*‘Nobody’s Daughter’*
10,000-Word Sample

Title: *Nobody’s Daughter*

Author: *Teodora Miscov*

Full Word Count: *75,000 words*

Genre: *Upmarket Psychological Suspense*

Email: *teodora@teodoramiscov.co.uk*

*Trauma doesn’t only happen when a wicked villain
does some wicked thing to an immaculate hero.*

*We’re more perverse than that.*

\*\*\*

When the gate screeched closed behind her, Ana took pride in ignoring its plea. She knew no one would trim the ivy. Soon, it would occlude the windows, leaving her books to mould and her pillow to rot in the same tomb where her youth lay buried.

*Better them than me,* Ana thought, tightening her grip on Laika’s lead to tighten her grip on herself. She tugged her away from sniffing the flattened Coca-Cola bottle on the side of the mountain road and followed the sole discernible direction: that of the telephone wire as it dipped and rose, dipped and rose overhead.

All her life she’d contemplated it, imagining the conversations it would have carried if Artur hadn’t slashed its cable before she could even speak. But that one ‘if’ presupposed many more impossible ‘ifs’: *if* Artur’s theory hadn’t been so strict, *if* she’d been able to leave, *if* she’d had anyone on the Outside to call. But she didn’t.

Instead, the heavy curtain of the thick woods blacked out the world from her, and her from the world. Some nights she’d allowed herself to come out of the villa. She’d sit in the middle of the road, wild and shameful, blinking at the brightening horizon only to retreat and lock the gate herself, like some sort of domesticated freak.

But now, stepping out of the thinning foliage, it didn’t take long to spot the tight cluster of the sleeping village below. And there it was: civilisation. Houses, smaller than she’d imagined, squatted shoulder to shoulder, washed-out roofs and walls blended into one single body that breathed one single breath. The gaping windows of the clustered buildings stared up in the half-light of dawn: *And who are you?* they asked. For now, she could only stare back.

As Ana walked down into the village, the hints of life piled onto themselves. Haystacks. A rug drying on a clothesline, a banged-up turquoise car, a single dusty shoe. Then, the first house—nothing like Artur’s—its walls caked in soot, one window shattered. Ana stole glimpses inside, hoping to observe the rhythms of life, someone watching the morning news or making breakfast or existing, but the village slept still.

Then, a man. When they spotted him in one of the shoddier gardens, Laika froze; she didn’t even bark. Ana didn’t dare move. Smoking a cigarette out of the corner of his mouth, the villager looked like he’d been sunburnt through his skin, down to his liver. He hurled corn onto the ground and, with each throw, a hurricane of plumage at his feet convulsed. The grey chickens pecked up seeds and dirt and their own shit in hungry jabs, dumb necks jerking back and forth, blank eyes staring at air as their master coughed spit and tobacco overhead.

Should she have asked him for directions? Perhaps. But before she could think it, Ana found herself hurtling towards the village, her steps quickening so much that she had to hold down her heavy bag to keep it from hitting her hip. Maybe she could ask someone else. Someone who wore a suit, like Artur, or at least a clean shirt.

As she hurried down the hill, dirt road turned into paved road, the houses inching closer together until one’s wall was another’s fence—then Ana found herself in what was trying to be a main square. But if these were the streets where life happened, they were sorely lacking life. Ana let Laika sniff aimlessly, trying to steady herself and hold the rising tide of disappointment at bay. She looked around, hoping to find something not as extravagant as their villa seemed now, but at least something good, clean, cared for. All there was was dust.

Advertising sunflower oil in crinkled plastic bottles, the single storefront broke the promise of its opening hours with bolted doors. The rest of the buildings, most of them slathered in cement, propped up ugly signs: *‘Construction Materials,’* one announced in hand painted letters that got smaller as the artist ran out of space. *‘Second Hend Feshion,’* said another. On a hill in the near distance, the white tower of a church held a cross made of two welded iron bars, on which a pigeon perched, watching.

*Where is everyone?*

Just then, a chair screeched against pebbles. The sound had come from the other side of the square, and whipped their panicked attention to the front of a peeling building. Ana had thought it abandoned, but its door was now propped open with a broom and there she was: a woman. Kicking some plastic tables together, she dragged herself back inside and disappeared under the communist-era sign, coughing as it tried to scream in faded red letters: *‘HOTEL COSMOS.’*

The fear climbed further up Ana’s throat, but she knew it would. She’d prepared herself for this, the task that put even Artur’s endless assignments to shame; starting her life, unshielded by anything other than her own intelligence, her own strength, her own force. This was it. Ana ignored the feeling of hot blood pounding through her ears and walked towards the front door.

Although the morning sun was strong, the hotel entrance—half reception, half café-bar—was so dark it blinded her for a moment. The room revealed itself to her gradually, in swollen stairs, stained upholstery stretched over old chairs, still lifes hung up on the walls like forgotten suicides. They all seemed covered with a thick layer of dust. So did the woman behind the reception, who was quiet enough for Laika not to notice her.

‘Hello, sir—madam. Good morning,’ Ana stuttered, digging her nails into her palm for her mistake, but the woman was too busy pressing a plastic pen into a notebook to notice she was there. Counting, not breathing, her shoulders and cardigan lumped together in a congealed dumpling: meaty and glutinous.

‘Good morning,’ Ana repeated, more pleased with the tone of her voice this time. It sounded strong. Perhaps too strong—the woman cocked backward as if she’d just noticed an axe suspended overhead. When she looked up at Ana’s face, she saw it fall.

‘Weren’t you coming at nine thirty?’

‘Pardon?’

‘You’re the audit lady, no?’

Ana stared at her; this scenario she hadn’t practised. ‘My apologies, but I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘Oh, thank God,’ the woman said, looking up at an imagined sky where Ana could only see a mouldy ceiling. Then, hunching back over her calculations, she continued a half-interested enquiry. Ana would’ve found it rude if it wasn’t such a relief to not be looked at. ‘You wanna check in, then?’

‘Oh. No.’

‘Then what do you want?’

*I want to see what a normal human looks like*, Ana contemplated saying. But she kept her gaze as casual as she could, just in case the woman looked up, and forced a smile at her thinning scalp: ‘Um—is your café open?’

‘Just about,’ the woman said, pointing her pen at the askew clock nailed into the wall behind her. Its second hand struggled to move forward, some faulty mechanism inside forcing it to jut backwards again and again and again. ‘Bit early, though.’

‘That’s why I need coffee,’ Ana said with a little laugh that didn’t sound like a laugh. The woman either didn’t register her joke or didn’t find it funny. Ana tightened her lips.

‘Milk. Sugar. Hm?’

‘Neither. Thank you.’

