

TWO BIRDS TRAPPED IN RED LINES



Ayla Dirdam



Ayla Dirdam is a teenage girl who was born in Catalonia in 2005. She is being educated in a high school in her hometown and preparing to attend college. Because of the influence of reading in her family, she was attracted by books and fiction worlds from a young age.

She has just recently begun writing stories, with *Two Birds Trapped in Red Lines* being her first and only short story, but she hopes to write more in the future. She has always enjoyed writing and reading, and a school project was the one who inspired this short story. Since a very young age, she has considered herself a feminist, this being the reason for writing this plot and spreading awareness of what women have to go through during the 21st century.

Chapter 1

I still remember the first time I smelt the comforting streets of Florence. I was probably seven years old when I first came here with my family on vacation. It feels like nothing's changed. Everything looks the same. I am sitting in a coffee shop drinking my cold latte, observing the people walking by and taking photos of the city and their families. I enjoy photographing strangers and imagining their stories based solely on their appearance. I like seeing people and imagining that they do not have struggles when they get back home, just like me. This is one of the reasons I like traveling by myself far away from home. It makes me forget about what is going on in my life and create a new me that no one is going to judge because nobody knows me here. At least this is what I'd like to believe. I close my eyes and start to remember how I feel every time I come to this place. I lied when I wrote that nothing had changed. There is something that has changed, but it is not the monuments; it is not the way they prepare the coffee; not the people who sit and draw the views; not the foodie smell when you walk past the restaurants; and surely not the art inside the museums. It is me that changes. Every time I set foot in this city, something in me has changed, whether it is my clothing style, my food preferences, the way I do my makeup, or the people I choose to be around. This time, I presume it is my mindset and how I have changed as a person. I see things differently now than I did years ago. The person sitting here this year in this little coffee shop on this bright day of summer is much more mature than the one that came here two years ago, to this same

table.

It is kind of crazy how a situation can completely change who you are and how you perceive things. Things that I didn't use to merely distinguish, I can see them clearly now. Sincerely I don't genuinely believe I have changed that much, physically. Once I went through puberty and got my period for the first time, my body has looked the same. I haven't remarkably changed my clothing style and neither have I modified my hair drastically. Maybe when I was little, when my mum cut my bangs, but I think that was it. What I really want to see is how much I've changed mentally. I wish I could take pictures of my head every day since I was born and compare them.

I was walking down the principal streets of Florence, and I found myself facing the Galleria degli Uffizi. It was right there, in front of me. I started questioning if I should enter or not, glancing keenly at the paintings for the umpteenth time. People were walking past behind me, time was running out and I, however, hadn't decided to either enter that building or not. It was a simple decision, but I couldn't make it.

After ten minutes of standing in the middle of people's paths, I decided to get in and purchase a ticket. I approached the principal entrance and walked in confidently. 'Once I am in, there's no way back', I said to myself. There I was, among the crowd. Families taking pictures of the paintings, sneaking up on the guards, kids being bored and telling their parents that they dearly want to go home, people looking at the paintings, mysteriously pretending they know anything about art and this kind of stuff. It is very entertaining for me to go to these kinds of places where there is such a considerable variety of strangers in one place. Everybody has a different story to tell. Thousands and thousands of experiences and memories. Each is

very different from the others. I found myself walking through the halls of the museum. I wasn't paying much attention to the paintings. I couldn't stop thinking about the last time I came here. I wore the exact same outfit I am wearing right now. I didn't stand out from the rest; it was quite simple. My friend's short white jeans, a basic pink tank top that showed my belly button, an oversized black zip-up hoodie, and a tote bag to store my belongings somewhere.. I still paint my nails black and wear lots of accessories; necklaces, rings, caps, and sunglasses since it is summer. Everything looks exactly the same, or at least it feels the same, except for the fact that he isn't here.

He is not sitting in one of those comfortable somewhat coaches in each exhibit room with a ruby red notebook taking notes and drawing what he was looking at. If I remember correctly, he was gathering the Birth of Venus. He was wearing a pale shirt with no sleeves and slate gray cargo pants with white sneakers. He had messy blonde hair and was of average size. I could barely see his eyes. He wore accessories, just like I did; rings, necklaces, and bracelets. He was listening to music, and I could assume, because he was wearing earphones. Something about him was different from the rest of the people there. I didn't know what made me so interested in him. He was unbothered by other people. No one could distract him from his notebook. That stupid little red notebook. It was as if he was the only one in that room. I stood there, in the middle of that room, looking at him for about eight minutes. He trapped me, unconsciously. I was nothing but trying to figure out what was so interesting about him that remained me there, still, looking at him like a fool. I dearly wanted him to raise his sight from that notebook, but he didn't. What was he noting? What was he sketching? I had nothing

else in my mind but that foolish notebook.

I started biting my nails and I started giving him a detestable look because it started to piss me off that he only came to the museum to sit and take notes. Why? Couldn't he do that at home? Why here? Why this painting? Since I didn't have the courage enough to ask him all these questions, I went to the public toilets. I went straight to the sink to clean my hands and refresh my face. I looked at myself in the mirror for five minutes. My hair looked messy and my eyebags were still present. You could see my freckles were pretty clear all over my face since I was not wearing makeup. I looked really tired. I got out of the bathroom and impulsively decided to leave the building. I don't know what effect that boy had on me that day that I couldn't take him out of my head all day. I know it sounds stupid and you may be thinking that he was just a normal guy, that I shouldn't care that much. But he wasn't. I realized that the following day.

Chapter 2

I was sitting in a coffee shop when I spotted a book laying on a table. I decided to take a seat. I opened the book and noticed some marked phrases, so I decided to read some of them.

“Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot”

I think about this quote almost every day. It was the quote that altered everything. I finished reading that one statement and observed someone sitting in the chair next to me. When I looked up, I didn’t identify him until I stared at him for a few seconds. Him. It was the man from the museum. What was he doing here and why did he sit next to me?

