

THE  
DEMON INSIDE



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NATALIE THORPE

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*This book is dedicated to everyone who, despite every poor choice they think they may have made, have learned to live with themselves. And to those who are still trying to figure out how to do that.*

*You matter!*





*I don't know  
what lurks behind that grin  
but would I be wrong  
to assume it is sin?*

*will you be my rose  
press your thorns against my skin  
grow scarlet in the throes  
of our original sin?*

*shall I make you bloom  
my hands on your hips  
in your moonlit room  
your petals on my lips?*

Tadhg Ó hErodáin (2022)







“DEMON! Where are you?!” Hissing and cursing as his feet tangle in the undergrowth, the young man thunders through the woods. He’s already passed the place where it happened three times, yet there is no sign of the demon he struck a deal with.

The demon that betrayed him.

He should have known—demons are like that.

A vine twists around his ankles, making him trip and crash to the forest floor. The string of profanities that follow are only in part directed at the tangle of vegetation, most of it is because of his own stupidity and desperation that made him do something as reckless as striking a deal with a demon in the first place.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...” he mutters before he places his hands beside his body, ready to push off the ground. Then he stills.

*Is that? No, it can’t be...!* His face close to the forest floor, the rich, earthy scent of humus pleasantly prickles his nose but besides that there is another scent—a familiar one, fresh and sweet... *citrusy*. And another, similar to the first but more flowery and more mature.

Amazed and a little confused at how he is able to pick up these scents from the forest floor, he sniffs again and discovers a third. This one drifts upon the air and is reminiscent to the smell that lingers after striking two pieces of flint together.

This is the scent he is after.

How he can be so certain of this he cannot say, but the young man pushes off the forest floor and follows his nose in the direction of the old folly ruins in the middle of Bray Forest.

Trying to ignore the fact that the two other scents are also becoming stronger the closer he gets to the folly, he takes a moment to calm himself and focus on the smoky trail that he just *knows* is the demon's.

"I know you're here, demon," he rumbles and he's surprised to find a new depth to his voice that wasn't there before, making him growl almost animalistically. "Show yourself!"

"No need to shout. I heard you just fine the first time."

In the shadow of the folly's entrance the slim figure of the demon casually leans against the stone arch—the wooden door itself long since rotted off its hinges—seemingly unaware or unbothered by the building's questionable structural integrity.

The creature's dark appearance barely stands out against the folly's inner shadows but it strikes the young man that the demon appears to be less corporeal than when they last met and a whole lot less colourful. Its clothes look even less like actual garments and more as if he is dressed in shadows and smoke that lazily drift around its body which is of the same dark grey colour. Even the face, though still resembling that of a man, has taken on a different hue. It is as if he's looking at the demon through a dark veil.

"You betrayed me," he snarls.

"Have I?" The demon's lackadaisical stance and the slightest twitch of a corner of his mouth suggesting a hint of amusement enrages the young man even further. His muscles tremble with the desire to storm at the creature and rip it to shreds with his bare hands. He has no doubt he will be able to do it

either, but for some strange reason he knows it will be pointless and as tempting as it may seem he needs this cursed creature to undo what it did.

“You did something to me. You—”

“*What* seems to be the problem?” the demon interrupts, impatiently now. “Didn’t I give you exactly what you asked for?”

“No! I didn’t ask for *this*—”

“Then *you* should have been more specific.”

The young man’s anger flares once more at being interrupted a second time but dies down just as quickly, leaving only a helpless desperation twice that which had driven him to make his plea in the first place.

“She left... she left before I even got the chance to see her!”

“Then it seems to me you simply came to me too late.” The demon shrugs indifferently and turns to enter the folly ruins. “For which I am *most certainly* not to blame. And here I thought you were a polite young man worthy of a fine gift. I should have known better! All you humans are the same. Now... please remove yourself from my vicinity before I make you.” The demon’s already dark voice becomes even lower, seemingly echoing the deep dark pit of hell itself, and the young man takes a few hurried steps back before turning and disappearing between the trees.

“You’ll pay for this!” the young man whispers under his breath, sure the demon will not be able to hear from this distance, yet he glances back despite himself. The creature looks like it’s slowly evaporating, swallowed by the darkness within the ruins, then its voice rings out once more.

“I already am... *but when will you?*”





# 1

## THE LETTER

“Show me how you do that trick. You know the one.”

“Ask me properly and I might consider it.”

Eleven year old Vera had sighed with ill-concealed impatience.

“Dear Aunt Viola, would you please show me that trick I like so much?”

She had pressed her palms together, chin resting on her fingertips while she gave her great-aunt what she hoped was her most angelic expression. Aunt Vi had frowned and muttered; “Alright, you don’t have to overdo it.” But Vera had seen the corners of her mouth slightly turn upwards while a twinkle lit up her eyes at the impertinence of her goddaughter. “But I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from referring to it as a trick; this is advanced elemental magic.” The young girl had nodded fervently, the eager anticipation clear from her sparkling brown eyes and almost trembling body. “Then fetch us some candles, dear.”

