

Dark and Deepest Red

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Feiwel and Friends
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A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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To my father, who taught me to love books in the first place

Cuando el camino es largo, hasta las zapatillas aprietan.

When the road is long, even slippers are tight.

—PERUVIAN PROVERB

Chacun sent le mieux où le soulier le blesse.

No one knows better where the shoe pinches than
she who wears it.

—FRENCH PROVERB

Dance in red shoes, but make sure they're the ones
you've made by hand.

—CLARISSA PINKOLA ESTÉS,

Women Who Run with the Wolves

Rosella

My mother told me once that being an Oliva meant measuring our lives in lengths of red thread. And probably, that was true.

But growing up in Briar Meadow meant I measured mine by the glimmer that appeared over the reservoir every year.

That was what they called the strangeness that settled onto our town for a week each October, a glimmer. Both for the wavering light that hovered above the water, and because it seemed like the right word for the flicker of magic that came with it.

One year, the glimmer stirred the air between neighbors who hated each other. Families who'd become enemies over fence lines and tree roots suddenly burst into each other's kitchens, trading long-secret recipes for tomato sauce or spice cookies.

Another year, it was icicles that tasted like rose candies. My mother and I ate them all week, licking them like paletas, and tried to save some in our freezer. When the glimmer left at the end of the week, we found them vanished from between the frozen peas and waffles, and managed to be surprised. (My abuela called us fools for thinking we could hold on to Briar Meadow's magic any longer than the glimmer let us.)

And once, it was the thorns on the trees and bushes around

town. They grew so fast even I could sit still long enough to watch them. The wood twisted into shapes, some simple as a corkscrew curl, others intricate as the figurine of a deer, others as sharp as little knives. Sometimes we woke up to find blood dripping down the points, and we couldn't be sure if someone had pricked their fingers, or if the thorns themselves were bleeding.

And maybe my mother was right about measuring our lives in red thread, because those drops of blood looked, to me, like the beads on the most beautiful shoes my family made. Red shoes, the kind everyone knew us for.

They bought other colors, of course, but it was the red ones that carried the whisper of a magic not so different from the glimmer. Our red shoes bore the hint of something forbidden and a little scandalous. Parents bought them for anxious brides, who then kissed their grooms with enough passion to make the wedding guests blush. Women had pairs made for class reunions, strutting into the tinsel-draped auditorium like queens. Husbands gave them to their wives before trips meant to celebrate twenty- or thirty-year anniversaries, and the couple always came back with their eyes glinting, as though they'd just met.

Well-crafted seams and delicate beading gave my family a trade and a living. But red shoes gave us a name. They made us infamous. They made us brazen.

Until they came for us.

Except that's not quite true.

They didn't come for us.

They came for me.

Strasbourg, 1507

The first time Lala catches Alifair on the land, he is stealing crab apples from a tree that belongs to her and her aunt. Though, as it turns out, he will come to be theirs far more than the tree, or the land, ever will. The crab apple tree, along with all others on the plot, belongs to them no more than the house, each paid for by the month.

When Lala and her aunt first arrived in Strasbourg, they found that the stature and upkeep of the shabby wattle and daub had been much exaggerated by the friend of a friend. Lala stood in the shade of the roof, staring into the house's face. The thatch hung so far past the walls that the whole structure seemed to be frowning.

We are new women here, Tante Dorenia told her. *We bring with us nothing of who we were.*

Nothing of who we were means Tante will not wear the dikhle, the pretty head covering of married women, not just because she is unmarried but because the gadje must find no sign that they are Romnia. It is for the same reason that Lala cannot even be called Lala, the name she has heard since the time she could speak. Now she is Lala only in Tante's house and in her own thoughts. Everywhere else she must be Lavinia, her full name, prim and uncomfortable as a starched dress.

Whenever Lala asks why they left the hills outside Riquewihl, left where they buried her mother and father, Tante says, *What we are, they have made it a crime in our own country. So we will go somewhere no one knows us.*

When Lala weeps for her mother and father, as though she might call them from across the weed-tangled land, Tante whispers, *We will always love them. We will mourn them. But we will not speak of them. We will hold them in our hearts but not on our tongues, yes? We will keep an altar for them and let their souls rest, will we not?*

To all this, Tante is quick to add, *We will not lose ourselves here. Because there is work we will do here. Not only for our vitsa, but for others.*

The day Alifair appears, Lala spots him first. She shrieks a moment before realizing the moving figure in the branches is not a young wolf or a hawk but a boy. Older than Lala's five years but still a child.

Tante runs out from the house, wiping her onion-damp hands on her apron and telling Lala to stop carrying on every time she sees a badger, that truly they won't hurt her if she doesn't bother them.

Tante stands beneath the tree.

"Don't look at him," Lala whispers, trying not to stare herself.

"Oh?" Tante asks. "And why not?"

"They'll think we're trying to steal him." Lala keeps her whisper low, even if Tante won't match it.

Lala may be small, but she's old enough to listen. She knows how many gadje mothers and fathers suspect Romnia of being witches who have nothing better to do than steal their children.

Tante tilts her head to look at Lala. "And who exactly will think that?"

With a prickling of guilt, Lala realizes there is a reason Tante

does not ask if the boy is lost, or if anyone is missing him. It is clear from his dirt-stained clothes and hungry look that he is on his own.

The boy's eyes shine out from the crab apple branches, more feral than frightened, like a cat caught in a lantern's light.

Lala barely knows anything of their neighbors, or of this place her aunt has brought her. But it seems enough like Riquewihr that she knows what would happen to this boy, or what already has. Farmers' wives chasing him off. Merchants beating him to make sure he never comes back.

Tante sets her hands on her hips, tilts her face up to the tree, and asks the boy, "And what are you good for?"

Not a taunt.

A true question.

Without hesitating, the boy comes down from the crab apple tree. He has hardly set his bare, dirt-grayed feet to the ground when he climbs the great oak next.

Lala watches at Tante's skirt. She winces as the boy ascends into the clouds of wasps that fill the space between boughs.

He plunges his arms into those swarms and grabs handfuls of oak galls, not once being stung.

He climbs down, jumping from the lowest branch.

Soon, Lala and Tante will learn that this boy knows how to keep secrets. Theirs, and his own. As young as he is, he knows how to fold away the things the world would punish him for.

He holds the oak galls out to Tante Dorenia.

Tante looks between the boy and the tree.

"Now that," she says, "is worth something."

Emil

Emil sat at the top of the stairs, letting his parents believe he was asleep.

“It’s harmless, Yvette,” his father said.

They must have been in the kitchen. It was always easier to hear them when they were in the kitchen than the living room. The sound bounced off the hard floor and counters instead of disappearing into the sofa and rug.

