

ROBERT MOORE



EVERLIEGH

HEART OF THE CHOSEN



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Robert Moore

2022

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Cover design by: R H Moore

Prologue

1253, Saint-Girons, place of Lédar, Ariège

“Isabelle Castellane!” cried the inquisitor, whose loud voice silenced the assembly, “do you recognize before the people the accusations of witchcraft of which you are the object?”

The woman fixed her Franciscan executioner with a sharp gaze and surveyed the crowd massed around her. These people who wanted her dead and whose feverish eyes no longer concealed the ardent desire they felt to witness an execution. Some had known her since childhood, but in these troubled times, fear and hatred spread like a disease. The Church hunted down heretics and the region was well known for its resistance to doctrine. Pope Innocent IV led a ruthless crusade to eradicate them. Far from the precepts of the Bible, the Inquisition practised torture and immolation as the supreme punishment in order to purify souls rebellious to the dogma of the Church.

Although the woman in question was hardly concerned with these Cathar ideologies, she nevertheless represented everything that the clergy wanted to eliminate definitively. Feeling her blood running down her leg and the sharp pain that tormented her from all sides, she was perfectly aware of living her last moments. Having sworn never to abdicate to the Inquisition, she was now paying the price.

“I don’t recognize anything!” she declared in an angry voice, “I am as God created me and I have never denied His name!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, pagan,” retorted the inquisitor, “it’s the devil who gave birth to you! God doesn’t recognize ungodly people, witches or whatever you might be. You have been found guilty and you will atone for your sins in flames!”

The audience applauded, jubilantly, but with an impatient wave of the hand, the man in a black alb stopped the sinister ovation. The heavy silence that followed barely concealed the unhealthy fervour that agitated the people while a fierce grin distorted the features of the young priest.

“We cannot tolerate blood as impure as yours,” he went on, icy, “so before you take your last breath, know that your lineage will end the moment I find your bastard daughter!”

“NO!”

Isabelle’s scream tore through the air. Her tears of despair left thin white streaks on her face, soiled by many days of captivity. Her eyes became imploring this time when she addressed the Franciscan.

“You have taken the oath, priest! We had an agreement, I surrendered on the condition that you let her live!”

“Why would I hurt you with my dagger, do you think, sinner? Thus, I have spilt your blood and you no longer have the resources to defend yourself. I wanted to be absolutely sure that you wouldn’t use your evil powers against me. Now that this is the case, know that no oath holds with the work of the evil one and your daughter will suffer the same fate as you! Wherever you have hidden her, we will find her!”

“I WILL NOT ALLOW IT!”

The woman let out her anger. A perceptible shudder shook the assembly while a gleam of fear crossed the eyes of the inquisitor. Some took a step back.

“With that wound in your side, do you really think you scare me?” persisted the man of the Church. “You are only a shadow of yourself and...”

“You should be scared!” Isabelle cut him off in a dark voice, “because I won’t leave alone, you will all die with me. I swear to God!”

Her words were lost in a long silence during which the condemned woman, panting, considered the crowd. All widened their eyes, horrified by the words of the one who was commonly called a witch. Some had witnessed the strange events she sometimes unleashed around her, the very people who had denounced her in order to benefit from the favours of the clergy. Yet she had never done them the slightest harm and she was surprised to discover that some had even taken their children to watch this miserable spectacle. Around here, distractions were rare, so parents found it fun to take their offspring to this type of event, which is increasingly common in the region. Now the brats were crying their dread in their mother’s petticoats. Everyone turned to the inquisitor who, against all expectations, burst out laughing. The faithful, reassured, imitated him in front of a beleaguered Isabelle.

“That’s enough!” said the Franciscan, “let her be burned! Isabelle Castellane, you will expiate your faults in the purifying flames!”

The audience acclaimed the priest’s sentence. Isabelle closed her eyes. Despite her ugly appearance, she had always been blessed with innate grace and an attractive figure. In her twenties, she had been adored by many young people in the region, but she only had eyes for the father of her daughter. The poor man had disappeared in the mountains a year earlier and

on the eve of celebrating their wedding. Grief haunted her day and night, but she could not regret the weakness of having given up her virtue before the wedding because, from their short union, her daughter, Eleonore, had been born. Isabelle was the target of all the mockery and the worst resentment, but Eleonore was all that remained of her late beloved. As well as the one and only gift she has received in her entire existence... Eleonore.

Isabelle looked up, eyes still closed. Men were already advancing brandishing their torches. The flames caught immediately and thick grey smoke wrapped around the condemned woman. We could already see only her face which, strangely, didn't show the slightest sign of pain. The pyre burst into flames, but Isabelle remained motionless, inert, expressionless. We were beginning to smell a terrible odour of burning flesh when the flames licked her legs and rose towards her blackened face. Her clothes crumbled and spilt in the breeze of that gloomy morning. No sound, just the tireless crackling of fire that had now taken hold of the sinner's entire body. An inhuman howl suddenly broke the suffocating silence that reigned in the crowd. The villagers understood too late that this abominable cry came from the middle of the furnace and the events that followed sealed their disastrous destinies forever.

A whirlwind of fire rose and coiled like a snake around Isabelle's body, a dull roar tore the eardrums of the audience who were now bawling their suffering. The unbearable noise became more and more strident as the incendiary tornado turned into a gigantic ball of fire. People were screaming in terror while some fled covering their ears, others were pushed around or trampled on, not knowing where to go. The panic intensified. As the inevitable outcome drew near, the priest's eyes widened in horror. The commotion suddenly ceased. The flaming sphere emitted a high-pitched hiss. Everyone looked at each other in horror, but

before everyone understood how such a phenomenon could have happened, the formation exploded in a torrent of fire. More cries. Then silence. Burning everything in its path, the flames left Isabelle's charred body towering over the slaughter and hundreds of corpses in ashes.

Chapter 1

Present-day, St Alleyn's High School, London

My return to school in the new term. Finally, I was going to be part of the elite of Alleyn's. And while that may seem futile for any teenager, it was vital for me to start this year off on a better footing. The cause came down to a three-week relationship with a guy named Cedric Fabre. This asshole had spread the rumour that I had gone completely insane after our first kiss. And when I say insane, the word isn't strong enough. Without explanation, he had ruined my reputation in a matter of hours. I had finally concluded that my oral performance was so disastrous that a campaign of slander was the only way for this fool to break up with me for good. My previous flirtations hadn't complained so far, but I had to admit I could count them on the fingers of one hand. Still virgin of all carnal relations, I was more than happy not to have taken the plunge with Cedric. Anyway, he was now in college, and for my part, I hoped to start a new life.

