

PROLOGUE

Our breathing was torn raggedly from us in the wake of our recent exertions, eyes met over the prostrate form lying between us on the floor amongst the messy piles of coats and bags which spread in a largely dark but varied landscape to the large double bed on which another unconscious figure lay. The party continued outside the door with blissfully ignorant exuberance. Two pairs of brown orbs met the pair of blue and each other – none of us were running, we were in this together now for better or for worse.

Corinna kicked into introverted crisis management mode and was putting her magnificent deductive skills to work “Ambulance. Police? Self defence? Blood test for... family won’t want this to get out...” She was in the zone, mapping out the spidery network of possible action and reactions and had no need of my help. She would ask when she hit a metaphorical wall, until then I trusted her instincts and reasoning as though they were my own. She tucked her Kinte cloth into her waistband as she knelt beside the figure on the floor and reached for his wrist with the forefinger and middle finger of her left hand extended.

“Bodhi? Boudicca?” I insistently addressed the owner of the blue eyes with flecks of green and orange. They were steadily focused with paralyzing horror at the form on the floor. She looked at her hands questioningly and at the bloodstained brass of the Venus De Milo still clamped sweatily in her left fist. I gripped her shoulders and forced her to look at me. She threw the statuette away from her before looking at me with the question still there and awaiting an answer from me. The enormous irony of her weapon was foremost in my mind and I wanted to laugh but her need for focus was greater than my need to laugh in the face of the undeniable gravitas of this situation. I stifled the entirely inappropriate impulse just as her face threatened to collapse and render her a liability.

“No!” I remonstrated sharply, “Moi Siestra.” I said with more kindness in my tone and to bring her back to me in as much of her consciousness as she could muster.

“I couldn’t.. even though. I just couldn’t...” Bodhi spoke raggedly and incoherently, eyes darting from one prone body to the other.

“Bodhi. We are with you. You need to be calm now and trust us.”

It occurred to me this may be a lot to ask, given we had known each other for less than a year.

Together we three could steer our ship through the increasingly choppy waters. Meanwhile on the horizon... the stormclouds, they gathered.

CHAPTER 1

Excerpt from a poem by Corinna Reynolds

The lines which were made to nullify us made us stronger. We build our bodies and minds, feed them with frustration born of anger.

Through segregation we have congregated together and children receive the wisdom of their elders because as we all know the death of an Elder is like the burning of a library.

The world halfheartedly swam into focus. I took in my room as my brain functions started firing up, the computer still on as I had worked on a new track on Cubase until I dropped, still fully clothed, onto my unmade bed. My older brother, Noah, has repeatedly ripped me for being too old for Marvel but I do not care and my duvet, emblazoned with Wolverine, states my allegiance clearly. I much prefer the box sets of the animated series rather than the films, although they are a good watch. Halle Berry's Storm was not nearly as hardcore as she should have been, not her fault I'm sure, Hollywood would not have wanted a feisty black heroine in such a mainstream movie.

Fucksticks! New school today, my mother's doing. She conspired with the headmistress at my old school to send me to an all girls' school which took A-levels really seriously. They pretty much hatched it completely independent of me and I was merely asked for a last minute opinion by my mum, who made it plain that my going was inevitable and to make the best of the opportunity. Of course she asked me again to name any people of colour earning over £20 000 a year who didn't have a degree. There weren't too many in my circle it's true, although more because they were artists, musicians or community minded. These are professions that are given no accolades and certainly only a few can reap financial rewards without the backing of well off or well connected parents.

"Corinna!" I could hear my mother's purposeful footsteps coming up the stairs. Arsetits! I had my weed out last night, did I put it away out of sight? I scan the desk holding my mac, books and empty glasses, plates and all the general mucky signs of an all nighter. Some contraband but all of it legal, so I pulled my duvet over me so that she couldn't tell I was still in last night's clothes and looked sleepy.

"Still in bed? Lazy! Gimme your clothes for today, I'm gonna iron them."

"Whaaat!" I say, dramatically feigning shock.

"Oh, you got jokes now huh? No chile of mine's going to first day of school looking like a ragbag. Come on UP!" she whips the covers off me. Goddamnit! Why can I keep nothing from her?

"You slept in your clothes? Why all these dirty plates here? You want us to get mice?" This is my mum's style of nagging, a stream of hypothetical questions featuring the worst case scenario consequences of whatever it is we have done. She insists she is NOT turning into Grandma but this is not helping her case.