“His teacher used the word *alarming*,” his mother said. “Our son somehow managed to *alarm* his grammar school. You want us to ignore that?”

Emil listened harder, his back tensing.

Something about the way his parents said *grammar school* made him feel like he was still in kindergarten.

“All he said was something about us having an ancestor table on holidays,” his father said. “It was everyone else who turned it into summoning ghosts from graveyards.”

Now the understanding hit Emil in the stomach. And as soon as it touched him, it turned to shame at how stupid he’d been. Stupid enough to think anyone at school would understand, or want to.

Last year, he’d told Rosella Oliva about his family’s altars—the white candle, the dish of water, the food left for the dead, the

good cloths they used only for this. She'd taken it as naturally as him telling her the name of a particular butterfly. She'd told him about her own family's altars each November, the photos and candles laid out, the food and flowers brought to those they'd lost.

And that, how easily she'd understood, had made him careless around everyone else. He'd forgotten that most gadje buried their dead and then acted like they were as far away as another galaxy.

"You know how this is," Emil's father said. "You mention something harmless, and suddenly they think you're talking about Satan worship."

"You think I don't know that?" His mother's voice rose, good for listening but bad for Emil's sudden wish not to hear her. "Unfortunately, whatever they turn it into is what everyone else believes."

"Just let it be forgotten," his father said.

"And in the meantime, what?" his mother asked. "We let them say whatever they want about our son?"

"It's not worth arguing with them."

"We can explain."

"And what do you think that will accomplish?" Emil could hear his father stop his pacing in the kitchen. He was still now. "This happened to the Olivas last year, remember? Rosella brought in those pictures of the calaveras, and half a dozen parents decided she was trying to frighten their children with skeletons."

The mention of Rosella made Emil both wince and listen harder.

"And the Olivas talked to the school to clear it up," Emil's mother said. "You're only proving my point."

"I am not, because I wasn't done," his father said. "The Olivas tried to *explain*, and it ended with Rosella having to apologize. *Apologize*, for who she and her family are. And a week later she came home wearing lipstick." His father said this last part with the resigned flourish of giving a story's moral.

"What are you saying?" Emil's mother asked. "One wrong move, then what? Next week our son will be a smoker?"

"We can't ask him to hide everything about himself," his father said. "He didn't do anything wrong."

"When has that ever mattered?"

The words made Emil go still, at the same time the kitchen went quiet.

His mother and father wanted him to be proud. He knew that. They had taught him early the names of their vitsi, so he would know what kind of Romani he was. The words Manouche—his mother's vitsa—and Sinti—his father's—were some of the first he remembered learning.

But he also knew enough, from what his parents told him and what he'd overheard. He knew how much of his family had survived by trying to pass as gadje, and how many who couldn't had spent years getting driven out of places they lived, or worse. When a child went missing, his grandmother had had to move, the weight of a whole town's scorn and the threat of all those suspicions driving her away. No one bothered apologizing when the little girl turned up days later, laughing at the harried adults, having hidden in a friend's attic.

A small meow sounded behind Emil. Gerta, announcing her presence in the hall. The kitten batted at the hem of his pajama pants, like she knew he didn't want to be alone.

During the last glimmer, she'd come out of the woods with the other forest cats, fluffy and green-eyed, with early snow dotting

their fur as they decided which houses would be theirs. (Gerta decided that she hated everyone, but hated the Woodlocks the least.)

Emil heard his mother crossing the kitchen. He picked up Gerta and went back toward his room before his mother got to the stairs.

“Where are you going?” his father called after her.

“To check our son’s room for cigarettes, of course,” she called back.

Emil shut his door as quietly as he could. The exaggeration in his mother’s voice made him almost sure she was being sarcastic, but he briefly debated jumping into his bed and pretending to be asleep just in case.

His mother passed his room. Then he knew for sure.

Emil leaned against the door and looked down at Gerta, pawing his shirt. He looked at his own hands, at the shade of brown, in a way that felt unfamiliar, unsettled.

That brown made most of the school look at him differently, him and his friends who were their own shades of brown.

Most of Briar Meadow didn’t know what Romani meant, and if they did they thought it was the same as another word, one that stung every time he heard it.

Emil closed his eyes, realizing he’d just decided something.

With his family, he could speak of his Romanipen. Every time his cousins came over, or he and his parents baked hyssop into unsalted bread, gave it life, like blowing on embers.

With everyone else, he had to hold his Romanipen hidden inside him, a map to a country he had to pretend didn’t exist. In this house, he could be who he was. Outside, he had to be like everyone else.

He would keep altars with his family. He would help his

mother with the recipes that carried the luck of baxtale xajmata.

But he wouldn't ask to know more. He wouldn't learn any more about their family than his mother and father insisted on. Because if he did, it would spill out of him.

If he did, he would just make the same mistake again.

Strasbourg, 1514



er Zigeuner schädigt, frevelt nicht.

Whoever harms a Gypsy commits no crime.

It is law that spreads across borders like a blight through fields. And it comes alongside decrees that Roma must leave kingdom after kingdom, city after city.

Zigeuner. The term the gadje use for Lala, and Tante Dorenia, and all like them, bites like the teeth of a gadfly.

It is nearly sunrise when Lala goes in from keeping watch with Alifair.

The wattle-and-daub house has become a place where those fleeing can stop, for the night or for long enough to clear a child's cough or an old woman's fever. Tante tends to the families. Lala bakes bread and makes their vegetable patch and root cellar stretch into pot after pot of soup. Alifair gathers scrap firewood from the forests at night, his sharp eyes watching for anyone who might catch him.

Then, like a flame burning through a map, the law consumes Strasbourg.

Tante thought they might be safer in a free city, not beholden to kingdom laws. But now the magistrate issues an order for the apprehending of any Roma in Strasbourg.

Alifair goes out into the trees, collecting frost-chilled berries for a baby to teethe on.

So many families have already gone, fleeing to the forests and mountains to escape laws that will forever be against them. But those who have remained, Lala and Tante and Alifair quietly aid. The hollow-eyed men, the frightened mothers, the families desperate to leave before the arrests, crowd into the wattle and daub. The breath of more bodies than ever before fills the house.

Alifair comes back and hands Lala the iced-over beads of the frozen berries. With a small nod, he leaves again. Tonight a few are moving on from Strasbourg, and Alifair helps the vardos to a far road in the last of the dark.

She watches him go, his form against the dark trees.

With each family they see safely off, Lala feels her own heart growing stronger. Her spirit defies the gadje who would arrest these men and women and their children. Her own Romanipen puts deeper roots into her soul.

