

# **ISLAND OF DEAD GODS**

novel by

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It is not true that trouble shared is trouble halved. Your pain will always be yours alone, whether it hurt only you, or three others, or millions. And it doesn't matter if you tried to resist or learned to live with it or if you were courageous or a coward.

“Coward” was the last word Amanda thought when the cyanide, traveling to her insides on a gulp of French champagne, started a fire. First it burned her tongue, her gullet, and when the poison hit her gastric acids, things really got wild. Membrane, tissue, nerve fibers, muscles were slashed like paper in a shredder, flinging her body in crazy spasms. The pain seemed to last forever. It only died down when seagulls announced the new day Amanda would no longer have to face.

Rosenda, the housekeeper, discovered her employer in one of the lounge chairs at the swimming pool. The first thing she noticed was Amanda's smooth, rosy complexion. Rosenda frowned. So she's done it too instead of growing old the way Mother Nature intended. Isn't this supposed to be a woman's world now? Does she really think this can be a solution to the problem? To him?

What Rosenda did not know was that Amanda's rejuvenated face only reflected the oxygenating effect of the cyanide. When, after multiple repetitions of “Good morning, ma'am” the closed eyes still wouldn't open, it dawned on Rosenda that no plastic surgeon had worked here, but *Moth*, the God of Death.

## I.

### Last Trip to Ibiza

#### Chapter 1

Departure had been delayed to almost midnight. For the umpteenth time, the ferry's loudspeakers emitted the old resistance song and last year's summer hit, "Bella Ciao." Philine—or Phil, as she preferred to be called—hummed along, "One morning I woke up / and there was the invader..." but after a while, the words felt like punches. When the engines finally fired up and drowned out the music, people cheered as if they hadn't counted on departure anymore.

From the upper deck, Phil watched the ritual of Spanish farewells: passengers throwing rolls of toilet paper at the people below on the dock. As the *Balearia* ferry pulled out to sea, the travelers kept the end pieces grasped while the ones staying behind tried to catch the rolls. Some paper dropped into the water, but most spanned between the hands of the people on board and those on the dock like a metaphorical bond. It blew in the wind, unrolled, stretched, still connected. Only when the ship left the harbor did it tear apart.

For a moment, Phil wished she also held such a piece of paper in her hand, but then she thought, why? It was toilet paper. Silly symbolism. Her connection had already torn. She should accept it. She did accept it, and she would manage on her

own. She patted down her reddish curls, damp in the drizzle and writhing around her head like Medusa's snakes. She would.

The waves line-danced towards the open sea; the ferry stomped along. Seagulls accompanied her, screeching something like, "That's it that's it." Phil massaged her ears until the words disappeared and only seagull cries were left. When the lights of Barcelona had sunk into the night, she went below deck.

In the dormitory cabin, the crying of overexcited babies competed with TV noise, and a stale smell of food and sweat hung in the air. The only empty seat Phil could find was in a row of three. At the window lounged a blonde woman in a black leather coat with a profile like Charlize Theron. She focused on her smartphone, an intense expression on her heavily made-up face. An elderly lady sat towards the aisle reading a pulp novel. When Phil climbed across her, she accidentally pushed the book out of the hand of the lady, who reacted with a remarkable expletive, "*Ay! Hostia puta.*"

"Sorry." Phil fished for the book and was rewarded with such a mischievous grin she felt like giving the woman a hug. But she only smiled back, "*lo siento, señora,*" slipped off her boots and, with her toes, arranged them side by side under her seat, so none of them would get lost alone. She rolled her green sweater into a pillow and closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, Phil's first thought was that she should have paid for a plane ticket. As if a few more debts would have made much difference now. She

often had sleeping problems, but this night in the dormitory cabin had been like sleep deprivation-torture. The air below deck had intensified to near suffocation, passengers competed in a snoring match, especially the elderly lady at Phil's side, and her *butaca* proved to be the most un-ergonomic sleeping chair on Earth.

But now, golden morning light fell through the portholes, and on the horizon Ibiza appeared—*la Isla Blanca*. Phil's tiredness was replaced by giddy anticipation, as always, when she got close to her favorite island. The approaching coastline, the sandy beaches, the gentle hills over jagged cliffs where hotels and mansions jostled with modest farmhouses for the best sites by the sea—she loved it. As she loved her house, the charming old *finca*, three whitewashed stone squares that made two bedrooms and a *sala* with a kitchen, an unreliable shower and a roof leaking in two spots when the rain fell and the island winds howled. A house full of imperfections, but gentle like a rugged old friend.

It used to belong to Phil's great-aunt Charlotte, who in the Seventies dropped out of her affluent German existence to become a hippie and live in accordance with nature. Charlotte spent the rest of her life on the island she called magic. When she died at ninety-seven, Phil could hardly believe she was the lucky one to inherit the *finca*.