My name, Everliegh.

Burberry. Not quite eighteen. At one time not so long ago, I thought I was attractive and pretty curvy. With my milky skin, my long jet black hair and my big green eyes, I felt I had nothing to complain about, even if a slight gap between my incisors gave me a little complex. I would spend a lot of time getting ready in the morning in front of my mirror, but the *Cedric Fabre* story had destroyed the little esteem I had left, not to mention my perception of the male sex had taken quite a beating. So I considered that nothing was worth the slightest effort on my part, especially if I had to get up half an hour earlier every morning.

I had been living in London for two years, including the previous year which seemed to me to last a century. My adoptive father, Samuel Gregory alias Sam, worked in the army, which led us to move very often. But life in the London region seemed to suit him this time, so we were here for an indefinite period. The problem was that with the reputation I acquired in high school, I had thought that one last move wouldn't have been wasted. But Sam seemed to be happy, so... I owed everything to Sam. He took me in when my father, Nathan Burberry, died when I was only 4 years old. A suicide. Sam refused to talk to me about it and thought he was protecting me, and himself for that matter. It bothered him to even mention his name and he behaved strangely when I tried to talk about him. He was his cousin, and from the few answers I had gotten from him, I had formed the image of a charismatic and loyal father. Alas, all I had left of him was a photo shrivelled by time. The reasons for his suicide, I had discovered on my own. My mother had died a year after I was born, trying to give birth to her second child, my unnamed brother... I had assumed that my father must have gone through a slow and painful depression before killing himself on my fourth birthday. It had therefore taken him three years to realise that he would never recover from these two losses.

Well, I had no memory of any of that, of course, and that was better. My family's story was like a real Greek tragedy and I didn't want to suffer any more. Without Sam, I would have spent my life in a foster home with all the consequences that such an experience entails. My objective was therefore to make him proud by all means, but this image of a psychopathic high school girl didn't help me much. That's why I had to do everything to rehabilitate myself.

Olivia, my best friend, was in the middle of the yard waiting for me, a wide smile on her devilishly plump lips. She was the only one who didn't change her attitude towards me after Cedric's scandalous chronicles were broadcast.

"Hello, Miss Burberry!" she said, holding out her arms to me.

"Hi, Liv, so ready for a new year?" I asked her.

"Of course! Well, provided that there are attractive males this year, new ones, I couldn't refuse!"

Olivia wasn't the kind of girl to be shy and her experience, compared to mine, was like a long scroll next to a post-it. She also kept a list of all her conquests, and among them were the best of the school. Long-term relationships weren't really her cup of tea because she got bored quickly and always noticed the slightest flaw as an excuse to break up. She thought of boys as giant Kleenex and I often pointed out to her that she had a guy mentality in a woman's body.

Olivia was very beautiful and a *real* blond (to be specified because, according to her, the *fakes* were bitches, jealous of a dying minority), with blue eyes, measuring about six feet tall. A good ten centimetres taller than me. She always displayed an ironclad self-confidence. Besides, I very much envied this trait of character which I was horribly lacking.

"Catching some handsome male," I commented, "you know hanging out with me isn't going to make it easy for you, you forget I'm crazy!"

"Exactly, it's all planned! No competition! And who said I liked it easy?" she said before displaying a pleasantly surprised look, "Oh, but aim a little to your left, there are two who can't take their eyes off us!"

Having guessed that they were two representatives of the male gender, I wasn't going to look at them immediately. So I faked pain in the back of my neck to slowly move my eyes in their direction. In passing, I noticed that only the seniors were now waiting for the call from the principal who stood at the microphone on the steps of the courtyard.

The school was a completely renovated former hospital. The east wing was original and the west wing was a few years old. For the record, there were rumours that the refectory was a former morgue! In the courtyard was *The Roundhouse*, a sort of high school cafe. There were tables, chairs, table football, a billiard table and Arlette, the *sheet metal worker*, as she was called. She was a strong woman, in her forties, who knew how to enforce the rules. Even the little scum at school dreaded her, and unlike most students, she liked me a lot. So I regularly helped her to prepare the lunch sandwiches to thank her for this favour that few granted me.

The Roundhouse was my favourite place, I could read there, do my essays and chat with Arlette whenever I had free time. Only today, it was closed, but under the porch, I discovered the two most fascinating faces that, even in a dream, I couldn't have imagined. Of the two individuals, one was very tall, close-cropped copper blond, his hard features adorned with a perfectly trimmed goatee and a look that could have pierced a wall from a distance. He looked older than the other seniors. I immediately realised that he had to have repeated classes to still be in high school at his age. From where I was, I couldn't make out the colour of his eyes, but it was impossible for me to remain indifferent to them as his attention was penetrating. A shiver ran down my spine and my gaze finally returned to the other. He was only a few centimetres shorter than his neighbour and was so handsome that it was almost painful to look at him. He was quite the opposite, he was a brunette, his hair dishevelled, his pale

complexion was relieved by two incredibly clear eyes. His expression was softer and his smile could have melted an iceberg. He took my breath away. I could already feel my heart racing and my legs shaking with emotion. I tried to contain the striking attraction that drove me towards these two individuals while I curiously felt the tingling that agitated my own flesh. Even the handsome Cedric Fabre hadn't provoked such a surge of passion during our first meeting. During my visual inspection, I noticed that the brunette was wearing a dark leather jacket over faded jeans and black Stan Smith sneakers. I wondered how such a handsome man could still be unknown. Any reality TV show could have relied on his sex appeal to boost its ratings, that was for sure. And the blond, next to him, wasn't left out. He wore military pants and his open black parka over a close-fitting white T-shirt revealed a well-built torso. With his enigmatic gaze and a sneer on his lips, he looked like a young Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*, a dangerous-looking but terribly attractive guy.

The brunette tilted his head slightly when he saw me staring at them. I then realised the length of our visual exchange and immediately looked away as if nothing had happened.

Damn, but who were those two?!

"... Michel Gomez, Class ES2", continued the headmaster's call.