Even though it means being so close to all she is not allowed to have. Rromanès, a language she has never been taught. Aprons and layered skirts with more red and age-softened lace than Tante will ever let her risk. Particular ways of braiding hair. The careful embroidery of clovers and horseshoes, roses and certain leaves, the sun and the moon. Things they cannot chance the gadje recognizing.

Lala slips inside, quiet as a cat. She says a prayer of thanks to Sara la Kali that neither the little ones nor their mothers stir. Her steps fade beneath the sound of breathing and soft snoring.

She is so silent, it seems, that the only two voices in the house continue, unaware she can hear their low words. There is not yet enough light through the beams to reveal her.

Lala easily places the first voice. Tante's.

"She is my niece," Tante says, her words firm but her tone polite, deferring. "I know well enough to know what's good for her, I should think."

"And what's good for her is denying her own name," the other voice, a man's, says. The words do not rise in a way suggesting a question. They would seem an accusation if the tone didn't sound so magnanimous, as though it is up to him to give Tante permission.

That voice sends a shiver between Lala's shoulder blades.

It belongs to a man who is older, but holds himself so straight that his back seems that of a young man's.

He has done nothing to explain the shiver, apart from the fact that whenever he looks at Lala or Alifair, he has the pinched smile of someone tolerating a troublesome child. He calls her *Lavinia* in a way that seems pointed, as though to remind her what she misses by so rarely hearing her familiar name.

She wishes she had the nerve to tell him she already knows.

Lala pauses in the dark, listening, hoping they do not hear her.

"And the boy?" the man asks.

Tante sighs. "What of him?" she says, with more exhaustion than annoyance.

"Gadje already think we take their children," the man says, and though it seems the beginning of a thought, he does not go on.

"He has no one to ask after him," Tante says plainly.

The man lets out a brief sound, a curt hum, that at first seems considering but then dismissive.

It is not the first time such disapproval has been made clear to Lala's aunt. If it is not over Alifair's presence in this house, it is something else, mild scorn at the fact that Tante will invite

Roma across her threshold, but will not meet them in the open.

Some pity Lala and Tante for passing among gadje, sure they are losing a little of their souls each day.

Some consider it unforgivable.

The sunrise barely finds its way in. Tante and the man are still only silhouettes.

“She’s in love with him,” the man says. “You must know that.”

Heat blooms in Lala’s cheeks as she waits for Tante to ask *Who?*

But after a moment of quiet, Tante only says, “And he hasn’t touched her.”

The heat in Lala’s face grows as she realizes how obvious it must be. How plainly it must show in the way she looks at this boy who first appeared in the crab apple tree.

It is worse than that. She first tried to kiss Alifair last year, and he stopped her in a way that was even more devastating for being so gentle, setting his palms on her upper arms, widening the distance between them.

She has never felt more sharply the slight distance between their ages. They were children together, looking for the shapes of horses in storm clouds, but now that slight distance has put him on one side of a border and left her on the other.

Lala holds her breath, urging Tante to keep the silence, hoping she will not be pressed into breaking it.

Tante knows better than to try to convince this man of Alifair’s Romanipen. Alifair was born a gadjo, but from so deep in the Schwarzwald that he came to Lala and Tante already understanding the breath and life of trees. The rest—the auspicious

nature of certain foods, the different points of a stream used for washing—he learned.

The children of these families take to him quickly, waiting for him to play the next song on his Blockflöte. But the mothers eye him warily, grateful for how he does not talk to them unless they talk to him first.

The older man's voice cuts through the silence. Tante has outlasted him, and though it is a small victory, it is so clear Lala could sing.

"You let the boy stay here," the man says, "he'll have a baby on her by next year."

Lala hears the catch in Tante's throat, and knows she is trying not to laugh over how much this man thinks he knows.

Alifair has worked so hard to hide that he was given a girl's name at birth, and has to conceal the fact of his body to be considered as the boy he is. He has done this work, learning to bind himself beneath his shirts, settling his voice as low as the other boys', and he has done it so well that even this man doesn't suspect.

They all bear the secrets of their own bodies. Lala and Tante, their blood. Alifair, a form he must hide, one that would make others declare him a woman if he didn't.

Tante collects herself quickly. "We'll see, I suppose."

"Well," the man adds, with a wave of his hand that shows against the coming light. "You have your own opinions of these things."

Lala wishes she could glare at the man, for this slight over Tante remaining unmarried. Women have clucked their tongues at Tante's choice, but somehow this feels sharper, as though it will leave a mark.

Lala's protests grow heavy on her tongue. She slips from the wattle-and-daub house so she will not speak without meaning to.

The sky catches flame, orange and pink blazing through the deep blue.

A silhouette stands alongside the crab apple tree, both forms cut against the bright color.

One of the women. Lala didn't realize anyone else was awake.

Lala draws near enough to see the woman's dress, the yellow apron over the black skirt. The delicate cloth of a worn but well-cared-for dikhle covers her head.

The woman is placing her hands on the bark of the crab apple tree.

"What are you doing?" Lala asks, and then gasps at her own rudeness. It is no better than interrupting a priest who kneels in prayer.

But the woman offers her a smile, shown by the growing light. Not a tolerating smile. One as true as the color in the sky.

"Lowering a fever," she says simply, as though she assumes Lala will understand.

Something behind Lala catches the woman's attention. She looks past Lala, into the growing light.

Lala turns around.

Halfway between the tree and the lane stand Geruscha and Henne, two girls in plain clothes and unadorned hair who live even farther outside the city walls than this house. They have taken to Lala and Alifair so easily, and seem to like them so beyond reason, that it unsettles Lala. Henne brings over vegetables from her mother's garden. Geruscha endlessly admires the scraps of blue cloth Tante Dorenia sometimes gives her.

Geruscha and Henne pause, bread in their hands.

They know they have interrupted something.

Lala's heart falls.

As though Lala and Tante did not have enough gadje watching them.

Now Geruscha and Henne have seen Lala with this woman, this woman in her dikhle, with skin the same brown as Lala's, both of them standing at the crab apple tree as though it is a dear friend.

Geruscha and Henne leave the bread, and back toward the lane.

But it is already done. Lala knows that, even before they vanish against the brightening sky.

It doesn't happen all at once, the way the families stop coming. But they do stop coming, judging the risk too great, either to Tante Dorenia or to themselves.

Lala never finds the nerve to tell Tante why. She leaves her aunt a thousand reasons she could assume—her being an unmarried woman, her taking in a gadjo boy, and raising him with Romanipen at that.

Lala knows it lessens their risk, no longer having families here, or women setting careful hands on their trees.

