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Written by **Cassondra Windwalker**

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IDLE HANDS

CASSONDRA WINDWALKER



AGORA BOOKS

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Cassondra Windwalker grew up on plains and longed for mountains. Today she lives by the frozen sea. She earned a BA of Letters at the University of Oklahoma and pursued careers in bookselling and law enforcement before resigning her post to write full time.

A poet, essayist, and novelist, her short-form work has appeared in numerous literary journals and art books. Her full-length books of poetry and prose are available in bookstores and online. She welcomes conversations with readers through her social media platforms and in the occasional coffee shop.


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CASSONDRA WINDWALKER

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To my father, who taught me to play tennis, save the brakes, and play a mean devil's advocate

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

Of all of them, Tad was the hardest for me to hold on to. Perhaps that was why I let him go so soon.

You probably know a little about light theory. Or rather, the absence of a satisfactory theory to explain one of the most fundamental necessities of your paltry existence. According to your scientists, it's either a wave that thinks it's a particle, or a particle that thinks it's a wave. I never tire of listening to you fight to tie up ideas in words. To be fair, I suppose that's not your fault. You're limited that way. You can't comprehend a thought you can't assign a name to.

Of course, light is especially difficult for you because it's not entirely in my realm, which means it's not entirely in yours either. Maybe that whole particle—wave nonsense isn't so far off after all.

Energy that sometimes acts as if it has matter might be the best way for you to understand the soul.

Tad's soul was ... well, now I'm tangled up in the same net as you. I want to tell you what it looked like, the incredible colour it sang out when it left me and all my poor efforts behind, but that's another of your delightful paradoxes. Just as you can't comprehend

anything you can't name, you can't name anything you haven't comprehended. You see so few of the colours that exist, I can't begin to tell you what he looked like. But I can tell you that, even to me, who typically doesn't have much time for such nonsense, he was a beautiful light.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I should start with introductions. You can call me Ella. I admit I hijacked that name a long time ago just to irritate a former friend of mine, but I've since grown attached to it. You generally assign me a whole host of other preposterous monikers, when you deign to acknowledge me at all. But the one that most nearly approaches the truth is "Adversary", which has its own set of incorrect preconceptions. I'm not your adversary, specifically. That's just the part I play. You could just as easily name me "Juxtaposition". Whenever you come to a crossroads, I'm that perpendicular track. I'm the choice some of you find so necessary to the concept of free will; what others of you deny even exists in favour of behavioural predestination. I think the least imaginative name I've heard is "the devil", but I'll answer to it if I must. My bad rap comes from the fact that the choice I offer is always, unapologetically, carnal.

That's an old-fashioned word these days. Basically, it's fancy talk for me being far more committed to this creative experiment called the universe than any of the other players are. But don't be fooled. You were always designed with me in mind. Just because I'm the Adversary, doesn't make me your enemy. Although, my interest in your dilemmas is undeniably more dispassionate than the curious clowns on the other side.

Honestly, I'm not the bad guy here. If you want to assign dubious motives to anyone, you should start with the Creator who set this game in motion in the first place, who trapped your strange little wandering souls in flesh-cages and then demanded you look away from the material. I'm the one trying to persuade you to fully exist in the space you've been given, to enjoy every possible sensation to its

fullest. I'm here to remind you who you are, not who you could be. I'm about the immediate, the tangible, the tasty — the personal.

After all, nothing fascinates you — or me — so much as identity. You're constantly figuring out who you are and laying claim to the name of the hour. You define whole periods of your life by these efforts and yet never seem to actually finish it. You're testing your boundaries as teenagers, you're indulging in mid-life crises a few decades later, and then there's the new and somehow undreamt-of tragedy of empty-nesting or retirement. And in all of these little dramas, you measure your successes and failures by the exchanges you have with the other people in your life. The Creator set you up with this notion that on some level, your life is about relationships. You gauge your own worth by how good a mother, a friend, a daughter, a worker you are.

I offer a different perspective. I want to know you for your own sake. I want a quiet moment, away from all those people with their needs and wants and demands and expectations, to hear what you want. What you need. What you expect and long for and ache without. If you give me the chance, I can offer you everything They tell you to sacrifice. I just need a moment alone with you.

I happen to have a gift for solitude. All it requires is a small hurt. Large hurts create their own loneliness, but in the right hands, even something as innocuous as an unready word can isolate. I'm always looking for these small hurts, these quiet quarantines of the soul I can craft into islands of the spirit. There I can persuade you of all the delightful comforts of the flesh. There I can tempt you onto an unfamiliar path. If alone weren't by far the better course, why would I have chosen it?

