy off guard on the street corner just a moment ago, and now, here she sits, in the passenger's side of her father's car, with her head leaning against the door, clenching her hands into little fists.

"Can you---slow down a little, Mercy?"

"Right. Driving slow." Mercy glances over at her. "Well, at least we know you're not pregnant. You haven't had a boyfriend since James, ha ha."

Emmy is not laughing. None of this is funny. In fact, it's downright alarming.

Where is all this sickness coming from? If it's not car accidents, then it's nosebleeds, and if it isn't

nosebleeds then it's headaches, pressure on her head and a sudden desires to vomit.

But strangest of all has been that writing that flashed across her head. Had it been a mere thought, it would not have stirred her concern. This, however, was something she could see and feel---like someone etching words inside of her head.

Mercy licks her lips. "To be honest, for a moment, I thought you ran out of the store 'cause he said something to you."

Emmy opens her eyes. The breeze from the rolled-down window soothes her as they drive along.

"I mean, you seemed kinda jumpy for a moment back there."

Should she tell Mercy that she was jumpy back there? No. What would be the point? "It was---nothing."

"So, are we still on for the party tonight? I mean, if you're feeling that bad we can always cancel."

Mercy's mind is clearly fixated on Markus right now, and she could not care less about some old scheduled date with Kirk and Anders.

But Emmy wants to go. It isn't just the Legolas costume she wants to sport around in, it's that she needs to be outdoors; the months and months of confinement were a torture to her.

"I'll be fine. We can go."

"All right. But let me know if you change your mind. Anyway," she smiles. "Did you like him?"

"Who?"

"Gilead."

"Mercy, we talked for two minutes."

"*Six* minutes. And I saw him follow you to the back of the store. Aw, c'mon. There was something between the two of you."

There was something between them. But how can Emmy explain that the something wasn't good? "I think I upset him," she explains.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know how, but I did."

"Did you say something insulting to him?"

"Of course not. Why would I do that?"

Mercy frowns. Then she says excitedly, "Maybe it's love at first sight and he's mad at you about it, like Darcy was with Elizabeth---"

"Stop." Emmy rolls her eyes. "Where do you get these crazy ideas?"

Mercy starts to giggle. "I'm just trying to cheer you up."

"Hmmm."

Secretly, Emmy almost wishes that love was the problem. She could tolerate the awkwardness of a man

who likes her and just doesn't know how to approach her, but this encounter was different. This encounter was---was---what is the word she is looking for?

Emmy does not confess that there was something about Markus that bothered her, too. For all of his outward congeniality, she thought she detected a chink in his friendly armor---for a single moment, as she was racing out of the store, she thought she saw a subtle grimace slide across the corners of Markus's mouth, as if he suddenly disliked Emmy as much as the other one did.

Then again, maybe it's all in her head.

"I'm thinking," Mercy starts up suddenly. "I want Markus to ask me out."

"Mercy," Emmy says solemnly. "A man like that has a million girlfriends, Mercy. Be practical."

"Well, *you* weren't being practical when you were trying to date James, were you? Even I could have told you he likes his coffee with cream."

"Oh, ha ha."

"Just saying."

"Slow down, would you?"

"I'm only five miles over the speed limit. But all right, if it's not one brother, I can take the other."

Emmy glances over at her. "What do you mean brother?"

"That's what Markus told me. They're brothers."

"They are? But---"

But Markus is as Nordic looking as a man could be, and Gilead looked like some black god dreamed up out of one's imagination.

"Adopted," Mercy answers. "And their father is Indian. Not that I quite caught the name---Nabel, or something like that. Apparently he has a knack for adopting huge, good-looking men for sons, huh?"

"Why does that statement sound disturbing?"

"Oh, stop. They were babies when he got them."

"You asked him all that?"

"He brought it up. Not me."

Emmy now half sits up in her seat. At last, the nausea is beginning to subside. "It almost seems like they should be blood-related, don't they?"

"Well, they grew up in the same house."

"Growing up in the same house does not make two men the same height. And how come they both wear glasses?"

"I don't know. I just hope their dad didn't raise them to like only Indian women---"

Emmy smiles. "You're impossible."

"---Of course, I'm not saying Markus liked me or anything, but he seemed interested. Don't you think?"



Emmy doesn't want to discuss this topic anymore. She rests her head against the seat and closes her eyes until Mercy gets her home.

Both women are relieved to find that Emmy's aunt has gone out since they drove to the store, and upstairs in Emmy's old room, they crank up the music as they prepare for the evening.

Emmy never likes to blow out her hair. She always loses a big clump of curly strands when she does so, but it can't be avoided tonight. She needs it to be straight if she's going to be a proper Legolas. There are already has two strikes against her being female and black---she won't compromise on the straight hair.

The moment she clicks off her hair dryer, however, Mercy takes up with a new topic.

"By the way," she starts, sewing up a patch in her costume. "Be open to Anders."

"Open?"

"I know he's not your type, but at the rate you're going you're gonna end up an old maid."

"Mercy, that's horrible to say."

"But kinda true. I dunno. It's like there's an invisible sign above your head that says, 'Not for you: keep walking'."

Is that true? Is that why Emmy never seems to get any dates? "Really?"

"Really. So be open."

By the time the men arrive at eight o'clock to pick them, Aunt May has returned home and mumbles that Mercy's Wonder Woman costume is "a bit revealing, ain't it?"

Then, in another moment she is eyeing Emmy's date with suspicion as the men remain on the porch. It's all Emmy and Mercy can do to rush out of the house and avoid further inquiries.

"I am indeed a fan of Wonder Woman," Kirk laughs, hugging Mercy.

The other fellow, Anders, just nods in Emmy's direction.

Anders is a large fellow, not large like, say, Markus or Gilead, but large enough. There is a small gap between his two front teeth and he has a fat, square face that matches the squareness of his shoulders.

Both men are dressed in football uniforms, which is a safe choice since, according to Mercy, they used to play college football together.

Apparently Anders manages a local restaurant in Glens Falls and is the nephew of a New York councilman, while Kirk works for an IT company in the city.

"And you work as a veterinarian, right?" Anders's thick fingers drum against the steering wheel when they are finally all in the car.

"Used to be," Emmy responds, sitting in the passenger's seat, while Mercy and Kirk are nestled in the back. "But I lost my job after the accident."

"Oh, that's right. The car accident." He hesitates. "Well. You look great now."

He touches a hand to a lock of his blazing red hair and smiles at her shyly.

She nods. First-time meetings are always so awkward.

"And I'm sure you'll find a new one job when the time is right," he assures her.

For the first time tonight, she cracks a genuine smile. "You think so?"

"Yep. See, everything comes when it's supposed to. At least, that's my motto. But you gotta believe in yourself first."

"Oh, she *must* believe in herself," Mercy interrupts, adding more lipstick as she peers at herself in her little

compact. Kirk already has one arm decidedly around her shoulders. "'Cause she's like a walking miracle these days. First she had a broken back, then she got nosebleeds, now sometimes she vomits---"

"Mercy!"

"What? It's true. But look at her! You'd never know it, would you?"

Anders laughs. "Nosebleeds, eh? I used to get them in the service, when we were training."

Here is something they have in common. "What caused them?"

"Who knows. I got 'em and dealt with it."

Emmy glances back and sees Kirk resting his head on Mercy's shoulder. She's neither pushing him away nor embracing him. Instead, she closes her compact and puts it in her purse; Emmy can guess who Mercy is thinking about.

The car speeds up suddenly. Emmy faces forward.

"Can you slow down a little?" she inquires.

Speeding always makes her think of that December evening when she went driving with her mother.

Jeannie Hughes's death came about by a simple mistake---Emmy had swerved to avoid hitting an animal darting across the road.

Anders nods. "Yeah, sure, no problem."