But Lala cannot help hating Geruscha and Henne for taking it from her.

Rosella

The first time I saw them, the most beautiful pair of red shoes my family ever made, began with a nightmare. It was the year the glimmer left blood on the rosebushes, and I dreamed of nothing but red staining the petals and twists of thorns.

I was still small enough that when I had nightmares, I went looking for someone else in the house. So I crept downstairs, avoiding all the spots that creaked.

That night, my mother and father had taken our rust-reddened car out of town, meeting with the shops that would carry the work of my family's hands. They left me with my grandmother and grandfather, who let me have little sips from the coffee they drank as they worked.

I snuck toward the workroom, listening for the sound of my grandparents' voices.

But there was another voice besides my abuela's soft chatter and my abuelo's low laugh. A man's voice.

People came from all over for Oliva shoes, made by my parents or—if they were really willing to pay—the stiffened but skilled hands of my grandfather. They came to our corner of Briar Meadow, where the houses thinned out, the way my father said stars spread farther at the edges of the universe. Families

brought daughters to be fitted for satin heels or velvet ballet flats. They thrilled at the shoes' beauty, and the stories that they made girls hold themselves prouder and taller, or made their hearts lucky, or gave them grace that stayed even after they slipped them off.

I stopped at the cracked door.

A tall, blond man was talking to—no, not to, *at*—my grandfather.

“You expect my daughter to wear *these*?” He shook a pair of red shoes at my grandfather. They were as deep as cranberries, covered in vines of red-on-red embroidery.

Anyone who owned a pair of our red shoes handled them as gently as antique ballet slippers, each pair packed away into attic trunks and under-bed boxes, stuffed with paper to keep their shape.

But the man shook this pair so hard I worried the beads would tremble away. He wielded the red shoes, the workroom lamplight catching the glass beads.

The tight-woven satin looked adorned with tiny drops of blood, and I shivered with some echo of my dream.

“*Red?*” The man spat out the word. “For a debutante ball?”

My grandfather did not cower. But he didn't meet the man's eye either.

My grandmother stepped between them.

“Your daughter asked for red,” my abuela said, her face hard.

“She would never,” the man bellowed. “She would never ask for a color that made a mockery of the whole event.”

“Well,” my abuela said, turning through her receipt file and refusing to match the man's volume, “it seems she would, and she did.”

The man ignored my grandmother, setting his eyes onto

my grandfather. He stood half a head above my abuelo, lording every inch over him.

A hollow opened in my stomach.

The man slammed the shoes down.

The slight rattle of glass beads made me wince. I felt it on the back of my nightgown.

Then the man's gaze shifted. He studied the shoes, the fine stitching and beading. He couldn't even hide how he admired them.

It was a look I'd seen before, when someone wanted a pair my grandfather was making for someone else, the moment of admiring turning into wanting.

But there was something sharp in this man's eyes. Possessive.

"We'll expect white ones by the end of the week," the man said.

My grandfather nodded, showing neither fear nor defiance.

The hollow in my stomach turned hot. A week? For a pair from scratch? With my grandfather's other commissions, he'd be up every night until his fingers bled.

"And we'll accept these"—the man plucked the shoes off the table and stuffed them back into their tissue-lined box—"as an apology for the delay."

Anger roiled in my stomach and rose up into my chest.

The man would take those red shoes, those beautiful red shoes, and demand white ones (how would my grandfather make full-beaded white shoes in a week without his fingers bleeding on the pale satin?) and he wouldn't even pay for them.

My grandmother took a step forward. "Oh, no, we would never ask you to do that." Even from behind the door I could catch the mocking in her voice. "We would never expect you to bear the sight of something so offensive to you. Here." She

snatched the shoes from the box. “I’ll save you the bother of carrying them home.”

She slipped a pair of scissors off a work table and, quick as a magic trick, cut the red shoes into pieces.

I had to bite my own hand to keep from gasping.

The pieces fell like confetti between the man’s horrified face and my abuela’s proud glare.

My eyes flicked from the gleam of my grandmother’s scissors to my grandfather’s face. I braced for the pain that would twist his expression. Every cut, every whine of the scissors’ hinges, must have put a crack in his heart.

But wonder opened my grandfather’s eyes as wide as I’d ever seen them. No pain. Only awe, like he’d just fallen deeper in love with my grandmother.

At the sound of the blond man shifting his weight, I ran back upstairs, dodging the creaky places in the wood.

I breathed hard in the dark, and I waited.

After the man was gone, after I heard the shuffling-around noises of my grandparents shutting off lights and going to bed, I snuck back down to the workroom.

I had spent whole afternoons in this room, watching my grandfather’s dark, weathered hands shape the heel of a shoe, or my father guide cloth through the sewing machine. I studied my mother’s calloused fingers stitching patterns and constellations, and my grandmother hunching over her desk, making careful accounts in heavy books that seemed a hundred years old.

I had wanted to be part of my family’s craft since I first filled my palms with glass beads and felt like I was holding the stars. My parents could keep me busy with hours of threading needles and sewing tiny stitches, the things my father said were the first skills he learned.

Even without turning on a light, the workroom seemed stuffed with magic. Dyed satin and velvet spilled from the shelves. Tiny buttons sparkled in their glass jars. The length of beads my mother left on stretches of silver cord glittered like salt crystals. Every-color thread confettied the surfaces. When my mother asked me to help clean up, I pretended I was a bird, gathering up scraps to build a bright nest.

But now I picked up the confetti of candy-red satin and apple-red velvet and blood-red beads.

I wrapped them in crumpled tissue paper, my heart ringing with what I now knew.

I would never let this happen again.

When I grew up, I would never let my family, or myself, be where my grandparents had just been, having to cut our own work into pieces so someone else wouldn't steal it.

I would never let this happen again.

And I kept those pieces as a reminder. I would find a way to make sure we never had to destroy something of ourselves just to stop other people from taking it.

Strasbourg, 1518

In the dark, all she has are her hands.

She wants to light a candle so badly she feels the ache of it in her fingers. With nothing but the faintest breath of moon outside, the darkness is so thick that Lala's dress, her hair, her skin feel woven from night. But the sound of iron striking flint would wake her aunt as surely as a thief breaking the cellar door.

Lala pulls back the rushes, wild marjoram woven into the plaited mats to lessen the stale smell, and she unearths a wooden box.

If Tante Dorenia knew what Lala was doing, her glare would be enough to open the ground beneath her. Lala is sixteen now, a woman, old enough to know better than to take such risks.

Lala brushes off the lid, so no dirt will fall inside. It would seem a useless effort to anyone watching, anyone who could see her in the dark, since the box only holds more of the same. A scant handful of earth.

