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THE MAIDENS



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Prologue

Edward Fosca was a murderer.

This was a fact. This wasn't something Mariana knew just on an intellectual level, as an idea. Her body knew it. She felt it in her bones, along her blood, and deep within every cell.

Edward Fosca was guilty.

And yet—she couldn't prove it, and might never prove it. This man, this monster, who had killed at least two people, might, in all likelihood, walk free.

He was so smug, so sure of himself. *He thinks he's got away with it*, she thought. He thought he had won.

But he hadn't. Not yet.

Mariana was determined to outsmart him. She had to.

She would sit up all night and remember everything that had happened. She would sit here, in this small, dark room in Cambridge, and think, and work it out. She stared at the red bar of the electric heater on the wall, burning, glowing in the dark, willing herself into a kind of trance.

In her mind, she would go back to the very beginning and remember it all. Every single detail.

And she would catch him.

I

A few days earlier, Mariana was at home, in London.

She was on her knees, on the floor, surrounded by boxes. She was making yet another halfhearted attempt to sort through Sebastian's belongings.

It wasn't going well. A year on from his death, the majority of his things remained spread around the house in various piles and half-empty boxes. She seemed unable to complete the task.

Mariana was still in love with him—that was the problem. Even though she knew she'd never see Sebastian again—even though he was gone for good—she was still in love and didn't know what to do with all this love of hers. There was so much of it, and it was so messy: leaking, spilling, tumbling out of her, like stuffing falling out of an old rag doll that was coming apart at the seams.

If only she could box up her love, as she was attempting to do with his possessions. What a pitiful sight it was—a man's life reduced to a collection of unwanted items for a jumble sale.

Mariana reached into the nearest box. She pulled out a pair of shoes.

She considered them—the old green trainers he had for running

on the beach. They still had a slightly sodden feel about them, with grains of sand embedded in the soles.

Get rid of them, she said to herself. *Throw them in the bin. Do it.*

Even as she thought this, she knew it was an impossibility. They weren't him; they weren't Sebastian—they weren't the man she loved and would love forever—they were just a pair of old shoes. Even so, parting with them would be an act of self-harm, like pressing a knife to her arm and slicing off a sliver of skin.

Instead, Mariana brought the shoes close to her chest. She cradled them tight, as she might a child. And she wept.

How had she ended up like this?

In the space of just a year, which once would have slipped by almost imperceptibly—and now stretched out behind her like a desolate landscape flattened by a hurricane—the life she had known had been obliterated, leaving Mariana here: thirty-six years old, alone and drunk on a Sunday night; clutching a dead man's shoes as if they were holy relics—which, in a way, they were.

Something beautiful, something holy, had died. All that remained were the books he read, the clothes he wore, the things he touched. She could still smell him on them, still taste him on the tip of her tongue.

That's why she couldn't throw away his possessions—by holding on to them, she could keep Sebastian alive, somehow, just a little bit—if she let go, she'd lose him entirely.

Recently, out of morbid curiosity, and in an attempt to understand what she was wrestling with, Mariana had reread all of Freud's writings about grief and loss. And he argued that, following the death of a loved one, the loss had to be psychologically accepted and that person relinquished, or else you ran the risk of succumbing to pathological mourning, which he called melancholia—and we call depression.

Mariana understood this. She knew she should relinquish Sebastian, but she couldn't—because she was still in love with him.

She was in love even though he was gone forever, gone behind the veil—“behind the veil, behind the veil”—where was that from? Tennyson, probably.

Behind the veil.

That’s how it felt. Since Sebastian died, Mariana no longer saw the world in color. Life was muted and gray and far away, behind a veil—behind a mist of sadness.

She wanted to hide from the world, all its noise and pain, and cocoon herself here, in her work, and in her little yellow house.

And that’s where she would have stayed, if Zoe hadn’t phoned her from Cambridge, that night in October.

Zoe’s phone call, after the Monday-evening group—that was how it started.