But Emmy's unsettledness remains---not from the driving (Anders does indeed slow down) but from another feeling that calls her attention.

She thinks again of the way Gilead was looking at her this afternoon, of the assiduous glance of his eyes----how very curious he seemed; a curiosity that passed visibly to anger from one second to the next.


At the moment, Anders pulls into a street where a house lit up like a Christmas tree grabs their attention. Cars are lined up all along the block and party-goers in costumes emerge from cars and head up along the lawn.

"Well," Anders says. "Here we are."

Emmy is ready to have a good time. She wants to savor the thrill of this night. But it is now that she finally places words to that odd sensation she got in the dress shop. It's true it could be her imagination or a misguided assumption, as it surely *is* one of those two things. But the feeling she got, false as it must be, was that Gilead didn't just dislike her, but wanted to kill her.

## CHAPTER 12

### Party



It isn't that the party wasn't lovely, because it was. In fact, the house reminded Emmy of the beachfront homes one might come across in a magazine.

And she certainly had a good time, but it's the going home that ruins the mood of this easygoing night for

Emmy, because Anders is blazingly drunk, yet insists on driving the women home.

"Nah, nah, I'll drive," Kirk offers, as they make their way out the front door. Other intoxicated guests, elaborately dressed in costumes, are leaving as well; some loiter in the driveway, others laugh and trample the grass as they make their way to their vehicles.

Mercy is leaning against Kirk, and walking barefoot as she holds onto the long redboots from her Wonder Woman outfit. "You really shouldn't drive, least of all," she slurs at Kirk.

Emmy is the only sober one of the group, and she refuses to get into the car with Anders behind the wheel.

It takes the calm cool of the host and his wife--- Marc Antony and Marilyn Monroe---to finally make Anders hand the keys over to Emmy, and even then, Anders hems and haws about it.

"I'll drop you guys home," Emmy tells the men, when they have all climbed inside the car at last. "And



Anders, you can come get your car at my place tomorrow."

He doesn't seem to hear her, but rests his head against the headrest in the passenger's seat and closes his eyes.

Emmy hopes no one falls asleep during the ride home. She doesn't plan to be a human crutch for anything stumbling and puking---in fact, she can't be. Her back, stronger though it is, is still not a hundred percent healed.

Turning on the radio, she glances in the rearview at Kirk and Mercy making out. Or rather, Kirk is making out with a nearly comatose-looking Mercy.

"Hey, hey!" Emmy calls. Her yelp awakens both Mercy and Anders.

"What? What?" Mercy yawns.

"Stop molesting my friend," Emmy warns. But this comment only serves to make Mercy giggle.

Anders is fiddling with the the radio. "What's good on? What's good?"

"So pretty out," Mercy mumbles.

"You're pretty," Kirk tells her.

Emmy rolls her eyes. She's not letting Mercy go home with this guy tonight. No way.

Anders finds a radio station he can live with, and now removes a bottle of schnapps from his glove compartment; Mercy starts humming the theme song from the 1970's Wonder Woman show.

All the noise bothers Emmy. "So, I'm going to need the address where you live, Anders. You're in Glens Falls, right?"

He nods, but doesn't give her any address.

Kirk leans forward in the back seat and says to Emmy: "Why don't we drive up to one the mountains? See the stars?"

*At this hour?*

"It's beautiful out tonight, right, babe?" Kirk turns to Mercy.

"Uh-hmmm."

"Oh, we should," Anders agrees. "Right, man, right. We *should*."

"It's one in the morning," Emmy counters.

"Aw, don't be boring, Em," Mercy says, trying to sit up.

"Emmmmm--my," Kirk sings, laughing. "C'mon. Turn here at the next exit."

"No."

"*Perrrrty* please," he jokes.

"No," she repeats.

It is here that Kirk mumbles something, then half jumps up from his place in the backseat, grabbing the wheel of the car. He tries to exit for her.

"Whee-hoo!" he laughs.

The car swerves.

Mercy and Emmy scream, but Kirk only laughs harder.

"Are you crazy?" Emmy yells, trying to push him off.

Kirk releases the wheel. "C'mon, I'm kidding," he counters innocently.

That single moment of feeling out of control, with the car zig-zagging down the highway, sends Emmy into a tizzy. There are too many memories associated with that feeling.

How her heart is beating!

"Don't you ever, *ever* do that again."

But Anders just jostles her shoulders. "No worries, no worries."

"Don't got getting us killed, you moron," Mercy says, hitting Kirk across the arm. But there is a hint of mirth to her scolding.

It never ceases to amaze Emmy how much alcohol can endear a woman to a man.

"You should do it again," Anders chuckles.

"Enough!" Emmy insists.

There is laughter all around from the others. In her intoxicated state, Mercy seems to have forgotten Emmy's trauma with cars.

"C'mon. Quick stop off," Kirk pleads. "Make me happy so I don't get wild again. Which road goes to like, Black Mountain or North Tongue."

"Ooooh, yeah!" Mercy slurs, "we can climb them and see the town." The men chime in with whoops and yells.

"Nobody is climbing those mountains in the middle of the night," Emmy says. "You wouldn't even do it in the daytime," Emmy says.

It would be foolish for Emmy to agree to such a request. It would be far better to endure everyone's disappointment than to honor their drunken wishes. But when Kirk makes a gesture like he's going to take the steering wheel again, Emmy angrily relents.

"Okay, okay, okay," she says, gesturing him away. "But only for a minute."

Hopefully, a quick stop off to the base of a mountain will shut everyone up.

Pulling off the highway, her anger rises when it takes more than twenty-minutes to find a road that satisfies the men and Emmy pulls over in front a sign that reads: Tongue Mountain Range Trail.

This will have to do. At least, to Emmy's great relief, there are two other cars parked just ahead.

The lights of the other two vehicle are blaring, and she sees several figures moving about along the side of the road. Music and laughter fill the air.

They're college kids more than likely, or maybe high schoolers. Or maybe tourists. Either way, their presence is no surprise. It's the weekend, the start of summer, and this is one way to have a good time.

Glancing through the rearview mirror as she parks off to the side, Emmy sees Kirk kiss Mercy, and soon Mercy is returning the favor. Anders, meanwhile, fiddles with his bottle of schnapps in the passenger's seat.

*Great, Emmy thinks. It's like being in a car with three teenagers.*

Emmy turns off the engine.

There has always been something spooky about such areas at night. When she was a little girl, and her parents would drive here to take the kids sightseeing, Emmy used to worry when the sun began to set. It had been her assumption that an ax murderer lurked here in the woods, some Frankenstein-like figure, holding his

weapon over his shoulder, eager to jump in front of moving cars and dismember a family of four.

"Okay, we're here," Emmy says. "You've got two minutes."

She does her best to sound tough and authoritative, but she has never had a strong voice---it is too mellow and soft to come off as rough.

Kirk whispers something into Mercy's ear and when she laughs, Kirk opens the car door.

"Two minutes," Emmy repeats.

She can only hope they intend to stand near the car and not go walking along the trails. Yet to her alarm, Kirk and Mercy move toward the plethora of trees just beyond the sign post.

Emmy gets out of the car. "Mercy? Where are you going?"

"Be back," she calls out, half hanging on Kirk.



"No, no," Emmy shouts. "We'll be here forever. We---there are snakes in the woods, you know?"

But they are already disappearing into the wall of trees with their arms wrapped around each other.

For a moment, Emmy remains standing where she is, with the door open and the headlights blazing.

Anders opens his side of the car and, with his bottle of schnapps in hand, gets out and stumbles to the side to relieve himself.

*What am I even doing here?* Emmy thinks. *How did I let them talk me into this?*

At least it's beautiful out, even if it is a little spooky. The night air feels heavenly.

