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THE
BOOKSHOP
BELOW

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HODDERSCAPE

Prologue



IT IS NOT an easy thing to slip a knife between a man's ribs. So the hand that wields the blade has been practising.

They have practised, too, infiltrating the bookshop, quieting its magic with an ink-black tongue – because it really is ink that stains their mouth – and creeping up the staircase that could so easily betray them with its protest of groans. By comparison, the murder itself is tragically straightforward.

The owner of the bookshop is sleeping in an armchair, his body open in the looseness of slumber. If anyone was observing, they might believe he has no notion of what's coming next, and indeed he doesn't stir as the murderer approaches.

The knife flashes, twists, releases.

The owner gives a terrible cry and tries to rise, but his murderer gently forces him back down. If there was ever a time to call for help, it was when the murderer was casing out the bookshop weeks ago. Now, it is far, far too late.

Still, the owner grips the armrests for one more attempt at strength. With a laboured breath, he gasps a question. Not *who are you?* or *why are you doing this to me?* or even *how did you get in?*, though they are all valid concerns. He knows the answer to two of them, and he thinks he knows the answer to all three – although on this last point, he's woefully wrong.

'How did you find out?'

With every exhalation, a little more blood soaks into the chair. The murderer tilts their head, and steps outside the crimson ring now seeping over the floorboards. The owner clutches his side and hisses, but it's a feeble motion. His grip is slackening, the pain traveling to a distant place in his mind.

'How?' he says again, and this time it's a sigh.

'Lady Fate always finds out in the end.'

The murderer waits until the owner's breaths still, before tucking the knife away. For a murder, there is little fanfare; the work is done, they think.

Down in the bookshop, there is a whisper.

CHAPTER

One



WHEN CASSANDRA FAIRFAX was a little girl, a bookseller told her about Lady Fate.

Lady Fate, with her enigmatic smile and her hands plucking strings across the chords of time. Lady Fate, who could make or break your fortune, who could set your feet astray from the path you had so determinedly set for yourself, or place glory in your outstretched hands. Lady Fate, the oldest of storytellers.

The bookseller knelt down, so they were eye to eye with Cassandra, and said, ‘Lady Fate will fuck you over, little girl.’

It was several years before she understood that anyone else can fuck you over just as easily, no godly intervention required.

Take now, for instance.

She’s standing in front of a sleek block of luxury flats towering over the Thames, wondering if she’s about to make another enormous mistake. Canary Wharf is full of such edifices, but the windows above are dark and opaque, the flats mostly empty: still waiting to be filled with designer furniture, along with the playboys and heiresses to inhabit it. People for whom money is no longer sufficient, who have already climbed to the highest rung they can buy, and are now looking for a different kind of currency to spend.

Her phone rings.

‘Roth,’ she says.

‘Come on up, Cass.’ His honey-glazed accent puts her in mind of tennis courts and long afternoons by poolsides. ‘I’ll buzz you in.’

Definitely a mistake. But it's too late to back out now.

Well, no – she could still turn around and leave. But her rent is overdue, for one. And she's just coming to appraise a few stolen books: an easy, uncomplicated job. Moreover, Roth pays well; she can tolerate a few hours of him for that.

The foyer is hauntingly dark, but in the gleam of the day's last light, she catches the opulent decor. Veined marble flooring, glossy chrome fittings, and the ever-present security cameras to make sure the riff-raff stay out. Her boots leave traces of mud across the otherwise spotless floor as she walks past the empty reception.

Joke's on them, she thinks, this riff-raff has an invite.

The elevator takes her up to the penthouse, where a man lounges in the doorway. She recognises Roth instantly: well built, with floppy blonde hair, and a tan to match the watch on his wrist. A less discerning admirer might call him a golden retriever of a man, but Cassandra knows a shark when she sees one.

'It's been too long, darling,' he says.

'You could hire me more often,' she reminds him, as he takes her coat. 'And you'd like that, hm?'

Roth's gaze lingers on her chest before he drags his focus back to her. She forces herself to smile, to appear not stupid but harmless. Possessable. Anyway, she knows Roth isn't really interested in her – as long as she remains in reach.

'Just a couple of books,' she warns. 'I'm on a tight schedule.'

She's not, but let Roth think that she's deigning to grace him with her presence.

'That's all I ask,' he says.

'And I want the cash up front,' she adds.

He finally moves aside to let her into his flat, but not so far that she doesn't have to brush past him. His hand touches the small of her back and lingers.

'What do you think of the new place?' he says, his breath against her ear. 'Tempted?'