‘Take a seat,’ the woman sighed as she pushed her belly away from the desk, eyes still lingering on the figure her old pocket calculator blinked back at her.

Unhooking Laika’s lead, Ana hurried to the seat closest to the door as if towards a life raft. When she got there, she held onto the plank of wood underneath her with clenched fingers, allowed herself a few seconds to get used to the turbid waters. Five minutes, one coffee, one short conversation to find out about the trains. *Easy, easy, easy*, she told herself, as she watched Laika’s billowy white fur scuttle around.

When she caught her reflection in one of the glass cabinets, Ana thought she looked much too stiff, obviously uncomfortable, but leaning back into the sticky wood of the chair felt like easing into a mud-filled gutter. The tacky touch of it against her long hair and bare forearms made her shoot upright again.

Could anyone condemn her for thinking what she was thinking? Artur wouldn’t. Despite his disgust for what lay outside of the villa’s walls, Ana had spent her years imagining a wondrous place. How could she not have? The Dostoyevskys, the Tarkovskis, the Beethovens he’d taught her to appreciate were undeniable proof of it. But all of that seemed incompatible with the sight of this modern troglodyte spooning some dubious powder from a cloudy jar into a chipped mug.

‘No dog in ‘ere,’ the woman said as she banged Ana’s watery coffee onto the table. Her fat finger pointed at Laika, whose nose was still ping-ponging its way from one delicious stain to another.

‘Oh, so sorry,’ Ana said, trying to read the woman’s face, but it was coded in some alien language. ‘Would you prefer that we leave?’

‘No, it’s fine. Just don’t let it touch anything. And God forbid it pees or shits anywhere—’

‘She’s well trained,’ Ana said, calling Laika to her and tying her to the leg of the chair; she bit and pulled on it straight away. ‘It’s just that she’s not used to the lead yet.’

‘A dog not used to the lead?’ the woman said, as if she’d heard about a sun that doesn’t set.

‘She didn’t need it. She used to just roam around the garden until recently,’ Ana said. ‘It was a large garden. A little forest, really,’ she added, trying to guess the meaning behind the woman’s bewildered face, but it didn’t make a difference. The frown sunk deeper.

‘It’s tiny, but it’s not a puppy anymore, is it?’

‘She’s four.’

The woman gasped. ‘And for four years, you didn’t introduce this mutt to the lead?’

Something bitter scraped across the roof of Ana’s mouth and came out through words: ‘She’s not a mutt.’

‘Huh?’

‘I said, she’s not a mutt. So don’t call her that,’ Ana said, her smile gone. ‘Please.’

‘Alright,’ the woman said, re-evaluating some previous assumption. ‘Well, what brings you here, anyway? Visitin’ family?’

Ana paused, retrieving the careful phrasing she’d rehearsed. ‘I was only here for a few days, seeing my uncle.’

‘What’s ‘is name?’

She could barely keep from laughing in the woman’s face; there was no cosmos in which Artur knew her. ‘Oh, his house is much further up the mountain road. I don’t imagine he comes down often…’

The woman waited, her expression blank. At length, Ana conceded.

‘His name is Artur Alexandrescu.’

The woman tutted, rolled her eyes. ‘But of course I know Professor Alexandrescu. Owns that nice big ‘ouse up the road. Sure I know ‘im. Everyone knows ‘im.’

Ana’s mind jammed. *You knew about the villa?* She wanted to ask, nearly choking. *All this time?* But instead she asked a less conspicuous, ‘Everyone?’

‘Well, whoever’s left in this ghost town,’ the woman sighed. ‘So you’re the Professor’s niece, then? Figures,’ she said, giving her another head-to-toe look, another re-evaluation that this time resulted in a smile. ‘Ana, isn’t it?’

*What?* They not only knew of Artur and the villa, but they knew of *her*? The words blew a hole in the middle of her already shoddy certainty and turned what she’d thought would be a social exercise into a game with higher stakes. Ana wanted to ask more about what these villagers knew, but the words failed to come.

‘D’you know, this is the first time I seen any of his family down in the village? Haven’t seen ‘im ‘round either, more than a year now. It’s a pity. He usually comes every summer like clockwork. ‘Round this time, actually,’ the woman said, drawing a chair to sit at Ana’s table. ‘Guess he’s forgotten all about this place, like everyone else.’

‘No, it’s not true,’ Ana fought the thought, a well-practised reflex. ‘He hasn’t forgotten. He… well—’

‘I know it doesn’t look like his kind of place, dear, but he’s been ‘ere more than a few times,’ the woman said, misinterpreting some look on Ana’s face. Her posture straightened but immediately reverted to a slump, thick fingers dusting crumbs off the foulard tied around her midriff.

‘Yes, I’m sure…’

‘Loves my apple pie. Always tips well. No man who tips like that is ever a bad guy, y’know, and he’s not too high and mighty to joke around, like some of the villagers think. But ‘cause he’s doing well for hisself they can’t tell he’s just a quiet, thinky type. They think he’s arrogant, which is funny, really, ‘cause actually they’re the ones—’

The door screeched open. Ana’s shoulders nearly covered her ears. Laika snapped into a mad bark and jutted towards the door with so much force that Ana’s chair slid towards the entrance. In a succession of loud bangs, a man stomped into the reception.

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ he said to Laika, staggered, then bent to growl back at her with bared, rotten teeth. Ana’s veins and nerves all shrieked at the same time, but when she looked at the woman she could tell by her half-smile that the man meant it as some sort of joke. Even then, Ana’s hands gripped her chair until he finally shot up straight and shouted: ‘Big day, Marta! You doin’ alright?’

‘Mm. One second, dear,’ she said as she returned behind the bar, sighing.

The man gave Ana a lingering look, but took his time to walk to the table, to pull out Marta’s chair, to sit his bones on it. Even through the tide of her fear, when he put down his newspaper on the table Ana was dying to pick it up, run away, and read and read and read, but she forced herself to hold his gaze. She was surprised to recognise him. He was still smoking a cigarette out of the corner of his mouth.

‘I seen you earlier. You were walkin’ down the mountain road just now, weren’t you?’

‘We were,’ Ana said, checking how close she’d left her bag.

‘Yeah, you were lettin’ that little pooch drag you ‘round like you were the one wearin’ the collar,’ he said, laughing a rattling laugh, leaning over the table enough for her to smell beer and salt.

Laika growled. Ana let her.

‘Well, it ain’t like I wouldn’t have remembered you, anyway, puffy dog or not,’ the man went on. ‘No one comes ‘round here anymore. Everyone’s children and nieces and nephews are too busy workin’ their guts out God knows where.’

‘Ain’t that the truth,’ Marta mumbled from the other side of the room.

‘You visitin’, then?’

Ana forced herself to speak. ‘We’re leaving.’

