

SOME
PLACES
ARE
JUST
EVIL

SANCTUARY

Valentina Cano Repetto

A NOVEL

SANCTUARY



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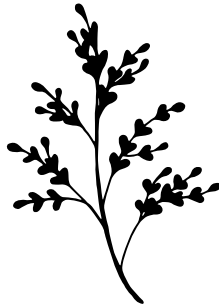
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For C and L







M A D D A L E N A

1596



I DIPPED THE SILVER SPOON INTO the steaming dark liquid and filled it with death.

The dusky blue of the soup plate's painted lilies gleamed through beef and broth, flakes of chopped herbs swirling around the rim of the majolica. I could almost see the enameled figure at the bottom, the maiden always bent of knee, the unicorn's head heavy on her lap. The empty forest around them as if the world had come to a hush.

I doubted I'd manage to reach the maiden with breath left in my body.

I took the first sip of the weak stew. There was a trace of bitterness, a tail end of it, but the rosemary and the basil had disguised it, faithful friends they always were. Even now, the herbs spoke to me, whispering warnings in their earth-soaked language that I blinked away as the liquid scorched my throat. I knew all too well what I was doing.

"It's too hot," Francesco said, his large eyes squinting at the steam.

I forced myself to smile. "Blow on it for a few seconds. Gently," I added as his cheeks puffed up with air.

I looked down the stone table at my other children, eating in silence, my eyes and mind attempting to fly over the empty seat and falling like shot birds. At the end of the table, Florindo sat staring at the walnut backrest of that same empty chair, conjuring up the same tendrils of golden hair that I could still feel under my fingers. His spoon hovered over the plate.

“Eat, *sposo*,” I said.

He blinked and the tears fell but he did as he was told. A good husband and father. A good man.

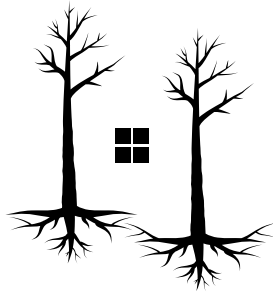
I followed my own instructions and drank more broth, the vital part, my jaw too tight to chew through beef. The only sounds were the tapping of spoons against majolica and the roar of the torrent behind the mill. But under layers upon layers of the noises that had filled my days since it had happened, there was that one sound. That crack. It ricocheted through me still.

A twist of nausea made me bite the inside of my lips. I looked up at one of the etched cornices that encircled the *sala*, focusing on a gold-leaf curlicue as I breathed and swallowed the bile down. If I became ill now, so soon, none of this would work. They would all stop and they must not.

How I wished we’d never left Genova. That we’d never come to this place.

I did what I could to ignore the bite of sudden hot pain in my stomach and dipped my spoon back in the stew. My hand trembled. Candlelight contracted like a pupil.

Please let this be over quickly.



SIBILLA

1933



THE CAR ROLLED OVER YET another stone, the thin and worn leather seat doing little to cushion the steel knobs and joints that had been knocking against me for the past half hour. My hands flew to my stomach to cover the small mound that still didn't require many adjustments to my waistlines, the mound that was the first and last thing I thought about each day. All this movement couldn't be good for him, for the boy I knew I carried. I felt his maleness like a bone ache. It hadn't felt like that before, not in the other two pregnancies. With care, I smoothed out my skirt, eyes sliding down to look for snags in the rayon stockings I'd bought especially for this trip. They were pristine.

The driver jerked the steering wheel, and the car rattled as if it were considering spread-wheeled collapse as it swerved to avoid half a tree trunk. I winced and shifted again.

We'd had the option of a better car at the station in Ovada, one with seats so cushioned and oiled they looked like sofas in those well-to-do clubs that peppered Torino, but Giovanni had insisted on this one. He had to

have his reasons, of course, but it couldn't have cost very much more than hiring this rickety contraption, and we had the money now. Habits of the middle class, I supposed.

Yes, out of which his clever mind has lifted us.

Because we now owned a home, a villa, and not just that but a mill and hectares upon hectares of land.

The thought was like a sip of brandy.

With a smile, I slid my hand off the mound and slipped my arm through Giovanni's. I peered past the driver's head. "Do you think there's much more to go?"

"Why?"