"... Eric and Thomas Panchak, Class L1..."

The two handsome ones headed for the headmaster and climbed the steps of the courtyard to join their ranks.

Eric and Thomas Panchak, I thought they were brothers!

"Oh damn! They're in Literature like us!" Olivia raved, "no, but you saw how they were watching us!"

I remained silent, shaken by this encounter. But thinking about it, I realised I was in my best friend's eye line. Olivia was much more beautiful than me. So who was I to attract the attention of two such perfect boys?

"... Karim Mezaour, Class S2, Olivia Kaprisky, Class L1..."

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" said Olivia, "the same class as Adonis and Apollo! See you soon, Eve!"

And she rushed towards the new Greek gods of the school.

"... Sophia Chang, Class L2"

"... Everliegh Burberry, Class L2"

Oh no! I had changed classes from last year. I immediately held back my tears and saw Olivia's face crumble at this announcement. Seeing me walk slowly like a death row inmate dragging herself to the gallows, she smiled at me sadly. Behind her, I could have sworn I saw the two brothers confused as if they didn't understand this injustice either, but I knew very well that apart from Olivia, no one cared to know that I was going to spend another rotten year in this school! So I lined up at the end of the line of students in my class. Olivia tried to get me to lip read *see-me-at-the-exit*. I nodded in agreement while praying that this damned day would be over as soon as possible.

Chapter 2

The first lesson of the year, well if you could say lesson. Rather two long hours listening to the teacher introduced us to the new rules of the school and our new schedule.

Earlier, I was overflowing with energy at the idea of starting this new term, but the announcement of my class separation with Olivia had taken away all my moral strength. I was sitting in the back, alone, my hand tucked under my chin to hold my head which, if I had let go, would have ended up sprawling on the desk. For more than three-quarters of an hour, Mr Keller presented the structure of our schedule. I still deigned to show him interest when I realised why Olivia and I were in two different classes. Two days earlier, the teachers' council had submitted the idea, since validated by the principal, of dividing the classes because of our options, in order to avoid the mixing of students in the courses which sometimes caused nuisances in the conduct of school activities. Therefore, the students of *language* options and those of *mathematics* options had to be separated into two very distinct classes. Listening to this nonsense, I curse the teachers of all evils. Couldn't they tell us sooner! I would have taken the *languages* option like Olivia, what a bunch of rats, these teachers!

A knock on the door snapped me out of my dark thoughts. Mr Keller motioned the person in and my breath stopped when I recognized the person coming forward.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir, but there's been a mistake in the division of classes," declared the intruder confidently.

"How's that?" wondered Mr Keller who wasn't a man to like hiccups in an organisation.

“I have just spoken to the principal about this and he agrees that there was clearly a misunderstanding about the choice of my admissions option.”

“So, you have taken the *mathematics* option, Mr... uh...”

“Panchak, Thomas Panchak.”

“Good. Take a seat next to Miss Burberry in the back right, a place is available and I wouldn’t blame you if you manage to get her to smile.”

All the students giggled stupidly but my handsome dark-haired boy hadn’t blinked, he was already advancing in my direction and I blessed Heaven to be seated because my legs were becoming dangerously limp. In the class, the comments mingled: “*The poor thing, he’s placed next to the crazy,*” or “*This crazy bitch is too lucky to be at the back with the handsome boy*”. Mr Keller didn’t even respond. Unless you were deaf, it was impossible not to notice, but it had been a while since the teachers took offence at contemptuous remarks towards me.

You might wonder why a simple kiss got me voted high school pariah, but I didn’t even know. I had already tried to speak to Cedric in order to get an explanation, but he immediately wore a terrified look and fled without answering me. According to Olivia, who was aware of everything in high school, Cedric had said that after our famous oral exchange, I had behaved like a hysteric and, the rumour swelling in the ranks of high school shrews, I had, in the end, tried to pull my hair out, screamed like the kid in *The Exorcist* and threw my bag in his face after hitting him with all my might. For me, I remembered something soft and delicate, which had suddenly stopped when I saw him run away at full speed. However, I could swear that I had done nothing but kiss him. Since that day, I have had a very poor image of men. But when Thomas Panchak sat down next to me, I stopped thinking, I was like... hypnotised.

He stared at me with his translucent eyes, so I quickly turned mine in the direction of the teacher, blushing. I then saw all the faces of the class staring at us and bursting out laughing when they saw the pink rising to my cheeks. The last hour was going to be agony.

“Alright, that’s enough!” exclaimed Mr Keller, “let’s get back to our schedules, so we’ll...”

This awkward silence between my neighbour and me suddenly weighed heavily. Should I address him first? Just say hello? That’s when my handsome brunette allowed himself to put his fingers under my chin and gently brought my face in his direction. I was in full catatonia, I couldn’t even blink my eyes. “I dream he touches me,” I repeated to myself. At his touch, I felt an electrifying charge through my body and convulsions shook my lower abdomen. He didn’t move and his eyes fixed on mine prevented me from emitting the slightest sound. Then he took his hand away and sat back in his chair, and with a satisfied look said to me:

“You saw how I fooled them.”

Rather than comment, I wondered: didn’t he hear the others making fun of me? Didn’t he notice my exile to the plague bench *at the back right?*

“H... how?” I mumbled in a flat voice.

“Well,” he whispered closer to my ear, “there was no error in admissions.”

Obviously, he looked proud of himself. I would have liked to ask him the reasons which had pushed him to do this, but I didn’t forget that speaking with me was going to tarnish his reputation as a newcomer. He deserved to know all the same, so I preferred to stop the costs of disappointment right away.

“Listen, Thomas...”

“I like the way you pronounce my first name,” he laughed, “I thought you weren’t listening when I arrived, so you remembered it?”

He had that terribly devastating smile. Lord, how attractive he was!

“Yes...uh...no. Listen,” I stammered, “you’re new here and if you want to keep some popularity in this school, it would be better for you to avoid me.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“What? uh... well.”

“Alright.”

“Alright,” I repeated a little too quickly for my liking.

I felt ridiculous, deep down. Had I really asked him to avoid me? But what did I think? This guy was far too sublime for someone like me.

