

THE CHILD BRIDE AND
THE SPANISH DANCER

— LOLA MONTEZ —



The Child Bride and The Spanish Dancer

A Lola Montez Book

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This book is available at <https://leanpub.com/lola-montez>

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Prologue

My name is Lola Montez. That is the first lie I will tell you, and the smallest.

There used to be a girl called Eliza Gilbert. She was Irish, plain, and no one wanted her so her mother sold her to an aged Judge. I killed her on a ship somewhere between London and Calcutta.

There used to be a wife called Mrs James. She was loved, until she became a piece of furniture that you trip over on the way to somewhere more important. She died on the way back to London.

The woman in the mirror now has black hair, Spanish eyes, and a past she assembled from pieces like the costume she's wearing. Underneath, if you peel it all back, the accent, the name, the legend, there is still Eliza and Mrs James. But nobody wants to see those women dance.

I have gone by four names, married three men, bared my breasts for a king, and toppled a government. I have been chased from more countries than most people will visit. None of it was supposed to happen and none of it was my fault.

When I die, and I know already that it will be soon, and ugly, and alone, they will write about the dancer. The seductress. The scandal. The woman with the black hair and Spanish eyes. They will not write about the girl who stood on the deck of a ship at sixteen and decided that if the world would not have Eliza Gilbert, she would give them someone they couldn't refuse.

Well, if they won't write about her then I will.

Lola Montez

Part I: Eliza Gilbert

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Chapter 1

I had a father once. I think he was kind.

That sounds worse than I mean it. I was three when he died, which is old enough to remember a face but not old enough to trust the memory. What I have is a veranda in India, and a spider building a web between the legs of a cane chair. So I will begin with the spider, because that is where my father begins, and my father is the only clean thing in this story.

The chair was one of four that nobody sat in because the rattan had gone soft in the monsoon and my mother said they looked colonial in the wrong way, something I missed entirely then and understand perfectly now. The spider had chosen the two back legs, anchoring its first thread from a point just below where the seat sagged, dropping down to the crossbar with the patience of someone who has nowhere else to be. I was on my hands and knees on the wooden boards with my face about six inches from the work, close enough to see the individual legs moving, close enough to feel the faint displacement of air each time a new thread pulled taut.

The veranda wrapped around the east side of the bungalow, so it caught the afternoon light slantwise through the neem trees. India does something to light that England never learned. In England, light arrives like a clerk, punctual and gray and dutiful. In India, it pours. It has weight. By four o'clock the veranda boards were the colour of burnt honey, and the air smelled of woodsmoke and jasmine and the iron tang of the well pump that the servants used to fill the bath. Somewhere behind the house a crow was having an argument with itself, and further off, much further, the cantonment bugle was playing something I couldn't name. The heat sat on everything like a hand.

I don't know how long I'd been there. Time at three years old is not time. It's a substance you move through, thicker in some places than others, and that afternoon it was thick as treacle and I was perfectly happy inside it,

watching this spider do the only thing it knew how to do, with a competence I found thrilling.

My father came out through the screen door. I heard the hinges first (they shrieked, they always shrieked, the servants oiled them every week and the heat ate the oil by Tuesday), then his boots on the boards, then the pause where he saw me and decided what to do about it. He was a tall man, my father. Not tall in the polite sense, not as men are sometimes described as tall, which usually just means they weren't short. Edward Gilbert was tall enough to make doorframes a problem and horses a negotiation. He wore his uniform like an apology for taking up so much space.

He sat down on the floor next to me. Not on the chair. That would have been the adult thing to do. On the floor, cross-legged, folding himself down with the careful awkwardness of a man whose knees were not designed for the position. His knee bumped the chair leg.

The spider froze.

We both held our breath.

I remember that. I remember the held breath. I remember the spider, suspended, one leg raised, waiting to determine whether the world had just ended or merely shifted. And I remember my father's face next to mine, his eyes on the web, his mouth set in the solemn expression of a man taking a spider very, very seriously because his daughter was taking it seriously and that was enough.

