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Opening Extract from...

Subject 375

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Chapter 1

The man sitting opposite me does not move. He keeps his head straight and stifles a cough. The sun bakes the room, but even when I pull at my blouse, the heat still sticks. I watch him. I don't like it: him, me, here, this room, this... this cage. I feel like pulling out my hair, screaming at him, at them, at the whole world. And yet I do nothing but sit. The clock on the wall ticks.

The man places his Dictaphone on the table, and, without warning, delivers me a wide smile.

'Remember,' he says, 'I am here to help you.'

I open my mouth to speak, but there is a sudden spark in me, a voice in my head that whispers, *Go!* I try to ignore it, instead focus on something, anything, to steady the rising surge inside me. His height. He is too tall for the chair. His back arcs, his stomach dips and his legs cross. At 187.9 centimetres and weight at 74.3 kilograms, he could sprint one kilometre without running out of breath.

The man clears his throat, his eyes on mine. I swallow hard.

‘Maria,’ he starts. ‘Can I...’ He falters, then leaning in a little: ‘Can I call you Maria?’

I answer instinctively in Spanish.

‘In English, please.’

I cough. ‘Yes. My name is Maria.’ There is a tremor in my voice. Did he hear it? I need to slow down. Think: facts. His fingernails. They are clean, scrubbed. The shirt he wears is white, open at the collar. His suit is black. Expensive fabric. Wool? Beyond that, he wears silk socks and leather loafers. There are no scuffs. As if he stepped fresh out of a magazine.

He picks up a pen and I risk reaching forward to take a sip of water. I grip the glass tight, but still tiny droplets betray me, sloshing over the edges. I stop. My hands are shaking.

‘Are you okay?’ the man asks, but I do not reply. Something is not right.

I blink. My sight—it has become milky, a white film over my eyes, a cloak, a mask. My eyelids start to flutter, heart pounds, adrenaline courses through me. Maybe it is being here with him, maybe it is the thought of speaking to a stranger about my feelings, but it ignites something, something deep inside, something frightening.

Something that has happened to me many times before. A memory.

It sways at first, takes its time. Then, in seconds, it rushes, picking up speed until it is fully formed: the image. It is there in front of me like a stage play. The curtains rise and I am in a medical room. White walls, steel, starched bed linen. Strip lights line the ceiling, glaring, exposing me. And then, ahead, like a magician through smoke, the

doctor with black eyes enters by the far door. He is wearing a mask, holding a needle.

‘Hello, Maria.’

Panic thrusts up within me, lava-like, volcanic, so fast that I fear I could explode. He steps closer and I begin to shake, try to escape, but there are straps, leather on my limbs. Black Eyes’ lips are upturned, he is in the room now, bearing down on me, his breath—tobacco, garlic, mint—it is in my face, my nostrils, and I begin to hear myself scream when there is something else. A whisper: ‘He is not real. He is not real.’ The whisper, it hovers in my brain, flaps, lingers, then like a breeze it passes, leaving a trace of goosebumps on my skin. Was it right? I glance round: medicine vials, needles, charts. I look at my hands: young, no lines. I touch my face: teenage spots. It is not me, not me now. Which means none of this exists.

Like a candle extinguishing, the image blows away, the curtains close. My eyes dart down. Each knuckle is white from where they have gripped the glass. When I look up, the man opposite is staring.

‘What happened?’ he says.

I inhale, check my location. The scent of Black Eyes is still in my nose, my mouth as if he had really been here. I try to push the fear to one side and, slowly, set down the glass and wring my hands together once then twice. ‘I remembered something,’ I say after a moment.

‘Something real?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Is this a frequent occurrence?’

I hesitate. Does he already know? I decide to tell him the truth. ‘Yes.’

The man looks at my hands then turns his head and opens some photocopied files.

My eyes scan the pages on his lap. Data. Information. Facts, real facts, all black and white, clear, no grey, no in-betweens or hidden meanings. The thought of it must centre me, because, before I know it, the information in my head is coming out of my mouth.

‘Photocopying machines originated in 1440,’ I say, my eyes on the pages in his hands.

He glances up. ‘Pardon?’

‘Photocopiers—they emerged after Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1440.’ I exhale. My brain simply contains too much information. Sometimes it spills over.

