

The Greed

SCOTT BERGSTROM



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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For Sonja and Renata, wise and brave

“It’s not the bullet that kills you—it’s the hole.”

LAURIE ANDERSON

Part One

JUDITA

One

Judita ignores the ghost of her reflection in the window—reflection is, in general, something to be avoided these days. She focuses instead on the figures four floors below her, a pair of lunch-hour lovers strolling along the Playa de los Pocitos, carrying their shoes as they walk barefoot in the sand. They pass an old man standing on the shore, who casts a fishing line through the air that catches the light and makes a silver arc, like a blade made of wire, before disappearing against the backdrop of water that's brown as chocolate milk.

Judita's bare arms, burnt from too much sun, prickle with the cold of air-conditioning set too low. It feels luxurious, and she eyes the white leather couch with the silk pillows and wonders what it would be like to take a nap there. She does not sleep much these days, and when she does, never well. But there's no time for a nap anyway when there's so much work to do.

There's a party about to start. At the dining room table behind her—a heavy slab of dark wood, legs as thick as an elephant's—a dozen china plates are surrounded by eight pieces of silverware each. Chafing dishes cover a sideboard, and the room smells of something foreign and delicious.

"There you are," a woman calls out in English. Her eyes tell Judita she's angry with her for stepping beyond the entryway where she was to wait, but the woman smiles anyway because she's American and smiling is what Americans do, even when they're angry. The work ID from a soft drink bottling company dangles on a lanyard around the woman's neck as she fishes through her purse. Her hand comes out with a pair of 500-peso notes, not quite enough to cover the bill, much less leave anything for a tip. "Your man shorted me on the salad. Do you understand, dear?"

Judita blinks at her. "Sorry," she says with difficulty. "My English, only little."

"*Te olvidó ensalada*," the woman says with a grimace, as if the Spanish words hurt her teeth. "I have people here in two hours. So who gets salad and who doesn't? Tell me, please. I'd really like to know."

Judita tries to follow the logic of her statement, then shrugs.

The woman sighs as she hands Judita the money. "I won't pay for something I didn't get. There's enough there to cover everything else." She pinches the bridge of her nose and squeezes her eyes shut, the whole world today a torture.

Judita looks at the money, looks at the woman.

"Next time maybe you'll check the order," she says, and gestures toward the door. "Really, you people."

Judita pedals her bicycle toward the Old Town along the boulevard that skirts the Río de la Plata. She's faster now without the woman's order from the restaurant hanging from the handlebars and striking her knees with every turn of the pedals. If she hurries, she'll be back to the restaurant in thirty minutes. But it's a hot February afternoon, the dead of summer, and the humidity is so thick she can see it. Better to go slow.

The traffic is heavy, but Judita is agile and practiced and weaves between the battered Fiats and new Geelys in bright orange and green that look to her like toy versions of real cars. A truck groans and lurches forward, coating Judita in a cough of black diesel smoke. She grabs

hold of a handle on the back and rides for a time, coasting along beside the truck until she breaks free and heads north toward the Plaza Independencia.

It's tourist season, and the Old Town is thick with pink skin and sandals and expensive cameras worn around necks. From the snatches of conversations she overhears as she blurs past them on her bicycle, it's mostly Brits today, a soft, older crowd. They snap pictures of the local kids who mug for the cameras and then hold their hands out. It's quaintness and poverty the tourists are looking for, and what luck finding it amid the charming buildings of the Old Town just a ten-minute walk from the pier. When a good ship is in port, the very boldest children can make maybe a hundred pesos a day.

To avoid the slow throngs ahead of her, Judita takes a left and cuts down a street so narrow she can touch the buildings on both sides if she stretches her arms out. In the heat of the day, the passage smells like piss and roasting meat.

Ahead of her, a woman with frizzy, pinned-up blond hair looks down at a pair of kids, ten or twelve years old. They're hassling her, arguing with her in Spanish, while she replies in English. The knot they form blocks the narrow street, and Judita swings one leg over the back of the bicycle and coasts with the other foot still on the pedal.

The woman is clutching her purse tightly to her chest, but the boys are undeterred and wily. One of them reaches up and touches her earring, and when she swats his hand away, the other yanks the purse free. The pair dash down the alley in Judita's direction as the woman's scream bounces off the stone walls.

Judita steps down off the bicycle and, as the boy holding the purse is about to pass, extends her leg. The boy lands in a sprawl on the cobblestones, sending the purse flying. The other makes a move for it, but Judita's reflexes are faster, and she snatches it up. The boys glare at her, and the one she tripped says something about a skinned knee and how she'd better watch her back. They take off down the alley and disappear around the corner.

The tourist woman is still paralyzed with shock as Judita holds out the purse to her, and it takes her a full ten seconds to understand it's being returned. When she takes her purse back, she does so carefully, as if the thing were now toxic. "Thank you," she says in English. Then, self-consciously, "*Gracias*." In her expression, Judita can see a reflection of herself: stained T-shirt, skin coated in sweat and diesel grime. The woman opens the purse, takes out a 20-peso note, and hands it to her, taking care that their hands do not touch.

Judita pulls the bicycle through the back door and into the kitchen of the restaurant, leaning it against the wall next to the big refrigerator where the steaks and lamb and vegetables are kept—the very finest in all of Uruguay, or so Judita tells the tourists from the ships that dock just a few blocks away. Emmanuel, at the grill, gives Judita a look. He knows he shorted her on the salad, tomatoes and cucumbers being pricey this year, and he hopes she won't bitch about it. But Judita won't bitch, grateful as she is to have the job. Emmanuel is sleeping with Mariela, the owner, and his opinion of people matters.

Tying an apron around her waist, Judita starts through the kitchen doors to the floor, but Mariela stops her. Mariela is tall and thick and wears too much makeup and the customers find her terribly sexy. She brushes her red hair behind her ear and smiles the way she does. "You're filthy," she says. "Wash up first."

Judita nods and hands Mariela the money from the delivery. Even though it comes up short, Mariela gives her back a handful of pesos anyway. "Americans," she says. "Always teaching the world a lesson."

In the little lavatory where the cooks sometimes go to smoke weed, Judita scrubs at her hands and arms and face with gritty powder soap and avoids looking in the little mirror until she has to. Her face is lean and hard—"unwelcoming" is the way she's heard it put. Her brown eyes are drills that tend to make people look away. She has to practice her smile more, the other servers say, which will lead to better tips. In the absence of a brush, she combs her ink-black hair with her fingers

and fastens it with a rubber band into a short ponytail. The ponytail keeps the hair out of her eyes so she can see. And Judita must see everything. Must stay constantly aware.

The restaurant is noisy and crowded with a ravenous, barbarous crowd of British tourists smacking their lips over the slabs of nearly raw beef and lamb and calling out, "Girl! More wine, *por favor*."