During the interminable last minutes during which Mr Keller bombarded us with instructions about the new hygiene rules in high school, my neighbour hadn’t spoken the slightest word to me. Yet I felt his eyes on me, so I was making monstrous efforts to stay focused on the teacher. To give myself some composure, I gently ran my hand through my hair. I must have looked clumsy, but I knew deep down I definitely wanted his attention. It was at this precise moment that he asked me *the* question:

“Why do they all take you for a crackpot?”

A cold shower. How tired I was of this story... I no longer wanted to explain myself so I answered him in an icy voice:

“Because I’m a bad kisser!”

Basically, I was devastated, a knife in the heart would have been less painful. A long silence. It was better, after all. After a while, he moved closer to my ear again and I could actually feel his warm breath brushing the back of my neck.

“I’m sure you’re lying.”

“That’s what they say, though,” I retorted angrily.

“No, you misunderstood me.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m sure you’re a very good kisser.”

The alarm rings.

In the hallway, two doors down from my classroom, Olivia was smiling, leaning against the wall waiting for me. I still managed to get out of my chair after the *Panchak* tornado. How stupid I must have looked in front of him! I was speechless and simply said, “*I have to go!*”

Pathetic.

No, but who was he to put me in such a state? I would have liked to believe that his allusions were mere flirtation, but deep down, I was convinced that he was making fun of me. Anyway, seeing my convoluted expression, Olivia frowned.

“What’s wrong?” she asked immediately, “you’re as white as an aspirin.”

“Let’s eat, I’ll tell you EVERYTHING,” I replied, looking tired.

“Okay, because I have things to tell you. Oh my, Eve! This year promises to be interesting!”

To say the least, I thought.

We were going to the bus stop when I noticed, coming out of the parking lot of the school, the two Panchak brothers in a metallic grey Audi A6. I could make out Eric at the wheel, having a visibly heated discussion with his brother Thomas.

“No, but you’ve seen their car!” marvelled Olivia, a fan of beautiful German cars, “they’re perfect, these guys!”

When we got home, I made lunch while Olivia told me the details of her morning. She was explaining to me the curious agitation that animated the two brothers when the form teacher explained to them the details of the new class arrangements. That’s when Thomas submitted his fake option problem and left the class in a hurry. Strangely enough, they seemed to totally disagree on this. Maybe Eric didn’t want to be separated from his brother in his new school, but I couldn’t see the handsome dark blond moping for that reason. Either way, Olivia had spent the entire two hours of class trying to get his attention. However, without success. At the same time, she was two rows behind him, obviously, that didn’t help, she explained.

“But I’m not going to give up,” she said, resolute.

Now it was my turn to tell her everything. Obviously, I didn’t pass on any details, I had never seen her so attentive.

“What? He said to you, *I think you’re a good kisser?* Wow! That was hot you realise, Eve!”

“Oh, yes!” I said sarcastically, “I especially realise that he doesn’t care about me. He’s playing with me.”

“Why would he do that? He has nothing to gain from it, and anyway, it wasn’t Sophia Chang he was eyeing this morning in the yard, it was you!”

Sophia Chang, a very popular high school student, my scourge of last year and, incidentally, ex of Cedric Fabre.

“Yeah, well, anyway, I almost felt sick.”

“What did you say to him after that?” Olivia continued to question me.

“*I have to go!*”

“What? No, Eve, you’re exaggerating! When’s the last time a guy hit on you like that?”

“I don’t know, it’s just that I sense something not logical in this story.”

“If you want my opinion, you’re using your head too much.”

Our discussion on the theme *Panchak* came to an end, so we continued on to other subjects that were much less exciting but oh so important: the purchase of our books for the year, our next cinema outing, and our plans for the All Saints holidays. No sooner had we resumed lessons than we were already thinking about the next holiday.

Olivia left around five o’clock, I took the opportunity to do some cleaning. Sam and I lived in a small house at the corner of a suburban street in London. It was a small millstone building from the 1930s with only two bedrooms, an American kitchen opening onto a large living room and two bathrooms. I had the upstairs all to myself, a blessing, especially since Sam rarely came up there to see me. Tonight, I had decided to cook him some Mexican fajitas. No sooner had I finished slicing the peppers than the front door opened. It was already seven o’clock but Sam was coming home early today, which was rare enough to be noted.

“Hi, Eve, so a good day?”

“Very nice!”

I wasn’t going to tell him all the details.

“So much the better. I hope this year will be less trying for you. Don’t forget what I told you: let it go, in a few years you won’t think about it anymore and there’s no point in getting upset.”

“Thanks for your usual spiel, Sam, but it’s easy for you to say, you’re incredibly calm. I do my best and above all, I don’t want to give them another opportunity to make me look crazy.”

“Well said! Otherwise, anyone new at school?”

Why was he asking me that? He had read my thoughts or what!

“Uh yes... two brothers, one is in my class, by the way. Olivia thinks he’s interested in me. In the yard, he looked at me, that’s all.”

Damn! I had already said too much!

“Hmm... What are their names?”

“Hey! I’m almost eighteen, Sam!”

Seeing him raise an eyebrow in an *if-you-think-I’m-going-to-drop-it-you’re-dreaming!* I give in miserably.

“Well, okay, Eric and Thomas Panchak, that’s all I know, so don’t insist.”

Sam looked thoughtful all of a sudden. How protective he was at times!

“Be careful, okay, you don’t know them.”

“Oh, they don’t look dangerous.”

Admittedly, that wasn’t quite the truth considering the sudden spontaneous combustion of my cheeks facing Thomas, a tomato would have looked less red. What’s more, Eric the blond didn’t really look like an altar boy, but what was the point of mentioning this to Sam. If I drove the point home, he was going to get into his head that they were undercover terrorists. I didn’t forget that Sam worked for the British army in the organisation of special operations. This is

also the only aspect of his job that I had managed to grasp. He never mentioned it, as if I understood what that meant exactly! One thing was certain, he was systematically investigating my friends, and particularly my boyfriends. Willy, the second (out of six, we can't say that Sam had a lot of work with my romantic relationships), had been arrested for dealing cannabis at 15; Damien, my fourth, had a very promiscuous mother during her husband's absences, while Cedric's father evaded taxes. None, of course, had any grace in Sam's eyes. "Alright, I trust you," he told me.

He went to take a shower while I set up the table. We were having dinner watching yet another rerun of *CSI*, and around 11 p.m. I went to bed.

