

PREDATORY NATURES

BY AMY GOLDSMITH

Those We Drown

Our Wicked Histories

Predatory Natures

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GOLDSMITH



INK ROAD

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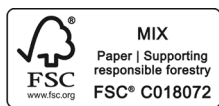
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To those afraid to stay but afraid to leave:
There's light on the other side, I promise.



She wants to be flowers, but you make her owls.
You must not complain, then, if she goes hunting.

—Alan Garner, *The Owl Service*





An early spring breeze stirs the delicate buds on the trees as I gaze out over the ancient walled city of Carcassonne, deep in the south of France. Adjusting the vintage sunglasses I picked up in Milan last week, I take a final sip of my chocolat chaud before heading back to the bustling market where Vincent is waiting for me, all floppy French hair and—

“Attention all passengers. The *Banebury* will soon be arriving on platform thirteen.”

The announcement crashes into my dream. I flip my glossy magazine shut with a grin and shove it into my backpack. The article I was reading is titled “Secret Escapes”—which is fitting—and soon that will be *me*, lapping up the scenery as I make my way across Europe. My phone’s already bookmarked with historic sites I’m dying to see and directions to all the best beaches. Clicking my phone to selfie mode, I force a smile and shake back my curls, appraising myself. I got

this. Lara Williams, reinvented. Lara Born Anew. My fresh start (Lara's Version). I'm friendly, professional . . . *relaxed*. If I say it enough times, who knows, maybe I'll start believing it. Picking up my Frappuccino, I tug my case toward the platform, weaving between hordes of distracted commuters.

I'm expecting the *Banebury* to be grand; after all, it's five-star luxury accommodation. But though I've checked out the glossy photos on the website countless times, I audibly gasp as the train slides into Cardiff Central station. I mean, okay, I knew it wasn't going to be anything like the crappy commuter train I used to take to school, all crazy '80s prints on the seats and perfumed with stale piss, but this . . . *this* is an entirely different beast.

It glides effortlessly along the platform like some magnificent stallion, its sleek black paintwork glistening, its windowpanes glittering like diamonds in the February sun. And for a moment, I think I must have got it wrong, that this is an entire echelon above the train someone like me is due to work on, but no, there's the name, painted on the side of the carriages in glorious golden, looping letters:

The Banebury

Through the windows, I spy plush crimson seating, acres of polished wood, and delicate crystal light fittings.

This is some fancy shit.

I'm early—I always am—wanting to scope out my surroundings and the people I'll be working with in advance. As the train finally stills, I wait to see if anyone disembarks,

but the doors remain stubbornly closed, with no sign of any passengers within. I hesitate outside the carriage nearest me, wondering if I should knock. But seconds later, there's movement behind the window, and a tall, serious-looking woman with neat black braids opens the door. She squints down at me.

"Lara, yeah?" Her accent is pure South London. I smile, relaxing immediately—the image of the sneery old posh guy I'd pictured as my boss thankfully dissolving.

"Hey! Yeah, that's me."

"Recognize you from your photo. I'm Shoshanna. Well done for being early—good start." She steps aside and, with a flourish of her white-gloved hand, gestures into the darkened interior of the carriage. "And *welcome . . .* to the *Banebury*."

At her invitation, I climb on, clumsily hauling my suitcase behind me.

"Leave that here a minute," she says, gesturing at my case, "while we wait for the others. I'll give you a quick tour so you can orient yourself. Follow me."

Together we step into what must be a dining carriage, the air expensively fragranced with a fresh floral scent. Roses, I think—my grandparents are big gardeners. My shoes sink deep into a plush carpet that is the color of ripe plums. What I notice first is how *warm* everything is, how welcoming. From the yellow-toned gold of the fixtures to the amber-colored wooden surfaces, all polished within an inch of their life, everything in this carriage glows with its own internal light. Elegant crystal glasses stand regimentally on mirrored shelves below fussy glass lamps that peer out from the walls like curious,

long-necked swans. Upon a magnificent sideboard, inlaid with mother-of-pearl in checkerboard patterns, are several etched-silver champagne buckets. Velvet-padded seats in a vibrant peacock print sit politely beneath tables draped in white cloths, each bearing its own delicate little Tiffany-style lamp.

