YOUNG WOMEN.

JESSICA MOOR

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Prologue

I WATCHED HER FILM last night. Moitié Victime, *it was called.*

She was sixteen in that movie. You could tell by the way that the director shot the sex scene that he knew that too. Maybe not emotionally, but contractually.

I hunched my body around the laptop, my nose inches from the screen. To see her better. To reach through and grab her.

Her face was perfect for period pieces. She made sense with her hair (chestnut brown here) back in a chignon, Cupid's bow mouth accentuated in creamy red lipstick. Perfect for an ingénue in Vichy France, a double agent. That was her role in this film, and that was always her gift, her magic. The way she worked in every context, not just plausible but perfectly suited. Inevitable.

She looks so young in that film. Deer-limbed and emerald-eyed, afraid in that way that men find sexy. So different to how she was when I knew her. I watched the film once as a forensic exercise, ignoring the parts of it that weren't her, or were at least an echo of her.

After I saw her in the footage of the protest, I watched her film a second time. This time I put on my dressing gown, poured a glass of red wine, let myself stretch out over the

sofa. I watched for the colour palette and the shot composition and the languid, reproachful pan of the camera over the cafes of a small-town square where the Nazi officers sat.

I treated it as an aesthetic experience. It worked well that way.

Part One

Chapter One

THE FIRST TIME I saw Tamsin her eyes were closed. Her lashes didn't flicker, even as the sirens wailed closer, even when they were so close that we could feel their screams through our bodies. Even as our skulls jolted with the knock on the tarmac of police boots.

The whole time her face was serene, as if she were dead and laid to rest.

I turned my head to look at her, feeling the road's grit scrape against my scalp. Her hair was gold. What they call old gold – the colour of gilded furniture, with just the slightest tinge of olive. Skin strobed by the lights of Piccadilly Circus. In all the shouts and slams and the crashes and the cries, she stayed lying there, unmoving. She seemed, in that moment, other-worldly.

As the police drew level with us we were engulfed by noise. It was then that her eyes popped open. They were green and feline, yellow-flecked.

I must have looked afraid. She looked at me. Grabbed my hand. Then she was yanked upright and her fingers were torn from mine. She went limp, resisting arrest as a corpse resists its own concealment.

Cop's breath on my neck, arms pulled painfully behind me, they half dragged, half carried us away. I couldn't stop my feet from skittering along in obedience. Tamsin was smiling slightly, as if she thought the whole thing was just a little bit funny.

They put us all into the van and slammed the door shut, harder than I thought they would, as if they were making sure we got the full experience. It was all people like me – young, white, privileged enough to be dizzy with excitement at the thought that they'd actually been arrested. Some were looking around, smirking, heaving in their breath. Others sat there, performatively grim. The flush-cheeked girl beside me on the bench was furiously tweeting.

Tamsin was sitting opposite me. Again, her eyes were closed. She seemed so calm, so sure that the right thing to do was disappear into herself, like her mind was a fortress.

I settled for a little half-smile, as if I'd been here before, as if I knew the drill. I made sure to look around at the other faces in turn, so that nobody would notice that all I really wanted to do was to stare at her.

I lost sight of her for a bit, while we were all being processed at the station. Someone started singing and everyone joined in. First 'Amazing Grace', then 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall'. I didn't know most of the words so I just mouthed along and joined in with the chorus. Then nobody seemed to be able to work out what to sing next; someone shouted, 'Anyway, here's "Wonderwall".'

We laughed like we thought it was stupid, but still we sang along. Everyone knew all those words. Then 'Rehab' by Amy Winehouse. It didn't really make sense, but it felt like it meant something when everyone started stamping their feet on the concrete floor and singing *no, no, no*.

We didn't find each other again until the singing had died away and everyone was sitting or lying on the floor. I was cross-legged, trying to sit with my spine straight, the way my teacher did in yoga. My hips hurt and my back ached. The adrenaline spike had left me feeling lifeless.

Tamsin touched my arm lightly and said, 'How are you doing now, sweetie?' As if we were just carrying on from an earlier conversation.

Her accent wasn't English. At first it sounded American, but as we talked, I started to wonder if it wasn't that international inflection that you hear when people speak English like it's their native tongue, but have no place to tie it to.

'I'm doing better,' I said.

'You looked scared when I saw you. I hope you don't mind I held your hand. I do stuff like that without thinking it through. You English don't like being touched.'

'I didn't mind.'

