

Godmother:

The Secret Cinderella Story

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

 loved arriving at the bookstore first thing in the morning, when the streets were still quiet, the sun half risen, and the whole place felt like a secret meeting room. I liked walking through the still-dark city, as if I were wading through air – the buildings like shadows looming on either side of me, the streets rushing forward in black rivers. There was something about the empty store, too, the books piled all around, that made you want to whisper and walk as slowly as you could. The city was always on top of you, pressing in, but the moment you stepped inside Daedalus Books, it felt like you'd closed your eyes and gone to sleep.

That day it was so hot the place was stifling when I walked in. August had made the whole city seem to melt and turned the air to water. It sat on my skin, sank into

it. I switched on the giant fan in the corner and stood in front of it, breathing in. Outside, I could see the glimmer of light from the bakery across the street. The steam of coffee, the baskets of bread being put out.

I had a ritual. Before I began sorting through the piles of books, organizing and cataloging and shelving them, before I began attacking the dust that had accumulated the night before, I stooped down in front of the shelf of rare books behind the register. The books glittered like jewels behind the glass, with their ornate covers and bright gold edges. I unlocked the case, slid it open, and then paused, listening for any sign of life upstairs.

The smell of the old books was sharp as it hit my face. I loved the earthy scent of them, straight from another time. I could almost imagine I was being hurled back. I was always seeking out things and moments and places that were filled with the past, that made history seem like something you could touch.

I reached in and pulled out my favorite – the book at the end of the bottom shelf, tucked away, the pages like onion skins. I moved my palm over the raised cover.

I drew a deep breath, taking in its rich bark scent, then pulled back the front cover, carefully, as if I were juggling glass, and peered in. George had many old collections of tales, but this was my favorite. It had the most delicately rendered drawings, separated with translucent

gold-speckled sheets that crackled when I turned them.

I felt something catch in my throat the way it always did, and I turned the pages, barely touching them, pressing them lightly with my palms so they wouldn't crumble.

The text seemed to have been stamped on the pages, among images of a girl sweeping the chimney and the floors. Scenes of a dance, a hall filled with men and women twirling like tops. The girl was drawn in pen and ink, her hair a mass of black lines. Leaves fluttered down the sides of the pages.

George had found the book, he said, at an estate sale, buried in someone's attic, with a stack of other books. *Peter Pans*, *Alice in Wonderland*s, wonderful old books as heavy as stones, filled with drawings and crinkled paper. He had bought the whole lot for barely anything at all, he said, and refused to sell them. I didn't question George. The store had been his father's, and his father's before him.

I sat down, pulled the book close to me, against my chest. I loved that each book had its own history. I kept a box under the counter filled with the ephemera I'd found in them, the notes and receipts and lists and bookmarks and bits of feather or plastic that people stuck between pages and forgot to pull out again. Once I'd opened a copy of *Middlemarch* and found a dried sprig of lavender and one pink rose. Another time a love letter had fallen out as I flipped through the pages of *Thérèse Raquin*. 'I can't see

anything but your eyes,' the lover had begun, and I would wonder who it was, if the lovers even remembered the fever that had passed over them once.

I loved the scribbles in the margins, the notes in the front of the books that told their stories, the ways they passed from one person to another. *'To Jennifer, Christmas 1921. May these words stay with you.'* The stray phrases and numbers jotted on the side of a page – *'Indian Taj, 74th Street'* emerging from the margins of *Utopia*, *'BUY PUMPKINS'* blaring up at me from the back cover of *To the Lighthouse*. As I sat behind the register, carefully erasing the penciled marks, I felt as if each book had a secret to tell, only to me.

In this one, my favorite one, someone had scribbled on the inside of the back cover, in French: *'Tous mes anciens amours vont me revenir.'*

All my old loves will be returned to me.

I had often imagined who had written it, the faded pencil, the strange scrawl. Sometimes I imagined a young girl, daydreaming. Sometimes an old woman like me, left with nothing but memories. I wondered what had happened to the woman, if she'd ended up having a life rich with love or if she'd lived how I had lived, starving and alone. It could have been anything, an artist's note or a quote to tell a friend, but I felt I could see this woman, her face lit with hope, the pencil poised in her hand like a swooping bird.

