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The Bitch Goddess Notebook

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Extract

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I lock my door upon myself,
And bar them out; but who shall wall
Self from myself, most loathed of all?

Christina Rossetti, 'Who Shall Deliver Me?'

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er:
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

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Pass Icy. Chains Required.
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Mind the Gap.
Want a beach book? Buy yourself some *Bridget Jones.*
Want to get off? Your local video store has a wide array of suitable titles. Or try the Internet.
If you want something simple, you're in the wrong place.
This is about revealing secrets, not tits and ass.
Well, not *just* tits and ass.
The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.
Danger: Riptides and Undertow. Swim at Your Own Risk.
Haunted Forest, Witches Castle, 1 Mile. I'd Turn Back If I Were You!
Do Not Leave Child Unattended.
Say it aloud: *Screw fairy tales and chick-lit and all forms of lying.*
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.
Ah, just jump in. We dare ya.

1
Rennie

March, 2003
Mill Valley, California

Rennie's heart is pounding so hard her chest is going to burst in a minute. She floats her tongue over her lips as her student teacher, Bay, tosses aside the pillow. He knots his hands in her hair, dips down for a kiss, and they fall together onto the bed. Thighs aching, she spreads her legs and wraps her arms around his warm brown back. Each movement presses away her literary agent's critique of her novel chapters:

Don't open with a sex scene, Wren. Readers will lose sympathy for your heroine.

She tightens her legs around her lover, grabs his ass.

Fuck me.

The word 'cunt' in a novel aimed at women? Probably not a good idea.

Bay, Bayuni, Bayuni Henares, her pretty young lover, her student teacher from San Francisco State, her Bay. All hers, no one else's. He's working with Rennie this year at Tam High, learning from her. Ooh boy, all kinds of things.

And he swirls his tongue into her ear, just how she likes it.

Your heroine needs a gay best friend.

She needs better shoes.

Fuck me.

Other than the titillating little term the university uses, 'Master Teacher', there's nothing illicit whatsoever about her and Bay. She grabs his head and presses his mouth to her breasts and he nibbles and sucks and everything is perfect. This is the moment where her lips fall open and she breathes out an 'oh'.

Don't write about the Midwest, Wren, no one cares.

Fuck me.

She guides his hips and they've found a rhythm now; he's rocking into her, perfect, perfect.

She and Bay started like these things usually do. After a few weeks of exchanged glances, too-long planning conferences, phone calls at home about newspaper layouts, Rennie couldn't stand it. The same old pattern – it was like picking a scab, she couldn't help it.

When she's Rennie Taylor grabbing someone's ass to push him farther inside her, she's not Wren Taylor, who can't finish her second book. She doesn't have to hear Lisa's voice in her ears:

She needs to live in Manhattan.

San Francisco, can you at least do San Francisco?

Safe.

Safe.

Safe.

When she's screwing yet another student teacher here in her Mill Valley cottage, she doesn't have to think about Lisa, doesn't have to think about her empty, nonexistent novel, doesn't have to think about anything.

Not her past.

Not the Porter Place.

That wasn't real anyway.

No more yielding but a dream . . .

She washed all that away a long time ago. She has all kinds of tricks for doing that.

Fuck me.

Fuck me.

Fuck me.

The best thing about sex is the way it fills the emptiness.

Before Bay, it was Jason. Before Jason, it was Lee. Before Lee, it was Seamus. Before Seamus, it was KevinBenTroyHectorJim. Then her student teachers blur into an endless string of Stanford undergrads including (if you count blow jobs as sex) that embarrassing little moment with a certain Stanford football player, whose real name she never did find out. When the quake hit in October of her sophomore year,

she was blasted on cheap sherry in the Maples Pavilion locker room, messing around with the star Cardinal quarterback and his best friend. Eight buildings on the Stanford campus were damaged that day, which just proves that disaster follows her wherever she goes.

An addict? It's crossed her mind but she's no addict. Addicts do it with random people in dark alleys, strangers they'll never see again, have sex partners into the hundreds.

She prefers to think of herself as a hobbyist.

Before Stanford, of course, it was Rob Schafer.

To blot away his face, the swatch of dark hair on his chin, she squeezes her eyes shut and presses against Bay, her breath quickening. A moan drifts from her lips, and she lets herself remember how it started with Bay, because that's the here and now.

That's the time and place she is fucking herself back into.

Late that night, as they were pulling student news items together, she watched him click away at layouts on the computer. Daring herself, she licked her finger, drew it across his neck. He turned, and she pressed her mouth on his. His lips parted and she dove right in, and his fingers tangled in her hair as he pulled her down on top of him. Clothes came off and they did it on the cold tiles, there at Tamalpais High School, after everyone had gone home.

Months later he's still coming to her little cottage in Mill Valley most afternoons after school. Of course their relationship isn't just about sex. They talk about teaching philosophy, learning styles, the war about to start in Iraq that Rennie's not really paying attention to because no one can change anything. What a fucking idiot, holding up signs in downtown Holland, Illinois. US OUT OF EL SALVADOR, what the hell difference did it make? Who in Holland gave a damn about El Salvador or could do anything?

If it weren't for the walls around Holland, everyone in the country would drown.