My night was agitated. I kept thinking about Thomas, his beautiful eyes, his hand touching my face, his body approaching mine... The last images were pure fantasy as I fell into a deep sleep...

Chapter 3

I arrived at school just before the gates closed. I woke up late so I quickly put on jeans, sneakers and a light grey hoodie. My hair didn't want to get in order, so I raised it in a ponytail.

No time for makeup, I caught my bus just in time to meet Olivia in front of the entrance.

"You're not early this morning."

"Hard awakening."

"Well, see you at eleven o'clock for gym class, okay?"

"Alright, on time!"

I headed for the west wing of the school, my two hours of philosophy class was on the second floor. Miss Conway was my teacher. A gorgeous brunette in her thirties who sat behind her desk, gazing at Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. Since she had arrived at high school two years earlier, the absenteeism rate for boys in philosophy had dropped by 90%. This is the secret of a diligent school: hire hot teachers!

"Today we're going to talk about Descartes or the search for truth but I'll take the attendance before starting..."

This is the moment that Thomas chooses to make his entrance, masterfully, of course. He settled down next to me again. I already felt a lump rise in my throat. He took off his jacket and revealed a close-fitting grey T-shirt that perfectly matched his muscles, slender and powerful at the same time. He looked at me with his ocean blue eyes, but this time I held his gaze.

"Hello, Eve," he said, an amused smile on his lips, "I love your big eyes but I think the teacher is calling you."

“Oh! uh...”

I raised my hand indicating my presence, the teacher made no remark but stopped for a few seconds to stare at the newcomer.

“You’re the new... Thomas Panchak, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Miss Conway.”

“And what high school are you from exactly?”

I was also curious to know. Where could this ephebe come from and what was he doing here... and, what’s more, next to me?

“Almost everywhere in fact,” he answered simply, “my family moves around a lot.”

“Ah,” Conway blurted, “well let’s start the lesson. Descartes had developed a method for his search for truth, who can tell me about it?”

Sophia Chang volunteered immediately, as usual! For my part, rather than thinking about the foundations of rationality, I still wondered what points I had in common with my handsome brunette, I too had moved around a lot. I wanted to know more about him. Then I had an irresistible urge to question him. I took a deep breath.

“Why did you come here?”

I had a feeling he expected me to ask him that question. He gave me his bewitching smile and I sat speechless gazing at him like a moron.

“You mean in this town, or in this class?”

“Oh...uh...well both?”

“Good thing the answer is the same.”

“Oh, good?”

He lowered his head, paused, and then raised it slowly, his gaze piercing me.

“For you.”

Eh?! Looking at him, he seemed sincere, but his answer was nonsense. When was he going to stop making fun of me? I was pissed.

“Don’t worry about me!”

I scowled in my chair, sulky. I no longer wanted to talk. I was now in intense reflection mode on Cartesian metaphysics when Thomas came dangerously close:

“We’ll speak again.”

“Sure...”

Then there was a long silence until the end of the lesson.

I was about to leave the room after having finished putting away my bag when Miss Conway called out to me, her voice drowning in the cacophony of the chairs that the students were putting away without the slightest delicacy.

“Miss Burberry, would you stay a minute, please?”

I approached her desk, standing straight as an I and curious to know what she wanted from me. Apart from the beginning of the lesson, I had been paying attention, hadn’t I? She waited a moment before starting the conversation, obviously wanting to talk to me alone. Once the last student left, she finally spoke to me.

“How are you, Everliegh?”

“Very good, miss.”

“I’m delighted about that. I know that last year things were not easy for you.”

“You know as well...”

“Sophia Chang is a good student, but discretion is not her forte.”

You surprise me!

Conway smiles. For a moment, her attention made me uncomfortable, her insistent dark eyes had something strange about them. Weird, that woman, but coming from a philosophy teacher, that wasn't unusual.

“I ask you this question because I thought I noticed a certain disturbance at the beginning of the class,” she continued, “is it this new one that distracts you?”

“Not at all. I apologise if I may have seemed distracted, but it had nothing to do with him.”

“Of course, but if that becomes the case, don't hesitate to let me know. I'll make the necessary arrangements to separate you.”

“That's very kind of you, miss.”

“Well, good day, Miss Burberry.”

“Thank you, miss.”

I left the room thinking that it was the first time that a teacher at this school was interested in my little person. I was glad for the sudden interest, but even though Thomas was indeed the distraction she was talking about, and even though he openly mocked me, I had no desire to see him settle down at another desk than mine. As long as he wanted to, he would be welcome there. After all, Olivia wasn't here, so it was going to be a long year.

Chapter 4

Sport, my favourite lesson. With Sam, I had practised almost all types. He thought that a life without sport was death at 50. So I had the chance to try a multitude of activities, from martial arts to volleyball and dancing. At the moment, I practised tai chi with him twice a week. According to my adoptive father, it was an essential exercise to channel your energy and control your breath. I loved it, but I needed more action, so I added a cardio session every Saturday and jogging on Sunday morning on the banks of the Thames, training that allowed me to have a slim and athletic body. I could afford to eat whatever I wanted, another pleasant benefit.

Physical education lessons took place in the gymnasium next to the school and, icing on the cake, Olivia had the same weekly hours as me. I passed the door when I noticed with astonishment my friend talking to a young man whom I immediately recognized as Eric Panchak. Stranger still, Sophia Chang stood next to them, her face flushed and stricken with tears. Olivia seemed at her wit's end. It must have been months since they had spoken to each other, and clearly, the conversation wasn't going in a peaceful direction. Now Olivia was brandishing a menacing finger two centimetres from Sophia's face, which was turning crimson. With a gesture, she twirled abruptly in my direction. Eric remained standing in front of my *enemy* staring at her with a contemptuous look that would freeze you with fear, the latter had lost her legendary composure and I thought I saw Eric's lips moving as well as the pale and anxious expression of Sophia who immediately lowered her eyes.

This should have alerted me and I should have felt some semblance of compassion for her tearful display, but I hated her so much that I was delighted to finally see someone shut her up! I wondered anyway, what could have happened to make this exchange seem so strong and especially why my best friend and, what's more, Eric were talking with this leech. I was going to ask Olivia who had just come over, outraged, but she gave me a furtive "*I'll be back in five minutes*" before leaving the gym. I then noticed all the pairs of eyes trained on me. They were rather numerous if one considered the forty students in the gymnasium. The whispers were getting louder and I would have been foolish to think I wasn't the object of them. Something was wrong. Eric stood beside me and spoke to me in an irresistibly serious voice.