Vera had excitedly jumped up to run over to the cabinet so fast, her stockinged feet had slid over the hardwood floor causing her body to connect with the dresser with a thud.

“I want you to show me *exactly* how to do it,” Vera had stressed as she yanked open the cabinet to quickly grab a bunch of candles. “I think I can do it too this time.”

“Gently!” Viola De Millais had admonished her niece. “And why is that?”

“I want to show Cal something special.”

There had been four elemental magics aunt Vi had shown Vera which, unlike any of the other spells they practiced, did not rely on a combination of words and ingredients, but summoning water or finding the way in Bray Forest where every path, patch of moss and babbling brook was known to them weren’t nearly as impressive to show her best friend. Although Vera had made Cal laugh at her being able to ruffle his hair with a summoned breeze, calling a flame to light a candle with... now *that* was something worth showing!

“I see,” Aunt Vi had narrowed her eyes. “Let me teach you an important lesson first, Veronica Hayward.” Whenever Aunt Vi called Vera by her full name, the girl knew to pay attention and listen well. “Never rely on witchcraft to impress someone; if people need to be impressed to like you, they are simply not worth your time. And secondly, you don’t need me to teach you *exactly* how to practice a spell—you can make your own.”

“I can?” Vera had knelt on the rug in front of the ottoman where her great-aunt was sitting, her sparkling brown eyes wide with a mixture of surprise and exaltation.

“Besides the fact that I’m about to teach you advanced magic at just eleven years of age...” Aunt Vi had continued. “I’ve seen you make connections—between plants, herbs and their properties—faster than even I seem to be capable of. You have an extraordinary talent when it comes to the craft, me dear; I think you can design any spell you choose as long as you remember to practice caution. Especially where other people are involved. But I don’t need to tell you that”—Aunt Vi had waved a hand dismissively—“you know the rules regarding choice, safety and hygiene as well as any other witch. Let’s begin!”

At the clap of Aunt Vi’s hands the memory had burst like a bubble. They all had. Some thing or another would spark a thought leading Vera back to

when she'd spent her summers at her great-aunt's country estate in Woodford in Lancashire, but whenever it had involved Aunt Vi's teachings her mind would suddenly go blank. Eventually, Vera had tried keeping herself from remembering anything to do with witchcraft at all. That way she also wouldn't be reminded of how much she missed Woodfold Hall, Aunt Vi and the life she had lived.

But now, after more than seventeen years of silence, a letter has arrived. The familiarity of the handwriting on the envelope makes Vera's heart skip a beat before it resumes its beating at a murderous rate. There isn't a return address, but Vera doesn't need one to know who sent it.

Her great aunt Viola De Millais isn't just reflected in the precise cursive of the handwriting but also in the meticulous placing of the address and the stamp depicting the stylised profile of King Charles III, as well as in the high quality of the salmon-coloured paper that will undoubtedly hold a matching monogrammed letter. There is even a hint of Aunt Vi's telltale scent of violets clinging to the stationery and Vera needs to suppress the urge to bring the envelope up to her nose to sniff it.

That comforting scent of violets immediately brings her back to her great-aunt Viola's stately home in Woodford, Lancashire where Vera had spent most of her summers as a child for almost as long as she could remember. The memory of it is as painful as it is dear to her now that her hurt over their falling out over seventeen years ago has lessened and only the pain of missing Aunt Vi remains.

Would this finally be the day she'd get an apology? Could they make amends before it was too late? After so many years, Vera finds it doesn't really matter anymore; she is happy to have received a letter—a sign of life—at all, no matter what the envelope will hold... although she fears it won't be anything good.

For the past few months Vera has been having a strange, unsettling feeling and her thoughts have drifted towards her great-aunt more often. Several times

she'd been overcome by a *certainty* she would never see Aunt Vi again—she'd be well over eighty now—and their last words to each other would always remain those spoken in anger and resentment.

Then, about two weeks ago, the dreams had started. Vera didn't have them every night, but they did get progressively worse and they had all taken her to Woodford Hall. If there was one place she could have called home, that would have been it; the regal building that was tucked away at the edge of a lesser known stretch of woodland area had always felt more like home than anywhere Vera had lived before or after. Yet, in the dreams it hadn't felt welcoming at all. The place had felt haunted with the ghosts of memories she couldn't see but whose cold hands poked and prodded her heart, mocking her; 'See how incomplete you are? Feel it, miss it...' Vera had felt as cold and empty as Woodford Hall's rooms had been in her dreams. The country estate's cosy gloominess that she used to love had felt dark and oppressive but Vera hadn't dared open the drawn curtains to let in the light. And she especially hadn't dared enter the sunroom at the back of the manor; its three sides of stained glass windows overlooking the mossy garden and Bray Forest beyond—where the old folly ruins stood. There had been something there, something Vera had wanted to prevent from seeing her, but with each subsequent dream she had grown more certain it—whatever it was—would be coming for her regardless. It would be coming from the folly.