"Wow," I say, my voice hushed with awe. I genuinely have no words. Shoshanna snorts. *"I know, right?"*

As she leads me through the train, the luxury seems to increase with each subsequent carriage. Through the dining room is a shimmering bar topped with milky, gold-veined marble, behind which is an expansive art deco mirror etched with candy-pink stained-glass feathers. Rose-gold stools topped with plump cushions in a playful shade of watermelon stand in a perfectly spaced arc about the bar.

"So this is the Dahlia Bar . . . and then through here . . . the Cedar Lounge."

The lounge is a cozy but opulent space crammed with pillowy burgundy couches and low tables stacked with pricey-looking tomes on fashion and architecture. Arched windows framed in gold are accentuated with tapestry drapes, and the floor is a carpenter's marvel: upon it, delicate polished stars interlink, each composed of three kinds of wood.

"Next, we've got the Azalea Coffee Lounge."

Shoshanna's meager words do not remotely do justice to this sumptuous homage to dark academia, complete with an antique, globe-style drinks trolley and artfully disheveled leather armchairs. A fully stocked coffee bar is discreetly hidden within carefully crafted bookshelves, each stuffed with

leather-bound tomes imprisoned behind delicate gold filigree mesh, presumably to prevent them from flying off once the train starts moving. Gazing balefully down from the higher shelves are several slightly eerie, although well-kept, examples of taxidermy.

In sharp contrast, the following carriage is a sleek, airy viewing lounge in cool shades of cream, sage, and heather. Delicate settees and chaise longues face crystal-clear picture windows. In the next and final carriage, a lustrous black grand piano dominates, surrounded by a scattering of chic golden tables and black-leather stools. A gold-etched sign decrees it the Orchid Lounge.

Shoshanna stops here and gestures about. “So . . . as you can see, we’ve got all the usual things you’d expect on a train like this—dining carriage, bar, couple of lounges . . . there’s an onboard chef, so you don’t have to worry about making meals or anything like that. As we make our way back through the train, I’ll show you the sleeper cars and the staff quarters, where you can dump your suitcase and get changed.”

At the other end of the train, past the communal areas, is a series of darker, narrower corridors carpeted in gold-flecked navy. On one side is a row of closed doors set into glossy dark wood, each bearing some ridiculously convoluted name engraved onto a brass plaque: the Amaryllis Suite, the Jacinda Suite, the Oleander Suite.

Shoshanna unlocks a door at random and gestures for me to look inside.

“Pretty swish, huh? You’d want it to be . . . for the price.”

It's like peering into an intricate jewelry box. A bottle-green leather couch faces an enormous picture window, beside which is a low glass table bearing several crystal decanters in the shape of swans. Beyond that, half obscured by the swoop of an emerald-velvet drape, is a king-size bed that takes up the entire width of the room. Crisp white sheets peek out beneath an embroidered coverlet. For a moment, I'm outrageously jealous that people are allowed to travel like this.

"I'll tell you how to make up the cabins once everyone's here. For now, let me show you where you'll be bunking."

We pass through another carriage of passenger suites until Shoshanna unlocks a door leading to a more utilitarian-looking area. Here the space is much plainer, the walls a dirty off-white. As in the previous carriage, there is a row of closed doors to our left, although the gaps between them are noticeably narrower. Shoshanna stops outside the first door, gray and unadorned. No brass plaques here.

"And this is you. You're lucky, actually. Usually, staff have to bunk together, but as you already know, *this* is a limited journey—skeleton staff, fewer passengers than usual—until we get to Tallinn and pick up the regular staff and full-paying customers."