My mum deflates what may have become a tirade as she grabs some items of clothing from my floor and sniffs them for laundry. "Make sure you have all your things on that list, here's £10 in case you've forgotten something and you can get it on the way." Looking at the piles of clothes, unable to distinguish dirty from clean, her ire is reignited, "How can you live like this Corinna? I want this tidy when you come home from school, hear me? And make sure your hair's neat." As woke as my mum is, she still has the thing about 'good hair'.

"Yes Mum!" I say mock-sullenly, reluctantly getting out of bed and heading towards the bathroom.

"Take off those clothes and bring them down, I'll wash them today." She says, as she leaves my bedroom and heads downstairs with her arms laden with laundry, yet managing also to carry two plates and a glass. She sees me spot them and states, "I'm only taking them down to soak, you're washing them and anything else that's in your room when you clean and tidy it later."

The bathroom door is locked so I pound on it loudly and unrelentingly. Noah has been spending so much longer in the bathroom since he developed a mad thing for this new girl at church. I don't want to know what he's doing in there but he ain't doing it on my time!

"Hurry up douchebag! I need to leave in 20 minutes an' I have to shower." I continue to pound and then change my knocking to imitate Sheldon in The Big Bang Theory, "Noah,(knock, knock, knock) Noah, (knock, knock, knock) Noah (knock, knock, knock)... I can do this for as long as it takes Mr Vain!" Then I sing "Mr Vain by Stevie V very loudly through the bathroom door.

The door opens and a cloud of steam, Lynx and a waft of something far less appealing hits me in the face. Noah stands there fully dressed and with a knowing smile all over his Chevy Chase.

"I wouldn't if I were you Sis."

"Oh! You...Fine!", I took a deep breath of relatively untainted air and plunged in to open the window. I'd be late if I waited and really needed a shower to wake myself up.

Ten minutes later, baby hairs pumpin' and lip gloss shinin', I head down for some of that bacon and whatever else smells so good that beckons me down the stairs with fingers of curling aroma. I pull on my clothes which are ironed and hanging over the back of a chair in the kitchen whilst Mum fusses over the laundry while juggling pans on the stove. I make my t-shirts and get a design of my choosing at the printers on the corner as I can't wear standard sizing, like most women. Today's offering is a blue number with a picture of Martin Luther King Jr on it. Once dressed I go over to assist with the breakfast and allow Mum to concentrate on the

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laundry. Aha – it was bake that I smelled. I love bake – it’s a bit like small circles of fried fluffy naan bread and it’s amazing with eggs and fried plantain which were sizzling in their own pans.

“What is this young lady?” I freeze as the ice in Mum’s tone creeps up me like ivy rooting me to the spot on which I slowly swivel to see her holding up my bag of weed and giving me the ‘death stare’.

Shitbags.

CHAPTER 2

An excerpt from a poem by Boudicca Stewart

Without siblings, I never learned how to defend myself from the darkness in others. When they came with a hidden dagger in the sweetness of embraces, I ran for kisses on my upturned face.

Fortunate years spent held in the arms and minds of ones who mould with love, wisdom and a steady hand hoping that one day, you will outgrow them. Just makes rejection harder to bear.

A sound from my phone woke me up, an alert from Snapchat. The time was seven thirty in the morning, who on earth could have been active at that time? It was footage of an enormous dildo and a message saying "Will this satisfy you?" It wasn't from a friend but part of a constant stream of harassment I have suffered of late. I want to delete the sender but I don't know what consequences I would be made to suffer if I did that and things are bad enough as it is.

The holidays would have been a blissful respite were it not for the habitual buzzing from my phone, even when we were in Italy. I lay for another ten minutes in bed plotting circumstances which would keep me from college. Stomach ache? Hackneyed. Migraine? Those are so bad when I do get them that it seemed immoral to fake it. Making myself throw up was a last resort but I hated it and the first day of school was tricky to be absent. Sod it – I would bite the bullet. Maybe today would be different, although the start to my day did seem to indicate otherwise.

"Morning sweetheart!" my mum barged into my room without knocking but she did have a welcome cup of tea in her hands so I let it pass without comment. "Rise and shine, first day of school today. Let's not be late."

I have told my parents nothing about anything going on at school except the purely academic. I wouldn't want to upset their lovely worldview and think it best if I just ride this out by myself. My dad lectures in Classics at the University and mum has written a couple of historical novels. They had me very late in life and are both fast approaching sixty, in fact it's dad's sixtieth at the end of the year and all the rellies are pouring in from Cornwall and the Home Counties for some sort of shindig which will probably involve a buffet and music by the Beatles, the Stones and Van Morrison. There will also be singing from my mum's family after approximately 2 hours of whisky imbibing.