‘Do you enjoy Virginia Woolf’s work?’, he asked me. I didn’t know what he was talking about until he pointed at the book. Because I couldn’t think of anything to say, he proceeded to speak about her for over half an hour. We spent the whole evening talking about books and artists until we decided to go for a walk.

I can’t put into words how we ended up spending all of our holidays in Florence together. I don’t even know myself personally. But we did. I recall going to the same coffee shop every morning, the one I mentioned previously. After that, we’d wander around Florence’s streets, finally ending up at a modest restaurant for lunch, eating spaghetti and ice cream for dessert.

We enjoyed going to museums in the afternoon, even if we had already been to the same one. At night, we loved to travel to a spot called Piazzale Michelangelo, which was located on a hill and had the most amazing view of the city, which was blazing. The stars had never appeared so close. I had the impression that I could grab them, one by one. It was beautiful. After spending so much time with him, I had the sensation that he had always been there. If I recall correctly, it was odd in the most amazing manner. It seemed like I was in a fairytale, and it was. He treated me like a princess, and everything was beautiful. However, it was coming to an end. I had to return to England. He never told me where he came from, now that I'm thinking about it, I never knew him at all. Despite that, I somehow managed to take him with me and move to a new place in a town next to London with him. I was blinded by love.

Chapter 3

I recall the first day we lived together. I awoke to the smell of a fried egg and music playing in the background. It was *The Beatles' Martha My Dear*. So I got out of bed and went to the kitchen, where I found him dancing and singing while making bacon. I stood there the entire song since he didn't notice me. I thought he looked adorable. He then turned around and finally saw me.

‘For how long have you been standing there?’ He questioned me while flushing with embarrassment. ‘Long enough to know you can sing terribly’, I joked. He, on the other hand, did not laugh and simply had me sit on the table in a serious manner. He paused the record player and handed me the food he had prepared. He exited the kitchen after telling me he had already eaten. I couldn't understand how someone could be in such a good mood and then snap like that over what I felt was a silly and obvious joke. I didn't think much of it, so I ate the breakfast he had prepared, and when I got to the dining room, I realized he had left. I assumed it was the nerves of the first day of living together that we just had to get used to. I unpacked my luggage, which I didn't do the previous night and I cleaned a little bit since it wasn't inhabited in a long time and there was dust everywhere. I could hear him coming back while I laid on the sofa, exhausted. When he noticed me on the sofa, he sat down next to me and looked me in the eyes. ‘I sincerely apologize for my early behaviour. I should not have behaved in that way; it was very inappropriate. I went for a walk to clear my head, and I really apologize.’ We

spent the rest of the day together, just exploring the city because we had never been there before. I know you might think I'm crazy for moving in with a stranger and to a place I've never been to before. I completely agree with you. When I look back in time, I see a clueless young girl who just wanted to experience new things and live in the moment. The rest of our first month together went well. I would get up in the morning and go to work, which was close to our apartment. I worked as a laboratory technician and was on my way to become the manager of that company. I really did enjoy working in that laboratory. I've loved science since I was really young and that has always been my dream job since I can remember. Two months later, I was about to become the manager of the company where I worked, and they were organizing a fundraiser. Every employee was invited, and they were allowed to bring a guest. So, when I arrived home, he was watching TV, and I told him about the gala and asked him to accompany me. He was hesitant at first, but after minutes of convincing him, he eventually surrendered and agreed to accompany me.

The following day, I went shopping with my closest friend at a recently opened mall. We were exhausted after wandering around the mall looking at the stores and stopped in a coffee shop on the roof. We then began talking about him. I couldn't even answer most of her questions. I realized I didn't know much about him, but I wasn't bothered by it. I knew exactly what he wanted me to know, and now I see myself as a complete fool. My friend questioned our relationship, but I couldn't help but defend him and what we had since I truly loved him and wanted us to work. I had no idea that this relationship was a never-ending hole. After arguing about the kind of relationship he and I had, I realized I hadn't satisfied her. She continued

telling me how she didn't like or trust him. She saw him as a psychopath. She wasn't all that far away. She changed the subject after I told her thousands of times that I was happily in love with him. We both returned home after chatting for a bit. We live rather far apart, so she had to use the metro. It was approximately ten o'clock at night. Throughout my walk home, I thought about what my friend had told me about him. I even questioned him. Did I know so little of him that I was insane to live with him? Did he truly have a secret that I was unaware of? I came to the conclusion that my friend didn't know him and was only worried about me. I did know him, did I? I decided not to worry about it any longer and went home.

He was sitting on the sofa, doing nothing. He had this illegible face, I didn't know what was about to happen. He kind of looked mad at me for something. I could hear the cars driving outside our flat and people talking loudly and laughing. I could hear everything else in that moment except what was going on inside the place I was. He didn't move and didn't even hesitate to look at me when I walked in. I started to worry. I started to think about all the things that could have happened to him these last few hours I was out so that I could understand what the meaning of his numb but angry face was. I couldn't even ask. My voice suddenly disappeared and I forgot how to say things, how to speak. I was trembling because somehow I knew that the reason for his long face was me, even though I couldn't think of any behaviour of mine that made him so maddened. I decided to go to our room and take off my coat because I was beginning to sweat anxiously. I passed by the sofa and he didn't even turn to look at me. I felt scared for no apparent reason. I entered the bedroom and laid the coat on the bed. I removed my shoes, and when I returned to where he was, I observed how he walked into

the room. He was standing on the door, this time staring at me. He had his arms crossed, and I noticed scars on his knuckles. The scars were new. When he realized I was staring at his hands, he decided to start talking. 'Where have you been? It's getting late'. He didn't say it aggressively or threateningly. His voice seemed calm, but his expression said the contrary. 'I was with a friend in the new mall. We afterwards decided to go to a coffee shop and completely lost track of time. I'm sorry'. I didn't say anything about his hand since I didn't want to complicate things. He didn't respond to what I had just told him, which confused me. I couldn't tell if he was upset with me, worried about me, or simply unconcerned. I followed him back into the kitchen. He was like a puzzle that I couldn't figure out. There was one missing piece. He drank something when we arrived at the kitchen. I'm not sure what it was, but it appeared to be becoming a habit. A shot before bedtime, or at least this was the first one was the only one I ever saw.

