

## Chapter one

### *the lover destroyed*

I have never known there to be so much talk surrounding the arrival of an Iraqi girl and her grandmother. But that's what came trailing in on their heels as they made a new home. The conversation, the rumors about their fortune, all of it clung to their backs even when they kept quiet in the evenings. I thought nothing of it. I was a miserable person. I saw ghosts around every corner. Ghosts of people I have lost, ghosts of people I know to be still alive, even ghosts of strangers. It was this town. I was ready to leave, run away and do whatever had to be done. I didn't have much to leave behind. Will my ghosts follow me? I was willing to take that risk. Willing to take the fall for a reckless decision on behalf of my anger, my resentment for all that has happened and will *happen*.

The orange trees in California seemed to never wither. The valley was bold and humid, harvesting anything but happiness for the small town stifled any sort of dream you had. I was losing inspiration, writing down lists instead of poetry, investing time in failure rather than creativity. I had no muse. I was strangely okay with that. Okay with the idea of fruition finding me in another life. Maybe, in this life, I was not meant to create. Just *be*. I didn't need a symbol of my existence to be found like fossils. I put down the pen.

That day in math class, when my teacher handed me back our last exam with a giant comical red D on the front page, I felt nothing. English class, my favorite, was next and oddly, I still felt nothing. I opened my journal, stared at the blank page and thought of *nothing*. I then closed the journal, frustrated. The new girl, sitting adjacent to me, flashed the A written on her exam to the boy sitting in front of me. He gave her a thumbs up. As the bell rang, I watched her get up and wander over to Michael's desk. I stuffed my exam into my bag, along with my journal, and made a run for it before my teacher could say anything.

The new girl began to appear everywhere. In every class, on the table beside me in the lunchroom, even at the cafe I spent most of my days. I couldn't shake this curiosity. I dropped my bag next to Samantha and sat down.

"Have you talked to the new girl?" I asked, letting the *curiosity* get the best of me. "Yeah, she's nice." Samantha said.

“Does the new girl...”

“She has a name.” Samantha laughed, turning to face me. Samantha was always the more social one, welcoming everyone and anyone into our friend group. I didn’t even protest when she said she invited the new girl to Michael’s party. I simply looked to where she stood across the schoolyard. The nonchalant way her hands spoke in the air when she was making a point. The way her long hazel hair glowed beneath the rays of the sun. Hearing her laugh like soft bells, I felt compelled to get to know her. To know her in a way that would ruin me completely. My curiosity was perhaps morbid.

I walked that day rather than riding my bike. I didn’t wish to go home, knowing what was waiting for me. I made my way to the orange tree instead. Once there I stretched my arms out as I rested in the grass, retrieving a book from my bag. I read until the sun went down. When I eventually walked in through the front door, my dad was asleep. I sighed with relief and snuck quietly to my bedroom. I slept soundly. The nightmares were to come soon. But for now, I was happy to remain oblivious. I have known peace and it was mostly when I closed my eyes.

I didn’t know how to feel about her. She picked up my pencil when I dropped it and she handed it back to me with a smile. A smile that seemed forced but harmless. It was always brief, our encounters. I was pretty certain she didn’t even know I existed, with her quick witted remarks and unintentional shooing away. I could never forget her. Even if our time together did plan to flee.

*I didn’t know how to feel about her.* She ran into me in the hallway and apologized without even looking in my direction. I didn’t take it personally but I was starting to grow impatient. Why did she not care to get to know me? Weary of my own approachability, I opened my locker and looked in the small mirror I had placed inside. I think I was friendly looking, well friendly enough. I grabbed my textbook for chemistry and shut my locker a little too forcefully.

I decided to despise her the night of Michael’s party. It was cold and windy, the chimes that dangled made a clatter of noise while I shook with a joint in hand. Music blared from the house, the sound of glass breaking echoed and Michael ran inside. It was her hand that reached for mine as I passed the joint. She huffed with amusement when I nearly dropped it. I narrowed my eyes and looked at Samantha.

“I think he likes you.” Ronny said.

“Who?” The new girl replied, still amused.

