



THE
**BUTTERFLY
ASSASSIN**

FINN LONGMAN

SIMON & SCHUSTER



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ERARO (MISTAKE)

That first night in her tiny flat, she cuts off her hair and her name. The brown strands are easily binned, but *Isabel Ryans* is harder to get rid of. When she looks in the mirror, that's who she sees, despite the asymmetrical crop of hair that half obscures her face. Not *Bella Nicholls* – the name on her new papers, her school records, the bank account with barely enough stolen money to cover next month's rent. Isabel can't hide from herself.

Which means she can't hide from *them*, either.

She keeps trying anyway. Every night she triple-checks her locks and wedges a chair underneath the door handle, because if it won't stop them, at least it'll give her prior warning if – when – they come for her. Each undisturbed night is both

relief and agony, and she spends her days waiting for it all to fall apart. They know she's here. They must know she's here. Nobody can hide from the guilds; they're too good at what they do.

The fact she's still alive just means they're biding their time.

After two sleepless nights, Isabel starts keeping a knife under her pillow. After three, she abandons her bed for the battered settee where she has an unobstructed view of the door. She wakes every morning with a crick in her neck that nothing can entirely ease, unable to shake off her fear.

I got out, she tells herself. But is that even true, when she can't bring herself to sleep in her own bed? This is nothing but a temporary reprieve, a moment's breath before things get a hundred times worse. She shouldn't have left. She's going to spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder.

Every morning she removes the chair, unbolts the locks, and reminds herself that she's free. Then she clips back her hair, already regretting the fringe, and sets off at a jog, hitting the streets as the world transitions from night to day. In those hours, the city is empty of life but for a handful of early commuters and a trudging paperboy starting his morning round.

It's on one of these early morning ventures that Isabel finds herself a job – a paper round that won't pay her rent but at least keeps her from starving. The *Echo's* circulation is small enough to complete before school and large enough to be worth Ashvin's time to hire someone to replace a kid who moved out of the borough. Ashvin is the newsagent, and Isabel's tether to

the real world. His shop feels real in a way that school doesn't, those early mornings and newsprint smudges on her hands doing more to convince her that she got out than any pile of homework. Sometimes she almost forgets that she heard about the vacancy because she was curled up in the alleyway behind his shop, shaking in the grip of a flashback.

And so it goes, for two and a half weeks. Two and a half weeks of normality, two and a half weeks of paranoia, until the night she's proven right. The sound of her shitty locks giving way wakes her, and the sigh of the chair sliding across the floor as the intruder eases the door open has her reaching for her knife.

There's somebody in her flat.

Isabel sits up slowly, willing the sofa springs not to squeak. The intruder's attempt at stealth is ruined when they trip over her school bag, packed for the morning and left beside the door. No professional would make that mistake, unless they were trying to lure her into a false sense of security.

She reaches out and takes a second knife from the coffee table, keeping her movements slow. Here on the settee she's invisible, shrouded in shadow, but as the intruder steps further into the flat, she can see his outline against the harsh, fluorescent lighting of the hallway.

He ducks to search her school bag for valuables, and Isabel throws the first of her knives. It embeds itself in the wall, inches from his head, and he shrieks, dropping the tablet he's taken from her rucksack. The screen shatters on impact. By the time he spots Isabel, she's already aiming the second knife.

‘Close the door,’ she orders him, because she has a good relationship with her neighbours. ‘Keep your hands where I can see them.’

He’s young, she realises as he shuts the door with a trembling hand and takes a single step towards her. Barely in his twenties, if she’s any judge. ‘I’m—’

‘Quiet.’ Weighing her knife from hand to hand, she listens. All she hears is the lacklustre hum of the elderly heating system. There’s no sound of anyone waiting in the hallway outside and no indication that he’s woken the rest of the building. She gestures with the blade towards the table. ‘Sit.’

After a moment’s hesitation, he obeys, hands on the table so she can see he’s unarmed.

Isabel closes the distance between them too quickly for him to flinch. With one hand, she slams her knife down, through his hand and into the table. With the other, she snatches up a tea towel and stuffs it into his mouth to muffle his scream. She waits until he subsides into ragged breaths before yanking the cloth away and taking a seat.

‘Mi havas du demandojn,’ she tells him, almost conversationally. ‘Kiu sendis vin tien ĉi, kaj kiel vi trovis min?’ *I have two questions. Who sent you here, and how did you find me?*

He shakes his head, skin shiny with sweat. ‘I don’t understand. Please ...’