‘Ah, of course you’re leavin’,’ he said, leaning into the backrest with a groan. Marta put an ashtray and a beer can on the table like a nurse lying down a forceps and scalpel in front of a surgeon. ‘Well, what can I say? Can’t blame you. There’s nothin’, absolutely nothin’ left here except dry land and old farts like us.’

‘Nice, Iacob,’ Marta said as she drew herself another chair to sit down next to him. ‘Keep talkin’ like that and everyone’s gon’ leave.’

‘Everyone already left,’ he said as he gave her a cigarette. She waited for him to light it, too, with the ease of a well-rehearsed routine that looked choreographed. ‘Smoke?’ he asked Ana.

‘No. Thank you.’

‘What is this lighter, Iacob?’ Marta said, grabbing it from his hand with a laugh. ‘You dirty old man.’

‘Eh. Some trinket I won at backgammon,’ he said, snatching it from her hand. ‘You’re Artur’s granddaughter or somethin’, then?’

‘Granddaughter! Is Professor Alexandrescu even married, you idiot? She’s his niece,’ Marta said, while Ana buried her face in the coffee cup, faking a slow, long sip to buy herself some breathing time.

She was dying for a good coffee—it had been months since the last of her jars ran out. But when the dubious liquid touched her tongue, it was so horrible that Ana let it stream back out into the cup. All she wanted to do was make some excuse and leave; was that the right thing to do? It was obvious they knew things, maybe even more than her. She couldn’t miss this opportunity.

Ana breathed into the steaming coffee, hot air blowing its murky aroma back up against her cheeks. When she put the cup down, her mind was made up.

‘You love my coffee, huh?’ Marta said proudly.

Ana managed to nod. Then she said, in an almost believable casual tone, ‘How do you know Artur?’

The man shrugged. ‘Everyone here knows everyone here.’

‘But how did you know I was his family?’

‘Don’t take a genius, am I right?’ he said, pointing his prickly chin in her general direction, prompting Ana to look down for whatever made her akin to Artur. As far as she could tell, there was nothing. ‘And besides, there’s nothin’ much up that road. No one ever goes that way but Artur.’

‘Why not?’

He shrugged again. ‘Tricky road. Dunno.’

*Tricky road, dunno*, Ana thought, laughing and crying inside at her theories of being surrounded by bare stretches of wilderness and dunes of sand, waterfalls and treacherous rivers and snakes and minotaurs. And now she was learning that, in fact, no one had ever gone past her gate because: *tricky road, dunno*.

‘I didn’t realise Artur had so many… friends… here,’ Ana said. The coffee cup and saucer clanked in her hands, dripping coffee onto Laika’s fur. She wiped it with a thin napkin while the two watched her, smoking.

‘He doesn’t,’ Iacob said with a short stab of laughter.

‘Now, that’s not true,’ Marta said.

‘And no, it’s not ‘cause he doesn’t like us. It’s ‘cause we don’t like him.’

‘Iacob,’ Marta said, as if he’d just dropped his trousers.

‘And that’s ‘cause he’s a grade A asshole.’

‘Iacob!’ Marta said, as if he’d dropped his underwear, too.

‘Asshole?’ Ana said, tightening the muscles of her jaw.

‘I’d say so. Never gets involved in anything ‘round here. Just bought the land with that castle and let everything outside his big boy fence be damned. I’m surprised he didn’t build a dam ‘round it, too,’ he said, wiping a final charcoal smear onto a suspiciously white wall. ‘Only descends upon us peasants once in a blue moon and, even then, I haven’t seen the man come down for a beer in years.’

‘That’s not true. He always comes to have coffee and apple pie.’

‘Who said anythin’ about your coffee and damn apple pie?’

Marta tutted. ‘Don’t pay any attention to him, dear. He’s grumpy in the mornings. Twenty years of hangovers will do that to you.’

‘Na, he ain't too popular—’

‘Your uncle was very nice to us when we were little, but he doesn’t want to remember that. And anyone who doesn’t want to get plastered with Iacob is either an idiot or an asshole in his books.’

‘—It’s just that there ain’t many good people ‘round here anymore.’

‘Professor Alexandrescu is a fine man,’ Marta said, looking straight at Iacob.

‘Just ‘cause he’s rich don’t mean he’s fine.’

‘Where are all the good people, then?’ Ana asked, unable to suppress the disgusted twitch of her upper lip. ‘In bars, having beer at 8 am?’

As soon as the words left her, she felt at once relieved and afraid; relieved to have aired thoughts she could’ve never uttered in Artur’s presence, and afraid of the repercussion that was sure to follow. The muscles in her forearms tightened, preparing to either cover her head or throw her very first punch.

But ‘I wish,’ Iacob said, missing her insult entirely. ‘No one knows how to have a good time ‘round here anymore. That’s the problem, everyone’s running around for fuckin’ money,’ Iacob said, tapping his cigarette for punctuation.

With every dumb word Iacob threw across the table, ash piling onto itself in feeble columns, Ana let her muscles release more; maybe Artur *was* right. Maybe the outside world *was* teeming with calcified weaklings. Maybe it *was* true that she had only to step outside of the villa to claim the world as her own. Maybe she *was* special.

But Ana’s relief quickly mingled with disappointment, leaving her staring at Iacob’s moving mouth, at Marta’s faintly shaking hands, wondering what life must’ve looked like for them to end up like this.

‘Anyway,’ Iacob said, pausing his weak tirade to uncross and cross his legs.

‘I wanted to ask you,’ Ana said before he could resume, ‘if there is a train station nearby.’

‘Sure there is, dear. Where are you headed?’

‘Oh, I think, maybe…’ Ana said, scraping her nails against her open palm, staring at its paleness like an expanse of questions she couldn’t begin to answer.

‘You don’t know where you’re goin’?’ Iacob sneered.

‘Well,’ Ana said, tracing the creases that tried to make sense of her skin, ‘where are the trains going?’

Marta’s eyebrows furrowed for a second. ‘The obvious. Bucharest, Cluj…’

The sound of it was heavy enough to make her throat close in, choked by its reverberation. Artur’s city.

‘Alright, then,’ Ana said, giving in to the inevitability of it. ‘Bucharest.’

‘In that case, you’ve still got time. The train leaves at ten.’

‘You mean, today?’

‘In about two hours, yes.’

‘Oh my God, I need to go,’ Ana said, shooting up. Her chair screeched across the floor, causing Laika to shift from paw to paw, ears pressed against her head. The whimper she gave was almost inaudible, but Ana caught it.

‘Don’t worry, sweet. There’s plenty of time. Iacob is goin’ to take you.’

‘I’m gonna what?’ Iacob groused.