I stayed up all night thinking about what had occurred earlier. 'What happened to his hand?' I continued asking myself questions. I got out of bed and went to the bathroom since I couldn't sleep. I shut the door so he wouldn't hear me. I closed my eyes and stared at myself in the mirror. This reminded me of the moment in the museum, but I was now living with the mysterious guy. I kept reliving memories of Florence while closing my eyes. Florence, my sweet Florence. I remembered the first time I laid eyes on him. 'Does he remember the first time he saw me?' I wondered. Then I thought of the red notebook. I realized I hadn't seen it since we moved in. What did he do with it? Or did he dump it? Why would he throw it away if it was only for sketches, drawings, and notes? Because of that ridiculous red journal, I had a lot of questions. I couldn't look for it that early in the morning since I didn't

want him to wake up and be discovered.

I remembered where we originally met, at that coffee shop. That's where it all began.

When we started spending our vacations together or got close. I remembered all the locations he brought me, the restaurants, the stories he told me, and the books he mentioned. We spoke a lot about literature. That was one of the things I admired about him. Nowadays, few males love spending time reading. But it seems that he did. He not only reads them, but he also analyzed them. He enjoyed doing research and analyzing what he had just read. He told me about the feminist elements in the books of Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen. According to what he told me, he admired Austen's work. He considers the Emma's and Pride and Prejudice's dialogues to be amusing and humorous. I've never read anything like this before. That's the difference between him and myself: he reads for pleasure, whereas I only read when it's required. He taught me what I needed to know about literature and did so in a manner that made me want to read something he recommended. I was recalling every tiny detail of what we had and lived in Florence not long ago, yet it all seemed so far away. I washed my face and opened my eyes. I was still very awake and didn't want to go to sleep, so I grabbed some earbuds and went to the dining room to paint while listening to music.

The next morning, I woke up on the floor, covered in paint. The sun was shining, and it felt warm and cozy. When I looked out the window, there were two birds right there. They were chirping and staring at one another. When they heard me getting up, they flew off quickly. I went directly to our room to wake him up. He was not there. 'That's unusual', I thought, and went

directly to the shower to clean myself up. Where was him, and why didn't he wake me up? I returned to the dining room, looked at the mess I had caused the night before, and grabbed the painting. I couldn't recall what it meant. It illustrated what it meant to be a man. It was dressed in a black suit and an unbuttoned chemise. But what was out of the ordinary was how I painted its face. I could imagine it was a face, but it really wasn't. I just added a bunch of red tones to make it seem blurry. A blurred red face. What was the identity of the man in the painting, and why did I draw him? It wasn't too bad, so I hung it on the wall of the diner room. I wished he'd like it and told me how nice it was. The most difficult part was cleaning. There was paint on almost everything. I turned on my earphones and began dancing and singing while scrubbing the floor. I didn't hear the door open or the sound of the keys, so I looked up and found him staring at me, confused. 'What are you doing?' he said, 'You look a little stupid dancing. Stop it and tidy it all up before lunch. This looks to be a complete mess; what did you do while I was sleeping?' I was astonished by the way he spoke to me, so I didn't answer and continued cleaning. He went into the bedroom and shut the door behind him. He didn't even notice the painting.

When everything was finished, I decided to make him lunch because he looked to be having a rough day. I didn't question him about where he went since I didn't want to bother him after leaving some stains on the floor. I made some spaghetti and set the table so that we could enjoy a quiet meal. When he smelled the meal, he went to the kitchen and sat at the table. We began talking about something we had watched on TV the day before because he appeared to be in a good mood. Roe v. Wade was overturned, which means that abortion rights will be determined by each state in the

United States. Half of the states had already prohibited it, while others had established stringent measures to implement the procedure. It was really unfair; it felt as if we were moving backwards and never advancing in our equality. 'How does a guy have the right to tell a woman what to do with her own body?' I asked aloud. I wasn't expecting an answer from him because he wasn't paying attention, but he stated forcefully; 'It affects both the woman and the men since the kid is theirs. He ought to have an opinion, because abortion kills the child. I do not see much of a problem with this. A life is a life; you cannot kill it. Do you want to be a murderer if you were pregnant?' I didn't know what to say in response. I couldn't believe what he had just said. A murderer? 'It hasn't even formed, it's a fetus!' I was thinking to myself. I decided to talk about it because I was getting very mad with what he just said and I couldn't let him think that way. I couldn't.

'Think about every young girl who will get pregnant. Can you see a thirteen-year-old girl caring for a baby? She's simply a kid! She has to learn, she needs to work, and she cannot care for a child. It would be overwhelming for her. Imagine a lady who is unable to provide a decent life for her child because she cannot afford it; this would be unfair to the child. Consider all the girls who will risk their health and lives by attempting an unsafe abortion. Furthermore, it is more probable to die during delivery than to have a safe abortion. You cannot put this much pressure on such girls; they must decide for themselves whether or not to continue with their pregnancy. They have the right to make their own decisions. They can't take that straight away. It is unacceptable'. He wasn't expecting me to say what I just did. He didn't seem to comprehend what the problem was, so I went for a walk to calm down.

When I got back, I found him on the sofa and apologized for what had happened at lunch. He made me lie down with him for a few minutes without saying a word. After those calm minutes, I reminded him that I was about to become manager of the lab where I worked in just two days. I asked him whether he had already decided what he would wear, and he said he hadn't given it any thought. I got upset because I was really looking forward to that day, I was excited, and it didn't even occur to him. He saw how dissatisfied I was with his response, so he promised to go find a suit this afternoon. I asked him if he wanted me to join him, but he said he wanted it to be a surprise because I had never seen him dressed up before. I hadn't seen the sophisticated version of him before. I was overjoyed to share that with him.