She used to hike up around these parts with her mother, who always said there weren't enough days in the week to do all the hiking she really wanted to do.

Emmy hears Anders zipping up his pants. Instinctively, she positions the car key in her hands in

such a way that she can jab him in the eye or neck quickly if tries something funny, but to her horror, he too is now making his way into the wooded area.

*Why can't he just loiter by the car?*

"Hey, we're leaving in a moment," she calls out, but he just grunts and keeps walking.

Emmy frowns. She doesn't like the idea of Mercy being up in those woods with Kirk, and now with Anders heading in that direction----

Mercy can be wild, but hopefully not that wild.

"Mercy," she yells, pausing, but there is no response.

Emmy thinks she hears more laughter coming from Mercy, somewhere farther up to the right. Five minutes pass.

She turns off the headlights and locks the car door. "That's it, we're leaving," she tells herself, moving at

last, into the trees. It is dark out here, but there is dim illumination from the moon---enough to see shadows.

Emmy thinks she sees Anders just ahead, and she can hear him take a gulp from his bottle. "Want a swallow?" he calls out to her.

"No," she answers sternly.

It's odd to her that she ever thought getting drunk was fun. In college, it had always been *the* thing to do and *the* way to unwind or socialize, but now---

Now it all just seems so silly.

"Mercy," she calls again, concerned, until she hears a slurred and irritated "*What?*" up ahead.

"My back is hurting and I need to go." Her back isn't hurting at all, but maybe the lie will work.

Mercy does not respond.

She moves farther along the trail, knowing already how lush these trees are to behold in the daytime. In the

fall is when they are the most beautiful, however, arrayed in colors of red, green, yellow and orange.

It's always so peaceful in these parts---a place unattached to the rest of the world; a place of clarity and sobriety, where the mind can let go of its worries.

In her imagination, she dreams she is on an adventure right now, in some fantastic world in the dark where the trails are lined with sparkling, emerald bushes, and the vegetation of exotic fruits is large as a human head. The rivers all around her flow like fallow gold.

Wouldn't it be great to be the heroine roaming through Gondor or Rivendell?

She hears the sound of grunting. Anders is still stumbling, tinkering with his bottle, and in a moment she passes him.

"Where you from again?" he asks her suddenly.

But she pays him no mind. "Mercy?" she calls out.

"Wait," Anders slurs. "You were born an' raised in La---Lake George, right?"

"Yeah."

"You got siblings?"

"What?"

"Like---a brother?"

"Who wants to know?"

He mumbles something that indicates his annoyance, then slops down more of his schnapps. In a moment, he lets out a loud whoop, like some dog.

"Man, that's good stuff," he bellows.

Seconds later, a different voice catches Emmy's attention. She's sure it is Mercy, slurring the words to the Wonder Woman theme song.

"Mercy---?"

Her voice is not so far away.

"Mer---"

But then another sound hits Emmy's ears and interrupts her---it is the sound of engines starting up.

Down below through the trees she sees lights passing by and realizes the two cars she noticed earlier are leaving.

"Great," she mumbles, feeling a lot less safe now and a lot more determined.

"Mercy, we need to go," she hollers, pausing for a response, then continuing up the hill. "Mercy?"

She can hear Mercy giggling.

The woods feel restless. A breeze flows through the air and shakes the leaves.

Emmy stops walking. She shivers. That's odd. She has such a strange feeling----

She feels--what does she feel? Afraid. That's what it is. Afraid and jumpy. She looks behind her and can hear Anders marching along and humming, several feet away.

It actually makes her feel safe to know he is near to her right now. Could he even help protect her if some animal were out here in the woods tonight? Would he even want to?

Sighing, she faces forward again and becomes cognizant of something moving high up in the trees, to her right.

In the dark she is surprised she even sees it, but the very dim illumination of the moon does allow for *some* sight and she thinks she detects something is perched on a tree limb.

What is that?

It could be a large animal, but she surmises that it's not an animal at all, but a---a person?

The figure moves.

She is too frightened to scream, and her breathing accelerates.

"Anders," she breathes, taking a step backward, but keeping her eyes on the tree.

"Anders?" she calls out again, turning around.  
"Anders---." She hits something.

"Whoa, slow down."

It's Anders and she is actually glad to see him.

"Someone is"---her breathing feels jagged and out of rhythm---"something is up in that tree."

She knows it can't be Kirk or Mercy. They aren't sober enough to do any climbing.

"Huh?"

"The tree," she points, but when she turns to look, the figure is gone. Did she only imagine it? Here in the dark, it is not unheard of to "see" shapes that aren't really there.

"I don't see anything," Anders says.

"I thought---"



He puts his hand on her shoulder. "That's all right, calm down, calm down."

She really doesn't like up here suddenly.

Why can't they just leave? And where in the world is Mercy anyway?

*I'm going to kill her when I find her*, Emmy thinks, tempted to return to the car. But Anders's hand is still on her shoulder. She tries to step away from him, but his grip tightens.

"Wha---?"

"Shhh," he insists. "I don't want to hurt you---I'm just trying to be your friend---keep still---"

Quietly, she panics. *What is he doing? Is he---is he---?*

"Anders---let go of me!"

He is behind her suddenly and his hand goes over her mouth. She can feel every nerve in her body jump to alert.

Her first thought is to reach behind and jab him hard in his leg with the car keys, but, letting go of her mouth, he pins her arms behind her back so quickly that it stuns her. *How did he manage to do that?*

She screams as he rips the keys from her grip. For the first time, she thinks she hears Mercy's voice. "Em?!"

And then she does not hear it again.

What she hears is Anders's heavy breathing as he hugs her from behind and jerks her head to the side to kiss her.

If only she could make herself vomit. Isn't that what she heard once? If she could only vomit on herself and on him . . .

She starts to suffocate against the crush of his smelly mouth against hers.

Frantically, she twists her head to the left, and when her mouth is free, she screams again. But there is no response from either Mercy or Kirk.

Emmy is not much of a fighter. Tall as she is, she is slight of weight, and certainly no match in strength for a man.

His hand goes over her mouth a second time when she attempts to scream, and this time Emmy bites his hand.

He responds by giving her a shove so hard that it knocks her to the ground and she finds herself lying amidst dirt, rocks and leaves. Pain shoots through her back.

Startled as she is, she tries to get up, only he is already there on top of her, pushing her face further into the dirt.

"Just shut up," he keeps saying. "Just keep quiet."

He is trying to lift up the tunic of her costume and pull down her pants at the same time and all she can think to do is to squeeze her legs tightly together, thinking *No! No, NO!*

As if on cue, she hears Mercy screaming, "No, no, no!" and this causes a succinct realization in Emmy: the men planned this, and like dupes the women followed along. Drunk as Kirk and Anders are, they are not drunk enough to be useless.

It is when she finally feels her pants being pulled down that she begins to understand the degradation and horror of this moment.

All Emmy can think, as this is happening, is that if Anders manages to rape her, something inside of her will be eternally broken. It will not be just a violent act against her body, but the unmitigated theft of her soul.

Then she will be like a drowned woman, faceless and spooky. She will feel her skin peeling away from her body, like the skin of an onion falling away---she will not be Emmy Hughes anymore, no longer cute or tall or natural or anything else, just raped, and her new name will be Shame.

Her cries rise into the air, and mingle with Mercy's as she calls out somewhere in the distance: *Fools*, their tears seem to say in harmony, *both of us, fools*.

But Emmy is not weeping only about this moment, but for the moments that will come hereafter.

Will other women see the pain and humiliation in her eyes? Will it be detectable?