I didn't need more than that to know I'd said the wrong thing. Not an unusual occurrence in our five years of marriage, but it still managed to yank me off-center when it happened.

"I was just wondering, that's all," I said, and forced a smile into my voice.

He smoothed out a crease on a trouser leg with a hand that I could have sworn had a small tremble in it. "You're sure you weren't thinking this is too far flung a place to be convenient? That perhaps I've made the wrong choice?"

How had he gathered all of that from my simple question? It was true, he hadn't consulted me before purchasing the property, placing the deeds on our kitchen table just three days before we were meant to take the train down here, but what good would my opinion have been in these matters? I knew nothing of mills or of purchasing land. Besides, he had bought it all with the money from his invention, his patent, money that was his and not mine. He didn't need to consult with me on its use.

The car gave another jostle and I pressed a hand to my stomach once more, as if that alone could keep the child safe. A gust of cold worry swept through me. I didn't know what I'd do if I felt the cramps now, the red loss soaking into my rayon stockings.

"This is strategically smart, Sibilla."

“Yes, of course,” I said, blinking, though I didn’t know what he meant.

“What do you see?”

“I-I don’t—”

He gestured outward. “Look, then.”

I swallowed, brought my mind to heel, and did what he said, though there wasn’t much to see. Out the window smudged with fingertips, I saw a crude road with stones tumbling in all directions, as if a fleeting river had swept over them in the past hour or so, and trees packed so tightly together their limbs grew intertwined under canopies of needles. Felling one would have brought knots of them crashing.

I had no idea what answer he wanted, so it would have to be the truth.

“I don’t see anything but trees.”

“Exactly,” he said. “No competing mills, no real neighbors. Up on the mountain behind the villa, we have hectares of oak trees that have sat untouched for generations and that we can transform into our fortune. You have to look at it with its potential in mind. Use a bit of imagination.” He sighed at my silence and flicked his dark eyes to me. “I would have thought you would understand what an opportunity this is for us, whether or not the mill is a bit distant from the hair salons and picture shows.”

His words stung like nettle, forcing me to look away from him and into the trees as I blinked back sudden tears. A tightness took hold of my chest even as I chided myself for being so silly. Much too sensitive.

Because I couldn’t blame Giovanni for his words. I knew he couldn’t help being irritable. Someone who was accustomed to working with fellow engineers, discussing ideas I could barely pronounce let alone understand, would not have found me amusing company today. Until he’d snapped his newspaper open, all I’d managed to talk about during the train ride from Torino had been the child. A man who had found a way to improve the efficiency of sawmills without any assistance but that of his own mind had had to listen to hours of female nesting chatter.

Well, I’d not bother him until we reached the mill. I wouldn’t ruin this for us. I’d keep my mouth tightly shut.



THE DRIVER HAD JUST URGED the car onto another road, this one narrower and without a single signpost, mostly mud and rocks, when I first glimpsed our new home. A roof of toothlike tiles made of red clay had sprouted a hat of green ivy leaves. I sat up and tried to peer through the trees, but it was impossible.

It was like attempting to read in the dark.

“This isn’t the original road,” Giovanni said, gesturing around us. “This one will take us to the mill, but there’s supposed to be another, larger one that leads right up to the villa.”

“With respect, *Signore Fenoglio*,” the driver said, “this is the original road. Because the mill was here first, you see, two or three decades before the Caparalia family had the villa built.”

Giovanni cleared his throat roughly. “Indeed? That is not what I was told.”

“Well, *signore*, I can’t speak to what you were told, but that is the truth. And for now, this is the only path to the property, I’m afraid. The larger road you mentioned has been underwater for, oh . . . I suppose it’s been . . . yes, almost four centuries. Because of the broken dam.”

“You live in these parts?”

“My entire family, *Signore Fenoglio*. For generations. They’ve been—”

“It’s *ingegnere*.”

I winced.

“Pardon?” the driver said, half turning.

“I’m an engineer. It’s not *signore* but *Ingegnere Fenoglio*.”

After a beat of silence, the driver gave Giovanni a nod and turned back to the road, hands tightening on the steering wheel.

My cheeks felt as if they’d caught fire. I restrained my impulse to offer a word of apology to the man.

