

LBRIS

We know
books

ALSO BY KERI LAKE FROM EVERMORE

THE EATING WOODS
Anathema

Nocticadia

KERI LAKE



PENGUIN BOOKS

TRANSLATIONS

“Voulez-vous boire un autre verre, mademoiselle?”

Would you like another drink, miss?

“Si vous comprenez, retrouvez-moi dans le placard dans dix minutes.”

If you understand, meet me in the closet in ten minutes.

“Je comprends. Et je décline votre offre.”

I understand. And I decline your offer.

Prologue

Dracadia Island

October 12, 1753

Lord Adderly had seen plenty of death in his lifetime. During his time as commodore for the Royal Navy, its cloying scent had clogged the back of his throat more times than he could recall. He'd felt its cold, vaporous breath skim across his flesh with a longing that would have made most men shiver.

Lord Adderly did not fear death. Some had even accused him of welcoming it.

Yet as he stared across the turbulent stretch of wintry sea toward an ominous black smoke that rose from the surrounding fog, a shiver of dread coiled down his neck. The order to have his men row back from whence they'd come sat heavily on his tongue when, in the distance, the island's shadowy silhouette split through the mist—an arched rock formation that loomed on the horizon like a sleeping dragon.

Halfway between the coast of Massachusetts and French-settled Acadia, the small Dracadia Island had long been a source of contention—a stretch of land that could be argued once belonged to the British. When most of the Acadians mysteriously abandoned the island, it was annexed as a province of Massachusetts. Lord Adderly had led the charge himself, prepared for battle in the event the French returned to reclaim the village of Emberwick on the north end.

It had never come to pass.

The British who'd settled there instead eventually came to suffer a series of misfortunes and fled the island, leaving Dracadia abandoned once more.

Of course, rumors spread. Some had blamed the indigenous Cu'unotchke tribe, who'd sequestered themselves in the southern mountains, for having roused their heathen gods. Whatever the cause, speculations of bad spirits and inexplicable maladies dissuaded most from land ownership on Dracadia. As a result, the island had failed to house any more than the heretics who'd been exiled there. The worst offenders of the holy doctrines.

Lord Adderly did not avert his gaze from the path ahead as the shore broke through the fog and the water shallowed. Over the devastated landscape, black birds clustered in thick flocks. A conspiracy of ravens, whose presence had long stirred fears of evil. Lord Adderly had watched their kind follow men to war with the promise of carrion. The circling birds could only be an omen.

A sign of death.

"Dear God," Lieutenant Christ said from where he sat beside the commodore. "Is it the savages, my lord?"

"No." While the commodore answered assuredly, the truth was he didn't know. He'd fought all sorts of savages, and while they battled with unconventional fervor, they were hardly inherently evil.

"Rumors speak of sharpened black stones for teeth and eyes like wolves in the darkness," Christ prattled on.

"Perhaps you give equal merit to stories of sea monsters and sirens."

"Of course not, my lord. But the men who say such things are of sound mind. Good Christian men."

The commodore had little doubt of their integrity, but to offer the truth behind their voyage would spark panic.

Perhaps even mutiny.

For unbeknownst to Lieutenant Christ, they had been summoned there by the church after several clergymen had failed to return with three accused witches. Under the care of Dr. Nathaniel Stirling, the

three women had been ordered to trial in Massachusetts proper. There'd been suspicion that the good doctor had gone mad, possessed by the very demons he had been charged to bleed out of the women months ago. The commodore had heard horrific stories of patients with black veins who'd been left to hang, bleeding, by their feet. Those whose mouths and eyes had been sewn shut and tongues removed. The commodore and his men had been sent to investigate the claims, and given the sinister warnings in the distance, he feared what they'd find there.

Closer, the boat tottered across relentless waves, and as shadows lifted to reveal the charred husks of trees, Lord Adderly inhaled deeply, swallowing back the greasy scent of burned meat on the air. The familiar scent of death.

Six of his men jumped from the boat, dragging the small vessel through the shallows, and once ashore, Lord Adderly set foot on the unhallowed grounds to which he'd sworn never to return. He swept his gaze over the impossible destruction, contemplating what in God's name could have accomplished such a feat.

An entire island burned to ash.

The fog around them thickened, and Lord Adderly frowned as it settled between them and the seared forest.

Lieutenant Christ strode up alongside him. "Forgive me for saying so, my lord, but I've no inclination to venture beyond the shore."

