

# **Sugar and Snails**

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**Inspired Quill Publishing**

## Chapter 1

**H**ALFWAY DOWN THE stairs, I sink to my haunches and hug my dressing gown across my breasts.

Below me in the hallway, Simon reaches up towards the row of coat hooks. His hand hovers above the collar of his black fleece and then falls, combing the sleeve as his arm flops to his side. “This is ridiculous, Di. We should at least talk about it.”

Can’t he see this has gone beyond talking? “It’s late. You’ve got a long day tomorrow.”

“Come to Cairo, then. Whatever’s bothering you, I promise, I can help.”

“We’ve been through all that.”

“Yeah, and you’ve served up one feeble excuse after another. Don’t you trust me, Di?”

Staunch as sculpted granite, Simon exudes reliability from every pore. Over the past five months, I’ve imagined him sharing my duvet, my toaster, my council tax bill. On good days, I persuaded myself I could summon up enough maternal sentiment to play mother to his kids. After tonight, I can’t envisage a casual catch-up over coffee.

Yet Simon rattles on, as if hope were a virtue: “Come to Cairo, Di. Come for a long weekend if that’s all you can spare.”

If I could explain, if I could open my mouth to speak, even, he would come to me. He would spring up the stairs and cradle me in

his arms. If I could cry, perhaps, as other women can, and let my weakness make him strong. But tears don't come naturally to me: I haven't cried for thirty years.

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I'M SANDWICHED BETWEEN my parents in the back seat of a taxi, crawling along the Corniche with the Nile to our left. I'm fifteen years old and this is my first and only foray out of Europe.

We've wound down the windows but there's not even the promise of a breeze. The driver hits the horn with the heel of his hand. Every time he does it my mother flinches and he hits the horn almost as much as he curses other drivers, which is practically all the time.

My father fans his face with a tourist map of Cairo. "It's not too late to change your mind," he tells me. "We won't think any less of you if you do."

My mother breaks off from rummaging through her patent-leather handbag. "Honestly, Leonard, you certainly choose your moments."

I try not to squirm on the tacky plastic seat. I've heard the quiver in my mother's voice often enough, but I've never heard her call my father by his Christian name.

Our driver waves his fist and growls in throaty Arabic as he pulls past a camel cart weighed down with builder's rubble. My eyes prickle, but I save my tears for later; crying is my mother's prerogative after all.

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THE FRONT DOOR slams. I rise stiffly and stumble down the remaining stairs. Dragging my fingertips along the dado rail, I reach the kitchen and flick the light switch on the wall. I note the

lustre of the sunshine-yellow cupboards and the chill of the tiles on my bare feet, but from a distance, as if I'm researching a stranger's home.

I pull out drawers and rummage through the contents. I select my best knives and rank them by length along the worktop, the way a toddler might arrange her toys: breadknife; chef's knife; carving knife; the whole gamut of blades, right down to the fruit and veg knife with the yellow handle, still smeared with dried threads of pumpkin from our supposed romantic meal. Pushing back my sleeve, I test each one against my forearm. None of them up to the job.

I fumble in the cupboard under the stairs for my torch and beam it around until it highlights an old shoebox stuffed with tools. The Stanley knife is a work of art in its simplicity, with its green plastic casing and satisfying heft in my hand. The blade seems sharp enough but it's freckled with dirt-coloured paint. Taking a crossed-tip screwdriver, I unleash the blade and turn it over. The triangle of pristine steel peeping out from the sheath gives me an artisan's sense of accomplishment.

My ears are abuzz with white noise as I push back the sleeve of my dressing gown to the crook of my arm. Flexing my wrist, the blood vessels reveal themselves below the surface like waterways on a map. The pads of my fingers trace a raised blue-green vein, from the middle of my forearm, through crossings of taut white scar tissue to the base of my thumb where it branches out with arteries and purple capillaries in a sanguineous river delta.