The board we're playing on, with all its coloured spaces, was laid out long ago. The game rarely requires much interference from me these days. Most people who face a choice between pleasure and sacrifice choose pleasure without prompting. For instance, I'd caution you to be highly sceptical of the hit-and-run driver who

claims "the devil made me do it." As if he needed any persuading. But some dilemmas are delightfully complex. Sometimes I truly have no idea what you're about to do. And neither does that Maker of yours, no matter what anyone tells you about how They always have a plan. What silliness. Why would They bother with a game whose every move was predetermined? Your whole appeal to any of us lies in your unpredictability.

Which brings us back to Tad, and why he held my interest more than most.

If I took my job more seriously, I'd probably start tracking your tendencies at an earlier age, but it's so rarely worth the effort. Everyone knows that old saying about "give a teacher a child till she's seven years old, and he'll dictate her destiny", but nothing could be further from the truth. I could pop in for a brief altercation at age 15, age 25, age 45, and send you careening completely off track with hardly any effort at all. Sure, you would feel conflicted about your new place in the cornfield, but your feelings are no concern of mine. Just your choices. And those are rarely difficult to affect.

Tad was different. I'm going to have to try and find a way to describe his light to you, a way that doesn't rely on colours or hues or intensities. It's contrary to what I generally work to accomplish, but bear with me for just a minute. Close your eyes and imagine a star so distant, so far away in time, that its light that burned out a million years ago still hasn't reached the earth. But it's coming. It's travelling, undeterred by the absence of its origin. Now imagine the moment that light finally arrives, how its shaft falls thousands of feet through the ocean and illuminates every secret on its way through. Imagine how it strikes the ocean floor, finds the fellow of its birthplace, and absorbs that dark light emitted by the earth itself. The gloaming brilliance refracted in that moment — that's what I felt when I first encountered Tad.

His light remained as brilliant and singular and ancient at the

conclusion of his journey as it had been at the beginning. So utterly itself.

I can see that doesn't help you. Which is good news for me. The less you understand of what you can't see, the better. Part of the lovely fallout of the whole "creation science" movement is how increasingly impossible it makes any faith in the unseen, even among those who claim to live by faith. And if I'm going to keep coming out on top, I need to keep you firmly in the realm of the felt. The mind that balks at quantum particles definitely won't be able to accept the folderol of a soul. Oh sure, you can spout a limited number of mass-produced slogans that pretend at spirituality, but it's not the sort of thing that will stand up to a real defence.

I guess I'll just show you. This story will make the most sense if I let you see the world through his mother's eyes, since her crossroads are the ones I'm arguing counted the most. As far as narrative goes, anyway — she writes the beginning and chooses the end. Which is funny when you think about it: one of the prevailing misconceptions of humanity is the all-consuming importance of every decision you make. You really took that whole butterfly theory to heart. Somehow you are utterly convinced that every step you take dictates the course of the universe. This self-absorption plays well to my purposes. Your conviction of your own importance produces anxiety, shame, guilt, fear, even pride — all emotions that leave you aching for some relief. And relief is what I offer in spades. I am the one who soothes, who comforts, who feeds.

But in this case, I grant Perdie the reality she perceives: that her choices, to go or to stay, dictate what will become of those she loves most. It's the sort of dilemma I live for. High risk on every side, with no way to know for sure what you'll choose. She should have fascinated me, but I was distracted by Tad along the way.

Tad was the strangest compound of self-contained and unselfish, elements unfamiliar to most of you and intriguing to me. I necessarily draw all my own definition and purpose from my

intersections with you. Sometimes I think you poor paltry mortals hold all the power in this game, objects of curiosity and longing toward whom all heaven is bent.

In the story I have to tell, Tad keeps his own path undeterred by how often his steps cross mine. He doesn't even acknowledge me, and that, as much as anything, enchants me.

Perdie, though, is continually engaged in my world, doubting every decision she makes, imagining her every act the crux of some new destiny. So I'll give her the place of storyteller here. You'll have to tell me by the end if she reminds you of anyone you know.

BEFORE THE ACCIDENT

CHAPTER ONE

"You know this is the only way," Perdie sighed, scraping back the strands of brown hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail.