"Hold your tongue." Lord Adderly spoke low. "Lest you invite mutiny."

"My lord!" one of his men shouted, and the commodore turned to see him pointing toward the trees.

Lord Adderly followed the path of the man's finger toward shadows within the fog. A figure moved toward them. The sharp clank of his men readying their weapons echoed around them, but when the white vapor parted for a young boy, perhaps only twelve years of age, Lord Adderly stepped forward. "Lower your weapons."

Dressed in the robes of a young acolyte, the boy stumbled toward them, his skin covered in black soot and robes stained with what was

undoubtedly blood. Before reaching the commodore and his men, the acolyte tumbled to the sand.

As Lord Adderly strode forward and lowered to one knee alongside him, Christ knelt at the boy's feet. The tops had small bleeding wounds that suggested they'd been impaled by something sharp. "Careful, my lord. We've no idea to *what* he's been exposed."

Cuts, bruises, and patches of glistening flesh where skin had been peeled back marked signs of unspeakable abuse.

The commodore thought of his own son, and he fought tears as he took in the acolyte's condition. "What happened here?"

"Blackness," the boy whispered on a ragged breath. "The sky... turned to blackness. All of them burned."

Lord Adderly brushed the sticky, bloodstained hair from the boy's face. "Who did this?"

Through the exhaustion that darkened the boy's eyes lay a flicker of fear. "They commanded the flames. And the flames did their bidding."

"Who commanded the flames? Witches?"

One slow blink, and the boy exhaled. When he breathed in, his chest rattled like coins in a tin cup. "Not witches. Worms. Black worms, spilling from the mouths of madness."

A hush fell over the men. The boy's words raised the hair on the back of the commodore's neck.

Christ moved closer and leaned in, whispering, "The boy does not seem well, my lord. He is speaking of evil."

Ignoring his lieutenant, the commodore placed a hand on the boy's bony shoulder. "You are the only one left?"

"All of them burned."

Lifting his gaze to Lieutenant Christ, the commodore kept his voice level in spite of his nerves. "We'll take the boy and return to the ship. Now."

"You cannot leave." A wet, barking cough sent a trickle of blood from the acolyte's mouth. "They will not allow it."

The commodore frowned at the boy and pushed to his feet. He ordered two of his men to carry him back to the ship.

"My lord!" the coxswain cried out with an edge of panic, and the commodore turned to see him stumbling through the sand toward them. "The boat! The boat is gone! It's gone!"

"Fear not, my lord." Over the din of panic as the other men caught on to the bizarre disappearance, the boy's weakened, almost ghostly voice reached the commodore's ears. "Your boat was never there to begin."

"I do not understand your words, boy."

"You and your men... arrived with the priests... days ago." Heavy wheezing filled each pause as the boy struggled to breathe.

"You are sick with delirium. I was summoned here by correspondence from the church itself."

He looked through hooded eyelids, and the boy's dry and cracked lips stretched to a slight smile. "You are dreaming now. But soon, you will wake to the sound of crackling fire and find you and your men tied to stakes. Your flesh will be seared. And your pain and misery will echo for eternity." The boy's eyes fluttered shut, and he let out a hiss of air before his body turned limp in his officer's arms.

Cold dread clawed at Lord Adderly's belly, the scent of burning fat and skin clogged his throat again. He closed his eyes, finding solace in the pitch-blackness, and when the first sounds of agony pierced the air, he dared not open them.

Chapter 1

LILIA

Four years ago

God, that stench. Too-crisp Spam sizzled in a pan as I held my arm to my nose. The popping sound of fatty meat was loud enough to carry over Jean Valjean's heartfelt plea to Javert from *Les Misérables* playing in the theater below our apartment. I'd accidentally burned the thinner pieces while peeling the potatoes, and there was no salvaging it at that point.

Whatever finesse my mother had always had in the kitchen failed to grace my genetics.

I hated cooking the canned crap, but Mom had developed a weird craving for meat lately, and we'd run out of the thin round steaks she liked eating rare. I couldn't help but wonder if her strange requests might've been her body trying to get better.

I hoped so anyway.

Watching her devour rare meat with the blood running out of the corners of her mouth had me feeling like a spectator in a gory episode of *Hostile Planet*, an appetite-withering sight. Particularly since my mother had never really been much of a meat eater anyway. Spam was a far cry from steak, but Conner, my stepdad, if I could even call him that, hadn't worked in a couple days, which left us short on grocery money.