As Emmy hears Anders fumbling stupidly but aggressively with his pants, she thinks of two things---of wanting to die and of a famous speech. *Why a speech, in a moment of crisis like this?*

"*Ain't I a woman?*" Her imagination will not relent. Right there, in her mind, Sojourner Truth is standing and weeping over her: *"I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?"*

*Am I woman*, Emmy thinks, *or a thing to this man?* *I am a thing. My feelings, my sense of pride, even my worth are meaningless to him.*

If only she could find a rock to use for a weapon, perhaps she could injure him with it, but she is face down.

Ah, wait, *wait*, here is a rock, just near the fingertips of her right hand.

"Shut up," Anders is yelling, for her cries have increased. "Just shut the hell up, you little---"

She feels the curse of his words as potently as she suddenly feels the whack of his fist against the side of her head. Her head snaps so hard that she bites right into her own tongue and the taste of blood fills her mouth. The blow dazes her and she stops reaching for the rock.

For one long, stinging moment Emmy cannot breathe, cannot hear anything at all, and her vision blurs. It is already impossible to see anything here in the night, but now the darkness becomes an inky, impenetrable black.

She stops fighting. The instinct to preserve her life takes over---even if she were able to injure him, it would not be enough. She would have to kill him to keep from

suffering the wrath of his revenge against her for wounding him. And his revenge could turn fatal.

Her thoughts shift to her father. How horrible it will be for him to learn his daughter has been raped, and even worse if she ends up murdered in the woods. The news would crush him and she cannot allow that. It is better to be silent and alive, to take the insult of rape, than to lose her life.

Anders's body lands fully onto hers, and now the inevitable is about to happen. Now the grief of her life will come to pass; she hates how fragile she is. She hates weakness, and she hates being a woman right now. But more than that, in this moment, she hates God.

*Why is He letting this happen? Why does He allow men the strength to take away someone else's happiness?*

*Stop, stop, stop, her mind keeps yelling. STOP!*

It has become windy again; a breeze picks up in the night air and Emmy is aware of her legs becoming unpinned.

"Wh---?" is the half-finished word that comes from Anders's mouth, as she feels the weight of his body being lifted from her.

*That's funny: Is he about to ask a question or did he stand up to finish taking off his clothes?*

The wind dies down and silence prevails.

Emmy thinks it's just that she can't hear him for a moment. She blinks and waits, then turns her face to the side, squinting to look about in the dark. But there is no sign of him anywhere.

All she can detect is the sound of her own breathing. Anders has completely disappeared.

## **CHAPTER 13**

### **What Did You See?**





It takes some time to believe she is alone. She knows Anders couldn't have disappeared. So what just happened? Is he playing some kind of game with her? Is he hiding so he can ambush her just for the sick thrill of it?

Everything around her is quiet, and even the sounds of Mercy's whimpering have ceased.

In a momentary panic, Emmy thinks of the ax man she used to imagine roaming in these parts. Has he come to life and killed everyone off?

Of course not. She knows it isn't true. And yet. . .  
.yet.

What just happened?

All she can hear, besides her breathing and the rapid thumping of her heart, is the chirping choir of crickets among the trees.

Reaching her hands behind her she inches her pants back up. She is grateful for the dark in this regard---that the cloak of night covers her nakedness and, in some way, her humiliation. But for this alone, of being

stripped down against her will, the shadow of degradation will always follow her.

She tries to sit up, but the tightness in her back prevents her from doing so, and she remains face down on her belly. She is no Legolas or heroine wandering through the woods. She is only scared little Emmy whose aching head disorients her.

Sweating with fear, she know she is not out of danger. Not at all. It's possible that Anders has gone to get Kirk, to help him rape her.

Is that what is happening?

Or did he run off to look for a stick or rock to beat her with? No, he could have used his bottle of schnapps, or even his bare hands, if he wanted to beat her.

So what is he doing? And what man would stop in the middle of an assault like that?

And what was that odd burst of wind at her back a moment ago? Did she imagine it? No, she couldn't have.

She felt it as surely as she now feels the cold, dewy dirt against her skin.

It felt like . . . like a rush---like a force of air popping out of nowhere, blowing her hair against her face.

For a long while, she does not move, and her thoughts fall to Mercy: *Where is she? What has become of her?*

Emmy listens for a sound, a movement from Anders, from Kirk, from Mercy, from anyone---even that thing in the tree.

Holding her breath, she can't help but think of the figure she saw perched on the branch. What was it? Did it have something to do with Anders's disappearance? Is it coming to get her, too?

*Dear God*, she thinks, *What is going on?*

Sobbing as silently as possible, she considers calling out for help, but to whom will she call? She does not know where Mercy is (Mercy might, in fact, be in a

worse predicament than she is), nor does she want to attract any unwanted attention.

Wincing as she reaches out to touch her back, she can only hope she hasn't re-injured it. She can't, just can't, bear going back to being half-crippled again. And just when she had gotten better!

Her sobbing increases and she feels a wave of nausea hit her.

Here she goes again, vomiting out of nowhere, onto the ground in front of her.

The stench gives her the strength to roll over onto her side and finally onto her back.

She has to find a way to get up and get out of here. Anders will pounce again. She is sure of it. An ambush is coming. She feels it. She feels. . . . what does she feel? She feels danger lurking around her, a sensation in her bones.

Up above, through the trees, she sees the moon, thin as a fingernail tip, that gives so little light, and once again that figure in the tree comes to mind.

Emmy has never shied away from her active imagination. What if it was a mountain lion that came and grabbed Anders? Do they even have mountain lions in Lake George? There are, she believes. But wouldn't a mountain lion make a sound? Wouldn't it eat her for dinner, too?

Tears stream down through the dirt on her face and though she wipes them away, they keep coming. Sniffling, she notices a figure approaching in the dark, and she holds her breath. She wishes she had a weapon. She wishes she had reached for a rock or a stick or even crawled behind a tree somewhere to hide.

It's Anders.

"Em?"

Wait. No, it's not. "Mercy?"

"Em, where are you?" What a relief to hear that voice.

"Over here on the ground. I can't---I can't move."

In a moment, Mercy nearly trips over her. "What's that smell?"

Emmy pauses. Here it is again, another feeling of shame. "I threw up," she says, and then her mind quickly focuses on more important matters. "Where's Kirk?" she whispers.

"I don't know."

Emmy expects Mercy to ask her where Anders is, but the question never surfaces.

"We should go," Mercy says, and at last, Emmy can hear that she too is sobbing.

"Help me up."

Mercy catches her by the arm to lift her up, but for a while it feels like a losing battle. "Stop. You're hurting me."

"You have to get up." Mercy seems to be pleading with her. "We have to go."

Does Mercy feel the same fear that Emmy does?

"Where are they?" Emmy asks.

"I don't know. But we have to go," she states, as she finally helps Emmy to her feet.

Emmy tries not to stumble, but the light-headed feeling makes her a bit wobbly. "Something was in the tree," she murmurs. "I---"

"What?" Mercy's grip tightens. "What did you see?"

"I saw---like an animal or---"

"Shhhh."

The sound of a branch breaking can be heard in the distance.

Here in this dark, shadowed place, they both now realize that if they want to make it out safely, then silence must be the name of the game.

They can discuss the mystery of the men's disappearance once they are out of harm's way.

Emmy clutches her backside as she limps forward. *Back to square one*, she thinks bitterly.

Now, how do they get out of here?

Which way do they turn?

"This way," Emmy whispers. "To the right."

The trees in this direction appear to slope downward, and as they move forward they gladly feel the descent of the hill beneath their feet.

It is difficult to go fast. Emmy's back seems to tighten by the second, and with each step it feels like someone is digging a needle into her back.

Touching the side of her face, she can feel a knot forming around the temple area from the blow she received.



Now, however, is not the time to feel sorry for herself. Now is the time to move, to place one leg in front of the other and get out of here.

Emmy squeezes Mercy's elbow. "Grab a stick," she whispers. "Search for a weapon."