Judita got this job because of her crude, utilitarian English. She keeps it because she's fast and can balance the trays of food on one hand and doesn't ever say no to Mariela or anyone else. She is always willing to swap shifts, or clean the vomit off the bathroom floor, or make the deliveries to the other side of town.

From four in the afternoon until one in the morning, she's on her feet, sweating, moving quickly from the broiling kitchen to the too many tables she covers. There are propositions and ass grabs and spilled wine on her tattered sneakers, but Judita works at her smile and says *no problem* and takes it all until Mariela shoos the last drunken customers out the door and locks it behind them.

Everyone cleans up, swabbing the toilets, putting the chairs up on the tables, then gathers at the bar. A few light cigarettes while Gustavo the bartender pours glasses of leftover wine for everyone. Judita drains her glass quickly, and Gustavo pours her another, which she also drains quickly. In exhausted silence, they count out the night's money, hoping the cash in their pockets works out to a little more than the total of the checks. They pool whatever's left and Gustavo is entrusted to divide it equally between them—servers, busboys, cooks. There's not all that much, usually. Maybe two hundred pesos for each of them. Only the Americans ever tip big. It's what they're known for, and the servers fight over who gets their table. All the servers except Judita, who always graciously allows someone else to take the Americans.

After the money is counted, Mariela emerges from the kitchen with parcels of food. Everyone goes home with something, and for most of them, including Judita, it makes up the lion's share of their diet. The

orders that were sent back are the best because they're mostly untouched. But no one is very picky. The half-eaten rice from table 10 and the almost-intact lamb chop from table 14 are bundled up in newspaper and carried home to waiting mouths. A woman with five children and a bedridden husband gets all the bones, which she boils for soup stock and sells at the market on Saturday mornings. As for the wine, the kind or vintage doesn't matter. Everything left over goes into the pails kept behind Gustavo's bar. Red mixes with white, Malbec mixes with Pinot. While the rest clean up, Gustavo funnels all the pails into the night's empty bottles. Whole families, whole neighborhoods, get drunk this way.

Judita tucks a parcel of food and a few bottles of wine into her backpack. Her bus doesn't come until 2:17, so she takes her time walking through what there is of nighttime Montevideo. Most of the city shuts down early, but this stretch, near the terminal from where her bus departs, only crawls out of bed at midnight. Bars and nightclubs and brothels are at their fullest and noisiest. The stink of weed hangs like a smelly ghost over the street. Judita doesn't mind, though, so long as the city leaves her alone.

She makes her way down to Piedras and keeps her eyes low, her posture meek, just a girl heading home from work. Which is all Judita is, all she aspires to be. The British ship is evidently lingering in port until morning—a problem with the radio, she heard someone at the restaurant say—giving the more adventurous passengers a chance to experience a night of fun in naughty, libertine Uruguay. A loud argument erupts between groups of men, and Judita knows it will escalate into a fight before long. Someone else trips on the root of a tree jutting through the sidewalk and laughs with blood running down his chin. Judita ignores it all and adjusts her backpack, heavy with the night's haul of food and wine.

"How old are you?" a voice calls out in English. Not drunk, not yet. Just loud.

Judita doesn't reply. Perhaps the question isn't meant for her, but

it's best to ignore it even if it is. Then she hears it again: "How old are you?" The man who says it—short-sleeved golf shirt tucked into khaki shorts over a bulging stomach—is too close for his question to be directed at anyone else. He starts walking beside Judita.

He's nearing fifty, heavy through the middle, weirdly narrow in his face. Judita sees he's carrying a camera, a good one. "Again say?" Judita asks in her uncertain English.

"I was asking your age," he says. "Sixteen?"

A flash of something crosses Judita's face for less than a second, as if a foul-smelling memory came to her. She smiles and hurries on. But the man stays at her side all the way to the corner where she has to wait as a bus groans past.

He steps closer. "I guessed it, didn't I?" he says. "Sixteen."

"Yes," she lies. "What you want?"

"We could find a hotel, maybe, but I'm not a snob about it. Anywhere is fine. Two hundred pesos."

She closes her eyes and breathes in deeply, pushing something down inside her. "Two hundred pesos for what?" she asks.

"You know. Keep each other company for a time."

Easy money. Money Judita needs. She asks herself: How hard can it be? "Five hundred pesos," she says.

"Two hundred."

She meets his eyes. "Show me."

He lets out a nervous laugh as he glances around, then moves his hands to the fly of his shorts.

"No. Your money," she says. "Half now."

He pulls the wallet out of his back pocket and hands her a hundred-peso note, wrinkled and dirty. But she sees there's also a fat sheaf of brightly colored British pounds. Crisp, new money. First World money. Pink and green and cream.

Judita tilts her head down the side street. "Come," she says.

He follows her as she looks for someplace private.

"You're pretty," he says.

"Yes?" Judita says shyly. There's a vacant lot between two buildings where piles of rubble from whatever stood here before were in the process of being hauled away. She steps from the sidewalk into dirt rutted with tracks, testing it with the toe of her sneaker to see if it's mud. It's not. "This way."

"I was in Thailand last year," the man says. "But the girls here are prettier, I think. At least you are."

She turns and gives him a smile. A backhoe sits idly near the far side of the lot, like a sleeping monster, and she directs him to the space behind it, where it's darker and out of sight from the street.

"You sure—you sure this is safe?" he asks. All shadow and stone here. Threats could be hiding anywhere.

"Oh, yes," she says, coming up close to him, near enough to smell his nervousness. Blisters of sweat on the side of one soft cheek capture and magnify the ambient light. She removes the camera from around his neck and sets it on the backhoe's track next to her backpack.

He makes a twitchy grin and unfastens his belt.

Judita drives her knee hard into his groin. The man pitches forward where she meets his chin with the butt of her hand and snaps his head back. Breath explodes from his mouth in a gasp as Judita's free fist lands squarely in his kidney and he crumples to the ground.

She gives him a second to recover, expecting him to leap up, take a swing, but there's no fight in this one, and instead he scrambles away from her on all fours in a manic crabwalk. Even in the dark, Judita can see his wide, panicked eyes. She steps closer and he starts to say something, a plea, but he can't find his words.

"Stand up," Judita says.

"Take—take my camera," he manages.

"I will," Judita says. "Stand up."

Slowly and with great effort, he does as he's told.

"Fight me," Judita says.

A flash of fresh terror lights up his face, but he takes a sloppy boxer's

stance, raising his arms into a defensive position, as if he's remembering what he's seen on TV. He's never done this before, Judita guesses.

She drives a fist straight forward into his nose, the soft cartilage bending and crackling against her middle knuckle. He staggers backward and brings his hands to his face, just as the toe of Judita's right sneaker lands hard on his left ear and sends him toppling onto the ground.

"I have pesos," he shouts. "Pounds. British pounds." He rolls over onto his back and pulls out his wallet. Judita snatches it from his hand. The sheaf of bills inside is pleasingly thick, and she pushes it into the pocket of her jeans. There's more on him, though. She knows tourists never carry all they have in a wallet. There's always a money belt or an emergency hundred in some sweaty crevice.