Isabel leans forward and applies pressure to the handle of the knife, watching his face as the blade twists. She’s met some good actors, but there’s no hiding pain – or fear. The stench

of urine mingles with the scent of blood in the air, and she realises exactly how terrified he is.

Amateur, she thinks, but a deeper instinct still asks, ‘La gildoj. Kiun?’ *The guilds. Which one?*

‘Please,’ he begs. ‘I don’t . . . I’m not . . .’

He’s not acting. There’s a civilian’s desperation in his contorted face, and pain has stripped away any artifice.

Isabel leans back in her seat, folding her arms. ‘You don’t speak Esperanto,’ she says. ‘Which means you’re not guild. Why are you here?’

‘I . . .’ He’s pale. Shaking. ‘I was planning to rob you.’

‘You picked the wrong flat.’

‘I can see that now,’ he manages, voice tight with pain. He glances at his hand as though considering pulling the knife out, but turns a sickly shade of white at the sight of the blood and hastily looks away. ‘Please don’t kill me. I’m sorry. I-I’ll apologise to whichever guild you’re from, or whatever you want.’

‘Say a word to the guilds and I’ll cut out your tongue.’

‘Fine,’ he agrees at once. ‘I won’t say anything. Please. I didn’t take any—’

‘Tell me,’ she interrupts. ‘Why this flat? Why me, of everyone in this building?’

He swallows. ‘I knew you lived here alone. That you were young, that you haven’t changed the locks yet. I didn’t think . . . I mean, it’s Lutton, the guilds don’t—’

‘You were counting on me being a civilian,’ she says.

Of course he was. Even the most daring of thieves wouldn’t

chance an encounter with Comma or Hummingbird, the two murderous guilds who dominate the city of Espera. Arms dealers and intelligence agents, poisoners and contract killers: their members have a diverse and bloody skill set.

And it never occurred to him that Isabel might be just as dangerous.

‘Yes. I’m sorry. I . . .’ He glances at his hand again and retches. When he looks back at Isabel, his eyes are wide and petrified. ‘Are you going to kill me?’

‘I haven’t decided. What’s your name?’

‘Ian.’

Oh. ‘That’s not a good answer.’

‘I’m not lying. My name’s Ian Crampton. I can . . . I can prove it.’

A civilian and an idiot, giving his full name to somebody he thinks is guild. Either he doesn’t think he’ll make it out of here, or it hasn’t occurred to him that he’s given Isabel all the information she needs to call a hit on him.

‘I didn’t say it wasn’t true,’ she says, and reaches over to grasp the knife, pulling it from his hand as easily as she put it there. Blood gushes from the wound and she tosses him the tea towel. ‘Put pressure on it. More,’ she adds. ‘Unless you *want* to bleed to death in my kitchen.’

She thinks he might be sobbing, but it’s hard to tell if the dampness on his cheeks is sweat or tears.

‘You’ve put me in a difficult position,’ Isabel confides. ‘It would be different if you were called, I don’t know, *David*. But *Ian*? It’s not a name that puts me in a good mood.’

‘Then – then I can be David,’ he stutters. ‘Whatever you want. Please.’

‘Too late.’ She dumps the bloodied knife in the sink and adds, ‘You know it’s a school night? I was trying to sleep.’

‘I don’t get it,’ he says. ‘You’re only a kid. You can’t be . . .’

Isabel turns, leaning against the edge of the counter. ‘Can’t be what?’

‘A contract killer.’ Ian stumbles over the words. ‘An assassin. The guilds don’t . . . they don’t train children.’

Funny the way everyone still believes that. ‘And I thought Lutton had a low crime rate,’ she says. ‘But it seems tonight is a learning experience for us both.’

‘I didn’t know,’ he insists. ‘I didn’t know you were guild.’

Killing him would cause problems, especially here in her flat. She’d have to deal with the body. It was a lot easier with Comma behind her. With her parents behind her.

Isabel disguises her shudder as a sharp movement towards the kitchen tap, rinsing the blood from her hands. When she’s composed her expression, she looks back at Ian. ‘Let’s get one thing clear. I’m not guild.’

‘But you—’

‘Get up.’

He staggers to his feet. ‘You can call the police. Turn me in. Whatever you want.’

‘Walk towards the door. Stay in front of me.’