"You should come with me."

After appreciating the general and rather hostile atmosphere in the gymnasium, I followed Eric at a run.

Now, when we were out of this stifling atmosphere, Eric sat down on the bleachers overlooking the football stadium. I stood in front of him and questioned him immediately:

"What happened?"

"I think your girlfriend will explain it to you better than me, Everliegh."

He knew my name, and the way he said it affected me more than I would have liked. His brown-green gaze pierced me through and through and I had a terrible time keeping my composure in front of him.

"How do you know my first name?" I said in an almost natural voice, "Olivia told you?"

"Who?"

“Olivia. My friend. That you seemed to support five minutes ago against that bitch Sophia Chang!”

He guffawed with a tenor laugh that transported me. I couldn't help laughing as well before regaining a serious look.

“Sorry, I shouldn't insult someone you don't know.”

“Don't apologise,” he said, “after all, I understand she doesn't really like you either.”

“But what exactly happened?”

“I'd rather your friend tell you about it.”

“Well... Okay.”

I sat down next to him. I was concerned and it seemed to be serious, according to the events. I should have worried more, but instead, I thought about what I'd seen in that gymnasium: Eric, a stranger, standing up for me. I watched him in profile for a moment. Contrary to the dangerous appearance he gave off, I felt safe with him, but my instinct told me that there was something strange about him, just like about his brother for that matter.

“It was my brother who told me about you,” he suddenly told me.

“Oh, good? Well, I hope!”

In response, he gave me a look that electrified me. A wave of warmth crossed my chest. Olivia interrupted us before I had time to blush.

“Eve, I need to talk to you. Excuse us, Eric, please.”

“Sure.”

He descended the steps of the bleachers and disappeared at the entrance to the gymnasium.

“What the hell is going on, Olivia? Another damn rumour, right?”

“Eve...,” Olivia whispered before she paused and her eyes filled with tears, “Cedric is dead.”

At the time, I thought my heart stopped dead. Everything around me went hazy as my vision blurred, probably from the tears I was trying to contain. I tried to say the words but they stuck in my throat. For several seconds, I couldn’t make the slightest sound, even my ears couldn’t hear anymore.

“How?”

“We don’t know. Sophia got a call from her mother in the gymnasium and when she hung up, she screamed in tears that it was your fault, that Cedric had been murdered and that there was only one... well ... crazy like you to do such a thing! You understand, in front of everyone! I almost jumped on her but Eric stopped me. He tried to calm things down and came to your defence. Sophia then pulled herself together a little and explained to us that he had been found last night, in a seedy street in Soho. He was allegedly tortured and had more than forty broken bones. The police only recognized him from the student ID he had on him.”

“So maybe it’s not him? Maybe it was a homeless man who had stolen his ID, I don’t know...

Maybe it’s not Cedric!”

I would have liked that so much. It’s true that after what he had done to me, I had wished him a thousand deaths, in the imagination of course! But I’d never have wanted something so terrible to happen to him. Nobody deserved to end up like that.

“His body was identified by the family based on his birthmarks. Sophia shouted in the gym that you had something to do with his death, and seeing the heavy silence, everyone heard. I think that bitch was still in love with Cedric and she’s so upset that she’s speaking nonsense. Even if I can’t stand her and she made me angry, deep down I felt a bit sorry for that bitch.”

For a moment, neither of us dared to say a word and we didn't go back to class. All the students had left within the grounds of the school, not without throwing accusing glances at me and sometimes even insults. In the end, it wouldn't be the year of renewal. But for now, I didn't care. I felt so sad for Cedric. I remembered all the moments spent with him, his smile, the way he squinted when he thought, his perfectly white teeth and his bright smile. So this is how we think when someone is gone? Do we only remember the good times?

Olivia and I were so downcast that we decided to go straight home. Sam wouldn't be here all night, so I asked her to stay home for the night. I didn't want to be alone. Olivia agreed and went to get her things. She lived with her mother in a nine-story building, just a ten-minute walk away. As soon as she could get out of her house, she took advantage of it. And for good reason, since her divorce, her mother was a notorious alcoholic and spent entire evenings denigrating her only daughter. When we first met, she called out to me and told me in an alcoholic voice: "*You don't mind being around a tramp!*" Charming welcome. Olivia was furious. Of course, she didn't suspect her mother would be there when I arrived, so she apologised for hours while I tried to make her understand that it wasn't her place to be sorry. In the end, knowing more about her family helped me better understand the gleaming character she showed off every day in high school. Moreover, I had no parents, so I was in no position to judge those of others. This event had finally brought us closer.

I prepared a salmon quiche and salad for dinner. Olivia had already been gone for more than three-quarters of an hour, but what the hell was she doing! With what had happened to Cedric, I didn't feel at ease. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door, I went to answer while declaring:

“You stress me out, Olivia! What took you so long...”

Olivia had arrived all smiles... and not alone.

“Look who I’m bringing!”

Thomas and Eric Panchak stood just behind her. Thomas displayed his crooked smile that couldn’t be more destructive and Eric, looking jovial, stared at me with his sparkling eyes.

Bewildered, I couldn’t feel my legs again, and as usual, my words were stuck.

“Come in, uh... sit down... Anything to drink?” I stammered miserably.

Olivia, however, had no problem.

“I met them on the way. They were going for a drink in the city, would you like to go with them?”

No, did she care about me or what?! I had put on my plum pyjamas (luckily I hadn’t put on the purple with the teddy print, I would never have been able to speak to them after that!), black slippers and my hair was up in a misshapen half-bun, half-ponytail. Moreover, I felt really low, because, could she have forgotten, Cedric had just been murdered.

“Olivia, I’m already dressed for the night in case you haven’t noticed.”

“So what? Change! Five minutes then we go, what do you say?”

Did I think the pyjama excuse was going to stop her so easily? Might as well be direct, I told myself.

“Listen, I don’t want to sound like a killjoy to you, but the news about Cedric has stirred me up a bit and I’m not in the mood to go out tonight, now you can go, Olivia, I don’t mind at all.”