"The rest," Judita says.

"I don't . . ."

She swings her foot into his side, then reaches down and yanks his shirt up out of his shorts. Just a hairless, milk-colored stomach without a money belt. "The rest," she repeats.

He struggles to reach his left foot, and withdraws a folded fifty-pound note from his sock. "All I have," he says. "Really. All I have."

The bill is wet but goes into Judita's pocket with the rest anyway. She pins him down with one knee pressed into his bare stomach, then takes his camera from the track of the backhoe. The flash fires as she takes his picture, and on the screen a half second later, she sees the man's face, a shining white moon of terror, creeks of blood running lazily from nose to mouth to chin. Her fingers work their way over the camera body until she finds the hatch for the memory card. "For you," she says, dropping the card on his chest. "To remember your visit."

Judita is gone a moment later, already out of the yard, already pushing the camera into her backpack with the food and the wine. She knows she can fence a nice Canon readily enough. Two thousand pesos, easy. His credit cards and especially his passport would have brought

in even more, but that means he misses his boat tomorrow morning and Judita wants to make his exit as easy and free of police as possible. Not that she worries much about that—in the version he told the cops, she would become an entire knife-wielding gang of men. But Montevideo is a small town, and she doesn't want to risk running into him. Running into people is one thing Judita does worry about.

Two

I've gotten good at this, thinking of Judita in the third person, as if she were someone else. Her name isn't my name, I tell myself. Her thoughts—concerned mostly with food and money—aren't my thoughts. She ignores the slights dished out by the customers at the restaurant where she works. She ignores the under-the-breath insults of Americans and Brits as they express shock that the South American waitress and delivery girl doesn't speak English as well as they think she ought to. She ignores all of it until, sometimes, she forgets who she's supposed to be and goes back to her old ways for a little while. But only ever in private. Only ever when no one's around to see.

To live as Judita is like waking up every day in a torturously boring sequel to a torturously boring sequel. Nothing changes. Today's exhaustion is yesterday's exhaustion. Today's endless bus ride is yesterday's endless bus ride. I tell myself to be grateful that I'm alive. I tell myself that I'm extremely lucky to be here in Uruguay instead of dead or in a CIA prison in Turkmenistan. Judita—Judita's life—is a gift.

The Uruguayan passport granted to Judita Leandra Perels lists her place of birth as a small town about 200 kilometers outside Caracas,

Venezuela. Her surname, is not common here in Uruguay. But then, all kinds of people turn up in Uruguay for all kinds of reasons, so nobody ever really asks about it. In the case of Judita Leandra Perels and her father, Dario Javier Perels, they were given citizenship after their names were brought up during negotiations about visa requirements and trade tariffs between Uruguay and Israel. Why Israel should care about two Venezuelans is anybody's guess. But their application was supported by the Consejo Judío Sudamericana, Montevideo branch, with a personal recommendation from the organization's president, Dr. Enrique Goldman, regular tennis partner of Uruguay's attorney general.

That's the official version of Judita's life. And that's the version I'll swear to. I've got enough material to last me two, maybe three, days under serious interrogation.

The bus drops me off a twenty-minute walk from my home. At this time of night, the streets are mostly empty, and all the windows dark. Houses, mostly, and a few three-story stucco apartment buildings. A stray dog prances along beside me, not even bothering to beg, just happy for the company. He was a handsome thing once, a golden retriever maybe, but the mange and grime are so thick, it's hard to tell.

Already, at three in the morning, the scrappers are coming out of their apartments, hooking horses up to empty wagons. The animals are beaten, ancient things, slouching along, heads low as their owners tie them up. In a few hours, the carts they drag behind them will be piled high with salvaged metal and wood, anything that might be of value to someone, somewhere. I always feel bad for the horses, though the guys driving the wagons don't look much happier.

In the Old Town of Montevideo and the barrios near the center, everything looks nice. A city comfortable with its status as a cleanish, safeish capital to a cleanish, safeish country. But the scrap collectors and I know better. We live out here beyond where the tourists and politicians and the middle-class office workers go, on the edge of the city,

at the edge of the nineteenth century. My dad and I are lucky to have running water, but most people here fare far worse. I pass them on this street daily on my way to work, kids in bare feet hauling pails of water back to the semilegal shacks made of whatever scrap their fathers can't sell. Life in these quarters makes it hard to give a shit about your horse.

I climb the steps to my apartment building and go inside. The landlady on the ground floor is watching TV, or maybe she fell asleep in front of it. The stairs creak as I climb to the second floor, then the third. I pause at my door, hand resting on the doorknob, brass turned brown with age. It's silent in my apartment, as it always is. I unlock the door and step inside.

"Soy yo, Papá," I say. Just me, Dad.

He looks me over, the light from the table lamp catching his eyes, and the corners of his beard turn up into something like a smile.

"Good day?" he asks quietly.

"Fine."

I slip into my bedroom, take the camera and two of the wine bottles out of my backpack. Then I count out the money. Two hundred and ten British pounds and three hundred Uruguayan pesos. Add the camera and it's a banner night. Something to celebrate.

All of it—the money, camera, and wine—go into the space between my bed and the wall. There's a small fortune there now, four cameras, six phones, and, as of tonight, what works out to 1,700 US dollars in cash. What I'm saving up for, I don't know. But I know we'll need it, probably sooner rather than later.

I change into a T-shirt and shorts, wash up, and step into the other room of the apartment, holding the parcel of food and the third bottle of wine like I just discovered treasure. "Beef and a little lamb, I think," I say in whispered English. "Also some asparagus."

We own two plates, two cups, and two sets of silverware. I dish the food out and bring it to him.

"Any adventures?" he asks quietly, inspecting a piece of lamb on

the end of his fork. When we speak in English, it always has to be quiet. Foreign languages arouse suspicion.

"Delivered a big order to an American. She stiffed me on the tip."

"Sorry, kiddo. That sucks," he says. "Still, you get stiffed and bring home the bacon anyway. I'm proud of you."

It's silent as we eat, my dad on the couch, me on someone's dining room chair that ended up at the flea market. After a few bites, my dad places the knife and fork carefully on the edge of the plate and leans back.

"Hot today?" he says.

"Yes," I say.

"Sorry you have to, you know, be out in that. Unpleasant."

"Yes," I say.

"Another month, maybe."

"Another month what?" I say.

"Before it gets cooler," he says.

It kills me. It kills me that he's like this. That he's become this. There was a hero inside him once. But the last time he left the apartment was two weeks ago, and that was because I begged him to. Take a walk, I said. Get some air. He was back in ten minutes, and what I could see of his face behind the gray beard and scraggly hair was white as a sheet from terror.

"You need to eat more," I say.

"Too rich," he says. "I'll eat something later."

I just nod and finish what's on my plate. I'll tuck the rest of his away in the refrigerator. "You didn't touch your wine."