I set the book down. What would someone say if they saw me? Silly old lady crying over a book for children. I put it away carefully. Locked the case. I used a mixture of white vinegar and clove oil to wipe it down, erase my fingerprints, and then I stood up slowly, facing the window.

The sun was starting to rise, and the light moved over the shelves, streaming in and onto the counter. Outside, the city breathed, groaned. Its hot breath steamed up the windows, and my own face stared back at me from the glass. The wrinkled, hanging skin, the dull hair that spiraled out like wires, the sunken dark eyes. I hated catching myself this way, by surprise. *This is not who I am*, I thought. Sometimes I ached so badly for my former beauty that I wanted to pull off my skin like an old robe.

I grabbed the broom and began tackling the floors. As I cleaned, I ticked off my day, what I had to do. Inventory, pricing and shelving, bills. There were boxes of books in back that George had dropped off the day before, and a few bags that customers had brought by to sell. This day I would be alone all afternoon while George headed upstate to track down some rare book. He was always off chasing treasures, and there was always someone in his array of contacts who would pay the price he asked for them. I thought of the bills I needed to pay and felt a twinge. The bookstore had limitless funds, thanks to George's family's

other ventures – their horses and restaurants – and his own rare-book trade on the side. I was always struggling.

When I finished sweeping, I rubbed the shelves and counters with a damp cloth, then watered the plants I'd stuck in the windows. I straightened the books that had slumped over during the night, all the shelves the customers had wrecked the day before. It was mindless work, but satisfying: The dull floors began to gleam, and the dust-covered shelves came to life. During the day there was never enough time to fix what the customers unfixed, but here, now, in the early-morning hours, the place was perfect. A completeness and fullness that came as close as I could remember to life in the other world.

At ten A.M., I turned the Closed sign to Open and wheeled out shelves of one-dollar books onto the sidewalk. A man passed me, walking his dog and carrying a newspaper under his arm.

I stood on the sidewalk. Stared out at the world, the comfort and hush of the store behind me. A few groups of people sat in the bakery now, sipping coffee, eating pastries. A woman stared intently into a laptop, tracing the screen with her fingers. Cars twisted down the street, nearly silent.

I went back inside. There were always mountains of new books to contend with, and the shelves were constantly shifting, transforming. Customers started trickling in, shuffling through the aisles, paging through books, slipping

science tomes into the poetry section, picture books in American history, Gabriel García Márquez next to Evelyn Waugh next to Casanova. I picked up a box of dusty children's books and got to work.

Around noon the back door opened and George walked in. He lived upstairs, in an apartment I'd never seen.

He had a book in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other. 'Good morning,' I said as he approached.

'Hey, Lil.'

'How was your date?'

'Oh,' he said, yawning and setting the book on the counter. A well-worn copy of *Revolutionary Road*, I saw. 'It was a disaster.'

'It was?'

I stared at his long-fingered hands, his famished eyes, the dark streak of his hair.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I just . . . Oh, I don't know. I guess I'm not much of a ladies' man, Lil, despite all appearances to the contrary.'

I laughed. I wished I could say something. I never knew what to say. He stood there for a moment, watching me, and then he walked away, disappearing into the back office.

I stared after him. I didn't know why I cared the way I did, but I wanted so much for him to be happy. I wanted it more than my own happiness. A remnant from my former life, this feeling. It was always rearing its head.

I put a pot of coffee on the table by the register, and I could see George turning on the computer. It glowed on his face and he sat hunched over it, oblivious to anything else. I moved through the narrow aisles, straightening books, and watched him out of the corner of my eye. There was this look that came over his face when he was concentrating, on a book or on something he was writing. He was writing now, his long fingers scrambling across the keyboard. I wished the women he met could see him like this, the way I saw him, all loose and flushed and taken over.

The bell tinkled, and a customer came in. I moved away.

A young man, a college student obviously, came up and asked for Shakespeare and Chaucer. '*Cadbury Tales*,' he pronounced it. I found the books for him and rang them up. Another group of customers swept in – more college students, looking for records and graphic novels – followed by a dreamy young woman who went straight to the poetry section, browsed the Baudelaire and the Lorca.

