

# **MEMOIRS OF A BITCH**

TWISTED SISTER SUKI

VOL 1 in the “Memoirs of a Bitch!” Series

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# 1

## THE ART OF SEDUCTION

LONDON 2013

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Jon slips up to the bar and smiles at me, looking confident and smooth and cocksure in lime green pants and a Jersey Boy pullover two sizes too small. He's wearing one of those trilby hats made popular by the Kings of Leon.

He imagines he looks eccentric and artistic and slightly mysterious and my gut instinct tells me he wears a variation of the same outfit every night of the week.

*And you wonder why you sleep alone.*

I never got his name, I never asked and he never offered so I'll call him Jon because he looks like a younger version of Jon Cryer from CBS' Two and a Half Men. That's not exactly an insult, but it's not exactly a compliment either.

The first words out of Jon's mouth are so mind-numbingly banal I almost groan aloud.

'I lost my phone number,' he says, his watery blue eyes crawling down my cleavage as his smile broadens into a lecherous grin: 'can I borrow yours?'

It's the worst pick-up line I've heard this month, triggering a deeply buried instinct to punish this poser if only for his catastrophic lack of originality.

I laugh politely and hit him with the 'cock shrivelling' response; 'sorry, darling, married.'

I show him my ring just to rub it in. I'd show him the entire finger but I want to keep this civil.

Jon stares down at my counterfeit wedding band and I can see the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, the sudden stiffening of his shoulders. He probably downed two pints in quick succession just to get this far. I realise his friends are likely watching from across the bar, waiting for Jon to either crash or score.

*I'm afraid it's going to have to be the latter, darling.*

His response comes too late to sound entirely natural, nodding and clearing his throat, he says, 'yeah, but that doesn't mean you're *happily* married....' He's trying to keep his tone light but I can tell it's an uphill struggle.

'Very happily married, thank you,' I purr, 'would you mind?' I turn my back on him and signal the bartender for a refill and I can almost hear the thin whine of deflating ego behind me.

'Fair play,' my would-be seducer mutters as he slopes off. I'm right about his friends watching from across the bar, their laughter is caustic and cruel as Jon slinks back to their table with his libido tucked firmly between his legs.

I don't blame the poor sap for trying. There's a mirror at the back of the bar and my reflection says it all, five foot nine, Amazonian physique, eyes sea green and skin tanned the colour of wild Spanish summers, I am what they politely refer to as pure Milf from head to foot.

I'm not boasting when I say I could have any man I wanted, and yet I don't want *any* man, by some perverse quirk of character I find I'm only interested in the one kind, the married kind, the kind that take the vows and walk the plank and now imagine themselves happy and settled.

I am a dedicated home wrecker. I want what other women have and yet as soon as I have it I find I don't want it anymore and that's really the most peculiar part of my affliction, I'm not interested in the men themselves, they're discarded as soon as the juice of fidelity has

been extracted, it's the act of betrayal that interests me, the challenge of stealing another woman's possession away from her, if only for a night, and then returning it the next morning, soiled and forever tarnished.

\*

It's all about control.

Controlling the image, the effect you have on others, that's the definitive party trick and one I've mastered to a fine degree. Society is ultimately shallow as a child's paddling pool and it doesn't take a mental giant to figure out that celebrity is next to godliness, that looks are more important than content, that a good makeup kit is indistinguishable from alchemy, or as an old and dear friend of mine used to say: "ugly better be rich, hon, because beauty's always a bitch".

My name is Judith Chambers. I am a thirty-four year old lady of leisure by day.

By night I am a predator.

A dedicated bitch.

That's something I'm not going to deny.

\*

I've been in the bar just over an hour and already I've been hit upon by four males, one dyke, and one person of indeterminate gender, and my response is the same each time - *not interested, no thank you... enjoy the view, it's all you're leaving with.*

Tonight I'm in the process of catching far larger fish.

I'm waiting for Alan Forrester, an infinitely resourceful Private Investigator of long acquaintance. God alone knows how the man is able to dredge up so much muck on people, he should have worked for the tabloids, he has a knack for finding the most inconsequential detail, "secrets of the trade" he's always telling me, "you pay, I provide."

He used to be a police detective and I believe he still maintains contact with the force. He puts his experience to good use, providing intelligence services for people like me, people with niche interests and money to spend and a pathological need for discretion.

But tonight he's half an hour late and that's just not like Alan. I'm growing impatient and pissed off. I'm about to give him a call and a piece of my mind when my cell phone starts vibrating through the thick padding of my bag.

I extract the phone.

'Where the hell are you, Alan?' I snap.

'Been and gone,' Alan's voice snuffles out of the phone. He sounds like he has a cold.

'What do you mean "been and gone"?' I demand. 'Been where? Gone where?'

Alan sniffs: 'I was in the bar about ten minutes ago....'

Now I'm growing furious. 'So what happened? You didn't see me? I've been waiting over an hour.'

'Oh, I saw you alright,' Alan says, 'you're dressed like a billboard sign, Judith, I said low-key...is that your idea of low key?'

'I am dressed low-key,' I bristle, 'believe me, this is positively demur, you uptight little wretch. I'm really growing tired of all this cloak-and-dagger rubbish, Alan; I've just wasted an hour....'

Alan interrupts me: 'There a coffee shop to your left as you come out of the bar,' he informs me, 'meet me there in ten minutes.'

'Have you got something for me?' I ask.

'Coffee shop, ten minutes, and wear a coat.'

\*

Alan Forrester has the eternal look of a paranoid beagle, corrugated skin, sallow and hanging in loose folds, his eyes rheumatic and heavily lidded, his nose beaten into a shapeless pulp by too many youthful brawls. He drinks heavily, smokes almost non-stop, and has suffered three heart attacks in the last five years.

He is not a well man.

‘You look like a monkey in a formaldehyde bottle,’ I tell him as I join him in the café. ‘You ought to give something up for lent.’

I wince at the bronchial sound of his laughter. ‘You’re a fitness Nazi,’ he accuses me, ‘sit down, I didn’t call you out here to talk about my health....’

I settle opposite him. ‘Don’t leave me waiting like that again,’ I tell him, ‘I’m really rather pissed off with you at the moment.’

‘That won’t last,’ he promises me as he lays a plastic office folder flat on the table. ‘I’ve got your little fix right here.’

I stare at him disapprovingly: ‘It’s not a fix ...’ I start to say.

‘Whatever,’ Alan grunts, ‘I just don’t understand why you can’t visit me at the office like everyone else.’

‘You don’t have an office, Alan,’ I remind him, ‘you have a broom cupboard at the back of a crack den and your neighbours are all prostitutes and gangsters, so no thank you, meeting like this suits me fine.’

‘You’re a snob, Judith.’

‘And you’re a slob, Alan, so what do you have for me?’

Alan pats the office folder and then almost reluctantly slides it across to me. ‘His name is Jared Anderton,’ he says as I flick the folder open.

I stare down at a portrait photo of a man in his late thirties, prematurely greying, good looking, good-natured smile, nothing particularly outstanding about him, but then again I’m not after them for their looks.

‘And who’s Jared Anderton?’ I ask.

‘Your next challenge,’ Alan winks at me, ‘Jared Anderton is a confirmed monogamist, just the way you like ‘em, married three years, engaged two years prior to that, never had an affair in all that time, never even looked at another woman, the silly sap still buys his missus flowers twice a week, I mean who the fuck buys flowers for their missus every week?’

‘Jared Anderton, apparently,’

I flick through the pages of information Alan has collected in his little dossier. ‘You’ve done your homework this time,’ I whistle with admiration, ‘you could write the man’s biography from all this.’

‘Yeah well,’ Alan shrugs modestly, ‘technology’s making it easier these days...still, you have to know what to look for.’

‘What’s *she* like?’

Alan glances at me sharply. ‘You mean his wife?’

I nod. ‘Mrs Anderton. Tell me about her.’

‘She’s pretty, she’s young, she works in charity, she reads erotica, that 50 Shades crap, and shed loads of romance, bit of a dreamer I guess, and what else can I say, she’s in love....’

‘How much in love?’

‘Let’s just say it would kill her if Jared had an affair, I mean it would fuck her right up,’ He sniffs, his eyes cold and hard as he studies me. ‘But that’s what you want, right?’

I nod and smile. 'Yes,' I say, 'I would very much like to knock Mrs Anderton off her little domestic pedestal.'

'You're a sick bitch, Judith, allow me the pleasure of telling you that every once in a while.'

I shrug. 'I need to hear it every once in a while.' I snap the folder closed. 'How do I make contact with this Jared Anderton?'

'You'll have to join his local gym, that's the only downtime he gets, three nights a week; the details are in the folder.'

'You're worth your weight in gold.' I pass Alan an envelope under the table and his policeman's fingers quickly make it disappear.

'Ta, love,' he grunts as he gets up from the table. Just before he leaves he bends down and pecks me on the cheek and says, 'get help, Judith, before it's too late.'

\*

Every Thursday evening I attend private one-on-one dance classes with a young Cuban instructor called Angelo Baptiste, and I will confess that these hour-long sessions are the nearest I get to normalcy, a relationship, a sense of spending time with another human being without asking for anything in return.

Angelo has been a dancer all his life, he tells me he first started dancing in his mother's womb, that he danced his way into the world and that someday he will dance his way into the grave, old and worn out, his feet covered in blisters and open sores, but could any man declare himself happier?

He is versed in all the great dance forms, the Cha-cha, the Danzón and Mambo, the Bolero, Rumba and Salsa, and I will happily proclaim him a man of both extraordinary looks and penetrating insights, his body as graceful as a river in evening flow, his mind possessed of a stillness that seems incapable of holding onto a single imperfect thought.

Perhaps I spend time with him because I wish to learn to move the way he moves, but that is simply not possible, one thing I have learnt from Angelo is that the body is merely an extension of the mind; that the one cannot abide in peace if the other is riven by turmoil, and if Angelo's mind is a lake of solitude then surely mine is white water rapids, but when we dance together it as though, just for a moment, I can leave behind my life of labyrinthine plots and circuitous schemes, and allow myself to be carried along in the bosom of the moment.

Tonight we dance with the studio lights turned down low, like secret lovers using the shadows to mask our passion, high proud posture, arms swept back, heads straining forward as we prowl across the floor, and then gracefully we pirouette, Angelo's hands holding me gently by the waist, and there is a swooning moment as we dip and turn and then rise again, proud once more, but now our direction is reversed and as the music surges our movements become more intimate, my hips grinding back against Angelo's pelvis, his hands caressing my belly as our feet move in perfect harmony.

'Lose yourself,' he whispers in my ear and deliberately lets his hand fall to my mound, I arch my back, my arms rising, my hands circling his neck, and now my buttocks swells against the hard angles of his body, my breasts thrusting outwards, high and proud. Angelo's hips undulate as he draws me backwards into his arms, our movements perfectly synchronised, there is no space between us; we have become a single indivisible organism that falls and rises, rises and falls, like the cyclic nature of time itself, and every movement is pregnant with symbolism for Angelo once told me that dance is the mother of all languages and that sex is the oldest dance of all.

He undresses me and yet hardly seems to touch me at all, shedding his own skin at the same time, and naked we coil like serpents around the same invisible limb, Angelo's lips

burning against my breasts, my throat, pressed tight against my own lips as his hands explore every inch of my body.

The music ends at the very instant he enters me and I gasp into the sudden silence, my fingers digging into the muscular swell of his buttocks, my face buried in the curve of his throat as he continues to make small circular motions with his hips, his cock buried to the hilt, and still we dance, micro movements now, soft and unhurried, swaying to the sound of our own heartbeats and I am unprepared for the moment he pulls back, or the savage instant he thrusts home again, like el matador delivering the fatal wound to a bull, a gasp ripped from my throat, a shudder wracking my body, and then he pulls me to the ground and crushes me beneath his weight and every thrust is deeper than the one before, my fingers caressing his arms, his tongue flicking serpent-like against my swollen nipples.

I rise towards a burning crescendo, again and again, kissing his eyelids, his lips, the prominence of his Adam's apple, and his cock sinks towards the centre of my belly, like a hot knife through butter, awakening every nerve ending along the way, triggering the urge to hold on to him, to hold him inside me as I grind my pelvis against his, and my gasps are indistinguishable from sobs, my pleasure inseparable from pain, my body thrown into a riot of confusion that continues long after Angelo reaches his own personal crescendo.

As he climaxes I pull back, I must watch his face, I must see his expression, I must read his eyes, but they are closed and he looks so peaceful, even in the throes of passion he looks gentle as a saint, a street poet, composing silent verse and voiceless prayers, and in that moment I want him so desperately and at the same time a dark bitterness twists my heart because I know I can never have him, that Angelo is the one man I can never tame, he exists beyond time and space, he is a ghost dancing on the border between this world and the next, and I hate him for the very same reasons I love him.