That ominous presence outside Woodford Hall had been there in all of the dreams, like the folly and the manor themselves, but *inside* Aunt Vi's home each dream brought something new.

One night Vera had opened a door to what she thought was a familiar room only to find what appeared to be a hospital room behind it. But it hadn't been brightly lit, nor were the walls painted in the usual white or soft yellow or taupe—or maybe they were, she couldn't tell as the room had been dark as if she was looking at it through a tinted window. When Vera had woken from that particular dream, the scent of antiseptics had stung her nose the rest of the day.



Other dreams had been equally unsettling and confusing, more than once leaving her smelling, hearing and feeling things throughout the day. The dream she had yesterday, had left her with a persistent sticky feeling on her skin that had made her shower twice. Her bare feet had touched something that hadn't felt at all like The Hall's hardwood floors that she remembered so well and when Vera had looked down, she saw she had left bloody footprints everywhere. It hadn't been *her* blood, but she couldn't discover where it had come from. She had looked through every room, but her childhood refuge had been empty, and on everything she had touched, every door, every handle, every light switch, she had left bloody handprints too.

All these dreams had given Vera one certainty; something was *wrong* at Woodford Hall, and had she still been in contact with Aunt Vi, she wouldn't have hesitated to return there and...

... and...

... do something?

Yes, Vera would have done something that Aunt Vi had taught her to do. Something Aunt Viola had made her *forget how* to do.

A bit of the old anger at what her aunt had done had flared back to life but only for a brief instance. She couldn't just pick up the phone and call Aunt Vi, could she? Besides, even if she could how was she to explain the *wrongness* she felt? Had she still been able to call herself a witch, she would have trusted her instincts but now... She shouldn't even be able to feel these things in the first place; her aunt had made sure of that. It had to be anxiety. It had to be. Maybe she should see someone... a doctor—a real one, Patrick would say, one who would prescribe her something to help her sleep rather than try to get her to talk about what was bothering her. He'd be right. Never in history had it been a good idea for a woman to admit being involved in witchcraft—or having been, in Vera's case. She had never even told Patrick and there had been no need for it either; that had all been left in Woodford.

After some tossing and turning, Vera had given up trying to sleep and, well before dawn, had quietly slipped from the bed to not wake Patrick. Even

though her husband was an early riser, preferring to have run a bare minimum five kilometres before most people even thought about getting up, waking at such an hour would be much too early even for him.

Vera was no runner. In fact, she abhorred sports in general and seldom used the fitness room in their Boston villa and so, by the time Patrick emerged from their bedroom, fully geared up to run, the kitchen was spotless, the laundry had been folded and all thoughts of Aunt Vi, Woodford Hall, witchcraft and bloody dreams had been chased away by the smell of coffee and crumpets. Everything was as right as rain.

But now, with the letter still unopened in her hand Vera knows for certain something is wrong at Woodford. This might give her the excuse she needs to finally call Aunt Vi.

Every once in a while a tiny, accusatory voice inside Vera's mind had reminded her *she* could be the one to reach out first, but her pride and her stubbornness at proving her aunt wrong had always prevented her from doing so. Before she realised it, nearly eighteen years had passed and Vera wondered how it was even possible for it to have been so many.

The first couple of years after their falling out Vera had been taken up by her anger and her attempts at adjusting to the new life in a different country that, even though she had chosen it for herself, was not quite how she had imagined it would be. First of all, she was completely overwhelmed by Patrick's mother and his sisters taking charge of the wedding arrangements which, though lavish and opulent, made for a magical ceremony. After that, there was the honeymoon—in Paris of course, Patrick wouldn't have it any other way—but he returned to his office soon after, making long hours which became even longer after he made partner at the law firm.

Eventually, Vera found her own pace, settled into her new life as best as she could, determined to show *everyone* how she was going to make her marriage a success. Vera wouldn't have need of the teachings that Aunt Viola had made her forget. But when the dust settled Vera began to see more clearly.

When those first few years had passed and her initial anger at what her aunt had done had subsided, all that was left was an emptiness where she had known something used to be that she missed and now had to learn to live without. The emptiness had become an Aunt Vi-shaped void and had filled itself with misery. And in that misery Vera found two things; the first being that her aunt had been right and the second that, no matter what, she *couldn't* make her marriage work. She didn't want to think it, pushing the thought away quickly as soon as it reared its ugly little head, but what Vera had done *was* wrong and she *did* suffer the consequences.

For seventeen years she had suffered those consequences, but as the years progressed it wasn't just her pride that kept her in a loveless marriage, it was fear. Fear of admitting that she alone had been the cause of her misery, exactly how Aunt Vi had warned her she would be, and fear that she lacked what she needed to undo it.

Vera had known it was an absolute no-go within the rules of witchcraft to try and make someone fall in love with you, but that was just the thing; she hadn't needed to, Patrick had admitted to already being in love with her. The problem was that Vera feared she might not be the only one he was in love with... And so, at almost twenty years of age, she had decided to use a tiny little binding spell to ensure the handsome, happy-go-lucky American would choose stay with her.