I locate a patch of clear skin amongst the tangle of old scars and apply the blade. At first there's nothing more than a puckering at either side. As with sex, I'm sorely out of practice. I press harder, digging the tip of the knife so deep that by rights it should reach bone. Still nothing. Pressing harder still, a tiny red bauble bubbles at the tip of the blade.

Maintaining an even pressure, I scrape the knife along my arm. The bauble clones itself over and over, beads on a rosary that multiply and merge into a glistening red band. Dropping the knife, I bring my arm to my mouth: the vibrant colour, the taste of hot coins, the pain as sharp as vinegar spearing the fug of nothingness with the promise of peace. When Simon left, I was drowning. Now I'm floating on a sea of calm.

In the kitchen, I bind a folded tea towel round my forearm, gripping one end in my teeth to brace the knot. Secure as a swaddled baby, I mount the stairs to bed.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SLEEP and memory, regret sneaks in. The jab-jab-jab of guilt, the rumbling shame. Part dream, part reminiscence, I look down on my ten-year-old self sprawled on the bathroom floor. Blue pyjama bottoms draped across the rim of the bath, blood pooling between my legs onto the chessboard lino. My mother screaming *What have you done? What have you done?*

Now it's my arm that's screaming. My mind wants to dive into oblivion but my arm is pulsing me awake. Patting the pain beneath the bedclothes leaves my fingers sticky. The digital alarm shows three-seventeen.

Switching on the bedside light, I steel myself to push back the duvet. The tea towel looks like it's been boiled with beetroot; not only the towel, but the sheet, the duvet cover, my torso from my breasts to my pubic hair are smeared with blood. *Oh, Simon, if only I could show you what your leaving means.*

My mind on automatic, I shake a pillow from its case and wrap the cloth around my arm, the fabric blotting steadily from salmon pink to crimson. The night chill slaps my bare skin as I shuffle along the landing to the bathroom, fingers pressed on the gash. I fill the basin and, tossing the makeshift bandage in the bathtub,

submerge my arm. The pain makes my eyes sting as the water flushes pink.

Out of the water, the wound dribbles blood the moment I release the pressure. The sides cleave apart like the crevice in a cartoon earthquake, picking out layers of skin like bands of rock in cross-section. It's going to take some expert needlework to heal the rift.

AT FIRST, THE A&E department seems like every other: the same weary people on the same jaded chairs. The same hiccupping lighting and ragged magazines. The tang of antiseptic that triggers the urge to pack away my feelings some place the medics can't get to, safe from their condescension and contempt. Yet tonight there's an extra element that, until I pause to analyse it, makes no sense.

Compassion. It greets me in the soothing voice of the triage nurse who takes my details at reception. I shrug it off as due to youth and an unfinished apprenticeship in cynicism, until it pops up a second time in his grey-haired colleague, who lays a gentle hand on my shoulder as she ushers me through the swing doors to a couch in a curtained cubicle, apologising for the wait. It lurks again in the form of the bleary-eyed doctor, a petite woman sporting a turquoise sari beneath her white coat, who won't move an inch without explaining what she's doing. It's as if they're too gullible to register they're dealing with a self-inflicted wound.

The nurse helps the doctor ease her hand into a latex glove. She rests my arm on a pillow and peels back the sodden cloths. Under the glare of the angle-poise lamp it looks like I've been attacked by a madwoman.

"We could arrange for you to talk to someone about this." The stick-on bindi between the doctor's eyebrows brings to mind that first bauble of blood. "Entirely up to you, Diana, but it might help."

I smile noncommittally as she shoots anaesthetic into my arm. The doctor is so well intentioned it would be churlish to argue, but NHS bureaucracy would surely save me from that indignity: all those letters shuttling back and forth to help me scramble onto the bottom rung of a lengthy waiting list. Simon would be back from Cairo before my appointment came through.

“It’s a lady called Pammy,” says the doctor. “She’s very sympathetic and discreet.”

“Tammy,” says the nurse, handing her colleague what looks like a pair of slim-line pliers. “Tammy Turnbull, the liaison nurse.”