But this earth is worth every field in Alsace.

The sound of weight on the road—a crunching of rock, the give of the ground—startles Lala. Her eyes skim the parchment windows.

Her hands pause in the heart of the wooden box. The thrumming of blood at her throat grows hot. She cannot help the sense of having already been found out.

This box of earth is a sign of all they have hidden. To be caught would mean the loss of their home, their small trade of ink and dye, and far more. Perhaps no one would understand what Lala meant to do with this handful of earth, but that would be all the more dangerous. They would count the hiding of it beneath a rush floor as a sign of unknowable witchcraft.

It is the same reason Lala and Tante put away their secret altar, folding their best length of blue cloth, hiding the candles and dishes. If the magistrate's men were ever of a mind to search houses, they could use it as evidence of whatever crime they liked.

The sound outside fades.

Lala's heart quiets.

Nothing but an oxcart following the ruts in the road.

Lala's fingers skim the inside of the box, the pale wood earth-darkened.

The soft creak of the ladder sounds above her.

"I have it," she whispers as she hears Alifair transfer his weight to the floor.

He insists on going with her, and she is neither proud enough nor stupid enough to refuse. He already knows her secrets and Tante's as well as they know his.

They go out into the night, and the farther they get from the house, the more that handful of ground turns heavy in Lala's skirt. Its weight feels greater as she bends to pick the tiny wildflowers that flash in the dark.

She would have wished to do this in daylight, ribbons of sun

gilding the earth from her mother's and father's graves. But with light, there would be the chance of questions, rumors.

What we are, Tante reminds her, *they have made it a crime, wherever we go.*

As though Lala could forget.

Lala follows Alifair, cutting only through land he knows. The flax fields, high with green-gold. The soft marshland. A sheep pasture owned by a man whose wife trades onions for Tante's extra radishes. An orchard that hasn't borne fruit since last winter's frosts.

Alifair has always seen better in the dark than Lala. She imagines he learned growing up deep in the Black Forest, beech trees wreathing it in perpetual dusk. He crouches to pick meadow roses Lala can barely see. Their petals collect what little light there is, as though the moon is showing them to Alifair.

His sharp vision is something she has learned about him not only in the fields near their home, but in the minutes they've stolen in shadow. Last year, he started looking at her in a way that made her wonder if she should try kissing him again. When she did, the winter night was so dark that she made a mess of it, her lips meeting his jawline instead of his mouth, so it seemed more an odd greeting than a try at kissing him. But then his lips caught hers in a way so hard and decisive it showed his certainty about both her and the dark.

The damp grasses prickle Lala's ankles. She lets the feeling chase off the memory of that kiss, the way his mouth took hold of hers.

The green ground offers a clean, sharp perfume alongside the stream. The ribbon of water catches the moon in time with its murmurs.

Lala draws the earth from beneath her underskirt. Alifair hands her the roses and then keeps a respectful distance.

This is the last of it, the ground she has kept, the packed earth she imagines still smelling of the lavender in her mother's hair, and the knife her father kept in his boot, and the bitter salt of the fever that took them both. Every year, in the month that stole them, Lala has brought out a handful from the box, to loosen the world's hold on their spirits.

A few years ago, in a thoughtful moment brought on by the coming of autumn, Tante Dorenia told her about how they once did this for all their dead. And Lala couldn't sleep until she had resolved how to do it for Maman and Papa. Tradition would have called for it once, on the day of their burial. But it had been so long since her mother's and father's deaths, she worried it would take more than the one time.

She bends toward the stream and opens her hands. The flowers tumble away first, their sugar lacing the air. Then the earth twirls from her fingers.

She releases a long breath.

Now they will rest. Now her mother's and father's souls will be free from this ground, this life, from their own dream-troubled, salt-soaked deaths.

Lala prays over the flickering water, over the river stones grown cold in the evening.

As she opens her eyes, a flicker of motion draws her head up.

At first, she cannot catch it. She sees nothing but the dark trees and the distant road, worn down by carts and horses' hooves.

But then Lala catches the streak of movement, the shape cut between the black trees.

The figure—a woman, Lala can tell by the kick of her apron

and skirts—flails and writhes. She runs a few steps and then thrashes out in a way that looks caught between skipping and running.

Lala squints into the dark, trying to make out whether this woman is fleeing wolves or thieves.

Alifair inclines forward, and Lala knows by his posture that he means to help.

She lays a hand on his arm.

“No one can know we’re here,” she whispers.

“Then hide and I will help her.”

“You can’t. If anyone . . .”

She loses the end of the thought, both her and Alifair realizing, in the same moment, that the woman is not fleeing.

The woman throws her hands toward the moon, spinning in feverish motion.

“Is she . . .” Now it is Alifair who cannot complete his own thought.

Lala nods, half in confirmation and half in wonder. “Dancing.”

Emil

The turquoise of copper chloride. The bright blue of copper sulfate. The cherry-Coke red of cobalt chloride. Sometimes the things Emil took from the lab seemed more like paint pigments than chemicals.

He tapped the powders into glass vials. By now, he'd done this often enough that he knew how much he'd need for the week that school would be closed. And by now, Dr. Ellern had drilled him and his friends on avoiding contamination between compounds, so he could've done it half-asleep.

Emil locked the door behind him. Tonight he'd hand the key back to Aidan. Among the four of them allowed into the lab closet, they'd voted him keeper of the single key they shared. Aidan was so organized that he alphabetized his family's breakfast cereals, and he never lost anything, unless you counted titration bets with Luke.

The back of Emil's neck bristled with the sense that someone was in the hall other than Victor, his and his friends' favorite school janitor. (After Ben Jacobs tried to stuff Eddie into a cabinet in the music room, Victor had helped Luke overwax the floor in front of Ben's locker. They resined the spot before anyone could draw any conclusion but that Ben had, wildly and spectacularly, tripped over his own feet.)

The sound of shifting ice came from the machine around the corner.

Emil took slow steps down the hall.

The noises stopped a second before Rosella Oliva appeared.

Emil jumped, almost dropping the copper chloride.

Rosella looked at his hands.

Emil got his grip back. "I'm not stealing," he said, halting over each word.

It was a reflex, one sharpened by years of classmates looking at him sideways and their parents pretending not to. By the number of times he felt compelled to clarify *Yes, this is my locker*.

By how easily gadje turned the word *Romani* into the word *gypsy*, with all the suspicions they tacked onto those two syllables.

"I know," Rosella said, in a way that was level and soft, like she both knew it was true and didn't blame him for thinking he had to say it. She probably understood the impulse better than just about anyone else in Briar Meadow. For one November show-and-tell, she'd brought in that painting of skeletons dancing and throwing marigolds into a fountain, and it had only taken until lunch for the whispers to start about her trying to talk to the dead.