"Are you sure?" Julie asked, her brow furrowed as she absently shook a doll in the direction of her three-year-old daughter. Lexie ran over and grabbed the rag-haired toy with a high-pitched squeal that barely registered to either mother. Julie frowned more deeply; her attention no longer divided. "What if he comes after you? Or charges you with kidnapping?"

"I'm not saying it's not a gamble. It is. But it's the only chance I have. And I think I at least have a fair chance of neither of those things happening. Matt's … very particular. He won't leave his classes mid-term. And he won't have me charged." Perdie's gaze drifted, darkened. "He can't admit to that kind of loss of control. At least, that's what I'm banking on."

"I hope you're right … But how will you survive out there? Isn't Colorado an expensive place to live?"

Perdie's eyes rested on her youngest child. Tad was just a year older than Lexie, but Perdie couldn't help noticing that their play was much more parallel than cooperative. He didn't ignore his younger playmate, exactly. It was more as if he humoured her, giving her just enough attention so that she would allow him to focus on his real interest: building a complex series of walls and towers out of alphabet blocks. It struck her as oddly self-aware for a four-year-old. Neither of her older girls had demonstrated that level of social acuity so young. In fact, she didn't think they possessed it now, at ages seven and ten.

With an effort, Perdie dragged her focus back to her troubled friend. It wasn't that she didn't want to reassure Julie, or that she doubted her good intentions; it was that she'd been over this a thousand times in her head, lying awake in the dark in a too-warm bed. Repeating aloud every argument she'd already had with herself felt unutterably exhausting. But Julie's questions came from love, so Perdie forced herself to explain. "It is. But it's also over a thousand miles away from Ohio. Going east is even more expensive than going west, and too close. If I go as far south, I'm looking at higher crime rates and depressed economies. Colorado is expensive, but I think it's safer, and there's more work out there. At least, I hope so."

"Do you have any leads on jobs?"

Perdie shook her head. "Maybe if I'd gone to school, like you, and had a degree, I could get someone to take me seriously from across the country. But I haven't even gotten a call back on any of the resumes I've sent out. I don't think retail and office jobs have to hunt for applicants, and that's all I'm qualified for. I just have to hope that my little nest egg holds out till I find something we can live on."

"That sounds terrifying, Perdie. What if it doesn't?"

Perdie fixed her with a stare. "What if the next time Matt

loses his temper my kids end up motherless? I'd rather wind up on government assistance than dead."

Colour rose to Julie's cheeks. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean — I just want to be sure you've thought this through. That you're in as good a position as you can be. Are you sure it wouldn't help to go to the church, ask the leaders for help?"

"Maybe if the leaders were people like you, who would actually take some kind of action, I could consider that. But it's not like they'd help us get out. They'd just pray over us and tell Matt to ask for patience and understanding for his rebellious wife. Not to mention that Matt would kill me if I humiliated him by going outside the family. If he so much as guessed I'd ever told you about any of our fights, he'd break every rib in my body. He'd be beyond furious."

Julie pursed her lips. "I wish I could tell you that you're wrong. You do know Darren and I will do anything we can, though, don't you? If you get into trouble out there, if it takes a while to find a job, you have to promise to let us know. Darren's as sick about this as I am. We don't have much, but we would never let you starve."

Perdie barked out a short laugh in spite of herself. "I don't think we would starve. I've never navigated the welfare system, but I think the whole point is to keep people from starving. Childcare is my more pressing issue. Hannah's not quite old enough to be left alone with Rachel and Tad."

Perdie realised too late that Lexie had become completely engrossed in the cartoon playing on the television screen, leaving Tad's attention undivided. He was slowly and absently setting one block on top of another, clearly intent on listening to his mother's words. With a grimace, she gestured toward her son.

"Oh, crumbs," Julie muttered hastily.

"Who wants Kool-Aid?" Perdie asked with determined cheerfulness, clapping her hands and rising to her feet.

"I do, I do!" Lexie exclaimed, without shifting her gaze from the screen.

"Me, too," said Tad solemnly, watching his mother as she headed into the kitchen.

The subject was dropped, the rest of the conversation between the two women conveyed in silent looks and a too-tight hug as the playdate ended.

Later that night, as Perdie lay in that warm bed and felt her husband's rumbling snores reverberate through her body, she thought of her son's sombre gaze and wondered what lay behind those ageless eyes that had already seen too much.