"Why?"

"In case we need it."

Mercy hesitates. "I don't think we will. I think--"

"Shhh." Now it's Emmy's turn to quiet her.

They pause for a long moment, holding their breaths.

They move forward.

Emmy thinks with a sigh of relief of the car and of escaping.

And yet . . . what if the vehicle isn't there when they reach it? What if the men took off with it? Then again, if

they had taken the car, wouldn't the women have heard it?

And what sorts of men commence a rape, halt it, and then drive off?

"There's the road," Mercy says.

Up ahead, the moon's dim light allows them to see what surely is the paved road. And as Emmy and Mercy reach the edge of the dense trees that stand like soldiers, they see not only the road, but the car.

The men did not take the vehicle. Emmy wants to breathe a sigh of relief at this, but something else accosts her attention.

The inside car light is on.

She frowns. She is certain the light was off when she got out.

Emmy panics. "They're in the car."

"What?"

"The light is on."

"You didn't leave it on?"

"Of course not."

Mercy inches forward, hedging to see inside the car. She shakes her head. "I don't think they're there."

"I *know* I turned the light off," Emmy insists.

Mercy nods. "And did you take the keys with you?"

"Of course."

"Because they're in the ignition."

"That's impossible. I---I tried to stab Anders with them, but he knocked them out of my hand."

"Let's go," is all Mercy says, coming back around to help Emmy lean as they inch forward..

Mercy opens the passenger's side of the door for her.

Emmy frowns. "I locked the door."

"Em---"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Emmy now takes a step backward. "This is wrong. This is all wrong---"

"I know---"

"Am I in a twilight zone or something?"

"Emmy, just get in."

"Mercy---"

"We've got to go, *please*."

Is Mercy not dumbfounded by any of this?

If Emmy didn't know any better, she'd think someone put the keys in the ignition and turned the light on *for* them.

But it's impossible. That sort of thing might happen in books and movies, but not in real life.

And Emmy isn't stupid: maybe she left the lights on and maybe she left the car door open, but the keys?

There can be no mistake about the keys. She had them with her in the woods.

Now, however, is not time to be asking questions.

Glancing in the backseat Emmy looks to see if the men are hiding out back there, but the backseat is empty.

"Look under the car," Emmy points.

"Why?"

"Kirk and Anders might be hiding under there."

"They aren't," Mercy insists. "Get in."

It strikes Emmy for the first time that Mercy seems unnaturally certain of Anders and Kirk's total disappearance.

Did Emmy miss something? She must have, for as she eases herself into the passenger's seat, she still fears an ambush from the men. Somehow, this is all prove to be a twisted joke on their part.

Kirk and Anders will jump out in front of them, on the road somewhere, and try to overtake them. Overtake the car! It's silly to think it, but Emmy can't control the wildness of her distress.

Climbing into the passenger's seat, Emmy feels a headache coming on as she closes the door. Then another wave of nausea hits her.

Mercy starts the engine.

The light inside the car is still on. Emmy sees that Mercy's left eye is badly swollen, and blood drips down her nose and onto her clothes. Kirk must have hit her pretty hard.

Not that Emmy is not much better off. She's going to have a large knot on her head very soon, but at least her nose isn't bleeding. She almost wishes it would bleed. Her back might stop hurting if she bled.

Mercy clicks the light off.

Emmy can only hope Mercy holds it together until they reach safety; Mercy has never been the best of drivers and right now her hands are shaking.

Emmy whispers, "Steady, steady, steady."

"Right. Right."

As they drive away, Emmy can actually feel her nausea start to pass.

"Where do we go?" Mercy asks after a moment.

Emmy frowns. "What do you mean? To the police."

Mercy shakes her head. "We can't report anything if the men are gone."

"Gone? But we don't know that. We don't anything at all, Mercy. Those pigs are probably looking for Ander's car right now. I think they got lost back there. I think---"

"Lost?"

"---or something. I don't know. But Anders isn't getting his car back," Emmy fumes. "If I have to push it off a cliff or burn it, I will. I---"

"Em---"

"I want them in jail," Emmy sobs suddenly, freely. And like a dam breaking, she puts her head in her hands and cries so hard that her head and eyes feels like a pool of water.

"But, Em, they aren't ever coming back," Mercy explains.

Even through her tears, Emmy is aware that Mercy's seems to know something she doesn't know. She hiccups and let's herself breath loudly for a long moment. "Why do you say that?"

Mercy takes a deep breath. "Because it took them up over the trees."

"Wha---what did?"

"That man. And I saw him. I saw him. I saw him."



## CHAPTER 14

### Who? What? Huh?

---

"Saw him, *who*?"

Mercy pauses for a moment, glancing in the rearview mirror as if she expects to see something on the road behind her.

"You know, Em, because you saw it, too," she reflects, "didn't you? Didn't you say you saw someone in the tree?"

"I said I saw *something*. I thought it was a man, sitting on the limb of a branch, but---"

"It *was* a man," Mercy assures her. "Or, *like* a man. But he---he darted away."

"Huh?"

"He was fast," Mercy breathes, her voice full of awe. She is certainly not drunk anymore. "So fast," she repeats. "And he took them. He took Kirk and Anders."

How does Emmy even begin to even process a story like that? "What do you mean he took them?"

"Didn't you see it?"

"No. I didn't see anything." Emmy's mind is feverish with confusion. "I was face down."

"You mean---Anders---" Mercy sounds embarrassed to say ask it: "He was on top of you?"

"Ye---yes. So I didn't see anything and---Mercy, pay attention to the road!"

Mercy steadies her hands on the wheel. Her breathing is thick and rapid. "But you must have felt it, no? That strange burst of wind."

"I did," Emmy confesses, thinking of how Anders said "Wha---?" like a question, like a startled gasp, just

as she felt a gust of wind pick up. And then . . . then it was all silence and nothingness.

"That wind was him."

"Him *who*? Mercy, who did you see?"

Mercy pauses and peers at the rearview mirror as if something might be following them.

"Is something behind us?" Emmy whispers, fascinated by the impending story, but fearful of this uncertain moment.

"I'm not sure. I keep wondering if---if he might come after us, too."

Emmy glances behind her, but in the dark it is impossible to see anything. Yet, how disturbed her spirit is at thinking something might be out there on the dark road chasing them.

This dread is worse than her old fears of the imaginary ax-man.

"Are you sure it wasn't an animal, you saw, Mercy? Like a bear or a mountain lion?"

"What animal darts away with a grown man in less than a second?"

"You keep saying the word *dart* ---"

"Because that's what he did, Em. I can't describe it. It was like flying, but he wasn't flying. He was *so* fast. And strong. And don't you think we might have heard the men screaming if an animal had bitten them and dragged them away? Don't you think the animal might have come after us, too? But it didn't. Because it wasn't an animal."

"And yet," Emmy takes up, "it couldn't have been an actual man, could it?"

Mercy shakes her head. "It had to be---it was---"

"Something alien," Emmy exhales.

Mercy glances at her. "What just happened, Em?"

Emmy tries to think clearly, but her head hurts.  
"What did he look like?"

"I don't know. It was dark and---," Mercy gulps. "I don't know because Kirk was on me, but I was face up. And he---he was saying all these terrible things to me; just horrible and nasty, and you had been screaming, and Kirk was covering my mouth and then he---" She lowers her voice here. "And then it was like, he let go."

"But not on his own," Emmy nods, thinking of how it felt when Anders was no longer on top of her. It felt like he had been pulled away, against his will.

Mercy snuffles. "And that's when I saw him," she continues. "I couldn't see the face. He was wearing something that covered his body, I guess. But I heard a man's voice shush me."

"Wait. He talked to you?"