Rosella adjusted the coffee can in her arms. "I know you're one of Ellern's chosen students." She held up the coffee can, condensation dampening the metal. "I'm just here for ice."

"Ice?" Emil asked.

"Yeah, it's the best. It's all fluffy and crunchy."

"You"—he looked at the coffee can—"actually eat that?"

"What?" she asked. "It makes the best Diet Coke fizz."

"That's the department ice machine. Do you have any idea how many trace chemicals end up in there?"

"This is a high school lab, not CERN. I think it's fine."

CERN? If he wasn't already a little in love with Rosella Oliva, that would've done it.

"Okay," he said. "But don't blame me when you glow in the dark by the time we graduate."

Their eyes met again, and he thought he felt some shared memory pass between them. How they used to see how long they could get lizards to sit on the backs of their hands before either they or the lizards flinched. Or when Rosella brought Gerta a stuffed mouse she'd made just to see her tear it to fabric shreds and quilt batting within a few minutes (she found this far more hilarious than upsetting).

Or the first time he told her about Sara la Kali, and she told him about la Virgen de Guadalupe, these dark, sacred figures who both allowed reverence toward that which was so often despised.

It could have been any of these things, but it also could've been nothing. Emil didn't want to ask. He didn't want to get it wrong.

Rosella and Emil had been friends once, in the way girls and boys were only ever friends before middle school. She had spent so much time at his house, she'd heard his mother's fairy tales more than he had, asking for them after he'd long grown bored. The ones she liked best were ones about dancing, or cursed or enchanted shoes. Go figure. She was an Oliva.

She loved all those stories, even the bloody ones. The little mermaid on land, feeling like there were knives beneath her feet as she danced. Cinderella's glass slippers cracking under her. A girl in red shoes that made her dance until she died.

Rosella looked at his hands again, and Emil wondered if she could see them going clammy against the glass vials.

“So what are you doing with . . . whatever you’re not stealing?” she asked.

“Flame tests mostly,” Emil said.

“You keep a Bunsen burner in your room?”

“I have a sort-of lab that lives in my mother’s gardening shed?” he said, and it turned out as a question. He set the vials in his backpack. “You can come over and see it sometime if you want.”

He cringed, instantly.

If there was a worse way to ask out a girl, he couldn’t think of it.

“Maybe,” she said. “If I’m not too busy eating all the ice in this machine.”

She said it in a way that was such a confusing mix of familiarity and flirting that it made him dizzy. He’d barely shrugged it off by the time he got home.

The second he was through the door, his father shoved a piece of paper in his hand.

Emil stared at the printout of a photo, a square of frayed blue cloth on a wooden table. “What am I looking at?”

“What are you looking at?” his father asked. Almost exclaimed. “Do you listen to anything I say?”

“No, not really.”

His father frowned and knocked the spine of an academic journal into Emil’s forearm. “That”—he jabbed a finger into the paper—“is the exact kind of woad blue *your* ancestors dyed in the sixteenth century.”

Emil stared at his father. “That’s wonderful.”

“How are you my son? You have no appreciation for history.”

“History.” Emil shrugged off his backpack. “As in, it already happened. There’s only so far you can get if you’re always looking back.”

“Thanks a lot,” his father said.

Emil sighed. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

His parents, both history professors, had a marriage that seemed half-built on finding the same things interesting. They’d met during a conference panel, and as far as Emil could tell, that was the academia equivalent of a fairy tale.

“I just meant it’s what you and Maman love,” Emil said. “And you’re good at it. But I don’t, and I’m not.”

His father gave a smile that was equal parts fond and wry. It always made him look like a grandfather, older than his sprinklings of gray hair warranted. “Yes, yes, you and your chemicals.”

Emil breathed out. *You and your chemicals*. At least they were even. Emil’s father had about as much interest in Emil’s favorite subjects as Emil had in his. His father’s desk perpetually held old records, two-tone pictures, age-yellowed papers kept in plastic sheets, wood-cut prints of old churches. Some were pages fallen out of long-misplaced family Bibles, the names in ornate, back-slanted script. Some were copies his mother had made on her last trip to le Bas-Rhin. Tourists went to France for Paris and Nice. His mother went for les Archives Départementales, with its centuries-old documents in barely legible Middle French and High German.

“You know.” His father’s eyes drifted toward the floor. “You can’t go where you want to go without knowing where you’ve been.”

Emil’s back tensed.

The burning of ancestors’ vardos. Words stricken from their vocabulary. Being forced from villages, or fleeing in the dark fold of midnight, because there was so often a relative who could feel the threat coming before anyone else, like smelling snow in the air. Fighting back with iron shards and pipes and whatever there

was to be found when there was no warning, and there were the old and the small to protect.

What he'd put up with in Briar Meadow—the ignorant questions, the word *gypsy* said in a way that felt like it was sticking to his skin, the pointed looks whenever something went missing—it was so small compared to what those before him had endured. But that made him more, not less, ashamed of it. He couldn't help thinking of it as some kind of failing on his part.

Outside of this house, he couldn't be who he was. He'd known that since the day his parents got that call home. But the more he knew about his family, the harder it was to leave his Romanipen behind every morning.

"I know where we've been," Emil said. He started up the stairs, saying, more to himself than his father, "and I kind of wish I didn't."

Strasbourg, 1518

At daybreak, Lala burns the wooden box, turning to ash the last of her parents' belongings.

She watches the wood crumble, the shade of the oak trees dulling the flames' gold. She offers a prayer of thanks to Sara la Kali, She who watches over Lala and Tante and all like them.

Once the embers have gone as dark as her hair, Lala draws away from the wattle fence.

Alifair is up in the oak trees. He never flinches, not even when wasps crawl along his wrists.

He slips a hand between their buzzing clouds to reach the darkest oak galls. They whirl around him but never sting, even as he steals the growths they have laid their eggs inside.

Ever since the day Alifair first appeared in their crab apple tree, this has seemed as much a kind of magic as Tante knowing how long to keep linen in the woad dye. The wasps do not mind him, for some reason as unknown as where he came from. Both his French and his German carry a slight accent, like two kinds of grain mixing in a sieve, so no one can guess which side of the Zorn or the Rhein he was born on.

When she catches his eye, they share a nod, a signal they know as well as each other's hands.

Within minutes, he is down from the tree, she has set aside the bay in her apron, and they meet behind the cellar door.

Lala pulls him to the stone wall. He throws his hands to it, bracing as she presses her palms into his back. His mouth tastes like the lovage he chews after each meal, like parsley but sweeter.