Somehow, Aunt Vi, who had taught Vera everything she knew about witchcraft since she first came to her great aunt's home at the small village of Woodford, Lancashire at the age of six, had caught wind of it and flew into a fit of rage. Although her aunt had been stern at times, she had never shown anger and had never even raised her voice at Vera, despite the girl's impetuous and inquisitive nature often leading her to come up with all sorts of 'experiments' warranting a stern talking-to.

The result of Aunt Vi's anger at Vera's abuse of what she had been taught had been twofold; Viola De Millais had used her own binding spell to keep Vera from her knowledge of witchcraft, and, reacting to that, Vera had left

Woodford never to return. In fact, she had never even returned to the whole of the United Kingdom.

As a result of Vera's own spell Patrick asked Vera to come to Boston with him on a short trip to his family home. When they were there Patrick had surprised her by asking her to marry him—in the presence of his entire family so she couldn't say no.

And she hadn't wanted to.

She'd sent her aunt word of her impending marriage, but no invitation. Aunt Vi wouldn't have come anyway, Vera had known that much. No reply had come either, in fact, she'd never heard anything from Aunt Vi ever again. Until now.

With trembling hands, Vera opens the envelope by sticking a fileting knife in one of its corners. A compromise; tearing the envelope open with her fingers, creating jagged edges along the paper feels almost a sacrilege to Aunt Vi's fine stationery but Vera doesn't want to waste time looking for a letter opener in Patrick's office either.

The sharp blade swiftly glides along the fold and so smoothly it's giving a sense of satisfaction no expensive, gilded letter opener ever could. Inside, however, Vera doesn't find a full sheet of her aunt's personalised stationery—the thick, handmade creamy paper with the elegant monogram at the top that, as a child, she would beg for to draw upon after having made several sketches on cheap paper and swearing to her aunt that she was ready to make the perfect piece of art—the folded piece of paper is only half of what it should be, the bottom half. There is no monogram and even though the edge is perfectly straight, it is clear the paper has been torn rather than cut. The act is so unlike her Aunt Vi, fear grips Vera's heart even before she reads the words.

There is no salutation; no 'dear Veronica' or just 'Vera' and the letter is not signed either. Still, this is unmistakably Aunt Viola's and the sole three words she penned down turn Vera's whole world askew.

*I have cancer.*



# BREAKING THE NEWS

At half past ten in the evening, Vera finally hears the sound of Patrick pulling up at the house. Like so many times before, he hasn't even bothered sending Vera a message saying he would be late—meaning he will have brought flowers. Pink roses. The usual.

Roses are nice but by no means Vera's favourite flowers and if she'd be honest she'd much rather have a more lasting gift—like a book—but she can't remember Patrick ever having asked her about her preference.

It's fine. It's the thought that counts, isn't it?

Besides, he doesn't really need to bring her anything every time he's so swamped with work that he forgets to send her a message; Patrick being late and not coming home for supper has become the standard at times he's 'wrapping up a case' and Vera has long since stopped waiting for him with a home-cooked meal ready to be warmed up only to be tossed in the bin untouched.

At the sound of the front door softly being closed, Vera puts aside the book she had been trying to read in an attempt to take her mind off the letter and Aunt Vi, but even though she had been flipping pages regularly, she hadn't retained any of the words, prepping the conversation she wanted to have with Patrick in her mind instead.

The three times she tried ringing Woodford Hall there had been no answer and Vera knew there wouldn't be one if her aunt was in hospital to get treatment. She needed to go there.

"Ronny?" Patrick calls out somewhere in the kitchen just before his head pops around the corner to the living room. "There you are. Hey babe." His blue eyes sparkle and his gaze softens upon spotting his wife curled up in a corner of the enormous sectional that he had designed to complement the floor to ceiling windows in the large living room.

The view those windows give of the garden is spectacular but he has noticed that, whenever his wife is alone in the house in the evenings she will draw the curtains even when it's still light out. She once said they made her feel as if she were on display and he had laughed, saying no one would be able to get into the garden to come watch her if that was what she was afraid of but he wouldn't blame them if they did—she was stunning with her long legs, full breasts above a slim waist, and warm skin that hardly needed any sun to look radiant.

But she didn't like being watched. By strangers at least.

It was one of the things he liked about her; how humble, kind and genuinely interested she was when in the presence of others. His elegant, demure British wife... Many who met her, instantly took a liking to her, remembered her and, in effect, they remembered *him*, liked *him*, and Patrick *did* like to be seen and remembered.

"Here I am," Vera says, a gentle smile curving up her full lips. Her shining, dark brown hair falls in loose waves like rivulets of molten dark chocolate over her shoulders and she's wearing that dress he likes so much. The blue one that she insists is 'lavender'. Her legs are curled up under her but he can see swathes of smooth olive skin and her feet are bare.

Patrick flashes a crooked, slightly mischievous grin, making him appear as if he's just discovered the world's best whitening toothpaste and he can't wait to share it via this advertisement.

“Veronica Benchley...” he purrs languidly.