‘I’m fine, I just need the directions—’ Ana said as she bent down to caress Laika’s worried eyes.

‘Yes, yes, of course you’ll take her,’ Marta said, waving her hand at Ana so that she’d sit again. ‘There’s no rush, the station’s not far. You’ll get there in five minutes with Iacob.’

‘And why’s the big man not drivin’ her, the professor guy?’

‘He would have,’ Ana lied, unsure why. ‘It’s just that he had to leave early. Business, in the city,’ she lied again.

‘Straight asshole,’ he said, as if sticking a label that said ‘milk’ onto a cow. ‘Let a clueless girl like you wander ‘round godforsaken roads, all alone, with pearls clamped in your hair,’ Iacob said, throwing what was meant to be a significant look at Marta. ‘Some guy, your Professor Alexandrescu.’

Ana felt her face burn up as she stared into his hooded eyes. Marta tutted again, and Ana imagined the sound of it multiplying backwards and forwards in time like a fractal, endlessly circling around Iacob’s insecurities. But this wasn’t the villa, and she wasn’t forced to stay here, or anywhere else. Not anymore; not in a world where the trains came and went every day.

‘Come on, Iacob, take the girl. I would’ve done it myself, but I need to finish checking the accounts.’

‘That’s why I came,’ he said. ‘The bank’s coming today, isn’t it?’

‘Mm-hm.’

‘You’re going through the accounts again?’

‘Just to be sure,’ Marta said, fiddling with her cigarette to avoid his rolling eyes. ‘I know what she’ll say already. It’s obvious from just walking down the village streets for two minutes. Ain’t enough people ‘round here to buy two sorry cans of Coca-Cola.’

‘How much for the coffee, then, Marta?’ Ana said, throwing her bag over her shoulder.

‘Oh, don’t worry about it, dear. It’s on me.’

Ana felt a touch warmer inside as Marta looked up and smiled at her. She could see why even Artur had grown to like her. ‘Thank you, Marta.’

‘Tell the Professor I said hi, and I’m so sorry about—’

‘You’re joking,’ Iacob said. ‘Are you really giving away free coffee when the bank’s knockin’ on—’

The floorboards creaked overhead, marking one, two, three heavy steps.

‘Oh, there we go. A guest,’ Iacob continued. ‘Maybe you still got a chance of runnin’ a profit here. If you let ‘em pay you, that is.’

*A guest?* Ana thought, wondering who would willingly choose to spend the night in Hotel Cosmos. But she didn’t care to find out; she’d done well talking to not one, but two people for her first encounter, and she didn’t want to push herself over the edge. Her shaking fingers moved quickly to untie Laika’s lead, but not quickly enough.

‘Morning,’ a voice cut through the room. When Ana looked up, she was surprised to see that the man wasn’t as old as the rugged sound suggested. Not at all. ‘I’m checking out now, Marta,’ he said, dropping a boulder of a backpack on the floor along with a smaller boulder of a camera. ‘Got to catch the train. I checked online. It’s at ten, right?’

His shoes were as dirty as if he’d woken up in a ditch rather than a hotel. And were those jeans grey or just faded black? When Ana allowed her eyes to finally drift from his crinkled t-shirt to his face, she saw he hadn’t even shaved—but she didn’t feel disgust. Quite the opposite; blood rushed against her skin in a new feeling that she couldn’t place. Her eyes lingered, her resolve to leave softened.

‘Yes, ten. But I thought you were staying with us for a few more days?’ Marta said as she walked towards him.

‘My plans changed,’ he said, rubbing his swollen face with violent strokes that dragged his cheeks up and down.

‘Good business, this hotel business, Marta,’ Iacob announced to the room. ‘Predictable market. Great for liquidity.’

He frowned at Iacob across the room. ‘Hey, man,’ he said, eyes flicking to the beer on the table. ‘Started early on the booze, huh?’

‘Damn right. You want one?’

The man looked at Iacob for a long second, then caught Ana’s gaze. She blinked, unthinking. ‘Only if she's having one.’

Ana guffawed, the unexpected burst of laughter dissolving a tension in her cheeks that she hadn’t been aware of. She was about to speak when Iacob cut her off.

‘Done.’

‘Oh, no, no, I—I—I need to go to the train station,’ Ana said.

‘So do I,’ the man said. ‘There’s plenty of time.’

‘Sure there is. There’s always time for a beer,’ Iacob shouted. ‘Marta, get the kids two beers, on me.’

‘Let me check ‘im out first, for chrissakes,’ she mumbled, pressing another calculation into her calculator.

In the meantime, the man’s eyes lingered on Ana, on her bare legs, on her dress, on her face. Was this one of those moments? It didn’t feel quite like she thought it would; there was a tingling, a lot of it, but much of the sensation was diluted by the thoughts popping up in her head: *Was this what Outside men looked like? Did no one wear a suit? Why did she like it? Should she sit down, or stay standing?*

The result of her confusion was that Ana did nothing. She just stared back, trying to keep her inner storm at bay. The man’s gaze speared his intention to her, direct and steady and impossible to mistake, even for someone as inexperienced as she was. It was a relief when Marta drew the man’s attention away from her, to hand him a piece of paper and some money—another minus-something for her accounts.

‘No, you keep it,’ he said, closing her palm into a fist. ‘I cancelled on you at the last second.’

She shook her head. ‘I won’t even hear abo—’

‘Just take it, Marta,’ he said, and they exchanged something in their gaze that dipped her dry dumpling cheeks into hot chicken soup. Seeing her smile made Ana smile, too.

‘Alright, dear.’

‘Come, sit down. You too,’ Iacob said to Ana, puffing up his chest as if readying himself to be measured up. ‘What’s your name?’

‘I’m Franco,’ he said, shaking his hand. His chest and shoulders, though taut, remained relaxed.

‘I’m Iacob. This here is—actually, what’s your name?’

‘Ana,’ she said, grateful that it didn’t involve too many syllables and that, despite his appearance, the man knew proper etiquette; she hadn’t extended her hand first, so he didn’t either.

‘She’s just leaving too,’ Marta shouted from behind the bar, her voice climbing to a squeaking inflection.

‘Yes, she mentioned that,’ Franco said, with that same look that Ana had never been on the receiving end of. Her mind scrambled, whatever fear had remained now subdued to the intensity of her curiosity. ‘You’re going to Bucharest?’ he asked, dragging a chair much too close to her.

‘Yes,’ Ana said, crossing her legs away from him.

‘Same,’ Franco smiled at her as he leaned back. ‘We can catch the train together.’

Ana tried to look straight at him and say something to the effect of a non-committal maybe, but she knew by the smug look on his face that she wasn’t pulling ‘casual’ off—he obviously took her social ineptness as the shyness of some swooning ingénue. She hated the thought. Even Iacob looked at her with a knowing smirk, and when Marta served their beers, she raised an eyebrow at her.