Her words send cold reality crashing over me—a reminder that this was the only reason I managed to score such a good job. I applied for the opportunity the very first moment I heard about it last fall, along with some of my old school friends. Back then, it seemed like the perfect way to spend

our first summer after graduation—working for the first few weeks but in *luxury*, then backpacking home across Europe.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, due to my complete lack of any relevant experience, my application was almost immediately rejected. Until a few weeks ago, that is, when, several dull months into an unexpected gap year, I was contacted by the company and offered a similar position on one of their off-season trains. Two weeks' work for a pretty decent sum of money—enough to get me back home in style. I accepted mere seconds after opening the email. To quote my friend Casey: For once, the planets seemed to have aligned. After a long run of nothing but bad luck, here was the perfect opportunity to turn things around while I waited to re-sit my exams in May. It wasn't as if I had much else to do, and I hoped that working would take my mind off the fact that my social life had recently dwindled to nothing, leaving me festering in my bedroom watching *Supernatural* reruns and consoling myself with the odd tub of ice cream.

Anyway, *off-season* actually sounds much more my speed than the original offer. From what I can gather, I'll be strictly making up the numbers as the *Banebury* ambles across Europe to its official starting point, Tallinn, where the professional staff get on, along with all the millionaires. I'll be leaving the train there and traveling back to Wales, hopefully catching some early spring sun on the way.

"Right, then, I'll leave you to get sorted while I look out for the others," Shoshanna says. Once I've retrieved my case, she hands me a neat stack of monochrome clothes and checks

her watch. “Team meeting in the Cedar Lounge in about half an hour, okay?”

Opening the door, I shrug off my heavy backpack and scope out where I’ll be staying for the next couple of weeks. There’s a narrow, metal-framed bunk bed that gives me prison vibes, a chipped fold-down table beneath a meager slit of a window, and a slim built-in armchair. Opposite the bunk, a door leads to an imaginatively small bathroom containing a toilet and a mini sink. No shower—but I assume they’re shared—and at least I have my own toilet. Besides, anything is going to look disappointing after the opulence I’ve just walked through.

Heaving my suitcase onto the bottom bunk, I splash my already sweaty face with water, apply a quick slick of mascara, and pull my unruly blond curls into an approximation of a neat bun. Next, I get changed into the uniform Shoshanna handed me. It isn’t exactly something I’d *choose* to wear: a black knee-length pencil skirt (that, in all honesty, is probably a size too small) and a starched-collared white blouse, all topped off with a fussy burgundy scarf that conveniently matches a lot of the train’s upholstery. A badge declaring my name is the finishing touch. Tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear, I smile, close-lipped, into the mirror, barely recognizing the professional-looking person staring back at me.

“You *got* this,” I remind my reflection sternly.

A loud bang comes from the cabin beside mine—the sound of a door being flung open too exuberantly—and I jump. Attaching the old-fashioned set of keys Shoshanna gave me to

my belt loop, I go to see what the noise is all about, narrowly avoiding walking directly into a tall, rangy figure with a tangle of dark hair shoved beneath a baseball cap. Immediately, I catch his eye, and time seems to slow.

“Oh,” I say, momentarily lost for words. “It’s you.”



“Well, that’s quite the welcome,” muses Rhys in his familiar singsong Welsh drawl. “Yeah, I’m doing good, Lara. Happy to be here, thanks for asking and all.”

I falter at the sight of him, finding myself unwillingly pulled into a whirlpool of complicated emotion.

“Sorry,” I murmur. “I’m just surprised to see you here, that’s all.”

Honestly, I shouldn’t be. After all, we initially applied for the position together. Rhys was the one who’d found the ad way back when we’d all been planning out our summer with giddy excitement. In the before-times, when we were still friends gazing out at that glorious stretch of freedom together before heading off to university and whatever awaited us beyond.

Of course, it *had* crossed my mind when I accepted the job that Rhys might well have been offered this second opportu-

nity, too. I knew that like me, he'd ended up taking a gap year. Not because he was retaking exams, like I was—Rhys would *never*—but to save some money before he took up his deferred place at Cambridge. Still, just the sight of him dredges up a tangled skein of feelings that I hadn't wanted to examine too closely unless I was forced to. Wariness, uncertainty . . . and even *hope*.