I didn't mind, either, when she pulled out a worn little deck of cards from her pocket and asked if I wanted to play. I didn't give my standard response – I didn't like card games, too much organised fun – I just nodded. We sat cross-legged on the floor opposite each other. She bent forward from the hips the way babies do, joints fluid, hair slipping from her shoulders and forming a curtain

to encompass the two of us. I couldn't work out how old she was – she could have been anything from sixteen to thirty – whether the easy way she was talking to me was a sign of naïveté or maturity.

I asked her what had brought her to the protest today.

'If we don't do something about climate change, it seems to me like there's no point in caring about anything else,' she said.

I nodded, and said that it was something similar for me. That morning I'd set off to the protests with my flatmate and some of her friends, all of us sitting on the Overground with our arms around our placards like they were something we loved.

They let us go sometime after midnight. They processed Tamsin first, and she didn't say goodbye before she left. I assumed that was that – one of those brief intimacies, like from a plane or in a queue, that never got its chance to take root. I emerged from the holding area with Hana, my flatmate, and a couple of her friends. But when I got to the waiting area of the police station there she was, sitting on one of the plastic chairs among a gaggle of people staring listlessly at their phones. One Doc Marten-clad foot resting on her knee, the way a man crosses his legs. She was reading a paperback book.

Tamsin looked up expectantly when I entered, as if she'd recognised my tread, and smiled.

'Drink?'

*

None of the bars were open. Hana and the rest of her gang quickly begged off, and it would have been obvious for me to get the last train home with them. But instead Tamsin and I found an all-night Tesco Metro. Everyone looked dull under that awful strip lighting, but not Tamsin. Her skin seemed to carry with it a patina that couldn't be scrubbed away by too much reality.

I instinctively reached for the bottle of Pinot Grigio that was on offer, but she waved her hand at me and said, 'Don't worry, I'll get this.'

She was scanning the top rack of the bottles of red wine.

'That one's on offer.' I pointed.

She shook her head. 'They're bullshitting you with these offer things, ignore them.'

She chose a bottle of Malbec, then went over to the refrigerated section and selected two different kinds of cheese. She cradled them in the crook of her arm like they were kittens, her hand clasped around the neck of the bottle.

'Okay, we just need . . .'

She walked quickly, on the balls of her feet, to the baked goods section and felt the baguettes in turn, through their cellophane wrappers.

'These are fresh,' she announced, and her face seemed to brighten, as if it was the best news anyone could have given her.

All the self-checkouts were available, but she went up to the cashier desk.

'How's your night going?' she asked the cashier, a tall, loose-limbed boy of seventeen or so, who looked like he was still waiting to grow into his own frame.

I expected him to grunt something in reply. I expected to find that she didn't really understand how London worked, how people were here. But he shrugged and said, 'Yeah, not too bad. We've had a lot of people in from the protest today.'

'That's where we've just come from.' She gestured at me, and it occurred to me that, as far as this cashier was concerned, we could be old friends. 'What did you make of it all?'

'Well, it took me a long time to get in to work.' I expected him to leave it at that, for him to brusquely twist the card holder towards her and disappear back into his role. 'But you know, I support it. I'd be out there too, if I could. It's important. I read this thing online this morning and it said "there's no Planet B".' He laughed. 'I know it's cheesy, but it stuck with me. No Planet B. Someone's got to do something.'

I'd been planning to dart forward, to tap my card on the reader, to beat her to it. But that would have felt like interrupting, so I held off until it was too late. It cost £21.89, the wine and the cheese and the baguette. She didn't even look at the reader.

The summer night was still warm. None of the parks were open. Tamsin wanted to climb over the railings into Victoria Embankment Gardens on the river. I didn't. It wasn't that

I was scared – it just felt too raw an exercise of privilege for us to trespass, knowing that if we were caught there would be no real repercussions. I said something along those lines to her.

She gave me a measured look. 'Who is it that you think that's helping?'

I didn't have an answer, so I climbed too. For a moment I felt weightless.

She somehow managed to fashion a cheeseboard out of the cardboard packaging. She poured half of the Malbec into her emptied-out steel water bottle and gave the rest to me. We clinked the two together.

'Was that your first arrest?'

'God, yeah. I'm such a rule-abiding little creep.'

'To many more, then!' She raised her bottle as if saluting not just me but the Thames, the reflection of the London Eye in its inky surface, the darting lights of the bridges as they lunged across the river. She seemed happy for the silence to remain untouched, and there was something in the quality of it that I liked too. Yet there were some obvious questions that still needed asking.

'So, you're from America?'

'Montréal,' she said, pronouncing it the French way. 'Canada. Originally. I moved to the States when I was twelve though, so you're kind of right. Connecticut. Fucking kill me.'

'Sorry. I didn't mean to assume.'

'Don't worry. Canadians are too polite to care when we get mistaken for Americans.'