"He said, 'Close your eyes' and I did. I thought I was going to die, Em. I thought he was going to kill me. I did what he asked. I closed my eyes. I *did*. But he was faster than me closing my eyes. That's the thing! For a

fraction of a second, I saw Kirk flying up beyond the trees, *darting* up, and that man was holding him. And then my eyes were closed and I stood there waiting. And that was it."

"Kirk didn't scream?"

"I don't think he could. I don't think---," Mercy starts to sob uncontrollably now.

For a long while, neither of them speak.

"You believe me, Em, don't you?"

"Of course I believe you."

Mercy has never had the fluidity of mind that Emmy has - she has never been imaginative, outside of her love of silly romance novels. For her to suddenly describe a scene like this has to be attributed to something real and tangible that she experienced.

"And yet," Emmy concludes, "we can't go to the police with that story."

"Police?" Mercy frowns.

"We have to make our story credible unless you wanna sound like Sean's parents."

Mercy scoffs. "We have a bigger credibility issue than that, because I can't exactly tell the police that Kirk stopped in the middle of a sex act, which he did, can I?" There is sarcasm in her tone now. "I mean, men don't do that, Em, *do* they?"

That's a good point. Emmy remembers waiting for the worst to happen to her, even as the veins in her forehead seemed about to burst with silent horror, and then . . . Nothing.

Emmy hesitates. "Did Kirk---did he---?"

Mercy groans, and her sobs turn to convulsions. "Yes, if that's what you want to know. And it won't be called rape in anyone's eyes but ours. Sure. He forced me, but only the second time. Do you get it?"

Yes, Emmy understands.

"The police will focus on why we went up to the mountains with them at night in the first place," Mercy

continues. "And they'll think I'm insane to say I wanted it the first time but not the second. In their minds, we'll just be a couple of drunk whores who asked for it. And don't split hairs over the fact that you weren't drinking, Emmy. It won't matter. You were there."

Mercy's words are clear and striking. Emmy instinctively knows she is right, but why should it be so? Does a woman's mistake really exempt her from the right to justice?

Must going to the police be like speaking to stopped-up ears?

*What were you doing up there at night with those men, anyway?*

That *is* what folks will say, won't they?

If it hadn't been her, Emmy might be tempted to ask the same question. How different it now feels to be on the other side of a bad judgment call.

Emmy burns with rage. *Who do men think they are that they can take, or attempt to take, the very happiness*



*of another human being like that, for a single moment of pleasure?*

The corners of Mercy's mouth tighten. "Did Anders---did---"

"No." Emmy shakes her head. "No."

"So I'm the one who got raped."

Emmy snaps her head around. "Don't you do that," she shouts. "Don't you make your pain more credible than mine. It's different, yes. But it's still *my* pain. And we wouldn't have been in that predicament in the first place if you hadn't insisted on going into the stupid woods at night with that leech."

Mercy hits the breaks. The car comes to a screeching halt. "Ooooooh, so, that's what this is about?"

"Of course that's what it's about. I never wanted to be there, Mercy. I just wanted to go home."

"Okay, well, I'm sorry for living, for breathing. How is that? How about I deserved to be raped? How is that? Does that make you happy?"

"Oh, stop. You know that's not what I meant---"

"You did, you did. All right then, I'm sorry, okay? I'm such a horrible, terrible, evil human being and---" but her anger can't outrun her sadness. "And I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, all right? I'm *sorry*---"

"Shhhh. Easy, Mercy, easy. It's okay."

Funny how each heart know its own bitterness. What to do with all these feelings?

The shadows of the dark quiet them.

"Let's just get home."

Mercy shakes her head. "I don't want to go home. I-  
--"

Emmy knows. Mercy's grandpa will be awake when she gets home, up watching television even at this late hour. And he is the sort who will call out, "Hey, kiddo"

when Mercy comes walks through the door, and maybe he will come into her room and ask if she wants to play cards and she will have to put on a fake smile and hold her head down so that he can't see the blue bruises on her pale skin.

He will ask if she enjoyed yourself and she will lie and say yes, and go to the bathroom to wash the filth of Kirk from her body.

Emmy knows all of this."You'll come to my place. Now start up the car. Don't just sit here on the road," she says gently.

Mercy starts up the car. "So no police, right?"

Emmy can barely bring herself to accept defeat in this area. But although her head hurts and her back is killing her, her thinking is not dulled. She is reasonable enough to understand the problem of going to the police with their tale.

And so, with a heavy heart, she concedes, "No. No police."

Mercy wipes her eyes with her left hand.

Soon, they will be away from the wooded area, driving along the quiet residential streets of Lake George. The town will be sleepy and peaceful, but Emmy and Mercy will not be.

Emmy closes her eyes and listens to the soft hum of the car engine. Here the women sit, driving in the shade of anger, lostness and even deep wonder.

"Don't wake my aunt," Emmy says as they near her house. "I don't want her coming out of her room to meet up with us."

Her aunt should be in bed at this hour. But even if she's not, they're grown women. They do not have to answer to her about the time they come home. Their main concern, however, is about not being seen.

Emmy has an urge to smash in Anders windows once Mercy parks his car in front of Emmy's house. But in the end she decides against it. Mainly because she doesn't have the strength for such a feat anyway.

The porch light is on. They enter the house quietly, taking off the boots of their respective costumes.

Emmy pauses in the living room and listens for her aunt as Mercy locks the front door. The house is silent.

And yet, the moment their feet hit the staircase, her aunt's voice rings out from upstairs. "That you, Em?"

*Shoot*, Emmy thinks.

"Um, yeah, it's me."

"Someone with you, baby? I thought I heard you whispering."

"Just Mercy."

"Oh. Hi, Mercy," she calls out.

"Hello, Mrs. Jackson." Mercy tries to sound cheerful.

They wait several seconds before making another move. There are no further inquiries from Maybelline.

Good. That means there will be no twenty questions and no forced admissions tonight.

Emmy does her best not to wince or grunt from the pain as she mounts the stairs.

She knows that on Monday she is going to have to call to make an appointment with her. But how is she going to explain re-injuring her back without revealing her story? Well, she must come to that bridge later.

For now, she is eager to get out of her dirtied attire. She and Mercy say goodbye to Wonder Woman and Legolas; Mercy takes a shower in the downstairs bathroom and Emmy sits for nearly an hour under the hot water in the upstairs bathroom.

In silence they later crawl into bed, with Mercy sleeping in the twin bed across from Emmy---the bed that still holds all Emmy's old stuffed animals and dolls from when she was a little girl.

Emmy recalls how once, when they were nine years old, she and Mercy had jumped up and down on these

beds, giggling and carefree, chanting again and again,  
"I'm a pretty princess and I'm going to the ball."

But no one is a princess tonight, and there are certainly no princes in the world to take them to any ball, are there?

"Em?" Mercy breaks the silence of their shared misery.

"What?"

"I was thinking about the light being on in the car."

"What about it?" Emmy whispers.

"I think---I think he did it. Everything was so perfect, so laid out for us, in a way. Don't you think?"

It *was* laid out for them; the light, the keys, the unlocked car door.

Emmy can't figure it out. Then she says: "An alien with a soft spot for us," she says dryly. "Is that what you're getting at? Right."

"Maybe he was protecting us," Mercy offers.  
"Maybe---" but Mercy stops as Emmy points to the door.

"Mmy aunt," she mouths.

A long moment passes. Sure enough, they soon hear the soft tread of feet moving away from the door, and toward her aunt's room.

For a long while, neither of them speak. Mercy does not pick up again with her last topic of conversation, and Emmy does not press it.

Instead, Mercy twists her blond hair around her fingers as tears stream down her face. "Stupid, stupid," she murmurs, burying her face into the pillow.

But Emmy cannot comfort her because she is not comforted herself.

In their separate beds, silence becomes their companion in the quietness of the night.