"Guess you got the email, too?" he asks. "I was going to call and ask you, actually, but . . . uh, yeah."

To my relief, he leaves it there.

He's like a stranger before me, despite the fact that up until recently, we were close friends, and had been for over a year. I don't know where to look or what to do with my face as he stands there expectantly, waiting for some kind of response.

As the seconds tick by, my neck slowly heats. I know I should have called him the moment I got the job—before that even—but every time I tried, the words I wanted to say became an unknown language, impossible to speak.

Get it together, Lara. Just act normal.

I clear my throat.

"Yeah—yeah, I got the email. I mean, this opportunity is too good to miss, right?"

Adventure . . . distraction. But more than that, *escape*. *That's* what I'm here for. Well, it'll be harder to escape now that there's a permanent reminder of my recent past chilling in the next cabin.

He nods at my outfit.

"I barely recognized you, to be honest; it's been so long. Still, I've got to say, the air-hostess vibe kind of suits you."

Unsurprisingly, there's a tinge of resentment in his tone. I chew my lip. I can't exactly blame him for it.

"Yeah, well. I guess we've both been busy," I say breezily. "I've been working double shifts at the bakery, saving for the trip back."

His reply is drowned out by the door to the other end of the carriage opening, revealing what must be our first three passengers, all decked out in expensive goose-down jackets and carrying skis.

"No, we can't be staying here, Cass. This area is obviously for the plebs—"

The speaker—lanky, blond, and blandly attractive, with an expensive-looking tan—spots me and stops, apparently not at all embarrassed by his faux pas. "Oh . . . hey there."

Rhys turns to me with a pained wince.

"Good morning, and welcome to the *Banebury*," I say, smiling sweetly as if I haven't heard him. "Are you looking for the passenger suites?"

"Ye-es, actually. Need to offload these babies." He gestures at the skis. "We're on our way to Zurich to catch the last of the powder, y'know."

I do *not* know. He draws out the words, his voice bored as if it's paining him to speak to me.

The pair behind him are similarly attractive: a beachy-looking, freckled blond girl, likely related to the speaker, and a moody-faced guy with decent cheekbones and neatly gelled black hair.

Shoshanna looms up behind them, a professional-looking mask on her face. “Allow me, sir,” she says, gesturing for them to follow her—which is good, because I’ve already forgotten where the passenger cabins are.

“So . . . remind me, how many passengers are going to be on this thing?” I ask Rhys, in a pathetic attempt at normality, once the skiers are out of earshot. “This is meant to be off-season, right? Easy money and all that?”

Rhys nods. “Sure is. Shoshanna says we’re starting with around thirteen passengers, but most aren’t staying for the whole trip—and there are five of us staff. Pretty healthy ratio for the service industry.”

We dutifully join the rest of the staff in the Cedar Lounge, sinking into the deep wine-colored couches, the dull gray light from the station soaking through the vast windows. Joining Rhys and me is a confident-looking girl with a ready laugh and large doe eyes, her thick black hair woven into an intricate French braid. Beside her slouches a tanned older guy with short gray hair shoved behind a paisley bandanna, who radiates a could-not-give-a-fuck attitude, yawning as he scrolls noisily through his phone.

Shoshanna sits at the head of the walnut coffee table in a wingback armchair, an enigmatic smile on her face, looking immensely pleased with the power she wields over us. I give her a wary glance. I’ve seen teachers with that expression before; they’re always dangerous. After passing us all a sheaf of thick cream-colored paper with *The Banebury* etched into the header in gold, she settles comfortably back into her chair.

“Right, everyone, welcome to Team *Banebury*. You guys

got lucky, being booked for this trip. Believe me: It's going to be an easy ride *all* the way to Tallinn."

I absently flick through the papers, which I discover is the roster of all the guests, along with basic info about them, such as allergies and food preferences, as well as some poorly printed photos. "In my experience, that all depends on the *guests*," the older guy murmurs gruffly. I am hazarding a guess that he is the chef. Ignoring him, Shoshanna introduces us all.