The doctor eases black thread through my skin with the pliers, double wrapping it around the tip to form a loop. “Comes on duty at eight, doesn’t she?”

The nurse passes her a pair of scissors to finish off the stitch. “Seven-thirty. Even less of a wait.”

“You want me to see this liaison nurse here? This morning?”

The nurse strokes my knee. “Try and relax for Doctor if you can, Diana. Won’t be much longer.”

WHEN I WAS thirteen, my mother took me to Lourdes. “Don’t let on what we’ve come for,” she whispered as we boarded the coach.

So many people, so many queues, ever anxious of joining the wrong one. Lining up for breakfast in the hotel. Lining up again at the stalls near the grotto to buy holy water and souvenirs. Joining up with pilgrims and penitents of every nationality to process by candlelight through the night-time streets. Waiting to be dipped head-to-toe in the water, one queue for the able-bodied and another for the cripples.

“What have we come for?” I said.

“A miracle of course,” said my mother. “Why else would I bring you?”

WITH MY LEFT arm in a high sling, I prepare to tackle the vending machine one-handed. Feeding it some coins and punching a few buttons, the machine responds with some serious whirring and gurgling. I'm still undecided as to whether I'm passing the time till Tammy Turnbull comes on duty, or I fancy a synthetic coffee before making my escape.

The drink almost scalds my fingers as I extract the styrofoam cup from the machine and take it to a seat in the far corner of the room. I could walk to the university in ten minutes, be at my desk before my colleagues are out of bed. Another five minutes would take me down to the Haymarket, three stops on the Metro to be home with the milk float. Put the bedclothes in the washing machine and mop the blood from the bathroom tiles.

What would I say to a liaison nurse? What possible use could she be?

I picture an earnest woman positioning her chair at a nonthreatening ninety degrees. *What made you do it, Diana? Let's start with that.*

I feel foolish even thinking about it. I take a sip of bitter coffee and leave her to guess. She may be a figment of my imagination but, if she wants to know my secrets, she's going to have to put in some spadework.

*Boyfriend trouble, is that it?*

I'm amazed I've enough blood in my system to blush, but I do. I'm forty-five years old for chrissake. Even my first-year students wouldn't be so gauche.

*Simon is off to Cairo for six months and he wants you to go out and visit. Lucky you!*

Doesn't feel so lucky from where I'm sitting.

*You don't want to go?*

Of course not.



Sun-streaked hair parted down the middle, flower-power clothes: my imaginary liaison nurse bears a striking resemblance to the social worker they foisted upon me after Cairo. Yet Ms Thompson wouldn't need to ask why I can't go back.

*You can't tell Simon the real reason but, if you don't, he'll think you don't care. You're caught between two stools, scared of losing him if you don't go ...*

And losing myself if I do.

The phantom Tammy Turnbull-Thompson looks pensive. Her bangles clatter as she pushes her hair back from her face. *I must admit, it's a tricky one, but if we put both our minds to it, perhaps we can find a way ...*

I COME TO with a jolt. My arm is throbbing and there's a coffee-tinged damp patch down the front of my jumper.

A middle-aged woman looms before me. "Diana Dodsworth? I'm sorry to startle you, but I believe you wanted to see me. I'm Tammy Turnbull. The liaison nurse?"

With her sombre skirt suit and tamed hair, she looks nothing like Ms Thompson. Her eyes brim with well-meaning confidence as she offers me her hand. She reminds me of those Home Counties girls at boarding school, raised on gymkhanas and tennis lessons and tea on the terrace at half past four. They were always very jolly and willing to have a go, but real life with all its pain and contradictions would've sent them careering into a tailspin.

How could I be so naive as to imagine anyone could even begin to understand? *If we both put our minds to it!* What an ass to let my guard down and leave myself so open. Like a dance-floor buffed to a silky sheen, hope is riddled with risk for the unwary: let yourself go and, sooner or later, you're bound to come a cropper.