Soon, there is no moon to be seen in the sky at all. The evening drifts on toward four a.m. The distant howls of a dog reach Emmy's ears.

Her mind is so busy. "What if they come back?" Emmy suddenly whispers, thinking of the possibility.


But Mercy can't hear her. Her head is in her pillow, and she is still weeping and weeping and weeping.

## CHAPTER 15

### News



---



Emmy does not drift off to sleep. Not for a long while. Her thoughts are too restless for sleep and great disquiet settles into her bones, keeping her up.

Sometime after 7a.m., however, her eyes close and she manages an uneasy slumber.

In her dream, she can see the obscure image of someone---a man---chasing her down in the woods and trying to harm her.

Anders.

The *almost* of being raped does make her heavy heart feel any less traumatized. There is so much she feels about what was *intended*, and that he nearly succeeding in stealing from her something that could never be replaced or fixed, makes her feel nauseous, and her limbs feel weighted down with iron.

She wakes from the dream, glancing across the room. When Emmy sees that Mercy's unmade bed is empty, she is jolted with a fear that her friend has gone out and done something terrible to herself.

Or is she in the bathroom?

Neither, apparently.

As Emmy attempts to rise, she is suddenly aware of Mercy sitting at the open window, peering outside.

"Mercy?"

Mercy seems tinier to her suddenly, as if she has become pulled into herself.

"Mercy?"

Slowly, Mercy turns her head in Emmy's direction. "Do you hope they're dead?" she asks gently.

Mercy is so calm sitting there, and her voice is nothing more than a whisper.

"Huh?"

"I wonder if we can get our wish granted. Or at least, *considered*."

Emmy rubs her eyes and blinks. She feels a bit disoriented again. "What---what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the wish we might be able to ask of our avenging guardian." Her eyes shift back toward the open window she is facing.

Emmy frowns. It seems to Emmy that Mercy is actually looking at something -or someone. "What's outside, Mercy?" she asks, with trepidation.

"Nothing."

"You're not staring at---someone?"

Mercy laughs. "I'm just waiting, that's all. Maybe he'll come around again. But I suppose not in the light of day, huh?"

Mercy is not really talking to Emmy, but more to herself.

"Mercy---"

"The car is gone," she announces suddenly.

The words move Emmy to confusion. She turns over onto her stomach. "What do you mean, *gone*?"

"I'm guessing our friend took it."

Emmy pauses. As much as she understands that something unusual transpired last night, in the bright

clearness of the morning it all seems too amazing to have ever occurred.

A slight smile appears on Mercy's face---to Emmy, there is something creepy about the smile. "I went to check if my makeup compact fell out into the backseat." Her normally raspy, excitable voice is cool and low. "And that's when I discovered the car was gone."

"But, I thought you had the key."

"I did have the key. I *still* have the key," she says, holding it up in her hand for Emmy to see. "But the car is gone. I was afraid at first. I thought I might see Kirk or Anders somewhere outside, mocking me. Mocking us, and then driving away. But then I thought about it again. I thought about last night and---remember when we talked about the light being on in the car?"

Emmy nods.

"And the key being in the ignition?"

"And the door being opened," Emmy adds. "You think he did those things."

"I think he did this, too."

Mercy seems to be infected with some kind of happy delirium. She nods, and her eyes are wild and large.

"But, why?" Emmy asks.

Mercy smiles. "Oh, Em, let's not be smart and reasonable about this. Let's first admit that there is nothing good left in this world."

Emmy half sits up. "What are you talking about?"

Mercy approaches the bed where Emmy is resting. "The world is evil, Em. People are evil. And sometimes, the only worthwhile thing left in this world is a good case of revenge."

"I---"

Mercy cuts her off. "I don't know why he took the car. That's not a question I even care to answer. I don't *need* an answer. I just need to know that he's on our side,

Em. I think he is. And maybe this is his way of doing away with them forever. This is revenge for us."

"You're scaring me, talking like this, Mercy."

Mercy shake her head. "Don't be afraid. And as for him, I say, do it---take the car, take the men, take it all---take them away and *kill* them."

"Mercy!"

"Now is not the time to try and be good, Em," she says, sitting on the bed. "Now is the time to be clear about what we want."

"Clear to who?"

"Him."

"God?"

"No! Our friend. What if he can hear us?"

Emmy is dismayed. "Where are you getting these crazy ideas from?"

"I don't know. But tell me---," she arches her brow. "Are you saying you don't you want Kirk and Anders dead?"

Emmy feels nauseous again. *Again!* And it is a sensation made worse by the pain in her back. She closes her eyes. "I---," she breathes slowly. "It wouldn't satisfy my need for justice."

Mercy smirks. "Oh, I see. You need to know why they did what they did it. Is that it? You want men like that to see your tears and feel your pain. As if they care! They did it, Emmy, because they thought they could get away with it; because they were horny and drunk and cruel. How is that, for starters? They did it because they didn't care, because they *could* do it, and because we were there for the taking. They did it because they wanted what they wanted. How is that for an answer? No don't go looking for some complicated reason. As for me," she laughs a dry laugh, sprinkled with a heavy heart, "I don't need justice. Death is good enough for me. And I hope they get it."

"Mercy---!"



But Mercy jumps up from the bed and leans forward in the open window, looking into the sky. "Whatever you are, we say, make them suffer!"

"Mercy, shhhh!"

Mercy sticks her head back inside. "Oh, you're always such a *lady*, Em. At least admit you wouldn't *mind* it if they were dead. Admit how good it would feel in your heart to have something stronger than them, crush them."

Emmy hesitates.

She thinks, for a moment, of how many nice, decent men has she been acquainted with, who raped women, but she never knew.

How many have there been? How many have never been called to justice for what they did?

Emmy nods. "Okay, Okay. I would be---relieved I guess."

"There, Em. Good, Em."

"But we have no avenging guardian, Mercy. We just have a situation we don't understand."

Mercy looks at her. There is no point going on about it. She closes the window. "Well, since the car is gone, I need yours."

"And you're sure Anders's car is gone? I mean, maybe Anders came and took it."

"Ah. So you think they're alive?"

"I don't---know. And as for going home, your grandpa is going to see your face. You look awful."

"I'll wear glasses."

"In the house?"

"I can manage it."

Emmy can't refuse her. "Just don't let my aunt see those bruises on your way out."

Mercy shakes her head. "Too late. She saw me when I was downstairs earlier. She was in the kitchen."

Great, Emmy thinks, touching the small knot near her temple. *Now she'll ask a million questions about it.*

When Mercy leaves, there is not much for Emmy to do but remain in bed all morning, trying to recuperate. To her relief, Aunt May does not knock on her bedroom door or try to check up on her, and for this bit of peace, Emmy is grateful.

She does not want to replay Mercy's words in her head, but she does anyway: *take them! Take them away and kill them!*

She and Mercy are already dealing with the horror of being assaulted - why must they deal with all of this other weird stuff, too?

A knock comes at her door just after one o'clock.

"You want some lunch?" her aunt calls.

"No, I'm not hungry."

Actually, she is starving. But she doesn't want her aunt to see her.

"You sick?" her aunt starts to open the door. Emmy turns her face to the wall.

"It's just a tummy ache. I'm gonna rest it off if you don't mind."

She knows her aunt has a desire to come in and snoop around.

"Well, I'll just set this plate on the desk and when you're ready---"

The smell alone is enticing. When her aunt leaves, Emmy manages to make her way to the desk with mincing steps and finish off the entire dish.

But it is sleep that she enjoys the most. Reality, for the moment, stings too much. Life is not so beautiful after all, but a bitter pill she has been made to swallow.

Around six that evening, another knock comes first to the front door, then a minute later, to Emmy's room.