The spider decided the world had not ended. It moved again. The leg came down, found the thread, continued.

We watched it finish. Neither of us said a word. The light went from gold to amber to pink, and the neem tree shadows stretched across the boards and touched our knees, and the crow stopped arguing and somewhere a dog barked twice and stopped, and the spider completed its web and sat in the centre of it, vibrating faintly, alive, done.

I smiled. My father smiled back.

That is the entire memory.

I have turned it over so many times that I cannot be certain any of it is real. I was three. What do you actually remember from three? I remember the spider. I remember the light. I remember his knee bumping the chair. But

did the crow exist? Did the jasmine? Was the well pump iron or brass? Was it neem trees or tamarind? I have lived in so many places and invented so many pasts that the real ones have started to feel counterfeit. You handle a memory too often and it wears smooth, like a coin, until you can't read the face on it anymore.

Here is what I know: there was a veranda, and there was a spider, and my father sat on the floor instead of the chair, and for twenty minutes or an hour or an entire lifetime, I was not alone.

I have built worse things on less truth.

There are other memories of India, and I will give them to you in time because they are owed, but I want you to understand that the spider is the one I chose to keep. Everything that came after, the funerals and the ships and the kings with their proposals and their conditions, all of it sits on one side of a line, and the spider sits on the other, and I have spent my whole life trying to get back to the right side of that line and I never have and I never will.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. That is a habit of mine. Lola Montez has always preferred the dramatic to the chronological.

My father died later that year.

Cholera. Which is to say: India. Which is to say: the Empire killed him, but gently, and with the appropriate paperwork. He had a fever on Wednesday and was dead by Sunday and none of it made sense, because no one told me anything. Children in the cantonment were managed like the equipment, dusted and repositioned and expected to remain where you left them.

The funeral was held on a Tuesday, which I know because my father once told me that nothing good happens on a Tuesday, and I have carried that useless fact with me for thirty years now. It was hot season, the kind of heat where the air shimmers above the ground and the crows sit on the fence posts with their beaks open, panting like dogs. And into this heat the British Army had assembled itself in full dress uniform to bury one of its ensigns.

They stood in rows, these men. Brass buttons. Stiff collars. Wool, for God's sake, wool in 100 degrees because the regulations had been written

in London by men who had never been further east than Kent. They sweated magnificently. It ran down their temples and darkened their collars and dripped off their chins onto the red dust, and not one of them acknowledged it because the British do not sweat, not officially at least.

They towered above me. I came up to somewhere around their belt buckles, and I spent the service staring at a wall of dark blue wool and brass and leather, the smell of boot polish and perspiration, and the sound of someone reading unfamiliar words in a voice designed to carry across parade grounds. I could see boots. I could see the red dust settling onto the boots. I could hear my mother breathing in a way that didn't sound like breathing.

An officer picked me up. I don't know which one. He lifted me as though I were a vase, rigid arms, held away from the body, fingers uncertain. He was afraid of dropping me. Or possibly afraid of holding me. I was a child attached to a dead man the officer hoped I that made me a problem of logistics rather than emotion, and the British Army was good at logistics.

From up there I could see the box.

It was wooden and it was closed and it was too small for my father. That is what I thought. I thought: he won't fit. He was so tall. His knees will be bent. It seemed cruel, to make a man who already apologised for his height spend eternity folded up. I wanted to say something about this. I wanted to tell someone that they'd gotten the wrong box.

My mother wore white, because this was India. She stood very straight and did not cry and looked at a point somewhere above the heads of the assembled officers, somewhere in the middle distance where the shimmering heat made everything uncertain.

I said, "When is he coming back?"

Nobody answered. The reading continued. The boots stood in the dust.

"When is he coming back?"

My mother looked at me, then looked away. Not quickly. Slowly, deliberately, like turning a page. And I understood, or began to understand, that the answer was the looking away. The answer was the absence of an answer. The answer was the careful slow turn of her face toward that shimmering middle distance where the heat bent everything out of shape.