I push him away from me. 'I have to go,' I say rather more sharply than I intend.

He nods and sighs and prepares to get up.

'You could always ask me to stay,' I say.

'But you know I won't.'

'Yes,' I say bitterly, 'I know you won't.'

'You seem offended.'

'Do I? Not at all. Why would I be?'

'Next week then?'

'Wouldn't miss it for the world.'

\*

That night I sit in my Chelsea flat and make a careful study of the dossier Alan gave me. I listen to Rachmaninov's piano concerto No 3 and sip a fine Veuve Clicquot, unconsciously tapping my fingers in time to the piano recital as I search for a credible chink in the Anderton's matrimonial armour.

I am studying my prey.

Dissecting their habits.

Strand by strand I am weaving their fate.

Jared Anderton was born in Wembley, the fourth child of a GP father and a housewife mother. He studied English and Spanish at the University of London, travelled through most of his twenties, trawling the coastlines of the world in search of perfect surfing country. He met Samantha on a tourist bus in South Africa where she'd been involved with a UNICEF inoculation program, and on and on it goes, pages and pages of personal information that help build a portrait of the man I intend to seduce.

Alan has been deliciously thorough and has included screenshots from the couple's individual Facebook and Twitter accounts. I find these extremely useful, offering as they do an unguarded glimpse into the Andertons' thinking process.

Jared and Samantha Anderton - a match made in heaven, blissfully unaware that a dark wind blows from Chelsea, that wheels are turning in the night, that right now plots are being hatched and schemes unravelled, and you might well ask why I do it, why I invest so much energy in the destruction of someone else's marriage, and the answer will always be the same.

Because I can.

\*

## ELASTIC BALLROOM CONTORTIONS

ISTANBUL 2011

Two years earlier it is April and I am in Istanbul, standing alone on the banks of the Bosphorus. The evening sunlight glints off the nearby dome of the Ortakoy mosque as a distant muezzin summons the faithful to prayer. I am presently snarling down my cell phone at Greg Noll, the man I've left in temporary charge of my company back in London, cupping my hand to my ear to ward off the sounds of piety and river traffic.

'I don't care if she *is* pregnant,' I tell Greg, 'I want her out before her maternity leave is due, I'm not having her breed at my expense, get her on capability, restructure the department, do what you have to but make sure she's gone by June, is that clear enough for you?'

Greg is used to my impromptu tirades and his tone remains calm and neutral. 'Consider her gone,' he says, 'will there be anything else, Judith?'

'Have you closed the Baxter account yet?'

Greg hesitates. 'They're asking for a reason,' he says, 'Ed claims he's been with us four years, says he's one of our founding clients so he reckons he's entitled to an explanation at the very least.'

'He's become a liability,' I respond as I turn away from a quayside hawker who's attempting to sell me some trinkets, furiously motioning the lad to bugger off. 'The Moriarty account is ten times larger,' I continue '...And they don't want us working with the competition....'

'Yeah, but I can't tell Ed that,' Greg reasons, 'I can't tell him he's being dumped in favour of the competition, that's unethical, Judith....'

I sigh, 'tell him we're downsizing, tell him we can't offer him the service we think he's entitled to, butter him up, make it sound like we're doing *him* a favour, whatever it takes, Greg, but I need him closed down and gone by the end of next week or we can kiss the Moriarty account goodbye.'

'No problem,' Greg says, 'consider it done. How's Istanbul?'

'Never mind Istanbul,' I snap, 'I'm relying on you, Greg, call me if there's a problem.'

I hang up.

As I stand staring past the Bosphorus Bridge at the distant lights of Europe I spark up a cigarette and take a long measured puff.

I feel wretched despite being rich, young, and unattached, I feel I could own the whole world and it still wouldn't be enough, could never be enough. I watch young lovers walking hand in hand along the banks of the river and they are poor people, without merit or consequence, and yet they seem far happier than I'll ever be.

The wind picks up and I try to keep the silk shawl from blowing off my head and my anger grows with each despairing puff on my cigarette.

The poor have no right to be happy.

The rich have no cause to feel wretched.

Something's not right with the world and I can't quite put my finger on it.

\*

My father, the architect, built many houses in his time but to the best of my knowledge he never succeeded in building an actual home. He was conspicuously absent

from the house I grew up in, he was “away on business” my mother would tell me in the same manufactured tone she used to describe the weather, it wasn’t until my early teens that I realised that father’s particular brand of “business” involved siring children out of wedlock and leaving them scattered across the country like so many unfinished projects.

He died of heart failure when I was twenty years old and I inherited a vast sum of money when my mother died two years later.

I started my business when I was twenty-three and worked long hours to make it the success it would later become, but nothing, no amount of success, will ever fill the void left by absent fathers, that’s something that never goes away.

\*

My life will be changed forever by events that evening two years ago and I mark that point as the beginning of my obsession with married men.

I was visiting Istanbul on the first holiday I’d allowed myself in over a year and I’m afraid the local sights were lost on me, I’d been working too hard for too long, my head swilling with all the things that could possibly go wrong back at the London office, and it was impossible to switch off for any period of time. Greg was competent but that wasn’t the point, I was a control freak and at that precise moment I was experiencing a catastrophic loss of control.

Heroin addicts must experience something similar when they’re forced to go cold turkey.

Whilst staying in Istanbul I lodge at the Grand Hyatt hotel which is quite close to Taksim Square I believe, and I have a patchy recollection of gorgeous fountains that spill water down blue marble terraces, and things floating from high elaborate ceilings, paper dragons and butterfly lanterns and luxurious draperies that extend from floor to ceiling, and of course I’m thinking the ad team really needs to come out and have a look at all this, a little Ottoman decadence might help shift that new line of tampons we’re having problems selling.

I spend the first part of that evening watching a rakkas, a male belly dancer, perform in an exclusive club just off the Nevizade Sokak. The dancer is all sinuous snake hips and lithe muscles and he is quite the most beautiful creature I have beheld in a long while, but the performance is spoilt by the fact I am not alone. A fellow guest at the Hyatt hotel, an American called Chiles, invited me here on the pretext of “grabbing some culture”, but that’s not all he’s interested in grabbing as it turns out.

Chiles informs me he’s here in Istanbul on business. He’s frightfully boring, a serial philanderer with large fleshy hands and a wide insincere smile and he presses far too close when he talks, his breath sodden with alcohol and traces of peppermint, and when he tries to insinuate one of those hands between my legs I snatch a carving knife off the table and press the point against his balls, hard enough to make him wince and recoil in shock. I move after him, keeping the pressure on the knife, my voice low and urgent.

‘Listen to me, you ghastly yank,’ I hiss, ‘you do that again and I can guarantee you’ll lose the masculine inclination to touch another woman as long as you live.’

‘Jesus!’ Chiles holds his hands up in terror, ‘I’m sorry, lady, I thought we were...Christ, I thought we were connecting...’

‘We *are* connecting,’ I probe his testicles with the point of the knife, ‘would you like to feel any more connected?’

He shakes his head, his eyes bulging with fear.

I toss the knife back on the table and retreat to the ladies toilet where I sit in a luxurious cubicle and I’m so angry at that point I actually start shaking. I’m not angry at Chiles who’s merely incidental, but every now and again this rage creeps up on me, this black

hatred for the world and every creature on it and all I can do is squat and shake and wait for the feeling to pass, like an animal nursing some monstrous injury.

As I sit there a woman's voice floats over the toilet divider

'This world is entirely a thing of the senses, don't you agree?'

I'm not certain the voice is addressing me so I remain silent.

The voice continues. '...We see, we taste, we touch, and some say we are here merely to observe, that we cannot ever truly possess, I find that sad because of course I think it is true, don't you think it is true?'

'Are you talking to me?' I ask.

'Yes I am; does that alarm you?'

I'm nonplussed, not used to being addressed over the dividing wall of a public toilet: 'I'm not...' I stammer, '...I don't...Excuse me; I find this exceptionally odd; do you often talk to people in the toilet?'

'It's the most honest place in any establishment, I find.'

'I'd like to be left alone, if that's alright with you?'

'Alone with a rage you can never explain?'

Something in that voice conveys a sense of power, a feeling of divine right, it is heavy, accented, but the words are perfectly formed, almost lyrical, and I'm intrigued despite myself.

'Do I know you?' I ask.

'Would you like to?'

\*

The voice in the toilet cubicle belongs to a Turkish woman called Yasmin Kamisli. She introduces herself as she washes her hands in the sink and I think she must be a witch. I've never felt such an instant rapport with another human being, it is as though we are meeting again after a long absence, as though I've known her in prior lives and each time the guise was different but the eyes were always the same.

She wears a silk kaftan that falls around her figure in soft, exotic waves, her eyes darkened with kohl, lending them an almost supernatural vibrancy. She is in her early forties but her skin is flawless, her beauty typical of that region, haughty profile, dark olive complexion, and a bearing that can best be described as regal.

'It is not an accident that we meet like this,' she tells me as she runs her hands under the air dryer, 'we who possess a certain charisma, women like us, we will always contrive such meetings, in toilets and back streets and vegetable gardens, it doesn't matter where, it only matters when, the timing, you see, must be impeccable, the stars must be in agreement, and only then can a particular kind of magic be invoked, and only then can certain forces be set in motion.'

I tell her my name is Judith Chambers, I would have told her more, no doubt, but my tongue feels like cotton wool and my words are clumsy and uncouth.

'Yes, Judith Chambers,' Yasmin smiles as though my name were a forgone conclusion, 'tonight I would like to extend you the hospitality of my home,' she takes my hands in hers' and stares intently into my eyes, 'it would greatly please me if you would accept.'

\*

Yasmin lives on the European side of the Bosphorus Straits, in an exclusive suburb reserved for Istanbul's power brokers and wealthy socialites, and that night I find myself

sitting in a small inner courtyard of her mansion, dining on traditional Turkish cuisine with live folk music playing in the background.

For some reason the musicians have been blindfolded. I assume in my ignorance that this is an Islamic practise, that the male musicians are forbidden to look upon the women who attend Yasmin's little get together, but Yasmin will later tell me that the musicians have been blindfolded merely to deprive them of any masculine authority, that this courtyard is the abode of the feminine and although males may visit they must do so only as supplicants.

The courtyard is reminiscent of a secret pleasure garden with arches and miniature pillars and a central pool filled from a lion shaped fountain. Lanterns cast soft arabesque shadows against the marbled floor and the air is filled with the fragrance of wild rose and hyacinth.

A young man and woman entwine limbs as they slip like velvet around our small gathering; they are professional dancers, semi naked; their flesh glistening and writhing in the soft light of the lanterns. It is an erotic vision straight from some hedonistic fairy-tale and their presence embarrasses me at first, and then it intrigues me, and after a while it seems the most natural thing in the world, like a physical extension of the music that haunts the evening.

My fellow guests are all women of indeterminate middle years, a fashion designer called Selma who has fine nervous fingers that are never still, that make continuous weaving motions as she speaks, as though conjuring fabric from the raw material of her words. Beside her sits Mariam, a Greek actress who boasts the powers of a human chameleon, and right in front of my eyes she transforms herself into a succession of vivid characters, a Southern American belle, a Yorkshire woman, a French aristocrat, her accent slipping flawlessly from one persona to the next and it is quite the most extraordinary thing I have witnessed.

The Bulgarian real estate magnate, Ivanka, claims to know the ancient secrets of mammon, the Mumbai hotelier, the Andalusian poet, all women of power, gathered together in Yasmin's wonderful villa where we are served local delicacies on silver plates and it is an enchanting evening that years later I will recall as one might recall the ramblings of a long ago dream.

'We are not religious folk,' Yasmin tells me as she orders my glass filled with a fine red wine.

The Mumbai hotelier has a rich smoker's laugh that makes light of any conversation. 'God Spare us from religion, yah!' She cackles as she slaps a mosquito off her right arm.

'I didn't dare presume you *were* religious,' I respond.

The fashion designer puffs on the corded spout of a hookah as she turns to me. 'Are *you* a religious person, Judith?' She asks.

'I'm not, no...I don't believe in God.'

Yasmin leans sideways and touches my knee, a fleeting contact that nevertheless sends a small thrill of electricity through my flesh. 'But you absolutely must believe in a god,' she insists, 'even if that god is *you*.'

'That's rather narcissistic,' I laugh.

'Here-here!' The Andalusian poet applauds softly, her bangles making a musical sound as they sparkle and twinkle on her slender wrists, 'behind every hard working god there's usually a goddess working twice as hard.'

I frown, 'I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean...'

'What's to understand?' The Mumbai hotelier demands, 'all men are bastards, it's been scientifically proven.'

Yasmin sighs. 'Men have changed their names many times in order to fool women,' she explains, 'they called themselves priests and scientists and bankers and politicians, but in the end they were still men, and so we women continue to abide by the laws of men, the will

of men, the ideas of men, and every now and again a token women is thrust upon us to keep the grazing herds happy.'

