

# The Golden Shawl



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Laurien Prins

Author: Laurien Prins  
Coverdesign: Laurien Prins  
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# 1

It was an unusually warm evening in Amsterdam for the time of year. Anna was walking along the quay beside the IJ when she first noticed them.

She had just locked her bicycle when the sight arrested her mid-step. Seven yachts lay moored in the water—sleek, silver-white vessels that caught the last golden light of the sun like polished mirrors. The largest was adorned with soft, glowing lanterns, and on its deck stood real palm trees, their fronds stirring faintly in the breeze.

She had never seen anything like them in this northern city. They felt misplaced, almost hallucinatory: something tropical and weightless adrift in the Dutch haze. A quiet dislocation of reality.

Anna felt herself drawn toward them as if by an invisible tide. She took a few hesitant steps closer.

On the deck of the largest yacht, figures stood conversing in low, unhurried voices. They were not tourists, nor revellers. They wore light, flowing garments in delicate shades of blush, ivory, and dove-grey. Their very presence seemed to radiate a serene composure that reached into some long-forgotten chamber of her heart.

A woman on deck noticed her. She had dark curls and a gentle, open face. She smiled at Anna as though she had been waiting for her all along.

“Bonsoir,” she said warmly. “Would you like to come aboard?” Anna nodded before her mind could catch up. The woman beckoned her forward with effortless grace. Anna stepped onto the yacht.

The interior astonished her. Instead of the expected nautical austerity, she found warm, diffused lighting, soft textiles, and an atmosphere reminiscent of a hidden mountain sanctuary rather than a vessel at sea. Everything was white. In the

background, delicate wind chimes murmured like distant, forgotten music.

The woman, who introduced herself as Elise, led her deeper inside. Without thinking, Anna slipped off her shoes—a gesture of reverence that felt strangely instinctive. The others in the room smiled at her with a kind of attentive warmth she had rarely encountered in the city’s guarded streets.

“Welcome,” said a young man with long hair, warm brown eyes, and the faintest shadow of stubble. “I’m Jonas.” His English carried a rich French accent. “How did you find us?” he asked gently.

“I was only walking by,” Anna answered truthfully. “I had to come and see.”

Everyone in the room looked at her as though they understood precisely what she meant.

“Would you like something to drink?” Elise asked. “Tea? Or water with lemon?”

“Water, please,” Anna replied, though she was not thirsty. She lowered herself onto a low couch.

A woman with long blonde hair, Amara, nodded at her from a cushion on the floor.

“We travel,” Amara said softly. “From country to country. This is our European route.”

“Why?” Anna asked.

A brief, comfortable silence followed, as though they were truly weighing her question.

“To find each other,” Elise answered at last. “Awareness. A different way of living. Real connection.”

It sounded vague, yet their warmth made dismissal impossible. What struck Anna most was the way they looked at her. For once, she was in a room where every gaze rested upon her with genuine interest and kindness. It made her feel strangely exposed.

It was a vulnerable, almost sacred sensation—to be truly seen. Something she had never quite known before. Not even with her closest friends, who liked her but had never fully glimpsed the depths of her inner world.

The conversation unfolded more easily than she had expected. Anna found herself speaking of her ordinary life as an administrative assistant, her quiet longing for something more profound, and how Amsterdam sometimes pressed upon her like a too-tight garment. She spoke of her dream of living abroad one day, and of her free-spirited parents who had raised her with an open hand—treating her almost as an adult from childhood. The word “no” had scarcely existed in her early years.

She told them how difficult she had found that absence of structure, that lack of guidance. She spoke of her dreams, which often felt more vivid than waking life, carrying insights she could share with almost no one except her mother.

No one laughed. No one shifted uncomfortably. No one called her strange.

Instead, Elise said softly, “You truly look. Most people only see what they already know.”

The words moved through her like a benediction.

When she finally rose to leave, Amara touched her arm with gentle fingers.

“We’re having a gathering tomorrow,” she said. “It is not an obligation. But if you feel called... come.”

Anna nodded, as though the decision had already been made elsewhere.

She stepped off the yacht carrying a quiet sense of wonder—and the unmistakable feeling of having come home.

## 2

As Anna walked home, the sky had grown heavy with the promise of storm. In her apartment, she dropped her keys on the table, kicked off her shoes, and sank onto the couch. She had spent only a few hours with them, yet it felt as if she had crossed into another realm.

She wanted to tell someone—about the warmth, the attention, the profound calm that had settled over her like a silken veil. So she called her mother.

“Honey!” her mother answered brightly. “How was your day?”

Anna told her everything: the yachts, the people, the strange and luminous atmosphere.

On the other end, silence bloomed.

“Mom?” Anna asked.

“I... I’m going to lay out some cards,” her mother said. “I’ll call you back.”

Before Anna could respond, the line went dead. She stared at her phone as a faint tension crept into her chest.

Twenty minutes later, her mother called back, her breathing uneven.

“Anna... listen to me,” she began. “I drew a combination I haven’t seen in years.”

Anna sat up straighter. “What do you mean?”

“The Tower. The Devil. The Hanged Man.”

Anna closed her eyes. “Mom, please.”

“This isn’t a joke,” her mother said, her voice tight with fear. “I don’t know what kind of energy they carry, but the cards are screaming danger.”

Anna felt a wave of irritation laced with guilt. “Mom, they’re just people. Spiritual travellers. They were incredibly kind.”

“That’s how it always starts,” her mother whispered. “With kindness. With warmth. With the feeling of finally coming home.”

Anna sighed. “I’m not crazy. I only talked with them for a while.”

“Please don’t go back,” her mother pleaded. “Not yet. Let it settle first.”