As an old couple, we did the dishes together. I was so thrilled at the time that I forgot about what had happened previously. Our relationship was like that; we had our ups and downs, but after a few minutes, we were the happiest people on the planet. He made me feel like a princess at times, and I was just a fool in love with him.

Chapter 4

The big day arrived. I was excited. I woke up as he was making breakfast and approached him from behind, hugging him. He kissed my cheeks, and I flushed. I was still not used to such affection; after all, he was the first boy I had ever loved and been with. I wasn't a very affectionate person since I didn't know how. But it was so easy with him. He had that certain spark that made me feel at ease.

I helped him in preparing breakfast and washed the dishes we had left on the sink the night before. We sat at the table, and I told him about meeting my parents, who were curious about this mysterious guy I told them about. I didn't press him since I knew it was a major thing, but he didn't seem convinced. They weren't going to the fundraiser since they were on vacation, but he told me how he invited his sister. I was more concerned about meeting his sister than about the event. He adored his sister and had told me all I needed to know about her since the first time we met at a coffee shop in Florence. I loved listening to him talk about her because I could feel his admiration for her. This is why I was willing to meet her; I wanted to meet her and hear what his brother is truly like. I wanted to meet the nice and embarrassing version of him since sisters typically reveal the embarrassing stuff about the brother. I tried on the dress I was planning to wear this afternoon, after breakfast. It was ideal. It was a long green silky dress with an opened back. It looked great with my straight blonde hair, but I planned to wear it in a messy bun. When I graduated, my father got a collar, which I was going to wear. And finally white high-heeled shoes.

I was curious to see his reaction the first time he saw me because I had never worn anything like this before. I always dress simply: jeans, a hoodie, and sneakers. I don't like dressing up because I don't understand the point. When I do go out at night, I always wear the same plain black dress with boots. But this time I wanted to impress him and feel pretty for a change. I did it not just for his approval, but also for me. It had been a long time since I had felt at ease with my own body, with myself. Since entering high school, I've struggled with my body image. I don't enjoy showing too much of myself since it makes me uncomfortable. What may appear normal to others is difficult, if not disgusting, to me. I had no idea what I looked like at times; I looked completely different every time I glanced in the mirror. It was quite difficult not knowing what you looked like. How did others see me? Did they see my insecurities as I did, or did they believe it was perfectly normal? I stopped coming to the gym for the time being because it made me hate myself much more than I already did. I felt watched and judged. I felt weak. That changed for a while, but it always returned. I continued relapsing even when everything seemed to be going back to normal and I was accepting myself. The war never ended.

We had a rather normal day. I needed to get to the place of the gala so that we could complete the last arrangements, and my friend, whom I had gone shopping with a few days before, was already waiting for me there. She complimented me and asked whether she would be meeting him. I told her that he would be coming late since he needed to pick up his sister from her apartment. 'So, you're going to meet his sister, how do you feel about that?' 'Are you nervous?' she said. 'I'm confident', I responded, not giving it any thought. We went inside and introduced her to everyone I worked with. My

boss asked me to step outside for a minute and chat with him; I assumed he wanted to congratulate me, so I followed him outside.

‘Are you nervous about today, bird?’, he asked with a smile on his face. He never talked to me like that.

‘Only a little. This establishment is lovely, everyone is nice, and the food looks delicious. Does your wife happen to be with you this afternoon?’, I responded.

‘She is the one in the blue sea dress. You should congratulate your friend on all of the decorations; she was a pain in our butts since she wanted everything to be perfect for tonight.’

I smiled and then went looking for his wife, whom I had never seen before. She wore a lovely gown that complemented her form well. She appeared much younger than she was, she was stunning.

‘She looks incredible, you must tell her that for me.’

‘Yes, she does, but nothing compares your beauty today.’ As he got closer to me, I began to feel uncomfortable. What was he doing? We had always had a nice connection from the first day I started working here, but he had never acted around me like this before. I attempted to distance myself from him, but he continued approaching. ‘You’re going to be wonderful today, bird’, he said in my ear as his arm wrapped around my back. ‘I am really proud of you.’ He then smirked and went back inside, all the while staring at me. I was disgusted. I wanted to hide, I wanted to vanish, and I wished it had never occurred. I froze for five to ten minutes, attempting to relax myself. Did my supervisor, whom I had always imagined to be like a father figure to me, really make sexual attempts toward me? I put on my leather jacket and walked around the backyard.

‘Excuse me miss, who are you and what have you done with my girlfriend?’, everything that had happened a few minutes before vanished as soon as I heard his voice. I hurried up to him and hugged him for comfort. ‘What’s wrong?’ he asked, seeing my tears. ‘Nothing, I’m just a little overwhelmed and I missed you’, I said so as not to anger him.

‘I’ve got something for you’, he replied, pulling something from his pocket. He opened a casket and found this wonderful bracelet that matched my collar inside. He’d never gotten me anything before, and I thought it was incredibly kind of him. He kissed me and placed it on my right wrist. He stared me in the eyes with his lovely green eyes. I’m not sure what it was, but there was something incredibly reassuring in his gaze. ‘Should we go inside?’ We asked, and so we did.

There were many more people than I had expected. He noticed me getting anxious and held my hand to assure me that everything will be fine. My friend rushed over to greet him as soon as she noticed me. It wasn’t weird at all; they got along great, which I appreciated. I hadn’t seen his sister yet; I assumed she was out socializing or something. I had never seen him try to get along with anyone before; he is really shy, so I appreciated that he went out of his way for me. I took a peek around to see if I could locate my boss. He was there with his wife and another couple, laughing. How could he be so cool after what he had done? He smiled as he discovered I was staring at him. I turned away, disgusted by him. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. ‘You didn’t say you came with anyone tonight’, he said. ‘We haven’t met yet, I’m Dr Bennett, the boss around here. It’s a pleasure to meet you.’ He came alone, leaving the wife with that pair. I was quite uncomfortable and didn’t know what to say. ‘I’m her boyfriend, and I haven’t heard anything from you

either.’ His voice changed; it was no longer the kind tone he had while speaking with my girlfriend.