‘Thank you, but I don’t drink beer—’

‘You don’t have to have it, dear. But you’re still paying for it, Iacob,’ she said.

‘Hey, how come I never get free stuff?’ he said, feigning discontent, although his downward tone had turned upbeat.

‘You’re not nice,’ Marta teased, ruffling his hair as they shared a little laugh that made Ana feel like laughing herself.

It was pleasant to be at a table of smiling strangers. Not a perfect table, sure, but a welcoming table. Maybe she’d been judging them too harshly. After all, they’d taken the time to talk to her, offered her drinks, given her directions. Maybe these were nice people, after all.

‘Thanks for the beer,’ Franco said, opening it with a hiss. ‘Cheers.’

‘Well, cheers. Hope you had a good time in our little shithole,’ Iacob said, actually smiling. He knocked back the invisible remains of his first beer to crack open the second—

—and then the ritual stopped.

Ana could tell by the expectation on their faces and their suspended beers that they were waiting for her to do something, to utter some sort of password that would unjam the social machine and allow it to proceed to the next stage. But she was no mechanic; Ana stared at their expectant faces and, when the silence had gone on for long enough to realise they wouldn’t simply ignore her, she went into internal panic mode.

In her darkest moments in the villa, she’d imagined something like this might happen when she finally left. That she would find herself in a group of people, doing well enough, and then suddenly and irreparably, everyone would know by some small gesture or throwaway word of hers that she wasn’t who she said she was, or who Artur thought he’d made.

In the worst versions of this nightmare, the hypothetical people wouldn’t only realise that she wasn’t like them. They would also know, through some other tell she didn’t know was seared into her being, that she had lived between four fences her whole life, that she was an abomination resulting from someone else’s unquestioned theories, and worst of all, that there was nothing of hers inside of her.

The Artur Shell.

‘Pick up your beer,’ Franco said, his tone mercifully friendly, although she could hear some sort of doubt arise underneath his ease. Her eyes refocused to realise she’d been staring at him.

‘But—but I’m not drinking,’ she said, nevertheless picking it up on his command, embarrassed and unthinking, knowing that to relieve that terrible tension she would’ve jumped on one leg to a three-quarter rhythm.

‘That’s fine. You can still cheers with us.’

‘Oh,’ she said, wanting again to dig her nails into her flesh, instead holding the can up with the tips of her fingers and clinking it with theirs as if it were a champagne flute. Some of the froth dripped on her hand and she wiped it immediately, trying not to think about how much she wished she’d left before she ruined this precious memory of her first Outside interaction.

‘Here’s some apple pie for you kids. It’s the one your uncle loves, dear,’ Marta said, rubbing Ana’s shoulder as she laid a plate with two spoons between her and Franco.

Ana flinched at the touch, another affront, another step towards the edge. She knew without looking that Franco’s watchful eyes had noticed, but she willed herself to recover with a swift smile and even managed to say, ‘Thank you.’

Ana stared at the pie. It didn’t look good; it didn’t even look edible. Nevertheless, an appetite took over her, a hunger for food that wasn’t white or beige, for a meal that had more than one ingredient, for something she hadn’t had to scrape from the last of the pantry. But her hand stayed glued to Laika, made of lead, just like her stomach, just like her pride.

All she wanted to do was leave. Alone. But how? They were all watching her. It made her afraid to move, to speak, lest she give away just how much of an oddity she was. *Please,* she thought to no one, careful not to move her face. *I can get further than this. I can do better than this,* she chanted in her mind, sinking her fingers in Laika’s soft fur to keep them from trembling. *I’m not going back there,* she thought, mentally planting her feet onto the floor, steadying herself in front of the gaping cliff ahead that only she could see.

‘You take your time and enjoy the dessert,’ Marta said, although neither of them touched it. ‘If Iacob drives you, you’ll get to the station well ahead of time, and it’d be nice to have a reception full of customers when the lady comes for once…’ she mumbled as she collapsed into her chair.

Iacob conceded. ‘Alright, alright.’

‘That’s a nice dog,’ Franco said, abruptly breaking his silent stare. ‘Girl, boy?’

‘Girl,’ she breathed. ‘Laika.’

‘Hi, Laika,’ he said, petting her head with hands that looked like he could slash a tree trunk with a blunt axe in a single blow. ‘Russian name?’

‘Mm-hm.’

‘Russian name, Russian breed… You Russian?’

‘No. I just like the name. You know, first dog in space?’

‘Ah, right. Quite the communist grandma reference,’ he said, smiling a wry smile at her. ‘That’s surprising, though. You look so Russian.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. It’s your jaw, I think. It’s very… square.’ His brows twitched downwards when he’d said it, as if wondering why she looked the way she looked.

‘Oh.’

It took everything she had to stop her hand from reaching up to her face. Artur had never said anything about her face, or about her jaw. She’d never noticed anything strange. Was it really square? Was that bad?

‘No, it’s nice. I like it,’ he said, answering the question that must have been plastered on her face. ‘It’s different.’

The compliment didn’t come with a smile, nor with a sense of reassurance.

‘Um, thank you.’ The silence extended. Iacob and Marta exchanged funny looks. ‘Is that a camera?’ Ana asked, aching to move the focus away from her, even at the expense of asking dumb questions.

‘Yeah.’

‘I also had one. Worked with film, from the ‘60s. Yours looks very… advanced,’ she said, feeling even more stupid.

‘It’s alright.’

‘Where are you from, Franco?’ Iacob asked. Ana thanked God for the short respite.

‘Bucharest.’

‘Heading back home after a holiday, then?’

‘Nah. I’m just travelling through.’

‘Where are you going?’ Marta asked as Iacob lit another cigarette for her. Adding to their choreography, he extended his pack towards Franco as well.

‘Cheers, man,’ he said, firing up his cigarette with Iacob’s plastic lighter.

He looked at it for a few seconds; stuck to it was a picture of a half-naked woman in a red devil suit. She looked as beautiful as Audrey Hepburn, but there was something dirtier, meaner, hungrier about her. Her jaw, Ana noticed, was rounded.

‘Um, where am I going? Don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’ Iacob asked.

‘Don’t know,’ Franco said, his tone flippant while his face showed something darker; a clenching of sorts.

‘But you’re going to the station?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And you’re going to Bucharest?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then you know where you’re goin’,’ he said, his old irritation scratching through his voice again.

‘I wouldn’t say that.’

‘Then what would you say?’

‘That I know the general direction.’

Something in Iacob’s throat now growled. ‘Well this here girl’s going somewhere in that gen’ral direction too,’ he said, swatting invisible flies in front of him. ‘Maybe you two free spirits can find your way to the summer of love together and spare me the drive.’