He’s unsteady, but does as he’s told. Isabel yanks her other knife out of the wall as they pass and keeps it in her hand as she directs him down the stairs and out of the fire exit. To the

right, the glittering solar panels of the main road send their coloured lights into the night. She tells Ian to turn left, towards the encroaching shadows of the narrow alleyway that runs beside her block of flats.

‘Do you know who I am?’ she asks him.

His face is ghostly-white in the gloom as he turns to look at her, washed out by blood loss. He manages to shake his head. ‘I don’t know anything.’

‘Let’s keep it that way.’

‘You’re letting me go?’

‘Looks like it. Now piss off before I change my mind.’

The thief looks at Isabel. He’s got half a foot on her, at least, but he cowers before her. ‘You’re fucking scary, you know that?’ he says, his fear tinged with grudging respect. Then he half runs, half stumbles down the alley away from her.

Ian. It’s not a name she associates with good things.

He’s maybe ten feet away when she throws the knife.

It hits him in the back and he crumples before she has time to register the absence of the hilt in her hand. She doesn’t remember deciding to kill him, choosing to take aim, but when she approaches him and bends to retrieve the weapon, his breath bubbles uncertainly through bloody lips, pain electric in his eyes.

It won’t take him long to die, but it’ll be long enough to hurt.

Isabel slits his throat, half mercy and half reflex, and the pain shatters into lifelessness: burglar to body, civilian to corpse, a vicious magic trick of a transformation that somehow feels like it should take longer.

It's beginning to drizzle, the dampness clinging to her pyjamas and her hair. Fine droplets catch the inadequate glow of light from the open fire escape. When she checks her battered watch, it tells her it's three in the morning.

She looks down at the body.

Fuck.

This is the last thing she needs.

'Morning, Bella. Rough night?'

Isabel glances up at the boy waiting by the tram stop, his blond hair an unruly mass of curls as usual. Nick Larrington. He attached himself to her on the first day of school because they were both new transfers with no other friends. He doesn't seem to have caught on that they have nothing else in common, and she can't figure out what it is that he wants from her. She'd half hoped that missing her usual tram this morning would mean she could make the journey unremarked. Apparently not.

She narrows her eyes at his question. 'Why?'

'You look shattered. Plus your jumper's inside out.'

By the time Isabel had dealt with the body, there was no point going back to bed before her paper round. Now she's exhausted but wired, a hair's breadth from snapping. Her paranoia whispers that Nick knows something, but logic points out that if he knew how she'd spent the night, he wouldn't still be talking to her.

He's smart enough that she's yet to catch him actively badmouthing the guilds – even in a civilian borough like Lutton, that's a sure-fire way to end up on a watchlist for

suspected abolitionist activity. But on their third tram ride together, he admitted that he sometimes cries reading the death notices in the *Echo*, the week's kills neatly broken down by borough and guild, and if he's not desensitised to murder after seventeen years in Espera, he never will be. She hadn't realised that was possible.

'Didn't sleep well,' she says, scanning the crowd. It looks like the usual mix of students and commuters, but she hasn't lived here long enough to notice anyone out of place.

She screwed up. She screwed up so badly. At least she dumped the body far enough away not to scream *ISABEL RYANS IS HERE* to anyone who cares to look, but there's no way an unclaimed kill in a civilian borough will go unnoticed for long. Maybe they'll send someone she knows, or maybe she'll never see them coming and she'll be nothing but another name on the list for Nick to cry over.

She should have called the police. Before throwing a knife at him, before giving away that she is – was – guild, when there was no risk in letting him walk away. That's how it's done in civilian boroughs, isn't it? The Espera Met stays out of guild business, but a thief they could have handled.

Instead, she killed him.

Fuck.

'Tram's coming,' says Nick. Soon she's swept up in the crowd boarding the packed vehicle. That's okay. She can hide in a crowd. They can't do anything here, on a tram, in public . . .

Isabel wedges herself in a corner next to the emergency exit, too far away from Nick to chat. He looks disappointed, but it's

a relief to drop the façade of normality. Two and a half weeks. Eighteen bloody days. That's all she managed.

She reaches out to grab the metal pole for support and catches sight of her nails. *Shit*. All that time spent scrubbing her hands in the sink last night and there's still blood under her fingernails. There's nothing she can do about it here without drawing attention to herself, so she shoves her hand in her pocket and tries to forget about it.

By now she's had plenty of practice ignoring the blood on her hands.