After the funeral, the house became a different house.

It had the same walls and the same furniture and the same view of the cantonment road, but the air inside it had changed composition. My father's boots were by the door for three weeks before someone moved them. His shaving kit stayed on the washstand. His chair on the veranda, the good chair, not the rattan ones, had an impression of him in the cushion that I would press my hand into, stupidly, as though I could feel the warmth. There was never any warmth. It was India, everything was warm.

The silence was specific. Not an absence of noise, because India is never quiet: the servants talked, the crows screamed, the cantonment went about its business of pretending that this corner of someone else's country was actually Surrey with better weather. It was the absence of his noise. The weight of his boots on the veranda. His humming when he shaved, always the same tune, something from a music hall that he'd never name when asked. The creak of his chair when he leaned back to look at the stars, something he did every night after dinner while my mother read inside and I was supposed to be asleep but wasn't, because I would sit at my window and watch the orange point of his cheroot moving in the dark like a slow firefly.

That cheroot glow was the last thing I saw every night for as long as I could remember, and then one night it wasn't there, and the veranda was just a veranda, and the dark was just the dark.

My mother moved through the house like a woman in a painting. Present, composed, unreachable. She managed the servants. She answered the correspondence. She wore her white for the appropriate period and then she stopped wearing it and started wearing colors again, which seemed obscene to me, though I couldn't have explained why. She did everything correctly. She was correct the way a clock is correct: mechanically, precisely, without any apparent feeling about it.

My mother married Captain Patrick Craigie six months after my father's body went into the red Indian dirt.

I could describe Captain Craigie for you, but there would be no point. He was a man of no distinguishing features. Brown hair. Medium height. A

moustache that was trying very hard to be a moustache. He laughed at things that weren't funny and failed to laugh at things that were, and he looked at my mother with the expression of a man who has found a bargain and can't quite believe his luck. She looked at him with the expression of a woman who has found a solution.

That's what he was, you see. Not a husband. A solution. The means to an end, and the end was not having to raise Eliza Gilbert alone in a country that killed her first husband and would kill her too if she gave it enough time. Craigie was a way out, or a way forward, or at the very least a way of not standing still, and my mother was a woman who could not bear to stand still because standing still meant feeling, and feeling was something that made you challenge your choices.

Let me tell you about waiting.

My mother told me she would be back by evening. I believe she said the word "evening." She may have said "soon," or "before dark," or "don't be silly, Eliza," which was her answer to most things. But in my memory she said "evening," and so evening is what I waited for.

I sat on the bungalow steps in a cotton dress that was too big for me because I was growing into it and I held a cloth doll that smelled of my mother's perfume. Jasmine. Or tuberose. Something white and sweet and heavy, the kind of scent that doesn't last on fabric but I held that doll against my face as though I could keep it there by force of will, breathing in the fading ghost of her.

The road from our bungalow ran straight for about a quarter of a mile before it bent around a stand of banyan trees and disappeared toward the cantonment. Red dust, packed hard, with ruts from the oxcart wheels and the footprints of a thousand barefoot servants going about the business of keeping the British comfortable in a country that did not want them. I could see the whole straight stretch from the steps. If anyone was coming, I would know.

I sat and I watched.

The servant, Hari, came out at some point and told me that my mother would write from England. England meant nothing to me. He said it gently,

squatting down to my level, as my father used to, and his eyes were the saddest eyes I had ever seen, though I did not have the vocabulary for sadness yet, only the feeling of it, which sat in my chest like a stone I couldn't cough up.

I had been on those steps since yesterday.

I had slept there, curled on the top step with the doll under my cheek and the mosquito net that Hari draped over me sometime in the night. I had no memory of him doing it, so I must have slept. That surprised me, because I hadn't intended to. I intended to keep watching the road. The road was the important thing. The road was where she would come from.