‘Not sure we can, though. The station’s a good few kilometres away, isn’t it? No taxis either,’ Franco said. ‘Could use the drive if you don’t mind, man.’

‘Eh, it’s nothing two youngins can’t manage.’

‘We’ll pay.’

‘We won’t even hear about it,’ Marta interceded.

‘Won’t we?’ Iacob’s voice climbed.

‘Come on, Iacob, drive the kids,’ Marta pleaded. ‘What were you gonna do anyway, go back home and talk to your chicken?’

‘If you care so much, why don’t you taxi ‘em around, woman?’ Then, lowering his voice: ‘And if they miss the train today, so what? They can get two rooms here, lunch, dinner, breakfast—’

A knock on the door twisted Marta’s neck towards the breaking voice: ‘Mrs. Spanciu?’

‘She’s early,’ Marta whispered, turning to realise she’d stubbed her cigarette into the table. ‘Oh shoot—’

‘Don’t worry, Marta, I’ll clean it,’ Ana said, smiling as she wiped it with her coffee- and beer-stained tissue.

‘Thank you, dear. You darlings take your time finishin’ your apple pie,’ she said, although they still hadn’t touched it. ‘Then you be nice and drive ‘em, Iacob. It’ll be good for you.’

\*\*\*

The car looked as functional as a soleless rubber boot.

‘How many beers have you had today, Iacob?’ Ana asked.

‘Not enough for this shit,’ he said, wincing as his last cigarette drag burned too close to the dirt under his fingernails. He threw it onto the ground, then yanked the door until its lock came loose and it opened with a thud. ‘Well? Get in,’ he croaked, pulling the front chair to create a small triangle for Ana to slither to the back seat. Stealing a glimpse through the smeared window, she shuddered at the sight of the coffin-like alcove.

The situation was dire, but what were the alternatives? Walking wasn’t an option anymore; they would miss the train. One more night in Poiana Mărului? No way in hell.

‘You need help?’ Franco asked when she’d hesitated the third time. ‘I can hold your bag.’

‘No—I’m okay—thank you,’ she said. The prospect of him touching her propelled her to step inside.

‘And be careful with that dog,’ Iacob said as he walked around the car. ‘Don’t let it pee in there.’

‘She’s well trained,’ Ana said, trying not to let the dry mud smeared on the backseat get onto her white dress. But both her and Laika had already been tainted; not by any particular stains as much as a general road-dust coating.

‘Don’t think it’d make much of a difference even if the dog shat in here, man,’ Franco said, laughing as he crashed into the front seat.

Ana nearly gasped at Franco’s blatant show of disrespect, her eyes shooting to catch Iacob’s reaction in the rearview mirror—but she was surprised to see him smile. She imagined with a shiver how Artur would react to such a remark; but of course, this would never be Artur’s car, and even if it was, it wouldn’t look like this.

‘Ah, I know,’ Iacob said. ‘This car’s a bad joke.’

To start the engine, Iacob had to crank the key and smack the dashboard at the same time. To escape the smell of acrid something mixed with decades of tobacco, Franco had to push the window down with his hand.

‘The car is the car, but what the hell is that smell?’

‘Bird,’ he said as the tuna can began to rattle down the road, the dark shades of Hotel Cosmos shrinking behind them.

Ana clutched the driver’s seat with her right hand and caressed a quivering Laika against her thigh with her left. Even in the turbulent chaos, a realisation made her smile: she was going somewhere, because she could. She didn’t have to stay, to get used to the village’s smells and people and streets. In a few minutes, she’d be on a train, and Hotel Cosmos would only be a memory taking up nothing more than a one-hour slot of her life, of which there were many. Then, in Bucharest, she’d get on a plane, and none of what happened there would have to stick to her, either.

Maybe one day, even the villa would be nothing more than a shadow cast on some distant wall she’d rather not look at.

‘You been livin’ here for a long time?’ Franco asked as the shutter of his camera clicked towards Iacob. He didn’t seem to notice or care, either due to no self-consciousness, or no consciousness of self.

‘My whole life.’

‘Good place?’

‘What do you think?’

‘Well, there’s not much going on.’

‘No. There isn’t.’

The houses sped past in a pale swoosh that the few people on the street blended into: an old woman with a crooked nose and a beautiful red scarf covering her head, three children jumping rope barefoot on the grass, a girl Ana’s age in a yellow dress riding a bicycle. Iacob took a slower turn and their eyes locked; Ana smiled, but the girl only scowled before she receded into the distance.

Ana tried to fixate on the figures passing outside her window and imagine what they were thinking, what they’d had for breakfast, if they got on with their mothers, but their sleepy faces said little about anything. When Iacob stopped the car to let a cow cross the road, it gave her a few extra seconds to gawp at an old couple who were walking hand in hand.

‘These fuckin’ cows, I swear to God,’ Iacob said.

The couple was impeccable, dressed in all black, a Sunday suit and dress. The man held a raffia bag in one hand and clutched his wife’s arm in the other, watching the pavement in front of her every step. The sweet sight made Ana want to take out her notebook and write down what she saw; but this was no time for such luxuries. Instead, she widened her eyes, gaping pupils taking in every detail they could fit into her already overwhelmed mind.

‘Wait, wait,’ Franco said to a honking Iacob. When Ana looked at him, she saw the camera lifted to his face, shutter clicking closed and open, closed and open as he took photos of the couple. Obviously, her red was his red.

‘You’re right. The honking will give the Gheorghes a heart attack,’ Iacob said. ‘They’re having a rough week already. Their son just died.’

The words killed the happiness bubbling in Ana’s stomach, turning it into sadness at the sight of the man, though frail himself, taking such care of his mourning wife.

‘Damn,’ Franco said, lowering the camera. ‘And he died before them? They look ancient.’

‘Yeah. He drank a lot, got cirrhosis. Good friend of mine, actually.’

‘If they’re also going to the train station, shouldn’t we ask them if they need a ri—?’ Ana began, but before she could finish, the engine sputtered and they’d swerved past the cow.

‘What, did you say somethin’?’

Ana watched Iacob in the rearview mirror. His eyes, dirty sieves for the world, fixated on the road. She’d seen glimpses of that hollow in Marta’s face, in the eyes of some people on the street. Not in Franco’s, though, Ana thought, watching the smooth line of the side of his neck; but her short reverie was interrupted by the sound of Laika retching.

‘What’s that dog tryin’ back there?’

‘She’s—’ Ana scrambled. There was no way to clean the stain nor cover the stench. ‘She’s throwing up, I’m sorry.’

‘Well-trained, my ass,’ Iacob grumbled.