‘How long have you known her for? She’s a really hard worker, you see, and the best employee I’ve ever had. You are quite fortunate to have her. I am sure you must feel very proud of her tonight, not just for how lovely she looks but for her accomplishments this year’, Dr. Bennett proceeded to tease him. ‘Have you told her how stunning she looks in this gown?’. He began to chuckle, but I couldn’t keep listening to him say that and other things I decided to forget. I wanted to go, but he wouldn’t allow me because he wanted to hear what Dr. Bennett had to say. I could feel his rage because he was crushing my palm, and I knew if we stayed there, he’d explode. As he was about to confront him, his sister appeared and moved him out of the situation. We all went outside, except for my friend, who remained inside since I didn’t want her to meet this version of him.

‘What did you think you were doing?’ his sister asked. She had a wonderful voice that was both lovely and intimidating. I could see by her look that she was angry with him. I didn’t want to argue in front of her; I wanted to make a good impression, but I also didn’t want to seem uncaring about what had happened.

‘He was obviously flirting with her right in front of me.’ I couldn’t stand there listening to his dumb comments since he was doing it on purpose. No fool is going to ruin her night,’ he continued. ‘Do you include yourself among the idiots? You must behave since, as you said, it is her night. Don’t ruin it by allowing your emotions to lead you,’ she said. ‘I’m truly sorry for that, I hadn’t got the chance to introduce myself properly,’ she said. I’m Maddie, and I’ve heard a lot about you. It’s wonderful to finally meet you.

I'm hoping we'll get along wonderfully.' She talked in a way that mesmerized me. Her intentions were good, and she didn't even seem to judge me. He stood there, staring at the ground. 'We should get going inside, finish this as soon as possible, and then have the opportunity to get to know each other better.'

The event went well, and my boss didn't bother us anymore, but he continued staring at me as he did when we were alone. We went out for drinks after it was all done. I loved seeing him in front of his sister; it was an entirely different version of him that I adored witnessing. He wasn't scared to speak up, and he appeared to be really happy. I was concerned I wouldn't be able to make him as happy as he appeared to be with Maddie, but I supposed that there is nothing like siblings' love. I drank a few drinks, perhaps more than I should have. But I didn't mind since I was overjoyed. I had just accomplished my dream job and I was here celebrating with the people I loved the most, apart from my family.

When they were tired and ready to go, Maddie phoned a taxi, and my friend, who lived next door to the bar where we were drinking, left. I was still pretty drunk and didn't want to go home, but he did, so we got in the car and went home. I felt free as we drove there. I felt the breeze on my face as I stared out the vehicle window. I observed the inebriated people yelling on the street, street animals rumbling on the rubbish in search of food, and music in the background... But none of this mattered since they were nonexistent. It was just him and I who mattered, who were still alive. I then felt his hand on my thighs, which I couldn't feel. They had gone numb. I didn't mind because he was free to do anything he wanted. He then drove in a different direction; the streets he was bringing me down were unfamiliar to me. He

parked in what appeared to be a forest.

‘What is this place?’ I asked, but received no response. ‘You see, I’ve never been here before. I grew up here but have never been here. Not even once. But it’s lovely, and I’m sure it looks even better during the day. Also in October! Oh, the brown and autumn-colored leaves... Autumn is lovely, isn’t it? Oh, just imagine how beautiful it would be if it snowed. You should bring me here when Christmas comes,’ I said, and I can’t even remember what else I said. I assumed dumb things and things he didn’t care about, since the next thing I remember is him grabbing me. He ripped my dress, which I protested about, but he ordered me to be quiet. He covered my lips, and I felt his hands all over my body. I didn’t move, I couldn’t. I was exhausted. I didn’t want him touching me just then, but I couldn’t say no. I knew it would be worse if I did. I was shouting, and no one could hear me. Everything was in my head. I screamed in silence because I knew it was my fault. I should not have discussed this with my boss. I should not have worn that outfit, and I should not have gotten drunk. He knew I couldn’t say no, what my thoughts were, but he didn’t stop. I just stood there and let him do whatever he wanted. I began to cry because I didn’t want this day to end like this; it was meant to be the best day of my life. That was the day I’d remember for the rest of my life. But there I was, terrified, crying in the vehicle. He noticed my crying, and I knew he was upset with me, so I tried to hide it. It didn’t work.

Chapter 5

I woke to the smell of scrambled eggs once more. I started by taking a shower because I felt dirty from the night before. I could still smell the alcohol on my breath and the odor of sweat. I felt humiliated looking at my naked body in the mirror. Bruises. I couldn't distinguish which drops were coming from the shower and which were from my eyes. I kept telling myself that everything was my fault. Boss, dress, drinks, me. He thought I wanted it since it was a successful evening that deserved a little celebration, pleasure. Right? I was so drunk that I may not have said no to him at all. Perhaps it was all a mistake.

After a month, every day began to feel the same. I'd get up by myself, and he'd be who knows where. And I'd take a shower. I took advantage of his absence to clean the house and take care of myself. Cleaning let me forget about everything; it was relaxing. I'd spend the entire morning cleaning, walking up and down the stairs, rearranging stuff, and planning what I'd do in the afternoon. This day, though, was different. I heard the keys and he came into the house. He walked right into our bedroom and showered. I could smell the whisky from here, like I did every day. I closed my eyes because I knew where he went when I woke up alone in the mornings. I always pretended it to be nothing and never dared to ask. Some days he arrived cheerful, some days he didn't, and I simply tried to get out of his way, so I made lunch before he got out of the shower since it seemed like it was one of those awful days.