“Michael.” Ronny murmured. I looked down at my feet. I thought Michael was an asshole. Ronny was jealous, I could tell by the way he said Michael’s name.

All the boys liked *her*.

“Not my type.” She remarked. I looked at her and our eyes met.

“What is your type? Boys or girls?” Samantha asked. Sexuality was Samantha’s favorite topic, constantly wanting to tell everyone she experimented with a girl at summer camp years ago. I rolled my eyes and thought of going back inside where the crowd of people could hide my irritation.

The new girl blew out smoke and smiled.

“Boys. Just boys.” She said smugly. I peered down at my feet and felt dizzy as the high began to kick in. It wasn’t like me to feel so angry. I was not my father. I didn’t even know why I felt such anger in the first place. I muttered something about getting a drink and stood up. Back inside I made my way to the bathroom and splashed cold water in my face. My hair was curling from the wind outside so I ran my fingers through it, wincing at the pain of the knots. Maybe I was having a nervous breakdown from overstimulation. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before opening the door. The new girl was standing there, twirling her long hair with one finger, leaning against the wall.

“All yours.” I said, holding open the door.

“It’s Ara, right?”

She did know me.

“Yeah. And you’re Solene?”

“We have almost every class together.” She said, ignoring my question. I said nothing. Smiling awkwardly, I started to walk in the direction of what I could only guess was a drunk Michael singing karaoke, hoping Solene would continue the conversation. I wanted her to give me a reason to stay in this hallway, away from the crowded room. But even if she did, the music would’ve silenced her as I kept walking. I never looked back.

My plan to hate her was crumbling with time. I settled with neutrality. I thought she was nice enough. I could even see us being friends. I decided to talk to her that day. I sat beside her in the schoolyard and listened to Samantha rant about their summer plans. Today was the last day of school.

“Hey, Ara.” Solene eventually said.

“Hey.” I said, “I was wondering if you two wanted to go swimming today?”

“Sounds fun.” Solene said, smiling.

All three of us rode our bikes through town, past the field, past the orange tree, and out onto the sandy beach overlooking the lake. The sky was golden. Solene hops off her bike, waving us over as she runs to the water, removing her top. And *this*, this is probably where I could've prevented it. Could've spared so much of myself when it came to the girl right in front of me. But at that moment, I thought nothing of it. Samantha follows suit, shouting, "Come on, Ara." They both scream and laugh at the cold touch of the water. I willingly jumped in.

Afterwards, we lay on the dock. It was sunset. My hair was nearly dry. Samantha and Solene are talking about boys. Solene had apparently been seeing Michael and they shared their first kiss last night. I closed my eyes and listened to the water gently hit into the wood.

"I should be getting home." I said.

"Me too. My grandma will be worried." Solene muttered, standing up.

"How's your father..." Samantha whispered as we got dressed.

"Not now, Sam." I said. I didn't want anyone to know of my troubles. Solene's house happened to be in the same direction as mine. Samantha said her goodbye and I got onto my bike, knees wobbly. Solene gripped my shoulder as I started to fall. She squeeze gently, just gentle enough to make me think I made the whole thing up. I shivered and looked at her. She smiled. Her teeth were white, her front tooth a little crooked in a way I found charming.

"Be careful." She said, "Ready?"

"Yeah." I was embarrassed by my clumsiness. She took off ahead and I watched her throw her head back with her mouth wide, still smiling for a reason I did not know. That was the summer we inevitably became inseparable. That was the summer I completely lost myself.