Dad and I discussed Ovid's treatment of Perseus in his *Metamorphoses* on the way to school and he dropped me off with a kiss on the top of my head.

“Have a good day Button!” he called through the open car window, attracting the attention of potential piss takers by the school gates. Honestly! I do love them but they are entirely clueless about what constitutes acceptable parental behavior at school.

I made my way through the bustling corridors to the form room where I sat and willed myself smaller. Through the lank curtains of my overgrown fringe, I watched others troop through the door to the classroom. They were carefree, noisy, marking out their territory by throwing their possessions over the desks and raucously laughing. Could it be directed at me again? I hoped not, shrinking further down in my seat and studiously avoiding making eye contact with any potential tormentor.

Oh for God’s sake! I thought to myself irritably, this is ridiculous. I started doodling in my sketchbook. At the moment I am going through a bit of a Tamara De Lempicka phase, the angularity of people’s features within her work and the bright but muted colours. Most of all though, I love the fact that she had a style that was identifiable and with so many paintings in the world her work was impressionably and powerfully in a category of one. I started to work on the shading of the jutting cheekbones and Roman style nose of my sketch – the colour would come later. Then suddenly - I heard it...

My stomach turned over and sent tendrils of anxiety radiating outwards through my core, freezing the blood in my veins as they passed.

“Slag!” It was said quietly but during a lull in the clamour for seats and space. Once more I found my body was inhabiting entirely too much of its surroundings, I hoped keeping my face hidden and my eyes cast downwards would avoid any sort of confrontation. The poisonous word was sent to me wafting on a travelling cloud of whatever celebrity-endorsed stinkspray was currently a la mode.

“Booo – DICK – AAAHH!”

Damn – it was her! At least the perfumed monkey could kind of pronounce it right although obviously she made it sound like some porn name followed by a sex noise. My name is Boudicca. I would like to blame my parents for giving me this name but my mother explained that I was named for a kick ass warrior woman who went totally ham on the Romans for disrespecting her, pretty much burning London (or Londinium as it was then known) to the ground in her justifiable rage. I like my name for this reason but can’t help judging my parents for failing to know that any name with the word “dick’ as a component makes for a tricky social life as a kid.

Back to the matter in hand - she was getting closer to me in that stinking cloud, circling her prey, egged on by her dopey admirers. She reminded me of a Harpy, massive birdbodies topped with a pecking evil woman’s head. According to the Greeks, they used to starve people in hell by snatching delicious food from them and watching them starve or by crapping on the food so they couldn’t eat it. Sort of

like devils poking people's 'special places' with tridents but much more vindictive in the way that women can be. They also used to travel in a cloud of what apparently smelled like dead things and rot – I rest my case. I've no idea what Katie Hopkins smells like but she too reminds me of these creatures.

It would make sense for me to be bullied for using words like 'vindictive' or talking about stuff like history or Greek classics most of the time – but that's only a part of it. Anyway, I learned pretty early on that most people find it boring and would rather talk about the Kardashians or football instead. *C'est la vie!*

The cow, who was named Juno, wasn't going to let it go.

"Little tramp! Don't think you're fooling anyone by going around in those baggy clothes and not putting any makeup on that mug. You'd give it up for anyone, wouldn't you? Eh? Eh?" She punctuated each of her 'eh's by poking me in the head in a way that was supposed to be intimidating...and it was. I prayed for the teacher to come in the classroom early because I had learned from past experience that no one was coming to my rescue. My stomach was churning and face was burning with embarrassment and shame.

"What's this?" she asked, picking up my drawing with her painted talons. Crap! My sketchbook! I had had it for a couple of years and used it a bit like a diary or journal. Dear God or Mistress of the Universe if you let me get it back without her reading it, I'll be virtuous in every way I can possibly think of.

CHAPTER 3

An excerpt from a poem by Saraswati

Bullies outside my cage - mere paper. Kept from becoming snatching and dangerous hyenas only by a tinfoil layer of privilege, the shinier the better.

The bars are charmed words spoken by mother over daughter, education and critical thinking conjure the key on the inside of the cage.

I woke up this morning at 3.30am. My skin was burning and I have even developed eczema on my eyelids which makes them scratchy and adds immeasurably to the overall inhospitability of my body. After Ammah died, I have had to go to the doctors fairly regularly for skin stuff. She was a doctor, a G.P. who started specializing in dermatology once I was born and she realized I had infantile eczema. These days I always had to go back to tell them the creams aren't working or are producing horrible side effects like hair growth on my face. As a girl of South Asian descent, I have enough facial hair issues to address without help from steroid creams, thank you very much.