‘Gutenberg’s Bible,’ I continue, ‘was the first to be published in volume.’ I stop, wait, but the man does not respond. He is staring again, his eyes narrowed, two blue slits. My leg begins to jig as a familiar tightness in my chest spreads. To stop it, I count. One, two, three, four... At five, I look to the window. The muslin curtains billow. The iron bars guard the panes. Below, three buses pass, wheezing, coughing out noise, fumes. I turn and touch the back of my neck where my hairline skims my skull. Sweat trickles past my collar.

‘It is warm in here,’ I say. ‘Is there a fan we can use?’

The man lowers the page. ‘I’m told your ability to retain information is second to none.’ His eyes narrow. ‘Your IQ—it is high.’ He consults his papers and looks back to me. ‘One hundred and eighty-one.’

I do not move. None of this information is available.

‘It’s my job to research patients,’ he continues, as if read-

ing my mind. He leans forward. 'I know a lot about you.' He pauses. 'For example, you like to religiously record data in your notebook.'

My eyes dart to a cloth bag slung over my chair.

'How do you know about my notebook?'

He stays there, blinking, only sitting back when I shift in my seat. My pulse accelerates.

'It's in your file, of course,' he says finally. He flashes a smile and returns his gaze to his paperwork.

I keep very still, clock ticking, curtains drifting. Is he telling me the truth? His scent, the sweat of his skin, smells of mint, like toothpaste. A hard knot forming in my stomach, I realise the man reminds me of Black Eyes. The thought causes the silent spark in me to ignite again, flashing at me to run far away from here, but if I left now, if I refused to talk, to cooperate, who would that help? Me? Him? I know nothing about this man. Nothing. No details, no facts. I am beginning to wonder if I have made a mistake.

The man sets down his pen and, as he slips his notes under a file to his left, a photograph floats out. I peer down and watch it fall; my breathing almost stops.

It is the head of the priest.

Before he was murdered.

The man crouches and picks up the photograph, the image of the head hanging from his fingers. We watch it, the two of us, bystanders. A breeze picks up from the window and the head swings back and forth. We say nothing. Outside, traffic hums, buses hack up smog. And still the photo sways. The skull, the bones, the flesh. The priest, alive. Not dead. Not splattered in blood and entrails. Not

with eyes frozen wide, cold. But living, breathing, warm. I shiver; the man does not flinch.

After a moment, he slips the photograph back into the file, and I let out a long breath. Smoothing down my hair, I watch the man's fingers as they stack paperwork. Long, tanned fingers. And it makes me think: where is he from? Why is he here, in this country? When this meeting was arranged, I did not know what would happen. I am still unsure.

'How does it make you feel, seeing his face?'

The sound of his voice makes me jump a little. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean seeing Father O'Donnell.'

I sit back, press my palms into my lap. 'He is the priest.'

The man tilts his head. 'Did you think otherwise?'

'No.' I tuck a stray hair behind my ear. He is still looking at me. Stop looking at me.

I touch the back of my neck. Damp, clammy.

'Now, I would like to start the interview, formally,' he says, reaching for his Dictaphone. No time for me to object. 'I need you to begin with telling me, out loud, please—in English—your full name, profession, age and place of birth. I also require you to state your original conviction.'

The red record light flashes. The colour causes me to blink, makes me want to squeeze my eyes shut and never open them again. I glance around the room, try to steady my brain with details. There are four Edwardian brick walls, two sash windows, one French-style, one door. I pause. One exit. Only one. The window does not count—we are three floors up. Central London. If I jump, at the speed and trajectory, the probability is that I will break

one leg, both shoulder blades and an ankle. I look back to the man. I am tall, athletic. I can run. But, whoever he is, whoever this man claims to be, he may have answers. And I need answers. Because so much has happened to me. And it all needs to end.

I catch sight of my reflection in the window: short dark hair, long neck, brown eyes. A different person looks back at me, suddenly older, more lined, battered by her past. The curtain floats over the glass and the image, like a mirage in a desert, vanishes. I close my eyes for a moment then open them, a random shaft of sunlight from the window making me feel strangely lucid, ready. It is time to talk.

‘My name is Dr Maria Martinez Villanueva and I am—was—a Consultant Plastic Surgeon. I am thirty-three years old. Place of birth: Salamanca, Spain.’ I pause, gulp a little. ‘And I was convicted of the murder of a Catholic priest.’