I smile. 'You make us sound like cows,' I accuse her.

'We must be cows,' the Greek actress growls, 'we spend our lives listening to bull.'

The fashion designer thrusts the spout of the hookah at me. 'Are you a sexual woman, Judith?' She queries.

The question is like a bolt from the blue and I blush furiously as I fumble for the appropriate response. 'Uhm...yes,' I stutter, 'I mean isn't everyone?'

'Not at all,' the Mumbai hotelier gives a throaty chuckle, 'not at all, you see, this is the misconception we live under; most people are merely lusty....'

'Horny....' The fashion designer intercedes.

'Like horny little goats....' The actress adds.

'But this is not the same thing as being sexual,' the Mumbai hotelier continues, 'sex is magic, yah, the ultimate power trip...*see*,' she points at the dancers as they writhe and contort in the shadows of the courtyard, 'look how the man dominates the dance...he is aggressive, yes, demanding, but watch, see how the woman uses that power to misdirect him, to bend him, to shape the dance around him....'

'In order to yield power you must first pretend to relinquish it,' the Greek actress is telling me, but at this point I'm having difficulty following the conversation, my head has started to spin, my flesh crawling with unease, and for a moment I fear I'm going to pass out, but the feeling gradually eases and I nod and smile, labouring to give the impression that all is well.

'Maria has a wonderful expression,' Yasmin tells me, 'what is that phrase you use, Maria?'

'Elastic Ballroom Contortions,' The Andalusian poet replies, 'EBC for short.' She turns to me and winks: 'learn your EBCs, Judith,' she advises me, 'take back your sexuality, it is your mystery, the source of your power, take control of the dance whilst always appearing to submit to it.'

'Elastic Ballroom Contortions,' I echo as I continue to watch the dancers from the corner of my eye, 'I'll try to remember that.'

'Remember it, Judith,' Yasmin touches my knee again and there is something almost proprietorial about the gesture, 'to own a thing is useful,' she says; 'to own a *person*, this is invaluable.'

I am dizzy, overwhelmed by the strangeness of the occasion, only later will I begin to piece the conversation together, but at that moment it all seems dislocated, fragmented, and I'm under the distinct impression that my presence here is not entirely accidental, that these women are trying to tell me something, to draw me into some arcane circle of knowledge. The dancers, the music, the wine, all add to the elusive nature of the evening.

'Elastic Ballroom Contortions,' the Mumbai hotelier raises her glass in a mock toast, 'let them rule their empires,' she proclaims, 'so long as we rule their balls, the world is fixed, yah?'

\*

That night Yasmin and I make love, the first woman I have ever been intimate with, and it is a diamond bright moment in my narrative, a departure point from the life that thus far I have been obliged to live.

'You must stay the night,' Yasmin tells me as her guests begin to leave.

'I really should get back to the hotel,' I reply, 'I don't have anything to change into....'

'My wardrobe is yours,' Yasmin smiles, 'whatever you need you have only to ask.'

‘Well, that’s awfully kind of you....’

‘Then it’s settled, I’ll have Bakir prepare a room for you.’

I’m high on something, not just the wine; things appear outlandish and far too fabulous to be the results of mere alcohol. I’m convinced the hookah was spiked, but Yasmin tells me that sometimes stepping out of one’s comfort zone is all the high the human brain requires.

Why don’t I believe her?

Why can’t I trust my own senses?

I can’t stop touching things, as Yasmin leads me through the house my fingers trail over every surface, revelling in the texture, the intimacies of detail - the brass ornaments feel liquid, the stone objet d’art almost organic, the walls are breathing, the flooring composed of one long endless sigh, and I’m melting in and out of coherence, experiencing a kind of low grade delirium that both frightens and exhilarates me.

We enter a large bed chamber, its floor made of lacquered wood, its walls covered in ancient tapestries.

I remember the bed in the middle of the chamber, but I do not remember its exact proportions, sometimes I imagine it was an enormous four poster and sometimes I recall a much more modest affair, but in all memories the bed is black, the sheets inscribed with silvery patterns that resemble magical runes and I remember laughing about this and asking Yasmin if she’s some kind of witch.

‘Yes,’ Yasmin says and the way she says it sends a shiver of disquiet down my spine, ‘every woman is a witch,’ she says as she slips out of her clothes, ‘sex is seduction, magic is life, love is illusion....’ Her voice takes on a peculiar resonance as she speaks, her features blurring, becoming indistinct, at the same time her eyes appear to be growing brighter, a Cheshire cat’s gaze observing me from the shadows, and I realise I am dangerously stoned.

‘What are you doing?’ I demand.

‘Taking you out of your comfort zone,’ Yasmin continues to undress, ‘delivering you into the moment.’

I stumble backwards, ‘I’m not...into that...’ I stammer, ‘sorry, I really think I ought to go....’

‘Of course you ought to, but you won’t, I sensed your hunger the moment I first saw you, your immaculate desire, like a ruby shining in the desert, you and I are very much alike, Judith, we are women who take what we want from the world and let the common man pick up the tab.’

I can’t remember her moving but suddenly she is standing beside me and she is naked, her fingers gently caressing my flesh, and it is a shock to realise that I’m naked as well - events are moving too fast - I try to push her away but somehow my limbs become entwined in hers’.

There is a scratched-record moment, a violent jump-cut, and the next second we are lying on the bed, her lips pressed against mine, her tongue sliding and writhing around in my mouth and there’s a peculiar thrilling motion she makes with her tongue, almost a vibration, that excites and repels me.

‘Don’t....’ I moan, ‘Stop....’

I might as well have been encouraging her for all the difference my protests make, her fingers slip between my legs, elegant fingers, blind fingers, teasing and probing and stroking my vagina in every way it likes to be teased and probed and stroked.

‘We can’t....’ I insist.

‘We can, we must....’ She whispers.

I shudder and reaching down try to stop her but she takes my hand and guides it to her own sex and the heat is indescribable, her clitoris erect and almost indecent in its eagerness to be stroked, and gently I oblige.

I am not myself at that moment, I am wanton and shameless and wonderfully perverse, and all this feels so natural, so effortless; so damned familiar.

She whispers something in Turkish, words that sound like a prayer, or an incantation, at the same time rolling her dancer's hips, grinding her mound against my hand, and I feel her fingers slipping inside me, all resistance melting from their path.

'Fuck....' I hiss.

'Yes,' she moans and bites my tongue, not hard, just enough pain to let me know who is in control and who is being controlled, her fingers working away inside me with increasing ardour, her skin hot, fabulously hot, her eyes burning down into mine, almost mocking in their intensity.

'Cum...like a harlot,' she whispers in my ear.

I cum worse than that, I'm afraid, I explode with such force my stomach muscles cramp, my limbs flopping about in the extremis of my passion, and my mind is engulfed by a white scream that is silent raptures and endless torment and every shade of purple ecstasy between.

\*

**MACHINE SEX**

LONDON 2013

I make first contact with Jared Anderton, my intended victim, in his local gym just north of Holland Park. According to Alan's dossier Jared frequents the gym three evenings a week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and so I do likewise, taking out a three-month membership under an assumed name and causing an immediate stir the first time I take to the floor.

On that particular occasion I'm wearing a pair of red Nike lycra shorts, a grey streamlined hoodie from Gap, and a pair of red and white suede classic trainers from Puma. I'm not exaggerating when I say that the moment I appear every man redoubles his workout and in the first half an hour alone there are more training mishaps than the entire previous week combined, this according to the rather gawky teenager who takes me through a hurried induction course; he can see I know my ab machines from my abductors and after a while he lets me get on with it.

The floor glistens with exercise equipment designed to trim and pump and sculpt and mould and I can't help wondering to what good use Torquemada might have put these machines if only he'd been given the blueprints, there's a torturous ingenuity about them, a certain devilish cunning in the way they batter farm muscle out of flab and sinew out of cellulite.

I spend ten minutes warming up on the treadmill, using that time to scan the gym, to familiarize myself with its layout.

I quickly spot my target, recognising him from the photo Alan supplied.

It's leg day for Jared Anderton and quite a fetching pair of legs he has too, bulging out of a pair of khaki coloured shorts as he puts them through their paces, hairy and masculine and not too stout, the kind of legs that wouldn't look entirely out of place on the Scottish Highlands with a kilt and a pair of knee length socks to keep them warm.

He squats a hundred and sixty kilos; grunting and snorting through the effort, his training partner too busy staring at me through the mirror to assist him at the required moment.

Not once do I commit the cardinal sin of glancing in Jared's direction, or give him any indication at all that I'm interested in him, and for a while he shows no particular interest in me either.

But I know he *is* interested.

He lets his guard down in subtle ways.

After my warm-up session I use a pair of light dumbbells to work my triceps and rear deltoids and whenever I bend forward to perform my set Jared's eyes flicker - not stray, not quite wander - but *flicker*, as though he's having difficulty keeping them focussed on the task at hand, it is the kind of tell that would have betrayed him in a game of high-stakes poker.

My buttock cheeks are muscular and wickedly proportioned and the exercise I have carefully chosen shows them off to perfection, placing me in the classical receptive position, like a bitch about to be mounted from behind, I couldn't have adopted a more suggestive stance if I'd been posing for Playboy Magazine.

I use the gym mirrors to excellent advantage as I crouch down and brace myself against an exercise bench, raising each dumbbell in a tight rowing motion that isolates the appropriate muscles. All the while I watch Jared without appearing to watch him.

His muscles bulge and flex and tremble and as he performs his squats the sweat soaks liberally through his T-shirt, and every now and again he snatches micro glances in my

direction despite his best efforts not to, and each time he does so he immediately grows flustered and confused.

The exercise I am performing is called “bent-over-rows” and in order to receive the full benefits the upper torso must be held level with the supporting bench, the buttocks thrust backwards and upwards to give maximum stability to the spine. When I adopt this position my buttock cheeks take on a peculiar gravity, every eye in the gym drawn towards their perfect symmetry, the men openly gawping; the woman looking for some sign of imperfection, a dimple, a ripple of cellulite, something to suggest I am human and not some deity come to earth for the express purpose of showing them up.

I remain professional, working hard, barely acknowledging the people around me, I quickly distinguish myself from the social trainers, the ones who hog a particular piece of equipment and chat ceaselessly to friends and acquaintances. I give the impression of someone who knows exactly what she wants out of a workout and has every intention of getting there in the least time possible.

It is a game and one I happen to be particularly good at.

Jared wants me, I can sense it - it only remains for his head to catch up with his body.

### ISTANBUL 2011

After Yasmin seduces me I spend the whole of the next day in my hotel suite trying to sort out my emotions, more convinced than ever that I had been drugged, still refusing to admit my complicity in the previous night’s debauchery.

I am not a lesbian, one act of indiscretion doesn’t change the preferences of a lifetime and I am still very much attracted to men, but then it occurs to me that I can’t really recall the last time I had a normal relationship, or even the desire for one, I am still building my career at this point and it seems there aren’t enough hours in the day to accomplish what I have set out to. It’s entirely possible I might be a lesbian and just never realised it until last night.

It is a depressing thought.

But for some reason I am not depressed.

Whatever happened between Yasmin and I was less like sex and more like an initiation into something immeasurably vaster than sex, infinitely more compelling, and I am aroused despite myself, in fact I spend most of that day in a low state of arousal, masturbating once in the shower, and again whilst watching some Turkish soap opera on television.

I am bewitched.

Yasmin has bewitched me; I can’t rid myself of the sensation of her body pressed against mine, her fingers gently violating me, her tongue like a fat eel squirming around in my mouth. I try to preoccupy my mind but my body has a memory of its own, it still carries echoes and traces of last night’s impiety, my quim growing tender and moist of its own volition, my breasts aching with residual desire.

I see her eyes everywhere, staring at me out of the hotel mirror, from behind the courtesy bouquet, peeping at me through the heavy lace curtains, and sometimes I hear her voice whispering faintly in my ears, her fingers crawling over my flesh like the onset of a fever, and the third time I masturbate it is in the heat of a peculiar delirium, my body entwined with the memory of hers’ as I writhe and twist on the hotel bed, my face buried in the pillows to suppress the urgency of my groans.

\*

Yasmin didn’t invite me to her house that night but when I show up at the gate she buzzes me in nevertheless, and at the front door she laughs and says, ‘I’ve been expecting you.’

‘What did you do to me last night?’

She steps aside and I slip past her, feigning outrage, indignation, refusing to look her in the eye because I’m convinced that’s how she casts her spells.

‘What do you imagine I did to you last night?’

‘You seduced me....’

‘You allowed yourself to be seduced.’

‘That’s not true, I was inebriated....’

‘On three glasses of wine?’

‘Oh come on, don’t try to tell me you didn’t slip something into the...the shisha...I don’t know, opium or ganja or whatever the hell you use.’