Holland makes her think of the Porter Place again, and her breath bursts out in hot waves. *Just fuck it out of me, take it away.*

He moves against her, faster now, and she needs to blur and blot out her memories, but at that moment a still-frame flashes in front of her, a wine glass suspended in mid-air, shards falling to the floor, each containing a feature of *his* face. The scream of a barn swallow tears through the silence. Cherry's eyes plead with Rennie through the car window, her lips forming the word that sealed her fate.

I'm such a bitch, I'm such a bitch, how could I let her do that? She presses against her lover, her fingernails biting into his back. *Oh, fuck me, just make it go away* . . . And it sort of works, better than anything else does, anyway. Maybe she and Bay will last a while, longer than the others. Her romances are dandelion puffs; one moment of a thrill and they're gone.

His fingers press her hair back from her face. But she aches for more, it's not enough, just sex is never enough, and despite her promises to herself she whispers, 'Bay . . . get it . . .'

Bay rolls off her. Rennie's fingers slips between her legs, and her gaze falls on her memory shelf. The red-stained jar holds the light like a garnet, reflected from the lamp on the bedside table. Bay's never asked about it. He respects her privacy or maybe there are things about her he doesn't want to know.

She keeps it because she can't get rid of it, but sometimes her glance flits in its direction, like tonight in the swell of sex in her room, in the womb of passion that still, somehow, contains *this*. A sinking spin flies through her stomach. Fifteen years ago, wasn't it? When the Bitch Posse girls took a straight razor blade, slashed it across their forearms, trickled the blood into three glass jars. That was before they'd pushed things too far, before that night in the middle of nowhere, before that night of blood for blood.

'Forever . . .' Cherry whispered in her ear, her breath blowing at Rennie's hair, then dyed pure black to match her crocheted see-through sweater, her shorter-than-short miniskirt, her Doc Martens. The jars had been Cherry's idea.

Oh, God, her girls, her lost sad girls . . .

That's the past, Rennie; you can't change it.

She presses her hands to her breasts, and now Bay's holding the knife just how she likes it. What she loves about Bay is that there's no hesitation; he wants only to please her, and he has never asked questions or judged. And she moves her fingers from her breasts to her eyes and lets the crish, crash rock her, not to sleep, but to that unworldly feeling, the one at the top of the roller coaster, the jumping out the window feeling, the second before gravity catches her and pulls her unabashedly toward earth. The moment wraps her up and spins her, and her body heats up, scalding, and she feels him get into bed with her, his skin smooth and sweaty against her belly.

That night fifteen years ago, things made sense. Amy held her hand over her eyes as the blood washed into the jars, but Rennie watched the whole thing. Cherry's fingers tangled around Amy's waist, her red hair whispering around her chin as Rennie clasped her arms around Cherry, in love with her friends, forever.

Forever.

Afterward they flopped across Cherry's bed, watched the blood trickle up and down the sides of the jars they turned this way and that, before falling asleep.

She leans to the bedside table and turns off the light.

'Now?' Bay slides the blade along her belly, gently, not cutting.

She can smell Cherry's incense, patchouli, or is it Bay's sweat, so sweet, so bitter? But she squeezes her eyes closed. Metal presses against flesh. 'Harder.'

He draws the knife across her belly again. This time the skin separates and she blinks her way back into the universe, watches the valley fold open, the blood seaming up along the cut and pressing out, blue to red in the air of this world, and as usual the pain springs her into the here and now.

But some blood will never wash away.

Forever.

How could they have known it would end the way it did? She's never talked about it, terrified, stricken, unable to

comprehend that she did such a thing, that it actually happened, that it materialized in the real world.

But the story plays itself over and over in her head when she's alone in bed at night, when guilt tugs her insides out and flings them into her face, when tears roll down her cheeks for no reason at all.

That's why being alone is so terrifying.

She lifts her body toward the knife, and Bay understands, slices again. She wonders sometimes if he likes this too much, because this time the cut is really deep, and she cries out, spreading her legs. He sets the knife aside and now, now, he presses into her again. They move together, the blood sticky between them. He's drawn her so close to the edge, so close, and she comes quickly, hard, heart beating in her ears as she scrapes her nails down his back.

When it's over embarrassment floods her, and they speak little as they attend to the business of daubing her belly, covering up with a bandage. The stage prop cigarettes are lit; smoke curls in the air. Shiny eyes blink in darkness, and Bay says comforting words: *You're so sexy, Rennie . . . My wild one . . . Did I do it right?* But of course that's not what she wants; she doesn't know what she wants. She felt good for a minute but now it's all she can do to keep from pulling the stained knife from the bedside table, slashing it across her wrists. Why is she so unhappy, with her pretty Bay, her great teaching job? She has only two preps this year, she lives near San Francisco just like she'd planned, out of Holland, Illinois for-fucking-ever. She's a published writer, an award-winner even. (Never mind that pesky second book that doesn't exist and maybe never will.) She and her younger lover are smoking in bed after terrific sex, and he'll stay over tonight, cook her pancakes, and they'll drive to school separately, surreptitiously. It's just naughty enough to be fun but not so naughty it could get her into trouble. Her life is all she's ever wanted.

Isn't it?

Some wounds will never heal.

From across the room the memory jar stares back at her.

It got too awkward to write to Cherry after a while, the letters pouring back in Cherry's rounded script, telling her way more than she wanted to know about where she was and why and how it felt. And Amy, of course, Amy pushed her away right after it happened.

Those girls are gone forever.

The Girl Genius is dead.

The tears that sting her eyes are easy to explain.