"Bee!" I called out for my younger half sister, the nickname short for Beatrix, and tossed the charred Spam onto awaiting plates. "Did you check on Mom like I asked?"

"Oh, shit!" The thud of footfalls followed her curse, and with a smirk, I shook my head. At twelve years old, four years younger than me, she carried a lot more responsibility than most girls her age.

Both of us did.

Mom's illness had gotten worse, so much worse, and the fact that she refused to see a doctor about it only put more pressure on Bee and me to navigate the progression of her strange symptoms ourselves. While Mom still seemed to have her wits about her, there were terrifying moments. Like the nights she'd tell me that evil men were coming for me. The nights she'd be covered in sweat, her eyes glowing with unseen horrors.

Monsters, she called those invisible tormentors, but in her mind, they were as real as the deep black circles beneath her eyes. Though as horrible as it was to say, with her sickly, distorted spine, silvery glowing eyes, and deep protruding bones, she'd begun to look like the very monsters she spoke of.

Praying had never really been my thing, but I'd done an awful lot of aimless pleading on my knees over the last few weeks, and if God existed, he sure as hell didn't offer much hope.

As I spooned the last glob of mashed potatoes for Bee, a knock at the door halted my plating. I frowned and quietly placed the pan back onto the stovetop and wiped my hands on a nearby kitchen towel. Cautiously, I padded toward the hallway and peered at the entry door. Another hard thud jerked my muscles, and the audacity of whatever was behind that obnoxious racket heated my blood. I tromped toward the door and, through the peephole, spied a man I didn't recognize.

Deep-set, beady eyes, a scar at his left eye, and an oddly crooked nose, like he'd been in one too many fights, made him look like a walking mug shot.

One thing I'd learned from living in a city like Covington—you didn't answer the door to strangers. Particularly ones who looked like criminals.

He pounded against the door again, and I ground my teeth with annoyance.

"Yeah?" I called through the barrier. "What do you want?"

At first, he didn't answer, and I watched him look around toward the hallway. Something about him—those dark eyes and the smirk of his lips—sent a crawling chill beneath my skin.

What a creep.

I glanced at the door's dead bolt, making sure it was engaged. Unfortunately, the apartment didn't have the most robust locks.

"I'm a friend of Conner's," he finally said. "Is he here?"

"No."

"Any idea when he'll be back?"

Studying his face proved challenging since the guy refused to look up. "Look, I don't—"

At the sound of a piercing scream, my spine snapped straight, and I swung my attention toward the back rooms. Abandoning the weirdo at the front door, I dashed across the apartment toward the sliver of light shining beneath the bathroom door.

Light—the first sign that something was wrong. Mom had grown to hate the light. Said it hurt her eyes.

"Mom! No!"

A whisper of fear spiraled down the back of my neck at what I recognized as Bee screaming at my mother on the other side of the door, and I pushed through into the brightly lit bathroom.

Mom stood alongside the tub, making a strange growling sound while water splashed on the floor. Two pink-socked feet kicked out over the edge of the basin.

Oh God.

Bee!

Icy pulses of adrenaline took over as I rushed toward them and knocked my mother aside, into the wall.

The moment she was released, Bee shot up out of the water, her upper half sopping wet, and she let out a barking cough.

"What the hell are you doing!" I shouted at my mother, whose eyes gave off an iridescent flicker in the light.

On a screech, my mother barreled forward again, knocking into me, and pushed Bee back into the water.

Panic exploded through my muscles, my body no longer moved at my will but on instinct. I grabbed my mother by the hair, throwing her off Bee. A chunk of dull, red locks sat in my palm as my mother slid from my grasp and fell backward against the toilet. The slippery floor had her scrambling to get to her feet again, and I yanked Bee out of the bathtub, sliding on wet tiles as I pushed her toward the door.

Once out in the hallway, I hauled the door shut after us, tugging the knob to keep it closed.

"Go to your room! Lock the door, and do *not* come out until I tell you!" I commanded.

"I was..." She coughed and sniveled. "I was...just trying to keep her...from drinking the water, and she...attacked me!"

The door thumped and jerked my arm as Mom fought from the other side. "She's one of them! She's one of them!" Mom screamed through the barrier. "Don't let her get away! She'll tell them I'm here!"

"Go! Now! Lock the door! Don't open it, no matter what you hear!" I braced my feet against the wall and leaned back into the pull of the knob, holding the door closed as Bee scampered toward her bedroom.