Lala has never asked him whether that first kiss was because they had both gotten older, or because he had grown less skittish about his own body, a body that once tethered him to the girl's name he was given when he was born.

Now Lala knows not only the facts of his body but the landscape of it. She knows where there is more and less of him. She knows where he is both muscled and soft, full-hipped and full-chested, strong in the shoulders and back. The strips of binding cloth beneath his shirt give him the appearance of a heavier man, rather than one laden with a girl's name at birth.

Lala hears footsteps coming in from the lane, and goes still.

"I should go," Lala says, almost moaning it, eyes still shut.

"Later," he whispers, the word coming as a breath against her neck.

Lala squints from the cellar into the light, looking for a stout form—Geruscha—and a second figure with a tight-woven bun, the seldom-talking Henne.

For months, Lala held her breath over the two of them, fearful that any day the magistrate's men would come to Tante's door on the report of these two girls. But their efforts at friendship have only persisted, despite the frosted politeness Lala offers them (cold, so as not to encourage them, but cordial, so as not to offend these two girls who saw her with the woman in the dikhle).

Lala shields her eyes from the sun's glare.

The approaching figure does not turn toward the back garden, but takes the crabgrass-roughened path to the door.

Not Geruscha. Not Henne.

A man.

Lala distinguishes the colors of his garb, white and black.

Her heart quickens.

The robe and cape of a Dominican friar, one trained to root out witchcraft.

Alifair is alongside her, his approach quiet as a moth's.

They listen at the weather-warped door.

They hear the friar's voice, his greeting to Tante Dorenia. His words, however polite, cannot veil the contempt in his tone, his disdain for the fact that Tante is a businesswoman, never married, trading in the richest black and deepest blue.

Lala cannot catch all the words, but hears enough to make out a name, a phrase, a stretch of time.

Delphine.

She has been missing.

Two nights and a day.

Delphine.

The woman whose silhouette Lala and Alifair glimpsed just beyond the trees.

The woman they saw dancing.

Lala feels Alifair's shadow incline forward.

"Alifair," she says.

"We saw her," he whispers. "What if we can be of help?"

She takes hold of his arm. "And don't you think he will wonder what cause we had to be out in the thick of night?"

"I won't tell him about that," he says. "And I'll leave you out of it. No one will even know you were there."

As though that is any comfort. One word to the magistrate

that Alifair was the last to see Delphine, and to see her dancing like some wild spirit at that, and they'll blame him for it. He'll be brought to the scaffold or the stake before he finishes his testimony. The rumors that he appeared out of the woods like some fairy's child will not help.

Lala grips his arm tighter. "Please."

Alifair looks at her, his eyes turning to flint, his jaw hardening. He shrugs off her hold, and nods.

Lala knows him well enough to recognize this not as agreeing, but as relenting.

He is simply giving in.

Rosella

In Briar Meadow, our small, loosely gathered set of houses bounded in by woods and highway, the glimmers were as much a part of our calendar as the seasons. But I was the only one always dreading another year of blood on rosebushes, and all the slashed cloth and scattered beads that might come with it.

It never came.

Not when I was eight, when daughters who'd given their mothers nothing but silence for months suddenly wanted to spill their hearts out over late-night freezer cake. Not when I was eleven, when congregation members who, according to their choir director, "couldn't carry a tune in a bucket" sang like angels. Not even two years ago, when the glimmer brought Mexican coywives out of the woods; cute as puppies, they had an annoying talent for getting into houses—even ones where all the doors and windows were locked—and chewing on the nicest shoes they could find.

By the time I turned sixteen, I had almost forgotten to dread the glimmer, so I wasn't even thinking about it when the red shoes started appearing around town. They showed up on sofas and bedroom floors. Instead of resting in attic trunks, or on the high shelves where they'd been stored, they appeared in

the open, as though airing themselves out. They were found propped up in corners, heels against baseboards, toes resting on carpet. Or in cupboards, with broom bristles grazing their delicate beading. Mothers stumbled over them in hallways, pausing to yell to their daughters to pick up their things before realizing the red shoes on the floor had been wrapped away in tissue paper for years.

They emerged from linen cabinets and coat closets. They showed up in dining rooms, and slender women who'd sworn off bread years ago ate slices of black forest cake like they were drinking in a new perfume. When red shoes appeared at the senior community out by the pear orchard, eighty-year-olds who'd once been high school sweethearts ran off together.

Aubrey Wyeth, famous for being afraid to drive, found a brick-red pair once belonging to her older sister, in the middle of the street. The neighbors all saw her get into her mother's four door and speed away from that cluster of houses, identical and neat as folded shirts.

Sylvie Everley found a pair resting on her bed, soles down on her great-grandmother's patchwork quilt. The color of the satin, just between red and burgundy, was the near-purple of her mother's favorite wine. The beading made her think of how the light from the dining room chandelier reflected in a glass. The next morning she took a second look at a flush-cheeked boy she sometimes partnered with on the debate team. He'd been trying for weeks to work up the nerve to talk to her. That afternoon they were kissing behind the library.

For all the rumors that Oliva shoes brought grace and luck, it had always been our red ones that carried the spark of secret kisses, of brazen hearts, of eating bread with more butter than flour. And this year, all my friends were wearing them. Their

red shoes crunched over the leaf mulch, flashing with the bright magic that had taken hold of them all.

All of them, except me.

I was an Oliva. My family had made all these red shoes, and somehow I was the only one of my friends not wearing them. I had learned to blow-dry my hair straight (sometimes just so Sylvie could curl it again), put on eyeliner in the side mirror of Graham's car (pencil only; I was still working on liquid), eat lemon slices dusted with packets of artificial sweetener (the only thing Piper ever ate before a dance). All the things that made me almost, almost the same kind of girl as Piper Tamsin and Sylvie Everley.

And this would be the thing to remind them that I was nothing like them. It would call attention to my brown skin and brown-black hair. It would remind them that whenever I bought something new, I wore it twice the first week, while they all had so many tags-on things in their closets that they forgot about them.

This would be what set me aside from them, that a pair of red shoes enchanted with this year's glimmer had yet to appear on my windowsill or by my bed.

But when I got home from getting the crunchy, fluffy ice my mother and I loved, pieces of beaded red satin and velvet lay on the floor of my room.

Without bending for a closer look, I recognized them.

The cut-up scraps I'd saved eleven years ago. The last I had of my grandparents' work, both of them dying within months of each other when I was seven.

I let out a breathless laugh, both at the memory and the beauty of the stitching.