“In any case,” my husband said, turning to me as if the driver had never spoken, “we’ll fix that main road when we rebuild the original dam and

divert the torrent's water again toward the wheel. We can't have guests arriving at our villa by this path. It's unseemly."

I nodded even if I wasn't entirely sure what guests he meant, other than perhaps my father and his wife if I could pry him away from my two half brothers and his sweets shop for long enough to come down from Torino. Giovanni had no family of his own left, and though he did have business acquaintances, I couldn't imagine that any of them would be willing to leave the city for a *cena*.

It was then, all at once and as if it had shoved its way through the trees, that the mill rose in front of us. My thoughts scattered in all directions—guests, meals, hair salons and picture shows, civilization itself forgotten before the size of a building made of stones so ancient they were black with days. A vertical rectangle of at least three stories and pockmarked with holes where the rocks had shifted or fallen under the pressure of the years, it pushed against the shores of a dried up millrace. Its wooden wheel rested like a weapon at its side.

This was not what I'd caught sight of before, the clay roof and pretty ivy leaves. The mill's structure was made only of those dark stones. Not a hint of green, nor of any color besides black and gray, had laid claim to it. Nothing grew in its crevices.

It was difficult to look away from the dark shape of the mill. Even its splintered wood and iron door tugged at me.

"Hello," I whispered, just a puff of air.

The driver took a turn and the car jerked off the rough road onto even rougher terrain. We passed the mill on the left and that was when the villa itself appeared, down to our right, drenched in sunlight.

The perfectly square villa sat on what looked like a grass-covered dais, with a containment wall of mossy stone encircling the front. Now this was what I'd seen earlier, clay and ivy in harmonious matrimony on the roof. But the ivy was a fickle thing, for I now saw it clung to everything: it had sent its tendrils across the villa's facade, latching on to the stairs and twining around the balustrades that led up to the entrance colonnade, had grasped

on to five of the eight rectangular windows visible from our position, and had even slid into the four brick chimneys. Parts of the roof had buckled in. That was visible, too, despite all those plants, and there were obvious water stains along the edge of where the clay tiles met the stucco.

Under and past all that green and all those water marks, though, I could see what the villa had been. Chantilly walls and golden accents. Its past glory trembled like a soap bubble against the present, but it was there.

I decided it then.

Villa Caparalia was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen.

I'd lived my life surrounded by beauty in Torino, palaces and museums and even cafes festooned in gold leaf and Rococo moldings, but none of them compared to this place. Because this one was mine.

The car stopped with a jerk, the driver yanking on the hand brake until I thought he'd tear it right off. Giovanni flung his door open and stepped out without a word, stopping only to smooth his smoke-colored vest and tug on his jacket before starting off for the mill.

I smiled at his enthusiasm even if it did mean I had to find a way out of this car on my own. He could have been any boy hearing the midnight chimes on the eve of *Natale*.

Well, all right then, nothing to it but to begin. I gathered my purse, adjusted my gloves, and pulled on the metal handle. The door swung out with more force than I'd expected and before I could shift, it had slammed back into place. With a sigh, I leaned into it to begin again.

"*Signora*, let me help," the driver said.

"Oh, there's no need, signore. I'm sure I can manage."

But he had already stepped out and had come to my side, one hand holding the door open and the other offering me assistance in rising. Despite the renewed warmth in my cheeks, I smiled and took his hand.

"Grazie, signore," I said once my heels were on the squelching ground of my new home. "Most kind of you."

He nodded in acknowledgment before turning to the car to start unloading some of the trunks we'd brought. Mainly clothes, some kitchen

utensils. Our furniture would arrive later, on the tractor and cart Giovanni had hired to fetch it all from the station.

“Would you like me to take them up to the house, signora?”

I hesitated. That wasn’t part of what we’d paid him to do and I didn’t have a single *centesimo* to give him for the extra work. But I also couldn’t carry the trunks on my own and disliked to leave them sinking into the mud.

I opened my purse and looked inside for my smaller money bag, though I knew well enough it was empty. Giovanni did not approve of married women carrying money if it could be avoided.

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything to give you,” I said.

“It’s no trouble, signora.”

“Perhaps my husband . . .”