I didn't eat the rice Hari brought. He left it on the step beside me in a small brass bowl, and it sat there getting cold and then getting hard and then getting visited by ants, and eventually he took it away and brought more, and that got cold too. I wasn't hungry. Hunger was somewhere very far away, on the other side of the watching, and I couldn't get to it without stopping.

The heat pressed down. My cotton dress stuck to my back. Sweat ran into my eyes and I wiped it with the hand that wasn't holding the doll and kept watching.

The road shimmered. Sometimes the shimmering made shapes, figures that approached and then dissolved, and each time my heart seized and then released, seized and released, like a fist opening and closing on nothing. A bullock cart passed. Two sepoy on foot, their rifles slung. A woman with a basket on her head, walking with the straight-backed grace that Indian women have and English women spend their whole lives failing to imitate. None of them were my mother.

Evening came. She didn't.

I don't remember the transition from waiting to not-waiting. It wasn't a decision, not a single moment where I thought: she isn't coming. It was erosion. The hope didn't break, it wore away, grain by grain, like the red dust wearing away the steps themselves over years of monsoons and dry seasons. One day I was watching the road. Another day I was watching the road but thinking about something else. Another day I was sitting on the steps but looking at my hands, at the lines on my palms that Hari told me

were the map of my life, and wondering whether the map showed the road and whether anyone was coming down it.

Weeks, perhaps. I lose the chronology. I was three or four and time was still that thick substance, but it was getting thinner now, less treacle and more water, and I was starting to move through it faster, . The days were passing and each one was a day she hadn't come.

I stopped holding the doll. Not all at once. I stopped pressing it to my face, then I stopped carrying it, then it sat on the step beside me where the rice used to be, and then one day it was inside on a shelf and I didn't remember putting it there.

One afternoon, and I remember this with a clarity that is probably false but I'll give it to you anyway, I walked down the steps and stood at the bottom and looked at the road one more time. The straight quarter-mile. The banyan trees at the bend. The shimmering heat and the red dust and the ruts from the oxcarts. I looked for a long time. Then I looked at my hands. Then I went back up the steps and picked up the doll and went inside and closed the door behind me.

That was the end of something. I had no name for it then. I'd call it childhood, but that implies I had one.

I was sent to live with my father's father, a man I had never met, in a place I had never been, because my mother and Captain Craigie were being posted to a new station and a child was inconvenient.

Eleven years. That is how long it was before I saw my mother again. Eleven years between the last time she held me (did she hold me? she must have held me, at the dock, but I can't remember it, I have tried and tried and the memory is simply not there, which tells you something about what we choose to keep and what we let go) and the next time I saw her face.

Eleven years is a long time when you are five. It is, in fact, forever.

Scotland was wet and gray and smelled of boiled things. I will not waste more words on my grandfather's house because it does not deserve them. He was a stern man who believed children should be visible only at meal-times and then only briefly. I lived in his house for a year or two before being

sent to school. It was the first of several institutions that would attempt to make something respectable out of me and fail.

The last was Montrose Academy, Bath. Someone at some point decided that a school for young ladies should be housed in a building made entirely of wet stone, and that the curriculum should consist of needlework, French conjugation, and deportment.

Girls being sanded down into wives. That was the project. Take the rough edges off. Teach them to sit, to pour, to embroider, to conjugate irregular verbs in a language they would never use except to impress dinner guests. Make them smooth. Make them agreeable. Make them the kind of women that men of modest ambition and inherited income would find tolerable across a breakfast table for the next forty years.

I arrived at nine or ten with a trunk of clothes that didn't fit and an accent that couldn't decide whether it was Irish, Indian, or Scottish, and I was placed in a dormitory with eleven girls who had known each other since birth and had no intention of knowing me.