That was how the nightmare began.

2

The Monday-evening group met in Mariana's front room.

It was a good-sized room. It had been given over to the use of therapy soon after Mariana and Sebastian moved into the yellow house.

They were very fond of that house. It was at the foot of Primrose Hill in Northwest London, and painted the same bright yellow as the primroses that grew on the hill in the summer. Honeysuckle climbed up one of the outside walls, covering it with white, sweet-smelling flowers, and in the summer months their scent crept into the house through the open windows, climbing up the stairs and lingering in the passages and rooms, filling them with sweetness.

It was unseasonably warm that Monday evening. Even though it was early October, the Indian summer prevailed, like an obstinate party guest, refusing to heed the hints from the dying leaves on the trees that it might be time to go. The late-afternoon sun flooded into the front room, drenching it with a golden light, tinged with red. Before the session, Mariana drew the blinds, but left the sash windows open a few inches to let in some air.

Next, she readjusted the chairs into a circle.

Nine chairs. A chair for each member of the group, and one for Mariana. In theory, the chairs were meant to be identical—but life

didn't work like that. Despite her best intentions, she had accumulated an assortment of upright chairs over the years, in different materials and in various shapes and sizes. Her relaxed attitude to the chairs was perhaps typical of how she conducted her groups. Mariana was informal, even unconventional, in her approach.

Therapy, particularly group therapy, was an ironic choice of profession for Mariana. She had always been ambivalent about groups—even suspicious of them—ever since she was a child.

She'd grown up in Greece, on the outskirts of Athens. They'd lived in a large ramshackle old house, on top of a hill that was covered with a black-and-green shroud of olive trees. As a young girl, Mariana would sit on the rusty swing in the garden and ponder the ancient city beneath her, sprawling all the way to the columns of the Parthenon on top of another hill in the distance. It seemed so vast, endless; she felt so small and insignificant, and she viewed it with a superstitious foreboding.

Accompanying the housekeeper on shopping trips to the crowded and frenetic market in the center of Athens always made Mariana nervous. And she was relieved, and a little surprised, to return home unscathed. Large groups continued to intimidate her as she grew older. At school, she found herself on the sidelines, feeling as if she didn't fit in with her classmates. And this feeling of not fitting in was hard to shake. Years later, in therapy, she came to understand that the schoolyard was simply a macrocosm of the family unit: meaning her uneasiness was less about the here and now—less about the schoolyard itself, or the market in Athens, or any other group in which she might find herself—and more to do with the family in which she grew up, and the lonely house she grew up in.

Their house was always cold, even in sunny Greece. And there was an emptiness to it—a lack of warmth, physical and emotional. This was due in large part to Mariana's father, who, although a remarkable man in many ways—good-looking, powerful, razor sharp—was also highly complicated. Mariana suspected he had been damaged beyond repair by his childhood. She never met her

father's parents, and he rarely mentioned them. His father was a sailor, and the less said about his mother, the better. She worked at the docks, he said, with such a look of shame, Mariana thought she must have been a prostitute.

Her father grew up in the slums of Athens and around the port of Piraeus—he started working on the ships as a boy, quickly becoming involved with trade and the import of coffee and wheat and—Mariana imagined—less savory items. By the time he was twenty-five, he had bought his own boat, and built his shipping business from there. Through a combination of ruthlessness, blood, and sweat, he created a small empire for himself.

He was a bit like a king, Mariana thought—or a dictator. She was later to discover he was an extremely wealthy man—not that you would have guessed it from the austere, Spartan way they lived. Perhaps her mother—her gentle, delicate English mother—might have softened him, had she lived. But she died tragically young, soon after Mariana was born.

Mariana grew up with a keen awareness of this loss. As a therapist, she knew a baby's first sense of self comes through its parents' gaze. We are born being watched—our parents' expressions, what we see reflected in the mirror of their eyes, determines how we see ourselves. Mariana had lost her mother's gaze—and her father, well, he found it hard to look at her directly. He'd usually glance just over her shoulder when addressing her. Mariana would continually adjust and readjust her position, shuffling, edging her way into his sight line, hoping to be seen—but somehow always remaining peripheral.