Once the store cleared out, I poured a fresh cup of coffee for George, adding in one teaspoon of milk, one packet of sugar, and went to the room in back. He had left. The computer was dimmed, but when I tapped the keyboard, it sprang to life again. I was tempted to sit down, retrace his steps, but I could hear the door opening and shutting out front, the bell tinkling, books falling from the

shelves and to the floor, the dust multiplying. The hours stretching out before me.

By seven P.M. I was exhausted. I took care of the till, shut off every light, and locked the door.

The sky was still bright, as if it were the middle of the day, as if it were right on top of you.

I stepped into the street. The West Village, right here, was the part of the city that was most like the old world: the cobblestone streets with trees hanging over them, the balconies and wrought iron, the rustling leaves. Brownstones with bright flower boxes and glittering windows, ivy lacing up the shutters. Stone steps leading to arched wooden doorways that opened into secret, unknown worlds. You could see the odd framed picture or chandelier through open curtains, an occasional cat curled and sleeping in the sunlight. A man stood cooking at a stove, oblivious to the people walking by.

I turned and trudged up Hudson, past all the strolling couples, the outdoor cafés packed with people talking and laughing. Thin women with bare shoulders and dangling earrings, men who looked like they could be in cologne ads, baring their teeth. Hudson turned to Eighth, and I walked until I couldn't feel my legs anymore – through Chelsea, past Madison Square Garden and Penn Station, past the fabric stores and office buildings, the pizza shops and

hardware stores, up to Thirty-eighth Street. My favorite diner was in the middle of the block, an unassuming place I'd been coming to for as long as I could remember. I sat down at the counter, at my usual seat by the swinging kitchen doors, where I couldn't see myself in the mirror behind the counter. The fan blasted on me, mercifully, almost making me shiver. There was only one other person at the counter. A teenage boy sipping coffee across from me and looking around nervously. His glance met mine and then he looked through me, as if I weren't there.

'Hey, Lil,' Mike said, walking up to me in his white apron. 'You want the usual?'

I nodded. 'And just water, please.'

A second later he set a glass beside me. I picked it up and took a long swallow. The clink of spoons against mugs, forks against plates, made me feel safe and warm.

I devoured my burger when it arrived, letting the thick grease and meat collect in my mouth, then ate the French fries one by one, drowning them in ketchup. I paid and headed home, walking back to Eighth Avenue. The street-lamps lit the sidewalks. If you squinted, you would never think you were in this massive, breathing city. The buildings like mountains, the water towers on top of them like island huts. I liked to play this game, to make the city into something else, to seek out the places that didn't fit. I

walked past the corner bodega, turned onto Thirty-sixth Street. Past 'Non Stop Fashion,' through the door, and up the flight of stairs. I locked the front door after me and one by one clicked the dead bolts shut, then leaned into them, letting relief pour through me. I was safe.

I shrugged out of my clothes, unwrapped the bandages from around my chest, and drew a bath, pouring in the mixture of herbs I kept on the shelf in a jar – eucalyptus oil and wintergreen oil, rosemary and thyme and dried mustard. A film of sweat stuck to my skin. The fragrance wafted up to me, sent a tingling through me. I let the potion spread out and cloud over, then leaned down and dunked my hands in, making circles in the water. Steam filled the bathroom. I stared and stared into the water, as if it were fire. With the potion suffusing it, the water was the color of a river, a deep yellowish green. I breathed in. The scent curled around me.

I stepped into the tub, lowered myself in. Instantly I felt better.

All my old loves will be returned to me, I thought.

I relaxed and lifted my arms out of the water, one at a time, to watch it drip down my skin. I moved my palms across the surface and over my stomach, up my breastbone and to my neck. Everything seemed to slow down. The water pressed into me, filled every pore.

I was alone, finally, completely free. I leaned forward

and unclenched my back. A pure feeling of bliss moved through me.

My wings unfurled. White feather by white feather, curving out and up toward the ceiling, spreading to their full span, like two halves to one heart, until they tapped the walls.