Cassandra tilts her head just enough for him to see her smile. 'Oh, you know. Seen one, seen them all, really.'

His hand falls from her back. Something cold slithers into his gaze.

‘Books are in the library,’ he says, his superficial charm vanished. ‘And you’ll be paid when you’ve done your job.’

Rent, she reminds herself. And she can’t do that if she gives Roth the slap he so badly deserves.

‘Is that a problem?’ he asks.

Yes. But she shrugs. ‘Why would it be?’

The theoretical problem is that Cassandra isn’t supposed to be here at all. Most certainly she shouldn’t be offering to appraise stolen books – taken by Roth, or by another collector and *then* by Roth, or by some underpaid museum curator decades ago; who knows and, quite frankly, who cares? – much less sell them on to other unscrupulous collectors. But it only stops being theoretical if she fucks up, and a little bit of illegal brokering is a safer game than the one she was playing six months ago.

What a fuck-up *that* had been.

As Roth leads her through his flat, she has to admit that it’s a gorgeous space. Hideously outfitted, though, because it’s Roth. The living room feels more like a gallery, bedecked in abstract glass sculptures on gold-trimmed pedestals and topiaries clipped to angular perfection, all dominated by an ivory chaise longue in the centre. But the view is spectacular: an enviable expanse of London, with the Thames shearing through it, tinted by the blaze of sunset.

Roth recovers some of his showmanship as they walk through a set of glass doors. ‘This, darling, is where the magic happens.’

Roth’s library. Last time she was here, this room was little more than a construction site, the books still stowed carefully in boxes. But now she understands why he was so keen to move here, when he’d had his pick of apartments. The high ceiling allows for endlessly tall bookshelves, each one packed tight with rows upon rows of books. Most, if not all, will be rare editions, coveted by museums and collectors alike, although some are custom-bound in new leather with Roth’s name stamped on the back. A touch, no doubt, he’s picked up from other aficionados with more money than taste. Cassandra finds herself calculating the value and origins of each one, envy bitter in her throat.

If she didn't know Roth better, she would conclude that this is the work of hired expertise. An interior designer with a careful eye, or a particularly savvy assistant. But Roth is a collector through and through; no book would have passed through here without his explicit, personal hand in the acquisition.

She wonders how many of them came from Chiron's bookshop.

'Nice collection,' she says because she knows he's waiting for a compliment.

'It's nothing special,' he says, with blatantly false modesty. 'I keep the *real* rarities in a climate-controlled library elsewhere.' As though reading her mind, he adds, 'Seen the old man lately?'

If she didn't know Roth as well as she does, or if it had been someone else asking, she might have chalked up the question as passing curiosity. But she's seen that gleam in his eyes before.

She shrugs. 'Have you?'

'Oh, I've seen him, sure.' Roth waves his hand in the air vaguely. 'Around.'

Cassandra can imagine. At exclusive dinners, secretive conferences meant for booksellers and collectors only, underground auctions, where no one looks too hard at a book's origins. At the bars afterwards, when the real deals happen, and the alleyways after that, where debts are collected and favours squeezed. What's a little drink between old friends, after all?

What's a little blood?

'He isn't taking appointments anymore,' Roth says pointedly, as though this is her fault. 'And there's a book I'm simply dying to get my hands on.'

Well, Chiron had never much liked customers in the first place. Or people, for that matter. Once, Cassandra had considered herself the exception, along with a handful of booksellers who'd worked alongside him in his shop, each possessing decades' worth of experience. Last she'd heard, he'd all but shut the shop, the booksellers long gone.

'Weren't you his apprentice? Protégé?' Roth prompts.

Like he doesn't know exactly who Cassandra is. Or who she used to be. She pretends to focus on a particularly glitzy set of rebound

classics displayed in a glass case. How ironic that it's Roth, of all people, who's managed to put together what she's spent nearly a decade hiding.

'Fairfax is a lovely last name,' he adds. 'I don't know why you'd change it to Holt.'

She keeps her eyes trained on the bookshelves. To keep people like you from finding me, she thinks.

He sidles over to her. 'Darling, if only I had—'

'I told you, I don't know where the bookshop is. What do you want with him?' she asks, as lightly as she can manage.

'Just satisfying my curiosity.' Roth rests his arms on the back of a chair and gestures invitingly. 'Please.'

Cassandra settles herself at the table, ignoring Roth's breath against her neck.

'The books?' she says.

'Packed away. Let me get them for you.'