‘If that’s easier to believe.’

‘I didn’t intend for last night to happen.’

‘Then why are you here tonight?’

I frown. ‘To tell you I didn’t intend for last night to happen.’

‘Will you be staying tonight, Judith?’

‘No, I won’t; I should think that’s bloody obvious....’

‘Then at least stay for a drink.’

‘It’s too early in the evening.’

‘That depends on the kind of evening you intend having.’

‘Fine, one drink then... but that’s all....’

\*

I climax three times in her arms that night, she cums twice, and afterwards we snuggle together on the bed and she strokes my hair and sings a soft lullaby in her language. Half in and out of sleep I ask, ‘who are you, Yasmin, the others, your friends, who are *they* really?’

‘Women who have learnt to control their feminine instincts,’ she responds.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We dance to our own tune, Judith, and every one of us has attained enormous wealth and status as a consequence, a long time ago they called us witches and because men feared the power we wielded they persecuted us and drove us into the forests...and so there are certain advantages to living in secular times.’

‘Will you teach me what you know?’ I plead with her.

She cups my breasts gently, ‘this is all you need to know,’ she whispers in my ear, and touching my quim adds, ‘this is what you need to forget.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Use your sexuality, Judith, do not let it use *you*.’

‘Is that all there is to it?’

‘You sound disappointed.’

‘I really thought you were a witch.’

She laughs. ‘Shall I summon a spirit?’

‘You’ve summoned enough spirits for one night,’ I sigh.

‘Then one more won’t matter,’ she insists, ‘and his name shall be Yorg.’

She claps her hands.

Yorg appears as if by magic, rising from the tangled bedding like a merman from a mirage of sea foam. I scream when he first appears and tearing myself from Yasmin’s embrace I scramble backwards, staring in horror as the naked man seemingly pulls himself out of the very bed itself. He’s wearing a stocking mask so sheer I think at first he has no face, that he’s some kind of golem summoned by our sinful appetites.

Yasmin laughs. ‘Everything is permitted,’ she tells me ‘nothing can be denied.’

‘What the hell are you up to?’ I demand, my voice harsh with shock.

The man is naked and well proportioned, incredibly well-proportioned I should say, his muscles oiled and bulging, his cock like a fat tentacle dangling between his legs, almost pornographic in its girth.

‘This is Yorg,’ Yasmin says as she reaches out and strokes his chest, ‘he is a bedroom spirit.’

Yorg bows his head.

I reason this must be a parlour trick, some kind of secret compartment hidden under the bed, a vent in the linen allowing the occupant to crawl into the open at the appropriate moment.

‘Does every Turkish woman keep a spare man under the bed?’ I ask.

‘Only those who can afford to.’

Yorg acts as though he is an extension of Yasmin’s will, a slight caress, a simple touch of her fingers; with the smallest gesture she appears to control his every move.

‘He is an animal,’ she croons, ‘a puppet to my will.’

She laughs and clicks her fingers several times, each click causing Yorg’s impressive member to swell even further, his muscles quivering with tension as unaided his cock jerks itself to a powerful erection.

Yasmin takes my hand and guides it to his genitals.

‘Touch him,’ she commands me.

I snatch my hand back as though scolded.

‘Do as you will,’ Yasmin encourages me, ‘everything is yours to possess.’

‘I don’t want to possess him,’ I tell her, ‘not like this anyway....’

She takes my hand again and returns it to Yorg’s cock and this time I let it linger, stroking him, enjoying the sensation, all the while staring up into his face, wondering if he can see me behind that mask, wondering what he’s thinking....

‘It doesn’t matter what he’s thinking,’ Yasmin whispers as she caresses my breasts with her lips and tongue, ‘he is a beast, all men are beasts, they can only think as a beast thinks.’ Her fingers slip into my moist centre and I gasp and moan aloud.

‘Suck him,’ she urges me.

She makes it sound like a royal imperative and I’m not even conscious of lowering my head and taking Yorg’s cock into my mouth, it seems the most natural thing in the world, and he shudders and groans and I remember thinking Yasmin is right, he even sounds like an animal.

### LONDON 2013

The second time I attend the gym I notice Jared Anderton has become more conscious of his appearance, a fresh haircut, a shave, an expensive new tank top vest, I notice everything without appearing to notice anything.

He smiles and nods in my direction as I pass close to him at one point.

I smile back, a quick, professional smile, merely one gym rat acknowledging another.

But throughout that second evening it is as though we are already making love and the machines are just proxies, the grunts, the sighs, the muscles tensing and releasing, and somewhere along the way the glances from Jared become longer and more obvious.

I still refuse to acknowledge him beyond that one courtesy smile.

Other men attempt to talk to me, the bolder ones who imagine their charm can cut through the fog of determination I’ve surrounded myself with. I am polite with my responses but offer no encouragement, slipping my earphones off long enough to tender a perfunctory “yes”, “no”, “sure....” before slipping the phones back on and resuming my exercise, a blank smile salving whatever injury I might inadvertently cause.

I'm filling my bottle at the water fountain when Jared joins me, smiling and tapping his left ear to indicate he wants to talk to me.

My heart beats fast as I slip my earphones off.

'You sure know your machines,' he tells me,

'Thank you, I've been training a while,' I continue filling my bottle.

He nods approval. 'It shows,' he says, 'most people just stick to a couple of exercises, there's a guy in here with sixteen inch biceps and legs like a stick insect.'

I laugh.

'I'm Jared,' he pushes his hand out.

'I'm Theresa,' I shake it.

'You're Australian?'

'Yeah, is it that obvious?'

It's a banal first meeting, not one of my most memorable, but it's an important first step and I let Jared do the talking. I nod and smile and the moment he pauses for breath I say, 'well, I'd better get back to work, Jared, I'll see you around...'

'Yeah,' he looks flustered for a second, then he smiles, 'sure, keep it up, Theresa....'

'You too.'

\*

Theresa is the name of the girl Jared spent that endless summer with.

Yasmin once told me that everyone recalls their one perfect summer, a moment in time unlike any other, in the company of a girl or boy or sometimes alone, but always in love, and always beloved.

'It is love that makes the moment perfect,' Yasmin said, 'and not just any love, Judith, but a particular kind of love, an immaculate love, we will be lucky if we experience such a love but once in our lives, and after that all else will appear vague and second place.'

Jared's 'endless summer' was on the Gold Coast of Australia back in '96. He spent that summer in the company of a girl called Theresa Adams. His mother had recently passed away and he'd taken a year away from the world to surf and grieve. Theresa had been there at the opposite end of the earth; a freckle faced beachcomber who'd perfectly filled the void in his heart.

In a very conscious way I am reconstructing that one true love, not verbatim, I could never be the exact mirror of the girl Jared loved and lost all those summers ago, but adopting her accent, assuming her name, would certainly stir a few of the memories he might have buried but could never truly forget.

It was years after that summer fling with Theresa that Jared met Samantha, his current wife. Perhaps something in Samantha's nature convinced him to settle down, something that reminded him, however obliquely, of paradise lost, but it occurs to me that no matter how much he loves Samantha, no matter how much he tries to be the perfect husband, she can never be Theresa, never be the woman who first captured his heart.

This fact is the guilty thorn twisting in Jared's side.

In a sense the same thorn is piercing the side of his relationship with Samantha; it is the chink in their armour, the one weakness that can help bring their marriage tumbling down around their ears.

I pay Alan Forrester, my Private Investigator, an obscene sum for the information he regularly supplies me but in my opinion the man is worth every penny, he has the ability to shed light on the most obscure corner of a man's soul, dredging up the juicy little morsels of gossip that any other investigator would have overlooked or thought insignificant. He has taught me that it is always in the details that one can find the key to any man's nature – *always the details.*

## THE WIDOW OF NOTTING HILL

*“To hunt the domesticated male of the species one must first understand that he is a creature of routine and established pattern.”*

**Yasmin Kamisli. (The Witch of Istanbul)**

ISTANBUL 2011

The bedroom spirit, Yorg, is a skilled lover but oddly passive, and when he enters me I imagine it is actually Yasmin slipping into my flesh, that Yorg is merely an echo, *her* will made manifest, and even as he thrusts his cock into me she whispers in his ear, strokes his flesh, guiding him, controlling him, he does nothing without her say so, his cock moving into me at a pace that *she* determines, his libido *hers* to command.

The circumstances are bizarre to say the least; I imagine Yasmin really *has* conjured a spirit out of the bed linen and at that point I simply don't care, I can't see his face as he thrusts down into me and in a strange way this only adds to the excitement, I want to reach up and rip that mask away but I'm afraid of what I might see, it's like being fucked by a ghost, a cipher, and I can imprint any face I want onto those blank features, imagine it is any man, every man, fucking me in the semi dark.

‘Use him, Judith,’ Yasmin urges me, ‘use the filthy domuz, he is nothing but an animal; a male trollop...satisfy yourself...’

I am mesmerised by her words, thrusting my hips up against my anonymous lover, legs clamped around his waist as my fingers work desperately against my clit, and a moment later my body is convulsed by the first of a series of orgasms, each explosion more intense than the last, and still Yasmin's golem continues to thrust into me, his mask melting into a blizzard of different faces, every race and creed, each one leering down at me with mad eyes that bulge obscenely from their sockets.

As the last orgasm shudders through my body Yasmin appears behind her male surrogate and places the curved blade of a knife against his throat.

‘Now you understand the world a little better,’ she tells me and smiles and slits his throat open before I can utter a word.

I scream as my face is splashed with gore, kicking away from Yorg, scrambling back across the bed and tumbling to the ground in my panic, still screaming as I try to wipe the blood from my eyes.

‘Do not fret,’ Yasmin laughs as Yorg's body convulses on the bed, ‘they are ours to use, my dear, they have no other purpose for existing.’

I know she is mad then.

God help me, I am in the company of a lunatic.

LONDON 2013

It is always something of a culture shock when a woman dons a pair of boxing gloves and actually wallops a training bag, not taps it politely, or smacks it gracefully, but actually wallops it with force enough to leave a dent.

I learnt to box soon after I sold my advertising business and I sold my advertising business soon after my return from Istanbul. I was determined to better myself in every way, both physically and mentally, and towards this end I took out membership with a boxing gym

and hired a trainer, and four nights a week he'd teach me how to inflict injury upon another human being.

I was a willing student and a quick study and in only a few short months I was able to stand my ground against male sparring partners twice my weight, a year's practise and I could knock a man off his feet with a single uppercut, providing I could get in under his guard first.

The gym Jared attends has a corner reserved for boxing practise, there's not much equipment on offer, a speedball, a practise bag, and a trunk full of old sweat stained gloves, but that's more than enough if you know what you're doing.

I bring my own gloves, which is always a good idea, and taking up an indifferent stance in front of the bag I start my session with a few light practise jabs. There's a group of young lads nearby and they pause to watch, chatting amongst themselves as I slowly find my range, but they quickly fall silent when I start pelting the bag like a pro, bobbing and weaving as I deliver a flurry of hook shots, straight jabs, one-two combos and vicious cross shots.

The bag is pummelled mercilessly, the force of my blows causing it to jump and snap on the link chain that attaches it to the ceiling, my breathing is light, my shoulders squared, and right now every eye in the gym is on me - female boxers are rare, beautiful female boxers even rarer.

I spend twenty minutes on the bag and by the time I finish I'm covered in a light sheen of sweat, my cleavage glistening as I bend down and scoop my towel up, giving the young lads an eyeful without appearing to mean to.

'Respect!' One lad mutters as I head for the changing rooms.

An hour later I'm showered and changed and sitting in the gym cafeteria and as usual I've timed it to perfection, my coffee arriving at the same time as Jared Anderton. He orders an energy drink at the bar and because the café is virtually empty he saunters across to me.

'Do you mind?' He asks, nodding at the empty chair at my table.

'Not at all,' I tell him.

He sits down. 'You're a pretty good boxer,' he tells me, 'did you grow up in a houseful of boys or something?'

I smile and brush a strand of hair from my eyes. 'Something like that,' I say, and then I shrug, 'actually that's pretty much spot-on, six brothers, one sister, and I guess you could call it survival of the fittest.' My Australian accent is perfect, even down to the particular region it hails from; *Queensland*, I doubt even a real Aussie would be able to tell I was faking it.

Jared laughs. 'That's quite a brood,' he says.

He laughs easily, an out door's kind of laugh, and I imagine his breath smells of mint, will always smell of mint even first thing in the morning when most people's breath smells of damp carpets and stale cigarettes.

*Make him want you.*

'I wish everything could stop,' I say wistfully as I stir another sachet of sugar into my coffee, 'I mean just for a while, every car, every train and jet, all the conveyor belts and escalators of the world, just for a day, and everyone just sort of...hangs out....' I smile self-consciously, 'silly really...kind of a stupid thought.'