He brushes the knee of his pants. "I'm not thirsty."

"So—what we were talking about yesterday," I say. "The plan."

"The plan," he repeats, as if he's never heard these words before.

I take a long drink of my wine and, when it's gone, reach for his cup. He doesn't like it, how much I drink. He used to tell me that, but in the last few months he hasn't bothered.

"You need to get out," I say. "Into the world. I saw a sign for a chess club at the Jewish Center downtown."

"Dangerous," he answers, swatting at a mosquito. "Maybe in a year or so."

"We've *been* here a year," I say through gritted teeth.

"Keep your voice down," he says.

The anger flares inside me, but I look away to keep him from seeing it. "Buenos Aires," I say just above a whisper. "It's close. Three hours by ferry. And much bigger. We wouldn't have to hide all the time. We'd be just part of the crowd. I could, I don't know, go to college."

"Sweetheart . . ."

I know what he's going to say and cut him off. "There's a program at the Instituto Tecnológico, a part-time thing. I could take math, intro courses. I looked it up on a computer at the library. It costs a lot, but if I tutored English . . ."

He reaches across the table, places a hand on my leg. "College can wait."

"For what? Until I'm thirty?"

He squeezes my knee. "Your voice," he whispers, glancing to the wall and the neighbors sleeping on the other side of it.

I pull my leg away.

"We can do it, Dad. We can have"—I gesture around the room to the cracked walls, the bedsheet curtains—"more."

I stand and take our plates into the little kitchen. There's a spider on the wall, a nasty, hairy thing, but it's not bothering me so I won't bother it. I place the dishes in the sink, and when I turn around, my dad's standing there. His hands are folded over the stomach of his yellowed undershirt. He's looking down at the cracked tiles on the floor. *Don't*, I will him. *Don't start now*.

But he doesn't apologize. The last vestige of my old dad is still there somewhere inside him, the CIA operative part, the strong part. "Gwendolyn," he says, using my real name for the first time in months. "It isn't people that are looking for us. It's a thing. With ten thousand heads and a million eyes and a very, very long memory. This—what we're doing, keeping the lowest of low profiles—is a tactical necessity. Do you understand?"

I nod that I do. *Tactical necessity*. Soldier talk. Comrade talk. Not dad talk. "Yes," I say, even though I'm not sure I do. "How long?"

"Until they get distracted by something else. But even then . . ." The thought hangs there, and he shakes his head, not wanting to finish it. "You never see it coming, Gwen. Never. There's not a knock at the door. The floorboards don't creak. You don't see them until after the bullet is in you."

I turn away. "Stop talking like that."

"It's true, Gwen. This isn't the life I had in mind, either. But it's the hand we've been dealt."

"Then change it."

"How?" he says.

"You know how," I say.

I hear him breathe out through his nose, disappointed and a little angry. It's the untouchable topic, the thing-that-must-never-be-discussed.

"Sweetheart," he says. "Money won't fix a goddamn thing."

I turn back to him, eyes on his, willing the message to finally be received. "Let's try it and see," I say.

He may be asleep. Hard to tell. The other room is quiet, but then it's always quiet with my dad, the mouse who thinks every shadow is a cat. I sit on the bed, back against the wall, eyes drifting aimlessly out the window. Sometimes in the morning, if the smog is not too thick, I can see a little slice of the river beyond the shanties. Sometimes, if the river's not too muddy, it actually looks blue, gleaming like a promise. Now, though, the dim yellow lights of Montevideo are all I get, just a scattering of them, as if there were barely a city there at all.

I reach into the space between my bed and the wall and pull out a bottle of tonight's wine, the slurry of remnants left behind by the customers at the restaurant. I have little to compare it to quality-wise, but it's not bad by my low standards, and sometimes it even contains a surprise or two. Tonight's, for example, tastes like rancid blackberries,

but in the best possible sense. Complicated and weird. I pour it into a chipped coffee mug and sip it primly, like some exiled, destitute princess.

I don't drink wine because I like it, or to get drunk—both are side effects, distractions from the real reason, which is that wine makes me sleepy. It's a drug, a medicine. When I first started bringing it home from the restaurant, a single glass did the trick. But then a single glass turned into two, then became a bottle. Lately, getting sleepy takes a bottle plus one—a full bottle plus a glass from the next. A bad road to start down, but a girl's got to sleep. I can't help it if my mind won't shut off or if my body resists sliding into my personal dreamland hell.

I take out my deck of cards and begin shuffling. It's an old deck, dating at least from my time in New York, maybe before, and I took it with me to Paris and Berlin and Prague. The cards are worn and bent and fraying, and really, I should just break down and spend a few pesos on a new deck. But it's practically the only thing that remains from my other lives and other names, the single thread stretching from Judita to Sofia to Gwendolyn.

As I drink, my hands grow steadier, the shuffles sharper and more precise—another bad sign—but I can't do it properly without the wine anymore. I splay the cards out on the bed in a perfectly spaced, face-down arc, then sweep them over so they flow like a wave and finish faceup. This has, for years, been my therapy, the calm orderly plastic world of chance and statistical probability. Each shuffle is a new universe of winners and losers.

The money. The idea flashes across my mind again, so I take another sip of slurry wine and tell it to go away. But it won't. In the cartoon of the man crawling across the desert, the money is the mirage glass of water on the horizon, the thing keeping him going. But this is no mirage, despite what some people say. The money belonging to the dead crime lord Viktor Zoric, the man my dad helped put in the grave, is now comatose in Switzerland and Liechtenstein, asleep, dormant, waiting to come alive again at true love's kiss.

It's how Zoric paid people off, my dad says. Start a new company, open a new account, and make the payee a co-owner. Bribing an official is as easy as that. I'd had the account numbers. And my dad knew where to find the passcodes and names. This information had nearly killed us both.

I push the cards together and set the deck on the table next to my bed. Then I take the last swallow I'll allow myself—a bottle plus one. I sink back into the bed and close my eyes. What I see projected in my mind are the twenty-odd bodies I stacked up as I gouged my way from Paris to Berlin to Prague. Each face comes back to me. The guy I stabbed on the train, the guy whose brains I blew out in a jail cell, are the most generous, appearing to me only as they appeared at the moment they died—openmouthed, frightened. But I remember the others more clearly. Emil in the blue cast of the dashboard lights of his van, rapping along with American hip-hop. Roman as he bought me a dress, struggling through morphine to count out the money. Bohdan Kladivo as he smiled and lit his cigar and told me that if I wanted to rise in this world, I needed to be crueler than any man.

These faces I see as they were before their deaths. Living faces. The faces of men. My rational, daytime self believes that each and every one deserved it, whether it was the knife or the bullet or the rat poison I dumped in their tequila. But my subhuman, nighttime self is less sure, remembering as it does the blood and toxic vomit and how the idea of justice looks nothing like the reality of justice.