In a journal of hers, Plath said *I may never be happy, but tonight I am content*. I felt *that* when I was with Solene. I felt content enough to stow sorrow in my back pocket and forget it by nightfall. When it did come to rear its head, it looked like my mother. How could I despise my own sadness when it resembled the only scrap of her I had left? But on a day where I was content, I knew the reason was this; a ripe orange in Solene's hands as she read fiction to me. I just liked how she said things. The way she pronounced certain vowels, the way she stretched out a word that had great meaning, and of course the shyness in it all because we were new to this. New to being friends. I read to her in return, laughing whenever she made unnecessary commentary. We ate the bread she brought from home, her

grandmother's secret recipe. We shared clothes, I told her to not even bother to pack anything but a toothbrush whenever she slept over. I snuck her into my house each night so my father wouldn't be a problem. We spent every second of every day together, listening to sad music and riding bikes to all corners of our small town. She was slowly becoming someone vital in my life. Vital in a way that frightened me because I didn't know what my life looked like before her. I could only remember being a lifeless meteor that hemorrhaged through a downhearted atmosphere. I now had a best friend who understood me and took care of me. I took care of her too. And it was all happening rapidly. Our friendship was a rapid thing that I never, even once, saw coming.

"I think you should go on a double date with me and Michael."

"Who would I go with?"

"Ronny."

I laughed, hysterically. Solene joined in, nudging my shoulder.

"C'mon, I'm being serious."

"I'm being serious too." I said, wiping away my smile.

"What's so bad about Ronny?"

"Solene..." I groaned. I've known Ronny since I was nine. He was the kid who stuck pencils in his ears. Not even a single ounce of me found him attractive.

"Okay, fine." Solene said.

"I like how things are right now. The last thing I need is a relationship." I said, lightheartedly.

"Fair enough."

I wanted to warn her about Michael and the things I knew about him. But I didn't want to overstep. I continued reading my book while I felt her staring. I didn't question the chills it gave me. I didn't question the pulling sensation I felt on the sides of my mouth, as if her *stare* made me involuntarily smile.

"What?" She asked, a slight giggle bubbling under the surface of her concern.

"Nothing." I shrugged.

"Bullshit." She said, opening up her own book.

"You were staring..."

"Was I?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry."

"I don't mind."

“Okay.” She smiled.

“Okay?”

“I was staring because you look happy.” She paused, “Happier than when I first met you.”

I don’t know why but I winced. Maybe I winced because I didn’t know that my own miserable self rubbed off on others or was detected.

“I’m only *slightly* happy.” I said. Our eyes met and then we were laughing again.

“You make me happy.” Solene said after our laughter died down.

“I’m happy to know you.” I said in return. The silence that came after made me think I fucked it up. My honesty, at times, felt like a fatal flaw. Though, at times, everything that came out of my mouth felt like a lie. I didn’t want to scare her off with an overbearing heart. I forgot what it was like to care for someone so vivaciously. We had become sisters. But the word *sisters* stuck with me noisily, as if to say *wrong, wrong, wrong*. Friends felt fitting. *Friends*. Still, the noise was there.

I loved everything and everyone, quite suddenly. I was writing more than ever, observing others and keeping my head down to listen to conversation. It inspired me, *life*. Life was now a thing that proved to be worth living. I loved everything and everyone, inexplicably. Happiness was running rampant in my body. Though happiness felt foreign, I let it smother me. And I hoped Solene felt it too. Sharing most of our days, my happiness had to have been contagious. But there was always something, in the back of my mind, that gorged on weariness. I still had the same life. The same circumstances. Solene was bound to make a run for it if she found out too much. I kept my secrets close to my chest. I kept this happiness a secret until the very end. Until it was taken away. There was some kind of rotten thing hiding within me.

The anniversary of my mother’s death was on this day. That’s when the whiskey occupied my father and I would lock myself in my room. He was a drunk, a *mean* drunk, but today he was a weeping drunk. I felt bad, unable to face him or comfort him because I looked too much like her. What a waste. We could’ve grown closer. Instead, I was nearly seventeen, soft spoken and afraid for my life. No one knew about my father’s habits besides Samantha. She was the one who had to hear him almost break down my door when I locked it. She was the one who hugged me after my father called me an ungrateful bitch and threw the tv remote at the wall. So of all days, it was today that hurt most when Solene showed up at my front door

in a yellow dress. I stepped out and shut the door quietly, not to disturb my father who was now sleeping.

“You haven’t been answering my texts.” Solene frowned.

“I’m sorry.”

“I missed you.” She sounded breathless.