"As you already know, I'm Shosh. We've also got Lara and Rhys on service; believe you guys know each other already, right?" She gives us both a comedy wink, and I stare fixedly at my shoes, unable to meet Rhys's gaze. "And Samira here, also on service, and finally, Carlos, our chef."

We all wave and mumble awkward hellos.

"There's also Terrance, our driver, who's already settled in. I've worked with him before—a very experienced gentleman. You probably won't see him much; he's got his own quarters right next to the cab and tends to keep himself to himself."

She continues: "Now, more importantly, on to our *guests*. So we've got three skiers who are leaving the train in Zurich: Cassandra Montague, Theodore Montague, and Xavier Henley-Richards. They're already on board. Points to note: Theo is gluten intolerant, and Cassandra is vegan. None of that should pose a problem, *especially* to an experienced chef." I catch Carlos rolling his eyes.

"Next, there's a *baroness*—apparently—Carlotta Winterbourne and her niece-slash-assistant, Rebecca. Our dear baroness also has a very limited diet. Chef, I'll talk to you

about that in a bit. Then we've got the Chao family—they're only staying until we get to London—and the Marriotts, newlyweds, who'll be leaving us in France. Finally, we have a pair of siblings—Gwendolyn and Gwydion Llewellyn. They'll join us a little farther down the line, before we cross the border into England."

The faces of the last pair stare mournfully out at me from the paper, both so white-faced and dark-haired that the picture may as well have been black-and-white. Shoshanna wraps it up.

"So only thirteen passengers for the five of us to handle. As you all know, this is a limited charter—the *real* work will start when we reach Tallinn and pick up all the passengers paying full price for five-star service and the scenic route back to London." She nods at Rhys and me. "But you guys don't need to worry about that, as I believe you'll be leaving us then. I'll give you a run-through of your duties next, but it's nothing too taxing. Apparently, a few other guests dropped out at the last minute, you lucky things. Now let's all go grab a cup of tea, and I'll show you what to expect."

Rhys, Samira, and I spend the next few hours shadowing Shoshanna as she fastidiously demonstrates how to clean the cabins, each of which is more sickeningly luxurious than the last, with their silken coverlets in expensive shades of racing green or vermillion and polished gold bathroom fixtures. Immediately after, we get an exhausting speed run of how to

restock the bar and the coffee lounge and lay the tables for meals.

Shoshanna clasps her hands and looks at us with satisfaction, evidently confident that we know exactly what we're doing. "Okay, on to service. Plan is that I'll do tonight's dinner service alongside Samira, who's got the most experience. You two can serve the drinks and take notes so you're ready to take over tomorrow."

I chew my thumbnail. Rhys, who's worked in his mum's café pretty much since birth, will undoubtedly ace this, while I have the (frankly, earned) reputation of being spectacularly clumsy.

The rest of the passengers are due to board within the next hour, and then we'll be setting off. Before they arrive, we are treated to a dismal lunch of microwaved lasagna in the staff lounge. It's a depressing little room, the last carriage before Shoshanna's office and the driver's cab, with dirty yellow walls and mismatched faulty or stained furniture from the main part of the train, haphazardly arranged on corporate blue carpet tiles. Shosh reels off another set of incomprehensible instructions, then rustles busily away, leaving us blankly looking at each other.

"This *train*." Samira exhales, throwing down her fork and shaking her head. "Can you believe it? How the other half live, am I right? I mean, I've worked at a couple of nice hotels before, but *this* is luxury."

"It's pretty lush," I agree distractedly, poking at my food, Rhys's presence still unsettling me.

“Understatement of the year,” Samira replies. “D’ya reckon we’ll get time off to, like . . . hang? Planning on getting some bougie content on here.”

Rhys nods amiably as he flicks through pages on his Kindle. “Yeah, of course, although I doubt we’ll be allowed to use the guest facilities. We’re not paying customers, after all.”

I frown a little. I hadn’t thought about that. My room is so tiny that the thought of being confined to it for hours when I’m not working a shift gives me intense claustrophobia. They probably made the staff cabins that way on purpose to put an end to any slacking.