‘No, it’s okay. I’ll clean it up.’

‘You better,’ he said, throwing his newspaper towards Ana. It hit her in the head, but she didn’t have the time to protest. ‘Put the paper on it. It’ll soak it up.’

Franco turned and saw Laika claw onto the seat at wide angles, preserving any stability she could get, still vomiting.

‘Well, she sure eats enough.’

‘I didn’t know how long it’d be until we found somewhere to eat,’ Ana said as she blotted the seat. ‘I wanted to make sure she wouldn’t get hungry.’

‘And what did you eat? Ten cheeseburgers?’

Ana looked up at him with what she intended to be an *‘Are you really making jokes right now?’* face, but from his expression she could tell it only served to amuse him more.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ she asked, deepening his smile, which annoyingly also deepened hers. ‘I’m sorry, Iacob,’ she said when Franco finally turned around. ‘I don’t think this newspaper will be enough.’

‘Eh, just leave it on the patch. It’ll dry.’

Ana pressed a few pages against the remaining vomit and, while Laika calmed down, read her first ever newspaper headlines. The ink had blurred, but she managed to make out snippets: *‘17-YEAR OLD PERISHES ON BIRTHDAY IN HORRIFIC CAR CRASH,’* *‘ANIETTA LOSES THIRTY POUNDS IN SHOCK SUMMER TRANSFORMATION,’* *‘MILITARY CHIEF ACCEPTS “TOUGH SITUATION” IN EASTERN UKRA—’* she made out, before being distracted by a page-wide image of a woman with nearly exposed breasts.

‘Why is there a naked woman in the newspaper?’ Ana asked before she could check herself.

‘Why not?’ Iacob laughed, the phlegm in the back of his throat breaking. ‘Am I right?’ he said to Franco, but he didn’t respond.

*It must be a low-tier publication,* Ana thought, ignoring that the title above all the other titles read, *‘Romanian Times, The #1 Romanian Newspaper.’* In a few more minutes of driving over unpaved roads that the classified section could hardly handle, they made it to what Iacob said was the train station. It didn’t look like it. The small blue sign announcing ‘GARA’ was its only distinctive feature.

‘Well, there you go,’ Iacob said, scowling at Laika as Ana let her stretch her legs on solid ground. When he glanced at the train station, his teeth stopped their screeching and clenched.

‘Thanks for the drive, man,’ Franco said, shaking his hand. Ana thought she saw a banknote slip from his palm to Iacob’s.

‘Yeah.’

‘Thank you, Iacob,’ she said. ‘And sorry again.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I managed to get most of the vomit out of the—’

‘Right. Train’s comin’ in an hour or so, if you’re lucky. Enjoy.’

‘What do you mean, if we’re lucky?’ Ana said, but Iacob had already got into the car and begun the ritual of slamming the dashboard.

‘He means the delays,’ Franco said, throwing his backpack over his shoulder. ‘But don’t worry, they’re usually no later than two hours, max three.’

‘Three *hours*?’

‘What, you got somewhere to be?’ he said as he walked into the train station. He didn’t hold the door open for her, but she didn’t care. She was too happy to be left alone for a moment, and to see wide windows letting plenty of sunlight into the waiting room, which had only one person in it.

The station was quiet but for a radio buzzing and a coffee machine burring. In blinking letters, the panel announced the two-line train schedule: Bucharest—10:00—DELAYED, Cluj-Napoca—16:00.

*Two trains every day,* Ana whispered to herself, imagining the country breathing through train lines running all across it, filling up here and emptying there. It explained why a place like Poiana Mărului would be all exhale, no inhale—and why she had to get to Bucharest.

On the side of the room, a repurposed school desk served as a ticket counter. The man behind it watched them like he would another train coming and going; he barely raised his eyes as he emptied a sugar sachet into his paper coffee cup.

‘Two for Bucharest?’

‘Yes, please,’ Franco said. ‘How much?’

‘Twenty-five lei each for second class. Fifty-five for first.’

‘Um, Franco, could you help me, please?’ Ana said, calling him to the side. She’d opened her brown leather bag and his eyes widened, as if waking from a lull. ‘I’m not quite sure which bill—’

‘Holy shit. What are you doing carrying all that cash?’

His tone made her heart sink. ‘I just… I need it. Why, is it a lot? I mean, is it bad?’

‘It is, if someone sees it. No, don’t—don’t take it out,’ he said, pressing her hand back into the bag. ‘Don’t let anyone see that.’

‘Oh.’

His hand felt warm, but the touch wasn’t as surprising as the realisation that it didn’t make her uneasy. It didn’t even make her flinch.

‘Leave it. I’ll get your ticket.’

‘Really?’ Ana said, hoping her blushing wasn’t too bright.

‘Yeah. You got mostly euros and the only lei you have are huge bills. You need to break those.’

‘Break them?’

‘Yeah, like get smaller bills. This man wouldn’t even have enough change to give you.’

‘Is it really that much?’

‘Shh,’ he said, widening his eyes at her.

Even fifty-five lei to get to Bucharest sounded like very little. Looking at her money clips, it seemed ridiculous to calculate how many trips she could buy with even just one of them. Judging by the weight of the bag, the number was in the hundreds, thousands—but the thought wasn’t reassuring.

Why would Artur be so generous? Why would he already give her all the money she could possibly need to start her life? Surely, he must’ve expected that she’d come to see him in Bucharest. He wouldn’t have thought she’d just disappear… right?

‘You should at least wrap the cash in your clothes,’ Franco said when he handed her the ticket.

Ana tried to remain calm as her doubt threatened to choke her. The questions closed in on her jugular. What if Artur wasn’t in Bucharest, or what if he didn’t want her to find him? But no, impossible. She was special to him. He hadn’t really meant it when he’d said… It must have been his anger, the disappointment that had been growing in him, his way of pushing her. Must have. That one dismissive goodbye can’t have been *the* goodbye.

‘And you should also hide each of the clips in different places in your bag.’

‘Um, why?’ she asked, bringing herself back to reality.

‘That way, if anyone ever finds one, they might think that’s all of it, and you’ll still have the rest of the cash left.’

‘Oh,’ Ana said, double-checking the zip of her bag as they walked out onto the platform, keeping a safe one-metre distance from him. A small group was also waiting for the train at the far end; now that she had yet another thing to hide, she was doubly pleased to see no one looking at her. ‘You’re very streetwise, aren’t you?’

‘For someone walking around with a house deposit, you’re surprisingly not.’

Ana watched him carefully. ‘I’ll figure it out, don’t worry. I always figure things out.’

‘You didn’t make your little fortune selling drugs then, I gather?’

‘Why, did you run out?’

Franco laughed. It was surprisingly nice to have been the cause of it. ‘I stopped getting refills a long time ago, when I was still young and wild.’