CHAPTER TWO

Perdie's insides were shaking so violently she thought she might throw up. It was impossible to tell how much of her reaction was simple fear and how much was physical overexertion. Matt had left for a full day of classes at 6:30 that morning, but there was never any guarantee he wouldn't stop home for lunch on a whim. Not that there was anything remotely whimsical or sweet about his drive to continually check up on her. Today had been a lucky day, though. She'd fielded two calls and a text message, but he'd stayed on campus for lunch. No doubt taking the opportunity to wow some besotted student with his insights. Perdie knew she should be concerned for the next woman to fall into his trap, but she could only summon up gratitude for anything that diverted his focus away from her.

She'd made her peace months ago, back when she first hatched up this plan, with all the belongings she'd be leaving behind. There wouldn't be time to pack, and she couldn't afford a big trailer anyway. Resolutely, she kept her gaze from lingering on the massive, old oak table Aunt Lorna had given

her as a wedding gift. How many family holidays had she spent as a kid, crowded around its battered surface teeming with overflowing platters and kid-crafted place settings? When she'd first married Matt and dutifully joined his church, she'd dreamed of playdates and dinner parties, imagined their growing family a hub of hospitality and happiness. That had been the worst sort of folly, of course. Now she kept every imperfection on the scarred wood carefully hidden away beneath a lace tablecloth. Matt had only consented to let her keep it because it was solid wood, a pricey indulgence for a young couple.

For one moment, she pushed aside her terrified urgency and slid her hand beneath the lace. Against her palm, she felt the scratches of heavy dinner plates and childish pens, the rough reassurance of old varnish. Warmth seemed to emanate up her arm, the living flame of every woman who had ever set a plate or rested her weary head on that table. Her heartstrings threatened to tear when she pictured Matt sitting alone at this table in an empty house, never knowing its true worth, but they stubbornly stitched themselves back up.

Seems like a perfect moment for me to intrude, doesn't it? Flood Perdie's mouth with the acrid flavour of bitterness, consume her mind with regrets and losses disguised as nostalgia. For most people, you'd be right. But this wasn't an intersection Perdie even acknowledged. Perdie's dilemma would require more sophistication than the blunt instrument of selfishness. She makes this sacrifice look positively easy...

So she had to leave the table behind. With it, she'd leave every memory of cold, tense, silent suppers. Even as a talisman of familial love, this table hadn't served a single meal to nourish the heart while Matt sat at its head. She'd build a new

happiness for her kids, even if they had to eat pizza off paper plates, sitting on an apartment floor.

She pulled her hand away, squared her shoulders.

Her only priority was the kids' stuff. It was going to be hard enough for them to start over in a new place surrounded by strangers. She was determined they would at least be able to close their eyes at night and pretend they felt at home.

She'd filled the inflatable pool first thing this morning and stuck the kids in the backyard. Snacks and drinks on the back porch meant they shouldn't have any reason to come indoors and catch her hauling all their furniture and armfuls of clothes into the mini U-Haul trailer Darren and Julie had dropped off for her earlier this morning. They'd both offered to stay and help her pack it up, but Perdie was adamant in her refusal. It was still possible that Matt would come home and catch her. Darren and Julie's presence would only guarantee the worst possible outcome. Losing face was a possibility no narcissist could permit. Given enough time and distance, Matt might eventually accept her defection, but he'd never allow himself to be humiliated. A key element of her escape was allowing him to write the story after she left. He could play the victim all he wanted once she was gone — cast her as the cruel, selfish woman who'd stolen his children and run away without so much as a goodbye.

It had taken some convincing, but she'd known the price of backing down would be too high to pay. She'd let this go on for too long as it was. Adding more victims to the fallout wasn't an option. This was her mess, and she was cleaning it up. Not to mention she still had the niggling, persistent fear that Matt would cry and plead and convince Darren and Julie that she was the villain after all. She'd watched him manipulate too many people too deftly to discount him, even among those she counted as friends.

Of course, she'd known her plan wouldn't long survive contact with the enemy, by which she meant her own kids. Tad would happily stay in the pool till his skin permanently raisined, but Hannah and Rachel — mostly Hannah — soon bored of waterplay and kept trying to come in. She'd locked the back door, which just meant that Hannah came wandering around the front of the house to get in and caught her mom staggering toward the trailer with two tubs of toys.

"Mom! What's happening? Where are we going?"

By this point, Perdie was already too tired and too afraid to react much to being caught out by her ten-year-old daughter. She'd simply shoved her brown hair out of her eyes and panted out, "We're going on a trip. But it's a surprise. Help me keep your sister and brother out of the front yard till we're ready to go."