“Let’s meet at our spot tomorrow?” *Our spot*, a simple orange tree among a flourishing field. I only showed it to the ones I trusted most.

“Not today?”

“Today doesn’t work for me.” I felt pain for rejecting her. She was biting her bottom lip. She looked concerned.

“Okay.” She said after a slight pause. I was relieved she didn’t question me further. So when I showed up to the orange tree the next day, I had no reason to collapse in her arms crying. But I did anyway. She soothed me like a best friend, rocking me like I suppose a mother would. Was I crying because it had all come crashing down? My mother, my father, my secret life that I led. I was only a child most days, with no sense of direction. Solene never asked what was wrong and I was grateful for that. I didn’t want her pity nor her understanding.

Solene and I didn’t speak of my episode. Since that night, I was becoming someone I was unfamiliar with. The hunger pains came and went, I was starved for something I could not name. I know now that the nightmares began not too long after *she* materialized. The kind of nightmares that make sleep dreadful. The kind that tore at your psyche like ravaged wolves. My mind was so full of grief, an exorcism was taking place within my dreams to get it out. I came to the conclusion that *this* was a punishment. *A punishment for what?* I had no idea. Not yet at least.

Solene was reading Plath beside me, brow furrowed. She did that when she read. I didn’t realize I was staring until she said, “Why are you staring?” “Nothing. Just getting hungry.” I wasn’t hungry.

“Eat an orange.” She stood up and plucked a single orange from a low hanging branch, and tossed it to me. I ate it quickly once it was peeled. The sweetness of the orange was intoxicating.

“What are you reading?” Solene asked.

“Zami.”

Solene took the book from it where sat beside me. I looked at her, confused. She put *my* book into her bag and smiled. I didn’t even ask why she was stealing it. I was slightly amused. We were sitting close to one another, the blanket we brought

was far too small. I noticed *her eyes*, brown with specks of green and honey. I also couldn't help but notice her lips were stained a cherry red, her hazel hair wavy. That unfamiliarity crept back in and I shook my head.

"It's getting late." I said.

"Here, you're supposed to take my book now." She said, handing it to me.

"Why?"

"I'll annotate yours and you'll annotate mine. Then we'll give them back to each other." She smiled. I reluctantly took her copy of *Ariel*, though I've read it dozens of times, I was willing to play her game. Solene then stood up, brushing dirt and grass off her shorts. She grabbed my now sticky hand and helped me up. It was nearly dark outside and my father's disdain could be felt for miles. It was past my curfew. How do I tell her that I live a lie, with my father's teeth clamped down around me? There was no place safe but here. *Solene, I'm afraid*. Our hands were still twined. I pulled away with a little too much aggression.

"Goodnight, Ara." Solene said, climbing onto her bike. Later that night, I opened Solene's book and began to read, highlighting and writing all my thoughts to the point where the pages were completely full. *I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me*. In response to Plath I wrote, *the thing that sleeps in me is rage*. I hoped Solene would understand. Did she know what it was like to be rage-filled? To be brimming with an anger that suffocates the softness I so desperately try to evoke. I finished the book by four a.m. and fell asleep holding it in my arms. My dreams that night were painless but nonetheless still frightening. I was guilty for dreaming of death. *Solene, what if I tell you that I feel like dying but I'll do nothing about it?*

To this day, I knew Solene was not a ghost. Just the embodiment of all my ghosts trapped in human form. Though I felt crazy, I knew she would understand. I never spoke of it, my ghosts, my skeletons in the closet. I never once brought up my mother and father. I never once imagined *my punishment* to be inflicted by her. *Never once* imagined my feelings to be deeper than *this*. I ignored it until I could no longer do so. Whatever *this* was. Unfamiliar territory. I plotted hard to forget *this*. Later on I would put a name to it. *Yearning*. Castigation followed.

"I dream of running away." Solene said.

"Where would you go?" I asked. My stomach dropped at the thought of her leaving.

"No idea. You can come. And of course my grandmother would come too."



I snorted.

“That’s not running away, Solene.”

“At least it will take me far away from here.”

“What’s not to like?”