'Montreal's in Quebec, right?' I couldn't have sworn to it then – it was a guess from the way she said the name.

'Right.'

'So you speak French?'

'Bien sûr.' She pronounced the words strangely, as if the vowels were dangling from her mouth. 'French and English from living in Quebec. Then my mom's Italian and my dad's Polish.'

'Like, first generation?'

'Right. Not that weird thing of saying you're Irish when no one in your family's set foot in Ireland for more than a century.'

'So you speak Polish and Italian too.'

'Sure.'

'Wow.'

'There's a lot going on there.' She took a sip of wine from her water bottle and slid down the bench so that her head was resting on the back. Staring up at the stars.

'Is Tamsin an Italian name? Or Polish? It sounds . . .' I cast about, unsure.

'It's one of those strange bastardised names. A short form that turned into a name all by itself. It's a contraction of Thomasina. That means twin.'

'Do you like your name?' A playground question.

'I've always thought it was kind of ugly. Yours is so much prettier.' Said without any smile to indicate flattery.

I didn't agree. I didn't really think Tamsin was a pretty name either. Rather, it sounded like the name of someone who didn't care if her name was pretty.

'Emily means industrious. Striving.' I sighed. 'There were seven different Emilys in my year at school.' I could still count the fleet of Emilys off in my head, ten years later. Morris, Chapman, Kim, Parker-Johns, Sullivan, Cheung.

And me.

'And are you?'

'Am I what?'

'Industrious.'

I took a sip of the wine. 'I mean, sure.'

'That's why you were at the protest. You care.'

'Everyone cares.'

'But not everyone gives up their weekend.'

I stayed quiet.

'Anyway, industrious or not, that doesn't mean it's not a pretty name. It's so classic. So English. Emily.'

She said it in an English accent – not the cod-aristocratic-slash-Cockney that I've heard Americans do, but an impressive approximation of RP, cut-glass and perfect, like Helena Bonham Carter in *A Room With A View*.

'But anyway . . .' She looked at me, popping a crumb of Stilton into her mouth. 'My god, the cheese in this country is so fucking good. I still can't get over it. Anyway. Where are you from?'

'Here,' I said, gesturing to the bench. 'I mean, London.'

'Amazing.'

'Not really. I'm not from a cool part. I'm from Wimbledon.'

I waited for her to say 'Like the tennis', as if that settled everything, but she didn't. Instead she said, 'So what's that

like? Posh? Gritty?' She articulated the two ts carefully, as if she was enunciating them one at a time. 'Diverse?'

'In a sense. I mean, Wimbledon itself is quite posh.'

'I'm sensing a but. Are you posh? I find it hard to tell.'

'I'm . . .' I thought about the red-trousered croquet-playing specimens I'd met at university. 'I'm sort of medium. Not posh exactly . . . my ex was really posh.' Harry had always made it clear how gauche I was, that I'd never done a good enough job of imitating people like him. My exact social class without him was another thing that I had yet to work out. 'I went to a grammar school.'

'Is that like private school?'

'No.' Explaining myself from first principles. It was liberating to not feel stuck in the usual class shorthand. 'State school. But they did this high-pressure entrance exam, so the mood of the school is completely neurotic. All-girls.'

'My god.' She laughed. 'I don't want to be mean about it or anything.' The way she said 'about' reminded me that she was part-Canadian. A-boat. 'It's just a strange concept to most North Americans, a single-sex school. Unless you're Catholic or something. Which I actually am, and I still didn't . . . Anyway, go on.'

'So yeah . . . crazy school.'

'Crazy in what way? Is that where you learned to be a "rule-abiding little creep"?'

She repeated my words back to me in another British accent, her imitation too good a mirror to feel like mockery.

I paused. Took a sip of wine.

I didn't want to give her my spiel, the same little speech about my adolescence that I'd developed on my gap year and perfected during my first week at university. As a lawyer I was prone to the spiel, the shorthand, the potted summary. But mature people didn't talk like that.

I shook my head. 'Anyway, that's all so boring.'

'It's not boring to me. Did all that stuff affect you? I mean, I guess it must have, in that atmosphere. But did it . . .'

'. . . I'd say I got off pretty lightly. I wasn't exactly down the mines.'

'Sure.'

'Tell me about Montreal.'

I guess I was expecting a breakdown of the city's demographics. Or a quick sound bite on the politics, a survey of rent prices.