“What?” Vera can’t help but huff a laugh as her husband slowly prowls over.

“You’re so damn beautiful, you know that, baby?” Patrick says in a low voice. Then, instead of presenting her with the single pink rose he kept hidden behind his back—a large, expensive one that smells divine and had some kind of girl name he couldn’t remember—he sticks the stem between his teeth while he crawls on the sectional towards his wife and allows her to take it.

Sliding a hand over a bare calf and up along her thigh underneath her dress, Patrick looms over her to claim a kiss. Vera finds herself struggling not to place her hand atop Patrick’s to prevent his from sliding up her dress further—she hates how she tenses when she should have no reason to and tries to hide it by smelling the rose.

“Just the one?”

“It’s a ten dollar rose...” At seeing Vera’s shocked surprise, Patrick shrugs. “Rest of the bouquet is in the sink. Didn’t know where you keep the vases.”

“You got me—?” Vera laughs nervously. “You must be drunk.”

“Nah,” Patrick grins against her lips, nipping at the bottom one. “Just one glass over dinner.”

“Wine?” Vera asks, having noticed the burgundy coloured smudge just above the third button on the inside of the placket of Patrick’s crisp, white shirt. The top two buttons are left undone and his tie most likely lies discarded on the kitchen counter, along with his briefcase... and over a hundred dollars-worth of roses.

Hush-roses.

Having followed her gaze down, Vera reads a hint of a dare within Patrick’s blue eyes as they snap up to meet her own brown ones.

“Yes. Wine,” Patrick says firmly and Vera instantly knows she has to tread very carefully if she wishes to accomplish what she needs to. Slowly, she lowers her gaze while lifting up a hand to trail her fingers down the column of Patrick’s throat.

“Well, if you only had one... I could fetch us a bottle, if you like,” she offers and when Patrick draws in a deep breath through his nose and relaxes his shoulders, Vera knows she’s done well but also that she has to push through now, before he’ll start to expect her to ‘put out’ and be disappointed if she doesn’t.

It’s not that she doesn’t want to but over the years, sex has become a routine in which they tend to follow a set programme until both of them—but most of the time just Patrick—are sated. Vera’s bouts of passion had always been quickly tempered by Patrick who’d hardly ever strayed from his routine of starting his way at the top, slowly move downward, insert, pump, withdraw, roll to the side and sleep.

Since sex has left Vera feeling as if she were one of those hop-on-hop-off London tourist buses—being taken to see all of the highlights but never actually experiencing them—she eventually lost interest in it entirely. It was fine. She had long since stopped caring anyway. Outside of their home and the occasional fundraiser or party they both attended, there was little else they shared and so physical intimacy had become a chore rather than a natural desire. Standing close together, a swift kiss, a gentle caress... it felt all so genuine when other people were around, and it was, but when in private Vera had started to notice she tensed every time Patrick’s hands connected with her skin—she hated that she did.

Vera forces herself to relax.

“I’ll get one. In a minute,” Patrick says as he slides his hand further up underneath Vera’s dress. When his wife softly sighs as he moves his mouth to the side of her neck he smiles as it looks like he’ll get a two-for-one deal tonight.

Being thrilled by the prospect of it—perhaps he won’t even need to get that bottle of wine to get her to loosen up—he trails a line of kisses along her jaw but just before he reaches her mouth she starts speaking.

“I received a letter today.”



“Oh yeah, who from?” Patrick asks although he doesn’t give a single fuck who sent it.

“My Aunt Viola,” Vera says and it takes a moment before Patrick remembers the old lady his wife’s MSF doctor parents sent her to stay with every summer since she was old enough to attend boarding school while they hopped from one messed-up country to the next trying to save the lives of people *other* people had tried to blow or starve to kingdom come. Patrick had strong opinions with regards to people who left their children in the care of others, no matter how noble their pursuits—a stable home bred better people. But his wife’s great-aunt had tried to step up where her parents had failed—until *she* had failed as well, driving his Ronny away so far she never wanted to go back. Ronny wouldn’t even tell him what their fight had been about, which had led Patrick to believe it must have been him. The old snob probably didn’t approve of her ward falling for the son of a man who had *earned* his money simply by making the *American Dream* his reality.

“Well, what did she want?” Patrick replies offhandedly as he tries again to lay claim to his wife’s luscious lips.

“She’s unwell. I’m sorry, but I-I think I should go visit her, before it’s... too late.” Vera’s voice trembles.

Patrick stops attempting to get into his wife’s panties. He’s not getting any, he realises that now. Normally, it would have angered him to the point where he’d let his disappointment show by being gruff and sullen, which usually had her come round, but this time he’ll let it slide—his needs have already been met anyway.

“When?” Now that his chances are gone, he’s eager to get this conversation over with also.

“As soon as possible. She might not have long,” Vera adds the last bit for good measure.

“Damnit, Ronny,” Patrick sighs wearily. “There’s the Alpine Crest fundraiser in two weeks. I want you there.”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry. Can’t you just tell them I’ve fallen ill and I made you go anyway because I care *so much*. They love that shit. Wins you sympathy points,” Vera smiles cheekily as she employs a tactic Patrick would have used himself.