For eleven years, I had kept them in the back of my closet,

wrapped in mushroom-colored tissue paper, and now they had swept out like a whirl of bright leaves. It felt like both a blessing from my abuelo and a pointed remark from my abuela.

This was how I could honor the beautiful pair of shoes my grandmother had cut into confetti.

I had learned since that night that if I never wanted families like the Tamsins or the Everleys to make me give up a piece of myself I had made by hand, the best way was to become like their daughters. I had done it for years, and I would do it again. Like their daughters, I would wear red shoes this fall.

But I would do it the way my abuelo and abuela would have wanted.

I had grown up among leather awls and dyed thread. At three, I played with empty wooden spools instead of blocks. At eight, I knew how to measure a shoe's side seam, and at ten, how to run a drawstring through a slipper's casing without bunching it.

I picked up the scraps of beaded cloth.

I was an Oliva. If I wanted the kind of shoes my friends were wearing—shoes that might spark love, or inspire the making of midnight polvorones—of course I would have to sew them myself.

Strasbourg, 1518

“Try it for yourself.” Melisende holds out a dish of pale yellow coins. Small rounds of butter.

Lala stares at the dish. She has never seen anyone eat butter on its own, not even the wealthiest Strasbourgeois. Is this a test, to see if she will do it? Will they laugh if she places one on her tongue?

Being liked by these girls has shielded Lala from Strasbourg’s inquiring glances. But it comes at the cost of them thinking her strange and intriguing, with her rough palms, her confusion about delicate manners, and the fantastic rumors Tante has started to explain their brown skin.

She looks to Enneleyn, the first of the burgher’s daughters who ever offered her friendship, and the one whose lead Lala follows whenever she is unsure.

All Enneleyn says is, “You must be joking.”

“It works,” Agnesona insists, taking one and rubbing it into her cheek.

Then Lala understands.

There is no end to Melisende and Agnesona’s schemes to render their hair more gleaming, their complexions more luminous, their forms more radiant. Two girls, considered the most beautiful in the city except Enneleyn, and they work without

rest for it. Last week they dabbed on brimstone ground with oil of turpentine for red spots.

Their limbs are delicate as carved alabaster, their fingers slender and uncalledoused. It is the look of having been raised within the city walls, in the wealthier quarters. They let the sun on their faces so little they must pinch their cheeks for the slightest blush. If not for the brilliant red of their curls, the sisters would seem almost colorless, while Enneleyn, with her cloth-of-gold hair, has lips as pink as stained glass.

It took months for Lala to learn not to stare at Enneleyn, trying to guess how she might become such a girl, so adored it would make her and Tante a little safer.

Melisende turns her face toward the window. The grease gleams on her cheekbone. "Look."

Lala would sooner pocket a coin of butter than smear it onto her skin.

"Has she shown you the one she will not even share with me?" Agnesona snatches a jar from a low table.

"Give that back!" Melisende shouts.

But Enneleyn has already taken the jar, filled with a deep amber liquid that holds a point of light at its center.

Enneleyn lifts the jar. "What is it?"

"It's birch sap." Melisende tries to snatch it back.

Enneleyn holds it out of reach.

"With a pearl in it," Agnesona says, laughing. "See how the sap is dissolving it."

"Lavinia, look." Enneleyn tilts the jar toward Lala, showing how the sap eats at the creamy sheen.

These girls, with their Veronese raisins to brighten their complexions, the Tuscan oil they comb through their hair, their dust-rose gowns for Carnival. These girls from whom Lala hides

her hands so they will not see the stains and calluses wrought by work. These girls, who only showed interest in Lala when rumors Tante started took hold. Tante planted the bulb, the first whispers that she and Lala were the cast-off issue of Italian noblemen. And it bloomed, quietly explaining the brown of their skin. It flowered so well that no one remembers that Tante herself started it.

It has had the unexpected advantage of making Lala interesting to girls such as Melisende and Agnesona. They would never bother with her otherwise, no more than they would bother with Geruscha and Henne.

They would also never guess that Lala now keeps the secret of a missing woman.

As Agnesona slips the jar from Enneleyn's hands, Lala's stomach pinches hard as a knot in thread.

She and Alifair saw Delphine in the fields outside the city, and have said nothing.

Because Lala insisted they say nothing.

And now Alifair's guilt kicks at him. She can hear it at night, in the creaking of his bed, how he turns over and cannot sleep.

Her thoughts begin to spin, wondering over the safest place to confess. Perhaps the priest at Saint-Pierre-le-Vieux, the one who doesn't fleece his flock for all they can tithe.

"Give it!" Melisende grabs at the jar again.

"So, Lavinia." Agnesona gives the overdone air of pretending not to notice her sister. "How is your changeling? High summer must be his favorite time of year."

Lala swallows a sigh. "Don't call him that."

"Come now." Agnesona lifts a suggestive eyebrow. "If I were the love of a fairy prince, I'd tell everyone."

Her tone is more mocking than whimsical, especially on the word *prince*.

“Not this again,” Enneleyn says.

“What?” Agnesona asks. “No one knows where he came from, and he’s prettier than the other boys.”

Lala’s stomach buckles, wondering if *prettier* means Agnesona suspects he was proclaimed a girl at birth.

“Sounds like a forest nixie, if you ask me.” Agnesona quirks her lips.

“Are you so desperate for gossip that you must dredge these shallows?” Enneleyn grabs the jar and hands it back to Melisende, settling the dispute with the quiet authority of an older sister.

A scream rises up from the lane. It slices through the bustle, quieting the shopkeepers who call out to customers.

Before Lala can even move, she imagines the scene.

Delphine, barely alive, running home with the wounds of wolves’ teeth spilling blood from her limbs.

Enneleyn throws the shutters wider.

The four of them crowd at the window.

A young woman—Isentrud, Lala recalls her name—kneels at her doorstep, recoiling from a mass of blood and flesh staining the cobble.

“What . . .” It is the only word Lala can produce before trailing off.

“A sheep’s afterbirth,” Enneleyn says, almost mournfully.

“They’ve left it at her father’s door to shame her,” Agnesona says, less mournfully.

Lala turns away before the sight of it lifts the acid from her stomach.

“Now everyone will know she’s lain with Guarin,” Melisende says.

“As though everyone didn’t know that,” Agnesona says.

Enneleyn rounds on them both. “Can’t you two think of anything better to do with your mincing mouths than make an awful thing worse?”

She storms from the room, the windows gilding her hair and gown.

The sisters lower their eyes.

Lala watches the corner of Enneleyn’s skirt vanish.

If her lips were still before, now they feel sealed in place. The blood, the wailing woman, it is all a reminder of what Lala had almost forgotten.

In Strasbourg, the only way to survive your own crimes is for no one to know of them.