That's why, no matter the volume of wine I drink, my sheets are tangled around me and wet with sweat every morning. But it was all for a good cause, wasn't it? Rescuing one's father. It all worked out in the end, didn't it? Waking to another morning in Montevideo, alive.

Three

See you on the other side.

That's what Yael said, just before I left the German farmhouse a few kilometers from the Czech border. She said it casually, in the middle of a loveless hug concluded with two quick pats on the back. The other side of what? The Atlantic? Death? Good and evil? But instead of asking, I climbed into the trunk of the Mercedes sedan. Someone handed me a bottle of water, a bag to throw up in if I needed it, and two small pills—a sedative and something for nausea meant to be dissolved under the tongue.

I rode in the dark for a very long time—two hours or eight, impossible to tell. My mind went blank in the tight confines, aware only of itself and the discomfort of the body to which it was attached. I rode over rough roads and smooth, through cities and over highways. I puked into the bag once, and nearly again when the smell of it became too much. By the end, I had to pee so badly I thought I'd pass out from the effort of holding it.

When the trunk finally opened, we were in a dingy hangar at a small airport, the air smelling of gasoline and the walls piled high with

boxes and spare parts. I climbed into the backseat of a single-engine prop plane, the whole cabin no bigger than that of a small hatchback. A pale guy with terrified eyes and clutching a briefcase to his chest climbed in next to me. "She saw my face," he hissed in French to the man who turned out to be our pilot.

East to another airport, where the signs were in what I took to be Polish. Another plane south, a small jet this time, utilitarian blue vinyl seats with metal rings between them. I stared at these for a while, trying to figure out their purpose, and realized after we'd taken off they would be perfect for anchoring handcuffs. A pretty woman with short black hair smiled at us like a flight attendant, then seized my hand with an immensely powerful grip when I tried to open the window shade.

"Windows are to remain covered," she said.

"Until when?" I asked.

"Until we land," she said.

As she turned away, I saw a pistol holstered in her waistband.

The French guy fell asleep a short time later, his head resting on my shoulder. He snored and murmured something indiscernible as he dreamt. Every once in a while, he shuddered with the briefcase against his chest, as if even now he was fearful of losing it.

With no external reference point, time again slipped away, just as it had in the trunk of the Mercedes. We flew for six hours, or so I guessed, enough for several cycles of terror turning to boredom and back to terror again. Just as my body was telling me it was time to go to sleep, we touched down. The French guy woke in a panic as the wheels bounced and squealed on the tarmac, gasping and sucking drool into his mouth. But this wasn't, it turned out, his stop. Only mine.

When the cabin door opened, I stepped into the queer chill of a desert at night. As I climbed down the staircase to the ground, I saw nothing but a small airstrip with a few hangars and unmarked military trucks, all painted tan. A woman with olive skin pulled tightly over fine features and black hair cut close to the scalp waited for me beside a jeep. She wore a green serge army uniform with no patches or markings, not even a flag.

"Hello," she said in English that had no accent. "We're pleased to have you here, Student 312."

There was no official name for the place, so someone who came before me gave it an informal one: Orphan Camp. We called it that because that's what we were, at least in a way. There was no wall and no guard tower, only a fence, a mere two meters high. This wasn't, the instructors were quick to remind us, a prison; it was the safest place in the world we could possibly be. Besides, who needs a wall and a guard tower when you're surrounded by untold miles of desert?

A few minutes after my arrival, another woman in the same unmarked uniform stood me up before a dozen serious faces and introduced me.

"Welcome, 312," they all said back in frightening unison.

There was a hardness to each student's face, something born of trauma and sadness that had petrified their features into a kind of stony beauty that was nearly angelic. They weren't surprised by anything anymore, nor could they be hurt by anything anymore. The color of the students' skin ran from nearly black to paper white, but there was a commonality of experience that made them appear almost like siblings. We had all, for reasons known only to Tel Aviv, somehow fallen into Israel's orbit. Hence our presence here.

Student 309, a wispy Arab boy who spoke English like a British duke, was assigned to show me around the camp. There wasn't much to it besides a few metal buildings, some farm equipment, and fields beyond the fence where wooden lattices held up plastic plants. Just what kind of plants they were supposed to be—grapes, maybe, but in the desert?—I had no idea. Afterward, 309 helped me collect my bedding, toiletries, and uniform: blue fatigues identical to the instructors' except for the color.

Our final stop was the barracks, where he tapped on a thin mattress on an upper bunk. "Days begin at six," he said. "Except when they don't."

I looked at him with a tired smirk that showed I was too exhausted for riddles.

"Sometimes it's a four-in-the-morning run through the desert," he said. "Other times, it's a tear gas grenade through the door."

"A tear gas grenade?"

"To get the blood flowing," he said. "Orphan Camp coffee."

They allowed me to rest that first day, something 309 told me it was better not to get used to—"As you shan't see much more of it for the next six months." *Shan't*. The first time I'd heard someone use that word in real life.

The heat in the barracks was sweltering, and I knew it would be worse when the others came back, with too many bodies too close together. As I drifted off—too tired to be frightened or even intrigued by what was in store for me next—I heard, through the metal walls, shouting instructors, and every once in a while, a factory whistle.

I managed to sleep until the students returned in what I took to be the late afternoon. They were beaten and dirty, their uniforms soaked through with sweat. No one had the energy to speak, so they simply stripped naked and either crawled into bed or sat around in exhausted silence. This nakedness, I would come to learn, was no more than a biological fact, signifying nothing other than how hot it was. The temperature was simply too high and our bodies too empty for anything like arousal.

I climbed down off the bunk and saw the person who slept below me was a parchment-skinned woman with red hair, no older than twenty. She went by 303, or, as she pronounced it, "Tree-oh-tree"—hard *t*'s, trilled *r*'s. I recognized her look and her accent.

"*Vuy Russkiy?*" I said. You Russian?

She looked at me coldly. "As I said, I'm 303."

No names here, and no nationalities either.

Firearms training always came first thing in the morning and was taught by a blond-haired, blue-eyed giant of a man who introduced us to the wonders of the world's most common pistols and assault rifles. Thousands of paper targets later, there were blisters on my trigger finger

and on the webbing between my thumb and hand. We repeated exercises on disassembling, cleaning, and reassembling the weapons so many times that by the end the instructor blindfolded us, and we could do it in the dark.

After firearms, it was hand-to-hand fighting, taught by a cheery middle-aged woman who looked like her hobbies included scrapbooking and collecting porcelain cats. She was, however, never to be crossed, and when a boy I thought from his accent might be from West Africa failed to deliver a hard enough blow to her during sparring, she twisted his arm behind his back until he screamed.

This class always ended with the mysterious factory whistle. As soon as it sounded, everyone—students and instructors alike—retreated to the nearest shelter. A tractor dragging an enormous sheet of plywood by a pair of heavy chains went out, driving around the grounds, erasing our tracks. I learned why on my first day. Student 300, an Asian girl in her late teens, pointed to the sky as we waited inside a barn and said, “Satellites.”