Mrs. Nicholson ran the operation. She was the headmistress, though "headmistress" suggests a grandeur she did not possess. She was a tall, dry woman built along the lines of a wardrobe, with a face that had been assembled for disapproval and hands that were always clasped in front of her, always, as though she was permanently in prayer or permanently preventing herself from striking someone. She believed in posture the way other people believed in God: absolutely, without evidence, and with the conviction that failure to maintain it was a moral failing that would follow you into the afterlife.

"Deportment," she would say, and before she said it there was always a little sniff, a sharp intake through the nose that served as both punctuation and judgement, so that the word arrived pre-condemned. Sniff. "Deportment, girls, is not a subject. It is a state of being"

I hated her. I studied her.

These are not contradictory activities. In fact they are the same activity, if you do them properly. To hate someone well, you must know them completely: their gestures, their habits, the exact way they hold a teacup or clear their throat or distribute punishment. Mrs. Nicholson cleared her throat before every caning, a small preparatory sound, like a singer finding

her note. She held the cane loosely, almost carelessly, like a conductor with a baton. She aimed for the hands, always the hands, because the hands were visible and the marks were a lesson that could be read.

I learned more from Mrs. Nicholson than from any teacher I ever had, and none of it was needlework.

The holidays were the worst.

Christmas at Montrose Academy was a study in absence. The other girls left in stages, collected by parents and aunts and family carriages that pulled up to the front steps in a procession of reunion that I watched from the second-floor window of the dormitory. I always watched from the same window. Third from the left, overlooking the front drive, with a crack in the lower pane that let in a thin whistle of December air. I would stand there with my hands on the sill and watch them go, one by one, until the drive was empty and the building settled into its holiday silence. A different silence from the term-time silence, deeper, more thorough, the silence of a place that had been emptied of purpose.

The corridors echoed. My footsteps on the stone floors sounded like someone following me, and I would stop and turn and there would be no one, just the long gray perspective of doors and walls and that same smell of cold stone and floor polish that no amount of holiday cleaning could remove. I ate in the kitchen with the cook, Mrs. Hewitt, who was kind in a baffled sort of way and gave me extra pudding and called me “duck” and did not ask why no one had come for me because she already knew.

I wrote to my mother. Once, in the first year. I sat at the desk in the empty common room with a sheet of writing paper and a pen that blotted, and I wrote a letter that I have spent thirty years trying to forget.

“Dear Mother,” it began, because Mrs. Nicholson insisted on “Dear” as the proper salutation regardless of one’s feelings about the recipient, which was, I think, my first lesson in the performative nature of language.

I told her about the school. I told her about the food (terrible) and the other girls (indifferent) and Mrs. Nicholson (a wardrobe with opinions). And then, at the end, after all the careful observations and the dutiful reporting, I wrote: “When are you coming?”

She didn’t write back. Or she did, months later, a short letter about the weather in India (the same weather it always is) and Captain Craigie’s

promotion and the new house they'd moved into, and somewhere near the end, almost as a postscript, she hoped I was well and was minding Mrs. Nicholson.

I didn't write again.

I was twelve when I discovered that I could become other people.

It was after lights-out, which at Montrose Academy meant after nine o'clock, when the gas was turned down and the dormitory was supposed to fall into the silent, restorative sleep that Mrs. Nicholson believed was essential for the development of moral character. Instead, as in every school dormitory in every school that has ever existed, it fell into whispered conversation, muffled laughter, and the particular restless energy of twelve girls who had been told to be quiet and were constitutionally incapable of it.

I was stood on my bed. I don't know why. Some instinct, some need to be elevated, to be seen. The mattress sagged under my feet and the bed frame creaked and the girls in the neighbouring beds turned to look, and I had their attention.

I became Mrs. Nicholson.

I straightened my spine. I clasped my hands. I lifted my chin to the precise angle of a woman who believes that God is watching and is not impressed. And then I did the sniff. The little sharp intake through the nose, the preparatory sniff before the word, and the girls knew instantly, they knew before I said anything, because the sniff was Mrs. Nicholson the way a scent is a person, the concentrated essence.