Mercy enters, almost slamming the door behind her. Tears are in her eyes. "He's home," she announces, matter-of-factly.

"Who?"

"Kirk."

Emmy tries to sit up. "You saw him?"

"I waited outside his apartment." There is such a look of disappointment on her face. "He showed up around five o'clock."

Mercy shakes her head in disbelief.

*So there it is, Emmy thinks. The men didn't disappear. And one of them, probably Anders, retrieved the car from in front of Emmy's house this morning.*

"How did he look?" Emmy inquires.

She doesn't know why, but she thinks he ought to look different after being grabbed and taken away. Where did he go? What did their darting 'friend' do with them - or do *to* them?

"Kirk? Like he hadn't slept in days. But he was still Kirk."

Emmy turns her face to the wall, and listens to the sounds of her own breathing. "Maybe it's better they returned," she concludes. "Because if they had gone, that would have posed a problem for us. I mean, we we're the last ones to have seen them, and we had their car. How funny if the police had come looking for us, instead."

Emmy means to smile at the irony of such a thing happening, but no smile emerges.

"Anyway, " she adds. "Now maybe we can tell."

"Em---I told you how they'll treat us if we tell. We can't tell. We won't be the victims."

Sighing, Emmy hates to think of seeing Kirk and Anders again, of running into them somewhere in town.

That's what burns her the most: that the men will see in the women's eyes how they settled, out of fear, out of the torment of possibly being called liars, or worse, whores who went asking for it.

Surely, it is a cowardly thing not to stand up and report the incident. But Emmy knows Mercy is determined to keep quiet. And Emmy's version of events, if she were to go tell just her story---that Anders actually ceased the act of peneration her---would not hold up well at all without ridicule.

She and Mercy sit for a long while in silence, just the two of them, feeling strangely small and insignificant.

Gloomily, Mercy leaves in another hour, declaring she will walk home, to clear her mind.

Emmy lets her go, and they part with lethargic goodbyes.

It is aunt May who soon interrupts Emmy's quiet repose soon, knocking at her bedroom door again at around eight o'clock.

"You want dinner?" she asks, opening the door. The light is off. Emmy raises her head from her pillow.

"Um---,"

"I made steak."

Even in the dark, Emmy can see her aunt holding yet another. "Can you leave it on the desk?"

Her aunt pauses, moves into the room, and sets the plate down. This time, however, she does not leave.

Emmy knows that her aunt can tell something is gravely wrong. If only her mother were here! How tempted Emmy is to sob right now, to give in publicly to her sorrows.

"Maybe you ought to talk to Harry Puddifoot," her aunt announces after a moment.

"What?" Emmy blinks. "Huh?"

"I started up with that writer's course again," Maybelline explains. "I was gonna quit, but never mind about that. Turns out I got to talking to them Puddifoots. And they know you, Em. Don't they?"

"Oh--yes."



Emmy has been so disinterested in her aunt's writing activities, she failed to recall Sean's parents being in the same class her aunt mentioned taking up.

Emmy smiles weakly. "Are you writing something?"

"You don't care about that, so don't change the subject." Her tone is not harsh when she says this, just authoritative. "I don't know *exactly* what happened last night, but I ain't stupid, either. And if Harry is a man you need talk to, then you talk to him. Hear me?"

"Don't tell Dad."

"Everything is 'don't tell, dad'. Well, I ought to. Don't have me covering up for you."

"Please just--don't."

Aunt May shakes her head. "Emmy, Emmy, Emmy. You were always such a precious little girl. The delight of your parent's eyes. For the love of God, start making better decisions about the men you hang around with."

*So she knows. Or at least, she has an idea of what happened.*

"I knew about that last boyfriend you had. What was his name?"

"James."

"That's the sucker. No, I know you ain't gonna talk about that bruise on Mercy's face. Lord knows I'd hate to see what *your* face looks like. But if silence is your choice, well, you get to live with it."

Emmy feels her hands shaking. The tears are coming.

Her aunt walks to the door. "Choose someone who cares about you, Em. Someone who respects you---who thinks you're worth something beside sex or a punching bag. That's my two cents. And get yourself to a doctor."

*Choose someone who respects you---*

Her aunt exits, and now Emmy's tears come like a torrent.

What would her mother say? What will her father think? Didn't they raise her to make smarter choices than the one she made last night?

And why didn't Emmy leave for the city the moment her back was feeling better, a couple of weeks ago? Why had she kept the promise of going on this stupid date in the first place?

She could have stayed with her old roommate in New York and spent the last two or three weeks looking for work. In fact, she might have been back permanently in Brooklyn now, safe from "nice" guys like Anders and Kirk. In the city, at least, she was always on her guard from men.

The days pass slowly. Monday stretches into Tuesday and Tuesday drags itself into Wednesday and Friday arrives with a whimper.

Silence is all Emmy wants; and silence feels like it is all she can present to the world.

Across town, silence is all that Mercy feels she can offer, too. Separately, both women remain in a shell of

their own restlessness, but it is Mercy's loneliness that feels strangely, well, cramped in the house she shares with her grandfather.

Maybe it is because Old Man Wexler coughs so much. And there is always the smell of old cigarettes still enmeshed in his clothes, and sometimes a fresher smell of smoke in Mercy's clothing. An odor of grease from the kitchen often mixes in with the cigarette odor, and together they float around the house like a putrid cloud.

The sounds in the apartment are just as unpleasant.

Even when her grandfather shuts his bedroom door, Mercy can hear his laborious breathing in her bedroom.

In his wheelchair, with his barrel chest prominent, he wheezes one moment and takes a sip of soda or beer from a plastic cup the next. Often, the roar of a game show can be heard from his television.

If the days of the current week pass slowly for Emmy, then they pass dreadfully for Mercy.

*She* is the one who got raped, who felt something sickeningly alien within her, and it galls her to her very soul.

She manages to call in sick to work, but only for a couple of days since she cannot afford the possibility of getting fired. She has her grandfather to care for, after all.

It's his house but it is her paycheck that helps with food and some of the bills, while all of his disability and social security money goes to rent and his medical treatments.

On Friday night, he comes into the living room, taps one hand against the leg of his wheelchair, and says to Mercy, "Wanna play some cards?"

Mercy shakes her head. He does not mention the bruise on her face. No amount of make-up can cover it over, but he will not press her. She gets fiery when she is pressed.

"No cards," she repeats. "But I'll fix dinner" she announces.

In the kitchen sink there are plastic yellow plates and green cups. A fly buzzes over Mercy's head. She turns on the water, slumping where she stands for a moment.

From her grandfather's room, she can hear the television blaring.

"----police are still trying to figure out what caused the accident---"

She shuts the water off and listens further. Walking quietly to the kitchen door, she stands there, frowning as the words pour from the lips of a local reporter.

Emmy does not get the phone call from Mercy. She hears the report on her own, while retrieving something to drink from the fridge. Her doctor found a ruptured disk in her back, but she is not as disable as she was before.

She shuts the refrigerator door.

"----it was certainly one of the most gruesome finds police have seen in years---"

Her aunt is in the living room reading a book, with the local news channel on.

Slowly, Emmy moves to the kitchen door to listen.

Her Aunt May puts her book down when she sees Emmy standing in the kitchen doorway. "Something wrong?"

Emmy shakes her head, but remains where she is, staring across the way the TV screen.

The footage of cop cars loitering near a mountain cliff can be seen one moment, and in the next minute, a woman appears onscreen, crying, "My son, my son, my son."

"You know her?" Aunt May inquires.

"No." Emmy wonders if her mouth is agape.

It is true that she does not know the woman, but she does know the man the woman is crying over: according to the local news, her son, Anders Sliven, and another

young fellow named Kirk Mitchell were killed this morning, decapitated in a car accident.

**Stay tuned for episode # 4,  
coming May 30th.**