But Anna felt the opposite. The more she thought about it, the stronger the pull became.

“It’ll be fine, Mom,” she said softly. “I’m going to sleep. I’ll think about it tomorrow, okay?”

Her mother was quiet for a long moment.

“If you feel like going back... call me first,” she said at last.

“I will,” Anna lied.

“And whatever you do, don’t stay overnight.”

“Okay, Mom. Don’t worry so much.”

After hanging up, Anna sat motionless. The room felt heavier, saturated with the unease her mother had sown.

And yet, beneath it all, she felt a powerful magnetic pull toward the yachts—toward the calm, the warmth, toward something she had been seeking her entire life without ever naming it.

The next morning, Anna woke with the clear certainty that her heart had already chosen. She wanted to return. The longing felt deep and strangely peaceful—as though something essential had begun that now needed to be followed to its source.

She dressed quickly, drank half a glass of water, and walked toward the IJ. The sky was clear now. The water lapped gently against the quay in a soothing rhythm. When the yachts came into view, the same warm wave washed over her as before.

Elise was standing on the deck of the largest yacht.

“Good morning, Anna,” she said, her gaze soft and welcoming. “I’m glad you’re here. We’re about to begin.”

“Begin?” Anna asked.

“The meeting,” Elise smiled. “Come.”

Anna followed her inside.

The large room at the heart of the ship was filled with cushions, low stools, and gently flickering candles. The air carried the scent of sandalwood and sage. The hushed voices created a sense that everything was already attuned to what was coming. Anna chose a cushion at the edge of the room, her hands resting on her knees, a light tension fluttering in her chest.

The door at the back opened.

Laurent entered.

He was older than she had imagined—around sixty—yet still an imposing figure. Tall, with a full head of silver-grey curls and sun-bronzed skin. His smile was warm, but his nearly

black eyes held a sharp, distant alertness. He radiated a natural, almost gravitational charisma.

The atmosphere in the room shifted at once. Everyone stood as he entered, and Anna rose with them. He looked calmly around, offering each person a brief, deliberate moment of his attention. Then his gaze found Anna. It lingered just long enough for her stomach to tighten.

Laurent gestured for everyone to sit. He took his place at the front, hands resting lightly on his knees, and began to speak in a clear, rhythmic voice that felt almost hypnotic.

“We live in a world covered in layers,” he said. “Noise, temptation, sexuality, fear. Everything pulls your vibration down. Coffee, meat, sugar, the news, emotions that are not yours. The outside world is low energy. Here, we cultivate purity.”

Everything he said in French was quietly translated into English for Anna. She felt the words move through her—not because she believed every syllable, but because the calm in the room settled into her body like warmth.

“Purification requires discipline,” Laurent continued. “That is why most people here live celibately. No distractions. No unnecessary exchange of energy.” He smiled softly. “Except at my level. I am the only one who can lift you higher. Some connections exist on a different plane.”

No one looked surprised. Everyone nodded with quiet reverence. A clear hierarchy existed, though it needed no name.

Anna did not know what to do with the feeling—whether to surrender to it or resist. She only knew one thing with clarity:

She wanted to keep listening.

### 3

The meeting stretched far longer than Anna had anticipated. By the time Laurent rose, the sun had already surrendered to the horizon, leaving behind a bruised sky streaked with violet and gold. He regarded each person in turn, offering quiet thanks for their presence. His voice remained low and measured, the words lingering in the air like fragrant smoke from incense.

Anna stood slowly. Her body felt heavy, enveloped in a thick, luxurious languor, yet her mind was crystalline, unusually sharp. She sensed herself strangely fused with the others around her, as though the boundaries of her self had softened and blurred. It felt almost jarring when someone addressed her as “you,” as if she had momentarily dissolved into the collective, no longer wholly separate.

Elise approached her with a gentle smile that seemed lit from within.

“It’s late,” she said. “Stay the night. We have guest rooms below.”

Anna wanted to refuse. Her mother’s warning echoed faintly in the back of her mind. She intended to say she should go home—but instead, she heard her own voice accept, soft and almost eager.

“Is that alright?” she asked.

“Of course,” Elise replied warmly. “You are welcome here.”

She followed Elise down a narrow staircase into the lower deck. The corridors were compact yet warmly illuminated, lined with small, inviting cabins. Each held a bed dressed in

white, a soft blanket folded with care, and a single gentle lamp.

“Sleep well,” Elise murmured.

Anna smiled with genuine gratitude and stepped inside. The room was modest but deeply comforting: a low bed with a crisp white coverlet and a round porthole through which the water’s reflected light danced in slow, liquid patterns across the walls.

She sat, removed her shoes, set her bag beside the bed, and slipped beneath the covers. The mattress received her with a softness she had not known in years. She sank into it as though returning to something long forgotten—a family she had always missed, a safety she had never truly known.

That night, she slept more profoundly than she could remember. It was a dreamless sleep, vast and still, in which her restless mind finally grew quiet, as if the entire world had drawn in a breath and paused.

When she woke, time had lost its meaning. She felt only a deep, bodily certainty that this had been more than mere sleep. It was a reset. A single night that had stretched like a week. An immersion into a current impossible to find anywhere else in the noisy, fractured world above.

At breakfast, friendly faces greeted her like old companions. People who had heard her name only once spoke it with the easy warmth of long familiarity.

“How did you sleep, Anna?” Amara asked, her voice gentle.

“Deeper than ever,” Anna answered, feeling strangely open, almost raw in her honesty.

But when Laurent turned his gaze upon her—his lips curving into a soft smile while his dark eyes remained cool,

unreadable, and strangely distant—a sudden jolt passed through her chest. What, she wondered with a flicker of unease, had she unknowingly bound herself to?