Perdie wasn't any more or less perceptive a mother than any other, but even in her own distress, she caught it: the instant her daughter's soul snapped shut, a nearly invisible locking-down that was nothing more than a flicker in her brown eyes — the only genetic nod to her mother's input in a face that otherwise mirrored her father's handsome Nordic influence.

Perdie didn't know what to do about it, of course, but she did see it. Saw it, and grieved it. Ten years was just too long to have seen such violence, even if it stayed mostly behind closed doors. And leaving meant the end of the fairy tales and lies children inevitably spin to make sense of their own horrors: Hannah's father was not suffering under an evil enchantment, her mother was not going to rescue them all, they were not going to live happily ever after.

Her father was a bad man, her mother was giving up, and they were running away. So, standing there in the hot Ohio

sun in a cookie-cutter suburban neighbourhood, hope died on the driveway, and Hannah grew up.

"Okay. Where are we going?"

"Colorado. To the mountains."

Hannah's face brightened at that. Cornfield kids can't help but be cheered by the thought of mountains, even in the darkest of circumstances.

"Can I grab a book? I'll stay in the backyard. I'm just tired of the pool."

Perdie hadn't gotten to the bookshelves yet. Between the kids' beds and dressers, she wouldn't have room for shelves, but she intended to take as many armfuls of books as she could all the same. She hardly had time to read herself, but all three of the kids were voracious, even Tad.

"Go for it. Just — keep track of it, okay? Or it might get left behind."

Perdie wanted to be surprised that Hannah hadn't asked why they were taking mattresses and dresser drawers on vacation, but she knew that Hannah had grasped the situation more swiftly than a ten-year-old girl should be able to. If Hannah was willing to pretend to swallow her mom's story for the time being, then Perdie was going to let her and be grateful.

She stuffed her clothes, hangers and all, on top and around the corners of the kids' stuff. She stacked the photo albums in with the books. She'd planned ahead, of course — planned for months — so she had a stash of paper plates, napkins, and plastic glasses and tableware. She took a saucepan and a skillet and a couple large utensils, but that was it. She didn't intend to give Matt any ammunition to use against her. She even left all the photos on the walls, her Colonial-themed décor and baskets. She did squeeze in all the throw pillows, though. Matt found the things frippery and pointless, and they'd be glad of

something to sit on when they got to their new apartment, even if it was just a pillow on the floor.

Between Hannah helping keep Rachel and Tad corralled, and Perdie's own ruthless abandonment of virtually every personal possession, she managed to get the trailer packed up by 2:30. That gave her two hours before Matt made it home and discovered they were gone. Not much of a head start, but then, she wasn't expecting him to chase after them, either. He had classes tomorrow, too, and there was no way Matt Blevins would admit that he'd lost so much control over his household that he had to cancel classes to chase down his wife.

There had been a time when his narcissistic tendencies had terrified her, but in time, she'd learned to bend them to her own purposes. With mixed results, but still. She had to take back some semblance of power in her own life. And if that made her as much of a manipulator as he, so be it. She'd accepted her role as victim for far too long. If getting out from under those fists made her a villain, too, she wasn't about to lose any sleep over it.

She ran through the house one last time, forcing her eyes to focus with immense effort. She was already so exhausted, as much from the constant terror of Matt coming home early as the difficulties of dragging out the furniture. Part of her still didn't accept this was actually happening. She'd been expecting to die for so long now, it seemed preposterous to expect that she might live, after all.

On an impulse, she scooped up one last item: a delicately carved little soap dish that looked like a birds' nest with a robin perched on its edge. It had been a gift from Julie. *This is mine*, she thought fiercely. *I'm keeping it*.

Now for the hard part. Getting the kids into the minivan would be easy. They were always up for an adventure, and even a trip to the library qualified. Telling them they were

never coming back: that was going to be something else entirely.

The one thing I'll grant you about Perdie is that she was fierce. That might seem oxymoronic — a fierce, battered wife? But they're more common than you think. She'd had her reasons for staying, and she knew what they were. Now that she'd been given a bigger reason for leaving, nothing was going to deter her from that path, certainly not her own fear and inadequacy. One of my favourite things about you humans is how willingly you will run pell-mell into situations you are entirely unequipped to handle. As often as not, you even prevail through sheer obstinacy. Perdie was one of those sorts. She didn't know the healthy way to break the news to her kids that they were moving over a thousand miles away and, for all intents and purposes, didn't have a daddy anymore; but she was bound and determined to do it anyway.