“Because you're a kind of hippie too,” her cousin Felicitas, who got a whole townhouse in Frankfurt from Aunt Charlotte, had snapped. What she probably meant by “hippie” was that Phil was leading her life with no ring on her finger, a single mother in a freelance-job with no more than basic pension rights and no plans to

change this. Which, in Phil's opinion, didn't have much to do with being a hippie. Her life was the result of a myriad of factors: reflections, reflexes, wrong decisions, right decisions, pure coincidences. Usually, she felt quite comfortable in it. Although not lately.

Phil's excitement was replaced by a heavy heart—but she'd better not dwell on the past. Instead she would have to act now, and everything would change. She would lose her beloved *finca*, the home she had dreamed about moving to full-time as soon as her son was through school and she could afford it. Now she never would. Because she was broke. Bankrupt. Alone. She had twelve days to solve the problem.

Phil struggled out of the uncomfortable *butaca* and fished for her boots. The elderly lady had already left, but to Phil's left, the hand of the blonde woman was dangling from the armrest. It was a beautiful, strong hand, a hand one wanted to shake. No nail polish on the long-limbed fingers, no ring but a heavy silver bracelet that wound around the wrist like a snake. The hand's owner was sound asleep, regardless of the stale air, the narrowness and, again, the brutal noise. Her made-up face, contrasting strangely with the authentic hand, rested in the ghastly chair's cushion, protected by a cocoon of bleached hair.

Phil's lashes, almost invisible in their natural state, longed for mascara, her curls screamed for a comb and her teeth for a brush. But as the restrooms reeked of un-flushed things and seasickness, she decided to postpone her restoration.

## Chapter 2

In Dallas, Texas, the sun rose seven hours later. The moment Adam opened his eyes, he knew he had made a mistake. Again. Damn booze. But after the daylong meeting in which Major General Anita C. Peyton had briefed him and his fellow investigators on the crisis, everyone needed of a drink. Never before had they been confronted with so many voiced concerns, complaints, denunciations and rumors concerning the armed forces. Adam, who had quit military police to become an independent contractor, knew that a hell of work lay ahead of them.

Not that evening, though. Adam had ordered another round.

When his colleague Lori from nearby Fort Worth sat down close to him, knees touching, and reminded him of how special their relationship had been, he was tackling margarita number four. And his rational brain had already begun to shut down.

Now it was morning, and Adam cursed himself for restarting an affair that had never been a relationship. Lori was searching his crumpled sheets for her lost real-hair eyelashes while her accusations beat down on him like cold rain.

“I’m very sorry” he said, genuinely sad, “I know I’m an egomaniac and incapable of a relationship. You mentioned that before.”

Why in the world did it mean so much to Lori to leave her hairbrush in his bathroom? As if she wanted to stake a claim or leave a red dot on an object meaning “Sold.” Did she not need her hairbrush at home?

“And that’s it, right?”

“Look, we both said it’d be for the best...”

Lori was fuming. “Fuck you!”

Adam was relieved when the phone in the hallway rang. He closed the door behind him and picked up.

“Hello?”

Immediately his ears were attacked by a foreign voice full of rolling Rs. Adam heard “Amanda Scherer... Ibiza.” Then he understood he had a policeman on the line, an Inspector Dziri, with heartbreaking information.

The phone in his hand, Adam stood petrified as Lori came storming, carrying with her a fanfare of new accusations. When she saw his face, she choked off the bitching.

“My sister died,” Adam said.

Lori took him into her arms, pressed herself against him as if to seize the opportunity. Adam leaned against her warm body, wishing he would never have to move, or speak, or think again. Wishing he could just cling to her and trust and love. But this chapter was closed for him.



He softly pulled Lori's hands apart. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I need to be alone now."

Amanda's letter arrived the same morning, after a week in transit from Ibiza to Dallas. Hasty words, sputtered out in her tiny handwriting, a spidery scrawl, as if she had been shaking while writing:

*Dear Adam,*

*It's been such a long time since we talked. You may say I'm responsible for this silence as I am the big sister and did nothing to change it, and you are right. But I never knew how to breach it. What to say. I will always remember the look in your eyes when Dad took off with you. Over 40 years ago, can you imagine? People are so cruel. When you came back, I knew we had another chance as Adam and Amanda. Remember how we used to say I have an extra syllable because I am the older one? Please forgive me, Adam, that I was not able to take this chance. I was already too screwed up then, trapped in my illusions. A friend of mine calls himself "Nobody," and this is me as well, reduced to nothing and nobody, betrayed, humiliated, effaced. Everything in my life has gone wrong. Oh, Adam, I miss you so much. Please, let's try one more time, I beg you, let's talk. But if something happened to me, know that I have always always missed you.*

*Love, Amanda*