The schedule of the whistles was fairly regular, but there were enough variations—one day, it sounded a total of thirteen times—that I wondered just how the instructors knew when the satellites were overhead. In any case, the images the satellites sent back to Washington and Moscow and Beijing were of a small farm consisting of a few buildings, some crops, and scattered pieces of equipment. Nothing of interest. And certainly not a summer camp at which Kumbaya-singalongs were substituted for AK-47 training.

Firearms and hand-to-hand combat were only two of the subjects we were taught in what turned out to be a comprehensive education in clandestine life. Other instructors in anonymous green uniforms taught us old-school tradecraft, things like street passes, dead drops, surveillance detection—analog alternatives to the high-tech, and of more use today, they told us, than ever before. They taught us how to hot-wire and drive anything with an engine, from a scooter to an elephantine military truck. We learned how to slam through a roadblock,

and how to spin a car 180 degrees with just a flick of the wrist and deft dance on the brake and gas.

There was a special sort of pleasure to the training. The tools of revenge is how I saw it. Especially when I got to the knives. Easy to get, the instructor said, and devastating, even in the hands of an amateur. We started with fancy ones, built for fighting. Then cheap ones, made for cutting tomatoes and available anywhere on the planet. It turns out, knives were what I was good at, and the instructor said she liked my technique. There was, in her words, a certain “elegant aggression” to my style.

That’s the thing that happens to anger when you live with it awhile—elegant aggression. The fury doesn’t make your hands shake or your skin buzz anymore. It just lives in your veins, like a drug, making you stronger and that much faster. Making your aim at the carotid or femoral or liver or kidney that much sharper. The guns were fine, and the driving fun, but that—the ten centimeters of steel coming to a point like an extension of my very arm—is where I found my real pleasure.

Each night, back in the barracks, there was little talk and almost no camaraderie. It’s hard to make friends when you go by a number and aren’t allowed to say so much as where you came from. Only 303 became something approaching a friend. It turned out both of us had trouble sleeping, haunted by memories that had followed us all the way here. So after lights-out, we’d sneak into the yard to escape the heat. Hushed conversations were all that followed, and those always in the present and future tenses, never the past.

“We’re in Israel, you think?” she said one night.

She’d been better with the *th*’s lately. No more turning them into *t*’s or *d*’s.

I shrugged. “Too obvious.”

“North Africa somewhere.”

“Maybe.”

She leaned back against the barracks wall. “They say someone got

a radio once. Climbed up on the roof to listen for a signal, maybe figure out where this place is.”

“Did they hear anything?”

“Yes,” she said, looking at me through the darkness. “A voice telling them to turn off the radio and get off the roof.”

We both laughed into our arms until tears came. It was too absurd not to be true.

People came and went. Student 309 vanished one day, and a week later Student 303 did too. Where they went, none of us knew. New arrivals showed up at random times. Student 313 turned out to be a kid I thought was Japanese until she opened her mouth and out came pure Chicago; 314 was a Latino boy who became the hand-to-hand teacher’s star pupil within a single day.

My time came after I’d been there six months. As the others retreated to the barracks one afternoon, I was summoned to the office of the camp’s director, the same woman with olive skin and fine features who’d picked me up from the airfield.

“Your father’s doing well, happy to say,” she said with no hint of emotion from behind a battered wooden desk. “Question is, how are you doing?”

It was a startling question in an environment where what they teach you is trickery and deception and how to kill. “I’m—doing well also,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Our goal was to teach you survival skills,” she said. “For a new life, in a new world, with a new name. Do you feel we’ve met that goal successfully?”

I nodded. That had been the line from day one, but it hadn’t fooled any of us. Survival skills are how to start a fire or open a bank account. What we’d been taught was more aggressive. We weren’t being trained for defense but offense. And it wasn’t lost on me that I’d incurred a debt to the state of Israel that they weren’t likely to forget.

“Yes,” I said. “You did that successfully.”

She didn't acknowledge the answer and instead pulled a sheaf of papers from a manila folder. "Your Spanish," she said. "Still fluent?"

"Tal vez," I said.

She blinked at me from across the desk.

I tried to smile. "Maybe."

She slid the sheaf of papers toward me. "Montevideo, Uruguay," she said. "Your name is now Judita Leandra Perels."

Four

Dear sir or madam,

Contained in the enclosed documents are details of forty-seven (47) operations undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. All transpired with the knowledge of, support of, and/or participation of members of the Department of Defense, the executive branch, and key members of Congress. The events are described from personal memory, as I was a participant or observer in all the cases described here. Each scream of the tortured, each body disposed of in an anonymous grave or in the sea or left in the sun, is precisely accurate to my memory.

Nothing is conjecture or supposition.

What you are reading is a catalog of crimes. This catalog describes torture and brutality perpetrated against provably innocent individuals, and murder perpetrated against same. This catalog describes the CIA's collusion with dictators and enemies of the United States, as well as collusion with organized crime syndicates, including, but not limited to, the Zoric

crime family based in Belgrade and Sarajevo, the Kladivo crime family based in Prague, the Solkov syndicate based in Moscow, the Al-Alwadi smuggling organization based in Damascus, and several others. This catalog describes the participation of CIA operatives and agents in arms and narcotics trafficking, and the trafficking of human beings, often women, often children, for the purposes of sexual exploitation. This catalog describes the profiting from these actions by members of the intelligence and defense establishments, members of the executive branch, members of Congress, and private interests—all of whom are herein named.

It is my only hope that my daughter, Gwendolyn Bloom, likely the deliverer of this document, be protected by whatever means you have at your disposal. She is innocent in these affairs, though hardly unstained by them. Gwendolyn's safety is, as I write this, my foremost concern in this world. Had it always been my foremost concern—which, as a father, it should have been—it would not have been necessary to write this document in the first place.

*Yours, in trust,
William Bloom
Montevideo, Uruguay*

So begins, in his spidery, formal cursive, the first pages of his confession, what he calls his “doomsday device.” It spans some seven children’s school notebooks in all—two with blue covers, three with pink, and two Hello Kitty. Each page is filled, front and back, with careful prose in ink, virtually uninterrupted by redactions or corrections, as if he were merely transcribing something that already existed fully formed in his head.

The murder of a French spy by the CIA as a favor to a corrupt colonel in Pakistani intelligence. A meeting in a Saudi hotel suite between American businessmen, a US senator, and a Saudi prince in which advanced weapons technology was traded for cash. CIA officers being

treated to a buffet of child prostitutes by Viktor Zoric in the city of Munich.

And so on, page after page, brightly colored children's notebook after brightly colored children's notebook, until he has damned everyone he has ever known, including himself. I read the pages only incidentally, to and from the network of Internet cafés where I scan the notebooks and upload the videos he makes of himself reading the whole confession aloud. There are hours of footage, my dad sitting in dim light, speaking low so as not to be overheard by the neighbors, occasionally fiddling with the camera on the smartphone I'd gotten at his request from a pawn shop.