He shook his head and grabbed the first trunk. “Va bene, signora. You should not have to carry these up yourself.”

He led the way up the incline toward the villa and I followed, wincing at the mud that was already splattering my fawn-colored skirt and my stockings, seeming to swallow up my heels a bit more with each step. At least I’d been smart enough not to wear the new kidskin boots Giovanni had bought me to celebrate the sale of his patent.

This would be one of the first things that I’d turn my husband’s attention to: laying down a stone walkway from the road up to the house to avoid splattered shoes.

The driver had already placed the first two trunks by the entrance and had started down for the rest by the time I reached the top of the stairs, the row of waistline buttons pinching my sides, and walked through the ivy-clad colonnade toward the front door. It was a massive wooden creature under an arch made of black iron cast so thinly it could have been spun sugar. At its center was a knocker featuring a face, perhaps an angel, puffed of cheek as if it were about to blow a tempest into being, a motif echoed in the door handle. It would be a trick to fit the key into the tight opening inside that mouth.

“Oh, the key!” I said and hurried to the smallest trunk.

“Pardon, signora?”

I waved the words away. “Nothing at all. Just me talking to myself.”

Like I’ve been told not to do dozens of times. It’s not seemly.

My hand closed around the heavy skeleton key, one of two, and a shiver ran down my spine. I was about to enter my own home.

“That’s the last of them,” the driver said, placing two more trunks on the landing and smacking a mud spot on his trousers with his cap. “Is there anything else you require, Signora Fenoglio?”

“No, thank you . . . I’m sorry, I just realized I don’t know your name.”

“Piero, signora.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Piero. You’ve been very kind.”

He nodded and made to turn, but stopped himself at the last moment, his hands worrying at his cap.

“Yes?”

“*Scusatemi*, signora. I hope you won’t think I’m overstepping, but I just wanted to say that should you require anything, me and my family live a little ways up the valley. On the other side of the river. It’ll be lonely up here come winter and, if you’ll pardon me, a woman in your condition should know in which direction help can be found.”

I blinked. I was certain I wasn’t showing yet. “How did you know?”

Piero smiled and nodded to my midsection. “You are so very careful.”

I realized then I’d pressed the hand not holding the key against my stomach without knowing it, both barrier and cradle for the life beneath it.

“Oh,” I said.

“There’s no doctor closer than the one in Ovada, but my wife has had three of her own and can help when the time comes, signora. And, of course, if I’m around, my car is always at your service.”

“I, uh, I’m very grateful, Piero. I’ll keep that in mind.”

He did place his cap on his head now and turned to the stairs with a nod but without another word. What a peculiar man. He should have said all of that to Giovanni, because I was no good at remembering those kinds of things. A mind like a sieve, he always told me.

I turned back to the door.

Besides, Piero made it sound as if I'd be in the house all alone, when that would certainly not be the case. The two or three maids that Giovanni promised me, and Giovanni himself, would be more than enough to ensure there were no complications with the birth, winter or not.

I slid the key into the space between the lips of the blowing angel and turned it, the mechanism engaging with a scrape of metal but no other complaint. The door itself opened with relative ease, too, requiring only a slight push of the shoulder before it dislodged itself from the frame.

Darkness was what I expected. I'd imagined blindly pulling ivy from the windows before being able to catch sight of a room's contours. Instead, ribbons of light unfurled past the curtains of vines and over a courtyard that was already visible through the arch leading from the marble entrance hall. I had been right about the water, though. A rather large pool of it gleamed in front of me. At least it made me feel just a bit less like a muddy-heeled desecrater as I stepped into the house. My house.

My footsteps distorted in all that space, the high ceilings stealing the sound and returning it slightly off rhythm, so that by the time I reached that internal, covered courtyard, I no longer recognized my own steps. Not that I cared one jot for that when I finally looked up.

A fresco spanned the entire expanse of the vaulted ceiling. It was divided into connecting panels, the unmistakable scintillating blue of a cinquecento sky the perfect background on which golden-winged figures could frolic. The tops of trees in kaleidoscopic greens provided a border, as if the viewer were looking up at the sky from the center of an immense forest. The fresco shone with gold leaf that was flaking in places and there were some spots of faded blue, but it retained most of its crispness. It was dizzying to think that I could come and look at it whenever I wanted, for as long as I wanted.