My father moved us soon after my mother died, I think it may have been to get away from Ammah who is one of my favourite people. They do not get on, he finds her terrifying, which I find amusing. In Tamil our mum and dad are called Ammah and Appah respectively. Some people choose to spell it differently, after all the English alphabet was not designed to encompass languages which have been alive since long before England approached anything nearing civilisation. Your mother's mother is called Ammah and her father, Ammapah. Your father's mother is called Appamah and his father Appapah. There are also specific names for aunts and uncles which denote their relationship with your parents. It is beautifully logical and self explanatory.

I love my father, I suppose, because he is my father and I'm sure he feels he is doing his best under trying circumstances. He also provides me with a roof over my head and clothes – all the things money can buy. As individuals, we do not get on, he seems baffled by me and keeps trying to fit me into the mould of a womanhood which is just as confusing to me as I seem to be to him.

Since I wasn't able to sleep, I turned on my tablet and watched Blade. I've got a bit of an action fetish right now as Swartznegger, Stallone and Snipes are just what I need to entertain me without picking me up like a rag doll and shaking me emotionally like some of my other favourite films. Thus Predator and Demolition Man have earned their place in my pantheon of film alongside Once Were Warriors and 12 Angry men. My mother always said I had "Catholic" tastes which meant varied. Strange in my opinion, given that I have always thought the defining feature of Catholicism was dogma and strict adherence to rules.

At about seven, my little brother wandered into my room and I grabbed him onto the bed and delight in his fits of giggles as I plant some raspberries on his small distended belly. He thinks he's too old now, at six, to crawl into my bed for cuddles but he still likes affection disguised as playful roughhousing because kisses from girls are still (apparently) gross.

He paused and shyly produced a sanitary towel wrapped in pretty plastic which he had probably found whilst looking in my bag. He was a curious little bugger! Now was not the time to berate him for looking in my bag though because he obviously had a question about womanhood which everyone thinks to keep boys "safe from" as though anything vaguely connected with vaginas in a useful way is dangerous information. I had been taught always to clean up after myself and not leave anything unsightly for the next person using the bathroom but I had also been taught that if I am old enough to ask, I am old enough to know.

I sat cross-legged and pulled him into my lap facing away from me before bending over to look at what he obviously saw as contraband of some sort whilst he curled his legs into the space provided.

"Open it." I told him. He unwrapped it carefully as though it were a thoughtfully chosen gift and looked at it with a furrow in his brow.

"It looks like a plaster."

"Good. It does work a bit like a plaster. When a girls gets to a certain age her body is prepares itself for having babies. Inside her tummy a comfy lining is laid down for the baby. If she doesn't have a baby, the lining comes out and that's what you catch it with."

He processed visibly whilst turning over the pad and detaching it from the plastic. It seemed the information I had given him was satisfactory and I wouldn't have to traverse the sex education talks that were probably fairly imminent now just yet.

A knock on the door made him start and hide the sanitary towel behind him, I took it and surreptitiously put it under the pillows. My father, already dapper in his three piece suit, opened the door and saw us both intertwined,

"He's a big boy now, too old for this type of coddling. Why don't you go downstairs and get some breakfast." My brother sheepishly climbed out of my lap and went downstairs with his small head bowed. My blood started to simmer steadily, "Saraswati, I thought about you learning the guitar but I think it will be better to continue with a classical instrument. You're already on Grade 6 and if you can get to Grade 7 this year it will look better on your University application."

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“What? You said that if I took the Grade 6 last year I could learn the bass this year! Why won’t you keep your word? If you...”

“Shut up! I won’t be spoken to like this. That’s the end of it.”

I was absolutely outraged but remained silent because I knew that I had to pick my battles. I merely glared murderously at him. I would find a way to do what I wanted by myself.

Bio:

Manon Olegasageram is a music-loving geek who escapes the world via stories and oral traditions. She seeks culture and music as far back as there is accessible evidence of culture to be mined with a particular interest in ancient history and the concept of otherness as proscribed by current and former societies. An avid record collector and lover of uninhibited dance floor action, she has started to turn her hand to writing.

It is Manon’s ambition to become a celebrated raconteur and hold the best parties in town – part salon, part sweaty basement funk. Only lack of a lottery win stands between her and her goals.