Instead, Tamsin told me about a city built on a mountain, a mountain that rose out of the vast icy river that ran all the way from Lake Ontario to the North Atlantic. I couldn't think exactly where those places were; it seemed enough to embrace the sounds of the names. She told me that sometimes, in the winter, you saw seals in the river. She said the mountain was turned into a park where people hung out and played guitar in the summer. That there was a great cross on top of that mountain that you could see from all over the city. She told me about the network of tunnels that ran underneath the city so that in the winter people could get to work, to the shops, to university, when the temperature dropped so low that you couldn't go outside.

'Sounds a bit like the Paris catacombs,' I said.

Her eyes lit up. 'Exactly. I'd never even thought about that before, but when I went to Paris and saw the catacombs I felt like, in a weird way – yeah, this makes sense to me. This feels like, home, even though they're nothing alike.' She laughed. 'And like, it's still Canada. It's still cars and hockey and Tim Hortons or whatever. But it's something else as well. It's this European sensibility, I guess. Truly bilingual. People flick back and forth from English to French depending on which word they like better in either language. And there's all these cultural influences. English and French obviously, but also Haitian, Lebanese, Jewish. Such beautiful food. So, when my parents moved us to this small town in Connecticut I just felt like . . . I don't know, like my soul had lost all its nutrients.'

I paused. Took note of the phrase.

'Why did you all move?'

'Dad's job. What other reason is there, for uprooting a whole family?'

'Sure. So what did you do?'

'Oh. You know. Read a bunch. Didn't talk to people much. Became a weird theatre kid in high school. The usual story. But my little sister was fine. It worked well for her, actually. That way of living.'

Her voice had become strangely flat when she said this.

'You were shy?'

'Hell yeah.'

'I find that hard to imagine.'

She shrugged.

'So what brought you to London?'

'Being a weird theatre kid.' She laughed, again. Snorted, really. 'No, I mean, if you really care about acting there are basically two places to go: London and New York.'

So she was an actress. It seemed strange to think of her being paid to pretend to be someone else, when people would probably pay her good money just to be herself, to make them feel like this.

'And LA, obviously,' she continued, an afterthought.

'You didn't fancy LA?'

'Not really my thing.'

'What's the thing?'

'I don't know. Sunshine. Fucking juicing.' She broke off the tip of the baguette and pushed it into her mouth. The crunch of it sounded buttery, resonant. 'I mean, right here, this fucking baguette, this is why I'm not LA material. That's the stereotype, anyway.'

'And not New York.'

'Right.'

'How come? It seems the obvious choice. Closer to your family.'

She paused before replying. 'It's funny.' She wiped some crumbs from around her mouth, took a swig of wine. 'Funny that you say that. To me London was the obvious choice.'

I let her keep talking.

'I mean, I guess if I were to think about it pragmatically . . .' She turned to look at me, her eyes capturing mine as her voice gained momentum. 'I'd say that it's to

do with the type of acting here. Like, most American acting is very much film-focused, very method. Whereas you have these British actors, these classically trained actors, and they're just on another level. They convey so much, yet they do so little.'

An indistinct image came into my mind of a certain type of old, grizzled Shakespearean actor.

'The kind of actor that can become someone else,' I said.

She didn't even reply, she just pointed straight at my chest, smiling broadly, as if words were unnecessary. I felt proud. I wasn't sure if it was because I had articulated something for her, or because I was somehow associated with the tradition she admired so much.

Or maybe it was the Malbec.

'Good call on the red,' I said, holding up the bottle.

'I hope you don't mind. You were gravitating towards the white, right? But the thing with red is you don't have to worry so much about the temperature. I love white too, for the right mood, but it's got to be fucking ice-cold. Like, right now, this is pretty tepid, but it's perfect. Red wine is always perfect.'

In the light of the street lamps and the London Eye I could see that the Malbec had stained her lips, but it didn't make her look drunk or sloppy. Just like she was tasting life.

'Anyway, that's me. An artsy stray cat. What about you?'

'I'm a lawyer,' I said automatically. 'I mean, I was. I'm in a slightly different role now, working for a charity.'

'What charity?'

'It's called the Women's Advocacy Centre.'

I paused, waiting for Tamsin to nod and then move the conversation seamlessly back onto herself. I'd met people like her before, beguiling people who were good at seeming interested but didn't really want to hear your answers to their questions. But Tamsin stayed listening, intent. Partly to fill the silence, I carried on.

'We mostly help vulnerable women who've suffered various forms of gender-based violence access legal remedies. Often it's women who can't access existing services, for whatever reason. Immigration, usually. No recourse to public funds. Language barriers. That kind of thing. So we take lots of cases on things like trafficking, female genital mutilation, sexual violence. And then we also do policy work, position papers, advising the government.' I stopped, then said quickly, 'Sorry. Massive downer.'