The courtyard opened into four different vestibules and corridors, a cross of passages, and I took the first one to the left now, which led up into what, from its size, could only be the sala where the Caparalia had to have

done their dining and entertaining. The damage was extensive here. Water had wiped whatever had been on the walls and had cracked the plaster from the ceiling. Some pieces still rippled with damp. Chunks of it lay scattered on the peach marble tiles that made up the floor, along with cracked glass and, *Santissima Madre*, rat droppings.

I stepped carefully through the mess and started down toward the center of the room. There had perhaps been gold leaf on the walls, for the sun did catch stray flakes that glittered in the cornices, setting them aflame for a moment before the shadow of an ivy covered them again. In its youth, the room must have shimmered.

At the far end, near the fireplace that spanned most of the wall and where the shadows were thickest, stood a table.

How strange that no one had taken it. So far, I'd seen no hint of so much as a three-legged chair.

But the moment I walked over to it, I saw why it was still here. It was made of one giant slab of stone that didn't look as if it'd fit through the door. Its heft was obviously meant to be the focus, for its only ornamentation were four carved rosettes, one at each corner. Even its legs, black with mold now, were bare and simple.

I brushed my fingertips over its surface. It was much smoother than I'd thought it'd be, almost like nacre or polished quartz, and cold. Now that I was closer, I could see it had a vein the color of rose gold and as thin as a thread running down its center. I followed its path down the length of the table with my finger, from rosette to rosette. They looked just like the cream-filled chocolates my mother used to make for Father's shop, the ones women in fine silk dresses bought. She would have loved these.

No question the table was beautiful. The finest piece of furniture I'd ever owned.

Yes, but I don't want to touch it anymore.

I frowned at my thought before realizing my fingers were aching with cold. And it wasn't just my fingers, for my teeth were clicking lightly together and I had a vague idea they had been for a while. There was a trace

of something in the room now, too, an odor that I hadn't smelled when I'd walked in, like meat about to turn.

I took a step back.

"Sibilla!"

I gasped, clapping a hand over my mouth to keep from yelping.

"Where are you? Sibilla!"

Sudden relief swept through me, leaving me slightly weak of knee. It was just Giovanni.

Well, of course—who else would it have been?

"I'm in here!" I called out, shaking my head at myself as I walked toward the sala's door.

Madre di Dio, what a silly thing I was. Frightening myself in my own home because a table was cold and the room smelled a bit of mold. Giovanni was right; I always allowed my head to run off following some emotion or other, all feelings and no sense.

"Didn't you hear me calling?" Giovanni said, appearing at the doorway.

"No, I'm sorry. There's so much room, sound gets lost." I hurried to smile. "It's all so beautiful."

"Yes, I suppose so." He peered past me, into the sala. "That's a minor disaster, though. It'll likely need to be completely replastered, practically torn down to its foundations to get all the humidity out."

I nodded. "I wonder what it must have looked like when the Caparalia lived here."

"Expensive. That's what it looked like."

Giovanni grasped a corner of plaster and peeled a hand-sized piece off the wall with ease, letting it crumble and fall like wet sand to the marble floor. I had the ridiculous impulse to offer some kind gesture to the wall, a bit of comfort, a promise that we'd soon resolve its problems.

"After we get the mill running, we'll begin the work in the villa," Giovanni said with a grimace as he drew out a handkerchief and wiped his hands. "For now, look through the rooms and see which ones won't collapse around us and we'll make do with those."

I frowned. "I thought the repairs would happen at the same time."

That was what he'd said when he'd told me about the purchase of the property, what a bargain it'd been because of the condition it was in. That we'd be able to afford to fix it all up.

"There aren't enough men in the area to do both and, apart from wiring some of the rooms for electricity so that we don't have to sit in the dark and installing a telephone, the mill is the crucial thing."

"Oh." A telephone. I hadn't realized that was a priority. The expense of that . . .

I hesitated, a hand going to my midsection. "But the child? I'm just concerned about the damp."

He waved my words away and walked out into the corridor. "There is still time until its birth. I have some of the men coming tomorrow to begin the repairs and in a couple of months, if that, we'll have the mill working and be making our fortune."