After another minute of fighting to keep her contained, the thumping stopped. Mom's screams silenced.

With heaving breaths, I eased my muscles and straightened as she no longer resisted. "Mom?" I spoke low through the door, hoping she'd give a coherent answer. An explanation for what the hell just happened. She'd spoken of someone coming after her before but had never projected those paranoid thoughts onto me or Bee.

Nothing.

But the cloying scent that had been companion to my mother's illness seemed stronger than usual. Thick and sticky, it clogged my

throat, and I raised the back of my palm to my nose in a poor effort to stifle the odor.

Over the past few months, Mom's sweet floral scent, a comforting smell I'd known my whole life, had somehow faded under the weight of that unfamiliar stink.

Now it was all I breathed.

Ignoring the urge to gag, I turned the knob and entered the bathroom.

Mom lay slung over the edge of the tub, her face submerged in the water.

"Mom!" I sprinted toward her, and with a splash of water, she swung around, screaming again.

I reached for her arm, but she swung out first, plowing the back of her knuckles against my cheek. Pain zapped my bones on a burst of floating stars that wobbled my vision.

I shook off the dizziness when she swung out again, and ducked. That time, she failed to connect as her hands flailed in a fit of rage. Gathering her arms in a tight grip, I dug my nails into her frail bones, but a sharp sting pierced my hand where she sank her teeth into my flesh.

"Ouch! Shit!" I pushed her off me, and she slipped, arms thrashing around as she fell backward into the tub. When I tried to pull her up, her hands reached out for me and gripped my shirt, wrenching me toward the water.

A rush of fluids shot up into my sinuses, and it burned, her grip unrelenting as she held me underwater. Panic crystallized my muscles. Water splashed with her frenzied kicking and grappling of my neck.

I reached out for the only thing I could get my hands on in the melee. Palm to her throat, I squeezed just enough to lessen her grip, and I held her there as my face breached the surface of the water and gasped for breath.

She yanked me down again, dunking my face underwater with her.

I squeezed her throat harder, and once again, she loosened her hold.

Each searing lungful of air scorched my throat and shot out of me on a coughing fit.

Frantic, she scratched at the back of my neck, trying to pull me under again.

“Mom! Please!” Breath weak in my lungs, I could hardly push out the words as my muscles locked around my chest. My legs slid across the tiles as I wrangled her arms to keep her from pulling me.

Submerged beneath the water, my mother opened her mouth, eyes wide in a shocked expression.

As if her fight was over, she stilled while a haunting resolution flashed over her face, one that tickled the back of my neck.

I pushed away and stood over the tub, no longer holding her, but she didn’t emerge.

Surely, the air had withered in her lungs by that point. Surely, she needed oxygen.

C’mon! Get up!

I lurched for her arm to pull her up but halted when, from her mouth, a long, skinny, fibrous creature slithered out past her lips and into the water.

Three more tumbled after it—two from her nose.

A scream shook out of me, and my limbs froze with horror. I watched as the worms wriggled over the tub’s porcelain floor and forged a path through the water to gather at the drain holes. At least two dozen more poured free, forcing her mouth and nostrils wide. More still after that. They all wriggled toward the plugged drain.

My breaths arrived in small panting gasps as I watched the terror. Until blackness consumed me.

Chapter 2

LILIA

Present day

Lilia?” a voice cut through the void.

I blinked my eyes open and found myself hunched over the drain of a yellowing sink.

“Earth to Lilia,” the familiar voice said again.

Confused, I turned to find my coworker, Jayda, standing alongside me, and I pushed up from the sink. It was in the haze of confusion that I remembered scrubbing the sink, during which I’d caught wind of a strange but familiar scent, like rot and dirt. The odor was so heavy that I’d fallen into memories again.

A sheepish grin tugged at my lips, and I cleared my throat. “Sorry, I must’ve spaced out.”

It happened sometimes. Something would trigger thoughts, and those thoughts had me slipping into the most horrific memory of my life. One that never failed to pull me under so deep that I lost sight of my own reality.

It’d been four years since my mother’s death, yet I remembered every detail. The scents. The sounds. The cold.

“I was just saying, I’m going to work on the office next door.” Forearm across her nose, Jayda coughed. “I don’t know what the hell the last person in here ate, but that does not smell healthy. So I’m gonna leave all these latrines to you,” she said on a chuckle.