“No way!” said Thomas, who immediately softened, “we’re not going to spoil your plans for the evening.”

“Well let’s stay here, then!” Olivia decided jovially, “you don’t mind, do you, *Everliegh?*”

I hadn’t missed her emphatic way of saying my first name (in full, what’s more, which she never did) and her accusing gaze meaning *if-you-tell-them-to-leave-I-kill-you!*

“Not at all,” I yielded, embarrassed, “there’s salmon quiche and green salad. I can open a bottle of wine if you want.”

“Gladly!” approved Eric.

“As far as I’m concerned, I’ll take Diet Coke, please, my darling that I love!”

“Of course, Olivia! Come and help me in the kitchen.”

No sooner had I passed the central island which separated the kitchen from the living room than I whispered in her ear.

“But what got into you, we don’t even know them, Sam is going to kill me!”

“Oh, dear! Don’t mind, you’ve become really stuck since this drama last year. Tell me, straight, when did you last find yourself alone with a guy in the same room?”

“But I’m not alone with him since you’re here, and whoever the guy is, his brother is present, it’s creepy!”

Suddenly we remembered that our two guests were a few metres away. We turned our heads ninety degrees to find our whispered bickering amused them. My first idea was to flee upstairs, but leaving them hanging in the living room wouldn’t have been the best effect. Olivia giggled and faced with this burlesque situation, I did the same. This calmed me down a bit and I was almost relaxed as I set the cutlery on the coffee table.

The discussion wasn't the liveliest during the meal. I deduced that my dish should be to their liking, but yet I felt an embarrassment, maybe I had to talk to them first? I was the host, after all.

"The quiche is good?" (pathetic, I know)

"Delicious," Thomas replied kindly.

"Eve prepares the meal every day," Olivia testified with her big go-between clogs.

We could always count on Olivia to introduce you with delicacy, anyone could read between the lines and that was the goal.

"Indeed," Eric agreed, "so you live with a guardian? Where are your parents?"

The dreaded question. Normally, I dodged quickly. I knew, however, that if they hadn't been here, I would have spent my evening moping beside Olivia, and she had already suffered from my gloomy mood for a year. The announcement of Cedric's death had upset me and their company prevented me from thinking about it. What's more, Olivia had found her smile again, and obviously, Eric was going to be the victim of her inescapable charms. So I couldn't shorten this evening otherwise my best friend was going to be angry with me until the end of her days. After all, I owed it to them to be honest with them, if only to thank them for being here.

"They're both dead. My mother died in childbirth and my father committed suicide, I have almost no memory of him."

It was clear that the story of my family wasn't going to brighten up the evening, but I thought strangely that it was time to confide. It had been so long since I'd had any conversations other than those with Olivia. And something told me that I could trust them. Maybe another mistake on my part, but at the point where I was, anyway...

“I don’t remember them,” I continued, “I only know what Sam wanted to tell me, and you can’t say he’s very talkative. I prefer it. I’m afraid to discover other unacknowledged tragedies.”

“What makes you say that?” Olivia asked, frowning.

“I don’t know. More and more often I have the feeling that he’s hiding things from me.”

“Do you think they are important things?”

“No... I don’t know. He’s the best adoptive father and he does everything to treat me the best he can be, we even do tai chi together.”

“Tai chi? That’s not trivial,” commented Thomas.

“He says it helps channel my energy. There are times when I feel like he sees me as a pressure cooker ready to explode.”

“Like all those idiots in school!” blurted Olivia; “In the end, you may be a psychopath, Eve!”

She burst out laughing. I imitated her, the better to conceal this old anxiety that had been gnawing at me for some time. Olivia ignored all the questions that nagged at me. The stories of the past year and the tenacity of the rumours about me had only increased my confusion. After all, my father had committed suicide. If this tragedy had happened the year after my mother’s death, I would have understood, but why three years later? Perhaps it was a slow mental agony that had led him to make this decision. Or maybe he was sure, at that moment, that he was leaving me in good hands when he died and had taken all this time to prepare for it. I wanted so badly to convince myself that he hadn’t abandoned me with full mental capacity, because if he was sane, then he must have been aware that he was leaving his 4-year-old

daughter behind, alone, and without a father. Anyway, for a year I had concluded that something had to be wrong with me. Thomas snapped me out of my thoughts.

“You’re far from crazy, Eve.”

Did he read my thoughts, too! Was I so easy to read? Nevertheless, his observation touched me. I needed to hear those words from someone other than Olivia and Sam, I found them biased when it came to me.

Eric and my best friend were talking on their side, Olivia monopolised him and played him like never before. Thomas, meanwhile, stared at me with his wolf eyes. I could have drowned in that stare so clear. I could examine him even better, his face was perfect with his curved nose and his mouth whose lips seemed to call mine, not to mention his fine and firm musculature. Watching him was a test for the nerves. He bewitched me.

“Did you know this Cedric Fabre well?” he asked, pulling me out of my contemplation.

“Yes,” I replied in a whisper, “I went out with him last year. But it’s because of him that I now pass for a cuckoo clock.”

“What happened?”

“Oh! Uh...I don’t know. We’d been together for a few weeks. He called me all the time, left me messages and emails, and he wanted us to see each other more and more often. He was quite nice, actually.”

I lowered my head sadly, noticing in passing that Eric was straining to listen to me without taking his eyes off Olivia.

“And one evening, we were here, and I had decided not to make him hang around anymore... er... wait.”

Thomas was smiling with his devastating lips, how handsome he was! Uh... where was I?

“Anyway, we ended up kissing. After a while, he backed away with terrified eyes, I still can’t explain it to myself. He turned around and left without a word. The next morning, everyone at school saw me as the new pariah of the moment. I wanted to understand, but he never wanted to talk to me again.

Thomas burst out laughing. I was furious. Why did I have to tell him this! But he was the culprit, with his body of Adonis, he was pulling the words from my mouth before I had time to say phew! He leaned toward me with a deceptively serious look.

“You don’t think that a simple kiss could cause such a reaction. I’ve never heard anything so stupid!”

I was mortified.

“Don’t get me wrong, Eve. I don’t think you’re stupid, and I don’t think you tried to crucify him with a drill either (hey, I didn’t know that one). What I’m trying to tell you is that something else must have happened to disturb him. No man would be foolish enough to run away after... well, trust me.”

“You think? But what else can there be?”