'No-no, not stupid,' he laughs incredulously, 'I get that feeling all the time, I'm not sure whether I wish the world would stop, or just me....'

He's admitting something here; could there be a slight blemish on his perfect domestic coffee table?

'What would we do though?' I sigh, 'with all that free time, I mean. I'd love to just do nothing, but it scares the heck out of me, just sitting still for any length of time.'

‘Maybe we’d wind up doing all the things we would have done if we weren’t so busy all the time,’ Jared suggests.

‘Like bake the perfect cake,’ I let my voice drop, ‘or catch the perfect wave?’

‘Catch the perfect wave,’ he says and there’s a soft yearning in his voice, ‘yeah, that would be something.’ He drifts off into a moment’s thought, and then he turns to me. ‘Do you surf?’

‘I used to.’

He nods. ‘So did I.’

‘They say once you’ve got the sea in your blood it never goes away.’

He nods. ‘We’re kindred souls, Theresa,’ he gets up and prepares to leave, ‘you’ve got the sea in your blood as well, you’ll make waves whatever you do.’

And then he’s gone.

I let him go.

I’m in under his skin.

That’s enough for today.

\*

Helen Gibson, the Widow of Notting Hill, has summoned me to her gallery in Knightsbridge, one of many she owns across the city, and I head across town soon after my encounter with Jared, pausing at my Chelsea flat just long enough to change out of my Theresa persona and back into my own.

Helen Gibson is a retired lawyer and a prominent businesswoman and the author of the enormously successful book: *The Widow’s Guide to Good Business Practise*. She is also a member of that fabulously wealthy and obsessively secretive group of witches I first encountered in Istanbul two years previously - the same group Yasmin belongs to, the same group I have since become associated with.

Helen is in her mid-sixties but has the bearing and look of a woman at least two decades younger. She surrounds herself with a retinue of young gay men who keep her endlessly entertained with the bitchy little comments they direct at all and sundry.

‘She looks gorgeous,’ one of Helen’s young men eyes me critically as I cross the gallery towards them.

‘She’ll age in a hurry,’ another says, ‘people like that always do.’

A third young man shakes his head sadly. ‘I knew a girl,’ he says in a mincing French accent, ‘she looked stunning, absolutely, right up until she turned forty, and then, my word, how she aged,’ he snaps his fingers dramatically, ‘I mean *overnight*, darlings, I couldn’t believe my eyes, she was forty but you’d think the poor thing was sixty.’

They close ranks in front of me.

‘Helen is busy,’ one of them says, ‘do you have an appointment, darling.’

‘She’s expecting me,’ I tell him, ‘could you tell her its Judith...Judith Chambers!’

‘It’s ok, boys, let her through,’ a woman calls out from behind them.

The young men move aside grudgingly.

‘She’ll see anyone these days,’ the French one whispers as I pass them.

Helen holds me at arm’s length as she gives me a long appraising look. ‘You’ve put on weight,’ she criticises, ‘or else I’m remembering you incorrectly,’ she forces me into an awkward pirouette and I feel a little like a bullock at a dairy show, ‘you ought to give up smoking,’ she snaps.

‘I did,’ I remind her, ‘two years ago.’

‘Then you ought to start again, something’s not sitting right with you, anyway, glad you could make it, I’m not keeping you from anything, am I?’

‘Not at all, I was planning a quiet evening so no great loss.’

‘You don’t keep in touch, you’re becoming a stranger; did we offend you?’

‘No, sister, whatever gave you that idea?’

‘I don’t know, there’s a cloud hanging over you, Judith, something is obscuring my vision, come,’ she takes me by the hand, ‘let me read your fortune.’

She guides me to a quiet corner of the gallery where we sit on a leather sofa and she continues to chat to me whilst all the while holding my hands in hers, reading my palms with her fingers.

‘What do you think of our resident artist’s work?’ she asks.

I look at the paintings displayed on the gallery walls and shudder. ‘They look like someone vomited over them,’ I tell her, ‘I suppose you’ll say it’s abstract art but really, my God, it’s absolutely vile.’

Helen chuckles as she continues to read my palms. ‘It *is* actually vomit,’ she says, ‘the artist is bulimic, I believe, and he’s made a rather unorthodox study of his own sick, but don’t mention that to anyone, his work is going for an obscene fortune.’

She releases my hands and sighs.

‘What’s wrong?’ I ask her.

‘Beware the red man, Judith, he will be the cause of much misery in your future, and do not pass between eagles, it will lead to sensual ruin...that’s all I can tell you for now, I’m afraid.’

‘I don’t know what any of that means.’

‘Yes, well,’ Helen sniffs, ‘these things aren’t precise, lunar wisdom never is, but sleep on it, my dear, perhaps your dreams will inspire the answer.’

I nod. ‘Thank you, Helen; I’m sorry I haven’t kept in touch....’

She dismisses this with a wave of her hand. ‘You had your reasons, I suppose, I wouldn’t make a big thing of it....’ She smiles and her features instantly soften, ‘you hold a special place in Yasmin’s heart,’ she tells me, ‘she talks about you all the time, you know; she calls you her protégée.’

I sigh: ‘Yasmin certainly taught me a thing or two in her day,’ I admit.

## ISTANBUL 2011

I spend most of the night cowering in Yasmin’s bathroom.

I’m in a blank state of panic most of that time, I’ve just witnessed a man being horribly murdered right in front of me, practically mid-coitus, and it’s blown a hole in my thinking process, nothing makes sense, everything is washed out greys and piss coloured light and the voice in my head keeps saying, ‘*you’re next, Judith, she’s going to come right in here and cut your head off!*’

The bathroom door is bolted but that doesn’t make me feel any safer.

I’m naked and shaking and it’s been over an hour since Yasmin cut Yorg’s throat and I can’t get the image of it out of my head, arterial blood spraying from his neck, the flash of the blade as it sliced through flesh, the look in Yasmin’s eyes as she cut deep, not homicidal, not angry, but tender, almost religious, as though she was bestowing a blessing upon the man even as she murdered him.

God, I can still hear the sound he made as his throat was cut, caught between a sigh and a groan, the same sound a man might make as he orgasms, I’m so scared and I can’t stop shaking, I’m squatting there on the bathroom floor, rocking back and forth, and the blade flashes over and over again in my head and Yasmin laughing all the while, ‘*they are ours to use, my dear,*’ she says, ‘*they have no other purpose for existing.*’

Only after two or three hours have passed do I start thinking it might be a good idea to get out of here, but I am sickened by the thought of actually opening that bathroom door, convinced Yasmin is waiting on the other side, and so I hug my shoulders and rock even

harder and when someone knocks on the door a moment later I'm so wired I actually piss myself in the extremis of my terror.

'Come, Judith,' Yasmin calls softly through the door, 'you asked me to teach you the ways of my kind....'

'I didn't know the ways of your kind included murder!' I howl at her, 'Jesus, Yasmin, you just killed a man, doesn't that bother you?'

'Nature thrives on murder,' she replies, 'everything murders in order to survive, am I any more murderous than the mantis or the scorpion, I sting because it is in my nature....'

'I just want to go home,' I wail, 'please God, just let me go home...I won't tell anyone, I promise, not a word, just let me go....'

'You have seen too much,' Yasmin replies, 'you are committed, I have made my pledge to you, now you must make your pledge to me....'

I stare at the door. 'What do you mean?' I croak.

'I mean you must murder as I have murdered, if you cannot do this, if you cannot commit yourself to this, then I am afraid I cannot permit you to leave my house.'

It takes a long while for her words to sink in. 'You want me to murder someone?' I hiss.

'Tonight, right now, the victim is waiting, if you can find the strength to commit this one act then you will have won the right to live.'

'I can't....' I shake my head fiercely, 'I can't just kill someone...Jesus, Yasmin; you know I can't....'

'Then you must die instead.'

I stare at my hands for a while and then I say, 'give me a few moments to think about it.'

'I will give you exactly five minutes.'

Five minutes later I say, 'you promise to let me go if I do this?'

'I give you my word, Judith.'

I sigh miserably. 'What do I have to do then?' I ask.

'Open the bathroom door and come out.'

It occurs to me that this could be some horrible trick to draw me from safety, but then it occurs to me that I'm not exactly safe, that I have no real choice in the matter, and so I stand up and grab a towel from the towel rack and wrap it around my naked torso and then I unbolt the bathroom door and pull it open.

Yasmin is standing on the other side. She is entirely naked, her breasts and belly splattered with dried blood, a knife in her hand, the same knife she'd used to slit Yorg's throat.

I stare at the cruel curve of the blade.

Yasmin smiles and passes it to me handle first.

'Come, my dear,' she takes my hand and gently pulls me from the bathroom, 'every sacrifice requires a lamb.'

### LONDON 2013

It is an advantage to work in the property market as I do, it means I always have a flat or two lying vacant, waiting to be renovated, or rented out, or simply not selling as quickly as I'd hoped.

One such flat sits in West Hampstead, a modest one-bedroom affair that is ideal for short-term leases. At the moment it is vacant and this perfectly suits my purposes.

In order for Theresa Miller, the character I have created, to fully live and breathe in Jared's mind, she must have a home, I've decided, a refuge filled with mementos of the life she has lived, as well as poignant reminders of the life she would have liked to have lived.

It takes just over a week to refurbish the West Hampstead flat, stripping it down to bare walls and floorboards and then building it up again, filling it with the kind of bric-a-brac a girl like Theresa might have picked up on her carefree journey through life.

I am meticulous in my planning, obsessive in detail, going to great pains to affect the right atmosphere, the lighting, the colour scheme, the furniture, all must be commensurate with Theresa's personality, the paintings are particularly important, I hum and hah for a few days before finally settling on abstract art, wild colours, gushing reds and oceanic blues and endless spirals, all done by an artist called Kimbo who was himself a surfer in earlier days.

It is not enough to create a false persona as I have done, it is not enough to perfect a particular accent, the characters I construct must inhabit their own space, must have their own memories, their own independent sense of destiny – in the several weeks of her existence Theresa becomes a real person, at least as far as Jared is concerned, and it is a pleasurable thing to set her to work picking away at the seams of his resistance.

Jared tells himself he doesn't want an affair; that he just wants a friend, but the gravity that exists between male and female is too great for mere friendship, sooner or later they must come together as they are designed to, sooner or later all opposites must unite.

As I prepare Theresa's flat I continue to play my little cat and mouse game with Jared. We greet each other in the gym, we chat in between sets and afterwards we have coffee and chat some more and it's all becoming rather cosy and nice, I flatter him, make him laugh, I've read the books he's read, I've watched the same films, listened to many of the same records.

The subtext of these conversations suggests Jared is ripe for an affair, that he wants to relive that one endless summer before everything in his life turned stale and predictable – and yet he loves his wife, that much is indisputable, he talks about her freely in the beginning, and then less so as time goes on, but always I sense his devotion to her.

He's not looking for an affair, he's happy, he keeps telling himself this, he keeps telling himself he's happy, glancing down at his wedding band when he thinks I'm not looking, a frown upsetting the symmetry of his brow, his lips tightening for that single unguarded moment.

If I am to own him body and soul I must overcome Jared's devotion to his wife, I must somehow convince him that I am the one he wants, that Samantha Anderton was only ever a stop gap, that I am the one he has been waiting for all these years, a natural continuation of that one summer he can never forget, never let go of, no matter how happy he keeps telling himself he is.

I let him touch me.

I am training my legs tonight and I tell him I need someone to assist me through the last few reps. He positions himself behind me as I hoist the Smith machine barbell up on my shoulders, 40 kilos attached to either end, the maximum I can squat without risking injury.

As I slide down beneath the weight I push my buttocks out in order to maintain a safe posture and Jared is forced to bend over as my cheeks inadvertently come in contact with his crotch, I feel his breath against my neck, hot and sensual, his arms slipping beneath mine as he helps me raise the bar again.

Again we go down and again he helps me back up, the sides of his arms pressed firmly against the outer walls of my bosom, and I know he is becoming affected by the intimacy of this movement. I grunt and hiss and fume and accomplish several more reps than I would have managed on my own and afterwards I thank him as I sit on a bench to recover, my thigh muscles jumping and trembling with the recent exertion.

Jared is red faced and breathing hard. He nods and retreats back to his own exercise but the rest of that evening he keeps glancing at me in the mirror and I know the thoughts squirming around in his head are not of his beloved wife.

*And yet he loves her.*

That much is certain.

‘She was working for UNICEF when I met her,’ he tells me as he walks me to the train station one night, ‘I mean she’s always been into charity, that’s the kind of person Samantha is, always putting other people’s needs first, I was on holiday in South Africa and she was passing through and we just kind of bonded...over a couple of beers and a hot curry, I might add.’

‘Must be nice...you two must have a lot in common,’ I venture.

‘Not really,’ Jared replies, ‘we don’t really have the same tastes, but that doesn’t matter...I mean Samantha pretty much does her own thing, but she lets me do *my* thing and that’s what counts, we respect each other’s space, you know, and I think that’s important in a relationship.’