I don't watch the videos, though, which would make it impossible to pretend the character of "I" in the notebooks refers to someone other than my father. He, William Bloom, the I, comes off better than the others, of course, actively participating in no torture, and only three or four or maybe five murders depending on where one draws the line between participation and observation. At no point does he accept any gift or bribe.

I love him. Still. Despite. Maybe because he's my father and nothing can change that, or maybe because he's the only thing left to love. But it's different now. Since coming here, since reading his doomsday device for myself, the love is different.

Carga Completa, says the screen. Upload Complete.

Counting this, the latest and hopefully final episode of Dad's doomsday device, there are fourteen videos in total—two each for each of the seven notebooks.

My dad put together a list of editors at newspapers, magazines, blogs, and television news networks most likely to be interested in the story. Some were old-school journalists for whom integrity and telling truth to power mattered above all. Others were simply scandalmongers, eager for any kind of scoop. The e-mails to the editors linking to folders in several redundant cloud storage sites around the world are already

written and waiting in the drafts folder of several different e-mail accounts. All I have to do in case my dad is captured or killed is log in to just one of them and hit send.

I move on to the next cloud storage service and start the process of uploading the video and scanned notebook pages again. Turns out, prepping to bring down the world is tedious business. I have to use the TOR browser for anything I do on the Web. It bounces the traffic through servers all around the world before it finally reaches its destination. It's slow at the best of times, but here in Uruguay, it absolutely crawls.

When watching the progress bar creep along becomes too painful, I turn back to my book. It's hard to concentrate here; the *pew-pew-pew* from games and moaning from porn is relentless. And the book I'm reading, checked out from the library, isn't helping, either. *CIA Involvement in Central and South America, A Critical Analysis*. I keep the book's dust jacket off, so only the plain cover is ever visible to the curious.

The topic is interesting enough, but getting through it is like hacking my way through a jungle. Dense, mosquito-infested text, by an author who has no interest in getting to the point anytime soon.

But at least it's mind work, not physical work, not schlepping steaks to tourists and having my ass grabbed. I delight in sorting it all out, drawing the connections between one thinker and another, of wondering whether the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the state of things today are related, and finding out that they are.

To me these books are more than abstract ideas. They show me my place in the world. There are reasons the world looks the way it looks and behaves the way it behaves. My story—a woman of nineteen caught between borders and ideologies—isn't even original. Everything has happened before. Everything will happen again.

Carga Completa.

I put the book down, go to another cloud service, and start the

upload again. It's the last one, thankfully, and moving pretty quickly now by TOR-in-Uruguay standards. I indulge myself and open another tab.

Argentina, this month—just a single border away. Somewhere in the countryside, photos of Argentine cowboys and little villages. The month before it had been China, with wonderful photos of Shanghai and Beijing. Couples on the streets. Children holding balloons. Skateboarders midair.

I'm not an artist, and no photographer, but I know good when I see it, and Terrance's work is good. Forget for a second the colors and the light, and look at how the photos are structured. Their composition. See how that little girl is there, and her grandmother, over there? See how the rake the grandmother is holding cuts at a perfect diagonal that mirrors the shape of the bicycle in the background? It's Terrance's eye that makes him so good. His way of looking at the world.

TerraFirma is what he goes by on Tumblr. That's all that's left of Terrance Mutai IV these days. The wonderful, brilliant, deliriously gorgeous high school kid who always looked like he just stepped out of a Ralph Lauren photoshoot. No more Facebook profile. No Twitter feed. Just a Tumblr full of photos seen by 143 followers.

Harvard, he'd said to me in New York as we sat on that bench in Tompkins Square. Double legacy. A shoo-in. But that was right before the sky opened up and it started to rain and the world—mine, then his—fell apart. It feels wrong, looking at the world through his eyes, seeing the things he thinks are beautiful, with him not knowing that he's sharing them with me.

Carga completa.

Five

A black Lab naps in the sun, tail beating a slow, lazy rhythm on the sidewalk. A street kid of about nine wearing a Red Sox tank top says, “Hey, baby,” and asks me for a cigarette. I keep to the shady side of the street and pass a dilapidated old building marked with a sign saying HEILMANN TRADING CO. Through the open windows I hear the sound of typewriters clacking away—actual typewriters. What, exactly, does Heilmann Trading Company trade?

The ship that was in port yesterday is gone, leaving Old Town mostly quiet. I could find a corner somewhere and get a few hours of rest before Mariela’s, but it would just find me there, too, the anxiety. It always comes afterward, when the business of uploading another video is finished and it’s just me and video’s meaning. It is a train that hits me in the chest, dull mass, a hundred tons strong. It is a blade that slides upward, past my stomach, the point probing around for my heart, pushed forward by an expert hand.

There is only one way to escape it, so I keep walking, west through the Old Town and through the residential neighborhoods until my little refuge comes into view.

I hear it from the street, rap music and men grunting, and I smell it meters from the door. The cure for anxiety lies within: peace through pain, happiness through suffering.

A fist strikes me on the side of the head—a stupid mistake on my part, letting it happen—but I recover instantly and strike back with an elbow to the neck, followed by a tug of the hair as I pull his head back and drop him with an uppercut to the stomach. This guy's good, though, and bounces back, not flailing and desperate like most of them, but sharp and accurate, swinging a leg around and aiming for my bad left knee. I scoop him up by the ankle and drive a foot into his groin. His eyes pinch shut and he rolls away from me onto the mat. *Sorry*, I almost say.

I reach down to help him to his feet, but the instructor, Zvi, is right there. “No!” he shouts, as he would to a bad dog. *Not done yet*, he means. I know what Zvi expects of me, so I drop myself on top of my enemy, burying my right knee in the center of his back, and circle my right arm around his neck. The man's stubble is wet and scratchy on my skin. I brace my other arm on the back of his neck, then look up at the instructor. *Good*, Zvi nods. That's far enough.

From this position—an arm braced on either side of the neck—you jerk your right arm back and to the side, and if the movement is explosive enough, you break your enemy's neck. But I let the guy go and pull him to his feet. He fistbumps me with shredded knuckles and says nicely done. And that's the point here, the thing, the way you're supposed to do it down at the little Krav Maga studio off Avenida San Martín. It's okay to get beat. Just don't be a child about it.

I make my way to the water fountain, spit out my mouth guard, and drink. The first few swallows have the iron tang of my own blood, but the first few swallows are always like that. I keep drinking until the adrenaline and endorphins beating at the walls of my head recede; then I fall to a wooden bench and stare at the ceiling. It's boiling in here. And what's the point of the feeble little ceiling fan, stirring it all up as if it's making a difference? Christ, that shot to the head hurt.

"He's a cop, you know," the voice next to me says.

"What?"