‘What is this?’ he asked. ‘Pesto pasta, just the way you like it. I added some little shrimp,’ I said, confused. ‘I don’t want it. ‘Make something else quickly, I’m hungry,’ he replied. I was very surprised. I was at a loss for words. ‘There is no more food in the fridge, honey. This is all we have. I’ll go to the grocery shop today, but we’ve got nothing else,’ I stutteringly said. ‘Well, as I have said, I don’t want this. God, why can’t you simply do what I require you to do?’ he said as he lay on the sofa, his eyes heavy. I felt bad for him and guilty for not understanding what was wrong with him or how to help him. I decided to sit with him, holding his hand. He was hurt again, and I assumed he got into a fight, something I despised and over which we had argued repeatedly. I kissed it and turned to face him. He began to cry. I was taken aback since he had never cried in front of me before. So I simply held him tightly and didn’t let go. He quavered, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...’, ‘It’s okay,’ I tried to reassure him. ‘I want to help you, but I’m not sure how. Please tell me what’s wrong. What have I done?’ I said, sobbing. He stood up and turned to face me. I was afraid since he had never looked at me like that before. ‘Why are you crying?’ he said, wiping his face. ‘I’m not sure,’ was all that came out of my mouth. He walked to the kitchen, got a dish of spaghetti, and returned to the living room. He threw the dish at me, but I avoided it. It shattered and splattered across the wall. ‘What is wrong with me? This is all a fucking nightmare.’ He yelled, ‘You should ask yourself what’s wrong with you! Why are you so afraid of me? You can’t even look at me right now,’ he chuckled as he went around the room, his eyes fixed on the floor. I was still crying on the couch. I was terrified, terrified for my life. I examined the pieces as well as the pesto stain on the wall. I returned my attention to him, and he continued speaking. ‘You only

work, clean, eat, and sleep. Have you met any of my friend's girlfriends? You should, and you should learn from them. They all act so nicely, all they do is fuck and be for their boyfriends... You should see how they all look. You'd have to stop eating to look exactly like them,' he kept smiling, I assumed thinking about those girls. Did he ever... I preferred not to think about it; I liked to believe that I was his only girl. He was mine, and I was his. 'I'm leaving; you enjoy what's left of this awful dish you've made.' He then walked away. I felt like Mrs. de Winter, who doesn't understand her husband and believes he doesn't love her. That there is something separating her from him. But it wasn't the late wife's death in this case; it was something else that I couldn't figure out.

I spent the whole day there, sitting on the couch. I hadn't eaten anything. I wasn't hungry anymore. I tried to remember the person I was before I met him. The young and free girl that enjoyed little things and acted like a child. Who was I? Where was this little girl? What happened to her? She was killed that day in the car. She was killed those days when I would wake up with bruises on my body, with a black eye. She disappeared all those times whenever she is cat called, touched in a night club by strangers. She leaves whenever she is scared to speak, when she cannot express what is happening to her. That little girl is forever gone. So, who was I? I had no idea. I couldn't recognize myself. I'm not sure what I want to do with my life anymore, and I'm not enjoying my job as much as I used to. But I liked going to work. Sometimes I felt safe there. I still had to put up with my boss's glances and comments, but I got used to it.

I went for a walk when it was already dark outside. It was late and he still didn't come back. I supposed he was out there in some bar drinking or doing

God knows what. It was very cold, I couldn't feel my hands and I had forgotten to take my gloves when I left home. But I didn't turn back, I didn't want to. I couldn't because I knew that if I did I wouldn't go out again. I put my hands inside the jacket's pocket and kept walking straight. Nobody was on the streets. It was just me. I could hear the frogs trilling and crickets chirping. Throughout my whole life I have been scared of going out alone, especially at night, but at that exact moment, I wasn't. There was nobody catcalling, not a single person who could kidnap me and do whatever to me, nobody could stare. It was just me. I tried to think what myself of years ago would think of me if she could see me. Would she be proud? Disappointed? Would she feel pity towards me? I don't know, but I wish I could be her again. I wish we never grew up. I kept walking. I felt drained, trapped in a place I wasn't able to escape. Why didn't I leave at that right moment? Did I still love him or was I just too afraid? I really can't explain what was going on in my head. I don't think anyone can really understand what I was going through and why I was still there. I got to the edge of a bridge and I approached it to listen to the water. The current's river was very heavy. And suddenly the notion that had haunted me for so long returned. 'This is the ideal opportunity,' I thought. I climbed the bridge and gazed down. The water was strong and whirling. Yet it appeared to be peaceful. My entire body began to shake. I thought about my parents. Could I actually do that to them? It would be really selfish. But they didn't get it; they had no idea what was going on. They couldn't, could they? I then remembered him. I couldn't leave him. I couldn't leave the boy I'd met at the museum. I couldn't leave the boy who would bring me flowers when I got out of bed and drive me to places I'd never gone before. I wanted to hear him talk about the things he

enjoys. What happened to this boy? I couldn't recognize him. What did I do to him to change him so drastically? I couldn't forgive myself for anything I had done to cause him to be so broken.

I couldn't go on living like this. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get rid of this feeling. I relapsed no matter how many times I healed. What was wrong with me that I couldn't feel normal? Growing up, I always had the feeling that I didn't fit in. Hurting myself during the process of trying to find my place in this little world, until I met him. He made me feel at home, at ease, and yet here I was, crying on the edge of a bridge ready to end it all. I was ready to put an end to the pain I had been through for so long. But then I remembered all of the things I'd miss. I still had a spark of hope of finding my place, so I held onto it and put my feet back on the ground. I now realize that my small hope was for him to become the boy I first met and for things to work out between us. My feelings for him overtook me. I really wanted to fight for us, but I didn't understand it was too late. There was nothing I could do. I wish I could tell her, the girl on the bridge, that it wasn't her fault at all. That she was not the problem, and that no amount of effort could change what was going on inside that house.

Chapter 6

‘Where have you been?’, were the words I heard just when I came back to the house. He was waiting for me sitting at the kitchen’s table with his computer on. ‘I just went for a walk’, I responded. He closed the computer and got up. He approached me, slowly. We were face to face and he kept staring at my eyes. What was he thinking? With his right hand, he grabbed my face and with the other hand brushed my hair backwards. ‘Don’t you know it is dangerous for you to go out at this time of the night? Anything could have happened to you? You know that right?’, he then said. He seemed calm, like he had sobered up. ‘I want to know wherever you go out like that, do you understand that? I want to know when you leave this house. Will you tell me next time? Will you?’, he screamed that last question. He still had me between his hands, so I couldn’t look anywhere else but his eyes. He now looked a little bit mad, even a little worried. I liked that he was worried like that for me, it gave me the hope that I had thought of not long ago. He kissed me on the forehead and let me go. He walked towards the kitchen’s table and opened his computer again. I just stood there, static. I didn’t know what just happened, it was like he saw me right there on the bridge and heard my cries. I went straight to bed because I was very tired and I heard him enter the room as well. He closed the door.