He sounds almost defensive, as though he’s not so much talking to me as trying to convince himself. ‘Are you hungry?’ I ask him.

‘Famished,’ he says.

‘Want to grab a bite, unless you’re in a hurry.’

‘No, a bite sounds good,’ Jared says, ‘there’s a KFC up the road.’

‘There’s a sandwich bar a little further, they do a mean line in jacket potatoes.’

He laughs. ‘Lead the way,’ he invites me.

Over jacket potatoes and banana smoothies I talk about the home I’m in the process of moving into, I keep my banter light and innocent but by and by I let it slip that I need someone to help me get rid of a rather unwieldy bureau that’s taking up too much space in the living room, and of course Jared, ever the gentleman, offers his services.

‘I couldn’t ask you to do that,’ I protest, ‘I mean it’s no big thing, it’s just getting in the way of my peace of mind, that’s all, you know the way other people’s furniture always leaves this lingering energy, well that’s how I feel, like I can’t settle down until I’ve gotten rid of it,’ I laugh, ‘I’m a bit obsessive that way.’

‘Listen,’ Jared says, ‘it’s no problem, let’s say Sunday if that’s any good, and you can fix lunch if you think I did a fair enough job.’

‘Deal,’ I say and shake his hand. ‘Thanks, Jared, you’re a life saver.’

He smiles and shrugs, pleased with himself, and it’s really that easy, like shooting fish in a barrel, and of course he’s not even thinking about Samantha at that point and when he does start thinking again he can always reassure himself that he’s simply doing a favour for a friend, that he has no ulterior motive for helping me, that it’s all strictly platonic.

And for the time being it perfectly suits my purposes to let him go on thinking that.

## A TWIST OF THE KNIFE

LONDON 2013

I'm sitting in a sky restaurant and I might as well be floating in a Zeppelin for all the attachment I feel to the earth, there's a tremendous view of the capital laid out below me and I can't help thinking that from this vantage point London resembles a vast chess logia with bishops and knights and rooks and queens and an entire population of pawns swarming around their gargantuan feet.

My laptop sits open in front of me and how much like a game of chess this is; each move opposed or supported by every other piece on the board, no action complete until it is viewed as a whole.

'Do you like chess?' I type into my recently activated Facebook account.

There is a delay in the response.

*'I never learnt,'* Samantha types back and adds a sad-faced emoticon to emphasise the point.

'I could teach you sometime,' I offer, 'it's regarded as the game of kings and generals, not a game for women, but that's why I think it essential that a woman learns.'

*'Do you think men and women are so very different?'* Samantha asks.

What a lamb this one is, what naivety.

'I think that fundamentally men and women are the same,' I reply, 'I think that the difference lies in the nuances, the subtleties, for instance a woman is compelled to wear a mask whenever she is out in public and for a man this is inconceivable, this act of applying makeup and removing it, as easy for a woman as the act of breathing or eating.'

*'I suppose makeup is a kind of mask,'* Samantha writes: *'it almost makes it seem as though women are the object and men the observers....'* She ends this comment with another emoticon, this one in lipstick and heavy eyelashes. I find her frivolity a little irritating. I suspect the emoticons are an attempt to make her appear humorous and spontaneous but they simply come across as uninspired.

'And so long as women remain the object,' I type, 'they will never learn to trust their own observations, their own feelings...do you imagine London would have looked the way it does if a woman had designed it? Or Paris for that matter? Or New York?'

*'LOL! God, what a thought? What do you imagine London would have looked like if the architects had all been women?'*

'Green and fertile, with spheres and curves and elegant floral designs and splashes of outrageous colour, and the emphasise would not have been on commerce but rather on community, on connecting rather than producing, on living rather than serving, and that's precisely the problem, we dwell in a world of ying, of too much fire and not enough passion.'

Samantha seems captivated by these words and of course she asks me to elaborate and of course I do just that. I am "bonding" with her, winning her trust one layer at a time and it is a skilful game, one mistake and I will forever be consigned to her list of acquaintances, of not-quite-friends, and I so desperately want to be added to her list of friends, of confidants, of social intimates.

*'Do you write poetry?'* She asks.

'A little, nothing exceptional; why do you ask?'

*'The way you write, the things you say, it's actually quite refreshing, usually words are a means to an end, but you treat them differently, you treat words with respect, I find that kind of refreshing.'*

‘Thank you, Samantha, my father was a writer, he taught me the power of words, I guess.’

*‘You can call me Sam, you know, all my friends do.’*

I’m in. Just like that.

‘Thanks, Sam,’ I type, ‘you can call me Elle.’

Breaking into a person’s confidence is pretty much the same as hacking into any software program, find the right combination of words and all the usual defences melt away. We are friends now. I can call her Sam. She can call me Elle.

The waitress brings me a cappuccino as I sign out of my account and for a long while afterwards I sip coffee and stare out at the London skyline.

\*

Two weeks earlier I’d contacted Jared’s wife via her Facebook account, professing a keen interest in the children’s charity she is currently running part time, I told her my name was Elle and that I wished to make a sizeable donation on behalf of a niece I’d lost to Leukaemia but that I wasn’t sure how to go about it.

Samantha offered condolences for my dead fake relative and hooked up with me on Facebook Messenger to chat further.

‘I’m willing to donate three thousand pounds,’ I told her when we were connected.

There was a protracted silence after this declaration and then Samantha wrote back. ‘God bless you, Elle, that’s the best news I’ve heard all year.’

I sent the money through her PayPal account, three thousand pounds that meant nothing to me and the world to her and after that we spoke almost every night, about frivolous things mostly, the nature of life and fate and art and spirit, the future of fashion and the state of the economy, but every now and again we’d broach the topic of relationships and Samantha would gush endlessly about the man she’d married, unaware that I knew that man quite well, was in the process of getting to know him even better.

In describing Jared, Samantha would use words like “soul mate” and “life partner” and “total commitment” and on more than one occasion I told her how lucky she was, how she needed to hold on to Jared for all she was worth, men like that were rarer than hen’s teeth.

Talking about her relationship gave Samantha the perfect excuse to ask about mine.

‘Are you seeing anyone at the moment?’ She asked.

‘I’m getting to know somebody,’ I wrote back, ‘but I don’t know, we’ll have to see how it goes.’

‘What’s he like?’

I thought about this.

‘He’s a great guy, we have a good time together, but you know how it is?’

‘Well, hang in there, he might be a keeper.’

‘Lol! Yeah, you’ll have to tell me what signs to look out for.’

And all the while I’m conducting this conversation I’m lying semi naked in bed, rubbing myself through a pair of cotton knickers, and it’s such a turn-on, the knowledge that *my* “keeper” and Samantha’s perfect husband are one and the same man.

Irony is a bitch.

After I close the laptop I bring myself to two powerful orgasms in quick succession and then I trot off to the bathroom to prep a bath.

I am terribly pleased with myself.

Everything is going according to plan.

\*

‘Sometimes I think I’m mad,’ I confess to Angelo that Thursday night after we dance and make love to the strains of a lone Spanish guitar, ‘all I want to do is hurt people and I can’t stop, I can’t control myself, I mean I must be mad, right?’

I stroke the wild locks of his hair, his head resting in my lap, and I try to imagine what it must be like, to be like Angelo, so at peace with himself, so perfectly content.

‘You must have been hurt once upon a time,’ he says, ‘that’s the way these things go, endless cycles, until someone finds the strength to break loose.’

‘I can’t find that strength, sometimes I want to, but other times I just want to make the whole world pay.’

‘That’s sad to hear.’

‘Do you think there’s some good in me, Angelo? I can’t be all bad, can I?’

‘No one’s all bad, Judith.’

‘I hated my father for a long time, the way he treated my mother, the way he’d abandon us and then return whenever he pleased, and she’d always take him back, listening to his lies, believing his lies...God, she was weak.’

‘Perhaps it is your mother you hate, not your father.’

I think about this. ‘Perhaps,’ I whisper, ‘they’re both dead, you know, they both pissed off and left me and sometimes I just wish they were still around...that even if one of them was still alive then I wouldn’t have turned out the way I did.’

‘You didn’t turn out so bad, Judith.’

I laugh bitterly. ‘You don’t know what I’m like, Angelo; you don’t know how fucked-up I am.’

‘Is that why you dance?’

I shrug. ‘Nothing seems to help.’

‘Do you want help?’

‘Sometimes, other times I just want to go on hurting people.’

‘My brother was killed in a street fight,’ Angelo says softly, ‘my only sister committed suicide when I was fifteen....’

‘Jesus, I’m sorry, I didn’t know that....’

Angelo shakes his head: ‘the point I’m making is that we all experience hurt; it’s how we deal with it that determines the way our lives turn out.’

‘How did *you* deal with it?’

‘I didn’t try to control the pain, or deny it, I let it sweep me away to some very lonely places, and for a long time it was like a storm raging in my heart, but even the most powerful storm burns itself out in time, and so I danced and loved and laughed and wept, and after a time the storm faded, the pain went away, and I picked up the pieces of my life and carried on and I believe I am stronger because of the pain, not despite it.’

‘I love being with you.’

‘You must love being with yourself even more, that’s the secret to happiness, life is a dance, love the dance and you will love life, and then you will be happy.’

‘Easier said than done.’

‘You deserve to be happy, Judith, everyone deserves to be happy.’

I close my eyes. ‘I only wish I could believe you,’ I tell him.

## ISTANBUL 2011

The young man squats in the middle of the bedroom like a bird crouched on its favourite branch. He is naked, his flesh burnished and dark, his muscles reflecting the light of lanterns that have been secreted in alcoves around the room.

There are red roses everywhere I look, their petals carpeting the ground, smothering the bed, covering every available surface like bright splashes of blood in the aftermath of a massacre, and the scent is cloying and overwhelming.

I feel as though I'm in a dream, Yasmin has to hold me up as time and again my legs threaten to give way beneath me. I lost my towel somewhere between here and the bathroom and I'm naked, just as she is naked, but somehow this is the least extraordinary part of the evening.

Supple shadows bend around the light; a man sits cross-legged in one corner of the room. He is blindfolded and in his arms he holds a lute-like instrument called a bağlama that he gently plucks on with his fingers, producing a soft soulful sound not dissimilar to the chords of a Spanish guitar. The sound vibrates pleasantly, almost seductively, around the room, and Yasmin's hips sway gently in time to the rhythm.

She laughs.

'To kill is the easy part,' she tells me, 'living with it afterwards is considerably more difficult.'

'Listen, Yasmin,' I plead with her, 'I don't want to murder anyone...please don't make me do this...'

She presses against me, her hips still swaying, her belly flat against mine, 'I will not make you do anything,' she whispers in my ear, 'the choice must be yours.'

An old Turkish woman sits in another corner of the room, embroidering a cushion that she has placed in her lap, her fingers moving supply as they thread coloured wool into the fabric. She cackles inanely to herself as she stares off into the shadows and I realise she is blind; her pale eyes gazing inwards, warmed only by the memory of light.

'Drink this,' Yasmin raises a metal goblet to my lips and instinctively I twist my face away.

'What is it?' I demand.

'Witch's brew,' Yasmin laughs, 'what did you expect.'

Again she presses the cup against my lips. 'Drink,' she commands me, 'or forfeit the evening.'

The contents of the goblet tastes absolutely vile, like stewed onions with a hot bitter aftertaste, I gag but manage to gulp most of it down and keep it down and after a while it feels as though a fire has been lit in my belly, as though the lights in the room are transforming into the sinuous coils of an enormous gilded serpent, the roses becoming hot sensuous mouths, the walls trembling with invisible obscenities.

I stumble and almost fall; clutching the knife Yasmin gave me to my breasts as I stare wildly around me at these wondrous things.

'What's happening to me?' I hiss, 'what have you done to me?'

'The Yang is beginning to flow,' Yasmin's voice echoes all around me, 'the goddess is rising, go with it, Judith; do not fight it!'

I move the knife through the air and it becomes a long comma of silver, the object and its motion merging into a single unified thing, and when I hold the knife up I see ancient languages inscribed on its surface, and behind these tiny hieroglyphs I see my own reflection, my eyes like the eyes of a lunatic.

'*You must be willing to do this thing,*' Yasmin's voice booms in my head.

'I can't...'

'*Then you must be willing to die, Judith, I'm afraid I can't offer you a third choice!*'

In the centre of the room the young boy is singing softly to himself, a dirge, his voice lyrical and sweet, he seems oblivious to our presence, perhaps he too has been drugged; perhaps he is a simpleton, perhaps he simply doesn't care.

I must kill this boy in order to save my own life.

The inscriptions on the blade are a contract that must be signed in blood, either my blood or the blood of the boys’.

I stare down at him as I turn the blade over in my hands.