"Department," I said, in her voice, in her exact voice, the dry Somerset vowels and the aspirated 't' and leaning on the first syllable as though pressing it into service. "Department, girls, is not merely the arrangement of the body. It is the arrangement of the soul."

Laughter. Actual laughter, the kind that has to be swallowed, bitten down, pressed into pillows, and that makes it better, the best kind of laughter, because it is forbidden.

I did the hands. The clasp, thumbs crossing right over left, always right over left, holding them at waist height, not chest height, because chest height would suggest anxiety and Mrs. Nicholson did not experience anxiety, she administered it. I did the walk, the particular glide that she achieved by taking very small steps in very hard shoes, so that she appeared to be moving without the involvement of legs, a sort of ecclesiastical hovering that I had studied for three years without knowing I was studying it.

“Miss Gilbert,” I said, still in her voice, looking down at an invisible student from an enormous height, “your posture is an affront. To me. To this institution. To the very concept of verticality.”

The girls were dying. Charlotte Morton had her face in her pillow. Emily Cartwright was making a sound like a kettle. Two beds down, Sarah Lyle was crying with laughter, actually crying, tears running down her face, her shoulders shaking.

And then Mrs. Nicholson appeared in the doorway.

She was holding a candle, which lit her from below in a way that was, frankly, dramatic and which I would have appreciated more if I had not been standing on a bed performing her. The flame threw her shadow up the wall behind her, enormous, wavering, a woman twelve feet tall with clasped hands the size of dinner plates.

The girls scattered. Charlotte into her bed, Emily under hers, Sarah frozen mid-sob with the tears still wet on her face. The dormitory went from chaos to silence in two seconds. A credit (I use the word reluctantly) to the power of a woman with a candle and a reputation.

I didn't move.

I was still on the bed. Still standing. Still, I realise now, in character, my hands still clasped, my chin still lifted, my spine still straight. I looked at her from across the dormitory, across the rows of beds with their suddenly motionless occupants, and she looked at me.

What I saw on her face was not anger. Anger I knew, anger I could have managed, anger is predictable and has a shape and a duration and you can wait it out. What I saw was recognition. This girl sees too much. This girl has been watching. This girl has taken me apart and put me back together for entertainment, and the reassembled version is accurate enough to be dangerous.

She walked between the beds. The candle flame bent and recovered with each step. She reached my bed and looked up at me (I was taller, standing on the mattress, the only time in my life I was taller than Mrs. Nicholson, and I savoured it) and she brought the cane down on the bed frame.

The crack was enormous. Wood on wood, a sound like a branch breaking, and the bed shuddered under my feet and the girls flinched, all of them, every single one, a dormitory-wide spasm of fear.

I didn't flinch.

My chin stayed up. My hands went behind my back, gripping the fabric of my nightgown, and my knuckles were white, I could feel the bones of my fingers pressing against each other and the cotton bunching in my fists, but my face didn't move. Not because I wasn't afraid. I was terrified. My heart was hitting my ribs so hard I was certain she could hear it, certain the whole dormitory could hear it, a twelve-year-old's heart hammering out its terror for everyone to witness.

But flinching is a choice. You feel the impulse, the body's desire to contract, to make itself small. And then you choose. Holding yourself still when every nerve is screaming at you to cower, that is a kind of power.

Mrs. Nicholson looked at me for a long time. The candle guttered. Somewhere a girl was breathing too loudly and trying not to.

Then she turned and left.

No caning. No punishment. No words. Just the slow recession of candlelight down the corridor and the click of her hard shoes on the stone floor, getting quieter, and quieter, and gone.

I stood on that bed for a long time after she left. The other girls didn't speak to me. They didn't know what to say. Neither did I. I had discovered something and I didn't have a name for it yet.

I have a name for it now. Performance. The understanding that you can construct a version of yourself that is harder than the original, and the world will believe it.

I would build a career on this understanding. Several careers, in fact. And ruin them all. That too is a kind of talent.