He bent, frowning, to peer at a crack on the floor in which his entire hand could have fit. It was one of many.

It was true, I supposed. The baby wouldn't be born for five more months, and we didn't need to have the entire villa ready by then, just a few rooms free of mold and humidity. And the courtyard had no real damage, so the house must have many other places that were perfectly suitable. More than suitable.

Yes, by the time he was born—

If he doesn't follow the fate of my last two.

—I'd make sure he had the loveliest nursery waiting for him, all light and warmth.

I nodded to myself as I reached to close the sala's heavy door. I could start doing some things, too.

When the help arrived, they could assist me light the fireplaces, all the ones I could find, to try and dry the place out a bit. That alone would make a difference.

Having a plan, even one that small, eased a knot in my chest.

“I’m looking forward to seeing the mill running,” I said. “Will you show me how the part you invented works once you install it?”

Giovanni glanced up at me before returning his gaze to the cracked tiles. “The repairs will need to be done first and then the addition of reciprocal power to the existing rotary system, but yes, after that I can show you the new crankshaft.” He stood. “But never mind all of that, I had something brought for you from Ovada to celebrate.”

My eyebrows shot up, both at his words and at the sudden sunlight in his voice. “Really? What is it?”

“Guess.”

I smiled. “I don’t know, Giovanni.”

“All right, a hint, then.” He drew closer. “What made you first look at me, that day in your father’s shop?”

And as if he’d pulled me down the years, I could see him, then, all of twenty-three, at the wooden counter behind which my mother and I stood. He held a bowler hat so worn its brim shone, but he had bought a dozen of the *dolcetti di marzapane* that Mother had spent the dawn making. Once he’d paid for them, he’d held the bag over the counter and offered me one. For the next week and a half, until he’d asked permission to call on me, he’d done the exact same thing. I’d gone to sleep each night with the taste of almonds in my mouth and his smile in my eyes.

Much later, once we were promised to one another, he’d told me that very first day was the day he’d been made the director of engineering at the sawmill in which his own father still worked as a laborer. He’d decided to finally approach the chestnut-haired girl who lived among sweets and whom he caught sight of every day on his way to work.

After one bite of marzapane, I’d fallen in love with him. And that hadn’t changed.

Except—

I smiled despite the sudden tightness in my chest and shook my head. “Do you know, I don’t entirely remember how we met. So many young men were coming in and out of the sweets shop that it’s all a bit of a blur.”

“Is it? What a shame. Then perhaps you won’t want the bag of marzapane waiting in the kitchen.” He started forward. “I’ll just go and toss it before it attracts rats.”

I tugged on his sleeve and brought him closer so that I could reach up and place a kiss on his lips. “Thank you. But, you know, you’re late.” I gestured to the droppings scattered around us. “We already have rats.”

It was only when he laughed that I realized how long it’d been since I’d heard him do so. Even after the sale of his patent almost six months ago, he’d not been quite himself, as if he found no real reason to celebrate. But things would change now. With the baby, and the mill, and this villa. I could feel it.

This was an auspicious beginning.

“Come on, I know the way,” he said, offering me his arm and that same smile from that very first day.

Yes, everything would be fine now.

I twined my arm through his and he led us down the corridor, in what I assumed was the direction of the kitchen.

“I sent word to have a few more things delivered from Ovada for our cena, nothing very extravagant, but tomorrow we’ll have to get one of the workers to show us where to buy what we need,” he said. “We’ll have to think about buying a car of some sort, as well. Anything with wheels and a motor.”

He kicked a piece of fallen plaster out of the way and took us down another corridor.

Tomorrow, then, if I could get some help cleaning up the kitchen, I could prepare a proper meal. The new gas stove he’d promised me would have to wait a bit, of course, but I could manage with a woodstove for now. And though leaving our refrigerator behind in Torino had been almost painful, we had our old ice box. We’d survive.

“Do you think it’ll be possible to ask about two or three maids tomorrow morning, too?” I said. “I’m sure the workers must know a few women in need of work.”

“No, we’d better wait. I don’t want any more expenses than are absolutely necessary.”

I almost stopped walking. “Giovanni, I can’t take care of this entire house on my own.”