'Not a downer for me,' Tamsin said, leaning forward. 'I mean, you're right, those are some heavy issues. But do you think it's a downer? Does it bring you down?'

'Oh, I'm already down. Might as well put it to good use.'

Tamsin didn't laugh like I expected. She just kept looking at me, her face intent.

'Is that true? You're already down?'

'Oh no. No, I'm fine.'

'So . . . there must be a good reason why you do it. Is there a huge rush when you win?'

'We don't win very often,' I admitted. 'Usually the odds are just too stacked. But I guess . . . it's good to go to work every day and feel like there's clearly a moral value

to what you're doing. So it's worth carrying on, even if we don't win them all. Even if it's just to keep the idea of justice alive, until a better time comes.'

Tamsin didn't say anything, and for a few seconds I was confident that I had killed the mood entirely. But after a long pause she said, 'I like that phrase. Keeping the idea of justice alive. I'd never thought of that before.'

It was nearly three a.m. She saw me looking at my watch and leaned over to look too. She smelled of wine and something woody, like an antique cedar chest, only lighter.

'You smell lovely,' I said. Then, quickly after, 'What perfume do you wear?'

'Oh, thanks. *Féminité du Bois*, I think it's called.' She said the French words in that same strange, drawling way. 'I was just about to compliment you on your lovely ring. Is that an emerald?'

'Yeah. It was my grandmother's.' She had died a year earlier. The ring came to me in her will. 'Classiest thing about me, by some distance.'

'I'm sure that's not true. But fuck, man, it's late.'

It was.

'My place is pretty close by. If you want to crash.'

'Erm . . .' I tried to think of reasons why not. But I wanted to meet the invitation in the same spirit in which it'd been extended, so I said, 'Oh fuck it, yeah. That'd be great.'

A smile spread across her face. 'Perfect. We'll go home. I can make us some green tea. I've got this daybed in the living room and it's actually super comfy. I nap on it all the time. And in the morning we can do cardamom buns

and coffee from this little Nordic bakery near my place and maybe go for a walk? If you want?'

Of course I wanted. But the mention of the bakery reminded me.

'Shit.'

'What?'

'I've got plans in the morning. Breakfast plans at nine. Back in Wimbledon, with an old friend.'

'Oh,' she said.

I felt like I might crack with disappointment, and what made it all the more potent was that she seemed like she was genuinely sorry too.

'I could bail.' Lucy wouldn't hold it against me. But it was precisely because she wasn't the kind of friend that held grudges that made me feel guilty.

'No, no, you should see your friend. I don't want to push you into bailing. Especially if she's an old friend. They're really precious.' She laughed, lightly. 'I wish I had a few more of those. You can still crash for the night though, and go off early?'

'I . . .' I knew it would have been more sensible, more efficient than getting two night buses across London. But I didn't want to just snatch a few hours' sleep in her living room and then scurry off to catch the first train. I wanted the lazy morning, the coffee, the cardamom buns. 'No. No, don't worry. It's probably best if I just get the bus back.'

We walked together as far as my bus stop in Trafalgar Square.

'I can never get over Nelson's Column,' she said. 'I know it's a cliché, it's just . . .' she kissed her fingertips, 'the essence of London. Perfect.'

'He had all these links with the slave trade,' I said, looking up to where Nelson leaned languidly on the hilt of his sword. Harry had told me once that his great-great-great-great grandfather had been one of Nelson's commanders. 'This whole city's like an awful shrine to Empire. It's gross.'

'It is gross,' she said, folding her arms and scrutinising Nelson, as if she were about to start conversing with him. 'It's gross, and it's gorgeous, and they can both be true at the same time.'

I could see my bus rounding the corner of the Strand.

'This is me,' I said. 'Are you sure you're okay getting home? Are you going to get an Uber?'

'Fuck Uber. They're neoliberal assholes. I'm gonna walk. It's a gorgeous night.'

'Are you sure it's . . .'

'Safe?' She shrugged. 'Look, man, I don't buy all that stuff about women not walking around at night. It's my city too. If a dude is going to rape me there's like an eighty per cent chance that it'll be someone I know, so . . .' she grinned, 'statistically I'm safer with strangers.'

'I've never thought about it like that before. That seems . . . healthy.'

'Or just the rationalisations of a woman who's too lazy to learn Krav Maga.'

'Well, text me when you get home.' I took my debit card out of my pocket, ready to tap.

I'd said it because it was what girls said to each other. But she said, 'Wait,' and held out her hand. 'Gimme your phone.'

She tapped out her number, and just 'Tamsin'. No surname.

'Get home safe,' I said, when I got on the bus.

'Goodnight, sweetie. Thank you for a beautiful evening.'