The years after that moved as years do when you are young and unhappy: slowly while you live them, quickly when you look back. I grew. I studied. I performed Mrs. Nicholson privately, for my own entertainment, when the dormitory was empty and I could practice in the mirror without an audience. I moved on to other subjects. The French teacher, Mademoiselle Colbert, who pronounced “r” as though gargling. The vicar who came on Sundays, with his habit of touching his left ear before every sermon. The butcher’s boy who delivered on Wednesdays and couldn’t look at any of us without turning the colour of his own meat.

I collected people like other girls collected pressed flowers. Pinned them flat, preserved them, took them out to examine when I was bored.

The holidays continued to be empty. Christmas came and the girls left and I stood at my window, third from the left, and watched them go. I stopped hoping someone would come for me around age thirteen or fourteen. The exact moment is lost, but it happened the same way it happened on the bungalow steps: not a breaking but an erosion, not a door slamming but a door slowly, slowly, slowly closing on a room I’d already left.

Letters didn’t come. Or they came so rarely and said so little that they amounted to the same thing. My mother’s handwriting was small and careful and told me nothing. Captain Craigie was well. India was hot. She hoped I was applying myself. Applying myself. As though I were wallpaper paste.

I stopped checking the post tray by the front door. I stopped looking up when Mrs. Nicholson called a girl’s name during mail distribution. I stopped, eventually, feeling anything about it at all. That doesn’t mean the feeling went away. The feeling doesn’t go away. You just build something over it, a floor over a well, and most of the time the floor holds, and sometimes it doesn’t, and when it doesn’t you fall a long way in the dark.

I burned through tears about six years ago and never restocked.

That was something I told Emily Cartwright when she found me sitting in the empty common room on Christmas Day, staring at the fire. She was a boarder too, stuck that year because her aunt was ill. She sat next to me and asked if I was all right and I gave her that answer and she laughed, and I laughed, and it was the first honest thing I’d said in months.

Emily was kind. I should say that. She was genuinely, unstrategically kind,

as some people are, without calculation, without expecting anything back. I did not know what to do with this. Kindness confused me. It still does.

Then, after eleven years, my mother came.

I was sixteen. Mrs. Nicholson summoned me from the French lesson. Mademoiselle Colbert and I had reached an understanding based on mutual contempt and declining effort. I walked to the headmistress's office and was told that my mother was waiting in the parlour and would I please attend her.

My mother. The word landed on me like a stone dropped from a height.

I walked to the parlour with the careful posture of someone approaching a firing squad. Spine straight. Chin level. Hands at my sides, fingers uncurled, because clenched fists betray you and I had learned, on that bed in the dormitory five years ago, not to be betrayed by my own body.

I had rehearsed this moment. For years, for the entirety of my time at Montrose, I had conducted imagined conversations with my mother in which I said everything I needed to say. In some versions I was cold and controlled and my words landed like knife points and she wept and begged forgiveness and I granted it, graciously, from a position of unassailable moral authority. In other versions I was the one who wept, and she held me, and she explained everything, and the explanation was so reasonable and so loving that I understood immediately and forgave her without being asked. In a third version, the one I visited most often, late at night, in the dark, with my face turned to the wall so no one could see, I simply said: why. And she answered. And the answer was enough.

None of the versions matched.

She was sitting in the parlour chair with her hands in her lap and she looked like a woman who had been left in the sun too long. Everything about her was faded. Not old, not yet, but worn, like a pub sign after too many winters, the paint cracked along familiar lines, the name still readable if you already knew what it said. Her dress was good. Her hair was done. She had made an effort. Somehow worse than if she hadn't, because the effort meant she

knew this mattered. She'd had eleven years of knowing it mattered and had done nothing.

I stood in the doorway. She looked at me. Neither of us moved to embrace. The space between us was six feet of parlour floor and eleven years of silence and it might as well have been the ocean she'd put between us, the actual geographical ocean, all those miles of gray water between India and Britain.