Sweat glistens between his shoulder blades; his flesh has been perfumed, his hair oiled and midnight black, he looks so young, so innocent, and the blade seems to grow impatient in my hands, hungry to find his throat, to slice through that one vital artery, to drink his life blood.

I can’t kill another human being, not even to save my own pathetic life; I turn to Yasmin, my arms held out, signalling defeat.

‘I can’t,’ I whisper, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Look again, Judith,’ Yasmin says, ‘do you recognise him?’

I frown and turn back to the boy.

He has changed.

In the scant moment I glanced away the boy has become an old man, his skin mottled and sagging, his scalp shining through the few greying strands that cling to it, and even in that scant light I recognise the face of my dead father.

I drop the knife.

‘What’s going on?’ I moan, ‘what have you done to me....’

‘He never wanted you,’ Yasmin whispers, ‘he wanted a boy, not some worthless simpering female, why do you think he abandoned you....’

‘This isn’t real,’ I cry out, ‘none of this is real!’

‘Look at him,’ Yasmin hisses, ‘he is the cause of your black rage, the source of your red pain; make him suffer, Judith, the way he made you suffer....’

I stare down at the old man and I whisper, ‘daddy...!’

Yasmin takes me by the shoulders and shakes me until my teeth rattle. ‘Kill him,’ Judith,’ she howls, ‘the way he killed your mother, the way he killed your spirit, do this thing, I demand it!’

‘He’s...I can’t...I’m not....’

‘Don’t think, *act*, the time for thinking is past, this will either be the birth or death of you.’

‘My father....’

‘A pig, all men are pigs, focus your rage, wield your fury like a blade, cut deep, Judith, open his throat, you must wound him in order to heal yourself.’

As she speaks I feel the old black rage enveloping me, that nameless fury that has haunted me for as long as I can remember, I clasp the knife, staring down at the old man and every second I stare at him the rage grows, until it is a howling wind, a forest fire, and the knife shines in my hands like a hot crescent moon.

Blood red roses drip gore from every petal, the old woman cackling as the strains of the bağlama become ugly and discordant and everything is swelling on the cusp of this impossible moment.

‘You can end this!’

*Only you!*

I approach my father, trembling with rage, I can hear myself screaming down at him but I have no idea what I am saying, it is as though other voices are speaking through me, as though I am filled with a thousand furious demons all demanding that I act now, without delay.

I’m barely aware of what I’m doing when I place the knife against my father’s throat, and at the last possible moment he raises his head and stares at me out of sunken yellow eyes

‘Judith!’ he whispers.

Only now does he recognise me.

I draw the knife across his throat as hard as I can, grasping his hair and cutting deep, with every ounce of strength and rage I possess.

The blood is a fine mist that fills the room, the body convulsing beneath me, and I am screaming with hatred and fear as I let it go of him and stumble backwards. His body flops forward, still jerking, a strangled groan rising from him as he attempts to stem the flow of blood, and then his struggles grow weaker and after a while he stops struggling altogether and after that he lies perfectly still.

And just like that the black rage is snuffed out.

Afterwards I am hysterical, Yasmin holding me to her bosom, soothing me, stroking me: 'there-there, child,' she whispers, 'you did what you had to do, you did the right thing....'

### LONDON 2013

I make meticulous preparation for the seduction of Jared Anderton, beloved husband of Samantha, and each day that passes the anticipation grows more acute, my hunger ever keener.

'I have a confession to make,' I type into my computer, 'the man I'm seeing is married.'

After a brief delay Samantha responds: *'I had a feeling he was, you sounded pretty put out when you mentioned him the other night.'*

'It wasn't planned,' I assure her, 'just something that happened, I always thought I'd be able to walk away from a situation like this, no problem, but now that I'm actually in a situation like this it's really not that simple.'

*'You poor dear, he didn't tell you he was married?'*

'Not until too late, but I suppose some part of me must have already known.'

*'Does he still love his wife?'*

'I think so, but then why is he with me if he loves her so much?'

*'Good question, Elle, but don't you think you should back off before things go too far, I mean you're the one who's going to wind up getting hurt.'*

'I want to, but I can't, I keep telling myself this is so wrong, but it's like I'm on a roller coaster ride and I can't get off.'

*'I guess feelings are feelings, you can't apply logic to them, personally I blame the man, it's not like you're putting a gun to his head.'*

'Exactly, but then it's not like he's putting a gun to my head either, I can't help thinking about his wife, what it must be like for her.'

*'She must suspect something, I mean how happy can a marriage be if he's off with you? I think he'd still have had an affair whether it was with you or someone else...'*

'You don't think I pushed him into it?'

*'Not at all, I read somewhere that a certain type of man will have an affair no matter what, it's just in their nature.'*

'He's coming around this weekend... what do you think I should do?'

*'Go with your heart, Elle, do whatever feels right.'*

\*

Do whatever feels right.

It is so comforting to receive a wife's permission to shag her own husband, however unwittingly that permission is given, I feel a delicious shiver of anticipation as I close the laptop, the jaws of the trap are primed; now all that remains is for Jared, my darling little fish, to come swimming in.

\*

He arrives a little after one o'clock Sunday afternoon and I greet him at the door of the tiny West Hampstead flat with a jaunty, 'hey, Jared, thanks for coming.'

'No problem,' Jared says as he steps into my flat. 'Wow, nice place you've got here,' he looks around appreciatively, 'real homely....'

I have invested no small amount of effort in acquiring this "homely" effect, the front door leads directly into the living room which I've had painted stonewash white to compliment the antique wooden furniture, the cushions and wall hangings are composed of desert blues and sunset orange and there's a large dharmacakra, a Buddhist wheel of life, hanging over the old fire place that is easily mistaken for the helm wheel of a sailing vessel.

'That's the bureau,' I tell him, pointing to the ghastly hulk lurking in one corner of the room.

'You're right,' he says, 'it doesn't really go with the rest of the place.'

'It's pretty heavy,' I caution him.

Jared flexes a bicep, 'I work out,' he laughs, 'just about all I'm good for, shifting bureaus.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself,' I scold him, 'you're probably just as good at lugging sofas.'

We laugh and then Jared gets to work and I go to the kitchen to prepare lunch. I hear him in the other room, straining and heaving and muttering as he manoeuvres the unwieldy bureau across the floor. By the time I go in to check on him he's already shifted the bureau to the front door where he stands puzzling over his next move.

'Do you need any help?' I ask him.

'Nah!' He breathes, 'it's mostly just common sense from here on.'

I had the bureau assembled in the living room four days ago so I know it won't be an easy task to get it out through the front door but Jared manages it in less time than I would have thought possible.

'Well done,' I pat him on the back when he returns from the roadside skip I had delivered the previous day.

'Awkward cuss, wasn't it?' Jared breathes, 'I didn't even know people still used bureaus, I mean they have to be the ugliest items of furniture in the world.'

I spread my arms in the living room and take a deep, appreciative breath, 'God, you can just feel how much the energy has lifted in here,' I sigh, 'can you feel the difference?'

'Yeah,' Jared nods and smiles, 'it's certainly taken a load off the place.'

We sit on cushions and eat lunch off a low table; samosas and spring rolls and a sparkling white wine, and the flat is intimate, a snug fit for two people providing they are the right two people, it is too small for a family, but for lovers it is exactly the right size.

'You ever surf the northern beaches?' Jared asks as he eats.

I've conducted a little research into the subject of surfing, anticipating that at some point Jared might broach the subject. 'Dee Why was my favourite,' I reply, 'I used to go up there most weekends, sometimes I'd surf and some days I'd just sit on the beach and paint....'

'What did you paint?'

'The sea, what else,' I laugh, 'I'd imagine the waves were big blue blankets coming to tuck me in, and sometimes the sun would catch the crest of a wave and it would look so majestic, that was the moment I was always trying to capture, the way the sun would sparkle off all that water, but I was never much of a painter and the moment never lasted long.'

'I met a girl on Dee Why Beach,' Jared says, 'this was long ago, around the mid-nineties, she was called Theresa as well, she used to paint....' He shakes his head, 'it's weird

how much you remind me of her...I mean you don't look anything like her but the two of you could have been kindred spirits.'

'Did you have a thing with her?' I ask.

'More than just a thing,' he says softly, 'it was like we were...I don't know...meant to be or something, at least that's what I thought at the time.'

'Only you *weren't* meant to be?'

He sighs. 'No...she died....'

I act shocked: 'How?' I ask.

'Rip tide got her, pulled her right out to sea,' he shrugs, 'they never found the body, just disappeared, like the world opened up and swallowed her....'

'I'm so sorry, Jared,' my voice has become husky with emotion.

'I never surfed again after that,' Jared says, 'it took the wind right out of my sails, you could say.'

'God, that's terrible.' I reach out and touch his arm. My acting is impeccable, not for a second does Jared suspect that I am anyone other than the person I claim to be.

'Well, at least we spent that one summer together,' he says, 'that's something I get to hold onto.'

'One summer,' I whisper.

'Some people don't even get that.'

We speak of other things, trivial things; the kinds of things that people talk about when they're really talking about something quite different, I put some music on and we finish our wine and little by little we draw closer and the conversation grows more intimate and then Jared slips his arm around me and after that we kiss, hesitantly at first, and then with increasing passion.

\*

The poets would say we make love but in my experience love rarely has anything to do with it, Jared is in desperate pursuit of that one golden summer, in his mind he is making love to that other Theresa and it is long ago, a time before time, a place outside of ordinary experience.

His moans are indistinguishable from grief, his body shuddering each time I touch him, each time I kiss him, and his eyes glisten with unshed tears when he slips into me, hesitating at the very last instant, and I grab his shoulders and thrust my hips upwards and the moment of entry is trivial, fleeting, but so many things change, so many illusions are shattered, it will never be the same between Jared and Samantha after this, their marriage is effectively over in all but name.

Jared crouches over me on all fours, his back humped, his muscles trembling with suppressed tension, a wound has opened inside him and his anguish is released in one tremulous breath, he groans like an animal, and then slowly he begins to move his cock inside me, his hips making small circular motions as he works himself deeper.

'God....' I breathe.

He shakes his head furiously, as though still in denial, but his hips are moving with increasing urgency and my muscles tighten around him, holding him inside for a beat, and then releasing him again, and each time I do this he gasps and whimpers.

'Open your eyes,' I tell him, 'look at me.'

He opens his eyes and stares down into mine, at the same time a great shudder trembles through his flesh; an awareness enters his eyes, an understanding that all is lost, that he can't take back this moment even if he wanted to.

'Theresa....' He whispers.

'I'm here,' I mutter, but I know he's not talking to me; he's talking to a ghost, a woman he loved and lost a long time ago.

'What are we doing?' He moans.

'Go with your heart, Jared,' I tell him, deliberately echoing Samantha's earlier advice to me, 'do whatever feels right.'

\*

We move to the bedroom and he kisses every inch of my forbidden flesh, his tongue sliding over my swollen nipples, my belly, his mouth pressed against my burning centre, and I groan aloud and grasp his head in my hands, holding him against me as I climax against his lips, and I cannot describe the feeling of power that fills me when I orgasm, the complete sense of control, it is as though Jared is just another limb, the Ying to my Yang, and in that moment I feel like a vampire feeding on the life force of its victim, I am feeding on Jared, I am drinking his life-force, and the more powerful I get the weaker and more insignificant he becomes.

I am thinking of Samantha when I orgasm.

God, I wish she were here, I wish she could see her perfect husband with his mouth clamped between my legs and his fingers massaging my clit, I'd give away half my fortune just to see the look on her face.

I straddle him after that and ride him with short, controlled jerks of my hips, I take my time, relishing each moment he is inside me, relishing the feel of his hands on my arse cheeks, the way he gently chews on my nipples, his head pressed between my breasts, sweat drenched, hard breathing, our moans taking on a kind of musical harmony.

When I sense he is almost there I climb off him and gently massage his balls as I draw his cock into my mouth and a short while later he begins to convulse and tremble, his hands banging down repeatedly on the bed, like a wrestler frantically signalling submission, and then he cries out in passion as he empties himself into my mouth.

\*

Afterwards, lying in my arms, he says, 'I'm tired of playing it safe, playing Mr Husband because everyone expects it of you, everyone holds you up as some shining example of a great marriage when the truth is you're dying inside, you're being smothered by good intentions, good people, good-fucking-people, and not one of them could take a risk if a risk came up and bit them on the arse....'

'But you love Samantha?' I ask as I stroke his chest.

'I don't know that you'd call it love,' Jared sighs, 'I don't know what you'd call it – that's the thing about marriage, it's like an old pair of slippers, comfortable, well worn, but not... not exactly exciting, you know, not exactly...anything.'

'So why don't you leave her.'

He shakes his head. 'I don't know, I've never really thought about it....'

'You just assumed you were happy.'

'Yeah, natural assumption to make, and then along comes someone like you.'

'At least you know.'