While she waits, her thoughts turn reluctantly back to Chiron. It's been years since she's walked past a bookshop and lingered at its windows, wondering what Chiron's would look like now, what ghosts might walk its empty corridors. What the crackle of a spine could sound like in a room with no clicking of terse, irritable bookselling teeth, no hands to pluck the book from inexperienced fingers. What it would feel like to have the books humming in her head again, the rustle of paper and glossy glide of ink, buttery leather under her fingers and in her mind, an entire world on the tip of her tongue as she recites *Once upon a time*—

No, she doesn't think of it at all, anymore.

Idly, she splays her hands out on the table, and instantly regrets it. Although it looks clean, a sticky residue clings to the surface. Grimacing, she makes to wipe her hands on her jeans, then stops. Cautiously, she rubs the residue between her forefinger and thumb, then sniffs it.

Ink . . . and blood.

Every nerve sparks ablaze with warning.

'Cassandra Fairfax.'

She looks up – and locks eyes with Roth. Even though his gaze is steady, his eyes possess a glassy, otherworldly sheen. One that she knows all too well. A dense ripple of words slithers up his forearm, disappearing into his shirt. Ink magic.

She should never have come here tonight.

‘Cassandra,’ he says again, and his voice reeks with the tang of ink and power. ‘Tell me—’

She vaults off the chair in an explosion of energy. Roth lunges after her. The ink writhes on his skin, lending him strength. Strength that a reader has bestowed on him, judging from the way he moves, all leonine ferocity and unnatural speed.

‘Cassandra Fairfax, stop,’ he commands.

The sound pierces her through the sternum, against the door she’d been so close to fleeing through. Her body feels like lead, gravity exerting its terrible force, as the compulsion locks her feet to the floor.

Roth’s hands cup her face, cool against her flushed skin. She really should have slapped him when she had the chance.

‘You’ve got your loyalties, I get that. I really do,’ he says, all genuine earnestness. ‘The old man would be proud. But you’ve already proven that. So help me out, and I’ll help *you*, Cass. Talk to me.’

It’s just enough of a reprieve to allow her mouth to work around the compulsion. ‘Oh, fuck you, Roth.’

His eyes narrow. ‘Tell me where Chiron’s bookshop is.’

A wave of compulsion washes over her, seizing her limbs in a painful vice. Words bubble up her throat, drag her tongue over her teeth in the pre-echo of an answer. But reading rarely works so well on another reader.

Even – and perhaps especially – her.

‘Who read for you?’ she demands.

Not that Cassandra would know who it was. Someone stupid or greedy enough to work for Roth. Someone like her. But not, apparently, that skilled. Already, the script along Roth’s forearms is losing coherence, the bottom lines dissolving to gather in ink drops on his fingertips.

‘Cassandra,’ he says, then stops. ‘You shouldn’t be able to speak – you shouldn’t—’

She laughs, her lips bloody from biting down to stop coerced words spilling out. ‘Who do you think I am? Did you think this was going to be *easy*?’

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the edge of the doorway – and beyond that, all those glittering, expensive glass sculptures. Pins and needles shoot up her legs, welcome pain as the compulsion starts to slough off her. Come on, come on, she thinks desperately.

‘Why not ask Chiron yourself?’ she says, buying time.

‘You haven’t even *heard* about him, have you?’ Roth spits.

‘I told you, I don’t run in those circles anymore. And I don’t care.’

‘Well, if you don’t give a shit, then you have nothing to lose.’ His mouth twitches smugly. ‘But we both know you have nothing worth losing, anyway.’

She smiles at Roth and looks pointedly at his beading script, the ink splatters on his glossy floorboards.

‘Think it’ll stain?’ she says.

The second he looks down, she bolts. Through the doors of the library, to the bleeding glow of his living room. One leg buckles underneath her – remnants of compulsion – and she grabs a plinth to keep herself upright. Roth crashes after her, fury writ large on his face. Even without his extra strength, he’s still an athlete, with all those summers playing tennis and winters spent skiing.

She lets him get close enough to reach her. His hand snatches at the back of her collar. Then she grabs the ornate vase from the plinth and smashes it over him. Glass shatters. Roth shrieks – whether in pain or anger, she can’t tell.

It’s just enough time for Cassandra to stagger towards the front door. She casts one look at the mess she’s left behind: Roth, clutching his face through blood-stained fingers; expensive glass everywhere; ink spattered across a cream carpet. A ghost of a memory rolls through her and she shudders. Another room. Blood against glass. Ink slick on her teeth.