When they'd told me she was here, there had been a moment. A flash of something bright and hot in my chest that I recognized as hope. It lasted as long as it takes to blink. By the time I reached the parlour door it was gone, replaced by something harder and more useful, and I wore that instead.

"You have my cheekbones," she said. "Thank God for that."

"Is that why you're here? To inventory?"

She blinked. I saw it register, the tone, the edges on it. I had not spoken to her in eleven years and the first words out of my mouth had corners, and she hadn't expected corners, she had expected the cotton-dress girl on the bungalow steps, the one who waited and waited and held a cloth doll to her face.

That girl was dead. I killed her years ago. I've always been good at killing the women I used to be.

"Sit down, Eliza."

I sat. Because I was sixteen and she was my mother and the habit of obedience runs deeper than anger.

For a moment I thought she might say something real. Something about the years. About the steps. About Craigie, who was dead now, dead of a fever in Meerut or Madras or wherever the Empire had last posted him, leaving my mother widowed for the second time. But her face rearranged itself into something brisk and purposeful, and I understood. I was nearly done at Montrose, which meant I was nearly her responsibility again, and my mother did not want responsibilities. She wanted solutions. I was about to be shown mine.

She told me about Sir Abraham Lumley. She described his position (excellent), his reputation (sterling), his home (substantial), his connections (numerous and well-placed). She described these things as though describing

furniture to a prospective buyer: dimensions, condition, provenance. She did not describe the man himself because the man himself was, I think, beside the point.

“How old?” I said.

“Mature. Established.”

“How old?”

“He is a man of considerable experience who has...”

“How. Old.”

“Sixty-three.”

The number sat between us like a dead animal. Sixty-three. I was sixteen. I did the arithmetic because the arithmetic was obscene and because I wanted her to see me doing it, wanted her to watch the calculation cross my face.

“You came all this way to sell me.”

“To secure your future.”

“You had a daughter. You shipped her off. You didn’t write, or visit, or, God, you didn’t even send the right size dresses, I spent three years with my wrists sticking out of my sleeves. And now you’ve come to sell me to a man who is forty-seven years older than me because his position is excellent.”

“Eliza.”

“That is what’s happening, isn’t it? I’m just making sure I understand the terms.”

She was quiet for a moment. I watched her face and I saw something move behind the composure, something that might have been guilt, that in a better woman would have been guilt, but she caught it and shut a door on it like shutting a door, and when she looked at me again her face was clear.

“The ship leaves in four days,” she said. “Pack your things.”

She stood. She smoothed her dress. She walked to the door and through it and down the corridor and I listened to her footsteps recede, the click of her heels on Mrs. Nicholson’s stone floors, getting quieter, and quieter, and gone.

She didn't look back. Of course she didn't look back. Looking back was not something my mother did. It required a flexibility of the neck that she had trained out of herself, a willingness to see what you were leaving behind, and she had left so many things behind by now that turning around would have shown her a road full of them, stretching back to a veranda in India and a man who sat on the floor to watch a spider with his daughter.

I stood in the centre of the parlour for a long time.

The clock on the mantel ticked. It was a brass carriage clock with a face that needed cleaning and a tick that was slightly irregular, a tiny hesitation between the tick and the tock, as though it kept forgetting what came next and then remembering at the last moment. I stood and I listened to it and I did not think about Sir Abraham Lumley, who was sixty-three, or my mother, who was already gone, or the ship that left in four days.

I thought about the spider.

There was one in the corner of the window. Not a garden spider like the one in India, nothing so grand, just a small gray house spider in a small gray web in the corner of a window. It sat in the centre of its web the way the Indian spider had sat in the centre of its web, vibrating faintly, alive, done. Waiting for whatever the web would bring.

I watched it for a while. The clock ticked its hesitant tick. The parlour smelled of beeswax and old books and the faint ghost of someone's tea. Outside the window, English rain was doing what English rain does, which is everything, all the time, without apology.

Then I went upstairs to pack.

Chapter 2

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