“I don’t know, but I know a way to find out.”

“I remind you that he’s dead, poor thing.”

“That’s for sure. But there may be another way to find out.”

“And which one?”

“You have to kiss me.”

Here we are! Although his proposal seemed most attractive, I remained unsatisfied. Obviously, it would have been far from torture to kiss Thomas, I also wanted to. But the transition between “*Cedric is dead*” and “*You must kiss me*” didn’t seem to me in the best taste. Besides, I finally thought he was finding a solution for me to put together the puzzle of a year-old story that had been eating me away from the inside, and instead, I stayed with this idea that something was wrong. Frankly, Thomas had been downright simplistic on this one. Also, I could have sworn Eric was fuming. Did he also think that his brother was capable of anything to take advantage of the situation? It was I who should consider myself happy, he was sumptuous and I was ordinary and... in pyjamas.

“I’m serious,” he went on, “it’s a rather theatrical way of solving the problem, but it’s the only one that comes to mind. I’m not flirting with you if you want to know... well if a little, I’m not going to pretend not to take advantage of it either, but let’s face it, have you ever tried it again with someone else since?”

“No.”

“So it’s the only way. If you’re disastrous, I’ll tell you, I promise.”

I was terribly embarrassed and amazed by his revelations. Did he really say he was hitting on me or not? Finally, his proposal no longer seemed so far-fetched to me, it required thought, all the same! But Olivia and Eric were sitting two metres away from us and the situation was far too dangerous for me to get it on with Thomas right next to them. Nevertheless, this was the moment Eric chose to get up on the pretext of wanting to get some fresh air with Olivia who wanted to smoke a cigarette. They too needed privacy, apparently, since Olivia rarely smoked.

Having automatically locked the door with a key, I accompanied them to open it. After closing behind them, I barely had time to turn around when Thomas pinned me against the wall. He looked me straight in the eyes, my breathing stopped short. He kissed me full on the lips. A burst of electricity shot through my body from bottom to top as a blazing fire rose to my head. Instead of pushing him away, if only a little, to make the mystery last a little longer, I put my hands around his neck, trying to pull him closer to me, as if that were still possible. He imitated me, his hands buried in my hair, I could feel the pressure of his fingers and his mouth only became more insatiable. I felt like molten rock when he grabbed my waist and swung me to the couch. I could feel the effect of his arousal as if it were projected at me by some kind of sonic pulsation. I didn't understand this new sensation, but I found it so pleasant that nothing seemed more normal to me than to find myself, at this very moment, astride his lower abdomen. Time was suspended. His mouth was tender and voluptuous as our kiss became more and more bubbling under the fervour of our mingled tongues. His warm breath bewitched me and I couldn't suppress a growl when his right hand grabbed a strand of my hair. With a wave of his arm, he turned me around and was now above me. Our bodies intertwined to such an extent that I could feel, through my clothes, the most masculine part of his body, furiously bulging and ready for use. Which proved to me that he didn't find our embrace so disastrous. I was liberated and let myself be invaded by all the feelings, the joy, the envy, the gluttony, the excitement. I wanted his body right now.

Eric and Olivia chose precisely this moment to appear behind the door, and I presume they had already tried to attract our attention before. Luckily you needed a key to get in from the outside because they were going to break my handle!

“Hey! Oh! Someone there?” shouted Olivia.

Thomas slowly pulled away from my mouth and stood up, biting his lower lip, his gaze still locked in mine. I would have damned myself for such a vision, but the door was about to give way under the assaults of my best friend. I took ten seconds to comb my hair and put the straps of the top of my pyjamas on my shoulders. For my crimson cheeks, there was nothing more to do, I was cooked.

“I’m coming!” I said.

Before grabbing the handle, I turned to Thomas to discover him smiling with satisfaction and sitting casually, one arm placed across the couch. He gave me a wink and I opened the still shuddering door, struggling to hide a nervous smile.

“Sorry.”

Olivia looked suspicious then walked in as if nothing had happened. Eric meanwhile was not fooled, he looked at his brother silently.

“We have to go, Thomas.”

“Now?” Olivia said looking disappointed.

“Yes, now,” Thomas agreed as he stood up, “thank you again for inviting us to your home, Eve.”

“Uh... okay.”

“Yes, thank you again,” adds Eric. “See you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Olivia replied happily.

“Okay, so see you tomorrow.”

I accompanied them. In the doorway, Thomas turned toward me.

“I want to start over,” he whispered before closing the door behind him.

I was leaning against the wall, still confused by our embrace when I heard their voices recede.

“So?” asked Eric.

“It’s her. We have proof of that now...”

But what were they talking about? I couldn’t hear anything more, and my mind was way too muddled to concentrate anyway. The living room was in a bad state, I hadn’t realised the mess caused by our little evening. So I had carefully put everything away before joining Olivia, who I found in the upstairs bathroom brushing her teeth. I imitated her and then got into bed. Olivia lay next to me, her eyes narrowed, and she questioned me again.

“What happened behind that fucking door?!”

“You’ll not believe me!”

And I told her everything. Her face beamed, she was happy. She had been waiting for this moment perhaps longer than me.

“Finally a man who notices how sublime you are! A little longer and you’d have been on to the next level, my dear.”

“I don’t know, but I really wanted to,” I confessed candidly, “I had never felt such relief. My whole being wanted him, I no longer had any barriers. It was strange...”

“Yes, well, you have to marinate them a little, guys. Don’t forget what I taught you!”

“Promised,” I nodded, unconvinced, “and Eric, was he sensitive to your deployments of charm?”

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but at times he seemed to be elsewhere. He still said that I was superb and that he would be delighted to take me out to dinner one evening, that’s not bad, is it? Now, and after what you just told me, I suddenly find that my little moment together wasn’t

as exciting. No, but in what world do we find ourselves if Everliegh Burberry kisses a guy barely an hour after he walks through her door!”

We giggled at the same time. Fatigue helping, we decided to go to bed. The lights off, I thought only of Thomas. I was happy, delivered and I gradually regained the esteem I had lost, I felt like I could lift a mountain and my whole body was still bubbling from this hot embrace. If Olivia hadn't been here, my hand would gladly have slipped under the blanket, leaving me to fantasise about what might have happened if no one had knocked on that *fucking* door.

END OF SAMPLE