He takes me in his arms again. 'At least I know,' he says as he kisses me.

\*

After he's gone, after I've showered and changed, I settle on the sofa and flip my laptop open.

Samantha has left a message for me:

*Did he have his wicked way with you? ;-)*

I contemplate this for a time and then I send a return message:

*'Yes, he was pretty much insatiable.'*

After that I close the laptop and switch the TV on.

The TV is not tuned to any channel that Ofcom would approve of. I've hidden a number of high tech security cameras around the house and I spend the next hour watching my performance with Jared from the moment he arrived at the flat until the moment he left.

I'm extremely happy with the results.

I extract the incriminating DVD from its hard drive and insert it into my computer and then I set about the tedious process of editing the three hour footage down to a two minute film, selecting the juiciest and most compromising scenes, the grand highlights of our afternoon together, readying it for Samantha's end-of-term-report.

\*

## THE DEATH OF LOVE

ISTANBUL 2011

I sit with Yasmin on a small patio overlooking the west facing gardens of her villa. It is early morning and a peacock lets out a haunted cry as it struts across the mist-shrouded lawn.

I've murdered a human being, my hands are still trembling, my head filled with the dire implications of last night's act. A single word from Yasmin and I could conceivably spend the rest of my life in a Turkish prison, she is wealthy and well-connected in this city, I am a no one, a tourist, a foreigner, no one will vouch for me, no one will come to my rescue.

Yasmin looks glorious in a gown of deep purple velvet, her hair tied back into a ponytail. 'You must be famished,' she indicates the food spread on the table between us. 'This is sucuklu yumurta, dried sausages made of ground beef with garlic, red peppers, cumin and sumac, very spicy, but absolutely delicious.'

I watch her eat. 'I killed someone,' I say dully.

'But you enjoyed it....' Yasmin winks at me.

'No...I thought...Jesus, I thought I was killing my father, I thought I was cutting the old bastard's throat, I didn't know I hated him so much until last night....'

'Tut-tut, my dear, we hide such ugly truths from ourselves.'

'You drugged me.'

'I provided you with a little chemical incentive, yes.'

'Why?'

'Because last night was your initiation into a higher order of existence, Judith, you must understand that there are only predators and prey upon this earth, nobody is permitted to sit on the fence.'

I close my eyes but the moment I do so images instantly begin to pulse in my brain, red blood, the flash of steel...I quickly open my eyes again.

'The person I killed...the boy...how old was he?' I ask.

'Nineteen.'

'So young?'

'Would it have made things any easier if he were older?'

I shudder with the awful memory of it. 'Oh, God...what have I done?'

Yasmin lowers her voice as she leans towards me. 'Listen to me, Judith,' she says, 'you came here of your own free will, you came here because you wanted what you imagined I possessed, you wanted power over your own fate, power over the fate of others, an end to the rage that has consumed you since childhood, and you rage because you imagine you are helpless, you suffer because you imagine you are weak. I showed you that you are not weak, I showed you how to tap into hidden reservoirs of strength, last night you murdered the past and so this morning you are free to embrace the future. Is that so terrible?'

I stare blankly at her. 'What future, Yasmin?'

'Admit you enjoyed it.'

'I can't live with it on my conscience, I killed a human being, *you* killed a human being, we're a couple of fucking murderers and you're having breakfast like it's just another day.'

Yasmin shrugs. 'It *is* just another day.'

I stand up

'I can't stay,' I tell her.

'I'm saddened to hear that.'

‘Are you going to stop me?’

Yasmin smiles as she resumes her breakfast. ‘You’re not a prisoner here, Judith,’ she says, ‘you are a guest – you will always be an honoured guest in this house.’

I stare down at her. ‘Goodbye, Yasmin,’ I tell her.

‘Goodbye, Judith,’ Yasmin replies, ‘young Bakir will see you to the door.’ She claps her hands and a boy detaches himself from the scented shadows. She speaks to him in Turkish and he nods and smiles and motions me to follow him.

Before I depart, Yasmin says, ‘the world is a spiral staircase, Judith, we are either ascending or descending but we are never still.’

I follow the boy, Bakir, through the cool passages of the house.

Something about Bakir strikes me as oddly familiar; it is not until we are at the front door that I finally recognise him.

I stare hard at him, trying to imagine him naked, crouched like a bird, his hair heavily oiled and drawn back from his face.

‘Didn’t I murder you last night?’ I ask him.

Bakir smiles and it’s obvious he doesn’t understand a word I’m saying to him.

I grasp him by the shoulders and stare fixedly into his eyes. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be dead?’ I demand.

Bakir’s smile becomes a grin but he shakes his head to indicate he has no idea what I’m saying to him.

I mime the action of placing a knife against my throat and slashing sideways. ‘Dead,’ I point at Bakir, ‘*you!*’

Bakir shakes his head. ‘No me,’ he says in torturous English.

‘Yes, bloody *you!*’ I hiss, ‘God damn it, I killed you last night....’ My voice is rising steadily and I might have started pummelling him if Yasmin hadn’t called out at that moment.

‘Now perhaps you understand,’ she says.

I turn to see her approaching along the passage.

‘You made me think I killed him,’ I snarl at her, ‘what kind of sick mind does a thing like that?’

‘Illusion, Judith,’ Yasmin replies, ‘all of it illusion, we are women and so our strength lies in misdirection, the ability to make a person believe exactly what we wish them to believe, to act in exactly the manner we wish them to act.’

‘And the other one, Yorg, the one *you* killed; I suppose he’s not dead either.’

‘Good gracious no,’ Yasmin laughs, ‘Yorg is a gardener and a particularly skilled one at that, his death would be of great disadvantage to me.’ She shrugs and smiles, ‘why murder a man when you can simply steal his soul?’ She asks.

I am relieved despite my anger and resentment, I don’t have to carry the burden of guilt around with me; I’m not a murderer after all. Abruptly I start laughing, I can’t help myself; the moment feels crazy and off kilter and suddenly the world seems a place of infinite deceptions and endless possibilities.

Bakir gazes at me with soft brown eyes and then he starts laughing as well, and after a while Yasmin joins us.

‘I have much to teach you,’ Yasmin says when the moment has passed.

‘I’d like to learn,’ I tell her.

## LONDON 2013

I have chosen the place of ambush carefully.

Café Oceana on Market Street is a fashionable little place that serves some of the finest coffee in London. I’m parked opposite the café, watching through the long-range viewfinder of a video camera Alan has lent me for the occasion.

Earlier in the day I'd asked Samantha to meet me at the café for lunch, reserving the table by the window so I would have an uninterrupted view from across the street.

Samantha arrives right on time and I watch as the waiter takes her to the table and seats her and snaps out his notebook as she orders something, probably a coffee, looking slowly around the café as she does so.

I'd chosen the café for its décor.

The Oceana is a beach themed café with a laidback atmosphere and comfortable mismatched furniture, the walls are adorned with brightly painted surfboards and huge conch shells and stuffed swordfish and over in one corner there's a large bookcase that displays a collection of old World War II adventure books.

On the wall just across from where Samantha sits a large plasma screen is currently playing a montage of surfing's finest moments.

I study Samantha through the viewfinder, recording every detail, every facial twitch, for future viewing pleasure. Samantha is a petite girl in her early thirties; she wears little or no makeup and her blond hair contrasts strongly with a darker growth around the roots that suggests she hasn't visited the hairdresser in some time. She wears a cotton dress with floral print, a pair of indigenous bangles adorning one wrist, and she has a friendly, unassuming manner about her that some men might find refreshing.

I wonder what she looks like naked, pressed beneath Jared's sweating body. I wonder what she looks like when she has an orgasm, what expression she wears, does she cry out, bite her lip, or bury her face in his chest.

She looks like a lip biter; she looks like the kind of person who holds it all in.

My laptop lies open on the passenger seat and I turn to it and quickly tap out a message to Samantha.

*'I'm running a bit late, be there in 5.'*

Samantha gets the message a couple of seconds later. I watch as she takes her phone out of her bag and stares at the screen and then she smiles and types something into the phone.

A moment later my computer receives the message.

Samantha has written: *'Ok, shall I order you something?'*

*'I'll just have a coffee,'* I type back.

Samantha settles back and watches the plasma screen as she waits for her own coffee to arrive, oblivious to the world around her, so certain of her place in it.

I delight in every last detail.

\*

Jared arrives at the Café Oceana soon after, responding to a message I sent him last night. A waiter brings him over to the table I reserved and there's confusion on his face when he sees Samantha sitting there. He looks as though he's going to try and sneak out without being noticed but then Samantha happens to glance up and her eyes go round with shock when she spots Jared.

She grins and motions him to join her and he does so, his movements stiff and reluctant, the smile on his face so fake I'm surprised Samantha falls for it. But she senses nothing as he sits opposite her and they exchange pleasantries, I'm not a lip reader but it's fairly obvious Samantha is asking him what he's doing there, Jared responding that he was just in the area, or something equally asinine, and now he's asking her what *she's* doing there and it is at this moment that I turn to my computer and send across the little film I've put together.

Across the road Samantha's phone rings and she picks it up and I watch intently, camera trained on the café window, as she stares down at the screen and at first she frowns,

not certain of what she is seeing, and then her face becomes as rigid as mortuary stone, and the colour literally drains from it.

Jared notices nothing; he's staring around the café, probably looking for me, hoping to signal me the moment I turn up, to warn me to back off....

I smile. He still hasn't figured out that Samantha's presence here isn't just some monstrous coincidence.

Samantha has stopped watching the film I sent to her phone, now she's staring at Jared and there's a stillness about her that wasn't there before, her shoulders are hunched, her lower jaw jutting out, her hands closing into fists and then relaxing again as though she's contemplating taking a swing at her husband's head.

She says something to Jared and when he turns to her she places the phone on the table and slowly pushes it across to him. He picks it up, something in his posture suggests he has some inkling of what is wrong, even before he lowers his eyes to the screen and watches the video I've sent through.

On the plasma screen behind them a young surfer is riding inside the barrel of an enormous breaking wave, his arms held out to help stabilise his body. It seems the perfect image to accompany this particular scene.

Jared sits there, frozen, immobilized, staring down at the phone as though he doesn't dare look anywhere else, and Samantha is studying him intently as though he has become a perfect stranger, his every action a mystery to her.

Finally Jared switches the phone off and places it back on the table.

No word passes between husband and wife.

Jared stares down at the table.

Samantha continues to stare at Jared.

And then to my utter surprise and disdain Jared begins to sob, his shoulders buckling as his head drops and his hands clasp his face, ah, what a perfectly delectable moment, the death of love, the end of illusion.

At that exact same moment the young surfer is flipped end over end by the wave he is riding, his lithe body vanishing into the surf and water as his surfboard spins end over end.

Samantha stands up and her lips move to form three words.

I've re-played this moment endlessly, studying Samantha's lips in close-up, and I believe the words she uttered were: *'You fucking bastard!'*

After that she turns and storms out of the café.

Jared continues to sit at the tab, continues to sob, and I feel formidable in that moment, like a celestial being with the power to dispense happiness or ruin.

I continue to record for a few seconds longer and then I switch the camera off and flip my computer closed, and turning on the car engine I drive slowly away.

\*

Jared calls me for five days in a row.

It is the fifth day since the break-up of his marriage and I am standing on the banks of the Bosphorus when I finally decide to answer him.

He calls me on Theresa's phone and I answer in Theresa's voice.

'Theresa!' he gasps, 'why did you do it... what the fuck did you do that for?'

'Because I could,' I reply softly.

'You ruined my marriage,' he sobs, 'what kind of monster are you, for Christ's sake? You recorded us... who the fuck does that?'

'Us?'

'You and me... the two of us...'

'There is no "us", Jared, no "you and me", there never was.'

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

I drop the Australian accent at that point, reverting to my native Home Counties accent. ‘Theresa was a character I played,’ I tell him, ‘I’m no more Australian than you are, Jared.’

There is a considerable period of silence following this announcement and finally Jared croaks, ‘who the hell are you?’

‘Someone I trust you’ll never forget.’

‘You stole my marriage.’

‘No, I believe you handed your marriage to me on a platter.’

‘You’re a fucking bitch, Theresa.’

‘I’m not Theresa, but I’ll pass the compliment on.’

‘Well whoever the fuck you are, you’re psychotic, do you know that?’

I sigh. ‘Goodbye, Jared, I really hope you find what you’re looking for.’

‘Wait a minute, don’t...’

I hang up and switch the phone off and after that I take the pin card out and toss it into the Bosphorus.

A voice behind me says: ‘Only very few of us would understand your actions, Judith.’

I smile as I turn around.

Yasmin looks absolutely dazzling in the evening light. She takes me by the arm and gently leads me towards a waiting car, ‘come,’ she says, ‘there are some people I would like you to meet.’

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

**“RETURN OF THE BITCH!”**

COMING SOON