“Don’t swear—it’s unbecoming,” Patrick admonishes her absentmindedly and Vera cringes inwardly at letting the word—however trivial as it may be as far as swear words go—slip. “But yeah, that might work. I’ll book you a plane,” he relents before pushing off the sectional. “I’m gonna get that wine but let’s not drink to the old hag’s health. I want you back here as soon as possible.”

“You could always decide to come join me,” Vera offers, knowing he won’t; the only trips besides the occasional hunting or surfing trip Patrick ever makes are work related. They haven’t been anywhere together where he hadn’t already needed to go for work since they honeymooned in Paris sixteen years ago.

Although Patrick’s last remark stings, Vera knows it wasn’t said with malicious intent. Her husband is just an insensitive asshole without a care for anyone but his own personal needs—too bad she only learned that after they were married—and the burgundy smudge on his shirt, which most definitely *isn’t* wine, is proof of that.

“You know, I think I’ll do that,” Patrick mumbles, “if only for the funeral. I promise I’ll be there.



# FOREIGN EXCHANGE

For what it was worth, there hadn't been a single promise Patrick made to Vera in the seventeen years they had been together that he hadn't kept. His trustworthiness perhaps made him stand out even more than his dazzling features, especially given his profession. In fact, it had pushed him to the top of the list of most sought-after general practice lawyers in the whole state of Massachusetts.

Vera had first noticed Patrick during the first week of her foreign exchange programme with the VU in Amsterdam when she was nineteen. She was there for a few courses on Ancient Studies after she'd completed the first year of her study Ancient History and Classical Archaeology with excellent marks, while Patrick, at twenty-four, was there for some extra course in Law studies before he'd take his bar exam. And somehow through contacts of his father's, Vera had learned later on, he had also been able to get himself a behind-the-scenes tour of the Peace Palace in The Hague, home of the United Nations International Court of Justice. Stemming from a long line of lawyers and lawmakers himself, it was only natural Patrick Zachary Benchley should wish to become influential in the lives of people but the courtroom had always interested him more than politics had. Patrick liked his victories to be clearly defined and won.

Patrick had stood out amidst the small group of exchange students that they were divided in in order to make their introductions and tour through Amsterdam a bit more manageable. A few days prior, the entire group of ‘foreigners’ as one of the Dutch students had admitted they called them behind their back—no ill intent!—had been led around campus and the enormous group of people of various nationalities had proven to be wholly impractical.

Even in that large group it was nearly impossible *not* to notice Patrick, but in the small one he proved to be the centre of gravity. With his blond hair, bright, beaming eyes and matching smile he wasn’t all that different from the other tall, predominantly Dutch guys Vera had come across so far—if it hadn’t been for his bronze tan making him stand out like the golden boy that he was. Patrick had been like the sun and all those around him the planets drawn in his orbit.

Vera had overheard him mention he’d spent the summer surfing at some Californian beach and when one of the two German girls she’d had lunch with the day before asked him how he was adjusting to the dreary, wet European summer, he’d laughed heartily and said, in all honesty, that he loved it, making the people around him gravitate towards him even more.

Vera had approached the group then and Patrick had fallen silent in the middle of a sentence as their eyes met.

“Hi,” he’d said and Vera couldn’t help thinking she’d pulled the sun out of its place in the sky as he held out his hand for her to shake. “Patrick. Benchley. Loud American and *really* hoping you’re in this group.”

“Veronica Hayward,” she had smiled slightly overwhelmed. “British and I think I am if this is group D.”

One of the appointed guides had then stepped in, having counted heads and seen everyone had been present before loudly proclaiming it was, indeed, group D, and continuing to quickly rattle off the day’s itinerary.

Vera had been pulled in between the German girls—who had also been happy to have Vera join their group—and she was thankful for the chance to keep observing the handsome, charming American from a slight distance.

There was something warning her not to take her eyes off him but she hadn't been able to decide if that was a good or a bad thing.

Patrick had continued talking to the couple of students that flanked him as the group had made their way from their meeting point towards the tram stop in front of the University building, and throughout the day she'd seen him not only tell stories of his own but listen intently to those told by others. She slightly envied his natural charm and instant likeability—even though she'd had plenty of friends at her old school tell her they envied *her* for the same thing.

It had been all those summers spent with Aunt Vi; a strong, proud woman of her own means who had never needed anyone or anything but her own sharp mind—and a little spell craft—to live life to its fullest. Aunt Vi had been, and still was, the best role model any girl could hope to get, and by simply being her unapologetic self and teaching Vera all she knew about the ways of witchcraft, she had shaped Vera into a kind, steadfast young woman who knew who she was and where she wanted to go in life.