On the rare occasions she did catch a glimpse into his eyes, there was such disdain there, such burning disappointment. His eyes told her the truth: she wasn't good enough. No matter how hard she tried, Mariana always sensed she fell short, managing to do or say the wrong thing—just by existing, she seemed to irritate him. He disagreed with her endlessly, no matter what, performing Petruchio to her Kate—if she said it was cold, he said it was hot; if she said it was sunny, he insisted it was raining. But despite his

criticism and contrariness, Mariana loved him. He was all she had, and she longed to be worthy of his love.

There was precious little love in her childhood. She had an elder sister, but they weren't close. Elisa was seven years her senior, with no interest in her shy younger sibling. And so Mariana would spend the long summer months alone, playing by herself in the garden under the stern eye of the housekeeper. No wonder, then, she grew up a little isolated, and uneasy around other people.

The irony that Mariana ended up becoming a group therapist was not lost on her. But paradoxically, this ambivalence about others served her well. In group therapy, the group, not the individual, is the focus of treatment: to be a successful group therapist is—to some extent—to be invisible.

Mariana was good at this.

In her sessions, she always kept out of the group's way as much as possible. She only intervened when communication broke down, or when it might be helpful to make an interpretation, or when something went wrong.

On this particular Monday, a bone of contention arose almost immediately, requiring a rare intervention. The problem—as usual—was Henry.

3

Henry arrived later than the others. He was flushed and out of breath, and he seemed a little unsteady on his feet. Mariana wondered if he was high. She wouldn't have been surprised. She suspected Henry was abusing his medication—but being his therapist, not his medical doctor, there was little she could do about that.

Henry Booth was only thirty-five years old, but he looked older. His reddish hair was speckled with gray, and his face was covered with creases, like the crumpled shirt he wore. He also wore a perpetual frown, and gave the impression of being permanently tense, like a coiled spring. He reminded Mariana of a boxer or a fighter, preparing to give—or receive—the next blow.

Henry grunted an apology for being late; then he sat down—clutching a paper coffee cup.

And the coffee cup was the problem.

Liz spoke up immediately. Liz was in her mid-seventies, a retired schoolteacher; a prim stickler for things being done “properly,” as she put it. Mariana experienced her as rather trying, even irritating. And she had guessed what Liz was about to say.

“That’s not allowed,” Liz said, pointing a finger, quivering with indignation, at Henry’s coffee cup. “We’re not allowed to bring in *anything* from outside. We all know that.”

Henry grunted. “Why not?”

“Because it’s the rules, Henry.”

“Fuck off, Liz.”

“What? Mariana, did you hear what he just said to me?”

Liz promptly burst into tears, and things degenerated from there—ending in yet another heated confrontation between Henry and the other members of the group, all united in fury against him.

Mariana was watching closely, keeping a protective eye on Henry, to see how he was taking this. For all of his bravado, he was a highly vulnerable individual. As a child, Henry had suffered horrific physical and sexual abuse at the hands of his father before he was taken into care and shunted around a series of foster homes. And yet, despite all this trauma, Henry was a remarkably intelligent person—and it had seemed, for a while, as if his intelligence might be enough to save him: at eighteen he got a place at university, to study physics. But he only lasted a few weeks before his past caught up with him; he had a massive breakdown—and never fully recovered. There followed a sad history of self-harm, drug addiction, and recurring breakdowns landing him in and out of hospital—until his psychiatrist referred him to Mariana.