* * *

A woman next to me tugs at my sleeve.

‘Oi,’ she says. ‘Did you hear me?’

I cannot reply. My head is whirling with shouts and smells and bright blue lights and rails upon rails of iron bars, and no matter how hard I try, no matter how much I tell myself to breathe, to count, focus, I cannot calm down, cannot shake off the seeping nightmare of confusion.

I arrived in a police van. Ten seats, two guards, three passengers. The entire journey I did not move, speak or barely breathe. Now I am here, I tell myself to calm down. My eyes scan the area, land on the tiles, each of them black like the doors, the walls a dirt grey. When I sniff, the air smells of urine and toilet cleaner. A guard stands one metre

away from me and behind her lies the main quarter of Goldmouth Prison. My new home.

There is a renewed tugging at my sleeve. I look down. The woman now has hold of me, her fingers still pinching my jacket like a crab's claw. Her nails are bitten, her skin is cracked like tree bark, and dirt lines track her thin veins.

'Oi. You. I said, what's your name?' She eyes me. 'You foreign or something?'

'I am Spanish. My name is Dr Maria Martinez.' She still pinches me. I don't know what to do. Is she supposed to have hold of my jacket? In desperation, I search for the guard.

The woman lets out a laugh. 'A doctor? Ha!' She releases my sleeve and blows me a kiss. I wince; her breath smells of excrement. I pull back my arm and brush out the creases, brush her off me. Away from me. And just when I think she may have given up, she speaks again.

'What the hell has a doctor done to get herself in this place then?'

I open my mouth to ask who she is—that is what I have heard people do—but a guard says move, so we do. There are so many questions in my head, but the new noises, shapes, colours, people—they are too much. For me, they are all too much.

'My name's Michaela,' the woman says as we walk. She tries to look me in the eye. I turn away. 'Michaela Croft,' she continues, 'Mickie to my mates.' She hitches up her T-shirt.

'The name Michaela is Hebrew, meaning *who is like the Lord*. Michael is an archangel of Jewish and Christian

scripture,' I say, unable to stop myself, the words shooting out of me.

I expect her to laugh at me, as people do, but when she does not, I steal a glance. She is smiling at her stomach where a tattoo of a snake circles her belly button. She catches me staring, drops her shirt and opens her mouth. Her tongue hangs out, revealing three silver studs. She pokes her tongue out some more. I look away.

After walking to the next area, we are instructed to halt. There are still no windows, no visible way out. No escape. The strip lights on the ceiling illuminate the corridor and I count the number of lights, losing myself in the pointless calculations.

'I think you need to move on.'

I jump. There is a middle-aged man standing two metres away. His head is tilted, his lips parted. Who is he? He holds my gaze for a moment; then, raking a hand through his hair, strides away. I am about to turn, embarrassed to look at him, when he halts and stares at me again. Yet, this time I do not move, frozen, under a spell. His eyes. They are so brown, so deep that I cannot look away.

'Martinez?' the guard says. 'We're off again. Shift it.'

I crane my head to see if the man is still there, but he is suddenly gone. As though he never existed.

The internal prison building is loud. I fold my arms tight across my chest and keep my head lowered, hoping it will block out my bewilderment. We follow the guard and keep quiet. I try to remain calm, try to speak to myself, reason with myself that I can handle this, that I can cope with this new environment just as much as anyone else, but it is all so unfamiliar, the prison. The constant stench of body odour,

the shouting, the sporadic screams. I have to take time to process it, to compute it. None of this is routine.

Michaela taps me on the shoulder. Instinctively, I flinch.

‘You’ve seen him then?’ she says.

‘Who?’

‘The Governor of Goldmouth. That fella just now with the nice eyes and the pricey tan.’ She grins. ‘Be careful, yeah?’ She places her palm on my right bottom cheek. ‘I’ve done time here before, gorgeous. Our Governor, well, he has...a reputation.’

She is still touching me, and I want her to get off me, to leave me alone. I am about slap her arm away when the guard shouts for her to release me.

Michaela licks her teeth then removes her hand. My body slackens. Without speaking, Michaela sniffs, wipes her nose with her palm and walks off.

Lowering my head once more, I make sure I stay well behind her.