And so, when confronted with Patrick, Vera had much rather preferred if he'd been a little more vain, a little less considerate, and a whole lot less handsome. She'd also preferred him to have forgotten about her after their initial introductions but he had looked at her and smiled kindly in the tram, later at lunch, and several times in the museum. Then, as the group was about to start their tour of the Amsterdam canals, he had approached her and she had known this was the kind of man that could quite possibly derail her if she'd let him. Which she wouldn't; if Vera had wanted her life to be derailed, she'd have stayed in Woodford but as it so happened, she had escaped to Amsterdam to avoid certain derailment.

Foreign exchange student group D had just boarded the canal boat and there had been a moment of awkwardness when the German girls, Nada and Thù, almost automatically had scooted into adjoining seats before Thù had gotten up again and indicated for Vera to take the seat next to Nada, in order for her to not feel left out.

Vera hadn't felt that way at all; the girls had continued to involve her in their conversations throughout the day and hadn't even once fallen back to their use of their native tongue, which, in Thù's case also happened to be Vietnamese. But Vera had been tired and more than welcomed a bit of rest, so she'd kindly declined the offer and had happily taken up the seat behind her newfound friends to sit by herself for a while.

"Hi. Again." The voice to her right had startled Vera from her calm observance of the rippling of the canal's water as she had rested her head against the window to her left. "Is this seat taken?"

"Hi, eh, no. Please," Vera had stumbled and she had moved to sit a little straighter, indicating the seat next to her was free for Patrick to take, which he did.

"Are you sure you want to sit next to a loud American for the next hour, miss Veronica Hayward? You look like you were enjoying a bit of peace and quiet." He had smiled a crooked smile when he dipped his head closer to hers and Vera had caught a mischievous twinkle in his bright blue eyes. He was absolutely charming.

"I think I can manage *one* loud American," Vera had replied, answering his smile with one of her own.

As it so happened, the self-proclaimed loud American had silently sat beside Vera for most of the canal tour, until, at last, he had nudged her with his shoulder and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. "Did you know it says 'Lovers' on the side of the boat? Could be a sign, don't you think?"

Vera had pressed her lips together to keep a straight face at what must be the poorest attempt at a pick-up line she had ever heard.

"I *do* know that," she had whispered. "I think it's the name of the company that owns the boats. It doesn't mean anything and I'm pretty sure it's pronounced differently in Dutch."

"You go ahead and think that, I'll take it as a sign," he had whispered back, dipping his head closer to Vera's. "There are hearts too." While his warm voice made something inside her flutter, she smelled spearmint on his breath

and seen the twinkle in his eyes. Vera had smiled politely and looked out at the water again determined not to be derailed. She wondered whether she should tell him she'd come to Amsterdam to *study*, not to be wooed by... some loud—albeit charming and sinfully handsome—American when she wasn't even sure that was what he was trying to do. Maybe he was just trying to be nice. Strike up a conversation. What did she know about these things? His pickup line—if it was that—was also the best she ever heard, the amount of pickup lines guys had directed her way now having come to a grand total of one. That's what happens when you spend your entire teenage years between an all-girls boarding school and a secluded hole-in-the-road village.

No, that wasn't entirely fair.

Vera did her best trying to ignore the small scar on the palm of her left hand. Save for one, in hindsight slightly embarrassing instance little over a week ago, she'd never had any interest in boys—or girls—or dating in general. Aunt Viola had always taught Vera to rely on herself, be content with *herself*, before trying to please anybody else and because Vera had hopes and dreams and *plans* she wanted to see accomplished before settling down—with or without someone by her side—a relationship hadn't been on her mind at all. But she had been curious and slightly reckless, on the verge of moving to a different country to study there, so she had done something stupid that had nearly blown all her plans out of the water. Her planned study abroad had suddenly felt like she'd fled.

"Do you think that line would have worked in Paris?" Patrick had pulled Vera out of her reverie. "On the river Seine? I've been trying to come up with something decent for the past hour but I guess I need more time. I'm not really accustomed to this."

Vera had whipped her gaze back to the striking American and at catching his cheeky grin she'd burst out laughing. She had concluded then, that he wasn't what she wanted him to be; an incorrigible flirt, but that he was actually nice... and interesting... and *interested*, and that he definitely had derailing-

capabilities. But if Vera managed to keep her wits about her and stuck to the plan, maybe she could control the switch that would lead to a different track.





# UMBRELLA

Despite coming home late in the evening and sharing more than half a bottle of wine before they went to bed, *and* it being a Sunday, Vera finds Patrick just finishing his daily run on the treadmill in the fitness room as early as eight o'clock in the morning. The display shows a little over ten kilometres over a time span of forty five minutes.

"There you are, sleepyhead," Patrick beams a bright smile while he slows down to a brisk walk to start his cooling off. "Or should I say; booze head?" He bellows a laugh before busying himself with the treadmill's control panel much to Vera's relief so he won't see her failing to laugh at his 'joke'.

She'd only wanted one glass or she knew she'd end up having a restless sleep, but he had filled it a second time despite her objections, saying it had been her idea in the first place and she'd better not leave him to drink alone when he'd spent half the day thinking about her.