"The guy whose neck you almost broke. He's a cop. A detective."

"Is he."

It's Marco Levinbach, the owner of the gym. He's twenty-five, with fine black hair cut close to his scalp, the way soldiers wear it. It suits his tight, athlete's face. Even his jaw is muscular. "Rafael has a dentist appointment tomorrow morning," he says. "Can you teach his ten a.m.?"

I shrug. "I'll let you know in the morning."

"How about you tell me tonight," he says. "I miss you."

"I'm working tonight," I say.

"After," he says.

"I'm tired after."

I get up to go and feel Marco watching me. There's not even a locker room for women here, so I change in the women's bathroom. I'm the only one who ever uses it. Testosterone hangs in the air thick as smoke, and the men treat me as something between a novelty and a freak. In Uruguay, nice women aren't supposed to practice a brutal Israeli martial art that's all about fighting dirty and hard. I unwrap the tape from my hands. It's doubled around my knuckles using the webbing technique Marco taught me. "So your hands stay pretty," he said. I don't care, but the customers at the restaurant might if I were serving their food with my knuckles still bleeding.

I move on to the bandage wrapped around my left knee and peel it off. The swelling has gone down but it's still painful from last week when Zvi nearly broke it to prove a point. About staying aware of your vulnerabilities head to toe, is what he told me. To teach me some humility is what it was really about.

I stuff the bandage and mouth guard in my backpack, then wash the sweat off my body in the sink, mine and the detective's. I scrub hard—it's important to keep up appearances at Mariela's—and the smell of sweat and the tang of blood would be frowned upon there. I tie my hair in a ponytail and change into work clothes, cheap jeans and a tank top—anonymous Judita. On my way out, Marco tries one

more time. His mom's making a roast for Shabbat dinner. He'd love for me to meet his family. Maybe, I tell him, in a way we both understand means no.

But just as I'm about to disappear into the street, I stop. I've got an hour or two now, I say.

Afterward, I close my eyes, content to stay this way for a few minutes or, honestly, forever. The room smells of wet towels and the grimy orange cat who watches Marco and me with detachment as we lie naked on the mattress on the floor of his one-room apartment. Marco drapes an arm around me—a muscular arm, gentle—and pulls me close against his body. He's warm, strong, and most of all, here. He kisses my neck and it tickles and I smile, even though I'm pretending to be asleep, so he just stays there, holding me, and no one has to talk.

"You can't fool me," he says.

"I'm sleeping," I say.

He pinches my side. "Lazy girl," he says. "It's the middle of the day."

I squirm and push his face away. "Lazy girl has to be at work in an hour."

He drops his head back to the pillow and lets out a mock sigh. "Just use me, then. See if I care."

He's a good guy, Marco. Strong and confident. He was born here in Montevideo, emigrated to Israel to join the army, then came back to open his Krav Maga studio. His family is Orthodox, but he doesn't really keep kosher except for not eating pork and shellfish. I started sleeping with him last July.

He's smart enough for what's asked of him, and he's a decent human being, and a good fighter, and exactly who he appears to be: a business owner who pays his taxes and dreams of a nice house, a nice wife. His world, everyone's world, isn't complicated, doesn't take figuring out. And that's what he sees in me, or rather, in Judita. She's just like he is: a decent human being and a good fighter and exactly who she appears to be.

I comply and play the part. Because for the first time since being

on the run, I feel safe. Because for the first time, in Marco's little apartment off a side street off a side street in downtown Montevideo, I feel unfindable. Not a soul besides his knows where I am.

I doze off for a while to the sound of the ticking fan and traffic outside.

"What are you thinking?" he whispers, mouth millimeters from my ear.

One night a few weeks ago, tucked there beneath his arm, his breath warm on my neck, I nearly did it, nearly broke down and told him the truth about everything. My mouth was actually open, about to say the words. And I think he would have accepted it, told me he doesn't care. But there are some secrets no one should be asked to keep. "Nothing," I say.

"Know what I'm thinking?" he says.

"No."

"That I'll make you dinner and you'll skip work tonight."

My eyes snap open. "What time is it?"

"Fourish," he says.

I scramble in a panic from the mattress, pull on my bra and tank top. He watches me, a half-grin on his face. "Come on. Just stay."

"I can't. Pass me my—thing."

"Not unless you say it. Don't be shy around me."

"My—underwear."

"Panties."

"*Panties.*"

He tosses them to me and I slide them on, followed by my jeans.

I hear his words, the words I hate, just as the door to the apartment closes behind me. All of it—the sex, company, warmth, peace—I enjoy. I really do. But every time I leave, I tell myself not to go back to him. I tell myself it's too dangerous. Too easy to slip and tell him everything, especially afterward, as the sweat on our bodies cools and he presses his chest to my back and tells me he loves me.

. . .

Mariela's is ablaze tonight. A new ship just arrived in port and there's an hour wait for a table. I rush in through the back. "You're late," Mariela says, "and do something with your hair." But this is said with a wink, a literal wink, and that smile of hers. I look away, embarrassed, and pull my hair back into a ponytail. Then I grab an apron and head out onto the floor.

A mixed group today, tourists from Russia and Asia mostly, chaotic and drunk and loving the slabs of bloody meat. Mariela calls my name and points to table 14, a guy on his own, and American by the looks of him. He's tall, broad-shouldered, with ramrod-straight posture and short graying hair that makes him look like a military officer in civilian dress—a suit, in this case, with no tie. It's still a pretty formal outfit for this place, but somehow I get the feeling this is the most informal he ever gets.

"I'm slammed," I say.

"Who isn't?" she says, and thrusts a menu into my hand.

I approach the table cautiously. The customer is observing the room, sweeping his eyes slowly from one side to the other, and he sits so that he faces the door, just the way my dad used to. I place the menu on the table and greet him in English. He answers back in perfect Spanish. Not school Spanish, or Spanish Spanish, but Rioplatense Spanish. It's the dialect spoken here and in Buenos Aires, and with its flowing, exaggerated rhythm, it sounds to outsiders like Italian. He orders red wine, whatever I recommend, the beef, and a bean dish on the side that only locals ever ask for.

There's a flirty smile on his face as he speaks. I'm used to getting hit on by the customers, but this isn't that kind of flirting.

"Always this busy here?" he says.

"When a ship's in port," I say.

"Ah," he says. "People from all over the world, I imagine."

I shrug. "Yesterday Brits. Today someone else."

He shakes his head as if marveling at the idea of it. "Seems everyone ends up in Uruguay, eventually."

I walk away in too much of a hurry, and feel his eyes on me as I pour wine and serve food at my other tables. When I bring out his order, he simply thanks me and sets to work.

He folds his napkin and sets it on the plate when he's finished, and I bring him the check. "Thank you for a delightful meal," he says as he stands. He counts out the pesos, throwing in a very healthy tip. Then he leans in close and says in perfect American English: "Pleasure to finally meet you, Gwendolyn. Yael says hi."