‘And now you’re what? Old and boring?’ she said, looking him up and down. ‘You don’t look like it.’

‘I feel like it.’

When they sat down on the cracked plastic seats, she noticed Franco fixing her with a strange look. Again.

‘What?’ she asked, holding back Laika from scuttling down the platform. She kept looking towards the small cluster of young people who were smoking and drinking paper cup coffee in the cool morning air.

‘You’re a weird girl.’

‘You’re a weird guy.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘I’m from here.’

‘No, you’re not.’

Ana scoffed. ‘Yes. I am.’

‘You’re not. You’ve got about as much in common with these people as South Koreans do with North Koreans.’

‘Which one am I?’

‘Huh?’

‘North or South?’

‘Haven’t figured that out yet,’ he said, sinking his arm deep in his backpack. When he took it out, he was holding a fresh pack of cigarettes. ‘But I mean, come on. What’s the story?’

‘Okay. I didn’t really grow up in the village. But I grew up in a house not far from it.’

‘Mm-hm. And did you sleep on about a hundred mattresses in that house?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Like in the story. You know, with the princess who slept on lots of mattresses and could still feel a pebble under the first one.’

The story came to her in a flash; it was in one of her fairytale books back in the villa. Maybe she wasn’t so out of touch, after all. Eager to show she’d gotten a cultural reference, Ana hurried to say: ‘It wasn’t a pebble. It was a single pea.’

‘Was it really sticking into your back?’ he said, narrowing his eyes for comedic effect.

Ana watched him light his cigarette. ‘And where did you come from, the slums?’

‘Well, that’s a bit uncalled for.’

‘Well, that’s Iacob’s lighter,’ Ana said, pointing at the mean Audrey Hepburn printed on it.

‘It’s a nice lighter. And I thought he deserved to be taxed a bit for that attitude.’

‘The man drove us here, and you steal his lighter?’

‘You just feel bad ‘cause Laika threw up all over his back seat.’

‘It’s not that.’

‘Isn’t it? I didn’t think you’d be on his side, after he said what he said about you and your uncle.’

‘Still, it’s not right to steal his property.’

‘Big words. Right… Steal… Property. The lines are more blurred than that.’

‘That’s what thieves say.’

‘Hey,’ Franco said, raising his hands up in the air, the cigarette balanced between his lips. ‘I don’t claim to be morally sound.’

‘Good. You shouldn’t.’

‘Aren’t you worried the man of no morals will steal your little fortune there?’ he said, inching close to her face.

‘No,’ she said, pretending she hadn’t thought of it ten times already. He smelled like peppermint and tobacco.

‘Why are you carrying that much money, anyway?’ He was leaning so close that his face looked distorted, eyes large enough for her to fall into. ‘You cash in some old bastard’s alimony?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Of course. Living up to the Romanian stereotype, I see.’

‘So are you. Thug.’

Franco burst out laughing and then fell silent as he smoked. Ana used the intermission to prepare herself mentally for what the train would look like, how many people would be in the cabin, how long she’d have to sit there, pressed against hot, breathing people. She stole a quick glance at her ticket and some of her tension dissipated—it was a first class seat. Thank God.

‘Thank you ever so much for the ticket,’ Ana hurried to say, mortified, when she realised she’d been too lost in her thoughts to thank him. ‘Sorry. I forgot to say.’

‘You’re ever so welcome, madame,’ he said with a little bow.

\*\*\*

The train was late; empty tracks sizzled hot under overgrown weeds. When the Gheorghes arrived, some of the young travellers let them have their seats, and the man helped his wife sit down, still holding her arm. Franco took another sneaky picture of them while Ana pretended not to be bewildered by the camera’s little TV-like colour surface. *‘It shows the photograph already?’* she wanted to ask, but managed to keep her tell-tale wonder under control.

When the door opened again, Ana saw that the latest person to join the platform horde was the girl in yellow. She’d picked up a friend on the way, but this time, she wasn’t scowling at Ana. She was staring at Franco.

‘So why are you leaving early, then?’ Ana asked.

‘‘Cause that hotel was disgusting.’

‘And you say I’m the princess.’

‘Believe me, I stayed in plenty of fucked up hotels. I get it. You travel down a bumpy road, you expect a bumpy ride. But this place was something else. The bathtub was like the floor of a barber shop.’

‘Is that why you didn’t shower?’

He puffed smoke out in a sudden cloud, like the train that wouldn’t come. ‘Damn. You’re brutal.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just, it’s quite obvious.’ Another faux-pas; Ana cringed. ‘It’s not your smell. You smell great. It’s the … the crazy hair … and everything.’

‘Don’t worry, I can take it,’ he said, holding her gaze. ‘It’s a good thing you’re going to Bucharest, pea princess. I can’t imagine you sleeping in a room like that… and I’ve got a pretty wild imagination.’

‘Oh,’ Ana said, looking away and damning her schoolgirl mannerisms.

She wished she’d been in the world for at least a week or two before meeting him. Right now, he was too close, too forward, too much for her to deal with. Everything was going too fast; she’d expected the train would take days to come, not hours. Most of all, she thought she’d be alone, a free agent with the anonymity to make blunders here and there and then disappear again, not forced to feign normality at the same time as figuring everything out. Not in the company of a man, a man her age, a man who looked like he did.

‘What’s the plan, then?’ Franco asked. ‘Why are you going to Bucharest?’

‘I’m going to stay with family for a little while,’ she said. Then, measuring his unimpressed face, his road-wrecked shoes, she added: ‘And then I want to travel.’

‘Oh, really?’ She’d managed to catch him off guard, if only for a second. ‘Alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nice,’ he said with a strange, slow nod.

‘What’s that look?’

‘Nothing. I’m just a bit surprised.’

‘Why?’

‘You don’t seem like the solo traveller type. More like the kind to go on boyfriend-subsidised trips to Saint Barts or some shit like that.’

Ana was lost—*what the hell was Saint Barts?*—but she kept her face neutral, tried to guess at his meaning.

‘I’m not going travelling for fun,’ she said. ‘It’s more of a… strategy.’

‘A strategy?’

‘Yeah.’

‘For what?’

‘To make myself figure stuff out.’

‘Figure what out?’

‘Me,’ she tittered, embarrassed by the word as soon as she said it.

He nodded. ‘No, I get it.’

‘Are you seeing your family? In Bucharest?’

He grimaced at some foul stench only he could smell. ‘Nah.’

‘You’re not close?’

‘We haven’t talked in a long, long time.’

‘That’s a sad thing to say.’

‘No, it’s not.’

Ana stayed silent for a while, wondering what it’d take for her to never speak to her family, if she had one. She couldn’t come up with much.