“Shosh seems cool, though,” continues Samira chattily. She flicks a beautifully manicured finger across her phone screen. “I’m saving to do a cosmetology degree. What about you guys?”

I fill her in, shamefaced, about having to do exam re-sits later this year, and she nods sagely, patting my hand. “Hey, resilience is an underrated quality, you know. Getting back up and trying again.”

I like Samira already, and I’m not usually this quiet, but being here, in such close proximity to Rhys after everything that’s happened these past months, has got me tongue-tied.

Eventually, Samira gives up trying to make small talk, and for a few minutes, we all awkwardly listen to the sound of our own chewing, intermittently interrupted by the distant sound of slamming doors.

“Honestly, it is good to see you again, La,” says Rhys eventually, with an inscrutable smile. But I still detect a hint of

slyness or at least chastisement in it. “As I said, it’s been a while. I half wondered if you’d be *allowed* to show up here.”

“Come on, Rhys, give it a rest,” I mutter uncomfortably. “You *know* all that’s over with now.”

Seeming to sense the immense tension that has fallen cleanly across the room like a guillotine blade, Samira clears her throat and excuses herself from the table with a knowing flash of her eyes, leaving us alone.

I fiddle aimlessly with my phone. He’s right; it *has* been a while since we last saw each other—since I saw *anyone*, to be fair. And I thought about contacting him to ask if he was going on this trip—unsure of my feelings, whether I’d be glad or whether I’d want to cancel immediately if he was—but each time I selected his number, saw his face in my phone contacts, I managed to find some excuse not to call.

And anyway, the last time I saw him—a month or so ago—was one of the most excruciating moments of my life. We bumped into each other in the grocery store, where I’d picked up a few shifts in the bakery to help save for the trip—one way or another, I was getting away from here for a while. Truthfully, I’d clocked him first and was trying to fade into obscurity behind a bread oven before he noticed me in my highly unflattering uniform. He called my name three times before I realized I couldn’t ignore him anymore without it being weird and greeted him with an awkward hello. We made small talk, initially so stilted it cracked my heart, until the rusted joints of our friendship slowly began to loosen.

“I heard about your re-takes,” he said apologetically, study-

ing the baguettes. “I’m sorry. . . . Maybe I could have helped if I’d known earlier.”

I pulled a face. “Well, don’t be. It’s my own fault. Besides, I’m going to ace them second time around.”

He looked up at me warily, and I waited for him to offer me some tutoring, to catch me up on all I’d missed, to tell me Stevie, Casey, and Aiden were always asking after me. That things could be how they used to be if I wanted. But he didn’t. Why would he? I didn’t deserve it. And anyway, before he could speak, his mum discovered us talking and launched into a ten-minute public tirade about how someone like *me* should be nowhere near her precious son.

“Anyway, you’re looking . . . well,” I say now, forcing myself to be cool and collected. And I’m relieved to see that he does look well—*now*. Better than well, in fact, although it’s weird to see him out of his usual uniform of rumpled plaid shirt and hoodie.

“Yeah, healed up pretty good,” he says, absently patting the side of his face. Then he leans across the table, catching my eyes, his own preternaturally green in the sharp slant of sunlight that falls through the window. Something painful and long buried rises within me, and instinctively I swallow it back down.

“Honestly, La, I wasn’t sure how I’d feel if you were here. I knew it might not be easy between us. But now that you *are* here . . . I’m glad.”

This time there’s a sincerity to his words I can’t help but smile at.

Might not be easy is the understatement of the year. But I still sense the ghost of that easiness between us, the patterns of teasing and relaxed banter we fall into, the firm foundations of our old friendship, and if he's willing to forgive me, then I'm more than willing to meet him halfway.

I open my mouth to reply, when the train gives a sharp lurch, rattling the cutlery on the laminate table like bones, followed by a piercing whistle. Rhys immediately shoots up, apparently even more relieved by the distraction than I am, and heads directly to the nearest window.

"Hey . . . looks like we're moving." He turns to me and grins, his eyes full of hope. "London . . . here we come!"