The next morning was just like others, I woke up alone but I received a message from my friend, who I hadn’t seen in ages. We went to have a coffee and I could see just by the look on her face that she was worried about me. I

tried to hide it, but it was useless.

‘What happened to your eye?’, was the first thing she asked once she took a glance at my whole body. ‘I fell down the stairs’, I answered. I knew it was the most unbelievable excuse but it was the only thing that came to my head. She changed the subject since she saw I was uncomfortable about it so we went into the coffee shop and we sat. This coffee place has been my favourite since I can recall. It is a bookshop coffee and it is located in a small street, not so far away from where I lived. It has always been my comfort place since I can be whoever I want in there and it is very peaceful since people only come here to study or just hang out, not like in other bars where you can only hear people talking loudly and laughing. I have known the owners since I was a child because my parents are friends with them, so there has always been an attachment between this coffee shop and me. There are many pictures on the wall, taken with an analogical camera, which I am in some of them. It is very well-lit during the day, but when the sun goes down the ambience is very comfy. It is dark and rather dingy, but not in a bad way, all the contrary, they light some candles and turn the lamps on so that it gives the sensation that you are home. And they also have the most delicious lattes and coffees of the whole city. I just love to hang out here. I forgot when the last time I came here was, and while growing up I did come very often.

We sat on the table closest to the bookshelf and ordered what we wanted to drink. She commented how she saw on the news that there were women being killed in Iran because of wearing their hijab incorrectly and protesting about it. I haven’t seen the news for ages and when she told me that I was shocked. When did the choice of wearing the hijab become compulsory? She kept explaining that to me and I just felt rage about it. I couldn’t believe that

these kinds of things still happened in the 21st century. We spent almost a half-hour commenting and getting angry about it before she asked what I was worried she would. 'Are you all right? I haven't heard from you in a long time, and I've been concerned about you. I almost panicked when I saw you today because you have changed. You've lost so much weight... What's wrong? Please tell me...' I didn't know what to say, so I played with the tea cup, and I started to get anxious. I didn't want to tell her the truth because I didn't want anyone, especially her, to be concerned about me. I didn't think it was a big deal since I didn't want her to think I was being dramatic. 'I promise I'm alright. I'm just exhausted and can't seem to get a good night's sleep. That's all,' I replied. But she didn't seem convinced. 'How's he doing?' she asked. I could tell where she was headed by the way she stared at me when she asked me that question. Then I looked out the window and I noticed the same two birds I had seen standing behind my window the morning I was covered in paint. That painting, that night. I now understood what the painting represented. He was the red guy. He was there all the time. He was there from the morning till the evening, controlling everything I did. I just wasn't brave enough to portray his true face since I had no idea who he was. Not until it was too late. And then, six months later, I realized it. Has a year truly passed since we started dating? I couldn't remember much of what I had done this year. When everything happened. Everything's so blurry. She grabbed my hand as I began to shake from the realizations. I began crying because I realized how much I wanted to talk to someone. But I couldn't say anything to her. I was terrified. I was afraid she wouldn't believe me and wouldn't speak to me again. I was frightened of being laughed at.

'I just feel stuck here. I'm not even sure who I am anymore. I'm terrified

of losing myself inside that house. I honestly have no idea why he acts the way he does. What have I done to deserve this? You don't know him, and I don't think anyone does. When we go outside, which we don't do anymore, he acts shy and pleasant. I'm not going to be able to leave that house. I can't. Every day, I am mentally and physically exhausted, and I don't even go out. Every night, I feel his hands on me, dominating me... How can a person feel safer at work than at home? I used to like coming back home to him; now I'm not sure when he'll return from wherever he goes. I don't think I'll be able to live like this for much longer; I can't do it anymore. I can't...', That's what I wanted to say to her, but I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't say anything. She handed me a tissue, and I dried my eyes and tried to calm myself since I didn't want to make a scene at this coffee shop. I explained that we were just going through a hard time and that we were working on it. This is something that happens to every relationship. She seemed to believe me, so we paid the bill and left my beloved coffee shop. She hugged me when she walked me home. That hug wasn't the sort you give every day or to ordinary people; it was the kind you give to tell someone 'everything is going to be okay' without saying it. That hug saved me; it was the hug I had been looking for for a long time. I didn't let her go. We just stood there in the middle of the street, hugging and supporting one another.

Chapter 7

Things seemed to improve a month later. He began to help more with house chores and seemed kinder to me. He didn't appear as lost as he once did. I was glad that I had kept the hope that I once lacked.

We planned to go out to dinner. We planned to meet in the restaurant because he was at work. I couldn't recall the last time he had prepared something romantic for me. I was thrilled and overjoyed. Even though it was cold outdoors, I wore a blue naval long dress that belonged to my mother. Because it was a big event, I wanted to look special. I was nervous, like if it were our first date, as if I had never met him before. I walked into the bathroom to put on makeup and straighten my hair. I got myself a cup of tea and sat on the couch. I was thinking about how happy and proud I was of him. I didn't want to remember about the awful months we went through because he changed for the better. I didn't want to return to those. I have forgiven him and given our relationship another chance. I stood up, went to my wardrobe to get a coat, and looked at my phone. No messages from him. I called a taxi number and headed outside. There were so many cars, and everything was really noisy. My cab came about five minutes later, and I told the driver my destination. He was quite nice, unlike most taxi drivers I'd encountered, which made me feel comfortable. He dropped me off at the restaurant, and I waited for him at the entryway. It was still not time, so I lit a cigarette and took a look around. There was a good environment in this part of town, therefore there were a lot of people. Because the restaurant he chose

was very classy, mainly elderly people or those who appeared to be wealthy entered. They all appeared very elegant because of the way they moved, which was incredibly formal. I was intimidated, but I didn't care; all I wanted was for him to be here with me.