“The town is so small and stuffy. I can’t breathe.” She sighed. That was the first time she ever brought up wanting to run away. It made me wonder even more of her past. *Are you so inconsolable, Solene, that you won’t even let me take care of you?* I was gripped by sympathy, my throat tightening as I wished to mend her. *I’m not broken*, I can hear her say.

I did not know how to explain it. I was envious of the way she got under my skin. I ached at the sight of her. I was deprived of such friendship since Samantha and I had grown apart. It was my fault. I was too wrapped up in fading away, hiding myself in books and my journal. But I couldn’t hide from Solene. I couldn’t bear to not be seen by her. Still unfamiliar, I told myself I was aching to be reminded of a time where I was seen as human. All the boys who saw me as meat. All the girls who saw me as threatening. I remember Amber said I was a *cunt* because her boyfriend wanted my number. I was human, I was. Solene made me feel human. I ached because I was ready to walk into a room and look for her in every corner. I was wanting to ache, openly and readily.

My copy of *Zami* was returned to me a week later. A single page was dog eared. I turned to the page eagerly and read the part she had underlined. *I was discovering all the ways that love creeps into life when two selves exist closely, when two women meet.* I blushed. I couldn’t remember the last time I had ever blushed. I flipped through the rest of the book and read all her notes she left in the margins. I didn’t know why I felt so warm. I was ignited by this unfamiliar feeling of kinship. This feeling of lust. *Lust?* Of course, I was blind from the beginning. *Solene.* I was *now* familiar with a self that maybe, just *maybe*, wanted her. I was at least ready to admit that my feelings surpassed whatever we were now. *Best friends?* *Solene.* I was scared out of my mind. I *was* smitten. I now remember smitten to be akin to the word *smite*. To be beaten, bruised, stricken. So then does smitten mean to be devastatingly struck by adoration? The devastation to come was proof enough.

I rode my bike past the field on a day where I felt like hiding in plain sight. I looked to the right. Solene was under *the* orange tree. I wanted to join her and tell her *I feel on fire. I only feel it when I’m around you. Why is that?* Despite my need

to ask these questions, I turned around and headed home. She'll never know how the bright oranges paled in comparison to her slender body as she lounged in the grass, drowning out the world with a book in hand, swimming in a sea of languished secrets. Her suffering was quite prominent but her confidence was brave. I glanced back one last time and she was gone. *My Eurydice*. All that had gone unnoticed before was now obvious. Her beauty? *obvious*. Her voice? How could her voice sound like the moon? I did not think I knew the moon's language, but now I am hungry for it.

I just wanted her *bliss*. To continue in this perfect bubble we created. Our friendship, though brittle at times, was perfect. With these new feelings that have come alive, there was nothing I could do about it. My dreams had escalated. Solene now became a part of them. We were wandering through an ancient city. Reading on the seven hills. Feeding from Lupa. Skinny dipping in the Tyrrhenian Sea. We prayed in the Pantheon. I told strangers about our forbidden love. And once we did all that we could do to save one another, I was betrayed as was Rome when Tarpeia spoke to the Sabines. *I will be betrayed*. I didn't want to believe it. Who was Solene? Just someone I now desire? We rarely spoke of personal things. She was infuriating at times, pure at others. I couldn't decide what I was feeling most days. We were no more than strangers. Solene knew nothing about me and I knew nothing about her. Why did she care so much, showing up at my doorstep every single day? Why did she stick around when I was such a miserable person? Perhaps my thoughts were apparent because Solene nudged me in that moment and smiled. That same smile I couldn't help but mirror. We were under the orange tree. The heat was blistering.

"What's up?" She asked.

"Nothing." I muttered, already defensive.

"If you say so."

"Why haven't I met your grandmother?"

Solene looked at me, confused.

"You always talk about her..."

"She doesn't know english." Solene said. "What would you two talk about?"

"Nevermind." I snapped.

"Hey, what's your problem Ara?"

"Nothing. Just... I'm sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Okay."

“Okay?”

“Try to be a little more nice to me sometimes.” Solene said, pouting.

“I’m sorry, Solene.”