Mariana had a soft spot for Henry, probably because he’d had such rotten luck. But even so, she was unsure about admitting him into the group. It wasn’t just that he was significantly more unwell than the other members: seriously ill patients could be held and healed very effectively by groups—but they could also disrupt them to the point of disintegration. As soon as any group establishes itself, it always arouses envy and attack—and not just from forces on the outside, those excluded from the group, but also from dark and dangerous forces *within* the group itself. And ever since he’d joined them a few months ago, Henry had been a constant source of conflict. He brought it with him. There was a latent aggression in him, a bubbling anger, that was often difficult to contain.

But Mariana didn’t give up easily; as long as she was able to maintain control of the group, she felt determined to work with

him. She believed in the group, in these eight individuals sitting in a circle—she believed in the circle, and its power to heal. In her more fanciful moments, Mariana could be quite mystical about the power of circles: the circle in the sun, the moon, or the earth; the planets spinning through the heavens; the circle in a wheel; the dome of a church—or a wedding ring. Plato said the soul was a circle—which made sense to Mariana. Life was a circle too, wasn't it?—from birth to death.

And when group therapy was working well, a kind of miracle would occur within this circle—the birth of a separate entity: a group spirit, a group mind; a “big mind,” it was often called, more than the sum of its parts; more intelligent than the therapist or the individual members. It was wise, healing, and powerfully containing. Mariana had seen its power firsthand many times. In her front room, over the years, many ghosts had been conjured up in this circle, and laid to rest.

Today, it was Liz's turn to be spooked. She just couldn't let go of the coffee cup. It brought up so much anger and resentment in her—the fact Henry thought the rules didn't apply to him, that he could break them with such disdain; then Liz suddenly realized how much Henry reminded her of her older brother, who had been so entitled, and such a bully. All Liz's repressed anger toward her brother started surfacing, which was good, Mariana thought—it needed to surface. Provided Henry could stand being used as a psychological punching bag.

Which, of course, he couldn't.

Henry leaped up suddenly, letting out an anguished cry. He flung his coffee cup onto the floor. It split open in the center of the circle—and a growing pool of black coffee spread out onto the floorboards.

The other members of the group were immediately vocal and somewhat hysterical in their outrage. Liz burst into tears again, and Henry tried to leave. But Mariana persuaded him to stay and talk through what had happened.

“It’s just a fucking coffee cup, what’s the big deal?” Henry said, sounding like an indignant child.

“It’s not about the coffee cup,” said Mariana. “It’s about boundaries—the boundaries of this group, the rules we abide by here. We’ve spoken about this before. We can’t take part in therapy if we feel unsafe. Boundaries make us feel safe. Boundaries are what therapy is about.”

Henry looked at her blankly. Mariana knew he didn’t understand. Boundaries, by definition, are the first thing to go when a child is abused. All Henry’s boundaries had been torn to shreds when he was just a little boy. Consequently, he didn’t understand the concept. Nor did he know when he was making someone uncomfortable, as he usually was, by invading their personal or psychological space—he would stand too near when he spoke to you, and exhibited a level of neediness Mariana had never experienced in a patient before. Nothing was enough. He would have moved in with her if she’d let him. It was up to her to maintain the boundary between them: to define the parameters of their relationship in a healthy way. That was her job as his therapist.

But Henry was always pushing at her, needling at her, trying to get under her skin . . . and in ways she was finding increasingly hard to handle.

4

Henry hung around afterward, after the others had left—ostensibly to help clean up the mess. But Mariana knew there was more to it; there always was with him. He hovered silently, watching her. She gave him some encouragement:

“Come on, Henry. Time to go . . . Is there something you want?”

Henry nodded but didn’t answer. Then he reached into his pocket.

“Here,” he said. “I got you something.”

He pulled out a ring. A red gaudy plastic thing. It looked like it had come out of a cereal box.

“It’s for you. A present.”

Mariana shook her head. “You know I can’t accept that.”

“Why not?”

“You need to stop bringing me things, Henry. Okay? You should really go home now.”

But he didn’t move. Mariana thought for a moment. She hadn’t been planning on confronting him like this, not now—but somehow it felt right.

“Listen, Henry,” she said. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

“What?”