He'd regaled her with courtroom stories and it had actually been nice to hear him talk amusedly. Patrick was sure they were headed for a swift closure with a win on their hands, so they made a toast to victory, dividing the last of the wine between them.

When Vera finally rose to go to bed, the room spun once—but that also could be because she had been really tired by then. Patrick dropped off the empty bottle and glasses in the kitchen while Vera busied herself in the bathroom, then went through his own routine. By the time he was done, Vera had been half asleep already and she didn't have the energy to stop Patrick's hands from sliding up her skin underneath her silk chemise. She let her thoughts wander off while her husband kissed the sensitive spot in her neck and rubbed himself against her while fondling a breast. With a low, hoarse voice Patrick whispered a few sweet little nothings in Vera's ear that he knew never failed to elicit a sensuous moan or two, then he slid down her panties and pushed in between her legs. It took him a little longer than usual to feel his climax start rising but when his composed, graceful wife's breathing deepened and became more erratic, signalling her own impending orgasm, he got that final push he needed.

After Patrick had finished and rolled to his side of the bed, Vera forced herself to get up to go to use the bathroom. He was already asleep when she returned, slid underneath the sheets again. Before she had switched off the light, Vera's eyes had snagged on her husband's clothes that he had draped over the back of one of the two padded armchairs. She'd fallen asleep with the image of the small red stain on Patrick's crisp, white shirt. As her husband had stood in front of her in her dream in all his poised perfection the stain had bloomed until it had become a full impression of a lipstick mouth.

Then it had turned to blood.

Patrick had smiled at her then, lipstick smeared across his lips and he'd turned her around to face a mirror. It had been her lipstick; it was still on her lips even though she knew she didn't even own red lipstick. Patrick had once said it made even the most beautiful woman look cheap. The offhanded remark had been enough for Vera to refrain from buying any colour other than those that matched her natural lip shade the closest.

Dream-Vera had watched herself in the full-length mirror—Patrick standing tall behind her—as the room around her grew dark. Then the lipstick had

started running down from her bottom lip and it had tasted like blood—it *was* blood.

“You’re killing me, Ronny,” Patrick said behind her and his face in the mirror had changed into a slightly younger version of himself—the age he was when they had first met—while the Patrick that stood behind her stayed the same. “You should have let me go,” mirror-Patrick had said. “Now you can’t. You’ve trapped us both.”

“I’m sorry,” Vera had broken down in a sob. “I’d undo it if I’d still knew how, but I can’t. I can’t remember anything Aunt Vi taught me!”

“You can’t undo it—that would kill me too; I’d be nothing without you, Ronny. I *need* you.”

He’d kissed her then and the acrid taste of the blood-lipstick had filled her mouth until she had felt sick. She’d woken up still feeling sick and also convinced Patrick would reconsider buying her a plane ticket until after the fundraiser, meaning if she wanted to fly back to the U.K. as soon as possible, she’d have to buy one herself. Not that that was going to be a problem, it was just that she’d hoped to do this without having to deal with any kind of fall-out.

As his well-off parents’ only son, significantly younger than all of his four sisters, Patrick never struck people as the typically spoiled brat one would come to expect, but only those closest to him knew he wasn’t far from that mark either. Patrick had simply grown too used to getting what he wanted—although he often worked hard for it too, predominantly in the courtroom where he was in his element the most. A fall-out usually entailed Patrick becoming sullen towards Vera—if he even deigned to acknowledge her existence at all. He’d never become angry with her or raise his voice, but he definitely would refrain from notifying her when he’d expected to be home—he wouldn’t even tell her where he was going if he went out. He’d hardly speak to her at all, sometimes for days on end, before bringing her pink roses that he would leave on the counter in the kitchen as if just because *Vera* had been difficult, it was no excuse for *him* to deviate from his usual practices.

Vera hated how insecure it made her feel. She'd much rather prefer they'd had an actual fight but there had been only a few instances in the sixteen years of their marriage when she'd raised her voice at him in frustration. Vera had despised how her anger had made her mind go blank and her voice tremble until she'd broken down in tears. What was worse, each time Patrick had calmly stated he wouldn't argue with her while she was in such an 'unreasonable state' and had simply walked away, leaving her to doubt herself even more. Perhaps she *had* been in an 'unreasonable state', too emotional for certain; she hadn't even been able to come up with any sound arguments to plead her case if she'd had to save her life.

She wouldn't allow that to happen this time.

While Vera brushed her teeth in order to rid herself of the lingering tang of blood her dream left her with, she mentally prepared a list of arguments she might need to calmly convince Patrick of her need to fly back to the U.K. as soon as possible. She really does fear she might otherwise be too late to speak to or even see her Aunt Viola and hopefully get a chance to settle their differences. *Admit I was wrong*—Vera thought, for she knew she had been. Last night's dream had cemented that belief.

Running her fingers through her long dark hair and thinking she'd probably get away with forgoing to comb it properly Vera first heads for the small room that is her office to start up her laptop in order to book herself a plane ticket later, then follows the steady thumping sounds to the fitness room at the back of the house, still in her silk chemise but ready to present her case.