“You don’t have to, just the rooms we choose to live in for now. Then, when we can, we’ll hire a woman or two.” He flicked his eyes to me. “I thought you understood that the mill comes first.”

“Yes, of course I do, but perhaps you can hire one fewer worker and pay that salary to a maid. A girl without experience won’t cost much. Less even than a worker. Or perhaps leave the telephone installation for later.”

“We can’t run a proper sawmill without a telephone, Sibilla. I’ve already made the decision.”

All of the light had disappeared from his voice and I knew I should stop talking, but I just didn’t understand. He was the one who had mentioned the help back in Torino, telling me I’d need to be ready to take charge of an entire army of them. Well, I wasn’t asking for an army. One would do for the moment.

“Just airing out the rooms we use will take a lot of work and you’ll be too busy with the mill to help me. Look at the size of this place!” *Stop talking.* “We likely won’t have radiators for the winter in place yet and I can’t bring up all of the wood necessary to keep the fireplaces lit on my own, not with the baby—”

Giovanni exhaled sharply, shaking his head “Always the baby. We always arrive at the same place, don’t we?”

He tugged his arm from my grip and stalked off around the corner, his shoulder nudging me just enough that I felt the soles of my wet heel lose their purchase on the tiles. With a gasp, I grasped at the nearest wall, digging fingernails into the soft plaster to remain upright. A flurry of it rained down into my hair.

My heart thundered. A tourniquet tightened around my chest, cutting off my breath.

Not now.

But yes, now, and I could only clutch at the crumbling wall as a thick wave of red fell over my vision. I knew that red. I knew the confusion it hid in its folds.

“You can’t imagine how lovely it is to see you.”

A whimper escaped my lips.

“Here, have some of mine.”

Stop it. Please.

I squeezed my eyes so tightly the red bleached into white, and I held on to that, as I always did, dividing it, transforming it into worn ivory keys. And now I dropped in spots of ink that elongated and clicked into place, exactly where they belonged, their smooth surfaces under my fingertips as my hands sped across them. Melody burst like a wineglass shattering. The sound smothered the world into silence. As it always did.

Over and over, I played that melody, that waltz, on the perfectly captured image of my mother’s piano.

When the pressure in my chest finally eased, I took a shuddering breath and released the music, feeling as if my bones had turned to aspic. My hands trembled when I placed them on my stomach.

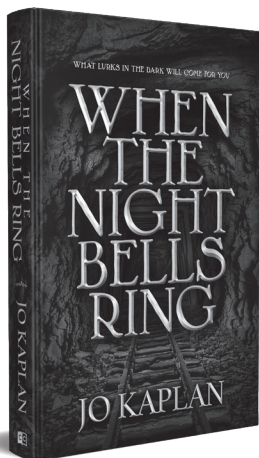
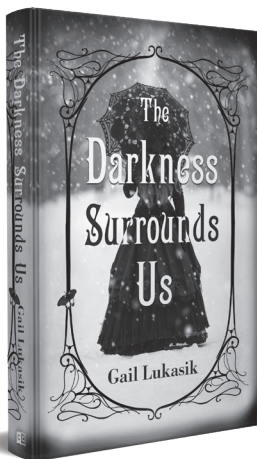
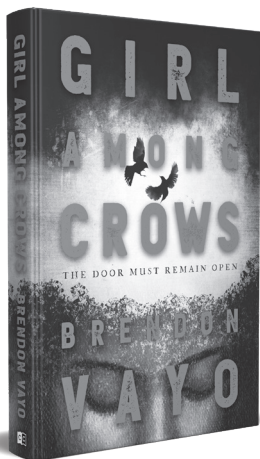
I had to stop doing this to myself and to the baby. This was exactly what Giovanni and the doctor always warned me about—my emotions getting the better of my head, filling in the holes in my memory with anything I could grab hold of. Because I didn’t actually know what had happened that night. No one did.

Those two snatches of conversation were the only things my mind could dredge up from the night our last child had died in my womb.

And I didn’t even know who had uttered them or why they snapped at my heels like growling dogs.

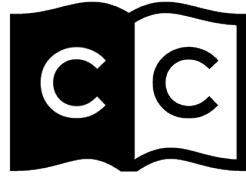


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That we’d never come
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