“On Thursday night—after my evening group finished, I looked out of the window. And I saw you, outside. Across the street, by the lamppost. Watching the house.”

“It wasn’t me, mate.”

“Yes, it was. I saw your face. And it’s not the first time I’ve seen you there.”

Henry went bright red and evaded eye contact. He shook his head. “Not me, not—”

“Listen. It’s okay for you to be curious about the other groups I conduct. But that’s something we talk about *here*, in the group. It’s not okay to act on it. It’s not okay to spy on me. That kind of behavior makes me feel invaded and threatened, and—”

“I’m not spying! I was just standing there. So fucking what?”

“So you admit you were there?”

Henry took a step toward her. “Why can’t it just be us? Why can’t you see me without *them*?”

“You know why. Because I see you as part of a group—I can’t see you individually as well. If you need individual therapy, I can recommend a colleague—”

“No, I want *you*—”

Henry made another, sudden move toward her. Mariana stood her ground. She held up her hand.

“No. Stop. Okay? That’s way too close. Henry—”

“Wait. Look—”

Before she could prevent him, Henry lifted up his heavy black sweater—and there, on his pale, hairless torso, was a grisly sight.

A razor blade had been used, and deep crosses carved into his skin. Bloodred crosses, different sizes, cut into his chest and abdomen. Some of the crosses were wet, still bleeding, dripping blood; others were scabby, and weeping hard red beads—like congealed, bloody tears.

Mariana felt her stomach turn. She felt sick with repulsion, and wanted to look away, but wouldn’t let herself. This was a cry for help, of course it was, an attempt to elicit a caregiving

response—but it was more than that: it was also an emotional attack, a psychological assault upon her senses. Henry at last had managed to get under Mariana’s guard, under her skin, and she hated him for it.

“What have you done, Henry?”

“I—I couldn’t help it. I had to do it. And you—had to see it.”

“And now I’ve seen it, how do you think it makes me feel? Can you conceive of how upset I am? I want to help you but—”

“But what?” He laughed. “What’s stopping you?”

“The appropriate time for me to give you support is during the group. You had that opportunity this evening, but you didn’t take it. We all could have helped. We are all here to help you—”

“I don’t want *their* help—I want *you*. Mariana, I need you—”

Mariana knew she should make him leave. It wasn’t her job to clean his wounds. He needed medical attention. She should be firm, for his sake as well as her own. But she couldn’t quite bring herself to throw him out, and not for the first time, Mariana’s empathy prevailed over her common sense.

“Wait—wait a second.”

She went to the dresser, opened a drawer, rummaged around. She pulled out a first aid kit. She was about to open it when her phone rang.

She checked the number. It was Zoe. She answered.

“Zoe?”

“Can you talk? It’s important.”

“Give me a sec. I’ll call you back.” Mariana ended the call and turned to Henry. She thrust the first aid kit at him.

“Henry—take this. Clean yourself up. See your GP if you need to. Okay? I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“That’s it? And you call yourself a fucking therapist?”

“Enough. Stop. You have to go.”

Ignoring his protestations, Mariana firmly guided Henry into the hallway, and out of the front door. She shut the door behind him. She felt an impulse to lock it, which she resisted.

Then she went to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and took out a bottle of sauvignon blanc.

She felt quite shaken. She had to pull herself together before she called Zoe back. She didn't want to burden that girl more than she already had. Their relationship had been imbalanced ever since Sebastian's death—and from now on, Mariana was determined to correct that balance. She took a deep breath to calm down. Then she poured herself a large glass of wine, and made the call.

Zoe answered on the first ring.

“Mariana?”

Mariana knew at once something was wrong. There was a tension in Zoe's voice, an urgency that Mariana associated with moments of crisis. *She sounds afraid*, she thought. She felt her heart beat a little faster.

“Darling, is—is everything all right? What's happened?”

There was a second's pause before Zoe answered. She spoke in a small voice. “Turn on the TV,” she said. “Turn on the news.”