I kept checking the time, but he didn't show. Five minutes, ten minutes, thirty minutes... He didn't arrive after all. I began to think that he was attending an important meeting and had just left work late. But he didn't show up. After an hour of keeping my hopes up, I phoned a cab and went home. I can not really remember what I was thinking in the cab on the way home. I wasn't even disappointed; everything had been so perfect the previous month that it didn't feel real. I didn't expect him to be at home, and I was right. He wasn't there. I undressed, changed into my pajamas, and sat on the sofa to watch a movie on TV. I stayed up till he arrived because I wanted to see him. I was interested in hearing what he had to say. I knew where he went, what routine was going to begin, and I felt the heartache I used to. That was something I couldn't go through again.

I switched off the TV when he finally arrived, which was really late. I kept staring at him, watching his movements. He didn't even acknowledge me there. He just went to the kitchen and got a glass of water. He seemed pale and worn down. It hurt my heart to see him in that condition. I stood up and approached him from behind, but as soon as I touched him, he pushed me away and walked to our bedroom. I followed him and asked where he had been. Of course, he replied that it was none of my business. 'You stood me up. I waited for you for about an hour. If you weren't going to show up, you could leave a message or just tell me that you weren't going to come. Was it really that difficult? What have you been doing? You're no longer a

child; act like an adult', I said angrily. 'Never speak to me like that again. Do you hear me?' he yelled back, slapping me. I suddenly felt like I was back inside the car.

This cycle kept repeating over and over again. After another year of trying to save him, I gave up. I couldn't help the person who was destroying me. Why didn't I leave if I knew perfectly well that if I stayed with him, he'd kill me? I needed to go, but he couldn't know. He wouldn't let me.

It was one of those days when I knew he'd be gone for the entire day, so I packed my essentials quickly. I ran out of time to pack everything. I packed everything I wanted to keep including my clothes, artwork, books... The rest was left in that apartment. I started gathering things while bawling my eyes out, and I walked to the coffee shop for five minutes to call my parents because I didn't have a phone with me. Because of my fear, I kept crying uncontrollably. I had to be quick. I asked my parents if I could stay with them for a while without explaining anything. I didn't want to upset or disappoint them. I felt like it was my fault, I was the one who kept living with him. I walked back upstairs and checked around to see if I had forgotten anything that belonged to me, but it appeared that I was done. As I got to the front door, I looked back and felt guilty for leaving him like that. I even rethought staying, but I couldn't do that. I was stronger than that. At that moment, I felt that hope again, but not hope towards him. Hope for me. I felt like I wasn't done, I had lots of things to live and I had the hope that there was still time to save myself. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I internally said goodbye to him, and I hoped he would forgive me. I opened the door, shaking, and left.

Chapter 8

And so you might be thinking what happened with that red notebook. I got nothing from him, I wanted to have nothing that belonged to him. I didn't want to know anything related to him. But there was only one thing that during those years I spent with him that made me crazy, this stupid red notebook. When I finally got out of that household, once I had everything packed and managed to escape that dark place, I opened my suitcase once I got to my parent's place and saw right on top of the clothes, the notebook. I bursted crying the first time I saw it. That notebook was the only thing that could bring back all the memories I tried so hard to forget. That brought me back to Florence, our apartment, the gala, our nights out, my fears, him. It is weird how something that you, for a long time, wanted to know what was inside of it, you couldn't manage to open it. I was scared. He managed to play with me again, he won again. He knew what would happen once I got the notebook. He already knew I was leaving. He saw me going to that coffee place, and so he took advantage of it. I spent half an hour sitting on the floor with the notebook in my hands, my tears wetting its cover.

I finally opened it and began flipping through its pages. He just used one page, the last one. That generated hatred in me toward him. All this time wondering what was in the notebook and him being so careful and sly with it for only one page being touched. I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was a portrait from the museum that day. I couldn't see her face, but I knew who he drew well enough. I was the girl in the drawing. He drew me, he had

spotted me from the start. It was so precise that I realized why he never drew anything else; he continued adding details as time passed. He continued painting that while living with me, making me feel like I was in hell. He continued reliving the first time he saw me...

But I didn't recognize myself in the illustration. I felt stronger and freed now. I didn't recognize that kid and innocent girl. She had no idea how that day would impact her entire life, the way she would see things now, and how it would affect her mentally. I wondered what would have happened if I hadn't gone to that museum or hadn't picked up that book in that coffee shop the next morning. What would have happened if I had never seen him or chosen to live with him? I wish I could tell the girl in the painting that everything worked out in the end, that those days when I was drained and didn't see a future were the ones that shaped me into the person I am today. I would wipe those memories out from my mind if I could, but no matter how hard I try, I can't. He is a part of me, and he will be with me for the rest of my life.

So now I found myself looking at the same sculpture from the one in the painting, with the notebook with me. I suddenly felt nostalgic. I wondered where he was now and what had happened to him since I had gone. I imagined what he might have thought when he saw my suitcase and understood I was leaving for good. But I couldn't help myself from wondering why he didn't stop me. I was so afraid that he would catch me on the floor packing my stuff, just to leave the notebook in it and leave. He was a unique individual, unintelligible. I like to imagine he let me go, that he released me for good because of love. I wondered whether he ever truly loved me, and I want to believe he did at some point. But how could you let the

person you care about to live like that? I had a soft spot in my heart for him and had only just learned to forgive him. I was proud of the person I'd become. I met new friends that make me feel like the luckiest girl in the world, who care about me and support me. I left that job and went on to become a professor at a university, which I thoroughly enjoyed and in which I never felt uncomfortable.

Even though I sometimes still fight with some demons, I am glad to say that a new chapter has begun, and I am not going to let nobody turn me down. Nobody, not even myself.



her.