“My grandmother is a serious woman. She’s eighty five and is set in her ways. But she’d like you.” Solene smiled. “I know she would.”

I felt the anger wash away all at once and I almost reached for her hand.

“I miss my country.” Solene said, solemnly, after a great deal of silence between us. “Even though it took everything from me, I still miss it.”

“I miss my mom.” I whispered. Solene is now the one who takes my hand and squeezes it. She’s the first person I’ve said that to in years. I wanted to know all her demons. I wanted to kiss the sadness from her mouth and carry it myself. I wanted to taste the nape of her neck and ask her everything there is to ever know about a person. A girl like Solene deserved an ocean, not a raging river that was shallow. Her heart was deep. It could hold the entire Atlantic. I squeeze her hand. *Solene, have your way with me.* She said nothing for the rest of the day.

She always asked to walk me home from the orange tree or the cafe or anywhere we went together. I was territorial. I hoped she knew these were our *spaces*. Only for us. It was nearing the end of summer and I was infatuated. The kind of infatuation that makes you smile too much and makes other people sick. The only problem was, nobody knew and nobody could ever know. It was my secret to keep. Yet sometimes the yearning grew so large, I felt outnumbered. *The way she would quote poetry to me. The way I would lean in, catching myself in a thought so unseemly that I could feel my cheeks burn red. The way she would stare back at me and I’d think: Do you feel it too? Do you feel this hunger that is eating me alive?* Tell me I’m not crazy, Solene. I write furiously in my journal, not about us, no, there can’t be any trace of *us*. But I do write about the birds that sing too loud in the morning and the bees that made a home in the yard. How strange it is to notice and appreciate the small things when life is so clear. *You make me good, Solene. For you, I will be good.*

On a day where I chose to hide again, Michael came to the orange tree looking for Solene. That was the moment I realized she had brought him here before. I felt ill. I told him I didn’t know where she was, then I packed my bag and left. This place felt hollow now. Solene called me later that night and I ignored all four calls. I wanted to throw my phone, just as my father threw the remote, I wanted to break everything. I wanted to puke and cry and get her back for all the pain she has

caused. But I was weak, thoughtless. How could I ever be good enough for her? As the phone rang a fifth time, I blinked away my tears and picked it up.

I answered with a disgruntled hello. Solene was sobbing hysterically. She had never cried in all the time I have known her. My pulse was racing. After minutes of calming her down, I could finally understand her.

“What took you so long to answer?” She wailed.

“I was busy.” My heart sank down into my stomach.

“Are you upset with me?” She asked, voice shaky.

“Solene...”

“Can you meet me?”

I wanted to suggest that she call Michael but my cynical side was not pretty. I agreed to see her.

Solene was sitting on her ratty blanket that we always laid on. Her face was puffy from crying but there were no longer tears leaking from her eyes. I was dreading this part, this part of not knowing who or what had hurt her. *If it was me, Solene, please forgive me for every fiber of my being needs you to be okay.* I sit beside her and feel the tension immediately. She’s breathing softly, evenly, and I feel as though my breath is ragged. I could die right here and she still would never know how I feel.

“Ara...” She began. How my name falls off her lips, I could melt from the ease of it all. “...Have I ever told you of my country?”

“No.”

“I promise someday I will tell you everything. It’s hard to talk about. Everything that has happened to me. I feel so helpless. But Ara, you have to say you’ll always be my friend. You can’t abandon me.”

I could say, *there’s no leaving even if I wanted to. Even if I wanted to rid of you, there’s no going back to the way my life was before. There’s no cure to get you out of my anatomy. You’re built into me, Solene.*

Instead, I say, “You’re my closest friend.”

She hugs me tight and we stay like this, tangled, until both our curfews. But at this very moment, I hoped that would never come. I hoped the sun would never set. I hoped she knew. Knew just how much I almost *said it* every time I saw her. On a whim, I almost said *I love you. The escalation of this feeling was swift and transformative. I love you. The escalation of you was boundless in a way I could*

*never have foreseen.* I never would have plummeted into her if I knew what was to come.

***TO BE CONTINUED***